

The Guile of the Griffon

By Arch Whitehouse

Down through the ebony night dived a strange, black amphibian. Glistening in the reflected light of the great Montauk beam, it glided to the water and taxied to a ramp where two men stood in the shadows. And from the cockpit of that eerie craft crawled a hideously deformed creature—a man whose very existence was a cruel mockery of the grave. “I built—” he croaked, leering at the taller man, “not one plane, but two. The other,” he continued in a queer cackle, “went to a man whom you, Keen, will kill—though as yet you’ve never even heard of him”

THAT eerie screech which pierced the night had been increasing in intensity for several minutes. At first, it had come from the west, but now it came from the north. The great beam from Montauk Light seemed to be seeking it.

The screech produced a spine-tingling in its hearers, yet it carried an undeniable fascination. At times the cry rose and fell.

Two men huddled in the pointed shadow of a massive cedar tree standing beside a sod-bordered pathway running to the inky waters below. They, too, listened intently and tried to catch a certain beat in that mechanical wail vibrating above them. There was no moon. The night was crisp and cold.

Now the scream developed a new chord. One of the men in the shadow of the cedar nodded, raised an instrument, and squinted through its short telescopic sight, picking out the spiked gleam of an engine exhaust above. His finger pressed the trigger of an Aldis lamp, and two stabbing jets of light flamed out. Instantly, the weird sound stopped, as though a great knife had slashed through the man-made throat that emitted the cry.

“All right,” said the man with the instrument, “he’s caught our signal.”

In response, the second man darted away and took up a position at the foot of the concrete ramp. He waited, listened carefully, and finally sensed a new sound as of something slipping down from the sky. He waited again, squinted out across the black waters, and finally glimpsed the silver swish of bisected plumes thrown up by two pontoons. He watched them cautiously, one hand on the butt of a massive automatic. Then he smiled.

The low sobbing became more distinct. Then the unmistakable outline of a black mid-wing amphibian crept out of the night. The man on the end of the concrete ramp drew an electric torch from his pocket, gave two short jabs on the button switch, then stepped back into the shadow.

The amphibian came up gently. Her steel prop still turned, slashing the moist air with a low hissing. No sound seemed to come from the motor, but a keen ear would have detected that low crying throb from the mufflers hidden in the heavy wing root.

Out of the water came the ship, her boxed wheels finding the runway. The prop snarled a little louder and the wings now seemed to disappear. Actually, they had folded back against the deep, oval body so that in the indistinct light it seemed they were no longer a part of the ship.

“Nolbein?” rasped the man in the shadow.

The pilot’s head, protruding only a few inches above the edge of the glassed-in cowling, nodded with a doll-like, jerky movement. Then the amphibian rolled on until it vanished through a hole which suddenly opened in the side of a great rock-garden. When the plane had completely disappeared, the rock-garden assumed its former blend.

INSIDE the hidden hangar, two men stood under the brilliant light that bathed the strange black ship. The little pilot still sat in the cockpit, but he had pulled the cowling back to speak with the two men below.

His voice was a dry cackle. He talked in startling jerks, much like the speech of unfortunates in asylums. At times, the voice was a deep basso that resounded through the hangar, then it would click up into the soprano of an hysterical witch.

He was horribly deformed and his face was pitted with bluish-black splotches. A cruel scar swept from his left eye to his full-lipped mouth. Only his hands, which moved with a weird artistic grace, seemed to belong to anything human. And those hands were the most skillful in the world—at their selected task.

“You are late, Nolbein,” Kerry Keen, noted ballistics expert, said. “But she looks like a grand plane.”

“I am late!” snapped the deformed one. “I should be late. I not only built one—I built two!”

“Two?” whispered Keen, puzzled. “I ordered one—but never mind. Keep it. We may have use for it.”

“But I did not keep it,” squeaked the little pilot. “I sold it immediately. It was ordered from me.”

“Ordered—? Like this?” Keen frowned. “You mean to tell me you sold another ship exactly like this—with one of your specially-designed motors in it?”

“I did. Why not? I need the money,” argued the hideous little pilot.

Keen exchanged a quick glance with his butler-mechanic, Barney O’Dare—a glance that warned the Mick to keep quiet.

“That’s interesting,” smiled Keen. “Do you mind telling me who bought it?”

“No, I don’t,” Nolbein croaked, his voice breaking down to his booming basso. “But I didn’t tell him who yours was for. He thinks I’m crazy! Thinks I don’t know what I’m doing. But I fooled him.”

“He thinks you’re crazy?” sympathized Keen. “You must have fooled him. Who was he?”

“Major Clyde Hartney!” cackled Nolbein. “He doesn’t know this one is for you. He thinks I’m crazy. He doesn’t know me, does he?”

“I’ll say not. Why does he want it?”

“I don’t know. Just to fly. My motor got him. He never saw a motor like that before. Sixteen beautiful cylinders. Every one hand-honed in. Eight in opposed rows, delivering 1,000 horsepower—and he thinks I’m crazy.”

“Aren’t you afraid this Major Clyde Hartney will take your motor apart, study it, re-design it, and sell it to the government?” asked Keen.

“No—I know he won’t. He won’t have time!” squealed the hunchback.

“Why not? Nothing to stop him, is there? You never patent anything you invent. This would be easy for him.”

“He won’t,” went on Nolbein, with a wild laugh—“because you’ll kill him!”

Keen stared at the gargoyle face peering down upon him. “What did you say?” he demanded, spacing his words carefully.

“I said you’ll kill him.”

“Why should I kill him?” demanded Keen with a scowl. “I’m no murderer.”

“Maybe not. But you’ll kill Major Clyde Hartney just the same,” replied Nolbein.

WITH that, Nolbein clambered down from the cockpit, and Barney reached in for some crutches and slipped them under his arms. Without a word they walked through the cellar corridor and went upstairs into a luxurious living room.

Barney supplied generous drinks. Then Keen went to a wall safe, took out a thick stack of greenbacks, carefully counted them off, and approached Nolbein, who had sunk into a club chair.

“There you are, Nolbein,” said Kerry. “Fifty thousand—in hundreds. Satisfactory?”

Nolbein took the wad, smiled enigmatically, and stuffed it into his coat pocket.

Then Keen handed him a second stack of bills, adding, “and that hospital you spoke about. They fixed you up, didn’t they? See that they get that hundred grand somehow—anonymous, of course. Understand?”

“I do. By *Gott*, they’ll get it, too. You are a strange gentleman, Mr. Keen.”

“I’m paying for your silence, too, remember.”

“But I say queer words now and then, eh?”

“Damned queer! What did you mean when you said I would kill this Major Clyde Hartney? I never even heard of him.”

“No, but you will, and he’ll either kill you or you’ll kill him.”

“When did you deliver that ship, Nolbein?”

“He came for it last night—flew it away himself.”

That instant the telephone rang. Barney took up the receiver, then glanced over to Keen.

“For you—It’s Lang!” Keen took the receiver.

“This is Lang, Keen,” said the voice at the other end. “Where were you all night tonight?”

Keen laughed. “What’s the *Griffon* been up to this time?”

