

THE TRAIL OF DEATH

WAR ADVENTURES OF THE FLYING BEETLE

George E. Rochester

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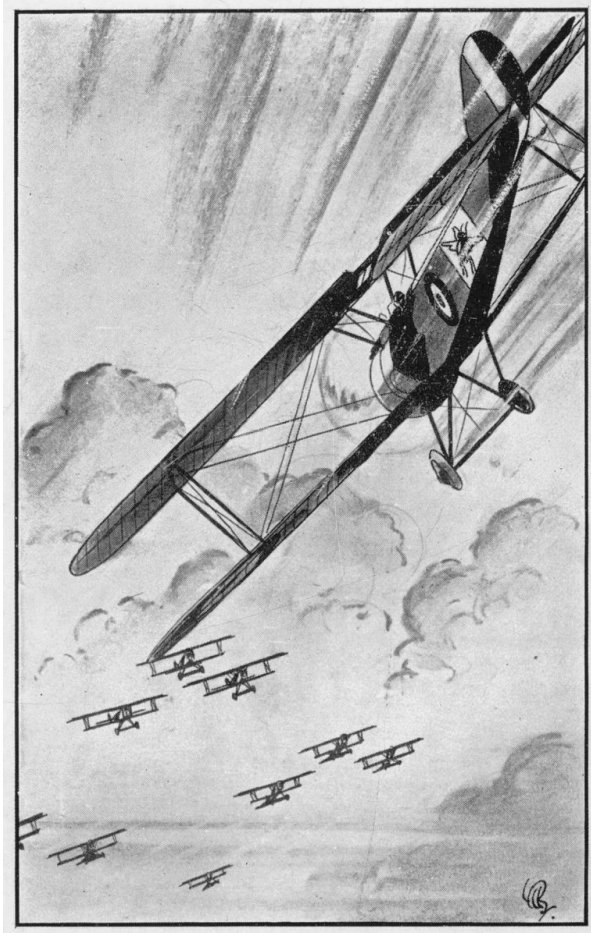
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Frontispiece

DAWN PATROL

THE "ACE" SERIES

THE TRAIL OF DEATH

WAR ADVENTURES OF THE FLYING BEETLE

BY
GEO. E. ROCHESTER

Author of Black Squadron, Flying Beetle, etc.

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CHAPTER I

THE DAWN PATROL

I

“FOUR o’clock, sir!”

Captain Harry Davies, of Three Hundred and Five Squadron, operating from Duville, was awake in an instant.

“Oh, hallo, Bates!” he grunted. “What kind of a morning is it?”

“Clear and fine, sir!” replied the batman.

“Righto!” exclaimed Davies. “Stand by outside with the canvas bucket, Bates, and I’ll have a cold sluice!”

Five minutes later, clad in his oil-stained khaki uniform with its pilot’s wings and row of medal ribbons on the left breast of the tunic, Davies crossed to the mess, his short leather flying jacket over his arm.

Dew sparkled on the grass and the cloudless sky gave promise of a glorious day to come. But from eastwards came the eternal rumble of heavy gunfire, grim token that the dawn “strafe” had already commenced in earnest.

Gulping down a cup of steaming hot coffee, Davies made his way towards the hangars where the mechanics were wheeling out his fast little Camel fighting scout.

Painted on the fuselage of the scout was a black replica of a flying beetle, and it was as the Flying Beetle that this grim-faced lad with thirty-four German machines to his credit was known the whole length of the battle-line, from the Swiss frontier to the sea.

A sergeant mechanic swung himself up to the snug little cockpit as Davies appeared, and as he switched on, another mechanic swung the propeller.

The engine picked up with a shattering roar, and after running it up to full revolutions on brief but searching test, the sergeant throttled down.

Leaving the propeller ticking quietly over, he clambered out of the cockpit and dropped to the ground.

“Okay, sergeant?” asked the Flying Beetle.

“Yes, sir!” replied the sergeant.

“Giving her revs.?”

“Yes, sir, she’s fine!”

The Flying Beetle nodded.

“I’m off towards Metz on offensive patrol,” he remarked, buttoning his flying coat; then added with a tinge of regret: “I suppose it’s a bit too early in the day for our friend, von Platz, to be astir!”

The sergeant’s lips twitched in a smile. Every flying man on that part of the line knew of the Hauptmann Gerhard von Platz, one of the most brilliant of Germany’s

great war aces whose bag of Allied machines already totalled sixty-four.

The machine he flew was a black Fokker scout, with a grinning skull painted in white on its beautifully-streamlined fuselage. As a fighter he was fearless and merciless, showing no quarter nor expecting any to be shown him.

“I suppose I ought to consider myself lucky that I haven’t met him yet,” said the Flying Beetle, turning towards the cockpit of his Camel.

“Lucky, sir?” repeated the sergeant questioningly.

“Yes,” replied the other, “for when we do meet only one of us will live to return and I don’t think that one will be me!”

“You’re as good a fighter as he is, sir,” asserted the sergeant stoutly. “Better, if you don’t mind my saying so. You only have to meet him in the air to prove it!”

“Ah, but we don’t seem fated to meet, he and I,” laughed the lad, swinging himself up into the cockpit.

He ran his engine up to satisfy himself that it was giving full revolutions, then snapping down his goggles, he opened up the throttle.

The roar of the engine rose to a high, pulsating, thunderous rhythm, and as the little fighting scout quivered madly against the chocks the pilot’s gloved hand whipped up.

In response to the signal the waiting mechanics yanked away the chocks from in front of the tired wheels of the undercarriage, and, like a greyhound from the slips, the fighting scout shot forward.

The tail came up, and as the Flying Beetle inched back the control stick, the Camel took the air in a steep upward climb.

Circling once over the hangars, the Flying Beetle pushed forward the control stick and dived on the banked-up firing range at the far side of the aerodrome. Above the thunder of his engine sounded the staccato rattle of exploding cartridges as he fired a test burst from his synchronized gun.

Then back came the stick again and the scout went up and up into the blue in an almost perpendicular zoom, to level up and swing eastwards towards the line, climbing as it flew.

And back at the hangars far below, the sergeant turned to the watching mechanics.

“I’ll bet a month’s pay,” he said with slow determination, “that if ever the Flying Beetle meets von Platz on either side of the line there’ll be one Boche pilot the less operating over this sector!”

At fifteen thousand feet, the Flying Beetle passed over the trenches and headed eastwards into Germany. He was tensed in his seat, his ever-watchful eyes continually scanning the sky ahead, to port and to starboard.

More than once, also, he turned to sweep with his eyes the sky behind, for he knew the peril of being caught napping by some enemy aircraft coming hurtling down on his tail from out of the blue.

Far below, on the ground, grey-clad columns of German infantry were moving up towards the line. Anti-aircraft guns, busy with the shelling of British R.E.8’s carrying

out artillery observation, had little time for the one lone scout so high in the morning sky.

The Fokkers or the guns farther eastwards would attend to him!

On and on roared the Camel, climbing now to eighteen thousand feet. Visibility was excellent, the sky cloudless. Away to starboard something like a ball of cotton-wool came suddenly into being, then dissolved into thin and drifting wraith-like smoke. Another and another appeared, closer now. It was shrapnel.

The pilot saw it and smiled grimly. The German gunners had not got his range yet and he would be past before they could do so. They'd be waiting for him coming back, of course, but a lot might happen before the Camel came winging its homeward way.

Suddenly the pilot stiffened in his seat. Instinctively his hand moved towards the trigger of his synchronized gun. Far ahead, high in the blue, were ten machines heading towards him.

They were mere specks in the sky as yet, but by the time the Flying Beetle had lifted the Camel another thousand feet in a thundering climb, the oncoming machines were near enough to be identified.

They were Fokker scouts!

It was already very evident that they had sighted the Flying Beetle and were roaring on to the attack. But advantage of height lay with the lad and he continued to climb.

Remorselessly, in fighting formation, the Fokkers came thundering on towards the lone Camel. What did it matter to them that the Englander had the momentary advantage of height? Were they not ten to one? The chances were that the Camel would turn and run rather than face certain death by showing fight.

But the Flying Beetle did not turn and run. Steadily he kept on, the nose of his machine up, until the Fokkers were within a quarter of a mile of him and two thousand feet below.

Then forward went his control stick and his gloved finger curled round the trigger of his synchronized gun. With engine thundering at full revolutions he tore down on the Fokker formation, wind shrieking madly through his flying wires and struts, the death snarl of his blazing gun audible above the high-pitched scream of his engine.

Right through the formation he went, and as he pulled back his control stick to go up and up in a wild, soaring zoom, one Fokker went spinning earthwards in flames, its pilot sprawled lifelessly across the controls, his spine shattered by a burst of bullets.

But the nine remaining Fokkers had broken formation, and with black-encased guns viciously ablaze, were driving in at the pilot from every angle.

Bullets tore and whined through the fabric of the Camel's fuselage and wings, and splintering white wood showed vividly beneath the varnish of riven struts.

Throwing the Camel over in a roll, the Flying Beetle kicked on rudder, and whipping the control stick diagonally across, drove down on the nearest Fokker.

He had a momentary vision of the haggard-faced German crouched over his controls, then in that instant of time when it seemed as though the two machines must

smash into each other, the Fokker pilot leapt to his feet, his hands clutching at his torn and lacerated throat.

The control stick of the Fokker jerked forward of its own accord, and as the machine went thundering earthwards in the death plunge with engine racing at full revolutions, the pilot slumped heavily forward and slithered to the floor of the cockpit, shot through the throat.

But there were eight of his companions left to avenge him. Twisting, diving, looping, rolling, the Flying Beetle fought desperately against the overwhelming odds. His left arm was hanging limp and useless and the shoulder of his flying coat was wet with blood. Hemmed in as he was by lurid, flaming guns, he knew that the end was inevitable. Already his fighting scout was lurching drunkenly and his rudder control wires were hanging by strands only.

But if he himself was sorely damaged, the Fokkers themselves had been desperately harried by this grim-faced lad, and two more German scouts went plunging earthwards in the death spin, their pilots limp across the controls, before the end came for the Flying Beetle.

The German leader had pulled out of the fight, manœuvring for position, and now he came thundering down on the Camel's tail, the cartridge belt whirling madly through the chamber of his Krupp gun.

The Flying Beetle whirled to meet this deadly attack, but as he kicked on rudder, the control wire snapped and the rudder bar swung loosely beneath his booted foot.

In that same moment he felt a searing, agonizing pain across his scalp. His world went black about him, and, as he slumped forward in his seat, the Camel went plunging earthwards out of control.

At five thousand feet the rush of cold air served momentarily to revive the lad and sweep the deadly nausea from his bemused mind. Weakly he hauled himself back off the controls, his gloved fingers groping instinctively for the switch.

The Fokkers, following him down, saw the Camel crash heavily on buckling port wings, then because the ground was rough and wooded, the triumphant leader wheeled the remnants of his formation and drew off in search of a landing place where he could plant his Fokker down without fear of a buckled undercarriage.

II

Consciousness returned slowly to the Flying Beetle and as it did so his eyes flickered open and he looked about him in dawning wonderment.

He was swathed in bandages and was lying in bed in a small and sparsely-furnished room. Seated by the side of the bed watching him intently was a thin and elderly man in shabby civilian attire.

Apparently the man, whoever he was, had been waiting for the lad to regain consciousness, for seeing him awake, he rose and shuffled from the room. The door closed behind him and there came to the ears of the Flying Beetle the faint click of a key being turned in the lock.

Minutes passed—long minutes during which jumbled recollection of the dog-fight with the Fokkers came back to the lad. His head was aching agonisingly and he felt strangely limp and weak.

Murmured voices on the other side of the door drew his attention. Then suddenly the key clicked back, the door opened, and a young man stepped into the room.

He, also, was in civilian attire, but his pale features were drawn and haggard as though through long suffering and his right arm hung withered and misshapen in its sleeve.

With a pitiful, halting limp he crossed slowly to the bed and stood looking down at the Flying Beetle.

“You are awake, then, m’sieur?” he said, speaking in French, and the smile which accompanied the words wiped something of the pain from his haggard features and lent a momentary but wondrous sweetness to his face.

“Yes,” replied the Flying Beetle weakly, staring up at him in puzzled wonderment. “But I do not understand. You are French, are you not?”

The other bowed his head in assent.

“Yes, m’sieur, I am French,” he said. “My name is André Fontnoy!”

“But,” persisted the lad, his wonder deepening, “I crashed in Germany!”

“Pardon, m’sieur,” corrected Fontnoy quietly, “you crashed in Alsace!”

“Which is German territory,” pointed out the lad.

“Yes, German territory,” agreed the other and there was a quiver in his voice. “A little while longer they may hold it, these cursed Prussian Junkers, but already their field-grey hosts fall back and the shadow of defeat hangs heavy over Germany. I know what I know, m’sieur, and soon now the armies of Britain and France will push forward to the Rhine and Alsace will pass again into the hands of France!”

The Flying Beetle was silent. He knew what this André Fontnoy meant, for it was common knowledge that there were many in Alsace who, being of French blood, eagerly looked forward to the day when their beloved France would once more take possession of Alsace, that lovely fertile province which had been wrested from her by the mailed fist of Prussia at the close of the Franco-Prussian War.

“Will you please tell me how I came to be here?” asked the Flying Beetle quietly, breaking the sudden silence.

“You crashed within a kilometre of this house of mine, m’sieur, which stands isolated and alone, some twenty kilometres south-east of Metz,” answered Fontnoy. “You have the good God to thank that you were not killed. Your aeroplane hit the ground in what I think you call a side-slip. You were thrown clear of the wreckage which took fire. At least you were not thrown quite clear, but Jacques—he is my manservant, m’sieur—with whom I was out walking, ran and pulled you away from the flames. I,” with a pitiful, twisted smile, “I could not have helped much. You see, m’sieur, I am paralysed in my right arm and side and have been so since birth!”

“What can I say to thank you for what you have done?” began the lad.

“Nothing, m’sieur!” interposed Fontnoy quickly. “We require no thanks. For two days we have kept you here and nursed you, and——”

“How long?” interjected the Flying Beetle in astonishment.

“It is two days since you crashed, m’sieur,” explained Fontnoy. “And during those two days death has hovered very close to you. But you will get better now, and Jacques and I will keep you hidden here until you are strong and well enough to attempt an escape from this country. M’sieur, you must not be taken prisoner. You do not know the horror of some of these prison camps of Germany!”

The Flying Beetle stared up at the man in blank amazement.

“Do you mean to say,” he demanded, attempting to raise himself on his elbow, “that the Boches don’t know I’m here?”

“No, m’sieur, they do not!” replied Fontnoy. “They came, of course, later in the morning to inspect the wreckage of your machine, but none had seen Jacques and I carry you here and they think you crawled away to die somewhere. They were very sure you had been badly wounded!”

“It’s a wonder they didn’t search this house,” remarked the Flying Beetle, slowly.

“But they did search it, m’sieur,” said Fontnoy. “Jacques and I were prepared for that, however, and we had hidden you beneath some old planks and sacking in one of the cellars here. The Boches did not search much beyond my wine cellar and you, unconscious, never stirred!”

“But, good Heavens, man, don’t you realize that you’ll be taken out and shot for harbouring me if the Germans ever find me here?” cried the lad aghast.

“I realize that, of course,” answered Fontnoy quietly, “and it is a risk which I most willingly take. M’sieur,” he went on, his haggard, pain-drawn face working strangely, “you do not know how I have thanked the good God from the very bottom of my heart for this opportunity which He has given me to aid our cause—the cause of France and Britain. I have not been interned because the Germans do not know that my sympathies are heart and soul with France. Nor does the German expect hurt from a poor cripple such as I. On the eve of war I tried to reach France, but I was too late. The frontiers were closed in a night and I was forced to remain here!”

“But, Fontnoy,” began the Flying Beetle in distress, “I cannot allow you to risk your life——”

“Is life then so sweet for such a one as me?” cut in the other bitterly. “Is it so sweet that I should fear to face a German firing squad? And what better death could I die than in the service of my country?”

He bent his head, his left hand clenching until the knuckles showed white through the skin.

“One thing only do I ask of life before I die,” he said in a low, choking voice, “and that is to see justice done to the man who murdered my brother!”

He looked at the Flying Beetle, his eyes burning.

“You are an airman, m’sieur,” he said, “and maybe you have heard of him, that thrice-damned Prussian Junker, for he is a famous war ace!”

“His name, Fontnoy?”

“Is the Hauptmann Gerhard von Platz,” grated Fontnoy, “and daily, hourly, I have prayed that he might be sent earthwards in flames which, for him, would be the flames of hell!”

Days drifted on and, hidden in the attic of Fontnoy’s house, the Flying Beetle progressed slowly through convalescence to health. Fontnoy spent long hours with him and a strangely deep affection for the poor cripple grew in the lad’s heart.

Often when he was alone the Flying Beetle would find himself thinking of Fontnoy’s ill-fated brother, Louis, and of how the latter had met his death at the hands of the Hauptmann Gerhard von Platz.

“It is the cursed arrogant blood of the Potsdam Prussians which flows in the veins of von Platz,” Fontnoy had said. “He spent many of his boyhood days on an estate near here, owned by his father. Louis and I were boys, also, at the time and we saw much of von Platz and came to know him well. Often we quarrelled, von Platz and I, for he, happy in his splendid health and body, would make a mock of me, a helpless cripple. He took care, however, not to let Louis hear him, nor did I complain to Louis, for I knew too well my brother’s hot blood and hasty temper!”

“There came a day, however, when Louis did hear him and the thrashing he gave von Platz will live for ever in my memory. But the years rolled on, m’sieur, we grew up—and there came the eve of war. Von Platz was here on his father’s estate. Never had he forgiven Louis for that thrashing and I knew he hated Louis. Out there in our garden, m’sieur, on one of those hushed summer evenings which immediately preceded the outbreak of war, von Platz taunted my brother about the Alsatian blood which flows in Fontnoy veins. They quarrelled—and Louis struck him!”

“But not this time was it settled with boyish fists, m’sieur. There were others there who saw that blow and von Platz demanded satisfaction. It was a duel, m’sieur, for not yet had duelling been forbidden in Germany. Von Platz is deadly with the rapier—and Louis had never handled one. Yet this affair of honour demanded clean steel—and Louis died. M’sieur, it was cold-blooded and deliberate murder on the part of von Platz, for it was to this end that he had goaded Louis into striking him. Even as a boy he had sworn he would one day repay the thrashing Louis had given him, and now he had repaid in full!”

“And have you ever seen Gerhard von Platz since this happened?” the Flying Beetle had asked.

“Yes, indeed!” Fontnoy had replied. “I have seen him often, for since he commenced operating from the aerodrome situated on the outskirts of Metz he makes it a practice to come here to dine with friends of his whom he brings with him. Yes, m’sieur, you may stare, but it is so. Nothing would give him greater pleasure than for me to refuse him admittance, or to quarrel with him myself. I repeat, m’sieur, he hates the Fontnoys and his presence here is a calculated and deadly insult. Yet if I offend him he will denounce me to the High Command either as a traitor or as a dangerous pro-Ally, and if I am not shot, then I will be sent to an internment camp. That is what he would like to see happen, but I will not afford him the satisfaction of seeing me being put away. I wait, m’sieur, for I know in my heart that some day if I am patient I will see

Louis avenged. I know I puzzle von Platz by my silence about Louis, but he will not trap me as he trapped my brother!”

The more the Flying Beetle pondered the matter, the more he was convinced that under the circumstances Fontnoy’s attitude was the wisest one. After all, the facts as the world knew them were that Louis Fontnoy had struck the first blow and had been killed in clean fight for his presumption. Hostility on the part of André Fontnoy could only result in misery, and maybe death, for the poor cripple. No, André Fontnoy was wise to bide his time.

There came a day when he brought a German air service uniform to the Flying Beetle.

“I have procured this from Munich, m’sieur,” he said. “It was not difficult, for one does not require a permit to purchase an officer’s uniform. You are almost well now and in this uniform you will have a better chance of reaching either the line or the frontier. I suggest you make for Switzerland, but beware of the bloodhounds of Mülhausen and beware of the Swiss frontier guards, many of whom are in German pay. I want you to leave here to-night!”

The Flying Beetle took the grey, high-necked uniform and looked steadily at the cripple.

“Why is it that you suggest I leave here to-night, André?” he asked.

“Because, m’sieur, I do not think you will be safe here much longer,” replied the other.

“Why?” demanded the lad.

Fontnoy was silent a moment and when he spoke his voice was low and troubled.

“Because, m’sieur,” he said, “to-night von Platz comes here again and brings with him his friends. It will not be safe for you to be in the house!”

The Flying Beetle stared at him, his eyes glinting.

“Safe?” he repeated with a grim laugh and took Fontnoy’s arm in his firm, strong hand. “It’ll be safe enough, André, old friend. Ever since you told me your story I’ve been hoping against hope that I might meet this Gerhard von Platz beneath your roof. I was intended for the Diplomatic Service and I can speak German like a native. Listen, André, I have a plan and if all goes well, by to-morrow night you will be back in your beloved France and Louis will have been amply avenged. Now listen carefully!”

.

That evening, his young face pale but composed, the Flying Beetle, in the uniform of the Imperial Air Service of Germany, sat at dinner with André Fontnoy, the Hauptmann Gerhard von Platz and four other officers whom the latter had brought with him from Metz.

Acting on the lad’s instructions, Fontnoy had introduced him as the Hauptmann Alberich von Federkiel, on leave from the School of Aerial Fighting at Düsseldorf, and as such the Flying Beetle had been accepted by von Platz and his companions without question.

Dinner was served by old Jacques, the manservant, and as the meal progressed, the Flying Beetle covertly studied the German ace whose methods in the air were as merciless and unscrupulous as they had been in his dealings with the late Louis Fontnoy.

No wounded Allied pilot, spinning earthwards in the death plunge or pulling out of a fight with controls shot to ribbons, ever received any mercy from von Platz.

He would follow the unfortunate down, riddling him again and again, driven by the sheer lust to kill. Stragglers, limping home after an encounter with German anti-aircraft guns, or with machines on offensive patrol, were his favourite game. Lurking high in the blue or in the cover of the white fleecy clouds, he would spot his man, then down he would come in a screaming dive, his synchronized gun roaring its message of death.

But whatever one might think of his methods, they were at least successful, and steadily his bag was mounting.

He was a tall, thin, fair-haired man with the high cheekbones and arrogant carriage of the Prussian. His pale-blue eyes were hard as chilled steel and his mouth was thin-lipped and cruel.

Time and again the Flying Beetle felt his blood boil as von Platz shot some thinly-veiled taunt at the poor, malformed cripple to whom von Platz's very presence in the house was torture.

Yet any refusal by André Fontnoy to entertain the great ace would sooner or later inevitably recoil upon himself, and because of his supreme faith that the slowly grinding mills of God would one day crush this slayer of his brother, the cripple had steeled himself to wait.

So he sat in brooding silence throughout dinner, his eyes on his plate, and it was when the coffee and liqueurs were circulating that, leaning back in his chair, von Platz said with a smile:

"You are strangely quiet to-night, my André. Come, man, be more cheerful. Listen, I will give you a toast. To-day I claimed my sixty-ninth victim. A Frenchman flying a Spad. That's thirty-two Frenchmen I've accounted for, André. Thirty-two cursed Frenchmen. Well," he raised his glass, "here's to my seventieth victim and may he, too, be a Frenchman!"

"I sincerely hope for your sake that he may be," said the Flying Beetle pleasantly.

Von Platz stared at him.

"You mean?" he said icily.

"I mean," replied the Flying Beetle, "that I don't doubt for one moment that you would prefer meeting a Frenchman to an Englishman!"

There was a moment of tense silence. Slowly von Platz put down his glass. His chair scraped back and he rose. His face was pale with suppressed passion and his thin-lipped mouth was drawn into a cruel and livid line.

"I demand an explanation of that remark!" he rasped.

"Oh, certainly!" replied the Flying Beetle. "What I meant to convey was that whilst being a good fighter in the air, the average Frenchman is admittedly not so good as the

average Englisher. That, Herr Hauptmann, is why I said I do not doubt you would prefer to meet a Frenchman!”

There was no mistaking now the deadly insult in the words. With blazing eyes, von Platz glared at the seated boy.

“If you are being deliberately offensive,” he began in a dangerous voice.

“Yes, I am being deliberately offensive!” cut in the Flying Beetle rising swiftly to his feet. “And for why? Because, Herr Hauptmann, you are nothing more than a loud-mouthed swaggering braggart and I welcome this opportunity of being permitted to tell you so. Anyone could get victims as you get them. Anyone could shoot down wounded and blinded enemy pilots, as you do. It is men like you, Herr Hauptmann, who make of war a fouler and more bestial thing than it already is. You are, let me tell you, a disgrace to the uniform you wear!”

Von Platz’s face was white with passion, but somehow he held himself in check.

“You understand,” he choked, “that there can be only one answer to what you have said!”

“Yes!” replied the Flying Beetle with a shrug of his shoulders. “One answer, as you say. A court martial for gross insolence to the Hauptmann von Platz who will doubtless prefer to protect his honour thus!”

There was no one in the room who did not understand the purport of those words. They were tantamount to a challenge, yet the challenge must come from von Platz.

It did!

“My honour is in my own safe-keeping,” he said harshly. “I shall prove that to you one hour after dawn!”

The Flying Beetle nodded.

“Let us dispense with seconds for the moment,” he said. “The choice of weapons lies with me?”

“That is so!”

“Then I choose the aeroplane and the synchronized gun,” said the Flying Beetle grimly. “You and your friends flew here in your machines and I can take one of them. I shall meet you in the air, Herr Hauptmann, one hour after dawn!”

He turned to the silent, staring others.

“As for you, gentlemen,” he said, “I suggest that whatever the result of this duel may be, you give your word that your story will be that the loser died in an accidental crash!”

“That is agreed!” interposed von Platz harshly, answering for his friends.

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High in the morning sky, one hour after dawn, wheeled the two Fokker scouts engaged in a battle to the death.

They had made contact at ten thousand feet and for eight minutes they twisted, rolled, looped and dived, each pilot striving desperately for the mastery.

The Flying Beetle was fighting with a threefold purpose. The shooting down of von Platz would mean the avenging of Louis Fontnoy whose brother, at the risk of his own life, had sheltered and tended the injured boy; it would mean, also, that no longer would von Platz ride the skies, taking grim toll of Allied machines, and it would mean life and liberty for the lad.

But von Platz was fighting with a cold and terrible rage and there came a moment in that fight when he had the Flying Beetle completely on the defensive.

With vicious gun aflame he tore in at the Flying Beetle who, yanking back his control stick, went hurtling up and up in a wild, soaring zoom.

But von Platz followed, grimly intent on finishing off this insolent cub from Düsseldorf. The Flying Beetle's dashboard shattered into riven wood and splintered glass, and bullets tore through wings and fuselage.

But keeping the control stick back, the Flying Beetle completed a whirlwind loop, and swerving on the downward dive, tore straight in at von Platz, blood-red flame stabbing from the muzzle of his blazing gun.

The cartridge belt was whirling madly through the chamber and the acrid fumes of burning powder swept back past cockpit windshield in the swirling slip-stream of the thundering propeller.

Von Platz flung his Fokker into a spin from which he emerged with a sudden roar of high-powered engine to tear earthwards in a thundering dive.

Above the roar of his engine sounded the shriek of wind through flying wires and struts, then back came the stick and the Fokker went up and up into the grey of early morning in a wild and almost perpendicular zoom.

Grimly the Flying Beetle followed, but already von Platz had rolled and was driving in at the boy with gun aflame.

The Flying Beetle flung his Fokker about in a sharp wing turn, but his lower starboard plane was holed again and two bracing wires were streaming loosely back in the slip-stream of the whirling propeller.

Behind his goggles, the lad's eyes were hard and grim. Except for one fleeting instance the fight, so far, had been all von Platz's. By superb piloting the lad pulled clear of the stream of bullets from the Fokker's snarling gun, then whipping forward his control stick he went screaming earthwards, swerving madly on the dive.

Crouched over his controls, his thin lips drawn back in a wolfish grin, von Platz followed. In his heart was wild exultation, for he had got the measure of this upstart from Düsseldorf and he knew it. So long as he kept harrying him mercilessly, so long as he held the offensive, the end was inevitable.

The Flying Beetle glanced over his shoulder at the Fokker which was hurtling down on his tail, sticking to him like a leech. Only the wild swerving of his machine on that frenzied downward dive was saving him from the bullets of von Platz's gun and he knew it.

Then suddenly his foot jerked hard on the rudder bar and he whipped the control stick across. The Fokker whirled out of the dive with a jar which sent the lad sagging wildly against the side of the cockpit. Bracing wires tautened and struts bent ominously to the terrific strain.

But grimly the Flying Beetle kept his foot pressed on the rudder bar and, with stick across, completed a whirlwind bank.

Von Platz, taken completely unawares by the amazing swiftness of the manœuvre, yanked back his stick in a frantic effort to pull out of his dive in a soaring zoom.

But already the Flying Beetle was tearing in at him from the flank, bullets from his blazing gun raking the Fokker of von Platz from engine cowling to cockpit.

With a choking scream von Platz leapt to his feet, a hole torn through the breast of his flying jacket. Then as he collapsed lifelessly over the controls, the Fokker dropped its nose and went screaming earthwards with engine thundering at full revolutions. A tongue of flame licked back from its riven petrol tank, spreading with terrifying rapidity.

Passing his hand wearily across his brow, the Flying Beetle swung his Fokker westwards towards the line. He flew low, for he had no wish to be attacked by British machines out on dawn patrol.

The moment the line was crossed he put the Fokker into a spin, and thinking he was crashing, the British gunners and infantry held their fire.

Straightening out at less than fifty feet, the Flying Beetle dumped the Fokker down behind the reserve trenches in a pancake landing which burst the undercarriage.

He was promptly taken prisoner, but by noon his identity had been established and he was on his way to Wing Headquarters at Le Courban.

And under cover of darkness that night, a Bristol Fighter landed as near as possible to the lonely house of André Fontnoy, and taking him and old Jacques on board, winged its way westwards into France.

CHAPTER II

THE UNDERSTUDY

THE LAIRD of Clancarde was seated at dinner. Very young he was for a laird, just nineteen years of age, in fact. And very pale and slight he looked seated there alone at the great mahogany table with its cluster of candles, in the vast and shadowy dining-room.

In the dim illumination, his strangely bloodless and sharply featured face was thrown into almost bizarre relief against the dark background of shadow, and so thin and white were his hands, with their long and sensitive fingers, that they might well have been those of a girl.

“Williams!” he said quietly; and as the portly butler turned from the serving-table beside the massive sideboard, he asked: “Is the car ready?”

“Yes, sir!” answered Williams.

“And the room?”

“Yes, sir. We have prepared the captain’s old room!”

“He will like that,” commented the laird.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” went on the butler a trifle nervously, “but is the captain likely to be staying long?”

“A fortnight,” answered the laird. “He has been given fourteen days’ leave and is spending it here.”

He smiled, but it was a smile which found no reflection in his dark and sombre eyes.

“Why do you ask how long he is staying?” he inquired.

“Only that it’ll be grand to see him back, sir,” replied the butler. “Back from them shambles. We’re—we’re proud of him here, sir!”

The laird’s thin lips tightened into a grim and forbidding line.

“Yes,” he said coldly, “he has done well!”

Laden with the tray, Williams withdrew to the kitchen where old Angus, the gardener, was seated smoking.

“Queer he is to-night,” said Williams setting down the tray and giving a jerk of his head in the direction of the dining-room.

“Aye, and it’s queer he’s been these months past,” said old Angus. “I’ve see’d the change in him ever since his cousin Harry went away for to be an airman and fight the Germans. He misses him, I’m afeared!”

“Yes, of course he misses him,” said Williams. “And it’s only natural. This has been Mr. Harry’s home ever since his father was killed in the Boer War and him and the laird have grown up together like brothers. You’d think the laird would be pleased Mr. Harry’s coming back to-night, wouldn’t you? But he isn’t, Angus. I took the liberty of

saying that it would be grand to see Mr. Harry back here at Clancarde and the laird just screwed up his face and gave me a sour sort of look!”

“Aye, he’s changed!” said old Angus sadly. “It’s been so lonesome for him here since Mr. Harry went away. That’s what’s done it. He’s brooded and got morose. I mind me what friends the two of them used to be——”

He broke off as there came the burr of a bell.

“That’s him ringing,” said Williams. “It’ll be coffee he’ll be wanting!”

Deftly he prepared a tray and carried it into the dining-room.

In silence, his sombre gaze on the table, the laird waited until the butler had withdrawn, then slowly and thoughtfully he took his coffee.

At length he set down his cup, and pushing back his chair, rose to his feet. Now could be seen the frail figure of him which had been suggested by his pale and finely-drawn features. But very erect he held himself and there was a set to his narrow shoulders which somehow gave the impression of litheness and of strength.

Crossing to the door he stepped out into the large, stone-floored hallway, pulled on greatcoat, cap and gloves, let himself out by the massive front door and walked round to the rear of the house where his old two-seater car was waiting outside the garage.

