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Title: Air Men o' War

Author: Boyd Cable

Release date: March 6, 2015 [EBook #48422]

Language: English

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AIR MEN O' WAR

[Pg ii]

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[Pg iii]

AIR MEN O' WAR

BY
BOYD CABLE

AUTHOR OF "BETWEEN THE LINES," "ACTION FRONT,"
"GRAPES OF WRATH," "FRONT LINES," ETC.



NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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TO ALL

[Pg v]

AIR MEN O' WAR

AND ESPECIALLY TO THOSE WHO ARE OR HAVE BEEN ON THE WESTERN FRONT, WHOSE HOSPITALITY AND FRIENDSHIP I HAVE ENJOYED, AND TO WHOSE HELP AND INTEREST THESE TALES ARE LARGELY DUE, THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED AS A TRIBUTE OF ADMIRATION AND A TOKEN OF CHERISHED FRIENDSHIP BY

THE AUTHOR.

IN THE FIELD,
September 5th, 1918.

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FOREWORD

[Pg vii]

It has been my endeavour throughout these tales not only to chronicle some of the wonderful work done in the air, but also to show the connection between it and that of the Armies on the ground, the assistance rendered in so many ways by the air arm, and its value in a battle and in a campaign. I hope that my stories may show something of the skill and daring of the air men and—what is less well known to the public—how much they are doing to save the lives and cut down the casualties of the men on the ground, and to help our arms to victory.

Already I have been rebuked for exaggerating and making my characters perform impossible feats, so I may forewarn the reader that I have written nothing here for which I cannot find an actual parallel—and in some cases even more wonderful—fact. Practically every incident I have pieced into my tales has, to my own knowledge, occurred, and I have left untold many which for sheer sensationalism would beat these hollow. There are many in the Air Force who will recognise incidents and feats, but will not recognise the characters I have attached to them, because—mainly at the urgent wish of the men themselves—I have used entirely fictitious characters and names throughout. Because most of the writing was done while the R.N.A.S. and R.F.C. were still in existence I have left this as written.

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I ask the indulgence of critical readers amongst the air men to any technical errors they may discover (knowing how keenly they will look for them). I make no pretence to being a flying man myself, but because I have done flying enough—or rather have been flown, since I am not a pilot—to know and appreciate some of the dangers and risks and sensations of the work, and have lived for over a year in the Squadrons at the Front, I cherish the hope that I have absorbed enough of the nature and atmosphere of the work to present a true picture of the life. I shall be very well content if I have been able to do this, and, in any slightest degree, make plain how vital to success a strong Air Force is. I have had experience enough of the line, and have gained enough knowledge of the air, to be tremendously impressed with the belief, which I have tried in this book to pass on and spread, that every squadron added, every man trained, every single machine put in the air, helps in its own measure to bring us to final victory, more quickly, and at a less cost in the long and heavy "butcher's bill" of the war.

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I

[Pg 1]

SILVER WINGS

An old man working in one of the aircraft factories once complained that he was not very satisfied with his job. "I've got three boys out Front, all in the infantry; and I keep thinkin' to myself, Why shouldn't I be doin' some sort of munition work that 'ud help my own three boys? I don't know a livin' soul in the Flyin' Corpse; why should I be workin' for them, an' not makin' shells or bombs or suthin' that 'ud be helpin' my own three boys?"

And then somebody told him how he *was* helping his boys, what the work of the air services really meant, how the artillery observation, and photographing, and bombing, and directing the guns on to hostile batteries and machine-gun emplacements, and so on, all worked up to the one great end, to making the task easier for the infantry, to saving the lives of the men on the ground; and told a few stories of some of the ninety and nine ways this help works out.

The old man was fully satisfied and grateful for all that was told him, and declared he'd go back to his job with twice the heart—"just knowin' I'm doin' mebbe the best work I could, and that I'm givin' real help to my own three boys."

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Amongst the tales told him the one of "Silver Wings" perhaps impressed him most, and that, probably because it bore more plainly its own meaning of help to the infantry, was more easy to make clear than the technicalities of artillery observation and the rest.

And just because it is such a good instance of how, after all, the chief or only end and aim of the air services is the helping to victory of the men on the ground this story of "Silver Wings" may be worth the telling here.

Hard fighting had been in progress for some days, and the flying men had been kept desperately busy from dawn to dark on the various branches of their several works, when a "dud day"—a day of rain and squalls and hurricane winds—gave them a chance to rest.

Toward afternoon the weather showed signs of abating a little, and word came through to the Squadron to which "Silver Wings" belonged asking if they could get a machine in the air and make a short patrol over the line on a special reconnaissance. A heavy and unpleasantly gusty wind was still blowing, but a pilot and machine were picked for the job and presently made the attempt. An anxious Squadron Commander and a good many of the pilots watched the trial and saw the quick result. The machine was brought out with mechanics hanging to the wing-tips to steady her against the gusts, the engine started and given a trial run up; then the pilot eased her off, looked round, felt his controls, ran the engine up again until his machine was throbbing and quivering to the pull of the whirling propeller, and waved the signal to haul away the chocks that blocked his wheels. His machine began at once to taxi up into the wind, still swaying and swinging dangerously, and then, in answer to the pilot's touch, lifted clear of the ground, ducked a second, rose again and swooped upward. The watching crowd let go a breath of relief as she rose clear, but before the breath was out it changed to a gasp of horror as the machine, caught by some current or eddy of wind, swerved, heeled, righted under the desperate effort of the pilot, slipped sideways, and with a sudden swoop plunged and crashed on the ground. The machine was hopelessly smashed and the pilot was dead when they ran and came to him and picked him up.

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The Squadron Commander would have abandoned or postponed the attempt to get a machine up, but the pilot of "Silver Wings" spoke to him and urged that he be allowed to have a try. "I'm sure I can get her off," he said. "I'll take her right over to the far side of the ground clear of the currents round the sheds. I know what she can do, and I'm certain I can make it."

So the Major gave a reluctant consent, and they all watched breathlessly again while "Silver Wings" fought her way along the ground against the wind, lifted suddenly, drove level for a hundred feet, swooped sickeningly again until her wheels were a bare six feet off the ground, hoicked up and away. Everyone could see by her dips and dives and sudden heelings and quick righting how bumpy and gusty the air was, and it was not until she was up several hundred feet, and came curving round with the wet light shining on her silvery planes that the watchers on the ground heaved a sigh of relief, watched her streak off down wind, and swing in a climbing turn

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that lifted her farther and farther into the safety of height.

"He's all right now," said one. "Only, the Lord help him when he comes to land again." The hum of the engine droned down to them, and the shining wings wheeled again close up against the dark background of the low clouds and shot swiftly down wind towards the lines.

Over the lines she turned again and began to fight her way across wind and moving slowly north. The wind constantly forced her drifting over Hunland, and in accordance with his orders to hold close along the front, the pilot had to keep making turns that brought him facing back to the west and fighting slowly up wind, edging off a little and slanting north and watching the landscape slide off sideways under him. And so, tacking and manœuvring buffeted and wind-blown, he edged his way along the front, his eyes alternately on the instrument-board and on the ground and puffing shell smoke beneath, his ears filled with the roar of his engine and the shriek and boom of the wind beating about him, his hands and feet in constant motion, juggling with controls, feeling, balancing, handling the throbbing horse-power and the wind-tossed fabric under him. And so at last, at the end of a hard-fought hour, he came to the spot he sought, circled and "sat over it" for five minutes, and watched and tried to pick up the details of the struggle that spluttered and spat in smoke-puffs and flashing jets of fire and leaping spouts of earth and smoke beneath him. He began to piece together the meaning of what he could see, and of what he had been told before he set out. A body of our infantry in the attack had gone too far, or their supports had not come far enough, with the result that they had been cut off and surrounded and were fighting desperately to hold off the infantry attacks that pressed in on them under a heavy supporting artillery fire. The cut-off party were hidden from the view of our front line by a slight ridge and a wrecked and splintered wood, and their desperate straits, the actual fact of their still being in existence, much less their exact location, was unknown to our side. This much the pilot knew or was able to figure out; what he could not know was the surge of hope, the throb of thankfulness that came to the hard-pressed handful below him as they saw the glancing light flash from his hovering "Silver Wings." They made signals to him, waving a dirty flag and straining their eyes up for any sign that he saw and understood. And with something very near to despair in their hearts they saw the shining wings slant and drive slowly up into the wind and draw away from over their heads.

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"No good, Jones," said a smoke and dirt-grimed young officer to the man still waving the flag. "He doesn't see us, I'm afraid. Better put that down and go back and help hold off those bombers."

"Surely he'd hear all this firing, sir," said the man, reluctantly ceasing to wave.

"I think his engine and the wind drowns any noise down here," said the officer. "And if he hears anything, there's plenty of heavy gunfire all along the front going up to him."

"But wouldn't he see the shells falling amongst us, sir, and the bombs bursting, and so on?" said the man.

"Yes; but he is seeing thousands of shells and bombs along the line from up there," said the officer; "and I suppose he wouldn't know this wasn't just a bit of the ordinary front."

Another man crawled over the broken débris of the trench to where they stood. "Mister Waller has been hit, sir," he said; "an' he said to tell you it looks like they was musterin' for another rush over where he is."

"Badly hit?" said the officer anxiously. "All right, I'll come along."

"He sees us, sir," said the man with the flag, in sudden excitement. "Look, he's fired a light."

"Pity we haven't one to fire," said the officer. "But that might be a signal to anyone rather than to us."

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He turned to crawl after the man who had brought the message, and at the same moment a rising rattle of rifle-fire and the quick following detonations of bursting bombs gave notice of a fresh attack being begun. Still worse, he heard the unmistakable tat-tat-tat of renewed machine-gun fire, and a stream of bullets began to pour in on them from a group of shell-holes to their right flank, less than a hundred yards from the broken trench they held. Under cover of this pelting fire, that forced the defenders to keep their heads down and cost them half a dozen quick casualties amongst those who tried to answer it, the German bombers crept closer in from shell-hole to shell-hole, and their grenades came over in faster and thicker showers. The little circle of ground held by the group belched spurts of smoke, hummed to the passage of bullets, crackled and snapped under their impact, quivered every now and then to the crash and burst of shells. They had been fighting since the night before; they were already running short of ammunition, would have been completely short of bombs but for the fact of the ground they had taken having held a concreted dug-out with plentiful stores of German bombs and grenades which they used to help out their own supply. The attack pressed savagely; it began to look as if it would be merely a matter of minutes before the Germans rushed the broken trenches they held, and then, as they knew, they must be overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. Waller, the wounded officer, had refused to be moved. "I'll stay here and see it out," he said; "I don't suppose that will be long now;" and the other, the young lieutenant who was the only officer left on his feet by this time, could say no more than a hopeful "Maybe we'll stand 'em off a bit yet," and leave him there to push along the trench to where the fire and bombing were heaviest and where the rush threatened to break in.

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The din was deafening, a confused uproar of rifles and machine-guns cracking and rattling out in front and banging noisily in their own trench, of bombs and grenades crashing sharply on the open or booming heavily in the trench bottom, of shells whooping and shrieking overhead or

crumping savagely on the ground, and, as a background of noise to all the other noises, the long rolling, unbroken thunder of the guns on both sides far up and down the lines.

But above all the other din the lieutenant caught a new sound, a singing, whirring *boo-oo-oom* that rose to a deep-throated roar with a sharp staccato *rap-tap-tap-tap* running through it. He looked up towards the sound and saw, so close that he half ducked his head, a plunging shape, a flashing streak of silver light that swept over his head and dived straight at the ground beyond his trench, with stabbing jets of orange flame spitting out ahead of it. A bare fifty feet off the ground where the Germans crouched in their shell-holes "Silver Wings" swooped up sharply, curved over, dived again with the flashes of her gun flickering and streaming, and the bullets hailing down on the heads of the attackers. It was more than the Germans, lying open and exposed to the overhead attack, could bear. They scrambled from their holes, floundered and ran crouching back for the shelter of deeper trenches, while the lieutenant, seeing his chance, yelled and yelled again at his men to fire, and seized a rifle himself to help cut down the demoralised attack. He could see now how close a thing it had been for them, the weight of the attack that presently would have swarmed over them. The ground was alive with running, scrambling grey figures, until the bullets pelting amongst them cut them down or drove them headlong to cover again. Then his men stopped firing and watched with hoarse cheering and shouts the dives and upward leaps of the silvery shape, her skimmings along the ground, her upward wheeling climbs followed by the plunging dives with fire spitting and sparkling from her bows. The Germans were firing at her now with rifles and machine-guns until she turned on the spot where these last were nested, drove straight at them and poured long clattering bursts of fire upon them until they were silenced.

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Then she turned and flew over the broken British trenches so close that the men in them could see the leather-clad head and arm of the pilot leaning over the side, could see his wave to them, the flung packet that dropped with fluttering streamers down amongst them. The packet carried a note jerkily scribbled in pencil: "Hang on. I'm taking word of where you are, so that they can send help to you. Good luck."

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The lieutenant, when he had read, handed the message to a sergeant and told him to pass it along round the men. And they read and shouted cheers they knew he could not hear to the pilot lifting the "Silver Wings" steadily into the sky and back towards the lines. He was high enough now for the "Archies" to bear on him again, and from their trenches the men watched with anxious hearts and throbs of fear and hope the black puffs of smoke that broke rapidly above, below, and about the glinting silver. He made desperately slow speed against the heavy wind, but fortunately had not far to go before he was far enough back to be over the lines and out of reach of the Archies. Then just when it seemed that he was safe, when the Archie shells had ceased suddenly to puff about him, the watchers saw another machine drop from the cover of a cloud, dive straight down on the little silver shape, saw the silver wings widen as they turned sharply upward to face the enemy, wheel and shoot sideways to avoid the dive. With beating hearts and straining eyes they watched the two dipping and curving, lifting and diving, wheeling and circling about each other. The battle noises drowned all sound of their guns, but they knew well the rapid rattle of fire that was going on up there, the exchange of shots, the streaming bullets that poured about both, thought at last they could catch the sound of the firing clearly, could see the black cross and circled red, white, blue, that marked enemy and friend as the two machines drifted back in their fighting down wind until they were almost overhead. Once the watchers gasped as the enemy dived on "Silver Wings" and she slipped sideways and came down a thousand feet nose first and spinning in dizzy circles. The gasp changed to a cry of relief as the "Silver Wings" righted, zoomed sharply up, whirled round, and in turn dived on the enemy machine, that had overshot his pursuing dive and come below her. And the cry changed again to a yell of applause, a burst of cheers, as the enemy swerved suddenly, slid drunkenly sideways and down, rolled over, and fell away in a spinning dive, swoop after sickening swoop, that ended crashing in a clump of wood half a mile away. A wind-blown torrent of streaming black smoke marked the place of the fall and the fate of the enemy. "Silver Wings" turned again, and fought her way back towards the lines, with the Archie shells puffing and splashing about her.

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Down in their trenches the isolated cluster of men set about strengthening their defences with new heart, made with a new hope preparations to withstand the next attacks. It was not long before they had help—a help that the guns, knowing now exactly where they were although they could not see, could send in advance of the rescuing attack. A barrage of shells began to pound down beyond them, out to their right and left, and even behind them. "Silver Wings" had dropped her message, and the shells brought the answer plain to the cut-off party. They knew that they were located, that the guns would help out their defence, that rescue would come to them as speedily as might be.

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The actual rescue came presently in the shape of an attack over the ground they had covered the day before. Before it came they had to beat off one or two more enemy rushes, but this time the help of those barraging shells stood them in good stead, the sweeping shrapnel prevented the enemy creeping in to occupy in comparative safety the shell-holes round the position, the steady fall of high explosives broke down the enemy trenches and checked free movement in them. The Germans were badly pounded on that portion of front, so that when the rescuing attack was made, it fought its way rapidly forward, and the isolated party were able to do something to help it merely by hanging to their position, by rear and flanking fire on the Germans who held the ground between them and the attacking line. The attack resulted in the whole line being pushed forward to the ridge behind the separated party, holding it, and thrusting forward a little salient which took in the ground the party had hung to so stoutly, consolidated, and held it firm.

The rescued men were passed back to their lines, and—most of them—to the casualty clearing stations. And when the lieutenant brought the remnant of his company back to the battalion, he told the Battalion Commander his end of the story, and heard in return how the message of their whereabouts had been brought back and how it had directed the movement that had got them out. The lieutenant wanted to send a word of thanks to "Silver Wings" and her pilot, but this the C.O. told him he could not do. "The pilot was lifted out of his machine and taken straight to the C.C.S.,^[1]" he said. "He was wounded by rifle-fire from the ground when he first dived to help you beat off that attack. No, not seriously, I'm glad to say, but he'd lost a lot of blood, and he got rather knocked about landing and broke his machine a bit I believe."

"Wounded," said the lieutenant slowly, "and at that time. So he kept on diving his machine about and fighting after he was wounded; and went through that air fight with his wound, and shot the Hun down, and then came on back and gave his message—" "Dropped a note straight into the signallers at Brigade Headquarters," said the C.O.

The lieutenant drew a deep breath. "We knew we were owing him a lot," he said. "But it seems we were owing even more than we thought."

"And I'm beginning to think," said the C.O., "that all of us here on the ground are owing more than we've known to those fellows in the air."

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Casualty Clearing Station.

II

BRING HOME THE 'BUS

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For ten minutes past the observer had been alternately studying his map and the ground 20,000 feet below, and now he leaned forward out of his cockpit, touched the pilot on the shoulder, and made a slight signal with his hand. Immediately the machine began to swing in a wide curve, while the observer busied himself with his camera and exposed plate after plate.

He looked up and out a moment as there came to his ear, dully but unmistakably above the roar of the engine, the hoarse "*woof*" of a bursting anti-aircraft shell. The black smoke of the burst showed a good hundred yards out to their left and some hundreds of feet above them, and the observer returned to his photographing.

"*Wooof*" came another shell, and then in quick succession another and another, the last one dead ahead and with such correct elevation that, a second later, the machine flashed through the streaming black smoke of the burst. The pilot looked back inquiringly, and the observer made a sign which meant "Do what you please," and sat back to wait until the pilot took such steps as he thought fit to disarrange the aim of the gunners below.

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The harsh rending cough of another shell came so close beneath the machine that both men felt her distinctly jolt upward, twisting from the wind shock. The pilot waited no more. He jammed the controls hard over and flung the machine out in a vicious side-slip, caught her at the end of it, tipped her nose over and plunged straight down with the engine full on for a thousand feet, banked sharply, pivoting fairly on his wing-tip, and shot off at right angles to his former course for a quarter of a mile; then, climbing slightly as he went, swung hard round again, dipped a little to gather speed, hoicked hard up, and in a few seconds was back somewhere about the position at which he had first departed from the course.

Back about the point where they had last turned a string of black smoke-puffs flashed out rapidly. The pilot shut his engine off for an instant. "Fooled 'em that time," he yelled back, and grinned gleefully at his observer. The observer peered out carefully and exposed another plate, turned and passed another signal to the pilot. Instantly the engine roared out, and the machine tipped her bows down and went plunging earthward. The observer watched the needle of his height indicator drop back and back through 20,000, 19, 18, 17, 16, hang there an instant, leap up again to 16 and 17. There it stayed quivering for ten seconds, while the machine hurtled forward at a hundred miles an hour on a level keel. There the pilot dropped her nose a little again and went slanting down with the engine full on, and the needle of the speed indicator climbing up and up until the speed touched 140 miles an hour and the height indicator dropped to a 14,000-foot level.

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The Archie shells were spouting and splashing round them in all directions, but their erratic course had sufficiently upset the gunners to bring the bursts well out and clear, and the pilot made the last steep dizzying plunge that brought him to the 10,000-foot height his observer had asked for. But at this height they were well within the range of smaller Archie batteries, and the observer jerked the handle of his camera to and fro at intervals, with the racking cough of the shells sounding perilously close, and the reek of their burst at times swirling past as the machine tore through their smoke. Three times heavy splinters *whurred* viciously past them, and once a sharp crack and rip left a gaping black rent in the cloth of the body close astern of the observer.

For a good ten minutes the machine circled and swung and darted to and fro, while the observer

hung on and snapped his plates at such objects as he wanted on the ground below; and for all that ten minutes the Archies continued to pitch a stream of shells up round and over and under them.

Then the observer signalled "finished," and the machine jerked round and streaked off at top speed in a series of curves and zigzags that carried her westward and homeward as straight as the pilot dared drive in avoiding the shells that continued to follow them. The pilot kept her nose down a little as he went, so as to obtain the maximum speed, but when he began to run out of range of the Archies and leave their smoke bursts well astern, he tilted up and pushed straight west at top speed, but on a long climb that brought him up a thousand feet a mile. Presently he felt the signal cord looped about his arm jerk and jerk again, and, tilting the machine's nose slightly downward, he shut off his engine and let her glide and twisted round to the observer.

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"Huns," yelled the observer. "Six of 'em, and coming like stink," and he pointed up and astern to half a dozen dots in the sky.

"Would you like a scrap, Spotty?" shouted the pilot. "Shall we take 'em on?"

"Don't ask me," shouted Spotty. "Ask the Hun. He'll scrap if he wants to, and you and your old 'bus can't help it, Barry."

"Thought you knew the old 'Marah' better," retorted Barry. "You watch"; and he twisted in his seat and opened his engine out.

Now the "Marah" was the pride of her Squadron, and, most inordinately, of her pilot. Built line by line to the blue-print of her class, fraction by fraction of an inch in curve, straight, and stream-line, to the design of her sisters in the Squadron, differing no hair's-breadth from them in shape, size, engine, or propeller, she yet by some inscrutable decree was the best of them all in every quality that counts for best in a machine. There are theories to account for these not uncommon differences, the most popular and plausible being that the better machine is so merely because of some extra skill and minute care in her and her engine's building, last touches of exactness and perfection in the finish of their parts and their assembling.

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The "Marah" could outclimb anything in the Squadron with the most ridiculous ease, outclimb them in feet per minute, and in final height; she could outfly them on any level from 100 to 20,000 feet, could "out-stunt" them—although here perhaps the pilot had as much to say as the machine—in any and every stunt they cared to challenge her on. Barry, her young pilot, literally loved her. He lost no chance of trying her out against other types of machines, and there were few of the fastest and best types even amongst the single-seater scout machines that could beat her on a level fly, or that she could not leave with her nose held slightly down. No two-seater Barry had ever met could come anywhere near the "Marah" in stunting, in the ease and speed at which he could put her through all sorts of fancy spins, loops, side-slips, and all the rest of the bag of air tricks. How much of her superiority was due to her own qualities and how much to her pilot it is hard to say, because certain it is that Barry could climb her nearly a thousand feet higher, and drive her several knots faster, than any other pilot who had flown her.

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It is because of all these things that Barry had preferred to make this particular photographing trip a lone-hand one. It was a long-distance journey far back behind the German lines, to a spot known to be well protected by long-range Archies, and of such importance that it was certain to order out fast fighting machines to cut off any flight taking back reports or photographs. Barry's arguments for his single-handed trip were simple, and, as the Squadron Commander had to admit, sound. "One machine stands much more chance of sneaking over high up without being spotted than a whole flight," said Barry. "When we're there I can chuck the 'bus about any old how to dodge the Archies, while Spotty snaps his pictures; and if we're tackled by any E.A.,^[2] the old 'Marah' could probably outfly them by herself. And since you're so beastly positive that this isn't a scrapping stunt, I'd sooner be on my own and free to dodge and run and use clouds and so on without having to think of keeping formation. Don't you worry. We'll come through all right."

The Squadron Commander gave in. "Right oh," he said reluctantly. "And do keep your eyes skinned for Huns and run from 'em if you've a chance. This information is wanted badly, remember, and you mustn't risk getting scuppered with it. And, besides we can't afford to lose the 'Marah' out of the Squadron. You don't count of course, but the old 'bus is too good to lose."

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He hid a good deal of anxiety under his chaffing, and Barry, reading that and the friendship that bred it, laughed and took the same light-hearted tone. "You won't lose her," he said. "If a Hun punctures me and Spotty we'll just jump overboard and tell the old girl to push along home on her own. She's jolly near got sense enough to do it too, I believe."

Now all this was in Barry's mind when Spotty told him of the pursuing enemy, and so he set himself to take every ounce of advantage he could. The machines behind were travelling faster, because they had sighted him from a much higher level, and had all the additional speed that a downward slant gave them, while the "Marah," still held on a slightly upward incline, lost something of her top speed thereby.

Barry knew there were Archie batteries to be passed over on the way back, and if he meant to keep a straight course it was necessary that he should be as far above them as possible. He leaned out and peered down at the landscape wheeling and unrolling under them, picked out the spot he was watching for—a village where he knew Archie batteries were located—and altered course slightly to give it a wider berth. In another minute the Archie shells began to bark about them. At the first one that came dangerously close the "Marah" hoicked abruptly upward 500 feet, wheeled sharp south for half a mile, swung again and drove straight west. Twice she had to

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swerve and dodge in similar fashion before she cleared the zone of the Archies' range, and these swerves and their faster downward passage allowed the enemy craft to overhaul her considerably. Spotty swung his machine-gun round in readiness and trained it aft and up on the hostiles.

Two single-seaters were half a mile ahead of the other four and looming larger every minute. They were within long range now, and, presently, one of them loosed off a dozen rounds or so at the "Marah." Spotty jerked a signal that he was going to fire, and taking careful sight rapped off about twenty rounds. The range was too great yet for him, and the Huns made no sign of a swerve from their direct path, so Spotty ceased firing and waited, glancing over his sights at one machine that had forged slightly ahead of the other. Barry looked back over his shoulder and up at the two machines. They were still a good thousand feet above the "Marah," but Barry was satisfied enough with the way the game was running, because while they had dropped from perhaps 20,000 feet to 15,000, the "Marah" had gained 3,000 to 4,000 as she flew.

The advantage of height was half the battle, and Barry wanted to snatch every inch of it he could gain. For that reason he passed a signal back to Spotty to open fire again, and Spotty obediently began to rip out a series of short bursts. The two men had flown so long together that each knew the other's dodges and ideas to an extent precious beyond words, and had a code of brief signals in head-noddings and jerkings and hand motions that saved much waste of time and breath in shutting off engine to shout messages or yelling through the communicating 'phone. Spotty figured now just the plan Barry had in mind, a plan to hustle the enemy into making his attempt before he was at the closest effective range for a diving attack. The plan succeeded too. His bullets must have been going somewhere close, for Spotty saw the nearest machine swerve ever so slightly, as if her pilot had flinched or ducked instinctively. Then Spotty saw her nose dip slightly until it was pointed straight at the "Marah," the machine-gun firing through her propeller broke out in a long rapid burst of fire, and the "tracer" bullets^[3] came flashing and streaming past in thin pencils of flame and smoke. What followed takes a good deal longer in the telling than it did in the happening. All three machines were travelling, remember, at a speed of anything round a hundred knots, a speed that rose at times as they dipped and dived to nearer perhaps a hundred and thirty and forty. While they were flying on the same course with little difference in speed each airman could see the other closely and in detail, could watch each little movement, look over at leisure small items about each other's machines. Mere groundlings cannot get nearer to the sensation than to imagine or remember sitting at the window of a carriage on the slow lumbering sixty-mile-an-hour express, watching the almost equally slow mail rushing over the rails at sixty-five miles on a parallel line, and seeing the passengers at her windows scanning deliberately the shape of your hat or colour of your hair.

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In just such fashion Spotty saw the pilot of the leading machine rise slightly and glance astern at his companion, saw him settle himself in his seat, saw him raise a hand and motion downward. Instantly he jerked the cord fast to Barry's shoulder, signalling "look out," and with swift clockwork motions snatched the almost empty drum of his machine-gun, and replaced it with the full one he held ready clutched between his knees.

Vaguely in the swift ensuing seconds he felt the machine under him sway and leap and reel; but his whole mind was for that time concentrated on his gun sights, on keeping them full on the bulk of the machine astern of him, in pressing the trigger at the exact critical second. He saw the round bow of his nearest pursuer lift and for one long breath saw the narrow tapering length of her underbody behind it. That was a chance, and he filled it full and brimming with a fifty-round burst of which he saw the bullets flash and disappear in the fuselage above him. Then in a flash the underbody disappeared, and the rounded bow of the hostile came plunging down on him, growing and widening as it came full power and speed of engine and gravity pull. He was dimly conscious of her firing as she came, and he kept his own gun going, pumping bullets in a constant stream, his eye glued to the sights, his finger clenched about the trigger. Somehow he knew—just knew, without reasoning or thinking it out—that his bullets were going to their mark, and it gave him no slightest touch of astonishment when he saw his enemy stagger, leap upward, lurch and roll until she stood straight up on her wing-tip, and so, banking and deflecting from the "Marah's" course, flash in a split fraction of a second out of the fight.

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He had no more than a glimpse of a gust of fire and gush of black smoke from somewhere about her before she vanished from his sight, and he was training his sights on a second shape that came swooping and plunging down upon him. This second enemy made better play with her gun. With deadly slowness and persistence, as it seemed, she closed, yard by yard. Spotty trained his gun full in the centre of the quivering light rays that marked the circle of her whirling propeller, and poured burst after burst straight at the jerking flashes of the machine-gun that blazed through her propeller. He felt an agonising jar on his ankle ... but the drum of his machine-gun snapped out its last cartridge, and Spotty smoothly and methodically whipped off the empty drum, stooped and lifted a full one, fitted it in place, and looking over his sights rapped his gun into action again; while all the time the bullets of his adversary hailed and ripped and tore about and upon the "Marah," riddling the rudder, slashing along the stern, cracking in the whip-like reports of explosive bullets about the observer's cockpit, lifting forward and rap-rap-rapping about the bows and the pilot's stooped head. The "Marah" leaped out suddenly and at full stride in a hundred-foot side-slip, checked, and hurtled upward; and in that breath of time the pursuer flicked past and down and out of the vision of Spotty's sights.

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It was all over so quickly that Spotty, looking overside, could still see the first enemy spinning down jerkily with black smoke whirling up from her fuselage, spinning helplessly down, as he knew, to hit the earth 15,000 feet below. Spotty felt suddenly and surprisingly sick and faint. His

particular story blurs somewhat from here on, because he himself was never able to supply it in detail. He was able to answer Barry—Barry turning to shout his question while the "Marah" tore along at her full 110 knots—that he'd been hit somewhere about the foot or leg, and didn't feel much, except sick. This Barry was able to gather with some difficulty, after juggling with the wheel beside him that shifted angles of incidence, and more or less stabilised the "Marah's" flight, abandoning his controlling "joy-stick," clambering up on his seat, and hanging back and over to bring his head into the observer's cockpit and his ear within reach of Spotty's feeble attempts at a shout. He himself was rather unfit for these acrobatics, owing to certain unpleasant and punishing wounds just received. While he attempted to carry on his laboured inquiries, the "Marah," her engine throttled down and her controls left to look after themselves, swooped gently and leisurely, slid downwards on a gliding slant for a thousand feet, pancaked into an air-pocket, and fell off into a spinning dive.

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While she plunged earthward at a rate of some hundred feet per second Barry finished his inquiries, dragged or pushed back into his seat—it was really down into his seat, since the "Marah" at the moment was standing on her head and his seat was between the observer's and the bows, but the wind pressure at that speed made it hard work to slide down—took hold of his controls, waited the exact and correct moment, flattened the "Marah" out of her spin, opened the throttle and went booming off again to westward a bare 5,000 feet above ground level.

He had, it is true, a moment's parley and a swift summing up of the situation before he turned the "Marah's" bows definitely for home. And the situation was ugly enough to be worth considering. Spotty (Barry thought of him first) was in a bad way—leg smashed to flinders—explosive evidently—bleeding like a stuck pig (wonder would the plates be spoiled, or was the camera built water-tight, or blood-tight?)—very doubtful if he'd last out the journey home. Then Barry himself had wounds—the calf of his left leg blown to shreds, and the toes of his left foot gone, and, most upsettingly painful of all, a gaping hole where his left eye should be, a blood-streaming agony that set his senses reeling and wavering and clearing slowly and painfully. This last wound, as it proved, was the result of a ricocheting bullet which, flicking forward as Barry had turned his head, cut his left eye clean from its socket.

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The summing up was very clear and simple. They were a good thirty miles from the lines; Spotty might easily bleed to death in less than that; he, Barry, might do the same, or might faint from pain and exhaustion. In that case done-finish himself, and Spotty, and the "Marah," in a drop of 5,000 feet and a full hundred-mile-an-hour crash below. On the other hand, he had only to move his hand, push the joy-stick out and sweep the "Marah" down, flatten her out and pick a decent field, land, and he and Spotty would be in the doctor's hands in a matter of minutes, both of them safe and certain of their lives at least. In seconds they could be "on the floor" and in safety—and in German hands ... the two of them and ... and ... the "Marah." It was probably the thought of the "Marah" that turned the scale, if ever the scale really hung in doubt. "We can't afford ..."—what was it the Squadron Commander had said?—"can't afford to lose the old 'Marah' from the Squadron." No (Barry's vision cleared mentally and physically at the thought),—no, and, by the Lord, the Squadron wasn't going to lose the "Marah," not if it was in him to bring the old 'bus home.

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He knew it was going to be a close thing, for himself and for the "Marah"; and carefully he set himself to take the last and least ounce of the chances in favour of his getting the "Marah" across the line. It would be safer to climb high and cross the fire of the Archies that waited him on the line; safer so far as dodging the shells went, but cutting down the limit set to his strength and endurance by the passing minutes. On the level, or with her nose a little down, the "Marah" would make the most of the time left her, or rather left him. His senses blurred and swam again; he felt himself lurching forward in his seat, knew that this was pushing the joy-stick forward and the "Marah's" nose to earth, shoved himself back in his seat and clutched the stick desperately to him ... and woke slowly a minute after to find the "Marah's" bows pointed almost straight up, her engine struggling to lift her, his machine on the very verge of stalling and falling back into the gulf. He flung her nose down and forward hastily, and the "Marah" ducked gracefully over like a hunter taking an easy fence, steadied and lunged forward in arrow-straight flight.

