



BUSTEM

HELL'S SEVEN ACES

by LESTER DENT

*A key around a dead man's neck was the thing that sent that Devil's spawn of seven into action.
It took red skies and Spandau steel to end that bloody trail.*

WITH A RAT-SQUEAL of terror, the Cockney voice splintered out in the drizzling half-darkness. "Bloody 'Eaven! Don't 'arm me, gov' nor! 'Ere's my key. Tyke it!" "Bustem Bill" Harn stopped walking suddenly. Oyster-colored strings of rain slanted down in the French twilight and made a soupy

drumming on vegetation that walled the path. Bustem tugged at his raincoat collar, trying to make it encircle a too thick neck, and squinted in an effort to see a few feet into the streaming murk. He heard the serpentine hissings of a whisper, the words unintelligible.

"Blime!" the Cockney's voice shrilled. "You don't 'ave to 'and me w'at you did the others. I don't know

you, gov'nor, 'onest I don't. Lemme go and I'll sling my bloomin' 'ook! I'll desert!"

Bustem Bill Harn licked rainwater off his lips. The cowardly quality in the Cockney whine made him reluctant to interfere. Bustem hated a craven. Too, this was quite possibly no affair of his. A lorry driver had told him a few minutes ago that this path led to the drome of the Sixtieth Pursuit Squadron, Royal Flying Corps. And the Sixtieth was his destination,

"Gord, don't kill me, gov'nor! Ow, damn you! 'Elp! 'Elp—!" The Cockney's voice turned hoarse with agony and terror.

Bustem Bill Harn pitched through the stringing rain. A scared craven was one thing, but the same individual about to be slain was another. He crashed into brush as the path turned and sprawled in mud that stuck like dough. Swearing, he jerked erect.

Two figures materialized ahead. His headlong charge brought them closer. One was undersized, weazened, bedecked as a flight lieutenant, R.F.C. Beaten to his knees, he clutched madly at the legs of the man who threatened his life. The latter was tall. He wore an officers' raincoat, tightly buttoned. A sacklike mask of dark cloth enveloped his head completely. His right hand held a Webley revolver.

"Hey!" barked Bustem sharply. "What—"

The roar of the Webley drowned his demand, as the masked man shot the flight lieutenant in the top of the head.

Bustem flung his bulk sidewise as the gun squirted flame again. The bullet puffed cold on his face. Going down, he pawed for his own Webley, cursing the underarm holster in which it nestled.

The masked man's gun bellowed once more. The lead slapped mud into Bustem Bill's eyes. He rolled. Brush fluttered wildly as he left the path. Water spilled off the leaves. He ripped fasteners off his raincoat and buttons from his jacket and got his gun. The grip smacked snug in his palm as he fired. Powder flame from the other gun lashed back at him. Bustem scooted forward, tobogganwise, when hot metal tore the raincoat across his back.

He poked his gun out to shoot again, decided he had lost the masked man's exact location and waited.

The soggy squish of madly running feet sounded. Three times, Bustem Bill's Webley stuttered deafeningly at the noise. Then he knocked himself erect and lunged down the path.

The watery thump of feet died suddenly. Bustem braked to a stop.

Some distance ahead, men yelled excitedly. No other sound lifted above the wet drumming of rain. Bustem waited, ears strained, gun clamped tight to his hip, left hand curiously exploring the bullet rip in the back of his raincoat.

THE yelling ahead increased in volume. Men were approaching. One led the pack, for Bustem could hear him splattering noisily along the path. Then the fellow poked a flash beam down the trail. It lifted, clapped a blinding glare into Bustem Bill's eyes.

"Drop the gun!" the newcomer ordered harshly.

Bustem Bill Harn frowned and tilted the Webley muzzle at the voice.

"Turn that light on yourself!" he barked sharply.

More men arrived amid a clapping of feet in mud. A flash splashed on the man who had given the order. It revealed a flight-captain, bareheaded, rain coat unbuttoned. He was fleshless, wiry, with ropy tendons standing out on his hands and neck. He had a scarred, hard face and huge, pointed, devil-like ears. Half a dozen other men, pilots and ground crewmen, crowded behind him.

Bustem grinned through the mud on his face and slid his Webley back in the shoulder holster.

"Dead man back there!" he grunted shortly. "Fellow who shot him ran this way."

The devil-eared captain advanced. His walk was stiff-legged, belligerent. He thrust his face within six inches of Bustem Bill's.

"I told you to drop that bally gun!" he snapped. "Do it!"

Bustem Bill's eyes narrowed to glittering slits. Big knots of muscle inhered in front of his ears.

"A man was just murdered back there!" he said steadily. "You'd better stop blowing your breath in my face and hunt the killer!"

"I'll attend to that!" rasped the flight captain. "But first, I'll take that gun!"

His left hand shot under Bustem Bill's coat, clutching for the Webley. Bustem knocked the hand away.

"Damn you!" grated the flight captain. His right hand, knotted into a fist, drove savagely for Bustem Bill's jaw.

Bustem ducked and grinned wolfishly. He planted the palm of one hand in the devil-eared man's face. The hand was big; it made the fellow's head look hardly larger than a good-sized orange. Bustem shoved. The devil-eared man described a parabola and lit on his head and shoulders in the brush.

"No more of that damned foolishness!" Bustem growled, harshly. "The killer wore a raincoat, had a sack over his head and he came this way. Get busy and find where he left the trail. Huh—another one!"

The last as a man dived at his legs. Bustem flexed a knee. The diver changed direction and sprawled in the mud several feet back of where he had started. Another man rushed. Bustem pushed the fellow aside and tripped him as he went past. Then somebody rapped a fist into his stomach. More knuckles rapped solidly on his jaw.

Bustem grinned and struck. A fist mashed the grin on his teeth. Bustem went to work with both hands, fighting in grim silence. A cloud of striking, clutching, cursing bodies battered him down into the mud.

More men came slopping along the path, charging excitedly. Bustem Bill's head rang as somebody rapped him with a revolver barrel. He pitched and kicked off the path.

"Don't shoot him!" croaked a frog-voiced newcomer.

Sheer numbers flattened Bustem. Spreadeagled, men sticking to him like flies, he was dragged back into the path. A flashlight whitened the struggling group. Bustem Bill's raincoat had entirely parted company with his big form, exposing his rank insignia.

"A captain!" somebody exploded.

A man squirmed clear of the grunting melee. He was toad-chested, tall. Bustem Bill Harn was big, but this fellow was gargantuan, a giant in stature. His face was a bit flabby and his eyes colorless, like big, distended drops of water.

"Who are you?" he demanded. It was the froggy voice which had ordered no gunplay. Bustem squinted and saw Frog-voice was a major.

"Bustem Bill Harn," growled Bustem. "Tell these damned lightweights to let me up."

"Captain Bustem Bill Harn!" echoed Frog-voice. "To be sure! I was notified headquarters was sending one of their fair-haired heroes out here to get *Hauptmann* von Fleigg for us. But I understood you were to fly over. Let the little tin god up, men!"

BUSTEM snorted and got to his feet. He felt gingerly of a welt on his head which had risen magically where the revolver barrel rapped.

"When I find the guy who put that there, he'd better be hard to catch!" he grunted.

"Just a minute!" snapped Frog-voice. "What started it?"

Bustem stared about ominously. The devil-eared captain, busy wiping mud off his face, did not look up.

"I felt like fighting!" Bustem growled. "There's a dead man up the path. Killer ran this way. These lightweights thought I was him."

"See about that, Captain Leeds!" ordered Frog-voice.

The devil-eared Captain Leeds and several others charged away.

Bustem picked up his raincoat, found it was not badly damaged and threw it across his arm. Then he joined the rush to the spot where the body lay.

"Cockney Pete!" devil-eared Leeds gasped.

Bustem Bill Harn eyed the man curiously. The fellow's face had whitened, the red welts of scars standing out like raw scratches. And the other men looked strangely disturbed. Horror obviously had descended upon the group, a horror out of all proportion to that to be expected from the violent death of one man.

"The eighth!" Leeds mumbled.

Bustem eyed the devil-eared Captain Leeds intently. The fellow's hard face mirrored an emotion very akin, to fright.

The frog-voiced major glared at the uneasy faces.

"Godamighty!" he roared, "It's nothing but another dead man, you jelly-rolls! A couple of you carry him in!"

"And the rest of you look along the path with flashlights!" growled Bustem, "See if you can find where the masked man left. There oughta be some mud,"

The frog-voiced major whirled,

"I'm giving orders to this gang of milk-feds!" he barked sharply.

Bustem glowered and shot his jaw forward.

"What's wrong with that order?" he demanded harshly.

The coarse-voiced major planted both fists on his hips.

"Another tough one, eh?" he grunted. "Listen, Bustem Bill Harn! I specialize on your kind. You may be the wonder-boy ace to H.Q., but I see you're going to be a pain to me!"

From down the path, the devil-eared Captain Leeds raised a sudden interrupting yell. There was a concerted rush for the spot. The captain was peering at something in the brush.