“How did you know?”

“I don’t. Whenever you call me at this time of night, I know the *Griffon* has been up to something.”

“Ever hear of a Major Clyde Hartney?”

Keen sucked in his breath and lied, “Major Clyde Hartney? No.”

“Well, he’s sort of an inventive genius with the Army Air Service. He’s working on some secret robot plane out your way.”

“Out here on Long Island?” queried Keen, watching Nolbein’s face. The little pilot-engineer was laughing fiendishly.

“Yeh. He’s got a secret experimental shed somewhere near Montauk Point. He was working on a new robot plane controlled by radio that could be sent off to drop high explosives on distant points. Oh, you know the game. Every big power is working on it, but this guy seems to have something—or did until tonight.”

“What do you mean—‘or did, until tonight’?”

“Well, the *Griffon*’s back. He blew in there some time this evening, held up this chap Hartney, and cleared off with the new ship which was equipped with

all the apparatus they want to keep secret. He says it was the *Griffon*, anyway.”

“How interesting. What does it have to do with me?”

“Do with you? For cripes sake, you live within a few miles of his hangar. Do you know anything about it?”

“How could I?”

“We’ll find out. We want that ship back—and damned quick.”

“Look here, Lang,” Keen roared back. “I know nothing. I haven’t left this place for two days. I never heard of this Hartney, and I’m too busy to bother with work that is rightfully yours.”

“There’s a lot of money in it, Keen,” taunted Lang.

“Well, why don’t you go after it. I’m not eager for it.”

“You wouldn’t be. Any guy who can give fifty grand to a crippled children’s hospital and twenty-five thousand to a blind institution wouldn’t need it. Listen, brother, if you don’t help find out what happened to that ship, I’ll start looking into your income-tax returns.”

“I never had any such money,” lied Keen.

“Well, how did those institutions get it? I’ll tell you. Remember that place in Jersey where they train police dogs to lead the blind? Well, the blind guy you picked on to take that package of dough wasn’t blind at all. He was just a trainer going through the motions. He saw you, recognized your photo. We worked from that, and there you are.”

Kerry Keen had gone white. He said nothing for a moment. He was watching Hans Nolbein, who sat leering.

“I told you, you’d have to kill Major Clyde Hartney,” chortled the cripple.

Keen swore under his breath.

“Okay, Lang,” he muttered, “you’re mistaken, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“When will that ship be back in the Montauk hangar?” prodded Lang.

“Judas! Give me time, will you? I don’t know what it’s all about yet.”

“Midnight tomorrow, would be okay, Keen,” Lang taunted.

Keen hung up with a bang.

“Where did Hartney take that ship you sold him, Nolbein?” demanded Keen.

“I don’t know. I only know that he came to Wooden Ball Island twice. Once to order, and once to take delivery.”

Keen turned to Barney. “Where’s this hangar at Montauk, Barney? You ought to know. You’re always wandering around—just when I want you here.”

“I know where it is. Stands back from the light about a quarter mile. Used to be a boat-building shed. Now they’ve got a heavy, high-wire fence around the place. But you could get in.”

“Right! Let’s go. We’ll take Nolbein back to his place and then. . . .”

“Then you can come back and kill Major Clyde Hartney,” Nolbein laughed tunelessly.

FOR the second time that night, the mysterious door under the rock-garden opened. The black amphibian was rotated on the turn-table, then the big Nolbein motor was started. They kept the muffler cut in, and Keen took the pilot’s seat. Nolbein sat behind and explained briefly a few of the new features he had incorporated in the ship. Barney closed the garden doors while Keen eased the plane down the concrete ramp. Then Barney clambered in and squeezed himself into the space behind the rear cockpit.

They took off easily with flaps down. Once they were well clear of the water, Keen cut the Skoda mufflers out and the great opposed motor let out a gigantic roar as the amphibian hurtled to a speed of 250 miles per hour.

“Now try the retracting gear,” grunted Nolbein, as Keen headed her up the coast in a northeasterly direction. “That long switch there.”

Keen moved the black handle over and a small motor began to grind. He noted the air speed needle eased up another twenty miles as the pontoon gear was raised and drawn into two long hollow slots molded into the whale-like body. A red light beamed above the black switch—warning that the pontoons were up and the pilot must lower them before attempting a landing.

“See?” beamed the little German. “And if your electric gear does not work, you can raise or lower the pontoons manually with this crank. You fit it on that bar under the instrument board.”

“Perfect!” commended Keen.

About an hour later, the black amphibian dropped down with muted power and sought the little cove that snuggled into Wooden Ball Island. This tiny chunk of rock lay twenty-five miles off the coast of Maine, opposite Rockland and was only two miles in length and less than half that wide. Here Hans Nolbein turned out high-speed planes, sans government license or supervision, for those who could afford to pay for them. Keen had become acquainted with him through his many charity forays.

It was an unusual story. Nolbein, a former German ace, had attempted to set himself up as a manufacturer and designer in America, but his ideas and designs were considered impractical by the authorities. Worse yet, certain unscrupulous engineers blocked his

chances of getting government patronage. The climax had come when he attempted to display a new single-seater fighter before Army Air Service officials. Something was “slipped over”—sabotage—and Hans Nolbein was carried from a grim pile of wreckage with no chance for life. However, a little-known surgeon of the old school had taken him into his small private hospital, and after months of skilled care, Nolbein was snatched from the grave, a horribly distorted semblance of his former self but alive and able to continue his profession. The most remarkable feature of his recovery was the fact that what he lost in physical powers seemed to have been more than compensated by his amazing mentality. Long months of suffering, innumerable operations, and the siege of pain and fever seemed to have whetted his mind to an amazing keenness and new ideas and improvements skimmed from his pencil-point.

It was then that Kerry Keen discovered him and paid his hospital expenses. In return, Hans Nolbein had agreed to build his benefactor the finest ship money or skill could obtain.

THEY dropped into the little cove that lay like a black velvet mantle off the rugged shoulders of Wooden Ball Island. Keen ran up to the planked ramp and helped Nolbein clamber down.

There was a weird tenseness in the air that caused Keen to look up. Nolbein was just ramming his crutches under his arms when the shock came.

A low growl, a steely hissing, and out of the sky swept a strange biplane with a projectile body.

“Say!” gasped Keen. “What’s that?”

Barney was taking no chances. He moved up into the gun compartment, ripped a double pair of Colt-Brownings out of the shelter cubby, and opened fire at once. The strange ship came on. A blue light suddenly flashed from the biplane’s cockpit and she jerked perceptibly.

Then there was a dull thud. Flame flashed up, and for an indescribable second the outline of Hans Nolbein’s shed and cabin stood out in gaunt silhouette. Then, like an insane shadow-graph, it all disappeared in a blotched nothingness. *Ba-ar-oom!*

A bomb had landed with weird accuracy, directly in the middle of the little island factory. A shower of debris pattered down about them and pinged off the dural sheeting of the amphibian’s wings. Barney pounded away at the black and white biplane. Nolbein turned to Keen with a stare of frustration.

“Go get that devil!” he screamed through the tusked design of his shapeless mouth. “Get that swine! He has destroyed everything I have.”

