



A TORCH FOR THE DAMNED

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Captain Bill Dawes—you'll like the guy—the way he fights in an open sky, the thrust of his jaw—the beat of his heart inside of his shirt! A fighting eagle brings his brood to rest, and lights the skies of the Western Front with a blazing torch for the damned!

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CAPTAIN BILL DAWE, the American Sky Devil, had his nerve fibres drawn as taut as fiddle strings. He had come out alone this afternoon, having ordered his Brood to remain at the drome.

There was a reason for this move. The Sky Devil and his Brood had been ordered to Paris, to take part in a general allied army show that was being put on for the sole purpose of stepping up the morale of the French citizenry.

Big Bertha, that hideous long range gun, had been finding Paris lately and panicking the city. Her people had been long suffering, and their doughy morale was beginning to crack. They were beginning to question the ability of the Allies to defend them. That's one reason why the Sky Devil's Brood was going out for a few days—to show the citizenry that the enemy were not the only ones who could raise hell in the sky.

So, Bill Dawe didn't want any of his gang shot up today. He wanted his boys to get this trip. They needed it, for from the skipper down, the Brood was battle-weary. Rests, leaves, furloughs were mighty few and far between for this ace flight of Dawe's. Fewer, since their C.O., Major Petrie, who hated Dawe fiercely, rode them at every hand's turn.

While his Spad flashed through the sky lanes, Dawe had momentary visions of a touch of Paris night life. He visualized his buddies, after maneuvers were over for the day, at the cafes, at the Follies, intermingling with the glitter, and the pomp of soft feminine atmosphere.

Dawe's big chest heaved. If only this cock-eyed French sky up here would stay quiet, until he had pin-pricked on his map, locations of a few German batteries—something to justify his solo patrol!

It seemed that the Sky Devil was to have his wish. He was harassed by a few Archies, but managed to streak over, and find a couple of hidden batteries of .77's—a good enough day's work.

Now he kicked his ship for home. His heart was a bit lighter. He glimpsed the chain of kite balloons strung out as far as the eye could see.

"All's well on the western Front," he breathed. Then he broke into song—a muttered monotone, toneless. Bill admitted he couldn't sing.

"Once had a gal, her name was Sal, Not much on looks, but oh I what a pal.

Weddin' all fixed, an' the preacher hired, But Sal run off with a—uh—"

Bill broke off, his brows scraping up under the goggle rims. His eyes were staring wide. . . . One—two—three of those sausage balloons was whorling in flame.

Men at the trucks below were frantically hauling away. The ludicrously fat balloons, those untouched by flame, were going down, like monster grubs from some forgotten world above settling down to earth. . . .

The Sky Devil kicked his ship round to north west and gave her the gun. . . . There was no escaping trouble. Hell! It just couldn't be done. Fate always seemed to serve up some wild dish for the Sky Devil, right when he least wanted trouble of any sort.

SUDDENLY, Number Four balloon in line attracted Bill's attention. He gasped as he saw a fusing white light seeth along her cable. There was a blue white fusing of metal. The monster grub suddenly reared up her squat nose. She broke! By the great horned spoon! She was free and climbing with incredible speed.

"Jump! . . . Bail out, you fool!" Dawe half-screamed. He saw that the observer was making no attempt to get overside, nor even to toss out his camera and instruments, as all observers were instructed to do in such a crisis.

Bill fed his Hisso all the gas she would take. His heart was thumping fiercely as he lanced the sky. Nose up, he was heading up for that escaping balloon.

And now he overhauled her, at an altitude of fifteen thousand feet. He banked round, and side-slipped off, streaking down under the basket. He zoomed and fetched up so that he could glimpse the face of the officer observer. A low croak escaped Dawe's throat. He was looking into a mummy mask. The man was dead, his face burnt almost to a cylinder—a horrible revelation. . . .

Bill Dawe never thought faster in his life. No flame had reached this man. He was sure of this, and yet—He shot another glance at the almost black flesh.

"I got to get him down," he jerked. "M.O.'s might find something. We've got to get a clue as to his death."

Without stopping to wireless his intentions below, he streaked up, banked round, and blasted a hard burst of Vickers fire dead into the kite's bag. . . .

Flame! . . . A terrible gout of black-enveloped flame gouted from the kite. She would go down all right.

Dawe's lips were cracked, and his throat parched. . . . He hoped that poor devil in the basket would land somewhere where he could be picked up whole enough to assure a good autopsy.