A few moments later with his coat collar turned well up about his ears, he had turned the car out through the big iron gates of the avenue and was purring along the moonlit road in the direction of Glenmuir railway station four miles distant.

He did not hurry, for he had plenty of time. Eventually he drew up outside the little wayside station, and throwing a rug over the radiator of the car, he walked on to the badly-lighted and deserted platform.

With hands plunged deep in the pockets of his greatcoat he slowly walked the length of the platform until the sudden rattle of a signal wire caused a distant light to change from red to green and brought an untidily-uniformed man from the booking-office.

Seeing the solitary figure on the platform the stationmaster-cum-porter ambled forward, touching the peak of his cap as he recognized the young Laird of Clancarde.

“Nice evening, sir,” he greeted. “Are ye travelling?”

“No,” returned the laird. “I’m meeting my cousin, Captain Davies!”

“What, is the captain coming?” exclaimed the other eagerly. “That’s fine, sir. Glad indeed ye’ll be to see him. Aye, and so will all of us. A captain, mind ye, and him just a laddie. And all them medals what the newspapers say he’s got. Proud ye must be of him, sir!”

“Yes,” said the laird.

“The newspapers say that the Germans call him the Flying Beetle along o’ him having a flying beetle painted on his aeroplane,” went on the other garrulously. “Aye, he was allus one for a lark, was Mister Harry. Ha’e ye heard aboot young MacNab—him fra’ the village here?”

“No,” said the laird.

“He’s been killed, puir laddie. That’s the second one in that fam’ly. The telegram come this morning. Went out wi’ the Gordons, he did. They say their losses ha’e been something fearful. Oh, sir, sir, when is this awfu’ bluidy slaughter gan tae stop?”

The laird turned away.

“Indeed I do not know,” he said in a low voice.

There was a moment of silence and to the ears of the pair came the rumble of an approaching train.

“Here she comes!” exclaimed the stationmaster. “I’ll be gettin’ ma lamp!”

He retreated to the office to reappear with his lamp and a few moments later the train clanked its way into the station. Scarcely had it come to a stop when the door of a first-class compartment was thrown open and a good-looking lad in stained and double-breasted khaki leapt down to the platform.

“Hallo, Alastair!” he cried, running forward with outstretched hand. “Jove! but it’s good to see you again!”

“And to see you, Harry!” replied the laird, taking in limp clasp the hand of his cousin, Captain Harry Davies, home on leave from the Western Front where, from Ostend to the Swiss frontier, he was known as the Flying Beetle.

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In the flickering shadows of the dining-room fire the two cousins sat late that night.

“Tell me what it is like over there,” the young laird had said. “Tell me everything!”

And in silence he sat listening, his face strangely pale and set in the firelight glow, whilst the Flying Beetle talked of France, of life with the squadron, of stirring encounters with Germany’s fighting airmen high above the battle-smoke and the shell-pocked shambles of trench and No-Man’s-Land.

Time and again as the young laird listened, his dark eyes moved with a fierce intensity from the laughing, eager face of his cousin to the row of worn and oil-stained medal ribbons on the left breast of the khaki tunic.

Fascinated, the laird appeared to be by those ribbons, but it was only by repeated and direct questioning that he could learn the details of the winning of them.

“I’m not rejoining my squadron at Duville,” said the Flying Beetle at length. “When my fourteen days’ leave is up, I’ve to report to Two Hundred and Seven Squadron operating from Ouchy. Alastair, old man, I only wish you were coming out with me!”

The laird was silent a moment. When he spoke his voice was low and quivering.

“Yes,” he said, “so do I!”

The Flying Beetle leaned forward, his eyes on the laird’s set face.

“You feel it a lot, Alastair, not being out there?” he said.

“Wouldn’t you?” The laird laughed sharply, bitterly. “But what use would I be—a weakling who has been turned down by every medical board I’ve attended. No, all I’m fit for is to stay at home and read the casualty reports in the newspapers!”

He stared into the fire, his long, sensitive fingers nervously entwining.

“Don’t you ever go to our workshop now?” asked the Flying Beetle, watching him curiously. “You never mention it in your letters!”

“No, I never go near it!” said the laird.

“What about that old bus we built and had such fun with?”

“It’s never been out of its shed since the day you went away!”

Rising to his feet, the Flying Beetle gently laid his hand on the laird’s thin shoulder.

“Alastair,” he said quietly, “to have to stay at home here and keep a stiff upper lip whilst we’re out yonder must require a very great courage. You’re not letting it beat you, are you?”

The laird raised his dark eyes to his cousin’s face.

“No, it’s not beating me,” he said.

The Flying Beetle laughed cheerily, and taking the laird by the arm, pulled him to his feet.

“That’s fine!” he exclaimed. “Come on, we’ll have a look at the old workshop, then I’m going to turn in. Are our horses still here, or have the military commandeered them?”

“They’re still here,” replied the laird as his cousin piloted him towards the staircase.

“And are eating their heads off in the stables, I’ll bet,” laughed the Flying Beetle. “Well, we’ll give them a good rousing gallop in the morning. By jove, Alastair, but it’s good to be home again!”

Together the two cousins mounted the dark and gloomy staircase to a wide landing where the laird took a small oil lamp from its bracket on the wall.

“We’ll want this,” he said.

By the feeble illumination of the lamp they passed on along the landing and up a narrow stairway which led to the attics. Opening the door of one of the rooms, the laird stood aside whilst his cousin stepped across the threshold into the room which at one time had been converted into a workshop and which still retained its bench, table, lathe and tool-racks.

Dust and cobwebs were everywhere, and moving to the bench, the Flying Beetle picked up a small, unfinished model of an aeroplane.

“My favourite Farman biplane,” he said as the laird approached with the lamp. “Can you remember the arguments we used to have about the wing stagger? By jove! I wish I’d had the time to finish it. I’d have proved you wrong, Alastair, old chap. I’d have got our record flight out of this bus with decent elastic winding!”

Lovingly he examined the little model, turning it over and over in his hands. Then setting it down, he picked up another.

“Our model of the machine in which Hawker did his flight round Britain,” he commented. “One of our most successful efforts, Alastair. Remember when it got stuck right up in the firs? That was our altitude record, eh? And do you remember the job we had to get it down again? It required a ladder, and three fishing-rods lashed together!”

He put down the model and the laird watched him in silence as he moved about, picking up a partially-completed model here and a blue-print there, and recalling the days when he and Alastair had devoted many long and happy hours to this hobby of theirs.

“But our greatest effort was the real bus we built,” said the Flying Beetle. “And she flew, Alastair. That was the amazing thing. It cost us nearly all the cash we had, but we got her off the ground. D’you know, if this war hadn’t come I believe you and I would be building real aeroplanes and selling ’em!”

“Yes,” said the laird, “and I’d still be flying!”

So bitter was his voice that the Flying Beetle wheeled on him in dismay.

“Please, Alastair, please!” he pleaded, slipping his khaki-clad arm round the laird’s frail shoulders. “Don’t take it like that!”

“How else can one take it when one’s only companion is the casualty reports?” burst out the laird furiously.

He broke off and turned towards the door.

“Come!” he said abruptly. “Let’s get to bed!”

Alone in the privacy of his bedroom the Laird of Clancarde stood long that night by the window staring out across the hushed and moon-bathed countryside.

His hands were clenched, his features drawn and haggard, and in his heart was a fierce and burning resentment against the fate which had cast him as a weakling, useless to his country in her hour of need.

But he was not useless. He knew it. He could fly—could pilot a machine—for before war had come, he and his cousin had been taking flying lessons.

He had been as good a pilot as Harry then. It was in no spirit of boastfulness that the laird told himself that. It was simply a fact. He had a natural flair for flying and there had been magic in his sensitive hands when they had held the old-fashioned leather-bound control stick.

Eagerly, when war had come, he had gone with Harry to join up. Then had come a cruel and staggering blow. He wasn’t wanted; he was medically unfit; a weakling who could never stand the strain of war!

So whilst Harry had gone through the training school and then to France with one of the earliest expeditionary squadrons of the glorious Royal Flying Corps, the laird had returned alone to Clancarde, there to brood over and foster in his heart the bitter resentment which he felt at being rejected for service because of his physique.

That resentment, directed at first only against the fate which had given him so poor a body, had slowly but steadily deepened into a fierce jealousy of his cousin whose stirring deeds high above the battle-smoke had thrilled the country and earned for him an honoured name.

In the glorious fighting career of the Flying Beetle, the Laird of Clancarde saw what his own might have been had he not been cheated of it because of his frail and puny body.

It was not that he wanted medals, honours or decorations. All he asked was to be allowed to fight for Britain against the field-grey hordes of Germany in what was the most devastating war the world had ever known.

But he was not wanted. The struggle could go on without him, and that night as he had sat with the Flying Beetle the latter's worn and oil-stained khaki with its strip of medal ribbons had rendered hideously and unmistakably plain to the laird the knowledge that he was a weakling and an outcast who had no place in the world of men.

For uniform and ribbons were the stamp of manhood these days—a stamp which he would never bear.

Standing there by the window, the laird bowed his head.

“O God,” he whispered brokenly, “give me one chance . . . *just one chance*——”

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Leave, in those grey days of war, had a habit of passing all too quickly, and, almost before the Flying Beetle and his cousin realized it, seven days of the fourteen had sped.

“Just one more week, Alastair!” exclaimed the Flying Beetle as they sat at breakfast one morning. “So we'll have to make the most of it. If it slips past as quickly as this week's done, I'd better start packing now. Coming riding this morning?”

“Yes,” answered the laird.

Breakfast over, they made their way to the stables and were soon riding out across the brown bracken and heather which covered the moors around Clancarde.

“Come on!” cried the Flying Beetle, pointing to the placid grey waters of Loch Krane, half a mile away. “I'll race you to the boathouse, yonder!”

“Right!” exclaimed the laird.

They broke into a gallop, their mounts racing neck and neck until, as they neared the low stone wall which had once marked a boundary of Clancarde, the Flying Beetle commenced to draw ahead.

Gathering his reins and taking his horse well by the head, the Flying Beetle put him at the jump. But in taking off, the animal pecked and stumbled. Gallantly it attempted to recover, but its forelegs struck the wall and it fell heavily, sending the Flying Beetle hurtling from the saddle to crash to the ground where he lay a limp and huddled heap.

Leaping the wall, the laird flung himself from his own saddle and ran to where the Flying Beetle was lying. Turning him over, the laird gently raised the unconscious lad's head. The Flying Beetle's face was deathly pale and his left arm was hanging in a queerly twisted manner. Slowly his eyes flickered open and with dawning consciousness, a moan of agony came from his livid lips.

“Steady, old chap!” said the laird. “I'll have to get help!”

The Flying Beetle tried to grin, his lips twisted bravely, then his head fell limply back and he relapsed into unconsciousness again.

For a moment the laird knelt there irresolute. Then gently he lowered his cousin to the ground, and getting to his feet, whipped off his jacket. Rolling it up he placed it beneath the Flying Beetle's head to act as a makeshift pillow. Then catching his horse he leapt into the saddle and set off for Clancarde at a breakneck gallop.

He had to get help to have the Flying Beetle brought home and someone despatched to Glenmuir for Doctor Fraser. How badly the Flying Beetle was injured he did not know, but he did know there was little he could have done by remaining with him and every moment so spent might prove to have been a dangerous waste of time.

Reaching Clancarde the laird sent Alec, the gardener's lad, post-haste for Doctor Fraser, then returned to the scene of the accident with Williams and old Angus.

The Flying Beetle was still unconscious when they reached him, and after forcing a little brandy between his bloodless lips, they bore him gently back to Clancarde on a stretcher improvised from a hurdle, and got him to bed.

"His left arm and three ribs are broken," said Doctor Fraser after he had made his examination. "He is in no danger if we can avoid complications setting in, but he will have to have constant care and attention. I will send a nurse here. When does his leave expire?"

"At the end of the week," replied the laird.

"He'll not see France again for some weeks," said the doctor. "I suppose you will acquaint the Air Ministry with what has happened?"

"Yes," assented the laird. "They'll want a doctor's certificate, I expect, so if you'll write me one out I'll enclose it in my letter!"

He walked with Doctor Fraser to the latter's car, and having seen him off, returned thoughtfully to the house. Making his way to the library he commenced to pace up and down, his hands in his pockets, his head sunk on his chest.

Suddenly he halted and squared his shoulders as though he had come to some decision. For a moment he stood there, then stepping briskly to the door, he went upstairs to his cousin's room.

During the next few days the laird spent every available moment with his cousin and under expert care and attention the Flying Beetle commenced slowly to mend.

"And to think," he said wistfully one evening, "that to-morrow I was to have returned to France. You've written to the Air Ministry, Alastair?"

"Yes," answered the laird. He hesitated a moment, then went on: "I—I hope you won't mind, but I've got to leave you for a few days. I'm leaving for London to-night!"

"Why, whatever for?" exclaimed the Flying Beetle, looking at him in surprise.

"Oh, it's just some business connected with the estate," replied the laird. "I don't want to go into details otherwise I'll have nurse down on me for boring you. I had a letter from Dagleish, the family lawyer, this morning. He wants to see me!"

"The poor old bird's always fussing over something," smiled the Flying Beetle. "Well, don't let him keep you in town too long, old chap. It'll be lonely here without you!"

The laird turned away towards the door.

“Yes,” he said in a low, queer voice, “I found it lonely without you.”

Dusk had deepened into night, the curtains had been drawn and the lamp lighted when next he returned to the Flying Beetle’s room. He was overcoated and ready for his journey.

“Good-bye, Harry!” he said, crossing to the bed. “Get fit whilst I’m away!”

“I shall certainly do my best,” smiled the Flying Beetle.

To his inward astonishment his cousin suddenly bent and kissed him on the brow before turning abruptly on his heel and quitting the room.

Never, even when they had been quite small kids, had the quiet and reserved Alastair been guilty of such a demonstration of affection. And long after he had heard the laird’s car purr down the avenue on its way to Glenmuir station, the Flying Beetle lay wondering what had caused his cousin to bid him so strange a farewell.

But the Laird of Clancarde knew why he had bidden the Flying Beetle that farewell. It was because he would never see him again. For the night express which was bearing the laird Londonwards through the darkness was bearing him also to his death.

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In the laird’s carefully packed bag was the strip of medal ribbons cut from the Flying Beetle’s tunic. And in the laird’s pocket were the Flying Beetle’s papers. Furthermore, there had been delivered at a certain London hotel a new khaki uniform which was to be collected and donned by the laird on his arrival in town.

How ridiculously simple it all was. He had not reported the Flying Beetle’s accident to the Air Ministry and consequently the Flying Beetle was expected back from leave. And the Flying Beetle was to report to a new squadron at Ouchy where—as the laird had discovered by means of adroit questioning—he was personally unknown even if his reputation wasn’t.

Well, the laird intended to turn up at Ouchy and report as Captain Harry Davies, the Flying Beetle. It was an impersonation which would require no tedious keeping up, for on his first flight over the German lines he would be shot down and killed.

The laird had no illusions about that. To go over without experience and without ever having fired a synchronized gun in his life was simply asking for a death which was certain to come.

But the laird didn’t mind. He would die game and before he went earthwards in the death plunge it wouldn’t be his fault if an enemy pilot hadn’t preceded him.

In any case he would have struck a blow for his country and would have died like a man on the battlefield instead of skulking at home, an object of pity and contempt.

So thinking, the laird settled himself more comfortably in the corner seat of his compartment, and lulled by the clickety-click of the racing wheels, drifted off into peaceful slumber.

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The squadron at Ouchy received him without suspicion, and because he firmly declined to talk about himself, or, indeed, about anything very much, he got through his first evening there more comfortably and smoothly than he had dared to hope.

He intended turning in fairly early in order to be as fit as possible for the eventful morrow, and he was on the point of seeking his hut when Major Grant, the Squadron Leader, sent for him.

“Oh, Davies,” said the major. “A telephone message has just come through from French Brigade Headquarters at Rambervilliers. A German kite balloon opposite their sector is worrying them. It ascended at dawn this morning for an hour and will, presumably, go up at dawn again in the morning. You might destroy it for them, will you?”

“Yes, certainly, sir!” replied the laird.

Destroy a German kite balloon, he thought, as he made his way to his quarters. Well, that shouldn't be a very hard job. A sitting target, unless it was one of those decoy balloons of which the Flying Beetle had sometimes spoken. But it could scarcely be a decoy, for a decoy wouldn't be put up for an hour only.

Really, reflected the laird as he undressed and turned in, it was astonishing how much he knew about France and the fighting front from the airman's side of it. Yet it was understandable, for apart from the talks he had had with the Flying Beetle, he had always read and re-read the latter's letters until he could almost have quoted them by heart.

He lay long awake that night—for, to the best of his knowledge, it would be his last on earth. And, in spite of himself, he found it a disturbing thought. Eventually, however, he drifted off into restless slumber from which he awoke to find his batman standing over him, saying:

“It's five o'clock, sir!”

“Oh, is it?” said the laird. “All right!”

He rose, dressed, and crossed to the mess where he gulped down a cup of scalding black coffee.

Returning to his hut, he took down his new flying kit from its peg and made his way to the hangars where a little white-winged Sopwith Pup was being wheeled out on to the tarmac.

It was strange how calm he felt, he reflected, as he watched a sergeant mechanic clamber up into the cockpit and switch on whilst another mechanic stood by to swing the propeller.

“Contact!” called the sergeant.

“Contact!” repeated the mechanic and next instant the engine burst into life with a reverberating roar.

Running the engine up to full revolutions on brief but searching test, the sergeant throttled down, and leaving the propeller ticking over, dropped to the ground.

“She's all right, sir,” he reported. “Giving her revs!”

“Thanks!” nodded the laird. “D’you mind showing me the controls. I don’t know much about Sopwith Pups. I’m expecting my own bus from Duville to-day. Somebody’ll ferry it along here for me!”

A few minutes later he was fully conversant with the controls, and, settling himself more comfortably in his seat, he studied his map. Then stowing the map away, he pulled on his gloves and his fingers closed on the throttle.

The drone of the quietly-running engine deepened to a roar and as the little machine quivered against the chocks, the laird’s gloved hand shot up.

In response to the signal the waiting mechanics whipped away the chocks from in front of the tired wheels of the undercarriage and the scout shot forward to take the air in a lifting, clumsy climb.

“And that,” said the sergeant staring after it, “is the famous Flying Beetle, is it?”

“Yes,” grunted the mechanic. “Seems a bit heavy-handed on the controls to me!”

“I don’t know about being heavy-handed,” responded the sergeant, “but them questions what he asked me about the controls was the sort of questions a cadet would ask you—not a blinkin’ fighting pilot.”

“Perhaps he was pulling your leg?” suggested the mechanic.

“Ah!” said the sergeant darkly. “A larky cove, eh? I’ve met ’em before!”

Meanwhile the laird, feeling anything but a larky cove, had swung southwards towards Rambervilliers, climbing as he went. Dawn had already come and as he crossed the line at a height of ten thousand feet above the French sector, he suddenly stiffened in his seat.

Far below him, a dark blob against the background of mud and trench, was a kite balloon lazily ascending.

The laird lost no time in debating the best method of his attack. Yonder was his quarry and he intended to get it. So forward went his control stick and with engine thundering at full revolutions, he tore down towards the kite balloon.

The fact that the sky about him was now a screaming inferno of exploding shrapnel from German anti-aircraft guns on the ground below, daunted him not at all. Grimly he held on, thundering down through the barrage with wind shrieking madly through flying wires and struts.

His gloved finger closed on the trigger of his synchronized gun and as the crackle of exploding cartridges sounded above the thunder of his engine, hot flame from the belching muzzle licked back past the cockpit windshield.

Eight hundred feet—five hundred feet—one hundred feet separated him from the kite balloon. Already the observer was clambering frenziedly out of the basket. Suddenly a tongue of blood-red flame licked along the envelope, spread with amazing rapidity, and as the balloon went plunging earthwards in flames, the laird yanked back his control stick and went soaring skywards in a stalling zoom.

Well, that was that job done. The thing now was to get away from the shrapnel and find a German pilot.

So eastwards flew this madman of a laird—eastwards into Germany, heading into the rising sun of morning. Time and again he peered down with close interest at the ground far below where long grey columns of marching men were moving forward to the line, accompanied by ammunition wagons, ambulances, heavy tractor-drawn guns and all the grim appurtenances of war.

It was on one of these occasions when he was staring earthwards that his hand suddenly tightened convulsively on the control and his eyes glittered exultantly.

For there, a full thousand feet and more below him, was a double-seater German Fokker, the black Iron Crosses plainly visible on wings and fuselage.

The laird didn't hesitate. Forward went his control stick and with engine thundering under open throttle, he tore down on the German in a screaming dive, his gloved finger pressed steadily on the trigger of his synchronized gun.

But the German pilot saw him coming and refused to fight. He swung away towards the east, and as the laird's foot moved on the rudder bar in order to follow, he felt a sudden numbing pain in his shoulder and the dashboard in front of him was riven as though by an invisible axe.

Swiftly turning his head the laird looked behind him. As he did so his heart missed a beat. For thundering down on his tail from out of the sun was a squadron of ten German scouts.

Trapped!

Fool that he was not to have realized that the two-seater pottering about was a decoy to lure him to attack and leave his tail exposed to the swift and deadly hawks wheeling up there in the cover of the sun.

Well, the laird had expected death and here was death at hand!

But he wasn't going under without a struggle, so yanking back his control stick he went soaring up and up in an almost perpendicular zoom.

He had never looped a machine in his life, but he knew exactly how to do it, and he threw the Sopwith Pup over in a whirlwind loop which nearly knocked all the breath out of him.

But his nose was pointing earthwards again—and that was all that mattered. Yanking open the throttle to full and with gun ablaze, he went hurtling down on the German formation, went right through it, then zoomed and dived again.

The amazing ferocity, the almost insane savagery of the attack, threw the German scouts into temporary confusion. But the pilots were veterans with nerves of steel, men who had won their spurs in many a hard-fought fight above the battle-smoke.

Breaking formation, they banked to port and starboard. Then control sticks were whipped forward and the Germans roared earthwards, gathering in a few seconds the necessary speed to take them soaring up in a zoom which would bring them out above this suicidal maniac.

One plane failed to pull out of that dive, however, and it went plunging earthwards with the pilot lying a limp and huddled heap over the controls, his spine shattered by a burst of bullets.

But the Germans had gained height by now and with gloved fingers curled round the triggers of their snarling guns they drove in on this madman who had attacked them single-handed.

Frantically the laird twisted and swerved, striving desperately to stave off Death until he had sent at least another Boche to his doom—and as his feet slid backwards and forwards on the rudder bar he found time to be astonished at the amazing manner in which the gallant little Sopwith responded to the controls.

But the end was near and the laird knew it. The scout was beginning to reel beneath him, he was deathly sick with the agony of a shattered shoulder, and his right arm was hanging numb and useless.

At any instant now the last fatal burst of bullets must come whanging into him, sending him and his machine earthwards in the death plunge.

If only he could get height. It was height he wanted. But something had happened to his rear controls and the Sopwith would not climb.

Queer, he thought, why that final burst of bullets had not got him yet. Passing shaking hand across his spattered goggles, he peered outboards. There was nothing there. Weakly he turned his head.

He had pulled out of the fight and a mile or more behind him the remaining nine Fokkers were engaged in a desperate and defensive battle against ten white-winged British Camels which had apparently been out on dawn patrol.

Turning to his controls again, the laird pressed weakly on the rudder bar. He would go back and help these newcomers. But what was the use? He had neither the cartridges, nor the strength, for he was almost fainting now with pain and loss of blood.

Confound it!—he had fainted, he believed. Certainly he had not seen the approach of the white-winged Camels which were now flying to port and starboard of him and keeping height and pace with him as they escorted him back to the line.

Febly he waved to them, then turned and looked behind again. The sky was clear. So the fight was over and the victors were seeing him home.

Yes, home, for yonder were the trenches and here was the bursting shrapnel of the German anti-aircraft guns. The laird grinned foolishly. What at, he did not know, unless it was at the utter futility of the shrapnel. For, see, the barrage was passed and yonder were the hangars of Ouchy.

Mechanically the laird pushed forward his control stick and mechanically he throttled down. But how he landed he never knew. He had a jumbled recollection of a blur which was the ground, of a somewhat beastly bump, of confused voices which grew fainter and fainter until they died completely away in the wave of utter blackness which engulfed him.

When the Laird of Clancarde next opened his eyes it was to find himself in hospital far behind the line. He had been badly wounded, they told him, and it would be a long time before he would be well again.

So the days passed and he lay and wondered what would happen to him for having impersonated the famous Flying Beetle. The whole affair was bound to have come out by now.

Then one day two Brass Hats entered the ward and crossed to his bed.

“The Laird of Clancarde, I believe?” said one of them.

“Yes,” admitted that young gentleman.

“Your conduct,” said the officer sternly, “might have earned for you severe punishment had there not been exceptional circumstances in the case which have been successfully pleaded on your behalf by your cousin, Captain Davies!”

He paused, smiled, and went on in a different tone of voice altogether.

“It will probably hasten your recovery to know that although you will never be fit enough to fly again, His Majesty the King has been pleased to confer on you the rank of Lieutenant in the Royal Air Force and to invest you with the Distinguished Flying Cross for most conspicuous bravery in attacking, single-handed, a squadron of enemy Fokkers!”

CHAPTER III

ZEPPELINS WESTWARDS

“THAT affair of yours at Château Fontnoy in Alsace when you shot down the Hauptmann Gerhard von Platz was a good show, Davies,” said the grizzle-haired Colonel Tempest of Wing Headquarters at Castelnau, staring appraisingly across the blanket-covered and paper-strewn table at the youthful Captain Harry Davies, who was known from Ostend to the Swiss frontier as the Flying Beetle. “Your German must be extraordinarily fluent?”

“It’s not bad, sir,” admitted the Flying Beetle modestly. “You see, I was intended for the Diplomatic Service and I specialized in German.”

“Quite so,” nodded the colonel. “Well, apart from your own report, a full and detailed account of your masquerade at Château Fontnoy as a German officer attached to the School of Aerial Fighting at Düsseldorf was obtained from André Fontnoy by our Intelligence Bureau. It has prompted them to instruct me to ascertain if you would care to transfer to the Secret Service!”

The Flying Beetle stared in astonishment.

“The Secret Service, sir?” he repeated wonderingly.

“Yes,” replied Colonel Tempest. “It is felt in Whitehall that you might be of incalculable value behind the German lines. How does the idea appeal to you?”

“It appeals to me very much, sir,” said the Flying Beetle slowly, “except that I suppose it would mean I would have to give up flying?”

“Not necessarily,” replied the colonel. “The work you would be chiefly engaged in would be around German aerodromes and aircraft factories. However, I do not want you to come to any hurried decision. Think the matter over carefully and I will see you again to-morrow.”

A few minutes later, the collar of his leather flying jacket turned up against the bitter chill of the December afternoon, the Flying Beetle was walking thoughtfully in the direction of the hangars where the engine of his fast little Camel fighting scout was being run up on test.

The Secret Service, eh? Well, it mightn’t be a bad stunt at all. There’d be plenty of excitement in it. Not that there wasn’t plenty of excitement to be had over the line against the German Fokkers!

But this would be different, this pitting of one’s wits against the Boche counter-espionage service. The thing gripped the lad’s imagination. Yes, he’d do it. He’d accept the offer.

In the meantime, however, he had his forthcoming offensive patrol towards Liège to think about, and waiting until the sergeant mechanic had vacated the cockpit, he swung himself up into the snug pilot’s seat.

His gloved fingers closed on the throttle and he ran the engine up to full revolutions on brief but searching test. Satisfied that all was well, he snapped down his goggles, his

hand flashed up, and in response to the signal the waiting mechanics whipped away the chocks from in front of the tyre wheels of the undercarriage.

Like a greyhound from the slips, the fast little scout which bore on its fuselage the replica of a black flying beetle, shot forward across the aerodrome to rise into the lowering greyness of afternoon in a steep upward climb.

Visibility was bad and it was at a height of seven thousand feet that the Flying Beetle crossed the line. Peering down, he could vaguely discern the usual activity behind the enemy trenches.

Along thin ribbons of roadway, moved long, winding columns of marching men, together with slow-moving lorries, ambulances and heavy, tractor-drawn guns. They were all making towards the west—towards that shell-pocked sea of mud and blood which was the trenches.

But save for one brief survey, the Flying Beetle had little time for them. His job was to find and fight enemy aircraft and continually his eyes swept the sky to port and starboard, ahead and behind.

But the flight proved singularly uneventful and at long length, when the short afternoon was beginning to merge into dusk, the Flying Beetle swung his machine northwards towards the Dutch frontier, then eastwards again towards the line.

As he did so he suddenly stiffened in his seat and his gloved finger leapt to the trigger of his synchronized gun. For coming hurtling at him through the dusk were two German Fokker scouts, their guns luridly ablaze.

The Flying Beetle had one split instant in which to act. Whirling his machine round to meet the thundering Fokkers, he whipped forward his control stick and took the Camel earthwards in a screaming nose-dive. Then back came the stick and he went soaring up and up into the murk in a wild and almost perpendicular zoom.

Flinging the Camel over in a whirlwind loop, he roared down on the nearest Fokker, the wicked, stabbing flame of his gun splitting the dusk with crimson tongue.

Sensing the death which was hurtling down on him, the Fokker pilot took his scout earthwards in a mad, zigzag dive, the shriek of wind through flying wires and struts almost drowning the scream of his engine.

For moments only did he hold that dive, then back came his control stick and he went boring up and up into the dusk. The Flying Beetle followed sticking grimly to the Fokker's tail; but with stick hard across the German rolled, and pulling a sharp wing turn, drove in at the Camel with gun aflame.

He was the fraction of a second too late, for as the two scouts tore in at each other the German saw his inner starboard strut suddenly splinter as though riven by an invisible axe and bracing wires parted to slap madly against the upper wing.

Livid of face, the German kicked frenziedly on his rudder bar and whipped the stick across. The Fokker answered gallantly, whirling away from that deadly stream of Camel bullets.

But in that same instant of time the German's nerveless hand fell from the control stick. Shot through the lungs and coughing out his life-blood, he lurched to his feet.

Then as he slumped heavily forward over the controls, the Fokker dropped its nose, and with engine thundering at full revolutions, went hurtling earthwards in the death dive.

The whole thing had taken but seconds, and in a wild, soaring zoom the Flying Beetle went boring up and up into the murk, for like a scarlet meteor in the dusk the second Fokker was coming hurtling in at him with gun aflame.

The German pilot had glimpsed his comrade's death dive and his face was wolfish in its rage. Before this fight was over he would have avenged his comrade's death and rid the skies once and for all of this impudent marauding Englishman who flaunted on his fuselage the replica of a flying beetle.

The Camel's dashboard shivered into riven wood and splintered glass, bullets ricocheted off the engine cowling and tore through fabric but keeping the stick back the Flying Beetle completed a whirlwind loop.

Swerving with the swiftness of a hawk on the downward dive he tore straight in at the Fokker and again his gun roared into vicious life, stabbing the deepening dusk with blood-red flame as the cartridge belt whirled madly through the chamber and hot, acrid fumes swirled back past cockpit windshield.

The German threw his machine into a spin from which he emerged with a sudden roar of high-powered engine, to tear earthwards in a screaming dive. Then back came the stick and he went hurtling up and up into the thickening greyness of the winter dusk.

The Flying Beetle followed, grimly, relentlessly, but already the German had rolled and was thundering in at the lad, intent on finishing off the fight.

The Flying Beetle pulled a sharp wing turn, whirling momentarily out of range. But his lower starboard wing was ripped as though by a knife and three bracing wires were streaming loosely back in the slip-stream of the propeller.

The lad's oil-spattered, powder-grimed face was grim and set. This Fokker pilot was a master of aerial fighting. Except for one fleeting moment the fight, so far, had been all his. Had the Flying Beetle at length met his match?

By superb piloting the lad pulled clear of the deadly stream of bullets from the Fokker's gun, and whipping his control stick forward, he went earthwards in a thundering nose-dive, swerving wildly as he went.

Crouched over his controls, his lips savagely a-grin, the German followed. In his heart was wild exultation, for he had got the measure of this cursed Flying Beetle and he knew it. He was harrying him mercilessly, keeping always the offensive, and the end was inevitable.

The Flying Beetle glanced swiftly over his shoulder at the scarlet Fokker hurtling down on his tail, sticking to him like a leech. Only the wild swinging of his Camel on that screaming dive was saving him from the bullets of the German's synchronized gun.

But he knew his deadly peril. At any instant his spine might be shattered or his tail planes and rudder controls shot to ribbons.

Yet purposely and with a grim determination he held that dive. Then suddenly his foot jerked hard on the rudder bar and he whipped the control stick across.

The Camel whirled out of the dive with a suddenness which sent the Flying Beetle sagging heavily against the side of the cockpit and bracing wires and struts bent to the terrific strain.

But resolutely the lad kept his foot pressed on the rudder bar, and with stick across, completed a whirlwind bank.

Taken completely unawares by the amazing swiftness of the manoeuvre, the German yanked his control stick back to pull out of his dive in a thundering zoom.

