WANTED— ONE FOKKER

by Capn. JOHN E DOYLE, D.F.C.

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A Camel vanished without its Pilot and a Fokker rose up from its own Ashes before Major "Monty" Hardcastle, M.C., had finished Ringing the Changes in a Daring Game of Bluff Played with the Loaded Dice of Death!

CHAPTER I
MONTY IS THREATENED

THAT REGULAR RISE AND FALL in pitch was unmistakable. The Huns might know just why it was that the two Mercedes engines in a Gotha night-bomber gave such tell-tale warning of their approach. Barry did not, though he had a vague idea that it was because the engines were not synchronised.

Anyway, the noise roused him, so that he raised his head from the table which carried the modest telephone switchboard and glanced at the aeroplane watch that hung from a nail on the wall.

It was four o'clock.

"Hell!" he muttered, "won't this night ever end?"

The rhythmic hum grew steadily in volume until it seemed that the machine must pass right over the Squadron. Barry rose on legs stiff and cramped, switched off the already dimmed light, and left the hut. Here, at least, was a diversion, and since the Hun was homeward bound there was no cause for alarm.

The Gotha appeared fairly caught by three shafts of light which rose from the ground as slender white threads from widely distant points. The threads widened and paled as they rose, until the beams were hardly distinguishable against the sky, but where they converged the bomber stood out against the darkness like a moth transfixed in a car's head-light.

"*Whouf, whouf, whouf,*" stuttered a remote gun, and three flashes marked the curtain of night, to be followed after an interval by three sharp reports and the whine of several odd fragments of shell-casing that scattered themselves indiscriminately among the Squadron tents.

With a complete absence of respect, one of these fragments ripped its way through the tent of no less a person than Major Montgomery de Courcy Montmorency Hardcastle, M.C., who was also a peer of Scotland, though he elected to be known in France simply as "The Major," and was usually referred to, even more simply, as " Monty."

The fragment buried itself in the floorboards with a vicious smack which did no damage. It did not even wake Monty, who merely turned over restlessly in his camp-bed.

But when, several minutes later, a muffled bell tinkled at his side, he was alert on the instant. It was as though he had not really been asleep, but merely lying in wait for this call. For his hand shot out towards the telephone standing on the sugar-box at his side.

"Murray!" he hissed, as he grasped the receiver.

"Major Murray, sir," said Barry, now back at his post. "I'm sorry to call you so early, but he says it's most important."

"H'm!" came an expressive grunt from the bed. "Then hold the line for a moment, Barry."

Monty's eyeglass, which always hung from the 'phone at night, had slipped to the floor, and he felt quite unable to face the coming conversation until he had recovered it. In any case, the last man he wanted to talk to at this moment was Murray, and while he groped in the darkness he considered the position.

THE Squadron had been suffering unusually heavy losses, which was saying a good deal, but only yesterday Monty had discovered the reason. As was his way, he had dealt with the situation promptly and in the only manner that seemed open to him.*

On the same aerodrome was a French flight of Spads commanded, as Monty had suddenly discovered, by a German spy who was passing as Capitaine Jejeune and an ace of renown. Now, to bring a sufficiently strong charge against this man to ensure his court-martial was, unfortunately, out of the question, for as Monty alone knew of his guilt, the evidence would depend solely on his word. The result of any such attempt would merely have been to cause friction between the Allies, with all the inefficiency and loss that friction involved. Monty, therefore, had taken direct action. Which was where Murray came in.

Murray commanded an S.E. squadron further north, and an undamaged Fokker biplane had recently come into his possession. Knowing this, Monty had

* See "Sky Code," by Captain J. E. Doyle (AIR STORIES, September 1937).

flown to Villers, where the S.E.'s were quartered, and by means of a certain pressure induced Murray to lend him the German machine for the plan he had in view.

This pressure concerned a Crossley car which had unlawfully come into Murray's possession when the War was young and he a very junior officer. That car had been a curse to the man ever since. He had found housing for it down at the coast, the rent for which he still paid weekly. He could neither sell it nor give it away, for its Government origin was easily recognisable.

In the meantime, responsibility had come to him. He now had a squadron of his own. His duty it was to see that those under him observed the regulations, and to punish such as did not.

A reference to this matter by Monty had, as has been said, sufficed to secure the loan of the Fokker. Monty had immediately flown off in it, and had encountered and shot down the spy over their joint aerodrome. Then Monty had himself been badly shot about by the rest of the French flight, as well as by some of his own pilots, who did not recognise him in his borrowed Fokker. He had come down in a nearby wood where the Fokker had been destroyed by fire.

So, for the moment, it was generally understood that a renowned Frenchman had been killed in action over his own 'drome, and that the daring German concerned had escaped under cover of a wood. There was no reason for anyone to question this. The only danger was that when Murray did not get his Fokker back he might turn both curious and nasty. The pressure which had secured its loan might not suffice to cover its permanent loss.

Such were Monty's thoughts as he groped in the dark for his monocle. But when his fingers had closed over the piece of glass and had inserted it in his eye he felt more sure of himself. The hold he had over the fellow was a very strong one, he assured himself, and he would make use of it to the full. The wellbeing of his squadron demanded it.

"Hullo," said Monty to the 'phone. "Good mornin', Murray."

"It's taken you a mighty long time to wake," was the aggrieved reply.

"The middle of the night is hardly a good time to ring anyone," said Monty affably. "But if it's important I'll overlook it this time."

"Important!" echoed Murray in a voice which had risen to a high squeak of indignation. "It's immensely important. D'you think I'd bother to 'phone you at such an hour for my own amusement?"

Monty smiled grimly in the darkness. "I don't flatter myself to that extent. But what's it all about?"

"My Fokker, as you know very well. You borrowed it yesterday for a short flight, as I understood, and . . ."

"Of course, of course. Stupid of me to have forgotten. But you're making a mountain out of a molehill, Murray. What's a Fokker more or less? I'd have brought it back last night if I could. As it is . . ."

He had been about to add that it was impossible for him ever to return the confounded machine, but was glad a moment later that he had been prevented. For Murray broke in, insistently.

"Look here, Hardcastle," he said, "it's no use wasting time. I've got to have that machine back at once. Hang it all, man, the thing isn't my toy! It's about the first undamaged sample of the type to fall into our hands. It has to go to the Depot this afternoon to be packed for despatch to England. Farnborough and Martlesham both want it for experiment. If you don't bring it as soon as it's light I'll come over myself and fetch it."

Monty's fingers tightened on the telephone. This was worse than he had feared; much worse. "I shouldn't do that," he said quickly, "I'll bring it over as soon as I can."

"That won't do! I'm coming over."

"You can't, it isn't here."

"What! Have you lent it to someone else? You'll be telling me it is crashed next!"

Monty's thoughts flashed to the charred remains of that Fokker. "Nothing can harm it," he said. "If I could bring it over at once I would."

"Why can't you?" Murray demanded.

This was getting more and more awkward. "That's a leadin' question," Monty prevaricated. "We're a very busy squadron, but . . . I'll try to be with you by mid-day."

"Not good enough!" snapped Murray. "Will nothing make you take this matter seriously? I'll have to report it to Wing."

"How's that car goin', Murray?" Monty inquired, playing his last card.

A snort of indignation came over the wires.

"You can't intimidate me any longer that way," stormed Murray. "I'll report that matter to the Colonel at the same time."

"Wouldn't that be a pity? " asked Monty. "It couldn't do any good. Leave things till mid-day, as I say." He hung up the receiver.

Then he rang for MacPherson, his batman, and gave orders for Sykes, the Recording Officer, to be called.

CHAPTER II
A CAMEL ON THE WARPATH

WHEN MONTY, shaved and dressed, and having breakfasted in solitary state at the end of the long table in the mess, went into the squadron office, Sykes was already there.

"Good morning, sir," he said as Monty entered.

"Mornin', Sykes. I've a busy day ahead."

"Yes, sir," agreed the R.O., relieved to learn that some urgent matters, neglected yesterday, would now be cleared up. "I'll get the papers out right away."

"Can't deal with 'em now, Sykes; can't deal with anythin' to-day."

Sykes looked up in amazement. Why then, in Heaven's name, had he been called so early?

"They are . . . er, urgent, some of them, sir," he pointed out. "There was a German pilot right over us yesterday, when you were out, sir. Captain Jejeune attacked him but got shot down. Captain Jejeune, the great ace! It was awful . . . !"

"What's an ace; and who says I was out?" questioned Monty abruptly. "Did you try my tent?"

"No, sir, but . . . but you had gone off in your Camel."

"Ah yes, to be sure. But I came back, didn't I? You should have looked for me."

"Yes, sir. But, anyway, the German was brought down in the end, though he escaped, as I expect you know. The Colonel wants a full report immediately. He seems to think it a scandal that a German pilot should be able to get right down to the aerodrome of what was once a famous squadron. That was how he put it, sir, though how he thinks we can stop such things I can't for the life of me imagine." Sykes sounded on the brink of tears.

"Insolence!" snapped Monty. "'Once a famous squadron,' indeed! Were those his words?"

"Yes, sir; as near as I can recall. Of course, we're not the squadron we used to be. It's not to be expected," blurted Sykes, quite oblivious of the fact that at that moment he came as near to sudden death as it is possible for an R.O. to come.