And then another thought flashed to Dawe's mind. He realized that this balloon company was commanded by a brother of 120 Squadron's S.C.; Major Petrie. Captain Roald Petrie commanded Number 17 Balloon Company, and this was one of 17's balloons.

The Sky Devil gulped. Here was a prime chance for Petrie to get in some more of his dirty work. It looked bad: "American Pilot sends American balloon down in flames!"

But Dawe ousted these thoughts from his mind. He whirled his silver ship about, and hoiked up her nose. Somewhere in the upper altitudes, there must be the source of this sinister work—a ship of some sort.

Dawe clapped his amplifier receiver set to his ears, and ripped up along the fringes of the ceiling, but in spite of his diligent search, he came away disappointed. The sky was empty. Four balloons had been torched down by some invisible force. It seemed incredible. But there was the evidence below—the charred remnants of men and equipment. Not a single observer had been able to bail out. . . .

A heavy emotional storm surging through his being, Bill kicked his ship about. He had run his solo well into the gathering dusk. He was short on gas, and must get down. . . .

As he landed on 120's tarmac, his heart gave a hard kick at his ribs sector. A couple of strange cars were parked outside the S.C.'s office.

"The lid's off!" he jerked. . . . Then his tires kissed the turf. He was down. And already there was an orderly waiting for him, with a message to report at once to Major Petrie.

DAWE was amazed, on opening the office door, to find seated there, General Davies, chief of the flying service. As well, Captain Petrie of 17 Balloon Company sat beside his brother, Dawe's C.O.

"Sit down, Captain Dawe," rapped the general. "I'd like your personal report on your action in sending down one of 17's balloons this afternoon. What in the name of heaven possessed you?"

"First, might I ask you, sir, from what source you got your report on that action?" Dawe snapped.

"I gave the general the report, Dawe. I phoned him to meet you here," cut in Major Petrie.

"And you, in turn, received your report from your brother?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Then Dawe turned from the major to the general.

"I should like to hear Captain Petrie, first, general, if you've no objection."

"Very well," Davies responded. "Read the official charge you drew up, Captain Petrie."

Dawe listened closely. . . . His thin lips twitched occasionally throughout the lengthy reading. But at the closing words, he started forward in his chair.

". . . And that the act was deliberate, though possibly the result of drunkenness, is the opinion of all officers of Seventeen Company, who witnessed the act."

Captain Petrie broke off. Dawe was on his feet, eyes blazing fiercely. But he held himself in restraint. He knew that General Davies was a fair-minded man. . . . For a long moment, there was silence.

"Well!" The silence was broken by the senior officer commanding.

Dawe spun, to face the general.

"You surely haven't accepted that report, sir?" he asked.

"I have not said I have accepted it, Captain Dawe. I am here convening a court of inquiry. I want your story. It was found that Lieutenant Martin, the observer of the balloon which you sent down, was badly burnt. I want your story."

Bill Dawe winced. General Davies wasn't convinced that there was no truth in Roald Petrie's report.

"Well, in the first place, general," he snapped. "I was never drunk in my life. I seldom touch liquor, and Petrie knows it. Secondly, Lieutenant Martin was dead in his balloon. I flashed in close for a look at him. He was burnt to a mummy-like parchment—dead, with his grip frozen on the basket rim. . . ."

The Petrie brothers fidgeted. Major Petrie got to his feet.

"If I might say so, sir," he addressed the general, "I'm of the opinion that this court should be adjourned, until we can reconvene, and bring forward the witnesses from Seventeen Company."

"You damned—" Dawe took a sharp step forward, then checked himself. Petrie was wanting to spot him, to stall this business, for the sole purpose of tying up Dawe and his Brood. He had objected to their going to Paris, as he objected to everything that would give the Brood a little relief or pleasure.

Bill turned, and made his apologies to the general.

"General Davies—you know that the report is a lot of foolishness. I sent that balloon down for one purpose: Martin was dead. None of the flame which cut his cable touched him. I wanted his body on the

ground, so that an autopsy could be performed. I know it was a hellish thing to do—to cut down one of our own balloons, but—that’s my story; part of it. The rest is: There’s a new, sinister German menace in these skies. Somebody has got to look into it. I am sorry to rob Major Petrie of the opportunity to cut out my Paris trip. Two hours ago I decided for myself to cancel that trip. My Brood will go, under the leadership of my deputy, Lieutenant Verne. I’m staying here, to investigate this torch menace.”