Keen shouted over the side, ran the amphibian further up the ramp, and barked out at Barney. The Irishman leaped out, grabbed a wing-tip, and turned the ship around. Then, while Nolbein exhorted them with screams, Barney leaped back in and they rolled down the planked ramp.

Into the water, then, with everything the throttle had, Keen slashed the dural pontoons through the water, hoiked her up on her step, and gradually took her off. They climbed madly. Barney was trying to find the mysterious ship with the aid of night-glasses. Once he caught a glimpse of the tongues of flame streaking from the biplane’s exhausts, but when they tried to catch up, the black and white craft disappeared.

“What now?” demanded Barney when they eased down and set their course back for Long Island.

“We’ll go back. I guess old Nolbein was right, after all. We will have to see that Major Clyde Hartney is—removed. He certainly is mixed up in this mess. You know what that was, don’t you?” he continued. “It’s a robot plane—flown by remote control. There was no pilot in that ship. I could see that when the circuit breaker flashed inside and released the bomb.”

THE hangar behind Montauk was the scene of much activity about an hour later, even though it was well on toward 3 o’clock in the morning. At the front end was a well-furnished office that looked out across the sparse grass and sand that ran down to the waters of the Sound. It boasted two wide desks, a large drawing board, several files, and a great safe.

At one of the desks sat a medium-sized man in khaki uniform. He was a colorless individual, except for his deep-set, piercing eyes. He was speaking into a telephone.

“Then you are certain that she scored,” he was saying.

“Positive. The seismograph attachment records the explosion with accuracy. The barograph shows the actual height course, and the explosion graph corresponds perfectly with the lowest point of the dive.”

“Everything else check?” demanded the man in khaki. “We can’t risk anything further on that old devil.”

“Well, there’s one thing I can’t make out at all and it has me worried. The damn thing came back full of bullet holes!”

“What?” gasped Major Clyde Hartney.

“A fact. Two bad bursts in the tail assembly and another through the body just behind the robot-pilot mechanism. Another foot, and she’d never have returned.”

“Any idea where that happened?”

“Hard to say. The recorder shows that one burst must have hit her a few seconds before I released the bomb. They show in jerky lines on the tape just before the recording of the bomb explosion. The second burst hit her a few seconds after the bomb exploded.”

“Then that means that someone fired at that ship when she was actually diving on old Nolbein’s place. Where did they come from?”

“Apparently from the ground.”

“Then she was not attacked from the air.”

“I wouldn’t say so, considering the angle from which the bullets entered. But we’ve got to be very careful. Nolbein may be dead. He should be if he was still in that shed. I figure we made a direct hit and there will be no chance of his getting the other ship out.”

“We don’t know, of course, whether it was still in there or not. He said he was using it himself. But somehow I don’t believe that.”

“Well, I’m hoping that it was. It will make things a lot easier for us. Anything on Groener?”

“They’ll be ready for delivery at midnight tomorrow. You’ll have to fix her up by then. Can you do it?”

“Certainly. No real structural damage. A few new dural sheets and she’ll be as good as new. I’ll pick you up as arranged.”

“Fine! We’ve got to work fast now, Monkton.”

Major Hartney put the receiver down on its base and looked up into the blue-black muzzle of a grim automatic. It was held by a man in a tight-fitting coverall whose face was completely covered with a scarlet mask.

FOR an instant Major Hartney sat spellbound, then he snatched at the telephone, receiver again.

“Never mind,” said the man in the scarlet mask in a tone that was in every sense an order. “Keep your hands off that—and everything else on that desk.”

There was a quiet, but strong, severity in the voice.

Hartney raised his hands slowly and the blood seemed to drain from his face as his long delicate fingers stretched upward. He peered through his upraised arms like a felon staring through the bars of a cell.

“What do you want?” he finally said in a husky voice. “Do you realize that you are trespassing on government property?”

“If I’m trespassing on government property,” stabbed the masked man with a hint of a chuckle in his voice. “What are you doing here? Actually,” he added, “you’re engaging in a gigantic theft.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Hartney.

“Don’t stall. I don’t have much time to waste on you, Hartney.” Then the man in the scarlet mask slipped his fingers into a small pocket set in the waistband of his coverall. He drew out a small white card and flipped it across the table with a dexterous movement. It fell face up before the man seated with his hands up. His eyes turned slowly down from the gun and focused themselves on the card in front of him.

“*The Griffon!*” he gasped. Then—“The robot plane? What did you do with it?”

For a moment the man who had tossed the card relaxed his grip on the blue-black gun. His body lost its tenseness as a wave of humor and admiration swept through him.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Hartney,” he replied after a short pause. “You certainly are a grand actor. You missed your calling.”

Hartney raised his eyes from the card again and frowned at the man before him.

“Don’t try to carry it any further, Hartney,” warned the man in the mask. “You may be able to fool the boys in Washington, but you are not slipping it over on me. You see, I’m the real *Griffon*, and the lad who took the robot plane was someone working with you who happens to be flying a ship exactly like mine.”

Hartney let out a viperish hiss.

“We can save a lot of time and trouble, Major,” the man in the Mask went on, “if you tell me where that robot plane is.”

“I don’t know. I tell you a man who calls himself *‘the Griffon’* stole it.”

“Liar! I know for a fact that you are in touch with someone who has that plane and who plans to hand it over to someone by the name of Groener. You see, I overheard most of your telephone conversation. Your little game is finished, Hartney.”

“And now you want the robot plane—the plane I developed after years of hard work.”

“Perhaps, Hartney, but now that it is finished and ready for actual service, you intend to sell the device to some foreign power and pick up a lot of money, eh? But it’s not going to work this time.”

“Any chance of working this thing out?” asked Hartney with a leer.

“There might be. How much have you been paid so far?”

“Two hundred thousand dollars. I get the rest when—when the plane is delivered. What will you take to clear out?”

“Where’s the two hundred thousand?” demanded the man in the scarlet mask.

“See that fuse box over there on the wall?” said Hartney, directing his eyes across the room to where a

black enameled box was screwed. "It's in there. I didn't leave it around handy for the boys to find when they made their search after the ship disappeared. Go over and pull the lid down. It's all there—in hundreds."

The *Griffon* shifted his gaze to the box and noted that it carried armored cable through the round insulators. He studied it carefully a minute and smiled.

"You go over and get it out, Hartney," he finally said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I'll have to pull the switch down, you know, to open it," Hartney replied with a smile.

"I've noticed that," the *Griffon* smiled. "That's why I wanted you to open it. Don't worry, you'll be well covered."

Hartney's hands began to drop. So did his jaw.

"You—you get it. I feel too shaky, *Griffon*. This experience has upset me badly. You open it. I'll play the game."

"Sure you will. You're game, Hartney. I'm taking no chances on that box. Go over and get that money."

The air in the small office was tense. Both men were watching each other like crouched panthers. The *Griffon's* gun moved closer to Hartney's chest.

"Go and open that box, Hartney!"

The man in the major's uniform slowly got to his feet. He stared across at the box, then back at the *Griffon*. His face was like dried putty and his eyes blazed an insane fire. He turned and stared at the door, a hint of a smile at one corner of his mouth.