"What is it, Leeds?" asked the frog-voiced major.

"The boots the fellow wore, Major Geising!" explained the devil eared Leeds.

The boots were mud-covered. Obviously, the killer had discarded them so as not to leave a muddy trail as he crept furtively away through the brush. The boots were, English, of a type affected by flying officers, but they bore no mark which would identify their owner.

Trailing the killer in the woods would be an impossible task. Bustem Bill Harn eyed the feet of the men about him; Fully a third were without boots, or even trousers. Evidently they had not waited to dress when the excitement lured them out of quarters.

The group carrying the body passed. Bustem trailed them; the others fell in behind.

The dome of the Sixtieth proved to be some one hundred yards away. A few lighted windows made panels of sickly yellow in the slanting rain streaks. A great, black smear located the tarmac.

CHAPTER II POISON SLUG

THE BODY OF COCKNEY PETE was carried to a sheet-metal shack. A short man sat on a cot in the lighted interior. He wore rimless eyeglasses and was clad only in his underwear. Pendant wads of fat hung on his arms and under his chin. His face was benign, pleasant.

"Look him over, doc!" croaked Major Geising. The fat doctor's examination was

"Killed instantly," he said. He worked for a moment with a probe. Straightening, he rolled a bit of lead in his palm and tossed it to devil-eared Captain Leeds. "Here's the bullet. Rather unusual, eh? Might help identify the killer."

Captain Leeds caught the bullet and gave it one glance. He started, as if burned and let the lead pellet roll out of his fingers.

"The same as the others!" he said hoarsely.

When the bullet caromed against his feet, Bustem Bill Harn picked it up. The slug, metal-jacketed, still retained much of its original shape. In the snout, a craterlike pit had been hollowed out. This still held traces of a greenish substance.

"The green is probably more of that bally poison," said the fat doctor. "I'll bank it's the same as that we had analyzed."

"Could you identify the killer?" Major Geising frog-croaked at Bustem.

Bustem squinted.

"I told you he was masked," he grunted. "He wore an issue raincoat. How could I identify him?"

"Vague!" snorted the devil-eared Leeds suddenly.

Bustem frowned and elaborately spat. Donning his muddy raincoat, he rammed his fists into the pockets. His right hand suddenly knotted under the fabric, feeling something in that pocket. He glanced quickly at the garment, as if doubting it was his own. Then he stared intently at Captain Leeds.

"What the hell do you mean, vague?" he growled harshly.

Captain Leeds' face acquired a purplish hue. His chest bloated.

"You may be Bustem Bill Harn, the marvel G.H.Q. thinks can down a German ace we've failed to get!" he snapped. "But you'll find I rank your equal around here. And you don't use that tone on me!"

"Yeah!" Bustem barked ominously. He knotted one fist.

Major Geising elbowed forward. "Your usual tactics won't go around here, Captain Harn!" he snapped. "I've heard of you. You're a Yank and a troublemaker. You were formerly a major and not long ago you were reduced to the rank of captain over a matter of discipline. Is that right?"

"Yeah, that's right!" Bustem growled. "I socked a major!"

Major Geising's flabby cheeks blew out until they became distended sacs. "Maybe you'd like to sock another one?" he demanded. "I'll promise you there won't be a court-martial, either!"

Bustem frowned and spat again to keep from grinning.

"All right! All right!" he growled. "But your friend with the pointed ears don't seem satisfied with my story. Maybe he thinks I'm carrying a gun loaded with those trick bullets."

"Hell!" snorted Major Geising. "Nobody thinks you killed Cockney Pete. But you'd better get it through your head that I'm running this squadron!" He whirled and roared, "Get in the office, all of you! And every man had better be able to prove where he was when those shots were fired!"

The pilots who had crowded into the medico's shack made a surly exodus.

"Your duffle box came in this afternoon!" Major Geising grunted at Bustem. "It's in number nineteen."

Doc, here, can show you where nineteen is." He stamped after the others.

The fat doctor grinned at Bustem.

"In case you don't know it already, you've landed in a choice corner of hell!" he said.

"Meaning?" queried Bustem.

"During the past year, seven men have been murdered in this squadron," the medico grunted.

"You just witnessed the seventh killing. Two others were shot with poisoned bullets. One was clubbed to death. The rest had mysterious accidents upstairs."

"Why?" asked Bustem.

The fat man shrugged.

"The motive seems to be a mystery. You're the first man to as much as see the killer."

Bustem jerked a thumb at the body of Cockney Pete.

"Let's search it!" he suggested.

They unearthed a handful of paper and silver money, a knife, cigarettes.

"No key!" grunted Bustem.

"What do you mean key?"

"He was trying to trade a key for his life. Wondered if the guy in the mask got away with the key."

"Um-m-m-m!"

Bustem eyed the doctor curiously.

"You think the murderer is one of the squadron?" he asked.

"I'm making it a point not to think out loud!" said the medico testily.

Bustem looked at the fat man intently. The fellow returned the look and jerked his shoulders.

"You don't get me mixed up in this!" he snapped. "A rumor got about that one of the murdered men was a military intelligence agent sent here to investigate the killings. It's my idea that curiosity might be unhealthy. I stick to my business. And it's not being a detective, either."

"Then the murderer is in the squadron," Bustem grinned.

"Ahr-r-r-r!" growled the fat medico. "I'll show you your quarters. Then I suppose I'll have a session proving I was awakened by those shots and was too lazy to go see what it was about."

THE walls of cubicle nineteen were of unpainted boards. Nails driven haphazardly into the planks solved the wardrobe problem. For furniture, there was a folding cot. A window pierced the rear wall, affording a vista of rain-sodden weeds and underbrush.

Bustem Bill Harn dropped his raincoat on the cot as the fat medico departed. He opened his sheet metal duffle box and dragged out dry clothing. His movements leisurely, he stripped and changed. That done, he took a pair of binoculars from his duffle box and carefully removed one of the magnifying lenses.

Then he picked his raincoat from the floor and from the pocket extracted a shapeless wad of cloth. Shaken out, this proved to be a sacklike mask of dark cloth. It was wrapped around a Webley revolver. Using the mask to keep his fingerprints off the gun, Bustem broke the cartridges out. Some had been discharged. Others had deep pits in the leaden snouts, pits filled with a villainous green paste. He flung the collection on the cot.

"Somebody slid that into my pocket during the fight!" he grinned. "Tried to frame me."

He polished the binocular magnifying lense and stared through it at the Webley, then at the cartridges.

"No fingerprints!" he grunted regretfully. "Wiped off!"

He fashioned a cigarette, lit it and oozed smoke tendrils from mouth and nostrils. For several minutes he considered the enigma of the condemning revolver and mask in his pocket. The murderer must have placed the incriminating articles there intending that they be found. But why had he not demanded that Bustem be searched? There had been ample opportunity. Bustem drew his lips back in a wolfish grin and let ram horns of smoke curl out of his mouth corners. One thing might explain it. When planting gun and mask, the killer did not know Bustem Bill's identity. Learning that, he had grown wary.

"Saw me find the things in my pocket!" Bustem growled. "When I invited anybody to search me, the killer got scared. That was a mistake! Damned if I don't believe it kept me from solving this thing right away."

He thrust a hand inside his jacket and brought out an official letter. Unfolding it, he eyed the typed lines for minutes.

To Bustem Bill Harn:

This is confidential. It accompanies orders you will receive to report to the Sixtieth, R.F.C., and fly a lone patrol in an effort to shoot down the German ace, *Hauptmann* Robart von Fleigg, whose circus is stationed in front of the Sixtieth. The orders have gone in duplicate to Major Geising, commanding the Sixtieth.

Here's some dope for you. During the early part of the war, the Sixtieth was stationed in Egypt. While there, a detachment of native soldiers reported

witnessing seven planes of the Sixtieth shoot down a German bomber. The crew of the enemy ship were slain, according to the witnesses, and the bomber was then burned, demolished and the parts buried in the desert sand. A patrol of seven Sixtieth ships in the air at the time denied having encountered the bomber. The native soldiers could not locate the spot where they said the bomber was shot down, when asked to do so.

Since then, five flyers of the Sixtieth have met mysterious and violent death, evidence in each case pointing to murder.

The only thing we have discovered which might point to a solution of the murders is that all of these five were among the group of seven who denied shooting down the Boche bomber.

The surviving two of the seven are Lieutenant "Cockney Pete" Sauls and Captain "Devil" Leeds.

You are joining the Sixtieth ostensibly to bag von Fleigg. Make every effort to do this. But you will also bend every effort to solving these murders. Use care. Military intelligence sent an agent to investigate these killings and he was murdered.

This Sixtieth is a hard-boiled outfit and they have a cast-iron and brimstone skipper in the person of Major Geising. I can guess about how you two will get along. Sending you there to get von Fleigg insulted him no little. He gave me a cussing over the telephone when I told him you were coming. Unofficially, I hope you knock hell out of him. Officially, you had better bill and coo like a pair of doves.