The Sky Devil stood erect, his square jaw outthrust, defiant. He was aware that the Petries wouldn’t get to first base in a court-martial, with their charges. He knew that Major Petrie was aware of this; but the major had a chance to break up Dawe’s plans. He was bitterly jealous of the Sky Devil’s popularity, and of his semi-detached relationship to 120 Squadron. It was he who had originated this feud from the very day he had taken over command of 120 Squadron—a position which should have been Dawe’s.

“But I have an official charge laid against you, Captain Dawe,” the general observed. “It is my duty to order you under open arrest, pending further inquiry. While I deeply regret this, I—uh—h’mmm. . . . Well, give me an hour or two to think it over, gentlemen. Meantime, I see no reason why your flight, under Lieutenant Verne, should not carry out their Paris trip, as per previous instructions. That will be all for the moment. I shall have to hurry back to G2 headquarters. This damnable thing you speak of, Dawe—It—”

But General Davies broke off. He could see that Dawe was no longer listening. The Sky Devil’s face muscles were twitching. He had the poise of a cougar, about to attack.

The G.O.C. then shot a sidelong glance at the Petries, and tried hard to muffle the snort of contempt which escaped him. Curtly, he snapped an order at the major, then picking up his hat, he strode from the office, followed by Captain Dawe.

Hell had broken loose at the quarters of the Brood, that fighting, field-strafting outfit. Chuck Verne, Dawe’s deputy, was steamed up to make a raid on Seventeen balloon company, and ram the witnessed report down the witnesses’ throats. But the Sky Devil stepped in, and began dishing up orders.

“You leave for Paris at dawn, gang,” he jerked. “Forget all about me. Do your work well, and play well when you’re through for the day. Get drunk! Do what the hell you like, but remember the honor of the brood. . . . I know I can depend on you. . . . Carry on.”

“But—you, skipper,” Verne replied. “We can’t leave you here to face the music alone. Why, those charges were preposterous! You mentioned the honor of the Brood. It’s at stake now. Why, the dirty, lou— You can’t expect us to take that, sir?”

Bill smiled, and slapped Verne’s shoulder.

“I’m grateful, Chuck. But forget it. They’re not going to keep me below, brother. Not while that German menace rides topside. I’m going aloft with the dawn balloons. To hell with Petrie and his precious brother. Now that’s all I want to hear about it. Have a good time. It’ll do you all good.”

The Sky Devil swept the Nissen hut with his keen eyes. He would have given lots to have led the gang in the Paris tattoo, but—there was another tattoo topside. . . . A devil’s tattoo; and the Sky Devil could already picture himself in those upper altitudes, pitting his will, guts, and skill against that deadly scientific German menace. And—if Petrie attempted to stop him. . . . He’d stop Petrie. There was a showdown due, but Dawe was doing all possible to hold his impulses in restraint.

AN HOUR before the gray lights of dawn had begun to pencil the eastern horizon, the Sky Devil’s Spad had rocketed skywards.

When Chuck Verne and the Brood stepped out to the deadline, they found that Bill Dawe had gone. He hadn’t stopped to say “so long.”

A dark, foreboding cloud seemed to settle its gloomy mantle over the Brood. For a moment, Chuck Verne was of a mind to countermand orders—to take the flight up on the trail of the skipper. The other officers were with him. They would have sustained Chuck in anything he decided upon. But Verne had had his last minute instructions from Dawe. The flight must turn to Paris at all costs!

Meanwhile, the lone Sky Devil slit the dusk-filled sky wide open, skimming the ceiling. He was crouched forward, his every sense atuned to its highest pitch. To his ears were affixed that delicate listening apparatus—the invention of a famous Russian scientist whom Dawe had befriended, during the revolutionary days.

Those sensitive electrical ears would detect the faintest sounds of an unusual nature—they seemed to reach right up into the stratosphere, recording the whisperings of a lost world beyond.

Suddenly Dawe caught a definite thrum-a-thrum—Some giant motor, or motors, throbbed above him. His heart quickened its beat.

"Zeps!" he breathed. "Some night riders returning . . . probably a raid on Britain last night."

And then he commenced to pick up a message. Wireless was being transmitted and received. He watched the needle on his very sensitive little wireless dash. It was quivering hard over to right.

"Congratulations. . . . Your attack on Hull splendid. . . . Return to T 7—D-h 9 at once. . . ."

Attack on Hull! The Sky Devil gasped. So that great British north city had been attacked again! But he quivered in every limb. The home nest of that monster beyond was calling its vulture in.