"All right," he finally muttered. "You go over and stand in front of the door. Leave it open, so that nothing can happen—so that I can't rush out when the light goes out."

The *Griffon* glanced at the box, then at the door. The box faced the door exactly. He nodded, backed toward the door, and with left hand behind him turned the knob. He drew the door open and stood in the doorway. He smiled as he measured the height of the conduit box opposite. His victim could not see that smile.

Hartney moved over slowly, watching the *Griffon* carefully. He glanced around the room, as if seeking something, then, with a final glance, moved over in front of the box. His hand reached up for the black metal switch that protruded out of the right-hand side of the box. The *Griffon* watched him carefully, his gun waist high.

"Go on, pull it!" the *Griffon* ordered. "What are you waiting for?"

"I—I don't want to get a shock. There's a lot of juice in these wires. I'll move over to the other side."

He started to cross over in front of the box, his fingers still hooked around the black handle. Then the

Griffon moved swiftly to the iron safe. His gun barked with a crack, and a bullet smashed into the beaverboard above the box.

Hartney jerked and something exploded with a low roar. The Major let out a low cry, spun around, and dropped to the floor, a mangled figure. A small looking object glinted from the opening in the box.

"Just as I figured, Hartney," the *Griffon* said. "That was not a regular fuse box, and you reacted just as I thought you would when I fired that shot. You jerked away, pulled the switch lever, and worked the treacherous mechanism that fired that hidden gun. A natty idea, but you should not have left the real fuse box in view. You might have moved the safe over another foot and covered it."

Then with a quick movement he darted to Hartney's desk and ripped open a drawer. It contained nothing of interest. He tried a second and a third and finally came upon what he was looking for—a small first-aid kit box. He ripped open the lid and smiled under his mask. It was stuffed with neatly packed bills. With a quick movement he switched off the lights and hurried to the door.

SILENTLY the man in the mask slipped into the shadows outside the big hangar and listened. Ahead the great light of Montauk was sending out its long beam and guiding mariners out on the Atlantic.

Footsteps could be heard faintly and an auto horn squawked in the distance. He ran like a quarter-miler across the smooth sand-packed ground toward the silver-laced water that gleamed ahead. He could see the outline of a black amphibian curling around from the north and heading for the stretch of beach that swept northeast from Culloden Point. A shot rang out from the blackness behind him and he ran on under cover. The silent amphibian came down hissing like a giant drone and kissed the easy rollers with her racing pontoons. Then, as soon as was possible, the pilot applied rudder, slewed around, and came to a shuddering halt not ten yards from the water's edge.

The *Griffon* ran again after giving the ship a quick glance. Then, like a white wraith, he charged into the water, yanked at the tail of the amphibian, and spun her around until her nose faced the open water again. He struggled up on the pontoon, gripped the leather-covered combing at the rear portion of the pit, slipped down under the open window cowl, and yelled: "Let her go, Barney!"

The amphibian jerked and strained as the great motor opened up and hauled the weight up onto the step. Then she began to stream away and hustle for height.

“Nice timing, Barney,” the *Griffon* remarked as he leaned over to squeeze the water out of his coverall and trousers below his knees.

There was no answer from up front.

“It took a few seconds longer than I figured,” the *Griffon* went on. “But I got the light out eventually. You must have started down at once, eh?”

No answer from up front.

The *Griffon* looked up quizzically and studied the man in front of him. He was much taller than Barney. He wore white coveralls, a white linen helmet, and under it a scarlet mask!

Keen gasped.

Now the man was peering at him over his shoulder as he skillfully climbed the black amphibian. His eyes gleamed with a leer of triumph.

“So—Mr. *Griffon*,” sneered the man in front. “I have caught you. What were you doing down there on that Government field?”

Keen sat back in his seat. His hand was on the butt of his big automatic. His mind was racing at tremendous speed.

Where was Barney and his black amphibian? Who was this man up front? Groener or the man named Monkton to whom Hartney had talked over the telephone? Where was he being taken?

“I never expected I would ever be able to take you for a ride,” the man taunted. Still Keen held his tongue. His silence, he knew, would soon get under the other man’s skin.

“Well, say something. What’s the matter, scared?”

Then as if he had suddenly remembered something he turned around further in his seat, still keeping the muffler in so that they could talk.

Keen half-smiled at the man through his goggles, but did not answer.

“Did you get Hartney, you swine?” he half screamed, letting the ship slip off a trifle.

No answer.

“Come on. There’s no use trying to bluff me. You’re licked. I’m the boss this time, Mister *Griffon*. Where’s Hartney?”

In reply there came a low taunting laugh. The pilot up front tried to figure it all out.

“So you think you have me,” laughed Keen. “You are easy. In the first place, your friend, the Major, has done off with your two hundred grand. Next, he plans to get to Star Island, get the robot plane off to Groener on his own, collect the rest, and leave you to face the music. Now what are you going to do—head for Star Island?”

For an instant the man up front sat stiff, letting the amphibian veer off, but finally he turned back to his controls, steadied her, and went over a northeasterly

course. Keen watched the compass card slide around and display the course figures. He smiled, for he knew that his wild stab had been reasonably correct.

“How do you know all this?” demanded the pilot in the strange makeup.

“Easy! I arrived just too late to stop him. But he left certain papers and scribbled notes on his memorandum block—notes jotted down after talking to someone on the phone. It was easy to figure out the rest.”

Now it was the pilot’s turn to lapse into taunting silence.

But Keen kept jabbing away: “You’d better hurry up to Star Island and head Hartney off.”

Suddenly the man up front turned and glared at Keen. Then he smiled cruelly: “You are making a wild stab, *Griffon*. I don’t believe a word you say. If this is all true, why did you climb into my ship, and how did Hartney expect to get to Star Island? Answer those two questions.”

“Simple. I mistook this machine for my own, which was supposed to be there. I don’t know what happened to my man, but I can guess now. You see Hartney went up to Star Island in a plane flown by Hans Nolbein. There’s your whole trouble—Hans Nolbein.”

“Liar! Hans Nolbein was killed in an explosion at his shack tonight. I saw to that.”

“Fool! Hans Nolbein was not even in his shack, as you call it. He was flying with me and we are the ones who put those bullets you were so puzzled about into that robot plane.”

“From the air?” snapped the man up front.

“No. From the water. We had just landed.”

“Then how did Nolbein get back to Montauk so quick? Answer that one!”

“I can’t,” replied Keen with a queer smile. “He must have had another ship of some sort.”

The pilot turned back to his controls and headed further away from the rugged Massachusetts coastline. He was trying to figure it all out. But he had no intention of allowing Keen to dive overboard and take to the silk—not just yet.

THEY flew on in tense silence for a time, and the pilot kept his mufflers in to make certain he could catch every move his passenger made. It was a ticklish situation. He knew Keen could kill him and take over with little trouble, but he also sensed that he was making a wild effort to find out something else. Then, if Hartney had cleared off with the money and the robot ship, his fate was settled already. His only hope now, was to get out of the country and lie low for some time. The wilds of Canada seemed to be his only salvation.

