



GUNS OF MYSTERY

by HAROLD F.
CRUICKSHANK

It was the unpardonable sin to mount a gun on a plane, but when a blazing path of steel traced itself across his wings Kelly felt icy fingers on his heart and knew that a new horror was winging through the air.

A BRISTOL PURRED at the deadline, shimmying on her wheel chocks as her pilot revved up in a cold cheerless morning, somewhere near Ypres.

"Some crate," growled Flight Lieutenant Kelly, the pilot, to a shivering mechanic. "Faith, if we don't hustle with some improvements in this war, the Boche'll have us all in kingdom come in a few months. Yesterday I got a couple of Taubes on my tail, an' d'you think I could shake 'em? An' that wasn't the half of it, Friar. The lousy devils are packin' rifles in the cockpit. Rifles, get me?"

"Well, blister me, sir. Yer don't mean it?" gasped the Cockney grease-monkey. "Guns, in the flarnin' cockpit! Strike me, but— Say, why don't you pack a Enfield with yer?"

Lieutenant Kelly straightened his broad frame and grinned. He winked as he beckoned the mechanic to him.

"See that, brother? That's the cock eyed Enfield. Sure them Boche ain't going to run the sky trails after to-day. I—"

"Lieutenant Kelly!" The pilot scowled, and wheeled sharply at the voice. His eyes glared at the squadron's adjutant—a short fussy captain who was not any too popular. "You're not going up at this hour, Kelly, on a day like this," he snapped. "Where did you get any such orders?"

Kelly bit hard at his lip. His Yankee heart seemed to revolt at once. A couple of words from Captain Rymer, at any time, set his blood steaming up to somewhere near boiling point.

"I'm not taking this solo on any order, sir, but, by request. Infantry skipper over yesterday, when I came in. Asked me if I'd try and locate a mortar battery east of the bluff. Minnenwerfers playin' hell with his boys. And, if you were ever in the infantry, sir—of course you weren't, so you wouldn't understand. But, when a minnie cracks in close, it splits hell out of everything an' everybody. I told the skipper I understood. I do, captain. I was with the infantry at Second Ypres. I'm going up. Sure you wouldn't expect me to loaf in the billet when them boys are getting blown to pieces every minute. What the hell are we here for?"

"You'll please take your orders from me, Kelly," snapped the other. "There is no solo work on our schedule, understand?"

"H'mmm—lousy little rat," breathed Dan Kelly, inwardly. "Wonder why he don't want anything worth while doing. You'd almost think he was afraid the

Jerries might get hurt. Tcha!" The last exclamation was bitten off so that the adjutant heard it, all right. His head came up with a snap and he strode to the cockpit.

"No insolence, Kelly," he barked. "Another thing I want you to understand is, that you'll start to equip your bus with arms only when I order you to do so. Let me have that Enfield."

So he'd been snooping while Kelly talked to the mechanic! Dan hated a snoop. The Irish in his Yankee blood liked a square shooter. He was fed up with Rymer—damn little shifter.

"Spin her, George," he shot at the mechanic, who darted to the prop.

"Contact!"

"Contact!"

Dan opened the throttle and the Bristol's ticking engine gave vent to a smothering roar. Dan waved to the Cockney, who jerked the chocks free, and the plane shot forward down the runway, almost spilling Captain Rymer, who had clung on till the last.

"Lousy little devil," grunted Dan as he eased back on the stick. "Why, I'd sooner be shot at dawn than miss a chance to locate that minnie battery for the infantry."

His feet braced hard on the bar, Dan gave her the gun and came up in a stiff climb one thought in his mind—that minnie battery.

AT THREE thousand feet Dan struck a ceiling in the thick clammy atmosphere of dawn. He came out of a heavy drenching cloud mass and swung south.

"There's one thing certain," he muttered as he nosed down to the bluff, a hellish sector in the hill sixty area, "you ain't going to have any company on this run. The sky's as bare as a—a—"

Pfutt! Pfutt! Dan gasped as he watched a strip of fabric peel from the surface of his right upper wing. Bullets! He opened his throttle and set his nose down in a hard drive, then pulled her back in a zoom which terminated in an reversement. He was not the only plane in the sky. That flying sniper was at large, had been steering through the cloud strata above the Yank.

Leveled out, Dan reached down for his Enfield. It was loaded, and he jerked it into position on the rim of the cockpit. One hand would have to manipulate stick and throttle now. Kelly was going hunting.

It was early in '15 when, save for the odd crude bomb, airplanes cruised aimlessly back and forth, taking a chance at the strafe of machine guns or archies below, but—in the sky trails there was nothing

to fear—that is, until Kelly had been shot at the previous day.

The renversement had put him above the narrow cloud bank, and now he banked around to the left. His keen eye piercing the half light, he spotted the familiar lines of a Taube. He gave the Bristol the gun. That damn sniping phantom wasn't going to be given a chance to gain altitude on Kelly. There was blood in Dan's eye.

"You hit-an'-run swine," he growled. "You're going to get a stream of hot lead. You—"

With incredible speed, the Boche pilot brought his Taube around. A stream of menacing flame shot from his starboard side as he swung across Dan's bows at full throttle. He was climbing away, shooting as he went, with a Mauser rifle that was fixed to the starboard rim of his cockpit.

"He's got a cockeyed jump on us again," swore Kelly. "Got both hands free, the devil."

A bullet cut through the leather of Dan's cap, and the Yank reeled, momentarily. His heart gave a violent leap as he felt a stream of blood course down his left cheek. But he grinned a second or two later, when he realized that it was from a mere scratch.

"Pretty close, that. Pretty close, Dan. Don't let him get his starboard across you again. Now—give him hell, Enfield."