After this Barry concentrated on the faces of the clock, the height and the speed indicators. Once or twice he tried to look overside to locate his position, but the tearing hurricane wind of the "Marah's" passage so savaged his torn face and eye that he was forced back into the cover of his windscreen. Five minutes went. Over, well over a hundred the speed indicator said the "Marah" was doing. Nearly 5,000 up the height indicator said (must have climbed a lump in that minute's haziness, concluded Barry), and, reckoning to cross the line somewhere inside the 500 up—which after all would risk machine-gun and rifle fire, but spare them the Archies—would allow him to slant the "Marah" down a trifle and get a little more speed out of her. He tilted her carefully and watched the speed indicator climb slowly and hang steady.

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And so another five minutes went. Two thousand up said the indicator; and "*woof, woof, woof*" grunted a string of Archie shells. "Getting near the line," said Barry, and pushed the joy-stick steadily forward. The "Marah" hurtled downward on a forty-five degree slant, her engine full out, the wind screaming and shrieking about her. Fifteen hundred, a thousand, five hundred pointed the needle of the height indicator, and slowly and carefully Barry pulled the "Marah's" head up and held her racing at her top speed on the level.

Fifteen minutes gone. They must be near the lines now. He could catch, faint and far off through the booming roar of his engine, the rattle of rifle fire, and a faint surprise took him at the sound of two strange raps, and the sight of two neat little round holes in the instrument board and map in front of him. He looked out, carefully holding the joy-stick steady in one hand and covering his

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torn eye with the other, and saw the wriggling white lines of trenches flashing past close below. Then from the cockpit behind him broke out a steady clatter and jar of the observer's machine-gun. Barry looked round to see Spotty, chalk-faced and tight-lipped, leaning over the side with arms thrust out and pointing his gun straight to earth with a stream of flashes pouring from the muzzle. "Good man," murmured Barry, "oh, good man," and made the "Marah" wriggle in her flight as a signal.

Spotty looked round, loosened his lips in a ghastly grin, and waved an arm signalling to turn at right angles. "Nothin' doin', my son," said Barry grinning back. "It's 'Home, John' for us this time. But fancy the priceless old fellow wanting to go touring their front line spraying lead on 'em. Good lad, Spotty."

A minute later he felt his senses reel, and his sight blacken again, but he gripped his teeth on his lip and steered for the clump of wood that hid his own Squadron's landing ground.

He made his landing there too; made it a trifle badly, because when he came to put rudder on he found that his left leg refused its proper work. And so he crashed at the last, crashed very mildly it is true, but enough to skew the wheels and twist the frame of the under-carriage a little.

And as Spotty's first words when he was lifted from his cockpit were of the crash— "Barry, you blighter, if you've crashed those plates of mine I'll never forgive you.... You'll find all the plates exposed, Major, and notes of the bearing and observations in my pocket-book"—so also were Barry's last of the same thing. He didn't speak till near the end. Then he opened his one eye to the Squadron Commander waiting at his bedside and made an apology ... ("An apology ... Good Lord!..." as the Major said after). "Did I crash her badly, Major?" And when the Major assured him No, nothing that wouldn't repair in a day, and that the "Marah" would be ready for him when he came back to them, he shook his head faintly. "But it doesn't matter," he said. "Anyhow, I got her home.... And if I'm 'going West,' the old 'Marah' will go East again ... and get some more Huns for you." He ceased, and was silent a minute. Then "I'm sorry I crashed her, Major ... but y'see, ... my leg ... was a bit numb."

He closed his eye; and died.

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A pilot lost doesn't very much count.
(But don't tell his girl or his mater this!)
There's always another to take his mount,
And push the old 'bus where the Archies miss.
But a 'bus that's lost you can't renew,
For where one works there's the want of two
And all they can make are still too few,
So we must bring home the 'bus.

FOOTNOTES:

[2] E.A. Enemy Aircraft.

[3] Tracer bullets emit smoke and flame to allow the shooter to follow their flight.

III

A TENDER SUBJECT

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The telling of this tale in the Squadron Mess came about through (1) a mishap, (2) a joke, and (3) an argument. The mishap was to a fighting two-seater, which landed on the Squadron's 'drome with a dud engine. The pilot and observer made their way to the Squadron office and, after a brief 'phone talk to their own C.O., borrowed a tender and pushed off for their own 'drome. The leader of "A" Flight walked down to the tender, chatting to them, and four of the Squadron's pilots took advantage of the chance of a lift in to a town the tender had to pass on the journey. All of them heard and all were a little surprised, at "A" Commander's parting word to the two visitors. "I've told the driver to go slow and careful," he said. "You fellows just watch he does it, will you?"

The joke began to dawn on the four just after the tender had carefully cleared the first bend of the road from the 'drome and the driver began to open her up and let her rip. The joke grew with the journey, and the four on their return to the Squadron that afternoon burst into the full ante-room and, announcing it "Such a joke, oh, *such* a joke!" went on to tell it in competing quartette to a thoroughly appreciative audience. It appeared that one passenger—"the pale-faced nervy-looking little 'un with pink eye-rims"—had showed distinct uneasiness when the tender rushed a dip-and-rise at top speed, and his observer—"a reg'lar Pickwick Fat Boy, quakin' like a jelly"—complained openly and bitterly when the tender took a corner on the two outside wheels and missed a country cart with six inches and a following gust of French oaths to spare.

When, by the grace o' God, and by a bare hand's-breadth, they shaved past a lumbering M.T.

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lorry, "Pink Eye" and "Fat Boy" clung dumb to each other and plainly devoted themselves to silent prayer. The dumbness deserted them and they made up all arrears of speech, and to spare, when the tender took four heaps of road-metal by the wayside in a series of switch-backing hand-springs. "Course we twigged your joke by then," said the four to "A" leader. "I suppose you delivered the driver his go-slow order with a large-sized wink and he savvied what you meant." It appeared that Pink Eye had asked the four to make the driver slow down, or to kill him or something. They pretended innocence and said he was a most careful man, and so on. Fat Boy nearly wept when they met a Staff car travelling fast and, never slacking an ounce, whooped past with a roar; and after a hairpin bend, which the tender took like a fancy skater doing the figure-of-eight, Pink Eye completely broke up and swore that he was going to get off and walk. "He'd have done it too," said the four delightedly, "if we hadn't eased her up. But you never saw such a state of funk as those two were in. Kept moppin' their brows, and apologisin' for their nerves, and fidgetin' and shiverin' like wet kittens every time we took a corner or met a cart. It was too funny—really funny."

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This led to the argument—whether men with nerves of that sort could be any good in air work. "I know I'd hate to be a pilot with an observer of that kind watching my tail, almost as much as I'd hate to be an observer with Pink Eye for a pilot," said one, and most there agreed. A few argued that it was possible for men to be brave enough in one kind of show and the very opposite in another—that one fellow could do the V.C. act seven days a week under fire and take every sort of risk in action without turning a hair, and yet go goosey-fleshed on a Channel crossing in a choppy sea, while another man might enjoy sailing a boat single-handed in a boiling white sea, and yet be genuinely nervous about dodging across the full traffic-tide of a London thoroughfare. Most of those present declined to believe these theories, maintaining stoutly that a good plucked 'un was always such, and that an obvious funk couldn't be anything else—except in novelettes and melodrama. Then came the story.

"Did y'ever hear of 'Charger' Wicks?" said the Captain of "A." "No? Well, you're rather recently out, so you mightn't, but—well, he's fairly well known out here. He's rather a case in point—"

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Being told by an expert to an audience of experts, his tale was put more briefly, technically, and air-slangily than I may hope to do, but here is the sense of it.

"Charger" Wicks was a pilot in a well-known fighting squadron, and was so called from a favourite tactic of his in air fighting and his insistent advice to the rest of the Flight he came to command to follow his plan of attack. "Always charge straight at your Hun if you get a chance," he would say. "Drive straight and hard nose-on at him, keeping your gun going hot. If you keep straight, he'll flinch—every time; and as he turns up, down, or out, you get a full-length target underneath, topside, or broadside. If you keep on and shoot straight, you're bound to get a hatful of bullets into him somewhere."

The plan certainly seemed to work, and Charger notched up a good tally of crashed Huns, but others in the Squadron warned him he'd try it once too often. "Charge straight at him, and he'll dodge," said Charger. "Wait," said the others. "Some day you'll meet a Hun who works on the same rule; *then* where'll you be?" "Yes," said Billy Bones, Charger's observer, "and where'll I be?" But although he pretended to grumble, Billy Bones was, as a matter of fact, quite in agreement on the nose-on charging stunt and believed in it as firmly as Charger himself. It took nerve, he admitted, but if you had that—and Charger certainly had—it worked all right. As it happened, the nerves of both were to be "put through it" rather severely.

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They were up with the Flight one day, Charger with Billy Bones leading in their pet 'bus Y221. They ran into a scrap with odds of about two to one against them, and in the course of it Charger got a chance to put his old tactic to the proof. The moment he swung Y221 and headed her straight at a Hun scout, Billy knew what was coming, and heaved his gun round ready for any shot that offered as the Hun flinched past. But this time it looked as if the Squadron's old warning was going to be fulfilled and that Charger had met the Hun with the same rule as himself. Charger's gun began to rattle at about one hundred yards' range, and the Hun opened at the same moment. Billy, crouching with his gun at the ready and his eyes glued on a scarlet boss in the centre of the Hun's propeller, saw and heard the bullets stream smoking and cracking past and on their machine. It does not take long for two machines travelling about a hundred miles per hour to cover a hundred yards, but to Billy, staring tense at that growing scarlet blot, each split fraction of a second was an age, and as the shape of the Hun grew but showed no sign of a changing outline, Billy's thoughts raced. Charger, he knew, wouldn't budge an inch from his line; if the Hun also held straight ... he still held straight ... the slightest deviation up or down would show instantly in the wings, seen edgeways in thin lines, thickening and widening. The bullets were coming deadly close ... and the red boss grew and grew. If the Hun didn't give now—this instant—it would be too late ... they must collide. The approaching wing-edges still showed their thin straight line, and Billy, with a mental "Too late now!" gasped and gripped his gun and waited the crash.

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Then, at the last possible instant, the Hun's nerve gave—or, rather, it gave just an instant too late. Billy had a momentary vision of the thin wing-edges flashing wide, of the black crosses on the under side, of a long narrow strip of underbody and tail suddenly appearing below the line of the planes; and then, before he could move or think, he felt the Y221 jar violently, heard horrible sounds of splintering, cracking, tearing, had a terrifying vision of a great green mass with splashed ugly yellow spots rearing up over the top plane before his startled eyes, plunging past over his ducking head with splintering wreckage and flapping streamers of fabric whizzing and rushing about his ears. Y221—whirling, jolting, twisting all ways and every way at once apparently—fell away in a series of sickening jerks that threatened to wrench her joint from joint.

Billy's thoughts raced down ahead of them to where they would hit the ground 15,000 feet below ... how long would it take ... would they hit nose-first or how ... was there anything he could do?—and before his mind shaped the question he had answered it—No, nothing! Dully he noticed that their engine had stopped, that Charger apparently was busy at the controls; then—with a gleam of wondering hope, dismissed at first, but returning and growing—that the lurching and rolling was steadying, that they were coming back on an even keel, were ... yes, actually, were gliding smoothly down.

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Charger twisted and looked down overside, then back at Billy and yelled, "D'ye see him?" Billy looked over, and next instant saw a vanishing shape with one wing folded back, saw another wing that had torn clear floating and "leafing" away on its own. The shape plunged plummet-wise until it was lost in the haze below. Billy turned inboard. "Broken in air," he shouted, and Charger nodded and turned again to his controls. Billy saw that their propeller was gone, only one jagged splinter of a blade remaining.

They made a long glide back and a good landing well behind the lines on a grass field. "What happened?" said Billy the moment they had come to rest. "He flinched, of course," said Charger. "Ran it a bit fine, and our prop caught his tail and tore it up some. I dunno that we're much hurt, except for the prop and that broken strut."

And, amazingly enough, they were not. The leading edge of a top plane was broken and cracked along its length, one strut was snapped, the propeller gone, a few jagged holes from bullets and Hun splinters ripped in their fabric. "God bless the people who built her!" said Charger piously. "Good stuff and good work in that old 'bus, Billy. That's all that brought us through."

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Billy mopped his brow. "Hope we don't meet any more of that breed of Hun," he said. "I find I don't like collisions—not one little bit."

"He flinched at the finish, though," said Charger simply. "They all do."

When they got Y221 back to the 'drome and overhauled her they found her wrenched a bit, but in a couple of days she was tautened up into trim and in the air again.

And the very next morning, as if this weren't enough, Charger and Billy had another nerve-testing. They were up about 12,000 and well over Hunland when they ran into a patch of Archies, and Charger turned and led the formation straight towards a bank of white cloud that loomed up, solid looking as a huge bolster, before them. The sun was dead behind them, so Billy at first sat looking over the tail on the watch for any Huns who might try to attack "out of the sun" and its blinding glare. But as it was dead astern over the tail Billy could see clearly above and behind him, so that there was no chance of a Hun diving unseen from a height, and they were moving too fast to be overtaken on the level "out of the sun." Billy turned round and watched the cloud they were driving at. The sun was full on it, and it rose white and glistening like a chalk cliff—no, more like a—like a— Billy was idly searching his mind for a fitting simile, when his thoughts broke and he yelled fiercely and instinctively in warning to Charger. But Charger had seen too, as Billy knew from his quick movement and sudden alert sit-up. The cloud was anything round a hundred yards from them, and they could just see the slow curling twisting movement of its face. And—what had suddenly startled them—they could see another machine, still buried back in the cloud, and looming large and distorted by the mist, but plainly flying out of it and straight at them.

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What followed was over and done in the space of seconds, although it may seem long in the telling, as it certainly was age-long in the suspense of the happening and waiting for the worst of it. Billy perhaps, powerless to act, able only to sit tense and staring, felt the strain the worst, although it must have been bad enough for Charger, knowing that their slender hope of escape hung on his quick thinking and action. This was no clear case of following his simple plan of charging and waiting for the Hun to flinch. The whole success of the plan depended on the Hun seeing and knowing the charge was coming—on his nerve failing to meet it. Charger didn't even know this was a Hun. He might be one of ours. He might have seen them, and at that very second be swerving to miss them. He might be blinded in the cloud and know nothing of them driving full-on into him. All this went through Charger's mind in a flash, and almost in that same flash he had decided on his action and taken it. He thrust the nose of Y221 steeply down. Even in the fraction of time it took for him to decide and his hand to move the control lever he could see the difference in the misty shape before him, could judge by the darkening, hardening and solidifying outline the speed of their approach. And then, exactly as his bows plunged down, he saw and knew that what he feared had happened—the other pilot had seen him, had thought and acted exactly as he had. Charger saw the thin line of the edge-on wings broaden, the shadowy shape of the tail appear above them, just as he had seen it so often when the Hun he charged had flinched and ducked. But then the flinching had meant safety to him driving straight ahead—now it meant disaster, dipping as he was fairly to meet the other.

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Again for the fraction of a second he hesitated—should he push on down, or turn up? Which would the other do? And again before the thought was well framed it was decided and acted on. He pulled the stick hard in, zoomed up, and held his breath, waiting. The shape was clearer and harder, must be almost out of the cloud—doubtful even now if Y221 had time and room to rise clear—all right if the other held on down, but—

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The nose of his machine swooped up, and as it did, and before it shut out his view ahead, Charger, with a cold sinking inside him, saw the outline ahead flash through changing shapes again, the wings narrow and close to edge-on view, open and widen again with the tail dropping below. Again the other man's thought and action had exactly followed his own. No time to do

more; by the solid appearance he knew the other machine must be just on the edge of the cloud, and they were almost into it, its face already stirring and twisting to the propeller rush. Charger's one thought at the moment was to see his opponent's nose thrust out—to know was it a Hun or one of ours.

Billy Bones, sitting tight with fingers locked on the cockpit edge, had seen, followed and understood every movement they had made, the full meaning of that changing outline before them, the final nearness shown by the solidity of the approaching grey shape; and the one thought in his mind was a memory of two men meeting face to face on a pavement, both stepping sideways in the same direction, stepping back, hesitating and stepping aside again, halting, still face to face, and glaring or grinning at each other. Here they were doing just the same, only up and down instead of sideways—and here there was no stopping.

He too saw the spread of wings loom up and out of either side of them, rushing up to meet them. The spread almost matched and measured their own—which meant a nose-to-nose crash. The cloud face was stirring, swirling, tearing open from the rush of their opposing windage. Had Charger time to—no, no time. They must be just ... it would be on the very cloud edge they would meet—were meeting (why didn't Charger turn, push her down, do something—anything) ... meeting ... (no escape after this collision—end on!) ... *now!*

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Next instant they were in darkness—thick, wet, clammy darkness. No shock and crash of collision yet ... or yet. Billy didn't understand. Was he dead? Could you be killed so instantaneously you didn't feel it? It wasn't quite dark—and he could feel the cockpit rim under his hands—and—

They burst clear of the cloud, with trailing wisps sucking astern after them. He was bewildered. Then, even as Charger turned and shouted the explanation, he guessed at it. "Shadow—our own shadow," yelled Charger, and Billy, nodding in answer, could only curse himself for a fool not to have noticed (as he had noticed really without reasoning why) that the blurred, misty shape had grown smaller as well as sharper as they approached. "I didn't think of it either," Charger confessed after they were back on the 'drome, "and it scared me stiff. Looked just like a machine in thick cloud—blurred, sort of, and getting clearer as it came out to the edge."

"It was as bad as that beastly Hun," said Billy, "or worse"; and Charger agreed.

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Now two experiences of that sort might easily break any man's nerve, and most men would need a spell off after an episode like the collision one. But Charger's nerve was none the worse, and although Billy swore his never really recovered, the two of them soon after put through another nose-on charge at a Hun, in which Charger went straight as ever, and when the Hun zoomed up and over, Billy had kept his nerve enough to have his gun ready and to put a burst of bullets up and into him from stem to stern and send him down in flames.

Everyone in the Mess agreed here that the two were good stout men and had nothing wrong with their nerves.

"Not much," said the narrator, "and they're still goin' strong. But you remember what started me to tell you about them?"

"Let's see—yes," said one or two. "We were talking about the joke of that couple to-day being so scared by a bit of fast driving on a clear road."

"Right," said the other, and laughed. "Heaps of people out here know those two, and it's a standing joke that you can't hire them to sit on the front seat of a car or a tender or travel anything over fifteen miles an hour in anything on wheels."

He waited a moment for some jests and chuckles to subside, and finished, grinning openly. "They are the two I told you about—Charger Wicks and Billy Bones!"

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There was dead silence for a minute. Then, "Good Lord!" said one of the quartette faintly, and "Wh—which was Charger?" faltered another. "In their flying kit we couldn't—"

"The smallest—the one you called the pale-faced, nervy-looking little 'un," said "A" Flight Commander.

"Help!" said the other weakly. "And I—I recommended him 'Sulphurine Pills for Shaken Nerves.' Oh, help!"

"Yes," said the last of the demoralised quartette miserably, "and he thanked us, and said he'd write it down the minute he got back."

There was another pause. Then, "Such a joke!" said someone, quoting from the opening chapter of the quartette's story—"such a joke!" And the Mess broke in a yell of uproarious laughter.

The quartette did not laugh.

IV A GOOD DAY

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Half an hour before there was a hint of dawn in the sky the Flight was out with the machines lined up on the grass, the mechanics busy about them, the pilots giving preliminary tests and runs to their engines. There had been showers of rain during the night, welcome rain which had laid the dust on the roads and washed it off the hedges and trees—rain just sufficient to slake the

thirst of the parched ground and grass, without bringing all the discomfort of mud and mire which as a rule comes instantly to mind when one speaks of "rain" at the Front.

It was a summer dawn, fresh, and cool, and clean, with the raindrops still gemming the grass and leaves, a delicious scent of moist earth in the balmy air, a happy chorus of chirping, twittering birds everywhere, a "great," a "gorgeous," a "perfect" morning, as the pilots told each other.

A beautiful Sabbath stillness, a gentle calm hung over the aerodrome until the machines were run out and the engines began to tune up. But even in their humming, thrumming, booming notes there was nothing harsh or discordant or greatly out of keeping with the air of peace and happiness. And neither, if one had not known what it was, would the long heavy rumble that beat down wind have wakened any but peaceful thoughts. It might have been the long lazy boom of the surf beating in on a sandy beach, the song of leaping waterfalls, the distant rumble of summer thunder ... except perhaps for the quicker drum-like roll that rose swelling every now and then through it, the sharper, yet dull and flat, thudding bumps and thumps that to any understanding ear marked the sound for what it was—the roar of the guns.

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Already the guns were hard at it; had been for days and nights past, in fact; would be harder at it than ever as the light grew on this summer morning, for this was the day set for the great battle, was within an hour or two of the moment marked for the attack to begin.

The Squadron Commander was out long before the time detailed for the Flight to start. He spoke to some of the pilots, looked round, evidently missed someone, and was just beginning "Where is ——" when he caught sight of a figure in flying clothes hurrying out from the huts. The figure halted to speak to a pilot and the Major called impatiently, "Come along, boy. Waiting for you." "Right, sir," called the other, and then laughingly to his companion, "Worst of having a brother for C.O. Always privileged to chase you."

"Flight Leader ought to be first, Sonny, not last," said the Major as the boy came up. "Sorry, Jim," said the boy, "I'm all ready," and ran on to his waiting machine.

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One by one the pilots clambered aboard and settled themselves in their seats, and one after another the engines were started, sputtering and banging and misbehaving noisily at first in some cases, but quickly steadying, and, after a few grunts and throaty *whurrumphs*, picking up their beat, droning out the deep note that rises tone by tone to the full long roaring song of perfect power.

The Major walked along the line, halted at each machine, and spoke a word or two to each pilot. He stood a little longer at the end machine until the pilot eased his engine down and its roar dropped droning to a quiet "ticking over."

"All right and all ready, Sonny?" said the Major.

"All correct, sir," said Sonny laughingly, and with a half-joking salute. "Feel fine, Jim, and the old bus is in perfect trim."

"Think the rain has gone," said the Major. "It's going to be a fine day, I fancy."

"It's just topping," cried Sonny, wrinkling his nose and sniffing luxuriously. "Air's as full of sweet scent as a hay meadow at home."

"Flight, got your orders all clear to start?"

Sonny nodded. "Yes, we'll show you the usual star turn take-off all right. You watch us."

The Major glanced at his wrist-watch and at the paling sky. "Almost time. Well, take care of yourself, Sonny." He put his hand up on the edge of the cockpit, and Sonny slid his glove off, and gave an affectionate little squeeze to the fingers that came over the edge.

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"I'll be all right, Jim, boy. We're going to have a good day. Wish you were coming with us."

"Wish I were," said the Major. "Good luck," and he stepped and walked out in front of the line of machines, halted, and glanced at his watch and up at the sky again.

The half-dozen machines, too, stood waiting and motionless, except for the answering quiver that ran through them to their engines' beat. Down from the line the throbbing roll of the gunfire rose louder and heavier, with a new, an ugly and sinister snarling note running through it. The flat thudding reports of the nearer Heavies came at quicker and closer intervals, the rumble of the further and smaller pieces ran up to the steady unbroken roar of drum-fire.

The wind was coming from the line and the machines were lined up facing into it, so that the pilots had before them the jumping, flickering lights which flamed up across the sky from the guns' discharge. Earlier, these flashes had blazed up in broad sheets of yellow-and orange-tinted light from the horizon to half way up the height of the sky, leaped and sank, leaped again and beat throbbing and pulsing wave on wave, or flickering and quivering jerkily for seconds on end, dying down, and immediately flaring up in wide sheet-lightning glows. Now, in the growing light the gun-flashes showed more and more faintly, in sickly pallid flashes. There was no halt or pause between the jumping lights now; they trembled and flickered unceasingly, with every now and then a broader, brighter glare wiping out the lesser lights.

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The pilots sat watching the battle lights, listening to the shaking battle thunder, and waiting the Squadron Commander's signal to go. The birds were chattering happily and noisily, and a lark climbed, pouring out long shrill bursts of joyful song; somewhere over in the farmyard beside the 'drome a cock crowed shrilly, and from one of the workshops came the cheerful clink-link, clink-link of hammers on an anvil.

It was all very happy and peaceful—except for the jumping gun-flashes and rolling gunfire; life was very sweet and pleasant—unless one thought of life over there in the trenches, and what the next hour or two would bring. Everyone knew there was "dirty work" ahead. It was the first really big "show" the Squadron had been in; they had been in plenty of the ordinary O.P.'s (Offensive Patrols) and air-scrap, but this was the real big thing, a great battle on the ground, and a planned attack on the grand scale in the air, which was to sweep the sky of Huns ... and the gunfire was still growing ... and the lark up there was bursting his throat to tell them what a pleasant place the world was on this summer morning, with the raindrops fresh on the grass and the breeze cool in the trees.

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Nearly time! The Flight Leader ran his engine up again, its humming drone rising to a full deep-chested roar. The other pilots followed suit, engine after engine picking up the chorus and filling the air with deafening and yet harmonious sound. A man stood just clear of the wing-tips to either side of each machine holding a cord fast to the wood blocks chocked under the wheels; another man or two clung to each tail, holding it down against the pull of the propeller, their sleeves, jacket tails, and trouser legs fluttering wildly in the gales which poured aft from the whirling screws and sent twigs and leaves and dust flying and dancing back in a rushing stream. So the pilots sat for a minute, their faces intent and earnest, listening to the hum and beat of their engines and note of their propellers' roar, watching the Flight Leader's movements out of the tail of their eyes. He eased his engine down; and promptly every other engine eased. He waved his hand to right and left, and the waiting men jerked the chocks clear of his wheels; and five other hands waved and five other pairs of chocks jerked clear. He moved forward, swung to the right with a man to each wing tip to help swing him, and rolled steadily out into the pen; and five other machines moved forward, swung right, and followed in line astern of him. He wheeled to the left, moved more quickly, opened his engine up, ran forward at gathering speed. Moving slowly his machine had looked like a lumbering big fat beetle; skimming rapidly across the grass, with its nose down and its tail up, it changed to an excited hen racing with outstretched head and spread wings; then—a lift—an upward swoop and rush—and she was ... a swallow, an eagle, a soaring gull—any of these you like as symbols of speed and power and grace, but best symbol of all perhaps, just herself, for what she was—a clean-built, stream-lined, hundred-and-umpty horse, fast, fighting-scout aeroplane.

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The Squadron Commander stood watching the take-off of the Flight with a thrill of pride, and truly it was a sight to gladden the heart of any enthusiast. As the Flight Leader's machine tucked up her tail and raced to pick up speed, the second machine had followed her round her curve, steadied, and began to move forward, gathering way in her very wheel-tracks. As the Leader hoicked up and away, the second machine was picking up her skirts and making her starting rush; and the third machine was steadying round the turn to follow. As the second left the ground, the third began to make her run, and the fourth was round the turn and ready to follow. So they followed, machine by machine, evenly spaced in distance apart, running each other's tracks down, leaping off within yards of the same point, each following the other into the air as if they were tied on lengths of a string. It was a perfect exhibition of Flight Leadership—and following. One turn round the 'drome they made, and the Flight was in perfect formation and sailing off to the east, climbing as it went. The Commander stood and watched them gain their height in one more wide sweeping turn and head due east, then moved towards the huts.

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The hammers were still beating out their cheery clink-link, the birds chirping and twittering; the lark, silenced or driven from the sky by these strange monster invaders, took up his song again and shrilled out to all the world that it was a joy to live—to live—to live—this perfect summer morning.

And the guns replied in sullen rolling thunder.

The last red glow of sunset was fading out of the square of sky seen through the open Squadron-office window. The Major sat in his own place at the centre of the table, and his Colonel, with the dust of motor travel still thick on his cap and coat, sat by the empty fireplace listening and saying nothing. A young lad, with leather coat thrown open and leather helmet pushed back on his head, stood by the table and spoke rapidly and eagerly. He was one of the Patrol that had left at dawn, had made a forced landing, had only just reached the 'drome, and had come straight to the office to report and tell his tale.

"I have the Combat Report, of course," said the Major; "you might read it first—and I've some other details; but I'd like to know anything further you can tell."

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The lad read the Report, a bare dozen lines, of which two and a half told the full tale of a brave man's death—"as he went down out of control he signalled to break off the fight and return, and then for the Deputy to take command. He was seen to crash."

"That's true, sir," said the lad, "but d'you know—d'you see what it—all it meant? We'd been scrappin' half an hour. We were on our last rounds and our last pints of petrol ... against seventeen Huns, and we'd crashed four and put three down out of control ... they were beat, and we knew it, and meant to chase 'em off."

He had been speaking rapidly, almost incoherently, but now he steadied himself and spoke carefully.

"Then he saw their reinforcements comin' up, one lot from north, t'other from south. They'd have

cut us off. We were too busy scrappin' to watch. They had us cold, with us on our last rounds and nearly out of petrol. But *he* saw them. He was shot down then—I dunno whether it was before or after it that he saw them; but he was goin' down right out of control—dead-leafing, then a spin, then leafing again. And he signalled—" The boy gulped, caught and steadied his voice again, and went on quietly. "You know; there's half a dozen coloured lights stuck in the dash-board in front of him—and his Verey pistol in the rack beside him. He picked out the proper coloured light—goin' down helplessly out of control—and took his pistol out of the rack ... and loaded it ... and put it over the side and fired his signal, 'Get back to the 'drome—return home,' whatever it is exactly—we all knew it meant to break off the scrap and clear out, anyway. But he wasn't done yet. He picked another light—the proper coloured light again ... and still knowin' he'd crash in the next few seconds ... and loaded and fired, 'I am out of action. Deputy Flight Leader carry on.' ... Then ... he crashed...."

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The boy gulped again and stopped, and for a space there was dead silence.

"Thank you," said the Squadron Commander at last, very quietly, "I won't ask you for more now."

The boy saluted and turned, but the Major spoke again. "There's a message here I've just had. You might like to read it."

The pilot took it and read a message of congratulations and thanks from Headquarters on the work of the Air Services that day, saying how the Huns had been driven out of the air, how so many of them had been crashed, so many driven down out of control, with slight losses of so many machines to us. "On all the fronts engaged," the message finished, "the Squadrons have done well, and the Corps has had a good day."

"A good day," said the boy bitterly, and spat a gust of oaths. "I—pardon, sir," he said, catching the Major's eye and the Colonel's quick glance. "But—Sonny was my pal; I was his chum, the best chum he had—" He checked himself again, and after a pause, "No, sir," he said humbly, "I beg your pardon. *You* were always that to Sonny." He saluted again, very gravely and exactly, turned, and went.

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The Colonel rose. "It's true, too," said the Major, "I was; and he was the dearest chum to me. I fathered him since he was ten, when our Pater died. I taught him to fly—took him up dual myself, and I remember he was quick as a monkey in learning. I watched his first solo, with my heart in my mouth; and I had ten times the pride he had himself when he put his first wings up. And now ... he's gone."

"He saved his Flight," said the Colonel softly. "You heard. It's him and his like that make the Corps what it is. They show the way, and the others carry on. They go down, but"—he tapped his finger slowly on the message lying on the table, "but ... the Corps 'has had A Good Day.'"

(To the tune of "John Brown's Body.")

Half the Flight may crash to-day and t'other half to-night,
But the Flight does dawn patrol, before to-morrow's light,
And if we live or if we die, the Corps still wins the fight,
And the war goes rolling on.

V

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A ROTTEN FORMATION

The Major lifted his head from the pile of papers he was reading and signing, and listened to the hum of an engine passing over the office and circling down to the 'drome. "One of ours," he said. "Flight coming down, I suppose. They're rather late."

An officer lounging on a blanket-covered truckle bed murmured something in reply and returned to the sixpenny magazine he was devouring. The noise of the engine droned down to the ground level, ceased, stuttered, and rose, sank again, and finally stopped. The C.O. hurried on with his papers, knowing the pilots of the Flight would be in presently to make their reports.

In three minutes the door banged open noisily, and the Flight Leader clumped heavily in. Such of his features as could be seen for a leather helmet coming low on his forehead and close round his cheeks, and a deep collar turned up about his chin, disclosed an expression of bad temper and dissatisfaction.

"Hullo, Blanky," said the Major cheerfully. "Made rather a long job of it, didn't you? Any Huns about?"

Now Blanky had an established and well-deserved reputation for bad language, and although usually a pilot is expected more or less to modify any pronounced features in language in addressing his C.O., there are times when he fails to do so, and times when the C.O. wisely ignores the failure. This apparently was one of the times, and the Major listened without remark to a stream of angry and sulphurous revilings of the luck, the Huns, the fight the Flight had just come through, and finally—or one might say firstly, at intervals throughout, and finally—the Flight itself.

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"Three blessed quarters of a bloomin' hour we were scrappin'," said Blanky savagely, "and I suppose half the blistering machines in the blinking Flight are shot up to everlastin' glory. I know

half the flamin' controls and flyin' wires are blanky well cut on my goldarn bus. And two confounded Huns' brimstone near got me, because the cock-eyed idiot who should have been watching my plurry tail went hare-in' off to heaven and the Hot Place. But no-dash-body watched any-darn-body's tail. Went split-armin' around the ruddy sky like a lot of runaway racin' million-horse-power comets. Flight! Dot, dash, asterisk! Formation! Stars, stripes, and spangles——"

He broke off with a gesture of despair and disgust. None of this harangue was very informing, except it made clear that the Flight had been in a fight, and that Blanky was not pleased with the result or the Flight. The Major questioned gently for further details, but hearing the note of another descending engine Blanky went off at a tangent again. Here one of them came ... about half an hour after him ... wait till he saw them ... he'd tell them all about it ... and so on.

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"Did you down any Huns?" asked the Major, and Blanky told him No, not one single, solitary, stream-line Hun crashed, and couldn't even swear to any out of control. Before the Major could say more, the office door opened to admit a leather-clad pilot grinning cheerfully all over his face. Blanky whirled and burst out on him, calling him this, that, and the other, demanding to know what the, where the, why the, advising him to go'n learn to drive a beastly wheel-barrow, and buy a toy gun with a cork on a string to shoot with. The bewildered pilot strove to make some explanation, to get a word in edgeways, but he hadn't a hope until Blanky paused for breath. "I didn't break formation for more'n a minute——" he began, when Blanky interrupted explosively, "Break formation—no, 'cos there wasn't a frescoed formation left to break. It had gone to gilt-edged glory, and never came back. But I was there, and your purple place was behind me. Why the which did you leave there?"

"Because I'd winged the Hun that was sitting on your tail," said the other indignantly. "I had to go after him to get him."