Bustem, I'm sorry to hand you a lemon like this. But you're the man for the job. Go in there and stamp on everybody's toes and you may learn something. I can smooth out anything short of a killing. And if you succeed in shooting down von Fleigg, I can promise the ranking of major which you recently lost, will be restored. And should you solve these murders, I can also promiss you command of any pursuit squadron on the Front.

Luck to you!

General Sam H. Fitch,

Officer Commanding.

"Well, we've made a good start with our toe stamping!" Bustem grinned.

CHAPTER III RIFLE RAID

BUSTEM GROUND HIS HEEL on the cigarette and fashioned another. The match he used to light it, he touched to the letter he had just read, When the paper had burned into black crinklings, he gathered the bits in his palm and tossed them through the window.

He took a step toward the cot, halted suddenly and cupped both hands behind his ears.

Above the drumming roar of rain on the roof, the moaning of aeroplane exhausts had risen. The sound had a throbbing, uneven quality peculiar to German Mercedes motors.

"Krauts!" Bustem grunted. "A half dozen of them!"

He swept the Webley, the poisoned bullets and the sacklike mask under the blankets on his cot. Then he crashed the door open.

A siren whined softly, loudened to an excited wail. Lights about the field doused. Major Geising's frog-voice bellowed orders to get fighting ships upstairs. The snarl of Boche motors rose to a thundering howl. Hungry Spandau eyes peered redly from the dripping, fuliginous dome of the night heavens. Lead made a metallic rattle on a sheet-metal hangar roof. Searchlights squirted beams that were like incandescent rods. Archie thumped heavily. A machine gun gobbled.

A searchlight located a camouflage-daubed Boche Fokker D-7 and poked inquiringly along the fuselage. The letter and numerals emblazoned near the cockpit glistened wetly. U-13!

"*Hauptmann* von Fleigg!" a man howled, voice fright-cracked.

Spandau slugs came across the tarmac with a sound like a madly running rabbit. Light suddenly scalded the field as a German falcon dropped a flare. Captain Devil Leeds, running for a Sopwith Snipe, the only ship unhangared, abruptly veered for the shelter of a hangar.

Bustem sprinted for the Snipe, only to flatten in the mud. For the U-13 Fokker had pounced on the Snipe, turning it into a writhing bundle of red flame.

The raiders were too low for archie pegging. But

machine guns filled the streaming, calcium-whitened night with a rattling hell clamor.

Because there was nothing else to do Bustem Bill Harn rolled on his back and watched the Fokker horde of *Hauptmann* von Fleigg.

They droned about like gigantic hornets, banking, diving, Spandau muzzles licking the Sixtieth tarmac with bloody flame tongues.

Bustem grunted suddenly. He shaded his eyes against the flare light.

The U-13 Fokker had ripped around, sprayed lead at a machine-gun crew, then climbed howling into the night. A tiny message parachute broke out in its wake, flinging about madly in the slipstream vortex.

Bustem gauged the chute drift. The metal cannister of the message cylinder was plainly visible, swinging beneath the diminutive lobe of silk,

"*Whe-e-e! Spug!*" Two sounds, the squeal of a rifle bullet, the impact as it hit mud, were a conglomerate one. Somewhere about the field, somebody had shot at Bustem with a rifle!

"My Aunt Susie!" Bustem gulped. He rolled, doubling so that he went end over end like a circus tumbler.

The flare dropped by the German pilot hit the muddy tarmac with a loud fizzing. As it winked out, Bustem stopped his rolling. In the searchlight-gutted sky overhead, the squawl of Fokkers rapidly receded. A glance upward showed the Boche brood hoicking triumphantly away, pursued by a lone searchlight beam.

The hoarse stutter of machine guns around the field died. The rodlike searchlight beams began collapsing in midair.

"Let'm go!" Major Geising's frog voice roared angrily in the darkness. "You couldn't catch the beggers, you rabbits!"

EARS strained in the comparative quiet following the raid, Bustem caught a tinny thump. He ran for the sound and found the message container, the silken chute just collapsing. Carrying the cannister, he slopped through the mud to the operations office.

The place was empty. Kicking the door shut, he turned on the lights and uncapped the message can. It held two sheets of paper, clipped together. A glance disclosed his own handwriting on the lowermost. He detached that hastily and stuffed it in his hip pocket. Then he read the other. It was couched in excellent English, the pen-printed letters small and painstakingly made.

Captain Bustem Bill Harn:

My greetings to you! I had never heard of you, but my commanding officers evidently have, for they generously offer me a month leave of absence and mayhap more medals for the article which you, evidently being an American, call your scalp.

I am jubilant. To-night, I write my fiancée, informing her we shall be married very soon, with a whole month for our honeymoon. You are a blessing, Bustem Bill Harn.

Would ten o'clock to-morrow, fifteen thousand feet above the lines before your drome, be too soon? I shall be alone, of course.

Hauptmann Robert von Fleigg.

The operations office door slammed open and Major Geising stamped inside swearing.

"Visibility practically zero!" he roared wrathfully. "And that Kraut son found our field! He can fly, the damned pest!"

He discovered Bustem.

"Half the men in the squadron didn't have witnesses to prove where they were when Cockney Pete was killed!" he grunted. Then he saw the paper. "Gimme that!"

He read the missive, swore explosively. "How'd he know you were here? Hell in petticoats! Have we got a spy in this outfit, to top the rest?"

Bustem grinned and produced the paper he had stuffed in his hip pocket. Major Geising glared at it.

Hauptmann Von Fleigg:

Greetings! The scalp-annexing season has opened and I have a hunch your curly fuzz would look good in my collection. How about a chance at it?

Bustem Bill Harn.

"You dropped this on von Fleigg's drome?" demanded Major Geising.

"Yeah," Bustem growled. "And a swell joke it turned out to be for me. That Fokker outfit shot my gas tank full of holes and I barely got across the lines. Cracked up setting down. I'll have to have a new wagon."

"Headquarters' fair haired boy!" snorted the frog-voiced major. "You made a fine start!"

Captain Devil Leeds of the pointed ears entered the operations office.

"No one killed," he said. "Other than that one ship they burned, they did little damage."

Remembering the celerity with which the Devil had sought cover during the raid, Bustem grinned insultingly. Devil frowned at him. Bustem frowned back intently.

"Somebody around here is a damned poor rifle shot!" he grunted suddenly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Major Geising.

"Somebody tried to potshoot me!" said Bustem. He explained about the rifle bullet which had come his direction in the midst of *Hauptmann* von Fleigg's visit.

Devil Leeds ripped out a stream of oaths. "We'll make every two-legged rabbit on this drome explain exactly where he was when the shut came," he roared.

"A very commendable idea," said Bustem.

The Devil squinted at him. The expression on Bustem Bill's face seemed to rankle.

"I don't give a damn whether you think it's commendable," he snarled.

"Rats!" growled Bustem.

"Stop that!" roared Major Geising., "Get the men in here! We'll find who fired that shot!"

The questioning got under way, but after the ninth man had been catechized, Major Geising belched out a stream of baffled profanity.

"Too much confusion!" he barked. "They ran around like scared chickens. Nobody seems to know a thing except that he was taking care of himself. We'll have to give it up."

BUSTEM BILL HARN slept that night with his cubicle door locked and a blanket over the window; he slept with his cot in a different corner from that in which it had formerly stood, where a rifle bullet through the planking walls would not be likely to find him.

Next morning, he drew a new ship. The old one had been a lopsided Sopwith Camel, a ship which had a habit of doing hair-raising stunts of its own in a dogfight. The new ship was a Sopwith Dolphin, a late production job, Hisso motored, good for a high speed of around a hundred and thirty-five.

Bustem checked over the motor, then took the ship upstairs for a test hop. Compared with his old Camel, the Dolphin was like a drink of rare *vin* after an enforced diet of stale water. Finding a small lake, he sent the Dolphin stabbing downward a number of times, fingers tight on the Bowdin trips, ears attuned to the satisfying chuckle of the Vickers, watching tracer thread down and boil the lake surface.

Major Geising and Captain Devil Leeds met him when he put the trucks back on the tarmac.

"I've notified everybody you are to meet von Fleigg and ordered them to keep out of that patch of sky!" growled Major Geising. "That Jerry has a reputation

for fairness, and for fighting."

Bustem stared at Devil Leeds intently. Devil returned the stare. His face reddened. The rosy muscles in his neck and wrists squirmed like snakes.

"I'm not going to take your riding!" he barked angrily.

"Who's riding you, spike-ears?" demanded Bustem.

"Damnation!" roared Major Geising. "Harn, you're going to get the guts kicked out of you. And I want the privilege of doing it!"

Bustem made an animal noise in his throat.

"Why not start kicking now?" he inquired harshly.

Major Geising's toad chest bloated. He shoved his jaw forward.

"I would, if you weren't going after von Fleigg!"

"I'll be back!"

"I don't think you will!" snarled Major Geising.

"But, by God, if you get back, I'm going to put you in the hospital!"

He grinned fiercely and stalked off. Devil Leeds followed him.

