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DASTRAL OF THE FLYING CORPS

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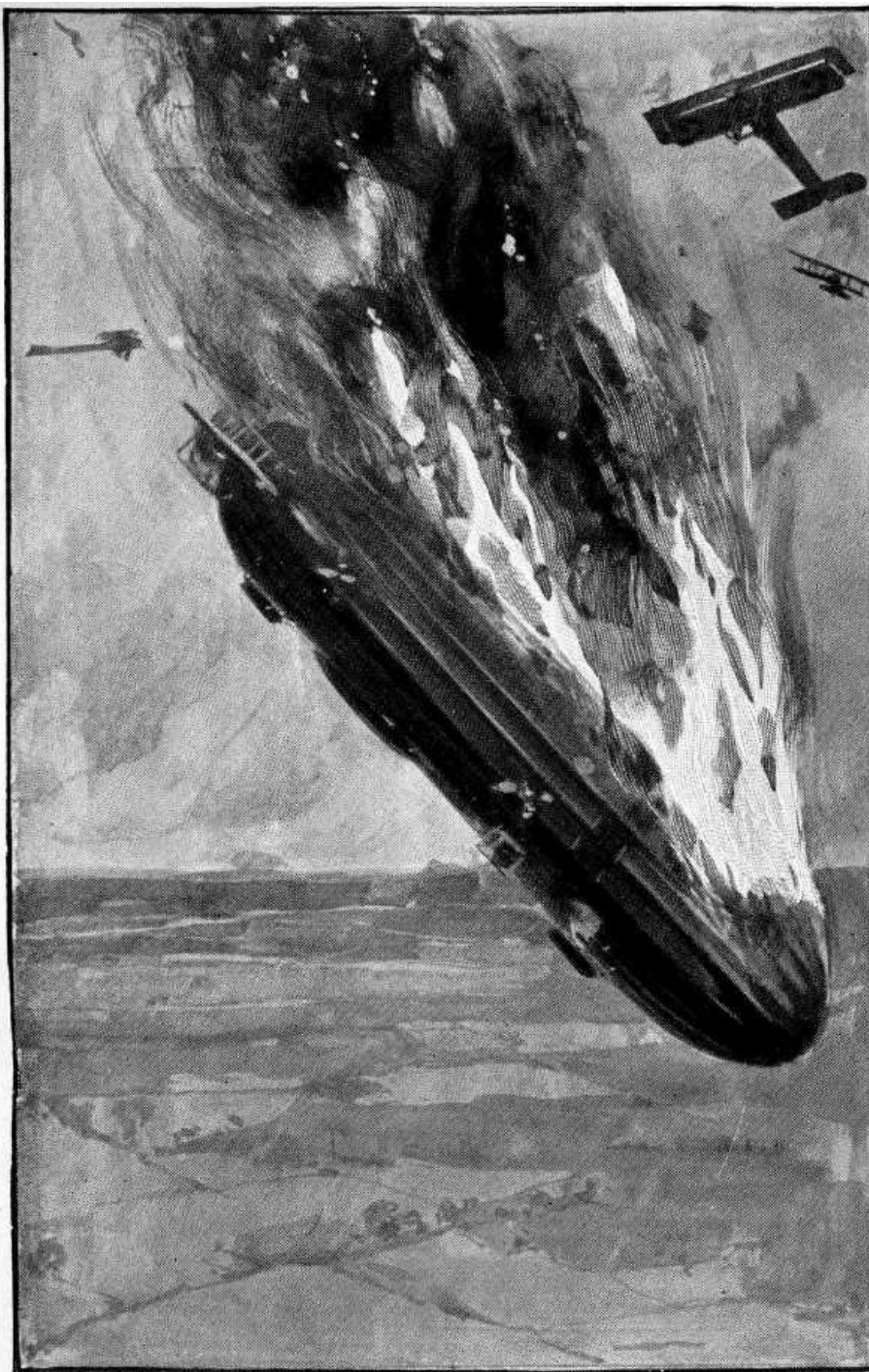
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BUCKLE OF SUBMARINE V 2
OSCAR DANBY, V.C.

S.W. PARTRIDGE & CO.
4, 5 & 6, SOHO SQUARE, LONDON, W.I.



"DOWN, DOWN WENT THE BLAZING MASS FOR A COUPLE OF THOUSAND FEET."

DASTRAL OF THE FLYING CORPS

BY

ROWLAND WALKER

AUTHOR OF "BUCKLE OF SUBMARINE V2," "THE TREASURE



S.W. PARTRIDGE & Co.
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To
THE PILOTS,
OBSERVERS AND AIR-MECHANICS
OF
THE ROYAL FLYING CORPS,
THIS
STORY OF ADVENTURE AND PERIL
IS
Dedicated

PREFACE

THE GREAT WAR OF 1914 opened the floodgates of hatred between the nations which took part and this stirring story, written when feelings were at their highest, conveys a true impression of the attitude adopted towards our enemies. No epithet was considered too strong for a German and whilst the narrative thus conveys the real atmosphere and conditions under which the tragic event was fought out it should be borne in mind that the animosities engendered by war are now happily a thing of the past. Therefore, the reader, whilst enjoying to the full this thrilling tale, will do well to remember that old enmities have passed away and that we are now reconciled to the Central Powers who were opposed to us.

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DASTRAL OF THE FLYING CORPS

CHAPTER I

DASTRAL WINS HIS PILOT'S BADGE

"One crowded hour of glorious life,

Is worth an age without a name."

--SCOTT.

AT the time of which I write, the smoke of battle still filled the air. The freedom of men and nations, the heritage of the ages, hung in the balance, so that even brave men were often filled with doubt and despair.

The German guns were thundering at the gates of Verdun, seeking a new pathway to Paris, for the ever-growing British army had barred the northern route to the capital of France and the shores of the English Channel. But even the attempt to hack a way through Verdun was doomed to failure, and the first rift of blue in a clouded sky was soon to appear.

Against that glittering wall of steel, where the heroic sons of France lined the trenches against the tyrant, hundreds of thousands of Prussians, Bavarians and Saxons were doomed to fall, and the best blood of Germany was already flowing like rivers, for, though the *poilus* during times of great pressure slowly yielded the outer forts inch by inch, yet the price which the enemy paid for

their advance was far too dear.

The future hung heavy with fate, and the civilised world looked on amazed, as the western armies, locked in the grip of death, swayed to and fro. The earth trembled with the shock of battle, and the very air vibrated with the whir-r-r of the fierce birds of prey, the wonderful product of the new age. Land and sea did not suffice as in days gone by, for in the heavens the struggle for freedom must also be fought. And many great men were beginning to say that the side which gained the mastery of the air, would also gain the mastery of Europe and the world.

In no country was this recognised more than in England, and at early dawn even remote villages were often stirred, and the inhabitants thrilled by the advent of the whirring 'planes and air-scouts, whose daring pilots were preparing to wrest the mastery of the air from the enemy.

The most daring of our English youths left the public schools and universities, and strained every nerve, risking death a hundred times, to gain the coveted brevet of a pilot's "wings" in the Royal Flying Corps.

So it happened that, during one fine morning in the early summer of 1916, a group of men, some of them wearing on the left breast of their service tunics the afore-mentioned brevet, were watching a young pilot undergoing his final test in the air before gaining his wings. The place where this occurred was over an aerodrome, somewhere near London.

"Phew! there he goes again. Just look at that spiral!" cried one of the onlookers.

"Ha! Now he's going to loop; watch him!" exclaimed another.

The daring aviator, who was flying a new two-seater fighting machine with a twelve-cylindered engine, capable of giving over fourteen hundred revolutions a minute, seemed perfectly oblivious of the danger he was in, as seen by those below, for he careered through space at a speed varying from eighty to nearly one hundred and twenty miles an hour, and performed the most amazing spirals, twists, and gymnastic gyrations imaginable.

The people below, even the pilots, watched him with bated breath, and sometimes with thumping hearts. They felt somehow that he was overdoing it, and sooner or later he would crash to earth and certain death. Several times even the experts, who were there to judge him, and award him the coveted brevet, felt sure that the youth had lost control of the 'plane, for she swerved so suddenly, and banked so swiftly, as she came round, that one of them exclaimed:--

"Good heavens, he's going to crash!"

"Phew! Just look there, he's met an air-pocket, and it's all over with the young devil," shouted a civilian, evidently a representative of the New Air Board.

But, strange to say, all their prophecies were wrong, for, recovering himself, the daring young flyer, Dastral as he was called, had the machine under perfect control, and was just as easy and comfortable up there at three thousand feet--and far happier--than if he had been in an arm-chair in the officers' mess at the aerodrome.

"There's a nose dive for you!" cried the major who commanded the Squadron at the aerodrome, and who had done more than any one to encourage the lad, and bring him out. As he spoke, the youth was speeding to earth in a thrilling nose-dive which must have been at the rate of anything approaching a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

For an instant it seemed as if the prediction of one of the gloomy prophets would now be fulfilled and the aviator would crash; but no, after a dive of a thousand feet Dastral, as cool as a cucumber, jammed over the controls, flattened out for a few seconds, looped three times in succession, then spiralling and banking with wonderful and mathematical precision, shut off the engine, and volplaned down to the ground, touching the earth lightly at the rate of some fifty miles an hour, taxied across the level turf, and brought up within ten yards of the astonished spectators.

"Humph! He's won his wings, major," exclaimed one of the small crowd.

"So he has," cried another. "He knows all the tricks of the air."

"Yes," exclaimed a third; "if he keeps on like that, he will prove a match for Himmelman himself, some day, should he ever chance to meet with him."

Now Himmelman was the crack German flyer--the Air-Fiend of the western front--the man who had made the German Flying Corps what it was, and had earned for it the great traditions it had already won.

A moment later, the youth leapt lightly from the cockpit, gave his hand to his observer to help him down, and, stepping lightly up to his Commanding Officer, saluted smartly.

"Capital, Dastral! You shall have your wings to-morrow. If anybody has ever won them you have," exclaimed the major, grasping the lad's hand, and greeting him warmly.

"Thank you, sir. It's very kind of you to say so," replied Dastral.

"Not at all. You've won them yourself, my boy, and I congratulate you. But, I say, you played the very devil up there. There are very few of our fellows who can do those monkey-tricks without crashing. It's a mercy you're alive, boy."

"Oh, it was only an extra turn or two, sir, just for the spectators. But, Jock, here, sir, my observer, is he all right for his brevet also?"

"Yes, he shall be gazetted and granted an observer's wing. I will get them through orders at once."

Once more Dastral thanked his chief, and, followed by Jock Fisker, his chum, who had entered the air service with him, and who was destined to accompany him through many an exciting air duel in the future, they returned to the machine, which was already being keenly examined by a group of the privileged onlookers, before the air-mechanics returned it to the shed.

Shortly afterwards, as Dastral and Jock were preparing to leave the aerodrome, the major came by, and, seeing that the young pilot wanted to speak to him, he said:--

"Well, what is it, Dastral?"

"Sir, now that I have gained my wings, I should like to be posted overseas as soon as possible, so as to join some active squadron with the Expeditionary Force in France. Would it be possible for you to push my request forward?"

"Humph! Rather early yet, isn't it, my boy?"

"Perhaps it is rather early, sir," replied the youth, blushing like a girl as he faced the C.O. "But I should like to take part in an air-fight before the scrapping finishes."

"We've a long way to go yet, Dastral, before it is finished. Still, as you are so keen, I will see what I can do. But it will take at least another fortnight to get the thing through. At any rate I will communicate with Wing Headquarters, and through them with the War Office. Perhaps General Henderson will accede to your request," added the major, for he well understood the lad's eagerness. He had felt it himself, and had already seen a good deal of that air-fighting of which the youth spoke, as the ribbons below his wings indicated, for he was the winner of the D.S.O. and also the Military Cross.

"Thank you, sir," and the pilot saluted again, but cast a sidelong glance at Jock, who stood a few paces away, and was already fretting in his soul lest Dastral should be sent away without him.

The major caught the glance and understood, for he turned sharply round after a few steps, and said:--

"And Jock, what about him?" smiling blandly at the lads.

"He is of age, sir, he can speak for himself," replied Dastral. "But I should like him to go overseas with me. We have done most of our training together, and we thoroughly understand each other, and I know that he's just dying to go with me, sir."

"Is that so, Jock?" asked the major, looking at the Scotch laddie, who had scarcely finished his course at Glasgow University when the war called him from his studies.

"Oh, yes, sir, I'd give all I possess to go overseas with Dastral." And the youth's eyes shone with joy at the very possibility of the event coming off, for he had feared that they were now to be separated.

"Very well. Don't expect too much, but possess your souls in patience for another fortnight or so. Goodbye!"

"Good-bye, sir!" and once more after the customary salute, the youths went their way, wondering how soon they would be in France, within sound of the guns.

For the next fortnight they were busy every day at the aerodrome, trying new machines, testing, carrying out imaginary reconnaissances over the German lines, bombing raids, studying war maps and plans, night flying and a score of other things that would prove useful when they found themselves in France.

One morning, about two weeks later, a telegram was delivered to Dastral at his rooms. It came from the War Office, and ran as follows:--

"Second Lieutenant Dastral and his observer to proceed overseas forthwith, on one of the new fighting planes, and to report his arrival at -- Squadron, British Expeditionary Force, France."

After the customary interview with the C.O., it was arranged that early next morning the two aviators were to make their first attempt at flying the Channel.

CHAPTER II

THE FERRY PILOT

IT was an hour before dawn, and the stars had not yet faded from the skies, when a group of air mechanics at one of the aerodromes just north of London were busy about the ailerons and fuselage of a new machine, which was destined to fly across the Channel that day, and to join one of the British Squadrons on the other side.

The secret of the machine had been well kept, and only a favoured few had been permitted to see the "hornet," as she was called. Great things were claimed for her when she joined one of the active squadrons, now fighting in France for the supremacy of the air.

Just a few folk in Old Blighty had been scared by the advent of the Fokker, the new German aeroplane which had recently come into existence, and for which such wonderful things were being claimed daily by the German "wireless."

"Double up there, you sleepy imps!" yelled Old Snorty, the aerodrome sergeant-major, a short, stout, florid, shiver-my-timbers type of disciplinarian. And another squad of sleepy air-mechanics, just out from their blankets, doubled up smartly to give a hand.

In a few minutes the hornet in question was ready for her long flight overseas. Every wire and strut had been carefully examined and proved, for men's lives depended upon the testing, and oiling, and straining. And now the silent, filmy thing was waiting only for the pilot and observer.

A sound of footsteps upon the soft turf of the aerodrome was heard, and voices carried lightly down the soft morning air.

"Halt! Who goes there?" called the sentry, standing near by, and at the same instant a hand lamp was flashed in the direction of the newcomers.

The sentry, however, appeared to recognise some important personality approaching, like the mastiff who knows, as if by instinct, the approach of his master, for, without waiting for an answer to his challenge, he shouted:--

"Guard, turn out!"

And instantly, the men in the guard tent turned out in time to salute the Commanding Officer of the Squadron, who came by with Dastral, the pilot, and Fisker, the observer.

Simultaneously, the air mechanics sprang to attention, as they stood about the hornet. Then, after a couple of minutes spent in chatting with the adventurers, who were about to sail forth on the wings of the morning, the O.C. and the pilot flung away their cigarettes and gave a few apparently casual glances over the framework by the aid of the hand-lamps.

"Better load up with a few twenty pound bombs, Dastral," laughed the O.C. "You may have the chance of using one going over seas. You never know your luck."

"Yes, sir," replied the youth.

A moment later the pilot and observer were seated in the biplane, snugly wrapped in their thick leather coats, their hands encased in huge gauntlets, and their helmets tightly drawn about their ears, ready for the morning adventure.

Dastral gave a final glance around, his hand already on the controls, then gave a nod to the chief of the ground staff.

"Swing the propellor!" came next, followed by "Stand clear!"

"Whiz-z-z!" went the huge blades, and, as the pilot switched on the current, the engines--powerful 100 horse-power ones, capable of some 1400 or 1500 revolutions a minute--broke into their wonderful song, and with a final word of parting from the Squadron Commander, the machine taxied off rapidly over the level turf.

"Burr-r-r-r!"

The air seemed full of a mighty sound, and a terrible vibration filled the heavens. It was the

song of the aeroplane.

At a hundred yards, in response to a very slight movement of the joy-stick, the winged creature leapt into the air, then circled around once or twice, climbing rapidly up to a couple of thousand feet, and made off south by south-east.

The first whisper of dawn came out of the east as the hornet headed off towards the great city, for a filmy streak of grey, followed by a saffron tint, appeared in the sky low down on their left hand. The stars overhead began to fade and disappear, as though withdrawn into the vaulted dome overhead. Then the saffron turned to crimson, and soon the eastern horizon was aflame with light, for, as the machine rose higher and higher, the horizon broadened, and the whole earth seemed to lie at her feet.

Now they were over the city, and the pilot laughed joyously, for he was exhilarated by the bracing air which rushed past him at a tremendous rate.

"Look there, Jock," he cried, pointing down far below, where, through the gloom which still enfolded the lower regions, a faint silvery streak showed where the majestic Thames rolled down under its many bridges to the sea.

Jock Fisker, his chum and observer, who was destined to see many an adventure with Dastral in the near future, peered over the side of the fuselage, and noted the river and the many spires of the great city. He saw the thin spire of St. Bride's reaching up towards him, St. Martin's, and St. Clement Danes'; and then, as the upper rim of the sun appeared above the horizon, he saw the blue-grey dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, and caught the flash of the sun upon the golden cross above it.

"How glorious!" Dastral ejaculated, half turning his head every now and then for Fisker to hear, as some impulse moved him but half the words were lost, or carried on by the rushing air into infinitude.

Soon, they left the southern outskirts of London far behind, and, as the daylight broadened, they looked upon the Surrey Downs, and the wide heath of the rolling countryside. Village after village they passed, with its red tiled roofs and church spire pointing heavenwards, but onwards, always onwards, they sped towards the white cliffs and the sea.

The slender, filmy thing had found herself this morning, for the R.A.F. engines were working splendidly, doing already nearly fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. Vibrating with an intensity that was perfectly marvellous, considering her fragile build, with every strut, bolt and wire in perfect unison, the hornet sailed majestically along at over eighty miles an hour, as though on a pleasure trip, instead of a life and death errand; for in reality she was bound overseas to join the forces in their fight for freedom's cause.

Now they were in Kent, the garden of England, and far below were the cherry orchards and the hop-fields. With his glasses Jock could now and then pick out a few farm labourers, already trudging along the roads, or working in the fields.

"There is the railway, Dastral!" shouted the observer, as he picked up the narrow thread of metals winding along towards Tunbridge.

"Yes, I see it now," replied his comrade, bringing his glasses to bear on the object for which he had been keenly searching for some minutes.

"Straight road now. Give her a few more points eastward."

Dastral altered the controls a little, and, banking slightly, the hornet came round smartly upon her new course, which, for the rest of the journey to the coast, was almost due east.

The continuous roar of the engines and the whir-r-r of the propeller made conversation almost impossible, except for a few short, jerky sentences, uttered in a loud, shrill voice, and accompanied by corresponding gestures.

The world beneath them was waking up now, for the two aviators could see the smoke ascending from the chimneys of a few scattered farmhouses and cottages. The birds, too, were astir, and the larks, mounting up towards the sun, made sweet music which was drowned in the whir-r-r of that strange-looking bird of prey, which sailed serenely above them. Instinct, however, made the songsters shrink and flee away from that hawk-like menace with stretched-out wings, for they evidently feared that it might swoop down upon and destroy them.

"Dover!" shouted the observer suddenly, as the Cinque Port came into view.

"Yes, by Jove! So it is. I hope they won't turn the guns of the fort upon us."

"No fear. They'll have been warned of our coming by now."

A minute later, they opened out the sea, the forts, and Shakespeare's Cliff, and within another three minutes they had crossed the boundary of sea and land, and at a tremendous altitude were gliding over the Channel.

"Nine thousand!" yelled Dastral, turning his head towards Jock, after casting a brief glance at his indicator.

"Now let her rip," cried the other, for in climbing to get the required height to rush the Channel, the machine had lost speed.

"Right-o!" came the answer.

So, in order to get speed quickly, Dastral did a little nose dive of about three hundred feet, then flattened out again, intending to rush the Channel at one hundred and twenty miles an hour, lest they should slip unconsciously into an air-pocket.

As he did so, he noticed a flash of fire followed by a puff of white smoke down at the Castle.

"A signal!" shouted Jock, who had noticed the occurrence at the same instant.

"Yes, they want to speak to us," and with a circling sweep the machine came round as Dastral pulled the joy-stick hard over, and swept back again until he hung right over Dover Castle.

"Can you make it out, old man?" asked the pilot.

"Yes, I have it," cried Fisker, whose eyes had been glued to a spot on the Castle grounds just at the top of the hill overlooking the naval harbour.

"What is it? Do they want us to go down?"

"No. The Commander of the fort says there are several enemy submarines in the Channel, and requests us to keep a sharp look-out for them as we cross over."

"Cheery-o, Jock! That's good news. I'm going to drop down a bit, then. There's a D.S.O. for you if you spot one. Here goes!" And with that, Dastral jammed over the controls again, and did a neat nose dive of two thousand feet, looping the loop once or twice just to express his joy, and give vent to his feelings.

Jock had picked up this information from a few white strips of calico, which had been stretched out in a curious fashion within the Castle grounds. To a trained observer like Fisker, it was mere child's play to read a code signal like that.

And now the daring joy-riders, keenly watched by hundreds of eyes far down below, left the shore once again, and the naval harbour with its shipping, and headed for the French coast, watching the surface of the sea as though they would read its secret.

"East-south-east, Dastral! That's the course till we sight the opposite shore," shouted Jock to his comrade, who, he thought, in his excitement and eagerness to spot a submarine lurking in the depths, might miss his way, as many a brave aviator before him had done.

"Right-o!" came the answer to this reminder, for the French coast was hid as yet in the morning mist. Then the course was altered slightly once again, in order to make a proper landfall on the other side.

They were flying low now, much lower than the usual regulations permitted, for it is necessary to keep a good altitude in crossing the Channel, not only because of the chance of running into a stray air-pocket, but to enable one to 'plane to safety should anything go wrong with the engines, for only a seaplane can ride the waves like a ship; and this was no seaplane they were riding to-day.

Far down below them they could see the patrol boats hunting for their prey. They could also see the mine-sweepers at work, clearing the fairway from those foul nests of floating mines which the crafty foe had been busy laying with their submarines. Once or twice they thought they could make out some dark-grey object like a mine or sunken vessel beneath the surface of the water.

A string of mine-sweepers were stretched out below them now. They could see them distinctly, could see even the long nets that trailed between them, for the sun was gaining power and the morning mists were rolling away. The grey expanse of water took on another hue, changing from a dull grey to a greenish tint, with patches here and there of deep blue, where the water deepened, or the surface of the mirror reflected a corresponding patch of the azure above.

Keenly now they searched the face of the deep for any dark speck, for, from an aeroplane, it is possible to look far down, often even to the bed of the sea; but as yet they saw nothing, save an occasional piece of wreckage, which had probably detached itself and floated from the treacherous Goodwins, away to the eastward and the northward--those treacherous shoals which hold the remains of so many gallant barques and vessels, from the Roman galley to the modern liner.

They had not long left the mine-sweepers on their port quarter when Jock, through his glasses, noted something like a string of porpoises, which, owing to the motion of the waves, appeared to be travelling along. They seemed so regular and orderly in their movement, however, that he was about to pass them over. Thinking, however, that he would like to call Dastral's attention to them,

he shouted:--

"Starboard bow, Dastral! Look at 'em! What are they? Not mines, surely. Look like porpoises, only they're not dark enough, and they don't tumble about much."

Dastral peered over the side of the cockpit and looked down.

"Can't say," he ejaculated.

"Let's go down a bit lower, old man," said Fisker.

"Aye, aye. Hold tight!" cried the pilot, for he noticed that Jock was standing up and leaning over, unstrapped.

"Right away! I'm all right," replied the observer, squatting down, and pressing his knees against the knee-board, which is the life-line of the aeroplane.

And down they went in a graceful nose-dive till they were within five hundred feet of the surface of the water, with the engines shut off. Then, as they flattened out, both men peered over the side again, and Dastral was the first to exclaim:--

"Porpoises be hanged! They're German mines. A whole string of them floating about in the fairway, ready for the first ship that comes along. The dirty Huns!"

"Snakes alive! So they are. Now I can make them out quite plainly; I can even see the horns and contacts through my glasses. Phew! There'll be a deuce of a mess shortly unless they're cleared up."

"Look alive, old man, or there'll be trouble!" shouted the pilot.

"How so?"

"See that ocean tramp coming up Channel. She's a seven thousand tonner, and her cargo's worth a couple of hundred thousand. She'll be right on the string of mines directly, and then--gee whiz!--there'll be fireworks, and another valuable cargo will have gone to Davy Jones' locker."

The mine-sweepers were about a couple of miles away by this time, but the Commodore of the little fleet had seen the rapid nose-dive of the hornet, and knew that something unusual was happening.

He had already strung out the signal for a boat to detach its nets and proceed at full steam to the spot, for he thought that the machine was coming down with engine trouble.

It was his duty, therefore, to save the men, and, if possible, salve the aeroplane also. Dastral saw the signal through his glasses, and watched the vessel cast off her nets to come up. His immediate concern, therefore, was for the tramp steamer surging up Channel, and nearing the end of her long voyage from Valparaiso to London. At all costs to the aeroplane, she must be saved from the deadly mines towards which she was now heading directly. The tide was with her, and she was coming up rapidly. In another five minutes she would be in the cunningly laid trap.

For the moment, Dastral continued to circle over the mine bed, hoping thereby to warn off the tramp. Of this she appeared to take no notice, though undoubtedly a score of eyes were watching his gymnastic gyrations from the deck and bridge of the vessel.

"Try the gun, Jock. Quick!"

"Rip-r-r-r-r!" went the Lewis gun, as Jock pressed the button and fired off half a drum of ammunition.

Even yet, the tramp steamer did not seem to understand, for her captain did not change her course.

"Is she fitted with wireless?" yelled Dastral.

"Yes," answered the observer, putting down his glasses into the socket for an instant.

"Then give her a message on the international code. It's her last chance. She'll be on the infernal things in another two minutes."

"Right-o! Here goes!" and, uncoiling the long aerial wire, he tapped out just one word on the sending key:--

"M I N E S!!!"

"Good. If that fails, the ship's done for!" ejaculated Fisker, as he watched eagerly for the ship to change her course.

On came the vessel, quite oblivious of the danger. She was less than a cable's length from the string of mines, and still steaming fast, when Dastral noted some movement about the deck,

where a dozen or so of the crew stood just for'ard of the bridge, in the waist, gazing intently at the 'plane.

"Heavens! It's too late!" gasped the pilot, as he saw the steamer's bows running dead on towards the very centre of the floating mines.

"No, she may just do it," he ventured to his observer, as he saw the sudden commotion on board.

Suddenly, out of the wireless room, the operator, evidently carrying the message, dashed up the companion way to the bridge, flourishing a piece of paper in his hand, and shouted:--

"Mines in the vicinity, sir!"

Then it was that the captain realised the danger he was in, for the mine-sweeper coming up on the starboard bow was also flying the signal for her to heave to.

Dashing to the wheelhouse door, a few paces away from where he had been standing, the captain shouted to the man at the helm,

"Hard-a-starboard!"

And though the tide was with her, the good ship swung round smartly, only in the very nick of time, for, as she turned, one of the deadly mines was within two feet of her stern, and the wash from her screw and the rapid movement of her rudder as she came round, caused the nearest mine to come into contact with a piece of wreckage, at which there was a terrific roar, and a huge column of water was lifted up and hurled some two hundred feet into the air.

Then followed a more terrible spectacle, for one after another the whole string of mines went off, as though they had been countermined. It was just as if there had been a sub-aqueous earthquake, for a prolonged roar of thunder, earsplitting and nerve-racking, immediately followed, while the sea for hundreds of yards around rose up like a huge waterspout, and for some minutes the whole surface of the water, hitherto placid, broke into tumultuous waves.

The tramp steamer received fifty tons of water upon her decks, but save for a slight starting of the plates in her stern, she was untouched. Nevertheless, she had to keep the pumps constantly in use for the remainder of her voyage.

After circling round the spot for another few minutes to speak with the Commodore of the fleet of mine-sweepers, Dastral turned the hornet's head once again towards the enemy's coast, and the captain of the tramp steamer dipped his pennant and gave a long blast on the siren, as a token of gratitude for the service rendered.

The aviators were well pleased with themselves for the part they had taken in the little adventure, which had not been without its thrills, and a spice of danger.