"Get him," said Blanky contemptuously. "Well, why didn't you?"

"I did," said the pilot complacently. At that Blanky broke loose and cried aloud for the wrath to descend and annihilate any man who could stand there and deliberately murder the truth. "But I *did* get him. I watched him crash right enough," retorted the maligned one. Blanky was still yelling at him, when in came another couple talking eagerly and also with faces wreathed in smiles, and evidently well pleased with the world. "Hullo, Blanky," said the first. "Pretty good show, eh?"

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Blanky wheeled and stared at him as if in dumb amazement. "Blanky doesn't think so," said the Major softly. "He's complaining a good deal that your formation wasn't very good."

"Good, Major," exploded Blanky again. "It was worse than very beastly bad. I never adverb-ed saw such an adjectived rank bad formation. It was a rotten formation. And then Billie tells me—has the crimson cheek to say he crashed a constellation Hun."

"Ask Tom there," said Billie. "Tom, didn't you see me put one down?"

Tom couldn't be sure. He'd been too busy with a Hun himself. He and the Diver had one fellow between them, and both shootin' like stink at him, and were watching after to see if he crashed ——

"Crashed," burst in Blanky. "My sainted sacred aunt. Another fellow walking in his sleep and killing criss-cross Huns in his dithering dreams. Any imagining more of you get a fabulous freak Hun?"

The Diver said mildly, "Yes," he'd got one—not counting the one between him and Tom, which might have been either's. Blanky was beginning again, when the Major stopped him. "This is getting too complicated," he said. "Let's get the lot together—observers and all—and see if we can make anything of this business."

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A babble of voices was heard outside, the door banged open, and in jostled another batch of pilots and observers talking at the pitch of their voices, laughing, shouting questioning, answering, trampling their heavy flying boots noisily on the bare wood floor, turning the little office hut into a regular bear-garden. Their leather coats were unbuttoned and flapping, their long boots hung wrinkled about their knees or were pulled thigh-high, scarves swathed their throats or dangled down their chests, enormous furry gauntleted gloves hid their hands. Some still wore their leather helmets with goggles pushed up over their foreheads; others had taken them off, and looked like some strange pantomime monsters with funnily disproportionate faces and heads emerging from the huge leather collars. For minutes the room was a hopeless bedlam of noise. Everyone talked at once: all, slightly deaf perhaps from the long-endured roar of the engines, and rush of the wind, talked their loudest. They compared notes of flashing incidents seen for a fraction of a second in the fighting, tried to piece together each others' seeings and doings, told what had happened to them and their engines and machines, asked questions, and, without waiting for an answer, asked another, or answered somebody else's.

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The voice of Blanky haranguing some of the last-comers, calling down curses on their misdeeds, rose through any break in the hubbub. The Major sat for some minutes listening to the uproar, catching beginnings and middles and loose ends of sentences here and there from one or another: "Gave him a good half drum." ... "Shot away my left aileron control." ... "Went hare-ing off over Hunland at his hardest." ... "Pulled everything in sight and pushed the others, but couldn't get her straightened." ... "A two-inch tear in my radiator, an' spoutin' steam like an old steam laundry." ... And then the voice of Blanky spitting oaths and "It was the rottenest formation I ever saw, abso-blanky-lutely *rotten*." His sentence was swamped again in the flood of talk and fragments of sentences. "Then it jammed—number three stoppage and" ... "yellin' myself black in

the face, but couldn't make him hear." ... "I hate those filthy explosive bullets of theirs." ... "Chucked her into a spin." ... "Missing every other stroke, fizzing and spitting like a crazy Tom cat." ... "I ask you now, I ask you what could I do?" ... "Down flamin' like a disembowelled volcano."

The Major called, called again, raised his voice and shouted, and gradually the noise died down.

"Now, let's get to business," he said. "I want to know what happened. Blanky, let's hear you first." [Pg 63]

Blanky told his story briefly. The formation of six machines had run into twenty-two Huns—four two-seaters, the rest fighting scouts—and had promptly closed with and engaged them. Blanky here threw in a few brief but pungent criticisms on the Flight's behaviour and "rotten formation" during the fight, mentioned baldly that they had scrapped for about three-quarters of an hour, and although there were certainly fewer Huns in at the finish than had begun, none, so far as he knew, had been crashed. All the Flight had returned, mostly with a good few minor damages to machines, but no casualties to men.

"Now," said the Major, "some of you claim Huns crashed, don't you? Let 'em alone, Blanky, to tell their own yarns."

The first pilot told of running fights, said he had sent at least one down out of control, and saw one crash. His observer corroborated the account; Blanky pooh-poohed it scornfully. He contradicted flatly and hotly another pilot who said he had crashed his Hun, and in the middle of the argument the last pilot came in.

"Here's Dicky. Ask him. He was close up, and saw me get 'im," said the denied victor.

"Dicky," cried Blanky, "I've been waiting for—here, you cock-eyed quirk, what in the Hot Place did you mean by bargin' across the nose of my bus when I'd just got a sanguinary Hun in my ensanguined sights. You blind, blithering no-good..." [Pg 64]

"What's that, Blanky? What d'you say?" remarked Dicky cheerfully. "Wait a bit. My ears...." He gripped his nose and violently "blew through his ears" to remove the deafness that comes to a man who has descended too quickly from a height. "Didn't you see me get that Hun, Dicky?" demanded the Diver. "Why didn't you keep formation? Served you something well otherthing right if I'd shot you, blinding across under my gory prop...."

Dicky gripped his nose and blew again. "Wait a minute—can't hear right...."

The talk was boiling up all round them again, in claims of a kill, counter-claims, corroborations, and denials, and the Major sat back and let it run for a bit. Blanky, the Diver, and Dicky held a three-cornered duel, Blanky strafing wildly, the Diver demanding evidence of his kill and Dicky holding his nose and blowing, and returning utterly misfitting answers to both. He caught a word of Blanky's tirade at last, something about "silly yahoo bashing around," misinterpreted it evidently, and, still holding his nose, grinned cheerfully and nodded. "Did I crash a Hun?" he said. "Sure thing I did. Put 'im down in flames."

The Diver leaned close and yelled in Dicky's ear: "Didn't I crash—one—too?" Dicky blew again. "No, I didn't crash two," he said. "Only one, I saw, though there was another blighter—"

Blanky turned disgustedly to the Major. "They're crazy," he said. "I know I didn't see one single unholy Hun crashed in the whole sinful show." [Pg 65]

"Between them they claim five," said the Major, "and you say none. What about yourself? Didn't you get any?"

"No," said Blanky shortly. "One or two down out of control, but I didn't watch 'em, and they probably straightened out lower down." (Blanky, it may be mentioned, has a record of never having claimed a single Hun crashed, but is credited, nevertheless, with a round dozen from entirely outside evidence.)

The Major spent another noisy three minutes trying to sift the tangled evidence and claims of crashes, then gave it up. "Write your reports," he said, "and we'll have to wait and see if any confirmation comes in of any crashes. You were near enough to the line for crashes to be seen, weren't you?"

"Near enough?" said Blanky. "Too disgustingly near. I suppose anyone that knows a bus from a banana would recognise the make of ours, and I'm rank ashamed to imagine what the whole blinking line must have thought of the Squadron and the paralysed performance."

The bir-r-r of the telephone bell cut sharply through the noisy talk, and the Major shouted for silence. He got it at last, and the room listened to the one-sided conversation that followed. Some of the men continued their talk in whispers, Blanky fumbled out and lit a cigarette, Dicky dropped on the bed beside the man with the book, who, through all the uproar, had kept his eyes glued to the magazine pages. "What you got there?" asked Dicky conversationally. "Any good?" [Pg 66]

"Good enough for me to want to read," snapped the other. "But a man couldn't read in this row if he was stone deaf."

"Well, y'see, they're all a bit bucked with the scrap," said Dicky apologetically.

"Oh, bust the scrap," said the reader. "I'm sick of scraps and Huns. Do dry up and let me read," and he buried himself again in the fiction that to him at least was stranger than the naked truth that rioted about his unheeding ears.

The Major's end of the talk consisted at first of "Yes ... yes ... yes ... oh, yes," and then, more intelligibly, "Yes, pretty good scrap evidently.... No, they're all back, thanks.... Thanks, I'm glad

you think—what?... Are you sure?... Quite sure? Good. There's been rather an argument.... Six? Quite certain?... Thanks very much.... I suppose you'll send a report confirming.... Right. Thanks.... Good-bye."

He put the receiver down on the stand and turned to Blanky with a smile twitching his lips. "Our Archies," he explained, "rang up to tell me they'd watched the whole show—" "Pretty sight, too," growled Blanky. The Major went on: "and to congratulate the Squadron on a first-class fight. And they positively confirm six crashes, Blanky; saw them hit the ground and smash. Some others seen low down out of control, and could hardly recover, but weren't seen actually to crash. So we only get six—and as the others only claim five, you must have got yours after all."

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"Course he got it," struck in Blanky's observer; "only I knew he'd argue me down if I—"

"Oh, shut up," said Blanky. "How could you see? You were looking over the tail, anyway."

"Well, I knew I got mine," said Dicky.

"Me, too" ... "And I was sure—" ... "And I saw mine."

"For the love of Christmas, dry up," stormed Blanky. "If you could only fly as well as you can talk, you might make a half-baked blistering Flight. As it is you're more like a fat-headed flock o' incarnadined crows split-armin' over a furrow in a ploughed field. Of all the dazzling dud formations I ever saw—"

"Never mind, Blanky," said the Major. "You got six confirmed crashes amongst you, so it wasn't too dud a show."

"I don't care," said Blanky, tramping to the door and jerking it open. "I don't care a tuppenny tinker's dash what Huns we got." He swung through, and, turning in the doorway with his hand on the knob, shouted back with all the emphasis of last-word finality: "I tell you it was a ROTTEN formation, anyway."

Behind him the door *slammed* tremendously.

VI QUICK WORK

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It is difficult, if not indeed impossible, to convey in words what is perhaps the most breath-catching wonder of air-fighting work, the furious speed, the whirling rush, the sheer rapidity of movement of the fighting machines, and the incredible quickness of a pilot's brain, hand, and eye to handle and manoeuvre a machine, and aim and shoot a gun under these speed conditions. I can only ask you to try to remember that a modern fast scout is capable of flying at well over a hundred miles an hour on the level, and at double that (one may not be too exact) in certain circumstances, and that in such a fight as I am going to try to describe here the machines were moving at anything between these speeds. If you can bear this in mind, or even realise it—I am speaking to the non-flying reader—you will begin to understand what air men-o'-war work is, to believe what a pilot once said of air fighting: "You don't get time to think. If you stop to think, you're dead."

When the Flight of half a dozen scout machines was getting ready to start on the usual "offensive patrol" over Hunland, one of the pilots, "Ricky-Ticky" by popular name, had some slight trouble with his engine. It was nothing much, a mere reluctance to start up easily, and since he did get her going before the Flight was ready to take off he naturally went up with it. He had a little more trouble in the upward climb to gain a height sufficient for the patrol when it crossed the line to stand the usual respectable chance of successfully dodging the usual Archie shells. Ricky, however, managed to nurse her up well enough to keep his place in the formation, and was still in place when they started across the lines. Before they were far over Hunland he knew that his engine was missing again occasionally and was not pulling as she ought to, and from a glance at his indicators and a figuring of speed, height, and engine revolutions was fairly certain that he was going almost full out to keep up with the other machines, which were flying easily and well within their speed.

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This was where he would perhaps have been wise to have thrown up and returned to his 'drome. He hung on in the hope that the engine would pick up again—as engines have an unaccountable way of doing—and even when he found himself dropping back out of place in the formation he still stuck to it and followed on. He knew the risk of this, knew that the straggler, the lame duck, the unsupported machine, is just exactly what the Hun flyer is always on the look out for; knew, too, that his Flight Commander before they had started had warned him (seeing the trouble he was having to start up) that if he had any bother in the air or could not keep place in the formation to pull out and return. Altogether, then, the trouble that swooped down on him was his own fault, and you can blame him for it if you like. But if you do you'll have to blame a good many other pilots who carry on, and, in spite of the risk, do their best to put through the job they are on. He finally decided—he looked at the clock fixed in front of him to set a time and found it showed just over one minute to twelve—in one minute at noon exactly, if his engine had not steadied down to work, he would turn back for home.

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At that precise moment—and this was the first warning he had that there were Huns about—he heard a ferocious rattle of machine-gun fire, and got a glimpse of streaking flame and smoke

from the tracer bullets whipping past him. The Huns, three of them and all fast fighting scouts, had seen him coming, had probably watched him drop back out of place in the Flight, had kept carefully between him and the sun so that his glances round and back had failed to spot them in the glare, and had then dived headlong on him, firing as they came. They were coming down on him from astern and on his right side, or, as the Navals would put it, on his starboard quarter, and they were perhaps a hundred to a hundred and fifty yards off when Ricky first looked round and saw them.

His first and most natural impulse was to get clear of the bullets that were spitting round and over him, and in two swift motions he had opened his engine full out and thrust his nose a little down and was off full pelt. Promptly the three astern swung a little, opened out as they wheeled, dropped their noses, and came after Ricky, still a little above him, and so fairly astern that only the centre one could keep a sustained accurate fire on him. (A scout's gun being fixed and shooting between the blades of the propeller—gun and engine being synchronised so as to allow the bullet to pass out as the blade is clear of the muzzle—means that the machine itself must be aimed at the target for the bullets to hit, and the two outer machines of the three could only so aim their machines by pointing their noses to converge on the centre one—a risky manoeuvre with machines travelling at somewhere about a hundred miles an hour.)

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But the fire of that centre one was too horribly close for endurance, and Ricky knew that although his being end-on made him the smaller target, it also made his machine the more vulnerable to a raking shot which, piercing him fore and aft, could not well fail to hit petrol tank, or engine, or some other vital spot. He could do nothing in the way of shooting back, because, being a single-seater scout himself, his two guns were trained one to shoot straight forward through the propeller, the other, mounted on the top plane on a curved mount which allowed the gun to be grasped by the handle above his head and pulled back and down, to shoot from direct ahead to straight up. Neither could shoot backward.

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Ricky, the first shock of his surprise over, had gauged the situation, and this, it must be admitted, was dangerous, if not desperate. He had dropped back and back from the Flight, until now they were something like a mile ahead of him. A mile, it is true, does not take a modern machine long to cover, but then, on the other hand, neither does an air battle take long to fight, especially with odds of three to one. With those bullets sheeting past him and already beginning to rip and crack through his wings, any second might see the end of Ricky. It was no use thinking longer of running away, and even a straight-down nose-dive offered no chance of escape, both because the Huns could nose-dive after him and continue to keep him under fire, and because he was well over Hunland, and the nearer he went to the ground the better target he would make for the anti-aircraft gunners below. He must act, and act quickly.

A thousand feet down and a quarter of a mile away was a little patch of cloud. Ricky swerved, dipped, and drove "all out" for it. He was into it—400 yards remember—in about the time it takes you to draw three level quiet breaths, and had flashed through it—five or six hundred feet across it might have been—in a couple of quick heart-beats. The Huns followed close, and in that half-dozen seconds Ricky had something between fifty and a hundred bullets whizzing and ripping past and through his wings. As he leaped clear of the streaming wisps of the cloud's edge he threw one look behind him and pulled the joy-stick hard in to his stomach. Instantly his machine reared and swooped up in the loop he had decided on, up and over and round. At the first upward zoom Ricky had pulled down the handle of his top gun and brought it into instant action. The result was that as he shot up and over in a perfect loop the centre machine, which had been astern of him, flashed under and straight through the stream of his bullets.

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Ricky whirled down in the curve of his loop with his gun still shooting, but, now he had finished his loop and flattened out, shooting up into the empty air while his enemy hurtled straight on and slightly downward ahead of him. Instantly Ricky threw his top gun out of action, and, having now reversed positions, and having his enemy ahead, steadied his machine to bring his bow gun sights to bear on her. But before he could fire he saw the hostile's right upper plane twist upward, saw the machine spin side on, the top plane rip and flare fiercely back and upward, the lower plane buckle and break, and the machine, turning over and over, plunge down and out of his sight. One of his bullets evidently had cut some bracing wires or stays, and the wing had given to the strain upon it.

So much Ricky just had time to think, but immediately found himself in a fresh danger. The two remaining hostiles had flashed past him at the same time as the centre one, while he threw his loop over it, but, realising apparently on the instant what his manoeuvre was, they both swung out and round while he passed in his loop over the centre machine. It was smart work on the part of the two flanking hostiles. They must have instantly divined Ricky's dodge to get astern of them all, and their immediate circle out and round counteracted it, and as he came out of his loop brought them circling in again on him. For an instant Ricky was so concentrated on the centre machine that he forgot the two others; but, the centre one down and out, he was suddenly roused to the fresh danger by two following short bursts of fire which flashed and flamed athwart him, and caught a glimpse of the other two closing in again astern of him and "sitting on his tail."

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Both were firing as they came, and again Ricky felt the sharp rip and crack of explosive bullets striking somewhere on his machine, and an instant later knew the two were following him and hailing lead upon him. He cursed savagely. He had downed one enemy, but here apparently he was little if any better off with two intact enemies in the worst possible position for him, "on his tail," and both shooting their hardest.

A quick glance ahead showed him the white glint of light on the wheeling wings of his Flight,

attracted by the sight of his battle, circling and racing to join the fight. But, fast and all as they came, the fight was likely to be over before they could arrive, and with the crack and snap of bullets about him and his own two guns powerless to bear on the enemy, it looked uncomfortably like odds on the fight ending against him. Another loop they would expect and follow over—and the bullets were crippling him every instant.

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Savagely he threw his controls over, and his machine slashed out and down to the right in a slicing two-hundred-foot side-slip. The right-hand machine whirled past him so close that he saw every detail of the pilot's dress—the fur-fringed helmet, dark goggles, black sweater. He caught his machine out of her downward slide, drove her ahead, steadied her, and brought his sights to bear on the enemy a scant twenty yards ahead, and poured a long burst of fire into her. He saw the streaking flashes of his bullets pouring about and over her top planes, dipped his muzzle a shade, and saw the bullets break and play on and about the pilot and fuselage. Then came a leaping flame and a spurt of black smoke whirling out from her; Ricky had a momentary glimpse of the pilot's agonised expression as he lifted and glanced wildly round, and next instant had only in his sight a trailing black plume of smoke and the gleam of a white underbody as the enemy nose-dived down in a last desperate attempt to make a landing before his machine dissolved in flames about him.

With a sudden burst of exultation Ricky realised his changed position. A minute before he was in the last and utmost desperate straits, three fast and well-armed adversaries against his single hand. Now, with two down, it was man to man—no, if he wished, it was all over, because the third hostile had swung left, had her nose down, and was "hare-ing" for home and down towards the covering fire of the German anti-aircraft batteries. Already she was two to three hundred yards away, and the first German Archie soared up and burst with a rending "Ar-r-rgh" well astern of him.

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But Ricky's blood was up and singing songs of triumph in his ears. Two out of three downed; better make a clean job of it and bag the lot. His nose dipped and his tail flicked up, and he went roaring down, full out, after his last Hun. A rapid crackle of one machine-gun after another struck his ear before ever he had the last hostile fully centred in his sights. Ricky knew that at last the Flight had arrived and were joining in the fight. But he paid no heed to them; his enemy was in the ring of his sight now, so with his machine hurling down at the limit of speed of a falling body plus all the pull of a hundred and odd horse-power, the whole fabric quivering and vibrating under him, the wind roaring past and in his ears, Ricky snuggled closer in his seat, waited till his target was fully and exactly centred in his sights, and poured in a long, clattering burst of fire. The hostile's slanting nose-dive swerved into a spin, an uncontrolled side-to-side plunge, back again into a spinning dive that ended in a straight-downward rush and a crash end-on into the ground.

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Whether it was Ricky or some other machine of the Flight that got this last hostile will never be known. Ricky himself officially reported having crashed two, but declined to claim the third as his. On the other hand, the rest of the Flight, after and always, with enthusiastic unanimity, insisted that she was Ricky's very own, that he had outplayed, outfought, and killed three Huns in single combat with them—one down and t'other come on. If Ricky himself could not fairly and honestly claim all rights to the last Hun, the Flight did for him.

"*Three!*" they said vociferously in mess that night, and would brook no modest doubts from him. And to silence all doubts the Squadron poet composed a song which was sung by the mess with a fervour and a generous slurring over of faulty metre (a word the poet didn't even know the meaning of) that might have stirred the blood of a conscientious objector. It was entitled, "Three Huns Sat on his Tail," and was sung to the tune of "There were Three Crows Sat on a Tree," or, as the uninitiated may prefer, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," and it detailed the destruction of the Huns one by one, verse by verse.

When I tell you it was sung chanty fashion, with the first, second, and last lines chorused by the mess, I can leave you to imagine the loud-pedal, full, fortissimo effect of the "Hurrahs," and (helped out with feet, with fists, spoons, and anything else handy to resound upon the table) of the final rolling "Cr-r-r-ash."

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There were three Huns sat on his tail,
Hurrah, hurrah!
But he looped over one and gave him "Hail
Colum-bi-a!"
He shot up the Hun so full of lead
That before he knew he was hit he was dead,
And our Archie look-out reporting said:
One!—CR-R-R-ASH!

But all this was later, and is going a little ahead of the story. As the last Hun went reeling down, Ricky, in the official language of the combat reports, "rejoined formation and continued the patrol." He pulled the stick towards him and rose buoyantly, knowing that he was holed over and over again, that bullets, and explosive bullets at that, had ripped and rent and torn the fabrics of his machine, possibly had cut away some strut or stay or part of the frame. But his engine appeared to be all right again, had never misbehaved a moment during the fight, was running now full power and blast; his planes swept smooth and steady along the wind levels, his controls answered exactly to his tender questioning touch. He had won out. He was safe, barring accident, to land back in his own 'drome; and there were two if not three Huns down on his

brazen own within the last—how long?

At the moment of his upward zoom on the conclusion of the fight he glanced at his clock, could hardly believe what it told him, was only convinced when he recalled that promise to himself to turn back at the end of that minute, and had his belief confirmed by the Flight's count of the time between their first turning back and their covering the distance to join him. His clock marked exactly noon. The whole fight, from the firing of the first shot to the falling away of the last Hun, had taken bare seconds over the one minute.

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That pilot was right; in air fighting "you don't get time to think."

Quick is the word and quick is the deed
If you would live in the air-fight game;
Speed, give 'em speed, and a-top of it—speed!
(Man or machine exactly the same).
Think and stunt, move, shoot, quickly; or die,
Fight quick or die quick; when all is said,
There are two kinds of fighters who fly,
Only two kinds—the quick, and the dead.

VII THE AIR MASTERS

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It is hardly known to the general public—which seems a pity—that the Navy has, working on the Western Front, some Air Squadrons who fly only over the land and have not so much as seen the sea, except by chance or from a long distance, from year's end to year's end. They have carried into their shore-going lives a number of Navy ways, like the curt "Thank God" grace at the end of a meal, or the mustering of all hands for "Divisions" (Navalese for "Parade") in the morning, marking off the time by so many "bells," hoisting and lowering at sunrise and sunset the white ensign flown on a flagstaff on the 'drome; they stick to their Navy ratings of petty officers and sub-lieutenants and so on, and interlard their speech more or less with Navy lingo—a very useful and expressive one, by the way, in describing air manœuvres—but otherwise carry out their patrols and air work with, and on about the same lines as, the R.F.C.

Naval Number Something is a "fighting scout" Squadron, which means that its sole occupation in life is to hunt for trouble, to find and fight, "sink, burn or destroy" Huns. At first thought it may seem to the Army which fights "on the floor" that this job of a fighting machine is one which need interest no one outside the Air Service, that it is airman fighting against airman, and that, except from a point of mere sporting interest, the results of these fights don't concern or affect the rest of the Army, that the war would roll on just the same for them whichever side had the upper hand in the air fighting. Those who think so are very far wrong, because it is on the fighters pure and simple that the air mastery depends. Air work is a business, a highly complicated, completely organised and efficient business, and one bit of it has to dovetail into another just as the Army's does. The machines which spot for our guns, and direct the shooting of our batteries to destroy enemy batteries which would otherwise destroy our trenches and our men in them; the reconnaissance machines which fly up and down Hunland all day and bring back reports of the movements of troops and trains and the concentration or removal of forces, and generally do work of which full and true value is known only to those Heads running the war; the photographing machines which bring back thousands of pictures of all sorts—the line knows a few, a very few, of these, and their officers study very attentively the trench photos before they go over the top in a raid or an attack, and so learn exactly how, why, and where they are to go; the bombing machines which blow up dumps of ammunition destined for the destruction of trenches and men, derail trains bringing up reinforcements or ammunition to the Hun firing line, knock about the 'dromes and the machines which otherwise would be gun-spotting, reconnoitring, and bombing over our lines—and perhaps some day one may tell just how many Gotha raids have been upset, and cancelled by our bomb-raids on a Hun 'drome—all these various working machines depend entirely for their existence and freedom to do their work on the success of the fighting machines. The working machines carry guns, and fight when they have to, but the single-seater fighting machines are out for fight all the time, out to destroy enemy fighters, or to put out of action any enemy working machine they can come across.

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The struggle for the air mastery never ceases, and although it may never be absolute and complete, because the air is a big place to sweep quite clear and clean, the fact that scores of our machines spend all their flying hours anywhere over Hunland from the front lines to fifty miles and more behind them for every one Hun who flies over ours and, after a cruise of some minutes, races back again, is fairly good evidence of who holds the whip hand in the air.

All this introduction is necessary to explain properly the importance of the fighting squadrons' job, and why the winning of their fights is of such concern to every man in the Army, and to every man, woman, and child interested in any man in the Army. It also serves to explain why it was that three machines of Naval Number Something "leapt into the air" in a most tremendous hurry-

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skurry, the pilots finishing the buckling of their coats (one going without a coat indeed) and putting on goggles after they had risen, when the look-out at the Squadron telescope reported that there were four Hun two-seater machines circling round at about 10,000 or 12,000 feet and just far enough over our front lines to look suspiciously like being on a gun-spotting or "Art.-Ob." bit of business.

That such a performance should be taking place almost within sight of their own 'drome doorstep naturally annoyed the Navals, and led to the immediate and hurried steps which took the three machines and pilots who were first ready into the air in "two shakes of the jib-sheet." The three men were all veteran fighters, and their machines three of the Squadron's best, and if the four Huns had known their reputations and calibre it is doubtful if they would have dared to hang about and carry on with their work as they did. There was "Mel" Byrne, a big man with a D.S.C. and a Croix de Guerre ribbon on his breast, and a score of crashed Huns notched to his credit, flying his "Kangaroo"; "Rip" Winkle, who had once met and attacked, single-handed, seven Huns, shot down and crashed three hand-running and chased the others headlong as far over Hunland as his petrol would take him: he was in his "Minnenwerfer"; and the "next astern" was the "Un-settler" flown by "Ten-franc" or "Frankie" Jones, a youngster of—well, officially, twenty, so called, not because he was in his baptism named Frank, but because of a bet he had made with another Naval Squadron as to which Squadron would "crash" the most Huns by a stated date. He was desperately keen to win his often-referred-to wager—so much so in fact that the other pilots chaffed him constantly on it and swore he would risk more to win his bet than he would to win a V.C.

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The three wasted no time in the usual circling climb over the 'drome, but drove up full tilt and straight for the four dots in the sky. They climbed as they went, and since the Trichord type is rather famous for its climbing powers they made pretty good height as they went. "Mel," in the lead, was in a desperate hurry to interrupt the enemy's artillery-spotting work, so gave away the advantage of height and sacrificed the greater climb they could attain with a lesser speed to the urgent haste and need of getting in touch with the enemy. They were still a good couple of thousand feet below when they came to within half a mile of the Huns, and the "Kangaroo," with the others following close, tilted steeply up and began to show what a Trichord really could do if it were asked of her. They were gaining height so rapidly that the Huns evidently did not like it, and two of them turned out and drove over to a position above the Trichords. The three paid no attention to them, but climbed steeply, swinging in towards the other two machines which, since they still continued their circling, were probably continuing their "shoot" and signalling back to their guns. But the Trichords were too threatening to be left longer alone. The two turned and flew east, with the Trichords in hot pursuit, slanted round, and presently were joined by their friends. Then the four plunged on the three in an almost vertical dive. Because the fighting scout only shoots straight forward out of a fixed gun, its bows must be pointing straight at a target before it can fire, and the Huns' straight-down dive was meant to catch the Trichords at a disadvantage, since it was hardly to be expected they could stand on their tails to shoot straight up in the air. But this is almost what they did. All three, going "full out," turned their noses abruptly up and opened fire. The Huns turned their dive off into an upward "zoom" and a circling bank which allowed their observers to point their guns over and down at the Trichords, and fire a number of rounds.

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But because it was now perfectly obvious that the Trichords had attained their first and most urgent object, the breaking-off of the Huns' "shoot" and spotting for their guns, they could now proceed to the next desirable part of the programme—the destruction of the four Huns by methods which would level up the fighting chances a little. The "Kangaroo" shot out eastward and began to climb steeply, Mel expecting that the other two would follow his tactics, get between the enemy and their lines, and climb to or above their height. But the "Un-settler" was in trouble of some sort, and after firing a coloured light as a signal to the leader meaning "Out of action; am returning home," slid off west in a long glide with her engine shut off. Rip Winkle, on the "Minnenwerfer," followed the "Kangaroo" east a few hundred yards and began to climb. The four Huns at first tried to keep above the level of the two, but it was quickly evident that the Trichords were outclimbing them hand over fist, were going up in a most amazing lift, in "a spiral about as steep as a Tube stair." The Huns didn't like the look of things and suddenly turned for their lines, dropped their noses, and went off at full speed. The two Trichords cut slanting across to connect with them, and in half a minute were close enough to open fire. Two against four, they fought a fierce running fight for a minute or two. Then the "Kangaroo" swept in astern of a Hun, dived and zoomed up under him and poured in a point-blank burst of fire. Mel saw his bullets hailing into and splintering the woodwork of the underbody, was just in time to throttle down and check the "Kangaroo" as the Hun's tail flicked up and he went sweeping down in a spinning nose dive. But a hard-pressed pilot will sometimes adopt that manœuvre deliberately to throw a pursuer out of position, and, knowing this, Mel followed him down to make sure he was finished, followed him watching the spin grow wilder and wilder, and finish in a splintering crash on the ground. Mel lifted the "Kangaroo" and drove off full pelt after the others. Two of the Huns had dived and were skimming the ground—they were well over Hunland by now—and the other one and the "Minnenwerfer" were wheeling and circling and darting in and out about each other exactly like two boxers sparring for an opening, their machine-guns rattling rapidly as either pilot or gunner got his sights on the target. Then when he was almost close enough to join in, Mel saw a spurt of flame and a gust of smoke lick out from the fuselage of the Hun. The machine lurched, recovered, and dipped over to dive down; the "Minnenwerfer" leaped in to give her the death-blow, and under the fresh hail of bullets the Hun plunged steeply, with smoke and flame pouring up from the machine's body. The wind drove the flames aft, and in two seconds she was

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enveloped in them, became a roaring bonfire, a live torch hurtling to the ground. The Trichords saw her observer scramble from his cockpit, balance an instant on the flaming body, throw his hands up and leap out into the empty air, and go twisting and whirling down to earth.

A Hun Archie shell screamed up past the hovering Trichords and burst over their heads, and others followed in quick succession as the two turned and began to climb in twisting and erratic curves designed to upset the gunners' aim. They worked east as they rose and were almost over the lines when Mel, in one of his circlings, caught sight of a big formation flying towards them from the west. He steadied his machine and took another long look, and in a moment saw they were Huns, counted them and found fourteen, most of them scouts, some of them two-seaters of a type that Mel knew as one commonly used by the Huns on the infrequent occasions they get a chance to do artillery-observing work on our lines. Both Mel and Rip worked out the situation on much the same lines, that the Huns had some important "shoot" on, were specially keen to do some observing for their guns, had sent the four two-seaters first and were following them up with other two-seater observing-machines protected by a strong escort of fighters. Mel looked round for any sight of a formation of ours that might be ready to interrupt the game, saw none, and selecting the correct coloured light, fired a signal to Rip saying, "I am going to attack." Rip, as a matter of fact, was so certain he would do so that he had already commenced to climb his machine to gain a favourable position. The fourteen were at some 17,000 feet, several thousand above the Trichords, but here the great climbing power of the Trichords stood to them, and they went up and up, in swift turn on turn that brought them almost to a level with the enemy before the Huns were within shooting distance. They came on with the scouts flying in a wedge-shaped formation, and the observing-machines protected and covered inside the wedge.

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The odds were so hugely in their favour that it was clear they never dreamed the two would attack their fourteen, and they drove straight forward to cross above the lines. But the Trichords wakened them quickly and rudely. Each wheeled out wide and clear of the formation, closed in astern of it to either side, lifted sharply to pick up an extra bit of useful height, dived, and came hurtling, engines going full out and guns shooting their hardest, arrow-straight at the two-seaters in the centre of the formation below them. Owing to the direction of their attack, only the observers' guns on the two-seaters had any chance to bring an effective fire to bear. It is true that the few scouts in the rear of the wedge did fire a few scattering shots. But scouts, you will remember, having only fixed guns shooting forward, can only fire dead ahead in the direction the machine is travelling, must aim the machine to hit with the gun. This means that the target presented to them of the Trichords flashing down across their bows made it almost impossible for them to keep a Trichord in their sights for more than an instant, if indeed they were quick enough to get an aim at all. Their fire went wide and harmless. The two-seaters did better, and both Trichords had jets of flaming and smoking tracer bullets spitting past them as they came, had several hits through their wings. But they, because they held their machines steady and plunged down straight as bullets themselves on to their marks, were able to keep longer, steadier and better aim. Mel, as he drove down close to his target, saw the gaping rents his bullets were slashing in the fuselage near the observer, saw in the flashing instant as he turned and hoicked up and away, the observer collapse and fall forward with his hands hanging over the edge of his cockpit. Rip saw no visible signs of his bullets, but saw the visible result a moment after he also had swirled up, made a long fast climbing turn, and steadied his machine for another dive. His Hun dropped out of the formation and down in long twisting curves, apparently out of control. He had no time to watch her down, because half a dozen of the Hun scouts, deciding evidently that this couple of enemies deserved serious consideration, swung out and began to climb after the Trichords. Mel promptly dived down past them, under the two-seaters and up again under one. The instant he had her in the gun-sights he let drive and saw his bullets breaking and tearing into her. She side-slipped wildly, rolled over, and Mel watched for no more, but turned his attention and his gun to another target.