The Boche had made a mistake when he saw Dan's head rock back. He had played his shot for a real knockout. His Taube hung level two hundred feet below Dan's, when the Irish Yank set the Bristol's nose earthward.

Wind screamed through the bracing, whistling a weird tune as it rushed through the rents in the fabric.

The Boche tried a climbing turn, and Dan, quick to seize the opportunity of the entire Taube surface in his sight, pulled the trigger.

A gasp of delight escaped him, as he saw the effect of his shot—a gleaming furrow along the side of the Boche's fuselage, in line with the pilot's legs.

The Taube slipped off on a wing, and Dan gave vent to a shout of ecstasy. But this changed, and the Yank's face clouded instantly as he watched the clever pilot below recover, avoiding a spin, and level off in a brilliant maneuver.

But the Taube was yawing badly. Dan went down, his eyes glued dead on the other pilot's body.

"That devil has a case of tricks up his sleeve," he grunted. "Got to watch him close. I do believe he's hit, but—"

With a glance over his shoulder, the Boche leaned forward. His right shoulder tipped and he jerked open the throttle. Down in a full-on dive he went, to within five hundred feet, when he pulled out again. Dan overshot, and as the Bristol rushed by, he felt a hard slap at the side of his fuselage. The glass of his tachometer crashed in a hundred pieces.

Again the Boche had beat him to the shooting. But, it was just as well. Dan was keyed up now. In spite of the advantage held by the Boche, whose rifle was fixed, Dan was determined to get him. He was soon between the Taube and the German lines, though he had lost altitude. Then both pilots set their noses to the sky, each seeking to outclimb the other.

BELOW, in the wretched trenches, infantrymen gasped in amazement. Shots in the sky! Incredible! Pilots weren't supposed to fight each other, surely. That wasn't in the book.

"I'll be a cockeyed son of a horn toad," exclaimed a bombing sergeant, "if that damn Bristol hasn't set the other ablaze. Look! The Taube's smokin' like it was—Cripes!"

In a whirring spiral, the Taube nosed down, flames lapping at its entire length. Peering through the orange-black enveloping mass of flame, the pilot's face gleamed ashen for a split second, then disappeared in a hellish inferno of flame and smoke.

Men in the trenches gasped, and turned to each other with murmurs of awe.

"Bad enough down here," muttered a corporal at a sap head. "But when you're a mile high, an' things busts loose—curtains. An' what a hell of a way to pass out! Well, that's the beginnin' of some, more devil's work, gang. They're doin' it on land, under land, on the sea, and under the cockeyed sea, an' now, perish me if they ain't murderin' each other in the clouds. What a war!"

Dan Kelly's face was a picture of awe as he watched the result of his shooting. The first aerial victory! There was a lot in that, but—his heart was pulsing feebly as he watched the charred wreck of the Taube sock hard into the ground, in the crater-filled wastes of No-Man's-Land. He licked the blood which had trickled down into his lips, and banked around. As he looked at the crashed glass on his dash, he felt an odd pluck at his chest.

"Yeh," he grunted. "You've got all sorts of sympathy, haven't you? Look at that glass, you damn fool. That might've been your head—would've been if you hadn't

jerked it down to jazz the throttle. Now, you've got to fight 'em. They'll be up an' comin'. That lousy sausage balloon out east there saw it all. You better get your observing done an' hightail it for home."

Dan pulled the Bristol east and struck the lines of the Ypres Canal which skirted the bluff. Suddenly, from just back of a small copse in the enemy area he glimpsed four tiny puffs of flame. He switched his focus to the Allied lines, nosing down to a few hundred feet.

Karrumph! Karrumph! Karr—rrumph! Karrumph!

Dan's fingers closed tight over the stick, as he watched four fearful volcanic eruptions in the lines of his own side.

Four black, deathly upheavals, which obliterated a hundred feet of a support line.

Through half-closed eyes, the Yankee pilot watched the sandbags, khaki cloth, infantry equipment sock back to earth. Then, his teeth gritted hard. He eased the Bristol's nose up and let out the throttle. From about eight hundred feet, ripping through a flight of fleecy clouds he spotted the minnenwerfer battery in action. On an open map on the dash, he dotted location. Pretty soon a battery of British howitzers would attend to those infernal mortars. Dan's work was through. He would go back now, and report himself to his commanding officer, Squadron Commander Major Carver. No doubt the adjutant had already reported Dan.

"Likely be hell poppin'," Kelly muttered. "But I've started something real in the sky. Something that's going to wake headquarters up. They'll come alive now, for I've the evidence right here to prove that if I hadn't croaked that Taube man, he'd have sure got me."

It was then that Dan noticed for the first time that his prop was spinning eccentrically. Suddenly a large sliver shot back from the whirring wood, narrowly missing the pilot's head. His Bristol slipped off, and Dan struggled hard at the controls. But he was flopping earthward in loose spirals—his stick dead.

"I must've shot off half my damn prop," he swore. "Now that damn adjutant will have something real to rave about—that is if I don't get all busted up." Just then his engine roared, and Dan was quick with his control. He jiggled his rudder bar and pulled back hard on the stick. A miracle, he thought. Then he set his teeth as the Bristol socked hard in a driving pancake into a patch of willow scrub.

His wind was cut off as he bounced hard into the safety belt. For a moment he struggled to regain his

breath, but his inside had suffered badly from the jar. His head swam, a myriad lights dancing before his eyes. He was dimly conscious of voices, and the pound of footsteps toward him. But, with a groan, he slumped over the side, to hang limp—out.

A little later Dan grinned up into the face of a medical corporal from artillery.

"Much obliged, brother. Sure, I must have taken the count, huh?" Then his head turned, and eyes popped from their sockets as he glimpsed the smoldering remains of his Bristol. He swallowed hard and switched his staring gaze to the corporal.