They were now almost in mid-Channel, and could see both shores. There were the white cliffs of Old Albion behind them, while in front, a little on their left, Cape Grisnez rose out of the water. Below them several liners, transports and colliers, could be seen making either up or down Channel, or for one of the ports on the English or French coasts. Turning round to Fisker, the pilot shouted through the speaking tube:--

"Sorry it wasn't a German submarine, old fellow. There'll be no D.S.O. for us for picking up a string of floating mines."

"Ah, well. Better luck next time," called back the observer.

"The place is too well patrolled now for the Huns' submarines to show themselves about here. Gemini! but I'd give my brevet and six months' pay to spot one this journey. It would be some find."

The observer did not reply immediately. He was keenly searching the opposite shore to find the breakwater at the entrance to Boulogne harbour.

"Can you see it yet?" called the pilot, noting an anxious look on Jock's face. "Yes," replied the latter. "Better give her another two points south, and then we shall just about hit the canal below the town. Our instructions were to follow it to the main aerodrome."

"Aye, aye," answered the pilot, altering the controls slightly, and bringing her head round upon a more southerly course.

Shortly after this, the town and harbour of Boulogne came into full view to the naked eye. Their intention was to leave it a little on their left, and, then making a landfall of a certain railhead and canal, take a short cross-country flight to the big aerodrome behind the British lines. They now began to regard themselves as nearly at the end of their journey, and had no expectation of a still greater adventure before them--an adventure which would prevent them reaching their destination, at any rate, that day.

Only some five or six miles of sea now lay between them and the land, and they were right over the track of the transports, which made a continuous line of traffic between the two shores, when Fisker, who had taken up his glasses again in order to watch a batch of troopships, escorted by a couple of destroyers, suddenly turned them on to a large four tunnelled hospital ship, which, coming out of the harbour, crowded with wounded and war-worn men, was ploughing its solitary way towards Old Blighty, without any other escort or protector than the Red Cross flag.

Suddenly, as he watched the stately vessel moving along at twenty-five knots, with the huge combers falling away from her bow, and a long milk-white trail from her stern, he started suddenly, and lowered his glasses, almost shrieking at the top of his voice:--

"See there, Dastral! Quick!"

"Where away?" cried the pilot, turning round sharply, and catching a glimpse of Fisker's horrified face.

"There!" exclaimed the observer, laconically, pointing with his hand in the direction of the hospital ship.

Dastral looked in the direction indicated.

"The brutes!" he gasped. "Not if I can prevent it."

That which had called forth these horrified expressions was nothing more or less than a lurking German submarine, hidden beneath the water, but with a few inches of periscope above the surface, manoeuvring to bring the huge hospital ship within its range. It had evidently watched the procession of transports pass by, but, fearing that it might be rammed by one of the destroyers if it revealed its presence, it had waited for some other tasty morsel to come along. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could touch but this hospital ship.

With any other nation, a vessel flying the sacred emblem of humanity, which floated from the masthead of the ship, would have been immune from attack. But to the Hun no code of morals seems to hold good. Nor was any crime to be regarded as such if only some damage could be inflicted upon the enemy.

"Ach, wohl, mein herr!" the German ober-lieutenant in the submarine was remarking to his superior officer at that moment. "The verdomt transports are gone, and there's nothing but a big 'hospital ship steaming by. Shall we loose a leetle tin fish at her? You can't trust these English; they're probably transporting materials of war. There are sure to be some staff officers on her decks anyhow. What say you, mein herr?"

"Sink the blamed hooker, Fritz! We can say that she tried to ram us, when we make out our report. No one will be any the wiser, for dead men can't tell tales. He, he! Ho, ho!"

And already the commander's hand was upon the lever in the conning-tower which controlled the torpedo tubes in the bow. Hesitating just for a second, as though battling with the last shreds of a lingering conscience, he pulled the lever.

"Swiss-s-s-h!" came the sound as the deadly missile left the tube and entered the water.

"Good heavens! She's fired!" exclaimed both the aviators, as, in the very middle of a dangerous nose dive they saw what had transpired, and followed for an instant, even in that downward dive, the wake of the deadly torpedo.

Fortunately, at that very moment the captain of the *Galicia*, the big four-funnelled boat, having had his attention attracted to the spot by the nose-dive of the warplane, saw the periscope of the enemy's submarine, and, starboarding his helm, swung the huge vessel just sufficiently to port for the first torpedo to miss his stern by a few feet.

Then commenced a stern chase, for the *Galicia*, seeing the imminent danger that she was in, sought refuge in flight. Placing her stern towards the oncoming submarine, she fled down Channel, hoping thereby to save her precious cargo of wounded heroes.

"Donner and blitz!" exclaimed the commander to his lieutenant. "We have missed her. That will never do. We must sink her now at any cost, or the American cables will be full of the affair, and the anger of the neutral world will be turned against us once more."

"What shall we do, mein herr?" asked the lieutenant of the submarine. "She can do twenty-five knots and we can only do seventeen while we are submerged."

"We must run her awash, and give her three-inch shells with the deck guns. The transports and patrols are some distance off now."

"She will be calling back the destroyers by now with her wireless, mein herr."

"Gott in Himmel! but we must risk it. There may just be time. I wish we had let the blamed hooker go by."

Then, with a few round oaths, he switched down the periscope, pulled over the lever that drove the water out of the ballast tanks, and, as the boat came to the surface, he had the hatch unshipped, and ordered his gun crew to stations, calling them dachshunds, and a few more vile names.

As soon as the submarine came to the surface, the electric motors were stopped, and the surface engines started so that every knot could be got out of them.

"All clear!" had been reported to him by the lieutenant, and as regards the narrow horizon which can be surveyed from the periscope of a submerged vessel, all was indeed clear, for they had not seen the hornet which was buzzing overhead, silently dipping and nose-diving with her engines shut off, and rapidly manoeuvring like an angry wasp, waiting but an opportunity to get at its victim.

So intent was the submarine commander upon his prey, with one eye on the hospital ship and another on the horizon, watching for the patrol boats, which he knew would be sure to return, that he had even got his deck-gun to work, and was firing rapidly at the *Galicia*, when to his dismay he heard, just over his head, the whir-r-r-r of the aeroplane, as Dastral started his engine again.

"Mein Gott, was ist das?" he cried.

"Ach, Himmel, but we are lost!" came the cry from the gunners and the ober-lieutenant.

"Dachshunds!--you verdomt fools, turn the gun on the aeroplane!" yelled the irate commander, but he realised that he had lost the game.

Nearer and nearer came that dreaded enemy, with its angry buzz, till but a hundred feet above the broad, whale-like back of the submarine, for Dastral, having but the two twenty-pound bombs in his carrier, determined not to miss his chance.

"Be careful, Jock!" he shouted. "Drop it right on her conning-tower. Take no risks."

"Right-o, old fellow!" Jock had replied, his hand on the bomb release. "She's giving us shrapnel, though. Look out!"

"Spit . . . Bang! Spit . . . Bang!" came the bursting shrapnel from the quick-firing gun on the deck of the submarine, and a shot hitting the left aileron of the warplane, just as the observer was releasing the first bomb, caused her to roll and bank so much that the bomb fell into the sea, just a few inches from the starboard beam of the boat.

"Great heavens, you've missed him!" shouted Dastral, as the bomb, which was fitted with a contact fuse, sank down harmlessly into the sea.

Jock bit his lips, which were white with anger at his failure, and placed his hand once more on the bomb release. It was his last bomb. If they failed this time they were done, for already they had lost several struts and wires, and the planes had been holed in a score of places.

Even Dastral's face was pale, though not with fear, as he jammed the rudder bar over with his feet, and using the joy-stick as well, came round swiftly once more, dropping down to within fifty feet of his enemy.

"Great Scott! She's preparing to submerge, Jock. For heaven's sake don't miss her this time!"

Jock did not reply, but taking true aim just as they were directly over the boat, he dropped his second and last bomb fairly and squarely on the conning-tower.

"Whis-s-s-h! Boom-m-m!" came the sound as the bomb descended swiftly and exploded right amidships, splitting the conning tower open, just as it was being closed ready for the boat to descend.

A blinding sheet of flame shot up into the sky, scorching both the pilot and the observer, and a crashing noise followed the explosion, as the submarine, her deck split open and rent in twain, opened out, then sank like a stone, carrying down with her the twenty-two men who manned her.

A few minutes afterwards the only trace of the pirates was an ever-extending patch of oil which floated on the surface of the water, punctured here and there by the air bubbles which forced their way through the patch.

So suddenly did she disappear from view that even the airmen, scorched and bruised and bleeding from slight shrapnel wounds, were amazed at the work of their hands. Dastral was the first to recover speech, however.

"Well done, Jock!" he cried. "Thus may all pirates perish who fire on the Red Cross flag."

The observer did not reply, however, for he had fallen forward in a dead faint, from sheer excitement and loss of blood; perhaps most of all from sheer fear of failure with his last bomb. And now his head was resting against the wind screen just in front of the cockpit.

"Jock! Jock! What's the matter?" Dastral called to him.

The observer made an effort to rouse himself, for he had only momentarily lost consciousness. He lifted up his head, tugged at his leather helmet, and managed at last to pull it off.

"Great Scott! You're wounded!" exclaimed Dastral as he saw the blood streaming from his companion's face.

"It's all right now. I feel better, Dastral. Carry on! The petrol tank overhead here is leaking, and we're about run out. But I've sent a message to the destroyers on the wireless and here they come."

Dastral turned sharply, and looked in the direction which Jock had indicated by slightly raising his hand.

"Yes. Hurrah! Here they come!" he cried.

And indeed there was no mistaking that long trail of black smoke just a couple of miles away, nor the white trail of foam as the combers broke and fell away from the two snake-like boats, which were coming up full pelt, for they had been drawn to the spot by the sound of the firing even before they had picked up Jock's message.

Nor did they come a moment too soon, for the aeroplane was wounded as well as her crew. Her work was done, at any rate for the next few days, until she had been overhauled by the smart air-mechanics, fitters and riggers of the Royal Flying Corps. The engine was missing too, very badly, for the petrol tank was pierced in several places, and the supply had almost run out. The planes and struts were damaged and in parts shot away, so much so, that, as Dastral jammed over the controls and banked to bring her round, with her head towards the rapidly approaching patrols, one of the wings collapsed, and she slithered down, slipping sideways into the sea, now only some thirty feet below her.

"Jump, Jock! Jump!" cried Dastral. And both the aviators, having managed to free themselves, leapt out as the singed and broken air-wasp lightly struck the waves.

Fortunately the life-saving jackets, which all the ferry pilots are compelled to wear when crossing the Channel, ensured their safety, once they managed to disentangle themselves from the wreckage of the 'plane.

"This way, Jock. Let us keep together. Here come the destroyers!" shouted the pilot. And the next instant, they heard a strong voice shout out--

"Hard-a-starboard there! Jam her over, man!"

And immediately after the same voice shouted to the man at the engine room telegraph--

"Full speed astern!"

Two minutes later both the aviators were safe on board the destroyer. A signal from her slender masthead caused the other boat to sweep round, pick up the wrecked warplane, which was already settling down, and to tow her into port.

So ended the adventure of the ferry-pilot and his companion. And next morning, after a good night's rest at the Hotel de l'Europe in Boulogne, a short message in a pink envelope, which was placed on the breakfast tray, informed the youthful and daring heroes that--

"His Majesty, King George the Fifth, desires to congratulate and to thank Lieutenants Dastral and Fisker, of the Royal Flying Corps, for, when on active service, their gallantry and courage in attacking and sinking the enemy submarine U41, and to confer upon them the COMPANIONSHIP OF THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER."

CHAPTER III

OVER THE GERMAN LINES

"WE must have been born under a lucky star, Jock, to win the D.S.O. as well as the thanks of the King, for that trifling little incident which occurred yesterday," said Dastral as they sat down to a substantial breakfast that morning, in the dainty little coffee-room which looked out on to the English Channel.

"It was a stroke of luck, anyhow, to encounter that U boat just when we did. We should have made a landfall in another five minutes, and then we should have missed her altogether," replied

his companion, pausing for an instant in his attack on the coffee and hot rolls.

"And the hospital ship?" queried the pilot.

"Ah, the brutes! But we were one too many for them," replied Jock. "I had the time of my life during that short fight. I'd just love a scrap like that every day. Almost wish I'd joined the R.N.A.S. now. What say you, old fellow? Besides, the odds were all on our side. The Hun never so much as suspected our presence, else he wouldn't have shown himself as he did."

"Just wait a few days, Jock, till we join our fellows down at the Squadron, and you'll have all the excitement you want."

"You mean?" went on the observer, looking up into the pilot's face as he helped himself to another portion of grilled ham and fried eggs.

"I mean," Dastral continued, without waiting for Jock to finish his sentence, "I mean, wait till we get orders from the new Squadron Commander to go over the German lines. The odds will not be so much in our favour."

"H'm! I wonder what it's like to be over there with the shrapnel bursting all around you, and miles and miles of trenches below you, with the 'Archies' spitting at you all the time with continuous bursts of fire, and the very heavens full of air-pockets."

"And half a dozen Fokkers coming up out of the horizon to scuttle you, and give you a spinning nose-dive of ten thousand feet into No Man's land, with your petrol tank blazing, and your engine missing, eh? Go on, you veritable misanthrope!" and here both the young heroes burst into a fit of laughter at the woeful, nerve-shattering picture which they had both been drawing.

Thus they continued to talk about the future which lay immediately before them. Yet all these things they were to see, and much more, ere they were many months older. They were full of life and vigour, and in action they were to prove daring and resourceful; yet they were wise in this, that they did not under-estimate either the task that lay before them, or the enemy they were to meet.

Their chief concern for the present, however, was centred on the broken aeroplane, with which they had started from England on the previous day for their first flight overseas. "I wonder what's become of the hornet," said Dastral, a few moments later, as they sat by the fireside, and settled down to a smoke.

"We shall hear shortly, as you have wired to the O.C. reporting the incident. Besides, the destroyer is sure to have brought her in, even if she is badly damaged."

Shortly after this the telephone bell in the corridor rang. A maid appeared, and after a very pretty French curtsey, said:--

"Monsieur le Commandant Dastral, s'il vous plait?"

"Ah, oui, Mademoiselle, qu'est-ce que vous voulez?" asked Dastral, rising to his feet, and returning the pretty maid's curtsey.

"C'est pour vous, ce message téléphonique."

"Merci, mam'selle," replied Dastral, as he hastened to the telephone box.

"Hullo! Who is that?" asked a voice some twenty or thirty miles away.

"Lieutenant Dastral, of the Flying Corps. Who is that, please?"

"Major Bulford, Squadron Commander, speaking from the aerodrome at St. Champau."

"Yes, sir!" replied Dastral smartly, springing unconsciously to attention, although the voice was so far away from him.

"Good-morning, Dastral. Congratulations, my boy. I have heard all about your adventures yesterday from my Adjutant. You've started well! You're just the man we're wanting here. We're having warm work with the Boches this week. You're a lucky dog to run into a German submarine on your first trip over."

"Oh, it was my observer, sir. He spotted the blamed thing, and bombed her. It was as easy as winking. Just a stroke of luck, sir, that's all."

"Well, I hope your luck 'll keep in. We shall be glad to see you as soon as you can come over. Are you both all right?"

"Yes, sir. Quite all right, 'cept for a slight chill through being in the water for a few minutes."

"Well, better stay where you are a couple of days if you are comfortable, and then come on here."

"Thank you, sir. Yes, we're quite comfortable here, and we'll report at the aerodrome in a couple of days."

"Right. Good-bye. Oh, I say! Are you there?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was going to tell you that the machine arrived here about an hour ago. It's some 'bus' and I like the look of her, except that she's badly smashed, and will be in the hands of the riggers and mechanics for four or five days before she can be used again."

"Oh, that's not so bad. I feared she would be useless after the crash she got, sir. How did you get her there so quickly?"

"Oh, we received word from the harbourmaster that she had been brought in by a destroyer, and we immediately sent down a couple of tenders with trailers and brought her on here this morning. Good-bye. The fellows here are all anxious to meet you."

"Good-bye, sir."

As soon as he had rung off Dastral rushed back into the room to tell Jock all about his chat with the O.C. of the Squadron at St. Champau, and especially about the two days' extra leave.

"Good!" ejaculated his friend. "Seems a decent sort of chap, eh?"

"Rather a sport, I should say, old man."

"Capital. That little affair of ours yesterday seems to have done us no harm. It'll probably give us a good entree into the new mess. Hope they're all decent fellows there."

So they spent half the morning resting after their exciting adventures of the previous day, and reading the papers, some of which gave censored accounts of the event. The two days passed all too quickly, and on the third morning they were both awakened just before dawn by the rep-r-r of a motor bicycle, which pulled up sharply outside the hotel.

It was "Brat" the despatch rider of the -- Squadron, who had come post haste from Major Bulford, with an urgent message which ran as follows:--

"To Lieutenant Dastral, D.S.O.,

"Hotel de l'Europe,

"Boulogne-sur-Mer.

"Be prepared to join Squadron immediately.

Tender will call for you within an hour.

"JOHN BULFORD, *Major.*"

Two hours later both the young officers were on their way to St. Champau, where they arrived before noon.

They received a warm welcome at the mess and were congratulated upon their recent adventure. They soon found that plenty of work and adventure awaited them on the morrow. The incessant roar of the British artillery, which was carrying out an intense bombardment of the whole front, amazed and bewildered them, for preparations were already in progress for the Somme "push."

Away to the eastward, the line of battle was clearly demarked. Shells were bursting in mid-air, and during the afternoon a huge mine was exploded under the enemy's trenches, which shook the earth for twenty miles around, and hurled thousands of tons of timber, rocks, and clay into the air, making a crater of huge diameter, towards which the British advanced and later in the day captured and consolidated the position.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, a flight of aeroplanes, which had been over the German lines, returned. Two of them had been badly hit and one of the observers had been seriously

wounded. They reported having encountered several flights of enemy 'planes, which, however, had avoided them and made off eastward. They also reported some unusual activity behind the enemy's lines, but, the weather having become dull, and the sky overcast, they were unable to make a full reconnaissance.

"H'm. There must be a further reconnaissance at dawn," the O.C. had remarked, after receiving their report. Then, turning to Dastral, he said:

"Lieutenant Dastral."

"Yes, sir," replied the young pilot, advancing towards his superior officer, and saluting smartly.

"The mechanics and riggers have been working day and night on your new machine since we received it. They will continue the work through the night, and I want you to supervise it, so that it will be ready before to-morrow. I want you to use it as soon as possible. We have lost so many of our machines lately over there," and here the O.C. made a gesture with his right hand towards that line of fire and blood, where the British and French troops held back the enemy's hordes.

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure, sir," replied the intrepid youth, glowing with pride at the thought that he was to be made use of so quickly.

"And--er--I want you to carefully study the map of the section in which we are working. It will be absolutely necessary for you to know every road, hamlet and village marked on that map, before you go over. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get to work at once, my dear fellow. I have great hopes of you, and if you continue as you have begun, I can promise you it will not be long before you are made a Flight-Commander."

Dastral blushed deeply at this compliment, for he was but a boy in years, despite his courage and resource. Leaving the Commander's presence, he went direct to the shed, where he found Jock, who was not only a brilliant observer but a first-rate mechanic, and already had the work in hand, having been drawn there by his affection for the filmy thing that had already brought them across the seas, and had served them so well during at least one great adventure.

"Well, how is she, Jock?" were his first words.

"Ripping!" replied the observer, handling the delicate creature as though she were a lady. "I've already been round her. The engine and propellor are quite sound now. The new petrol tank and feed are already fitted, and in another couple of hours she'll be as perfect as when she left England."

"Good!" exclaimed Dastral, who had the greatest confidence in the lad's judgment in these matters, and was prepared to back him against any expert in aerodynamics, or the mechanism of any aeroplane in existence.

"What say you to a trip in her this evening? There'll be plenty of time before dusk, old fellow."

"Yes, I'm quite agreed, even if it's only a joy-ride to try her, for to-morrow we go over there," said the pilot, flinging away the stump of his cigar, and jerking his thumb in the direction of his shoulder.

"Over where?" asked Jock, straightening himself from the stooping position he had assumed, to examine the baffle-plates on the propeller.

"Over the German lines," came the reply.

"Really! You mean it, and so soon?"

"Yes, to-morrow at dawn we go over on a reconnaissance; C.O.'s orders."

"Good!" exclaimed the observer, throwing down a spanner which he still held in his hand.

"And here's a map of the section in front of our lines. We must spend the evening over it."

So that evening, after the machine had been got quite ready for her next flight, they spent four hours over the map, scaling it out, and committing to memory the names of villages, hamlets, rivers, canals, roads and railway lines, so that when they retired to bed, the whole of the map was actually photographed upon their minds.

Morning came at length, and at the first whisper of dawn, having received their detailed orders from the Squadron-Commander, four or five aeroplanes were wheeled out on to the aerodrome, then taxied off quickly and disappeared in the dark. The last of the flight was the hornet, with Dastral and Jock starting on their first real venture over the enemy's lines.

After climbing rapidly, and circling round the aerodrome once or twice, the machines made off, each to reconnoitre the section of the line allotted to it.

The hornet carried two Lewis guns, with plenty of ammunition, for when an aerial patrol sets out on a flight, one never knows what duels he may have to engage in before he returns. The hornet had this advantage over the other machines, which were of an older pattern: she had a higher speed, was a better climber, and with her improved controls she could manoeuvre more quickly than any other machine yet made.

"Gee whiz!" cried Jock down the speaking tube, which ended close to the pilot's ear, "but she's climbing."

"What is it?" yelled back the pilot, half turning his head so that his mouth came near to the end of the tube.

"Three thousand feet," came the answer.

"Good! Then we'll make a bee-line and cross the trenches. Look out for 'Archie'!"

The dawn had broken by now, and away in the east the gloom was lifting, but down below it was still wrapped in mist and darkness. It was the hour of standing-to. Down below thousands of eyes would be straining through the obscurity to find that speck in the heavens whence came that whir-r-ring sound.

But upward and onward went the hornet With a stern, strong beat of power in her twelve-cylindere engine. Nearer and nearer she came to that long line which stretched from the sand-dunes of Belgium away to Switzerland. The observer was already keenly surveying the landscape through his glasses as the light broadened, and the countryside revealed itself.

A silvery streak lay beneath them; it was the River Ancre. Now a broad white patch of roadway came into view. It was the main road from Albert to Bapaume. As they came out of a bank of rolling mist and fog, a few red roofs and a church tower next came into view, standing just where four roads met.

"Contalmaison?" queried Dastral, and Jock, after a brief reference to his waterproof map, called back:

"Yes, and Bazentin on the left."

They were now almost over the trenches, and far beneath they could discern hundreds of tiny points of fires.

"What are they?" asked the pilot again, and the observer who had been scanning those red sparks for a couple of minutes replied,

"Fires in the British trenches. Men cooking their morning rations. Can't you smell the bacon?"

Dastral laughed and sniffed the keen morning air, as though in reality he could make out the fragrant aroma of the morning dish, about which those cold, wet, and shivering heroes of the trenches were standing, ankle-deep in mud and clay.

"The poor devils!" added the pilot, altering his controls slightly, and wheeling round to the south to pick up the enemy's lines more clearly at a point where they made a sharp curve.

They could now clearly see both the British and the German trenches. Three long, scarred and ragged lines of brown earth showed clearly where the enemy's front-line, reserve and support trenches stood. Long, twisting lines of similar demarcation showed where the communication trenches ran.

Now they were over No Man's land, sailing along serenely, and the artillery down below had already opened the morning concert on both fronts, when--

"Biff, puff----!" came a time-fuse shrapnel and burst scarcely a hundred feet in front of the machine. Then another and another as the "Archie" below spotted the hornet, and tried to give her a packet.

Suddenly they were in a cloud of yellow smoke and half-poisonous fumes, which made them gasp and sputter. Then, owing to the bursting of the shells and the heavy concussions they found themselves in a succession of air-pockets.

"Look out, Jock!" cried Dastral, as the machine rocked and swayed, banking over once or twice as though she had been hit.

For several minutes they ran the gauntlet of this heavy fire from the German A.A. guns, but the terrific speed at which they were travelling--now nearly one hundred and twenty miles per hour--soon carried them beyond the range of the enemy's guns.

Then it was that the day's work really began. Their orders were to reconnoitre behind the enemy's lines and to report by wireless code any occurrence, such as the threat of a massed attack by infantry, the moving of transport columns, or the locating of heavy artillery. It was also necessary, above all, to watch the skies for the appearance of hostile aircraft.

The other 'planes which started with the hornet that morning are seen low down on the horizon, to the north and the south. They also are searching all the terrain for any signs of activity on the part of the Boche.

Spurts of flame, like jets of fire, are seen in many places. These are the German fieldguns firing upon the British trenches. The observer does not make any particular note of these; he is out for bigger game.

Suddenly, the observer steadies his glasses, resting his arm for a moment on the side of the fuselage. The loop line of the Combles-Ginchy railway is just ahead of them and slightly on their right. Though it is very early yet, Jock notices that the line about Ginchy is crowded with traffic.

"Ahoy there, Dastral!" he calls down the speaking tube.

"Yes," comes back the laconic answer.

"Railway line blocked with traffic. Troops detraining, I think. Put her over a bit."

"Right-o!"

Dastral jams over the rudder bar with his foot and, responding to her huge tail rudder the hornet comes round in a swift circle, banking a little as the joy-stick is also put over. Then Jock takes another view, exclaiming, as he does so,

"Yes, by Jove, there must be a whole division of them. Here goes!"

And dropping the glasses into the pocket prepared for them, he rapidly uncoils the long pendant wire, and begins to tap the keys of his instrument.

"Caught them on the nap, Jock, eh? Stroke of luck. Case of the early bird. Tell the heavies to give 'em hell, old man," shouted Dastral, but the conversation was carried away into the morning breeze, for Jock was already sending the message which would shortly bring the thunder.

"Zip-zip-zip, zur-r-r-r, zip!" went the brief coded message, back over Longueval and Ginchy; over Contalmaison and the trenches to where the British heavy batteries were waiting.

Behind the Ancre, in a little dug-out, an expert operator catches up the message. He has been waiting for it impatiently since dawn. The brief tapping which his receiver picks up, tells him exactly the spot on the terrain behind the enemy's lines where the thunder is needed. The whole map is scaled out into tiny sections and sub-sections, each with a number or letter to indicate the point where the concentrated fire is needed.

"Quick!" cries the operator to the little exchange. "Give me H.Q. Heavy Batteries." Then as the reply comes through he gives:

"A-2-3. Concentrated fire!"

Within four minutes, while the hornet still circles over the luckless Germans, now alive to their danger and rushing over each other in their haste to finish the detraining of the column, flashes of fire are seen away to the west, and through the air comes a heavy explosive shell. It is followed by another and yet another. As they explode, the observer sees the earth blotted out from view for a few seconds. He notes how near the first shots fall to the target. Then he taps his keys once more.

"Zur, zip-zip!" cries the machine, and the next shell falls into the midst of the column, destroying nearly a whole train. And so for another ten minutes the airmen remain, altering the range until at least a dozen direct hits are scored, and the damage done to the railway, the trains, and the division or so of men is tremendous.

Very quickly, however, the men are scattered and placed out of danger, hiding in the woods, and under hedges and trees where they cannot be seen.

The Germans, aware of that dangerous pest overhead, have rushed up anti-aircraft guns to deal with it, and have also telephoned to the nearest aerodromes for their beloved Fokkers. So shortly after, having done as much damage as possible in a short space of time, the hornet moves off to reconnoitre further afield.

"Watch for their verdomt Fokkers, Jock," cries the pilot. "They may appear at any minute. Himmelman himself may be in the neighbourhood."

"Himmelman?" queries Jock, more to himself than to his comrade, as he looks round uneasily, for on the previous day he had heard some tall tales of the doings of this crack German flyer.

Then as they move off and open out the engine to gain speed, Jock sweeps the horizon for a sight of enemy 'planes, for a strange curiosity grips him at the thought of Himmelman, and he wonders half aloud whether it will ever be his fate to meet this renowned airman, who was said to have brought down more machines than any other man living.

But there is little time for soliloquy in the life of an airman in war time. He must ever be on the *qui vive*. And so for another half an hour, seeing no enemy 'planes to engage and remembering that he is out first of all for a reconnaissance, he watches the ground more and more closely.

They have moved south some distance by this time, and have crossed the railway near Cléry. Below them they see the narrow waters of the Somme, glistening in the sunshine, for by now the sun is up, and there is the promise of a brilliant day. Jock is keenly watching the white road that leads from Peronne to Albert.

"Ah! Ah!" He gasps. "What is that dark object that breaks the white, sunlit road, as though some dark shadow has fallen across it?"

He points it out to the pilot, with a few gestures, and Dastral spirals round, and makes off towards the place at a rapid rate.