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By now the half-dozen Hun scouts had obtained height enough to allow them to copy the Trichords' dive-and-shoot tactics, and down they came to the long clattering fire of their machine-guns. Both Trichords had a score of rents in wings and fuselage and tail planes, but by a mercy no shot touched a vital part. But they could hardly afford to risk such chances often, so went back to their plan of outclimbing and diving on their enemies. Over and over again they did this, and because of their far superior climb were able to keep on doing it despite every effort of the Huns. Machine after machine they sent driving down, some being uncertain "crashes" or "out-of-controls," but most of them being at least definitely "driven down" since they did not rejoin the fight, and were forced to drop to such landing-places as they could find. There were some definite "crashes," one which fell wrapped in roaring flame from stem to stern; another on which Rip saw his bullets slashing in long tears across the starboard wing, the splinters fly from a couple of the wing struts as the bullets sheared them through in splitting ragged fragments. In an instant the whole upper wing flared upward and back and tore off, the lower folded back to the body, flapped and wrenched fiercely as the machine rolled over and fell, gave and ripped loose; the port wings followed, breaking short off and away, leaving the machine to drop like a plummet to the ground. The third certain crash was in the later stages of the fight. The constant dive-and-zoom of the Trichords had the desired effect of driving the Huns lower and lower each time in their endeavour to gain speed and avoid the fierce rushes from above. Strive as they would, they could not gain an upper position. Some of them tried to fly wide and climb while the Trichords were busy with the remainder; but one or other of the two leaped out after them, hoicked up above them, drove them lower, or shot them down, in repeated dives.

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The fight that had started a good 17,000 feet up and close over the trenches, finished at about 1,000 feet and six to seven miles behind the German lines. At that height, the pilot of one Hun

driven into a side-slip was not able to recover in time and smashed at full speed into the ground; another was forced so low that he tried to land, hit a hedge and turned over; a third landed twisting sideways and at least tore a wing away.

Then the two Trichords, splintered and rent and gaping with explosive-bullet wounds, with their ammunition completely expended, their oil and petrol tanks running dry, turned for home, leaving their fourteen enemies scattered wide and low in the air, or piled in splintered smoking wreckage along the ground below the line of their flight. The fight with the fourteen had run without a break for three-quarters of an hour.

They never knew exactly how many victims they had "sunk, burned or destroyed." As they stated apologetically in the official "Combat Report" that night: "Owing to the close presence of other active E.A.^[4] driven-down machines could not be watched to the ground."

"Frankie" was almost more annoyed over this than he was over having had to pull out of the action with a dud machine. "If we could have confirmed all your crashes," he remarked regretfully, "it would have been such a jolly boost-up to the Squadron's tally—to say nothing of my wager."

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FOOTNOTES:

[4] E.A.=enemy aircraft.

VIII

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"THE ATTACK WAS BROKEN"

The infantry who watched from their trenches one afternoon a Flight of our machines droning over high above their heads had no inkling of the effect that Flight was going to have on their, the infantry's, well-being. If they had known that the work of this Flight, the successful carrying out of its mission, was going to make all the difference of life and death to them they might have been more interested in it. But they did not know then, and do not know now, and what is perhaps more surprising, the Flight itself never fully learned the result of their patrol, because air work, so divided up and apparently disconnected, is really a systematic whole, and only those whose work it is to collect the threads and twist them together know properly how much one means to the other.

This Flight was out on a photographic patrol. They had been ordered to proceed to a certain spot over Hunland and take a series of pictures there, and they did so and returned in due course with nothing more unusual about the performance than rather a high average of attentions paid to them by the Hun Archies. The photos were developed and printed as usual within a few minutes of the machines touching the ground, and were rushed off to their normal destinations. The photographers went to their afternoon tea and forgot the matter.

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But in a Nissen hut some miles from the photographers' 'drome afternoon tea was held up, while several people pored over the photos with magnifying glasses, consulted the many maps which hung round the walls and covered the tables, spoke earnestly into telephones, and dictated urgent notes. One result of all this activity was that Captain Washburn, or "Washie," and his Observer Lieutenant "Pip" Smith, to their no slight annoyance, were dragged from their tea and pushed off on an urgent reconnaissance, and two Flights of two fighting scout Squadrons received orders to make their patrol half an hour before the time ordered. Washie and his Observer were both rather specialists in reconnaissance work, and they received sufficient of a hint from their Squadron Commander of the urgency of their job to wipe out their regrets of a lost tea and set them bustling aboard their 'bus "Pan" and up into the air.

It may be mentioned briefly here that three other machines went out on the same reconnaissance. One was shot down before she was well over the lines; another struggled home with serious engine trouble; the third was so harried and harassed by enemy scouts that she was lucky to be able to fight them off and get home, with many bullet holes—and no information. Washie and Pip did better, although they too had a lively trip. To make sure of their information they had to fly rather low, and as soon as they began to near the ground which they wanted to examine the Hun Archies became most unpleasantly active. A shell fragment came up through the fuselage with an ugly *rip*, and another smacked bursting through both right planes. Later, in a swift dive down to about a thousand feet, "Pan" collected another assortment of souvenirs from machine-guns and rifles, but Washie climbed her steeply out of range, while Pip busied himself jotting down some notes of the exceedingly useful information the low dive had brought them.

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Then six Hun fighting scouts arrived at speed, and set about the "Pan" in an earnest endeavour to crash her and her information together. Pilot and Observer had a moment's doubt whether to fight or run. They had already seen enough to make it urgent that they should get their information back, and yet they were both sure there was more to see and that they ought to see it. Their doubts were settled by the Huns diving on them one after another, with machine-guns going their hardest. The first went down past them spattering a few bullets through "Pan's" tail planes as he passed. The second Pip caught fairly with a short burst as he came past, and the Hun continued his dive, fell off in a spin, and ended in a violent crash below. The third and fourth

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dived on "Pan" from the right side and the fifth and sixth on her left. Pip managed to wing one on the right, and sent him fluttering down out of the fight more or less under control, and Washie stalled the "Pan" violently, wrenched her round in an Immelman turn, and plunged straight at another Hun, pumping a stream of bullets into him from his bow gun. The Hun went down with a torrent of black smoke gushing from his fuselage. Washie brought "Pan" hard round on her heel again, opened his engine full out and ran for it, with the scattered Huns circling and following in hard pursuit. Now "Pan" could travel to some tune when she was really asked—and Washie was asking her now. She was a good machine with a good engine; her pilot knew every stitch and stay, every rod, bolt, and bearing in her (and his rigger and fitter knew that he knew and treated him and her accordingly), every little whim in her that it paid him to humour, every little trick that would get an extra inch of speed out of her. A first-class pilot on a first-class scout ought to overhaul a first-class pilot and two-seater; but either the "Pan" or her pilot was a shade more first-class than the pursuers, and Washie managed to keep far enough ahead to be out of accurate shooting range and allow Pip to scrutinise the ground carefully as they flew. For Washie was running it is true, but was running east and further out over Hunland and the area he wanted to reconnoitre, and Pip was still picking up the very information they had been sent to find.

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When they swung north the three pursuing scouts by cutting the corner came up on them again, and Pip left his notes to stand by his gun. There was some brisk shooting in the next minute, but "Pan" broke clear with another series of holes spattered through her planes and fuselage, and Pip with the calf of his leg badly holed by an explosive bullet, but with his gun still rapping out short bursts over the tail. They were heading for home now, and Washie signalled Pip to speak to him. The "Pan" is one of those comfortably designed machines with pilot's and observer's cockpits so close together that the two men can shout in each other's ear. Pip leaned over and Washie yelled at him. "Seen enough? Got all you want?" "Yes." Pip nodded and tapped his note-block. "All I want," he yelled, "and then some——" and he wiped his hand across his wound, showed Washie the red blood, and shouted "Leg hit."

That settled it. Washie lifted the "Pan" and drove her, all out, for home, taking the risk of some bullet-holed portion of her frame failing to stand the strain of excessive speed rather than the risk of going easy and letting the pursuers close for another fight with a wounded observer to protect his tail.

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"They've dropped off," shouted Pip a few minutes later. Washie swung and began to lift the "Pan" in climbing turn on turn. "Look out," he shouted back, "look out," and stabbed a finger out to point a group of Huns ahead of them and cutting them off from the lines. Next minute Pip in his turn pointed to another group coming up from the south well above them and heading to cut them off. Washie swept round, dipped his nose slightly, and drove at the first group. The next few minutes were unpleasantly hot. The Huns strove to turn them, to hold them from breaking through or past, or drive them lower and lower, while Washie twisted and dived and zoomed and tried to dodge through or under them, with his gun spitting short bursts every time he caught a target in his sights; and Pip, weakening and faint from pain and loss of blood, seconded him as best he could with rather erratic shooting.

Affairs were looking bad for them, even when "Pan" ran out and west with no enemy ahead but with four of them clinging to her flanks and tail and pumping quick bursts at her; but just here came in those two Flights of our fighting scout Squadrons—quite accidentally so far as they knew, actually of set design and as part of the ordered scheme. Six streaking shapes came flashing down into the fight with their machine-guns pouring long bursts of fire ahead of them, and the four close-pursuing Huns left the "Pan" and turned to join up with their scattered companions. Washie left them to fight it out, and turned directly, and very thankfully, for his 'drome.

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This ends the tale of "Pan," but not by any means of the result of her work. That work, in the shape of jerky but significant reports, was being dissected in the map-hung Nissen hut even before Pip had reached the Casualty Clearing Station; and "Pan's" work (confirming those suspicious photographs) again bred other work, more urgent telephone talks, and Immediate orders. The stir spread, circle by circle, during the night, and before daybreak the orders had borne their fruit, and Flights—Artillery-Observing, reconnoitring and fighting-scout—were lined up on their grounds waiting the moment to go; the Night Bombers were circling in from their second and third trips of destruction on lines of communication, railways and roads, junctions and bridges, enemy troops and transport in rest or on the march, ammunition dumps and stores; in the front lines the infantry were "standing to" with everything ready and prepared to meet an attack; the support lines were filling with reinforcements, which again were being strengthened by battalions tramping up the roads from the rear; in the gun lines the lean hungry muzzles of the long-range guns were poking and peering up and out from pit and emplacement, and the squat howitzers were lifting or lowering to carefully worked out angles.

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Before daybreak was more than a mere doubtful smudge of lighter colour in the east, the waiting Flights were up and away to their appointed beats, and the first guns began to drop their shells, shooting "by the map" (maps made or corrected from air photographs), or on previously "registered" lines.

The infantry up in front heard the machines hum and drone overhead, heard the rush and howl of the passing shells, the thud of the guns' reports, the thump of the high-explosive's burst. That, for a time, was all. For a good half-hour there was nothing more, no sign of the heavy attack they had been warned was coming. Then the gunfire began to grow heavier, and as the light strengthened, little dots could be seen circling and wheeling against the sky and now and again a

faint and far-off *tat-tat-tat-tat* came from the upper air. For if it was quiet and inactive on the ground, it was very much the other way in the air. Our reconnoitring and gun-spotting machines were quartering the ground in search of targets, the scout machines sweeping to and fro above them ready to drop on any hostiles which tried to interrupt them in their work. The hostiles tried quickly enough. They were out in strength, and they did their best to drive off or sink our machines, prevent them spying out the land, or directing our guns on the massing battalions. But they were given little chance to interrupt. Let any of their formations dive on our gun-spotters, and before they had well come into action down plunged our scouts after them, engaged them fiercely, drove them off, or drew them away in desperate defensive fighting. Gradually the light grew until the reconnoitring machines could see and mark the points of concentration, the masses moving into position, the filled and filling trenches; until the gun-spotters could mark down the same targets and the observers place their positions on the map. Then their wireless began to whisper back their messages from the air to the little huts and shanties back at Headquarters and the battery positions; and then....

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It was the turn of the guns to speak. Up in the trenches the infantry heard the separate thuds and thumps quicken and close and run into one long tremendous roar, heard the shells whistle and shriek and howl and moan over their heads, saw the ground far out in front of them veil in twisting smoke wreaths, spout and leap in volcanoes of smoke, earth, and fire. Battery by battery, gun by gun, the artillery picked up and swelled the chorus. The enemy machines did little gun-spotting over our positions. If one or two sneaked over high above the line, it needed no more than the first few puffs about them from our watching Archies to bring some of our scouts plunging on them, turning them and driving after them in headlong pursuit. On the ground men knew little or nothing of all this, of the moves and counter-moves, the dodging and fighting high over their heads. Their attention was taken up by the ferocious fire of our artillery, and in waiting, waiting, for the attack which never came.

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Small wonder it never came. The guns caught it fairly, as it was developing and shaping and settling into position for the assault. The attack was a little late, as we heard after from prisoners—perhaps the Night Bombers, and their upsetting of road and rail transport timetables with high-explosive bombs and showering machine-guns, had some word in that lateness—and our fire caught it in the act of deploying. And when such a weight of guns as was massed on that front catches solid battalions on the roads, or troops close-packed in trenches, the Lord ha' mercy on the men they catch. The shells rained, deluged down on every trench, every road and communication way within range, searched every thicket and patch of cover, blasted the dead woods to splintered wreckage, smashed in dug-out and emplacement, broke down the trenches to tumbled smoking gutters, gashed and seamed and pitted the bare earth into a honeycombed belt of death and destruction. The high-explosive broke in, tore open, wrenched apart and destroyed the covering trenches and dug-outs; the shrapnel raked and rent the tattered fragments of battalions that scattered and sought shelter in the shell-holes and craters. The masses that were moving up to push home the intended attack escaped if they were checked and stayed in time; those that had arrived and passed into the furnace were simply and utterly destroyed.

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For a good three hours the roaring whirlwind of gunfire never ceased, or even slacked; for three hours the ground for a full mile back from the Hun front line rolled billowing clouds of smoke, quivered and shook to the crash of the explosions, spurted and boiled and eddied under the shells "like a bubbling porridge pot," as one gun-spotter put it, was scorched with fire, flayed with lead and steel, drenched and drowned with gas from the poison shells.

For three hours the circling planes above watched for sign of movement below, and seeing any such sign talked back by wireless to the guns, waited and watched the wrath descend and blot out the movement in fresh whirlwinds of concentrated fire; while further back a full five to ten miles other spotters quartered to and fro working steadily, sending back call after call to our Heavies, and silencing, one by one, battery after battery which was pounding our trenches with long-range fire. And for three hours the infantry crouched half deafened in their trenches, listening to the bellowing uproar, watching the writhing smoke-fog which veiled but could not conceal the tearing destruction that raged up and down, to and fro, across and across the swept ground.

Three hours, three long hours—and one can only guess how long they were to the maimed and wounded, cowering and squeezing flat to earth in the reeking shell-holes, gasping for choked breath through their gas-masks, quivering under the fear of further wounds or sudden and violent death; how bitterly long they were to the German commanders and generals watching their plans destroyed, their attack wiped out, their regiments and battalions burnt away in our consuming fire.

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Our despatches, after their common use and wont, put the matter coldly, dispassionately, and with under-rather than over-statement of facts—"The attack was broken by our artillery fire."

Broken! Smashed rather; attack and attackers blotted out, annihilated, utterly and entirely.

"By our artillery fire." The truth no doubt, but hardly the complete truth, since it said no word of the part the Air Service had played. So few knew what had been brought about by the work of a photographic patrol, the following reconnaissance, the resulting air work.

The infantry never knew how it was that the attack never reached them, why they did not have to beat it off with bullet and bayonet—or be beaten in by it—except that the guns perhaps had stopped it. The public did not know because the press did not say—perhaps because the press itself didn't know. And what the Air Service knew, as usual it didn't tell.

But Somebody evidently knew, because Washie and Pip found themselves shortly afterwards in Orders for a Decoration; and apparently the Squadron knew, because next morning when he went out to his 'bus Washie found that "Pan" had a neat little splash of paint on what you might call her left breast, an oblong little patch showing the colours of the ribbon of the Military Cross.

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*All that we are and all we own,
All that we have and hold or take,
All that we tackle or do or try
Is not for our, or the Corps' own sake.*

Through our open eyes the Armies see,
We look and we learn that they may know.
Collect from the clouds the news they need,
And carry it back to them below.
We harry the guns that do us no harm,
We picture the paths we shall never take;
There's naught to help or to hinder us
On the road we bomb or the bridge we break.
Only to work where our footmen wish,
Only to guard them from prying eyes,
To find and to fetch the word they want,
We war unceasing and hold the skies.

*All that we are and all we own,
All that we have or hope or know,
Our work and our wits, our deaths, our lives,
We stake above, that they win below.*

IX

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IF THEY KNEW—

A group of infantry in our front line trench watching the boiling eddying smoke and spurting fires of our artillery barrage on the enemy lines saw a couple of planes whirl suddenly up into sight above and beyond the barrage smoke. They were diving and twisting about each other like a couple of tumbler pigeons in flight, or rather, since one was obviously pursuing the other closely, like a pigeon hard pressed by a hawk. The excitement of the infantry turned to disgust as they caught plain sight of the markings on the machines, saw that the pursued was a British machine, the pursuer a black-crossed German. And when the British machine came rocketting and whirling through the barrage smother in plain flight from the German, who dared not follow through the wall of falling and bursting shells, the disgust of the men on the ground was openly and angrily expressed.

"Mastery o' the air," shouted one. "Fat lot he'll master." And from the others came similar jeers—"Hurry up, son, or he'll catch you yet—Why couldn't he have put up a fight?—Do they ever court-martial them blokes for runnin' away?—Fritz fliers top dog again."

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And yet, if those men had known, they would have cheered the man passing over them, cheered him for as plucky a man as ever flew—and that is saying something. If they knew, so often if they knew—but at least I can let them know something of this particular story.

The Flight went out as usual on "o.p." (offensive patrol), which, again as usual, had taken them well over Hunland. For the first half-hour they had a dull time, seeing no Huns about and having no more than the normal amount of Archie fire to dodge. Then the Flight Leader spotted a string of dots to eastward, and on counting them and finding they numbered something round a dozen to fifteen, concluded they were Huns. He ensured the Flight's attention to the matter, and then pointing his machine straight at the enemy, and after glancing round to make sure the Flight were in correct formation, began to climb them steadily up and towards the oncoming hostiles. He kept a close watch on the enemy, because he knew that the Squadron to which he belonged and the type of machine they flew had a name apparently discouraging to the Huns' fighting inclinations, and he was afraid that, even with more than two to one in their favour, they might on recognising the Flight avoid action and clear off. The Flight had already burnt a good hour's petrol and had some miles to go back home, and this did not leave a very great margin for a long pursuit and perhaps a prolonged fight. But this time the Huns showed no sign of shirking the fight, and came driving straight west on a course which must very soon bring them into contact with the Flight. As they swept closer it was seen that the hostile fleet was made up of three two-seater machines and a dozen single-seater fighting scouts, and just before they came close enough for action "Ailie" Arrowman, the Flight Leader, noticed something else that made him decide very quickly to concentrate the Flight's frightfulness on the two-seaters. The three were bombers, and from their slow and heavy flight obviously fully loaded with bombs, and from the direction they were taking were clearly out on a bombing raid over the British lines.

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Now these Hun raids and bomb-droppings had been becoming unpleasantly frequent for a little time before this, and all our patrols had special orders to keep a sharp look-out for bombers and make things as hot for them as possible. The Hun was coming to specialise on rapid dashes over

our lines, the hurried dropping of their eggs, and a hasty bee-line flight for home. Our infantry and our batteries were a good deal annoyed by these attentions, and naturally and very simply wanted to know why our flying men didn't "stop these blighters coming and going as they liked." This, of course, is a delusion of the men on the ground. The Huns were very far from doing as they liked, but since the air (for flying purposes) is twenty odd thousand feet high, and as long as the line, it takes a lot of policing against tip-and-run raids, especially when you remember that machines can pass within quite a few hundred yards of each other and never know the other is there. The groundlings don't recognise these facts, much less the incidental possibilities of Huns sneaking over under cover of clouds and so on, and it must be confessed the airmen, as a rule, don't take many pains to enlighten them, even when they do get talking together. On the ground, again, they know nothing of the Hun bombers chased back and brought down well behind their own lines, and nothing of the raids which are caught and interrupted, as the one I'm telling of was about to be.

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All this is by the way, but it explains why Ailie was specially keen to out the bombing machines first of all, and also why the bombers at the first sign of attack on them dropped their noses and went off at a rush, and the Hun fighters hurriedly dived in to divert the Flight and force a fight with them. We need not at the moment follow the details of the whole fight, but see rather how the one man Ailie fared in it. But, incidentally, it may be mentioned that the rest of the Flight sank one bomber and chased the other down to the ground, fought the escort and sank three of them at a cost of no more than one pilot wounded, a great many bullet holes in the machines, and one badly crippled and just able to reach and land on our side of the lines.

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Ailie went down in a hurricane dive on the first bomber, and since he was much faster than the big machine, especially with it carrying a full load, he caught it up rapidly, and bringing his bow gun into action commenced to hail a stream of lead on it. The gunner of the two-seater began to fire back at Ailie, but as his pilot at the same time was swerving and swinging his machine to dodge the streaking bullets, he spoiled the gunner's aim and few of the bullets came dangerously close to Ailie. But two of the enemy scouts had seen Ailie's charge, had promptly swung and dived after him, and, following hard astern, opened fire in their turn. Ailie caught up the two-seater, swooped down under her, throttled back to keep her pace, pulled down the gun fixed on his top plane, and started to pelt bullets up into the underbody hurtling along above him. The two Hun scouts dropped to his level and followed, shooting close and hard, and Ailie, finding their bullets snapping and smacking on his planes, was forced to swerve and duck and at last to turn sharp on them. Either he was the better pilot or his was the handier machine, because in a few seconds he had out-manœuvred them and driven them diving down ahead of him. He ripped a short burst into one, wheeled, looked round for sight of his two-seater and, sighting it tearing off at top speed, swung and, opening his engine full out, went racing after it. The two-seater flung himself into a spin and went twisting and spiralling wildly down, Ailie following close and shooting whenever he could bring his sights to bear. But again the renewed rattle of close machine-gun fire began, and he glanced round to find the scouts hot in pursuit again. This time they were not to be pursuers only, for another of the Flight leaped suddenly into the fight, rattled off a quick burst of fire, and in an instant had one of the enemy scouts plunging down helplessly out of control, whirled round and without a second's hesitation attacked the second. The Hun bomber, down to about 1,000 feet, flattened out and drove off east with Ailie still hard after him. He was getting angry now. Burst after burst of fire he had poured, as far as he could see, straight into the big machine, and yet it kept on apparently unharmed. But suddenly its tail flicked up, a wing buckled and tore loose, and it went down rolling and pitching, to crash on the ground.

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Ailie swept over, leaning out and peering down on the heaped wreckage; but whatever triumph he might have felt was short-lived, for at that moment *tat-tat-tat-tat* went a gun close behind him and then the quicker closer rattle of double or triple guns. Ailie hoicked hard up in a swift climbing turn, whirled round, and just catching one of the enemy scouts in his sights, gripped the trigger of the firing mechanism. His gun fired—once—and stopped, although he still held the trigger hard gripped and it should have continued to fire. The target swept clear, and Ailie, after gripping and releasing quickly several times, knew his gun had jammed. The two hostiles reopened fire on him, and he swerved, straightened out and went off in a bee-line at top speed. He was not unduly alarmed, although his position, a bare 1,000 feet off the ground and therefore well within ground shooting range of rifles and machine-guns, with a jammed gun, and with two scouts hard after him, was uncomfortably risky. He was on a fast machine, so fast that he did not believe the Hun flew that could catch him; and he reckoned that in a straightaway flight he could drop the two sufficiently to be out of urgent danger from them. As he flew he leaned forward, wrenched back the cover over the breech of his gun and jerked the loading lever rapidly to and fro. But the jammed cartridge stayed jammed and Ailie felt a first qualm of fear, as he heard the guns behind him reopen fire and recognised that he was not gaining on his enemies. Another gun broke into the chorus, and Ailie glanced round to see another of his Flight diving in and engaging one of the enemy. The second one, a bright scarlet painted scout, kept on after him, caught him up and dived firing on him.

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Then began a game that Ailie might remember in his nightmares for long enough. His machine was not doing her best, and the hostile fairly had the wings of him. Time after time the Hun swooped up over him and dived down, firing as he came. Ailie could only duck and swerve and dodge, some of his dives bringing him perilously close to the ground; and as he flew he wrenched and jerked at his gun's firing mechanism, snatched the Verey pistol from its rack, and with the butt tapped and hammered at the gun, hoping the jar might loosen the cartridge. He escaped touching the ground and crashing over and over again by bare feet; more than once he had to zoom sharply and just cleared low trees or even bushes that appeared suddenly before him; once

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his wheels brushed and ripped across the top of a hedge, and once again in a banking turn his heart stood still for a second that seemed an eternity, as he banked steeply and the machine side-slipped until his wing-tip, as it appeared to him, was touching the grass. And all the time, in dive after dive, his enemy came whirling down on him, the fire of his machine-gun clattering off burst after burst, and the bullets hissing past in flame and smoke or smacking venomously on the wings and body of Ailie's machine.

And through it all, flinging his machine about, twirling and twisting like a champion skater cutting fancy and fantastic figures, doing star-performance low flying that might have kept every nerve and sense of any stunt-artist flier occupied to the full, Ailie still made shift to spare a hand and enough eye and mind for the job of fiddling and hammering and working to clear his jammed gun—a gun that was not even in a convenient position to handle because, set above the left upper edge of his cockpit, it was very little below the level of his face and awkwardly high for his hand to reach. He gave up trying to clear it at last and turned all his attention to out-mancœuvring his opponent. The Hun was above him, and every time he tried to lift his machine the Hun dived, firing on him, and drove him down again. He was too low to pick up or follow landmarks, so kept the westering sun in his eyes, knowing this was edging him west towards our lines. The Hun after each dive did a climbing turn to a position to dive anew, and each time he climbed Ailie made another dash towards the west. The Hun saw the move, and, to beat it, dropped his climbing-turn tactics and instead dived and zoomed straight up, dived and zoomed again and again. Ailie saw his chance and took it. He throttled hard back next time the Hun dived, and as the Hun overshot him and zoomed straight up, Ailie in two swift motions pulled the stick in, lifting sharp up after and under him, pulled down the top gun and fired point blank into him. The Hun whirled over, dived vertically, and in an instant crashed heavily nose first into the ground. And Ailie's top gun had jammed after about its tenth shot.

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He flew on west, hardly for the moment daring to believe he had escaped, opening the throttle and starting to lift from his dangerous proximity to the ground mechanically, and with his mind hardly yet working properly. If he had not caught the Hun with that last handful of shots before his second gun jammed....

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And then, almost before he had collected his wits enough to realise properly how close his escape had been, that same horrible clatter of machine-gun fire from the air above and behind him broke out, the same hiss and snap of bullets came streaming about him. For a moment he had a wild idea that his Hun had not actually crashed, but a glance round showed that it was no longer the brilliant red machine, but another, and again a fighting scout.

Exactly the old performance started all over again, but this time without even that slender chance he had used so well before of catching his enemy with the fire of his top gun. Again he went through the twisting and dodging and turning to avoid his relentless enemy and the fire that crackled about him. Again he dived into fields, skimmed the ground, hurdled over low bushes and hedges, used every flying trick and artifice he knew, but had never before dared try at less than thousands of feet height, to shake off his pursuer; and again as he flew he wriggled and worked at the jammed gun in front of him. For breathless minutes he worked, casting quick glances from the ground rushing under him to the gun mechanism, jockeying his machine with steady pressures or sharp kicks on the rudder-bar and one hand on the joy-stick, while the other fumbled and worked at the gun, and the bullets sang and cracked about him. By all the laws of chance, by all the rules of hazard, he should have been killed, shot down or driven down into a crash, a dozen times over in those few minutes; just as by all the limits of possibility he could never hope to clear a jammed gun while doing fancy flying at such a height. But against all chance and hazard and possibility—as pilots do oftener than most people outside themselves know—he flew on untouched, and ... cleared his jamb. By now he was worked up to such a pitch of fear, frenzy, desperation, anger—it may have been any of them, it may have been something of all—that he took no further thought of mancœuvring or tactics, whirled blindly and drove straight at his enemy, firing as he went, feeling a savage joy in the jar and bang of his spurting gun. To avoid that desperate rush and the streaming bullets, the Hun swerved wide and swooped out in a banking turn, a turn so hurriedly and blindly taken that, before he could properly see, he found himself whirling into the edge of a forest the chase had unwittingly skirted. Ailie saw him distinctly try to wrench round to clear the trees—but he was too near; to hoick up and over them—but he was too low. He crashed sideways on a tree-trunk, down headlong into the ground.

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Again Ailie swung and flew straight towards the sun, switching on to the emergency tank, because by now his main petrol tank was almost empty. He continued to fly low and no more than 100 or 200 feet off the ground. At his speed it would take a good shot to hit him from the ground; higher up he would run more risk of Archie fire and of meeting Huns, and—this perhaps was the main determining factor, because by now he was almost exhausted with the fatigue of severe and prolonged strain—flying low would bring him quicker to the lines and safety.

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One might have supposed that by now the grim gods of War had had sport enough of him. But he was not yet free of them. Within a mile he was attacked again, and this time by three hostile scout fighters. He made no attempt to dodge or out-mancœuvre them. His cartridges were almost finished, his machine was badly shot about, his petrol was running out. He opened his engine out to its fullest and drove hard and headlong for the lines and the drifting smoke and winking fires that told of an artillery barrage. Close to the barrage he had to swerve and dodge a moment, because one of the Huns was fairly on top of him and hailing lead on him, but next instant he plunged at, into and through the barrage, his machine rocking and pitching and rolling in the turmoil of shell-torn air, his eyes blinded by the drifting smoke, his ears stunned by the rending crashes and cracks of the drum-fare explosions. He won through safely and alone, for his three

enemies balked at facing that puffing, spurting, fire-winking inferno, turned back and left him.

Ailie, hardly daring to believe that he was actually clear and safe and free, steered for home. He skimmed his bullet-torn machine over the trenches, a machine holed and ripped and torn and cut with armour-piercing and explosive bullets, his guns jammed, his ammunition expended, his petrol at its last pints, he himself at almost the last point of exhaustion, dizzy from excitement, weak and faint from sheer strain.

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Yet this was the man and the moment that those infantry in the trenches jeered, looking up as he passed over, his ripped fabric fluttering, his shot-through wires whipping and trailing, blessing the wildest luck that had left him alive, heart-thankful for the sight of khaki in the trenches below him.

It seems a pity those disgusted infantry could not have known the truth, of all he had come through, of those long danger-packed minutes, of those three crashed Huns scattered along his track—and of those bombs which would *not* drop on our lines, batteries, or billets that day.

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THE FO-FUM'S REPUTATION

I am naturally anxious to avoid angering the Censor by naming any particular type or make of machine, but fear it is inevitable that anyone who knows anything of aeroplanes must recognise in reading this story the type concerned, although that may hardly matter, since the Hun knows the type well (and to his sorrow), and the tale more fully in the exact detail of his casualties than we do. And because this type, which we may call the "Fo-Fum 2," has for a full year previous to the date of this story's happenings been openly scoffed at and condemned in speech and print by the "experts" as slow, clumsy, obsolete, and generally useless, I also fear I may be accused of "leg-pulling" and impossibly romancing in crediting the Fo-Fums with such a startling fight performance. I may warn such critics in advance, however, that I can produce official records to prove a dozen shows almost or quite equally good to the credit of the Fo-Fums.

A Flight of six Fo-Fums went up and over Hunland one morning when a westerly wind and a strong hint of dirty weather in the air made it an abnormally risky patrol for anything but the best of pilots and the most reliable of machines and engines. But the Fo-Fums, whatever their other faults, have at least the admitted merit of reliability, and the quality of the pilots on this patrol is fairly shown by this story.

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They were well over the lines and about 10,000 feet up when a circus of about twenty Huns hove in sight well above them. The Flight Leader saw them and, climbing a little as they went, he led the formation towards the hostiles, or, as he put it, "beetled off to have a look at 'em." The Huns evidently saw the Fo-Fums at the same time, and with natural willingness to indulge in a scrap with odds of more than three to one in their favour swooped up, "coming like stink," to quote the Flight Leader again, to the attack.

The Fo-Fums knew how the ball would almost certainly open under the circumstances—twenty Hun scouts with the advantage of superior speed, height and weather gauge, against six Fo-Fums—and quietly slid into a formation they had more than once proved useful in similar conditions.

The Huns, seeing no other enemies near enough to interfere, circled above, collected their formation into shape, and made their leisurely dispositions for the attack, while the Fo-Fums no less leisurely straightened out their wedge-shaped formation, swung the head of the line in a circle, which brought the leader round until he was following the last machine of the Flight, and so commenced a steady circling or—one can hardly refrain from quoting that expressive Flight Leader—"chasing each other's tails in a blessed ring-o'-roses giddy-go-round." The Huns drove up into a position which brought them between the Fo-Fums and the sun, thereby, of course, gaining the additional advantage of being able to aim and shoot with the sun in their backs while the Fo-Fums had the light in their eyes.

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The Fo-Fum men were not greatly disturbed by this, for several reasons, because they were used to conceding the advantage in beginning a fight, because knowing the Huns had the wings of them it was no use trying to avoid it, and because they were contentedly sure that there were so many beastly Huns there they couldn't all keep "in the sun" and that each man would easily find a target sufficiently out of it. They continued their "giddy-go-round," and a dozen of the Huns at top speed, with engines full out and machine-guns rattling and ripping out a storm of tracer bullets in streaking pencil-lines of flame and blue smoke, came hurtling down like live thunderbolts. The sight alone might well have been a terrifying one to the Fo-Fum men, and the sharp, whip-like smacks and cracks about them of the explosive bullets which began to find their mark on fabric or frame would also have been upsetting to any but the steadiest nerves.

But the Fo-Fums showed not the slightest sign of panicky nerves. They held their fire until the diving Huns were within reasonable shoot-to-hit range, and met them with a sharp burst of fire from observers' or pilots' guns as the position of each machine in the circle gave a field of fire ahead or anywhere in a full half-circle round to port, stern, or starboard.