"Sail right, sir. We got you clear in time. You'll be O.K. in a few minutes. Better have a shot of rum now."

"But the map case," jerked Dan. "That didn't go up, did it?"

"No, sir. That was what we pulled clear first. But tell me, ain't it odd that you were packin' a rifle in the cockpit? Was that you shootin' in the clouds? Cripes, you don't— Say you skymen have started strafing each other up there. Our B.C. said he could have sworn that Taube was knocked down in flames."

Dan reached for a mug of rum and downed it at a gulp, though it took his breath.

"Yep, brother," he gasped. "I got him. But, in gettin' him I shot off my prop. That's why I came down. He started shooting from the cockpit, same as he starts all hellishness; and he always is a jump ahead. But, I'm going to get him, corp. Just keep it under your hat—I aim to devote all my time to rigging something that'll—" The purring of a tender's motor cut Dan off short. The small wrecker car from his drome ground to a halt outside the battery emplacement.

Captain Rymer stepped down, and crossed at once to the wreckage of the Bristol. Dan watched him through narrowed eyes.

"Little swine," he breathed. "I do believe he's actually grinning."

But Rymer wasn't grinning when he turned to Kelly. His thin lips were drawn together in a hard line.

"Well! Hell of a fine ending to your harebrained escapade, eh?" he snapped. "Feel well enough to get back to the squadron? The S.C.'s rather anxious to see you."

Kelly got to his feet and stretched his sore frame. He flexed his iron muscles, and a mad urge took possession of him for a moment. Fists clenched, he strode toward the adjutant.

"I'm ready for most anything now, you—damn snoop," he snarled. "I watched you at the wreck, Rymer. You were grinning—grinning, blast you. I

reckon I'm getting a little bit hep to you. Go back to the S.C., with my compliments to Major Carver. I'll be along as soon as I've done a little business at the howitzers. I wouldn't ride in the same car as you, Rymer."

The skipper paled and flushed by turns. Kelly had surely rubbed him on the raw. Particularly when he mentioned the fact that Rymer had grinned at the wreckage.

"You mean you wouldn't ride in the same car with me—unless it was compulsory, eh?" he drawled, his lip curling. "But, if I put you under arrest, you'd almost have to come along—yes?"

"Wouldn't have to, by a damn sight, Rymer," roared the pilot. "If that's what you're threatening, you can go plumb to hell. I'll come in when my business is finished, not before; and you can stick that under your fur-lined helmet. Don't threaten me, or—" With a shrug of resignation and disgust, Dan turned abruptly away. He wanted to get to a signalman and phone through to the howitzers.

Rymer watched Kelly's tall figure stride away. With an oath at his lips he turned and jerked an order to the driver of the tender. Climbing aboard he was whisked away in a cloud of dust.

"I DON'T want this to go to Wing, Lieutenant Kelly," the squadron commander drawled that afternoon. "As Captain Rymer has stated, your offense is punishable by an alarmingly stiff sentence. Even Captain Bell, your flight commander, who thinks very highly of you, quite agrees. You know, you can't romp around the skies like a damned pirate whenever you take the notion, Kelly. You're in the army now—in the air service, understand? To send you up to Wing would be to have you cashiered. I don't want to do that. I like you, Kelly—am proud of the way you have done your work with squadron 18. But, you must be disciplined. Are you prepared to take my punishment?"

It was hard for Dan to suppress a grin. He liked Carver about as well as any officer he had ever met, since crossing the Atlantic.

"Sure, sir, it's an honor to accept your punishment," he jerked. "Although, if it would please Captain Rymer to have me cashiered—I wouldn't mind taking this to Wing." There was a flash of flame in Kelly's steel-gray eyes as he whipped his head around, to face the adjutant.

"Now, Kelly," cut in the S.C. "Nothing like that. Captain Rymer was just doing his duty as adjutant."

"Very good, sir," said Kelly, "and what will your punishment be, sir?"

"Forfeiture of seniority for six months, and suspension from the sky for a week." Dan felt that he wanted to rush forward and grip Carver by the hand. But he checked himself and his face took on an injured expression.

"Pity you hadn't made it two weeks, sir," he snapped.

"Then two weeks it is, confound you, Kelly. What in the name of heaven—"

"Thanks, sir," grinned the pilot. "And would you be good enough to give me a moment alone?"

Major Carver turned and nodded to the others. The flight commander withdrew at once, but Rymer hung around, shuffling papers in his usually fussy manner.

"Yes, Kelly. What was it you wanted to say?" jerked the S.C., lighting a pipe. Kelly frowned and jerked his head toward the adjutant.

"Ah, yes, Rymer," called the S.C. "Would you be good enough to leave now? Thanks." Rymer, his face clouded, stepped out, closing the door behind him.

"Now, major," Kelly began. "For the love of pete try and get me right. I wouldn't give two whoops if I was cashiered a dozen times so long as I got somebody to listen to what's on my mind. This morning I took off at the request of an old infantry buddy—a skipper, whose men have been getting strafed out of existence by minnenwerfers. I simply had to go. And—"

"But this idea of packing arms in the cockpit, Kelly," interrupted the S.C. "It isn't done, boy. And we don't want to be charged with any international breach of—"

"Say, major, didn't that little—Captain Rymer report to you that I was shot at two days ago by a blasted Heinie pilot?"

"No! Is that true, Kelly?"

"True as you're sitting there, sir. That was another reason for taking up an Enfield this morning. Well, I met that phantom sniper of the clouds up there this morning—before I crashed. And—" Kelly paused to light a cigarette.

"Yes, yes—go on, Kelly. What happened?" queried the S.C., impatiently.