EVEN to suggest to Monty that there might exist a better squadron than his own, or that his own was not at any given time at the very peak of fighting efficiency, was like a red rag to a bull. The man had scarcely a thought but for his squadron. Literally he lived for it, just as he had come within an ace of death a dozen times on its behalf.

"Just why?" Monty asked in a voice that was little more than a whisper, but with a glint in his eye that no ordinary observer could fail to notice. "Is it my fault?"

"Oh no, sir," floundered Sykes. "I never meant that. Majors are not allowed to fight now. I'm glad of that, really, but it does make a difference. Now when Major Gilbert commanded he was out with the squadron most days, and he'd go up by himself between times. We had a tremendous reputation then, but he got killed in the end and so . . . " Sykes hesitated.

"Then I came?" prompted Monty.

"Yes, sir, but I didn't mean it like that because the rule about Majors not fighting came at the same time. A very good thing too."

"Oh," said Monty. " Why?"

Sykes gave obvious signs of acute discomfort and flushed nervously. "The fighting is much harder nowadays, I believe, sir, and . . . and . . ." His voice tailed off.

"And majors are not what they were, eh?" prompted Monty, a sudden twinkle replacing the glint in his eye. He did not mind reflections involving himself alone.

"Is that it?" he pressed.

"Oh no, sir, I didn't mean that," faltered Sykes, his confusion giving a flat denial to his protestations. "You don't get any practice and . . ."

"Well I'm goin' to now," said Monty in tones suddenly sharp. "I'll get some flyin' practice in, anyway, so that if that order is changed I'll be ready."

"Indeed, I hope it won't be changed," said the earnest Sykes. "You wouldn't have a chance—" He bit his lip in sudden alarm. He had spoken without thinking.

"Well," snapped Monty. "We can't stand here arguin' till bedtime. I'm off. You take charge of orders from Wing."

"But about that report, sir! It's wanted at once."

"Let it wait, laddie. The Colonel won't be up for hours and hours. Or draft one out yourself if it'll ease your mind. Yes, draft it out, it will be interestin' to see your account when I come down."

THE twinkle in Monty's eye faded as he closed the door behind him. The first, pale, reflected light

of dawn illumined the eastern sky. Day was at hand; a day that promised unpleasant things. He should not have wasted so much valuable time foolin' with Sykes, he told himself—but the fellah was so simple and earnest it was a positive tonic to talk with him. It was impossible to imagine the Squadron without him. Pilots came and pilots went, but Sykes' tongue flowed on for ever.

A single hangar was illumined, and in the rectangle of light before its opening stood a Camel. On its fuselage were two parallel bars, the squadron mark, and the distinguishing letter "X." Monty's own machine was marked with a "Z."

"I ordered my bus," he said irritably to Flight-sergeant Hancock. "Is she in dock?"

"No, sir, you took Z out yesterday, if you remember, and returned . . . well, sir, I don't know exactly how you returned. Just let me know where she is, sir, and I'll send out and bring her in. A bit of trouble, perhaps?"

"Nothin' to speak of," said Monty hurriedly. "No, most certainly nothin' to speak about. No need to send. I'll fetch her myself later."

He got into the Camel and began to fasten the belt, somewhat perturbed. He was becoming forgetful. So much had happened yesterday, and he had since been so preoccupied with the problem of the Fokker that he had entirely forgotten he had left his own Camel up at Villers. Nor could he recover it until—

"Switch off, sir! Suck in!" called Hancock.

Monty repeated the words mechanically, still considering this fresh complication. Oh well, what did it matter? Camels were plentiful enough.

"Contact, sir?"

" Contact."

At the third swing the rotary fired, and Hancock stood to one side grasping the chock ropes and waiting for the signal. It came, and he watched the Camel trickle forward a few yards with the engine blipping quietly, then suddenly lift its tail and roar out of that lighted square into the westward gloom. Faintly he saw it rise in a climbing turn above the trees, to come charging back across the hangars in a crash of sound which faded quickly. He thrust hands in pockets and turned to follow its course. For a full five minutes he held it in view, a fast diminishing speck against the eastern sky.

"Strike me pink!" he ejaculated at last, and strolled, head down in thought, towards the hangar. He would have something of more than ordinary interest to discuss with the sergeants' mess at breakfast.

"THUNDERIN' bothah!" muttered Monty as his Camel bore him upwards to meet the sun. To get possession of an undamaged Fokker was a most urgent necessity, and one that seemed no nearer solution now that he was in the air. But at least flying was better than being inactive on the ground. He flew due east.

Ahead, a few searchlights still stabbed the waning night as though reluctant to admit they were no longer of use. By now the last of the night-flying Huns must have gained the safety of its own lines. One by one the lights snapped out. The stars faded as the sky brightened.

Crossing the lines at thirteen thousand feet, Monty shut down his engine to a mere whiff of throttle so that his presence might not be detected, and began to lose height. To shut off entirely would be to risk oiled plugs and a prison camp—an eventuality he did not care to contemplate.

A plan was now forming in his mind, though it was still painfully vague and incomplete. He would attack two-seaters; those artillery 'buses which would even now be preparing to leave the ground. He would make a pest of himself to these folk, so that the scouts would hunt him. Perhaps a Fokker or two would chase him across the lines and give him the opportunity he sought. But that was as far as the plan went. It did not deal with the problem of obtaining an undamaged machine. However, any plan was better than no plan at all, and there was just a chance that events would furnish the occasion.

Slowly the ground, still gloomy and indistinct, rose to meet him. The valleys were shrouded in misty vapour which would soon be dissipated; the hills were half in deep purple shadow while half reflected the pale light of dawn. But a closer acquaintance revealed the landscape in more detail. The dark mass of woods began to stand out clear and sharp against the greens and browns of farmland with their clusters of buildings scattered about the countryside. Most easily picked out, however, were the straight roads which gave a sense of order to the patchwork quilt.

There was a big wood immediately below, skirted on its far side by a road. Monty held his course, skimmed the tree-tops and then swung north to follow the road. He gave his engine just sufficient throttle to keep him afloat. Why tear away on full throttle just because a chappie was over the lines?

He was below the topmost branches of the trees on his left, and low over the deserted road. The road looked smooth and inviting, and he touched it lightly

with his wheels, and bounced. It was a foul road, and he kept it at a distance of three feet.

There was a cross-road ahead, and when he had cleared the wood he saw a lorry column approaching from the west. Those lorries would reach the crossing first; unless, of course, they stopped. No, they were coming on; the first of them passed it by. He could catch the second or the third. The third it would be. He clung to the road, maintaining a height of three feet. The driver was not going to give way, it seemed. He was leaning out of his cab and grinning broadly as the 'plane rushed at him, and he waved as it jumped his lorry with inches to spare.

But, looking back, Monty saw that the vehicle lay on its side in the ditch. The poor chap, he thought, would get into a spot of a bothah over that. But there, he should have kept his eyes on the road.

Dismissing the matter, Monty swung round in the direction from which the lorries had come, so that he was flying west. Unless his bump of locality was very much at fault this main road led eventually to Albert. Yes, he knew the road. Before long it would bring him to Bouvais, where there was an aerodrome.

It was amusin' that those lorry drivers had not recognised him for an enemy, he reflected, amusin' yet hardly surprisin'. Had they recognised the British markings—which they could not have done until the Camel had passed them by—they would most likely regard the machine as a captured one, since it was so low and so far over. It seemed to Monty there was no end to the bluff a chap could pull if he only did what was least expected of him. Possibly the folk at Bouvais 'drome would be under a similar delusion.- Monty smiled a grim smile. If so, it would not be for long.

CHAPTER III
A GAME OF BLUFF

BY THE TIME MONTY came within sight of Bouvais the sun was up and its golden rays were lighting the country ahead, except where the Camel's shadow raced along the road twenty yards in advance.

A church spire came in view, and Monty left the road to circle the village. Rising to some trees, he found himself on the boundary of an aerodrome. On the far side stood three hangars in a row and an assortment of huts. In front of the hangars five aircraft were lined up. Mechanics walked unconcernedly about the 'planes. Now one of them stopped to look round, putting up a hand to shade his eyes. Others stopped, and then all were on the move again as though at an order. Monty chuckled. This was becoming amusin'.

He was throttled down and skimming low over the grass, as though about to land. Temptation seized him; why not land? Smooth turf was a thing he had ever found hard to resist. Besides, if he stopped for a moment it would give him an opportunity to take stock of the place, and there was ample room for the take-off. He debated the matter, and all the while his hands worked mechanically, drawing the stick back and his tail down as speed fell away. He touched. It was a beautiful surface and the machine rolled smoothly to a standstill.

Monty chuckled, and set throttle and fine adjustment with care so that the machine would neither move nor the engine stop. He slipped the catch of his belt and stood up. His spine tingled with excitement. Obviously, those men at the hangars no more suspected his nationality than had the lorry drivers. True that a group of what appeared to be pilots stood gazing out at the Camel, but they were still, and only betrayed the interest that any squadron might show in a stranger. The mechanics were carrying on with their work. Then the group scattered and went towards the machines. The machines were D.F.W. two-seaters, Monty now saw. And at that point he got a nasty shock.

For his Le Rhone spat. His heart seemed to miss a beat as he dived for the levers. This was rather more excitement than even he liked. The worst of rotaries was that they could not be relied upon to idle for long. Throttle and fine adjustment had to be so carefully balanced that even a pound difference in the tank pressure threw the whole thing out.