And by a glance at his dash map, Dawe saw that the location was at a point beyond the fringes of the Ardennes badlands.

His wireless receiver gave a sudden, violent sputter. He felt a sharp pain through his eardrums. Like a streak he snapped off his auxiliary power, and his Hisso, and kicked his ship over into a steep sideslip.

"Phew!" he gulped. "That was close! They picked up the throb of your engine, and neutralized your equipment. . . ."

For a long moment, Dawe had to grit his teeth hard, to bite back the pain which assailed him. He let his head loll out to catch the slipstream. Soon his eardrums lost that terrible singing sound. The throbbing ache ceased. Then he gave his ship the gun, and streaked to eastward, taking advantage of every bit of cloud strata to protect him from view by watchers below. He was going to risk everything he had in an attempt to locate the source of German scientific hellishness.

If, as he thought probable, the Huns were applying their deadly device in attacks on such centers as Hull, what hope was there for Paris, or London; or for that matter; what hope had the Allies at all on the western front? Dawe had witnessed the demolition of those balloons. He had seen the fusing off of a stout balloon cable, as though some hand had clipped it clean with an acetylene torch from close in. There was terrific power behind that act. Natural power, though—electricity combined with a terrible magnetic force.

That it was a physical force, though, was some consolation. Dawe always worked on the knowledge that anything physical could be combatted, if one could find its source. He was going down, down to a landing beyond the badlands. Somewhere in those rocky gorges, lay the secret. . . .

THE BARON, *Oberst* von Schuler, smiled grimly as he applied a hideous-looking mask to his face. He fitted it,

then removed it quickly, and swung on an orderly who entered the rocky, cavelike dungeon which formed the nefarious science master's headquarters.

"Pardon, *mein excellenz*, but the N-7 returns. She is landing, as per your instructions. But she reports that an allied plane followed her for some miles."

"*Was! Lieber Gott!* Send her commander to me at once!"

There was no need for the orderly to carry the message, however, for very shortly, a tall German flying officer entered. His face was splashed by a broad, flat scar which ran from his right ear center down to the corner of his mouth. He saluted stiffly, and drew up close to his superior's desk.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to congratulate you in person, *Herr Hauptman* von Greitz," said the baron. "You made a successful attack on Hull, *nicht-wahr?*"

"*Jawohl, Herr Excellenz*. . . . But we encountered difficulties, too. We—"

"Was! You mean to suggest that my device is not proving satisfactory?"

"I merely reiterate, from my night's experience, what you were informed of after yesterday's balloon strafe, *excellenz*. . . ."

"You mean you sympathized with the report of that—that *dumbkopf*, Steinert?" the baron exploded.

"I can merely give you my honest report, *herr excellenz*. I am not offering an opinion. Steinert told you that far too much power is required of our super Zeppelins. For ground work, your device would be most clever, albeit not so morale-shattering."

The baron got slowly to his feet. His face was a livid mass of flabby, quaking muscles. His whole life's work had gone into these electrodes, and their allied forces of ultra-magnetism. To these twin forces he had added his new gas—taken from the deadly formula which, after one hellish experiment against the French, at Souchez, even the Germans had hesitated to use again. It was that gas, a nameless substance, which parched the bodies of the citizenry of that village, mummifying them.

To the *Hauptman* von Greitz, the whole thing was repulsive. He dreaded to think of the result of his attack over Hull last night. *Lieber Gott!* This was fiends' work they were engaged in. Not even the German Higher Command fully realized the power, the deadly hellishness of the Baron von Schuler's ghastly experimentation. Zeppelins had been granted him; to these he had attached an outer, topside buoyant

gas bag which helped the big ships defy ordinary ceilings. But those ships, as von Greitz had intimated, were being asked to carry far too much weight. If von Schuler persisted in his mad work, each Zeppelin's crew, though their work was effective, would become nothing more than a suicide crew.

"*Kommen zie mitt, Herr Hauptman,*" gruffed the baron. "I take you below, to the dynamo chambers. I will show you that shortly, I will relieve you of your worry about power. If I am allowed to continue, I shall soon direct our ships from this very spot. All I shall require aboard the Zeppelins, will be men I can trust, to operate the levers of my electrical guns. . . . It will come, in time. Orderly . . . Gotcher?"

"*Ja, mein excellenz,*" a voice responded.

The baron called into the dark shadows to a recumbent form, with instructions for the man to follow, bearing the baron's mask equipment.