But roaring in at him from the flank came the Flying Beetle. So close were the two machines that it seemed as though a crash must be inevitable, but bullets from the Camel's blazing gun were tearing through the Fokker's fuselage between engine cowling and cockpit, and as the Flying Beetle zoomed up to roar low over the German scout, the Fokker fell away into a spin.

Swiftly the Camel whirled with nose down. Then the Flying Beetle's hand dropped from the trigger of his synchronized gun. For a tongue of flame had licked back from the Fokker's riven petrol tank and the German scout was plunging earthwards through the murk, a blood-red mass of lurid flame.

Wearily the lad passed his gloved hand across his oil-bespattered goggles, and peering down, sought to get his bearings.

His compass was smashed and useless, and unless he could pick up some landmark he might, for all he knew to the contrary, be heading eastwards into Germany instead of westwards towards the line.

But so thick was the dusk that he could see nothing except a dull glow far below him in the murk—the burning wreckage of the Fokker which had hit the ground.

To get his bearings he himself would have to go down to within a few hundred feet of the ground, so swinging away from the vicinity of the blazing wreckage, the Flying Beetle throttled down and went earthwards in a long glide.

At five hundred feet he ran into thin and chilling mist. At three hundred feet he could dimly discern the shadowy outlines of leafless trees.

He came down to within a hundred feet of the ground. The trees persisted. There was nothing else save fields and copses—no landmark at all to indicate to him just where he was.

He opened up his engine. It would be necessary to do a spot of hedge-hopping here. But with a groan of dismay he juggled suddenly with the throttle, for without warning his engine had banged, spluttered and cut out on him completely.

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The Camel hit the ground a few moments later, crashing heavily on buckling starboard wings. Purposely the Flying Beetle had pulled her over an instant before the crash, deliberately writing her off so that she would be useless to the Germans into whose hands she must fall.

Bruised and shaken he scrambled from out the wreckage and stood peering about him in the mist-laden dusk which by now was deepening rapidly into night.

There was no one about and not a sound disturbed the tense and brooding hush. Satisfied that his crash had gone unobserved, the Flying Beetle stamped about, slapping his leather-clad arms to restore the circulation to numbed and stiffened limbs.

Suddenly he tensed, his fists clenched. Someone was approaching—a vague and shadowy figure looming up through the murk at a shambling run.

The fellow, whoever he was, was a civilian. The Flying Beetle noted that with inward relief. He was youngish, with sunken and cadaverous features, this unwanted arrival on the scene, and was clad in tattered blouse, ragged trousers and broken-peaked cap.

“Are you hurt, Herr Offizier?” he panted. “I heard the crash from the roadway over yonder. Your aeroplane passed over me like a shadow before you hit the ground. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I am unhurt,” answered the Flying Beetle curtly, feeling profoundly thankful that his leather flying coat covered his khaki tunic and breeches. “Where exactly is this spot? I lost myself in the mist!”

“The village of Hagfeld lies over there,” replied the other, pointing through the murk. “It is less than two kilometres from here. And the Dutch frontier is over yonder—seven kilometres away!”

He turned and stared at the wrecked Camel.

“*Mein blut!*” he began. “But she will never fly again, that one——”

Abruptly he broke off and took a step nearer the wreckage. The Flying Beetle stood tense and motionless, watching him with narrowed eyes.

The German wheeled.

“She is British!” he cried hoarsely. “She bears the red, white and blue circle of the Entente. You—*Mein Gott!*—you are no German!”

He turned to run. Just where, the Flying Beetle never knew. To Hagfeld, undoubtedly, to rouse the village. But before he had taken three paces the Flying Beetle was on him, tripping him with out-thrust foot.

The fellow went down heavily, squirmed over with a vicious snarl as the Flying Beetle pounced on him, and lashed out savagely at the lad with fists and feet.

“I hate to do it,” muttered the Flying Beetle, “but it’s you or I!”

With the words he drove his fist full to the point of the German’s jaw. The man gave a throaty gasp, quivered and went limp. Staggering to his feet the Flying Beetle stood staring down at him.

Queer how pitifully haggard and emaciated the fellow’s sunken features looked in unconsciousness. But there was no time in which to speculate upon that. Every moment was precious.

Swiftly the Flying Beetle went to work, whipping off flying coat and tunic. A few minutes later the change of garb had been effected and he stood clad in the German’s sabots, trousers, tattered blouse and broken-peaked cap.

From the pocket of the blouse he drew the man's dirty and crumpled papers, scanning them closely in the deepening murk of night.

They were stamped by the military tribunals of Erfurt and Essen and were to the effect that their owner, Hans Potz, was exempt from service with the colours owing to advanced lung trouble.

The German was stirring now, and thrusting the papers back into his pocket, the Flying Beetle stood staring down at him hesitatingly.

"Poor devil!" he muttered.

He ought to gag and bind the fellow. It was madness not to do so. But if he did leave him trussed and gagged it was a pretty safe bet that the poor devil would never survive the long and bitterly cold night of exposure which would ensue.

Turning abruptly on his heel, the Flying Beetle ran to the wrecked Camel. Taking the squat Very signalling pistol from its rack, he unscrewed the cap of the petrol tank.

Next moment there came the flash of the exploding magnesium cartridge followed instantaneously by a leaping sheet of blood-red flame.

With a hungry roar the blazing petrol seized on splintered wood and riven fabric, and with amazing swiftness the wrecked Camel became a raging holocaust of furious, swirling flame which licked and eddied far up into the night.

Flinging the empty Very pistol into the heart of the blaze, the Flying Beetle turned and sped away into the darkness, fleeing from that fiery beacon.

It was imperative that he put as much distance as possible between himself and the blazing wreckage, but as he ran he reflected with grim satisfaction that the Boches would never make use of the Camel's engine.

However, even if the flames were not seen by some villager, the Flying Beetle knew only too well that the hunt for him would be on the moment the wretched consumptive, Hans Potz, reached Hagfeld.

The news that a British pilot wearing peasant dress was in the district would be telephoned and telegraphed to all quarters, so if he was to avoid capture the Flying Beetle knew he would have to be miles away by morning.

There was one thing—the mist and the darkness were both very much in his favour and so long as he avoided blundering into some military patrol he reckoned he ought to be fairly safe until morning.

He had put two wide and uneven fields between himself and the blaze, which was still luridly visible through the murk, when suddenly he halted, his head inclined in a listening attitude.

Yes, he had not been mistaken. Somewhere in the vicinity and growing steadily in volume was the rumble of a train.

Peering in the direction of the sound he saw the faint and fiery glow of the engine cab showing luminous and ethereal through the mist.

The train was moving quite slowly. It was either taking a gradient or else the driver and his mate had slowed down in order to see what the blazing wreckage of the Camel might be.

Striking off at a tangent so as to avoid the engine cab, the Flying Beetle sprinted desperately towards the train. More than once he stumbled and almost pitched full-length on his face so rough and uneven was the going, but he reached the track as the rearmost, tarpaulin-covered wagons of a heavy freight train were sliding past.

As the tail light of the rear van passed him he leapt into the middle of the track and spurted madly in the wake of the van. His outstretched, groping hands felt the icy-cold iron rungs of the ladder which gave access to the top of the van, gripped them, and he was swung off his feet.

Next moment he was scrambling pantingly up the ladder, and gaining the top of the van, lay sprawled there, drawing great laboured breaths into his tortured lungs.

How far the train was from the nearest station he did not know, but it was imperative that he got under cover without delay. So rising at length to his knees he crept stealthily forward on all fours to the end of the van.

Below him was a tarpaulin-covered truck. Rising to a crouching attitude, the Flying Beetle tensed an instant, then leapt down on to the tarpaulin.

The damp and greasy tarpaulin afforded little hold and for one wild moment the Flying Beetle thought he was going to roll down on to the track. But his wildly clutching hands seized frenziedly on a fold in the tar-daubed canvas and he hung grimly on until he had slithered into a position of comparative security.

After that the unlacing of the tarpaulin sufficiently to allow him to wriggle beneath it was a tedious but not a difficult job and when, some twenty minutes later, the freight train clanked its way through Nurmetz station there was nothing to indicate that beneath the tarpaulin of the rearmost truck lay a fugitive British pilot, shivering with the bitter cold of the night and the icy chill of the iron cylinders on which he was lying.

What the cylinders contained, the Flying Beetle did not know. By exploration with his numbed hands he had come to the conclusion that they were gas cylinders, but whether they contained poison gas, hydrogen or helium he had no means of knowing.

Nor had he the slightest idea where the freight train was heading. All he knew was that it was bearing him steadily and with increasing impetus away from the district where the hunt for him must now be on in earnest.

And that was the sole comforting thought he had throughout the long and weary hours which ensued; hours during which the freight train thundered on through the night making for—as far as the Flying Beetle was concerned—Heaven and the authorities only knew where.

How he managed to get through the night he himself scarcely knew. There were times when he fancied he must have dozed off, times when the clickety-click of the racing wheels seemed to grow fainter and fainter and the hard, chilling iron of the cylinders less cold and uncomfortable.

But in spite of that the journey seemed interminable and he was wide awake, shivering, and utterly miserable when at 5.30 a.m. by the luminous dial of his wrist watch, the train clanked to a stop with a prodigious blowing off of steam and crashing of couplings.

Cautiously raising the tarpaulin, the Flying Beetle peered out. The train had stopped at what looked at first glance to be little better than a wayside halt. But a station name board, visible in the feeble glimmer of a platform lamp, brought a stifled exclamation to the lips of the Flying Beetle.

NORDHAVN.

Nordhavn!

The great German Zeppelin base in northern Westphalia. This then was the destination of the train. It accounted for the gas cylinders—accounted, also, for the grey-uniformed and greatcoated armed guards on the platform.

With the dawn, unloading would probably begin. But whether it did or whether it didn't, dawn must not find the Flying Beetle on the train, for to remain cowering beneath the tarpaulin meant certain discovery sooner or later.

Letting the tarpaulin fall back into place, the lad slithered stealthily across the cylinders, and raising the tarpaulin on the other side of the truck, peered out.

The track there was apparently deserted and was flanked by the rear of three long and enormous sheds, the black bulk of which loomed mightily against the blue-black of the sky.

The Flying Beetle's heart missed a beat. These were the Zeppelin sheds. Inside them, unless they were out raiding, would be the monsters who had already wrought such havoc over London and the eastern counties of England.

Letting the tarpaulin fall back into place, the Flying Beetle swiftly pondered his course of action. Here he was, an Englishman, in the very heart of enemy country with precious little chance of escape, but with an amazingly good chance of striking at least one very shrewd and pretty blow for Britain before he was taken.

There would be petrol in those sheds somewhere. Bombs, also, maybe. If only he could destroy one of these marauders of the night sky, then whatever happened to him after that wouldn't matter very much.

As a matter of fact, he had no illusions as to what would happen to him if he were taken after destroying a Zeppelin. He would be shot. The mere fact that he was in German peasant garb would be sufficient to damn him as a spy.

However, there was no use thinking about that. If he was going to act, he'd better act now before the first chill greyness of dawn lightened the eastern sky.

Stealthily raising the tarpaulin, he peered out. The track between the trucks and the rear of the Zeppelin sheds was still deserted.

Slithering from beneath the tarpaulin, the Flying Beetle dropped to the track, tensed an instant, then sped like a shadow to the blacker shadow of the nearest shed.

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Without a sound the Flying Beetle moved along the length of the shed. The entrance doors were open, and, pacing backwards and forwards in front of them was an

armed sentry, visible in the yellow glimmer of light which shone from out the vast interior of the shed.

Crouched rigid and motionless the Flying Beetle peered round the shed, waited until the sentry was pacing away from him, then slipped into the gloom and shadow of the interior.

He was conscious of a strange thrill as he saw looming mighty and gigantic above him the monster hull of Zeppelin L 110. Next instant he had merged with and was lost in the black shadow beneath the giant hull and crept cautiously forward until he reached the control car.

There he paused, listening with bated breath. From the interior of the great ship came no sound and fairly certain that there was no one aboard her, the Flying Beetle slipped into the control car.

So far, so good. The thing to do now was to find the petrol leads. The trouble was he dared not switch on any of the lights, even had he known where the switches were located.

Groping his way through the control cabin he entered the adjoining wireless cabin. He knew it was the wireless cabin, for the glimmer of the shed lights filtered through the ventilation ports and gleamed on switches, dials and gauges.

Suddenly he froze. Outside in the shed came the rumble of voices and the muffled tread of feet. There were men there, many men. What was it? Mechanics, fitters and riggers coming on duty? Most probably, for *réveillé* must have sounded before now.

Someone entered the control car. The lights there blazed on. The Flying Beetle had one split second in which to act. Below the starboard ventilation port was a locker which seemingly served also as a seat.

Lifting the lid the Flying Beetle slipped inside, crouched down on coils of wire and spare parts, and lowered the lid. He was not a moment too soon, for heavily booted feet clumped into the cabin and there came the rumble of voices.

If the Flying Beetle had been uncomfortable beneath the tarpaulin of the freight train he was a hundred times more cramped and uncomfortable in the darkness of the wireless room locker, but there he was forced to remain whilst a weary and interminable hour dragged by and then another.

There was considerable activity aboard the ship and he could hear clangings and hammerings and men moving about the ship. Whenever he could he kept the lid of the locker slightly raised to let air into his cramped quarters and to hear better what was going on around him.

He dared not come out. To have done so would have been madness. Yet he would have to come out sooner or later. The point was—what was happening? What did all this activity aboard the ship signify?

He soon knew, for shortly after dawn he heard sharp orders being given outside the ship, heard the faint creak of girders, and felt the giant airship begin to move slowly forward from out the shed.

Suddenly the forward movement stopped and was replaced by a slight regular swaying motion. The Zeppelin, then, was out of the shed.

A sudden muffled roar followed by another and another told him that the six engines of the ship were being started up and his heart beat rapidly with excitement.

The Zeppelin was about to take the air. On what mission? On a test flight—or on a bombing raid westwards over England?

Sharp commands rang through the control room, the ship lifted, the locker tilted, and the Flying Beetle knew that L 110 was boring up into the grey morning.

Thirty minutes passed. Listening intently to the steady hum of the engines and realizing that a definite course was being held, the Flying Beetle came to the conclusion that this was no test flight but a grim and certain mission.

Raising the lid of the locker he rose to his feet.

The wireless operator, seated at his transmitting and receiving set, headphones on his ears, stared at the Flying Beetle with dilated eyes.

“Who the—who the devil are you?” he rasped, leaping to his feet.

“I didn’t mean any harm,” whined the Flying Beetle, who had decided on his course of action. “I didn’t know the airship was going up——”

“Oh, you didn’t, didn’t you?” cut in the other harshly, whipping off his headphones and gripping the lad by the arm. “Well, you can tell that to the commander. Come on!”

Still holding the Flying Beetle by the arm he thrust him roughly into the control cabin where the stern-visaged and leather-jacketed Senior Lieutenant Gerhard von Schragen, commander of the ship, was standing with his officers.

“What does this mean?” grated von Schragen. “Who is this man?”

“A stowaway, sir!” replied the wireless officer. “I found him hiding in my cabin!”

Von Schragen stared angrily at the ragged peasant lad.

“Explain!” he rasped.

“It was like this, Herr Offizier,” whined the Flying Beetle. “I had nowhere to go—nowhere to sleep. I crept into the shed where it was warm. But I thought the soldiers might find me and put me out. So I crept into the ship and—and went to sleep in the locker. When I woke we—you—were in the air——”

“Who are you?” cut in von Schragen harshly.

“Hans Potz, Herr Offizier!” Eagerly and with trembling hands the Flying Beetle fished for his dirty identification papers. “Rejected for service with the colours by the military tribunals of Erfurt and Essen owing to lung trouble——”

“You don’t look like a lunger to me!” grated von Schragen snatching the papers and examining them. “Very well, we have no time now to investigate your story. You are under close arrest. When we return to Nordhavn—if we ever do return—your story will be fully investigated and if it is found that you have lied you will be shot. Even if you are telling the truth you will be punished with rigorous imprisonment for this offence!”

“I—I am telling the truth,” stammered the Flying Beetle. “But, Herr Offizier, what do you mean—if we ever do return?”

Von Schragen laughed harshly.

“I mean,” he said, “that we are bound for England. Our objective is London. Many of us do not return!”

There were four other Zeppelins taking part in that raid, and when at 12.30 p.m. L 110 flew at a height of a few hundred feet over Heligoland Bight, the Flying Beetle saw L 80 and L 84 approaching from Tondren in the north, and L 91 and L 98 approaching from Ahlhorn in the south.

After exchanging flag signals with outpost aeroplanes over the Bight, the Zeppelins shaped their course west-south-west towards Terschelling, climbing slowly as they went.

Although there were five airships engaged on the raid, they flew in no sort of formation, but as far as Terschelling, which was passed on the port beam about 3.30 p.m. they kept fairly close together.

Their height then was ten thousand feet, the red rim of the winter sun was already sinking low towards the distant horizon, and dusk was at hand.

Suddenly the wireless operator appeared from his cabin with a message for von Schragen.

“Commander of L 80 to Commander of L 110. Compelled to abandon flight owing to breakdown of forward starboard engine.”

Through the windows of the control car, where he was sitting hunched on a locker, the Flying Beetle saw the great bulk of L 80 turn slowly about and head back the way she had come.

Soon she had vanished in the deepening dusk and L 110 and her three companion ships drove on over the North Sea, heading towards England.

It was bitterly cold at that altitude and one of the officers handed the Flying Beetle a leather flying jacket.

“Put it on!” he said gruffly, and gratefully the lad obeyed.

As dusk deepened gradually into night the airships lost sight of each other. But as one hour succeeded another and they drove steadily on towards the English coast they kept in wireless communication with each other as far as possible.

Then came a message:

“Commander of L 84 to Commander of L 110. Where do you propose to cross the coast?”

The reply was sent out:

“Commander of L 110 to Commander of L 84. Will proceed up Thames Estuary. Pass on to L 91 and L 98 if still in communication.”

It was shortly after, that oxygen cylinders were brought into the control room and word went round that the ship was nearing the English coast.

“Yonder is the first light of England!” muttered one of the crew to the Flying Beetle, touching him on the arm and pointing to an intermittent golden beam of light far away in the distance. “It is the North Foreland Lighthouse!”

With straining eyes the Flying Beetle stared at that golden beam which grew steadily clearer as the zeppelin approached. The nose of the ship was up now and she was climbing to a height of eighteen thousand feet.

Then suddenly the darkness ahead was split by wheeling searchlight beams which leapt into being from out the black void far below.

The coast defences of England!

On drove the Zeppelin and the Flying Beetle waited with a tense expectancy. There was nothing he himself could do to prevent her dropping her bombs. He was unarmed and at the first suspicious move on his part he would, he knew, be overpowered.

With engines thundering at full revolutions, the monster of the night skies drove on towards the wheeling searchlight beams, then, without warning, the sky ahead was riven by a ragged incessant sheet of blood-red flame.

It was the first barrage!

The forward windows of the control car had been opened, and with powerful night glasses pressed to his eyes, von Schragen was leaning far out, peering down at the dark land mass far below.

Hunched on his seat by the starboard window, the Flying Beetle watched the wheeling rays of the searchlights and the splitting gashes of shrapnel bursting in blood-red flame so close to the ship.

It seemed impossible that any airship could live through such a dreadful inferno of screaming shells and anti-aircraft fire. Once, when a wheeling searchlight beam seized for an instant on the mighty hull of the ship, von Schragen whirled from the control car window and yelled an order at the steersman.

The wheel spun in the man’s hands and as the airship plunged steeply the beam lost it and continued to grope aimlessly around in the night sky.

The shrapnel was coming up thicker and faster now as the heart of the City was approached. Suddenly, two thousand feet below L 110, and half a mile or more to starboard, the Flying Beetle saw one of the companion ships glittering like some immense silver cigar in the beams of six searchlights.

It was L 84, and as the Flying Beetle watched with staring eyes, she turned from silver to a dreadful, ominous crimson, her bows dropped, and wrapped in flames, she went plunging earthwards—down, down to her doom, a ghastly, blazing mass.

Von Schragen was still peering down through the night, his glasses pressed to his eyes, and suddenly he wheeled from the window to the officer who was standing with his thumb on the bomb release.

“*Bombs away!*” he rasped.

The officer's thumb pressed hard on the bomb release, and, peering down, the men in the control cabin saw four blood-red spurts of flame amongst the dark mass of buildings far below.

Again the bomb release sent four high-explosive bombs hurtling down through the open trapdoors of the catwalk to burst with appalling and devastating effect on the city below.

All around and below L 110 the night was a ghastly sea of bursting flame and blinding yellow light, then without warning the airship lurched violently, flinging men against each other and against the sides of the car.

Almost instantly a white-faced rigger was reporting to von Schragen.

"Three of our centre gasbags have been riddled, sir," he said breathlessly. "The gas has run out!"

Von Schragen wheeled on the steersman.

"Steer north and take her down to fifteen thousand feet!" he grated.

"She is sinking herself, sir," replied the steersman, the wheel whirling in his hands.

Unsteadily and with a heavy list to port, the monster ship turned towards the north. She was slowly sinking, and, leaping to the wires which controlled the water ballast, von Schragen strummed them frantically, releasing the water in order to lighten the ship. Suddenly above the thunder of the engines and the crackle of exploding shrapnel came a loud report, and, ashen-faced, the second-in-command gripped von Schragen by the arm.

"*Mein geist!*" he cried. "Do you hear that? A girder has snapped. She is breaking up with us!"

"Keep her going at full speed towards the north!" shouted von Schragen, pushing past him and running towards the ladder which led up into the hull. "It's our only chance!"

Another loud report rang through the ship and the Flying Beetle knew then that she and all aboard her were doomed. The framework around the riddled gasbags was not strong enough to stand the strain which was being put on it and was beginning to snap.

Already the ship had dropped to nine thousand feet, but her engines were thundering at full revolutions and she was steadily drawing away from the darkened metropolis.

The shrapnel was coming up neither so thick nor so fast now and behind the ship the searchlights were beginning to shut down one by one.

Von Schragen appeared, swinging himself down into the control room.

"We've tied the anchor line across the empty gas chambers!" he cried. "Get every cylinder, all tools and every available piece of metal lashed to the line. If we can weight her in the middle we might save her!"

He wheeled on the steersman.

"Steer east-north-east!" he rapped. "Keep her going at three-quarter speed until we have passed out to sea. What is our height? *Mein Gott!* Seven thousand feet. We might

make Ostend—we might!”

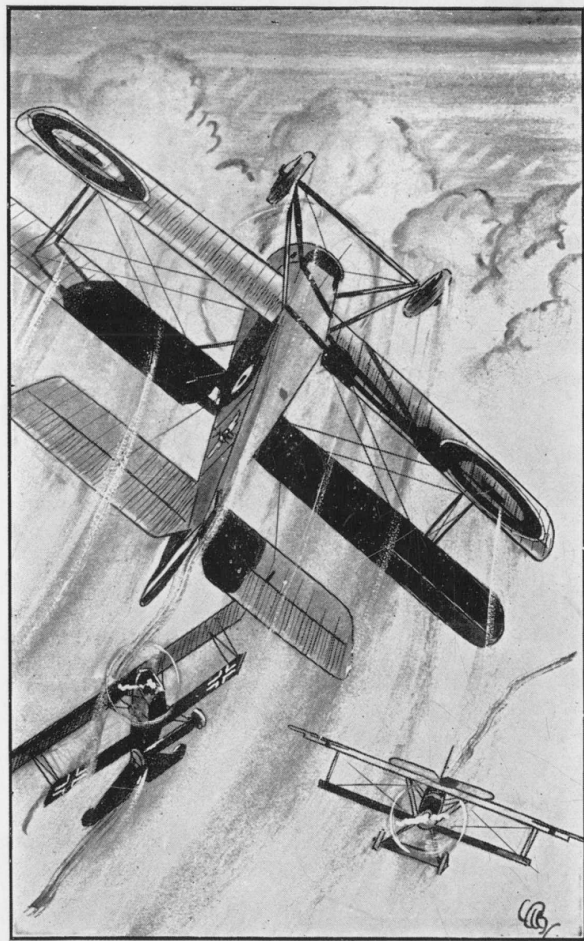
The effort to reach Ostend was an heroic one, but it was doomed to failure. With everything possible jettisoned and thrown overboard—including the wireless gear after a despairing message reporting her condition had been sent out to the German admiral commanding naval forces at Bruges—L 110 settled slowly on the water five miles from the English coast.

Officers and crew, including the Flying Beetle, climbed up through the hull shaft on to the top platform. In response to the distress signals which flared up into the night from the German signalling pistols, three lean, grey destroyers raced to their aid and took off every man.

Towards midday of that same day, Major Tempest at Wing Headquarters at Castelnaud received a telephone message relayed from Whitehall.

“The Flying Beetle is safe in London,” said the message. “He crossed from Germany aboard the ill-fated L 110. Details being forwarded by courier!”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” ejaculated the major in blank astonishment, and hastened off in the direction of the mess.



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FLINGING THE CAMEL OVER IN A WHIRLWIND LOOP, HE
ROARED DOWN ON THE NEAREST FOKKER.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEATH CLOUD

“CAPTAIN DAVIES to see you, sir!”

Sir Douglas Malcolm, Chief of the Intelligence Bureau in Whitehall, looked up from his desk.

“Thanks, Foster, show him in!” he said.

Foster, his secretary, withdrew, to reappear a few moments later to usher into Sir Douglas’s presence a pleasant-featured young man wearing a neat grey lounge suit and carrying a soft felt hat and walking stick.

“How d’you do, Davies?” said Sir Douglas, studying his visitor keenly as he rose and shook hands. “I am very pleased indeed to meet you!”

He was, for he and his colleagues had heard a lot about this young Davies who, known from Ostend to the Swiss frontier as the Flying Beetle, was one of the most brilliant air fighters on the Western Front.

Waiting until the secretary had withdrawn and his visitor was seated, Sir Douglas got straight down to business.

“Following your extraordinarily successful impersonation of a German officer when you were shot down behind the German lines by a squadron of enemy Fokkers a few weeks ago,” he said, “we made the suggestion that you should transfer from the Royal Flying Corps to the Secret Service. That suggestion—or shall I say invitation?—was conveyed to you by Major Tempest at Wing Headquarters at Castelnaud?”

“Yes, sir, that is correct!” assented the Flying Beetle.

“Before you had come to a decision,” went on Sir Douglas, “you had another forced landing in Germany owing to engine trouble. On this occasion you effected an astonishing escape by disguising yourself as a civilian and stowing away aboard Zeppelin L 110, which was forced down in the North Sea following a raid on London!”

He glanced at the open dossier on the desk in front of him.

“I have the full details here,” he proceeded, “and they convince us more than ever that you can be exceedingly useful to us in Germany. You speak German like a native, I understand?”

“I was intended for the Diplomatic Service, sir,” explained the Flying Beetle. “I made a special study of German and always spent my holidays over there. I was at Halle University on the outbreak of hostilities.”

Sir Douglas looked at him.

“Davies,” he said earnestly, “we have urgent need of men such as you. We have many splendid fellows in the Secret Service, but we must have more. As far as you are concerned, of course, such service will be entirely voluntary—but we need you and can use you!”

There was something in his tone which caused the Flying Beetle to ask:

“Have you any particular job in view for me, sir?”

“Yes, we have,” replied Sir Douglas quickly. “As perhaps you know, the Germans have a school of flying instruction at Altenburg in Bavaria. But what has made the place doubly interesting to us is the fact that a poison gas factory has recently been established there. It is of paramount importance that we acquire full details as to the plant and output of that factory. We think you could get that information for us!”

He paused, looking anxiously at the Flying Beetle. That young man was silent a moment, then he spoke:

“Very well, sir,” he said decisively, “I’ll have a shot at it!”

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The building of the poison gas factory on the outskirts of Altenburg had given that small German township an importance it had never known before, and had put much money into the pockets of fat Otto Baum, proprietor of the Golden Boar restaurant in Altenburg’s main thoroughfare.

There was much hustle and bustle in Altenburg nowadays, much coming and going of uniformed and civilian officials; and if the workers at the poison gas factory thought the Golden Boar rather too high-class for them, their superiors didn’t, and almost every night the restaurant was crowded with officials and their wives and also with young officers from the School of Flying Instruction.

Consequently, although fat Otto daily deplored the war and the dreadful slaughter on the Western Front, he secretly hoped it would go on for a long time yet—but not too long, in case he should be called up for service with the Landsturm.

The very thought of having to wear a uniform and carry a nasty rifle with a beastly long bayonet made fat Otto shudder and gave him a cold, crawling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

One other complaint which Otto had against the war was the scandalous scarcity of waiters for which it was directly responsible. Every able-bodied man—and a lot who were far from being able-bodied—were serving with the colours, and the Golden Boar boasted only three waiters when it could have done with twice that number.

One says “boasted,” but boasted is quite the wrong term to use, for Otto certainly didn’t boast about his waiters. As a matter of fact every time he looked at them he thought what a stupid, blockheaded, slovenly trio they were.

There was Karl, who had been rejected for military service because of his club-foot and misshapen shoulder. Three tribunals had said he could neither march nor shoot, and the way in which he went clumping noisily about the dining-room got thoroughly on fat Otto’s nerves.

Then there was old Johann of the rheumy eyes, the trembling hands, the quavering voice and the perpetual sniff. Johann was too old for military service—too old even for the Landsturm, and far, far too old, declared Otto, to be a waiter.

The third waiter was undoubtedly the best of the three, which wasn’t saying much. Hans was his name, and he was a consumptive, rejected for service with the colours by

the military tribunals of Leipzig and Frankfurt.

Pale and sunken of cheek, with lank, black hair, spectacles, and a dry, hacking cough, it was exactly three weeks ago that Hans had drifted into the Golden Boar restaurant, spoken of the card in the window which announced "WAITERS and KITCHEN STAFF WANTED," and asked for a job.

Otto had taken him on, observing like a true patriot that whilst there's a war on and all the sons of the Fatherland are fighting at the front you've got to be content with the miserable specimens which are left behind.

On this particular day, as the short winter afternoon was merging into dusk, Hans was standing at the dining-room window staring despondently out at the silently falling snow which was whitening the street.

He had a dirty napkin over one arm, and as he heard the door of Otto's office suddenly open he commenced to flick imaginary crumbs from a nearby table.

"Hola, there!" wheezed Otto, waddling excitedly across the empty dining-room. "You, Hans, I've just had a telephone message. What do you think has happened?"

Hans turned to face him.

"The war's over?" he said.

"Don't be a silly fool!" snapped Otto impatiently. "The war won't be over for a long time yet. No, General Salzmann and three other officers are coming here to dinner. Here, mind you!"

"And who might General Salzmann be, mein Herr?" asked Hans meekly.

"Who might General Salzmann be?" exploded Otto wrathfully. "Dolt—imbecile—blockhead, don't you ever read the newspapers?"

"I do not get much time, mein Herr," observed Hans mildly. "Eighteen hours of the twenty-four I am here, and when I am not here I am sleeping!"

Otto snorted and reddened. The remark had penetrated even his thick hide.

"Everybody knows who General Salzmann is!" he wheezed excitedly. "He is aide-de-camp to the Crown Prince. He is one of the most important officers of the High Command. And you stand there like a silly fool and ask who he is. Pah, you make me sick!"

"But what is he coming here for?" asked Hans in astonishment.

"He is coming here to eat, of course!" snorted Otto. "What d'you think he's coming here for? He's been at the poison gas factory. At least that is where the telephone message has come from. It came from Herr Furzanger himself, that message—Herr Furzanger, who has full command of the factory. General Salzmann and his three officers require dinner here before leaving for—for—well, for wherever they are leaving for. They require a private room!"

"But we haven't got a private room," said Hans gaping.

"I know we haven't got a private room, dolt!" bellowed Otto. "That is just what I want to tell you about. We must arrange my own sitting-room as a private dining-room.

Get Karl—get Johann. Hurry, fool, the place will be filling up soon and we must have everything ready. Go on, go on, I will lend a hand myself!”

Frenziedly he propelled Hans across the dining-room, and as that individual sped in search of the club-footed Karl and the aged Johann, fat Otto bustled into his private sitting-room and commenced pulling the furnishings furiously about.

“I myself will wait on the General and his officers!” he announced breathlessly when, with the aid of his three waiters, he had got the room transformed into a private dining-room with neatly-laid table and glittering cloth and cutlery. “I cannot trust it to you blockheads. Anyway, you will be busy enough out there in the dining-room. There are sure to be many here to-night when it becomes known that the Herr General and his staff are dining here!”

“What do you think has brought him to the poison gas factory, mein Herr?” asked Hans, giving a fork a final polish.

“How in hell do I know what’s brought him to the factory?” flared Otto; then, as though realizing that the remark hadn’t been particularly impressive, he went on: “But it will be something very important, I know. Very important, indeed. Day and night they have been working in the gas factory this past month. Enormous quantities of poison gas have been made. Perhaps the General will tell me what is afoot. You’d be astonished if you knew the secrets which my patrons tell me!”

The aged Johann sniffed. He had a perpetual sniff, but on this particular occasion it was a sniff which caused the fat Otto to glare at him suspiciously.