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It may help matters to explain here—and again it tells nothing to the Hun that he doesn't already know well and to his sorrow—that the fighting Fo-Fum mounts three machine-guns—one, which the pilot handles, shooting ahead; another which the observer, sitting in front of the pilot and to

the side of the pilot's gun, shoots anywhere outward in a half-circle round the bow and in any forward direction down or up; and a third placed on the top plane, which the observer also shoots by jumping up from his bow gun, standing almost man-high clear of the "gun'l" of the machine's body, and aiming up or level outward to either side and astern.

In meeting the attacking dive the observers stood up to their top guns, and if their position in the Flight's circle allowed them to bring their gun to bear on an enemy, they opened fire. If the machine was full bow on to the rush the pilot fired; or if she was in such a position that he could not see a target sufficiently ahead, or the observer see sufficiently to the side, he dodged the machine in or out of the circle enough to bring one of the guns to bear, and then wheeled her back into position.

These tactics may sound complicated, but really are—so the Fo-Fums say—beautifully simple when you know them and are used to them. What they amount to is merely the fact that all six machines were able to open fire within a second or two of one another, and that in some cases the pilot was able to get in a second burst from his bow gun by dipping his nose down after a hostile as she plunged past.

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That they were effective tactics was promptly demonstrated to the Huns by one of their machines bursting into flames, another rolling over sideways and "dead-leafing" down in a series of side-to-side slips which ended in a crash on the ground below, and by another continuing his dive well down, changing it into a long glide to the eastward and out of the fight, evidently with machine or pilot out of action. Several of the Fo-Fums had bullet-holes in their machines, but nothing vital was touched, and they had just time to connect up nicely into their compact circle when the remainder of the Huns came tearing down on them in similar terrifying fashion.

But the Fo-Fums met them in their similar fashion, and when the Huns, instead of diving past and down as the first lot had done, curved up in an abrupt zoom, the observers swung their gun-muzzles up after them and pelted them out of range. One Hun lost control just on the point of his upward zoom, flung headlong out until he stalled and fell out of the fight for good. From the fact that his gun continued to fire at nothing until he was lost to notice it was evident either that his gear was damaged or the pilot hit and unconsciously gripping or hanging to the trigger or firing mechanism. A fourth Hun at the top of his zoom up lurched suddenly, fell away in a spinning nose dive, and also vanished from the proceedings—whether "crashed" or merely "out of control" was never known.

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In a fight against this sort of odds, which our pilots so often have, the need of keeping an eye on active enemies rather than on the subsequent interesting fashion of an out-of-control's finish certainly reduces our air men's score a good deal, since it is the rule only to claim and record officially as a "crash" a machine which is actually seen (and confirmed) to have smashed on the ground, to have broken in air, or otherwise have made a sure and positive finish. Five Huns down and definitely out of action was a good beginning to the fight, especially as no Fo-Fum was damaged, and the odds were now reduced to fifteen against six—quite, according to the Fo-Fums, usual and reasonably sporting odds.

But the odds were to lengthen to such an extent that even the seasoned and daring fighters of No. Umpty Squadron began to look grave and feel concerned. Two Flights came looming up rapidly from eastward, and, occupied as the Fo-Fums were with the first brush, the new enemies were upon them almost the instant the second rush on them finished—before, in fact, the first Huns shot down and hit the ground. The newcomers converged on the fight and dashed straight at the Fo-Fum circle without a pause. There were twelve of them in one lot and eight in the other, and that, added to the twenty the Fo-Fums had counted at the beginning of the fight, made a total of forty machines against their six.

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After this the tale of the fight can no longer be told as a whole. It developed into a series of rushes and dives on the part of the enemy in large or small numbers, swift leaps and turns and twists, and plunges and checks, repeated hot attacks and attempts by the Huns to break the Fo-Fums' steady circle, determined and fairly successful efforts of the Fo-Fums to foil the attempts. For long minute after minute the fight swayed and scattered, flung apart, out and down and up, climbed and fell and closed in again to point-blank quarters. It ran raging on and on in a constant fierce rattle and roll of machine-gun fire, a falling out, one fashion or another, of Hun after Hun, in occasional desperate fights of single Fo-Fums forced out of the circle and battling to return to it.

Some of these single-handed combats against odds are worthy subjects for an air saga, each to its individual self. There was, for instance, the Fo-Fum which was forced out of the circle, cut off, and fought a lone-hand battle against eleven enemies. The observer stood and shot over his top plane at one Hun who tried to cover himself behind the tail of the Fo-Fum. The pilot at the same instant was lifting the nose a little to bring his gun to bear on another Hun diving on him from ahead, and this sinking of the Fo-Fum's stern gave the observer a chance. He filled it with a quick burst from his machine-gun, and filled the Hun so effectively full of bullets that his nose dropped and he swooped under the Fo-Fum. The observer jumped down to his bow gun, swung the muzzle down, and caught the Hun passing under with a burst which finished him and sent him whirling down out of control.

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The pilot's shooting at the same time was equally effective. The Hun who had dived on his right front was met by a quick turn which brought the bow gun to bear and a short burst of fire. The Hun continued to dive past and under, and both pilot and observer caught a flashing but clear-imprinted picture of the Hun pilot collapsed in a heap on his seat before he also fell helplessly rolling and spinning down out of the fight.

The observer, dropping his forward gun as he saw his shooting effective, scrambled quickly up to his top gun and was just in time to open on another Hun not more than twenty feet away and with his gun going "nineteen to the dozen, and rapping bullets all over the old bus till she's as full of holes as a Gruyère cheese," as the observer said. He only fired about a dozen rounds—the fight by now had been running long enough and hot enough to make economy of ammunition a consideration—but some of the dozen got home and sent another Hun plunging down and out.

The observer just lifted his eyes from watching the "late lamented" and trying to decide whether he was "outed" or "playing dead," in time to catch a glimpse of a black cross streaking past astern of him. He glued his eyes to the sights, jerked his muzzle round after the fresh enemy, and just as he swung in a steep bank "slapped a hatful of lead into him" and saw a strip of the hostile's cowering rip and lift and beat flailing back against the struts until the enemy shut off engine and glided out.

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The pilot's gun was clattering again, and the observer, seeing all clear behind him, turned and half jumped, half fell, down into his cockpit as the Fo-Fum lay over on her beam-ends in a bank that brought her almost sheer on her wing-tip. He was just in time to see the pilot's fresh victim fall out of control, and dropping the bow gun he had grabbed he hoisted himself to his top gun again.

It sounds a little thing when one speaks of all this jumping down and scrambling up from one gun to another, but it is worth pausing to consider just what it means. The place the observer had to jump from at his top gun was about as scanty and precarious as a canary bird's perch; the space he had to jump or fall down into was little bigger than a respectable hip-bath; the floor and footholds on which he did these gymnastics were heaving, pitching, and tossing, tilting to and fro at anything between level, a slope as steep as a sharp-angled roof, and steeper still to near the perpendicular.

And all the time the machine which carried out the acrobatic performance was travelling at the speed of a record-breaking express train, and if the performer mis-jumped or over-reached the enclosing sides of his cockpit, sides little more than knee-high as he stood on the floor, not ankle-high as he stood at the top gun, he had a clear eight to ten thousand feet, a good mile and quarter, to fall before he hit the ground. And this particular Fo-Fum stood on her head or her tail, on one wing-tip or the other, dived and dodged, twisted and turned and wriggled and fought her way through, over, under, and about her eleven opponents, putting four well down and a fifth damaged in the process, and picked up her place in the shifting, breaking, and ragged, but always reforming, circle.

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The fight flared on for full forty minutes, and still at the end of that time the Fo-Fums were all afloat and able to make home and a good landing, although some were so shot about and damaged that it was only by a marvel of piloting skill they were kept going—and, let it be added, as their crews never failed to add, because they were stout buses well and honestly built of good material by skilled and careful hands, driven by engines that were a credit to the shops they came from and would "keep running as strong as a railway locomotive, into Hell and out the other side, s'long's you fed oil and petrol to 'em."

One machine had the oil tank shot through, and yet the engine ran long enough without "seizing up" (melting the dry metal by friction to sticking point) to get home. There were other mechanical miracles—too technical for explanation here—that the pilots tell of with wonder and admiration, although they say little, or at most or no more than a mild "good man" or "sporting effort" of the equal or greater miracle of men enduring and keeping their wits and stout hearts, and carrying on, whole or wounded as some were—one observer to his death soon after landing—for that forty minutes' savage fight against odds. Full forty minutes, and at the end of that time there were only some score Huns left in the fight: and in the finish it was they who broke off the action, and slid out and away down wind.

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"Y'see," as the Flight Leader said after when he was asked why he didn't pull out or battle his way out and home, "Y'see, the old Fo-Fums are pretty well known on this slice of front, and they've got a reputation for never chucking a scrap. I'd have hated to come plungin' home with a crowd of Huns hare-in' after us. The line 'ud think we'd been runnin' away from a scrap; and I wouldn't like my Flight to be letting down the old Fo-Fums' reputation like that."

Most people will admit that the Flight didn't let it down. There are even a good many who think it added a good-sized gilt-edged leaf to the Fo-Fums' and the Umpty Squadron's plentiful laurels.

XI LIKE GENTLEMEN

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When Lieutenant Jack Smith, new come from a year of life in the trenches and reserve billets, landed for a day or two's stay with his brother in one of the squadrons of the R.F.C., he began to think he had strayed into an earthly Paradise, was amazed that such an excellent substitute for well-found civilised life could exist in the Field.

He got the first shock when he arrived at the 'drome about 8.30 a.m. and found his brother still comfortably asleep. While his brother got up and dressed he explained that, the Division being out on rest near by, he had taken a chance of the long-standing invitation to come and spend a

day or two with the Squadron; and while he talked his eyes kept wandering round the comfortable hut—the bookcase, the framed pictures on the walls, the table and easy-chair, the rugs on the floor, all the little touches of comfort—luxury, he called them to himself—about the place.

"You're pretty snugly fixed up here, aren't you, Tom?" he burst out at last.

"So, so!" said Tom, pouring a big jug of hot water into the wash-basin—hot water, thought Jack Smith, not only for shaving, but to wash in. "Being Flight Commander, I have a shack to myself, y'see. Most of the pilots share huts. We'll fix a bed here for you to sleep. Hullo, quarter-past nine! I must hurry—won't be any breakfast left. You had brek?"

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"Two hours ago," said his brother. "We don't lie in bed till afternoon, like you chaps."

Tom laughed. "Not my turn for dawn patrol," he said; "I'll be on to-morrow. My Flight's due to go up at noon to-day." And he went on outlining the methods of their work.

In the Mess they found half a dozen other pilots finishing breakfast. "My brother Jack—going to spend a day or two with us"—was introduced, and in ten minutes found himself pleasantly at home amongst the others. He began to forget he was at the Front at all, and the attentive waiter at his elbow helped heighten the illusion. "Tea or coffee sir?... Porridge, sir?"

Jack had porridge, and fresh milk with it and his tea. Fresh milk—and he'd nearly forgotten milk came from anything but a tin! Then he had a kipper—not out of a tin, either—and bacon and eggs and toast and marmalade. It was his second breakfast, but he did it full justice.

After breakfast he went out with Tom to the hangars, and had a look over the machines and potted round generally until after eleven. Then Tom went off to get ready for patrol, and handed him over to "Jerry," one of the pilots. Jack spent a fascinating hour watching the patrol start, and then being taken round by Jerry, who was bubbling over with eagerness to show and explain and tell him everything.

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Then they had lunch, and again Jack was led to forgetfulness that he was at the Front. Sitting there with a dozen happy, laughing, chatting companions at a table spread with a spotless cloth, with a variety of food and drinks to choose from, with no sound of guns or any other echo of war in his ears except the occasional hum of a plane overhead—and that was pleasant and musical rather than warlike—he felt and said he might as well be in a long-established Mess in barracks at home.

After lunch he sat in the ante-room with the others round the big, open fireplace and smoked a cigarette and skimmed the plentiful weeklies until Tom's Flight was about due in. Jerry picked him up again and took him out and showed him the Flight when they were pin-points in the sky, and explained the process of landing as they came in.

Jack found his brother's machine had brought home several bullet-holes, and he was oddly thrilled at sight of them—oddly, because he thought he was completely *blasé* about bullet-holes and similar signs of battle.

Tom made very little of it, merely saying Yes, they'd had a scrap, had crashed one Hun and put another couple down out of control; and who was on for an hour on the canal?

Jack went to the canal with them, and found they had there a wonderful boat built by the pilots out of planks they had "found." The boat held two comfortably, four uncomfortably, and on this occasion carried seven. They fooled away a couple of hours very happily and school-boyishly, landed, and went back at a jog-trot to the 'drome. The wind had changed and they could hear the guns now, heavily engaged, by the sound of them.

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They were back just in time to see a patrol go up, and Tom hurried Jack out to watch. "We've got another Squadron's Major here, staying to dinner to-night, and the patrol is taking off in a fancy formation that's our own special patent. It's worth watching. Come along."

It was worth watching, although Jack, perhaps, was not sufficiently educated in air work to appreciate it properly. The Flight was drawn up in line facing into the wind, and, after a preliminary run up of their engines, a signal was given, six pairs of chocks jerked simultaneously clear of the wheels, and the six machines began to taxi forward over the ground, still keeping in line.

Their speed increased until they were racing with tails up, and then, suddenly, the whole six lifted together and took the air, keeping their straight line and climbing steadily. The right-hand machine swept round to the right, and one after another the rest followed him, each banking steeply and, as it seemed from the ground, heeling over until their wings stood straight up and down. As they straightened they opened out and dropped into their places, and the Flight swept circling round above the 'drome in correct and exactly-spaced formation.

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"Pretty good show," said Tom critically.

"You wouldn't understand rightly, Jack, but it's a fancy stunt we've never heard of another squadron being able to do. Sheer swank, of course, I'll admit, but rather sport."

Later, Jack was able to appreciate better what the "stunt" was worth from the admiring and amazed comments of the much-impressed visiting Major.

Tea followed, and after it the pilots drifted off to such occupations or amusements as they desired. Some lounged in the ante-room, with the gramophone singing, whistling, and band playing; others went off to the hangars to see to something being done to their machines,

engines, or guns; others vanished into their huts, and, reappearing stripped, began strenuous work on a punching-ball or disappeared over the surrounding fields on a cross-country run. The brothers wandered round, and finished an idle hour with a brisk turn at the punching-ball.

"Gets a good sweat up," explained Tom, "and helps keep you in condition. That's the curse of this job—not getting any exercise unless you do something of this sort."

"Curse of it!" said Jack enviously. "Blest if I see much of a curse of any sort about it. It's amazing to think anybody can be in the middle of a big push in this war and be able to have such a ripping fine time of it."

Tom laughed. "Our C.O. always swears this is the only end of the old war where a man is able to live like a gentleman and fight like a gentleman," he said. "And I don't know he isn't right." [Pg 136]

"It's the only side I've seen where you can," agreed Jack. "You certainly live like gentlemen, anyhow."

"Oh, it's gentlemanly enough fighting, too," said Tom. "Anyhow, you do go out to scrap with your face washed and a clean shirt to your back, and come straight home to a hot bath inside half an hour after, if you like. And in the actual fighting it's clean scrapping—putting your skill against the other fellow's, and the best man winning, as a rule. None of your blind floundering through mud and shell-fire for me, thank'ee, and getting scuppered without a notion who did it or how you got it."

That evening they changed for dinner, Tom lending a pair of slacks to his brother. "Might as well," said Tom. "Not that it matters about you, because I could tell the C.O. you didn't bring kit. But he likes everyone to dress properly for Mess, and so do we all. Dunno he isn't right, too. Now, will you bath first, or shall I?"

The bath arrangements were explained to him—the bath being a curtained-off corner of the hut with hot water in a canvas bath on the floor and a shower operated by pulling a string to a tank on the roof.

"We're having the band for dinner to-night," said Tom, as they dressed. "We rather pride ourselves on our band, y'know; eleven instruments, and all real good performers picked up all over the shop, and in the Squadron as batmen or mechanics or something. Lots of 'em were part or whole professionals in civvy life." [Pg 137]

"I feel as if I were going to a ball or a banquet or a box at the opera or something," said Jack, as they walked down to the Mess—"I feel so amazing clean and groomed and sleek. And you lucky beggars have this any old night, and right in the middle of the war, too!"

The evening "put the tin hat on it" as he said. There was a champagne cocktail before dinner, and then the Major led the way into a Mess that made Jack blink his eyes. The table down the centre was big enough to take the whole score of diners and of generous enough width to allow of stretched legs without kicking opposite shins and toes. It was covered with a spotless cloth, glittering cutlery, and shining glass, and down the centre were shaded electrics and vases made from polished brass shell-cartridges filled with flowers. The C.O. sat at the head of the table with the Major-guest on the one side and Jack on the other with his brother beside him. There was a full-course dinner most excellently cooked and served, and there was almost any drink available you liked to call for, although Jack noticed that his brother and most of the others drank fresh-made lemonade or something of the sort.

"It's one thing you have to cut out pretty well," explained Tom. "This game doesn't leave room for men with anything but steady nerves, and most of us find little or no liquor and not too much smoking gives you the longest life and gets the most Huns. We're all out for the most Huns, y'see, and pushing up the Squadron's record. Over the hundred crashed in under six months now and we want to pile it up. There's hardly a man here hasn't got anything from two to a dozen a-piece." [Pg 138]

"Doesn't seem to sit on their consciences," said Jack, looking round the table of happy faces and listening to the chatter and laughter that ran steadily through the dinner. Out in the ante-room the band played light and cheerful music.

"Some band," said Jack admiringly in answer to a remark from the C.O. "Good as a West End Theatre; makes me want to get up and dance," tapping his foot in time to the alluring rag that the music had just slid off into.

"You people evidently believe in the 'eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow, etcetera' theory," said the visiting Major.

"Why not?" said the C.O. quickly. "Let's live decently while we can, I say. We're all proud of the Squadron, and all keen to do the best we can to make it the best in the Field, in living, and feeding, and comfort—and fighting. And the theory seems to work all right."

"Looking at your record," said the other Major, "it does."

They were at the second course, when half a dozen pilots came in in ones and twos, went to the head of the table and made their formal apologies for being late, and went to their seats. They were the evening patrol, and the Leader took his place near the Major's end of the table. [Pg 139]

"Anything doing to-night?" asked the Major when the Captain had been served and commenced his soup.

"Quite a brisk scrap," said the Captain proceeding industriously with his soup. "That's what made us so late. Chased a bunch of fourteen Albatrii and had twenty minutes' scrapping with them."

"Get any?" asked the Major.

"Two crashes and three down out of control. Jerry got one crash and I got the other. Makes the Squadron tally a hundred and seven, doesn't it?"

"Yes, good work," said the C.O., and called down the table "I hear you bagged another to-night, Jerry. How many does that make?"

"Hundred and seven to the Squadron, sir," said Jerry, "and eight to me."

The Flight Leader, hurrying his dinner to catch up to the others, went on to tell some bald details of the fight. Jack sat drinking it in, although it was rather a technical and air-slangy account for him to understand properly, and all the time he could not get it out of his mind how extraordinary it was that this man and the others who half an hour ago had been fighting for their lives, shooting men down, hearing (and seeing as he gathered from the story) bullets crack past, tearing home at a hundred and odd miles an hour with the reek and roar of a big battle beneath them, with shells puffing and coughing about them as they flew, should now be sitting, washed, bathed, cleanly and comfortably dressed, at a full-course dinner, with flowers on the table and a good band playing outside. He had seen plenty of fighting himself, but with such a difference, with such a prolonged misery of short sleep, scratch meals, hard physical work, living in mud and filth and dirt and stench, under constant fear of death or mutilation, that this air-fighting appeared by contrast—well, the C.O. had it right, "living and fighting like gentlemen."

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The port went round, followed by the coffee, cigarettes, and liqueurs, the niceties of Mess etiquette, Jack noticed, being very punctiliously observed, and no man touching his port or lighting his cigarette before the Major touched and lit his, none moving from the table until after the port had been round, and so on. The evening finished with a couple of very jolly hours in the ante-room where the gramophone took the place of the band in alternate turns with musical pilots at the piano. A group hung round the open fireplace chatting and joking, another round the piano where one pilot played musical pranks, sang topical air songs, and played seductive melodies that set half a dozen couples "ragging" round the room, and two or three tables collected for Bridge and Poker.

Jack, revelling in the comfort and pleasantness of the whole thing, was haled at last by Jerry into a set for Bridge, and played for an hour just the sort of game he liked—good enough to be interesting, free and easy and talkative enough not to be stiff and boringly business-like.

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He was very thoughtful as he undressed for bed—a comfortable camp bed, with a soft pillow, and pyjamas—and Tom looked at him with a glimmer of a smile.

"Wondering if you'll put in for a transfer to Flying Corps?" he asked.

Jack was a little startled.

"Well, something like that—yes," he admitted. "You do seem to have such a ripping good time of it, and right bang in the war, too. It's amazing."

"Tisn't all pie, all the time, y'know," said his brother seriously. "Pretty strenuous at times."

Jack grunted scornfully, with his mind on what strenuous times in the line meant.

"We'll talk it over to-morrow," said Tom. "Must get a sleep now. I'm on dawn patrol."

Next day was very much like the first, and Jack felt the inclination grow to consider a transfer to this life of luxury and ease.

But the afternoon brought a new side of air work to him. The remains of a patrol—three machines out of six—straggled home with riddled machines and the tale of a hot fight. Jack gathered and sorted out and had interpretations of the involved and technical details, and they made his blood run hot and cold in turn. The six had fought a big formation of fifteen to twenty Huns, fought them fast and fiercely for a good fifteen minutes, had crashed five certainly and put others down without having time to watch their end, had routed and driven east the remainder of the formation. But they had lost two men crashed. One had his top petrol tank holed and the top plane set on fire. He was low down and fighting two Huns, and he might with luck have dived down and made a landing in Hunland. He preferred instead to take one more Hun down with him and lessen the odds against his fellows, had deliberately flung his machine on the nearest enemy, crashed into him, and went hurtling down, the two locked together and wrapped in roaring flames.

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Another had his engine hit, but with water spraying out from his radiator fought on and finished his individual combat, and put his Hun down before he attempted to turn out and make for the lines. He had flown long enough after receiving the damage to make it a matter of speculation whether his engine could get him home or not, but he flung away this last chance by turning aside from his homeward flight and throwing away a couple of thousand feet of height to dive in to the assistance of another of our machines hard beset by four enemies. One of these he crippled and drove down, and another his divers on gave a quick chance to the hard-pressed pilot to shoot down and crash. But the damaged engine by now was done, and the pilot could only turn his nose for the lines and try to glide back.

One of the hostiles saw his chance, drove after him, dropped on his tail, pouring in burst after burst of fire, hung to him and followed him down in the spin which was evidently the last desperate attempt to win clear, finally shot him down and crashed him as he flattened out.

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A third pilot had been badly wounded by a burst of bullets which had riddled and smashed one arm. He, too, might have pulled out and escaped; and he, too, hung on fighting to the end; flew

his machine lurching and swerving home, landed, fainted, and died from loss of blood before the tourniquet was well on his arm.

A fourth, with a bullet-shattered foot, stayed in the fight and took another wound in the shoulder, and still fought on, saw it out, and came home—and went off to the Casualty Clearing Station with a laugh and a jest on his lips and the certainty in his heart that he was going to lose his foot or carry it mutilated and useless for life. But he refused to go until notes had been compared and he could be told their bag of Huns and the total it brought the Squadron up to.

What hit Jack hardest was that his new but firm friend Jerry was one of those crashed. And only an hour or two before he had been talking with Jerry and planning and taking his advice about joining up with the R.F.C., how to apply and how to get quickly through his training, and ways of wangling it to get to this Squadron—and—jumping far into the future—how he, Jerry, would put him up to any amount of fighting tips, and how to get your Hun and keep a whole skin and pile the Squadron's record up.

It had all sounded so good to Jack, and now—Jerry was gone, had fought his last fight, had died the death within an hour of his last laughing word to Jack on the 'drome, had flung himself flaming into a collision with his enemy and paid out his life for one more crashed Hun to the Squadron's tally. And the other one lost, the boy who had thrown away his chance by diving with a "conking" engine to help a friend, was the same boy who had fooled at the piano, had kept them all giggling and chuckling at his jokes and chaff at lunch that day; and then had gone out and played a man's grim part and sacrificed himself to give a friend a fighting chance.

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That night Jack talked to his brother and told him he'd made up his mind to put in for an exchange. "Yes, Jerry told me all that—poor old Jerry," he said, when Tom warned him he'd been seeing the best side of the life in that particular Squadron, that they were rather a—well, swanky lot if you liked, but believed in doing themselves well; that any other Squadron he might go to might be much less particular about how they lived and might rough it a lot more. (Which, by the way, is very true; and there are many men who have lived in Squadrons at the Front for many months may scoff at this description of Squadron life as rank exaggeration. It is not, as others can testify.)

Jack heard it all out, but did not alter his determination.

"Whatever Squadron it is you admit they live better than we do in the line," he said, "and anyhow that's not my point now. I'd like to get even a bit with some of that crowd who downed poor Jerry."

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"It is better than the line," admitted his brother, "and whatever the Squadron, at least we live decently and fight fairly and squarely."

"Yes," said Jack, "your C.O.'s right—live and fight—and, by the Lord," he added warmly, his mind on that day's fight, his two friends and the manner of their end, "he might have added 'die'—like gentlemen."

XII

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"AIR ACTIVITY"

That "air activity," so frequently reported and so casually read in the despatches, means a good deal more than "fleets of aeroplanes darkening the sky," machines dashing and flashing around anywhere up to their "ceiling" of twenty odd thousand feet, shooting holes in and crashing each other, bombing and photographing and contact-patrolling and ground-strafting, and all the rest of it.

There is just as much "air" activity, or if you measure by hours, from two to ten times as much, amongst those men whose sole occupation in life is pushing other people into the air and keeping them there until they wish to come down, and who never have their own two feet off the firm earth. The outsider hardly thinks of this, and there are even a few pilots—a very few, as one is glad to know—who are apt to forget it, while the great majority of the others don't or can't very well make much show of their appreciation of or gratitude for the sheer hard labour of the groundwork in a Squadron that keeps them afloat. I know that most pilots will be glad to have even this one little bit of the limelight turned on a class of men who deserve a good deal more than they get.

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No. 00 Squadron broke into the Air Activity period a full week before the Push began on the ground, but a certain amount of "dud weather" gave the pilots some intervening spells of rest and gave the Squadron mechanics a chance to catch up and keep level with their work. But in the last few days before the Push was dated to begin, the air work became more strenuous, because the Huns, evidently suspecting that something was coming off, set their air service to work trying to push over and see what was going on behind our lines, and to prevent our air men picking up information behind theirs. No. 00 was a single-seater fighting Squadron, and so was one of the ots whose mission in life was to down any Huns who came over to reconnoitre or spot for their guns, and, conversely, to patrol over Hunland and put out of action as many as possible of the Hun fighters who were up to sink our machines doing artillery observing or photographing. The more machines one side can put and keep in the air the better chance that side has of doing its work and preventing the opposition doing theirs—it is a pity many aircraft workers even now

don't seem to understand the value of this sheer weight of numbers—and since both sides by this time were using their full air strength it meant that No. 00, like all the rest, was kept flying the maximum number of hours machines and pilots could stand.

As the work speeded up the strain grew on pilots and machines, which also means on the mechanics. Some of the planes came home with bullet-holed fabrics, shot-through frames, and damaged engines. All the holes had to be patched, all the frames had to be mended, all the engines had to be repaired. The strain and pressure on a flimsy structure being hurtled through the air at speeds running from 100 to 200 miles per hour is bound to result in a certain amount of working loose of parts, stretching of stays, slackening of fabrics, give and take in nuts and bolts, yielding and easing of screws; and since the pilot's and the machine's life and the Squadron's efficiency alike depend on every one of the hundreds of parts in a machine's anatomy being taut and true, or free and easy-running, as the case may be, the mechanics began to find a full normal day's work merely in the overhauling and setting up of the machines, apart altogether from fight-damage repairs.

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Two days before the Push began the mechanics put in a hard working day of fifteen hours out of the twenty-four; the day before the Push they started at 6 a.m. and finished at 1 a.m. next morning—and with the first patrols due to start out at dawn. But they finished with every machine trued to a hair-line, braced and strung to a perfection of rigidity, with engines running as sweet as oil, and giving their limit of revolutions without a hint of trouble, with every single item about them overhauled, examined, adjusted and tested as exhaustively and completely as if a life hung on the holding of every bolt, brace, and screw, the smooth, clean working of every plug, piston, and tappet—as, indeed, a life would hang that day.

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The weather report of the day was not good, but a good half hour before dawn the mechanics had the machines out in line and the pilots were straggling out swaddled in huge leather coats, sheepskin-lined thigh boots, furred helmets and goggled masks. But before they arrived the mechanics had been out a full hour, putting the final touches to the machines, warming up the engines—for it was near enough to winter for the cold-weather nights to make an engine sulky and tricky to start—giving a last look round to everything.

The first two Flights went off before dawn, and the third an hour after them. The mechanics walked back into the empty hangars which, after the bustle of the last few days seemed curiously dead and desolate, and then to their waiting breakfasts.

For some of them the respite was short. Ten minutes after the last lot of machines had gone there was a shout for "A" Flight men. They hurried out to find the C.O. and the Flight Sergeant standing together watching a machine drive slowly up against the wind towards the 'drome. Plainly something was wrong with her; she had an air of struggling, of fighting for her life, of being faint and weary and almost beaten. It was hard to say what gave her this curious look of a ship with decks awash and on the point of foundering, of a boxer staggering about the ring and trying to keep his feet. It may have been the propeller running so slowly that it could be clearly seen, or the fact that she was losing height almost as fast as she was making way; but whatever it was, it was unmistakable.

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As she drew near to the edge of the landing ground it was evident that it would be a toss-up whether she made it or touched ground in a patch of rough, uncleared field. The mechanics set off, running at top speed to where she was going to touch; the C.O. and the Flight Sergeant followed close behind them. They saw the pilot make one last effort to lift her and clear a sunk road and bank that ran along the edge of the landing ground. He lifted her nose, ... and she almost stalled and fell; he thrust her nose down again, ... and she hung, ... lurched, ... slid forward and in to the bank. Would she clear ... would she....

Then, in an instant, it was over. The wheels just caught the edge of the bank, her tail jerked up and her nose down, ... and the runners heard the splintering crash of her breaking under-carriage, of her "prop" hitting and shivering to matchwood, her fabrics ripping and tearing. She stood straight up on her nose, heeled over, and fell on her side with fresh noises of crackling, tearing, and splintering from her wrecked wings. Up to now the runners had thought of the machine, but in the instant of her hitting, their thoughts jumped to the pilot and—would he smash with her, or would the wreck catch fire? But before they reached the piled tangle of wood and fabric they saw a figure crawl out from under it, stand upright, and mechanically brush the dirt from his knees. They found he was untouched.

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"Got a bullet in her engine somewhere, sir," he told the Major. "I caught a fair old dose from the machine-guns, and had the planes riddled; then this one got her, and I couldn't get my revs., and thought I'd better push her home. Poor old 'bus."

"Another one coming, sir," said the Flight Sergeant suddenly, and pointed to a machine whirling towards them at a thousand feet up. There was nothing wrong with this one, anyhow. She roared in over their heads, banked and swung, slid down smoothly and gracefully, touched and ran and slowed, and came to rest with the engine just running. It whirred up into speed again and brought her taxi-ing in towards the sheds and the mechanics running to meet her. The Major and the pilot, walking back towards the sheds, were talking of the show: "Something terriff., sir—never saw such a blaze of a barrage—and the place fair stiff with machine-guns. Yes, crowds of Huns—and ours—hardly pick a way without bumping—I put a good burst into one Albatross—didn't see—"

The Major interrupted: "Can you make out the letter—ah, there, 'K,'" as the machine, taxi-ing into the sheds, slewed, and they saw the big "K" on her side.

"The Kiddie," said the pilot. "Morton's 'bus. Seemed to be running strong enough."

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They quickened their pace, the Major with a growing fear that turned to certainty, as they saw men come from the sheds, clamber up on the machine, stoop over the pilot, and begin to lift him.

They found Morton hit in the foot and badly. But before he was well clear of the machine he was laughing and asking for a cigarette. "Yes, I stopped one, Major; but it doesn't feel too bad. Hullo, Solly, what's yours?"

"Engine hit, conked out, crashed her edge of the 'drome here," said Solly hurriedly. "I say, Major, can I take 'The Kiddie' and go back? I'm all right, and so is she—isn't she, Morton?"

"Better take a rest," said the Major. "After a crash like that——"

But Solly argued, protested so eagerly, that the Major gave in. The mechanics bustled and swarmed about "The Kiddie," filling the oil and petrol tanks, securing her light bombs on the racks fitted under her, replacing the expended rounds of machine-gun ammunition. And before Morton had finished his smoke or had the boot and sock cut from his foot, Solly was off. One might have imagined "The Kiddie" as eager as himself, her engine starting up at the first swing of the prop, roaring out in the deep, full-noted song that tells of perfect firing and smooth running. Solly ran her up, eased off, waved his hand to the two men standing holding the long cords of the chocks at her wheels. The chocks were jerked clear, "The Kiddie" roared up into her top notes again, gathered way, and moved out in a sweeping circle that brought her into the wind, steadied down, gathered speed again across the grass, lifted her tail, and raced another hundred yards, rose and hoicked straight up as if she were climbing a ladder. At a couple of hundred feet up she straightened out and shot away flat, and was off down wind like a bullet.

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Then the "air activity" hit the Squadron on the ground. A tender and accompanying gang sped out to the crashed machine and set about the business of picking it up and bringing it home; telephone messages buzzed in and out of the Squadron office; another tender rolled out of the 'drome and started racing "all out" with a pilot bound for the Park, where a new machine would be handed over to replace the crash.