As they approach the spot Jock scrutinises it yet more closely, for it looks suspicious. Then suddenly putting aside his glasses once more, he calls out,

"Enemy column on the march!"

"The deuce it is?" queries the pilot.

"Yes, ammunition column, I think, but we'll soon find out."

Then the tapping begins again, and the message is flung across the battle-ground and is picked up. With a swift mental calculation the observer has reckoned up when the head of the column will reach a certain point in the road, where a bridge carries the road over a tributary of the Somme.

"Swis-s-s-h! Boom-m-m-m!" comes the first heavy fifteen-inch shell.

It is a little short and another message on the keys is necessary.

This time the shell falls plump right into the middle of the column, for so accurately are the guns trained, that, though they cannot see the object they are firing at, if the message sent only gives the exact position on the map, a direct hit is soon gained.

The consternation of the Germans can be better imagined than described. Thinking themselves in comparative security so far behind the lines, a huge shell without the slightest warning explodes near by, and the next lands clean in the middle of the column.

The object hit was a motor lorry conveying ammunition up to the guns. The first explosion is followed by another, more terrific than the first, for a couple of hundred shells are exploded, and when the smoke and dust have cleared away the observer and his pilot look down, and there is a huge gap in the column, for two of the lorries are blazing, several have been overturned, and one has disappeared entirely from view.

Not only so but the road is blocked for the next six or seven hours for all traffic, and not only will guns go short of ammunition but more than one battalion of the German army will go short of food for the next twenty-four hours.

For half an hour the guns continue to shell the rest of the column, which by that time has managed to get the undamaged motors away, by dashing blindly down any side turning that leads to anywhere, out of that terrible inferno.

For a little while longer the observer continues to send cryptic messages back to headquarters, which have the immediate effect of altering and adjusting the range of the heavy batteries, until the whole convoy has dispersed sufficiently to prevent the waste of further ammunition.

Modern warfare is like a game of chess, with move and countermove, and this applies just as much to war in the air as to warfare on land. Evidently this morning, however, the enemy have been caught napping. His air patrols have not yet been sighted. Surely he has had time to deal with the offender up there in the skies, who has been reading the secret of his lines, and the movements in his rear, or can it be that he is laying a trap for the unwary?

So far the daring young adventurers have had it all their own way, but a surprise is in store for them. Meanwhile, however, they continue to circle around, noting half a dozen little things which Jock briefly enters on his memoranda sheet. A few photographs are also taken with the telescopic camera, for in reconnoitring the observer has noted some new lines of brown coloured earth showing up plainly against the green. Becoming suspicious he pointed them out to Dastral.

Holding the joy stick between his legs, Dastral takes the glasses for a minute, then cries out,

"New trenches, I believe!"

"I think so, but we must make sure. I want a snapshot. Reserve trenches probably. Perhaps the enemy are thinking of falling back the next time they are attacked in force."

"If so, we've got his secret. It's important; we must go down and see. Hold tight!"

At that moment while the couple were intent upon the line of new trenches below, they failed to notice a little cloud that was coming up out of the eastern horizon. Till now it had been bright and clear, as it often is at the break of dawn, but the first little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, had arisen. And it was in that cloud that the danger lay.

Heedless, however, of this little thing, and willing to take some deadly risks to get the precious photograph, which might prove to be the final link in some theory held at headquarters as to the position on the enemy's front, they ignored the coming danger.

Putting forward the controlling gear the hornet dipped her head, and made a graceful nose-dive at a terrific speed, losing in fifteen seconds that which she would shortly very badly need, namely, her altitude.

The long, downward glide is finished at last. They are within a thousand feet of the newly-dug trenches when they flatten out, and the camera is released and a series of short, sharp snaps are taken, as the instrument click-clicks. To-morrow, when these are developed, they will tell the divisional commander much that he wants to know, and may explain something which has puzzled him for days past.

At the moment, however, when they flatten out, half a dozen Archies, artfully concealed under a clump of bushes, suddenly open fire upon the intruder.

"Whis-s-s! Bang!" comes one of the shells and bursts within fifty feet of the 'plane.

For a few seconds they are blinded and stunned by the explosion, the flying metal and the deadly fumes. They gasp for their breath, and the aeroplane rocks wildly, but the terrific speed given them by the nose-dive carries them through the maelstrom once more.

"Are you hurt, Dastral?" shouts the observer, as soon as he himself regains the power of speech.

The pilot turns round just for half a second, and shakes his head, but Jock sees for himself that though he evidently does not know it, Dastral is wounded, for the visible part of his face is covered with blood. Jock, himself, feels that his left arm is useless, and he clenches it tightly with the other.

There is no time to waste in words, however, for another peril is at hand. They are soon out of range of the Archies, which, nevertheless, have riddled the planes with jagged holes. No vital part has been hit, however, and the two adventurers are not severely wounded.

"Is the engine all right?" shouts Jock, as he sees Dastral peer into the mechanism once or twice.

"She's 'pukka' (all right)," comes back the answer.

"Then we'd better make for home. Breakfast will be ready. It's nearly six o'clock, and we've been out an hour and a half."

Dastral nods, and heads the machine for home, altering the controls again in order to get a good altitude ready for crossing the trenches.

As he does so he happens to look away to the eastward, as the machine banks.

"Great Scott, look there!"

Jock did look, and in a cloud, not a couple of miles away, he saw two specks racing for them with twice the speed of an express train.

Seizing his glasses he fixed them for one second upon the objects, to discover, if possible, the rounded marks of the Allies upon the newcomers. Instead, he saw the black cross in a white rounded field, showing distinctly upon both machines.

"Enemy 'planes!" he shouted to the pilot.

"Himmelman?" suggested Dastral in a half bantering tone. "We're up against it this time, old man. He's the 'star turn' of the enemy's corps, and he fights like the deuce. I would like to have met him upon even terms. As it is, if we cannot leave him and get back with this information, we must fight him."

"Open the engine out, Dastral, and I'll bring the machine gun to bear."

Fortunately, the hornet had not been hit in any vital part, and her engine was running splendidly. But she had lost her altitude to get the precious photograph, having dropped nearly six thousand feet, and, in fighting, altitude counts a great deal, for it is much the same as the "weather gage" for which our sea-dogs used to contend in the olden days.

The hornet mounted two guns, but in a stern chase like this she could use only the rear

weapon. If he could only cripple one of their pursuers by getting the first shot in Jock knew that they would then be on more even terms, despite the fact that the enemy 'planes, having caught them unawares, had got the advantage of them.

"What are they, Jock?" asked the pilot.

"Fighting scouts, I fancy." Then half a minute later he added:

"Yes, Fokkers, both of them, single seaters with the gun forward."

"Are they gaining much?"

"Yes, they're creeping up rapidly. Now they're nose-diving to gain speed. Shall I open fire?"

"Not yet. Wait till they're within six hundred feet before you open. Cripple the leader if you can."

"Here they come. They're about to open on us."

"Biff, ping, ping, rap, rap!" and the Hornet was sprayed from wing to wing with machine gun bullets.

"Good heavens, the machine's like a sieve! She'll not last much longer at this rate," cried Dastral, as he looked round and surveyed the damage done. Then, turning round towards the observer, who was sighting his gun, he shouted wildly:

"Give it him, Jock!"

Then it was that Jock let fly, a full drum of ammunition clean at the fuselage of the leading enemy 'plane. Thus it was that nerve told. Not for nothing had Jock gained the highest honours in the School of Aerial Gunnery before putting his brevet up.

"Got him!" he cried exultantly, and the first machine went down in a spinning nose-dive under that withering fire, for the pilot at the controls was stone dead, shot through the head.

The next instant, however, the master-pilot of all the German airmen was upon them. While his companion had attacked from the level, he had kept his gage, and now, at the critical moment, he had appeared as it were from the clouds above their heads, firing from his bow gun as he did a thrilling nose-dive.

It was ever Himmelman's game to pounce upon his opponent and to beat him nearer and nearer to the ground, until he was forced to crash or make a landing in enemy territory. Once again he was about to triumph, so he thought, for never before had he caught his man so neatly.

But Dastral was no ordinary aviator, and though his machine was raked again from end to end, yet the engine still ran, and to Himmelman's surprise his quarry proved much more elusive than he thought. With his superior speed, owing to his downward drive, the German air-fiend swept round and round the hornet, firing all the while, but Dastral, his blood thoroughly up now, found an answering manoeuvre each time.

The end was near, however, for the English machine could not hold out much longer. Not only were the planes riddled, but several stays and struts were gone, and several times the engine had missed. To make matters worse, after the second drum the machine gun had jammed, and things seemed hopeless.

"Confound the gun! He's coming on again, Dastral," shouted the observer, clenching his fist, and forgetting all about the bullet in his arm.

"Look out, then, I'm going to ram him. If I've got to go down, he's going down with me."

The two machines were almost on a level now, and when the German came on, Dastral just put the joy-stick over, and made straight for his opponent.

"Donner and blitz!" yelled the irate Boche, for he did not understand such tactics. For one aeroplane to ram another in mid air at two thousand feet seemed incredible, but here was this mad Britisher coming straight for him.

"Mein Gott, no!" gasped Himmelman, and by a skilful manoeuvre he sheered off, though thousands of his fellow-countrymen were watching him from below, for they were now almost over the trenches.

"Bravo, Dastral!" yelled Jock, though but an instant before his heart seemed to be in his mouth, as the pilot made his almost fatal dash for his opponent.

Seeing that Himmelman had failed in his move, the anti-aircraft guns opened fire again from below, but the hornet sailed on over the trenches, and Himmelman did not follow, for out of the west three British fighters were coming to the rescue.

"Will she hold out, Dastral?" the observer asked a moment later, as they passed the British trenches, out of the range of the German Archies.

"I think so. Can you spot the aerodrome?"

"Yes, there it is, a little to the right."

"Thanks, I see it now," came the softened reply, for Dastral was rolling a little in his seat, as though he held the joy-stick with difficulty.

Jock bent over to help him, and the next minute they landed safely on the level turf. And Jock remembered hearing a voice say:

"Come along now. We're waiting breakfast for you in the mess."

CHAPTER IV

STRAFING THE BABY-KILLERS

DASTRAL and Jock received a hearty welcome home that morning. Although it was scarcely yet six o'clock, their day's work was finished, and a good day's work it had been. Dastral's laconic report was handed to the Squadron-Commander. Then, as soon as his slight flesh wounds had been dressed by the genial "Number Nine," as Captain Young, the medical officer for the squadron, was called, they went in to early morning breakfast at the mess.

"So you've had a scrap with Himmelman, have you, Lieutenant?" asked Number Nine at the breakfast table.

"Just a slight skirmish," replied Dastral.

"You're lucky to get away from him!"

"You think so?" queried the young pilot, pouring out another cup of coffee, and pressing Jock, whose wound was giving him a good deal of pain, to another slice of hot buttered toast.

"I do, decidedly. He's so deucedly clever that he's uncanny. We haven't found the man who can match him yet on our side. But one of these days we shall do it."

Dastral did not reply for some time. His mind was full of the details of the recent encounter he had had with the unbeaten champion. He wondered what Himmelman thought of his own tactics which had made the air-fiend sheer off at the last moment. And he also determined that should the opportunity ever come to fight with him on equal terms he would not refuse the challenge. If it were possible the western front should be rid of this champion, and the supremacy of the air wrested from the Germans.

For the next few days Dastral and Jock remained on light duty, nursing their wounds, and taking strolls about the aerodrome near Contalmaison. The hornet had been so badly damaged that it was necessary to send to England for new parts to be supplied before it could be flown again.

At the end of a fortnight, however, they were both quite well again, and the hornet had been brought to its pristine condition. Then they took part in several reconnaissances over the enemy's lines, and in more than one bombing raid, but nothing of unusual importance happened for nearly a month, when the following incident occurred:

Dastral had just been made Flight-Commander, and so, in addition to the hornet, three other active warplanes and three brilliant pilots who were ready to follow him to the "Gulfs," wherever that might be, had been placed under his command. This was the section of the Royal Flying Corps called "B" Flight, which was to win much fame and glory in the days of the near future. Already, Dastral, by his cool daring and skilful manoeuvring, had won a great name amongst his fellows, and some had even begun to talk of him as a possible competitor with Himmelman.

Often, after one of his more than usually brilliant raids or reconnaissances over the lines, his friends would remark of him in his absence:

"Some day he will meet with Himmelman again, and then one of the two will never return."

"What a fight that will be!" remarked Number Nine one day, as he lit his cigar and leaned back in his comfortable fauteuil, to puff rings of smoke into the air.

"And I hope I shall be there," said Mac, one of the pilots of "B" Flight.

"And while Dastral fights with Himmelman, may I be there to fight with Boelke," added Brum to his friend Steve, both pilots belonging to "B" Flight.

Brum was short and sturdy, while Steve, or Inky as he was sometimes called, was tall and thin and very dark, with piercing blue-grey eyes, and they both considered Dastral the finest and fairest fighter in the British Air Service.

One day, while the great fight on the Somme was in progress, and the Allies, by their great pressure were winning village after village from the enemy, there came a mysterious message to the Command Headquarters of the ---- Division, stating that the enemy had finished the construction of three huge Zeppelin sheds not far from Brussels. Also that the same number of Zeppelins had just arrived from Friedrichshaven to take possession of the sheds, evidently preparatory to a raid upon Paris or London.

The wires and despatch-riders were busy that day between the Command Headquarters and the Aerodrome. Plans were drawn up to destroy at an early date both the airships and the sheds. After some consideration, it was decided that "B" Flight should have the honour of carrying out the raid, and accordingly Dastral and Jock went to work at once with their maps and charts to evolve a thoroughly sound plan of campaign.

Several days later, towards evening, another coded message from the same secret service agent behind the lines came to hand by carrier pigeon, which when decoded ran something as follows:

"Two Zeppelins just left Brussels' sheds, travelling west-nor'-west!"

"Send Flight-Commander Dastral to me at once," said the Squadron-Commander, immediately the message was read to him.

As soon as Dastral appeared the O.C., who had been pacing about his little room, turned abruptly upon the pilot, and said,

"See this, Dastral?"

"Yes, sir," replied the youth, scanning the brief message, which told him so much.

"You know what it means?"

"It evidently means that a raid on London is imminent, and is being carried out to-night, I fancy, sir."

"Exactly!" snapped the O.C., who at such times became easily fractious and irritated.

At this moment the telephone in the C.O.'s office suddenly burst out,

"Ting-a-ling-ling!"

"Yes, who's there?" asked the Major sharply.

"Advanced Headquarters, Fourth Army. Are you the R.F.C.?"

"Yes--Squadron-Commander speaking from No. 10 Aerodrome."

"Right. News is just to hand by field telephone that three Zeppelins have passed overhead making for the Channel. We have wired the coast stations and the R.N.A.S. to look after them, and if possible to bring them down. There is evidently a raid in progress. What do you think you can do in the matter?" asked the officer at the other end.

"Hold on just a few seconds, sir!" replied the Major. Then, turning round to Dastral, he repeated the conversation briefly, and said,

"What do you suggest?"

"Just this, sir," replied the pilot. "Our plan to destroy the sheds is well forward, and we hoped to carry it out in three or four days. We know exactly where the place is----"

"Yes, yes, go on. The staff officer is waiting at the other end of the line," blurted out the C.O.

"Well, sir, if you will detail me to take my flight over there, so as to be on the spot at dawn, when the airships return, we may be able to strafe the lot. At any rate, we can destroy the sheds, and a Zeppelin would be useless without its cradle, and would soon come to grief."

"Good! Prepare your flight at once for the venture, and we must leave the other Squadrons and the R.N.A.S. and coast batteries to try and stop the raid."

"Yes, sir," replied the pilot, saluting smartly and departing on his errand.

So while the C.O. concluded his conversation with Headquarters over the 'phone, Dastral got to work at once with his flight.

While Snorty, the Aerodrome Sergeant-Major, and Yap, the rag-time "Corporal," and a squad of experienced air-mechanics prepared the machines for action, the Flight-Commander got together his pilots, Mac, Steve, and Brum, with their observers, and explained every detail of the proposed campaign. Distances were carefully worked out, a prearranged code of signals agreed upon, maps and charts examined and committed as far as possible to memory, and a score of necessary details worked up, so that there should be no confusion in the method of attack.

Having spent an hour thus discussing the matter and threshing out every aspect of the question that arose, Dastral said,

"Now then for a rendezvous, lads, for we must go singly, and come together smartly, at the precise moment, just as the dawn is breaking, which will be no easy matter."

"Let it be the Lion Mound on the battlefield at Waterloo," suggested Mac.

"Well, yes, that will do," said the Flight-Commander. "It is only about two miles away from the sheds, which are close by the village of Braine l'Alleud."

"Agreed," they all cried. "It will be a landmark we shall easily find."

"Then understand, all of you, that you must be there exactly as the dawn breaks, and, as soon as we pick each other up, we shall fall into regular flight formation, make a bee line for the sheds, and drop the squibs before the enemy can get to work with their Archies," said Dastral.

"And the cargo, Dastral? What shall we load up with?"

"Six twenty-pound bombs each, with ten drums of the new machine-gun ammunition. I think that will be all we can safely take without reducing speed."

"Right, sir!"

"And understand, boys," the leader went on. "There must be no fighting on the way there, even if attacked, unless it is absolutely necessary to prevent a crash. I quite expect we may have to fight an airship or two, and possibly a patrol of Fokkers or Aviatiks, for the Zeps are sure to be escorted on their way back, if they get wind of our little game."

"Agreed, sir."

"And now, gentlemen, to bed, all of you. It is imperative that you should each have a good night's rest, for if any man's nerves are run down in the morning, I shall put him off," said Dastral seriously, and they knew he meant it, for he could be serious at times, despite his laughing blue eyes, and his apparently gay and reckless manner.

So to bed they went, for they were all tired out, and not even the promise of the morrow's venture could keep them awake, for these daring airmen had learnt the happy knack of taking sleep whenever they could get it, as soon as duty was done, and of forgetting all about their machines as well as their own wonderful exploits.

Next morning, long before dawn, Corporal Yap, humming one of his rag-time songs, went round the bunks of the officers' mess and gently called the pilots and observers one by one. Within an hour they had breakfasted and were out on the aerodrome watching the machines being wheeled out, by the aid of the hand-lamps and electric torches.

After a brief but careful final examination of every strut and wire, the machines were quite ready, all loaded up, with the machine-guns shipped, compasses aboard, etc.

"All ready, sir!" reported Snorty, as he came up and saluted.

"Tumble aboard, lads!" called Dastral, and within two minutes the pilots and observers were in their seats, and the air mechanics standing ready to swing the propellers.

"Swish!" went the whirling blades.

"Stand clear!" came next in a shrill voice.

Then away into the darkness sped the four machines. In a few seconds they were lost to sight as they taxied across the aerodrome. Then one after another they leapt into the air, and began their upward climb, leaving their friends and well-wishers behind them, craning their necks to get a last view of them as they tried to locate them in the upper regions, by the hum of the gnome engines, and the loud whir-r-r of the propellers.

After rising rapidly to seven thousand feet the 'planes made off in the direction of the enemy's trenches, which they crossed at different points, for they had already separated in accordance with their plans. As they crossed the lines a dozen milk-white arms stretched up to reach them. These were the German searchlights, for the alarm had been raised and messages about.

"English aeroplanes crossing our lines!" had been flashed from the trenches to the Archies and the German searchlights.

"Boom-m! Boom-m!" went the anti-aircraft guns in a mad effort to find the raiders. But their efforts were futile, for the raiders looked down upon the little spurts of flame far beneath, and laughed as they quickly passed out of range.

The distance to be covered was nearly a hundred miles, before they arrived at the appointed rendezvous, but that did not trouble the daring aviators. Steering by compass, and watching the eastern sky right ahead for the first faint tinge of dawn, onwards they sped over Cambrai and the ruined fortress of Mauberge. Then they crossed into Belgian territory, that land of wretchedness and suffering, where a brave little people were enduring torment under the heel of the hated Prussian.

They were rapidly nearing the neighbourhood of the rendezvous when Jock called to Dastral, and shouted,

"Look, there comes Aurora, the Daughter of the Morn!"

The pilot looked in the direction indicated by his observer, and away to the eastward, over the far horizon, he saw the first grey streak which heralded the coming day.

He watched it as it grew and rapidly diffused itself over the sky. From grey it turned to a pale yellow, then as they still sped on, crimson flashes shot out over the firmament, as though the door of heaven had literally been unbarred, and the dark curtain of night had been rolled westward.

"Keep a good look-out for the other machines, Jock!" cried Dastral, for he had no time now to dwell in rhapsody over the beauty of the dawn. Danger was at hand, and he had a stern duty to fulfil.

The observer, however, did not need to be reminded; he was already peering through his glasses, searching the skies in the faint light for signs of the other 'planes.

"Can you make out any landmarks?" asked Dastral through the speaking tube, becoming not a little alarmed, and fearing that in the darkness they had overshot the mark and sailed past the rendezvous.

"Yes. Look, we are over a big city. I can see a dozen spires peeping up already through the gloom," replied the observer, after peering down towards the earth for another minute.

"Good!" ejaculated the pilot, bringing over the controls, and banking swiftly to come back on his course. "We must be over Brussels. We have come too far."

The next minute they were speeding away South-west towards the appointed rendezvous. Opening out the engine, they were soon going full pelt, before the enemy's guns could find them.

"Aircraft in sight to the northward," came next, for Jock had picked up a tiny speck away on their right.

And now for a moment there was intense excitement, for they knew not as yet whether the newcomer might prove to be an enemy, and they were anxious to avoid being entangled in a fight until their work was done.

"Can you pick up the Lion Mound yet?" asked Dastral. "It cannot be far away now."

"Yes, I have it now. A little further away to the right. Can you make it out?"

"Yes, I see it. We'll be there in a minute. Keep your eyes well skinned for the others. I think that must be Mac. away on our right, though he seems to be hanging back a bit; he evidently mistakes us for an enemy machine as we have come from the direction of Brussels. Can you make out his marks yet?"

"Not yet. It isn't light enough, and he's keeping too far away."

They were now right over the Lion Mound on the famous field of battle. The village of Waterloo was just behind them, standing almost exactly as it stood on that memorable day, Sunday, June 18, 1815. In the morning mist the old chateau of Hougumont lay sleepily ensconced in the hollow, while on the left the smoke was already rising up from the farmhouse of La Haye Saint.

"Another 'plane coming up on the south, making a bee line for us," shouted the observer.

"Splendid! That must be Steve," exclaimed Dastral, warming up a little as he saw that two of his three birds had reached the spot safely.

"But where the deuce is Brum? He should be here by now. It's getting quite light," said Jock, peering in every direction for the missing aviator.

"Ho! ho! here he comes."

"Where away? I can't see him."

"Right behind us. He must have over-shot the mark also, and he's coming back on our trail from Brussels."

The next instant, Dastral did a rapid swerve, and a steep nose-dive, in accordance with the pre-arranged code made before starting.

This was quite sufficient, for the strangers had been stalling their machines, and circling around, waiting for the signal. Now they opened out their engines and came on at top speed to meet their leader.

As they came up Jock could see the observers waving their hands in recognition. Yes, they were all here. The first part of the business was over. They had all come safely through and gained the rendezvous.

"Now we must get to work, for there's trouble brewing somewhere for us, and the sooner we get through the affair the better," shouted the pilot through the speaking tube.

As the machines came up, they wheeled smartly round, and each took up its appointed place in the formation. To an observer down below it must have appeared that they were great birds wheeling about to order, just like a platoon of infantry on parade.

"Prepare for action," was the next signal given, as they sped off, led by Dastral.

"Braine l'Alleud next," called Dastral.

"Yes, a little further to the right, just below the dip in the hill. We should see the Zeppelin sheds shortly," responded Jock, who was ready for the query, and had one finger already on the waterproof map.

"Shall I follow the road?" asked Dastral.

"Yes, till I pick up the hangars."

A moment later, the huge sheds came into view, and Jock, putting down his glasses, shouted with glee:

"There they are--three of them, and quite a crowd of people round about them. A little more to the left."

"Yes, I see them--why, there are hundreds of people there. What on earth can they be doing there?" asked Dastral.

"German soldiers waiting for the return of the Zeppelins that raided England last night, I expect."

"Phew! Our luck's in this time."

"They think we're friendly machines too, I believe," cried Jock, fingering the bomb release, ready to let go the first twenty-pound bomb on to the hangar. "Evidently, they can't make out our marks yet in the morning mist."

"They'll soon think differently," replied the pilot, as, coming up at full speed, followed by the rest of the flight, he did a rapid nose-dive of two thousand feet. Then, flattening out to get a better control over his machine, he swept on again till nearly exactly over the first huge shed, and did another rapid nose-dive, the speed of which must have approximated one hundred and fifty miles an hour.

"Look to it, Jock. Let go, man!" he yelled.

Jock pulled the clutch of the bomb release, and the first missile fell almost into the middle of the huge building. He could not fail to hit it, for the target was so large, and Dastral had dropped to within three hundred feet of the high roof.

"Swis-s-s-h---Boom-m-m-m----!"

The explosion was terrific, and the huge roof of the building crumpled in with a crash.

Scarcely fifteen seconds later Mac. dropped a petrol bomb into the half ruined building, and before the third plane could come into action, huge flames were bursting out everywhere.

Then it was that the German anti-aircraft guns, discovering their mistake, turned their concentrated fire upon the first machine, which by this time was passing the second hangar, and about to repeat the process.

"Spit! bang! boom!" And now the calm morning air was alive with bursting bombs and tearing shrapnel, while down below the distracted German soldiery, who had been waiting to house the returning Zeppelins, were rushing hither and thither, bewildered, whilst their officers were cursing those verdomt Englanders, who were always up to some new devilment.

"Gott in Himmel! Gott strafe England!" came from many a mouth, and curses and cries of anger, coupled with shouts of defiance, rent the air.

"Are you ready, Jock?" yelled Dastral, as they whirled through a screen of bursting shrapnel.

"Yes, aye, ready!" came the response from the observer, whose eyes were lit with the light of battle.

"Then let go!"

"Boom-m-m!" went another bomb on to the second hangar, and so with the third and last.

Within three minutes the whole of the structures of the three huge sheds were blazing fiercely, and, as the 'planes sped away, and climbed out of the line of immediate fire, they noted with joy that the flames from the third shed were larger and fiercer than those from the others.

Huge forks of fire leapt three hundred feet into the air, and the heat was so fierce within a hundred feet that everybody within that zone of fire was scorched and fell fainting or dead.

"Some blaze that, Jock!" cried Dastral as soon as they had left the fire curtain of shrapnel behind them, and could observe the burning mass properly.

"Yes, there's a Zeppelin in there, I'll swear to it. Else it would never blaze like that." Scarcely had he spoken, when a terrific explosion rent the air, fifty times as loud and terrible as that caused by the bursting of the twenty-pound bombs. At the same instant, a huge column of smoke, flame and debris shot up into the sky, making the very aeroplanes tremble with the tremendous vibration.

"Great Scott, you're right, Jock! We've done it this time. It must have been a Zeppelin. There is nothing left of the shed now. It has been clean lifted away."

The destruction wrought down below had been terrible. The casualties caused by the bombs had been as nothing compared to the terrible death-roll amongst the German soldiery by the explosion of a million cubic feet of gas and the wreckage of the huge hangar. The burning, blazing missiles of bent, twisted iron, steel, timber and aluminium came down from the skies, and wrought death and havoc amongst the labour battalions which must always be on duty near a Zeppelin hangar.

Once they were out of range of the enemy's guns Dastral looked round upon his companions. So far they had come through pretty well. No vital hit had been made, but every machine had received its quota of shrapnel. Not a 'plane amongst them but had its fifty or sixty jagged tears through the planes. Mac's propeller had also been hit, but as it was only slightly splintered, it still enabled the pilot to carry on.

However, as he wheeled round his flight, Dastral saw that it would take his brave followers all their time to get back nearly a hundred miles to safety. He gave the signal, therefore, for every pilot to make a bee line for the English trenches, and thus get home before the Aviatiks, Rolands and Fokkers came, which he knew would be climbing up already to attack them, from the aerodromes in the vicinity of Brussels.

Two of the observers had also been wounded, though slightly, and signalled accordingly, so that Dastral became uneasy, lest, after all, their return to safety should be hindered. Most of all did he fear that it might be necessary to leave one of his machines behind, for, if an aeroplane is forced to land in enemy territory, there is small chance of escape, either for man or machine.

The whole flight, therefore, had fallen into position for return, with Dastral leading, for he had signalled his men to keep together, as far as possible, till they were about to cross the lines. Suddenly, however, when they had proceeded some eight or nine miles on their way, Jock, who had been scanning the north-western horizon, called out:

"A Zeppelin! A Zeppelin!"