“Stop making that swinish noise in here!” exploded Otto. “Go on, get into the dining-room, the three of you. I am off to change. You, Hans, you will attend me whilst I escort the General in here when he arrives!”

He bustled excitedly away upstairs, and, resplendent in evening-dress, came bounding down again when, some thirty minutes later, a long and glistening limousine came gliding to a stop outside the entrance of the Golden Boar.

“Come on, come on!” he raved at Hans, who was lurking in the entrance lobby. “What are you waiting there for, idiot?”

Pushing open the swing doors and followed by Hans he bustled out towards the car, bowing obsequiously and rubbing his podgy hands as though he were washing them.

“Good evening, Herr General!” he wheezed fawningly. “I am honoured—I cannot find words——”

Appalling disaster. He slipped on the hard-trodden snow, his feet shot out from under him and he sat down with a sudden and horrid bump.

The thin lips of the tall and grey-cloaked General Salzmann twitched in a bleak and fleeting smile. Stepping past the gasping and petrified Otto, he and his three grey-coated companions followed Hans into the restaurant and to the private room which had been prepared for them.

Scrambling to his feet, the frantic Otto rushed back into the entrance lobby and pounced on Hans, who was coming out of the private dining-room.

“Fool!” he raved. “Why did you not have the snow removed? I am wet—I am soaked—I must remove my trousers!”

“But, mein Herr,” protested Hans aghast, “you cannot wait on the General without your trousers!”

“I do not intend to wait on him without my trousers, imbecile!” snarled Otto. “You must wait on them until I have changed. Obtain the wine order—take in the *hors d’œuvres*—move, fool, move!”

Pushing Hans furiously away, he bounded upstairs to his room, where he savagely changed into a dry pair of trousers. Then rushing downstairs again he glared at Hans, who was standing in the doorway of the little office which adjoined the private dining-room.

“Well?” he burst out in a furious whisper. “What are you standing there for?”

“Something has happened!” said Hans. “Come in here. I will tell you!”

“What have you to tell me?” stuttered Otto in sudden alarm, following Hans into the office. “What is wrong? Is the room not suitable for the General——”

“The room is quite suitable!” cut in Hans, closing the door and turning to Otto. “No, mein Herr, what I wish to tell you is this. You are a fat, unpleasant and atrocious pig. I am very glad you sat down in the snow. And now I am going to hit you very hard on one of your many and repulsive chins!”

The astounded Otto had a momentary glimpse of a new Hans—an erect and square-shouldered Hans who smiled with his lips, but not with his eyes, which glinted behind their spectacles—then Hans’ clenched fist hit him a terrific smack on the jaw.

Simultaneously something else hit Otto with frightful force on the back of the head. It was the floor coming into violent contact with the back of his skull as he went down. He saw a brilliant array of stars, one blinding streak of light which eclipsed them all, then the rest was a complete black-out.

Wheeling to the door, Hans turned the key in the lock. Whipping a length of fine rope from his pocket he securely tied the unconscious Otto’s hands and feet and effectively gagged him with a napkin.

That done, he got his hands under Otto’s armpits and dragged the man’s gross and bulky form across the floor to a wall cupboard used for storing papers, menu cards and old correspondence.

Bundling Otto inside, Hans closed and fastened the door. Then turning away he adjusted his spectacles, straightened his tie, and, quitting the office, entered the private dining-room.

He was again the stoop-shouldered and subservient Hans with the dry, hacking cough, and he halted abashed and apologetic as the General snapped:

“Where the devil have you been? We’ve been ringing for five minutes and more!”

That was an exaggeration, and Hans knew it. The whole episode in the office hadn’t taken more than three minutes at the most.

"I am very sorry, Herr General," mumbled Hans. "We are under-staffed here. I was in the wine cellar——"

"All right, hurry up!" cut in the General impatiently. "We haven't all night to spend here!"

He turned to his companions as Hans commenced to remove the *hors d'œuvres*.

"Yes, between Soissons and Rheims," he said obviously picking up the threads of conversation interrupted by the entry of Hans. "It is the strongest sector on the whole of our fighting front. An attack launched there——"

He broke off, staring at Hans.

"Will you hurry, *please!*" he rasped.

Hans departed with the discarded dishes and was back again within a few moments with the next course. From then until the end of dinner neither General Salzmann nor his three officers had the slightest cause for complaint about the service, for in response to their rings Hans was in and out of the room with an alacrity which proved that the General's rebuke had had the desired effect.

The public dining-room was filling up by now, and when the aged Johann came in search of Hans he blinked his rheumy eyes in surprise to see Hans standing by the door of the private dining-room, a napkin over his arm.

"Why, I—I thought Herr Otto himself was to wait on the General!" stammered Johann.

"Herr Otto was to serve," whispered Hans, "but they are in a hurry in there and he did not move quickly enough for them. It was too much for him. He wheezed and he panted and he perspired as he ran from here to the kitchens. So I am here and he has gone to his room for a little while. But get on with your own work, Johann!"

Johann departed and when dinner in the private room was over, Hans helped the General into his cloak and the officers into their greatcoats.

A few moments later he had bowed them obsequiously out to their car, and, waiting until the limousine was purring along the snow-covered street, he re-entered the restaurant and stepped into the office.

Closing the door, he listened a moment. From the cupboard was coming a dull and muffled thumping, token that the gagged and bound Otto had come round and was trying to get out.

With a faint smile, Hans quitted the office, locking the door behind him and pocketing the key. Descending to the kitchen where the plump Frau Fratz was presiding as cook, he discarded his apron and took his seedy overcoat and shabby felt hat down from their peg.

"Why, Hans, wherever are you going?" demanded the frau in astonishment.

"I go on an errand, Frau Fratz," explained Hans. "A most important errand!"

"Indeed it must be important to take you out at this our busiest hour," grumbled the frau. "Is it for Herr Otto, this errand?"

"Yes, for who else could it be?" responded Hans.

Passing through the basement door he went swiftly up the dark and narrow area steps to the street; and with head bent and hands plunged in pockets he hurried through the falling snow, traversing a labyrinth of deserted side-streets until he reached a squalid tenement building.

Running up the unlighted and rickety wooden staircase inside, he pushed open a door on the second floor and stepped into a small and bitterly cold room which, a moment or two later, was illumined by the sickly flame of the candle which he lighted.

The furnishings of the room consisted of a broken-backed chair, a low and untidy trundle bed, a rickety-looking table void of cloth but littered with dirty dishes, and a small store cupboard.

Pulling aside the table, Hans went down on his knees and raised a couple of loose floorboards. From the cavity revealed he took the oil-stained grey uniform and grey greatcoat of an air force mechanic.

Placing them on the bed he took from the pocket of the greatcoat a flat leather case containing syringe, wax, surgical scissors, astringents and a small but complete range of instruments and accessories used in the art of make-up.

Propping a piece of broken mirror by the guttering candle he went swiftly to work, and in an amazingly short space of time the stoop-shouldered, be-spectacled and pallid-faced Hans had been replaced by a fit-looking, grim-faced, grey-uniformed mechanic, whom those who knew him on the British side of the line would have recognized as the Flying Beetle.

In the very act of bundling the discarded dress-suit, seedy overcoat and shabby hat into the cavity beneath the floorboards, the Flying Beetle tensed, his head inclined in listening attitude.

Heavy feet and excited voices were ascending the rickety staircase outside, and plainly audible were the panting, wheezing tones of Herr Otto.

Swiftly thrusting the floorboards into position, the Flying Beetle pulled the table across them and turned coolly towards the locked door as there came a sudden terrific pounding on the panels.

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Yanking open the door, the Flying Beetle found himself confronted by an infuriated Otto, who thrust him roughly aside and waddled into the room, followed by a policeman. Behind them, on the landing, was gathered a gaping crowd of onlookers who had obviously followed Otto and the policeman into the building.

“Where is he?” bellowed Otto, glaring about him in the flickering shadows cast by the guttering candle. “Where is the scoundrel. I know this is where he lives, because I have the address written in my books——”

“What the devil are you talking about?” cut in the Flying Beetle angrily. “And what d’you mean by forcing your way in here like this?”

“I’m looking for that scoundrel, Hans Krugel!” shouted Otto. “He has committed a murderous assault on me. I am going to have him locked up. Where is he—where are

you hiding him?”

“I’m not hiding him, you bladder!” snapped the Flying Beetle. “And be careful what you say. Hans Krugel is my step-brother, and I will not have him called names by such a one as you!”

He turned to the policeman.

“What is all this about?” he demanded.

The policeman commenced to explain, but Otto cut in and dwelt passionately on the assault made on him by the thrice-condemned Hans.

“And he locked me in my own cupboard,” raved Otto in conclusion, “and waited on the General himself, so as to get the handsome tip which would be forthcoming. I know him, the thieving *schweinhund!*”

The Flying Beetle laughed, but there was a note of relief in his laughter. He might have known that the gross and dull-witted Otto would put some such construction on the assault as the pocketing of the tip.

“You’re a fool!” he rasped, and turned again to the policeman. “Do you know this Hans Krugel?” he demanded.

“Yes, I have seen him!” admitted the policeman.

“Then do you think a weak, consumptive wreck such as he, is capable of knocking this fat hog down and tying him up and locking him in his own cupboard?” demanded the Flying Beetle. “Do you think Hans has the strength to do all that? Do you?”

Dubiously the policeman rubbed his chin.

“Well, no,” he admitted, “now you mention it, it does seem strange!”

He looked hard at the simmering Otto.

“Are you sure you are not making all this up?” he demanded severely.

“Making it up?” shrieked Otto, almost dancing with rage. “No, of course I’m not making it up, idiot! He did what I’ve told you——”

“I don’t believe it!” cut in the Flying Beetle roughly. “He couldn’t have done it. The policeman says he couldn’t have done it, and he should know. So get out of here and take your lies somewhere else!”

“I won’t!” bellowed Otto. “I won’t go until I’ve found him!”

Whipping his identification papers from his pocket the Flying Beetle thrust them into the policeman’s hand.

“That’s me!” he exclaimed. “Kaspar Schwartz, first-class engine mechanic attached to the School of Flying Instruction here at Altenburg. It was to be near me that poor Hans came to Altenburg. Make a note of my name, because I am going to throw this bladder downstairs and he may wish to sue me for assault!”

He made a dive at Otto, and grabbing him by the seat of his trousers and jacket collar, ran him through the press of delighted onlookers and pitched him downstairs, helping him on his way with a parting kick.

“Well, anything to say about that?” he demanded, retracing his steps to the room and confronting the policeman.

The policeman stared at him.

“No, soldier, I haven’t!” he answered. “You are fighting for the Fatherland and he is not. Moreover, as you say, Hans Krugel could not have done it. No, it is impossible. Your papers!”

He handed them back, and, turning, brusquely ordered the onlookers away from the door.

“You are waiting for Hans?” he said inquiringly, turning again to the Flying Beetle.

“Yes,” nodded the latter. “Flying is over for the day along at the aerodrome and I am off duty now until morning. I have a late pass and when I am off duty at nights I always come here and wait for Hans. I wonder where he is?”

“Oh, he’ll turn up,” said the policeman, “and when he does you will learn the truth of this affair. There is, undoubtedly, some mystery about it!”

“It’s only that fat pig’s lies!” retorted the Flying Beetle. “Anyway, what if Hans did strike him? I will wager he deserved it!”

“Yes, undoubtedly!” agreed the policeman. “Well, soldier, I must be going. I am sorry to have been dragged into this stupid business, but am glad if I have been of service to you. Tell your step-brother not to worry. *Gute nacht!*”

He raised his hand in salutation and went clumping away downstairs. As for the Flying Beetle, he closed and locked the door, blew out the candle, and laughing softly, flung himself down on the truckle bed to rest.

Within a few minutes he was sound asleep, token of the steadiness of his nerves, nor did he stir until the early hours of the morning were well advanced.

The room was bitterly cold, and in spite of his greatcoat, in which he had slept, it was stiff and numbed that he rose and brewed himself a mug of acorn coffee over a small spirit lamp.

That, a hunk of black bread and a piece of aniseed cheese sufficed him for breakfast, but the black and scalding liquid put new warmth into him.

Buttoning his greatcoat well up about his neck, he glanced round the miserable little room, which, if all went well, he would never see again. Satisfied that everything was in order, he let himself out and descended the rickety staircase to the street.

It was the darkest hour of all the night, the hour before the dawn, but already the streets through which he made his way were wakening to life as the workers in the poison gas factory trudged apathetically to work.

Taking the road which led to the hangars of the School of Flying Instruction situated a kilometre outside the town, the Flying Beetle scaled a fence when still half a kilometre from the aerodrome, and, crossing a field, made a detour which brought him out at the rear of the hangars.

There was activity within the dimly-illuminated hangars as the rigging and engines of machines were overhauled in readiness for the day’s flying, and as the sky slowly paled

towards the east first one machine and then another was wheeled out and engines started up on test.

With hands plunged in the pockets of his greatcoat, the Flying Beetle sauntered from behind a hangar and stood a moment staring at the nearest machine, a single-seater Fokker D 7.

A sergeant mechanic was seated in the cockpit running the engine up on test. Another mechanic, having filled up the tank and swung the propeller, was standing idly by, wiping his hands on a piece of waste.

The Flying Beetle moved forward and joined him.

“ ’Morning!” he grunted.

The mechanic glanced at him.

“ ’Morning!” he responded shortly.

“I just got in here late last night,” said the Flying Beetle, still staring at the Fokker. “Reporting from Düsseldorf. What’s it like here?”

“Not bad!” grunted the other, entirely unsuspecting but obviously little inclined for conversation at that hour of the morning.

Throttling down, the sergeant mechanic switched off and swung himself from the cockpit.

“She’ll do!” he observed with a casual glance at the grey-clad and greatcoated Flying Beetle. “Come on, let’s get Bamberger’s machine out!”

The mechanic followed him into the hangar. The Flying Beetle moved towards the Fokker, his fingers unbuttoning his greatcoat.

He would have about thirty seconds in which to act, and he dared not risk being hampered by his coat.

Circling the machine so that he was facing the hangar, he let his greatcoat slip from him, then swinging himself up on to the lower starboard wing he leaned into the cockpit and switched on.

To anyone watching him, he might merely have been examining the controls. To his relief he was not challenged. Dropping to the ground he moved to the propeller, gripped it, and swung on it with all his strength.

The hot engine picked up at once with a shattering roar, the Flying Beetle leapt for the cockpit and from the hangar came a hoarse, questioning shout.

Half-scrambling, half-falling into the cockpit the Flying Beetle yanked open the throttle to full and felt the little fighting scout surge forward under the pull of its whirling screw.

“What the devil are you doing with that machine?” roared the sergeant mechanic, his face convulsed with astonishment and rage, as, rushing from the hangar, he leapt for the inner port bracing stays of the Fokker.

Gripping them, he swung himself up on to the lower port wing. As he did so, the Flying Beetle’s fist took him full on the mouth, sending him reeling back and nearly causing him to be brained by the whirling propeller.

Another savage smash to the face tore the man from his hold, he fell heavily, port and starboard wings dipped in wild see-saw, then righting herself the little Fokker tore forward to bore up and up into the grey murk of dawn under the pull of her control stick.

Swinging on the climb the Flying Beetle drove northwards until the hangars of Altenburg lay a full ten kilometres behind him; then another thrust on the rudder bar and the Fokker swung her nose westwards towards the line.

The Flying Beetle was driving her forward under every inch of throttle, for he was in the direst of peril and he knew it.

Long before he could reach the line—and even with a full tank it would be touch and go whether he had sufficient petrol to take him as far as the line—every aerodrome between Altenburg and the trenches would be warned to keep a look-out for him.

And the Flying Beetle wanted most fervently to get through without a fight. It wasn't that he shirked a fight—it was simply that he was in possession of information which must be rushed through to British General Headquarters without delay, and in the event of his being attacked he had only two belts of ammunition with which to defend himself.

Those two belts had obviously been placed aboard for use in target practice, but they wouldn't go very far if it came to a scrap with a squadron of Boches sent up to intercept him.

Apart from his discomfort of mind, the Flying Beetle was suffering most acute discomfort of body, for the bitter chill of the high altitude was biting through to his very bones.

Crouched behind his cockpit windshield, seeking some protection from the icy slipstream of the thundering propeller, he roared on towards the line at a height of twelve thousand feet.

It was much too low an altitude for safety, he knew, but he dared not risk wasting precious juice in seeking a higher ceiling.

Continually his narrowed eyes, blood-shot with the cruel cold, swept the skies to port, to starboard and ahead, and it was as he was approaching Buhl that he suddenly tensed in his seat, his fingers tightening involuntarily on the control stick.

For four machines were coming up at a terrific speed from the north, and as they approached the Flying Beetle recognized them as the new fighting Halberstadt D 3's.

That their mission was to intercept him was very evident, but as the only marking the Fokker carried was the Iron Cross, they could not be immediately certain that this particular Fokker was the machine they were looking for.

With that in mind, the Flying Beetle carried grimly on. Another twenty minutes and he would be over the line. If only he could stave these fellows off until then.

But the Halberstadts meant business, for as they thundered alongside the Fokker and saw the grey-clad and bareheaded lad crouched over the controls their sticks came back, and zooming, they wheeled and came roaring down on him with guns aflame.

But at the very commencement of that zoom the Flying Beetle had whipped his control stick forward, and kicking on rudder, had whirled his Fokker into a thundering dive.

Then back came the stick, the Fokker shot skywards in a whirlwind zoom which took it clear of the blazing Halberstadt guns, rolled, and had the momentary advantage of height.

It was a brilliant fighting manœuvre carried out by a brilliant fighting pilot, and whipping forward his control stick, the Flying Beetle thundered down on the wildly wheeling Halberstadts in a screaming nose-dive.

Grimly conscious of his lack of ammunition he purposely held his fire—then from the wicked muzzle of his black-encased gun spat lurid flame and whining lead.

The nearest Halberstadt reeled drunkenly, a wisp of flame licked back from its riven petrol tank, spread with frightful rapidity, then the scout went plunging to its doom, a mass of blood-red flame surmounted by a thick and eddying pall of black smoke.

First blood to the Fokker, and the odds reduced to three to one!

But those three Halberstadts were already driving in at the Flying Beetle with cartridge belts whirling madly through the chambers and the acrid fumes of burning powder swirling back beyond cockpit windshields in the shrieking slipstreams of their thundering propellers.

Throwing his Fokker into a spin from which he emerged with a sudden roar of high-powered engine, the Flying Beetle went soaring up and up into the grey of morning.

The Halberstadts followed, grimly, relentlessly, but already the Flying Beetle had pulled a perfect Immelmann roll, and with nose down, drove in at the nearest Halberstadt.

The German pilot whirled to meet him, but again the lad's gun roared its message of death, and with a choking cry the German lurched to his feet, his gloved hands clutching at his torn and bloody throat. Then as he slumped heavily forward over the controls the Halberstadt dropped its nose, and with engine thundering at full revolutions, roared earthwards in the death dive.

The two remaining Halberstadts came driving in from port and starboard with guns ablaze. And this time their grim-faced pilots meant to make no mistake.

The range was too short for a miss, and bullets from their flaming guns tore through the wings and fuselage of the Fokker as the Flying Beetle flung the scout into a dive. Burning pain stabbed through the lad's shoulder, tearing his hand from the control stick, and white-hot metal seared his head.

The stick jerked forward of its own volition and with throttle open the Fokker went screaming earthwards out of control. Both Halberstadts followed, hurtling down on the Fokker's tail with vicious guns asnarl.

His face white and streaked with blood, his right arm numb and useless, the Flying Beetle strove desperately to get a grip on his swimming senses.

Every instant he expected a burst of bullets through the back, but as he got a grip on himself he realized that it was the speed and steepness of his vertical dive which was saving him.

His altimeter needle was swinging swiftly back. Eight thousand feet—five thousand feet—two thousand feet——

The icy-cold hurricane which shrieked past him from his thundering screw served to sweep the clinging nausea from his brain. His left hand gripped the control stick, hugging it back close to his grey tunic.

With a nightmarish swoop which sent him reeling in his seat, the Fokker came out of its dive in a terrific zoom. Up, up and up it went, a hurtling meteor shooting into the greyness above.

Instinctively the Flying Beetle whipped forward the stick, levelled up, then went earthwards again, making towards the distant trenches in a long screaming dive.

Behind him came the Halberstadts, harrying him like hawks. He had momentarily outdistanced them by the speed of his zoom and dive, but they were closing in on him again and above the roar of their engines sounded the vicious staccato snarl of their blazing guns.

Again the Flying Beetle went up and up in a soaring climb. He was nearing the line. Yonder it was, eight kilometres or less away.

If only he could make it. He glanced over his shoulder. The nearer Halberstadt was very close, roaring in at him on his port tail plane.

Whipping his stick across, the Flying Beetle kicked on full rudder and whirled to meet the attack. So close were the machines that it seemed they must crash propeller boss to propeller boss.

The German pilot yanked back his control stick. To his frantic vision it was the only thing to do to avoid a crash. But as the nose of the Halberstadt lifted, the last burst of bullets from the Fokker's gun tore through the cockpit floor.

With a sobbing groan the German lolled heavily in his seat, his flying coat wet with spurting blood. Convulsively his fingers tightened on the control stick, jerking it back. The nose of the Halberstadt lifted vertically, then dropped sickeningly as the machine stalled and went plunging earthwards, its pilot limp and dying across the controls.

The Flying Beetle saw nothing of that. With nose down again he was roaring desperately for the line, his feet moving in and out like pistons as he juggled frenziedly with the rudder bar.

Swerving like a mad thing the Fokker pursued a wild zigzag course towards the line, followed by the desperately cursing pilot of the last remaining Halberstadt.

Under any other circumstances the Flying Beetle would have turned and fought. But apart from being still sick and dazed by his wounds, plus the urgent necessity of getting through with his information, he could not fight for the simple reason that he had no cartridges left.

What the astounded German and British infantry were thinking he did not know, but it must have been an extraordinary problem for the former to solve, this harrying of

a German Fokker by a German Halberstadt.

Should they fire on these machines which bore the Iron Cross on wings and fuselage, or shouldn't they? Did one machine contain an enemy pilot—and if so, which machine?

At less than thirty feet the Fokker roared over the German trenches hotly pursued by the blazing gun of the Halberstadt. The shell-pocked shambles of No-Man's-Land swept past, then both machines were behind the British trenches.

Like the Germans, the British infantry held their fire. There was some grim mystery about this amazing stunt, but it was very apparent that this was no trench-strafting raid. Had the idea not been so utterly bizarre and Gilbertian, one might have thought that a couple of Jerries were waging a deadly and private feud.

The whole thing was over within a few seconds. The engine of the Fokker either stopped or was switched off, the machine swerved with nose down, levelled up, hit the ground with a terrific bump and overturned, its tail whanging over in a perfect arc.

The Halberstadt whirled with gun ablaze, the bullets ploughing the ground around the wrecked Fokker. Let this be said for that German pilot. He was a trier and he did not lack for nerve.

Feet only above the wrecked Fokker he flattened out, and roaring skywards in a zoom, headed back the way he had come.

A hail of bullets greeted him as he swept back over the British trenches, two R.E.8's engaged on artillery observation were thundering down on him; and being almost out of cartridges he sought the protection of his own ground guns, crashing heavily on buckling undercarriage half a kilometre behind the German lines.

The Flying Beetle, leaning dazedly against the wreckage of the Fokker, wiped the blood from his eyes and saw him go down.

“Good man!” he mumbled. “You—you deserved to come through!”

Twenty minutes later he was closeted with a grim-faced Brigadier-General and his staff.

“I was taken over by aeroplane and dropped behind the German lines three weeks ago, sir,” he said, when he had made known his identity. “My orders were to obtain all information possible about the poison gas factory at Altenburg. I learned last night that the Germans are about to launch an appalling gas attack on the whole of the sector between Soissons and Rheims. The Craonne plateau, the hog's-back of the Chemin des Dames and the wooded bluffs and ridges of the Argonne, have been developed into one enormous labyrinth of trenches and tunnels packed with men and machine-guns. Twelve German divisions are being concentrated on the sector. They will follow the gas over in one terrific drive calculated to smash through the Allied front!”

“How did you learn this?” rapped the Brigadier.

“By waiting on General Salzmann and three of his staff officers last night,” explained the Flying Beetle quickly. “They did not talk over freely in front of me, but I listened at the door of their room and heard enough to bring me back to France this

morning. The poison gas train leaves Altenburg for Charleville at noon to-day. It must be intercepted by our bombing squadrons!"

"Yes," agreed the Brigadier grimly, reaching for the telephone, "it must!"

Three squadrons of D.H.9's took part in that raid on the ill-fated poison gas train bound from Altenburg to Charleville with its cargo of death.

The result was stated tersely a few days later in the official British *communiqué* issued to the daily newspapers over here.

"On the 20th inst. three of our squadrons carried out a successful raid on an enemy freight train laden with poison gas cylinders. The train was completely wrecked and the cylinders destroyed by our bombs."

That was all. Nothing was said, whatever might have been conjectured, of that cloud of poison gas which drifted like a fog of death across the countryside before slowly disintegrating.

Weeks later, when the first squadron of long-distance Handley Page night bombers reached France from England, the last chapter in the short history of the Altenburg poison gas factory was written.

Piloted by the Flying Beetle, who knew so well the locality of the factory, a Handley Page carrying sufficient fuel for the outward and homeward journey, and laden with sixteen 112-lb. high-explosive bombs, winged its way through the night to Altenburg, and with the dawn all that remained of that plague spot of a factory was charred and smoking ruins.

CHAPTER V

A NAVAL OCCASION

I

SIR MALCOLM FERGUSON, of the British Admiralty, looked up from his desk as a secretary entered his room in Whitehall, and said: "Captain Davies is waiting to see you, sir."

"Show him in at once, please!" replied Sir Malcolm.

The secretary withdrew to return a few moments later with a young man of clear cut feature and smartly dressed in civilian attire.

"Good-morning, Davies!" said Sir Malcolm, rising and smilingly shaking hands. Waiting until his visitor was seated and the secretary had withdrawn, Sir Malcolm went on: "In the excellent work you have done for the Secret Service, Davies, you have already undertaken many dangerous jobs. But I have a mission for you now which will, I am afraid, prove infinitely more perilous than any of them. The chances are that you will not come through alive."

Captain Davies, known throughout Germany as the Flying Beetle, the master-spy on whose head the German High Command had placed a price of one hundred thousand marks, was silent and Sir Malcolm proceeded:

"Ingenohl, the Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, has been deposed and Admiral von Pohl appointed to the command.

"A week to-day the Emperor of Germany is to carry out an inspection of the Fleet at Wilhelmshaven. He is to lunch with von Pohl and other high officers aboard the flagship, *Friedrich der Grosse*, when the future policy of the German Navy will be discussed. The British Admiralty want a report of that discussion."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" exclaimed the Flying Beetle, staring in astonishment.

"Oh, I know I am asking the impossible," said Sir Malcolm. "But you have accomplished the impossible before, and it is imperative that we learn what is decided at that secret conference—whether the German High Sea Fleet is to continue to skulk in harbour or intends to come out and fight us."

"I see," said the Flying Beetle thoughtfully. "Have you any idea, sir, as to who is likely to be present at that luncheon apart from Admiral von Pohl and his staff?"

"According to our present information, sent by Brankson through Holland," replied Sir Malcolm, "there will be one or two Ministers of State, and Count Vandenburg of the Austrian Military Staff."

"Why on earth has an Austrian been invited?" exclaimed the Flying Beetle, in surprise.

"I do not know," replied Sir Malcolm. "But Austria and Germany are allies, and it is common knowledge that Austria bitterly resents the failure of the German Fleet to put to sea. Perhaps this fellow Vandenburg, is to attend in order to take part in the discussion."

Some twenty minutes later the Flying Beetle stepped out of the Admiralty building and strolled along the crowded pavement of Whitehall. As Sir Malcolm had said, he, the Flying Beetle, had undertaken some dangerous tasks but never one so perilous as the attending of this luncheon aboard the *Friedrich der Grosse* in honour of the Kaiser. For if he was to get the information which the British Admiralty required, he *must* attend the luncheon. There would be no reports issued to the newspapers beyond, perhaps, a bald and useless statement.

A submarine had been put at the disposal of the Flying Beetle. Late that night he boarded it off a lonely part of the Norfolk coast and under cover of darkness two nights later the submarine came to the surface off the sand dunes north of Cuxhaven. Silently a canvas dinghy was lowered and with muffled oars the Flying Beetle was rowed ashore.

He was wearing the uniform of a German naval officer, and in his pocket were papers which described him as Lieutenant Zimmermann, torpedo officer, on leave from the U-boat U 29, at present undergoing a refit at Kiel. Dawn was breaking when, carrying a bulky suitcase, he stepped on to the platform of the little wayside railway station of Muden.

“When is the next train to Cuxhaven?” he demanded of the sleepy porter who eventually appeared. “I was motoring there, but my car broke down!” This explanation appeared to satisfy the curiosity of the porter as to how a stranger came to be on the platform at that hour of the morning.

“There isn’t a train for another two hours,” he said, and at the Flying Beetle’s curt request, departed to knock up the inhabitants of the nearest cottage and order breakfast for the stranded naval officer.

It was afternoon when, after changing trains at Cuxhaven, the Flying Beetle arrived at the busy naval town of Wilhelmshaven and put up at a quiet hotel in the Kolmstrasse. He did not venture out until evening. After dinner he took a stroll through streets which were thronged with sailors and marines.

In the narrow and badly-lighted Sabelplatz near the docks he turned in at the door of a chemist’s shop. The proprietor, sallow-faced and be-spectacled, peered at him from behind rows of jars and bottles on the counter. The shop was deserted except for themselves, and the Flying Beetle made a small purchase.

“When the wild oak is in bloom,” he said quietly, as the chemist was sealing the package.

The man looked at him sharply and muttered:

“The catkins droop from the willows.”

“And the rivers sing a glad song,” murmured the Flying Beetle.

“Which is echoed in the hearts of men,” responded the other.

“What time do you shut?” inquired the Flying Beetle, taking the package and slipping it into the pocket of his naval greatcoat.

“I am closing now,” replied the chemist. Coming round quickly from the counter, he closed and bolted the door and pulled down the blinds. “Come this way,” he said,

switching out the light in the shop and leading the way into a little parlour behind it.

“You are Brankson, the Secret Service agent who sent through the news of this forthcoming inspection of the German Fleet by the Kaiser?” said the Flying Beetle.

“Yes, I am Brankson,” assented the other.

II

It was late when the Flying Beetle left the shop, slipping quietly out through a rear door. He returned to his hotel and did not see Brankson again until the eve of the inspection of the fleet by the Emperor.

Brankson called at the hotel, but in the smartly-attired chauffeur none would have recognized the stoop-shouldered and be-spectacled chemist of the Sabelplatz.

“The car you ordered is here, sir!” he said, saluting the Flying Beetle in the lobby of the hotel.

A few minutes later the powerful car which Brankson had brought to the hotel was purring through the busy streets, but not until it had cleared the outskirts of the town and was roaring through the night did the Flying Beetle speak of what was uppermost in the minds of them both.

“You have discovered where Count Vandenburg is staying?” he asked.

“Yes, at the Hotel Schaft,” answered Brankson. “He has with him a secretary named Müller and an aide-de-camp named Captain von Rath.”

“That’s awkward!” commented the Flying Beetle. “We’ll have to get those two out of the way somehow!”

Twenty kilometres from Wilhelmshaven the car swung off the main road and after traversing a narrow and winding by-road it drew up in front of a small and unlighted cottage.

“This is the place,” said Brankson, switching off his lights. “I spotted it a few months ago. It is empty and there is little fear of discovery at this time of night.” In the cottage, behind windows curtained with heavy rugs from the car, the Flying Beetle and Brankson effected a quick but careful change of their attire—the Flying Beetle donning the uniform of a Colonel of Austrian cavalry and Brankson the uniform of an Austrian transport sergeant.

Re-packing their suitcases, they carefully removed all traces of their visit, and returning to the car, sat waiting until the luminous dial of the Flying Beetle’s wrist watch showed the hour of midnight.

“Right-ho, Brankson,” he said; “We’ll get back!”

Turning the car, Brankson took it roaring back towards Wilhelmshaven, and within an hour it drew up in front of the imposing entrance of the Hotel Schaft.

“I am Colonel Porek!” said the Flying Beetle, striding up to the reception desk. “I am from Vienna and wish to see Count Vandenburg at once, please!”

Picking up the telephone receiver, the clerk put a call through to Count Vandenburg’s suite and gave the message. Then he turned to the Flying Beetle.

“Count Vandenburg has retired for the night, sir,” he said. “Captain von Rath, his aide-de-camp, will see you.”

Calling one of the night duty porters, he ordered him to take the Flying Beetle up to Count Vandenburg’s suite, and a few moments later the Flying Beetle was being ushered into the presence of the grey-haired Captain von Rath.

“You are from Vienna, Herr Colonel,” began von Rath.

“I am from Vienna with urgent dispatches for Count Vandenburg,” cut in the Flying Beetle sharply. “I understand he has retired. He must be roused!”

“That is impossible,” said von Rath. “I will deal with them!”