THE SKY DEVIL'S heart pounded his breast madly. It was he who was fitted into the uniform of that orderly. He shuddered at the thought of the grim, short fight, a short time ago, which had resulted in the orderly's death. No alarm had been given. Bill Dawe had come out of the rocky shadows, catching the man off guard. Together they had locked arms and legs. The German had fought with the fierceness of a jungle creature, until at last Dawe's powerful right arm had clamped about his neck, strangling back the man's attempted outcry.

Swiftly the Sky Devil had stripped the man, and got into his clothing. He realized that he was about to step through the portals of death.

From his own pockets, he transferred a couple of deadly Mills bombs. These, now, he screened in the Oberst's mask. He was moving on, down a dimly-lit corridor on the heels of von Greitz.

There might be no return for Bill. In his heart he hoped that the Brood would have a good time at Paris. . . . Then he snapped such thoughts off. The baron had come to a halt, just outside a heavy oaken door.

"Apply your mask, *Herr Hauptman,*" von Schuler ordered. "Not even you have seen this chamber before. . . ."

Bill Dawe deftly whipped his two bombs to his pockets, and as he handed the mask to von Schuler, he stepped from under the dim light of an electric bulb. He thanked heaven for the class distinction between German higher officers and their subordinates. Von Schuler had not once looked at him.

"First you will remove from your pocket all matches, Herr Schuler. . . . It would be fatal for one spark to touch off inside this chamber. Herein lies the key to my equipment, its very heart. For it is herein that I combine my electric forces with the super-charged magnetic power. Tread lightly as you—*Verdamme dumbkopf!*" The baron swung on Dawe.

"Have you forgotten that I want the straps of my oxygen tanks placed crosswise?" he barked. "Fool!"

Bill stepped back. His fingers fumbled as he readjusted the straps. He was almost ready to keel over with the shock he had received. But now the oberst was satisfied. Both he and von Greitz were ready to enter the chamber of a million deaths. . . .

"You will stand by at the doors, Gotcher. I will press a buzzer twice when you are to open. Stand between the first, and second doors. Await orders."

"*Jawohl, mein excellenz,*" Dawe grumbled.

In another moment he was alone, in a small passageway between the outer door, and the safety, or gas-proof door which held in von Schuler's deathly secret.

He could hear the steady thrum of giant machinery, machinery which, Dawe had it figured, was capable of magnetizing such metals as balloon cables, upon which would pounce those currents of juice, since the cable, for instance, had been made into an electrode. . . .

Dawe shuddered. His solution had been brought about by an elementary knowledge of electricity and physics. There was nothing super-natural about it all, albeit the whole thing was devilish, and suggested the super-natural. And here was the Sky Devil right at the very threshold of the plant in which were manufactured those terrible torches of death. But he felt helplessly alone. What could he do, in between these two heavy doors, with only his automatic and two Mills bombs to back him up? These Germans were no fools. Sooner or later, his identity would be discovered. . . . And then, von Schuler would show no mercy. Wasn't Dawe in the uniform of a German soldier! He was an espion of the very worst type. . . .

Suddenly he caught the sharp rasp of the buzzer. It buzzed twice, and Dawe caught the clump of heavy footsteps. He stood by at the lever which opened the door.

"Stand clear as you open, Gotcher," came a strange, muffled voice, "else you want to be gassed."

Dawe understood. Until this man's clothing had contacted pure oxygen for a time, there would be fumes which might easily gas another.

Out in the main corridor a large fan operated, sweeping a flow of pure oxygen through.

The door swung open, and Dawe quickly stepped back, his breathing cut off. A ghoulish shape stumbled out, and hung tottering for a moment in the main tube.

And then the masked shape began to untie his cumbersome drachen set, a heavy mask and breathing tubes hitched to small oxygen sets slung over the shoulders.

"*Ach, du lieber gott!* What a fool to have volunteered for this *verdammte* duty. It is hell. I tell you it is hell, Gotcher—I—uh. . . . Why, you are not Gotcher! Who—"

But Bill Dawe had stepped in, snatching his automatic from inside his coat. The man from the chamber had jerked off the mask, and now he stood, his jaws agape. He was staring into a strange face. . . .

"*Espion! Englaescher!*" he gasped.

"Silence!" hissed Dawe, ramming the muzzle of his automatic into the man's ribs sector.

He felt the man's person for arms—a gun of any sort, but none was carried.

"Quickly, *kerl,*" he snapped. "I want your mask, and your smock. Don't try to fool with me. I'm not in the mood. . . ."