Bustem went to work testing guy-wires. He tightened turnbuckles, put a few last drops of oil on the guns, examined the ammo belts, drained the gas tank, strained new fuel into it through chamois. Satisfied, he stood back and squinted at the sky.

Nodules of cumulous clouds were hanging high, like soiled cotton puffs, hardly moving. Over the lines, these had banked, thickening into a great wall of somber gray that, near the bottom, darkened almost to sepia.

Devil Leeds, frying a Sopwith Snipe, led a patrol off with a businesslike pumping of an arm. The belligerent Major Geising, also in a Snipe, took another. Bustem bent a critical eye on their bird work.

"Good enough," he admitted after watching the two patrols take separate formation and dwindle into nothingness toward the lines. Which was by way of being high compliment.

He killed time until half an hour, before he was to meet von Fleigg. Bucketing himself in the Snipe, he took off in a manner anything but spectacular and circled the field three times, then arched away, swinging gracefully up into the frothy blue dome of the morning heavens.

Ten, thirteen, sixteen thousand feet and he still kept the stick back. War torn France was a mosaic beneath him, a vast brown and green smear, pocked and scratched where the trenches lay, the horizon a wall of faint slate-hued haze.

Clouds slapped at him like smoke puffs as he went higher. Then the vapor bunches sank beneath him. Seen from above and at close range, they seemed a vast, nodulose carpet instead of the disjointed cotton balls they resembled from below. Over the lines, the thicker bank resembled a fantastic, towering mountain range.

CHAPTER IV TRIPLE THREAT

HAUPTMANN VON FLEIGG'S FOKKER became visible an instant later. The U-13 ship was circling lazily over a great canyon in the clouds, exactly at the designated rendezvous of duel.

Bustem dived into the clouds hurriedly, hoping to greet the German falcon with a spectacular and unexpected appearance. The exhaust stacks of his Hisso lifted a hoarse, bawling cadence of power as he hammered the throttle against the wide-open pinstop. The Bowdin wires writhed and his Vickers gobbled a warming burst.

The brilliant sheen of the sun seemed to crash about him as the Dolphin pitched into the cloud canyon. But von Fleigg was too old a hawk to be caught napping. He was on the opposite side of the canyon, his Fokker tail down, gathering precious altitude.

Bustem hastily hauled on the stick. He twitched his Bowdins, making sure cloud moisture had not gummed the Vickers mechanism. The tracer draped far short of the U-13 Fokker, but von Fleigg saw, and flinging about, saluted a return burst. Then he ignored the Dolphin and spiraled for more altitude. Bustem grinned and followed his example. The ships screwed upward, a mile apart, each pilot keeping his eyes on the other.

Suddenly a shudder wracked the Dolphin. Instantly apprehensive, Bustem strained his ears, his eyes running over the instruments. All seemed well. But the shudder came again, more violent, then a snapping, crashing holocaust of sound.

The upper wing fabric scabbed off in handfuls before Bustem Bill's eyes. The windshield acquired jagged holes. Lead gnashed into the instrument board

with a cracking snarl. Another ship had him ringed from behind!

"The dirty skate!" Bustem squawked wrathfully. "A trap!"

He hammered the stick into his stomach. His right foot hit the rudder with a force threatening to smash it through the fire wall. The Dolphin came around in a wild careen.

But it was no Boche lead raking him. A Sopwith Snipe rode his tail. And it bore the insignia of the Sixtieth, R.F.C.

Bustem peeled his lips off his teeth and blew searing, blistering curses. For the head of the man bucketed in the Snipe cockpit was a featureless brown wart, enveloped in a sacklike mask of cloth.

The Hisso in the nose of the Dolphin gave a plopping sob and died.

The Dolphin became as fluttering, helpless as a boy's kite with a broken string. Bustem Bill Harn crashed the stick on the instrument panel. Downward the Dolphin floundered in a tight spiral.

Motor bawling, flying wires squawling, the bushwhacking Snipe rocketed alongside. The masked head in the cockpit twisted like something mechanical, the eyeholes glowering. It went past, to whip back in a strut-wrenching bank. Flame licked the Vickers muzzles.

Lead whistled and pounded the silently spinning Dolphin with a loudness almost deafening. Wildly, Bustem stirred the stick. He got the ship sideslipping sluggishly.

Again the Snipe volleyed past. It slanted over to come back. But half around, it suddenly flipped back level and fled, exhaust stacks moaning, for the clouds from which it must have pounced.

Bustem jerked around. The U-13 Fokker of *Hauptmann* von Fleigg was coming across the cloud-canyon with a cannonball roar. Tracer stuck out from its coffin snout like two fragile, angry whiskers. The U-13 ship boomed within a hundred feet of the silent falling Dolphin.

THE *Hauptmann*, crouched low in the cockpit, ignored Bustem, who was cold meat for the taking. He was a big man, this von Fleigg, the king Spandau artist of Imperial Germany. And homely! His nose was snub, his mouth a gigantic, toothy crack, his face a splattering of freckles like brown camouflage spots.

Bustem Bill Harn gave attention to his Dolphin, slanting the ship out in a glide that would take it well

into France. When he glanced upward again, he was in time to see the bushwhacking Sopwith Snipe and its masked pilot scuttle into a cloud with the U-13 Fokker raging in pursuit.

The earth came up at Bustem Bill's hushed Dolphin, swelling, bloating, festering out pimped clusters of towns and scratches of streams and roads and ditches and trenches. Bustem raked the terrain in quest of an emergency field. He selected a grassy stretch, evidently once a lawn, which lay beside the shell-torn remnants of a chateau.

He deadsticked down. The Dolphin bucked, careened, but held upright. Bustem exploded his bulk out of the well while the wheels still turned. Throwing his weight on the stabilizer, he braked the crate to a standstill split seconds before it would have rammed the cracked bowl of a dry ornamental fountain.

Artillerymen from a camouflaged battery near the chateau ran toward him.

He looked upward, searching among the clouds for planes. For a time he discerned nothing. Then he made out a single ship. A Fokker, high, careening aimlessly from cloud to cloud in search of a quarry it had lost. The Fokker dropped beneath the clouds and swung a great circle. It abruptly plummeted downward, heading for the spot where Bustem had landed. An anti-aircraft shell flowered a great, gray puffball beneath the dropping Fokker. Others bloomed near by. Von Fleigg flung to the right, then the left and kept coming.

The artillerymen pivoted and pounded back for their camouflaged emplacement. Bustem draped his big frame against the Dolphin flanks, head hinged back, and waited.

Pulling out of the dive, von Fleigg sent his U-13 screaming close to the lawn. His head pushed across the cockpit rim. He split his face in a wide, toothy grin. Both hands flipped out of the cockpit, clasped, as he shook with himself.

Bustem Bill Harn returned the grin and the gesture.

With a wave of his hand upward and a shake of his head, the *Hauptmann* indicated he had been unable to catch the masked bushwhacker. Then he was gone, blasted up into the heavens by a hot roar of his Mercedes.

Bustem squinted after the receding ship, his face long and thoughtful. He turned to the dead Hisso, loosened the engine cowling and slammed it open forcibly, peevishly.

"I'm gonna hate croaking that guy!" he growled.

It was sundown when Bustem Bill Harn fishtailed and put the trucks of the Dolphin down on the Sixtieth tarmac in a stall. Most of the day had gone in repairing the Hisso. Torn ignition cables had caused the motor stoppage, but lead from the masked man's guns had also ruined a pair of spark plugs and nicked a gasline.

Bustem cut the ignition, stripped off helmet and goggles and squinted at the handful of mechanics and pilots who had met him. He located Devil Leeds in the group. When the Devil smirked at him, Bustem glared.

"Did you lose formation this morning?" he demanded.

The devil-eared man nodded curtly,

"The sky was full of von Fleigg's Fokkers," he growled "They scattered our flight in the clouds."

"How about the other patrol?"

"The same. It was everybody himself with nobody knowing where others were. We outran them, however."

"You would!" Bustem snorted.

Ropy muscles began to crawl in the Devil's neck.

"I notice you came back smeared with glory!" he barked angrily.

"T'hell with you!" growled Bustem.

HARN stalked for the operations office. Of the flyers upstairs that morning, any one could be the man in the brown mask. They had all known the when and where of the duel.

Frog-voiced, big-chested Major Geising was in the operations office. He glowered at Bustem, his water-drop eyes sardonic.

"The fair-haired boy of G.H.Q.!" he croaked. "You accomplished about what I expected."

Bustem Bill Harn roared and hooked his right fist upward, driving it savagely for the frog-voiced man's jaw. The blow was terrific. But to Bustem Bill's disgusted surprise, it did not connect. Geising flicked his head aside.

The force of the blow lifted Bustem on tiptoes. The next instant he was flat on his back on the floor, ears ringing. He had been knocked down.

Geising backed to the door. He kicked the panel shut, threw the bolt, locking it on the inside. Then he punched on the lights, dispelling gloom of the rapidly approaching night.