"Good heavens, where?" shouted Dastral.

"Away over there on the right, low down on the horizon."

"Phew! So it is. One of their lame ducks coming home to roost, after raiding some English village, I expect."

"The devils. I say, Dastral?"

"Yes?"

"Let's strafe the baby-killer!" shouted Jock.

Dastral turned round once more to look at his battered flight. Could he do it? Where were the German Fokkers? he asked himself. And for once he hesitated. It was only for a moment, however, and it was not for any thought of himself that he hesitated, but the knowledge that he

would be attacked shortly by enemy 'planes, and that some of his machines would be lost, for they were not in any fit state at present to engage with enemy warplanes. Jock, always an eager fighter, was edging him on, however.

"What say you, Flight-Commander? The others seems eager to fight. We've plenty of bombs left yet, and haven't touched the drums. Let's bring the blighter down, so that it can't kill any more babies in their cots."

"Right-o, Jock! Throw out the signal-Zeppelin."

And the next moment a couple of smoke bombs were thrown out by the observer, which gave the order, "Prepare to attack."

"Whir-r-r!" went the four 'planes on their new tack, as the controlling wires went over, and each machine banked suddenly and came round head on towards the enemy.

"By Jove, she's seen us and she's heading off too!" shouted Jock through the tube.

"Yes, so I see. Bet she's using her wireless some to call for the Fokkers. We haven't much time to lose."

In less than three minutes they were within machine-gun fire of the huge gas-bag, which was flying as low as three thousand feet, and seemed incapable of lifting herself much, either through shortage of gas or damaged machinery.

"Look out! She's opening fire! See there!" Short sharp jets of fire spat out from the gondolas of the Zeppelin in half a dozen different places, and the bullets began to whistle and ping-ping about the ears of the aviators.

"Reserve your fire, boys!" ordered Dastral, for he knew that they would all be anxious to fire. Then he threw out another order, which meant, "Attack from above."

This they all understood immediately, and followed Dastral as he made his machine almost sit upon her tail, as she climbed and manoeuvred to get above the huge lumbering mass, which was already levering away to leeward on account of some defective machinery, and the fresh breeze which had sprung up from the south-east.

Two minutes later they were almost directly above the Zeppelin, and, except for two machine-guns which were mounted above the envelope, they were immune from fire, for the other guns down below were screened by the huge looming mass above them.

Even the gunners on the top were practically useless, for the terrors of the past night and the impending death now awaiting them had shattered their nerves, and they were firing wildly, so that the daring aviators had them at their mercy, for the hornets were about to attack.

Dastral gave one more look round at his flight, and saw them coming boldly on behind him. Then he shouted to Jock:

"All ready there?"

"Aye, ready," came the response.

"Then in mercy's name fire!" A short, sharp nose-dive of two hundred feet, and they were within a hundred feet of the leviathan, and immediately above her. So near were they that they could see the affrighted machine-gunners on the top of the gas-bag leave their posts and try to escape down the escalier, but they had left it too long. They were now about to pay the price for the toll they had wantonly taken of innocent lives during the long dark hours of the past night. And, like all cowards who wreak their vengeance upon helpless folk, they feared the dread spectre when it came close to themselves.

"Whis-s-sh! Boom-m-m!" went the first bomb; a time fuse fixed for two seconds. The explosion rent the envelope, and allowed vast quantities of gas to escape from two of the ballonets, so that the huge mass crumpled in at the head, and began to sink slowly at the nose.

Another bomb was dropped, and the second and third machines coming up, dropped petrol and phosphorus bombs, which blazed away, igniting the escaping gas.

She was well alight now, and in the fore part she was burning fiercely, but as yet she did not explode. Dastral saw that she was done for, however, and knowing that the enemy craft could not be far away after all this time, made off and signalled his men to follow.

Down, down went the blazing mass for a couple of thousand feet, then rolling over, it literally fell asunder into several parts, and each part, still burning, carried its helpless inmates down to destruction.

Once more Dastral looked round, and as he did so, he gasped out the words:

"Great Scott! The whole place is alive with Fokkers, Rolands and Aviatiks!"

Then followed a fierce running fight, in which the English were outnumbered three to one. The enemy were all around them, for they had been called by wireless from every direction. Dastral headed his men into the thick of the combat. Three German 'planes were brought down, and not till every round of ammunition was fired, and every drum empty did the Commander call off his flight again, or rather what was left of it.

Brum, fighting bravely to the last, had gone down in a whirling spiral after first sending down an Aviatik. Steve followed him a little later, with his machine blazing, for his petrol tank had been plugged time after time. Dastral alone, with Mac, both their machines damaged beyond repair and both their observers wounded, staggered through the curtain fire at the trenches later in the morning, and came to earth just behind the British first line.

CHAPTER V

A BOMBING RAID

DAWN was just breaking over Devil's Wood and Ginchy. The owls and bats which had flitted over the night-bivouacs had returned to their hiding places about the battered towers of the old church near by. A saffron tint flushed the low summit of the eastern ridge, beyond Combles and Ginchy, while thin blue-grey columns of smoke showed where the Germans held fast their steel line from the Somme to Bapaume.

Scarcely had the stars faded away, however, and disappeared in the morning light, when the little field telephone in the orderly officer's tent at the aerodrome near Contalmaison went "Ting-a-ling-ling!"

"Are you there?" came the query over the wire.

"Yes. Who is that?"

"Advanced Headquarters, Section 47, East of Ginchy. Is that the Wing H.Q., Royal Flying Corps?"

"Yes. What is the matter, that you ring a poor chap up for the twentieth time in half an hour?"

"Matter enough, Grenfell, old fellow! Seven aeroplanes have just crossed our lines from the direction of Morval and Lesboeuifs. They are flying in your direction, west by west-sou'-west. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, but I say, Ginchy. Hullo! Were they enemy 'planes?"

"Our sentries couldn't make out their nationality; it was too dark. That's why the O.C. wanted me to 'phone you, lest it should be another raiding party coming to bomb you, as they did the other morning at dawn. He wants you to take '*Air Raid Action*' at once. Got me, old fellow?"

"All right, Ginchy. We'll be ready for the blighters this time. S'long! Remember me to Crawford when you run across him."

"Can't, old man."

"How so?"

"He got a packet in the knapper this morning, and he's already on his way to Blighty."

"Lucky beggar! Good-bye!"

"Goodbye."

"Ting-a-ling-ling!"

Thus the brief conversation closed, and within another thirty seconds the orders had been given for "Air raid action" and every one was ready. The men of "B" Flight, No. -- Squadron under Dastral, were standing by their machines, and the aerial gunners and observers were placing the last drums of ammunition in the cockpit, where they would be ready to hand. Almost immediately afterwards the sentries on duty at the eastern end of the aerodrome gave the alarm:

"Aeroplanes approaching from the east!" Half a dozen pairs of glasses soon found the machines, and, for a moment, there was a little thrill of excitement, as the anti-aircraft gunners received their orders to load up and fix the range.

"Stand by to start the propellers!" shouted Dastral, the Flight-Commander, to the air mechanics.

"Are all the pilots ready?" came next.

"Yes, sir," replied the Flight-Sergeant.

In another moment the whole flight would have been in the air doing a rapid spiral, for the hum of the approaching aeroplane engines could be distinctly heard now.

"Whir-r-r! whir-r-r-r!" Nearer and nearer came the well-known sound of the propellers, when suddenly the Squadron-Commander, who had been intently watching the early morning visitants through his glasses, called out:

"Dismiss, 'B' Flight. It's only Graham's party returning from their reconnaissance."

There was not a little disappointment at this announcement, for every one had been looking forward to a scrap before breakfast. The sun, which had just showed his upper edge above the ridge, however, revealed quite distinctly the rounded marks of the Allies on each of the 'planes.

Five minutes later the newcomers descended by rapid spirals, and, alighting on the aerodrome, taxied safely almost up to the very entrance of the sheds, and the pilots and observers alighted to report what they had discovered.

They had been away two hours, had traversed fifty miles beyond the enemy's lines, and had picked up several night signals by a prearranged code, using the Morse flash and the Klaxon Horn. This information, which was of the utmost importance, had been collected from some of our most daring intelligence officers, who controlled a network of British spies behind the German lines.

"Well done, Graham!" exclaimed the Major commanding the Squadron, as he grasped the Flight-Commander's hand on alighting. "Did you pick up anything?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then slip off your helmet and heavy coat, and make your report at once, and--hullo, there, Johnson!"

"Sir," replied the sergeant in charge of the officers' mess, springing smartly to the salute.

"Have breakfast ready in ten minutes in the private mess. Lay covers for all the pilots."

"Yes, sir," replied Johnson, saluting once more, and clicking his heels at the "about-turn" he disappeared to introduce a little thunder amongst the early morning "fatigues" in the cook-house.

A powerful and crafty foe, whose emissaries have never been surpassed in the espionage in the world, prevents me from giving the details of the reports brought home that morning by Graham and his pilots. Let it suffice, however, to say that amongst other information collected beyond the enemy's front, by a wonderful intelligence system of our own, it had been discovered in that dark hour before the dawn, by the Morse flash and the Klaxon Horn, that three German troop trains were to leave Liege that morning at eight o'clock, and, travelling via Mauberge and Cambrai, were to reinforce the hardly pressed German troops facing the British soldiers on the Somme.

There was a jovial breakfast party that morning in the officers' mess of the --th Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, for in this wonderful Corps, which, in the short space of two years, has done the seemingly impossible, and taken the high jump from an insignificant detachment, and become the most brilliant service under the British flag, there is an *esprit de jeu* as well as an *esprit de corps* unsurpassed even by that of the Navy, with its centuries of tradition behind it.

"How shall I know a British 'plane, if I meet it suddenly in mid-air?" asked a German pilot once of his Flight-Commander.

"You'll know it because it will attack you!" was the reply.

And never yet has a British pilot, with a single round of ammunition left in his drum, turned tail upon the enemy, even though when outnumbered three to one. For such a pilot, there would be no room in the Royal Flying Corps.

So, during breakfast that morning at the aerodrome near Contalmaison, every flight-commander vied with his comrade for the post of honour. Maps and railway routes were carefully consulted, for there were no less than three routes by which the troop trains might arrive at the Somme front.

"Liège--Namur--Mauberge," said the Squadron-Commander, as he bent over the large map, and ran his fingers lightly along the route, whilst the eager youths with the pilot's wings on the left breast of their soiled and greasy service tunics listened and waited eagerly for their final orders, each hoping in his inmost soul that the route allotted to him might be the one by which the Huns would arrive.

"Let me see, now. After Mauberge and Cambrai the lines divide. Hum! Why, yes, they must come via Peronne, Velu or Lestrée. There now. Are you ready, boys?" asked the Commander,

raising his head for the first time for five minutes, and looking keenly into the glowing faces of those lads, who, less than three years ago, in most cases, were at Marlborough, Cheltenham or Harrow.

"Aye, ready, sir!" they replied almost in one breath.

"Are you quite sure, Graham, you can manage it? You have already had two hours up there in the dark, you know."

"We could do another four, sir, quite easily," replied the Commander of "A" Flight, with just a shade of disappointment in his voice, as though he feared the C.O. might hold him back.

"How are the engines running?"

"Perfectly, sir; never better! They never misfired once, and there isn't a strut or control wire damaged."

"Right!" exclaimed the Commander laconically, who then rolled up the big map, touched a bell, and ordered the aerodrome Flight-Sergeant to run out the machines and to let the air mechanics, observers, wireless men and aerial gunners fall in and stand by the 'planes. Then, turning to the three Flight-Commanders he said:

"Graham, you will take 'A' Flight and patrol the Lestrée line. You, Dastral, will take charge of 'B' Flight and watch the Havrincourt-Bapaume route, and Wilson there will watch the Peronne loop-line. They may come by any of those three routes. Where they will detrain I cannot say. It will be for you to discover. Fill up with the twenty-pound bombs, as they're the handiest, for I expect it will be more of a bombing raid than anything else. But if the enemy is escorted by Fokkers or Rolands, you must be prepared for a fight in the air as well, and I want each Flight to act independently, but if necessary to co-operate, should Himmelman and his crowd turn up. Smoke signals will be the best, I think. Is that quite clear, boys?"

"Yes, sir. Quite clear," they replied, for they were all in high glee, and regarded it all as nothing more or less than a boyish adventure, though more than one of those brave youths was going forth to his death. And what a death it is to be hit in mid-air by bursting shrapnel, and hurled seven thousand feet to the earth! But such a death they faced daily without flinching.

"Then fill up your glasses, boys, and I will give you The King! God bless him!"

And standing up they drank confusion to the King's enemies, and if a stranger had been there to note it, he would have seen that many a glass was filled with water, for the continuous demand upon the pilot's nerve and intelligence forbids his frequent use of alcohol.

Soon afterwards, the pilots, observers and gunners were carefully examining their machines, guns, fixing bombs, waterproof maps, and arranging every detail with care and skill. A faulty strut or control wire, a defective bomb release, or a leaking petrol tank might mean failure or disaster.

At last all was ready, and the final words of command were given to the air mechanics.

"Stand clear! Away!"

"Good-bye, lads, and good luck!" called the Squadron-Commander cheerfully, though at that very moment he was inwardly cursing his bad luck at having had his left arm seriously damaged in a recent crash. For of all things upon earth Major Bulford loved to lead his brave lads and to wheel them into action against the enemy squadrons.

"Whir-r-r! Whir-r-r!" went the first propellor, as the air-mechanic who had started it sprang back to safety. Then, one after another the machines of the three Flights taxied across the level ground of the aerodrome, and sprang into the air at the first movement of the elevator.

"Goodbye!" waved the pilots in answer to the last greeting of their chief, for the human voice could not carry two feet in that wild roar of propellers and engines, which seemed to make the whole atmosphere pulsate with a whirring sound.

After a few rapid spirals a height of two thousand feet was quickly attained, and then, still climbing, the 'planes, like huge birds of prey, disappeared for a while behind the British lines as though for a cross-Channel flight to England, in order to confuse the enemy observers. Then, by a wide sweep at seven thousand feet, the flights became detached, and each, under its own commander, went its own way by a circuitous route to the appointed station.

Dastral, with the four Sopwiths of "B" Flight, crossed the enemy's lines at nine thousand feet, somewhere between Ligny and Grévillers. As he did so he received his first baptism of fire from "Archie."

White puffs of smoke and fierce red jets of flame seemed to burst noiselessly around them, for the roar of the propellers drowned or subdued even the sound of the shrapnel as it exploded. Heedless of such small things, however, Dastral and his brave comrades sailed on, sometimes doing a spiral or a rapid nose-dive, if the enemy appeared to have found the range too closely.

Soon, however, they were ambushed in a friendly cloud, which hid them from the Huns far below, and when they had emerged from the clinging moisture, they were far beyond the enemy's third line trenches, and out into the open, with smiling fields and vineyards beneath them.

"Is that it?" yelled Dastral to his observer, jerking his head sideways, and pointing with his finger to something like a railway cutting far below.

"Yes. The Bapaume-Havrincourt railway line!" shouted his companion through the speaking-tube which ended close to the pilot's ear, for although only a few feet away, that was the only possible method of communication without shutting off the engines.

"Good!" nodded the pilot, for, despite the speaking-tube, conversation was chiefly carried on by well understood cabalistic signs.

A few minutes later Dastral pointed to a cluster of red roofs about a little church.

"What is that place?"

The observer, with one finger still on the little waterproof map in front of him, shouted back, "Beugny on the left. Haplincourt on the right."

"Yes, yes!" nodded the pilot, edging a little more south-east, as though the railway were not his objective. In so doing he alarmed Fisker, his companion, who feared he had misunderstood him.

"What's the matter?" he shouted. "You're leaving the target. The bridge-head and the ravine is over there, east-nor-east. That's where the junction is, at Velu."

"Right-o, old man! Glad you're awake. Keep your eyes well skinned away to the east for Fokkers and Rolands. This is Himmelman's favourite hunting-ground. He'll be down on us from the clouds like a thunderbolt, if we're not careful. I want to get up to twelve thousand, and come back on to the junction from the east."

"Oh-ay!" came the laconic rejoinder from Fisker, who quickly understood the manoeuvre. Then, leaving his map for a moment, he swept the horizon for any signs there might be of the enemy's 'planes.

So for nearly an hour the machines, playing at "follow-my-leader," swept round and round, watching and waiting in an altitude where, to put it mildly, it was cold enough to freeze a kettle of boiling water in ten minutes.

Cold? Yes, it was bitterly cold. Both Dastral and Fisker felt it through their thick leather, wool-lined coats.

They patrolled the country behind the German lines, and watched the smoke curling upwards from a dozen French villages in the enemy's possession. At length they crossed the loop line near Barastre, skimmed along over Ytres, and the Bois Havrincourt; sailed lightly across the silvery streak of the river Exuette, until, beyond the wood and the village they espied the main railway line that threaded its way to Bapaume.

"There it is, Fisker. Can you see it?" were Dastral's first words, when he sighted it.

"Yes, I see it," came the reply.

Dastral had timed his arrival nicely. Scarcely had they reached the railway when out of the eastern horizon a trail of white steam, followed by another and yet another, at intervals of perhaps half a mile, attracted their attention.

"Look! There they come, Dastral!" cried Fisker, putting down the glasses and waving his arms frantically to attract the attention of the other three pilots, and to indicate the target, now rapidly approaching.

One look in the direction indicated sufficed for Dastral. He made a sudden dip, then gave one of his rapid spirals, at which he was such an adept. This movement of the Flight-Commander's machine was the pre-arranged signal for the rest of the company and meant:

"Enemy approaching from the east. Prepare to engage him."

The movement was answered by each of the following 'planes. The formation of the flight was altered accordingly, and the machines now fell into their allotted places ready for descent.

The three trains were soon in full view, and the first one was just passing the village of Hermies. The trains were of enormous length, and were crowded with troops. What still puzzled Dastral, however, was that there appeared to be no escort of aircraft with them. Again and again, during the approach of the long procession, he had scanned the heavens all around and above him, for a sight of his most crafty foe, Himmelman, for, if the British machines had been sighted, there had been plenty of time for the enemy to bring up his aircraft from the nearest aerodrome.

Even yet Dastral was very suspicious. He knew Himmelman only too well already. He was the

demon of the air on the western front, and loved nothing better than to make a dramatic entry into a half-finished fight. His greatest and most daring method was to climb out of sight, often up to seventeen thousand feet and more, or better still, to make an ambush in a dark cloud, then suddenly to swoop down, hawk-like, upon his opponent, in an almost vertical nose-dive, and to overwhelm him with a spray of well-directed machine gun fire.

A dozen of the best British pilots had already gone down in a crash or a forced landing before this demon of the air, and more than once Dastral himself had encountered him. Before he led his men to the attack therefore, upon this occasion, he scanned the heavens again and again in search of his opponent, and actually waited until a tiny cloud far above had been scattered and pierced, before he gave the final signal to attack.

At length, fearing to lose his target by longer delay, for the first train was now abreast of the tiny hamlet of Beaumetz, and nearing the junction and the bridge-head at Velu, he threw out the signal for the attack.

A smoke bomb to the right and another to the left: that was the pre-arranged signal, and then, pulling over the joy-stick, down, down went Dastral, followed at regular intervals by the three other 'planes.

Down, down with a swoop, through the exhilarating rush of air, they went. All the engines had been shut off, and the pilots, with one hand on the joy-stick, and the other on the bomb release, waited almost breathlessly through those wild, thrilling seconds, while they fell with ever-gathering impetus, like a stone to the earth. Thus they went down to what seemed like certain death, while every instant during that mad dive seemed an age.

"Click! click!" went the little instrument that measured the altitudes. "Seven, six- five, three thousand feet," it tried to say, but its voice could not be heard.

At two thousand feet Dastral pushed back the joy-stick, and flattened out. His comrades did the same, all except Franklin in the last 'plane, who had trouble with his control wires and flattened out only at five hundred feet. Another five seconds would have dashed him to death. He was game, however, and though his face blanched, and his heart stayed its beating for an instant, he was soon climbing again to rejoin his comrades.

They had been seen now, for the smoke bombs had first given them away. The commandants of the German communications were hotly engaged on the telephone wires, reporting to headquarters and to the nearest aerodromes the presence of the intruders, and demanding that Himmelman and his comrades should come at once to deal with the sky-fiends.

The engine-driver of the first train also had seen the danger that threatened, and, putting on all speed, he tried foolishly to get away from the air peril. Velu was scarcely a mile distant, and there at least he could find some protection, if only in the "Archies."

But he was too late. When Dastral flattened out at two thousand feet he was almost abreast of the train. A neck-and-neck race commenced, but what chance has a heavily laden troop train, even though it has three engines, against a Sopwith which can do one hundred and thirty miles on occasion? It was like a race between a hare and a tortoise.

"Puff-puff-puff! Shriek!" went the train, but the scream of the siren was drowned in the whirr-r-r of the propellers racing alongside and just overhead, for the engines had been started again by the pilots as soon as they flattened out.

It was a matter of seconds now, for Dastral only waited until he had dropped down to one hundred feet. He was already in line with the engine, and directly above. Just ahead was the railway bridge, and the viaduct over the road leading into the village.

"Yes, my beautiful Boche, it's ten to one against you now!" muttered the Flight-Commander as he raced ahead, amid a spatter of rifle bullets from the soldiers guarding the bridge.

The engine-driver had seen the danger ahead now. He shut off steam, and put on his brakes, but the bridge was too near, and Dastral was already there.

"Whis-s-s-h! Boom-m-m! Crash!"

It was one of the new 112lb. bombs that Dastral dropped; the only one carried by the flight, who were chiefly armed with 20-pounders for the occasion. The aeroplane gave a lift and a lurch as the heavy missile left her, and had it not been for her great speed, the explosion that immediately followed would have caused her to crash.

Fairly hit in the centre of the track the brick and timber piles and beams collapsed, and the middle of the structure crumpled up and fell crashing into the roadway.

The troops, aware of what was happening when they saw the 'planes overhead, leapt from the doomed train, for no human effort could prevent the impending disaster now. When the bomb dropped and split the bridge, the train was but forty yards distant, and the sparks were flying from her brakes, as from a blacksmith's anvil, but it was of no avail. With a thunderous roar,

followed by a mighty crash, and the wild hiss of escaping steam she went over the chasm. Carriage after carriage, crowded with the finest troops of Germany, followed the engine.

Wild cries of pain and anger, curses and groans filled the air, as wounded, scalded and half buried men dragged themselves from that awful scene of carnage and death.

"Gott in Himmel! Donner und blitz! Himmelman, Himmelman, wer ist Himmelman?" cried many an eye-witness of the terrible tragedy, as though the German air-fiend were some deity.

The other three 'planes were bombing the long stretch of carriages which had not leapt the chasm, and the hundreds of fugitives who were trying to escape from the half-telescoped vehicles, which had not gone over the precipice. But Dastral, banking swiftly on his machine, came round, and with another smoke bomb called them off to attack the other two trains.

Leaving the Bridge of Velu, they wheeled back swiftly, coming once more into the zone of fire from the anti-aircraft guns. Stopping only to drop a couple of bombs on the battery 'which had bespattered the wings of the second machine with shrapnel, they noticed the second train pulling up quickly, and the soldiers also leaping from the carriages.

They proceeded to bomb it with the remainder of their 20-lb. bombs. Then, suddenly, to their amazement the third train, which had not received sufficient warning to stop on the steep gradient, crashed into the second, and another scene of wild confusion occurred. The German soldiers, taken for the most part by surprise, endeavoured to get away by any and every means from the blazing wreckage, seeking cover under clumps of trees, hedges, rising ground, etc., but the airmen, having discharged all their bombs, turned their Lewis machine guns upon them and scattered the fugitives in all directions.

At last, not a single round of ammunition remained in the drums, and Dastral, knowing that all the machines had been more or less hit, gave the signal to return.

It was time, for two at least of the machines had suffered severely, and it was becoming very doubtful whether they would be able to regain their own lines. They were of no further use for offence, so they began their climb into the higher regions, preparatory to the dash across the enemy's lines once again.

It was well that they did so, for at that very moment Himmelman, with half a squadron of fast Fokkers, was leaving his own aerodrome but ten miles distant, having received information of the raiders' presence. The whole feat had taken place so quickly, however, and the affair was so adroitly managed, that the intruders had just time to make their escape.

Not all the aviators, however, succeeded in crossing the German lines. Franklin's engine was missing so badly that he was unable to climb above four thousand feet, and when, shortly after, they reached the battle front, where the Allies and Germany kept their battle-line, the fusillade of the "Archies" commenced again. Cras-s-sh came a shell right into his engine, and the machine went down in a wild spinning nose-dive, just behind the enemy's front line trench.

Dastral and his comrades gnashed their teeth, as they saw their two comrades thus hurled to death, but, after all, death is only an incident in the life of a pilot of the Royal Flying Corps, and who shall mourn when a hero dies? In these days of blood and iron, when Britain stands once more at the cross roads, freedom and honour can only be purchased by the blood of her bravest sons.

That evening the dinner party which was held in the officers' mess at the aerodrome near Contalmaison, was less joyous and boisterous than the breakfast held there that same morning. Three of the 'planes of B flight had come back, it is true, and had brought their pilots and observers safely home through the ordeal of shot and shell. Every machine bore evidence of the fight. Scarcely one of them would be fit to fly again for another week, and the air-mechanics were already hard at work, fitting new struts and control wires, ailerons, and petrol tanks, for two at least of the three aeroplanes had barely held together to the end, so plugged were they with machine gun, rifle bullets and shrapnel; while Winstone's "old bus" had literally fallen to pieces on landing, and he had narrowly escaped a crash.

And when the second toast came, and Major Bulford rose to speak, his glance fell upon the two vacant chairs (for according to custom the places had been reserved); and his eyes glistened with something suspiciously like a tear, and there was a strange huskiness about his voice, as he uttered those words which had been so frequent of late,

"Let us drink to the memory of the brave lads who were with us this morning, but whose faces we shall never see again!"

So they drank the toast in silence, and then the Squadron-Commander, having regained his usual voice, added:--

"One crowded hour of glorious life,

CHAPTER VI

A ZEPPELIN NIGHT

Per ardua ad astra

IT was a bright sunny morning in September during the great war, as the mail packet slipped out of Calais breakwater, and headed for the white cliffs of Dover. For two days the service had been suspended for a special reason. Her decks were crowded with overdue mails, including those from India, Egypt and Australia, which had come overland from Brindisi.

There was also a fair sprinkling of passengers, including not a few officers, home on short leave from the Somme front, where the great push was still in progress.

Amongst the latter was a young officer, not more than twenty-two, clad in a "British Warm" and wearing the well-known service cap of the Flying Corps, with its circular badge, consisting of a wreath of laurels and the magic letters, R.F.C.; letters which have already woven themselves into the romance of English history, for the daring deeds of our airmen had already gained for this juvenile corps traditions which will never die.

"Good-bye, Dastral! Come back soon!" shouted several of his comrades, who had come to the edge of the quay to see the hero off to Blighty on his well-earned leave. For the youth in the service cap was none other than Dastral of the Flying Corps, the brilliant young pilot who had fought with the German air-fiend, Himmelman, only a few days before and had perhaps done more than any other individual towards wresting the supremacy of the air from the wily and cruel Boche.

He had already won that coveted decoration, the D.S.O., as we have previously seen, and now the King was about to confer upon him the Military Cross, for a daring bombing raid which he had organised and carried out over the enemy's lines, when as Commander of "B" Flight he had led his men beyond the Somme, and blocked the enemy's communications, bombed the Havrincourt-Bapaume Railway, and destroyed the bridge and viaduct at Velu, hurling one long troop train to destruction, and preventing the Germans reinforcing their front line trenches near Ginchy and Morval. Now, after his latest deed, the King had sent for him to congratulate him in person for his skill and daring. On the morrow he was to be received in audience at Buckingham Palace.

If he had consulted his own wishes he would much have preferred to remain with his comrades on the Somme, but a royal wish is an order, and, after all, perhaps the ten days' leave which had been granted to him would enable him to run north to visit his mother and friends in the little village in Yorkshire, and to gaze once again upon those blue, heather-tipped and bracing moorlands where he had spent his boyhood.

"Good-bye, Dastral. Don't stay too long in Old Blighty!" again shouted his friends, as the vessel sheered off and gained headway, and he had shouted back in reply:

"Cheer-o, boys! I shall soon be back again," waving his hand towards his comrades, as he bent over the rail.

As soon as they left the shelter of the breakwater a destroyer, waiting outside, sent up a couple of flags to her masthead.