"*Du lieber Gott!* . . . I can not do this. I—" He suddenly wheeled, and dived, taking the chance that Dawe would not shoot, and give the alarm. His arms clasped the Sky Devil's legs. Together they toppled. Dawe had some misgiving about the safety of the pins in his Mills bombs. Should one of them be loosened during the scuffle. . . . He dreaded to think of the consequences.

But he had slipped up. The heavy German was clawing for a throat hold. Dawe massed all his reserve strength with which to break the hold. . . . The man's knee came up and socked him terribly in the groin. Dawe countered with a half roll, then suddenly and savagely butted up with his head. There was a sharp impact. The clawing fingers lost their hold.

But the German wasn't out. His deep voice bellowed a roar of warning.

God! The Sky Devil squirmed back, lashed out with a terrific right hook as he came up to his shaking legs. The other slumped. Dawe could hear the buzzer frantically rasping. The alarm had reached the ears of von Schuler. . . .

The American ace had to think quickly. He cursed himself for not having stayed closer to the shadows. But in his anxiety to get this fallen man's mask and

smock, he had revealed his identity. . . . Now he must get away! Otherwise, he was trapped. As he had come down the corridor, he remembered passing the first of the man-shafts, or fresh air and safety shafts. He had not given it much thought. But now—it was his best chance of escape. There was a steel ladder leading up to the clear, topside.

He shot a swift glance downward. That mask! By George, he must have that. For he was not finished with his intention to explore this death chamber further.

A loud hammering on the inner door of the chamber of death arrested his attention. Came the muffled bellow of von Schuler's voice.

"If he only knew that the lever was not yet in place—that the door was, virtually, open," Dawe breathed, as he fumbled with the strapping of the German's oxygen set, "my goose would be cooked."

He had barely got the mask free, and partly strapped to his shoulders when that door burst open. Von Schuler, followed by von Greitz, came thundering out. The man Dawe had polled out, was struggling to his feet.

He turned, and pointed down the corridor. Von Schuler drew a Luger from inside his shirt, and fired. Dawe, hurrying along the wall, felt a bullet cut through the flesh of his left arm. He half turned, and poured out a couple of shots, hoping that he might stop the baron. At least that would be something. . . . But his shots were wide.

Now he caught the glimmer of the bulb which marked the airshaft. He gained the ladder as another shot spattered rock close to his head.

Biting back the pain in his arm, he began to hoist himself topside. He shuddered as he realized how perfect a target he was. . . . But several shots missed him. One cut his clothing, close to the pocket which housed his Mills bombs. He reeled sickeningly for a flash second, then tore on up. He was out in the open, when from some nearby point a siren blared.

The general alarm!

DAWN was preparing to break fully now. Dawe half groaned, as he hurled himself into the shadows of a scrub thicket. His arm was bleeding pretty badly. On every hand, he knew, the jackals of von Schuler would be on his trail. Slowly—craftily he moved in to cover. He was bitterly disappointed, but had not given up all hope. Never had he been in greater fighting mood. Petrie had irked him badly back at 120 Drome. The

major's threat of a court-martial had stood out in the form of a challenge to the Sky Devil.

Hell! There was a war on, and Petrie seemed to forget it at times, in his pettiness.

Now Dawe began to fix up his arm, applying iodine and dressing from a small first aid kit, the same sort as used by the infantry. He moved slowly on, following a line of scrub along the rimrock.

Suddenly his attention was arrested by the drone of motors. The very rock beneath his feet seemed to vibrate as though he were getting warning of earthquake temblors.

His breathing was suddenly cut off. He reeled back. Gas was escaping. Suppressing a cough, he adjusted his captured mask. The scent of that gas was significant. Somewhere close in there was a shaft leading up from the very heart of that diabolic equipment below. . . .

Dawe fitted the mask, applying the mouthpiece, which nauseated him, for it tasted of tobacco. Now he moved in. A machine gun suddenly rattled, reminding him that the German guards were on edge, and probably shooting at any stir in the thickets.

All at once Dawe came back in his tracks. He was looking at two funnel-like shapes protruding through the rock. Their necks were curved, as the air shafts aboard ship. . . .

A cold sweat suddenly swathed his body. He recalled von Schuler's own words, below, in connection with the necessity for depositing matches outside the chamber. One little spark. . . .!

Dawe was convinced that the deadly mummifying gas, blended with the chlorine of the dynamos, was highly explosive. His Mills bombs! He trembled at the thought. . . . But now his right hand closed almost affectionately over the hard oval of a Mills.