So, to be on the safe side, he advanced both levers a bit and checked the engine on the thumb-switch surmounting the stick.

"Blip . . . blip." That was better. In any case, he need not stay many more seconds, since he only wanted to take stock of the place.

There would be a complete staffel here, Monty judged, and half of them might already be up. But no, a more searching glance indicated that there were a number of machines within one of the hangars.

Then, quite suddenly, Monty dropped down into his seat, as though his legs had been shot from under him.

For his engine had cut clean out!

"Hell!" he gasped, and began frantically to struggle with the thumb-switch, which had stuck. It freed itself instantly, and the engine fired again. Not crisply, now, however, but with the smoky sullenness that spoke of a rich mixture and failed to give acceleration. He flicked the fine adjustment back and waited, tense with apprehension. For he could do nothing else but wait during those few interminable seconds which would decide the issue. And while he waited, powerless to avert catastrophe, the thing happened.

The prop, jerked to a standstill!

HALF numbed by this new shock, Monty tried to consider his position. No longer was he a squadron commander, but just a prisoner of war. For the possibility of restarting the engine was one that he did not consider. Without chocks, two men were needed to do that; one at the prop, and one in the cockpit. Even with chocks the Camel would be inclined to nose over when the engine fired, and there was not so much as a small stone with which to obstruct a wheel.

He got up and out of the machine, and looked towards the hangars. So far, he might have been invisible for all the notice that was being taken of him. Across the wide aerodrome, mechanics were busy swinging reluctant engines. Now one had started up.

Deeply depressed, Monty drew the Colt automatic from its clip. He would puncture the petrol-tank and throw in a match. He turned to look behind. The fence over which he had landed was a hundred and fifty yards back, and a further hundred yards the wood began. Unfortunately, it was a very small wood to aid an escape. He supposed he had better make the attempt, though he could think of nothin' more unpleasant than runnin' and dodgin' about the countryside, hidin' and gettin' covered with filth. He hoped prison camps included decent bathrooms. He faced round again.

Two men were walking out on to the 'drome. Monty levelled his Colt at the tank. It went to his heart to destroy his only possible means of escape, but it was inevitable. And what was more there was no time to waste. He squeezed the trigger and there was a dull click.

The weapon had failed him.

Or was it that Fate had intervened? Those men were walking deliberately and without hurry, and they reminded Monty of a couple of opening batsmen coming out to the wicket. Their manner certainly did not suggest that they, were coming out to take a prisoner.

Monty's eyes sparkled as a thought came to him—a wild, entrancing thought. It was the casual demeanour of the men that had inspired the thought. His own men would surely have run out in such a case. Now he would make these do the same.

He moved out from the fuselage, clear of the wing, and thought for an instant. *Schnell* was German for quick, *mache schnell* meant make haste. He raised an arm and beckoned with a vigorous, impatient gesture.

"Donnenoetter!" he roared with all the power of his lungs and in what he judged to be the best Teutonic manner. "*Mache schnell!*"

The response was immediate, for the men, after exchanging a word and a glance, broke into a jog trot. They continued to talk, apparently, as they ran, and with each sentence their pace increased. It was as though conviction grew on them that they had kept waiting an officer of high rank.

Now, when the Camel had first been sighted from the hangars it had been coming in low over the trees from the east. Viewed thus, head-on, it was impossible to mistake the type. Nevertheless, it caused no sensation for it was not the first time a pilot had visited them in a Camel. Indeed, the neighbouring scout squadron was rather addicted to such tricks, by which its pilots advertised their skill.

"Damned swank!" growled *Hauptmann* Leitner, commanding the D.F.W.'s. But then Leitner was not in a good humour to-day. Everything had gone wrong. Already the machines were late in leaving the ground—an unforgivable fault. He had no time for idlers who had nothing better to do than to fly around in captured aircraft, and he was, in truth, jealous of all scout pilots who, in his opinion, got far more than their fair share of the glories of war.

Angrily he ordered his mechanics, who had paused to gaze at the new arrival, to get on with their work. Nor would he at first release any men to go to the visitor's assistance when his engine stopped. It was young Gronigen out there, he guessed, and it would do young Gronigen good to be taken down a peg or two.

But when, after a calculated interval, the *Hauptmann* despatched two men, he was surprised to see that distant pilot gesticulating impatiently at them, and faintly to hear his angry shouts. Gronigen, to give him his due, was an easy-going lad. In fact, it was his very quietness that somehow conveyed his sense of superiority over the officers of the two-seater

squadron. Could it possibly be then, wondered Leitner, temporarily alarmed, that the *Herr* General had chosen a Camel to convey him on a surprise visit to this unit of his command?

It was just the kind of thing the General might do.

MEANWHILE, Monty, watching the two men running towards him, had decided to maintain his fierce attitude at all costs. A two-seater was taxying out now, and when it came abreast of the Camel it swung slowly round till it faced the hangars. The two machines were separated by scarcely fifty paces, and Monty was aware that the German crew were eyeing him with interest. He turned a cold glance towards them and then looked away again.

The men arrived, and halted in obvious surprise when they saw that the Camel still bore the British colours.

"*Donnerwetter!*" repeated Monty in thunderous tones. "*Mache schnell!*"

One of the men hurried to the propeller and raised his arms. But he lowered them again as his companion, a surly-looking fellow, and obviously suspicious, called out some words that Monty could not hear. For the D.F.W. pilot had opened up his engine.

Monty began to despair. These men still shrank from open defiance, but equally obviously they were suspicious and were playing for time.

Another D.F.W. was passing close, and began to turn. Monty sprang to his feet and shook a fist furiously at the man by the prop. Nor was he altogether acting, for, most decidedly, he was in a hurry and not anxious to be delayed.

"*Schweinhund!*" he bellowed again and again, until, overcome by the effort of trying to swear efficiently in an unfamiliar tongue, he suddenly relapsed into English.

"Don't stand there like a couple of paralysed prawns in aspic!" he yelled. "Jump to it, you . . ."

The Mercedes engine near by was kicking up a good deal of noise as it swung the D.F.W. round, and it may be that Monty's words did not reach the two men. Also, it may be that his fluency in his own language was more effective than his limited German. The fact remains that the man by the prop, gave his companion an anxious glance and reached up for the blade.

He shouted something, which Monty repeated, and gave a swing. Nothing happened. There was more shouting and counter-shouting, and a second swing. This time there came a single feeble explosion. The engine was clearing itself and would soon fire, but in the meantime anything might happen.

THE D.F.W., having now turned, stood motionless. Its crew were watching the Camel with growing interest. The gunner had gone so far as to swing his machine-gun across to bear on it. Clearly they were suspicious, and with good reason. It was strictly forbidden to fly captured machines until the black cross had been substituted for the red, white and blue target. Equally clearly, however, they were still uncertain whether their suspicions had any sure ground, and there was always the chance, however slender, that a high officer sat in the Camel cockpit. Generals were sometimes a law unto themselves, their own General in particular. Besides, the British were not in the habit of landing on that aerodrome at dawn . . . and yet—*Leutnant* Dreisel, the pilot of the D.F.W., wished that he did not have to take-off at once.

He caught the eye of Strauss, the burly mechanic, and beckoned him.

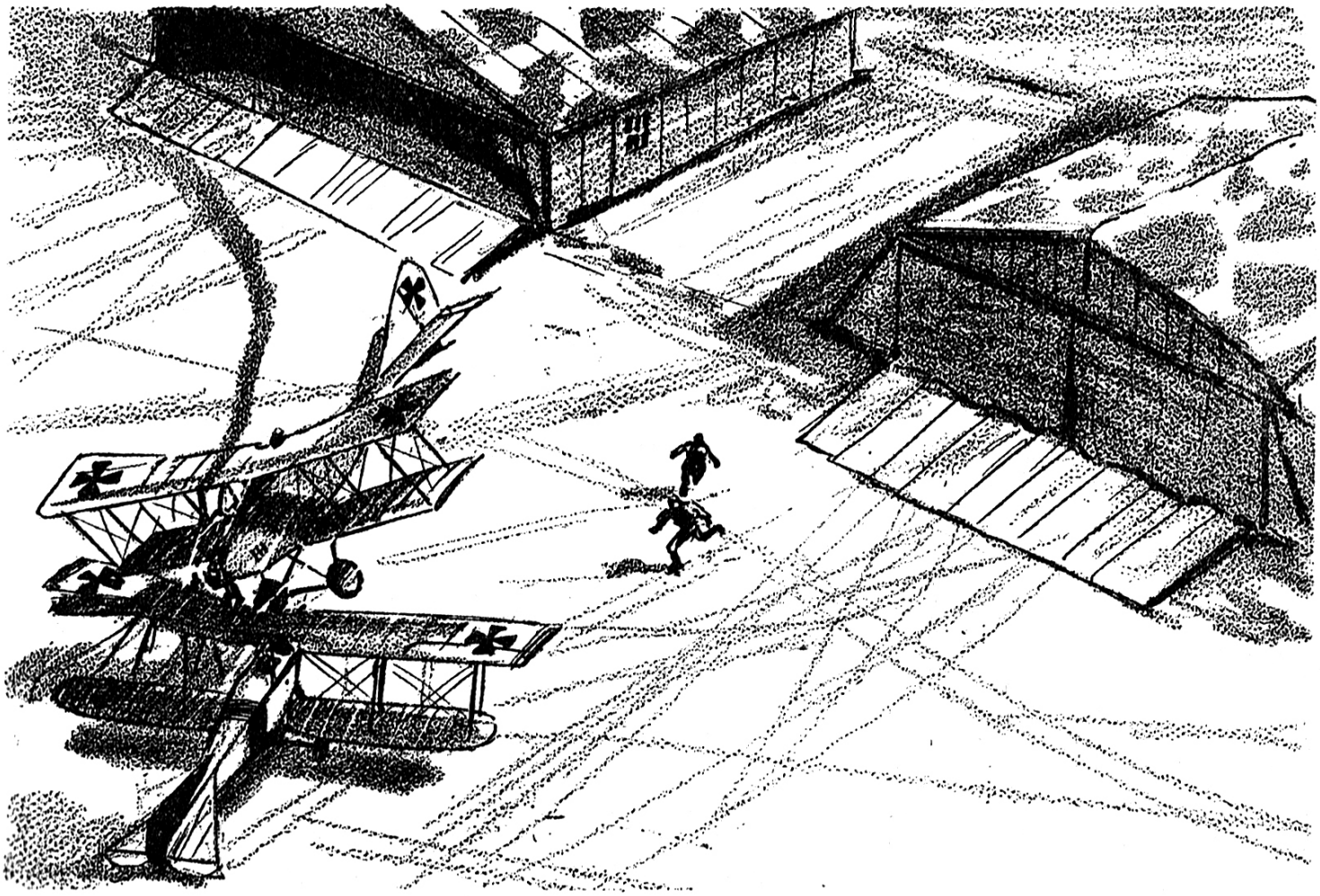
"Who is he?" he asked, and the gunner leaned forward from the rear cockpit to catch the reply.