Bustem twisted to his feet, catlike. His grin was incredulously gleeful.

"This is gonna be worth another court-martial!" he grunted.

"You won't get a court-martial!" Geising croaked. "You'll get a hospital bed, you false alarm!"

Bustem speared hopefully with one fist. Geising ducked it and stepped in. Bustem Bill's other fist, waiting for just that, met him in the throat. The major skidded backward, fell over a desk, hit on his head, came up instantly and charged back.

Dull, fleshy thudding of blows resounded as they came together. Bustem howled and hopped on one foot as his instep was stamped upon.

"Dirty, eh?" he roared. He fainted a haymaker and kicked the frog-voiced man in the stomach.

Geising's tongue ran out of his mouth. He tottered. Then he fell forward, wrapping his arms around Bustem. They crashed to the floor. Over and over they spun, stout furniture turning into match-wood, inkwells flying like ping-pong balls.

Bustem was getting some rather disagreeable facts. Major Geising could fight, and did. He was better than holding his own.

"I've been aching to dress you down, you ape!" Geising snarled. "But I couldn't put you in a hospital before you had your whack at von Fleigg!"

Bustem Bill's face turned green as a knee smashed him numerous times in the groin. He grabbed Major Geising by the hair and yanked his head forward, deliberately butting him in the nose. Then he chopped at the man's throat with the edge of one huge hand.

Clothing ripped as they tumbled across the floor. Bustem Bill's arms became entangled in the torn halves of his jacket and he got a half dozen quick, crushing blows in the face. Stunned, he found himself in a hammerlock, arms bent back. Pain shot through his elbows as Geising tightened. Bustem kicked and tore free an instant before he knew the bones would have broken.

Geising hopped backward, favoring one shin from which Bustem had kicked skin and flesh. Bustem booted the other foot from under him. Geising crashed down. Bustem hit him in the jaw. The major flopped back, eyes rolling. Bustem caught him by the hair, lifted him and hit him with another swing to the jaw. Major Geising went rag limp.

Gulping air, knees threatening to fold in both directions, Bustem staggered to the window and hung outside, very sick. After a while, he felt better. He stumbled to a chair and sat down.

A man banged on the door. He had banged before, Bustem realized now. Several men were outside, shouting excited demands. Evidently the fight sounds

had attracted attention. Leaving the chair, Bustem crossed the floor, watching his knees. They did not wobble overmuch. He opened the door.

Captain Devil Leeds jumped inside. More men funneled through in his wake. They saw Major Geising, on his back, breathing noisily.

"Jove!" somebody muttered. "The old wolf finally met his match!"

CHAPTER V THE REAPER'S KEY

BUSTEM BILL'S EYES, calculating Major Geising's condition, absently noted a flat steel key, suspended around the man's neck by a length of boot lace. He attached no particular significance to the key at the instant. He walked to a corner and got the waterbucket. He was tilting the bucket, to dump the contents on the unconscious man, when the lights went out.

There was silence an instant. The darkness was black, impenetrable. Then a man swore. Another laughed. The light switch clicked, but no burst of luminance answered.

"Switch won't work," some one said.

Bustem fished in his pocket, got a match and struck it. The fitful glow showed the men milling about.

Then Bustem started. The key had disappeared from around the neck of Major Geising!

More matches rasped and blazed. Somebody found and explained the cause of the light failure, a short-circuit in the cord of a desk lamp. The cord trailed across the floor and the current-bearing strands, insulation mutilated, had made contact.

"Stepped on," hazarded the man who had found the trouble.

Bustem Bill Harn squinted about, wondering if the stepping could have been deliberate. He was not sure just who had been present when the lights went out. Bustem tilted the contents of the waterbucket on Major Geising. The frog-voiced officer stirred, sat up. His eyes rested on Bustem.

"Hell!" he growled. "I must be getting soft. Has anybody seen my nursing bottle?"

Bustem grinned widely, reached down a hand and jerked Geising to his feet.

The major felt himself over. Absent-mindedly, his fingers sought his neck. They clawed aimlessly, searching for the key. But no change of expression was discernible in his slightly flabby face as he realized it was gone. He scowled at the assembled pilots.

"Get out of here!" he roared suddenly. "I can still whip any three of you!"

The operations office emptied precipitously. When the last man was outside, Major Geising slammed the door. Without looking at Bustem, he got a bottle and two glasses out of the desk. Bustem saw his eyes sweep the floor swiftly, as if hopeful of finding the key.

Filling both glasses, Geising extended one.

"I guess we'll get along," he growled.

"Sure," grinned Bustem. He hung his upper lip into the glass, licked the liquor which wet it, then downed the glass with a gulp. "Lights went out a minute ago," he offered suddenly. "When they came on, your key was gone."

Geising spilled whiskey on his chin as he drained his glass.

"Queer some one should take that," he grunted.

"It's the key to my bank box. I'll write the bank, telling them it is gone. No harm done. I guess. Now, Bustem, what happened this morning?"

Major Geising's contempt, his belligerence, had evaporated. But there was nothing ingratiating, nothing craven, in his manner. He spoke as one hard man to another.

Bustem gave an account of the events of the morning.

Geising swore harshly when the recital was done. "Learning the identity of the masked man will be difficult," he grated savagely. "Both patrols in the air at the time, that of my own and Captain Leeds, were scattered by Fokkers."

Bustem stood up and stretched.

"Wonder why our masked friend is picking on me?" he questioned.

"I don't know," muttered Geising. "I sure don't."

Bustem went outside, closed the door and stared at the unpainted boards speculatively for fully a minute. Then he listened. Certain meaningful estaminet sounds reached his ears. He made for these.

NIGHT had descended. Clouds were overhead and the darkness was ink-black, warm and a little sultry. Bustem found a cellar estaminet in the ruins of a village near the field. Bustem walked into the establishment, saw a fairly well lighted room, tables

on the left, a bar on the right, space to dance a bit in the center and a stairway leading up in the rear. A slattern woman of great age shuffled behind the bar. Another woman, younger, somewhat more comely, cared for the tables. Business seemed good. Many men of the Sixtieth were there, as well as infantrymen and artillerymen back for a respite from the lines and clerical workers from near-by depots and headquarters.

"*Un vin rouge!*" grunted Bustem. "Then some more *uns!*"

The slattern behind the bar slapped a bottle down before him. Bustem eyed the bottle, then stared intently at the hag. She squirmed uneasily, reached reluctantly for the bottle and substituted another, obviously of superior quality.

Bustem drank, draped his back to the bar and ran his eyes over the estaminet crowd. Men, watching him furtively, glanced quickly away when they met his eyes. He located a pilot of the Sixtieth who had been with one of the morning patrols and stared at the fellow intently. Soon the buzzard began shifting as if his chair had become uncomfortable. Abruptly he rose and sidled out through the door.

Bustem turned around to drink and grinned into the bottom of his glass.

Selecting another pilot of the Sixtieth, he proceeded to glare steadily. Within a few minutes that one got up and followed the first.

"The power of the human eye!" Bustem told himself, face solemn. "I sure must have a mean face."

He located devil-eared Captain Leeds among the drinkers. Fixing his eyes on the big pointed ears, Bustem proceeded to stare as if fascinated. The Devil returned his stare for an instant, then arose and stalked forward, stifflegged. He stopped an arm length away.

"I can't whip you, you baboon!" he snarled. "But, by God, I'm going to try if you don't lay off me!"

"Willing to try, eh?" demanded Bustem.

"Willing as hell!"

Bustem projected two fingers.

"You're the second guy in this outfit Whose spine hasn't turned to spaghetti," he grinned. "Have a drink."

Devil Leeds glowered at Bustem Bill's contagious grin. Suddenly he laughed. The mirth sound was dry, shrill, like the crackle of wadded paper.

"I'll drink with you," he said. "But you got this outfit wrong, big fellow. They're fighting men. But they're up against a combination that's rotten. Seven of them murdered, probably by some one within the

squadron. And that von Fleigg *jagdstaffel* in front of us is the most dangerous gang in Germany. The morale of the outfit is shot."

"They got a white man for a leader, those Krauts!" Bustem growled throatily.

"Von Fleigg's falcons are all white men. No hospitals are bombed in this sector. None of our men are followed down and murdered after they have made forced landings. But they're fighting fiends. Ordinarily we might hold our own. But with every manjack of us wondering if he will be the next to get shot in the back or poisoned, we're making a sorry mess."

DEVIL LEEDS got a new bottle of *vin*, sloshed two goblets full and extended one. Bustem Bill Harn downed the glassful.

"You're next," he said suddenly.

The Devil eyed him sharply.

"What do you mean I'm next?"

"There were seven of you," Bustem grunted softly.

"Six are dead. Why shouldn't you be next?"

The Devil's pointed ears twitched. "You're crazy as hell!" he rasped. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Bustem looked at the man narrowly. "You're a liar!" he snarled his thoughts aloud. "I could break your damned neck and you wouldn't talk. Otherwise, I'd pick you to pieces, a handful at a time. But listen, wisenheimer, I'm just about to the bottom of this!"