"Well, he won't snipe any more, sir. I bagged him. Sent him down in flames—the first victory in the skies, and—you talk of cashiering, of suspension, of forfeiture of seniority. That Heinie sniper might have sent a dozen of our kids down before they realized the seriousness of the whole thing. In shooting that man

down, major, I shot off half my prop. Came down in a flop, and—the Bris went up in smoke. Sorry about that, but—*c'est la guerre*.”

Kelly inhaled deeply of his cigarette, his narrowed eyes watching the major's twitching face. The S.C. was on his feet, pacing the room with deliberate strides. Suddenly he halted and wheeled about sharply.

“Kelly, you don't mean all that?” he jerked. “Good heavens!”

“Listen, major. I don't feel badly about it all. Hell! It's just like the beginning of a big adventure to me. I've got ideas—ideas that simply must be put into material action. We've got to fight the Boche in the sky trails. We've got to fight him in a different manner from that which caused the wreck of my prop—my crate. That is why I got sassy and forced you to extend my suspension to two weeks. I want time off to experiment. I want to get something rigged up that will be a couple of jumps ahead of the Boche. Can I bank on your support and confidence, major?”

The S.C.'s eyes were misted. He was biting hard at his bristling mustache. His head nodded, and he scraped back a chair from his desk.

“I'm sorry, Kelly,” he snapped. “Looks to me as if Rymer had been deliberately trying to break you. Say—I don't like this at all. I'll send for him at once. Damn me, if I'm going to have any shady work in this—”

“One moment, sir,” cut in Kelly. “Let Rymer alone. To call him now would be to queer my plans. I want to say right here, though, I don't trust him. He's not on the level, major. I'm not exactly sure, but I suspect him, just a little, of not being just as loyal to the Allied cause as you and headquarters think him. He's a clever little rat, sir. I've no use for him. I may as well be honest with you, in spite of the chance I'm taking in making the charges. Do I still get your support, major?”

“By God, Kelly, you've got me swamped. It's hard to believe that of Rymer. He's such an active beggar. But—I'm inclined to think you're sound. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. Yes, I'll support you to the limit. What do you want?”

“Mark the Cockney mechanic, Friar, and myself out on some sort of a damn course, sir. Anything you can think of will suit. I want to get away—to be alone for a couple of weeks. By that time, no doubt, you'll have lost a third of your pilots, for Jerry isn't going to stop at the mounting of a rifle to the cockpit rim. Since I crooked his sky sniper, he'll be on development work right away. You'll see machine guns in the Taubes in less than a week, sir. But—what I have in mind will—

well, wait and see, major. I may be cuckoo, for all I know. I'd let Rymer think you've got me on the rap, see? One of these days—when I have time—I'm going to look into that little shuffler's history.”

“H'ramm,” the major had lapsed into deep brooding thought. Suddenly his head snapped up as a knock sounded on the door.

At his call, a signalman entered and handed Carver a message sheet. It was signed by the commander of A flight and read:

“REGRET TO REPORT TWO PLANES DOWN EAST OF HOOGE. AM DOWN MYSELF OUT OF CONTROL AT CANADIAN INFANTRY LINES. SUSPECT ENEMY USING MACHINE GUNS IN THE COCKPIT. NOT A CHANCE IN THE WORLD FOR US. MARTIN AND BANNARD DOWN IN FLAMES.

SIGNED A.E. PIERCE, CAPTAIN—A FLIGHT.”

The message sheet dropped to the desk from Carver's listless fingers. The S.C. was staring vacantly into space—staring—staring, with unseeing eyes.

“Can I read it, sir?” asked Kelly, reaching for the sheet.

Carver merely nodded, and Dan's eyes ran swiftly over the message. He came back with a start. Martin and Bannard—his two Canuck buddies. His hand clenched over the form, and his teeth gritted hard.

“Major,” he gasped, “keep that damn little rat of an adjutant occupied. I'm going to get a bus—can I have yours, sir?”

“You're not going east, Kelly, if that's what you mean,” growled the major.

“No, sir—I'm going west. I'm needing a plane for experimental purposes. Can I take yours, and the—Cockney?”

“Yes! Good luck. I'll fix up Rymer. For the love of heaven do something real, Dan.” The major grasped the Yank by the shoulders. “Come back with—oh, hell! With whatever you've got stowed away in that damned clever head of yours. Martin—Bannard, I liked those two boys. As tough as they made 'em, but—they were quite in your class, Kelly.”

With a forced grin, Dan sprang for the door, and hurried out to the mechanics' quarters. Friar was just the man he wanted—clever, discreet, and damned good company.

In an hour, to Captain Rymer's amazement, Kelly and Friar took off in the major's two-seater, and what stung the adjutant more than anything, Major Carver was there, waving to them as they taxied down the runway.

TWO days later the pilot and Friar were joined by a blacksmith from army ordnance, who set up a small forge in the back of an old wagon shed at the battered old farmstead, which Kelly had acquired for use as an experimental station.

From daylight till dark, and then far into the night, the three worked like slaves. At the close of their day they took turns at sentry duty. Dan and Friar spent a lot of time at the plane, which was concealed in a shambling old implement house. Here they rigged a bracket to the rear cockpit. It was almost finished. Friar was busy mounting the Vickers.

"Bust me, sir," he chirped. "Another week an' this should be in the sky. Won't that lousy adjutant get a eyeful, huh?"

"I'm not too sure that he won't get an eyeful before that, Cockney," jerked Dan, who worked at the engine. "Something seems to tell me that Rymer will be on our tails before long. Now, how's the Vick? Think it's going to work without shooting a wing off?"

Cockney Friar grinned, and stepped back.

"There she is—a real job. Now, let's roll Lizzie out an' test the bleedin' thing. You can't never tell how the mulligan's gonna taste till you've started eatin', sir. I votes we climbs aboard an' do some shootin'. Course the man who operates the gun's gotta be damn careful. They's only so much traverse. See—"

Friar took the Vickers' bracket—a crude affair, turned out under difficulties by the blacksmith.