He crept in. But crouched low as the sound of footsteps reached him. A search party was coming down in his direction. He could hear a non com gruffing orders.

Carefully, lest he break a single dry twig, Dawe crept close in to the side of one of the funnels. He moved to the back of it, and crouched.

"*Die verdammte ally espion!*" boomed a voice close in. "He has slipped away, like a phantom. Spread out, and penetrate deeper into the timber. Shoot on sight, men. Those are the orders of his *excellens*. . . ."

Dawe grinned inside his mask, and his fingers fondled the mills shape. . . .

The footsteps died away. Dawe came out.

He yanked a Mills pin with his teeth. For a moment

he stood stiffly rigid, his hand clamped down over the lever, then he turned, and dropped the clicking death missile down the chute. . . .

Swiftly he raced to the other shaft and dropped his second bomb. It had scarcely left his fingers before a muffled explosion rocked the zone; and then another. But that wasn't all. . . . The rocky badlands began to quiver as though a formation of jelly. There was a sudden, indescribable eruption, which hurled the Sky Devil about ten feet, flat to his face. . . . And then with reverberating grumble, the noise settled down to a tense pall of quiet. Dawe raised his aching body and dragged himself deep into a thicket. He burrowed down in cover, there to catch some rest, while he planned his next move. He knew that the devilish plant of von Schuler was ruined. But, the Sky Devil still had to get out of this hell trap.

It was close to dusk when next he ventured out, and a strange, uncanny sense propelled him back, like some nocturnal jungle marauder toward the office, headquarters area of von Schuler.

THERE at von Schuler's headquarters a pall of gloom had settled. The nefarious baron sat hunched over his desk, a broken man. His face was a mask now, a drawn twitching mask. . . . Outside, crouched flat to the rock wall of the cutout entrance, was the silent form of the Sky Devil. Bill Dawe had crept in, while the German guards hunted for him far removed from headquarters.

A buzzer suddenly rasped. Dawe cocked up his head.

"Answer that *verdammte* thing, von Greitz," the baron snarled. "It is from the wireless station. Tell them I have nothing to say. . . . Nothing to—report."

There was a click of a telephone receiver being removed. The sudden scraping of a chair on the rock floor, and then von Greitz's thick voice. Dawe shifted position, craning his neck forward.

"*Mein Gott, Herr excellenz*," von Greitz called. "Listen! From our special agent Number 17 comes word that tonight, at midnight, there are to be allied maneuvers at Paris. A big demonstration. British, American . . . and with them is the Brood of the *verdammte Amerikaner Himmelteufel!* . . ."

"*Was!* . . ." von Schuler sprang up his feet, but with a grunt turned again. "That can do me no good now, *Herr Hauptman*," he snarled. "My work of a lifetime is ruined; utterly ruined. I shall be recalled. . . . *Ach, Gott!* I wish I had gone up with the plant."

“But, *mein excellenz*, you forget that we have a Zeppelin equipped, which could—”

“Stop! . . . Fool! Do you suggest that I attempt to to— Wait, von Greitz. You are right. You, too, are part of this great failure of mine. You will not feel like facing the music back with the All Highest. I see what you have in mind. But, there is no special gas sac over the Zeppelin L 16. We should have to go out as an ordinary ship, at ordinary cruising altitude. Have you thought of that?”

“I hadn’t, *excellenz*. But what does it matter now? We stand a chance of inflicting terrific punishment on the Allies . . . their act of exploding your plant can be avenged. *Ach, du lieber Gott!* Let us go! We must!”

“We—must! . . . You are—right, von Greitz. We must take our chance—tonight, our chance against the Allied air service, and—fate.”

Von Greitz chuckled. It savored of a touch of hysteria to the listening Sky Devil.

“At what time, *Herr excellenz?*” von Greitz asked.

“At ten hours, von Greitz. Thank you for your loyal support. It is possible we shall not return, but by the great *Gott!* France will know that we were in the sky tonight! Paris and her citizenry will realize that in spite of their demonstration, Germany is all powerful to—to the very end. . . . Ten hours, *Herr Hauptman*. I will personally command.”

Bill Dawe already had begun to move away. The iron-shod heel of his captured field boot made a harsh scraping sound. Von Greitz leaped for the entrance, and called out. He fired a shot. . . . But only silence rewarded him. Bill Dawe knew how to “freeze.”