"You're crazy!" repeated Devil Leeds savagely. Without another word, he stalked back and rejoined his party.

"Didn't learn a thing," Bustem mumbled disgustedly.

He devoted himself to lowering the liquid level in the wine bottle. Within a few minutes, Major Geising entered the estaminet, sat at a table alone and drank.

Minutes dragged past. Bustem began to feel strangely apathetic with himself, with the wine and the world in general. An infantryman, face beaded with alcohol sweat, invited him to drink, and without waiting for an answer, made a disparaging remark about aviators in general. Bustem found himself too languorous to care about fighting.

"I'd better hit the hay!" he growled disgustedly.

Suddenly he stiffened.

"Hell frozen solid!" he exploded.

He charged headlong for the estaminet door, knocking tables out of his path. In the darkness outside, he ran wildly, breath a procession of great, labored gulps.

He found the fat doctor asleep on his cot and awakened him by dumping him bodily into the floor.

The medico sputtered and swore. Bustem shook him into silence. Then he opened his mouth and poked a finger into its cavernous depths.

"Pump me out!" he ordered. "I been poisoned! The stuff was in wine!"

The pudgy medico asked no questions. He scrambled off the floor and seized a stomach pump. He emptied Bustem, made him swallow a villainous-tasting liquid concoction and pumped him out again. Nearly an hour he worked. Then he jabbed Bustem in the ribs with a thumb.

"Get out of here and let me sleep!" he grunted. "You're all right now."

Bustem stood up. His head ached. His muscles were sore and his bones felt as if the marrow had soured. His stomach was raw. He slid the Webley from its shoulder sheath and dropped it into his coat pocket.

"What are you going to do?" the doctor demanded, his interest not wholly professional. "You'd better get in bed."

"I only drank with two guys," Bustem growled.

"Better get to bed," grunted the doctor. "I don't want to be up all night digging out bullets."

Bustem chuckled wolfishly and stumbled out into the night. He ran for the estaminet, pitched inside, gun in hand. With a hard-eyed stare, he raked the place.

"Where'd Geising and Leeds go?" he demanded.

"Left a minute ago," somebody muttered.

Bustem backed out, ran to his quarters and got a flashlight. Then he went to the cubicle of Major Geising. His knock got no answer. He eased inside and penciled the flash beam about. The frog-voiced man was not there. His bedding was unrumpled.

Bustem ran to the cubicle of Devil Leeds. He found it untenanted.

"Queer!" he growled.

CHAPTER VI MASK OF THE TRAITOR

IN THE DEW-WET GRASS beside the cubicle row Bustem sprawled on his back, breathing deeply to clear his head, and tried to think. He got to his feet at last and made certain preparations. He placed an empty tin fuel can against the door of Major Geising's cubicle and a bit of board against that of Devil Leeds,

in such a manner that, were either door opened, there would be noise.

He eased his bulk through the darkness for the hangar which housed his Dolphin. The hangar was closed with a sliding door. Bustem started to open the panel, remembered it had squeaked loudly that morning, and crawled back to the wall of the adjoining hanger. He ensconced himself there, sitting, back against the corrugated iron. There was just a chance the killer might try to tamper with the Dolphin. It was Geising or the Devil. And both had seen him bolt from the estaminet when he had discovered he was poisoned.

Where he sat, he could hear the can or the board fall should Geising or the Devil enter their quarters. He tried to think. The poison, whatever it was, had sapped enough of his vitality to leave him feeling extremely tired. The field of suspects was undoubtedly reduced to two, providing the old crone in the estaminet had not slipped him the poisoned liquor, which he did not consider likely. Geising could have doped the drink in the operations office, and the Devil could have accomplished the same thing in the estaminet. Bustem wracked his memory, but could conjure up nothing to indicate which of the pair had done the poisoning.

Suddenly he dropped consideration of the puzzle. For a stealthy sound had reached his ears. Some one was crawling along the wall of the hangar which housed the Dolphin!

Bustem Bill Harn straightened silently, palming his automatic. The prowler's sleeve rasped the hangar wall. Bustem fingered his flashlight, thumb hesitant on the button.

The hangar door grated as it was rolled back a few inches. Silence followed. Bustem advanced, squinting in the gloom. Then his knees folded as he let himself silently to the ground.

Another man was following the first into the hangar—doing it furtively. The shifting blur of the figure became visible momentarily, then faded into the blacker slash of the hangar door.

Suddenly Bustem discarded caution and flung forward. Out of the hangar pulsed sounds of a furious fight. Fist blows smacked and popped furiously. A man vented a whistling grunt. Oil drums upset, clattering. The men crashed against the plane, and the thumping of missed blows against the taut, doped fabric boomed like drum beats.

Bustem smashed into the partially opened hangar

door. The aperture was too narrow. He jerked his shoulder against it. Rust-cankered hinges shrieked as the door collapsed open half its length.

Bustem tightened on the flashlight button. Simultaneously, a gun cracked, spurting a flame tongue the length of a man's arm in his direction. Bustem released the flash button and pitched sidewise into the hangar. His head cracked the leading edge of the Dolphin wing and he sat down forcibly. The gun squirted powder flame at him again.

Bustem Bill's Webley sparked at the flash. Then he rolled. A hollow, melonlike thump sounded, metal against a human skull. There was a shuffling sound, evidently a man collapsing on the hard floor of the hangar.

Jerking the flash out at arm's length, Bustem pressed the button. Lead and powder fire gushed at him. Dodging, dousing the flash, he shot back. His gun lightning disclosed a man scuttling for the hangar door, the figure indistinct, a shifting blur.

He punched lead at it and charged. The fleeing man gained the hangar entrance, sent the sliding door screaming shut as Bustem crashed into it. Lead rapped the door, fired from outside.

Bustem tore at the sliding panel. The man outside had thrown the fastener, for it defied him, mangled his fingernails. He drew back, swung a foot and drove it repeatedly through the corrugated metal. Doubling, he pitched outside.

He lay sprawled where he landed and listened. Hearing nothing, he swore. Fully half a minute had been lost. His quarry had gotten away in the darkness.

WINDOWS reddened; pilots yelled excited questions. In a moment the field would be in an uproar. Bustem twirled the flash beam in a sweeping circle, risking a shot. He saw no one.

Jerking erect, he lunged back into the hangar. He twitched the flash about—into corners, on the floor, under the Dolphin. The beam disclosed a man face down beneath the right wing bank. A sacklike mask of brown cloth lay a few yards from the fellow. A small bottle reposed near by. Bustem turned the bottle with his toe. "Sulphuric acid!"

Poured into fittings which held the wing strut ends, or into turnbuckles with which flying wires were tightened, sulphuric acid would eat away the metal to a point where it would collapse under combat strain. One prowler had attacked the other, it was obvious. But which had carried the acid?

Bustem shoved the unconscious man's head with his booted foot, rolling it. The flabby features of frog-voiced Major Geising turned uppermost.

Bustem Bill Harn tangled his fingers in Geising's hair, lifted the officer's head, and slapped his face, first one cheek, then the other. Geising moaned, roused by the pain, stirred feebly. Bustem cuffed him again and splashed the flash beam in his face.

Geising sat up, eyes watering in the glare. His tongue seemed incapable of use. He kneaded his throat, hammered his chest. Then he managed to get words out.

"That devil hit me over the head kicked me in the belly," he labored. "I became suspicious of him, followed him here and caught him tampering with your plane. The masked killer—Devil Leeds!"

A roll of erratic, crashing reports blasted out. They mounted in volume, becoming the high-pitched moan of a warming Hisso.

"Grabbing a plane!" Bustem grunted. He pitched through the hole in the hangar door and located the roaring motor by the flame slobber from the exhaust stacks. The stabbing tongues changed position as the plane was taxied. Bustem went down the tarmac in a series of great, jackrabbit leaps.

The plane receded before him, taxiing with the wind while the motor warmed. Clawing out his gun, Bustem shot at the exhaust flames. The reddish slaving disappeared and the suddenly mounting roar of the motor denoted the plane had nosed about, the engine barrels hot. It howled across the field. Clipping fresh cartridges into his automatic, Bustem drove them at the ship.

The plane lifted off the darkened tarmac and flung up into the night, Hisso cans bawling triumphantly. A searchlight licked upward, tilted about crazily and the plane was suddenly embedded in the rodlike column of lustre. It was a Sopwith Snipe. Devil Leeds huddled in the cockpit.

The Snipe careened away in the direction of Germany.

Bustem Bill Harn pounded back for the hangar holding his Dolphin. Half-dressed pilots and grease-monkeys surged, onto the tarmac. A group trailed him into the hangar. Major Geising was still on the floor, holding his head.

"Can you catch him?" he demanded.

"How the hell do I know?" Bustem roared. "Action here, you buzzards!"

Men seized the Dolphin and trundled, it outside.

A mechanic did his dance on the prop end. With a blubber and a stubborn bang, the Hisso caught.