“You will not deal with them, sir!” snapped the Flying Beetle. “They are from General Conrad von Hotzendorf himself and are for no other eyes than those of Count Vandenburg!”

The mention of General von Hotzendorf was enough, for he was supreme head of the Austrian armies in the field. Turning on his heel, the aide-de-camp strode to the door of an adjoining room, knocked and entered, closing the door behind him. There came to the Flying Beetle’s ears the murmur of voices, then von Rath reappeared.

“Count Vandenburg will see you in a few moments!” he reported.

When Count Vandenburg appeared he did not look a very imposing personage, but perhaps no man looks at his best in slippers and dressing-gown after a brusque awakening from slumber.

“You have dispatches for me?” he said, blinking at the Flying Beetle.

“I have urgent dispatches for Your Excellency,” replied the Flying Beetle, drawing a heavily-sealed envelope from his pocket. “They are from General Conrad von Hotzendorf and are accompanied by a verbal message which must be delivered in the strictest privacy. Your Excellency will kindly ask your aide-de-camp to withdraw!”

Count Vandenburg stared in surprise. “But surely this is unnecessary,” he began. “Captain von Rath is one of my trusted——”

“It is not a question of trust!” cut in the Flying Beetle. “I am acting on the strictest order in delivering these dispatches into your own hands and forbidding the presence of a third party whilst I give you the verbal message which accompanies them!”

“If you will withdraw,” said Count Vandenburg turning to von Rath, “I will ring for you when I want you.” Von Rath bowed, and marched from the room, closing the door behind him.

“Now, Herr Colonel,” said the Count impatiently, “if you will kindly give me the message I will examine the dispatches——”

Abruptly he broke off as stepping quickly to the door, the Flying Beetle turned the key in the lock and wheeled, a small automatic in his hand.

“You will refrain from raising your voice,” said the Flying Beetle, advancing, “and you will walk backwards into your bedroom.”

“But—but what is the meaning of this?” ejaculated the Count.

“It means,” replied the Flying Beetle, “that you are going to disappear until after lunch to-morrow!”

Almost before he had finished speaking he had leapt forward with the swiftness of a panther, his left fist whipping up with savage force. It took Count Vandenburg full on the jaw, cutting short the yell which he had been about to give and sending him reeling back, to fall limp and unconscious to the carpet.

When next the Count opened his eyes it was to find himself lying gagged and bound on his bed. Through the open doorway he could see the Flying Beetle in the adjoining room standing at the telephone, and as he lay glaring at him in helpless rage he heard the Flying Beetle speak into the receiver.

“Listen, von Rath”—how amazingly like Count Vandenburg’s voice were those rapid and high-pitched tones—“these dispatches mean our instant recall. The Italians are massing for a great offensive which is to be launched at any hour. Our whole front is in danger. You will leave at once with Müller. Yes, at once. These dispatches will engage me another two hours. No, it is unnecessary for you to see me. I am following at dawn with Colonel Porek. No, no, the hotel servants will see to my personal luggage. It can be sent on afterwards. Yes, leave at once. Good-bye!” and replacing the receiver, the Flying Beetle sauntered into the bedroom.

“I am sorry to cause you this inconvenience, Herr Count,” he said, “but I am afraid it will be impossible to have you released until to-morrow afternoon.”

Then he returned to the other room, closing the bedroom door behind him and leaving the gagged Count writhing in helpless rage.

He had taken possession of the Count’s keys, and unlocking the bureau, he examined all the papers it contained. More than one of the papers bore the Count’s signature, and seating himself at the bureau the Flying Beetle commenced to copy it on scraps of paper.

A sudden knock at the door brought him to his feet. For a moment he stood, tense and rigid. Then stepping quickly to the door he unlocked it and opening it a foot thrust out his head to see a sombrely-clad individual with rimless eyeglasses standing on the other side.

“Who are you and what do you want?” barked the Flying Beetle.

“I am Müller, Count Vandenburg’s secretary,” replied the man nervously. “Captain von Rath says——”

“I don’t care what Captain von Rath says!” thundered the Flying Beetle. “You and he have had your orders. You are to leave at once for Vienna and Count Vandenburg is not to be disturbed!” Then he slammed the door in Müller’s face, and softly turned the key in the lock.

Waiting until some minutes had dragged by, the Flying Beetle crossed to the telephone, picked up the receiver and asked at the reception desk if Captain von Rath and Müller had left.

“Yes, sir, they have just gone!” came the answer, and with a sigh of relief, the Flying Beetle replaced the receiver and reseated himself at the bureau.

Until long after dawn he worked, perfecting himself in the writing of the Count's signature. Satisfied at length, he typed a letter, signed it, then going into the bathroom which adjoined the bedroom, used the Count's razor and toilet accessories with excellent effect. He was spruce and smart when after locking both the bedroom and outer doors he descended to the reception office.

"Count Vandenburg has cancelled all appointments," he told the clerk, "and is not to be disturbed until three o'clock this afternoon. He has been working throughout the night and is now asleep."

With that he strolled into the breakfast-room.

III

Long before dawn of that fateful day, twenty-five thousand German naval seamen had been lined up on the quay, and on the decks of their mighty battle-cruisers to await the coming of their Emperor, the Supreme War Lord, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Rigid and motionless they stood like figures carved from wood, whilst still far away the Emperor lay sleeping in the special train which was bearing him through the night to Wilhelmshaven.

For this was discipline, and the Emperor must be impressed. What he would say when he saw the smashed and battered *Derfflinger*, *Seydlitz* and *Moltke* with their burnt-out turrets and warped and twisted ironwork, no one really knew. They were lately home from the Dogger Bank, these ships, where they had been soundly trounced by Admiral Beatty's battle-cruisers.

The *Blücher's* lock was empty. She had failed to return from that action, having been sunk by the superior guns of the British Navy.

Slowly the morning wore on and the crews waited like statues, their faces and hands blue with the cold. Divisional officers and captains, commanders and admirals, kept up a continual inspection of the sullenly silent ranks to make sure that not even a cap ribbon was a fraction of an inch out of place.

It was towards mid-morning that Admiral von Pohl was brought a letter. Ripping it open, he read:

Hotel Schaft.

"DEAR VON POHL,

"I regret that important developments on the Austrian front have meant my sudden recall. This is to present Colonel Porek who will deputize for me at to-day's ceremony.

VANDENBURG."

"Show Colonel Porek in," said the admiral and the Flying Beetle was ushered into the cabin.

A quick handshake and a few formal words of regret at the absence of Count Vandenburg, then Admiral von Pohl handed the Flying Beetle over to the care of his officers who strolled the deck with him.

Suddenly two white and glittering limousine cars flashed past the motionless ranks drawn up on the quay and stopped opposite the *Friedrich der Grosse*. It was the Emperor and his suite.

As the Emperor descended from his car, the Flying Beetle looked at him with intense interest. He was wearing a spiked helmet and long military cloak buttoned at the neck. His face was careworn and weary and there was no longer about him the arrogant pride which had been his when, in the opening month of war, he had spoken of the soldiers of Britain as "England's contemptible little army."

After a few words with von Pohl, he hurried along the ranks and went aboard the *Friedrich der Grosse*. Lunch was served in the fore cabin and as the banquet progressed the Flying Beetle sat listening to the views expressed on the advisability of sending the fleet out to meet the British fleet on the high seas.

Admiral von Pohl was strongly in favour of it, but the Emperor was not. The admirals of the battle squadrons were divided in their opinion, the majority agreeing that it would be better not to risk an engagement with the Grand Fleet of Britain.

The Flying Beetle took it all in, listening intently to every view expressed. This information he was gaining was beyond price and would alter the whole course of the war on the high seas. He was learning the most closely-guarded secrets of armaments, ships and personnel.

His imposture was bound to be discovered before many hours had passed. But that would not matter, for by that time he hoped to be safely away. As the luncheon dragged on and on, he began to cast more and more anxious glances at his wrist watch.

Would it never end, he asked himself? Already the hands of the watch were creeping remorsefully towards three o'clock, and unless he was out of the cabin by three he would be caught, for that was the hour at which Count Vandenburg was to be called.

Once Vandenburg was found the hue and cry would be raised for his attacker and communication established at once with the *Friedrich der Grosse*.

To rise from his seat and attempt to leave the cabin was impossible. Such an insult to the Emperor would result in the detention of the Flying Beetle until an explanation and an apology was forthcoming.

No, unless he could find some way of escape before three o'clock he was trapped. Then, to his dismay Admiral von Pohl suddenly said:

"We have not heard the opinion of Colonel Porek, who is here to speak on behalf of his country in place of Count Vandenburg."

The Flying Beetle rose, and there was nothing in either his bearing or his speech to betray the desperate plight which he knew he was in. He spoke quickly, basing his remarks on what he had been listening to.

"You say that the British battleships can steam faster and have a longer range of guns," he concluded, "yet I say to you that this inactivity is making your crews sullen and mutinous, and it is the fervent desire of the Austrian people that you go out and fight——" Abruptly he broke off as the door of the cabin burst open, and, dashing unceremoniously in, an officer spoke hurriedly to von Pohl.

Instantly the Admiral was on his feet, staring white-faced at the Flying Beetle.

“Colonel Porek,” he said harshly, “you came here purporting to represent Count Vandenburg, who has been found at his hotel, gagged and tied. What is your explanation?”

The Flying Beetle shrugged his shoulders.

“Merely that I am the man who tied him,” he answered.

Alone in the death cell of the grim naval prison sat the Flying Beetle. It was three days since he had been arrested aboard the *Friedrich der Grosse*, and he was to be shot at dawn. Looking back, he knew how useless it would have been to have attempted to deny his identity when von Pohl had questioned him. He had realized that the game was up, but even now he smiled when he pictured again the horrified consternation on every face, including the Emperor’s, when that august company had learned that a spy had been seated in their midst listening to their secret discussion.

His trial had been a formality, and he had heard the death sentence unmoved. He had gambled with death too many times to fear it when he lost. But even in the death cell he was preparing to make one final bid for his life.

As he sat listening to the tramp of the sentry outside in the corridor as the man passed and repassed the cell door, he was tearing his solitary blanket into three strips. At intervals of approximately twenty minutes the sentry would pull back a steel shutter in the iron door of the cell to see that the prisoner was all right. It was only a few moments ago that his face had peered through the open shutter, so the Flying Beetle had nearly twenty minutes at his disposal.

Knotting the strips of blanket into one length, he flung one end up and through the bars of the two-foot square cell window let into the wall above him. Leaving the rest of the blanket trailing down like a rope, he stretched himself flat on the stone floor and squirmed his way beneath his low, three-planked bed.

There he lay waiting, suddenly tensing in every nerve and muscle, as he heard the shutter in the cell door snap back.

What would the sentry do when he saw the startling sight of a fully barred window, a trailing rope, and an empty cell? Everything depended on what he did!

Would he rush off and raise the alarm, or for his own sake would he first dash into the cell to investigate the mysterious disappearance of the prisoner?

He adopted the latter course. Whipping back the bolts of the door, he dashed into the cell. Simultaneously as he grabbed the trailing blanket, strong arms clutched at his legs, jerking him off his balance. He let out a shout as he fell. Next moment a fist drove savagely into his face, knocking him half unconscious.

In that moment, the Flying Beetle was on his feet, and, springing to the cell door, he swung it shut. Another smashing blow knocked the sentry completely out, and rapidly the Flying Beetle stripped him of his greatcoat and helmet.

When the man recovered consciousness it was to find himself gagged with his own handkerchief, his hands lashed tightly behind his back, and his ankles bound by strips torn from the blanket. The cell was empty and the door closed.

And the Flying Beetle was walking steadily through the corridor which led to the entrance doors of the prison. In the sentry's helmet and greatcoat he looked like a soldier off duty. Those whom he passed scarce gave him a second glance, but the sentry on duty at the prison doors halted him, with a harsh demand to know who he was and where he was going.

"Shut your mouth!" snarled the Flying Beetle. "I'm not attached to this vault of a prison. I am from the Augusta Barracks with the punishment sheet!"

The glib and plausible explanation was accepted surlily but unsuspectingly by the guard, and he contented himself by growling an ill-tempered curse after the Flying Beetle's retreating form, which was rapidly swallowed up in the darkness of the street.

With the change of guards, the escape of the Flying Beetle was discovered. But by then an hour had passed, and the master-spy was safe in Brankson's parlour.

It is quite certain that even the guard whom he had outwitted would not have recognized the Flying Beetle as he appeared by that time.

He was clad in a cheap ill-fitting suit, his hair was dyed, and on his upper lip sprouted an untidy moustache.

The next day he left by train for Lumden in Westphalia, passing through the barrier at the station without the authenticity of his forged papers being questioned by the naval officials on duty there.

It was dusk when he alighted at Lumden. By means of his food ticket he managed to obtain a meal of black bread, aniseed cheese and sauerkraut at a dingy little café situated in a side street, and darkness had set in by the time he quitted Lumden.

Walking along the lonely and deserted road which led across the moors, he put ten kilometres between himself and the town before he halted and seated himself at the side of the road.

Slowly an hour dragged by and then another and always the Flying Beetle's ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound.

It was a few minutes after midnight when from away towards the west came the faint uneven drone of an aero engine, high in the night sky and heading eastwards into Germany.

As he listened a puzzled uneasiness took possession of the Flying Beetle, for there was something radically wrong with that engine which was misfiring badly.

Drawing a small electric torch from his pocket, the Flying Beetle waited until the night-flying machine commenced to circle high overhead, then pressing the switch he sent a swift dot-dash-dot-dash stabbing up into the darkness.

Three times he repeated the signal, then as though in reply the spluttering roar of the engine died away and a few moments later there came the faint swish of wind through struts and flying wires and the black bulk of a D.H.9 came gliding down out of

the darkness to land within a quarter of a kilometre of where the Flying Beetle was waiting.

With engine dead it came to a jolting stop, and as the Flying Beetle hurried forward a leather-clad figure swung himself from the forward cockpit.

“Hallo, Gibson!” exclaimed the Flying Beetle, as he and the pilot shook hands. “You’re late. What’s wrong with your engine? Sounds like ignition trouble.”

“It is!” answered Gibson. “We’ve got to fix it, or she’ll conk out with us before we reach the line. As a matter of fact, I’ve been expecting her drying up with me at any moment!”

“Righto, let’s get on with it!” exclaimed the Flying Beetle. “It’s going to be a bit awkward though, because we daren’t use a light.”

It was more than awkward having to strip, clean and reassemble the ignition in the darkness, and dawn was not far off by the time the D.H.9 was ready for the air.

“Will you take her?” asked Gibson, when at length the propeller was ticking smoothly over and the Flying Beetle was struggling into the spare leather flying coat which Gibson had brought over for him.

“Yes, righto!” nodded the Flying Beetle.

Swinging himself up into the forward cockpit, he waited until Gibson was safely ensconced in the rear cockpit, and giving the D.H.9 open throttle, he took her roaring across the flat stretch of moorland to bore up into the bitter cold of the darkened sky.

Already the sky was lightening towards the east, token that dawn was at hand; and as he roared westwards towards the line the Flying Beetle continually swept the sky to port and starboard in search of enemy aircraft out on dawn patrol.

It was when he was within fifteen kilometres of the line that he suddenly stiffened in his seat, and turning swiftly to Gibson, gestured with outflung hand towards two Fokkers which were coming up at a terrific speed from starboard.

Gibson nodded, grinned, and seizing the spade-grip of his Lewis gun swung it round to cover the enemy Fokker.

Above the thunder of his engine the Flying Beetle heard the sudden, vicious crackling of Gibson’s gun as the revolving ammunition drum whirled into life.

Glancing outwards, he saw one of the Fokkers go soaring up and up in a wild zoom, whilst the other held its course and came thundering straight in at him with synchronized gun aflame.

Whipping his stick across and kicking hard on the rudder bar, the Flying Beetle whirled the D.H.9 to meet this flank attack.

Simultaneously his fingers clamped round the trigger of his synchronized gun and above the roar of high-powered engines sounded the staccato snarl of exploding cartridges.

In the rear cockpit Gibson had swung his Lewis gun to cover the climbing Fokker, and with the knowledge that his tail was well protected, the Flying Beetle drove in at the second Fokker.

For one split second of time it seemed as though the two machines must crash propeller boss to propeller boss, but as the Flying Beetle inched back his stick and roared low over the Fokker's upper wing, the German machine dropped its nose and went plunging earthwards in the death spin, its pilot lying a huddled, lifeless heap over the controls.

Up and up in a wild soaring zoom went the Flying Beetle, but with the deadly swiftness of a hawk the remaining Fokker was thundering down on him with gun ablaze.

With a choking, gasping cry Gibson clutched at his throat, the swinging barrel of the Lewis gun struck him across the head, and as he collapsed on the floor of the cockpit, his life-blood spurting from his riven throat, another burst from the Fokker's gun shattered the D.H.9's dashboard into riven wood and splintering glass.

With face grim and set the Flying Beetle kept the stick back, hugged close into his leather flying coat, and completed a whirlwind loop. Swerving on the downward dive, he tore in at the wheeling Fokker and again his gun roared into life, stabbing the dawn with blood-red flame. The cartridge belt whirled madly through the chamber and the acrid fumes of burning powder swirled back past cockpit windshield in the slip-stream of the thundering propeller.

The German pilot threw his machine into a spin from which he emerged with a sudden roar of high-powered engine, to tear earthwards in a thundering dive. Above the roar of his engine sounded the shriek of wind through struts, then back came the stick and the Fokker soared up in a wild and almost perpendicular zoom.

The Flying Beetle followed, grimly, relentlessly, but already the German had rolled and was tearing in at the lad, intent on finishing the fight.

The Flying Beetle pulled a sharp wing turn, but his lower starboard plane was ripped in a dozen places and three bracing wires were streaming loosely back in the slip-stream of the propeller.

He knew too, that Gibson was either dead or unconscious and his face was pale and set.

By superb piloting he pulled clear of the stream of bullets from the Fokker's synchronized gun, and whipping his control stick forward, he went earthwards in a screaming dive swerving madly.

Crouched over his controls, his tight-lipped mouth agrin, the Fokker pilot followed. In his heart was wild exultation. He had got the measure of this Englander and he knew it. He was harrying him mercilessly, keeping always the offensive.

The Flying Beetle glanced over his shoulder at the scarlet Fokker hurtling down on his tail sticking to him like a leech. Only the wild swinging of his machine on that downward dive was saving him from a burst of bullets through the spine.

Yet with grim purpose he deliberately held the dive. Then suddenly his foot jerked hard on the rudder bar and he whipped the control stick across. The D.H.9 whirled out of the dive with a jar which sent the Flying Beetle sagging wildly against the side of the cockpit. Bracing wires tautened and struts bent to the terrific strain. But grimly the lad

kept his foot pressed on the rudder bar, and, with stick across, completed a whirlwind bank.

The Fokker pilot, taken completely unawares by the amazing swiftness of the manoeuvre, yanked back his stick to pull out of his dive in a zoom.

But tearing in at him from the flank came the Flying Beetle. So close were the machines that it seemed as though a crash must be inevitable. Bullets from the lurid, blazing gun of the D.H.9 tore through the Fokker's fuselage between engine cowling and rear of cockpit. And as the Flying Beetle soared up to roar over the Fokker's top plane the German machine fell away into a spin.

The Flying Beetle wheeled, his nose down. Then his hand dropped from the trigger of his synchronized gun. For a tongue of flame had licked back from the Fokker's riven petrol tank, and the stricken machine was plunging earthwards, a blazing mass surmounted by a thick and eddying pall of heavy black smoke.

Less than ten minutes later he crossed the line, his dead companion in the rear cockpit. It was the end of the great unblazed trail for Gibson, but this was not the first time he had been engaged on the perilous task of spy ferrying and for devotion to duty he was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

CHAPTER VI

A BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

I

WITHIN a cable's length of the shore a small, slowly-moving yacht came up into what little breeze there was, the white sail came down with a run, and the anchor splashed overboard.

"Nicely!" said Mr. Sercombe Pilcher, R.A., relinquishing the tiller and rising lazily to his feet.

He was a man past middle-age, wearing soiled grey flannels. His finely featured face, with its still reddish beard, was browned by the wind and the sun.

Knocking out his pipe, he stowed it away in his pocket and commenced hauling in the dinghy, which was riding at the end of its tow-rope.

"I don't know quite when I'll be back," he said to Hobbis, the elderly man who combined the rôles of crew, cook and general handyman. "It all depends upon whether Sir Gerald is at home or not. Anyway, you can tidy up and get everything snug and ship-shape."

A few minutes later he was sculling easily towards the beach on which the wavelets were rippling drowsily that perfect spring afternoon.

Waiting until the bows grounded, he leapt ashore, and, thrusting the anchor into the firm sand, strolled up the beach.

A coastguard approached him, almost the only sign on that lonely strip of Northumbrian beach that Britain was at war.

"Where are you going, sir?" he asked.

"I intend calling upon Sir Gerald Lester if he is at home," replied Pilcher. "My name is Pilcher—Sercombe Pilcher." He laughed. "I am afraid I have not a card on me, but Sir Gerald will vouch for my respectability and bona fides!"

"That's all right, sir," nodded the coastguard, and moving on up the beach, Pilcher came to a narrow strip of coast road which brought him to massive iron gates standing open.

Passing through the gates, Pilcher made his way along a tree-lined avenue until there came into view a large and imposing house of mellow red brick, covered with ivy.

Mounting the steps to the front door, which was open on a spacious hallway, he rang the heavy, old-fashioned bell. Before its jangling echoes had died away in the farther recesses of the house a butler came along the hallway.

"Is Sir Gerald Lester at home?" inquired Pilcher.

"What name, sir, please?" asked the butler.

"Sercombe Pilcher."

The butler bowed and withdrew. A few moments later Sir Gerald himself came quickly along the hallway. Like Pilcher, he was a man past middle-age, bluff and

rubicund.

“Why, Pilcher!” he exclaimed heartily, advancing with outstretched hand. “This is indeed a pleasure. Where on earth have you sprung from?”

“From the *Gadfly!*” laughed Pilcher. “I’ve been carrying out an Admiralty commission, painting dockyard scenes on the Tyne, and, having a few days leave at my disposal, I thought I’d avail myself of your long-standing invitation to look you up.”

“I’m delighted, my dear fellow!” exclaimed Sir Gerald. “Come in!” He led the way into a large and airy drawing-room. “You’ll have tea, of course?” he said. “Or perhaps you would prefer a whisky-and-soda?”

“Tea, thanks!” said Pilcher.

“So you’re working for the Admiralty,” said Sir Gerald when tea had been brought, “I suppose the paintings will be for some sort of National War Museum when this dreadful business is over.”

“Yes, that’s the idea,” replied Pilcher. “I’m afraid it’s not very much to be doing in the way of war service, but, like you, I’m too old for the front. It must be more than forty years since you and I were boys at school together, Lester!”

“Yes,” agreed Sir Gerald sombrely, “and whilst you have become a world famous artist I’m afraid I’ve rusticated here.”

“Oh, come, don’t say that,” laughed Pilcher. “Your researches and treatises on metallurgy have made you far more famous than myself. As a matter of fact I heard from Grant in the club, when I was in London the other day, that a new alloy of yours is being used in the construction of certain of our latest aircraft.”

“Well, yes, it is,” admitted Sir Gerald modestly. “As you know, I have my own laboratory here and I have been experimenting with various alloys on behalf of the Government. It gives one a feeling that one is at least doing something in this weary and dreadful struggle.”

The two old friends sat on talking about the war, and about those whom they knew out there on the fighting front, until Pilcher suddenly changed the subject by saying:

“As a matter of fact, I think this visit of mine is going to turn out something in the nature of a busman’s holiday. As I walked along your avenue I saw a glade through the trees. The sun was shining down through the branches with a suffused golden light. It looked glorious. I’d like to paint that, Gerald.”

“I know the spot!” exclaimed Sir Gerald enthusiastically. “It is, indeed, lovely. Certainly you must paint it. And I’ll buy the picture from you when it is completed!”

Pilcher laughed and rose.

“Let us go to see it,” he said. “I’m afraid, however, there is no brush can do full justice to it.”

“Except yours!” asserted Sir Gerald, with conviction. “There’s none got the genius you have, old fellow. You’ll stay with me, of course. We’ll have your kit brought ashore from the *Gadfly.*”

He waved aside Pilcher’s murmured protest about encroaching on his hospitality, and, reaching the glade, Pilcher stood looking about him in silence.

The artist's soul in him was deeply stirred, for although his wanderings had taken him to many beautiful scenes and places, he knew he had never seen anything so lovely as this peaceful and sequestered English glade, with its carpet of spring flowers.

"But for an effective picture there is something missing," he said, with a slight frown. "It wants some central figure—something to make the trees appear as a background!"

"A bird bath or a statue?" suggested his companion.

"No, hardly that," replied the artist, with a smile. "I don't know what is wanted, Gerald. It's something which will tone with the golden sunlight, the flowers and the shadows. It doesn't matter. It will come. I will think!"

"Well, whatever it is, we will get it," said Sir Gerald. "I see your idea, though. Something central—some figure in the foreground. Yes, I get that!"

It was some considerable time later, when afternoon was merging into dusk, that Pilcher turned out through the avenue gates and took the road which led towards the beach.

He was deep in thought, obsessed with the idea of his new picture. There was something that glade wanted—something which would make the picture one of his most outstanding successes.

Suddenly Pilcher halted, his teeth biting on the stem of his pipe. For drawn in on the turf by the side of the road was a yellow caravan, old and antiquated of pattern.

"By jove!" ejaculated Pilcher, smacking a clenched fist into the palm of his hand. "The very thing!"

II

Eagerly he approached the caravan. The steps were down, but the door was closed, and the only sign of life was a tethered horse browsing near by.

Mounting the steps, Pilcher knocked. No one answered, and he tried the door. It opened, and he peered inside. On the floor lay a few discarded articles of clothing, two unmade bunks lined either wall, and on a rack above a dirty oil-stove were three or four tin platters and a couple of mugs.

Who ever owned the caravan was evidently not at home. But Pilcher wanted to hire it. It would be the very thing for the picture.

He stood a moment looking about him irresolutely. Then deciding to leave a note pinned to the door, he stepped inside the caravan in search of paper.

A few moments later he reappeared on the steps and again stood looking about him in the deepening dusk. He didn't intend to leave a note, for it had occurred to him that any paper he used might be recognized by the owner of the caravan, who would very properly resent anyone having prowled about inside during his absence.

Pilcher certainly didn't wish to offend the owner, for he badly wanted the loan of the caravan. So, deciding that the best thing to do was to wait, he closed the door, and, seating himself on the steps, refilled his pipe.

He smoked until he heard voices approaching through the dusk, and there came into view a ragged, limping gipsy fellow accompanied by a gipsy lass of eighteen to twenty years of age and of a bold and dark-eyed beauty.

The man, swarthy and club-footed, stared at Pilcher suspiciously.

“Good evening!” said the artist pleasantly, rising from the step on which he had been seated. “Are you the owner of this caravan?”

“Yes,” growled the gipsy. “We’re not trespassing here, either, if that’s what you’re waiting to tell us!”

“I’m quite certain you’re not trespassing,” answered Pilcher with a smile. “What I wish to see you about is this. I am painting a picture and would like very much to include this caravan in it.”

The gipsy shook his head.

“That’s impossible, mister!” he said roughly. “The lass and I are pushing on for the Border in the morning!”

“Well, but look here,” said Pilcher. “I’m prepared to make it worth your while. I’m here for three days and I’ll give you ten pounds a day for the loan of the caravan.”

The gipsy hesitated. The girl pressed his arm.

“Take it!” she said. “Ten pounds doesn’t come our way every day!”

“No, that’s right,” growled the fellow. He looked at Pilcher. “That’ll be thirty pounds, mister?”

“Exactly,” nodded Pilcher.

“And we’ll have the money in advance?”

“Certainly!” assented Pilcher.

The gipsy nodded.

“All right the caravan’s yours!” he growled. “Are you wanting to paint her here as she stands?”

“No,” replied Pilcher, “I shall want you to take it into Sir Gerald Lester’s grounds over there. I’ll show you the place in the morning and when you’ve taken the caravan there for me, I’ll give you the money.”

He hesitated a moment, then added:

“I am afraid that during the three days I have your caravan you will have to seek some other accommodation. Sir Gerald is rather—er——”

“That’s all right,” cut in the girl with a short laugh, “we understand. You don’t have to explain. He doesn’t want gipsies camping in his grounds. None of ’em ever do. Hagar and I’ll walk into Alnwick. We’ll be back for the caravan at the end of the three days.”

“Aye, but look here, lass,” began her companion growlingly, “we don’t know this chap——”

“What’s it matter if we don’t?” cut in the girl. “What’s it matter if he does make off with the caravan? The thing’s not worth ten pounds!”

“There’s no fear of my making off with it,” Pilcher assured her with a smile.

“No, I don’t suppose there is,” agreed the man, staring at him hard. “All right, mister, we’ll shift it for you in the morning!”

Thus it was arranged, and, having had his luggage transferred to the house, it was a highly satisfied Pilcher who informed Sir Gerald of what he had arranged.

“It will make a perfect picture,” he said enthusiastically. “The very colour of the caravan—the whole setting—nothing could be better.”

And in the morning, when Sir Gerald saw the caravan in the sunlit glade, he heartily agreed.

Having received their thirty pounds, the gipsy man and girl took themselves off, promising to return in three days.

Sir Gerald lingered awhile, watching Pilcher make one or two preliminary sketches before getting to work with brush and palette, then leaving him to get on with it undisturbed, Sir Gerald returned to the house.

“Mr. Pilcher has not yet come in, sir,” said the butler, when, some considerable time later, Sir Gerald entered the dining-room for lunch.

“That’s the worst of these artist fellows,” commented Sir Gerald, with a smile. “Once they get started they lose all sense of time. I will call him myself.”

Stepping through the open french windows, he made his way to the glade. As he entered it he stopped short with an exclamation of horrified dismay.

For lying bound and gagged near the caravan was Sercombe Pilcher, his face bruised and battered, his head caked with blood.

III

Seated in his office in the Admiralty building in Whitehall Sir Malcolm Ferguson looked across his desk at the clean-cut featured young man seated opposite him.

“Sorry to interrupt your leave like this, Davies,” he said, “but we’ve got a very urgent job for you.”

“In France or Germany?” queried the youthful Captain Harry Davies who, before he had transferred from the Royal Flying Corps to the Secret Service, had been known on every aerodrome from Ostend to the Swiss frontier as the Flying Beetle.

“It’s in neither,” replied Sir Malcolm. “As a matter of fact it’s in England—in Northumberland. There has been a particularly daring robbery at the house of Sir Gerald Lester and a series of most important formulæ are missing from his laboratory.

“Nothing else is missing except the formulæ, I suppose?” interposed the Flying Beetle grimly.

“No, nothing,” assented Sir Malcolm. “But prior to the robbery, Sercombe Pilcher, the official Admiralty artist who is spending a few days’ leave with Sir Gerald, was beaten up by a gipsy fellow in the grounds of the house. There is not the slightest doubt that this gipsy and a girl accomplice are the thieves. I will give you what details we have, but you will obtain fuller details from Pilcher and Sir Gerald.”

His voice became exceedingly grave:

“But one thing is very definite, Davies. Those formulæ must not leave this country. They give the fullest possible details of the process of manufacture of a new and light bullet-proof alloy which Sir Gerald has invented and which we are using in the construction of our latest fighting and bombing aircraft.”

“But isn’t the apprehension of this gipsy and his girl accomplice more a job for the military and the police, sir, than for me?” asked the Flying Beetle in mild surprise.

“The police and military are already actively engaged in searching for them,” replied Sir Gerald, “but we can afford to take no chances. We want you on the job, Davies, and we want those papers back.”

They chatted a while longer, Sir Malcolm giving the Flying Beetle what details he possessed of the case, then the Flying Beetle rose.

“Very well, sir,” he said, “I will leave for Sir Gerald’s place at once!”

A Camel had been placed at his disposal at Hendon aerodrome, and within the hour the Flying Beetle was thundering northwards towards Northumberland.

Afternoon was merging into dusk when he landed in a field behind Sir Gerald’s house, and it was an exceedingly worried-looking Sir Gerald who came hurrying towards him as he switched off and swung himself from the cockpit.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” said Sir Gerald when the Flying Beetle had introduced himself. “I heard from Whitehall by telephone that you were on your way. There’s no sign at all of those damned spies. The police cannot find a trace of them anywhere. But we’ll go up to Pilcher and you’ll hear the whole story!”

Looking weak and ill, and with his head swathed in bandages, Pilcher was in bed.

“You’re sure you feel up to talking?” asked the Flying Beetle, sympathetically.

“Yes, I must talk,” replied Pilcher with an effort. “I feel that the whole thing is my fault—my fault entirely. If I had not hired that wretched caravan——”

“It would have made no difference whatsoever,” cut in Sir Gerald resolutely. “Both myself and the Assistant Provost Marshal have told you that repeatedly. You really must not distress yourself about it. The scoundrels were after my papers. That is why they were hanging about here. But tell Captain Davies just what happened!”