“Well, what’s your best offer?” he finally turned and asked.

“Where’s that robot plane?” demanded Keen.

“Oh, so you don’t know where it is, eh?” chuckled the man up front. “Well, now, that’s different. That means I can do the talking.”

“You can talk, all right, but you’ll have to say the right things,” taunted Keen. “I want that ship. Where is it. At Star Island?”

“Well, since you are so sure that Hartney has pulled out, I can’t say where it is. It might have been at Star Island once.”

“Okay, then. I suppose I’ll have to kill you and get rid of your weight.”

“Then what? You’ll be no closer than you were before.”

“Oh yes I will. I’ll nail Groener before he gets hold of it.”

“Fine. And how will you do that? You don’t even know who Groener is or where he might be. You’re not that smart, *Griffon*.”

“I was smart enough to find out where the robot plane was being handled from, eh?”

“Perhaps so. And I guess there’s only one thing for me to do,” said the pilot.

“What’s that?”

“Contact Groener, pick off Hartney, and get my share.”

For a moment, Keen was stumped. Then he nodded, smiled to himself. “All right,” he said. “Go to Groener. I’ll go with you and get the whole lot of you.”

The man up front laughed loud, cut out the mufflers, and headed the ship out toward the open sea. Then, while Keen settled back to think over his plans, something happened that broke up everything.

From above them slammed a streak of fire. The black amphibian jerked and bucked like a stallion. Again slim pencil-like tracers forked at them and the man up front shouted.

“Take that gun out and go to work!”

Keen turned and saw a black object hurtling down at them, pouring bursts as it came. The pilot of Keen’s ship darted the amphibian back and forth and tried to get its nose around, but as he twisted in his seat, something crashed into the glass above his head. He let out a loud cry and fell over the stick.

Down went the black amphibian like a comet. Keen quickly fired three short bursts from the gun—bursts which streaked well clear of the onrushing mystery ship and seemed to speak in a dot-and-dash system. Then he scrambled over, yanked the dead man off the controls, and saw that his face had been literally blasted away with explosive bullets. Keen hurled the

dead man clear and got at the controls. But it had all taken seconds, and by the time he was fully in position, the water below was dangerously close. He heaved back gently on the stick, but it snapped indicating that the elevator control had been blasted out. He shut off the motor, kicked the rudder, and rammed the stick over into the side.

“A spin,” he muttered grimly, “hits only one seventh as hard as a straight dive.”

The black amphibian spun. He forced her into a wider and wider arc and steadied himself for the smash. Then there was a wrenching crash and the ship floundered in the water like a harpooned whale. Keen covered his face with his arms and was hurled with a spinning jerk into the instrument board. Recovering a moment later from the stunning blow he clambered out of the battered cowl frame and made for the tail that stuck from the water.

Almost at the same instant, the other black amphibian landed nearby and eased up alongside, and Barney O’Dare leaned out, a black automatic resting on the combing.

“Put the artillery away, Barney,” cried Keen. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

He slipped along the body again, took out several cards from his coverall pocket, and made his way to a broken window where he could see the body of the man in white coveralls. He slipped the cards into the pocket of the dead man, then reached in further and snatched the maps off the board. In another minute he was crawling up the pontoon struts of the other ship.

“Bashing Barney the Boy Blunderer,” chuckled Keen. “You always turn up at the wrong time.”

“You mean you always take the wrong ship,” growled the Mick. “What the devil happened to you, anyway?”

“It’s a long story, Barney. Get off and head for Star Island, just off the New Hampshire coast. It’s one of those in the Isles of Shoals. South of Smuttynose.”

“Glory! First Wooden Ball Island, now Smuttynose! What is this? A crossword puzzle addict’s geography?”

“Get going, while I look over this chart of the *Griffon’s*,” gaged Keen.

“The *Griffon’s*?—Who was that guy?” demanded Barney.

“*The Griffon!*” replied Keen, in a determined voice.

BARNEY headed the amphibian well clear of the beam of Chatham light that shone from the headland on the tip of Cape Cod, checking his position with the radio signals that came from the Navy compass-checking station at the base of the big lighthouse. Then, while Keen studied his chart with rare care,

Barney turned northwest and shot for the comparatively short length of New Hampshire coastline and for the short string of almost barren islands lying in the sea about nine miles beyond—those islands, so battered and miserable in their plight, that few have ever found even the most meager livelihood upon them. There are three main islands of the string, namely Appledore, about a square mile in area; Smuttynose, a narrow spiteful block of rock and sand; and finally Star Island, which lies about two miles further south, and which by some strained sense of imagination might be termed star-shaped.

It was this latter bleak, untenanted chunk of rock that Kerry Keen had seen marked on a small map in Major Hartney's desk drawer. The same small island was also marked by criss-cross lines on the map yanked out of the clips of the amphibian that had just been wrecked. Whatever the man who had masqueraded as the *Griffon* had said about it, it was evident now that Star Island held some evidence concerning the missing robot plane.

Barney eased back and took a sight on Rockport and Cape Arin. Then he cut the mufflers in and leaned back to where Keen was still studying the dank chart under a small light from the radio panel.

"Well," he remarked over his shoulder. "We're only a few miles away. What's the menu?"

"Jerked shrouds, soused trousers, sizzling action, and Heaven knows what," Keen answered without looking up. He was working out something with the aid of figures on the back of a message pad.

"Well, the place is now only a few miles away."

"Okay. Strip the decks for action, Barney. Be ready to change seats any minute—or make a landing."

They still had the mufflers cut in and the big speedy amphibian was racing toward the small group of islands that lay like stepping stones out from the New Hampshire coastline. Barney circled wide, and Keen, who was studying the island with his night glasses, discovered only one dim light. It came from a smudged building that nestled between a great rocky pile and a sand dune. From the building ran what appeared to be a boarded walk, but the shadows and the low visibility of the night made it difficult to make out exactly what it was.

Keen tapped Barney on the shoulder and pointed down. "See that cove off to the right of that light?" he asked. "The water is fairly deep in there, Barney, according to the chart. Get her in there quietly. We'll have to land well out and swim in. That's our best bet."

THE black amphibian dropped down on the inky waters like a saffron ghost. Barney brought her in with

plenty of headway and kept her well inside the shelter of the cove. Then he let her drift toward the side closest to the light Keen had spotted.

"I'm soaked now, and a little more won't do me any harm," muttered Kerry, clambering quietly out and getting on the wing. "Give me that line."

Barney handed over a coil of hemp rope. Keen fastened it to one of the pontoon struts and dropped into the water. Then he swam with the rope slowly dragging the amphibian after him. As soon as his feet touched, he stopped, and Barney threw over a light anchor. The ship was soon steady and floating clear. Barney dropped onto Keen's shoulders and was carried through the water to the sandy shore.

"Whatever you do, don't get your feet wet," growled Keen.

"Don't intend to. I wunst knew a man who died from too much sea water," commented Barney casually. "Now if we had a drink—"

"You'll get one—when, and if, we get back."

"I don't like that 'when and if business.'"