Bustem gestured hands off his wings and goosed the throttle. The Hisso howled, dragging the Dolphin along the spongy ground. To the other end of the tarmac with the wind he taxied, as the Devil had done, then came about. The ship leaped under fast spraying carburetor jets. Up into the sombre darkness it lifted with exhaust stacks yammering. Bustem banked for Germany.

His big hands explored the cockpit and found two plump cannisters of chute flares clipped in place. He threaded belts into the guns.

THE sky was puddled blackness. Ahead, deep in Jerryland, lightning stabbed with great jagged daggers, auguring a rainstorm in brew. When the altimeter needle crawled to a thousand feet, Bustem leveled. The fitfully slumbering gehenna of the front lines was marked by an occasional bright shell flash. At intervals, flares blazed over the trenches, seeming to hang stationary, No-Man's-Land floating upward like a great, disembodied platter of brown.

Bustem calculated his position carefully, then swerved a bit to the right. Unclipping a chute flare, he twitched the ignitor and flung it overside. With the appearance of the cone of iridescence below, he rammed the stick ahead.

A clearing, a ruined chateau near by, lay illuminated beneath—the same he had used as an emergency field that morning.

He beat the flare down in a fast landing. Throttling the Hisso to a mutter, he yelled. An answer, faint over the Hisso purr, came from the camouflaged battery. Trailing the words, a shell shrieked down out of the darkness and let go with a blatant roar a couple of hundred yards away. The man at the battery cursed.

"Get out of here, you bat!" he bellowed. "Didn't we get enough of you to-day?"

"Did a plane go past here a minute ago?" Bustem demanded through cupped hands.

"It bally well did! Headed for Germany!"

"Thanks!"

Bustem hit the throttle with his palm, rocked the stick forward, then back. The Dolphin came off easily and hurtled for Boche-land.

Lightning flung random broken javelins of crackling fire across the black sky ahead. The hollow bark of thunder mingled with the Hisso roar.

For perhaps five minutes Bustem let the Dolphin

hammer ahead. Then, deep in Germany, he saw rainbow-tinted sparks appear, a great puffball of them. An archie shell! More of the dazzling spark balls appeared. Bustem grunted and impatiently hammered the throttle.

The deadly aerial display meant Devil Leeds' Snipe was ahead. The anti-aircraft guns were pegging from the spot where Bustem knew *Hauptmann* von Fleigg's staffel was located.

Hun searchlights poked up inquiring clubs of luminance that fanned and searched, stiff white squib tentacles from the night-blackened belly of *Deutschland*. One finally found the Snipe. The others instantly concentrated on the ship.

Bustem Bill Harn fed his Vickers a loosening cough. He tilted the Dolphin, let it slide down in the night.

On von Fleigg's drome, action was rampant. Fighting ships were crawling from hangars, taking life and scudding upstairs. The terrain surrounding the drome had broken out in a rash of flame pips that were stuttering machine guns. More archie shells were bursting, laying a basing, boiling barrage ceiling that was like a carpet of flame. Down through the inferno of bursting metal, the Devil's Snipe screwed.

An oath rumbled in Bustem Bill's cavernous chest. The Devil was frantically trying to surrender. He swept in low for the Boche tarmac, searchlights scalding his Snipe.

But the German falcons misunderstood his purpose. They suspected trickery. A U-13 Fokker, von Fleigg's own war wagon, stabbed with ribboning Spandaus.

CHAPTER VII MYSTERY LOCK

DEVIL LEEDS TWISTED, glaring about wildly for the source of the lead that cracked about his ears. He apparently saw the flame-bleeding nozzles of the *Hauptmann's* Spandaus, for he wrenched the Snipe aside and rolled, abandoning the attempt to land. Bustem Bill Harn tried to follow, but the searchlights lost the Snipe.

Twice Bustem saw the flicker of flame he knew came from Jerry exhaust stacks and twice his fingers hardened on the Bowdin trips. Then the white-hot

blaze of a lightning flash revealed Devil Leeds' Snipe. It had dived and doubled back, hedgehopping low as it sought to reach the Jerry tarmac.

Bustem plunged his Dolphin in pursuit. Fokkers were thick as fleas upstairs now. Chute flares ripened like ruddy fruit of the fuliginous, rumbling night. The sharper wrack of anti-aircraft shells was a brittle orchestration in the bass overtones of plane motors and thunder.

Overhauling the Devil in a screaming dive, Bustem churned both feet on the rudder. His Dolphin waltzed, giving the Snipe a slipstream slap. Searchlights blazed upon them. The Devil fought his controls and got level again. He shoved erect in the cockpit, eyes glaring.

Bustem pantomimed the Devil to quit the dogfight, to go home. Devil shook his head, then both his fists.

Tracer suddenly streamed whistling about them. Bustem hinged his head and located the German so ambitious to see their epitaphs written after his name. He booted to one side and went over in a tight loop.

The Boche let him go in order to nock hit Spandaus on Devil Leeds. The Devil's Snipe wobbled. The Devil himself writhed in the well, lead-bitten.

Then Bustem Bill Harn ringed the bloodthirsty Jerry. His guns hammered a double fistful of jacketed lead.

The German writhed. He pitched against the safety belt. Both hands slapped to his head. His Fokker tumbled, leaflike, and balled into a shapeless linen and steel and splinter hulk full in the glare of a falling chute flare.

Bustem held his Dolphin upended, diving for what he decided was the Boche headquarters shack, gun triggers locked back. The shack windows caved in. Planks fell off the walls.

Hauling out, he searched for the Devil in the blood and cloud soaked sky. Not finding him, he kicked for von Fleigg, who came flinging in from the right.

The *Hauptmann* met him with shuttling Spandaus. Deftly, Bustem slipped right and left. The wasp-headed U-13 Fokker danced on his crossed sight wires. His Vickers gobbled.

Von Fleigg rolled clear, but left wing fabric scabs and strut splinters fluttered in the glimmering column of a searchlight beam. They jockeyed, matching maneuvers. Time after time, Bustem clenched the Bowdins convulsively, to see the Boche Spandau king vanish out of his cross-wire rings. As often, he blew oaths past his teeth and battled the controls to get the squeal of the *Hauptmann's* ravenous lead away from his ears.

Came finally a moment when Bustem lost the

searchlights which hounded him. He spiraled in the concealing darkness, eyes alert. A searchlight beam, waving crazily, impaled von Fleigg. He was below, a perfect mark.

Bustem dived, big fingers cuddling the trips. He glanced to the sides, upward. A Sopwith Snipe rode above. It slanted, following him. Deciding Devil Leeds had returned to the bird fray, Bustem focused his gaze on von Fleigg. The *Hauptmann* was banking. Bustem grinned and corrected a bit to ring the U-13 Fokker.

Suddenly his Dolphin wrenched. Lead hammered the steel Hisso vitals with a banging clamor like hades unleashed. Flame squirted from the cowl vents. It grew to a fantastic, awful plume. The Sopwith Snipe above had turned Bustem into a flamer!

GNASHING enamel off his teeth, Bustem side-slipped the flame. One arm across his face to shield off the searing heat, he cut the ignition. Swishing of hungry flame became a snarling moan as the Hisso died.

More lead rattled on the lifeless carcass of the Dolphin. The Snipe was trying to finish him. Bustem rolled, fighting the heat, falling clear of the pelting lead. With a howl, the murderous Snipe went past.

Bustem belched an astonished oath. It wasn't the Snipe of Devil Leeds. The Devil did not occupy the cockpit. The man who did had a sack mask over his head.

Descending in a terrific slip to keep the flame out of his face, Bustem threw the remaining flare overboard. The calcium glare showed level ground, comparatively free of trees and brush.

He leveled. The trucks hit. Shock-cord stretched, contracted and knocked the Dolphin six feet up. With the bounce, Bustem pitched overside. He tripped, fell. The burning plane caromed away. Flame drooled out on the wings and back into the cockpit. The tank let go a volcanic fire belch. Cartridges in the ammo belts went off like firecrackers.

Bustem got up painfully. Thunder laughed a satanic rumble. Bustem growled in his throat.

"What a half smart cluck I turned out to be!" he snarled.

A plane swooped in the darkness, scudding into the luminosity of the burning Dolphin. A Snipe!

The ship rattled its doughnuts on the ground. It rocked craftily, Leaping. A miracle must have kept it upright. Looping, the B.R. motor pulled the ship for the spot where Bustem crouched, Webley in hand. Devil Leeds waved feebly from the cockpit.

"Thought, you might want the bus!" The Devil's voice was an unstable yelp.

Gun jutted out, Bustem leaped forward. Then he swore a great oath and pocketed the weapon. For the Devil had been shot numerous times in the lower part of the body.

"Heads down!" croaked the Devil.

A Sopwith Snipe came howling down out of the night sky with guns a-slaver. Vickers-dug sod raised up rugose tufts. Lead spanked, Devil Leeds' plane danced a little on its tires. The Snipe lifted and banked. Bustem got a look at the wart of a head that stuck out of the cockpit. "Masked!" He blew the word out of a throat that worked with rage.