Pilcher turned his head towards the Flying Beetle. Briefly he recounted his conversation with the gipsies when he had hired the caravan, then went on:

“I had been painting about an hour yesterday morning when I decided to alter the somewhat too tidy hanging of the window curtain of the caravan. Entering the caravan, I stepped on a loose floorboard which I inadvertently moved out of position with my foot. As I stooped to replace it, I saw something lying in a cavity beneath. Moving the floorboard, I picked up the object which turned out to be a thick, red-backed notebook fastened with an elastic band!”

He paused a moment to regain his strength, then went weakly on:

“Moved by sheer curiosity I opened the notebook. The pages were closely written in the form of a code book—German words and opposite them their English equivalent. As I was examining the book I heard a swift step behind me. Turning, I found myself face to face with the gipsy from whom I’d hired the caravan. His face was contorted

with rage and before I could utter a word he'd snatched the book from me and struck me a savage blow full in the face."

Again the weak, faltering voice of the injured man broke off, then resumed:

"I keep myself fairly fit and under any other circumstances I flatter myself that I could have put up something of a fight. But I was too stunned and astounded by that vicious blow to the face to recover myself at once, and before I could do so both the man and the girl were on me!"

"The girl?" interjected the Flying Beetle.

"Yes," assented Pilcher. "She had apparently followed the man into the caravan. By this time the fellow had got me down on one of the bunks and had a strangle grip on my throat. Picking up a stool, the girl tried to brain me with it, but snatching it from her, her companion gave me a smash over the head which knocked me out completely. The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground outside the caravan, gagged and bound and with a splitting headache. Of the gipsies there wasn't the slightest sign!"

"Did you hear them speak at all as they attacked you?" asked the Flying Beetle.

"No, the whole attack was carried out in silence," replied Pilcher. "It was all over in a few moments, of course, but neither of them uttered a sound, I'm certain of that!"

"It's quite obvious that they had returned for that notebook," said the Flying Beetle; he turned to Sir Gerald: "When did you discover that the papers were missing from your laboratory?" he asked.

"Immediately after I'd found Pilcher," replied Sir Gerald quickly. "When I learned from him what had happened, I telephoned at once for the doctor and the police, then made a search of my laboratory to satisfy myself that everything was intact. I keep my papers in a safe there. I found the safe closed and locked, but the formulæ were missing from it!"

"Had the keys of the safe been out of your possession at any time?" asked the Flying Beetle.

"Never, to my knowledge!" answered Sir Gerald emphatically. "I'm afraid the safe is a somewhat old-fashioned one, though, and could be opened easily enough by an expert thief. I never anticipated such a thing happening here."

"No, of course not," murmured the Flying Beetle. "Have you discovered how an entry to the house was effected?"

"Through the scullery window," answered Sir Gerald promptly. "The butler and I found the catch forced back, although the window is always secured at night, and the police are satisfied that an entry was made that way!"

He broke off as there came a knock at the door and the butler appeared.

"Inspector Spencer of the Alnwick police has just telephoned through, sir," said the butler. "He wishes me to inform you that the police have found the wanted man and the girl in a deserted bungalow on the sandhills between Alnmouth and Warkworth. They are being conveyed to the police station at Alnwick and the inspector will be obliged if you will go along to identify them!"

“Certainly, I will!” assented Sir Gerald grimly. “I can identify them all right. I saw the pair of them yesterday morning when they brought the caravan into the glade for Mr. Pilcher. Tell Inspector Spencer that I will be along at once. Did he say whether my papers have been recovered?”

“I particularly inquired about the papers, sir,” said the butler. “They have not been found on either the man or the girl, but the police are still searching the bungalow!”

“Confound it!” muttered Sir Gerald uneasily. “I hope the scoundrels haven’t got rid of them. You’ll come along to Alnwick police station with me, of course, Davies?”

“Yes, certainly!” agreed the Flying Beetle.

IV

Accompanied by the Flying Beetle, Sir Gerald set off for Alnwick in his car which had been brought round from the garage.

“There’s no particular hurry for a moment,” said Sir Gerald, as the car purred down the avenue. “If you like, we’ll stop and I’ll show you where Pilcher was attacked!”

“Yes, I’d like to see the place,” nodded the Flying Beetle.

At an order from Sir Gerald the chauffeur brought the car to a stop, and, dismounting, Sir Gerald led the way into the glade where the caravan was still standing.

Dusk was by this time deepening slowly into night and the hushed and peaceful glade was filled with darkening shadow.

“Pilcher was lying just here,” said Sir Gerald, after the Flying Beetle, with the aid of a box of matches, had looked round the interior of the caravan and examined the empty cavity beneath the floorboards. “There’s some of the rope with which the scoundrels tied him up!”

He kicked aside a fragment of knotted rope. Stooping, the Flying Beetle picked it up.

“You had to cut him loose, then?” he commented.

“Yes, there was no time to untie the knots,” said Sir Gerald, leading the way back to the car. “As a matter of fact, I thought at first that he was dead!”

Arriving at the police station at Alnwick, they found that the gipsy man and girl had already arrived there under police escort.

“Yes, these are the two,” said Sir Gerald grimly when he was confronted with them. “What have you done with my papers, you blackguardly spies?”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” snarled the man. “We’ve never seen any papers!”

“No, nor no red notebook either, I suppose?” snapped Sir Gerald. “Have they made any statement at all, inspector?”

“Yes,” replied Inspector Spencer and produced a statement signed by the man. “We were just going to take a statement from the girl when you arrived!”

“Which’ll be the same as his!” cut in the girl fiercely. “We’re not spies. We hired our caravan to that painter chap and that’s the last we saw of him!”

“What does the man’s statement say?” demanded Sir Gerald ignoring her and turning to the Flying Beetle who was perusing the typescript.

“Merely that they hired the caravan to Pilcher for thirty pounds,” said the Flying Beetle mildly, “and took up their abode in a deserted bungalow on the Warkworth sand dunes to wait until the three days of hire had elapsed!”

“But you told Pilcher you were going into Alnwick!” snapped Sir Gerald, wheeling on the pair. “Why the lies about that? Why go to this empty bungalow?”

“Because we changed our minds, that’s why?” snarled the man. “We had the brass—the thirty quid—and we reckoned we’d hang onto it instead of spending it on doss houses!”

“A likely story!” said Sir Gerald contemptuously. “Come on, you’d better own up. It’ll be better for yourselves in the long run. What’ve you done with those papers you stole from my laboratory?”

“We’ve never seen your damned papers or your laboratory, either!” shouted the man, his eyes blazing. “We can be identified and identified easy if you’ll send over to Ireland for some of our relations!”

“Ireland, eh?” exclaimed Sir Gerald, his eyes glinting. “A nice, convenient, long distance that. Is there no one in this country can identify you?”

“No,” said the man sullenly. “The lass and I crossed over about a month ago. We got a passage on a cargo boat—the *Black Swan*, if you want to know her name!”

“The *Black Swan* was torpedoed in the Irish Channel ten days ago and lost with all hands,” observed the Flying Beetle mildly. “She went down in three minutes!”

“Which this blackguard must know,” said Sir Gerald angrily. “That’s why he’s picked on the *Black Swan*. He knows we can’t disprove his story in that quarter. Well, what’s to be done with them, Davies? You’re in charge of the case at present. Do we keep them here or have them sent to Newcastle for further interrogation?”

“Oh, keep them here for the meantime,” said the Flying Beetle, handing the statement back to the inspector. “You’ll let us know at once, inspector, if the papers are found at the bungalow. I may have a look round there myself to-morrow, if they haven’t turned up!”

It was an exceedingly upset Sir Gerald who motored back home with the Flying Beetle.

“My God, Davies!” he burst out, “it’s going to be confoundedly serious if they’ve managed to get those papers out of the country. I must say, I’m rather surprised that you didn’t interrogate them yourself!”

The Flying Beetle shrugged his shoulders.

“What was the use?” he said. “The man had made his statement and was prepared to stick to it——”

“Yes, but you might have tripped him up,” cut in Sir Gerald sharply. “That’s your fellows’ job, isn’t it?”

“Partly!” admitted the Flying Beetle. “But I wouldn’t have tripped that chap up, so it would merely have been a waste of breath trying. But don’t worry overmuch about

your missing formulæ. I'm pretty certain they haven't left the country yet—and if they haven't, I'll find them!"

His confidence did something towards heartening Sir Gerald, who called back at the police station early the following morning.

"I'm afraid there's been no fresh developments, sir," said the inspector gloomily. "We've found nothing at the bungalow and both the man and the girl are sticking to their denial of having assaulted Pilcher or stolen your papers. I'm afraid that's going to be their line. They'll deny everything even after conviction and sentence. Where is Captain Davies this morning?"

"He's gone along to the bungalow on the dunes to watch your men digging," said Sir Gerald dismally. "Digging, my God! It'll be worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack. If the scoundrels really have buried the papers the damned things might be anywhere!"

"Yes, that's so!" agreed the inspector. "Our only chance of recovering them seems to lie in making the two prisoners talk, somehow or other!"

"I'd like to give 'em both a dose of field punishment number one," said Sir Gerald savagely. "That'd make 'em talk, all right!"

It was in a very despondent frame of mind that he returned home for lunch to find that the Flying Beetle had already returned from the bungalow.

"No, we've had no luck at all," the latter informed him. "But I've had a bit of luck in another way. Pilcher's lent me his yacht for the afternoon and I'm going to have a couple of hours fishing. I'm frightfully keen on fishing and I haven't had any for ages. Care to come along!"

"No, thanks, I've got some letters to write!" returned Sir Gerald gruffly.

He considered the Flying Beetle might have found a better way of employing his time than in going off fishing aboard Pilcher's yacht, and he said as much to Pilcher as he sat with that gentleman after lunch.

"Oh, I don't know," said Pilcher who was already considerably better. "These chaps work in their own way, you know. As a matter of fact, he told me this morning that this particular case was one which required rather more thought than action and he considered a couple of hours on the water would clear his brain and give him a keener perspective!"

"I hope it does!" said Sir Gerald grimly. "He's got a fine reputation, I know, but _____"

He left the rest of the sentence unsaid, but it was obvious that he was beginning to doubt if the Flying Beetle was all that the Admiralty said he was.

There's not the slightest doubt, however, that the Flying Beetle thoroughly enjoyed his afternoon. Accompanied by Hobbis, the deck hand and handyman, he fished from the yacht until dusk was creeping in across the waters, and with a commendable bag returned eventually to the house.

Apart from a brief telephone conversation with Inspector Spencer, he spent the next day lounging about the house and grounds. Sir Gerald, returning in the evening after an

afternoon spent at the aircraft works in Newcastle, learned this fact from the butler; and also from Pilcher who was up.

“Confound the fellow!” he burst out angrily. “Does he think this is a social visit, or what?”

He was unusually silent throughout dinner at which Pilcher was present; but when the last course had been cleared away and the three men were seated over their liqueurs and cigars, he said:

“Captain Davies, I have something to say to you!”

“By all means!” said the Flying Beetle courteously.

“I am disappointed—most disappointed indeed—in the manner in which you are handling this case,” said Sir Gerald, controlling his mounting anger with an effort. “From the very outset you have appeared to take remarkably little interest in it!”

“I am sorry you should think that, sir,” murmured the Flying Beetle.

“But I do think it!” burst out Sir Gerald angrily. “Instead of fooling around here all day, as I understand you have been doing, I think you would have been better employed in finding my missing papers—or, at least, in trying to find them!”

The Flying Beetle regarded him through the fragrant blue smoke of the cigars.

“But I have found them,” he said.

“You—you’ve what?” gasped Sir Gerald.

“I have found them!” repeated the Flying Beetle.

“Then—then where are they?” stammered Sir Gerald.

The Flying Beetle glanced across the table.

“Pilcher has them!” he said coolly.

V

There was a moment of tense silence. Then Pilcher leapt to his feet, his face livid, his chair crashing to the floor behind him.

“If this is a joke,” he burst out furiously.

“No, it’s no joke, Pilcher!” rapped the Flying Beetle, and a small, deadly-looking automatic had appeared in his hand as though by magic. “I don’t know whether you’re armed, or not, but you’ll note I have you covered!”

Sir Gerald was on his feet.

“Davies,” he said hoarsely, “you—you cannot mean——”

“Yes,” interposed the Flying Beetle. “I do mean it. It was Pilcher, there, who stole your papers!”

“I deny it!” shouted Pilcher, his face convulsed.

“You can deny it as much as you like,” said the Flying Beetle calmly, “but there’re the papers!”

He drew a seemingly untouched paint tube from his pocket and threw it onto the table. Pilcher stared at it with distended eyes.

“The papers?” said Sir Gerald uncomprehendingly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, that tube does not contain paint, but the rolled-up papers,” said the Flying Beetle. “Open the bottom and you’ll see!”

Snatching up the tube, Sir Gerald ripped open the bottom and with trembling fingers withdrew a tight, cylindrical roll of papers which he unfolded.

“My God! it’s them!” he said hoarsely and lifted a haggard face to Pilcher. “I—I would never have believed it!”

“How d’you know I put them there?” shouted Pilcher, his eyes blazing. “How d’you know that paint tube’s mine? I deny it absolutely. I’ve never seen that tube before _____”

“You can save your breath!” cut in the Flying Beetle. “I’ve got all the evidence against you that I want, Pilcher!”

“Evidence—what evidence?” snarled Pilcher.

“One particularly damning piece is the rope with which you were tied up,” said the Flying Beetle. “It was cut from a coil in your sail locker. Do you deny it now, Pilcher?”

Pilcher slumped heavily down on his chair like a man suddenly winded. His face was ghastly. To the horrified Sir Gerald no further proof of the man’s guilt than his appearance at that moment was necessary. But he was still absolutely bewildered.

“Will you explain, Captain Davies?” he said weakly.

“Yes, certainly,” replied the Flying Beetle. “When you and I visited the glade after talking with Pilcher you showed me the rope with which he’d been bound. I was practically certain in my own mind then that it was not the gipsies who had attacked Pilcher, for the rope was halyard rope which had recently been used. It was salty with brine and the knot in it was a reef knot. Distinctly not the sort of rope a gipsy would have in his possession!”

“No, I see that,” said Sir Gerald huskily.

“Again, they must have been singularly stupid spies to have left a code book behind, such as Pilcher described,” went on the Flying Beetle, “and stupider still to have remained in the neighbourhood after knocking him out and tying him up. No, the whole story smelt fishy to me. That’s why I went fishing. To find the coil of rope from which the rope for Pilcher’s bonds had been cut!”

“And you found it?” demanded Sir Gerald.

“In his sail locker,” nodded the Flying Beetle. “The ropes are identical in every detail. Pilcher was tied up by his own rope and by his own man—Hobbis!”

“But do you mean that the attack on him was a *fake*?” gasped Sir Gerald.

“To all intents and purposes,” nodded the Flying Beetle. “He had to be knocked about a bit, though, to lend his story credence, I admire his nerve in that. Hobbis did his job almost too well!”

“But—but why go to these lengths?” demanded Sir Gerald. “Why all this extraordinary camouflage?”

“So that the gipsies would get the blame,” explained the Flying Beetle. “Their appearance near this house must have been a godsend to Pilcher. How easy to put the blame for everything on them and establish an almost perfect alibi. The one slip Pilcher made was in the use of sail halyards.”

“But how did you know the papers were in this paint tube?” demanded Sir Gerald.

“Because I put myself in Pilcher’s place,” answered the Flying Beetle promptly. “In spite of his alibi, something might go wrong and his luggage be searched. It was absolutely essential that a safe hiding place for the papers should be found. What safer place than in one of his paint tubes? Whilst he was confined to his room, I examined all the tubes and found that one—*Look out!*”

His shouted warning came the fraction of a second too late. Pilcher had been sitting with his hands resting on the edge of the table. Exerting all his strength he had leapt suddenly to his feet, overthrowing the heavy table as he did so and sending the lamp on it crashing to the floor.

Instantly the room was plunged into darkness and next moment there came the crash of breaking glass as Pilcher drove head first through the closed french windows.

Leaping to the window, the Flying Beetle crashed his way through the jagged aperture already made by the fleeing Pilcher, the darkness being split by the livid, stabbing flame of his automatic.

From the blackness outside came answering flame, white-hot agony tore searingly through the Flying Beetle’s shoulder, and with a groan he staggered back, the gun falling from his nerveless hand.

So intense was the darkness that it was impossible to see in which direction Pilcher was making, but as the windows were wrenched open and Sir Gerald and the frightened butler dashed out into the night, there came the sudden roar of a car engine, the brilliant illumination of powerful headlights, and Sir Gerald’s car swept down the drive from the direction of the garage.

“Davies!” cried Sir Gerald wildly. “Davies—where are you?”

There came no response, for the Flying Beetle was dashing madly through the darkness towards the field where his Camel was picketed down.

Oblivious to the agony of his shattered shoulder, he cast off the picket ropes, and switching on, swung the propeller. There was one thing which was affording him a grim and intense satisfaction.

To make any speed at all—and he must make speed if he was to get out of the district before a police and military cordon was thrown round it—Pilcher would be forced to keep his sidelights, at least, switched on if he was to avoid ditching the car along the narrow and tortuous coast road.

And as he roared up into the night, the Flying Beetle saw that the fleeing Pilcher was trusting not to sidelights, but to headlights, and was taking the powerful car thundering through the night at breakneck speed.

Whether or not the thunder of the Camel’s engine was audible to Pilcher above the roar of his car, whether or not he knew he was being pursued in the air, will never be

known; but he kept the car thundering madly on until the Flying Beetle dived on him with gun aflame.

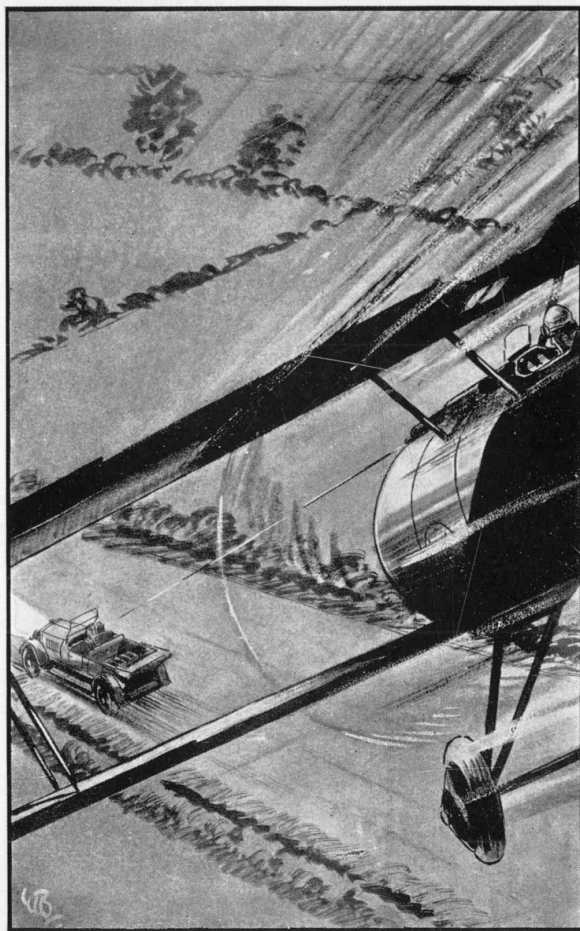
It was no time for nice measures, and the Flying Beetle knew it. Pilcher had proved himself a dangerous spy and he'd got to be stopped before he could make his getaway.

Guided by those racing, swaying headlights, the Flying Beetle dived with gun ablaze. The range was too short to allow of a miss and as the Camel flattened out feet only above the hurtling car, there came a wild scream from Pilcher's lips, and swerving off the road, the car plunged into the ditch and overturned.

Pilcher was quite dead when they took him from out the wreckage. But so successfully was the whole affair hushed up that it was not for many weeks that the German High Command suspected he was dead. And by that time many of his associates had also been rounded up.

"We have discovered Pilcher was a German by birth," wrote Sir Malcolm Ferguson to Sir Gerald Lester. "Like many another, he was apparently sent to this country to await the coming of 'Der Tag,' spending his boyhood years here and ingratiating himself with those likely to be in authority when hostilities eventually broke out——"

"The damned scamp!" ejaculated Sir Gerald. "And to think of the times I stood him tuck when we were lads at school together!"



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GUIDED BY THOSE RACING HEADLIGHTS, HE DIVED WITH
GUN ABLAZE.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRAIL OF DEATH

I

“IT MIGHT be accident, of course, or even suicide,” said Sir Malcolm Ferguson. “But Foster has his doubts about it, and, personally, I am inclined to agree with him!”

“What do you suspect then—murder?” demanded his visitor, Captain Harry Davies, who, before he had transferred from the Royal Flying Corps to the Secret Service, had been known on every aerodrome from Ostend to the Swiss frontier as the Flying Beetle.

“I don’t know what to think at all,” said Sir Malcolm. “But in view of the fact that Major Brown was attached to the Intelligence Service and was an extremely efficient officer, we want you to go up to Callay to investigate his death.”

“Very good, sir!” answered the Flying Beetle. “There is just this. Was Major Brown at Callay on business or leave?”

“On leave!” answered Sir Malcolm. “Foster is entertaining a small party up there, I believe, and Brown went up to spend a few days with him. Foster was invalided out of the service a month or two ago. He was badly gassed on the Somme, poor fellow!”

Within the hour, in the snug cockpit of the Camel which had been placed at his disposal at Hendon aerodrome, the Flying Beetle was roaring northwards towards Scotland.

It was when the sun was setting red behind the broad waters of the Atlantic that he came dropping down to land on a flat stretch of moorland which fringed Callay Castle, a grey and ancient stronghold situated on the coast of lonely Sutherland in the north of Scotland.

As he swung himself from the cockpit he was greeted by the tall and genial Foster, bronzed of feature by his weeks on the moors.

“So glad you’ve come, Davies,” said Foster, shaking hands. “This is a bad business, I’m afraid!”

“Just how did it happen?” asked the Flying Beetle.

“I don’t know,” said Foster as the pair of them walked in the direction of the house. “All any of us know is that yesterday afternoon Brown was shot dead in the heather.”

“But you think he was murdered?” commented the Flying Beetle.

“Well, that’s just what’s puzzling me,” said Foster. “It really looks as though he tripped over his gun and shot himself accidentally. He was alone at the time. The police and everybody except myself are satisfied that it was accidental death!”

“Why aren’t you satisfied?”

“Well, Brown was a crack shot and an old, experienced hand with a gun. He was always most careful, as well. To my mind, it’s absolutely ridiculous to think he was clumsy enough to trip over his own gun.”

“What’s your theory then?” asked the Flying Beetle.

“I haven’t one,” admitted Foster, “apart from being practically certain that it was neither an accident on Brown’s part nor suicide.”

“That leaves only an accident on somebody else’s part—or—murder,” remarked the Flying Beetle. “He was alone, you say, when he was shot. How did that happen?”

“He went off after lunch to visit the Lodgers. They’ve taken the Gables, a house about three miles from my place. He took his gun with him in case anything popped up as he was strolling along. He had tea at the Gables and set off to walk back to Callay. He hadn’t turned up by dinner, and after ringing the Lodgers and finding out he’d left about three hours beforehand, I sent a couple of gillies out to see if they could see anything of him. They found him lying dead in the heather about half-way between the Gables and Callay.”

“I see,” said the Flying Beetle thoughtfully. “Who are the Lodgers?”

“They’re Americans—a father and son,” replied Foster. “I believe they are very wealthy. Run three or four big cars and the boy is always flying about in an aeroplane. I believe he’s got a special permit from the Air Ministry to use it. It was Brown’s keenness on aeronautics which started his friendship with the Lodgers!”

“Have you mentioned these doubts of yours about the cause of Brown’s death to anyone else?” asked the Flying Beetle.

“No,” replied Foster. “I didn’t want to make things more unpleasant than they are already. Another thing, I may be wrong. Brown may have shot himself accidentally. But I cannot credit that such a careful fellow could have been so clumsy. However, if after you’ve had a look round, you’re satisfied that Brown died by his own hand that’ll be good enough for me and all of us.”

“Where’s the body?” asked the Flying Beetle.

“In my boathouse, awaiting the necessary police inquiry,” replied Foster.

“I’ll have a look at it,” said the Flying Beetle. “I suppose none of your guests will be leaving until after the inquiry.”

“No; the police have requested that,” said Foster. “A certain amount of evidence will have to be taken as suicide can’t be absolutely ruled out yet.”

After dinner that night the Flying Beetle strolled down to the boathouse. It was almost an hour later that he returned to the house. Foster was waiting for him in the room he used as a study. He had escaped from his guests under the pretext of writing letters.

“Well?” he asked anxiously as the Flying Beetle entered the room, closing the door behind him.

“You were right,” said the Flying Beetle grimly. “Brown did not shoot himself either accidentally or otherwise. Someone else did it for him!”

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Inspector McCulloch of the Kirkie police, summoned from his cottage that same night, hastened to the police station to find the Flying Beetle and Foster waiting there for him.

“It’s about Major Brown, who was found dead,” said the Flying Beetle, when Foster had introduced him to the inspector. “He was murdered!”

“Murdered?” repeated the inspector, aghast. “Why how d’ye make that out, sir?”

“By the depth and angle of the shot’s penetration into the bone of the forehead and by the complete absence of powder burning on the skin,” replied the Flying Beetle. “You have the gun here, I believe!”

“Yes, sir,” answered the inspector. “Also the cartridges found in it and eight full ones taken from the pocket of the jacket.”

He ordered the gun and cartridge-cases to be brought. He was amazed, but not for an instant did he doubt the truth of what he was hearing, for there was something about this young man from Whitehall which convinced him that the statement as to Brown’s death was no mere idle speculation.

“I wonder how many have handled this gun since the shooting,” said the Flying Beetle. “It will be almost useless to examine it for finger-prints now, but you’d better have that done. Let’s have a look at the cartridges.”

He examined them, breaking one open and comparing the pellets with two which he shook from an envelope into his hand.

“Yes, the same,” he commented. “Well, it’s fairly obvious that this is what happened. The major was either walking with someone or met someone in the heather. That someone got possession of his gun, stepped back a few paces, and fired. From what Mr. Foster has told me, the gun was found lying underneath the dead man’s body. It was placed there by the murderer. Did you notice any signs of a struggle when you visited the scene of the tragedy?”

“None at all, sir,” replied the inspector quickly. “I particularly looked for that, because I wasn’t certain myself then that it was an accident. There were no signs of a struggle at all.”

“Which seems to indicate that Major Brown parted with his gun willingly,” said the Flying Beetle. “In other words, that he knew the person who shot him and had no suspicions of him. If that theory is correct it narrows the search considerably. You examined the contents of the major’s pockets, of course. Did you find any letters or anything on him which might give us a line on this affair?”

“There were one or two letters, sir,” answered the inspector. “Nothing in them at all. I’ll let you see what we found on him!”

The inspector gave some instructions and presently all the articles found on the dead man were brought in for the Flying Beetle’s inspection. There were the letters the inspector had mentioned, a wallet, a few photographs, five pounds in notes, a bunch of keys, some loose change, a box of matches, a tobacco pouch and an old pipe.

Glancing through the letters, the Flying Beetle returned them to their envelopes and picked up the old briar pipe.

“The bowl’s practically full of tobacco,” he commented. “Brown must have lighted this pipe of his only a few moments before he was shot. Did you find the pipe in his pocket, inspector?”

“No, sir; it was lying in the heather a few paces from him,” replied the inspector quickly.

“I see,” said the Flying Beetle, casually opening the tobacco pouch. “Well, you’ll have to arrange for an adjournment of the inquiry to-morrow. Keep my name out of this, won’t you? I am staying with Mr. Foster as a guest only, in the meantime I’ll take this with me.” He slipped the old briar in his pocket. “I’m on the ’phone if you want me, inspector!”

II

The Flying Beetle was astir with the dawn and he tramped across the heather with Foster to the spot where the body of Brown had been found.

“It was exactly here!” said Foster coming to a halt and stubbing the ground with his walking stick.

“Thanks!” nodded the Flying Beetle. “You go and sit on that boulder over there out of the way. I’m going to have a look round!”

In slow and ever-widening circles, he commenced to search every inch of the heather and gorse around the spot where the body had been found.

Foster, sitting sucking at his pipe and watching him with interest, saw the Flying Beetle suddenly stoop and gingerly take something from a low-growing sprig of gorse and study it closely.

“You’re quite certain that all your party were indoors, either dressing for dinner or having dinner when the shooting occurred?” asked the Flying Beetle.

“Yes, absolutely,” assented Foster. “Why?”

“Because, apart from any member of your party, I’d like to know who wears brown golfing stockings around here when in mufti,” said the Flying Beetle.

“Why, several,” said Foster. “Let me think, now. There’s Captain Framlington, who’s staying with the Loders, and young Loder himself, and Captain Hamish, who’s also staying with them. They all sport brown. It’s a pretty popular colour on the moors, you know.”

“Yes, unfortunately,” said the Flying Beetle, opening his hand to disclose a tiny wisp of brown wool. “Recognize that?”

“No, I can’t say I do,” said Foster staring at it. “Is that what you found just now?”

“Yes,” replied the Flying Beetle. “It’s been torn off a stocking quite recently. It might, of course, have been left by anyone tramping about here.”

“So as a clue it’s pretty hopeless,” commented Foster, still staring at the tiny wisp of wool.

“I won’t say that yet,” began the Flying Beetle, then broke off as the stillness of the early morning was shattered by the distant roar of an aero engine.

“That’ll be young Loder,” said Foster staring across the moors towards the Gables. “Yes, here he comes!”

A Curtis biplane was boring up into the blue. At less than a hundred feet it flattened out and came roaring over the moors as though making for the sea. As it thundered low

overhead, Foster waved his stick in greeting. The pilot waved back and next instant the Curtis banked steeply with nose down, the roar of its engine died away, and it glided down to land in the heather.

“Remember, I’m merely a guest of yours,” said the Flying Beetle to Foster, as, vacating the cockpit, a good-looking youth came striding towards them.

“Hallo!” exclaimed the new arrival pleasantly. “I thought it was you, Foster. You’re out early!”

“Yes, just taking a before-breakfast stroll and showing Captain Davies where poor Brown was killed,” replied Foster. “Davies, this is Hugo Loder.”

Young Loder shook hands with the Flying Beetle.

“Rotten business, wasn’t it?” he said, referring to the death of Brown. “Did you know him?”

“No,” replied the Flying Beetle. “It must have been an awful shock to all of you, though. He’d just left your place, hadn’t he?”

“Yes,” nodded Loder. “We little thought we’d never see him alive again!”

He chatted for a few moments about the tragedy, then said:

“Well, I’ll have to be off. I’ve been fitting a couple of new plugs and am giving the old bus a try-out!”

Swinging himself up into the cockpit, he took the air again. Watching him thundering seawards, the Flying Beetle said to Foster:

“I want to stroll over to the Gables with you after breakfast. Can you think of a plausible excuse for calling?”

“Plenty,” replied Foster. “But you don’t think anyone there killed Brown, do you?”

“I don’t know who are there,” replied the Flying Beetle dryly. “I want to have a look at them!”

So after breakfast he and Foster strolled across the moors to the Gables. Loder had returned from his test flight, and he and Captain Hamish were loading their golf bags into the rear cockpit when Foster and his companion arrived. What drew Foster’s eye was the fact that both were wearing brownish plus fours with stockings to match.

The Flying Beetle stood chatting with young Loder and Captain Hamish, until, knocking out his pipe, Loder swung himself up to the cockpit, followed by the captain.

“See you both at lunch, if you’ll stay,” called young Loder, and a few minutes later the Curtis was in the air.

The invitation to remain for lunch was repeated by Loder senior, a tall and courtly gentleman, but declining on the grounds that they had to get back to Callay, the Flying Beetle and Foster set off homewards about midday.

“Well, you must admit that everyone in that party is absolutely above suspicion,” said Foster.

“If you had seen as much of this game as I have,” responded the Flying Beetle, “you’d know that no one is above suspicion. Have you a sailing chart of this part of the coast?”

“Yes, why?” said Foster in surprise.

“Because I’d like the loan of it,” answered the Flying Beetle, “and I’d like to borrow your motor-launch this afternoon. You can come with me if you like. If anyone asks, say we’re going fishing.”

III

Seated with Foster in the library of Callay, the Flying Beetle turned from the figures he had been pencilling on a scrap of paper. Picking up a ruler he laid it on the sailing chart spread out on the table in front of him.

“The Isle of Gullbrae,” he murmured. “Twenty miles due west of here. That’s about it, I think.”

“About what?” demanded Foster.

“About where young Loder landed this morning,” replied the Flying Beetle.

Straightening up from the chart he turned to Foster.

“When Loder left us before breakfast this morning,” he said, “he flew straight out to sea. It was exactly seventy minutes later that, seated at breakfast, I heard him returning. I noted the time because it struck me as a longish flight to test a couple of plugs. His Curtis can do about eighty miles per hour. So unless he landed somewhere he’d flown about ninety-five miles. Do you follow me?”

“Yes, quite!”

“When we walked over to the Gables after breakfast,” resumed the Flying Beetle, “I asked him casually if he’d landed anywhere this morning. He said he hadn’t. That was a lie!”

“How d’you know that?”