"Shut up! There's one hundred twenty-nine distilleries in Ireland and Scotland, at the last returns, still turning out plenty of stuff. You'll do well enough."

They collected themselves, checked their weapons, and wrung a few more quarts out of Keen's clothing. Then they clambered on up the rocks and peered over the other side. They could now see the wooden building plainly. It might have been anything from a net-drying shed to a rambling summer bungalow, from what they could see. They found a narrow path down the rocks, but Keen ordered Barney to step aside with him and follow it a few feet clear of the level track. He was taking no chances on booby-traps.

It took several minutes to get within inspection distance of the place without tripping over wires that had been set to catch unwary feet and set numerous tin cans jangling to warn the occupants.

"Reminds me of the old Jerry bait lines they used to lay out in the advanced sap communication trenches," mused Barney. "I'll bet someone put these in who had Western Front experience. I wonder—"

Keen plucked at his arm.

They stopped, for they could hear a voice—the voice of a man talking over the telephone. Keen stared up at the sky and peered all around.

"No wires about here," he observed quietly.

"Probably brought in by undersea cable. But listen, that voice is somewhat familiar," offered Barney.

Keen frowned, and stared at the Irishman. They exchanged knowing glances and gripped the butts of their guns.

They moved forward carefully and continued to listen. The voice rambled on in varied cadences.

"I'll be damned!" gasped Barney.

"I can't believe it," husked Keen.

They advanced again then Barney suddenly leaped sideways as a huge body suddenly fell upon him. There was a low scuffle, and Barney went down struggling.

Keen darted in and found his man holding the snout of a giant mastiff. The animal was frantically attempting to get free, but the little Irishman held on and his eyes gave Keen a knowing signal. In a flash, Keen ripped out a small tin box, selected a little bottle, and poured some of its contents on his handkerchief. With a quick move, he rammed it over the dog's nose and held it there while Barney turned away to evade the overpowering fumes. In a few seconds the big animal went limp.

"Hate to do that, old boy," muttered Keen, "but you'd rather upset the apple cart just now. You'll feel better in an hour or so. Nice work, Barney. A double-hooker for that—"

"Whin and if," commented the panting Barney.

They arose, listened again, then moved like shadows toward the screened window. Together they peered over the edge of the window sill.

At a small efficient-looking radio telephone panel, sat Hans Nolbein!

KEEN and Barney exchanged glances.

"So that's why he sold that other ship," whispered Barney.

"Nice little game to get either me or Major Hartney out of the way, eh Barney?"

"An thot other jimbo tried to get Nolbein. A nice little kittle o' fish!"

"Listen. He's still talking to someone."

". . . but I think it will be safer," Nolbein was saying in his cracked voice, "to dismantle it and get it out to you somehow."

Keen was staring at a black box that stood at one end of the room facing a bay-window that looked out on the sea. It was about eighteen inches square at the base and nearly four feet high. At the top were several dials, such as were used on radio sets in the early days. A heavy cable ran into the box from one side, and a series of taped wires ran out the other and seemed to go through a conduit under the window.

Nolbein continued after a short pause: "I don't think it would be so risky—I'm sorry we are so late, but Monkton and Hartney got into an argument and slowed things up a lot."

"Quite an argument," agreed Keen quietly. "Both dead!"

"Where are you now? Can you have your wicker trail platform ready within an hour?"

Keen hissed.

Nolbein was fumbling with a pencil and making a move to jot something down.

"Forty-three, ten, north by sixty-eight, forty. Let's see, you are about one hundred miles, roughly speaking, east of Portsmouth. Right?"

Keen jotted the numbers down on his pocket pad.

Nolbein went on in his excited cackle:

"She does about 126 tops with the motor we have in it now. That would mean it would be about an hour or so before she could get there. Give me your course. I'll set her, and you can take over and bring her in on the trail net with your control box. How will that be?"

"You'd better start moving. It will soon be daylight," warned the Mick.

"You're right. I'd forgotten all about the time. But listen!"

". . . I want the money in American bills, remember," Nolbein was saying. "All right, you put it over the side in a can on a raft. I'll get it as soon as it is light . . . The blue-prints? . . . I have them right, here. Yes, I'll post them to you through a Montreal office. They'll be in Berlin almost as soon as you . . . Right!"

"Come on," snapped Keen, "he's up to something!"

Barney stood back and heaved a punch at the screen in the window. It went in with a crash and Nolbein turned like a man shot. Then he screamed back into the radio-telephone receiver: "*Gott!* . . . Here she comes! Take her!"

Then, while Keen clambered through the window, the little crippled inventor crabbed across the floor, hurled himself bodily at the black control box. Then, with an ear-splitting screech, he jerked a lever before Keen knew what was going on.

"Stop him!" roared Barney, thundering across the room.

But Keen had been too late, and now there came the roar of an aircraft motor that had opened up somewhere outside. Keen tried to regain his bearings. "What's that?" he bellowed.

The three men made a grotesque picture in the big room. The insane Nolbein with a crazy expression of triumph across his face; Keen standing puzzled and uncertain, the big automatic in his hands; Barney, running back and forth like a gnome, peering out of the window snatching at maps, and charts. But the tuneless laugh of Nolbein broke the spell.

"Too late, Mister Keen," he raved, his whole body jerking and twitching with emotion. "Too late. You did just what I knew you would do. You killed Major Clyde Hartney—but I got the robot plane. He thought I

was crazy and so did Monkton. They both tried to do me out of my reward, but I fooled 'em both—and I'm fooling you. Listen!"

The aircraft motor still roared. Then there was a prolonged hiss, followed by a bellow of released power.

"He let her go," screeched Barney. "I told you he'd do it!"

Keen stood poised in the center of the room. Then he darted past Nolbein and stared out of the windows. His eyes caught the gleaming rails of a ground catapult. The cradle was still trembling against the buffers. And out in the distance gleamed the tell-tale exhaust pennons of an aircraft motor, set between the trim wings of a small biplane.

Hans Nolbein had discharged it toward its foul goal!

"KEEP him covered, Barney! If he moves, blow his brains out," Keen roared. Then he snatched the roll of blue-prints that lay on the table and spread them under the light. For what seemed minutes, he peered at them, studying each sheet carefully.

"Open cockpit, for one thing," he muttered aloud. "Regular controls connected into the robot mechanism with steel fingers. We can take care of this matter yet, Barney."

Nolbein still steadied himself against the control pillar. He glared with insane hate as Keen strode toward him. Then Keen pushed Nolbein from the column. The German twisted in agony and tried to reach the dial knobs, but Keen kept him clear. Nolbein snarled like a trapped animal and tore at Keen with his long slim fingers. Finally the cripple went sprawling across the floor.

"You dirty coward!" hissed Nolbein.

"Coward hell! After all I did for you, you rat. You squealed on me to Lang. You crossed me about selling that plane and told me Hartney had purchased it when you knew Monkton—Colonel Monkton who was working with Hartney—had it all the time. You tried to double-cross them. You ought to be hung! I'm giving you a break to let you live now."

"You'll wish you had killed me, yet!" ranted Nolbein from his grotesque position on the floor. "I can still stop you."