Before the crashed machine was in, the first lot out began to home to the 'drome. One by one they swept in, curved, slid down, and slanted smoothly on to the ground, and rolled over to the hangars. There was hardly one without a bullet-hole somewhere in her; there were some with scores. Planes were riddled, bracing and control wires cut, fuselage fabric and frames ripped and holed and cracked, propellers cleanly shot through. This was at 8 o'clock—and half of them were due to be up again at 1, and the others at 2. Every possible arrangement had been made for quick repairs and replacements, tools laid ready, spares brought out and placed to hand. The mechanics fell on the damaged machines like wolves on a sheepfold. Fuselages were ripped open, broken wires and controls torn out, badly damaged planes unshipped and slung aside, snapped and dangling bracing wires hurriedly unscrewed, suspected longerons and ribs stripped and bared for examination, holed or cracked propellers removed. In an hour anyone walking into the hangars might have thought he was in an airship-breaker's yard, and was looking at a collection almost fit for the scrap-heap. But at the appointed time the machines of the first Flight were ready, although it would take a decent-sized booklet to detail the nature and method of the repairs and replacements.

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But every hole in a fabric had been patched, spare wing and tail planes had been shipped, new wires rove, damaged propellers replaced by new ones, fuselage covers laced up, guns examined and cleaned. At a quarter to one the pilots came from an early lunch and found their machines ready, fabrics whole and taut, wires and stays tight-strung and braced, engines tuned up and ready, everything examined and tried and tested, and pronounced safe and fit. And "The Kiddie," that had come in a full hour after the others, and had several bracing and control wires cut, and twenty-seven bullet marks to show for her two trips, was amongst the first to take off with the others.

As, one by one, the first Flight went up, the men were hard at work on the machines of the second, hoisting up tins of petrol and oil, and pouring them into the tanks, reloading the bomb-racks, packing away fresh stores of ammunition, trying and running up the engines.

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At sharp two the second Flight took off, and at three the third (which had also brought home a miscellaneous assortment of injuries) followed them to the tick of time. But although all three Flights were out, the mechanics, with no faintest hope of a rest, set hastily about the business of mending and repairing those planes and parts which had been removed, and were now, or would be when they were done with, complete and ready spares.

They kept hard as they could go at it for a couple of hours, and then the first Flight began to drop in on them. One was missing—"crashed in No Man's Land"—another pilot reported, "Seemed to go down under control all right," and another was lost in Hunland.

The third Flight had even worse luck. Two were missing, nothing known of them, so apparently lost over the line, and another came circling back with her under-carriage swinging and twisting loose and hanging by a stay. On the ground they noticed the casualty, and, fearing the pilot might not be aware of the extent of the damage and try to land without calculating on it, they fired a light and signalled him.

But it was quickly evident from the caution of his manœuvres that he knew, and he came down and pancaked as carefully as he could. He crashed, of course, but, as crashes go, not too badly. Everyone was watching him with bated breath. As he touched the ground—*cr-r-rash*—a tongue of flame licked and flickered, and instantly *fouph* it leaped in a thirty-foot gust of fire, dropped, and

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before the horrified watchers could move tongue or foot, blazed up again in a roaring, quivering pillar of fire. Then, as some scuffled for fire-extinguishers and others ran with vague and crazy ideas of dragging the pilot out, they saw a figure reel out from behind the blaze, throw himself down, and roll on the grass. He was burned about the hands and face, had a skin-deep cut across his brow, a broken little finger—nothing that a few dressings and a splint would not make as good as ever. He had leaped out as he landed.

His amazing escape brightened the shadow that would have lain on the Squadron Mess that night from the loss of the other pilots, and for the hour of dinner the talk ran free and mixed with jests and bursts of laughter. In the ante-room there was another half-hour's talk over the events of the day, a medley of air slang about revving, and Flaming Onions, and split-arming, and props, and mags., and Immelman Turns, and short bursts, and Hun-Huns, and conking, and all the rest. Then, about 9.30, the pilots began to drift off to bed, and at 10.30 the mess rooms were clear and the lights out.

But in the hangars, the armoury, the carpentry and machine shops, the electricians were at full blaze, the mechanics were hustling and bustling for dear life. It grew colder as the night wore on, and by midnight men who had been working in shirt-sleeves began to put on their jackets. By 2 a.m. they were shivering as they worked, especially those blue-lipped and stiff-fingered ones who had to stand still over a lathe or sit crouched, stitching and fumbling with numb fingers at fabric and tape and string. Again the hangars were filled with a welter of stripped and wrecked-looking outlines of machines, and all the apparent lumber of dismantled parts and waiting spares. About 3 and 4 a.m. tenders began to rumble in on their return from various errands, and at 5 orderlies came from the cook-house with dixies of hot tea. The Flight Sergeants confabbed and compared notes then and sent half the mechanics off to bed and set the other half to work again; and by 6 the machines were taking decently recognisable shape. And at half an hour before dawn again the machines of the first Flight were out and ready, with engines run up and warmed, and tanks full, and ammunition and bombs in place, waiting for the shivering pilots stumbling out to them in the dark. They were gone before the first blink of light paled the gun-flashes in the sky, and they were barely gone before there came dropping into the 'drome the pilots who had gone off the night before to fly in new machines to replace the wastage. A second Flight went at 9, and then the mechanics, who had turned in at 5.30, were turned out again and the others sent to bed. They had an even shorter spell of rest, because new machines somehow require an appalling amount of work and overhauling and tuning up before any self-respecting Squadron considers them fit to carry their pilots.

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All that day the yesterday's performance was repeated, with the addition that parties had to be sent off in tenders to bring in machines that had made forced landings away from the 'drome and were unfit to fly home. The mechanics, dismissed for an hour at dinner-time and an hour at tea-time, spent about ten minutes over each meal, and the rest in sleep. They needed it, for that night they had no sleep at all, had to drive their work to the limit of their speed to get the machines ready for the pilots to take in the morning. That day there were more crashes, mild ones and complete write-offs, and it is hard to say which the weary mechanics loathed the most. The pilots had amazing luck. Man after man was shot down, but managed to glide back to our side of the lines, crash his machine, crawl out of the splintered wreckage, and make his way by devious routes back to the Squadron—to take another machine as soon as it was ready, and go out again next day.

For four days this sort of thing continued. In that time the mechanics averaged twenty and a half hours' driving hard work a day, the shop electricians were never out, the lorry-shop lathe, with relays running it never ceased to turn; the men ate their food at the benches as they worked, threw themselves down in corners of the hangars and under the benches, and snatched odd hours of sleep between a Flight going out and another coming in.

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By the mercy, dud weather came on the fifth day, driving rain and blanketing mist, and the mechanics—no, not rested, but spurted again and cleared up the débris of past days, repaired, refitted, and re-rigged their machines in readiness for the next call, whenever it might come. At the finish, about midnight of the fourth day, some of them had to be roused from sleeping as they stood or sat at their work; one man fell asleep as he stood working the forge bellows and tumbled backwards into a tub of icy water.

Then they reeled and stumbled to their beds, and again by the grace—since once asleep it is doubtful if mortal man could have wakened them—the sixth day was also dud, and the mechanics slept their fill, which on the average was somewhere about the round of the clock.

By then the fury of the battle assault had died down, the Squadron's duties were eased, and the mechanics dropped to a normal battle routine of fourteen or fifteen hours a day.

The Air Activity speeded up again after a few days of this, and from then on for another fortnight the men in the air were putting in two and three patrols a day and with some of the Artillery Observing machines in the air for four and four and a half hours at a time, while the men on the ground in the Squadrons were kept at full stretch and driving hard night and day to maintain their machines' efficiency. No. 00's mechanics did an average of nineteen to twenty hours work a day for fifteen days, and it is probable that if the full fact were known so, or nearly so, did the mechanics of most of the other Squadrons on that front. For, as it always does in prolonged fine weather and continued air work, the "air supremacy" became much more than a matter of the superiority of the fighters or fliers, dropped down to a race between the German mechanics and our own, their ability to stand the pace, to work the longest hours, to put in the best and the most work in the least time, to keep the most machines fit to take the air.

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The workshops at Home play a bigger and much more important part in this struggle than ever they have known, and are in fact fighting their fight against the German shops just as much as their air men are fighting the Hun fliers. A constant and liberal supply of spares and parts needed for quick repair obviously cuts down the Squadron's work and better enables them to keep pace with the job, and time and again in this period the Squadron mechanics were forced to work long hours filing and hammering and turning and tinkering by hand to repair and improvise parts which should have been there ready to their hand. As the struggle ran on it became plainer day by day that our men were gaining the upper hand, not only in the fighting—they can always do that—but in the maintenance of machines in the air. The number of ours dropped, perhaps, but the Huns' dropped faster and faster, until our patrols were entirely "top dog." The pilots will be the first to admit the part their mechanics played in this victory.

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Through all this strenuous time "The Kiddie," for instance, played her full part. Time and again her pilot brought her in riddled with bullets, with so many controls and flying-and landing-wires and struts cut through, that it was only because she was in the first place well and truly built, and in the second place, so keenly and carefully looked after, that Solly was able to nurse her back and land her on the 'drome. And always, no matter how badly damaged she came in, she was stripped, overhauled, repaired, and ready for action when the time came round for her next patrol; and always the work was done so thoroughly and well that she went out as good, as reliable, as fit to fly for her life, as any 'bus could be.

In the first week of the show, which was the most strenuous period just described, Solly Colquhoun got a Military Cross for his share of the show, and on first receiving word of it the Major sent for him to come to the office, and gave him the news and his congratulations.

"May I borrow the message, sir?" said Solly Colquhoun. "I'll bring it back in five minutes."

The Major gave him the telegram.

"Off you go," he said laughingly. "Off to raise the mess, I suppose. Get along. I'll be over to wet the Cross with you in a minute. Tell the Mess Sergeant to get the fizz ready that I had in."

But Solly had not gone to rouse the mess. He went at a hard trot straight to the Flight hangars.

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"Flight," he yelled as he neared them. "Fli-i-ght! Where's the Flight Sergeant? Oh, here, Flight—I want you and my rigger and my fitter. Fetch them quick."

They came swearing under their breaths. "The poor old 'Kiddie' for the air again," said the rigger. "Done her whack this trip, hasn't she?" returned the fitter.

"Look here," said Solly abruptly, hardly waiting for them to come to a halt before him. "Just read that wire, will you?... I brought it straight here. You're the first in the Squadron to know. I wanted you to be, and I wanted just to say thank you to you fellows for getting me this Cross. I know what 'Kiddie' has stood up to, and why. I know what you did, ... and ... well, thank you."

He shook hands awkwardly but very heartily while the men stammered congratulations and disclaimers of any reason for thanks. "Must beetle off," said Solly. "Promised to take this paper over. Tell the other men, will you? A Military Cross for our Flight. And thank you again."

He turned to hurry out, but, passing "The Kiddie," stabled there with her fore-end swathed and blanketted, her sides sleek and glossy and shining, taut and trim, spotless and speckless as the day she came from her makers, he halted and ran a fondling hand down her rounded back.

"Thank you too, 'Kiddie,'" he said, nodded to the Sergeant, "I got a good old 'bus, Flight," turned, and ran off.

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"A d——n good 'bus," said the Sergeant, "and a d——n good man flying her."

XIII

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THE LITTLE BUTCHER

The C.O. was showing a couple of friends from the infantry round the Squadron, and while they were in the hangars having a look at the machines—one of our latest type fighting scouts—a pilot came to them on the run, and hardly pausing to make a jerky salute, spoke hastily: "Message just come in by 'phone, sir, that there's a Hun two-seater over our lines near Rorke's Camp, and will you warn the Flight when they go up presently to look out for him. And if you don't mind, sir, I'd like to go up at once myself and have a shot at him."

The Major hesitated a moment; then "Right," he said, and with a quick "Thanks" the pilot whipped round and ran off.

"Might walk over and see him start," said the C.O. "He'll be gone in a minute. Always has his bus standing by all ready. He's our star pilot—queer little chap—always desperately keen for Huns, and makes any number of lone-hand hunts for 'em. Crashed nearly forty to date, the last brace before breakfast yesterday."

"Hope it didn't spoil his appetite," said one of the visitors.

"Spoil it!" The C.O. laughed. "Gave him one, rather. You don't know him, but I tell you he'd sooner kill a Hun than eat, any day. We call him 'The Little Butcher' here, because he has such a purposeful, business-like way of going about his work."

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They came to The Little Butcher as he was scrambling aboard his machine. He was too busy to glance at them, and the two visitors, looking at the thin, dark, eager face, watching the anxious impatience to be off, evident in every look and movement, saw something sinister, unpleasant in him and his haste to get to his kill. Their impressions were rather strengthened after The Little Butcher had gone with a rush and a roar, and they had asked the C.O. a few more questions about him.

"No, not a tremendous amount of risk for him this trip," said the C.O. "Y'see, he's on a 'bus that's better than their best, and can outfly and out-stunt anything he's likely to meet. He knows his job thoroughly, and it's a fairly safe bet that if he finds his Hun his Hun is cold meat."

Now, both the visitors had been fighting for rather a long time, had few squeamish feelings left about killing Huns, and were not much given to sparing pity for them. And yet they both, as they admitted after to each other, felt a vague stirring of something very like pity for those two German airmen up there unaware of the death that was hurtling towards them.

"I'm rather changing my notions of this air-fighting," said one. "I always thought it rather a sporting game, but——" [Pg 166]

"So it is to a good many," said the C.O. "But there's nothing sporting about it to The Little Butcher. He's out for blood every time."

"Seems to me," said one, when the C.O. had left them to go and see the Flight get ready, "this Little Butcher of theirs is well named, and is rather an unpleasant sort of little devil."

"I can't say," admitted the other, "that the idea appeals to me of going off, as it seems he's doing, to shoot down a couple of men in cold blood. Butchering is about the right word. I'm out to kill Germans myself, but I can't say I like doing it, much less gloat over the prospect, as this youngster appears to do."

Their unfavourable impression of The Little Butcher was so much stronger even than they knew that it really gave them a grim sense of satisfaction when the C.O. told them later that word had just come in that there were two Huns where one had been reported.

"Nasty surprise for your Little Butcher," said one, "if he bumps into them. But I suppose he'll see them in time and wait for the Flight to help him."

"Not he," said the C.O. "He'll tackle the two quick enough, and probably outfly 'em and get one or both. Sheer off from a chance of crashing two Huns instead of one? Not much."

This was late afternoon or early evening, and the two heard the story of the fight that night, before and during dinner, between courses and mouthfuls of food, over cigarettes and coffee, in snatches and patches, in answers to questions and in translations of air terms they did not clearly follow. And again their impression of The Little Butcher grew firmer, that he was "a murderous little devil" and "a cold-blooded young brute." There was no mistaking in The Little Butcher's telling his huge satisfaction in his kill, his fretting impatience when he thought he might be balked of his prey, his eagerness to finish his work; and frankly the two did not like it or him. [Pg 167]

When he had gone off that afternoon, he had flown arrow-straight for the locality the Hun was reported in, climbing in a long slant as he went, looking out eagerly for any sign of his quarry. He found them—or, as he still thought, the one—by sighting the puffing bursts of our Archie shells, and took quick stock of the position. The sun was still high and in the south-west; the Huns almost due south of him. His great anxiety was to approach unseen to such a distance as would prevent the Hun escaping on catching sight of him, so he swung wide to his left to gain the cover of a slow drifting cloud that might allow him to come closer without being seen. He passed behind and clear of it, and continued his circle, south now and bearing west towards another cloud, and as he flew he stared hard towards the puffing shell-bursts and made out the tiny dots that he knew were two machines. He was sure they were both Huns, because the way they circled and flew about each other without any movements of a fight made it clear they were not opponents. The Archie shells wrote them down Huns. [Pg 168]

With the second cloud safely between him and them, The Little Butcher swung and raced towards the two, reached the back of the cloud, and went laddering up towards its upper and western edge. He figured they could not be more than a mile from him then, but to locate them exactly and make his best plan of attack he skirted round the side of the cloud—a thick, solid, white cotton-woolly one—until he caught sight of them.

The instant he did so he plunged into the cloud and out of sight. He had kept so close to it that the one turn of his wrist, the one kick on his rudder, flung him side-slipping into it, to circle back and out clear behind it again. He looked down and round carefully for sight of any of our machines that might be coming up to interrupt his work and perhaps scare off his quarry, but saw none. But on the clear sunlit ground far below he saw a puff of smoke flash out, and then another close beside the hutments of Rorke's Camp, and concluded the two Huns were "doing a shoot," were observing for their artillery and directing the fire of their guns on to points below them. It gave him the better chance of a surprise attack, because at least one man's attention on each of the machines must be taken up in watching the fall of the shells. The Little Butcher revived his hope of bagging the two, a hope that at first had begun to fade in the belief that one might bolt while he was downing the other. [Pg 169]

The worst of the position now was that the two were rather widely separated, that his attack on the one might bolt the other, and that the second might reach the safety of his own lines before he could be overtaken. The Little Butcher didn't like the idea, so he restrained his impatience and waited, fidgeting, for the two to close in to each other or to him. He climbed to the top of the

cloud and circled with engine throttled back, swinging up every now and again until he could just catch sight of the two, ducking back behind the cloud edge again without being seen.

He was so intent on his business that it was only instinct or long habit that kept him glancing up and round for sight of any other enemy, and it was this that perhaps saved him from the fate he was preparing for the two. In one of his upward glances he suddenly caught sight of another machine full three thousand feet above him, and racing to a position for a diving attack. The Little Butcher, as he said that night, "didn't know whether to curse or weep." The newcomer broke in most unpleasantly on his careful plans. Two slow old Art. Ob. Huns were one sort of game; with a fast fighting scout thrown in the affair became very different. The two he had counted as "his meat," but now with this fellow butting in.... He felt it served him right in a way for not diving at them first shot instead of hanging about for a chance to bag the two. He had been impatient enough, Lord knew, to get at them, and he shouldn't have waited.

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All this went through his mind in a flash, even as his eyes were taking in the details of the scout rushing to position above him, his mind figuring out the other's plan of attack. He wasn't worrying much for the moment about the attack, because he was still circling slowly above his cotton-wool cloud, had only to thrust forward the joy-stick to vanish as completely from sight as if he were in another world. But he wanted to frame the best plan that would still give him a shot at the artillery machines, and—

The scout above pointed at him and came down like a swooping hawk, his guns clattering out a long burst of fire. The Little Butcher flipped over and sank like a stone into the thickness of the cloud. He went plunging down through the rushing vapour, burst out of it into the sunlight below, opened out his engine, and, turning towards the sun, was off with a rush.

As he swept out clear of the cloud he looked round and up, to locate his enemies, size up the position, and figure the chances of his contemplated plan working. The scout was not in sight yet, was circling above the cloud still, probably waiting for him to emerge. The two artillery machines were closer together, as if they had noticed the signs of fight and were in position to support each other. They were out on his right hand and about a mile away. He kept straight and hard on his course—a course that was taking him into a line that would pass between them and the sun.

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He saw the scout again now, high up and circling above the cloud still. The Little Butcher paid no further heed to him, but drove on at his top pace, with his head twisted to the right and his eyes glued on the slow swinging artillery machines. They gave no sign of seeing him for ten long seconds, or if they saw him concluded he was running away. "My luck held," said The Little Butcher in his telling of the tale, and the savage ring in his voice and glint in his dark eyes gave a little shiver to the two listening infantrymen.

He gained the point he was aiming for, shot up into "the eye of the sun," kicked the 'bus hard round, and came plunging and hurtling down on the nearest of the two machines. As he dived he heard the whip of bullets past him, knew the scout above had sighted him, was probably diving in turn to intercept him. He paid no heed; held hard and straight on his course, keeping his eye glued on the nearest machine and his sights dead on him, his fingers ready to start his guns at first sign of their seeing him. And because he was coming on them "out of the sun," because even if they had smoked glasses on and looked at him it would take a second or two to accustom themselves to the glare and be sure of him, he was within 300 yards before the farthest one suddenly tilted and whirled round and dived away.

The Little Butcher was on him before he had well begun his dive, had gripped the trigger lever of his guns and commenced to hail a stream of bullets ahead of him. He saw the Hun swerve and thrust his nose down, so changed course slightly to hold him in his sights, and kept his guns going hard. He was close enough now to see the observer swinging his gun round to fire on him, and then, next instant, to see a handful of his bullets hit splintering into the woodwork of the Hun's fuselage.

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The Hun fell spinning and rolling, and The Little Butcher thrust his nose down and ripped in another short burst as his target swept underneath. Then he lifted and swung, and went tearing straight at the second artillery machine, which was nose on to him and firing hard from its forward gun. At the same moment he heard the whipping and cracking of bullets about him and the clatter of close machine-guns, looked up, and saw the scout turn zooming up from a dive on him.

The Little Butcher held straight on, opening fire at the Hun ahead. The Hun side-slipped, ducked and spun down a thousand feet, The Little Butcher diving after, spitting short bursts at him every time he thought he crossed the sights, aware again that the scout above was following him down and shooting uncomfortably close. He was forced to turn his attention to him, so next time a dive came, he pulled his top gun down and let drive at the shape that plunged down, over, and up, then hoicked up after him and engaged hotly.

The two-seater below made no attempt to climb and join the combat, but swinging east hit for home as hard as he could go. The Little Butcher broke off his fight with the scout and went, full out, after the two-seater, the scout whirling round and following gamely. Because The Little Butcher had by far the faster machine, and had besides the added impetus of a downward slant from his thousand-foot higher level, he overhauled the two-seater hand over fist, forced him into a spinning dive again, and in a moment was mixing it in a hot fight with him and the scout. Again, because he had the faster and handier machine, he secured an advantage, and whipping round astern of the scout and "sitting on his tail" drove him to escape his fire in a steep spin.

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But at that moment The Little Butcher felt a spray of wet on his face, found it was oil, and

concluded, wrathfully, that his oil tank or pipe must be shot through. His engine, he knew, would quickly run dry, might seize up at any moment, and leave him helpless. And the two-seater was off tearing for the lines again, the scout still spinning down to escape him. He wanted that two-seater, wanted him badly. He had bagged the one and meant getting the other.

There was a last chance—if his engine would stand for a few minutes. He opened her out and shot off after the two-seater. He caught him up and dropped astern, the oil still spraying back, misting his goggles and nearly blinding him, the Hun observer pouring a long steady fire at him. He stooped forward with his face close to the windscreen, dropped to a position dead astern of the two-seater where the observer could not effectively fire at him without shooting away his own tail, and poured in a long clattering burst from both guns. His bullets, he knew, were tearing stern to stem through the Hun; but the Hun held on, and The Little Butcher felt his engine check and kick. The oil spray had ceased, which meant the last of the oil was gone and the engine running dry. The Little Butcher gritted his teeth, and kept his guns going.

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The Hun observer's fire stopped suddenly, and he fell limp across the edge of his cockpit. The Hun pilot was helpless. With a fast scout on his tail, with no gunner or gun to shoot astern, he could do nothing—except perhaps escape in a spin down. But astern of him the guns continued to chatter, the bullets to rip and tear and splinter through his machine.

The Little Butcher was in an agony of suspense as to whether he could get his man before his engine failed him, and as he told his story it was plain to see the intensity, the desperate uncertainty, and the eagerness he had felt. "I knew my engine was going to conk out any second—could feel a sort of grate and grind in her, and that my revs. were dropping off. The Hun was drawing away a yard or two ... and I tell you I cursed the luck. I hung on, dead astern and pumping it into him and seeing my bullets fairly raking him. But he *wouldn't* go down...." (His eyes gleamed as he spoke, his brows were drawn down, his whole face quivering with eagerness, with the revived excitement of the chase, the passionate desire for the downfall of his quarry.) "I began to think he'd get away. I'd never have forgiven myself—having him dead helpless like that, right at point-blank, and then losing him.... But I got him at last—and just in time. Got him, and crashed him good...."

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It all sounds very brutal perhaps—did certainly to the two infantrymen listening, fascinated. But—this was The Little Butcher; and he was out to kill.

The end had come a few seconds later. The Hun pilot lurched forward; his machine plunged, rolled over, shot out and up, tail-slid, and then went spinning and "dead-leafing" down. The Little Butcher shut off his crippled engine, looked round and saw the Hun scout streaking for the lines, put his machine into a long glide and watched his second victim twist and twirl down and down, watched until he saw him hit and crash.

He came down and made a landing on another 'drome, borrowed a tender, and in an hour was eating his dinner.

I have said the two visitors did not like the story or the teller. They were, in fact, a little disgusted and sickened with both, and they said as much to their friend the C.O. when the others had left the table, and they three lingered over liqueurs.

"Silly of me perhaps," said one, "but I hated the way that boy sort of licked his lips over the chance of catching that Hun unawares and shooting him down."

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The other wrinkled his nose disgustedly. "It was fifty times worse his hanging to that fellow who couldn't shoot back—when the observer was dead—and bringing him down in cold blood. Poor devil. Think of his feelings."

"Little Butcher," said the first, "you named him well. Bloody-minded little butcher at that."

"But hold on a minute," said the C.O. "I can't let you run away with these wrong notions of The Little Butcher. Have you any idea why he is so keen on killing Huns? Why he jumped at the chance to go up and get that one to-day, why he was in such a hurry to tackle the two, why he—well, why he is The Little Butcher?"

"Lord knows," said one, and "Pure blood-thirstiness," the other.

"I'll tell you," said the C.O. "It is because he was once in the infantry, as I was; and because he knows, as I do, what it means to the line to have an artillery observing machine over directing shells on to you fellows, or taking photos that will locate your positions and bring Hades down on you. Every Hun that comes over the line, *you* fellows have to sweat for; every minute a gun-spotter or photographer or reconnaissance machine works over you, *you* pay for in killed and wounded. Lots of our pilots don't properly realise that, and treat air fighting as more or less of a sporting game, or just as the job they're here for. The Little Butcher knows that every Hun crashed means so many more lives saved on the ground, every Hun that gets away alive will be the death of some of you; so he's full out to crash them—whenever, wherever, and however he can."

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The two guests fidgeted a little and glanced shamefacedly at one another. "I hadn't thought—" began one, and "I never looked at it—" said the other.

"No," said the C.O., "and few men on the ground do, because they don't know any better. P'raps you'll tell some of 'em. And don't forget—although I admit that, as he told the story, it mightn't sound like it—his isn't the simple butchering game you seem to think. You didn't see his 'bus when it was brought in? No. Well, it had just thirty-seven bullet holes in it, including one through the windscreen, a foot off his head. Any one of those might have crashed him; and he knows it."

Some day one of them will get him; and he also knows that. But he takes his risks, and will keep on taking 'em—because every risk, every Hun downed, is saving some of you fellows on the floor. There's a-many women at home to-night who might be widows and are still wives; and for that you can thank God—and The Little Butcher."

"I see," said the one listener slowly—"I see."

"So do I," said the other. "And I'm glad you told us. Now," thrusting his chair back, "I'm going to find The Little Butcher, and apologise to him."

"Me too," said the first—"apologise, and thank him for all he's done, and is doing—for us."

XIV A CUSHY JOB^[5]

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A Ferry Pilot once told me that he had a very pleasant and "cushy" job, especially when you compared it with the one in a Squadron working over the lines. Because we had just made an ideal flight across Channel on a beautiful summer day, and were sitting in comfortable deck-chairs, basking in the sun outside the Pool Pilots' Mess after a good lunch, I was inclined at first to believe him. A little later he told a story which made me revise that belief, the more so as it was not told to impress, and was accepted by the other Ferry Pilots there present so casually and with so little comment that it was apparently an experience not at all beyond the average.

A chance remark was made about a recent trip on which he had been lost in the mist, and had two very close shaves from crashing. Since none of the others asked for the story, I did, and got it at last, told very sketchily and off-handedly, and only filled in with such details as I could drag out of him with many questions.

He had started out one morning to fly a new fast single-seater scout machine to France, and, while getting his height before pushing out across Channel, noticed there was a haze over the water, and that the coast on the other side was also rather obscured, although not to any alarming extent. But before he had got over to the French side quite a thick mist had crept up Channel, and he had to come down to a couple of thousand feet to pick up his exact bearings. He lost some time at this, but at last recognised a bit of the coast, and found he was rather off his line, so swung off and pushed for the Depot landing-ground. Before he reached it, the mist, which had been steadily thickening, suddenly swept over in a solid wave, and he found any view of the ground completely gone.

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He climbed a couple of thousand into the sunlight again, and looked round for a bearing, thought he could make out the ground in one direction, and, opening his engine full out, pushed off for the spot. But either his eyes had deceived him, or the mist had beat him to it. He flew on, with nothing but crawling, drifting mist visible below him, dropped down again and peered over the side, down and down again until his altimeter showed him to be a bare couple of hundred feet up. There was still no sight of ground, and since he was now in thick mist himself he could see nothing but dim greyness below, all round, and above him. He climbed through thinning layers of mist into daylight, and headed straight south by compass, figuring that the best plan was to try to outfly the mist area, and, when he could see the ground anywhere, pick up a bearing and a 'drome, any 'drome, and get down on it.

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But after half an hour's flight he was still above crawling banks of mist, and by now had not the faintest idea of where he was. He had made several dips down to look for the ground, but each time had caught not the faintest indication of it, although he had dropped dangerously low according to the altimeter. He began to wonder if the altimeter was registering correctly, but came to the highly unpleasant conclusion that, if he could not trust it, he certainly dare not distrust it to the extent of believing he was higher than it showed, dropping down and perhaps barging into a clump of trees, or telegraph wires, or any other obstruction.

He admits that he began to get a bit rattled here. He became oppressed with a desolating sense of his utter aloneness, especially when he was low down and whirling blindly through the mist. He was completely cut off from the world. Firm ground was there beneath him somewhere, cheery companions, homely things like cosy rooms and fires and hot coffee; but while the mist lasted he could no more touch any of them than he could touch the moon.

To make it worse, he was completely lost and had not the faintest idea where he was. He was steering by compass only, and if he was drifting to the east he might be approaching the lines and Hunland, and if to the west might even now be over the sea. For an hour and a half he flew, trying to keep a straight course south, and seeing nothing but that dim grey around him when he came low, the sun and sky above, and the wide floor of mist beneath, when he climbed high. Flying high he had the same sense of aloneness, of being the only living thing in an empty world of his own, of cut-offness from the earth, that he had when he was in the blanketting mist.

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It was a different kind of aloneness, but even more desperate from the feeling of helplessness that went with it. Here he was, a fit, strong man, with every limb, organ, and sense perfect, with a good, sound, first-class machine under him, with a bright sun and a clear sky above, able to control his every movement, to fly to any point of the compass, to go up, or down, or round, at any angle or speed he liked—except a speed low enough to allow him to drop to the ground without smashing himself and his machine to pulp and splinters. All his power was reduced to

nought by a mere bank of mist, a thin impalpable vapour, a certain amount of moisture in the atmosphere. His very power and speed were his undoing. Speed that in free air was safety, was death on touching the ground except at a proper angle and with a clear run to slow in—an angle he could not gauge, a clear run he could not find for this deadly mist. It was maddening ... and terrifying.

He decided to make one more try for the ground, a last attempt to see if he could get below the mist blanket without hitting the earth. He thrust his nose down and plunged, flattening out a little as he came into the mist, shut off his engine, and went on down in a long glide with his eyes on the altimeter, lifting and staring down overside, turning back quickly to read his height. At three hundred he could see nothing, at two hundred nothing, at a hundred still nothing but swirling greyness. He flew on, still edging down, opening up his engine every now and then to maintain flying speed, shutting it off and gliding, his eyes straining for sight of anything solid, his ears for sound of anything but the whistle and whine of the wind on his wings and wires. Down, still down, his heart in his mouth, his hand ready on the throttle—down ... down....

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Everything depended on what sort of surface he was flying above. If there were flat open fields he must catch sight, however shadowy it might be, of them before touching anything. If there were trees or buildings below, the first sight he got might be something looming up before him a fraction of a second before he hit. Down, steadily and gradually, but still down—down ... then, UP—suddenly and steeply, his hand jerking the throttle wide open, the engine roaring out in deafening notes that for all their strength could not drown the thumping of his heart and the blood drumming in his ears. A hundred feet he climbed steeply; but even then, with the panic of immediate peril gone, he kept on climbing in narrow turns up into the sunlight again.

He had had a deadly narrow escape, had been so intent on staring down for the ground that almost before he knew what was happening he had flashed close past something solid, something that his wing-tips catching would have meant death—a straight upright pillar, then another, with faint pencilled lines running between them—a ship's masts and rigging. And as he shot up, almost straight up, he had a quick glimpse of another three shadowy masts jerking downwards into obscurity before and then beneath him. He must be over a harbour, or dock, or perhaps some sort of canal basin. He kept his upward course until he was in sunlight again, carefully examined his oil and petrol gauges and his compass, and set a northerly course. The mist might be over all France; he would make a try back for England.

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He held on until he had run his main petrol tank out, switched on to the gravity "emergency tank" set on the top plane, and kept steadily on his course. He had an hour's petrol there, and that ought, he figured, to take him well over England and inland.

He decided to keep going until he could see signs of the mist thinning, or until his petrol ran almost out; but when it was about half empty, and he thought he must be back over the Channel and a good many miles inland, he slid down through the mist on the chance of being able to see the ground below it. He went down to a hundred feet, lower, could see nothing, opened his engine out again and began to climb.

Then he had another hair-raising deadly scare. He saw the mist in front of him suddenly begin to darken, to solidify, to take shape, to become a solid bulk stretching out and thinning away to grey mist to either side, above him, and below him.

For one flashing instant he was puzzled, for another he was panic-stricken, knew with a cold clutch of terror at his heart that he was charging at a hundred miles an hour full into the face of a sheer-walled cliff. Actually his speed was his saving—his speed and the instinct that did the one possible thing to bring him clear. He had gathered way on his upward slant, his engine running full out. He hauled the control lever hard in, and his machine, answering instantly, reared and swooped and shot straight up parallel with the cliff face, over in the first half of a loop, and straight away from the cliff, upside down, until he was far enough out safely to roll over to an even keel. It was so close a thing that for an instant he saw distinctly the cracks and crevices in the cliff face, held his breath, dreading to feel the jar of wheels or tail on the rock, and the plunge and crash that would follow.

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A long way out he slanted up, with his heart still thumping unpleasantly, climbed until he was in the sunlight again, and turned north.

He found the mist thinning ten minutes later, cleared it in another five, glided down, and picked a good field, and landed—with about ten minutes' petrol in his tank.

And that same afternoon, when the mist went, he refilled his tanks and took his machine over to France, and delivered it to the Depot there.

But a Ferry Pilot, you'll remember, has a "cushy job."

FOOTNOTES:

[5] Cushy=easy, soft.