"We'll soon find out, *Herr Leutnant,*" said Strauss with feeling. "When we get to the hangars. . . ."

The Camel's engine, leaping into life, interrupted him and he hurried towards it to grab a strut. Adolph, his companion, was already moving out to the other wing, but before he could catch hold, the Camel, its engine revving fast, was upon him, bowling him over backwards. Out-distancing the now running Strauss, the Camel accelerated quickly towards the hangars. At once, Dreisel opened out to take-off, while his gunner steadied himself to take aim. It seemed a sitter.

Certainly the bullets cracked unpleasantly close to Monty. Yet he hardly heard them. His ears were only for the joyful song of a willing engine. His wings would soon be air-borne, and then. . . .

He lifted his wheels and dipped a wing towards the two-seater. There was an anxious moment when his windscreen shattered, and then he was out of range behind the D.F.W.'s tail. He whipped round and let off a burst before the bumpy slipstream from the other machine upset his aim and lost him some height. The hangars loomed up at him, but a quick bank steered him away, and he continued the circle, to see the D.F.W. apparently poised, hanging on its prop, some fifty feet above the tarmac. Then, as though acquiring a final spasm of energy, it flicked round and, a few seconds later, had crashed down upon another machine waiting to move away.



Meanwhile, more bullets were cracking past Monty, and he saw they came from the first D.F.W. to take-off, which had by now just completed a leisurely circuit. So he dipped sharply and came up beneath its fat belly before the pilot had time to throw on bank and so again expose the Camel. Even while it heeled over, Monty closed to point-blank range. He could see the muzzle of the rear gun hanging ready over the cockpit's side. Then he let drive a short burst with both Vickers, and turned off on a wing-tip.

But his eyes never left the D.F.W., which held its bank and started to slip inwards. It had full top rudder on. The manoeuvre was a perfect example of a sideslip, in that height was quickly lost without fall of nose and consequent increase of forward speed. Monty watched fascinated as the machine sank towards the middle of the aerodrome, and almost expected it to straighten out at the last moment for the landing. But the D.F.W. continued its crab-like progress until its lower wing crumpled on contact with the turf, and the machine collapsed on its back.

In a few seconds the whole position had been reversed. Already, three D.F.W.'s were wrecked, and Monty clearly had the upper hand. But his fierce joy at his amazing escape was suddenly damped by swift reaction. Somehow he still had to get a Fokker, and his recent exploits, stimulating though they had been, had not brought him any nearer fulfilment of his main purpose. But at least they had advertised his presence, and might well lead to retaliations by a scout squadron. Meanwhile he must get back.

As he turned, machine-gun bullets cracked near him, and he discovered they came from the rear cockpit of one of the two machines still on the ground. He dived at once, and the gunner jumped and ran towards the hangar and out of the picture framed by his Aldis sight. Monty held his dive while the picture grew . . . he fired . . . and flattened out in the nick of time.

As he zoomed, he saw flames leap from the machine, and he turned to dive again. The remaining D.F.W. had also been abandoned by its crew, though its engine was still running. Again Monty fired. This time there were no flames. But the D.F.W.'s propeller stopped suddenly, and with the knowledge that its engine had been well damaged, Monty headed for the lines.

CHAPTER IV
MYSTERY OF THE MISSING "Z"

MONTY WAS NOT IN a good temper when he came in to land, and his condition was in no way improved when the Camel dropped a wing to the grass, swerved, went hard over on the other wing, and finished up on its back.

The undercarriage had collapsed though the landing had been perfect, and doubtless the cause was damage by a bullet. Monty realised this, but it did nothing to appease his annoyance. Those seconds of helplessness, followed by a violent shaking and an unpleasant bump on the head against a Vickers gun, had made his temper worse.

Now, to add insult to injury, he could not release his belt as he hung fly-like from the cockpit. At last he succeeded, only to collapse in an inverted heap on the grass. He got to his feet to find a tender alongside.

"O.K. sir, I hope?" inquired Sergeant Hancock, a little fatuously.

"Everythin' is O.K.," replied Monty acidly. "Just practisin' inverted landin's! It's a bit wear in' on the kites, it seems," he added, pulling off his helmet, inserting his monocle in his eye, and glaring furiously at the wreck of what had recently been a perfectly good Camel. " . . . So you'd better get another out right away."

Declining a lift in the tender, he strode off to the office, the problem of the Fokker again uppermost in his mind.

Tutt, the Assistant Equipment Officer, was in the hut with Sykes. Exceptionally tall was the A.E.O., so that in spite of a pronounced stoop he easily topped everyone in the Squadron. To see him now, towering, lantern-jawed and cadaverous, over the diminutive and mild-eyed Sykes almost brought a smile to Monty's face.

The Equipment Officer swung round slowly at the Major's entry. "About that missing machine, sir," he began in his sepulchral voice.

Monty bristled. "What the blazes d'you know about it?" he snapped, thinking of the Fokker.

"I . . . er believe *Z* is missing, sir," faltered Tutt.

"Ah!" said Monty, relieved, "is that all?"

"Yes, sir, but I have to send in the return of aircraft to Wing. It should have gone yesterday."

"Then why didn't it"

"Because of *Z*, sir. But if you'll let me know the position, I'll complete the return right away. We're under strength as it is, and we can't get replacements until this is done."

"*Z*'s missin'," said Monty. "Tell 'em so. And *X* is a write-off—don't forget that."

"Yes, sir, it's quite simple about *X*, but it is not permitted in the regulations that machines be missing . . . er, unless the pilot is also missing."

"Tutt-tut, Tutt," snapped Monty irritably. "I mean rats, Tutt. You make a mountain out of a molehill. Report it missing and let there be an end of the matter!"

Lieutenant Tutt sighed. "Very well, sir." He saluted awkwardly and crouched out of the door.

"Anythin' else?" Monty demanded of Sykes.

"Yes, sir, one or two things." He handed over a paper. "I made out that report about the shooting of Captain Jejeune."

"Ah, yes, of course." Monty began to read, and a slight twinkle creased his unmonocled eye. He read to the end, then tossed the paper down. "Quite a fair account of the show, I should say."

"I'll send it, sir?"

"Why not?"

"It is very awkward that the German escaped, sir."

"Is it? Why?" snapped Monty.

"Well, sir, we might all be murdered in our beds."

"H'm," said Monty. "I hadn't thought of that. And now I'm going to take the air."

"Again, sir?"

"Yes, I need all the practice I can get after your remarks, and there's plenty of time before breakfast."

Monty left the hut, and through the window Sykes watched him wander out to where another Camel stood ready.

A MOMENT after Monty had left, Tutt re-entered the hut, and having assured himself that the Major had indeed departed he turned to Sykes with a troubled frown.

"Look here, Bill," he rumbled. "What am I to do about *Z?* His Lordship won't say where it is, and I can't get replacements until it is accounted for."

Sykes gazed up at him with an expression of sympathy.

"I wish I could help, old chap," he said, "but I've got trouble enough of my own. Why not ring up Wing and ask for advice? You won't have to get on to the Colonel."

Captain Strong was equipment officer to the 10th Wing and considered himself a very busy man. All the same he was far from pleased when his batman informed him that he was wanted on the 'phone by Lieutenant Tutt. For he was in the middle of a shave. Impatiently, he sponged the soap from his face, and ran down the stairs of the chateau in which he was quartered to his office, and grabbed the 'phone.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded curtly.

"Good morning," boomed Tutt.

"Look here, we are in urgent need of replacements; we're five machines under strength."