But Keen was studying the dials on the control pillar. One indicated a true easterly course, the second was set for 3,000 feet, and the third showed it controlled the r.p.m.'s. of the engine. The reading was 2,250 r.p.m., indicating some light motor, perhaps of the Menasco type, running at top speed.

"Keep him away from this column, Barney. We want that ship to continue its course at that speed. I'll take care of the rest."

He looked at his watch, then stared at Nolbein with bitterness: "After all I did for you, Nolbein. You just couldn't go straight, could you? Couldn't play the game. Well, perhaps it is not all your fault, after all, considering how much you have gone through. But it's too bad you couldn't forget the past and be satisfied to build ships as only you can. You could have made a lot of money and had a grand time up there at Wooden Ball Island. But no, you still retain your old bitterness, your old war-time animosities. Well, I'm now going to double-cross you. I'm going out to get that ship, if it's the last thing I ever do. Barney, you keep him covered. If he moves a foot, drill him cold and take his ship—he must have one around here somewhere—and beat it back to Long Island. I'll see you later."

And with another grimace at the prostrate Nolbein, Kerry Keen slipped out of the shack and disappeared.

ALREADY a low light was noticeable in the East as he released the cables that held the black amphibian. The big sixteen-cylinder engine, still warm, opened up with a roar. Keen had drawn the Skoda levers out to make certain there would be no back-pressure to hinder her starting. Then with careful maneuvers he took her out of the cove, gave her the gun, and headed into the wind.

The black amphibian climbed beautifully as he depressed the switch that wound the pontoons into their retracted positions. He checked his course as due east, let in the small automatic-pilot set, and turned his attention to his actual goal.

"He said 43:10 North by 68:40 West," he mumbled to himself, making a check mark on his North Atlantic chart. "She does about 126 top and has been flying now about ten minutes."

He fingered his slide rule, worked out the probable position of the robot plane, and marked it on his chart.

"She's about thirty miles out from Star Island now," he calculated. "I can do thirty miles in ten minutes with ease. I should catch her in about fifteen, at that rate."

He settled back, taking over from his automatic pilot, and set himself the task of seeking the mysterious ship now being directed by a small box back there in Nolbein's Star Island shack.

Several minutes passed. He checked his clock and compass again and peered about.

"Any time now," he calculated. "Funny, but I have a queer feeling about this. There's something eerie in a ship that flies itself. I always was a sucker for ghost stories and if this isn't one, I've never heard one!"

His mind was running through the events of the past twelve hours. Nolbein delivering his ship and boasting that he would kill Major Clyde Hartney. The fact that there had been two such ships mixed up in the affair, one set as a trap for the other. Nolbein, the fawning little inventor, who actually was his deadliest enemy. Hartney and Colonel Monkton, who believed they had the “steal” of the robot plane-sewed up. And now the mysterious vessel out there with a trail-net, waiting the arrival of their great prize.

He wagged his head and smiled at his own reflection in the clock face. Then he noticed that his ruminations had lasted longer than he had expected. More than fifteen minutes had passed since he had left Star Island.

Then the clock did something startling! The face cracked, in a shower of glass and a length of spring twirled out of the open orifice.

Keen jerked the amphibian out of the play. A streak of spluttering tracer spat his wing-tip and Keen twisted in his seat and saw a snarling fighting biplane rocketing down at him from above and behind. Just at that moment he glimpsed the robot plane ahead, but now there was other business to attend to.

“Sap!” he growled at himself. “Woolgathering, when you should be on your toes. What would Barney have said about this?”

The menace behind him came down harder, curling slightly to get another burst in. The gentleman above was coming in again with guns blazing. He was taking no chances. Lead spat from wing-root weapons and out of the black orifices above the Vee-banked cylinders of his motor. Keen darted back and forth to escape the fire.

“What the deuce is that?” he barked aloud. “Small, dull gray biplane—undoubtedly a Fokker D-19, one of the latest. Batches of revs, range, and popguns. Here’s real opposition, Mister Keen. You’d better work fast!”

And Keen did! The amphibian was thrown into a series of dizzy maneuvers that left the trim Fokker standing. He noticed that she carried no international markings, but he had a good idea who owned her—a gentleman whose last name was Groener!

“Came off a catapult, I’ll bet a hat!” he mused, throwing his machine into a half-loop. “Probably expects to get back on a drag net towed by some disguised tramp steamer out there, and yanked aboard by a boomed crane. Well, the best laid plans o’ mice and men, as Bobbie Burns said . . .”

He flipped the amphibian into a half-roll at the top of a loop, but the Fokker followed beautifully. Keen noticed his danger, skidded out of a long burst of heavy fire, and smiled.

“I’ll try it again, and see if I can fool you next time,” Keen muttered. “You Jerries seem to have that dragnet landing thing down pretty fine, but you’re not going to hit, *Herr Groener*.”

THE amphibian went down again in a dive with the roaring Fokker behind her. Keen yanked her up and over, but this time instead of whipping out into a half-roll, he continued on, after feinting such a move. The German behind him, opened his guns, went into the expected half-roll, and shot out clear expecting to find his quarry. But the amphibian had roared around in a tight loop, and before Groener could figure what had happened, Keen was behind him, cutting down the distance madly, his heavy caliber guns barking in triumphant unison.

The startled German tried to get clear, but it was all over. Keen hung on, pounded every ounce of power into the sixteen-cylinder motor, pressed every trigger control he had. The Fokker broke up in a welter of struts, spars, and slabs of curved metal. Down she went in a wild tangle, screaming, a long black plume of smoke acting as her burial shroud.

Keen quickly checked his course, set the amphibian on its true line, and stared about. He had no idea what time had been consumed in the scrap, for his clock was no more. The robot plane was nowhere to be seen.

He gave the amphibian the guns, checked the controls gingerly, and scoured the skies. He was well over 4,000 feet now. Then, Old Sol himself came to his aid. The golden glow, streaking across the horizon, caught the trim wings of the robot craft heading as straight as an arrow for a small oblong blotch that lay on the surface not two miles away.

With a low cry of triumph, Keen nosed down. He rolled back the splintered greenhouse covering above his seat and loosened his belt. Then he shot under the little biplane and inspected her carefully. His flap-controls allowed him to air-brake the amphibian to the same speed as the robot-plane.

“Perfect!” he smiled, looking up. “Neat, narrow cross-bar. Front leg well clear of the leading edge and plenty of room to clear the prop arc. Well, let’s go, baby. Drury Lang wants that ship back.”

BONG!

Something crashed out dead ahead of him with a tremendous concussion. He blinked.

BONG! BONG!

Two more such deafening concussions barked, and the two ships rolled madly in the concussion. Then the little biplane above him gallantly steadied herself and plunged out—toward a nondescript tramp steamer plunging below through the rollers and dragging a long canvas and wicker landing mat at her stern!

Keen took it all in at once.

"The devils came loaded for bear, all right. High caliber Q.F. guns aboard, too. Got to work fast now."

BONG! BONG! BONG!