“Because there were grains of sand on the axle of his undercarriage and on his tail skid which weren’t there when he took off from the heather after chatting with us,” said the Flying Beetle. “Another thing, his fuel gauge was standing at full when he left. I had a look at it again after breakfast. It was a point or two only below full. In other words he’d flown no more than forty or fifty miles, which would take him about half an hour.”

“But he might have refilled his tank after returning to the Gables,” said Foster.

“I doubt it, as he’d have filled it right up,” said the Flying Beetle. “I’m quite satisfied that Loder flew only forty to fifty miles this morning. His course was straight out to sea, and he returned the same way. Sometime and somewhere during the flight he landed on a sandy beach. Twenty miles due west of here lies the Isle of Gullbrae, the only island off this part of the coast with a sandy beach. We’re going to have a look at it.”

“But why?” asked Foster.

“Because I think that’s where Loder landed,” replied the Flying Beetle, “and I want to know why he denied having landed anywhere when I put the question to him.”

Foster’s launch was ready and within the hour it was sliding swiftly through the blue water, heading for distant Gullbrae with the Flying Beetle and Foster aboard.

As they neared the island, the Flying Beetle studied it earnestly through his powerful glasses. It was roughly oval in shape, being about a quarter of a mile in length and half that distance across.

Black and precipitous cliffs, rising sheer out of the sea marked its northern boundary, the high ground sloping away to sand dunes and beach at the southern end.

“There’s a hut there on the heights,” remarked the Flying Beetle his glasses still to his eyes, “and a fellow standing in the doorway watching us. We’ll circle the island before running in. We don’t want our visit to appear a too inquisitive one.”

Foster put the tiller over, and, having cruised round the island, headed towards a sandy cove. As he did so, the man at the hut came down towards the cove at a shambling run, a gun in the crook of his arm.

He was a muscular, unshaven fellow, swarthy and weather-beaten of feature, jerseyed and sea-booted. He wore a dirty reefer jacket over his jersey and a coloured handkerchief was knotted about his neck.

“What d’ye want here?” he demanded roughly as the launch surged in and grounded in the shallows.

“Nothing in particular,” replied the Flying Beetle. “We’re merely out for a cruise and thought we’d have a look round here and stretch our legs.”

“Well, you can’t,” answered the man. “This is private property. It belongs to the Laird of McCray, and no trespassers are allowed here.”

“I see,” said the Flying Beetle, clinking a couple of half-crowns. “We won’t do any damage, you know——”

“I tell you this is private property!” cut in the man roughly. “You needn’t try no bribes, neither. My orders is to keep trespassers off, and I’m keeping ’em off. So clear out. You’re not landing here!”

That he was to be neither bribed nor cajoled was obvious, and at a word from the Flying Beetle, Foster started up the engine and shoved the gear lever into reverse. The launch backed away, and, turning, stood out for the open sea.

“We’re getting warm, Foster,” said the Flying Beetle happily. “There’s something fishy about this place. We’ll clear off now and come back after dark.”

They headed for the mainland, and not until Gullbrae was merging with the haze of the horizon did Foster switch off the engine. Then as the launch rose and fell lazily on the long Atlantic swell, they tackled the sandwiches and the thermos flask of tea which they had brought with them.

After that they lighted their pipes and, stretching out lazily in the thwarts, puffed reflectively whilst evening deepened into dusk and the shades of night crept in across the smooth, calm sea.

It was when darkness had fallen that the launch crept softly in again towards the island. Waiting until the bows had grounded, the Flying Beetle leapt ashore, and embedding the anchor deep in the sand, was joined by Foster.

Moving unerringly through the darkness they made towards the hut and as it loomed up in front of them against the blue-black sky they saw a chink of light filtering

through a crack in the shutters which had been pulled across the window.

“He’s taking no chances of his light being observed from the sea,” murmured the Flying Beetle.

Creeping forward, he peered in through the crack. He had a limited vision of the interior of the crudely furnished shack, but he could see the man lying on an untidy bunk reading a magazine.

“Come on, Foster,” whispered the Flying Beetle. “We’ll have a look round.”

Retracing their steps to the beach, they started on a tour of exploration. A moon was swinging up from out the sea, tracing a path of shimmering silver across the water. It threw the sand into white relief against the dark background of cliff and plainly visible in the cold light of the moon was the imprint of booted feet in the firm, hard sand left by the receding tide.

“Our friend’s undoubtedly,” commented the Flying Beetle. “He’s obviously been on the prowl. We’ll see where they lead to!”

He and Foster followed the footprints along the beach until at a point near where the beach ended and the cliffs rose sheer and precipitous from out the sea, the footprints turned abruptly to the right and appeared to vanish into the cliff itself.

“By jove, look here, Foster!” muttered the Flying Beetle, the beam of his electric torch shining into the inky blackness of a cave, the entrance to which was concealed by an overlapping of the cliff face. “One could pass this place a dozen times, even in daylight and never suspect its presence!”

Together he and Foster moved forward into the vast cave in which, neatly stacked, were great piles of wooden boxes.

“They’re addressed to Stenson and Sons, General Importers, Grey Street, Newcastle,” commented the Flying Beetle, examining the labels by the light of his torch. “Hallo, here are some addressed to Sheffield, and some to Manchester. Hold the torch, Foster. We’re going to see what’s in these boxes!”

By means of the marlinspike of the seaman’s knife which he had found amongst the launch’s gear, the Flying Beetle levered open the lid of one of the boxes. Removing the top layer of straw with which the contents of the box were covered, he disclosed two gleaming cylinders.

“What are they?” demanded Foster staring.

“Gas cylinders!” said the Flying Beetle grimly. “But what on earth are they doing here——”

Abruptly he broke off as a beam of light was flashed on them from behind and a voice snarled:

“Put up your hands, both of you, or I’ll blow you to pieces!”

IV

The Flying Beetle and Foster wheeled. Standing in the entrance of the cave, his gun pointing straight at them, was the man from the hut.

“Up with your hands!” snarled the fellow. “I won’t ask again!”

The hands of the Flying Beetle and Foster crept waveringly above their heads, and his gun at the ready, the man slowly advanced.

“Spies, eh?” he jeered. “I thought there was something queer about the pair of you this afternoon. Where’re you from, and who sent you?”

“You’d better ask Loder,” said the Flying Beetle.

The shot went home, for the man started perceptibly.

“You’re not in with the Loders or you’d have said so before!” he began roughly. “So don’t come that game——”

That was as far as he got before the Flying Beetle leapt at him in a low, diving rugby tackle. The gun exploded, but the charge whistled harmlessly over the Flying Beetle’s head.

Next instant his arms were round the man, and, as he brought the fellow down, Foster leapt to his assistance.

Snarlingly the man fought desperately to throw off his attackers, but a smash full to the point stretched him out momentarily insensible, and when he came round it was to find himself tied hand and foot by rope taken from the cases.

“Now,” said the Flying Beetle grimly, “you’re going to answer a few questions. Who brought these cases here, and what is going to be done with them?”

“You can find out!” grated the man, glowering up at him. “I’m telling you nothing!”

“They’re gas cylinders,” said the Flying Beetle. “What gas do they contain?”

“I’m telling you nothing!” reiterated the man furiously.

“Very well,” replied the Flying Beetle. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to leave you here, and release the gas from one of the cylinders!”

“Go to hell!” snarled the prisoner, but there was fear in his eyes.

“You’d better get out of here, Foster,” said the Flying Beetle turning to the box he had opened and taking from it one of the gleaming cylinders. “This stuff may be pretty deadly, for all we know!”

“It’s deadly enough!” cut in the man hoarsely. “Open that cylinder and you’ll never get out of here alive!”

“I’ll risk that!” said the Flying Beetle.

Laying the cylinder on the ground beside the bound and helpless man he took out his handkerchief and tied it round his mouth and nostrils.

“Now!” he said grimly, his voice muffled by the handkerchief. “I’m going to give you one more chance before I release the gas. What gas is it, and what’s it to be used for?”

“I’m saying nothing!” returned the other savagely.

He saw the Flying Beetle’s fingers close on the cylinder tap and slowly commence to turn it. His nerve broke.

“Stop it, damn you!” he screamed. “Stop it!”

The Flying Beetle looked at him.

“Are you going to talk?” he demanded.

“Yes!” croaked the prisoner. “Yes, I’ll talk, curse you!”

He proceeded to do so, haltingly and with many an oath, but it was little he knew beyond the fact that the gas cylinders were brought to the island under cover of darkness by a small barque.

With the desperate earnestness of despair he swore that he did not know to what use the cylinders were to be put, and after prolonged questioning the Flying Beetle was forced to believe him.

“I tell you I came over from America with the Loders,” snarled the man, “and was given the job of minding this island. If you want to know what it’s all about you’d better ask the Loders.”

“I will!” said the Flying Beetle grimly.

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Dawn was by this time at hand, and assisted by Foster, the Flying Beetle bundled the prisoner into the launch and set off for the mainland.

As the red rim of the sun appeared above the eastern horizon there came another note audible above the chugging of the launch’s motor. It was the drone of an aero engine, increasing rapidly in volume.

“Young Loder!” said the Flying Beetle grimly. “On his way to the island, I suppose?”

It was Loder, and at less than fifty feet he roared over the launch, pulled a steep wing turn, and came back over the launch again.

His helmeted head and leather-clad shoulders were visible as he peered down at the two men and their prisoner, then whipping his control stick forward and across he dived on the launch, and above the thunder of his engine sounded the sudden, vicious rat-tat-tat of his synchronized gun.

With a choking cry Foster lurched to his feet, his hands clutching at his throat. Then as he slumped lifelessly across the thwarts, the Curtis zoomed and dived again with gun aflame.

Bullets whanged through floorboards and thudded into the frantically squirming prisoner who shrieked once in agony then became ominously still.

The Flying Beetle was overboard, his slim, young body cleaving the water as he dived down and down. When tortured lungs could no longer stand the strain, he broke water.

The Curtis was wheeling low overhead; the sinking launch, with two dead men aboard, was awash almost to the gunwales.

As the Flying Beetle’s head appeared, the Curtis banked and tore down on him, the snarl of its blazing gun audible above the thunderous roar of its engine.

Bullets spattered the water around the Flying Beetle, but he had dived again, swimming deeply and strongly.

For upwards of fifteen minutes this grim game of hide and seek went on, then suddenly the Curtis turned away for the mainland and vanished in that direction.

Treading water and drawing great gulping breaths into his pumped-out lungs, the Flying Beetle saw a brown-sailed fishing boat standing in towards him.

Twenty minutes later he was hauled aboard, and after a brief but vain search for the bodies of Foster and the prisoner, he told the thoroughly startled fishermen to stand in for the mainland without delay.

“A German machine?” he repeated in response to their hoarse inquiries about the Curtis. “Yes, it was an enemy machine all right!”

Beyond that he gave them little or no explanation, but on reaching Callay he got through at once on the telephone to Inspector McCulloch.

Following that call he put another one through to the Admiralty in Whitehall, then swinging himself up into the cockpit of his Camel, he flew over to the Gables.

The Loders, however, had literally flown. It was the vastly intrigued Captain Hamish who explained.

“Young Loder arrived back here about a couple of hours ago,” he told the Flying Beetle. “He looked pretty shaky, but he said he was all right, and after having a word with his Dad the pair of them climbed into the Curtis and flew off!”

“They didn’t say where they were going?” demanded the Flying Beetle.

“Yes, they said they were popping over to Raskirk,” said Hamish. “But what’s it all about?”

“You’ll know later,” said the Flying Beetle grimly. “I’m setting a police guard over this house and none of you must leave the premises until you have permission. If it means protracting your leave, I’ll fix that!”

He turned away as a police car containing Inspector McCulloch, a uniformed sergeant and a constable pulled up outside the house.

“The birds have flown,” he informed the inspector. “It’s what I expected. You’ve telephoned all police stations to keep a look-out for them?”

“Yes,” answered the inspector, “and following your instructions I’ve got a warrant for the arrest of young Loder for the murder of Mr. Foster and Major Brown. What on earth has happened, sir?”

“We’ll talk inside the house,” said the Flying Beetle. “We’ve got to make a thorough search. There’s something pretty foul going on around here, and although I’m beginning to get a line on it, I’m not sure yet just what the idea is!”

V

Whilst he and Inspector McCulloch carefully and methodically examined the private papers of the two Loders, the Flying Beetle told the inspector of the affair at Gullbrae Island and the attack made on him, Foster and the prisoner by young Loder.

He also told the inspector of the evidence he had against young Loder concerning the murder of Captain Brown.

“It was Brown’s briar pipe which gave me a line on Loder,” he explained. “When I saw the pipe at the police station the first thing I did was to check up on the tobacco in the bowl with the tobacco in the pouch. The tobaccos were different. Whilst I was talking to young Loder yesterday morning at the Gables here, he knocked out his pipe before getting aboard his Curtis. I retrieved a few shreds of the discarded tobacco. It was the same brand as was in Brown’s pipe!”

He paused a moment, then went on:

“Now Brown’s pipe was lying beside him, so it’s fairly obvious that he was smoking at the time of being shot. What is more, the tobacco had just been lighted. He had evidently filled up from Loder’s pouch, so Loder must have been with him. The way I figure it out is that Loder offered him a fill of tobacco, held Brown’s gun whilst Brown lighted up, then shot him dead instead of handing back the gun!”

“But why, sir?” demanded the inspector in bewilderment. “From what you’ve told me it seems to me that these Loders are spies. Do you think Captain Brown had discovered something about them?”

“Either that, or they had discovered he was attached to our Intelligence Service,” answered the Flying Beetle. “In the latter case they would, naturally, be afraid of him. Yet poor Brown was up here merely on leave!”

“Well, the sooner we pick the scoundrels up, the better!” observed the inspector grimly. “They can’t get far, sir, even with that aeroplane!”

“I don’t know, inspector,” said the Flying Beetle. “You can bet your boots they’d have their way of escape already planned in case anything went wrong!”

It certainly seemed so, for as the day wore on there came no word of the missing Loders, nor did the most searching scrutiny of their private papers reveal the slightest clue as to their whereabouts.

The Flying Beetle had already been in communication with police headquarters at Newcastle concerning Stenson and Sons, General Importers, of Grey Street, to whom the majority of the gas cylinders in the cave had been addressed, and late that same afternoon the Flying Beetle swung himself up into the cockpit of his Camel and set off for Newcastle.

Dusk was merging into night when he glided down to land on Gosforth Aerodrome on the outskirts of the grey, northern city. A fast military car was waiting for him and within fifteen minutes of landing he was closeted with the grizzle-haired Inspector Carter of police headquarters.

“We have made inquiries as you instructed about this firm of Stenson in Grey Street,” said the inspector. “The two sons are fighting with the Northumberland Fusiliers and Stenson himself appears to be a perfectly respectable man. He is of British birth and, so far as we can trace, has lived in Newcastle all his life apart from periodical visits to the Continent before the war. As a matter of fact he is over in France at the moment!”

“What’s he doing over there?” demanded the Flying Beetle sharply.

“Staying with a friend, a Professor Lefevre, who is a famous French scientist,” replied the inspector.

“How long has Stenson been over there?” demanded the Flying Beetle.

“His passport was issued three days ago,” answered the inspector.

“All right, we’ll have a look at this office of his in Grey Street,” said the Flying Beetle grimly.

The military car was waiting outside and a few moments later it was bearing the Flying Beetle and the inspector through the dimly-lighted streets, the pavements of which were thronged with munition workers, khaki-clad soldiers of the garrison and naval ratings from battleships, mine-sweepers and patrol vessels.

Turning into Grey Street, the police car drew up outside a large building given up solely to offices. There were lights in some of the windows where the staff were either working late or charwomen were busy. The lift was working and it took the Flying Beetle and the inspector up to the top floor. A few steps along a stone corridor brought them to a door on the glazed glass of which was printed in black lettering:

R. S. STENSON AND SONS.

“Hallo, there’s someone in here!” commented the inspector grimly.

A faint glimmer of light was showing through the thick glazed glass. The Flying Beetle tried the handle, but the door was locked.

In response to his knock, a heavy tread approached the door, a key clicked in the lock and the door opened to disclose a tall, thick-set man in shirtsleeves.

“Hallo!” he exclaimed sharply at the sight of the inspector’s uniform. “What do you want?”

“We want to have a look round,” said the Flying Beetle, stepping past him into a small showroom, “Who are you?”

“My name’s Meakin,” replied the man harshly. “I’m Mr. Stenson’s clerk. What’re you looking for?”

The Flying Beetle turned and faced him.

“Poison gas!” he rapped.

“Poison gas,” repeated Meakin snarlingly. “You’re mad!”

“What’s in here?” asked the Flying Beetle, strolling into an adjoining room from which was streaming the light which he and the inspector had seen glimmering through the glass.

The room was furnished with a camp-bed, a table and oil cooking stove, a cupboard, a corner wardrobe and a few chairs.

“I sleep here,” grated Meakin. “Mr. Stenson got permission from the owners of the property for me to sleep on the premises.”

“And you’re doing a bit of plumbing, eh?” said the Flying Beetle, nodding towards a length of steel piping, a hacksaw, and a small portable vice lying on the table. “Don’t the owners of the property look after that sort of thing for you?”

“They would if we asked them,” growled Meakin. “But it’s a small job, and I can do it myself.”

“What exactly is the job?” asked the Flying Beetle.

Meakin’s hesitation was but momentary.

“It’s a new cistern pipe,” he said. “I’m handy with my hands, and I like putting in my spare time with odd jobs like that.”

“I believe you!” rasped the Flying Beetle, and Meakin stared at the sudden harsh change in his voice. “I’ve never seen hands as calloused as yours on a clerk, and plumbing jobs are done with lead pipes, not steel. I’m going to have a look at this job of yours. That’s the trapdoor up there isn’t it? Bring me that step-ladder!”

He pointed towards a step-ladder standing propped against the wall. Meakin half turned towards it, then wheeled, a gun in his hand.

“Clever cove, aren’t you?” he snarled, and the gun roared into lurid fire.

The Flying Beetle hurled himself aside, but the bullet smashed through his shoulder, sending him reeling back. Simultaneously the inspector flung himself on Meakin, the gun roared again, and together the two men crashed to the floor.

Springing forward, the Flying Beetle kicked the gun savagely from Meakin’s hand, almost breaking the man’s wrist. As the weapon spun across the floor the Flying Beetle pounced on it and wheeled.

Then he froze, his face set, his eyes as hard as chilled steel. For Meakin, struggling to rise, had thrust the inspector from him, and the police official was rolling limply to the floor, the breast of his tunic wet with blood.

One swift stride took the Flying Beetle to Meakin, and the clenched fist of his uninjured arm, hard as iron, smashed full to the point of Meakin’s jaw before the man could rise.

Meakin went down as though pole-axed, crashing face-foremost to the floor, and, dropping on his knee by the side of the inspector, the Flying Beetle made a swift examination.

A few moments later he rose, pulled the arms of the still unconscious Meakin behind that individual’s back, and snapped the inspector’s handcuffs shut on the man’s wrists.

That done, he stepped swiftly to the telephone in the adjoining room, his face white with the agony of his shattered shoulder.

“Police Station?” he said when he got through. “This is Captain Davies speaking from Stenson’s office in Grey Street. Send an ambulance here at once. Inspector Carter has been shot at and is badly wounded. Yes, I’ve got the man!”

Replacing the receiver, the Flying Beetle stepped back into the living-room. Meakin had come round and was on his knees staring at the limp form of the inspector.

“Is he dead?” he rasped, swinging his head towards the Flying Beetle.

“It’s lucky for you he isn’t!” returned the Flying Beetle grimly, bending over the inspector again. “What have you got to say about this?”

“Nothing!” snarled Meakin. “You’ll get nothing out of me. But I’ll tell you this. There’s not a prison in England that’ll hold me. You’ll find that out!”

He gave a great bellow of laughter, and, heaving himself to his feet, leaned against the table, his manacled hands behind him. His voice rose suddenly to a shout:

“It’s no good you trying to get anything out of me, because you won’t—see?”

“You’ll talk!” promised the Flying Beetle grimly.

He broke off as the door of the outer office was thrust open, and a police superintendent strode into the room followed by Dr. Hardcastle, the police-surgeon, a uniformed sergeant and constable.

“Is this the man, sir?” rapped the superintendent, indicating Meakin, as the doctor hastened forward and bent over the inspector.

“That’s him!” nodded the Flying Beetle. “Have him taken away and remain here with me. I want to have a look round!”

Waiting until Meakin had been marched away, and Inspector Carter removed on a stretcher, the Flying Beetle told the superintendent and the doctor of the occurrence whilst the latter bandaged his smashed shoulder.

“You’ll have to go easy on this arm for a few days at least,” said the doctor completing the tying of a bandage.

“That’s going to be a bit awkward,” said the Flying Beetle. “Still it can’t be helped I suppose. Shove that step-ladder on the table, Nicholls, and we’ll have a look at what’s up there!”

A few minutes later he and the superintendent were standing beneath the rafters of the building staring in astonishment at serried rows of vertical steel pipes fastened in iron clamps and apparently protruding through the roof itself.

Each pipe terminated four feet from the floor boards and the end of each was threaded for about a foot of its length as though in readiness for something to be screwed on to it.

“What on earth do you make of it?” demanded the superintendent.

“I don’t know,” said the Flying Beetle slowly. “It looks to me like some elaborate scheme of ventilation. We’d better have a look through those two rooms below and see if we can get a line on the idea. There doesn’t appear to be anything else up here!”

But the subsequent search of the office and living-room revealed not the slightest clue as to the function of the steel pipes; and in the early hours of the morning the Flying Beetle had an interview with Major Gretton, the chief constable, and Colonel Williams of the Tyne Garrison.

“We can get nothing out of Meakin at all,” reported the Flying Beetle. “The man absolutely refuses to talk. There is not the slightest doubt, however, that the gas cylinders on Gullbrae are to be fitted to those steel tubes. The whole explanation lies with Stenson and I’m going over to France to see him!”

“Wouldn’t it be better to have him apprehended by the French authorities?” put in Colonel Williams quickly.

“No, because we don’t know the full ramifications of this plot,” replied the Flying Beetle. “To arrest or apprehend Stenson might send others scuttling to their holes and ruin everything. No, I want Stenson left to me!”

It was late in the evening of the following day when dusk was deepening into night, that the Flying Beetle arrived at the little French village of Angou, eight kilometres south of Boulogne.

He was dressed as a French peasant, was limping, his arm was in a sling owing to Meakin's shot, and in his pocket were his discharge papers from the French army owing to war wounds.

He called in at the one inn the village possessed, a tumble-down, low-roofed, white-fronted building.

"I am looking for work," he said to the innkeeper over a glass of mild beer, "and have a letter of introduction to Professor Lefevre. It may be that he requires a gardener. His house is near here, is it not?"

"Yes, comrade, two kilometres along the road," replied the innkeeper. "But he will not be requiring a gardener, not that one. A strange solitary he is, busy always with his books and his laboratory. Moreover he has a servant—a half-wit Belgian gipsy lad named André. No, there will be no work to be found there!"

"That is a pity!" said the Flying Beetle disconsolately; then more hopefully: "Still, I can try. There might be some work I can do and my letter of introduction is from Colonel Wigaud himself. But you talk about a laboratory. Is the professor, then, a chemist?"

"No, he is a scientist—a very clever one," replied the innkeeper. "And a busy one, also. Once every week the van carrying him supplies passes through the village here. It is a military van, for the professor is working for the Government!"

"What sort of work?" demanded the Flying Beetle.

The innkeeper shrugged his shoulders.

"Secret work," he said. "No one knows. But it is something to do with the guns or the bombs which we use against the *salles Boches* out there on the Western Front!"

The Flying Beetle lingered chatting some little time longer, then quitting the inn, he set off along the road in the direction of the professor's house.

By now the hour was late and he had the road to himself, until, topping a rise, he eventually saw the dark bulk of the house nestling in a hollow about a quarter of a mile ahead of him.

The house was smaller than he had expected. It stood some little distance back from the road and as the Flying Beetle approached he saw that it was enclosed by a low and broken-down iron railing.

Even in the soft light of the moon which had swung up, the place looked grim and sinister, and seating himself on a boulder, the Flying Beetle studied the house intently.

There were no lights to be seen, but shutters or heavily curtained windows would account for that; and not until his watch showed the hour to be one a.m. did the Flying Beetle abandon his long and patient vigil.

Rising stiffly to his feet, he made a detour and, approaching the house from the rear, clambered over the rusted railings.

He was fervently hoping the Lefevre kept no dogs, and, to his relief, he gained the outside of the kitchen premises without the stillness being shattered by the sudden outraged barking of some hound giving warning of his presence.

Keeping in the black shadow of the wall, he moved cautiously round the building until he came to the windows of what appeared to be some large living-room.

A rockery by the side of the windows gave access to the sill. With his opened knife gripped between his teeth, the Flying Beetle gained the sill, and, precariously balanced, tried the sash. The window was latched, but a few moments later there came a click as the latch snapped back under the pressure of the knife-blade.

It took all the Flying Beetle's strength to raise the heavy window with his one sound hand, but he managed it, raising it inch by inch to avoid any protesting creak.

Crouched there on the wide sill he hesitated. The black interior of the room was deathly still, but some seventh sense warned him of danger.

He listened with straining ears. Not a sound broke the tense and brooding hush. Yet something was hammering at the Flying Beetle's brain, telling him to beware, some vague and indefinable instinct which gripped him and held him back.

He tried to analyse it. Was it that this entry of his was being too easy? Was he walking into a trap?

His face set grimly. He hadn't come this far to turn back now. Raising the window another inch, he swung his legs into the room and dropped silently to the floor.

Straightening up, he listened with bated breath. The stillness was eerie and profound, the darkness as black as that of the nethermost pit.

But the feeling of menacing evil was growing. The blackness was pregnant with unnameable horror. It was all round him, foul and nauseous, gaining swiftly in intensity.

With a choking cry, the Flying Beetle stepped back. His breath shuddered in through his teeth in a dreadful moan; then, as he pitched forward on his face, he felt himself plunging down and down into the bottomless depths of black oblivion.

When the Flying Beetle next opened his eyes blinding light struck his eyeballs with such painful intensity that he closed his eyes again. He felt sick and dazed, and his head was aching agonizedly.

But as consciousness began to flood back on him his eyes flickered open and again through narrowed lids he began to take stock of his surroundings.

Almost immediately someone loomed close beside him, and a voice said suavely:

“Drink this, my friend!”

The Flying Beetle felt the cool rim of a glass pressed against his lips, and obediently he gulped down the bitter contents.

Whatever the antidote was it had an immediate effect on him. The pain in his head lessened, the feeling of deathly nausea passed and he opened his eyes again.

The first discovery he made was that he was sitting lashed to a chair, in what appeared to be a large and clumsily furnished drawing-room.

Two men were standing looking at him. One—big, stout, florid of face, and dressed in coarse brown tweeds—was smoking a cigarette.

But it was the other man, the man with the glass in his hand, who drew the Flying Beetle's stare.

He was tall, stoop-shouldered, and so thin and emaciated that his black, loosely-fitting suit hung on him as though on a scarecrow.

His sunken features were yellow and cadaverous, like wrinkled parchment drawn over a skull. His deep-set eyes were burning as they dwelt gloatingly on the Flying Beetle, and his great beaked nose gave him the appearance of some foul bird of prey.

"So," he purred, "you have come round? What do you think of my spy trap?"

"What was it?" croaked the Flying Beetle.

"A chlor-ether gas cylinder," replied the other, "so adjusted that the raising of the window released the gas. Simple, but effective, do you not think?"

"You're Lefevre?" rasped the Flying Beetle.

"At your service," bowed the other, his thin and bloodless lips twisting in a grin. "Is it permitted to ask who you are?"

"My papers are in my pocket!" rasped the Flying Beetle.

"But forgeries, undoubtedly!" purred Lefevre. "Will you tell my friend and myself who you are?"

"No," snapped the Flying Beetle.

"Then I'm afraid we must make him talk, eh, Stenson?" said Lefevre, turning to his companion.

"Yes, the damned spy!" rasped Stenson.

Taking a hypodermic syringe from where it was lying on a small occasional table, Lefevre approached the Flying Beetle.

"This will make you more easy for us to remove," he said pleasantly, baring the Flying Beetle's bound arm. "Do not be alarmed. It is not death—merely the ante-chamber of it!"

The Flying Beetle felt a sudden, sharp pain as the needle penetrated his arm, then, as Lefevre pressed the plunger, the Flying Beetle's world went black about him, and he sagged limply in his bonds.

How long this second bout of unconsciousness lasted the Flying Beetle never knew. When his senses returned to him he found himself manacled hand and foot by rusty chains to the wall of what looked like a stone dungeon.

The place was illuminated by a single electric bulb suspended from the ceiling, and, standing watching him, were Lefevre and Stenson.

But there was a fourth man in that dungeon—a dreadful, half-naked creature manacled to the wall. He was mouthing and cursing, flinging himself frantically

forward in his fetters in a maniacal effort to reach Lefevre.

“So, my friend, I perceive you are once again able to take an intelligent interest in your surroundings,” mocked Lefevre to the Flying Beetle. “Permit me then to introduce you to André.” He indicated the Flying Beetle’s manacled companion. “I will leave you with him, and if you will magnify one hundredfold whatever he tells you of his experiences in my little laboratory, you will appreciate what lies in store for you!”

He turned with Stenson towards an iron ladder which led to a trapdoor above. With one foot on the bottom rung he spoke over his shoulder to the Flying Beetle.

“You will note that I have not fettered your injured arm,” he said. “To have done that would have been to reopen your wound. I confess, I wonder how you came by it. The bleeding would weaken you, and I want you in as perfect health as possible in order to carry out my experiments on you. I will have a meal sent down to you. It will help considerably to counteract the effects of the chlor-ether!”

With that he followed Stenson up the ladder, the iron trapdoor clanged shut, and the Flying Beetle was left alone with his wretched and frenzied fellow prisoner.

“Stop that row!” he said sharply in French, for André was still mouthing and cursing and throwing himself madly about in his heavy iron fetters. “What’s happened to you? Who exactly are you and what’s this devil done to you?”

“What’s he done?” screamed André. “*Nom d’un nom!* I’ll tell you what he’s done!”

He did, and in spite of himself the Flying Beetle felt his flesh crawling as he listened to the half-incoherent tale which poured from the lips of André who had been taken on as a manservant a few weeks ago.

The poor devil had been taken to some laboratory in the house, and there he had been experimented on with drugs and poison gases, antidotes being administered from time to time to save his life and reason.

“All right, listen to me!” said the Flying Beetle sharply, when, exhausted, André had sunk sobbing to the floor. “Who’s the gaoler here? I mean who loosens your manacles when you’re taken to the laboratory?”

“The butler!” moaned André. “He always helps Lefevre. At first they used to drug me—but now he can handle me alone!”

“And does the butler bring your meals?”

“Yes.”

“Righto!” said the Flying Beetle briskly. “Look at this!”

André raised his head, then stared in bewilderment. For the Flying Beetle had backed against the wall to gain more length of chain and had thrust his manacled hands inside his coat and under the bandages round his wounded shoulder.

“In these bandages,” said the Flying Beetle, “I’ve got a gun. This groggy shoulder of mine is a dickens of a handicap, so I took the precaution of packing a second gun. There it is!”

Triumphantly he produced a small, but deadly-looking automatic. Then swiftly he secreted it in his hand, for the iron trapdoor had clanged back, and a brutish-looking manservant commenced to descend the iron ladder into the cell.

André had risen to his knees, crouching like some animal, his glaring eyes fixed on the manservant who descended slowly, for he was handicapped by the tray in one hand.

Reaching the bottom of the ladder, the man turned and approached the Flying Beetle. Stooping, he placed the tray on the stone floor in front of him. Then as he straightened up, he froze, staring into the muzzle of the deadly automatic behind which was the Flying Beetle's white, contorted face, terrifying in its murderous purpose.

"Put your hands up!" grated the Flying Beetle.

The man's hands half rose, then with the swiftness of a panther he whirled his arm to knock the gun aside.

He was a split fraction of a second too late. A vicious streak of flame stabbed from the muzzle, and the whip-like crack of the exploding cartridge was drowned in a frenzied howl of triumph from André.

The butler swayed on his feet, a livid hole in the centre of his forehead. Then his knees gave way beneath him, and, as he crashed to the floor, the Flying Beetle was on him, groping madly for the man's bunch of keys.

He found them in the man's pocket and a few minutes later he was free. As he unlocked André's manacles he glanced at the latter curiously. For André was panting, trembling, and his lips were drawn back from his teeth in a loathsome grin.

"Steady, man!" muttered the Flying Beetle.

"Yes—yes!" babbled André.

Next instant, as his fetters clattered from him, he swept the Flying Beetle aside with a savage thrust of the arm and bounded for the ladder.

"Stop, you fool!" cried the Flying Beetle hoarsely, and leapt in pursuit.

But André was already up the ladder, gibbering insanely and with murder in his eyes. Rushing along a narrow stone corridor with the Flying Beetle racing hopelessly in the rear, he burst through a swing door into a large stone laboratory, around the walls of which were ranged row upon row of gleaming cylinders.