He seized the Devil, lifted him put gently and lunged under the oil-pan belly of the purring Hisso.

Howling back, the masked killer sprayed jacketed death. The Snipe of Devil Leeds, lead punished, trembled and made cracking sounds. The exhaust and Vickers clamor seemed to slap at them from above, then recede. Abruptly the sound gathered a new quality, became the whining bedlam of two ships in bird battle.

Bustem Bill Harn peered from beneath the Hisso, Grunting, he reached over and moved the Devil so he also could see. For a U-13 Fokker had pounced on that killer Snipe. Fluttering, maddened bats in the lightning-cracked night sky hell, the planes stabbed and sparred. Sometimes the light of the burning Dolphin was red on their laboring, camouflage-daubed bellies. Sometimes they became exhaust-slobbered flickerings of flame that skittered about in the sky. Sometimes all but the bawl of engine cans and the staccato yap of Vickers and Spandau were lost in the blackness.

Minutes Bustem and the Devil lay side by side, rigid as death, except that their eyes rolled like marbles in their heads, watching the tableau above—for they were going through the bat scrap with that U-13 Fokker. Then their arms went stiff and fingers knotted as if tight on Bowdin trips.

"Now!" breathed the Devil harshly.

"Nun!" von Fleigg must have echoed. And his shuttling Spandaus nailed the hellbat Snipe, spiked the masked killer to the garish, shuddering night sky with reddened streams of lead.

THE Snipe flailed. The prop flew off the Hisso crankshaft, a varnished splinter. Flame puffed. The Snipe fluttered, becoming a great firebrand. And when it hung upside down, a lifeless head and shoulders dangled loosely from the cockpit.

The Snipe gyrated, becoming a great, fiery meteor which shucked off smoking fabric scabs as an oak tree sheds the scarlet leaves of autumn. It fell with gathering speed and the roar of its descent lifted as a banshee wail above the crunching of thunder and the moan of angry German Fokker-birds in the distance, where they were sticking close above their drome to stave off an attack they had no way of knowing would not come.

The Snipe wailed down and turned into a squishing burst of flame against the hard topsoil of Germany. The crash trailed the flame burst, splintering, cataclysmic.

The sound twitched Bustem and the Devil out of their coma.

"Take my bus!" gulped the Devil. "Clear out!"

"Hell!" Bustem gathered up the Devil's slack frame and stumbled for the Snipe cockpit.

"Wasting your time!" the Devil yelled. "I'm done. It's a spiked tail and horns for me, and maybe I'll rate an assistant devilship!"

Spandau slugs suddenly trickled past. Bustem flung up a rage-twisted face. A U-13 Fokker swooped low. Half out of the cockpit, von Fleigg made meaningful gestures. Bustem Bill Harn dragged out his gun, realized the Webley was a peashooter against those guttering Spandaus, then roared an oath and threw the weapon away.

Von Fleigg waved again. He banked around and landed, rolling his U-13 ship to a stop two score yards away.

The Spandau king pitched out of his cockpit, a long-snouted Mauser automatic in hand. His homely, freckled face was all a-grin.

"*Wie gehts!*" he roared boisterously. "This iss goot! The hands very high, *bitte!*"

Bustem Bill Harn snarled. He lowered Devil Leeds on the grass and hunkered beside him.

"*Achtung!*" rapped von Fleigg. "Take care! To shoot you voot be painful to me!"

Bustem glared into the long-snouted Mauser, then into the *Hauptmann's* homely features. "My buddy's dying!" he ground out harshly.

Von Fleigg ran a tongue around his lips.

"My pardon, *mein Herr*. But remember you are mine prisoner." He stood back, Mauser ready.

Bustem doubled close to Devil Leeds.

"You came over to surrender?" His voice was barren of accusation.

"Righto!" The Devil's grin was wan and wry. "I

didn't care about going like the others. Around my neck—get them! My arms—too damned heavy to lift."

Bustem Bill Harn obediently tore open the Devil's jacket. Von Fleigg folded forward a little from the hips, gun ready. Bustem Bill's fingers found a loop of string around the Devil's neck, broke it. There were keys on the string, two of them.

"Seven keys like that, altogether!" mumbled the Devil. "Seven keys to Hell! You know about the Boche bomber the seven of us shot down in Egypt?"

"Uh-huh." Bustem brought an ear close to Devil Leeds' lips in order to catch his whispered words above the catty purr of the throttled Dolphin and Fokker motors.

"There was nearly a quarter of a million pounds in diamonds aboard the bomber, a million in your bally dollars, Yank. The Jerries must have been carrying the sparkers from one of their African colonies. The seven of us did for the bomber crew and took the diamonds. We denied ever seeing the bomber. The diamonds are in a Cairo bank, the British Colonial. We took seven keys. Any one would fit the bank box. Each man got a key."

DEVIL twisted his head, staring at the wagging pencils of searchlight beams where German Fokkers still circled above their drome. Lightning blazed and thunder roared and in the electric flash the Devil's face was a pale, fleshless thing of bone and roped tendon.

"One man outside the seven learned of the diamonds," he whispered. "Must have overheard us talking. When one after another of the seven were murdered, we suspected each other. But after Cockney Pete I was the only one left. To-night, I found the key taken from Cockney Pete—around the killer's neck!"

"Geising!" Bustem snarled.

The Devil managed a faint, rueful nod.

"Righto. I followed him to-night when he left the estaminet. He was tampering with your plane. I jumped him then—intended to kill him. But you spoiled that. I got rattled—decided he could accuse me of being the killer and make his lie stick. So I pulled—for Germany. But they wouldn't let me land!"

The Devil's whisper trailed away. A full minute there was silence. Von Fleigg stirred uneasily, fingering his long-snouted Mauser gun. Devil's whisper breathed again.

"Hell of a thing to ask, but will you do me a favor?"

Bustem Bill Harn's voice was hoarse. "Hell, yes!"

"The Sixtieth—good fellows. Disgrace to have this get out."

Bustem nodded. "I'll keep it quiet."

"You sure—can do?"

Bustem glowered at von Fleigg and the black-eyed Mauser snout.

"Can do," he said. "Easy, old man. Guess I'm fixed for the rest of the war."

The Devil's whisper gathered a little strength.

"But if—you should get back? I mean escape. You sure—could keep it quiet?"

Bustem Bill's voice grew guttural and splintery.

"I told you once I'd keep it quiet!" he growled. "If I get back, I'll see my report goes into confidential files. Headquarters will do that, provided the diamonds——"

The Devil interrupted with a sudden croak, "The damned rocks!"

"Provided the diamonds are turned over to the government," Bustem continued, "where they should have gone in the first place."

The Devil's grin barely dragged his lips off the ends of his teeth.

"Righto," he said. He rolled his eyes. "Stand up. I've got—an idea!"

Bustem obediently straightened, puzzled. Von Fleigg followed him with the Mauser gullet. Lightning crashed. The *Hauptmann* let the babble of sound die away overhead.

"*Endigen?*" he questioned. "Have you done? If so, kindly lift——"

The crash of a gunshot clipped his words. With a dying spasm of strength Devil Leeds had dragged out his revolver and fired. He missed but the lead went close enough to make von Fleigg bat his blue eyes and dodge.

Bustem lunged. Both huge hands floated out. One, a big globe of a fist, jarred the *Hauptmann's* head back so that his eyes glazed at the sky. The other, a great

grab of fingers, harvested the Mauser.

Von Fleigg fell down stiffly on his back. But he was cast-iron tough. Squirming, he sought to come erect. Bustem smeared him flat, mashed his face into the sod. Knobbing a bone-hard globe of a fist, he pistoned it against the *Hauptmann's* temple. With a jerk, the Boche relaxed and was unconscious.

Bustem flung over and seized Devil Leeds' wrists.

Somewhere not far distant, a Teutonic voice barked gutturals. Brush crashed. A German patrol was approaching the burning Dolphin. Jagged electric lances split the heavens. Thunder mumbled and rain came down in pelting sheets.

Reverently, Bustem Bill Harn folded the hands of Devil Leeds across his chest. The Devil had made his supreme surrender.

"Went out a man!" Bustem mumbled. And no frocked cleric could have paid higher tribute in prayerful eulogy.

Jerking away, he scooped up von Fleigg's great form. With it, he clambered into the Snipe cockpit. His left arm clamped the German's frame across the cockpit. His right palm jarred the throttle to the pin then transferred swiftly to the stick.

The Snipe, overloaded, jounced as it moved. Shockcord pumped. The pumping became a rattle, then vibration almost musical. Bustem dragged at the stick. The ship slammed up and down a few times, then took the air.

The Sixtieth drome, bonfires of petrol-doused rubbish marking the tarmac edges, was crawling toward them when von Fleigg twitched, yelled and awoke kicking and striking. Bustem held him with an effort.

"Quiet!" he bellowed. "You'll fall out!"

The Boche subsided. "*Gott!*" he bawled. "I am in a pickle, *hein?*"

"Right in the brine!" Bustem roared agreeably.