THEN began one of the maddest contacts the air has ever known. The robot plane seemed to hesitate in her course, and Keen sensed that she was being taken over by the robot-control set aboard the ship below. He drew the amphibian in closer, undid his safety belt, and watched the little biplane. With a low cry he sensed that she was being directed into an easy glide. The motor seemed to have been throttled down by an unseen hand.

"There's still a chance," he muttered. He maneuvered the amphibian under the biplane, as the guns below continued to blaze away. Then clambered up on to his seat, steadied himself against the cowling frame, and placed his right foot on the top of the stick. By careful handling he brought the amphibian close enough almost to touch the belly of the biplane.

His mind was racing as fast as the shells that sought him. He could see the gun crews on the deck, and a cruel idea came to him. He waited a second longer, then reached up and grabbed the biplane's cross-bar. He felt the ship jerk up, as though someone inside had drawn the stick back. Before he left, he rammed the stick of the amphibian forward, intending to direct it straight at the tanker—but something exploded immediately beneath him!

As he dangled from the cross-bar, the amphibian below him disintegrated in mid-air and tumbled away, a shapeless mass of metal and flame. The gunners had scored a direct hit!

"Nothing like timing things right," he panted, working his way along the cross-bar to the wheel.

But the biplane was under control again, heading straight for the trailing mat at the stern of the vessel below. Keen struggled like a madman. Finally he clambered over the rounded leading edge of the lower wing. He took a quick look and saw that the robot plane was not more than three-hundred yards away from the landing mat! They were already swinging a boom over ready to drag it aboard.

He stood on the wing-root, stared inside the cockpit, and saw that the throttle and control stick were connected by long steel rods to a large black box fastened under the instrument board. He tugged at them, but they were bolted hard.

He swore as the biplane eased toward the mat. Then with a final effort he reached in with his automatic, and fired three times.

The controls broke clear, and he snatched over at the throttle and rammed it over. The motor opened up

with a roar. He grabbed at the stick, drew it back sharply. The next thing he knew the robot-plane was slamming madly at the aft mast of the tanker like a thing completely berserk.

Keen shut his eyes, dragged the stick over toward him, and hung on, expecting within the next second to be smashed. There was a light jerk. The upturned wing-tip had scraped across a boom cable but had cleared safely. He waited, sensing that the ship was in a dangerous side-slip and sliding toward the water. Then, at the last minute, it leveled off and raced past the fo'castle deck, with half a dozen men firing point blank at him.

How he cleared them, he never knew. But he stayed on the wing root, headed her clear, then clambered inside and felt for the rudder.

Again the automatic blazed to rid the pedals of the rods connecting them with the robot-control cabinet. But at last everything was free and he was able to fly it out with the Q.F. guns behind him firing away furiously but completely frustrated.

IT was broad daylight when he reached Montauk point. Keen had been figuring plenty all the way back. He had the robot-plane, but what could he do with it?

"Well," he muttered to himself, "she flies well and she's inherently stable. I wonder if I could get away with it . . ."

As he ruminated, a small seaplane was cutting in on him from the north. Above the open cockpit beamed the broad, homely mug of Barney O'Dare.

He gave Barney a signal, and in return, the Mick signaled back with an Aldis lamp.

"Nolbein conked out. Bum heart, I guess."

"The best way, too," Keen agreed. Then he gave Barney some orders by code, using his open hand for dashes and the closed fist for dots. Barney nodded. Then working from well out over the Sound, Keen checked the drift with a smoke streak coming from a Sound steamer and nosed the biplane down for the open landing field in front of the government experimental hangar. He steadied her gently, tied the stick into a neutral position, drew the throttle back, and let her glide toward the field. Then he climbed out of the cockpit, pulled his rip cord, and let his parachute pull him off. He floated way and saw the little biplane go down under her own stability, hit the edge of the field, screw around once, dig in a wing-tip, and finally climb gently onto her nose. Keen hit the water neatly, slipped out of his harness, and waited for Barney to pick him up for the second time in almost that many hours. The little seaplane took off with Keen flat across the port pontoon and was away before anyone at the field had noticed what had happened.

In half an hour, after clearing well out to sea, Barney brought the plane opposite Grayfields and let Keen off. Then he flew away again after handing a roll of blueprints to the dripping man on the pontoon.

“Get rid of that crate, Barney,” Keen ordered, “if you have to kill yourself, doing it.”

Then he raced up the concrete ramp and disappeared.

BY the time Barney had returned, after piling the seaplane upon a rocky shoal south-west of Hampton Bays, Keen was completely changed and had prepared a breakfast for the two of them. Barney first reached for a bottle, then sat down content. As they ate, they compared notes on the adventure. And then, Keen tossed the small tin first-aid box over to his Irish companion.

“A little to go on with, Barney. The account is getting pretty low, eh?”

“It will be after we get another ship—if ever,” grinned the Mick.

“Oh yes, and there will be a nice donation to the Seaman’s Institute, this time. It’s awful what some of the boys on the sea have to go through, what with amphibians dropping out of the sky upon them.”

“Twenty-five grand?” asked Barney.

“That will do. And, oh yes, the same amount to the President’s infantile paralysis fund, you know. But this has got to be under cover. Old Lang will be getting wise one of these days.”

The telephone bell rang.

“Speaking of Lang” smiled Keen, taking up the receiver.

“Hello!—Yes, Keen speaking,” he answered.

“Hey, Keen!” beamed Lang from the other end. “That business about the robot plane thing is off. You can forget it.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Well, lots of things happened. First off, we got the *Griffon* at last! The Coast Guard picked up a wrecked plane off Nantucket somewhere and there was a guy in it with a scarlet mask . . . well he had been wearing a scarlet mask, but half his head was shot away. Someone got him, somehow. Anyway, he had a lot of those cards marked ‘*The Griffon*’ in his pocket, so, he’s accounted for at last.”

“Oh, I say, Lang,” protested Keen. “You can’t do that. I’m supposed to be the *Griffon*, you know. I’m the one who gives all the money away and all that. You can’t shove me off like that.”

“Aw, forget it. I was only kidding. Besides, the robot plane is back.”

“Back?” cried Keen incredulously. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s back. The damn thing flew itself back alone. Piled up a bit, but it’s all there. No one knows how it got back. A funny thing, too. They found Major Clyde Hartney dead in the office with half his face blown away—just like this guy they found in the plane up there.”

“Who did that?”

“We don’t know yet, but there was a card on the desk marked ‘*The Griffon*.’”

“Then the *Griffon* went back and killed Hartney and then flew off and was bumped off himself. Well, that certainly puts me in right again, eh?”

“Sure . . . er . . . wait a minute, Keen. What was that you said? . . . There’s a guy here from the experimental field, who was there when the robot plane came in, and say, he claims there was a card stuck on the instrument board and that it said ‘*The Griffon*’! Now, what do you make of that?”

“What? . . . Why you said the *Griffon* was killed in a plane off Nantucket,” gaggled Keen, winking at Barney.

“I give up I give up,” moaned Drury Lang, hanging up the receiver.

“A squirt of O’Doul’s, Barney,” smiled Keen. “Old Lang is more puzzled than ever. But we’ll mail him those blueprints just to make him feel better, eh?”