"No need to ring me to say that," came the reply. "You know as well as I that you can be made up to strength as soon as I get your return."

"Yes," wailed Tutt, "and I'd have sent it in yesterday but one of our Camels is missing."

Strong snorted at the telephone.

"No difficulty about that!" he snapped. "If it is missing we just write it off.'"

Tutt sighed at the difficulty of this explanation.

"It would be all right if the pilot was missing as well," he said, "but, unfortunately, he is not."

"The 'bus flew off by itself, I suppose!" was Strong's sarcastic comment. "You'll be claiming it shot down some Huns next."

"It's not that." Tutt's voice sank to a ghost of a rumble. "Quite between ourselves the Major went off in it yesterday and returned without it. No one saw him come back, and he won't say anything about it."

Strong let out a quiet whistle. "Your Major, eh? You say you asked him about it?"

"Yes, and he tells me to report it missing. Won't say another thing. But we must have replacements soon or we'll be out of action."

Strong considered the matter in silence for a while. After all it was up to him to back up his juniors in a matter like this. These executive officers were all too fond of treating the equipment branch without the respect that was its due, and in past friction had invariably come off best. But there had never been a case like this. Here was a chance to show that E.O.'s were not to be trifled with.

"Send in that report right away," he said at last.

"And include *Z* as missing?" inquired the other.

"Yes," agreed the Wing E.O. "Goodbye."

He returned to his shave and to a consideration of the position. The more he thought about it the more he liked it.

MAJOR BANKS resided at the Aircraft Supply Depot at Candas, and was a person of some importance. For all aircraft that arrived from England passed through his hands for distribution. He was, in fact, the Deputy Assistant Director of Equipment. Without his services the war in the air would come to a standstill—so he often assured himself and others. To-day business called him even as he went down to breakfast.

"Could you speak to the 10th Wing Equipment Officer, sir?" inquired an orderly.

The Major altered course for the telephone.

"Good morning, sir, Strong here," came a distant voice. "I am sorry to disturb you at such an early hour but I have a matter on which I feel your advice is necessary."

"Don't apologise," said the D.A.D.E. "I'm here to help."

"Thank you, sir. It is just that 99 Squadron report a Camel missing, and I don't quite know what to do about it. You see the pilot in this case is the O.C., and he is not missing."

"I see," said the D.A.D.E. "Yes, the circumstances are certainly unusual, and you did right to ring me. Make out the appropriate form in triplicate and send it along."

"But, sir, there's no form for such a case as this; that's just the trouble."

"There must be, Strong. There's a form for everything."

"There's nothing to cover a machine going missing by itself, sir, nor anything in Army Regulations to deal with such a contingency."

"No, Strong, no. I see your point. I admit that at first I had not grasped the full gravity of the case. Leave the matter with me and I'll see what is best to do."

During breakfast, Major Banks came to the conclusion that he must seek higher authority in this matter, and after the meal he went at once to his office.

"Put a call through to the Assistant Director of Equipment in London," he told his clerk.

"Very good, sir. Er , . . the lines will be very busy just now, I expect."

"Then make it a first priority call. It is most urgent."

A little later in the day an open Rolls-Royce might have been seen gliding down Pall Mall. It passed

smoothly across Trafalgar Square where, in obedience to expert police control, the many lines of traffic made way for it as if by magic. For it was obvious that an officer of high rank occupied the rear seat, and it was war-time.

Brigadier-General Fitz-Fortescue, C.B., the occupant of the favoured Rolls, was well pleased that the day was fine, and the promise of heat did not disturb him. For he had planned to go to Brighton, and, being Director of Equipment to the R.F.C., there was none to say him nay. Nor did he anticipate any duty which could not safely be left to a subordinate.

The Rolls-Royce went swiftly down the Strand and swept majestically into the courtyard of the Hotel Cecil. The D.E. alighted quickly for the stout little man he was, and hurried to his office—a large room on the first floor, overlooking the Thames. In ten minutes he had allocated the work of the day among his subordinates, and was on the point of departure when Colonel Sampson, the A.D.E., came in.

"Ah, Sampson, nothing else, I trust?" queried the General.

"Why yes, sir, there is. I've just had a call from France. There's a Camel missing."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the General, startled. In his mind the years fell away, and he was once again a junior officer on service in Egypt. Of all the unpleasant animals he thought the Camel, whether of the single or twin hump variety, took the biscuit. It made his back ache simply to recall those long rides across the desert. But—his mind flicked back to the present—there was happily no need to dwell on such things to-day.

"The camel should never have been sent to France in the first place," he pronounced emphatically. "Climate's not suitable. Anyway, it's no concern of mine, and you should know that Camel Corps headquarters is the . . ."

"I refer to an aeroplane, sir, a *Sopwith* Camel," interrupted Sampson, who seemed quite taken aback.

"Then you should have said so at first," retorted the General angrily. "Hang it all, man, I haven't the entire day to waste on so trivial a matter. Aircraft are missing daily, but there's no need to refer it to me."

"Exactly, sir, but this case is exceptional. For the pilot who last flew the machine is back in his squadron alive and well. All that he will say is that the Camel is missing. I need hardly point out that if this sort of thing is allowed to pass unheeded a very dangerous precedent will have been established."

"Agreed, agreed," the General pronounced after thought. "The disease would spread. What is the usual procedure in such cases?"

"It has never happened before, sir, so far as I know, and the only course open to us seems to be to order a court of inquiry to be held on the spot."

"Do that then," said the Director of Equipment. " And make it urgent. Now I must be off. I hope that on my return you will be in possession of the findings of the court."

CHAPTER V
CHALLENGE TO COMBAT

THERE WAS A CERTAIN EXCITEMENT in Monty's squadron. Life was not proceeding in its usual ordered manner. In the first place there had been no dawn patrol that morning. According to Sykes, the Major had not ordered one, and no special instructions had come in from Wing. By contrast, Monty himself had shown the most extraordinary activity. He had taken off before dawn, so rumour had it, had crashed on landing and had immediately set out again in another machine.

It was true that he flew occasionally, but not to this extent, and following so closely on the disappearance of his own machine it called forth much comment. By general agreement, it was already a more absorbing topic even than the shooting of Captain Jejeune. It monopolised the conversation of the mess at breakfast.

Rodney, as a flight-commander, and a conscientious one at that, felt it was up to him to make light of the matter.

"I agree," he said, "that it is a bit strange; but it is no concern of ours."

"A bit strange!" echoed Grant sarcastically. "Be careful not to exaggerate, Roddy. But seriously, chaps, where can Monty have hidden the blessed thing?"

"Let's narrow it down," said Fry, who fancied his powers of deduction. "Is it east or west of the lines?"

"West!" came the reply in chorus.

"I think that's obvious," Fry agreed. "If only because His Lordship returned to roost."

"He's never crossed the lines, anyway," put in Kirk, who had not been out in France very long."

"Be fair," admonished Rodney. "He's not allowed to."

"Item two," continued Fry. "Will it be north or south of this point?"

"He flew north," announced Nixon, of "C" Flight. "I saw him go."

"North-east," corrected Carruthers.

"Same thing," summed up Fry. "North or north-east is north of this point."

"Are north, you mean," corrected Grant, who rather fancied himself as a grammarian.

"Shut up! We are agreed, then, that *Z* was taken north yesterday, but not east of the lines. Now what happened to it? Did it crash, was it burnt, or is it still intact?"

"Missing, believed killed," Nixon said solemnly.

"Don't be more funny than you can help."

"It was crashed," guessed Carruthers.

"But whether it was subsequently burnt . . ."

"Is immaterial," interrupted Fry. "Let's assume it was crashed. Why then doesn't Monty wish to give its position?"

"Because he does not want us to know where he went," suggested someone farther down the table.

" 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,' " quoted Fry. "That's a probability and a most likely one. See how an intelligent process of deduction narrows the issue. Assuming we are on the right track, can anyone suggest a place that would fit in?"

The pause which followed this question was taken up with some hard thinking. And then:

"Lucille's!" exclaimed Grant.

Just that one word he uttered, almost in a whisper, but his manner suggested that he had tumbled accidentally upon some great and blinding truth.

IT SHOULD here be explained that Lucille Matthiew was the daughter of a farmer whose farm lay some twenty miles to the north of the aerodrome. She was a young lady of charm and accomplishment; and of much business acumen. Furthermore, it was generally admitted, even by Frenchmen, that as a creator of pastries Lucille was unexcelled. The outcome was a foregone conclusion.

The Matthiews' farm enjoyed a wide and profitable notoriety, particularly amongst those who flew, for its big fields afforded good landing. Many were the pilots—and observers too—who landed there, and departed the poorer in pocket but with their stomachs full of richness. But only for a time did this happy state of affairs continue.

A crash or two brought the farm all too wide a notoriety, so that it had recently been put out of bounds to all pilots of the Ioth Wing. Monty issued the injunction to the Squadron and straightway forgot the matter, but there remained a sense of grievance among the pilots.

"I think Grant has hit the nail," ruled Fry, when an orderly who had been hovering round the mess, withdrew.

A murmur indicated general agreement. "The greedy brute!" said Nixon, by way of clinching the matter. "Wanting the whole of Lucille's output for himself, he puts the place out of bounds."

"You overlook the fact that the place is banned to the whole Wing," Rodney put in coldly. "Your deductions would disgrace a baby's class of the Stone Age. If you can't do better, drop the subject."