"You see, sir, they isn't much to work on. If this here bracket was smooth all the way around you could revolve the gun in any direction. But, you're bound to hit a cock-eyed brace, see? Not bad, but could be better. Now—swing 'er to the nose a bit too much an' you're liable to cut orf a brace, or crack the prop. Ain't what you call a miracle, but—she's a damn sight better than a bloody rifle, sir. My oath! Now how abaht that forward gun? Thought any more?"

"God, Friar! I'm doing nothing else but thinking of it. I believe I have the idea, too. Listen." Dan's voice lowered as he explained his plans.

"I want it so I can shoot through the prop, get me? Not exactly that, either, but so synchronized with the engine that the bullets will actually miss the prop. Understand?"

The little mechanic pushed his cap back and scratched his head.

"You don't arf want much, do you? A gun what'll shoot through the flamin' prop without shootin' through the perishin' thing. Blimey! Mebbe we better

take her up with the Vickers an' see what we can shoot off with that. Seems to me like you was gonna force the laws of—of grav—well, it don't seem like it's possible to shoot through that damn prop without actually shootin'—Oh, 'ell, sir. Lets go up with the Vick till me flamin' brain clears."

Inwardly Friar thought Dan was just edging close to something goofy. The idea of the Vickers at the rear was sound. But, a gun that would fire so as to miss that whirring prop with its lead was far too much for the Cockney to swallow all at one gulp.

They took off in a bumpy taxi along an indifferent field. Dan pulled her up sharp to miss a fringe of poplars. The mechanic settled at the Vickers' grips, which he squeezed gently.

Cr-r-r ac-a-tac-tac! A grin parted the man's lips as he caught the staccato crackle—the first of its kind in the air. Now, if Kelly would only maneuver so that the gun could be tested out from any angle! But Kelly was climbing hard for a patch of clouds; and, he was headed east.

As he leveled off he reached over and beckoned the mechanic to him.

"Best target we can get is to hunt up a Boche," he yelled. "Hang tight and don't lose your head."

Friar had guts—lots of them. He wasn't afraid of the sky. But Kelly was taking a long chance having a private, an unqualified observer, up with him. Nevertheless Cockney chuckled. "Just like we was a couple of bleedin' pirates," he muttered.

SUDDENLY, as the Bristol came out of a cloud bank, Dan dived her, then zoomed hard. He made altitude, though he had forced the bus to the extreme. Ahead, gamboling like hawks in the sky, were three planes.

Dan waved to the mechanic, and gave the Bristol the gun. Two of those planes were Germans. The other, struggling for mastery of the dogfight was a Bristol—one of squadron 18's crates.

As he raced ahead, climbing slightly as he went, Dan's lips were set hard. He had glimpsed the flashes from the enemy cockpits. He had started when he discovered that the type of enemy plane was new. The new Fokker! It had come earlier than expected. Now, he hit a cloud bank above the milling planes. He gasped as he saw the British ship heel over into a spin. But—the pilot brought her out. He was clever, having thrown the crate into a stall, purposely to slip off.

As he leveled out, a Fokker screamed down on him,

and then Dan realized that the new boats were two-seaters. From the rear cockpit of the diving Boche a Krupp machine gun bristled. He overshot, but came up in a hard zoom, and as he flashed by the Bristol his gun spewed a broadside into her fuselage—into her engine.

Dan set down his nose, full on. He tore through the air in a mad screaming fury, hoping that Friar wouldn't make any mistake with the gun.

Suddenly, the Bristol beneath him cracked wide open in a mass of flame. Dan had just glimpsed her markings; it was Captain Bell's bus.

Now a flame leapt in the Yank's eyes. Bell, one of the best, had gone down.

"Cockney, work that Vick," he yelled, although he knew that Friar couldn't hear him. The mechanic had seen, however. His popping eyes had glimpsed the stricken figure of Bell as he slumped down into the enveloping mass of flame.

Friar's hands were ready at the grips, as Dan pulled the crate back up. A diving Fokker above him streaked past the sight ring. Friar pressed, a curse hissing from his set lips as his stream of lead raked the other's fuselage fore and aft

But, the Boche came out apparently unhurt. Dan went down after him, banked left to give Friar another chance. The Cockney was ready, and his next burst was dead-on. A strut parted and the Fokker's right upper wing collapsed.

In a series of tight spirals he went nosing down. Kelly grinned and jazzed his feed. There was still another Fokker. It was ahead, climbing for altitude at such a rate as caused Dan to gulp. Never had he seen such fast climbing. It was too uncanny for words.

Suddenly the Boche came over on his left wing. His nose dipped and Dan had no time to bank right, his only way out. The new, flashing Fokker screamed down, diving dead under the Bristol's belly. As he swept beneath the British plane his Krupp crackled, and the rear of the Bristol's fuselage was like a sieve. Cockney Friar felt a bullet cut through his pants leg, a bullet which struck one of the steel braces on his Vickers bracket.

The nose of his gun slumped on to the carriage. Now it was up to Dan. The mechanic couldn't warn him of the situation. Not that the gun was useless, but—it could no longer be traversed.

Like two monstrous eagles the planes maneuvered for position. One gun apiece—evenly matched in that respect, they banked, and wheeled, pilots vying with each other for the breaks.

Dan knew his plane was outclassed, but he also knew that he and Friar had the guts. Seizing an opening he climbed hard. He had a hundred feet of altitude. The Boche saw this and went down hard, but Dan had him taped. The Boche, he knew, intended to come back in a stiff zoom.