"Send up the answering pennant, bosun!" cried the skipper of the mail-boat, when he saw the destroyer's signal, and immediately after he rang down to the engine room staff:

"Full steam ahead!" for the warship was there to act as escort, as there were very valuable mails aboard, and only two nights ago, the enemy's destroyers, breaking out of their base at Zeebrugge, had crept through the gap in the British mine-beds in the dark, and had sent two patrols and an empty transport to the bottom.

So, while the mail packet went full speed ahead, at twenty-four knots, the destroyer, with her

superior speed, waltzed round her, like a dancing marionette, leaving a trail of white foam in her wake. This she continued to do all the way across the Channel, for it was known that several enemy submarines were lurking about the neighbourhood, watching through their periscopes for just such a target as the mail boat with her valuable cargo offered.

Very soon, however, the white cliffs of Dover appeared in sight, and when they entered the new naval harbour, the destroyer sheered off and went back to her station.

Dastral, having been recognised on the boat, had received several invitations to dine in London that evening, but all these he had courteously refused, although one of them had come from a Cabinet minister and his wife who were travelling on the same boat.

"No," he had said to himself, "there is poor old Tim Burkitt, my colleague, who is studying law at Gray's Inn. I will go and hunt him up. He will be glad to see me, and we will spend the night together at Hallet's."

Now Tim Burkitt, who suffered from a physical deformity, had been breaking his young heart ever since war broke out, for he had been rejected from every sphere of service in the great war, owing to his deformity. He had seen his chums depart from Gray's into the Army, the Navy and the Flying Corps, and he had been left behind almost alone.

He had been chummy with Dastral, for they came from the same village, had come up to London together, and had shared the same drab dull lodgings in the great city. Later he was destined to become a great lawyer, for nature had compensated him by granting him the gift of oratory, but he would have willingly given up all that if he could but have shared with Dastral his adventures and his triumphs.

This afternoon he had thrown aside his law books to read in the papers a vivid description of Dastral's fight with Himmelman, the German air-fiend, and the poor cripple, with tears of grief and envy at his own hard lot, but with his heart full of joy at his comrade's success had just thrown aside the paper, adding dejectedly:

"Oh, Dastral, how I would like to see you again! You were always a true friend to me"; when suddenly he heard a scamper of footsteps up the bare stone steps that led up to his chamber in Gray's, and the next instant the door flew open, and Tim found himself embracing his old colleague, with a warmth he had never exhibited before.

"Bravo, Dastral!" he cried again and again. "I knew you'd do it if you had half a chance. And to think you should remember me, a poor cripple, when all England is talking about you, and the King himself has sent for you."

"Here, stow it, Tim! Who do you think I should seek out first if not you? I've come to spend the afternoon and evening with you. To-morrow, after I have seen the King, I'm going home to Burnside, where you and I spent so many happy days, and I want you to come with me."

"Good! Splendid! How kind of you, old fellow! Then to-night we'll have a dinner all to ourselves at Hallet's. What say you?"

"Right you are, Tim," said Dastral, clapping his old colleague on the back, and making him the happiest fellow in all London for the nonce.

That afternoon the two chums had a quiet stroll around Gray's, and Lincoln's Inn Fields, then called on one or two acquaintances who had also been left behind in the Temple. A visit to the Old Mitre of sacred memory, and a quiet smoke in Johnson's Corner at the "Cheese" in Fleet Street, passed away the hours of the golden afternoon, and the evening found them snugly ensconced at Hallet's, where, in the days gone by, they used to celebrate any little event in their lives by a special dinner.

Never for a moment did the conversation flag. The two chums unbosomed themselves to one another, except that Dastral would not talk about his adventures since he became a pilot in the Flying Corps, for the members of this Corps never seek advertisement, preferring that the record of their Homeric deeds should all go down to the credit of the Corps, rather than to any particular individual.

"But, Dastral," Tim would urge, as the plates and dishes disappeared and another course was laid, "you must have had a hundred amazing adventures since I saw you last. Just tell me about one of them, say your fight with Himmelman!"

"Bah! It was nothing, Tim--nothing, I mean to make a song about. If I could write and speak like you, now, I might be able to make a tale about it. But nature hasn't gifted me that way," replied the pilot.

"But don't you feel the romance and glory of it all, fighting a battle in the air at ten thousand feet?"

"Romance, glory?" laughed Dastral. "There is no romance or glory about war, when you are in it. It is horrid and brutal then. You must be miles away to see the romance of it. It is all an ugly

business."

Tim couldn't understand him. He just couldn't, but he had one more shot. "Don't you feel like singing sometimes, when you are up in the azure, mounting in circles like a lark to meet the sun, and the heavens are calling you?" he asked.

"Ah, when I am ten thousand feet up, and the engines are running smoothly, it is heavenly. I feel like music and romance then. The song of the propellers is beautiful, and the beating of the engine makes me imagine all sorts of weird things, but when I come down to the earth again I forget all the things I would say. It is wonderful though, that call of the heavens; the call of the wild, as the gipsies say, isn't in it. But I cannot describe it."

And so they talked on for an hour--two hours, long after the table had been cleared, making rings of smoke into which Tim Burkitt at least, with his rich imagination, saw wonderful things, when suddenly something happened which made them both spring to their feet--the electric lights went out, leaving them in utter darkness for a couple of minutes.

"What is the matter?" cried half a dozen voices, as soon as the waiter appeared with a lamp in his hand, which he immediately placed upon the centre table.

"There is a rumour, sir, that the Zeppelins are to make an attack upon London to-night, and the electric current has been turned off at the main," replied the jovial, beefy-faced waiter, adding with a smile, as he returned for another lamp, "What are we a-coming to?"

At this announcement several people at once took their departure, evidently thinking that Hallet's would be the first place to invite the attention of the raiders, and one or two ladies fainted and had to be helped out by their friends.

A strange and eager look came into the eyes of Dastral at the word Zeppelin. Tim noted it at once, and wondered what his colleague was thinking about, for, though his gaze was eager and keen, there was a far away look in his eyes. At the end of a minute he half uttered the word:

"Zeppelin!"

Then he rose to his feet, but recalling himself almost with a jerk to the fact of Tim's presence, he said apologetically,

"I say, old fellow, we've had a jolly time, but I think I must leave you, though it almost breaks my heart to do so."

"Go? Where to, Dastral? I thought you were going to spend the night at my rooms, and it's barely nine o'clock yet. Sit down, old man. You haven't got the Zeppelin fright as well, have you? If you have, here are my smelling salts--here, take a sniff now."

For answer Dastral burst into a roar of laughter. Then subsiding quickly, he said, in a more serious tone, bending low to whisper his words in Burkitt's ears:

"I have never yet fought a Zeppelin, except the lame duck we brought down near Brussels. I would give all I possess to go up and fight one. And during the last minute I have been wondering how it can be done."

"Well, how can you do it?"

"That's the trouble. I'm not attached to any Wing or Squadron in England. But a friend of mine has just recently returned from France, and has been appointed Commanding Officer of the --th Squadron, with its aerodrome about fifteen miles away from here. I must get into touch with him, if possible."

The next moment Dastral was engaged on the 'phone, trying in the dark to find his friend somewhere at the other end of the wires. After some ten minutes he managed it.

"Hullo! Hullo! Are you there?" he asked.

"Yes, who are you?" came the reply.

"I want the O.C. of your Squadron at once, please."

"He is busily engaged, and I cannot disturb him now, unless it is something of the highest importance. Hurry up, please, and tell me who you are, and give me your message. The wires are urgently wanted to-night."

"I am Dastral, Flight-Commander Dastral of the --th Squadron, --th Wing, and I have just come from France."

"What! Beg pardon, sir. Dastral. Not the pilot who fought with Himmelman?"

"Yes."

"Hold the line a minute, sir."

Twenty seconds later the O.C. of the Squadron himself was at the end of that line.

"Hullo! Is that you, Dastral?"

"Yes. How are you, Garner, old man?"

"But hang it, how came you to ring me up? I should dearly love to see you, but I've my hands full to-night. We received '*Air Raid Action*' half an hour ago. Several hostile airships have crossed the east coast, and are making for the metropolis, so I cannot stay now. Come and see me in the morning, do, old man. Eh, what's that you say?"

"Haven't you a spare machine you could let me try if I came over there by fast motor at once?"

"Hullo! hullo! All the machines are out with the men standing by, ready to go up at the first tip, except--let me see now--we've got a new fast '*Buckstead Bullet*' here, which none of the men are very familiar with yet. There's that. Come if you like, old fellow. It's a bit irregular, but if there should happen to be a big attack on London, and the case warrants it, I see no reason why you shouldn't try the blamed thing. It's a single-seater, only just in from the makers, and a devil of a whizzer as well as a first class climber!"

"Right-o! I'm coming straight away!" cried Dastral, waiting to hear no more, and banging down the receiver.

The next minute he was outside on the pavement, forgetting all about Tim, the settlement of the bill, and everything else. Tim, however, who had heard part of the message, had already paid the bill and got outside, where he had hailed a taxi, determined not to be left behind, for his quick intuitive mind had told him which way the wind was blowing. He had had a hard job to secure the vehicle, for there had been a great demand for the same, but he had whispered Dastral's name to the chauffeur and had agreed to foot the bill however big it might be, although he had only three half-crowns left in his pocket after squaring the bill indoors. That did not bother him at all, however. Here was a chance of rendering some service, however small, to the nation at large, for he felt convinced that if only Dastral could have a chance he would bring down half a dozen raiders.

Immediately, therefore, Dastral appeared at the doorway he shouted:

"This way, Dastral, this way. Quick!"

"What the deuce----"

"Inside, old man; this is my show!" and before the bewildered pilot could finish his exclamation, he was inside and Tim was with him and the door closed.

"Where to?" asked the cripple.

Dastral gave the directions, and told the driver to do his utmost to get them there within an hour, or it would be too late.

Within ten seconds they were whizzing away through the darkness in the direction of the Great North Road, and as there was very little traffic about, they reached their destination within three quarters of an hour. It was not a minute too soon. They had seen the searchlights at work on their way north, and towards the end of their journey they had several times heard the anti-aircraft guns blazing away at something up in the clouds.

"Halt! Who goes there?" came the challenge as they reached the turning which left the main road, and finished at the aerodrome.

The vehicle halted abruptly, for the driver had seen the flash of the barrel of a Smith & Weston revolver, which the air-mechanic on sentry-go held out to bar their progress.

"Flight-Commander of the Royal Flying Corps," shouted the pilot, hoping that would allow him to pass, and to get on to the aerodrome immediately, but the sentry was obdurate.

"Let me see your permit, sir," he asked.

"Haven't got one."

"Turn out guard!" shouted the sentry, and turning to the newcomers, he added:

"Advance, Flight-Commander, and report to the guard-room."

The guard-room was but a few yards further on, and the corporal of the guard, approaching the carriage, saluted, and led Dastral and Tim away to the Flight-Sergeant at the Orderly Room. He was expected, and a minute afterwards he was shaking hands with Garner, who had been waiting for him.

And now there was not a moment to spare, for the presence of the raiders had been reported from the O.C. Searchlights, as hiding somewhere in the clouds between Hatfield and Barnet, trying to break through to London. Only a ring of curtain fire from the A.A. Batteries, and a cordon of long flashing lights which swept the sky from the horizon was keeping them back.

Several machines had already gone up in search of the enemy and the other pilots were standing by their machines ready to "take off" immediately the order was given.

Immediately, therefore, Dastral had settled with the driver of the taxi, and introduced Tim to his friend, Squadron-Commander Garner, they were led through the darkness to the shed where the "Buckstead Bullet," as she was nicknamed, lay all ready to be wheeled out.

"Good! Excellent!" exclaimed Dastral, immediately he saw the little single-seater monoplane, for he had flown a similar machine several times in France.

With the aid of a dark lanthorn he carefully went over her, and lovingly fingered every part of her, from the bullet-nosed fuselage which gave her her nickname, to her neat, trim little tail and rudder.

The noise of the A.A. guns became louder and louder outside, as though they had discovered one of the raiders. And Dastral was just itching to go up!

"Let me go up in her, Garner!" he said. "She's a beauty!"

The O.C. scratched his head. He had wanted to fly her himself, for she was the only spare machine left over, and, moreover, as Dastral was not attached to the squadron, it was somewhat irregular for him to use the machine, without the express permission of the Wing Headquarters. He hesitated for a moment therefore, but, just at that instant, one of the raiders suddenly emerged from the edge of a cloud where it had been in hiding, and a fresh burst of anti-aircraft gunfire caused some excitement.

"There she is!" cried some one, as one of the searchlights caught her.

"As you like, Dastral. There's your target. Get into your togs quickly and I'll take the risk of it. I must leave you for a moment now. Those fellows in 'C' Flight are waiting to go up," and with that the O.C. turned round and dashed off, while Dastral, without waiting for anything further, got into a huge leathern coat, pilot's boots, and donned the flying helmet with long ear flaps and queer-looking goggles, which an air-mechanic had brought him.

Two minutes later the young pilot climbed into the 'plane, gave a final look round, waved a good-bye to Tim, whose pale face, now working with intense excitement, he discerned in the darkness.

"All ready, sir?" asked the Flight-Sergeant.

Dastral gave him a nod, and prepared to switch on the the current.

"Swing the propellor!" came next, and as the cool, calculating pilot pulled a switch, the mighty engine broke into its terrible song.

"Rep-p-p, rep-p-p! Whir-r-r!"

"Stand clear!" and away went the monoplane like a bullet out of a gun. As she started, a searchlight was deflected in a long beam along the ground, to give the daring young aviator the direction for his take-off, for the dangers of night-flying are many, as more than one brave pilot has found to his cost before now.

At a hundred yards the "Bullet" sprang into the air, and soared upward at a tremendous speed, being quickly lost to sight, as the searchlights tried once more to find the raider, which had found things too warm, and had sought again the shelter of the clouds.

By short and rapid spirals, Dastral soon reached a thousand feet. Every now and then he turned his little shaded electric lamp on to the indicator, which seemed to vibrate merrily, and almost to smile, as its little rounded dial told the altitude. Up and up they went, and the indicator almost laughed with joy as it clicked out the figures:

"Two thousand, two thousand five hundred, three thousand feet!"

Still they seemed to be climbing all too slowly for the pilot. He had caught sight of the Zeppelin when she showed herself for a moment, and he had said to himself:

"Twelve thousand feet, and then there'll be a chance! But nothing less than that will do."

He was impatient therefore to get higher and higher, for he feared the raiders would discharge or jettison their cargo of bombs before he could get at them. They certainly would have done, had they known that at that very moment Himmelman's rival was climbing to meet them, on a Buckstead Bullet, which could do one hundred and thirty miles an hour when pushed.

Already a number of bombs had been dropped, and away to the northward several fires could be seen where the night-raiders had left their victims behind, in the shape of burning homesteads, where the victims were women and children, old men and invalids; but the avenger was at hand, and the hour of reckoning had come.

"Eight thousand, nine thousand feet!" clicked the indicator, though its voice was lost in the roar of the engine and propellor.

At eight thousand feet Dastral passed several of the 'planes which had preceded him, and at nine thousand he left the last of them behind him and entered into a bank of clouds. Never once had he ceased his rapid, climbing spirals, and now, through the misty, clinging vapour of the clouds he still soared heavenwards. Once or twice he stopped his engines just to listen for a few seconds, but he heard nothing except the whir-r-r-r of the 'planes beneath him.

He was ahead of them all now, for his engines were running beautifully, and the "Bullet" raced through the next layer of clouds as a fish darts through the waters. It was becoming lighter also, for he could catch glimpses of the stars, and the remaining clouds were thinner than those below. Soon, he would be above them all, and perhaps above the raider. It was cold too, bitterly cold, but his young blood coursed madly through his veins, and his heart beat quicker and quicker.

"Ten thousand. Eleven thousand," laughed the indicator, joining merrily in the hunt, for it seemed to Dastral now that he could hear those weird voices of the night, speaking to him and calling him up and up, ever higher and higher. Yes, the clouds and the stars were calling him, and the music and rhythm of that pulsating engine a few feet away, and the whir-r-r of those propellers just ahead, seemed to make him almost light-headed, so that he began to laugh and sing.

He thought of crooked Tim far down below, and what he had said about the romance and the music, and from the pilot's lips there fell involuntarily the words:

"Poor Tim! How he would like to be up here alone, and to listen to all these voices of the night!"

As Dastral thought thus, he looked down, far down into the blackness, and he saw the flashes of the searchlights. Sometimes they reached up to him long extended arms that seemed to unite him to the earth, but he could scarcely believe that he had ever dwelt down there in that abyss of murky darkness. Yet always he swerved aside, and evaded those long stretching pillars of light, for he knew that if he crossed their beams but once, other eyes would see him, and the raider above would be warned of his near approach.

Suddenly at twelve thousand feet the monoplane shook itself as though dashing the clinging moisture from its yellow wings, and leapt, like a fish out of the water, above the topmost layer of clouds.

And now with keen searching eyes Dastral looked above and around for the presence of the raider, but she was nowhere to be seen. Below him rolled the clouds, like dark, monstrous billows. Here and there through an opening he still saw the flashes of the searchlights feeling for their prey. But above his head the sky was aflame with millions of stars. Right across from east to west, like a silvery pathway to heaven, shone the Milky Way, luminous with light, and along that trail of diamonds shone the bigger stars, in the constellations of Perseus, Cassiopeia and Aquila. And far down in the east, Orion the Hunter chased the dancing Pleiades, as he did thousands of years before aeroplanes were ever dreamt of.

"But where is the Boche?" Dastral asked himself again and again.

He was beginning to fear that he had lost him. Perhaps the Hun had caught sight of him as he came through the clouds, and had now departed unseen, as he came.

"Great Scott, have I missed him after all?" he cried. "For months and months I have been longing to fight with a Zeppelin, and now he's slipped me."

And for ten minutes he circled about, stopping his engines once or twice to listen for the roar of the invader's engines and propellers. Suddenly something whizzed past him and burst into a jet of flame. It was a shrapnel with a time fuse. Then another and another. They were firing again, then, down below, and they must have picked up the airship once more.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "She must be somewhere near me too, for I am almost in the line of fire."

Looking down he saw what had happened. The clouds in which the Zeppelin had been hiding were breaking up and drifting away, for a fresh, cold wind had sprung up from the east.

"Ah! Ah! I shall see her soon. She cannot escape me now. I shall find her in a few minutes."

"Whiz! Puff!" came another time fuse, and burst not fifty feet away, several pieces of which pierced the left wing of the monoplane.

"By Jove, but that was close!" he cried, throwing out three balls, which burst into red flame as they fell towards the earth, and was the signal for the Archies to stop firing.

"Ah, there she is!" exclaimed the daring pilot, as, out of the clouds, a thousand feet below him, he saw a black mass emerge against the lighter background of the thinning clouds. At the same instant the searchlights found her, and a dozen long arms of streaming light focussed their united rays upon her.

"Gemini! What a target!" cried Dastral, as he pulled the joy-stick over and dived to the attack, without a second's hesitation.

His gun, already cocked and ready to fire through the whirling propellor, and loaded with the new flaming bullet, was brought to bear.

Down, down he went, firing rapidly all the while. Then underneath and alongside her he raced, pumping his second and third drum into the huge looming mass.

Far below his friends saw the whirling monoplane, in the glare of the searchlight, for now it was as bright as day. The A.A. guns had ceased their fire in response to his signals, but the men on the doomed Zeppelin brought three or four of their eleven machine guns to bear upon him, but it was too late. They knew the deadly peril they were in, and it was impossible for them with their unsteady nerves to hit any vital part of that waspish little fiend, which circled round, above and below them at a truly terrific rate.

Dastral, in his rapid nose-dive, had dipped five hundred feet below the monster and flattened out to return to the attack, but, as he commenced his climb again he saw that the silvery glare of the Zeppelin, as it had appeared to him but twenty seconds before in the lure of the searchlights, had taken on a ruby glow, which, as he mounted up, became a ruddy glare.

"Heavens! She is on fire already!" he gasped.

It was only too true. The engines had been set going, for the Zeppelin commander had tried to make his escape, just as he was discovered, but it was too late. He had never suspected that Himmelman's terrible opponent was overhead, having climbed up twelve thousand feet while he had been hiding in the cloud.

"Ach! Gott in Himmel! Wir sind verloren! Donner and Blitz!"

Never will Dastral forget the sight which he beheld that night, close at hand, for the Huns now realised that all was lost, and that a terrible and speedy vengeance awaited them all from which there was no escape. As the huge envelope kindled into fierce leaping flames, two hundred feet high, the pilot could plainly see the panic-stricken crew of the doomed airship, wringing their hands in terror and fright, as they dashed madly along the narrow footways that led from one gondola to another, trying to escape, till the last second, from the fierce flames that spurted out above and below, and licked up and consumed everything with their intense heat.

It was truly a terrible sight, and the burning mass lit up the countryside far below as well as the great metropolis away to the south. Never since the day when every hill-top in England was aflame with the fires that announced the coming of the Spanish Armada, in the days of the great sea-dogs, had such a beacon been lighted in this land of ours.

Down, down fell the flaming mass, lower and lower, while the daring pilot, bewildered at what he had done, followed her, circling round and round, till, when some eight thousand feet from the ground, one of her four hundred-weight bombs, with which her crew had hoped to wipe out some peaceful village, exploded with the intense heat.

"Boom-m-m! Crash!" came the terrible sound, and the flaming mass, shivered into a thousand fragments by the explosion, fell down to the peaceful earth below with the charred and mutilated bodies of its crew of baby-killers.

A few minutes later Dastral, guided by a score of still flaming fragments about the adjacent fields, landed safely on the level stretch of grass from which he had ascended to fight the midnight raider.

Next morning the daring pilot was decorated by His Majesty King George, and ten days later, having bade farewell to his friend, Tim Burkitt, he was back with his Squadron in France, and leading "B" Flight over the German lines once again.

CHAPTER VII

COWDIE, THE "SPARE PART"

"REVEILLE! Show a leg there!" shouted Corporal Yap, one morning, as he went round the tents and hangars about the aerodrome near Contalmaison.

The sleepy air-mechanics of the Royal Flying Corps in the field opened their eyes and yawned, showing no immediate disposition to rise, for the fatigue of the previous day's work had scarcely passed away.

"Did you hear me, Cowdie, you, 'spare part.' Get up there smartly. I shan't call you again. If you're not on parade in fifteen minutes you'll be for the high jump."

"S all right, Corporal," shouted the "spare part," trying to wriggle out of his roll of blankets and commencing to sing in a doleful monotone:

"Oh, it' snice to get up in the mornin'

But it' snicer to stop in bed..."

Corporal Yap turned and went off on his errand, shaking up a few more "spare parts," and threatening everybody more or less with "the high jump"; which, of course, meant an appearance before the Commanding Officer of the Squadron.

As soon as his woolly head had disappeared behind the flap of the tent door, Cowdie rolled back into his blankets for another minute-and-a-half's nap. As he lay there he looked for all the world like an Egyptian mummy, for he had a peculiar way of rolling himself up in his blankets at night which gave him that appearance. But although his eyes were closed his ears were wide awake for the soft, stealthy tread of the orderly N.C.O., who he knew would be sure to return in about the space of ninety seconds to try to find who had left his warning unheeded.

Cowdie, though a spare part about the aerodrome, was quite a genius in his way. His senses were so acute that the others said he could hear the "footsteps" of a snake in the grass, so they dubbed him the "listening post" and made him sleep next the door of the tent, so that he could always give the alarm in case of need.

At the present moment he was counting under his breath. He knew the orderly's round, and knew to a nicety how long it would take him to get back to tent No. 7. He allowed ninety seconds, and he had just got as far as "eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine," when he suddenly stood bolt upright in his roll of blankets, thereby performing a wonderful gymnastic feat, and looking, with his sleeping cap over his head and ears, not unlike a Turk preparing for his morning ablutions.

Evidently he had heard some soft stealthy tread on the grass outside, for exactly at "ninety" the woolly head of Corporal Yap appeared at the door once more, and his yapping voice called:

"Caught you this time, you trilobite. Out you come! Can't say I didn't give you warning, Cowdie!"

Then catching sight of his man in the grey morning light, the Corporal gasped, and fell back a pace or two.

"The deuce! Do you sleep standing up, man?"

"Sometimes," replied the Spare Part. "M.O.'s orders. Number Nine told me to do so the last time I reported sick."

"Where are you going to? About to have a Turkish bath, I s'pose; all right, my man, I'll catch you yet. If you're not on parade in twelve minutes, bath or no bath, you're for it. D'y'understand?"

"Yes, Corporal, but I'm not going to have a bath. They're dangerous. Number Nine ordered me not to. Said I'd got a murmuring heart, he did," replied the Spare Part meekly.

"Murmuring heart, have you? Then where are you goin' to in that rig?"

"Ain't goin' anywhere; Corporal. I'm standin' still."

"What are you standin' still for?"

"Waitin' for my turn with the shavin' brush," came the quiet answer.

At this the Corporal departed, swearing wrathfully, for he was no match for Cowdie. At his departure the rest of the company in No. 7 tent burst into loud laughter, for they enjoyed immensely this daily tug-of-war between the bullying orderly N.C.O. and the apparently meek but cunning Cowdie, who was a great favourite, despite the nickname of "Spare Part," and "Regimental Cuckoo," which had been bestowed upon him.

Though he had lost two minutes in the start yet Cowdie was dressed, washed and shaved first as usual, for somehow he had the knack of literally jumping into his clothes, even when the men received an alarm and were turned out in the dark of the night.

These little morning episodes did much to enliven the men and to help them to endure the dull fatigue and monotony which was part of the lot of every man who went overseas with the British Expeditionary Force. All the time they were preparing for the roll call, dressing, shaving, rolling up their beds, tidying their kits, a running fire of sparkling wit and frolic was kept up.

Even when the aerodrome was bombed by the German aeroplanes, which happened two or three times each week, almost always just as dawn was breaking, these brave men joked just the same, amid the bursting bombs, and the blinding flashes of the explosions, the ensuing crashes, and the rattle of the anti-aircraft guns with which the aerodrome was defended.

While the shaving was in progress this morning and three of the men were trying to shave by the aid of one little cracked mirror about three inches by two in size, Brat, the despatch-rider attached to the squadron, said to the inimitable Cowdie,

"I hope you finished that letter last night, old man. You finished up all that two inches of candle I lent you. It must have been a long letter you wrote."

"No, I didn't quite finish it," replied Cowdie quietly.

"Was it another letter to your little girl in Old Blighty?"

"No, it was a short letter to mother," replied the Spare Part in a choking voice.

"Dear me! And you didn't finish it?"

"No," came the quiet answer, as Cowdie began to attack his upper lip, which was all quivering with apparent emotion.

"What did you say, then?"

"I said, 'Dear Mother,--I am sending you five shillings, but not this week.'"

At this a burst of laughter from the whole party called forth the ire of Old Snorty, who was passing by, for he had been up early, with several squads of air-mechanics, seeing off "B" Flight, who were paying another early morning visit to the enemy.

"A little less noise there, Number Seven, or some of you'll be in the guard room. How the deuce can we hear when 'B' Flight's coming in, if you kick up a row like that?"

"Old Snorty seems to have something on his mind this morning, doesn't he?" said some one. "'B' Flight won't be back for a couple of hours yet."

So the men were quiet for a whole minute after that until the sergeant-major, having passed out of earshot, and there still being three minutes left for parade, the men returned to their chaff and titter, Brat leading off again by saying:

"That letter of yours, Cowdie, reminds me of another chap who worked alongside of me near St. Pierre with the --th Squadron. He once wrote a letter to his mother as follows:

"Dear Mother,--Enclosed please find fifteen shillings. I cannot.

"Your affectionate son, John."

And the joke was reckoned so good in our squadron that we raised the money for the poor chap, and he sent it after all."

"Fall in!" came a stentorian shout, as Brat finished telling this yarn. And the men of Number Seven doubled up to fall in on the left, and answer their names to the early morning roll, for another day had begun, and more than one man of that small crowd was to prove himself a hero before another sun should come up out of the German lines beyond Ginchy, and set in blood-red clouds behind the British lines.

Some two hours after that, as the men busy about the labours of the day, which in an aerodrome, under active service conditions, range from the rigging of a defective aeroplane, mending struts, replacing controls, preparing ammunition dumps, to the taking down of a R.A.F. engine, and while "A" Flight was returning from a reconnaissance, and "C" Flight was preparing to go up and over the lines on a bombing raid, Grenfell, the orderly officer at the aerodrome 'phone, received a broken message from somewhere near Ginchy.

The message had to do with the crash of a British 'plane somewhere in front or just behind the first line trenches, but a terrific bombardment being concentrated on the place at the time the message suddenly ceased, as though the wires had been broken, or the speaker at the other end put out of action.

A minute later Snorty came dashing down towards the spot where Number Seven squad were

working.

"Where is Brat?" he shouted.

"Over there, sir, in the transport shed," replied Cowdie.