WHILE telephone conversations on the subject of his missing Camel were flashing between Candas and London, Monty crossed the lines for the second time that day. With each succeeding minute, his depression increased, and the task of capturing a Fokker intact appeared the more impossible.

The fact that on this occasion "Archie" was paying him the compliment of his undivided attention did nothing to improve matters. Almost he began to regret that he had made the morning's effort to escape, for captivity might have offered possibilities not now available. He was even tempted to fly a straight course so that his Camel and one of those bursting shells might meet in oblivion. But he had not quite come to that, and he turned and twisted in anticipation of each salvo, losing height as he went, so that a few cuts in the fabric of his wings were the only result of several hundred pounds' worth of expenditure on the part of the enemy. Then at last he was out of range.

Instinctively, he headed again for Bouvais aerodrome, which he now found deserted. Not a single machine was to be seen on the tarmac, nor was a man in sight. But a crackle of bullets from a hidden gun told him he was being watched.

He dived, streaked across the grass and fired a reply into the open mouths of the hangars. Then he climbed again and surveyed the sky. To the north was a cluster against the blue, composed of four or five machines. Single-seaters, Monty judged. They were coming south, and he climbed westward in leisurely manner.

Closer and closer came that formation as the lines drew near, and a faint hope stirred in Monty. The hope

was instantly dashed, however, when a careful scrutiny revealed them as Albatros Scouts.

"About as much good as a sick headache!" he groaned.

They were weak-hearted folk, too, he decided when he heard them open long-range fire. Evidently, they did not like such a close approach to the lines. Yet they still pursued.

Now they had actually crossed the trenches.

"Infernal bothah!" Monty muttered, deep in consideration of this waste of good opportunity. If only they had been Fokkers!

The Albatros Scouts, however, apparently content to have driven off the Camel, now turned east, and Monty drifted around for a while, aimless and despondent. After a while, it occurred to him that to fly twice before breakfast was hardly giving his business a fair chance. He had not allowed Jerry time enough to get going. He would alter that at once.

He throttled back, and pulling out a notebook, began to write—with some difficulty, for a Camel is not the best of desks. He was just behind the British front line, with which he kept parallel while he used up what height he had.

"Will return at two o'clock," be wrote. "Hope you will be about."

He signed it, "The Major," fished in a pocket for a knife and tied up the lot in his scarf. Then he opened up, zoomed almost out of a shell-hole, and paid some attention to his surroundings.

A nearby trench was lined with Tommies who waved excitedly as he flashed over them to dart here and there, snipelike, across No-Man's-Land.

Heads bobbed over the parapet to watch this diversion. "Blimey!" said a Cockney soldier. "The Mad blinking Major!"

"Keep down, Bill, you—fool!" roared a sergeant, and Private Bill Smith of the Royal Fusiliers kept down. There was a neat hole in his temple.

Back to Bouvais aerodrome went Monty, keeping to the low route. He zoomed up over the hangars and took the occupants by surprise. For now there was a D.F.W. on the tarmac, and several men were dotted about. Monty threw his message overboard and doubled back by the way he had come.

CHAPTER VI
"MAJORS MAY FIGHT"

ARRIVING BACK at his aerodrome late for breakfast, Monty was able to consume it in a solitude which suited his mood. Having decided to fly no more until lunch-time he would have plenty of time to clear up any arrears of office work and to attend to the ordinary squadron routine. But that prospect did not please him. He had staked everything on that afternoon appointment, and would be consumed with impatience while the hours passed. Furthermore, the time fixed was later than the latest time he had undertaken to return the Fokker. Meanwhile, Murray might decide to make a pest of himself.

No sooner had Monty finished breakfast and settled down at his desk than the trouble began. The 'phone rang and Sykes answered it.

"Major Murray, of Villers," he announced. "Will you speak to him, sir?"

"Yes," said Monty with a sigh, and a docility which astonished his R.O. "Hullo," he said to the instrument, "yes, speakin'. . . . No, old boy, I'm very sorry but I can't possibly return it yet. Frightfully busy here! Tell you what; leave it till four o'clock . . . . Come now, that's bein' unreasonable . . . What's that? Report it to Wing? Look here, Murray, if there's any more of that talk you'll never see it again . . . That's better. Yes, four o'clock at latest. Good-bye."

Sykes could make nothing of the conversation; but there was work to do and he got on with it.

For a while the two men sat in a silence which was but emphasised by the tick-took of the office clock and the scratching of Sykes' pen. Then came again the discordant ringing of the 'phone, distracting Monty's attention from the papers on the table so that he fiddled nervously with his monocle while fixing his R.O. with an unwinking stare.

"Wing!" whispered Sykes.

"Answer it," ordered Monty.

"Speaking," said Sykes. "Yes . . . yes . . . no, not yet . . . . What ! Court of . . . . Whose orders ? . . . Oh! Goodbye." He hung up, now looking every bit as worried as Monty, and scared as well. His face had

drained of colour. He picked up his pen but apparently could not write.

"Well?" inquired Monty.

Sykes squirmed, hesitated and then, abandoning a hopeless resistance, burst into a torrent of words.

"There's to be a Court of Inquiry about the missing 'plane, sir," he blurted out. "That was just an unofficial message, but detailed instructions will follow. Ordered by the Director of Equipment himself. I'm very sorry, sir."

"Meddlin' old fool!" thundered Monty, from whose face the worried look had now fled. It was as though now the blow had fallen there was nothing left to fear, and he was ready for the fray.

"Unregenerate and consummate ass!" he remarked acidly. "Get me through to him."

"Who, sir?" gasped Sykes, scared and perplexed.

"Murray! Who else?"

"B . . . b . . . but it was Strong, the Wing E.O. About the missing Camel."

"Camel!" Monty repeated with vague emphasis. "What are you talking about?"

"Your Camel, sir—*Z*."

The care fell from Monty's face as an inkling of the truth flashed across his mind. This new situation so appealed to him as a relief from his other worries that he almost smiled.

"My Camel!" he exclaimed. "Of course, laddie. I'd forgotten all about it. Ha, so they'd hold a court of inquiry, would they? I'll give 'em inquiry! I leave my Camel where I choose."

"Naturally, sir," said Sykes, momentarily relieved, but more perplexed than ever. He scented trouble ahead.

HALF an hour later there came a third ring on the telephone.

"Wing, sir," breathed Sykes, hot and bothered again all in an instant.

"Answer it," growled Monty, in his now familiar formula.

"The . . . the Colonel, sir."

"Answer it."

"He insists on talking to you." Monty hesitated ever so slightly, and then reached out for the instrument.

"Mornin', sir," he cooed. But his mouth was set in a grim line.

Just like a warship, thought Sykes. Everything quiet, but with the decks cleared for action. A shiver ran down his spine.

"Toppin', sir, thanks, and you?" Monty was saying. He felt ready for anything now.

"Look here," said the Colonel, "about crossing the lines."

Monty's hand tightened on the instrument. This was a line for which he had not been prepared.

"What about it, sir?" he cooed, eyes half closed.

"I know you've always wanted to," the Colonel went on affably. "It's very understandable that you should, and if I have always refused I should like you to know that the responsibility has not been mine. The order applies to all squadron commanders and was merely passed on by me."

"Quite, sir," said Monty tersely, feeling more and more at sea over this extraordinary conversation. In spite of the Colonel's friendliness he felt sure he had a sting in his tail. He was not left long in doubt.

"And so," said the 'phone, "it gives me pleasure to be able to say that the order is temporarily rescinded. To-day you will cross the lines at 1.50 p.m. at the head of your squadron."

"B . . . b . . ." said Monty.

"No, don't thank me. Since I was not responsible for the order I can't in fairness take credit for its reversal."

"Then I won't," said Monty, who felt anything but grateful. "But I've got a date at 2 o'clock." He bit his lip, conscious that he was making a mess of things. "I mean I'd rather be excused to-day, if it's all the same to you, sir. Slight head and that sort of thing, don't you know. . . ." He hesitated and heard the Colonel's sharp intake of breath.

"You will cross the lines at 1.50," ordered the Wing Commander, in tones now cold and businesslike. "Enemy aircraft are to be kept at a distance of five miles from the lines between 2.0 and 3.0 to cover certain troop movements. All squadrons are co-operating. Your section will be Bapaume—Villers-Brettoneau. That's all."

"Dante's Inferno!" muttered Monty, hanging up the receiver and mopping his brow. "That's torn the copybook into tiny pieces. Decent old boy, actually. Don't sit there gapin' like a hyena, Sykes! Order lunch for 12.30. Find out how many machines are serviceable to leave the ground at 1.30, and then get all pilots in here."

Sykes fled.

"They'll be along in a minute, sir," he said on returning. "And there are thirteen serviceable machines."

"Should be eighteen, or thereabouts," thundered Monty. "What's happened?"

"Pilot missing yesterday, and two machines crashed, sir."

"Three," said Monty.

"Then there's your own, sir."

"And?"

"You crashed one before breakfast, sir, and it seems the other you took off had a bullet through the longeron. It's a write-off. The rigger says he was sure the bullet wasn't there when you left the ground, but of course he must have overlooked it."

"What about replacements?" Monty inquired.

Sykes coughed nervously. "A small technical detail connected with *Z*, sir."