With a wave of his hand to Friar, Dan pushed his stick forward. Down—down like a plummet he screamed. Could Friar open fire when Dan pulled her out, under the belly of the Fokker? Hardly, and yet

Dan gasped. A crackle at his back told him that the Vickers was already in action. A bullet ripped at the fabric of a vying.

"Damn fool's going to wreck us," he snapped. "Using too much traverse; he'll cut a strut, or strip a wing."

Kelly just missed the Fokker's tail. A flash almost blinded him as he swept by, and with the flash came the swish of bullets, and the splintering of one of his struts. He pulled back hard on the stick, heard his own gun crackle. Then—a wild yell from the Cockney. He cut his engine a notch, half turned his head, to glimpse the Fokker flopping earthward, black smoke coiling up from nose to rudder.

But Dan felt his own plane yaw. He glanced to the right and saw his wing was down almost two inches, pressing on a broken strut. Could he make a landing with that?

Friar was wondering the very same thing. Could Kelly land the Bristol without forcing that wing? It seemed impossible. The plane was already slipping off.

Friar gasped. Dan was leaning hard over to the right. He was pointing frantically at the lower wing surface. Then, in a flash it dawned on the mechanic that there was only one way in which the Bristol could be saved. He unbuckled his belt and commenced to climb.

TEETH set, he eased his slight form forward, then commenced to lower. His feet touched the lower wing at the stirrup and he clutched at a strut. For a brief moment he hung on, the wind almost forcing him to let go. Then, with a flashed glance at the grim face of the pilot, he nipped to another strut. The Bristol came up, and Dan put her over in the mildest of left banks. With steady hand he let her volplane down, watching her every move, careful that his engine did not die.

They landed—a miserable two point, three miles from the farm.

Dan helped the trembling figure of the mechanic

down from the wing, and hugged the slight form to him.

"Guts isn't the word, Friar," he mumbled. "I'll say you've got something they haven't found a name for yet. Thanks, buddy."

"Aw, cripes, an' what were you doin'?" yelled the mechanic, with some slight showing of hysteria. "It was you brought the bloody crate down. Such pilot work I never seen yet. But, take a look at the gun. I reckon you didn't know it was crocked up, did you?"

Dan started as he saw the position of the Vickers.

"I'll be a cockeyed owl," he breathed. "But, Friar, it was a break for us, brother. If that Vick hadn't dropped we'd never have made the grade. It ain't such a damn bad war, huh? Not when you get out like we did. There's something lacking, though. Heinie has the bulge on us yet. He's got a faster, better plane. We've just got to concentrate on that prop-synchronized Lewis, forward, Friar. Thought any more about it?"

"Thought! Say, I never thought so perishin' fast in all me life, sir. But it wasn't about no damn Lewis I was thinkin'. Back in that rear cockpit there was more to think about, in less bleedin' time than—Lor'!" The cockney shuddered, and Dan grinned.

"Now let's get moving for some help," he jerked. "Better still if you hug close to the plane while I find a lift for us. She isn't cracked up bad. If I can get to ordnance I can get a man to fix us up. So long, Friar. While I'm gone try and figure out a way we can time a Lewis with that engine, huh?"

"Sure," grinned Friar, pulling a cigarette butt from behind an ear. "I'll have it all fixed when you gets back—not arf I won't."

In the next week, Dan Kelly seldom stopped work long enough to eat a proper meal. He was unshaven; hadn't bathed, and was irritable. Nerves tensed to the highest pitch, he had almost solved the synchronization problem. It was almost in his grasp, when, in a test flight he had shot off a prop, bringing the major's two-seater down in an almost total wreck.

It was necessary to get Carver to let him have a single seater. This he had brought over during the afternoon. Its engine lay bare, while Friar worked like a gnome. But, the Cockney was surly. This single seater meant that Kelly would, take the sky alone.

"By cripes, I've got it, sir," he jerked at last, flinging a spanner crashing past the blacksmith's head in his excitement. "Look'ere! I was a mug not to see that this 'ere def—what you call it, should be pushed forward a notch. Understand? Try her now, sir."

Dan revved his engine, while the Cockney bolted the Lewis into place. It was almost full dusk, and they worked by the light of a masked lantern.

Suddenly the blacksmith clutched at Kelly's sleeve.

"Listen, sir," he growled. "A plane, comin' in low. Sounds like she's cuttin' her engine. I'll go take a look."

A low whistle called Dan from the cockpit, a signal from the blacksmith. In a flash he was at the man's side.

"Lookit, over at the edge of the woods, sir. Ain't that a light signalin' the plane?"

"As sure as you're a day old. Go tell Cockney to put out our lamp."

Dan's right hand dropped to the pocket of his overalls. He commenced to move forward, but checked up short, as, through the gloom, he glimpsed the white folds of a parachute plop open. Some one had dropped from the enemy machine. Like a shot the Yank crept back and whispered to his men.

"Get your guns," he breathed. "But don't leave the plane. Don't move until you get a call from me. I'm going to sneak down to the woods from the north an' get the low-down on that out fit. It's some lousy spy come to get our—secret. I think I know—"

Dan never finished, for he was ducking to the north, to a copse from which he could creep up on the spy and his ground agent.

Suddenly a figure loomed up before him at a small clearing. It was the man who had landed in the chute. A flash played, and Dan caught the movement of a second figure. His teeth gritted hard. Sitting hunched, a plan spread out before him, was the short figure of Captain Rymer.

Dan's gun came up, wavering slightly as his hand trembled with keyed-up emotion.

"The blasted little rat," he breathed. "I always suspected him of being a twister. Now I know. He's been at our works. Must have sneaked in while the blacksmith was busy some place else. He's got the drawings of our Lewis, as sure as hell—"

With a quick spring forward he opened fire. The enemy skyman dropped. Rymer jerked a gun from his pocket, but Dan had flattened. Now his automatic blazed. He missed, and growled an oath.