"Fetch him at once!"

And Cowdie dashed off to find his chum, bringing him back a moment later.

"Bratby!" shouted Snorty, giving the despatch-rider his full name for once, as he saw the two doubling up.

"Yes, sir," came the answer smartly.

"You know the observing officer's dug-out near Ginchy?"

"The place where I carried the despatches the other day, sir?"

"Exactly."

"Yes, sir, I know it."

"Good! Go there at once. The wires are snapped again, and we have received a broken message through which stopped in the middle. One of our 'planes has come down. It must be part of 'B' Flight, for they're not in yet. Go there at once, take this message to the officer or senior N.C.O. in charge, and get the full message from him. Learn what you can while you are there, and come back at once, so that we may send out a breakdown gang for the machine, if not too late."

"Right, sir."

"Mind, we want the exact location of the machine, and you must try to find out if it is a bad crash, and what has become of the pilot and observer."

"Yes, sir."

"Now get off at once. It is five minutes since the machine crashed. And be careful now. There are some nasty corners there, and the Germans are shelling the Ginchy lines 'hell for leather' this morning."

Then, catching sight of Cowdie, for whom he had rather a soft place in his rugged heart, the Sergeant-Major added,

"Better take the 'Spare Part' with you. You may need a second man."

"Right, sir."

The next moment the two chums, happy as schoolboys because they were entrusted with a dangerous commission, had the "New Triumph" out of the shed. Then, with Cowdie seated on the carrier, Brat on the saddle, away they went, past the aerodrome sentries, out at the gate, and down the road towards the trenches.

"Zinc-zinc-a-bonck-rep-r-r-r!"

But, alas, it was an adventure which was to prove something more than a joy ride, before another two hours were past.

It was a clear sunny morning as they pattered along, wondering much what new venture it was that awaited them. Over there towards Ginchy the air was thick with bursting shells, and the clear, blue sky was marked in a score of places at once by aeroplanes and kite balloons, whilst round about them were splashes of fire, and floating milk-white cloudlets where the shells burst, as the Huns tried to bring down our "birds."

An air-fight was in progress already over Ginchy; two Fokkers which had ventured near the British lines were being countered and chased by several of our Sopwiths. They were two of the very same Fokkers which had chased Dastral and the remnant of "B" Flight after their drums of ammunition were all used up.

But Dastral, where was he at this moment? This was the thought that was uppermost in the minds of the two men as they whizzed down the Ginchy road, leaving Bazentin on their left. For of all the pilots of the --th Squadron, Dastral was the greatest favourite with the men. He was so brilliant and daring that they felt they could not afford to lose him.

"I hope it isn't Dastral who has crashed, Cowdie," said Brat.

"I hope not," replied Cowdie, feeling at the time somehow that it could be no one else.

"'B' Flight ought to have returned some time ago now. I'm very much afraid they've met their match this time. We could afford to lose half a dozen men rather than the Commander of 'B'

Flight."

"Perhaps he's met Himmelman," urged the man on the carrier, steadying himself for the next heavy jolt, for the last one had nearly thrown him off, and the bad places were becoming more and more plentiful as they neared the lines.

"He will meet him some day, and there'll be a deuce of a fight. Just mark my words. There isn't room for two lords of the air, not in these parts, and one of them will go under."

"Well, I hope it will be the Boche."

"So it will be if they meet on equal terms, but the German air-fiend is a wily brute."

"Whiz-z-z! Bang-g-g!" came a shell at that moment, striking the ground not thirty yards away from them, and sending both men and motor-cycle spinning into the ditch by the very concussion.

"Not hurt, are you, Cowdie?" asked Brat, as he scrambled out of the ditch first, and ran to help his friend.

"No, but it was a very near thing that. Another few inches and that would have been the end of the regimental 'spare part.' Look here!" and Cowdie showed a rent in his tunic where a piece of shrapnel had torn away six inches of it behind the left shoulder.

Fortunately, though both were shaken, neither of the men had been actually hit. It was a marvellous escape, however, one of those things one cannot account for. Though the machine had been badly knocked about and splintered, it had received no vital injury, and, after straightening out a few spokes, and cutting away a few more they mounted again and proceeded a little further.

"Halt Who goes there?" came the shout as they pattered up to the support trenches.

They halted and dismounted, and after telling their business were allowed to proceed, but they were cautioned that the road ahead was full of shell holes, and that they would not be able to ride much further. They would certainly be stopped at the reserve trenches.

Once more they started, their heads throbbing and aching with the noise of the terrific bombardment which was proceeding, for they were now in the super-danger zone, and shells were screaming overhead every few seconds, and many were bursting on their left and on their right.

Again they were halted, this time by a sentry near the second line trenches, and were absolutely refused permission to proceed further till they explained to the officer of the company commanding the trench what their errand was.

"Wires broken, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nearly all the wires to the front line trenches in this sector have been broken. We have had the engineers out all the morning mending them."

"There is news of one of our fighting 'planes having crashed somewhere over there, half an hour ago, sir," said Bratby, "and we have been ordered to proceed as near as possible to the place, to find out what has happened, as the aerodrome wire has been snapped."

"An aeroplane crashed, did you say?" asked the officer.

"Yes, sir."

"There have been half a dozen of them down in front of us since seven o'clock this morning; most of them German, I think."

"This was one of ours, sir."

"Yes, I saw it. There were two of them came down about the same time, but the other one fell by our support trenches and the pilot and observer were saved."

"And the other one, sir?"

"Oh, there is no hope for that one. She came down over there near our front line trench, and she was blazing when she crashed. We could not get at her, or at least we kept the men back who volunteered, as the Germans turned their machine guns on her directly she hit the ground and swept the spot for twenty minutes."

"The devils!" ejaculated Brat, looking more serious than he had ever looked in his life, while a strange light shone in Cowdie's eyes.

"We were told that we must get to the dug-out of Captain Grenfell, somewhere in the front line trench."

"Oh, very well; but you fellows go at your own risk. The Boches have been shelling the place like hell most of the time since daybreak."

"We're quite prepared to take the risk, sir!" replied Cowdie.

"Come this way, then, and mind that corner. We call it Hell-fire Corner these days, for we have lost more men there than at any other point," replied the officer.

A few minutes later he handed them over to a sergeant, with instructions to conduct them to the dug-out where Captain Grenfell and his two operators still held on to the end of the broken wires. No messages had come through for some time, but several squads of Royal Engineers were busy crawling out in the open and trying to find the loose ends in order to restore communication.

When they arrived there Captain Grenfell gave them the full text of the message which he had tried to get through, and pointed out to them the place where the ruins of the aeroplane lay, for they were still smoking.

"But the pilot, sir, where is he? And where is the observer? They were the best men in the Squadron, and their loss will be felt greatly, for Lieutenant Dastral was reckoned the best pilot in France, and great things were expected from him in the near future," said Brat.

For answer the Captain shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture which seemed to indicate that he feared the case was hopeless.

"Their bodies must be somewhere over there. Several of our men volunteered to go over to rescue them, but every man who went over the top went to his death, until the O.C. refused permission for any more to attempt it, for he said he could not spare the men."

While they were thus discussing the matter, one of the sentries a little further down the trench gave an alarm:

"Cloud of gas or fog coming over, sir, from the German lines!"

Brat and Cowdie, at these words, peeped over the edge of the parapet, and saw, about a quarter of a mile away, a dense yellowish vapour coming slowly onward from a point where the enemy's lines curved round and faced the British lines from almost due south-east. The order was passed quickly down the lines for the men to don their gas-helmets, but the C.O. coming along the trench shortly afterwards, remarked that it could not possibly be gas, for, from the direction whence it came, it would pass onwards over a portion of the enemy's lines at a spot where the trenches curved back again and made a salient. At this point the lines twisted and bent themselves into many curious salients, for the last advance had not thoroughly straightened out the position.

"The Germans are not such fools as to gas their own men, Grenfell, what do you say?" remarked the officer commanding the trench to Grenfell, who had come out of his dug-out to get a view of the cloud.

"No, sir. There must be some other reason."

"Yes, and the reason is, I think, a change of wind which is bringing on a dense fog."

"You are quite right, sir," added the other, after regarding the air and sky for some ten seconds. "There has been a sudden change of wind, and a dense local fog is coming up from the valley. The whole landscape will be blotted out in a few minutes."

"You're right, Grenfell," replied the officer. Then, turning to his orderly-sergeant, he called out:

"Pass the order for the men to stand-to! There is no telling but that the Boches may come over the top with the fog, and try to surprise us."

"Yes, sir," came the reply smartly, and the sergeant, saluting, disappeared along the trench, calling out the men from the dug-outs, and ordering a general "stand-to."

The chance was too good to be lost. Cowdie gave Brat a dig in the ribs, and whispered to him,

"Now is the time. See, the fog thickens, and it is nearly up to the wrecked aeroplane. Let's go over, or the Boches will be there first. They're sure to try it on. What say you?"

"I'm with you, old man, but it will be an awful job. Have you got your revolver loaded, for we've got nothing else?"

"Yes," replied his chum, feeling that his weapon was safe in the leather case, which hung at his left side.

"Come on, then; we haven't a second to lose."

The next instant they were over the top, and making a dash for the spot already hidden in the fog.

"Come back there, you fellows!" cried a sergeant of the Wiltshires, whose company lined the trench. "Where the deuce are you going to?"

"To save Lieutenant Dastral and his observer, sergeant! Don't let your men fire on us. We'll be back in five minutes," shouted Bratby.

"Devil a bit of use you fellows throwing your lives away like that. The Boches are sure to attack under cover of the fog. Come back, the pilot must have been dead an hour. The machine was ablaze when it crashed," called the sergeant again.

To this they returned no answer, but scampered as fast as they could across the broken ground, creeping under barbed wire, and stumbling into shell holes, for the ground had been torn and rent by the morning's bombardment, and huge gaps had been made in the barbed wire defences.

Now, when Dastral, his ammunition expended, his machine damaged to such an extent that it scarcely held together, had reached the British lines that morning, after the brilliant reconnaissance he had carried out with his Flight, he made a steep gradient to get to earth at the first possible landing-place, but even as he made the attempt he knew he would fail. The wasp's fuselage was plugged in a hundred places. The petrol feed had been severed by shrapnel, and a shell from the German lines, hitting the reserve petrol tank, set it ablaze, just at the moment when he was making for the ground.

Half-blinded by the flames and scorched by the heat, he, nevertheless, held the joystick firmly, and tried to reach his objective, but, when near the trenches, the machine nose-dived and crashed, side-slipping to the earth, so that the left aileron struck the ground first. Then she rolled over, and crumpled up. She did not strike the ground with any great force, because Dastral had kept her so well in hand.

Disentangling himself from the wreckage first, bruised, and burnt, he yet remembered Jock, who had received still greater injury.

"Jock!" he called. "Are you hurt?"

But no reply came from the unconscious observer, who lay under the wreckage which was now in flames.

"Come along, old man! Pull yourself together. The Huns are sure to turn their machine guns upon us in a few seconds."

Even as he spoke there came the dreaded sound, which told that the infernal Huns had opened fire upon the wreckage.

"Rep-p-p! Rep-r-r-r-r!"

A howl of rage went up from the British trenches at this act of cowardice, which permitted men to turn their guns upon wounded officers, entangled in the wreckage of a burning aeroplane.

"Come on, boys, let's give 'em 'ell!" shouted some of the Wiltshires, when they saw what was happening, and at least a dozen men sprang out of the British trenches of their own free will in a useless attempt to save the lives of the aviators, but every man fell long before he gained the spot where the wreckage lay.

Dastral, however, kept cool, and seeing a pilot's boot projecting from under the blazing he seized it, and tugged away, until the unconscious form of his chum lay at his feet. Then, heedless of the bullets still whizzing around him, he dragged his comrade quickly into the friendly shelter of a huge crater, a dozen yards away. Even as he rolled over into the hollow, after throwing Jock in first, his thick, leather pilot's coat was pierced by several bullets, and he himself was wounded again.

Still cheerful, however, he bandaged his wound, then endeavoured to rouse Jock, but all his efforts failed.

So he searched him, found several wounds, bound them up as well as he could with the emergency lint and bandages which every soldier on active service carries in the lining of his coat. Then, through sheer loss of blood he fainted away, and lay there he knew not how long, for he was thoroughly exhausted, and felt that he was dying.

As he slumbered, sheltered in that little hollow from the direct fire of the enemy, he became feverish, and dreamt wild, fantastic dreams. With Jock beside him he sailed away on the hornet, over distant lands, where the skies were blue and the sun shone bright and the atmosphere was pleasant and warm.

Here there were no Germans to worry them with shrapnel and bullets, but calmly and serenely they sailed over huge forests and deserts, swamps and islands, which studded the deep blue sea far below them, like gems set in emerald. Now they were in the tropics, skimming along over

huge palm trees, and lagoons that opened out into the sea. Great monsters basked in the sunlight on the banks of the rivers and lagoons, and on the shores of the sea. They were in an unknown land discovering strange places. Just such a trip it was as Jock and he had often talked about, when, the day's work done, they had settled in the comfortable arm-chairs in the officers' mess at the aerodrome near Contalmaison.

Often they had talked of these things, and the trips they were going to make in the happy years to come, when the fighting was all over, and the smoke of battle had blown away, and the liberties of mankind had been won back from the tyrants of these latter days.

Thus he dreamt, for he was feverish, while over him the shells burst, and the great guns thundered, and all around, upon the wide-stretched battlefields, the dead and the dying lay. And always he was parched and thirsty, and sometimes he would turn and say to Jock:

"There, far below us in the desert, Jock, I can see an oasis, with pools of cold refreshing water, and a cluster of tall trees, where we shall find dates and figs. Let us go down, Jock."

But the vision would fade before he reached the promised land, and the cup of water was dashed from his lips, and the goblet broken. Again he would see across the desert, which now seemed interminable, mystic and wonderful lakes of fresh water. But always he was mocked, and again and again those horrid German guns would thunder out from far below and forbid them to land.

Suddenly from out of the midst of his dream, he heard some one calling his name.

"Dastral! Lieutenant Dastral!"

He turned uneasily in his sleep; then he woke with a start, and looked about him. His brow was flushed, his head burned as though it were on fire, and his eyes glittered. All seemed dark, for the landscape was blotted out by a dark cloud.

Half regaining consciousness he murmured:

"Where am I? Who called me?" But while he wondered, his hand touched something, and he shrank back startled. It was Jock's poor wounded and bruised body that he had touched. Then he remembered it all. The flight over the German lines; the attack which had been made upon them by a whole German squadron; the fierce fight and the dash back, followed by a cloud of Fokkers and Aviatiks. Then the crash----. Yes he remembered it all now, and Jock, poor Jock must be dead, for he had not moved, and they must have been there for hours, days perhaps--at least, it seemed so, for it was dark as night, and it was morning when they crashed.

Then again he heard that welcome sound, a human voice, and it called him by name.

"Dastral! Lieutenant Dastral, where are you?"

And he feebly answered with all his strength.

"Here! Here! For heaven's sake help us!"

The next instant two burly forms came stumbling and rolling down the crater, for Cowdie and Brat had just arrived at the spot, and as yet scarcely an hour had elapsed since the crash. Strong arms were put around the pilot, which raised him up, for he had fallen down again, after his effort to rise. He had just time to murmur something, and point to the unconscious form of his observer, when he relapsed into unconsciousness again.

"Thank God we have found you both, sir!" exclaimed a strong voice, which seemed to resound again and again through his being.

As the thick fog came on, the firing had been suspended for a moment. It was a strange, weird silence that seemed to presage a coming storm. Cowdie was the first to read its meaning.

"Quick, Brat!" he cried. "They're going to attack. We must make a dash for it."

It was only too true. Scarcely had they reached the top of the crater, and proceeded a dozen yards with their heavy burdens, when they heard the sound of voices.

"Hist! What was that?"

They paused for a moment, and waited, but it seemed to them that their panting and the loud thumping of their hearts would betray them. How far had they to go yet? they asked each other. Then, with a shudder, Cowdie turned and began to retrace his steps, whispering to his comrade:

"We have come the wrong way. Those are the German trenches over there, and look, they are forming up over the top ready to attack."

"Good heavens! Then we are lost," replied his comrade.

"No, we may yet be in time. Come along. It cannot be far."

With his keen blue eyes Cowdie peered through the gloom, for Cowdie, the "spare part," had been the first to make the discovery. He had seen the shadowy forms of the Germans not twenty yards away. Fortunately, they had not been observed as yet, but they were not out of danger. They had regained their right direction, however. The British trenches were not more than seventy yards away.

On they stumbled, over the broken ground, through pools of water, and soon they reached the tangled wire. Exhausted they were ready to sink with fatigue, yet they held out. But their hands were bleeding and torn by the wire, and their clothing was in shreds.

Suddenly they heard the sound of voices behind them. Low voices called to each other, and the tramp of feet was also heard.

"They are advancing. Quick! quick!" shouted Cowdie.

Then, knowing that the British trenches could not be more than thirty yards in front of him, he called out:

"Stand-to! The Huns are attacking!"

The next instant a blaze of fire lit up the fog, as a dozen Very lights were fired up from the British trenches. The two figures of the men carrying the unconscious pilot and observer were clearly outlined. The sergeant of the Wiltshires shouted to his men:

"Don't fire! They are the R.F.C. men bringing in their officers."

The firing, however, came from a different direction, for the Germans, baulked of their prey, and seeing who had given them away, opened fire, and Cowdie stumbled into the British first-line trench into the arms of the sergeant of the Wiltshires, carrying his burden to the last. He was dead, shot through the heart. He had made the supreme sacrifice to save the man he loved.

With a wild cheer the British received the welcome order to charge, and the last thing that Brat remembered was that cheer, as the men swept by him, and he also sank down with his load.

Next day they buried Cowdie, "the regimental spare part." Gently they laid him to rest in a little graveyard by a shattered church, behind the British lines. And over his grave the bugles of the Wiltshires sounded the solemn notes of the "Last Post." And his comrades in Number 7 tent fired three volleys over the hero's grave, just as in the olden days, two thousand years ago, Aeneas and his comrades, when they buried the hero Misenus, called his name thrice into the shades.

And Bratby, he recovered from his wounds, and, to-day, upon his breast he wears the ribbons of the Military Medal.

Dastral and Jock also recovered from their wounds, for their work was not yet done, and six weeks later were back from sick leave, preparing once more to strafe the Huns.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RAID ON KRUPPS

IT was a dark night, some two or three hours before dawn, when Air-Mechanic Pearson, one of the outer sentries at the aerodrome near Contalmaison, thought he heard the whirr of propellers somewhere in the dark skies above.

For a few seconds he peered up into the gloomy heavens, trying to locate the sound, for he was very much puzzled, and could not account for the sound on such a night.

"They can't be aeroplanes returning from over the lines," he told himself, "or we should have had notice to light the flares. It will be a sheer impossibility to land without a crash on a dark night like this."

Again he listened, and he thought the droning sound settled down into the throb of engines. He was anxious, however, not to call out the guard on a false alarm, for he had once been severely reprimanded for so doing.

"They cannot be hostile 'planes attempting an early morning raid; it is far too thick. It would be like a nigger trying to find a black cat in a dark cellar," he muttered.

A quarter of a minute later, however, he thought he had discovered the real cause, for the throbbing of aerial engines could now be distinctly heard.

"It's a Zeppelin!" he exclaimed. "They're going to find the aerodrome with their search-light, and bomb the place, then make off before our machines can get up," and he instantly yelled out at the top of his voice, "Turn out, guard!"

The alarm was caught up, passed on to the next sentry, who repeated it, and the next moment, after turning out the main guard, the sergeant came running up, and asked:

"What's the matter, Pearson?"

"Zeppelin approaching from the eastward, sergeant!" replied the air-mechanic.

"Zeppelin, man! What the deuce do you mean? Where is it?"

"Up there, sergeant. I can hear it quite plainly now."

"By Jove, so can I!"

The next moment the sergeant was back in the guard-room. From thence he dashed into the orderly-room, and knocked at the inner door, where the orderly officer for the night was on duty.

"Come in," cried the officer in answer to the knocking. Then, as the sergeant, all puffed with his exertion, entered and saluted, he said:

"What's the matter, sergeant?"

"Zeppelin approaching from over the German lines, sir. Hadn't we better 'phone to the anti-aircraft guns, and the searchlights to pick up the raider before he bombs the place?" for to the sergeant's mind, visions of falling bombs and terrific explosions were present.

"Zeppelin?" laughed the orderly officer.

"Yes, sir. I can hear the engines as plainly as possible outside."

"No, you're mistaken. It's the 'Gertie' returning. She's been out on secret service work behind the German lines. I've been expecting her for a couple of hours. Not a word of this to the men, now. I am expecting a secret service man back before dawn, and the 'Gertie's' been to fetch him. Picked him up at some secret place in the dark, far behind the enemy's lines."

Now, the "Gertie" was a baby-airship detailed for special service, and not the least important part of her work was the secret journeying to and fro, across the German lines, to quiet rural places, where, in the dark, she dropped messages, carrier pigeons, etc., and occasionally brought back some daring member of the British Secret Service, who had been collecting information behind the enemy's lines.

By this time the orderly officer was out on the aerodrome, and the squads of air-mechanics were being roused by the orderly sergeant. Suddenly there came a cry from one of the guard.

"Airship signalling to the aerodrome, sir!"

"What signal was that?" demanded the officer.

"Two green lights and a red, sir, over there, half a mile away," came the reply.

"That's right. It's the 'Gertie' trying to find the landing place. Flight-sergeant, where are you?"

"Here, sir," came the answer, as the aerodrome flight-sergeant, just roused by the alarm, rushed up, without putties or tunic on.

"Light the usual flares at the landing-place, and give the Brigade colours as well."

"Yes, sir."

And the next instant he had disappeared into the darkness again to hurry up the air-mechanics and to light the flares. The "Gertie" had very nearly found her mark, having over-shot it but half a mile or so in the pitchy darkness, which was a very creditable performance.

As soon as the flares were lighted, her engines, which had been shut off, were heard again, as she gradually came nearer and nearer, until, when right overhead, she began to descend slowly.

"There she comes! This way, lads!" cried the stentorian voice of Snorty, whose piercing eyes were amongst the first to spot the looming mass overhead.

"Steady, there, steady!" came the next order, as the ropes and drags were lowered, and the men made a scramble for them. And, in a very short space of time the baby-airship was made fast, and from the single gondola, in which five men were cooped, some one leapt out, who held in his hand a bundle of documents.

"Captain Scott, I believe, sir," said the orderly officer stepping forward.

"Yes. Are you Lieutenant Grenfell?"

"Yes, sir." And with that the two men went off together to the private room of the orderly officer.

The newcomer was the bearer of some important plans and sketches, to obtain which he had risked his life every hour of the day and night during the past three weeks. They were nothing less than detailed plans of the great German arsenal at Krupps', for which the Commanding Officer had been anxiously waiting. For some time previously, the C.O. had received from the War Office, through the General Headquarters in the field, a peremptory order, something like the following:--

"To the Officer Commanding,

--th Squadron, Royal Flying Corps.

"It is of vital importance that the enemy's supply of munitions should be hampered and restricted as far as possible, in view of the offensive to be undertaken shortly. As soon, therefore, as the necessary plans and papers reach you, you will detail one of your best flights, under your most capable Flight-Commander, to carry out the first raid on the enemy's main arsenal at Krupp'."

This document, signed by one of the generals commanding in the field, had been in the hands of the Squadron-Commander for some days, and he had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of the promised plans and sketches. As soon, therefore, as the orderly officer received them, he sent Brat, the despatch-rider, with his motor cycle and side car to the C.O.'s quarters. And ten minutes later that distinguished person was leaving the officers' quarters on his way to the aerodrome.

Having arrived, after ten minutes' chat with the officer belonging to the secret service, his first words were:

"Grenfell, ask Flight-Commander Dastral to come down at once."

"Yes, sir."

And on his next journey, Brat fetched Dastral down from his bunk at the mess to join the party.

"Dastral," was the first word from the C.O. as soon as the daring young pilot entered.

"Yes, sir," replied the Flight-Commander, saluting smartly.

"Here's something for you after your own heart."

"What is that, sir?" asked the youth, smiling.

"The promised raid on Krupps'. How would you like to undertake it with your flight? You have often spoken about it."

"Nothing would please me better, sir."

"And the other fellows belonging to your flight, what about them?"

"They would follow me anywhere, sir!"

"Gad, I believe they would, for they all worship you. I believe they'd follow you to 'Gulfs,' if you led them there."

Dastral laughed, and repeated his avowal, that he would be only too pleased to start at dawn should the weather conditions prove good enough.

"Right!" exclaimed the major. "Then, you'd better spend the next two hours with Captain Scott here, and with your men. Get thoroughly hold of these plans, and fix them in your mind."

So, while breakfast was laid for the Intelligence officer, Dastral got his men together, including Mac and Jock. Afterwards the eight men who were going into action carefully laid their plans, arranging a code of signals and the method of attack, should they succeed in reaching their destination. Then they went over to the sheds, examined and tested the machines, saw them loaded up with bombs and drums of ammunition. The guns, compasses, etc., were then shipped

and everything was ready.

Dastral looked at his watch. In an hour it would be dawn.

"We must be off, boys. We must cross the German lines before daybreak."

"Right, sir," replied the others, "We can be ready in ten minutes."

Then, having previously breakfasted, they put on their thick leather coats, pilots' boots and helmets, and made ready. The C.O. came down to wish them godspeed and a safe return. The probable time of their return was fixed, and it was arranged that an escort should meet them on their way back to defend them from hostile aircraft, lest any of them should be in difficulties, and unable, through damaged machines or lack of ammunition, to fight their way home.

"Stand by! Contact, switch off!" came the order.

The propellers were swung vigorously once or twice, then, one after another, the engines broke into their mighty song, and the machines taxied off into the darkness across the aerodrome, and as the joy-stick was pulled over each 'plane sprang into the air, and began its long voyage.

"Good-bye, and good luck!" shouted the C.O. as each man taxied off, and as a parting salute, each pilot raised his gloved hand from the controls for an instant.

Four hundred miles, that was the distance of the double journey. Two hundred miles of enemy territory to be traversed before they reached their objective; then, another two hundred back again to safety; and no chance of a landing to remedy even the slightest defect. That was the prospect before these daring aviators, as they sallied forth on their dangerous errand this morning about half an hour before the first faint whisper of dawn came up out of the east.

No wonder the Commanding Officer of the Squadron, as he watched them depart, turned to his companions and said:

"A perilous venture, isn't it, for the boys?"

"You're right, sir," replied the orderly officer. "I hope not one of them will lose the number of his mess before nightfall."

"Ah, well. We have had some vacant chairs in the mess lately. Four hundred miles," he was heard to remark as he turned on his heels and went back to his room.

He was a kindly, considerate commander, for he had that rare quality which combined firmness with kindness, and because of that he was loved by all his men.

The adventurers crossed the German lines at seven thousand feet, and in the darkness the enemy's searchlights failed to find them, so they were well away for once. There was just a little doubt in Dastral's mind about the weather conditions when he started, as the success of the venture depended very much upon the visibility. At present, however, the dull cloudy weather was in their favour, if only it might clear up later.

He was therefore very pleased when, having left the enemy's lines some thirty or forty miles behind, the first tinge of dawn lit up the sky in front of them, showing the horizon clearly. The wind had changed during the last hour, and, though it grew colder, it became much brighter.

Once or twice the Flight-Commander looked round at his followers, casting a critical eye upon the whole flight.

"Thank goodness, the engines seem to be running well. Everything depends on them," he murmured.

His own machine was a double-seater type with the observer's car projecting right in front of the engine, a powerful twelve-cylindered R.A.F.

A little later Jock, speaking through the tube, shouted:

"Shots on the left, Dastral!" and he pointed to a spot far down below, for the landscape had opened out now, and they had been spotted for the first time.

Dastral looked down, and saw several rapid flashes, away down on the left, where a battery of "Archies," having found them, had opened fire.

In front of the machine which was leading the flight, Dastral saw several black bursts of smoke, and in the centre of each burst was a yellow glare.

"Ah, the Boches have found the range to a nicety!" yelled Dastral to Jock. "Look out! We must dive."

Then, pulling over the controls, the hornet dipped at the head, doing a neat little nose-dive of some five hundred feet, throwing the enemy's range out of gear, and compelling him to readjust

his sights.

As he dived, the others, with an eye always on their leader, followed him, and the whole flight dived clean underneath a mass of curtain fire, intended to bar their progress. So cleverly was it all done that they all escaped without a scratch.

The Commander looked down at those batteries still spitting fire. With not a little contempt he regarded them. They could not touch him, for already, before they could readjust their fire, the whole flight was out of range, for the engines were now doing well, and a speed of a hundred and twenty miles an hour had been worked up.