Now he slowly, quietly removed his heavy boots. Tucking them under his arm, he moved on toward the thicket. Clear of the rocks, he replaced his boots, then turned to the south east, toward the spot at which he had left his Spad. He was almost reeling out. His day had been full. He had lost a lot of blood, and had to pause every now and then, as he spun dizzily on his feet.

“Be all right once you hit your ship. Chin up!” he snapped, then slowly pushed on to where he had hidden his Spad.

OVER Le Bourget field, a string of balloons was being let go skyward. Two men in each basket. It had been announced to the huge crowd that the famous American Brood of Sky Devils would demonstrate attack on balloons. The American Spads would be touched with phosphorous paint, in order that their

amazing maneuvers could be followed by the crowd, a crowd that had been thrilled for upwards of an hour, by air services, infantry, galloping horse artillery, and other arms of the Allied war service.

Lieutenant Chuck Verne moved along his line of Spads, and gave a word of encouragement to his boys.

“Watch those cables closely, gang,” he cautioned. “Give this crowd the works. We’ve been highly honored, tonight. God! . . . Wouldn’t Bill be tickled, if he could. . . . Well, aboard! Let’s go take ‘em.”

The ships hoiked up. The balloons were already at two thousand feet, observers joking in the swaying baskets. Below, all was darkness, save for an odd winking eye of light here and there.

Suddenly, a scream rent the air. It was attended by a blinding, fusing light which seemed to ignite on the balloon cable of the outside balloon in the extended line.

That blinding flash of white flame seemed to dance upward, until another duller flame suddenly broke from the big bag of the kite! Chuck Verne gasped, as he gave his ship the gun. This was a demonstration from that mystery force of the Germans—the same force which had gotten American Number 17’s balloons and observers.

This mock warfare had turned into something terribly real. Verne signalled to his men. He also signalled down to the winch crews to haul away.

Then his attention was suddenly arrested by the mad stutter of sky guns. . . .

He jerked up his head and faintly made out the outline of a monster Zep; and then he glimpsed fiery eyes of light. Machine-gun flame. A ship was attacking that German marauder.

Like a rocket, the young deputy’s ship lanced the sky. His heart pounded madly, as though a strong hunch was pulling him up . . . up . . .

Another sudden eruption, and blaze of flame off right, below him, told him that another French ship and crew had got theirs. He rammed his throttle along the quadrant, forcing his Hisso. . . .

TOPSIDE, another American pilot rammed in his throttle. The Sky Devil had picked up his quarry, and had come tearing in madly, his Vickers wide open. He had been met by a withering burst of Spandaus, and Lanz gun fire. But, though a bullet had raked his side, he dived, swooped into a zoom from beneath the belly of the hellish German monster, and gotten on to her starboard side. The big ship was attempting

to outclimb Bill now, using all motive power. But it wasn't enough. That heavy electrical machinery had cut hard into maneuvering speed. A starboard brace of guns threatened Dawe. He slipped off, saw nothing but a blank void for a moment, then hurled his ship up in a terrible zoom. As he came up, he tramped on his trips. . . . His guns yammered. He leaned forward over the stick. A fire had broken out. . . . And then, before the many thousands of eyes watching from below, the death machine of Hunland hurled itself up in a horrible gout of flame, and then began its scattered descent, to earth—to death. . . .

LATER, Bill Dawe blinked owlishly in a well-lighted hangar, suddenly glimpsed the grinning face of Chuck Verne, who was bending over him.

"You just couldn't keep out of it, could you, Bill?" chuckled the deputy.

"No. . . . Somehow, they can't separate us, Chuck. But—Lady luck was with me all the way. . . . But get on

with the show, gang. I'll be okay. All I need is a big beef steak, and a mug of hot coffee. . . . Then—sleep—a lot of sleep, Chuck. I—"

He slipped off into a semi-coma that would have to serve as sleep for a long hour.

Chuck Verne drew his Brood outdoors, and offered his services to the French commandant for a repeat of the performance. But the other shook his head emphatically.

"*Non. . . . Non. . . .* Lieutenant Verne. The crowd. . . . *Mon dieu!* They want nothing more now but to glimpse the—your—Sky Devil. And may *le bon Dieu* pull him safely through. Tonight, *mes amis*, you will be free to run Paris as you wish. The city is yours. . . ."

He stepped in as though to kiss Chuck, but the deputy managed to duck, tactfully. . . . All in all this had been a hell of a good night's show, thanks to Bill. And the Brood were so justifiably proud of their skipper, that—well, who would deny them this one night of all the fullness Paris could offer?