There was a crash in the brush as Rymer leapt for cover, then Dan's tongue slipped between his teeth. He whistled, and from the farm came the answering call.

Soon a couple of shots rang out, but Friar and the blacksmith had been shooting at a running target, in the gloom.

"Get somethin', sir?" jerked the Cockney, crashing up to Dan's side.

"Yep, Friar. I got the chute man, but—the big noise got away. He's got our plans and he'll be over the line before I can get him. Say, Cockney, how near were you to getting that prop timed?"

"She's all set, sir. Just needs final adjustments. I can 'ave 'er ready to take off in fifteen minutes. Of course, it's up to you to test 'er out. But I can't see why she won't work. By the way, did you get a decko at that other bird?"

"Yes, it was Rymer, damn him."

Cockney Friar started. His brain was working hard. But, with a shrug of resignation, he turned to the prone figure of the spy.

"Grab hold, George," he grunted. "This 'ere game's too deep for me. Shouldn't be surprised, though, if Rymer just 'ops into 18 like he's come from a binge. Clever little devil, an' we ain't got nothin' dead on 'im. He can bluff that it wasn't 'im. Cripes, this bird's weighty."

The mechanic's mumbled words had opened up a new channel of thought for Dan, though. Rymer might try to bluff it out at 18. Well, why not call his bluff?

Back at the farm, the spy came to. Dan tried him with English, but with a contemptuous curl of his lip he pleaded ignorance. In a code pad, taken from his pocket, Dan glimpsed a note, in German, and—it was signed by "von Rymher."

The chute jumper was trussed up. Dan left him in care of the blacksmith, then he strode out to the Bristol.

"I'll spin her now, sir," yelled the Cockney. "The gun's all bolted down, an' I think everythin' else is right."

In five minutes Dan's right hand slipped to the Lewis grip. He squeezed. Bullets streamed through the whirling prop. Cockney stood by, a broad grin on his face, but Kelly's face wore no grin. His eyes were misted. He had won the first big round, but had yet to mill it out to perfection in the clouds.

Jumping from the cockpit he gripped the mechanic's hand.

"Great, Friar. Thanks, buddy. Now—for that swine, Rymer. Stand by here, ready to hand over to me at dawn. I'm going back to 18. If anyone comes snooping, shoot on sight. See you at dawn."

CAUTIOUSLY, Dan slipped into the billet of Major Carver. The S.C. was alone, his face clouded in a deep

frown.

He started at Dan's entrance, his eyes almost popping from their sockets.

"Kelly! What's new? You sneak in like some damn Indian. Rymer was just in—back from Wing. We lost young Swanson this afternoon. Wing's getting all steamed up. What's new?"

"First, sir, tell me; what's on the schedule for tomorrow dawn?"

"H'mmm, let me see. Yes, Rymer suggested that he take a solo, in order to get a line on the drome from which these new hellish Fokkers are coming. Wing wants to bomb there if we can locate their field. I think that's all for dawn, Kelly."

"Good, major," grinned Dan. "Do you mind if I become S.C. 18 for just one minute?"

"Go ahead. What's on your mind?"

"I want you to go back and pick up the Bristol, at the farm, sir. Have an ordinary plane ready for me, about an hour before Rymer takes off. I reckon I want to have a look at that drome, too. The prop-synchronized Lewis is working like a charm, major. You're the best skyman on 18, and I want you to take her across first. You—"

"Like hell I will, Kelly. You're going to see this thing through. To you the credit's coming, so think up something else. What's this idea of sneaking off ahead of Rymer?"

"Von Rymher, major. Don't forget the handle. That little squirt's a Jerry. I've got one of his associates back at the farm. At dawn I'm going to prevent Rymer from landing at that Fokker drome with the plans of our Lewis."

"You don't mean that, Kelly! Actually a spy agent, eh?"

"Certain, sir. Now, would you get through to Wing? I want a special wire put through to war office. We want guns—planes, by the hundred—prop-synchronized Lewis, or Vickers, in a faster climbing plane. I know what I'm talking about, major. Can you get 'em?"

In his own private code, which changed almost every day, Carver burned the wires to a friend at Wing. In less than an hour war office had a copy of the special Lewis mount. Wires to factories sizzled. They had come alive.

Dan Kelly shot back to the farm in the S.C.'s tender. And, before the first pencil of light commenced to scroll the thick murk of the eastern sky, he was pulling the single seater into the sky.

COCKNEY FRIAR stood with tear-filled eyes watching his Yankee buddy circling above the farm. For a brief moment Dan's hand came overside and waved.

"Streuth, George! Ain't he a real guy? Next time I see one of them 'For Officers Only' signs on some pub, I ain't gonna curl me bloody nose up so much. Dan Kelly might be inside. Well, chum, that's the end of our act. Now straighten your ugly mug an' let's go an' wet the success of the first prop synkerized Lewis."

The blacksmith was keen to get away. He hated to see Kelly leave, for with the officer's going had gone a touch of romance and adventure such as the private soldier doesn't often enjoy in war.

As he pulled up to five thousand feet, Dan Kelly was thinking of the two men he had left below.

"Greatest pair of eggs I ever met," he muttered. "If I come out of this all right I'm going to get us all a leave—take 'em to Paris and show 'em how much I've appreciated all they did to help. I—"

Dan broke off suddenly, as he glimpsed the sharp outline of a plane cut through the edge of a cloud bank. Then another shot past his line of vision. They were a mile away—Fokkers!

"That's Rymer's escort flight," he told himself. "As sure as I live. There, they're circling. Now, Dan, stroke the old rabbit's foot and go get 'em. You can furnish the escort for that little rat when you're through with the Fokkers." His heart gave a wild lunge as he settled himself firmly at the controls. His right hand moved up to the Lewis grip.