At another time Dastral would like to have dived down to within five hundred feet of those German guns, and put them out of action, but he had other work on hand today; work which would take all his time and skill to complete satisfactorily, and to bring his men back to safety. Even if Himmelman himself should attack him now, he must refuse him battle, unless compelled to fight for mere safety. His present duty was to bomb the great arsenal at Krupps', and, as far as possible, leave the principal buildings nothing but a heap of smoking ruins. So he opened out the throttle of his engine to the full, and for the first time reached one hundred and twenty-five miles an hour, not a very bad speed when you are loaded up with heavy missiles.

They had been flying for an hour now, and had climbed higher and higher until they were at nine thousand feet. It was bitterly cold, and already their feet and hands were numbed. What would they be like in another two hours?

An hour and a half passed, and shortly afterwards Jock shouted:

"The Rhine! The Rhine!"

Nor indeed was he mistaken. He had been eagerly searching for the famous stream that runs through the German Fatherland, and of which the Hun is so proud. And now, there it was, a little way ahead of them, running through the landscape like a silver thread.

Soon they were over the stately river, and Dastral, knowing that the road was as plain as a pikestaff now if the weather kept clear, no longer heeded his compass, but, wheeling smartly to his left, followed the stream on its way to the sea.

"What town is that?" shouted the pilot, as a vast assembly of houses and spires came into view.

"Coblentz," replied the observer, with his finger on the waterproof map.

"Better look out for trouble, hadn't we?"

"Yes, the Ehrenbreitstein Forts are down below; just a little way ahead on the left. They have plenty of guns down there."

This place, called the Gibraltar of Central Europe, is a towering fortification, overlooking the town of Coblentz, and defending the line of the Rhine. The river runs between the fort and the town, and the two are connected by a bridge of boats.

"Better skirt the town, else they will think we are going to attack the place, and some of our fellows might get winged."

"Poch! They can't hit us. All their best gunners are miles away at the front. Let's go straight on. We shall be out of their range in five minutes."

Before they reached the town the white puffs of the 77's made a line of smoke ahead of them, and, intermingled with this, they saw the black cloudlets caused by the bursting of the enemy's 105 calibre shells. In fact they were ringed with a curtain of shell fire.

Dastral gave the signal by a sudden clip of his 'plane, which was leading.

"Ninety degrees left and dip 500 feet!"

The Flight-Commander led the way through a gap in the curtain fire, and the rest followed, swerving rapidly to the left, then down, down in a fearful nose-dive of hundreds of feet, before they flattened out.

"Bravo! Well done, boys!" yelled the leader, waving his hand to the daring men behind. For they had outclassed the Boche, and before he could rectify his aim, the machines were out of range once more.

On the other side of the town, however, they came in for the same treatment, but they once more evaded the enemy's fire, and soon they left the town of Coblentz, with its Denkmal of Wilhelm der Grosse, and the forts of Ehrenbreitstein behind them.

"Three hundred shots for nothing, Jock," shouted Dastral, who was highly pleased with himself.

Jock did not hear, however, for the wind carried the words away, and the observer was

otherwise engaged, searching the skies with his glasses. A moment later, however, having discovered what he was looking for, he turned and shouted:

"One, two, three of them climbing to attack us!"

"Where are they?"

"Down below there to the left. Two yellow fat 'planes with black crosses on them, and a white one."

Dastral looked serious for a moment, as, holding the joy-stick with his right hand, he raised his glasses with the other and looked down, to where, from an aerodrome just by the river, three enemy 'planes were rising up to fight with them.

The shadow passed from the fair, young face of the chief pilot, as he gazed upon the enemy, and a calm smile wreathed his face.

"Humph! Let the devils come. We are not afraid of them. Sorry I can't stay to fight them, Jock. Our first business is to bomb the arsenal, not to pick a stray quarrel with these beasts, who are asking for trouble."

Then, opening out his engine once more to the full, he waved his hand coolly to the enemy, and called out:

"Good-bye, Mr. Boche. Some other time, if you don't mind, but to-day I'm busy."

His followers understood, and opened the throttles of their engines accordingly, and, speeding on, soon left the enemy behind, for they were slower machines, all the enemy's best fighters being on the western front.

Again and again Dastral looked round to see that his comrades were all right. Eagerly he looked for the red, white and blue cocarde on the wings, and felt very happy, for there was no need to be miserable and lonely with those brave fellows so near. Had they not sworn to follow him to the "Gulfs," if necessary?

The chief enemy, however, so far, was the biting cold. The thermometer was showing sixteen degrees below zero. Even with the thick leathern coats, pilots' boots and padded helmets, it was impossible to keep warm. The cold intruded everywhere. The thought which consoled them, however, was this:

"We shall soon be there, now! And we shall be the first raiders to bomb the enemy's citadel, where he manufactures his enormous supply of shot and shell to keep the war going."

They were following the Rhine still. Every now and then they could see long strings of barges being towed up and down the river between Coblenz and Dusseldorf.

"Cologne!" shouted the observer, and Dastral nodded, as he looked ahead and saw the twin spires of the wonderful cathedral, and close beside it the ancient Rathaus.

"What a target!" shouted Jock, as the great city lay beneath them.

"Yes, but there are women and children down there, Jock, and I am not a pirate. When we get to Essen we will begin."

"All right, old fellow. It was only a joke," came back the reply through the speaking-tube.

They received another baptism of fire as they reached the outskirts of the city, but, skirting round to the right, they avoided the heavy fire of the forts at Deutz, for Dastral knew that the brutes were not shooting badly to-day, and he was anxious not to have a single machine crippled before his mission was completed.

"There'll be plenty of fighting soon, my boy!" called Dastral. "The enemy will have guessed our objective by this time and they will be preparing a reception for us."

The observer nodded, for he knew that the fires down below would be busy, and the various German Commands would be communicating with Essen and the arsenal at Krupps'. There was no time to lose, and so, despite the cold, they were still doing about one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

"Dusseldorf!" soon came from the observer's nacelle, for they had passed Coblenz, and many other towns and villages that lay about the slopes of the Rhine.

"See that!" shouted Jock.

Dastral again looked in the direction pointed out by his comrade, and he beheld a great blur of smoke on the right, which blotted out the landscape.

It was Germany's black country. Here the towns were clustered thickly together. Elberfeld,

Barmen, Essen, and to the west of the last-mentioned town lay the mighty works of Krupps. Somewhere in that cloud of smoke lay the object of their long flight.

The Flight-Commander pointed his machine in the direction indicated, and the rest followed. The real fight was about to begin at last. How would they come out of it?

They were all eager to begin, for each machine carried a couple of the new land torpedoes, in addition to a number of twenty pound bombs.

It was well they had arranged a proper plan of campaign, else their labour would have been half in vain. Now, with the information which had come to hand by the mysterious Captain Scott, they knew the exact location of the very buildings on which they were about to concentrate their fire.

"Now we're going to be strafed! I thought so!" cried Dastral.

"Phew! We're in for it now!" replied Jock, as the shot and shell began to scream past them, bursting with red spurts of flame, followed by white puffs and black clouds.

Where was the huge powder factory? They were all searching keenly for it now, for the atmosphere was smoky, which was partly their defence, and partly their disadvantage, making it difficult to place their bombs correctly.

It would never do to fail now. They must go lower down and risk the heavy fire from the "Archies."

The T.N.T. sheds, where are they? The nitro-glycerine works, and the huge dump?

Oh, yes, there they were. Not all the smoke could hide them. Not all the enemy's fire could stop those daring and intrepid raiders.

Dastral gave the pre-arranged signal, and each 'plane dived to the objective for which it had been detailed.

"Boom-m-m!" went the first land torpedo.

Yes, the Flight-Commander had found the powder works. A flame of fire shot up hundreds of feet, and the place began to burn fiercely. The "Archies" roared louder than ever.

"Boom-m-m! Boom-m-m! Boom-m-m!"

The others had found their objectives too. Four huge blocks were burning fiercely. Down below the crowds were surging out of the doomed buildings, running hither and thither to escape those terrible bombs which were now being dropped in a dozen places, in rapid succession, and the still more terrible explosions which must shortly come unless the fierce fires which were now raging could be quickly subdued.

The utmost confusion reigned down below. The impossible had been accomplished. Krupps', the very heart of Germany, had been bombed by a few daring raiders.

"Donner and blitz!" people down below were shouting. "What is the good of our great Prussian army if it cannot prevent such things?"

The raiders were off now, for all this had been done in less than three minutes, once they had found their targets. As they made off German aeroplanes rose to pursue them. In every direction they saw the enemy, who had been surprised after all, in spite of the warning he must have received.

As they made off strange electric shocks seemed to agitate the air, and to make the machines rock wildly. Violent waves disturbed the atmosphere. Evidently the enemy had discovered some new device of creating air-pockets, and filling the heavens with lurid flashes of electricity.

But the device fails. The machines pass out of danger, but alas, it is doubtful whether two of them will ever reach the shelter of their own lines again. Still, they are going to make the effort. Number three and four have been badly hit, and Dastral's 'plane is torn with bits of shrapnel.

Once or twice they look back at the flaming destruction which they have wrought, all in the space of a few minutes. As they do so, a mighty column of flame and black smoke rises up into the air, and a terrific explosion takes place, which shakes the earth for fifty miles around.

Yes, the T.N.T. works have gone up, and the two explosions which soon follow show that something else has gone into the sky as well.

"Bravo! Krupps' has been bombed!"

Dastral gives the signal for his men to turn to the westward, and to make with all possible speed for the shelter of their own lines.

But enemy 'planes are in rapid pursuit, and there are two lame ducks in the flight. It means another two hours' journey, and there is no chance for the lame ducks if they are further molested.

The leader quickly decides. He has still some fight left in him, and so has Mac. They will escort the rest. He signals to Mac, "Take the left flank!" and Mac understands, while he himself takes the right flank.

Then he orders the others to go S.S.W., for they must not infringe the neutrality of Holland by going due west. And so they proceed, until Jock signals that two of the Huns are gaining upon them. They are fast 'planes, and will do some damage if they are not dealt with.

At present they are still half a mile behind and a thousand feet below them. So Dastral circles round once or twice as if to fight with them, but only one of them accepts the challenge, and opens fire at the Flight-Commander.

"Rap-rap-rap-rap!" comes the sound of the fire, just audible above the roar of the engines and the whir-r-r-r of the propellers.

But Dastral has the weather-gage of him, for he has a thousand feet greater altitude. He waits a moment, circling round. Then, as the Boche comes up, he dives at him, as though he meant to ram him, for he knew this would unnerve the enemy more than anything else.

At the same moment he treats the Boche to three sudden bursts of fire from his Lewis gun. It is quite enough for the enemy. He has outdistanced his friends, and does not care to engage this air-devil of an Englishman alone, so he swerves round, and hauls off a little, hoping that the Britisher will be sufficient of a fool to pursue him, but Dastral returns to his command, so that he may shepherd the lame ducks through any further peril that may come upon them.

Again and again on that long journey back he has to turn and fight, and often Mac accompanies him.

At length, half frozen to death, with their eyes smarting so that they can scarcely see, one of them sights the relief squadron which has come to meet them and escort them back to safety.

Half a squadron has come to meet them, good fighters, all fresh and ready for any hostile aircraft that cares to take the challenge. And so, after nearly six hours of a trying ordeal, "B" Flight returns safely to the shelter of the aerodrome behind the British lines.

CHAPTER IX

THE GIANT WAR-PLANE

FOR some days after the daring adventure recorded in our last chapter things had been fairly quiet along that portion of the Somme front, near the sector patrolled by the 'planes of the --th Squadron. There had been the usual daily reconnaissances over the enemy's lines; the usual spotting and registering for the artillery by the aeroplanes and the kite balloons, but the dull, cloudy weather had restricted the use of the 'planes to a great extent.

One incident that had occurred, however, caused no little excitement, and awakened the professional curiosity of the pilots, observers and air-mechanics of the squadron.

Late one afternoon a very small but swift aerial scout, in the shape of a new type of baby-monoplane, suddenly appeared over the aerodrome, and after circling round once or twice, made several rapid spirals and descended on to the grounds. It was no enemy machine, for the red, white and blue cocarde of the Allies was plainly visible upon the underside of the wings, and also on the rudder.

No sooner had the ferry-pilot who had brought her over from England, made a landing, and climbed out of his tiny nascelle, than every pilot and observer who was about the place, and not on duty, gathered round to welcome the newcomer with the usual greeting, and to flood him with questions as to the new machine. Amongst the rest the Flight-Commander of "B" Flight could be seen talking and arguing with his friends.

"Gee-whiz! But isn't she a beauty, boys?" he was heard to exclaim, as, with quite a boyish enthusiasm, he completed in less than two minutes his first brief examination of the machine.

"By Jove, but she's a gem!" replied Mac, to whom the question had been more particularly addressed.

"I've never seen anything like her," exclaimed another member of "B" Flight. "I don't think the

Huns have anything to equal her."

"Not even their Fokkers?" ventured one of the pilots, who was already seated in the little cockpit, trying her controls, for he was just longing to take her aloft. "And you came from London in an hour and a quarter?" asked Dastral of the ferry-pilot, helping him out of his thick leather coat.

"Yes, quite easily," replied the latter.

"And you never even pushed her?"

"I never opened the throttle to the full till I rushed the Channel, half an hour ago."

"And then you let her rip?"

"Yes, I did then. She fairly seemed to leap over the English Channel. She touched one hundred and sixty miles, and for a while she quite frightened me."

"Phew! I should think so. What the deuce shall we get to next? One hundred and sixty miles an hour! Great Scott! I'd give ten years of my life to meet Himmelman on her, when I've fairly tried her," said Dastral quietly.

There was a note of silence when the Flight-Commander spoke thus, for he did not often express himself like that, though every one knew that the ambition of his life was to meet the German air-fiend on equal terms, and fate had decreed that before very long his wish should be gratified.

After this, they all adjourned to the messroom, and, for that evening, and the next, the ferry-pilot was their guest.

At dinner that evening, when John Bunny, the jovial, stout, stumpy, chubby-faced waiter at the officers' mess, had cleared away, and cigars were lighted, and chairs drawn to the fire-place, all the talk was about the baby-monoplane. For the time being even the war faded away, except so far as it hinged upon the coming deeds of the new machine. They discussed its merits and its possibilities, its high speed, its wonderful but powerful engine, capable of 200 horse-power and nearly two thousand revolutions a minute.

Next morning, as soon as it was light, Dastral was seated in the little nacelle, climbing into the azure. For an hour he tested it, and came down delighted with his new plaything. Again and again he tried it during the next two days, until he was thoroughly at home with it, and could handle it just as well as any other machine he had ever flown. Indeed, the ferry-pilot who watched him was amazed at the antics which the Flight-Commander performed with the trippy little thing.

On the third morning after the arrival of the new visitant, the aerodrome was startled by renewed activity on the part of the enemy. Just as dawn was breaking Lieutenant Grenfell, who was again on orderly officer's duty at the aerodrome, was called suddenly to the telephone by the Flight-sergeant in attendance saying:

"Advanced Headquarters Ginchy want to speak to you, sir."

An instant later he was holding the receiver, and heard Ginchy speak plainly.

"Is that Advanced II.Q. Ginchy?" he asked.

"Yes. Is that the orderly officer, Contalmaison aerodrome?"

"Yes. Anything the matter?"

"Enemy 'planes crossing our lines, and coming in your direction," came the laconic answer. "Want you to take necessary action at once."

"Right, old fellow. Action shall be taken at once. But I say--hullo, are you still there?"

"Yes."

"How many enemy 'planes were there?"

"Three have crossed over. A very big one, and two fast scouts. The others have all been turned back by our A.A. guns, but they are trying again, I think, as the guns are opening fire upon them once more."

"All right. Good bye!"

Then, turning to the Flight-Sergeant, the officer said:

"Quick, sergeant! Sound the alarm to call up the men, and get the machines out of the hangars ready for action. There is no time to lose. If they are fast machines they will be here in less than five minutes."

"Yes, sir," and the sergeant saluted and departed upon his errand, calling out the guard and giving the orderly sergeant instructions to rouse all the men at once, while he himself returned to the orderly officer, and assisted in calling the pilots from their bunks by telephone.

Rapidly as everything was carried out, before all the machines could be got ready, or the pilots prepared, the enemy had arrived and had begun to bomb the aerodrome.

"Whis-s-s-h! Boom-m-m-m!" came the first bomb, which was quickly followed by others.

It was only just light enough to make out the machines, but Dastral, who was one of the first pilots on the spot, was already in his baby-monoplane, ready for the propeller to be swung, when the first bomb fell, not thirty yards away. His attention, however, for the past few seconds while the drums of ammunition were being brought, had been fixed upon the raiders.

He was amazed at what he saw. There were two small machines, evidently fast scouts and single-seaters, each fitted with a single-fixed gun, but the other visitor was a huge warplane, so big that for the moment he was astounded.

"Look, Jock!" he shouted. "Egad, but she's a tri-plane, a giant, with a double fuselage, two engines, and a protected or armoured car in the centre--at least, so it seems to me. And she's got two gunners at least. Great Scott! where are those drums? I must get off at once, or they will blow the place to bits. They've already hit No. 3 shed, and probably damaged half a dozen machines."

"Here is your ammunition, sir!" cried Corporal Yap, running up at that moment with the drums and placing them in the cockpit.

"Right. Stand clear there!"

"Rap-rap-rap! Whir-r-r!" came the sound of the engine and the whirring blades of the monoplane, for it could be distinctly heard above the roar of the anti-aircraft guns which were now furiously shelling the invaders. And while some confusion reigned for the moment at the aerodrome, the little hornet taxied off, and leapt up into the air.

Dastral was the first to mount up, but the Dwarf being a single-seater, he was compelled to leave Jock behind for the nonce.

Higher and higher he climbed, for the monoplane had the power to rise rapidly, and when at full speed to sit on her tail for a short period, that is, to climb nearly perpendicularly. She was so small, too, that she was difficult to perceive even from a short distance. Thus she was more fortunate than the others, which, on rising shortly afterwards, received the concentrated fire and bombs of all the three raiders.

Even Munroe had to land again, with his machine blazing, for one of the bombs had shattered his petrol tank, and set the machine on fire, so that the pilot himself was rescued with difficulty from the wreckage. Two other machines were also compelled to descend, for the enemy, having the weather-gage and being directly above them, had the advantage.

The Flight-Commander by this time was well away, and was careering round, climbing more rapidly than he had ever done before, and looking forward to the coming combat. He could see his own target, but, relying upon the small target that the Dwarf offered, he kept just sufficiently away to render his own machine invisible to the Huns, who were having the time of their lives.

Dastral was in a fighting mood; he felt ready to fight all the Boche airmen in the world, if he could only get at them. Higher and higher he rose, and marked the little register as it clicked out the altitude:--

"Three thousand--four thousand feet."

Its quiet voice was drowned in the roar of the engine and the whir-r-r of the propellers, but its face seemed to smile at the pilot and beckon him to victory.

He had got well over towards the enemy's lines, in his circling sweep, for he was determined to keep well between the enemy and his base. Besides, it was good strategy, for the day was breaking and already, up there, he could see the rim of the sun showing over the edge of the eastern horizon.

"I shall have the sun behind my back when the fight begins, and the Huns will have it in their eyes!" he told himself.

At six thousand feet he banked and swept round towards the enemy, still climbing rapidly, for the Boches were at about seven thousand feet. Again and again he made the whizzing Dwarf almost to sit upon her tail, so eager was he to reach seven thousand five hundred.

He felt perfectly happy, and braced for the conflict. His only anxiety was to get to business at once.

"Five thousand--five thousand five hundred feet," said the little dial, and Dastral laughed riotously.

"Seven thousand," came at last, though it seemed an age to the eager pilot.

Glancing down and away to the west, he could see his comrades climbing up to his assistance, for he had left them far behind. The Boches had seen them too, and were diving to attack them, dropping bombs and firing incendiary bullets.

"Capital!" shouted Dastral in high glee, as he saw the enemy make several rapid dives, giving him exactly what he wanted, the weather-gage.

"The beasts haven't seen me, or they wouldn't do that!" Dastral told himself, and he was right, for the enemy had not even suspected his presence yet, or, if they had seen him leave the ground, they had lost sight of him, owing to the tactics he had adopted. They were soon to have a knowledge of his presence, however.

"Now for it," said Dastral between his teeth, as, having reached seven thousand feet, he whizzed away to the attack of the nearest 'plane, one of the enemy's fighting scouts which had accompanied the huge warplane.

"Whir-r-r-r!" went the hornet, as Dastral opened the engine throttle to the full.

The speed of the hornet was terrific, and the sound of the wind rushing past him sounded to the pilot as loud as the noise of the engine.

"One hundred and sixty!" laughed the speedometer.

"They can't beat that," replied Dastral, as though the little dial-face understood. He felt that he must talk, though he had no observer this morning.

Now he was over the fighting scout, and she saw him for the first time. She was the highest of the three, but she was a thousand feet below him, and, relying on her speed, she banked, turned swiftly, and tried to escape, actually leaving the warplane to look after herself.

Dastral pulled over the controls, and down, down he went in a thrilling nose-dive as though he would crash her to the earth with his own fuselage, but that was not his intention. At five hundred feet he opened fire, and gave her three drums in rapid succession, and never was sound more agreeable to his ears than that "rap--rap--rap--rap--rap!" of his machine-gun as he sprayed the enemy from end to end of his fuselage with incendiary bullets.

Before the third drum was exhausted he noticed the flames leap from the doomed German, for Dastral had sent three flaming-bullets through his reserve petrol-tank, and in that moment he knew he had only two enemies left to fight, for the first enemy 'plane went down blazing in a plunging dip, which ended in a spinning nose-dive and a terrible crash, right over the eastern end of the aerodrome.

Dastral looked down, his eyes gleaming with victory, glad he had finished number one, but sincerely hoping in his heart that his comrades on the ground would be able to save the pilot from the burning wreckage, for of all deaths that the daring aviator dreads, to be burnt is the worst of all, and few English pilots, having sent the enemy down, wish him such an end.

There was no time for sentiment, however, this morning, for the next moment Dastral was startled by the sound of a machine-gun behind him:

"Rat--tat--tat!"

Yes, one of his own friends was already attacking the warplane. It sounded like Mac, and the tactics seemed suspiciously his, for he had been creeping up behind Dastral, following his leader, as he had so often done before, and he was now engaged in a battle royal with the monster, whilst another 'plane was tackling the second scout, though at a disadvantage.

For a second Dastral was halting which way to turn, but pilots have to make rapid decisions every day, and when he saw Mac's danger, for the enemy would assuredly send him down in a few minutes unless help came, the Flight-Commander banked quickly, and, still having the advantage of nearly a thousand feet in altitude, he swept on to help his man.

It was well he did, for though Mac fought bravely, as Dastral had taught him to do a score of times, he was no match for the huge German, with her armoured car, and two machine-gunners in addition to the pilot.

As Dastral swept back to his comrade, he saw the two machines raking each other, but though Mac got in several shots at the fuselage and the engines, he hit no vital part.

"Ye gods, what a huge brute she is!" ejaculated the Flight-Commander as he drew near, and sailed over the top of the monster, just seeking for some weak spot.

Before he could clamp in his drums he saw Mac's machine reel, and spin round once or twice,

as though the controls had been broken by some questing bullets. The German continued to fire, however, and the next instant Dastral saw the reason of it all, for he saw Mac's observer stretching over towards the pilot.

"Heavens! The poor chap's hit!" he exclaimed. Then shouting almost fiercely, as though he fancied Mac could hear him, he cried:

"Never mind, they shall pay for it, Mac!"

Again Dastral jammed the controls hard over, and though he knew he was fighting a different creature altogether this time, he tried his old tactics. He swept down as though to collide with the enemy and crash with him to earth, for he knew this was the best method of unnerving the Hun. With his feet on the rudder bar, and the joy-stick between his knees, and his hands clear for his gun, he fired two drums, but seeing no immediate effect, he flattened out suddenly, when only fifty feet from the Bosche, and pulling the switch of his bomb release, he dropped a twenty-pound bomb fairly on to the central armoured car of the monster.

Scarcely had he swept past his adversary when the thing exploded at close quarters, causing him almost unconsciously to loop the loop twice in rapid succession, for the very atmosphere seemed to be blown away from his propeller blades, and the air was so full of air-pockets that for a moment this daring aviator was in imminent danger of a side-slip and a fearful crash to the earth.

It was over in a minute, however, and the "Boom-m-m-m!" of the explosion and the smother of gas, smoke and flame being past, he looked round him, and saw the German three hundred feet below him, with half his central armoured car blown away, and with both gunners apparently lifeless, and the pilot, bleeding, still sticking it grimly, trying to volplane his machine to the ground.

The Flight-Commander looked down, and sweeping round till he had gained his old position, he was about to drop a second bomb to finish the warplane, but he withdrew his hand from the bomb release, saying:

"Poor bounder! He's bound to go down. He cannot get her over the lines. I'll let him alone."

Then, looking around for the third machine, he was just in time to see her disappear eastward towards her own lines, and saw two English 'planes, which seemed to have come from nowhere, following her.

"Ah, well, I'll go down and receive that chap's surrender--that is, if he can manage to get down without a crash."

There is, apparently, more honour in aerial fighting in these days than in any other field of warfare, and, when a pilot has brought his man down, should he fall, say, into the conqueror's lines, very often the victor will descend and receive the surrender of the vanquished.

Dastral's professional curiosity also urged him to do this. The huge machine was of a new type, for in all his experience he had seen nothing like it, and he was eager to examine it.

Keeping his eye, therefore, on the descending German, who was trying with the utmost care to navigate the aerial monster to the ground, Dastral banked, then spiralled, and after one or two rapid nose-dives, planed swiftly down to within a few score of yards of the place where the monster must ultimately descend; and three minutes later, having landed, he waited calmly on the ground for mein herr to complete his landing.

Down, down she came, lobbing first one way and then another, finishing up with a bump which completed the wreckage of one of her huge outstretched planes, and hurling the lifeless form of an observer-gunner to the earth.

"My word, what a size she is!" cried some one from the group of officers and men standing by.

She was a mass of wreckage, and how the wounded pilot had managed to bring her down so calmly was a miracle.

"Where are you hurt, Captain?" asked Dastral, helping the wounded man from the wrecked car.

"Here and here, Flight-Commander!" replied the German in good English, leaning heavily on the pilot, who a few minutes before had been his deadly enemy.

"Fetch Captain Young, the M.O., at once!" ordered Dastral, and immediately one of the air-mechanics ran off to find Number Nine.

"You were a marvel to bring her down without a crash!" said Dastral. "I'm sure I could never have done it."

The German smiled. He was a fair-haired Prussian, not at all of the Hun type, and there was moisture in his blue eyes as he replied,

"I thank you for the compliment, Flight-Commander. You also are *some* pilot, as you English say."

"And she is *some* machine, too!" urged Dastral, trying to keep up the man's spirit until the medical officer arrived.

"Ah, my poor machine, and my poor gunners! They were brave fellows and they died for the Fatherland. And the machine?--yes, she was a beauty, and it was her first trip. Now she is a ruin, and I must surrender her to you, but you will never be able to use her. See!"

Dastral turned round to look, and noticed that the German warplane was in flames, for the pilot, mortally wounded as he was, knew his duty, which was, if he could not bring his machine back, to destroy it. And his last act, which had been unnoticed, ere he left the machine, was to set her quietly on fire, only waiting to make sure that the second gunner was really dead.

"Ah! My poor machine, but you English--will--never--use--her!"

As he uttered these words slowly, gasping and clutching at his heart, the German turned ghastly pale, and, staggering, fell into the arms of Dastral just as the medical officer came running up.

For a moment Dastral held him, but the blood began to gush from his mouth and nostrils, and then his head fell back, for he was dead.

"You are too late, doctor," said the Flight-Commander sadly, as he laid the dead captain down on the grass, and looked at his pale face and wide open eyes, still staring up at the azure blue of the opening day, as though even in death the skies were calling him up there, as they did in life; for he had been one of the most brilliant of the German aviators, second only to Himmelman, who indeed had been his teacher.

"Too late, doctor! There was no chance for him from the beginning. He was mortally wounded."

"Yes, poor fellow, he has fought his last battle!" replied the M.O.

"Poor fellow! I wish he could have lived," muttered Dastral, and a feeling of unutterable sadness came over him, and he cursed the war which had made him this man's enemy.

Again he looked at the Prussian's face, and, stooping down, closed the man's eyes in their last long sleep. Then, turning to an air-mechanic, he said:

"Bring a German flag, and wrap it round him," and so he strode away towards his bunk, depressed by a feeling of profound melancholy.