Lefevre was standing beside a huge glass retort on an electric furnace.

He wheeled as André burst into the laboratory, then, with an animal-like snarl, André was on him, his savage, strangling fingers clutching in vice-like grip about Lefevre's throat.

André was wholly beserk in those moments—his strength the strength of ten. Lefevre struggled desperately to throw him off, but holding him in that murderous, throttling grip, the gibbering, frenzied André crashed him back against the furnace.

The bubbling retort tilted and fell, smashing into fragments and spilling its boiling contents over the floor. Heavy, choking fumes arose, driving the Flying Beetle back, dazed and gasping.

But André was oblivious to it all. His face contorted with maniacal fury, he thudded to the floor with the frantically struggling Lefevre who screamed in agony as the boiling liquid flowed around him.

The Flying Beetle, through the foul and nauseous murk, saw André smash Lefevre's head again and again against the stone floor; then, with his handkerchief tied round his mouth and nostrils, the Flying Beetle dashed forward.

He was too late!

Lefevre was lying limp and apparently lifeless with arms outflung, and sprawled atop of him was the half-naked and pitifully maltreated body of André.

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Two days later the Flying Beetle sat closeted with Sir Malcolm Ferguson in the latter's office in Whitehall.

"But what was the meaning of it all?" demanded Sir Malcolm in astonishment. "What was the scoundrels' idea?"

"Just this!" said the Flying Beetle grimly. "Lefevre, the Loders and Stenson were German agents and if their plans had been successful all the great industrial towns of Britain and France would have been paralysed within a few hours of the signal being given by the German High Command."

"But how?"

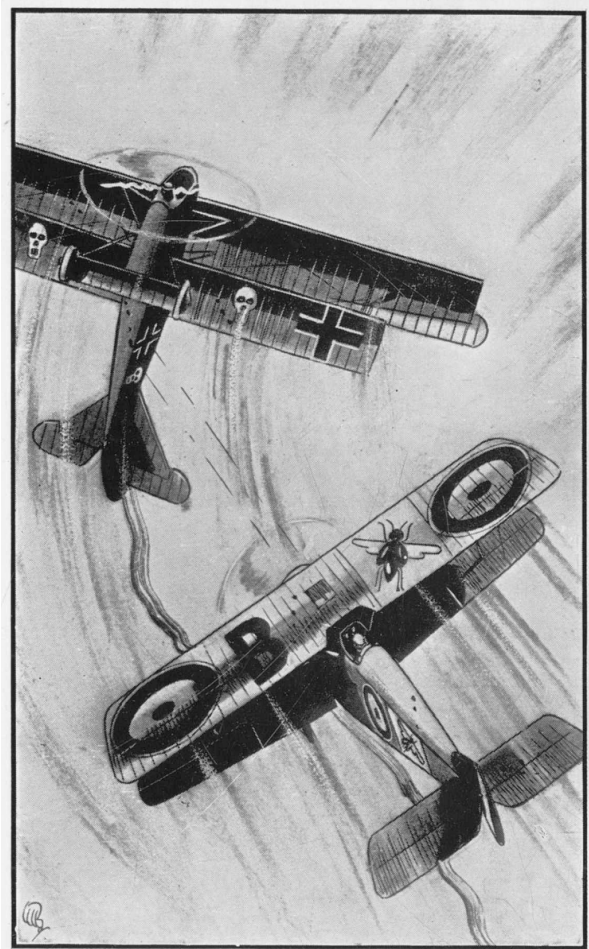
"By the use of top floor offices such as Stenson's in Grey Street, Newcastle," replied the Flying Beetle. "Those steel pipes I have described to you were to be used as vents for poison gas and deadly bacteria germs. The gas and germ cylinders were prepared by Lefevre himself in his lonely house near Angou. For years he has masqueraded as a Frenchman and there can be no doubts as to his brilliance as a scientist. The Isle of Gullbrae was being used as a dump for the bombs and they were also being filtered through to the industrial towns of France by means of the alleged military van. The van also took the bombs to the barque which waited at intervals off the French coast. The idea was to screw the bombs onto the vent pipes ready for a general release. If that release had come, both Britain and France would have been in the grip of a deadly plague, apart from the thousands of people who would have died by the gas!"

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Sir Malcolm aghast.

"We found a complete list of all agents at Lefevre's house," went on the Flying Beetle, "and, as you know, they have already been rounded up by the British and French authorities. I got Stenson myself before he could escape from Lefevre's house. None have escaped—not even the Loders!"

"No, their bodies in the wreckage of their machine were picked up by a destroyer off the Scottish coast," nodded Sir Malcolm. "Where d'you think they were heading for?"

"To some rendezvous with a German submarine," replied the Flying Beetle. "That is only an assumption, of course, but I think they would have their getaway all fixed. Whether their engine failed them or whether the submarine failed to keep the rendezvous may never be known. However, all that really matters is that this frightful menace which threatened the Allies has been stamped out once and for all!"



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VON RUHLEN WENT ZOOMING UP AND UP INTO THE BLUE.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAST ROUND

THE GERMAN ACE

“EIGHT FOKKERS in three days. I ask you to think of it, Herr Hauptmann. Eight Fokkers shot down since Sunday—and more than half of them in flames!”

The elegant Alberich von Ruhlen, one of the most famous of German war aces, laughed amusedly.

“But, Herr Commandant,” he protested, “that is not my fault. I can assure you that I have searched most assiduously for this Englander whom we know as the Flying Beetle. Fortune has been unkind to me, however, in that it has never yet permitted that he and I should meet!”

General Hagen, Commandant of Buhl aerodrome situated twenty-five kilometres behind the German lines, crashed his clenched fist to the blanket-covered and paper-strewn table of the flight office.

“But you’ve got to meet him!” he declared furiously. “And when you do you must shoot him down in flames. I tell you it is the order of the German High Command that we get this cursed Englander at all costs. Heaven knows the trouble he has given us already!”

Von Ruhlen pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette.

“Was he not with the British Secret Service?” he inquired. “I have heard he was!”

“Yes, he was!” swore Hagen. “And is still, for all I know. It appears to our High Command that he is taking a busman’s holiday by fighting again on the Western Front. He is making our air force a laughing stock and it has got to be stopped. There is one man who can do it and that is you!”

“Yes,” admitted von Ruhlen, calmly, “I am the man to do it!”

For a moment he gazed reflectively at the blue smoke of his cigarette curling lazily upwards.

“I will admit quite frankly to you, Herr Commandant,” he went on, “that it is my dearest wish to meet this Englander, this Flying Beetle, in the air. There is no doubt that he is a brilliant air fighter, but”—with a shrug of his grey-clad shoulders—“so am I. If ever the issue comes to be fought out between us with synchronized guns I think I will prove to the Allies and to our Fatherland that I am the better man!”

Hagen laughed appreciatively.

“Yes, yes, there can be no doubt of that, Herr Hauptmann!” he exclaimed. “And it is because they know you to be the one man in Germany who can rid the Western Front of this pestilent Englander that the High Command have instructed you to report here!”

Von Ruhlen acknowledged the compliment with an inclination of his head.

“I understand,” he said, “that this Flying Beetle has recently taken to flying towards Buhl on a dawn offensive patrol and that he flies alone.”

“That is correct!” assented Commandant Hagen. “Unless he departs from his usual custom he ought to be ranging the skies somewhere in the vicinity of this aerodrome shortly after dawn to-morrow morning.”

With deliberate movement von Ruhlen stubbed his cigarette in his ash tray and rose to his feet.

“Then if that is the case,” he said grimly, “I will get him. You can take it from me, Herr Commandant, that he will never live to return!”

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Dawn!

Hangar doors rumbled back on the British aerodrome at Ouchy and into the grey light of early morning dungaree-clad mechanics wheeled the fat little fighting scout of Captain Harry Davies, the young British pilot, who was known from Ostend to the Swiss frontier as the Flying Beetle.

On the fuselage of his fighting scout was the black replica of a flying beetle, a symbol which was known and feared behind the enemy lines.

Swinging himself up into the snug cockpit of the fighting scout, a sergeant mechanic switched on. As contact was established another mechanic pulled on the propeller and the engine started up with a shattering roar which reverberated deafeningly through the stillness of morning.

“How is she, sergeant?” inquired the leather-clad Flying Beetle strolling up with gloves in hand from the direction of the mess.

“She’s all right, sir!” replied the sergeant dropping from the cockpit and turning to the Flying Beetle with a snap salute.

“She’s giving her revs?”

“Yes, sir, she couldn’t be better!”

The Flying Beetle nodded and drew on his gloves.

“Righto, I’ll get off!” he said.

Buttoning up his flying coat which hid from view the rows of medal ribbons on the oil-stained tunic beneath, he swung himself up into the cockpit and slumped down into the pilot’s seat.

His gloved fingers closed on the throttle and he ran the engine up on brief but searching test. Then satisfied that all was well he snapped down his goggles and settled himself more comfortably in his seat.

Under open throttle the little fighting scout quivered like a live thing against the chocks and the tail quivered in the swirling slip-stream of the thundering propeller.

The Flying Beetle’s hand flashed up and in response to the signal the waiting mechanics whipped away the chocks from in front of the tired wheels of the undercarriage.

Like a greyhound from the slips the scout shot forward, roaring across the dew-laden grass of the aerodrome to bore up into the blue of morning in a steep climb.

Swinging on the climb, the Flying Beetle headed eastwards, passing over the trenches at a height of seven thousand feet.

Still climbing, he peered down. The mists of morning were rapidly dispersing now before the rays of the rising sun and the Flying Beetle could see intense activity behind the German lines.

Along the ribbons of roadways which led towards the bloody shambles of the front moved long grey-clad columns of marching men, slowly-moving lorries, ambulances and tractor-drawn guns.

The reporting of all this, however, was a job for the observation machines which, on their respective aerodromes, would already be making ready to take the air on their reconnaissance flights eastwards into Germany.

The Flying Beetle's job was to look for enemy aircraft and continually his goggle-protected eyes swept the blue skies of morning, ahead, to port and to starboard.

More than once he turned in his seat and scanned the blue high above him, for although he had climbed now to eighteen thousand feet he knew the danger of a sudden savage attack being launched on him by some German machine or formation riding high in the blue and awaiting the opportunity of swooping down with guns aflame on some marauding Englander.

Nothing happened, however, as the fast little fighting scout roared on towards Strasbourg, the tapering cathedral spires of which the Flying Beetle could already see away in the distance, glistening faery-like in the golden rays of the sun.

To starboard of him and far below rose the wooded slopes of the lovely Vosges mountains, but of enemy aircraft there was not the slightest sign.

Suddenly, however, the Flying Beetle stiffened in his seat and his gloved hand moved instinctively to the trigger of his synchronized gun.

For southwards, high in the sky but making towards him at a terrific speed, was a black machine—a German Fokker.

Pulling a sharp wing turn, the Flying Beetle swung to meet the enemy machine. As he did so, the pilot of the Fokker banked steeply disclosing on his wings and fuselage the emblem of a white, grinning skull.

The Flying Beetle's eyes narrowed. He knew by repute who carried that symbol of death on his wings and fuselage. It was von Ruhlen, one of the most brilliant war aces that Germany and the Western Front had ever known.

Pulling out of his bank, von Ruhlen levelled up and came hurtling like a meteor straight at the Flying Beetle, the vicious rattle of his synchronized gun audible above the thunder of his engine.

The two machines, British scout and German Fokker, were approaching each other at the same altitude, but suddenly whipping his control stick forward the Flying Beetle went earthwards in a screaming nose dive.

Von Ruhlen's thin lips twisted in a mirthless grin. So the Englander—the much-vaunted Flying Beetle—was shirking the issue and seeking safety in flight.

Next instant, however, von Ruhlen got a most unpleasant shock. For the Flying Beetle had whipped back his control stick and was soaring up and up in a wild zoom which would give him the advantage of height.

At the very top of the zoom, the Flying Beetle whipped his control stick across and executed a whirlwind Immelmann turn. Then forward went his stick again and with gun ablaze he roared down on von Ruhlen.

Hot flame from the blazing muzzle of his synchronized gun licked back with acrid fumes beyond his cockpit windshield and the cartridge belt whirled madly through the chamber to the vicious crackle of the exploding cartridges.

Realizing that death itself was hurtling down on him, von Ruhlen took his Fokker earthwards in a wild, twisting dive the shriek of wind through flying wires and struts almost drowning the roar of his engine.

For moments only did von Ruhlen hold that dive, however, then back came his control stick and he went zooming up and up into the blue of morning.

The Flying Beetle followed, sticking like a leech to the tail of the black Fokker. But with stick hard across, von Ruhlen rolled, and pulling a sharp wing turn, drove madly in at the scout with gun aflame.

Without an instant's delay the Flying Beetle flung his machine into a spin from which he emerged with a sudden deafening roar of high-powered engine, revving with throttle open to full.

Pulling back his stick, he commenced to climb, swinging up towards von Ruhlen with whom lay the momentary advantage of height.

Wheeling with the speed of a hawk, von Ruhlen swooped to meet the attack. And in that same instant of time sudden horror leapt into the Flying Beetle's eyes.

His gun had jammed!

Desperately he whipped his control stick forward in an effort to throw the scout into a spin. But in that same moment the roar of his engine rose to a shrill scream as it raced madly with a splintered and smashed propeller.

Haggard of face, the Flying Beetle switched off his engine. The worst had happened. His propeller had been broken by a burst of bullets from von Ruhlen's gun.

All the Flying Beetle could do now was to throw his scout onto its gliding angle and go down. There was a chance that he would never reach the ground alive, for his life was in the hands of von Ruhlen and he knew the German's reputation as a hard and merciless fighter.

The Flying Beetle, however, was not afraid. If death was to come to him here over enemy country he was ready to meet it, for in the perilous course which he followed death was always lurking close and he was not unprepared.

However, it did not appear to be von Ruhlen's intention to shoot his disabled adversary down in flames. Apparently realizing that the fight was over, he threw his Fokker onto its gliding angle and dived earthwards on the tail of the Flying Beetle's stricken scout.

“You are the Flying Beetle?” he said when, having landed, he and the English lad had vacated their cockpits.

“Yes,” answered the Flying Beetle. “I have to thank you, Herr Hauptmann, for holding your fire!”

Von Ruhlen smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“Why shoot you down in flames when you were disabled?” he said. “If your machine had been destroyed it might have been said that it was not you whom I had met and vanquished. You have, my friend, become to a large extent something of a mythical personage behind our side of the lines. You are here, you are there, but none really know where.”

He held out his hand.

“I will take your gun,” he said. “You realize, of course, the futility of attempting to escape. See—the soldiers are already coming and if you try to run you will, I’m afraid, receive a volley through the back.”

“I’m not a fool,” said the Flying Beetle, for indeed he saw the futility of attempting to escape.

A squad of soldiers armed with rifles was sprinting towards them and even if he did succeed in turning the tables on the watchful von Ruhlen and seizing the German’s Fokker, long before he could get the engine started up he would be riddled with bullets from the soldiers’ guns.

So he handed over his revolver and von Ruhlen thrust it into his pocket.

“I will always keep this,” said the German, “as a souvenir of our little encounter. I may mention that I was purposely looking for you this morning, having been brought to Buhl by the High Command specially for that purpose. Neither they nor I had any doubts as to the result should it have been my good fortune to have met you in the air, as indeed it has been.”

Lighting a cigarette he proffered his case to the Flying Beetle.

“And I think,” he went on with infinite satisfaction, emitting a cloud of fragrant blue smoke from between his thin lips, “that I have, conclusively, proved myself to be the better man, my friend!”

The Flying Beetle looked at the swaggering braggart with eyes which were cold and hard. He disdained completely to mention the fact that his gun had jammed—a fact of which von Ruhlen must be very well aware, but which he apparently saw fit to entirely ignore.

“You have won the first round, Herr Hauptmann,” said the Flying Beetle, “but may I be permitted to point out that there is sometimes a second round?”

Von Ruhlen laughed amusedly and flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“There will be no second round for you, my friend,” he said. “The remainder of the war will be spent by you behind the barbed wire of some prison camp. That is, if you are not shot. Our High Command are very anxious to assure themselves that you will trouble us no more. If you are not shot, you will certainly be imprisoned in some fortress from which there will be no escape.”

He broke off as the soldiers dashed up, led by a sergeant of Bavarian infantry.

“You will guard this man well,” he said turning to them. “He is the notorious Englisher, the Flying Beetle. I will accompany you to your camp to inform General Hagen of Buhl aerodrome by telephone that we are holding the Flying Beetle as prisoner.”

The guest of honour that night in the mess of the German aerodrome of Buhl was the Hauptmann Alberich von Ruhlen.

He was not a particularly willing guest, for although he made some slight effort to disguise it, Commandant Hagen and his staff frankly bored him.

He excused himself, therefore, as soon as possible and, collecting his flying kit, made his way to where his black Fokker was standing outside the hangars with engine ticking over, ready for his departure.

The commandant himself accompanied von Ruhlen to his machine.

“Good-bye then, von Ruhlen!” he said. “And thank you once again for ridding us of this dangerous Englisher. But I said you would do it. I only hope the High Command will see fit to give the dog six feet of German earth to occupy instead of sending him to some prison camp or fortress. But I think he is bound to be shot. Anyway, we have you to thank for having so neatly clipped his wings for him!”

Von Ruhlen paused in the act of swinging himself up into his cockpit.

“Talking of clipped wings,” he said, “I only hope that the High Command will see that his wings *are* clipped. He spoke this morning of a second round.”

“A second round?” repeated the commandant blankly. “Why, what on earth did he mean?”

Von Ruhlen shrugged his leather-clad shoulders.

“I cannot say,” he replied, “unless he meant that some day he and I will meet again. Escape appears to be in his mind, so it is up to the High Command to see that he doesn’t escape. If half the tales one hears of him are true he is an elusive customer and will need to be well guarded.”

“You need have no fear on that point!” answered the commandant confidently. “Now that we have him he will never escape again. But as far as this second round is concerned. Suppose there was a second round. What would it matter so far as you yourself are concerned? Always will you prove yourself a better man and a better air fighter than him!”

Von Ruhlen laughed softly.

“True, Herr Commandant!” he said.

With that he swung himself up into his cockpit, the engine was started up with a shattering roar and the black Fokker swept forward into the dusk to bore up into the shadows of evening in a steep climb.

THE MEETING

The weary weeks of war dragged slowly into months and ever the field-grey tide of German soldiery ebbed back and back towards the Rhine.

Then at long last came that never-to-be-forgotten day in the history of the world when, with Britain and the Allies victorious, the bugles of the war weary armies blew the “Cease Fire!” along the Western Front.

Whilst statesmen and politicians set about the task of attempting to bring peace and prosperity back to a devastated Europe, what of those countless thousands who had been but pawns in the bloody game of war?

Some returned to their homes and some of the fortunate ones returned also to their jobs. There were others, however, who preferred to follow the trail of adventure wheresoever it led.

Amongst these latter we find Alberich von Ruhlen, late of the German Air Force.

Eighteen months after the cessation of hostilities he became attached as pilot to the Hendries Expedition which was sailing from Copenhagen to survey the South Polar regions assisted by the use of aircraft.

“Our depot on the shores of Wilkes Land is already established,” Hendries, the Danish leader told him. “We have another aeroplane and a pilot waiting there. You will be interested to meet this man, von Ruhlen. He too was a pilot during the war days, but he flew for the British and not for the Germans, like you.”

“What is his name?” asked von Ruhlen casually.

“His name is Harry Davies—Captain Harry Davies,” replied Hendries.

Von Ruhlen stared at him in astonishment.

“You do not mean the Captain Davies who was known as the Flying Beetle?” he demanded.

“Yes, that was his name,” nodded Hendries. “He is with me because of a promise made during the latter days of war. He had been shot down in Germany and was under sentence of death as a much-wanted spy when he escaped and managed to cross the frontier into Holland. I was in Holland at the time and rendered him the small service of motoring him at once to the nearest British consul. I had this expedition in mind at the time and when I mentioned it to him, he promised to join me if he survived until the end of hostilities. I was only too glad to accept his offer as he was undoubtedly one of the finest pilots on the Western Front.”

“He was indeed!” assented von Ruhlen.

Beyond that he made no comment, refraining entirely from mentioning that he was the man who had shot the Flying Beetle down. For von Ruhlen wanted the job as pilot to the expedition and it appeared to him more than likely that if Hendries knew he was the man who had brought the Flying Beetle down he might feel inclined to cancel the contract on the grounds that the war years were too recent for there to be friendship and amity between German and Englishman.

During the ensuing voyage to Wilkes Land, von Ruhlen did, however, often ponder amusedly to himself on this queer jest of Fate which had brought him and the Flying Beetle together once again.

He had learned in Germany of the Flying Beetle’s escape and had been furious. The Englishman’s remark about the second round had always been in his thoughts after that,

but he had never encountered him again above the Western Front.

On meeting the Flying Beetle at Wilkes Land von Ruhlen noted the surprise in the lad's eyes, but accepted the latter's outstretched hand with some murmured commonplace greeting.

That night, however, as they sat alone in the hut which they were to share, the talk naturally enough turned to that summer morning when they had met high in the blue to fight out their battle to the bitter end.

"On examination of your machine we found your gun had jammed," said von Ruhlen. "Why did you not tell me so when we had landed?"

The Flying Beetle shrugged his shoulders.

"I thought you must have known," he said. "In any case, there was no reason why I should have mentioned it!"

"It would have made my victory a bit hollow if you had done," admitted von Ruhlen; then added: "So you managed to escape after all!"

"Yes, I was always prepared for capture," replied the Flying Beetle. "It is telling you no secret now when I say that I had a strong, pliable file concealed in the heel of my boot. I filed the bars of my cell window and got away!"

"But you never flew again on the Western Front?" said von Ruhlen.

"No, I wanted to," replied the Flying Beetle. "But the British authorities had other work for me to do and I was never allowed to go back!"

"Which was a pity," said von Ruhlen with a smile. "For then we could have fought out that second round of which you spoke. I still think, however, that the result would have been the same. I say that only because I was, by very virtue of my years of service, much more experienced than you——"

He broke off as Hendries, the leader of the expedition, entered the hut.

"I want you to get off as soon as possible in the morning, gentlemen," said Hendries. "You will fly with stores and your objective will be to establish a base two hundred and fifty miles due south of here. I have pin-pointed the place on this chart and you will establish a food depot at the nearest possible landing point to it!"

For twenty minutes or more the three men bent over the chart examining the wild and desolate region which lay to the south of Wilkes Land. Then, their plans made, Hendries straightened up, and bidding them good-night, quitted the tent.

A few moments later, stretched out in their sleeping bags, the Flying Beetle and von Ruhlen were sound asleep.

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On and on, southwards over a world of dazzling whiteness, thundered the two machines of the Hendries Antarctic Exploration Expedition.

Muffled in heavy flying kit the Flying Beetle and von Ruhlen were crouched behind their cockpit windshields seeking some protection from the bitter chill and icy slip-stream of their thundering propellers.

For two hours they flew over that land of gorge and crevasse blanketed under the shimmering whiteness of the eternal snows, then suddenly a very light landing signal dropped flaring from the Flying Beetle's cockpit.

The roar of the engines died away and noses went down for a landing. The two machines had reached their objective and after the Flying Beetle and von Ruhlen had restored the circulation to their numbed and stiffened limbs, they set about unloading and caching the stores which they had brought.

A short meal washed down by steaming hot coffee from their thermos flasks saw them ready to take the air again on the flight northwards back to the main depot.

"I do not know," remarked von Ruhlen before swinging himself up into his cockpit, "whether it is imagination or not, but I certainly do not like the feel of this machine of mine."

"What's wrong with her?" asked the Flying Beetle sharply, for he knew the peril of a forced landing anywhere along the desolate waste which lay between them and the main depot.

"I do not know what is wrong with her," replied von Ruhlen, "but she is sluggish on the controls. I will give her a thorough overhaul when we get back to the depot. Come, let's get off!"

"No, wait a minute!" exclaimed the Flying Beetle. "We'd better have a look at her now——"

"When we reach the depot will be time enough," cut in von Ruhlen. "I have nursed worse machines than this home, my friend!"

The words were accompanied by a smile which betrayed the innate conceit of the man, and although he felt tempted to let the whole thing go at that, the Flying Beetle said quietly:

"I really think we ought to have a look at her, von Ruhlen. If we hit bad weather ——"

"She will still ride it so long as I am at the controls," cut in the German. "Come, my friend, I am not afraid to take a risk. I begin to wish now I hadn't mentioned it to you. Let us get off!"

Without a word, the Flying Beetle swung himself up into the cockpit of his machine, engines were started up, propellers swung and side by side the two machines tore forward on their ski-undercarriages to rise into the air in a long upward climb.

The Flying Beetle, flying deliberately behind von Ruhlen, watched the latter's machine with anxious but expert eyes. The minutes passed without incident and steadily the two machines thundered northwards, flying at a height of fifteen hundred feet above the snow-covered wastes below.

Then suddenly the Flying Beetle tensed in his seat, for with gloved hand thrust outboards, von Ruhlen was signalling that he was going down.

Simultaneously as the German thrust forward his control stick to take his machine down, the Flying Beetle did the same and together the two machines commenced to dive, the Flying Beetle flying one hundred feet behind and slightly to starboard.

Altimeter needles flickered back from fifteen hundred feet to twelve hundred—nine hundred—five hundred feet. . . .

Next instant a startled exclamation leapt to the lips of the Flying Beetle as with horrified eyes he saw von Ruhlen's machine fall suddenly away into a spin, its starboard plane hanging loosely out of alignment.

Opening up his throttle, the Flying Beetle dived steeply and as he overhauled the spinning machine he could see von Ruhlen struggling desperately with the controls.

Remorselessly the snow-covered ground below was rushing up to meet them and realizing that a crash was now inevitable, the Flying Beetle glanced outboards to port and starboard in a desperate effort to find a suitable place for landing.

Directly below the spinning machine was an area of snow hummocks and outcroppings of ice stretching a full half mile square in extent. A landing there was impossible, and the Flying Beetle swung his machine towards the long, smooth glistening stretch of snow beyond.

Juggling frenziedly with his controls, von Ruhlen had a sudden, terrifying vision of jagged, snow-covered ice leaping up to meet him, then came a terrific, splintering crash, a smashing blow on head and body and a great engulfing wave of blackness. . . .

THE DEATH TREK

Von Ruhlen stirred restlessly and opened his eyes. Weakly and uncomprehendingly he looked about him. It seemed to him that he was lying inside some dark and tiny hut or tent.

Recollection stirred, and raising himself weakly on his elbow, he looked at the Flying Beetle who was seated by his side.

"I—I remember now," he said haltingly. "I crashed. The starboard wing gave way."

"Yes," nodded the Flying Beetle, "but you must not talk. Here—eat this!"

Von Ruhlen stared, then drew away from the piece of soaked biscuit which the Flying Beetle was holding to his lips.

"I'll feed myself," he said petulantly. "I—I'll be stronger in a minute."

"Yes, but you must let me feed you," said the Flying Beetle quietly. "You see your arms were badly burned and one of them was broken. They are both bandaged, so you will be unable to feed yourself."

"My arms burned?" whispered von Ruhlen hoarsely. "What do you mean?"

"Your machine took on fire when you crashed," explained the Flying Beetle. "I managed to get you out in time. But eat this and do not talk!"

In silence von Ruhlen allowed himself to be fed. With fuller appreciation of his surroundings he was beginning to realize how weak and ill he felt.

"How long have I been unconscious?" he asked suddenly, his eyes on the Flying Beetle.

"Three days," replied the English lad.

"Three days?" repeated von Ruhlen in astonishment. "But that is impossible——"

He broke off, staring with a newly-awakened understanding at the gaunt, haggard and unshaven face of his companion.

“And you have been with me all this time?” he said faintly. “Mein blut! man, but why did you not go for help. Why did you stay? You had your machine?”

The Flying Beetle shook his head.

“No, I did not have my machine,” he returned. “I had no time in which to make a landing. You caught fire the moment you crashed and the only thing I could do to save you was to drop my own bus down beside you. I smashed my undercarriage and buckled a wing. I wrote her off pretty well, von Ruhlen!”

“So we are stranded here until a search party from the depot finds us?” whispered von Ruhlen.

“No, not quite,” replied the Flying Beetle. “I have managed to make a rough sledge out of the framework and fabric of my machine. It will serve to carry you, and we will leave for the depot as soon as you are strong enough to be moved.”

Von Ruhlen was silent a moment.

“Am I badly damaged?” he asked.

“You will soon mend once we reach the depot,” answered the Flying Beetle evasively. “But you must try and sleep now!”

“I notice you do not reproach me for being a stubborn, thick-headed fool about overhauling my machine before we left for the depot,” said von Ruhlen weakly. “It is I who have let you in for this!”

“If we had overhauled your machine we would probably have failed to locate the trouble,” answered the Flying Beetle. “It looked like an interior wing joint to me. But do not talk. Sleep will give you strength and then we will leave here and try and make the depot!”

Von Ruhlen nodded weakly, then his eyes closed and he drifted off into deep slumber. Silently the Flying Beetle rose, and swaying unsteadily on his feet, quitted the tiny tent which he had made from the fabric of his wrecked machine.

It was not until noon of the following day that the two men left the scene of the crash and set out on the first stage of their two hundred miles trek back to the main depot.

Around the shoulders of the Flying Beetle were the lead-ropes of the makeshift sledge on which lay the semi-conscious form of von Ruhlen and there were times when, as the Flying Beetle plodded wearily and mechanically onwards, it seemed that only the restraining drag of the lead-ropes kept him from pitching face-foremost to the snow.

More than once he halted to pass his gloved and trembling hand across his eyes, goggle-protected to save them from the fatal agony of snow-blindness.

Then on again he would go, staggering and swaying on his feet, but moving always towards the north and the far distant depot with a pitiful desperation.

There were times, also, when he would halt to press between the livid lips of von Ruhlen crumbled biscuit moistened with snow. It was a meagre enough ration, but it

served as fuel to keep alight the flickering flame of life in the grievously injured man.

That journey to von Ruhlen was a nightmarish thing of strange phantasmal wanderings from the delirium of which he would awaken to brief moments. And during those moments he would see ever in front of him the blurred and indistinct form of the Flying Beetle.

After six hours of laborious travel the Flying Beetle was forced to make camp, building with what little strength was left to him a bank of snow which sheltered him and von Ruhlen from the deadly chill of the icy wind which was sweeping and moaning across the desolate wastes of snow.

He himself dared not sleep, for he knew if slumber claimed him out here in the open it would be a slumber from which he would never awaken.

So haggard-faced and hollow-eyed he sat listening whilst von Ruhlen tossed and turned on the light sledge, muttering in the dark throes of delirium, talking for the most part of those days when he had flown against the Englanders high above the battle-smoke of the Western Front.

More than once the Flying Beetle caught his own name mentioned in those disjointed mutterings and with it there would come the words "*the second round—he said a second round—it would have been the same—*"

When at length he knew that if he did not move the slumber of death would claim him for its own, the Flying Beetle staggered to his feet, and slipping the lead-ropes of the sledge about his weary shoulders, resumed his long and hopeless trek, stumbling blindly on through the snow.

And then at long last came strange awakening for von Ruhlen. Raw spirit forced between his lips was burning his mouth and sending the life-blood coursing anew through his veins.

Men were all around him, fur-coated men with dogs and sledges, tents and fires.

It was rescue!

Excitedly von Ruhlen strove to raise himself on his elbow.

"So we've won through?" he whispered. "He got me through—the Flying Beetle _____"

The burly, fur-clad Hendries, kneeling in the snow, his arm supporting von Ruhlen, answered:

"Yes, he got you through—eighty miles he made and without food!"

"Without food?" Von Ruhlen's cracked voice rose shrill and protesting. "But there was food—we always had food!"

"You had!" answered Hendries grimly. "*He* went without. The only rations you had between you were the emergency rations aboard his machine. You've had them all. The Flying Beetle never touched food for days. That was obvious from his condition!"

Von Ruhlen's fingers closed convulsively on Hendries' fur-clad arm.

"Bring him to me," he whispered. "I want to speak to him—there is something I must say——"

Hendries did not answer. He was staring past von Ruhlen, a strange look in his eyes. And following the direction of that gaze, von Ruhlen saw a small, low tent near which stood a group of silent men.

Stark fear seized von Ruhlen and his blood-shot eyes dilated.

“He’s—he’s not dead?” he whispered hoarsely. “He’s not dead, is he?”

Hendries bowed his head.

“He is very near to death,” he said quietly. “Only the good God can tell what the end may be. We found him lying where he had fallen, the sledge harness still on his shoulders!”

For a long moment von Ruhlen was silent, his face working strangely. Then:

“Lift me up!” he whispered. “Lift me up, Hendries!”

The strong arm of Hendries raised the man to a sitting posture.

Turning his face towards the tent, von Ruhlen weakly raised his trembling, bandaged hand.

“I salute you, comrade!” he whispered brokenly. *“The second round has been fought—the last round of all—and yours is a glorious victory!”*

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.

A cover was created for this eBook and is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Trail of Death: War Adventures of the Flying Beetle* by George Ernest Rochester]