NO THOROUGHFARE

For a week the line had been staggering back, fighting savagely to hold their ground, being driven in, time and again, by the sheer weight of fresh German divisions brought up and hurled without a pause against them, giving way and retiring sullenly and stubbornly to fresh positions, having to endure renewed ferocious onslaughts there, and give to them again. Fighting, marching, digging in; fighting again and repeating the performance over and over for days and nights, our men were worn down dangerously near to the point of exhaustion and collapse, the point over which the Germans strove to thrust them, the point where human endurance could no longer stand the strain, and the breaking, crumbling line would give the opening for which the Germans fought so hard, the opening through which they would pour their masses and cut the Allied armies in two.

Now at the end of a week it looked as if their aim was dangerously near attainment. On one portion of the line especially the strain had been tremendous, and the men, hard driven and harassed for two days and nights almost without a break, were staggering on their feet, stupid with fatigue, dazed for want of sleep. Of all their privations this want of sleep was the hardest and cruellest. The men longed for nothing more than a chance to throw themselves on the ground, to fling down on the roadside, in the ditches, anywhere, anyhow, and close their aching eyes and sink in deep, deep sleep. But there was no faintest hope of sleep for them. They had been warned that all the signs were of a fresh great attack being launched on them about dusk, by more of those apparently inexhaustible fresh enemy divisions. The divisions they had fought all day were being held stubbornly by rear-guard actions until the new positions were established; and plain word had been brought in by reconnoitring air men of the new masses pressing up by road and rail to converge with all their weight on the weakened line and the worn-out men who made ready to hold it. Everyone knew what was coming. Company and battalion officers scanned the ground and picked positions for trenches and machine-guns to sweep the attack; Generals Commanding pored over maps and contours and sought points where concentrated shell-fire might best check the masses. And all who knew anything knew that it was no more than a forlorn hope that if once those fresh divisions came to close quarters they could be beaten back. Our men would be outnumbered, would be unrested and worn with fighting and digging and marching continuously,—that was the rub; if our men could have a rest, a few hours' sleep, a chance to recuperate, they could make some sort of a show, put up a decent fight again, hold on long enough to give the promised reinforcements time to come up, the guns to take up new positions. But "a renewed attack in force must be expected by dusk" said the word that came to them, and every precious minute until then must be filled with moving the tired men into position, doing their utmost to dig in and make some kind of defensive line. It looked bad.

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But there were other plans in the making, plans figured out on wider reaching lines, offering the one chance of success in attacking the fresh enemy masses at their most vulnerable points, fifteen, twenty miles away from our weary line. The plans were completed and worked out in detail and passed down the chain to the air Squadrons; and Flight by Flight the pilots and observers loaded up to the full capacity of their machines with bombs and machine-gun ammunition and went droning out over the heads of the working troops digging the fresh line, over the scattered outpost and rear-guard lines where the Germans pressed tentatively and waited for the new reinforcements that were to recommence the fierce "hammer-blow" attacks, on over the dribbling streams of transport and men moving by many paths into the battle line, on to where the main streams ran full flood on road and rail—and where the streams could best be dammed and diverted.

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The air Squadrons went in force to their work, bent all their energies for the moment to the one great task of breaking up the masses before they could bring their weight into the line, of upsetting the careful time-table which the enemy must lay down and follow if they were to handle with any success the huge bulk of traffic they were putting on road and rail. Each Flight and Squadron had its own appointed work and place, its carefully detailed orders of how and where to go about their business. In one Squadron, where the C.O. held council with his Flight Leaders and explained the position and pointed out the plans, one of his Captains summed up the instructions in a sentence. "That bit of road," he said with his finger on the map, "you want us to see it's 'No Thoroughfare' for the Hun up to dark?"

"That's it," said the C.O. "And if you get a chance at a train or two about here—well, don't let it slip."

"Right-oh," "That's simple," "No Thoroughfare," said the Captains, and proceeded about their business. The Flights went off at short intervals, intervals calculated to "keep the pot a-boiling," as closely as possible, to allow no minutes when some of the Squadron would not be on or about the spot to enforce the "No Thoroughfare" rule. For the rest of the afternoon they came and went, and came and went, in a steady string, circling in and dropping to the 'drome to refill hurriedly with fresh stocks of bombs and ammunition, taking off and driving out to the east as soon as they had the tanks and drums filled and the bombs hitched on. They were on scout machines carrying four light bombs and many hundred rounds of ammunition a-piece, and Dennis, the leader of the first Flight, made an enthusiastic report of success on the first return. "Found the spot all right, Major," he said cheerfully. "The crater reported is there all right, and it has wrecked half the road. There was a working party on it going like steam to fill in the hole, we disturbed the party a whole lot."

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They had disturbed them. The road was one of those long miles-straight main routes that run

between the towns in that part of France. They were well filled with troops and transport over the first miles, but the Flight Leader followed instructions and let these go, knowing other Squadrons would be dealing with them in their own good time and way. "Although I wish they'd get busy and do it," as he told the C.O. "Having nothing to worry them, those Huns just naturally filled the air with lead as he went over 'em. Look at my poor old 'Little Indian' there; her planes are as full of holes as a sieve."

But he had pushed his "Little Indian" straight on without attempting to return the fire from below, and presently he came to the spot where the Squadron was to tackle its job—a spot where an attempt had been made by our Engineers to blow up the road as we retired, and where a yawning hole took up half the road, leaving one good lorry-width for the transport to crawl round. An infantry battalion was tramping past the crater when the Flight arrived above it, and since the "Little Indian" flew straight on without loosing off a bomb or a shot, the rest of the Flight followed obediently, although in some wonder as to whether the target was not being passed by mistake. There was no mistake. They followed the leader round in a wide sweep over the open fields with stray bunches of infantry firing wildly up at them, round to the crater, and past it again, and out and round still wider. The road by the crater was empty as they passed, but a long string of lorries and horse transport that had been waiting half a mile back began to move and crawl along towards the crater. The "Little Indian" kept on her wide circle until half the lorries were past the crater. Then she came round in a steep bank and shot straight as an arrow back to the road, swept round sharply again and went streaking along above it. Two hundred yards from the crater she lifted, curved over and came diving down, spitting fire and lead as she came, pelting a stream of bullets on the lorries abreast of the mine hole and diving straight at them. Thirty feet away from the hole, one, two, three, four black objects dropped away from under the machine, and four spurts of flame and smoke leaped and flashed amongst the lorries and about the hole, as the "Little Indian" zoomed up, ducked over and came diving down again with her machine-guns hailing bullets along the lorries and the horse transport. And close astern of her came the rest of the Flight, splashing their bombs down the length of the convoy, each saving one or two for the spot by the crater, continuing along the road and emptying their guns on the transport. Half a mile along the road they swung round and turned back and repeated the gunning performance on men struggling to hold and steady crazed and bolting horses, on wagons in the ditches, on one lorry with her nose well down in the half-filled crater and another one comfortably crashed against her tail that stuck out into the half-width bit of road.

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"A beautiful block," the Flight told the Major on their return. "Couldn't have placed 'em better if we'd driven the lorries ourselves. And there's horse wagons enough scattered along the ditches of the next half mile to keep the Hun busy for hours."

The second Flight, arriving about ten minutes after the first had departed homeward bound, found the Huns exceedingly busy struggling to remove the wrecked transport which so effectually blocked the way. There were men enough crowded round the crater especially to make a very fine target, and the first machine or two got their bombs well home on these, and scattered the rest impartially along the road on any "suitable targets" of men or transport. They established another couple of very useful blocks along the mile of road behind the crater, and completely cleared the road of marching men for a good three miles. The third Flight found no targets beyond the working party at the crater until they had gone back a few miles to a cross road, where they distributed some bombs on a field battery, bolted the teams, and left the gunners well down in the ditches beside their overturned guns and limbers.

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They had barely finished their performance when the first Flight was back again, but by this time the enemy had taken steps to upset the arrangements, and with a couple of machine-guns posted by the crater did their best to keep the traffic blockers out of reach of their targets. But the Flight would not be denied, and drove in through the storm of bullets, planted their bombs and gave the ground gunners a good peppering, and got away with no further damage than a lot of bullet holes in wings and fuselages. For the next hour the Germans fought to strengthen their anti-aircraft defences, bringing up more machine-guns and lining the ditches with riflemen, and the attackers got a reception that grew hotter and hotter with each attempt. But they held the road blocked, and effectually prevented any successful attempt to clear and use it, and in addition extended their attacks to further back and to other near-by roads, and to the railway. Crossing this line on one outward trip Dennis, still flying his bullet-riddled "Little Indian," saw a long and heavily-laden train toiling slowly towards the front. It was too good a chance to miss, so he swung and made for it, swooped down to within a hundred feet and dropped his bombs. Only one hit fairly, and although that blew one truck to pieces, it left it on the rails and the trains still crawling along. But the Flight followed his lead, and one of their bombs hit and so damaged the engine that a cloud of steam came pouring up from it and the train stopped. Another long train was panting up from the German rear, so the Flight swept along it and sprayed it liberally with machine-gun bullets, scaring the driver and fireman into leaping overboard, and bringing that train also to a standstill. Dennis headed back home to bring up a fresh stock of bombs, and, if he could, damage the train beyond possibility of moving, although he feared it was rather a large contract for a scout's light bombs. But on the way back he met a formation of big two-seater bombers carrying heavy bombs, and by firing a few rounds, diving athwart their course, and frantic wavings and pointings managed to induce them to follow him. Two of them did, and he led them straight back to the two trains. The driver and fireman of the second had resumed their duties and were trying to push the first train along when the bombers arrived, and planting one bomb fairly on the train, started a fire going, and with another which fell between two trucks blew them off the metals. The burning trucks were just beginning to blow up nicely as our machines raced for home and more ammunition.

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The next hour was mainly occupied with a fast fight against about twenty Hun machines evidently brought up to break up the road-blockers' game. The fight ended with three of the Huns being left crashed on the ground, one of ours going down in flames, and two struggling back across the lines with damaged machine and engine. Dennis was forced to leave his machine for one trip and borrow another while his damaged wings were replaced with new ones.

This time two Flights went out together, and while one engaged the Hun machines which still strove to drive them back, the other dived back on the road and again scattered the working party which struggled to clear the road. They had a hot passage, whirling down through a perfect tempest of machine-gun fire, and another machine was lost to it. Dennis struggled back across the lines with a shot-through radiator and an engine seizing up, was forced to land as best he could, wrecked his machine in the landing, crawled out of the wreckage, got back to the 'drome, and taking over his repaired machine went out again.

"That road's blocked," he said firmly, "and she's goin' to stay blocked." And he got his men to rig a sort of banner of fabric attached to a long iron picket-pin harpoon arrangement, painted a sentence in German on it, and took it up with him. They found the road still blocked, but columns of troops tramping in streams over the fields to either side. They spent a full hour scattering these and chasing them all over the landscape, had to break off the game to take on another fight with a crowd of Hun scouts, were joined by a stray Flight or two who saw the fight and barged into it, and after a mixed fast and furious "dog-fight" at heights running from anything under 300 feet to about as many inches, chased the Hun machines off. They came back in triumph down the deserted road and the empty fields, spattering the last of their rounds into the wrecked lorries and wagons still lying there, and then, as they passed over the piled wreckage at the crater, Dennis leaned out and dropped his streamered harpoon overboard. It plunged straight, hit, and stuck neatly upright displaying its legend clearly to anyone on the ground.

"What was on it?" said Dennis in answer to the questions of the Flight later on. "It was a notice in German. Maybe it was bad German, but it was a dash good notice. It said 'No Thoroughfare,' and I fancy we've taught the Huns what it means anyhow."

They, and a good many of their fellow squadrons, had, on this and on other road and rail Lines of Communication. They lost men and they lost machines; but the expected fresh attack on the line did not develop at dusk as foretold.

And that night the weary troops slept a solid life-renewing six hours.

XVI THRILLS

It was a bad day for kite-balloon work; first, because the air was not clear and the visibility was bad, and second, because there was an uncomfortable wind blowing, and the balloon was jerking and swaying and lurching at the end of its long tether, making it hard for the observers to keep a steady eye on such targets as they could pick up, and still harder to plot out angles and ranges on the map spread on the table sticking out from the side of the basket.

But hard fighting was going on, and the line was getting badly hammered, so that every balloon which could get up was in the air, and every observer was hunting for hostile battery positions, directing the fire of our guns on to them, and doing all they could to lessen the shell-fire that was pouring down on our infantry in their scanty trenches. At times a swirl of mist or cloud came down and shut off the view altogether from the balloons; but they hung on, and stayed aloft waiting for a clear and the chance to observe a few more rounds the moment they got it.

In one balloon the two observers had been sitting aloft for hours, after an early rising and a hurried breakfast. They had only been having fleeting targets at intervals as the haze cleared, but any danger of becoming bored was removed by the activities of a certain anti-balloon gun which did its best to shoot them down whenever it could get a sight on them, and by the excitement of watching out for an air attack whenever the low clouds came down and offered good cover to any Hun air man who cared to sneak over above them and chance an attack.

When a blanketing mist crawled down over the target again, one observer swore disgustedly and spoke down the telephone. The second kept watch round and listened to the one-sided conversation. When it finished, the first observer turned to the map. "This is unpleasant, Dixie," he said, pointing to a spot on it. "We've lost the hill out there."

"Lost the hill!" said Dixie disconsolately. "Don't talk to me about losing. I've lost my beauty sleep; I've lost interest; and if this cussed gas-bag doesn't stop behavin' like a cockle-boat in a tide-rip, I'm goin' to lose my breakfast next."

"It's clearing a little again," said the other cheerfully. "Hope so, anyway. I want to finish that battery off. Can you see what the line's doing?"

"Seems to be mainly occupied absorbin' Hun high explosive," said Dixie. "They don't look to be enjoyin' life down there any more'n I am —an' that's not enough to write to the papers about."

"There they go!" said the other. "Spot that flash? Let's get on with it. The P.B.I.^[6] down on the floor there want all the help we can give 'em."

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"You've said it, Boy," remarked Dixie, and turned to his spotting again.

Both were hard at work five minutes later trying to pick up the burst of their shells and pass their observations down to the guns, when there came a whistle and a howl and a loud, rending *c-r-r-rack!* somewhere above them.

"See here, Boy!" said Dixie. "This is gettin' too close to be pleasant, as the turkey said about Christmas. Can't we find where he's located and pitch a few back at him? I'm about tired of perchin' up here being made a cock-shy of."

"Wait a bit," said Boy. "I'm almost finished with this other battery. Maybe— Look out! Here she comes again!"

"Look out!" retorted Dixie, when the shell had howled up and burst in a cloud of filthy black smoke not more than a hundred yards out and on their level. "Pleasant prospect to look out at. Hades! Here's another. Say, Boy, this is gettin' too hot, as Casabianca said to the burnin' deck. He's got our elevation all right, and if we don't change it he'll get us next, for sure."

The closeness of the shot had been observed below, and, after a brief telephoned talk, the balloon was hauled rapidly down a thousand feet. Another shell crashed angrily above them as it went down. [Pg 199]

The next hour was a highly unpleasant one to the two observers. The "anti" gun was plainly out to down them, and kept pitching shell after shell with most discomfiting accuracy all around them. The winch below hauled them down and let them soar up to all sorts of varying elevations in strenuous endeavours to cheat the gunners, while the two observers did their best to pick up targets and lay their guns on to them, and the anti shells continued to scream up and burst about them. Several times the explosions were so close that it appeared certain the envelope must be holed, and the observers stopped work and waited with held breath to discover whether they were sinking and if they would have to jump for it and trust to their parachutes. But the balloon held up, and the two continued their shoot. It was unpleasant, highly unpleasant, but the hard-pressed infantry wanted all the assistance the guns could give them, and the guns wanted all the help air observation could give; so the observers held on, and chanced the shells, and kept their guns going on such targets as they could pick out of the dull light and grey mist.

It must be admitted that, as the time dragged past, the strain began to tell on the tempers of both men. The only respite they had from the continued torment of the anti-balloon gun was when the mist closed down on them; and then the strain was in no way lessened, but altered only to that of watching out for an attacking enemy. [Pg 200]

And that looked-for attack came at last. There came a sudden and urgent call on the telephone from below, and both men strained their eyes out through the lifting haze to the next balloon in the line and, with an instinctive fumbling at the attachment of their parachute harness, made ready to jump. But what they saw held them spellbound for a moment. The next balloon in the line was being attacked. It was over a quarter of a mile away; but the silhouette of a plane could clearly be seen swooping down on the defenceless balloon, flashes of fire spitting and streaking from his guns as he came. The two balloon-men leaped over the edge of the basket. One plunged down the regulation distance, his parachute fluttered open with a shimmer of gleaming silk that looked exactly like a bursting puff of white smoke, began to drop down in wide pendulum swings. But with the second man's parachute something plainly had gone wrong. Dixie and the Boy, clutching the sides of their basket and staring horror-stricken, gasped as they saw the little figure go plunging plummet-wise hundreds after hundreds of feet ... hundreds ... thousands ... and still the parachute followed in a solid unopened black dot. The balloon was near 3,000 feet up when the man jumped, and he and the parachute went down 3,000 feet, as a stone would drop down a well. Dixie and the Boy watched fascinated, tried to turn their heads or shut their eyes—and couldn't. [Pg 201]

When it was over, Dixie spoke hurriedly. "Come on, kid! Over! Or it's our turn next!"

But to watch a parachute fail to open, and the next instant to trust your life to the proper working of your own, is rather a severe test, and it is little wonder that both Dixie and the Boy waited another second watching and waiting before leaping over. They saw a lick of flame flicker along the top of the attacked balloon, die down, flash out again—and then caught sight of the Hun scout wheeling and heading for their balloon. The winch below was hauling down with frantic haste; but there is little hope of pulling down a K.B. 3,000 feet in anything like the time it takes a fast scout to cover 500 yards, and the Boy, taking a gulping breath, was on the point of jumping, when Dixie clutched at him and cried—croaked is a truer word—hoarsely at him. The new act of the drama was begun and ended almost quicker than the first. Out of the grey mist another plunging shape emerged, hurtling straight across the path of the enemy scout, its guns streaming fire, clattering a long postman-knock *tat-tat-tat-tat*. The enemy machine swerved violently, missed collision by bare yards, swept round, thrust his nose down and tried to dive away. But the other machine was after him and on him like a hawk after a pigeon, clinging to his tail and pelting fire at him. A gust of sooty black smoke puffed from the leading machine, a spurt of flashing fire followed, and it went diving headlong with flame and clouds of smoke trailing after. [Pg 202]

"Boy," said Dixie unsteadily, "I've mighty near had balloonin' enough for one morning's amusement!"

The telephone was calling, and the Boy turned to answer it. But before he spoke there rose to them again the shrieking rush of an approaching shell—a rush that rose to a shriek, a bellow, and ended in an appalling crash that sent the balloon reeling and jerking at its tether. Again both men

fingering the parachute harness buckled about them and stared up intent and uneasy at the swaying envelope above them. Before they could decide whether it was hit or not another wailing yowl heralded another shell, another rending crash, another leaping cloud of black smoke just below them, the shriek and whistle of flying fragments up past them, told of another deadly close burst. Choking black smoke swirled up on them, and the Boy began to shout hurriedly into his telephone.

"Tell 'em the basket's shot full of holes," said Dixie, "and my parachute's got a rip in it big enough to put your fist in. And tell——"

He broke off suddenly. The pitching, tossing, jerking of the tethered balloon had changed to a significant smoothness and dead calm. The Boy dropped his telephone receiver. "Dixie," he gasped, "we're—we're adrift!"

Dixie took one swift look over the edge of the basket. "You've said it," he drawled, "an' that ends the shoot, anyway." [Pg 203]

"Should we jump for it?" asked the Boy hurriedly.

"If you feel like it, go ahead," said Dixie, "but not for mine, thank'ee. My parachute's shot up to glory, an', anyhow, we're driftin' back over our own lines. I'd as soon stay with her till she bumps."

"I think she's dropping," said the Boy. "The shell that cut the cable, maybe, holed the gas-bag, and she'll come down with a run."

"We're comin' down all right," said Dixie philosophically, "but not fast enough to hurt. You jump if you like. I'm goin' to hang on and pull the rippin'-cord when she's near the floor."

But the remembrance of that other observer, falling like a bullet beneath an unopened parachute, was too close to encourage the Boy to leap, and the two waited, hanging over the edge of the basket, watching the ground drift past beneath them, trying to gauge how fast the balloon was coming down. It fell slowly, very slowly, at first, losing height so gradually that it was hard even to say it was losing. It began to look as if the two were in for an easy and comfortable descent without leaving the balloon. Then plainly the rate of descent began to quicken. The ground began to swirl up to them at an alarming speed; the balloon, which had up to now been drifting so smoothly that its movement could hardly be felt, started to lurch down in sickening swerves and drops and swings.

"Boy," said Dixie seriously, "I dunno you hadn't better chance it an' jump. Looks like this ol' sausage was punctured bad, an' I'm gettin' to think she's goin' to phut out quick an' go down wallop. S'pose you jump, an' I hang on to her. My parachute——" [Pg 204]

"Take mine," said the Boy quickly. "I'd as soon stay with her."

"Nothin' doin'," answered Dixie. "Parachute jumps is no popular pastime of mine at the moment, an' I don't mind ownin' to it."

So both waited, Dixie with his hand on the ripping-cord, both with their heads over the side, their eyes fixed on the passing ground. There was a strong wind blowing, and, as they came closer to the ground, they began to discover the surprising speed at which they were travelling, to feel a good deal uneasy about the crash with which they must hit solid earth. The balloon was falling now at dangerous speed, and, worse, was coming down in a series of wild swings and swayings.

"The wood!" shouted Dixie, pointing out and down. "Better crash her in it, eh?"

"Go on," answered the Boy briefly.

The next minute was rather a nightmare—a wild impression of a sickening plunge, of tearing crackling noises, of breaking branches, of a basket jerking, tossing, leaping, falling, bouncing and falling again, and finally coming to rest amongst the crashing tree-tops, hanging there a moment, tearing free and, falling and bringing up completely with a bump amongst the lower branches, while the envelope settled and sagged and flopped in another crescendo of cracklings and rippings and tearings on top of the trees. The two clung for dear life to their basket; were jerked and wrenched almost from their grip a dozen times; hung on expecting every moment to be their last; felt the basket at last settle and steady, and cease to do its best to hurl them overboard. [Pg 205]

They climbed over, caught stray cords, and slid thankfully to firm ground. "Did it ever strike you, Boy," said Dixie, "what a pleasant thing a lump of plain solid dirt under your feet can be?"

That ended their adventure so far as the air was concerned. But it cost them an hour's tramp to find a main road and discover where they were; and another hour to tramp along it to a fair-sized town where there might be an inn or hotel. A mile-stone on the roadside gave them their whereabouts and surprised them by the distance they had drifted back.

They set their faces east and began a steady tramp. The road was rather crowded with a stream of French civilians all moving west, and, as they walked, the crowd grew closer and more solid and showed plainer signs of haste and anxiety. There were no troops on the road; it was wholly filled with civilians—women and children and very old men for the best part, all laden with bundles or pulling or pushing or driving vehicles of every sort and description. There was a cow dragged behind an old woman and a child, a huge bed-mattress bundled and roped on its back; a perambulator piled high with clothing and blankets, and with a baby nested down in the middle of the pile; an old man leading a young child and carrying a bird-cage with two full-sized chickens crammed into it; a decrepit cart and still more decrepit pony, with a load of furniture that might have filled a pantehnicon; a family, apparently of mother and five children of descending ages [Pg 206]

and sizes, but each with a bundle hugged close; an old bent woman tottering a step at a time on two sticks. All trailed along wearily in a slow drifting mass; and all, except the very young children, were casting uneasy glances over their shoulders, were evidently struggling to put as many paces as possible between them and their starting-point.

Dixie and the Boy knew well what it all meant—merely the evacuation of another village that had come within shell-range of the Hun, or was near enough to the shifting battle-line to make it wise to escape before all in it were engulfed, made prisoner, and set to slavery in the fields on starvation rations for Hun task-masters, or, worse, deported, torn apart, child from mother, weak from strong, helpless from helpers, and deported to far-off factories or the terrors of an unknown fate. The French and Belgians have learned their lesson—learned it slow and hard and bitterly—that it is bad to be driven to leave all they own on earth, but infinitely worse to stay and still lose all, and more in the "all" than mere earthly possessions.

Dixie and the Boy tramped slowly against the tide of refugees and drew at last to near the town from which the stream was pouring. It was all very pitiful, very cruel. But worse was to come. The road was one of those long main national route highways common in France, running straight as a ruler for miles on end, up hill and down dale. The roofs of the village were half a mile away, and suddenly, over these roofs, an aeroplane came skimming. It flew low, and it flew in a bee-line along above the wide straight road; and as it flew there sounded louder and plainer the unmistakable *ac-ac-ac-ac* of a machine-gun; there was plainly to be seen a stream of spitting fire flashing from the flying shape. It swept nearer, and the clatter of its guns sounded now through a rising wail, a chorus of shrieks and calls and sharp screams, and the cries of frightened or hurt children. The gun shut off abruptly as the machine swooped up; burst out again in a long savage tattoo as it curved over and came roaring down in a steep dive. In the road there was a pandemonium of screams and cries: a wild turmoil of figures rushing hither and thither, flinging down into the ditches, scrambling over them and fleeing in terror out over the open fields. As the machine dived the two observers could see the streaking lines of the tracer bullets, hear the sharp cracks and smacks of explosives hitting the ground—and other things. They could only stand and curse in impotent rage, and the Hun machine, with a rush and a roar, spat a last handful of bullets over and past them and was gone on down the road. The two stood and watched its graceful soaring and plunging, listened to the steady rattle of its guns, swore savagely again, then turned to help some of the shrieking women and crying children about them. But next moment another distant *tat-tat-tat* made them look up to see another black-crossed machine, and then a third, leap into sight over the village and come tearing down above the road. Dixie and the Boy both filled the few intervening seconds trying to hustle the fear-stricken villagers off the road down into the cover of the ditches, behind carts—anywhere that might be out of reach of the bullets. But the newcomers had gone one better than bullets for fiendish destruction. As the first one approached a black blob fell away from it, and next second there was a rending crash, a leaping cloud of smoke and dust whirling and eddying up from the road. The machine roared over and past, with her machine-gun hailing bullets down the road, and far down the road came another billowing cloud of smoke and the crash of another bomb. The third machine followed close, also machine-gunning hard and also splashing bombs down at intervals, one falling with horrible effect fairly in a little crowd of women and children clustered under and behind a country cart. The cart was wrecked, and the horse and half of the women and children....

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The two observers gave what help they could, their faces white and their hands shaking and their ears tingling as they worked. The whole scene after the passing of the destroyers was heart-rending and pitiful and far too horrible for description. And the cruel part of it was that it was all such useless destruction, such wanton savagery, such a brutal and wilful slaughter of the innocents. The low-fliers were too close down for there to be any possibility of their not knowing well what they were shooting and bombing. There was not a sign of a uniform on the road; it was packed with what clearly and unmistakably was a crowd of refugees, of helpless women and children. It was hard to imagine what the Huns hoped to gain, what object they could have had in such indiscriminate murder; but, object or no object, its happening is a matter of cold history.

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It was growing late when the two observers, continuing their journey, saw a distant aerodrome, made their way across the fields to it, explained themselves, and were offered dinner first, and then transport back to their unit.

The two told their tale of the day while they waited with the Squadron for dinner to be served. It was dark by this time, and an annoying delay came before dinner in the shape of an order to put all lights out, and in the droning approach of some enemy bombers. They passed somewhere overhead, and the machine-gun defences fired a few streams of ineffectual bullets up at them. One bomb whistled and shrieked down and burst noisily a few hundred yards from the 'drome and others farther afield. The pilots and the two observers were collected again just outside the door of the mess listening to the distant drone of the Hun bombers, watching the flicker and jump of gun flashes in the horizon and a red glare that rose in a wide steady glow from one or two points. It was an unpleasant reminder of the trying time the Army was having, of the retreat they had made, of the stores and dumps that had been fired to prevent the enemy taking possession of them.

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One of the pilots—a youngster of under twenty, with two wound stripes on his cuff—laughed suddenly. "That Hun bomber just about rounds off a complete day of frightfulness for you two fellows," he said. "You have had a lively time, one way and another."

"We have," said Dixie. "I've had thrills enough for this day to fill a boy's adventure library full an' overflowin'."

"Too many for me," said the Boy, "when I think of watching that man go down with an unopened parachute."

"It was worse seeing that Hun come down the road," said Dixie, "and bein' able to do nothin' to stop him. An' when I think of that mother with a dead baby, an' that kid—a girl—about five years old, that an explosive bullet—" And he stopped abruptly.

There was silence for a minute, broken by the young pilot.

"Speaking of thrills," he said, and laughed again, "there was a paragraph—some of you will remember how we grinned over it. Wonder if I could find the paper? It would tickle you diving ballooning especially. I'll see," and he disappeared into the mess-room and began to hunt round with an electric torch.

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He found the paper and brought it out and read the paragraph by the light of his torch. It was headed "60,000 Thrills," and it ran:^[7] "A Blanktown cable, received by the Chief Representative for Blanctown, states: At an aquatic carnival, held by the Big Stone Swimming Club at Light Falls, there was an attendance of 60,000. The proceeds go to the Soldier's Fund. Prince Walkiyick—known as Alec Walker the Middle Seas sprint champion—dived from a height of 200 feet into the water. He was two seconds in the air and thrilled the spectators with his exploit."

"Good Lord!" said the Boy helplessly.

"Thrilled the spectators," repeated Dixie. "*Thrilled* ... well, if that doesn't take it."

The young pilot was laughing again, long and immoderately, and some of the others, looking at the two observers' faces, had to join him.

"Sixty thousand, you said," the Boy was beginning, when he was interrupted by a distant *boom—boom—boom*.

"Huns bombing Blanqueville again," said the young pilot. "More women and kid casualties, I suppose."

Dixie was cursing, low but very intensely. "If those spectators are out for thrills—" he said, and looked to where a red glow was beginning to rise in the sky over Blanqueville.

FOOTNOTES:

[6] Poor Blanky Infantry.

[7] Except that names are altered, the paragraph is reprinted here word for word as it appeared in a daily paper and was read by thousands of men in the line at the time of the first retreat in the spring of 1918. I have the cutting now.—B. C.

XVII

THE SEQUEL

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There was a strike in one of the aircraft factories; in fact, there were simultaneous strikes in many, if not most, of the factories, although for the moment this story is concerned only with one of them—or rather with its sequel. At the front they knew little or nothing of the strike, although, unfortunately, they knew a good deal of the result. On the other hand, the workers probably know nothing of what their strikes may mean to the front, and this is what I want to tell them. They have, it is true, been publicly told by a member of the Government that the strikes resulted in a waste of so many hours' work, a shortage or reduction of output of some hundreds of machines, and so on; but these things are a matter of cold figures. If they are told the result in flesh and blood, they may look at a strike in rather a different light.

One Squadron in France first "felt the breeze" of the strike in a drying up of the stream of "spares" and parts that are constantly required for repair, and the mechanics having to make good this shortage by many night hours' sheer hard labour, by working long shifts when they ought to have been sleeping, by hacking out with cold chisel and hammer, and turning upon overworked lorry-shop lathes, and generally making by hand what the idle machines in the factories should have been punching out in dozens on a stamping machine, or turning comfortably on automatic lathes.

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That was a minor item of the strike's sequel. Another and more serious item in the same Squadron was that one or two machines, which had been marked off for return to the depots and complete overhaul and setting up, had to be kept in commission and hard at work. This was unpleasantly risky, because at this time the Squadron was very actively engaged in the preparation for a coming Push, and the machines were putting in even more than a fair average of flying hours. The life of a machine is strictly limited and countable in these "flying hours," and after a certain life machine and engine, with constant wear, and despite regular and careful looking after by the Squadron mechanics, come to be so strained and shaky that for safe flying they must have such a thorough overhaul and tuning up that it almost amounts to a rebuilding.

One particular machine in the Squadron—the old "Gamecock"—had for some time back been getting rather rickety and was to have been replaced before the anticipated heavy operations of

the air activity that would open the way for the Push. One out of those hundreds of the strike's lost machines should have come to the Squadron to release the "Gamecock," but, of course, when it did not come there was nothing for it but to keep the "Gamecock" flying. She managed to get through her share in the work without any further trouble than a still further straining, and an engine which for all the labour lavished on it grew more and more unreliable. She carried on up to the actual morning of the Push, and her pilot and observer, the Flight and Squadron Commanders alike heaved sighs of relief to think that the rush was nearly over, that there would be no further urgent need to risk her in the air. But as it happened their relief was premature, and there was still a "show" and a serious one for the "Gamecock" to take a part in.

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The Squadron was an artillery observing one, whose work it was to fly over the enemy's lines and observe the fire of our batteries on selected targets, and, "spotting" where their shells fell, wireless back to our guns the necessary corrections of aim to bring them on the target. The night before the Push a reconnoitring Squadron had discovered a fresh group of enemy batteries, and Headquarters allotted the destruction of these to various batteries in conjunction with certain artillery flying Squadrons. The "Gamecock's" Squadron was included, and since there was already a heavy morning's work portioned out to the Squadron, there was nothing for it but to detail the "Gamecock" to help handle the fresh job.

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"Do it?" said her pilot scornfully in answer to a doubting question from the observer. "Course she can do it, and a dozen jobs on top of it. There's nothing wrong with her."

"Oh no, nothing whatever," said the observer sarcastically. "You'd claim there was nothing wrong with her if her engine turned round once a week, or if her planes were warped like a letter S. How many times did her engine cut out to-day? And she was rattling like a bag of old bones when you were stunting her to dodge those 'Archies,' till I thought she was going to shake herself into the scrap-heap right away."

"Rats," said the pilot stoutly. "She's strong as a house."

The Flight Commander evidently did not agree with him, to judge by the conversation he had that night with the C.O. "I hate sending the 'Gamecock,'" he said. "But I suppose there's no help for it."

"Afraid not," said the Major. "Every machine had enough to do before, and this new job will give them all their hands full. We just *must* send every machine we've got."

The Flight Commander sighed. "All right. I do wish they'd replaced her though, as they promised to do a week ago. Wonder why they haven't."