Monty flushed angrily and became calm, all in the space of a second or two. "So be it, Sykes," he said. "Is thirteen lucky or unlucky?"

"Lucky, sir," said Sykes promptly. He had a feeling he would himself be unlucky if he said otherwise.

THE door opened to admit a number of young men. Sykes coughed; Monty adjusted his monocle.

"Led by myself, the Squadron will take off at 1.30," he announced, without preamble. "We keep the Jerry five miles clear of line Bapaume—Villers-Brettoneau. Thirteen machines are available, so the least experienced will be left behind. We will fly in three flights of four. Rodney will take "A" Flight, Fry "B," on the left, and Grant "C," on the right. If broken up, each will rally on his leader, Grant and Fry will rally on Rodney; Rodney you will connect with me where possible.

"One word more," he concluded. "We will make all the height possible, but should I dive without warning, Rodney, don't follow. Follow only when I sign by the usual rocking. Keep your eyes skinned, fight like hell and . . . oh, run along and play."

There was a scramble for the door, but outside the show of haste was not maintained, for the pilots grouped themselves together in an excited bunch which moved slowly towards the mess.

Fry gave a long, low whistle as the first expression of pent-up feelings.

"Can you beat that?" he inquired. " 'Keep your eyes skinned'—'fight like hell!' He's telling *us!*"

"Anyway, you've got your wish," Grant commented. "Didn't you say you'd give a month's pay to see Monty in action?"

"That's right," agreed Nixon. "A cheque'll do if you're short of the ready."

"Quit rotting, you chaps," Kirk broke in. "We were discussing this patrol. It's the queerest thing that's ever happened."

"It's not happened yet," said one, Roy Smith, in an ominous voice. "That's just the trouble."

"Don't be trivial. You know what I mean. He's had no experience at all, yet he's going to lead us. What if we meet trouble?"

"Exactly!"

"The worst danger is that he is overconfident," Fry summed up. "If he'd get off his high horse and ask our advice it would be more encouraging. Ordering us about as if the Hunnish sky were a barrack square!"

"Blasted nuisance!" Rodney muttered almost under his breath. "Yet, I can't help feeling sorry for him. I don't know why, but the thought of the poor old chap being shot down in cold blood, eyeglass and all, quite fails to thrill me."

" 'Sufficient for the day,' " quoted Fry. "What about a wet? I'll stand one round."

They vanished into the marquee.

CHAPTER VII
FREE-LANCE FIGHTER

HANDS IN POCKETS, Sergeant Hancock gazed skywards. The Squadron had gone—every blinking machine. They made a good sight against the blue, and a good sound, too. Funny that the noise of a lot of engines came back in little ripples, with a big wave every now and then. He looked at his watch.

They'd got off dead on time. Smart ground work, that was. Pilots did not always realise what they owed to the chaps who did the donkey work and had the messy jobs. Still, he was glad to have one foot on the ground.

Monty, too, would have liked to have been on the ground at that moment. Never had he felt so little confidence. Against his will, he was leading his squadron, that was the trouble. Alone it would have given him much pleasure to keep that appointment, but he did not know how these chaps would shape if the Huns accepted his challenge and were waiting in force.

He would soon know. Already they were over the

lines and being loudly greeted by "Archie." They were keeping excellent formation, which was something; in three diamond groups, led by Fry and Grant on the flanks, and by Rodney, just above and behind. But they could not fight in formation.

Dead ahead there was a smudge on the sky. Monty swept a semi-circle of horizon with a slow, searching gaze. There was another smudge to the north, and yet another to southward. No doubt they were formations of the enemy come in answer to his invitation.

At five miles over, he turned north. He became restless. To sit like this until attacked was just courting trouble. He decided to leave the Squadron to Rodney's care.

He dived without warning, curved away astern and began to climb, setting his engine for maximum power. Not satisfied, he looked into an ammunition-box where a glance at the belt told him there were three hundred rounds in position. He broke the belt by extracting a cartridge, and dumped two hundred overboard, then he treated the other belt in similar manner.

Relieved of the dead weight of four hundred rounds, the Camel showed new life and, hugging the sun, Monty followed his squadron on an ever higher level.

RODNEY headed for Bapaume. He was disappointed that Monty had gone so soon, although in a way he was relieved. He did not fancy having to accept responsibility for his safety in the fighting that lay ahead. In front, not far away now, were eight Fokker biplanes on a rather higher level. He thought there were more behind, and wanted to get going before these could join in.

The Fokkers thought otherwise, however, for they put their noses to Hunland and then swung south. Further north was a squadron of S.E.'s, with nothing to do. All the Huns seemed to be south of Bapaume. Pity the S.E.'s did not come down where their help was so badly needed, Rodney thought. Then, having reached the northern limit of his allotted sector, he turned for the south. The Fokkers were edging closer now, and another formation converged from the south-east. Rodney raised a hand to the sun and peeped between gloved fingers. *Ugh!* There were six of them up there waiting to pounce. He rocked his machine in warning and held a pointing arm above his head. This was a bit too hot. One needed eyes everywhere—and guns, too—for a job like this.

Rodney had an uncomfortable feeling that this was to be his last fight, and wished that someone more experienced than he might be in charge. He was outnumbered in an attack which was developing from three different points. He was five miles over, and at a disadvantage in the matter of height. Nor could he ease matters by turning west, since orders had been so explicit. There was, then, nothing to be done but wait until the enemy should choose the moment most favourable for attack. While he was debating these things he kept a watch on the machines up in the sun, for they were the most immediate danger.

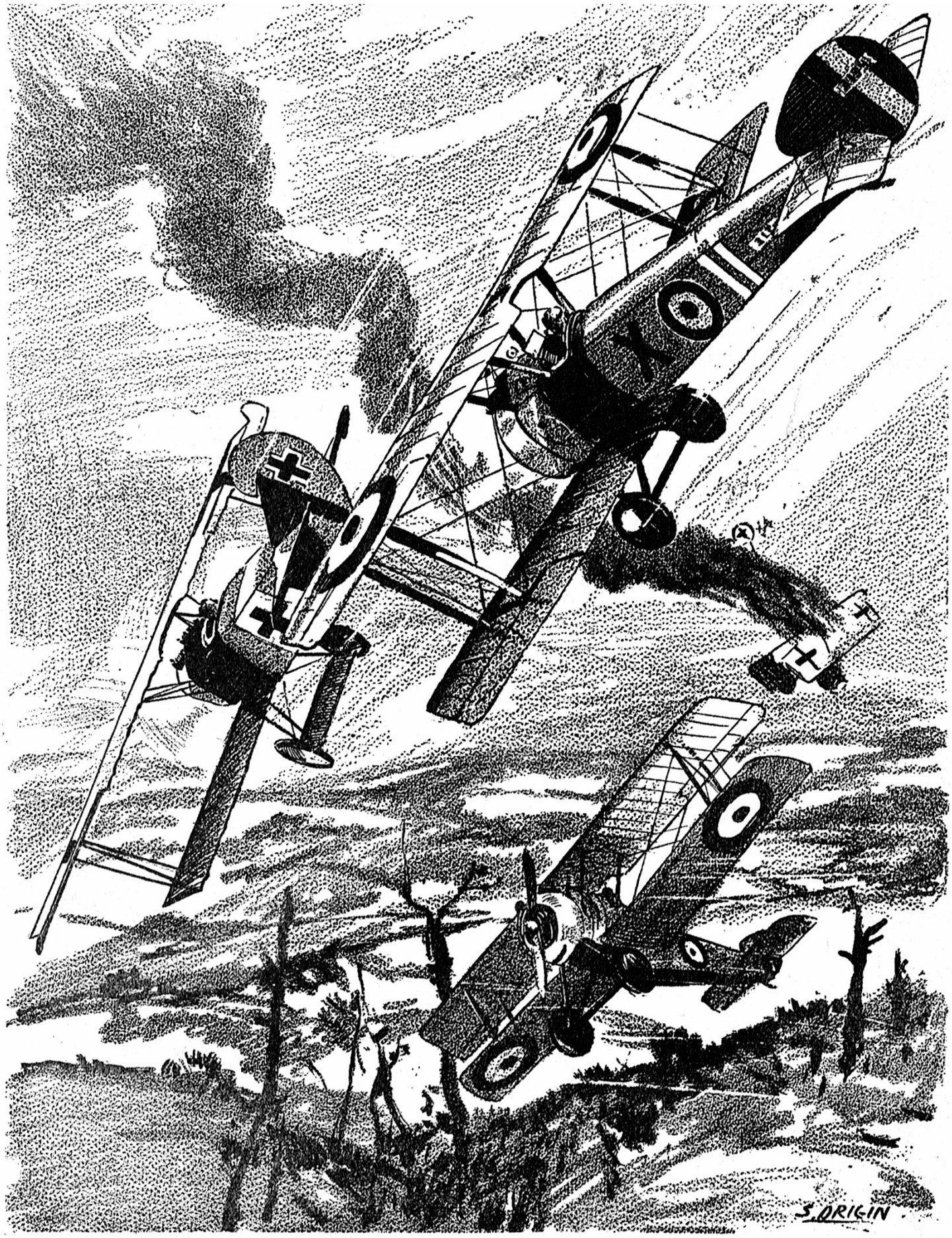
This was not too easy on account of the glare. He could only see five of them now—ah, there was the sixth, straggling a little way behind what was otherwise an excellent formation. They must be about to dive for they were well positioned. Yes, here they came. Their silhouettes had suddenly changed form so that now they showed their wings as two narrow bars, with slender fuselages amidships.