All at once a Fokker wheeled. From its side came the flash of a shutter signal. Dan grinned. The pilot was expecting Rymer; and for a moment the shutter flapped out Morse, frantically, appealingly.

Then the Fokker pilot suspected that all wasn't well. He fired a white flare—a signal to his companion. Dan set his teeth and pushed down on the stick. His eyes glued to the sight ring of the Lewis, he let the Bristol scream down on the Fokker's tail.

The silver plane below him banked left, and threw Dan off, but the Yank pulled his Bristol out of the dive, coming over in an renversement which regained altitude. He was now head-on to the second Fokker. His fingers closed over the gun and a stream of lead ripped through the Fokker's cowling, spraying the rushing plane mercilessly. The German pilot lost control and his nose tipped down in its last dive to earth.

As he banked away to refit a new ammo pan, he

took a raking burst of fire. The other Fokker crept up on him. A bullet slashed his left arm—a deep graze which brought a wave of nausea surging through his frame. But Dan shook it off. He must win this fight, in spite of the German's superior plane. As he banked around, he started. Coming from the west was the unmistakable shape of a Bristol. Rymer! The sight of the bogus adjutant was the means of mustering Dan's every atom of fighting spirit. It was now, or never! That Fokker must go down, and then—Rymer.

With an oath, the Yank came over. He went down in a terrible dive—a screaming dive of death, his Lewis spewing flame and lead from her eager snout.

Dan felt a swish past his ear. Rymer at work. Here was the swine who had refused to permit arms in the cockpit, firing on one of his own pilots.

Cr-r-r-r-ac-a-tac! Dan's Lewis cut another desperate burst full on the diving Fokker's tail. And he watched the German ship go over in an outside loop, which resulted in complete collapse. Then, a puff of red-black flame, and the enemy went down in flaming spirals.

Stiff and sick with the pain in his arm, Dan struggled to hang on to his wits. The greatest enemy of them all was left—Rymer. The captain could fly, too.

As he came up in a zoom, Dan glimpsed the other Bristol flash across his nose. He squeezed the Lewis, but there wasn't time for an effective burst. Rymer had got in a couple of shots from a Vickers which he had mysteriously fixed to his cockpit rim, and a long strip of Dan's fabric fluttered out like a pennant in the wind.

Dan changed his tactics suddenly. He would get between Rymer and the enemy lines, fight him from a distance and force him down on Allied territory. He wanted the spy alive, if possible.

Climbing with all the Bristol could stand, Kelly put her for the east then came around to meet the spy's plane. A long burst of fire from the Lewis caused Rymer to wheel. Dan continued to rake him, and for a moment, when in a turn, the spy clipped off a score of rounds from his Vickers.

Three or four of the bullets cut through Dan's cowling, narrowly missing his head. Instruments shattered into a thousand pieces; but now Kelly was seeing red. His one thought was to get Rymer.

"He can shoot me to pieces," he grunted, "so long as I finally land him."

Dan adjusted his last pan of ammo. In the brief respite Rymer banked around, thinking to make another dash for the enemy lines, but Dan was ready. He squeezed the trigger, diving dead on Rymer.

They were both heading fast for the British lines, when suddenly, Rymer's tail went up, and he started down, almost vertically, Dan hurtling in pursuit. Across No-Man-Land they dived, before Rymer could level off; but his Bristol was yawing sadly.

Resigning himself to the inevitable, Rymer grabbed his stick hard and struggled to hold up the Bristol's nose. Then, with a hard shove, left, he forced his wing down and smashed hard into a shallow sunken road.

Artillerymen came on the double, eyes popping with amazement. Two Bristols in action—antagonists in a devilish battle! It was incredible!

Dan brought his plane down in an indifferent, bumpy landing, a hundred yards to the north of Rymer's wreck. Slipping from the cockpit, he reeled toward the other, automatic ready, heart pulsing at a furious rate. Free of the wreckage, crouched in the lee of a boulder, Rymer was pumping lead. Dan flattened for cover and jerked up his gun. A deadly duel ensued. Then in a split second's pause, the Yank sprang to his feet and with gun spitting, he ran toward the spy. Rymer's gun arm raised, but with a yell he spun around, the thick automatic dropping from his fingers. His left hand clutched at his right arm, which hung limp. Then a thick guttural oath escaped him.

"*Verdamtnte schwein*," he growled. "You win, damn you, but you don't get me alive, yet."

He made a sudden move to the pocket of his leathers, but Dan's gun hand crashed across his arm.

"No, you don't, von Rymher. Now stick your good hand up while I remove that poison. There! Now I reckon you're all ready for the march to H.Q., huh? Before you go, take a look at that little Lewis, Rymer. Great little rig, huh? Two Fokkers an' a lousy Bristol spy all in the one dog-fight. I got you all—through the prop. Through the—"

"What the hell's all this about?" An artillery major barged up. "Isn't there enough murder in cleaning up the enemy, without slaughtering each— Say, I don't get this." He fastened a questioning glance on Dan. "What's wrong here?"

"Hold that man," jerked Dan. "He's von Rymher, German intelligence. Don't let him make a move, uncovered. I—I'm afraid I'm done, major."

Dan reeled, but was caught by a couple of gunners, who held him in their arms. The major's Colt came out and jammed into Rymer's ribs.

"You make one little phony pass, Von, an' I'll blow you apart. Now, I reckon you're ready to march, huh? Bring on that sky devil, boys," he thundered at the gunners. "Carry him, and carry him easy. He's a real soldier, that boy. Done more for the cause in ten minutes than we've done on this double blistered sector in two infernal months."

A smile flitted across Dan's face as he slumped back limply into the gunners' arms. He slipped away, the ring of the Lewis in his ears.