"Well, a machine isn't made as easy as knitting a sock, you know," said the Major. "I dare say it's a hard job to keep up to the wastage. Four machines we've had crashed and replaced ourselves in this last week. I suppose those people in the factories can't keep up the pace, even working night and day." (The Squadrons knew little or nothing of the strikes then. What they and the Major would have said if they had known, what they did say when they came to know, is a different story—*quite* a different story.)

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There was just one hour of light before the time set for the attack, the "zero hour" when the infantry would go over the top, and that hour was filled with a final intensive bombardment that set the earth and air quivering like a beaten drum. The "Gamecock" and the rest of the Squadron were up and over the lines with the first glint of light, and the fighting scouts were out with them and busily scrapping with any Hun machines that came near or tried to interfere with the artillery and reconnoitring machines.

The "Gamecock" waddled off to her appointed place, and after picking up the targets with a good deal of difficulty, owing to the billowing clouds of shell smoke and dust, and getting in wireless touch with the first battery, the observer waited till the machine was in a favourable position to let him see the shot and signalled the battery to fire. For half an hour the "Gamecock" circled steadily with a fairly heavy "Archie" fire breaking about her, and the observer picking up one target after another and putting the guns on to it. As fast as he signalled back that a direct hit had been obtained he went on to the next target and observed for another battery, while the battery he had just finished with proceeded to pour a hurricane of high explosive on the spot it had "registered," and to blot the enemy battery there out of active existence.

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Then the "Gamecock's" work was interrupted. A couple of Hun scouts dropped like plummets out of the clouds and dived straight for the "Gamecock," their machine-guns rattling rapidly as they came. The observer at the first sound of their shots whipped round from where he was hanging overside watching his target below, glanced up and grabbed for his machine-gun. He hastily jerked the muzzle in the direction of the coming Huns and ripped off a burst of fire, and at the same moment heard the sharp hiss of their passing bullets, saw the streaking flashes of fire from their tracers flame by. One hostile finished his dive in a sharp upward "zoom" just before he came down to the level of the "Gamecock," whirled round in a climbing turn, plunged straight down again at the "Gamecock," opening fire as he came, and before reaching her level repeated his tactics of zooming up and turning. The other Hun hurtled down past the "Gamecock's" tail, turned under her, and whirled upward, firing at her underbody. The observer ceased fire a moment and tapped back a message on his wireless to the battery saying the last round was "unobserved." He used the code of course which condenses messages into one or two Morse letters, and knowing that the battery would not fire until he passed the word that he was ready again, he turned his attention to driving off the two machines that plunged firing at them. The underneath one was practically concealed from him, so he first directed a carefully aimed burst of fire on the top one as once more it dived on them and its bullets whipped flaming past. He put

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in another burst as the Hun spun up and away again, then leaned out over the side and just caught a glimpse of the lower machine driving up at them. He swung his machine-gun round on its turret mounting and, thrusting the muzzle down, rattled off a score of rounds. At the same moment he heard the crack and rip of bullets tearing through their wings, and heard also the sharp *rat-tat-tat* of the overhead enemy's gun reopening fire. The observer swung his gun upward again, took a long breath, and directed careful aim on the body whirling down on them. He realised that the game was too one-sided, that with two fast enemies attacking in concert from above and below, it was merely a matter of minutes for the "Gamecock" to be sunk, unless he could down one of the two hostiles first. He opened fire carefully and steadily.

Up to now the pilot had been unable to take any part in the fight, because his gun only fired directly forward and the Huns had taken care to keep astern of him. But now he suddenly throttled down and checked the speed of the "Gamecock" by thrusting her nose up and "stalling" her. The move answered, and next instant the upper machine swept forward and up and ahead of them. The pilot opened his engine full out and drove for his enemy, pelting fire upon her. His bullets went straight and true to their mark, and the Hun, hearing them tear through his fabrics, dipped over and plunged hastily down a full thousand feet. The "Gamecock" heaved herself over and dived after him with the pilot's gun still going. Almost immediately he heard the observer's gun firing, and, stopping his own, glanced over his shoulder and saw the full width of the other Hun's wings wheeling close astern of them. Immediately he checked his dive and flattened out to give his observer a fair shot, and knew instantly from the long-sustained rattle of the observer's gun that the chance had been seen and taken.

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He leaned out and peered down for sight of the other machine, and then—his heart jumped at the unmistakable sound and throb—his engine missed, picked up, missed again, cut out, and stopped completely. The "Gamecock's" speed, held as she was at the moment on a slightly upward slant, began to fall away, and the pilot hurriedly thrust her nose down and went off in a long glide, while he tried desperately every device he knew to get his engine started again. There was no sign of the petrol leaking, so he knew the tanks were not hit, but on the off-chance he switched on to the emergency tank—without result. Oil pressure was all right, and—he broke off to glance round as the rattle of fire came again to his ear. His observer was standing up blazing at one machine which swooped after them closing in on the one side, while the other climbed and swung in from the other. The pilot groaned. There was just a last faint chance that they might manage to glide without engine back over the line, provided the observer could stand off the two attackers and prevent the "Gamecock" being shot to pieces. The chance was so small that it was hardly worth taking, but since it was the last and only chance the pilot swept round until his nose was for home, gave the "Gamecock" a good downward plunge to get her speed up, eased into a glide, and turned his attention to the engine again. The two hostiles, supposing his engine hit or at least seeing it out of action, leaped after and past the "Gamecock," and, whirling inward, each poured a burst of fire upon her. They were repeating the tactic, which shielded them from the observer's fire, and the "Gamecock's" chances began to fade to nothingness, when the game took a fresh turn. A scarlet-nosed grey shape flashed up out of nowhere apparently, past the "Gamecock"—as swiftly past her as if she were standing still—and hurtled straight at the nearest Hun, spitting a stream of fire upon him. The Hun, with the bullets hailing and cracking about him, checked and wheeled; but without a break the stream of drumming bullets beat and tore in under his fuselage, and just as the red and grey scout zoomed up and over him he dived, a spurt of fire flashed out from him, and he whirled down out of the fight with black smoke pouring from him in clouds. The other hostile spun round and streaked off, with our victorious scout tearing after him. And at that moment the "Gamecock's" engine sputtered, stopped, spat and sputtered again, picked up and droned out in full song.

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The observer seized the communicating 'phone and shouted into it. "Are we damaged, d'you know?"

"Lord knows," the pilot shouted back. "She seems to be running all right though. What next?"

"Back where we broke off the shoot," yelled the observer. "Three batteries to put 'em on yet; and look at the time."

The pilot glanced at his clock. It was nearing the "zero hour," the moment when the infantry would be swarming out into the open No Man's Land—and into the fire of those enemy batteries upon which the "Gamecock" had not yet directed our guns. Both pilot and observer knew how much it meant to have those hostile batteries silenced. The word had come from Headquarters and had passed down to the Squadron that it was very certain, from the fact that the batteries had been kept concealed and had not fired up to now, they were meant to be used for repelling the attack, that they would be reserved and unmasked only when the infantry began their advance, that they would then unloose a tempest of destroying fire on the attackers.

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And because both pilot and observer had served a time in the infantry before they joined the Flying Corps, they knew just what it meant to the infantry to have such a fire to make way against, and both turned anxiously back to complete their job.

Down below the ground was hidden under a drifting haze of smoke and dust, and the "Gamecock" circled slowly while pilot and observer searched for their objectives. They found the other spots on which they had directed the guns—spots which now were marked by whirling, eddying clouds through which the bursting high-explosive still flamed red at quick intervals. From there at last they found the next target, and the observer hastily signalled back to his battery to fire. The engine was giving trouble again, missing every now and then, running slowly and laboriously, while the pilot fiddled and fretted about throttle and spark and petrol feed and tried to coax her

into better running. The observer failed to catch the puffing smoke of the battery's first shot and signalled the code to fire again. Before the next shot came, a stutter of machine-gun fire broke out overhead, and pilot and observer glanced quickly up at the clouds that drifted over and hid the fighters. The machine-gun fire rose and fell in gusts, and then out of the cloud 1,000 feet up a machine whirled and spun down past them, recovered an instant and shot eastward in a steep gliding plunge, fell away suddenly, and crashed amongst the trenches.

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Immediately after her there fell out of the sky a cluster of machines, wheeling and circling and diving at each other like a swarm of fighting jackdaws. The "Gamecock" suddenly found herself involved in a scrimmaging mix-up without her crew knowing who or what was in it. A pair of wings, with thick black crosses painted on them, whizzed across the "Gamecock's" bows, and the pilot promptly ripped off a quick burst of fire at her as she passed. "Never mind them," shouted the observer, "get on with the shoot," and leaned out from his cockpit to watch for the fall of the next shell. The "Gamecock" resumed her steady circling, while the fight raged round and over her and drifted in wheeling rushes clear of her and away quarter, half a mile to the south.

But they were not to be left unmolested. A Hun two-seater dropped out of the fight and raced at the "Gamecock," putting in a burst of fire from his bow gun as he came, wheeling round the "Gamecock's" stern and pouring bullets on her from the observer's gun. The hostile was tremendously fast, and the "Gamecock" with her crotchety engine was no match for him. The observer, for all his anxiety to finish the shoot, was forced to defend himself, and he turned to his gun with black rage in his heart. "Brute," he growled, and loosed a stream of bullets at the shape astern. "I'd like to down you just for your beastly interference," and his gun rattled off another jet of bullets. The enemy swooped down and under the "Gamecock's" tail with his gun hammering viciously. The pilot lifted her nose so as to sink the tail planes and rudder clear of the observer's line of fire and give him a shot, but the "Gamecock" had barely speed enough for the manœuvre, lost way, stalled badly, slid backward with a rush, and plunged down.

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They were dangerously low for such a fall, and the pilot waited heart in mouth for the instant when she would right herself enough for him to resume control. He caught her at last and straightened her out, and at the same instant her enemy following her down dived past and up under her, where he was out of reach of the observer's gun. The pilot wrenched her round in a narrow circle that brought her pivoting on her wing-tip, and allowed the observer to look and point his gun straight overside and directly down on the enemy. He got off one short burst, and this time saw some of his tracer bullets break in sparks of fire about the fuselage and pilot's cockpit. They did damage too, evidently, because the Hun broke off the action, drove off full pelt to the eastward just as the "Gamecock" dropped in a dangerous side-slip. Again her pilot caught and steadied her, and began to climb her slowly and staggeringly to a higher level. Those last wrenching turns and plunges had been too severe a strain on her shaken frame, and now, as she climbed, both pilot and observer could hear and feel a horrible jarring vibration. They were not more than 3,000 feet up, but the engine threatened to refuse to lift them higher, and when it choked and stuttered and missed again, the "Gamecock" shivered and almost stalled once more. The pilot hurriedly thrust her nose down and swept down in a long rush to pick up flying speed again. "Get on," he yelled back. "Get on with your shoot. I daren't try'n climb her, and there's no stunt left in her if another Hun comes. A brace parted in that last scrap"—and he turned to his engine again, and swung the "Gamecock" in a wide circle.

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Once more the observer signalled his battery to fire. This time there was no difficulty in finding his target, because the "zero hour" had come; there were little dots swarming out over the No Man's Land below, and the hostile batteries the "Gamecock" was looking for were flaming out in rapid sheets of vivid fire, and their shells pounding down amongst our infantry. The "Gamecock" circled slowly over the batteries, losing height steadily, because her pilot had to keep her nose down so that the glide would help out her failing engine and maintain her flying speed. Her observer was picking out shell-burst after shell-burst with greater and greater difficulty in the reek below, signalling back the corrections to the guns.

By now the "Gamecock" was low enough to come within range of the rifles and machine-guns turned up on her. The batteries below her knew that she was "spotting" on them, and did everything possible to knock her out; while their gunners, having at last got the word of the beginning of the attack, opened a furious rate of fire barraging the No Man's Land. The observer above them saw those streaming flashes, and knowing what they meant, stuck doggedly to his task, although now the bullets were hissing close and thick about them, and the windage from the rushing shells of our own heavy guns and the air-eddies from the guns firing below set the "Gamecock" rocking and bumping and rolling like a toy boat in a cross tide. The observer felt a jarring crash under his hand, a stab of pain in his fingers and up his arm. The wireless instrument had been smashed by a bullet as he tapped a signal. He shouted to the pilot, and the pilot slowly turned a white, set face to him and called feebly into the 'phone. "Hit" was the only word the observer caught; and "Get her back as far as you can and shove her down anywhere," he shouted instantly in answer. The "Gamecock" swung slowly round and lurched drunkenly back towards their own lines. The observer looked at his clock. It was already past the "zero hour."

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Down below in the front line the battalions had waited for that moment, crouched in the bottom of their trenches, listening to the rolling thunder of the guns, glancing at watches, examining and re-examining rifles and bombs and equipment. One battalion in the Elbow Trench had been shelled rather heavily about dawn, but the fire had died away before the moment for the attack, smothered probably by the greater volume of our artillery fire. At last a word passed down the trench, and the men began to clamber out and form into line beyond their own wire. They could see nothing of the enemy trench, although it was only little more than 150 yards away. Its outline

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was hidden in a thick haze of smoke, although its position was still marked by spouting columns of smoke and flying earth and débris from our bursting shells. But exactly on the "zero hour" these shell-bursts ceased and over the heads of the infantry the lighter shrapnel began to rip and crash, pouring a torrent of bullets along the earth in front of the line as it started to move forward.

There was little rifle or machine-gun fire to oppose the advance, and although many shells were passing over, only odd and ill-directed ones were dropping in the open No Man's Land. It began to look as if the steadily-moving line was going to reach the first trench with very little loss. But suddenly, with sharp whooping rushes, a string of shells fell in a precise line exactly across the path of the advancing battalion; and before their springing smoke-clouds had fairly risen, came another crashing and crackling burst of shells along the same line; and then there fell a thick curtain of smoke and fire along the battalion's front, a curtain out of which the rapidly falling shells flamed and winked in red and orange glares, and the flying splinters screeched and whined and whirred.

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The left half of the battalion came through fairly lightly, for the barrage was mainly across the path of the right half, but that right half was simply shot to pieces. The bursting shells caught the men in clumps, the ragged splinters cut others down one by one in rapid succession. The line pressed on doggedly, stumbling and fumbling through the acrid smoke and fumes, stunned and dazed by the noise, the crashing shock of the detonations, the quick-following splashes of blinding light that flamed amongst them. The line pressed on and came at last—what was left of it—through the wall of fire. Behind it the torn ground was littered thick with huddled khaki forms, with dead lying still and curiously indifferent to the turmoil about them, with wounded crawling and dragging themselves into shell-craters in desperate but vain attempts to escape the shells and shrieking fragments that still deluged down from the sky amongst them. The remains of the line staggered on, the men panting and gasping and straining their eyes eagerly for sight of the parapet ahead that marked their first objective, that would give them cover from the raging shell-fire, that would need nothing more than a few minutes' bomb and bayonet work to make their own.

They were just taking vague comfort, such of them as had thought for anything but the trench ahead and the hope of clearing the deadly No Man's Land, at finding themselves through that barraging wall of flame and rending steel, when the yelling rushes of the overhead shells paused a moment, to burst out again with full renewed violence next instant as the enemy guns shortened their range. The barrage had dropped back, the curtain of fire was again rolling down, spouting and splashing and flaming across the path of the shattered battalion. The broken line pushed on and into the barrage again ... and from it this time emerged no more than a scattered handful of dazed and shaken men. But the parapet was close ahead now, and the handful took fresh grip of their rifles and ran at it. Some fifty men perhaps reached it; the rest of a full 500 were left lying on the open behind them, waiting for the stretcher bearers—or the burying parties.

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The "Gamecock's" pilot managed to bring her back into the lines of our old trenches and pancaked her, dropped her flat and neatly into a thicket of barbed wire that clutched and rent her to ribbons, but held her from turning over.

The observer clambered, and the pilot was lifted down from the cockpits and taken to a dug-out where a First Aid Post had been established. The Post and the trenches round it were crowded with wounded men. The pilot was attended to—he was already far spent with two bad body wounds—and the observer while he had his hand dressed asked for news of the attack. "Don't know much," said the doctor, "except that my own battalion had a bad doing. Left half got over with little loss but the right half had to go through a barrage and was just about wiped out. These"—with a jerk of his head to the casualties—"are some of 'em. But most are out there—killed."

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"I saw the barrage as we came back," said the observer bitterly. "Across the Elbow Trench? Yes, and about the only bit of the whole line they managed to barrage properly. And they could only do that because we couldn't out the guns that laid it down. Couldn't do our job properly and counter-battery them because we were up on a crock of a 'bus that the Huns could fly rings round, and that let us down into rifle range and got him"—nodding his head at the recumbent pilot—"his dose. All just for want of a good machine under us."

"Chuck it, old man," said the pilot faintly. "The old 'Gamecock' did her best ... and stood to it pretty well considering."

"Mighty well," said the observer hastily, suddenly aware that he had spoken louder than he meant. "I'm not grouching. It's a sheer matter of luck after all. How d'you feel now? Any easier?"

But he was wrong. It was not luck. It was the Sequel. The doubtfully efficient machine sent on dangerous work, the unsilenced batteries and high-explosive barrage, the hundreds of dead men lying out in the open, the "Gamecock's" pilot dying slowly there in the trampled mud of the dug-out under the flickering candles' light were all part of the Sequel—a sequel, of which the aircraft strikers had never thought, to a strike of which the dead and dying men had never even heard.

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"We were battered all round the ring at first,
We were hammered to hell and back,
But we stood to old Frightful Fritz's worst
And we came for another whack.
Now the fight's swung round; now we're winning fast,

And we'll make it a knock-out too,
If Home doesn't let us down at the last,
If our backers will see it through."

XVIII THE RAID-KILLERS

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The stout man in the corner of the First Smoker put down his paper as the train ran through the thinning outskirts of the town and into patches of suburban greenery. It was still daylight, but already the pale circle of an almost full moon was plain to be seen. "Ha," said the stout man, "perfect night!" An elderly little man in the opposite corner also glanced out of the window. "Perfect," he agreed, "bit too perfect. Full moon, no wind, clear sky, no clouds. All means another raid to-night, I suppose." The full compartment for the next few minutes bubbled with talk of raids, and Gothas, and cellars, and the last raid casualties, and many miraculous escapes. There were many diverse opinions on all these points, but none on the vital one. It was accepted by all that it was a perfect night for a raid and that the Gothas would be over—certain—some time before morning.

Dusk was just beginning to fall on an aerodrome in the British lines when the big black machines were rolled out of the hangars and lined up in a long row on the grass. Pilots and Observers, already in flying kit, were moving about amongst the machines and watching the final touches put to the preparations for the trip. The Squadron Commander stood talking to the Pilot and Observer of the machine which was to lead the way. He glanced at his watch for the tenth time in as many minutes. "You've got a perfect night for it, anyhow," he said. "Topping," agreed the Pilot. "And just as perfect for the Huns' trip to England," said the Observer. "Wonder how H.Q. are so sure about them starting on a raid from Blankenquerke 'drome to-night," remarked the Pilot. The Squadron Commander grinned. "They're certain about a heap of things," he said. "They don't always come off, maybe, but they get on the mark wonderfully well as a rule. Anyhow, they were dead positive about the reliability of the information to-night."

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"Wouldn't take a witch or an Old Moore to make a prophecy on it to-night," said the Observer with a laugh. "Knowing how full out the old Hun has been lately to strafe London, and seeing what a gorgeous night it is, I'd have made a prophecy just as easy as H.Q. I'd even have made a bet, and that's better evidence."

"Ought to be getting ready," said the Squadron Commander, with another look at his watch. "Plenty of time, but we can't afford to risk any hitch. You want to be off at the tick of the clock."

"Be an awful swindle, certainly, if we got there and found the birds flown," said the Observer.

"Don't fret," said the C.O. "The Lord ha' mercy on 'em if they try to take off while old Jimmy's lot are keeping tab on 'em, or before it's too dark for him to see them move."

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There were a few more not-for-publication remarks on the usefulness of "Jimmy's lot," and the effectiveness of the plans for "keeping tab" on the German 'drome, and Pilot and Observer turned to climb to their places. "All things considered," said the Observer, "I'm dashed if I'd fancy those Huns' job these times. We give 'em rather a harrying one way and another. Must be wearin' to the nerves."

The Pilot grunted. "What about ours?" he said.

The Observer laughed. "Ours," he said, and, as the joke sank in, laughed again more loudly, and climbed to his place still chuckling.

For the next ten minutes the air vibrated to the booming roar of the engines as they ran up, were found in good order, and eased off. The dusk was creeping across the sky and blurring the trees beyond the aerodrome, and overhead the moon was growing a deeper and clearer yellow. The Squadron Commander walked along the line and spoke a few words to the different Pilots sitting ready and waiting. He walked back to the Leader's machine and nodded his head. "All ready," he shouted; "just on time. Push off soon as you like now—and good luck."

The quiet "ticking over" of the propeller speeded up and up until the blades dissolved into quivering rays of faint light; the throaty hum deepened, grew louder and louder, stayed a moment on the fullest note, sank again, and as the Pilot signalled and the chocks were jerked clear rose roaring again, while the machine rolled lumbering and lurching heavily out into the open, its navigation lights jerking and jumping as it merged into the darkness. The lights swung in a wide curve, slowed and steadied, began to move off at increasing speed to where a pin-point of light on the ground gave the pilot a course to steer, lifted smoothly and on a long slant, and went climbing off into the dark.

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The moonlight was clear and strong enough for men on the ground to see all sorts of details of the machines still waiting, the mechanics about them, the hangars and huts round the 'drome. But no more than seconds after it had left the ground the rising machine was gone from sight, could only be followed when and as its lights gleamed back. Once it swept droning overhead, and

then circled out and boomed off straight for the lines.

Pilot and Observer were both long-trained and skilled night-fliers. They crossed the line at the selected point and at a good height, looking down on the quivering patchwork ribbon of light and shadow that showed the No Man's Land and the tossing flare lights from the trenches, the spurting flashes of shell-bursts, the jumping pin-prick lights from the rifles. The engine roar drowned all sound, until suddenly a yowl and a rending *ar-r-r-gh* close astern told them that Archie was after them. Faintly they heard too the quick *wisp-wisp* of passing machine-gun or rifle bullets, the sharp crack of one or two close ones, and then silence again except for the steady roar of the engine and the wind by their ears.

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Ahead of them a beam of light stabbed up into the sky, swept slowly in widening circles, jerked back across and across. The big machine barely swung a point off her course, held steadily to a line that must take her almost over the spot from which the groping finger of light waved. A spit of flame licked upward, followed quickly by another and another, and next instant three quick glares leaped and vanished in the darkness ahead. A second search-light flamed up, and then a third, and all three began swinging their beams up and down to cover the path the bomber must cross. The bomber held straight on, but a quarter of a mile from the waving lights the roar of her engine ceased and she began to glide gently towards them. The lights kept their steady to-and-fro swinging for a moment; the Night-Flier swam smoothly towards them, swung sharply as one beam swept across just clear of her nose, dodged behind it, and on past the moving line of light. One moment Pilot and Observer were holding their breath and staring into a vivid white radiance; the next the radiance was gone and they were straining their eyes into a darkness that by contrast was black as pitch. The engine spluttered, boomed, and roared out again; the lights astern flicked round and began groping wildly after them, and spurt after spurt of fire from the ground, glare after glare in the darkness round and before them, told that Archie was hard at it again. The Observer leaned over to the Pilot's ear and shouted "Dodged 'em nicely."

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"Jacky's turn next," answered the Pilot, and began glancing back over his shoulder. "There he comes," he shouted, and looking back both could see a furious sputter of shell-bursts in the sky, the quick searching sweeps of the lights where the second Night-Flier was running the gauntlet. The leader went on climbing steadily in a long slant, and at the next barrier of lights and guns held straight on and over without paying heed to the rush and whistle of shells, the glare and bump of their bursts.

Mile after mile of shadowy landscape unrolled and reeled off below them.

The Observer was leaning forward looking straight down over the nose of the machine, unerringly picking up landmark after mark, signalling the course to the Pilot behind him. At last he stood erect and waved his arms to the Pilot, and instantly the roar of the engine sank and died. "Steady as you go," shouted the Observer, "nearly there. I can see the Diamond Wood."

"Carry on," the Pilot shouted back, and set himself to nursing his machine down without the engine on as gentle a glide as would keep her on her course and lose as little height as possible. The Observer, peering down at the marks below, gave the course with a series of arm signals, but presently he whipped round with a yell of joyful excitement. "Gottem! We fairly gottem this trip. Look—dead ahead." The Pilot swung the machine's nose a shade to the left and leaning out to the right looked forward and down. "The 'drome?" he shouted. "'Drome," yelled the Observer, scrambled back to get his head close to the Pilot's and whooped again. "'Drome—and the whole bunch of 'em lined up ready to take off. See their lights? Wow! This isn't pie, what!" He was moving hastily to get to his place by his gun again when the Pilot reached out, grabbed his shoulder, and shouted, "Don't go'n spoil a good thing. We don't want to hog everything. Let's wait and get the crowd in on it."

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"Right," returned the Observer. "Keep the glide as long as you can."

They slid noiselessly in to the enemy 'drome, circled over it, losing height steadily, looking down gloatingly on the twinkling row of lights below them, and peering out in a fever of impatience for sign of the next machine of the flight. But in their anxiety to have a full hand to play against the enemy below they nearly overplayed. A search-light beam suddenly shot up from the ground near the 'drome. Another leaped from a point beyond it. "They're on to us," yelled the Observer. "Open her up and barge down on 'em quick."

But the Pilot held his engine still. "It's some of the others they're on," he shouted back, as light after light rose, and, after a moment's groping, slanted down towards the west where a sparkle of shell-bursts showed. "Now for it. Look out."

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The line of lights which marked the machines below had winked out at the first burst of the Archies, but the Night-Flier had marked the spot, her engine roared out, and she went swooping down the last thousand feet straight at her mark. At first sound of her engine half a dozen lights swung hunting for them, spitting streams of fire began to sparkle from the defences' machine-guns. The Night-Flier paid no heed to any of them, dropped to a bare three hundred feet, flattened, and went roaring straight along the line of machines standing on the 'drome below. *Crash-crash-crash!* her bombs went dropping along the line as fast as hand could pull the lever. Right down the line from one end to the other she went, the bombs crash-crashing and the Observer's gun pouring a stream of fire into the machine below; a quick hard left-hand turn, and she was round and sailing down the line again, letting go the last of her bombs, and with the Observer feverishly pelting bullets down along it. Clear of the long line, the Pilot was on the point of swinging again when a huge black shape roared past them, the wing-tips clearing theirs by no more than bare feet. Pilot and Observer craned out and looked down and back, and next moment

they saw the glare and flash, heard the *thump-thump* of bombs bursting on the ground. The Observer was stamping his feet and waving his arms and the Pilot yelling a wild "Good shot!" to every burst, when a rush and a crash and the blinding flame of a shell-burst close under their bows recalled them to business. The air by now was alive with tracer bullets, thin streaking lines of flame that hissed up round and past them. The Pilot opened his engine full out and set himself to climb his best. The tracers followed them industriously, and the Archie shells continued to whoop and howl and bump round them as they climbed. The Pilot, craning out and looking over, was aware suddenly of the Observer at his ear again. "I gotta heap of rounds left," he was bawling. "Let's go down and give 'em another dose."

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"Bombs are better," returned the Pilot. "Whistle up the pack. Shoot a light or drop a flare."

Next moment a coloured light leaped from the Night-Flier, and in return a storm of tracers came streaming and pelting about her. Another light, and another storm of bullets, and a couple of search-lights swept round, groped a moment, and caught them. "Your gun!" screamed the Pilot. "I'm goin' for the light." The big machine swerved, ducked, and jerked out in a long side-slip. At first the light held her fast and the bullets came up in a regular tornado of whistling, spitting flame and smoke, most of them hissing venomously past, but many hitting with sharp smacks and cracks and in showers of breaking sparks on wings and frame. But another wild swoop and dive and upward turn shook the light off for a moment, and then the Night-Flier put her nose down and drove straight at the point from which the sword of light stabbed up. As they steadied and held straight, the Observer swung his gun round, took steady aim, and opened fire. The light fumbled a moment, lit on them again, and poured its blinding glare full in their faces. The Pilot, his eyes closed to narrow slits, went straight at the glare, and the Observer, better equipped and prepared, jerked a pair of smoked glass goggles down off his forehead and reopened fire. The light vanished with a snap, and instantly the Pilot pulled the stick in and hoicked hard up. A thousand feet up, with the darkness criss-crossed by waving search-lights, the air alive with bullets, the ground flaming and spurting with Archie fire, he shut off engine a moment and yelled, "Good shot! Come on—try another."

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They tried another, the tracers flaming about them and ripping through their fabrics, the attacked light glaring savagely at them until they swept with a rush and a roar over and past it. Behind them more of the Flight were arriving, and a fresh series of bomb-bursts was spouting and splashing on the ground about the enemy machines and amongst the hangars round the 'drome. A hangar was hit fairly; a lick of flame ran along its roof, died a moment, rose again in a quivering banner of fire, and in another moment was a roaring blaze. The whole 'drome was lit with the red glow, and into this and through the rolling smoke clouds that drifted from the fire machine after machine came swooping and circling. The fire made a beacon that marked the spot from miles around, and the Night-Fliers had nothing to do but steer straight for it to find their target. The Leader's machine, with ammunition almost expended, climbed high and circled round watching the performance, Pilot and Observer yelling delighted remarks at each other as they watched bomb after bomb smash fairly amongst the hangars or the scattered line of machines standing on the 'drome. It was on these machines that most of the Night-Fliers concentrated. Huge black twin-engined "Gotha" machines, something over a dozen of them in a row, they made a plain and unmistakable target in the red light of the fire, and an irresistible invitation to any of the Night-Fliers that came swooping in. One after another they came booming out of the darkness into the circle of red light, swung ponderously and drove in along over the line, scattering bombs down its length, raking it from end to end with machine-gun fire. The whole place was a pandemonium of smoke, fire, and noise. The search-lights jerked and swept frantically to and fro, the air shook to the explosion of the bombs, the splitting crash of the Archie guns and bang of their shell-bursts, the continuous clatter of machine-guns on the ground and in the air. Several times machines were caught in the search-lights and swam for the moment bathed in staring light, while Archies and machine-guns pelted them with fire. Most of them stunted and dodged clear very quickly, or had to give in and escape to the outer darkness, circle and wait and take another chance to edge in clear of the blinding light and the uprushing streams of tracer bullets. One was turned back time after time by the defences and by another search-light which clung to him persistently, and would not be shaken off for more than a moment by all his dodging and twisting. Suddenly over by the light there sprang a volcano of flame and smoke—and the light was gone. Up above in the Leader's machine the two men were yelling laughter and applause, when they saw another machine swim into the glare of another light. She made no attempt to dodge or evade it, struck a bee-line for the row of Hun machines, droned straightly and steadily in and along the line, her bombs crashing amongst them, a sputter of flashes at her bows telling of the machine-gun hard at work putting the finishing touches to the destruction. The light followed her and held her all the way, and through its beam the streaking smoke of the tracer bullets poured incessantly, the shell-bursts flamed and flung billowing clouds of black smoke, the rocket fires reached and clutched at her. Utterly ignoring them all, she held on to the end of the line, banked and swung sharply round, and began to retrace her path, still held in the glaring light, still pelted with storming bullets and Archie shells. But halfway back she lurched suddenly and violently, recovered herself, swerved again, reeled, and, in one quick wild swooping plunge, was down, and crashed. A spurt of flame jumped from the wreckage, and in two seconds it was furiously ablaze.

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Up above Pilot and Observer shouted questions at each other—"Who was it ... What 'bus ... did you see ...?" And neither could answer the other. The search-lights rose and began to hunt, apparently, for them, and Archie shells to bump and blaze about them again. Out to the west search-lights and sparkling Archie bursts showed where the other machines were making for home. The Observer waved to his Pilot. "Only us left," he shouted, and the Pilot nodded, swung

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the machine round, and headed for the lines.

Back at their 'drome they found the Squadron Commander beside them before they had well taxied to a standstill. "I was getting anxious," he said; "you were first away, but all the others are back—except three. And here some of them come," he added, as they caught the hum of an engine. "One ... two," he counted quickly. "That will be all," said the Leader. "We saw one crash," and described briefly.

The two climbed out of their machine and walked slowly over with the C.O. to some of the other Fliers. None of them had seen the crash; all had dropped their bombs, loosed off all the rounds they could, and cleared out of the pelting fire as quickly as possible. All were agreed, most emphatically agreed, that the line of Gothas was a "complete write-off," and were jubilant over the night's work—until they heard of the lost machine.

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As the two machines dropped to ground and past the light switched on them a moment all there read their marks and named them. "Bad Girl of the Family" flounced lightly in, and "That leaves The Bantam's bus and old 'Latchkey' to come," said the waiting men. "Here she is ... Latchkey!" There was silence for a moment.

"I might have known," said the Leader slowly—"might have known that was little Bantam's bus, by the way he barged in, regardless. It was just like him. Poor little Bantam—and good old Happy! Two more of the best gone."

The C.O. knew The Bantam's mother and was thinking of her and the letter he would have to write presently. He roused himself with a jerk. "Come along," he said; "you've another trip to-night, remember. See you make it help pay for those two."

"They've gone a goodish way to pay their own score," said the Leader grimly. "And some others. Anyway, that lot will do no raid on London to-night."

The Squadron was drowsily swallowing hot cocoa, completing reports and lurching to bed, when the stout man clambered to his usual corner seat in the First Smoker and gave his usual morning greeting to the others there bound for business.

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"Well," he said jovially, "no Gothas over after all."

"Never even made a try, apparently," said the little man opposite. "Seems odd. Such a perfect night."

"Very odd." ... "Wonder why...." "I made sure," said the compartment. "I don't understand...."

They didn't understand. Neither did a-many thousands in London who had been equally certain of "Gothas over" on such a perfect night. Neither even did they understand in the homes of "poor little Bantam" and "good old Happy," whither telegrams were already wending, addressed to the next-of-kin.

But the Huns understood. And so did the Raid-Killers.

When you pray and hear them say
Baby prayers to-night,
"Guardian angels keep us safe
Till the morning light,"
Give a word and give a thought,
If you've one to spare,
To your guardian air men
Flying "over there."

Transcriber's notes: Normalised hyphenation and punctuation. Obvious typos corrected, but all other spelling errors (especially in dialogue) have been left unchanged.
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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AIR MEN O' WAR ***

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