CHAPTER X

HIMMELMAN S LAST FIGHT

IN the officers' mess at the aerodrome near Contalmaison, a blue-eyed, dark-haired youth of about twenty-two stood with his back to the fire. He was alone, for the others had not yet come in from the marquees and sheds where the aeroplanes were being stored. On his left breast he wore the double brevet of a fully-fledged pilot.

This was Flight-Commander Dastral of "B" Flight, of the --th Squadron, --th Wing, Royal Flying Corps, known to the whole of the British Expeditionary Force, and to the British public also, as "Dastral of the Flying Corps."

Just under his pilot's brevet was a couple of inches of blue and white ribbon, the insignia of the D.S.O. For, though but a lad, he had fought with more Aviatiks, Taubes and Rolands, and had more thrilling exploits over the German lines, than any other youth of his age.

To-night, however, the pilot seemed sad; there was a shadow of disappointment over his fair, young face. There was also a dreamy, far-away look in those usually piercing blue eyes. What was the matter with the lad? He was generally gay and even frolicsome. More than once the O.C. had found it necessary to take him to task for some of his jovial pranks.

At his feet lay the previous day's issue of the *Times*, which he had just been reading, and that which had made him sad was a paragraph telegraphed to London by the Amsterdam correspondent of that paper, which ran as follows:--

"Yesterday, at the German Headquarters behind the western front, the Kaiser in person conferred upon Himmelman, the famous German air scout, the insignia of the Iron Cross. It is claimed by the enemy that this air-fiend has brought down more than forty British and French machines, and that his equal in skill and daring does not exist upon the battle-fields of Europe. Quite recently he fought with and vanquished three British pilots single-handed in one day. This famous pilot flies a new type of machine called the Fokker, and the Germans claim for this machine that for climbing and rapid manoeuvre there is no other aeroplane which can be compared to it."

Dastral picked up the paper and read the paragraph again. Then, speaking half aloud, he said:

"So that's what happened to Benson's Flight the other day. I felt sure he had encountered Himmelman. Ah, well! A pilot's life is only a short one at the best, but there's one thing I beg of Dame Fortune, and that is, that I may meet Himmelman before I go down."

Again he cast the paper from him, and as he did so, the door flew open, and Fisker, his observer, accompanied by Graham of "A" Flight and Wilson of "C" Flight entered the room.

"Hullo! What's the matter that you look so glum, Dastral?" exclaimed Graham, as he caught sight of his friend. "Has the O.C. been giving you another reprimand over that last rag, old fellow?"

"What rags?" laughed Dastral, regaining his usual cheerfulness with an effort.

"Ho! ho!" laughed the others. "Of course you know nothing about it, Dastral, but all the fellows are laughing over it, and the whole squadron puts it down to you, naturally," replied Wilson.

"Naturally?" echoed Dastral with raised eyebrows, and a query note in his voice.

At this there was another burst of laughter. For this pretended ignorance of Dastral, and above all, the intoned, sepulchral voice he adopted for the occasion, reminded them of the "sky-pilot" as the chaplain was called, who, on this occasion, had been the victim of the rag.

"Tell you what," exclaimed Wilson. "If the O.C. hasn't yet heard of it, you'd better go out and have another of your scraps with a whole German flight, before he does. That would soften him a bit when you're called for the 'high jump.'"

"Yes, better go out and have a look for Himmelman!" suggested Graham, tossing the stump of his cigar into the fire.

"Himmelman?" replied Dastral, becoming suddenly serious.

"Yes, Himmelman. Why not? I believe you'll be a match for him, if you can only meet him at the same level, and with your drums full," replied the young commander of "C" Flight.

For answer Dastral picked up the paper again, and pointing to the column about the air-fiend, said brusquely,

"Read that."

For the next two minutes the newcomers crowded around the paper, and read, partly aloud, the paragraph above referred to.

At the time of which I write the supremacy of the air was still in question. The daring exploits of Himmelman and his school had been causing much anxiety to the Directorate of Air Organisation. Much consternation had also been caused amongst the British public by the manner in which certain sections of the press in Old Blighty had talked of the merits of the Fokker, the new type of fast fighting monoplane which the enemy had produced. But it was the bold and daring tactics of Himmelman himself, and his few immediate followers, which had given rise to this.

A new British School had come into existence, represented by Dastral and his type. These were very often mere lads from the public schools, full of the sporting instinct in which Englishmen excel. They were soon to make their presence felt, and gain for Britain and her Allies the complete mastery of the air.

What it cost in life and limb to gain this mastery over a wily and efficient foe will be known some day, when circumstances permit the veil of silence to be drawn aside. England will then know what she owes to her daring airmen, and every pilot's grave in France and Flanders--and they are legion--will be honoured and decked with the imperishable flowers of a nation's love.

When the trio in the officers' mess had finished reading the paragraph, it was Graham who spoke first.

"Dastral," he said, in quiet tones, "there will be no peace, and no victory, till Himmelman goes down. Nothing else matters, it seems to me; neither bombing raids, registering targets, nor

spotting, till this air-fiend gets his *coup-de-grace*. What say you?"

For full twenty seconds Dastral waited before he replied. Again there was that faraway look in his blue eyes as though he could see Himmelman on his fast monoplane, coming up out of the mists of the eastern horizon beyond the German lines. Then, recalling himself with an effort he replied calmly:

"You are right, Graham. Twice already I have encountered him. Once when my drums were empty, and the second time when my controls were damaged, and I had to make a forced descent just behind our lines. I have felt myself a coward ever since. But fight him I will, before sundown to-morrow, if he is anywhere in the heavens within fifty miles of Contalmaison. And not a shot will I fire, even if attacked by half a dozen Taubes, till I meet my man. I know his tactics now, and am better prepared to fight him than ever I have been."

"Better not tell the O.C., for you know our orders are to fight every and any enemy 'plane we see, while we have a round in the drums," replied his comrade.

"I know, Graham; that's the trouble. When your drums are empty or your gun has jammed, then this wary old Boche comes down from a small cloud where he has been hiding at twelve thousand feet, and comes hurtling down through space at a hundred and fifty miles an hour, spraying your fuselage from end to end with his machine gun. All the same, he is brave and courageous, and something of a sport--far away the best man they've got. But my belief is that if once he is sent down in a crash, the spell will be broken, and we shall have things all our own way," said Dastral.

Then, turning to Fisker, his observer, who had not yet had his twentieth birthday, though he had been with Dastral since they first left England, and thoroughly understood his method and tactics, he said:

"What do you say, old fellow? Do you think we're a match for this high falutin' Prussian?"

"Dastral!" replied his chum. "I repeat what I said to you only the other day. If you'll only get the O.C. to give you a perfectly free hand, and then lay a nice little trap for the Boche, you're more than a match for him. There's more room for strategy in the air than either in trench warfare on land, or in a naval fight, when the sea is strewn with mine-beds. And if you'll only try that new fast S.E. that you had out the other day, with the Lewis gun mounted for'ard, you'll do the trick, and it wouldn't be merely the D.S.O. that the King and a grateful country would confer on you, for ridding the western front of a nuisance, but you'd get the V.C. and a C.B. as well."

"Yes, I'd probably get the C.B. all right, Fisker, but not the V.C.," laughed the pilot, for in the army the letters C.B. have a double meaning.

"I don't mean *Confined to Barracks*, old fellow. You'll get that when you make a forced landing behind the German lines one of these days, if you will drop down to within a hundred feet of their batteries, just to put one of their 'Archies' out of action, and kill a few of their gunners. I mean the other C.B. which is usually given from Buckingham Palace."

"You're a sport, Fisker. I never had an observer or aerial gunner who served me so well as you do. The credit is yours for the majority of the enemy's machines we've brought down this last six months. But, as you're game, and you've got far more brains than I have, we'll just spend the night inventing such a trap for the wily old Prussian as you've mentioned, and to-morrow, if we don't get the weather-gage of the Boche, then we'll never put our heads inside this old mess again. Are you agreed?" said Dastral.

"Agreed!" replied Fisker, grasping the extended hand held out to clasp his, and to seal the bargain.

"And here's to your success, Dastral!" exclaimed Wilson, who had just poured out for himself a glass of *vin rouge*.

At this moment the mess sergeant appeared to announce that dinner was laid in the pilots' mess, and away they all went, laughing and joking, as though they had been discussing nothing more or less than a county cricket match.

That night, however, as soon as the meal was over, instead of the usual rubber of whist, or game of chess, Dastral and Fisker went into the little bunk where they slept, and, locking the door, they brought out maps, sketches, and diagrams, and, until midnight, they were hard at work, by the kindly flicker of a little shaded lamp, evolving scheme after scheme, until at length they agreed upon a little plan, which they decided to put into operation on the morrow. Then they turned in, and slept for four or five hours, having given strict orders to the mess attendant to call theirs before reveille.

Half an hour before reveille Dastral was down in the hangar, where his new aeroplane was sheltered. Though it had been carefully examined overnight by the air-mechanics, yet he could trust no one but himself to finally inspect the machine. He examined every strut and wire, every nut and bolt, oiling and testing the engine, controls, and half a hundred other little things that make up the delicate mechanism of a modern aeroplane.

At length he was satisfied, and lit a cigarette, while Fisker shipped the Lewis gun, packed the drums of ammunition, fixed the baby wireless, saw to the bomb carriers, maps, charts, and everything else that concerned him.

Soon, they were ready, and, having snatched a hurried breakfast, they wrapped themselves in their warm leathern coats, and were helped into their pilot's boots by one of the air-mechanics, whose duty it was to guard the machines. They drew their leathern helmets tightly about their cars, and encased their hands in thick gloves, then climbed into the 'plane.

Half a dozen air-mechanics wheeled the "wasp" out into the open, where the level ground of the aerodrome offered a good "take-off." Then they waited for a moment, while the O.C. himself came down, and handed to Dastral an envelope containing his special permit to leave his flight, and to act as a free lance for that day; the matter having been arranged between them.

"Good-bye, Dastral, and a good day's sport to you, my lad!" said the major, who stood on tiptoe to shake hands with the pilot and observer.

"Good-bye, sir," replied Dastral, his hand already on the joy-stick.

"Start the propeller," came the order from the cock-pit.

"Yes, sir," cried an air-mechanic, who sprang forward and swung the propeller once or twice.

"Zip-p-p-p--Zip--Whir-r-r-r!" came the sound, as Dastral started the engine, and the air seemed to vibrate with the song of the aeroplane, which has a music all its own.

"Stand clear!" came the final order, and as the mechanics leapt back, and withdrew the wooden chocks, the buzzing, waspish little thing taxied swiftly across the level stretch of grass, then leapt into the air.

Higher and higher it rose by swift spirals, sometimes banking over so rapidly as it turned in its circuit that those who stood watching it from below feared it had touched an air pocket. But never did fiery steed answer the touch of the huntsman's rein so quickly, and never did gallant ship, as she rode the combing waves, answer her helm more readily than did the air-wasp respond to the slightest movement of her controls this morning, as she mounted up into the dawn. For the daring and brilliant youth who held the joystick was a master-pilot, who understood every whim and fancy of his machine.

And now for a while let us leave Dastral climbing up into the azure, then traversing a dozen miles behind the British lines, so as to disappear from the enemy's view until the moment came for him to hunt his prey.

Soon after he had disappeared from view Major Bulford gave the order. "Squadron, prepare for action!" for this was to be a day of great things, and the Squadron-Commander himself, having now recovered from his recent injuries, was going to lead the whole of the three Flights, which composed the squadron under his command, over the enemy's lines.

Within an incredibly short space of time all the machines were ready on the level stretch of grass. The bomb carriers were filled and drums of fresh ammunition were shipped. And within half an hour of the departure of the air-wasp, the squadron started off in regular formation, and crossed over the enemy's lines.

The secret had been well kept. Only the pilots themselves, after they had taken their seats behind the propellers, received the whispered orders for the day. A great bombing raid was to be carried out behind the German lines with the express purpose of drawing out Himmelman and his crowd to counter-attack, while Dastral, hidden away in the clouds at 12,000 feet, was to enter the fight at the critical moment. Then the most daring air-fiends on the battle-fields of Europe were to meet in single-combat, and decide for ever to which side the supremacy of the air should be given.

The whole squadron crossed the lines at 7,000 feet, and received a baptism of fire from the anti-aircraft batteries, while thousands of combatants in the trenches far below stayed their fighting for a moment to watch the stinging hornets sail calmly by, as though utterly oblivious of the hail of bursting shrapnel, which made little jets of fire and cirrus-clouds of white smoke all about them.

One or two Taubes and Aviatiks which had been out on a reconnaissance and for a few photographs, rapidly retired before the hornets and fled to find shelter somewhere beyond. Meanwhile, the telephones in the German lines were busy and the presence of the raiders was quickly reported to the various commands, and from thence to half a dozen aerodromes. Machines were rapidly run out, and got ready to mount up and meet the invaders, for it was evident that the perfidious Britishers had resolved to carry out another great bombing raid on railway communications, billets, and ammunition dumps.

Within an incredibly short space of time, Himmelman himself had started to meet the the enemy. But the raiding party swept on, beyond Bazentin, Ginchy and Longueval, bombing, as they passed, Combles and the Peronne railway. Soon, they sighted the aerodromes at Scilly and

Etricourt, and bombarded them, receiving another crackle of fire from the A.A. guns posted to defend the hangars and sheds. Then, wheeling north they scattered a large transport column which was proceeding slowly along the main road from Le Transloy to Bapaume.

Shortly afterwards, a swift circling movement and a smoke bomb from the leading 'plane gave the signal:

"Enemy 'planes approaching!"

All this had been accomplished within half an hour of crossing the enemy's lines, and the Germans had been caught fairly on the nap. But now Himmelman had got his machines in motion, and a fight in mid-air could not be much longer delayed.

The English pilots looked down, and far below they could see from half a dozen places Aviatiks, Taubes and Rolands creeping up to the attack. By this time all the heavy missiles had been dropped, and the machines, with their engines running superbly, had gained something in buoyancy from the release of the half dozen 20-pounder bombs, with which each aeroplane had started.

Guns were now cocked and loaded, and the discs were clapped into place, while extra drums were placed where they would be most handy, for when the fight commenced, a delay of five seconds might prove fatal. Then a bold attempt was made to get the weather-gage, and to use their advantage in altitude to place the sun behind their backs, so that the enemy would have it in his face.

Every type of aeroplane approaching was carefully scrutinised, and, with sundry circling dips, short nose-dives and smoke bombs, the Squadron-Commander told off various machines to fight them, for every type of machine has its own special capabilities and limitations. At the same time the heavens were eagerly scanned for a sight of the hated Fokker.

"Where is Himmelman? Where is Dastral?" every keen-eyed pilot was asking himself. And every little cloud above and beyond was searched, but no sight of the air-fiends was vouchsafed. Ah, well, they must fight without Dastral if he had not yet picked them up.

This manoeuvring for position continued for some minutes, but all the while the combatants were drawing nearer and nearer. The enemy had evidently received strict orders to fight at all costs. Certain advantages were his. The chosen battle-ground was in his favour, as every British 'plane hit and compelled to make a forced landing, owing to damaged engine, petrol tank, or deranged controls, would be captured with its crew, while only the German 'planes which crashed would be lost.

At last the time had come for action, for the air seemed full of specks, both small and large. Nearly three whole squadrons had climbed to the attack of the British, who, however, had by this time gained the weather gage.

"Engage the enemy closely!" came the signal, as three more smoke-bombs were hurled from the commander's machine. Only one more order was given, which was:

"Reserve your fire till within two hundred yards!"

The rattle of the machine-gun fire had already commenced, for the enemy had begun to fire as usual at 1000 yards, but the British, reserving their fire, followed their leader's tactics, for immediately he had flung out his last signal, he dived down upon his nearest opponent, a big fat yellow 'plane with black crosses upon the doping.

"Spit--spit-t-t--spit-t-t-t!!" went the C.O.'s machine gun, as he pumped a whole drum of ammunition into his opponent, raking his fuselage, engine, and petrol tank from end to end. The next instant, the huge German machine, which mounted two guns, went down with blazing petrol tank, and crashed from 8,000 feet.

And now commenced an indescribable scene; a terrible fight in mid-air, which would have been deemed to be impossible but a few short years ago. The sky, to those watching far below, must have seemed full of wild, swooping and circling birds of prey, spitting fire and smoke, while every now and then a machine went down blazing, or wildly zig-zagging to destruction. No less than four enemy 'planes had thus gone down, when No. 2 machine of "C" Flight, with crumpled wing, went down with a fatal nose-dive in a terrific crash.

But still the fight went on, until more than half the British machines had gone under, taking down with them at least twice their number, and yet neither Himmelman nor Dastral had appeared. Numbers were telling upon the English, and those machines which were left had nearly consumed their ammunition, when, suddenly out of a little cluster of clouds at 12,000 feet a dark speck appeared.

The little speck at first appeared like a tiny bird, but the aviators knew only too well what it meant. Whistling through the air in a terrific nose-dive which reached the rate of 150 miles an hour, the dreaded Fokker appeared to strike his chief opponent. Straight for the Squadron-Commander's machine he came, like a fierce bird of prey.

For an instant the fight slackened, and the enemy machines even drew off a little space, to leave a clear path for the air-fiend, who had never been known to fail in his desperate strokes. A thrill of intense excitement held the combatants, as the Major made a daring counter move, and jammed his last drum of ammunition into place.

"Spit! Bang! Spit! Bang!"

"Whir-r-r-r!" Himmelman had opened fire while nose-diving at terrific speed. Already the victim seemed to be in his clutch, when, just as suddenly, from the same cloud in which the German air-fiend himself had found ambush, another speck appeared, swooping like a hawk with its talons ready to strike. It was Dastral, who had waited and waited, in the biting cold and the clinging moisture of the wet cloud; waited at 12,000 feet near the edge of the cloud.

He had seen Himmelman coming, had watched him like a tiny speck seeking shelter in the same misty vapour. How Himmelman had failed to discover his enemy was a mystery. They were both invisible to the combatants, it is true, and Dastral had used a dozen devices to keep himself out of sight of the Boche, though ready at any moment to fight with him.

There can be little doubt, however, that Himmelman had been watching the fight so closely that he had never even dreamt of finding his chief enemy so close at hand. Besides, no one had ever dared to imitate his tactics before, and his first intimation of Dastral's presence was when, during his wild swoop, having half emptied his first drum at the Squadron-Commander, he suddenly heard machine-gun bullets whizzing about his own ears, and felt a stinging sensation in his right arm. Looking round, he saw that the dark cloud in which he had been hiding had given birth to another air-fiend, and in that moment Himmelman knew that he was no longer the Master-Pilot of the Skies.

"Gott in Himmel!" he gasped, and made one last effort to manoeuvre.

With his hand upon the gun, and his feet upon the rudder bar, he flattened out, and tried to fight his enemy from below, leaving his last victim to limp away to safety.

But Dastral was too quick, for he had time to give the Fokker two full drums before he also flattened out just above the monoplane. He knew the Fokker had its gun fixed forward, rigidly fixed, so that it could only fire ahead through the propeller. All this he had coolly calculated beforehand. Unless, therefore, Himmelman could manoeuvre to get his enemy directly ahead, he could do nothing. Still, though wounded, the German fought on. Round and round spun the machines, over and under they went, like a shoal of porpoises, each trying to get the advantage.

Up there at 9,000 feet they performed the most amazing gymnastic gyrations and contortions. Once the German got the advantage, and was about to open a new drum of fire, when Dastral, pulling over the joy-stick, and with clenched teeth, muttered:

"No, you don't! By all the saints, no!"

And, with that, he dived under the air-fiend, and emptied his seventh and last drum into him from beneath.

It, was the end of the great fight, for with his fuselage ablaze from end to end--for his petrol tanks had been pierced--and with a bullet through his brain, Himmelman went down in a spinning nose-dive to the earth.

Even then the chief of the air nearly took down his opponent with his wreckage, for Dastral being underneath, only just slithered, rather than banked, in time to let the blazing mass hurtle by. Another dozen feet, and the heroes would have gone down together.

The next moment the daring young pilot gazed almost ruefully down upon the tangled wreckage far below. He was amazed at his own work, riding up there alone, for he was now the Master-Pilot of the Skies. Even so, somehow, his chivalrous young heart was sad, for a brave man never finds pleasure in the death of another brave man, and your true hero has always a gentle soul.

Then touched by a gust of sudden pity, he circled down to within three hundred feet of the burning mass in which the remains of the brave pilot lay, and, heedless of the risk he ran, he detached from its place, where he had secured it that morning, unknown to all but himself and Jock, a wreath of laurel, with these words attached to it, penned in his own hand:--

*"To Himmelman--the bravest of the brave--
the Pilot of the Western Skies. A tribute of
respect from his Conqueror.*

Dastral of the Flying Corps."

Then he climbed back again, joined the remnant of his squadron, which with broken struts and

wires, and bearing strong evidence of the great fight in every part of their delicate frames, struggled back to the aerodrome near Contalmaison.

Thus did Himmelman meet his end, going down bravely, and, with Himmelman, the Germans lost the mastery of the air.

But Dastral himself was wounded in that last fight, and his machine, the new "wasp," was so badly damaged that even his wonderful skill could not save her, and she crashed behind the British lines, quite close to Contalmaison.

CHAPTER XI

"BLIGHTY"

AFTER the fall of Himmelman the supremacy of the air was wrested from the Germans; the enemy's advance was definitely stopped. Thus was the way paved for the final victory, which was to end in the defeat of militarism, the restoration to Europe of her liberties, and to civilisation of her freedom.

There is only one more incident to record, before this story of adventure and heroism is finished. It concerns one of those unfortunate persons whose heroic soul had been confined, by some mysterious dispensation of Providence, to the narrow limits of a misshapen and deformed body.

We have met this poor fellow once before, in the earlier part of the story. Then it was that we saw his brave young spirit yearning with desire to do some manly deed, but we found him broken-hearted and dismayed, because all his efforts to serve his country, in her time of peril, had been refused. Now, by another strange dealing of Providence, which always assigns to every brave man his post in the day of trial, we meet him again.

When Dastral, after his fight with Himmelman, crashed just behind the British lines, he was carried away unconscious from the wreckage, scorched and blistered, and wounded in no less than three places, and taken to the field hospital. From there he was removed quickly to the base hospital, and, after three days of feverish tossing, during the whole of which time he remained unconscious, he was sent, at the urgent request of a General Officer commanding, by the next hospital ship to Blighty.

It was during the voyage from Havre to Southampton that he first regained consciousness. Once, on opening his eyes and trying to look about him, he asked:

"Where am I? What is the matter? And why is it so dark?"

A gentle hand was laid on his fevered brow. Dastral thought it was the hand of his mother, so soft it felt and kind. Then a tender voice, which seemed to echo far down into the distant past, whispered:

"Be quiet yet a little while, and you will soon be better."

The wounded pilot tried to turn his face towards the voice, but found that he could not move, for his head, his hands and limbs were powerless. The light also in the room was very dim. So he lay still, and tried to think, but his head was confused, and his brain was in a whirl.

"What is the matter? Have I been wounded?" he asked after another minute or two, without trying to turn his head this time, for the pain racked him so.

"Yes, you have been seriously wounded, and you must not try to talk or think much for the present. You just need to rest quietly, and you will soon be out of all danger," came the answer in those same quiet, but strong tones,

Again that voice which stirred the memories of the past, yet Dastral could not fix it. Somewhere he had heard it before, but where?

His eyes burned like live coals, and his body ached in every limb. He fancied that he could hear the throb, throb of an engine, and, as he dozed off again, with that pulsating throb in his ears, he was away again in his wild dreams, rushing through the heavens to meet Himmelman, and, over the German trenches, he was fighting his last great fight over again. But his dream kept changing, for the constant watcher by his bedside saw at times a stern look, and then a smile, flicker over his countenance.

"I wonder of what he is dreaming now?" murmured the hospital attendant, who, himself, wore the ribbon of the D.C.M. on his breast, lately awarded for bravery on the high seas, in the service

of his country.

Suddenly the pilot started again, and opened his eyes. As he did so, he caught sight of the face bending over him, and instinctively the words fell from his lips, as from the mouth of a child:

"Tim Burkitt!"

"Yes, Dastral, you are right. It is Tim Burkitt. God has sent me to watch over you, and to nurse you back to life."

Tim, who had been serving latterly as ward attendant on board one of His Majesty's hospital ships conveying the wounded men back to Blighty, had heard of Dastral's accident, and had been to fetch him from the base hospital, having secured permission from the D.D.M.S. to have him under his own special care.

"There, that will do, Dastral. I did not intend to let you recognise me until you were out of all danger."

Despite his orders, however, Dastral would persist in half-raising his hand, to grasp that of his friend. And, seeing the ribbon on his tunic, he gasped:

"Tim, where did you win that?"

"Hush! That will keep till another time," replied Tim.

"But, Tim, how came you here?"

In a few words the attendant told him how he had at last, after persistent effort, gained a footing in the services, and, though only the humble post of sick-ward attendant on a hospital ship had been offered to him, yet he had gladly accepted it.

"And so you see by a stroke of luck you happen to be one of my patients. And I am going to take you all the way home."

"Home! Blighty! Home!" murmured the patient. "Are we on the way home?"

"Yes, we are on the way to Blighty. We are now only a matter of twenty miles from the Nab Light at the eastern end of the Isle of Wight. In another two hours we should be in Southampton Water."

"Thank God!" replied Dastral quietly and reverently, as he closed his eyes, bewildered by all he had heard. But he opened them again shortly, and said:

"Tim, war is a ghastly thing. I hope it will soon be over, for it turns brave men who might otherwise be friends into enemies. But I am happy to think that you have won that decoration."

"Tut, tut! Dastral," replied the other. "Do you know that the King has conferred upon you the honour of a C.B., and also made you a Wing Commander. Do you know also that the whole country is talking of your fight with Himmelman, the German air-fiend?"

"Tim, I would willingly shed all these honours if I could bring back my brave comrades, who are buried in unknown graves out yonder. Alas, I shall never see them again," and here Dastral closed his eyes to keep back the tears that tried to force themselves out, and to gulp down a sob. Then he fell fast asleep, and Tim let him sleep on, till they had passed the Nab Light, and steamed along by the Southsea Forts, and Spithead, and Portsmouth, and had entered the lower reaches of Southampton Water.

Then again Dastral opened his eyes, and called softly for Tim.

"I have had such a dream," he whispered. "And I have seen Himmelman, and we are friends again. And I saw Steve, and Brum and Mac, and they were with Himmelman, for there are no enemies in the other world, amongst the brave men who have gone there. And the captain of the German warplane, he who died in my arms on the aerodrome near Contalmaison--he was there too. They were all happy together, and they said that one day I should meet them all. Oh, tell me, Tim, you who are so wise and learned, and know all these things, was it a dream or did I really see them?"

"Dastral, I don't quite understand. You say you have seen them, and they are all dead?"

"Yes, all dead, all brave fellows, killed by this accursed war. But come, tell me, do you really think I saw them, or was it only a dream, a spirit dream?" and the wounded pilot looked appealingly up at his friend.

"I do not know, Dastral," calmly replied the scholar after a full minute's pause. "We often discussed these things in the old days at college, though, after what has happened, it seems years and years ago. We will talk of it again, when you are stronger, but I do believe that for brave men, who have followed the star which has called them, and served God truly, there is, there must be, after death, something like that of which you have spoken, where good men are re-

united, even though they have fought with each other in the days that are past."

Then, after another long pause, he added

"Yes, Dastral, I believe there is a heaven."

* * * * *

Thus ends this tale of adventure and heroism during the great war. Dastral eventually recovered his health and strength, under the careful nursing of his friend, Tim Burkitt, but his work in the great war was finished. He had served his King and country nobly. He had crowded into twenty months of service a record second to none during the great war. He was the recipient of great honours from his King and Country. And right nobly had he carried them, for he had believed that the cause for which he fought was for freedom against tyranny.

In days gone by the brave and daring sons of Britain--men like Drake and Cromwell, Blake and Nelson--gained for this country the liberties of the present. And when the story of these days of bitter struggle is fully told, the names of Dastral and his comrades will be engraved in letters of gold, for, against the most fearful odds, they went out in jeopardy of their lives, risking every day a terrible death, so that they might lay deep and sure the foundations of our future liberty and peace.

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[Transcribers Notes:

Some inconsistencies in the text were left uncorrected, following the original. Examples are the inconsistent use of {Mac} and {Mac.}, {planes} and {'planes} (the single quote stands for {aero}) and also the symbols to indicate a person is going to say something: {:}, {:-} and {,}.

Corrected type-errors:

{at the first wh sper of dawn,} -> {at the first whisper of dawn,}

Not corrected type-errors:

{Seven, six- five,} -> {Seven, six, five,}

{were carefully consuled,} -> {were carefully consulted,}

{boys. We must cros} -> {boys. We must cross}

{from the Bosche,} -> {from the Boche,}

]

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