Rodney banked into a slow turn which would not disorganise his formation, but which might disturb the Huns' aim. His manoeuvres brought the enemy out of line with the sun so that he could see them more plainly. They were diving very steeply and would soon be in range. They were Albatros Scouts, he thought, and took his eyes from them for a last survey of the general position. What he saw caused a wave of sudden fear to possess him. He was not frightened for himself alone, but also for every man in the patrol he led. It seemed indeed that he had brought them into a trap from which there was no escape.

For, with a perfection of timing which spoke of long practice, the two lower formations were closing to strike at the very moment that the Squadron was braced to meet the threat from above. And it would only be a matter of seconds before those Albatros Scouts were within range—seconds which to Rodney, tense with apprehension, seemed stretched to incalculable periods of time. In spite of the bitter wind sweat broke out on his face. The collar of his Sidcot suit felt suddenly tight about his neck, but before he could raise a hand to the buckle there came a short burst of fire.

The fight was on.

WHILE Rodney still watched those swooping outlines, faintly surprised at that premature burst of fire, the incredible thing happened. A trail of smoke belched from the leading Albatros, which rolled slowly over whilst the others of the flight scattered and climbed as at a signal. Their carefully-planned attack was suddenly abandoned.


S. ORIGIN

Just why it had happened Rodney neither knew nor, for the moment, bothered to guess. He was otherwise occupied. Depression and fear had left him in that fraction of time, and he turned to force his attack on a now hesitant patrol of Fokkers. The initiative was with him at last.

Then, of a sudden, a sleepy sky seemed to awake. Peace turned to pandemonium. Aircraft flashed in and out of the circle of Rodney's Aldis, while some passed so close that he could not help seeing them over the barrel of the sight in spite of his concentration. For he was concentrating intensely on a single Fokker which, vertically banked, strove to escape his unwelcome attention.

He was convinced that the only way to win this battle was to stick it out with one man at a time. That meant that one had but a hazy idea of how the fight was going, and one risked a collision each second. Also, one had to leave one's own tail to look after itself, but this could not be helped. And the very tightness of his turn was some safeguard. So it was that, as the criss-crossed blue lines of smoke left by the crackling tracer rushed at Rodney and disappeared astern, only to be followed up by more in unending supply, he had but glimpses of how the others were faring. He saw a Camel burst into flames, and then another go tumbling in a slow spin, but he stuck the closer to his man. He was clearly getting the better of this encounter, and slowly coming into position.

His thumbs took up the slack in the triggers but, before he could fire, a bullet smashed into his Aldis and the picture went black. His engine began to vibrate. Instantly he transferred his eye to the ring and bead sight and rapped out a short burst. It was enough at such close range, and he saw the Hun's black helmet jerk forward on to the instrument-board.

A Fokker flashed across his path so close that he tumbled over on his back in its slipstream and came out in a dive. He righted himself and took stock of the sky. The dogfight had now opened out so that it covered a wide area with machines in twos and threes circling for mastery. He was himself considerably below the general height, and not, for the moment, threatened. The S.E.'s were coming down from the north to join in.

But what caught and held his attention was a little bunch of machines high overhead. They were the Albatros Scouts, he supposed, but could not imagine what they were fighting. For surely no Camel could have attained that altitude in the time. Yet there was a Camel up there! It was darting this way and that like a terrier worrying sheep. Now an Albatros was doing a slow falling leaf . . . another fell smoking, and the third dived for the lower machines. But the Camel was close on top of this third Albatros, which had not gone far before it rolled over and dived like an arrow, to be followed more sedately by little fluttering objects which had once been its wings.

The rest of the fight seemed to be turning away from the advancing S.E.'s, so that the Camels had some advantage. Three 'planes were tumbling out of it at different levels, and their bulging ailerons proclaimed them to be Fokkers. The S.E.'s would put a different complexion on the whole thing when they came within range. But they were not there yet, and meanwhile the Huns predominated.

THAT was all Rodney saw of the fight, for just then two Fokkers detached themselves from the melee and swooped upon him. He was, at the time, trying to regain his lost height, but with little success for his still-vibrating engine had dropped a hundred revs. He was badly placed to meet this new attack, and could only go into a gentle turn, which was of no great help to him.

With a shattering crash, bullets ploughed through his Camel, and its engine screeched to a standstill with a sudden jerk that threatened to tear the frame to pieces. The Camel spun and Rodney struggled to right it. The controls were slack, but it went into a dive and slowly flattened. He looked back. Three Fokkers were diving at him. Or . . . was the third a Camel? IT WAS!

A short crisp burst reached his ears and a Fokker suddenly lit up. The other swerved away, but was followed in its every movement by the relentless Camel.

Rodney watched, fascinated. It seemed to him the Hun had no chance—he was too close-pressed—and so he was not surprised when the stricken craft made a sudden lurch earthwards. His only surprise was at the extraordinary skill of the pilot who had so dramatically intervened. There was no one in the Squadron who could handle a Camel like that, or who fought in so masterly a fashion; of that he was convinced. And he ought to know; he had been with the Squadron longer than any except the Major himself.

But these thoughts were mere subconscious flashes in Rodney's brain, which was fully occupied with more

urgent things. To prevent his machine from spinning again was of vital importance if he was to survive. For the ground was close. The horror of fire, too, was something he could not dispel, for petrol was pouring from a punctured tank and black, choking fumes filled the cockpit. At any instant his Camel might become a mass of flame. There was nothing to prevent it, nothing he could do.

Below was rough country, uncultivated land, copses and gorse bushes; but there was also a clear space where at least he could put down somehow.

He brushed tree-tops with his wheels, banked a little and flattened. He was going too fast, couldn't get his tail down . . . now he was stalled, sinking. He hit the ground with a thud and snap that told of a broken undercarriage, and staggered into the air. A crash was certain. The right wing dropped and touched, and the whole machine cartwheeled over to finish up on its back.

Rodney loosened his belt and sank into petrol-soaked grass. Gently, he crawled clear and stood up, trembling uncontrollably. He ought, he supposed, to fire the machine since mercifully it had failed to catch alight in the air and he was now well inside enemy territory. Then he looked round suddenly at the sound of a Le Rhone engine.

Another Camel was coming in to land, turning easily in and out of clumps of trees. Now it touched down as gently as though on a perfectly-surfaced aerodrome, ran a little way and stopped. Rodney stared, fascinated. Here must be the pilot who had saved his life with such apparent ease, but who, it seemed, had yet not managed to save himself. He ran towards the newcomer. Then he stopped dead.

He was face to face with Monty.

CHAPTER VIII
THE DECOY OF DEATH

MONTY WAS STANDING on his seat and clutching the stick devotedly as he thumbed the switch which gave the even impetus to the engine.

"You've won a great battle, laddie," he smiled. "I doubt if there's ever been a more decisive victory than today's. I saw it all. Now get into this 'bus and off you go."

Rodney looked dumbfounded, as well as thoroughly frightened. "Y . . . you did it, sir. I . . . I hardly did anything. You saved my life—I saw you. And I saw you before that, saw what you were doing. I did nothing . . . nothing, I tell you. I can't fight! I'll never fly again."

His self-control suddenly broke and his body was shaken with sobs.

"RODNEY!"

That one word, spoken not loudly but with a deliberate emphasis that nobody in the Squadron ever ignored, had a strange effect on Rodney. Immediately he became calmer, and took Monty's place in the machine.

"Steer a little to the north," said Monty, as he grabbed a strut and guided the Camel back across the ground, "and you're not likely to meet trouble. Oh, and don't go wastin' ammunition for there's not much left."

He stood back and watched his flight-commander take-off, and when the machine had shrunk to a speck in the west a wave of loneliness came over him. Then he shrugged his shoulders, burrowed in his Sidcot for the monocle and plugged it fiercely in his eye. He strode off to where a crashed Fokker lay a little distance away. He had noticed it on coming down to land, and decided to investigate.

TO HIS surprise, Monty found a motionless figure in the cockpit, and with some difficulty got the man out and to the ground. Beyond all doubt, the fellow was dead, and no sooner had Monty assured himself of this than the hum of an aeroplane reached him.

He looked up, to see a Fokker circling like an eagle over carrion.

"Regular landin' ground, this," he told himself, and wondered whether yet another machine would try the tricky approach. He looked again at the corpse, and then again at the sky. The Hun was going to land he decided, not a doubt of it. Simultaneously an idea took shape in his mind, and Monty actually smiled a grim smile.

He picked up the corpse so that it was in the attitude of standing and, hugging it round the waist, struggled with it in the direction of a dense copse close by. It was not easy work, and several times Monty stumbled with his grim companion. Viewed from any distance they had the appearance of two men grappling desperately with each other—which was just how Monty wanted it to look. For, as he heard the

thud of wheels on turf and the metallic click of tail-skid against stones, he raised one arm as though to strike.

When the Fokker dashed past, Monty and his burden were at the edge of the copse, and he hurriedly deposited the dead German out of sight in the undergrowth. Then he ran towards the Fokker, stopping midway, just as the pilot jumped out.

"*Verdompte Englander! Schnell!*" he shouted at the top of his voice, and doubled back to the copse.

But once in that leafy shelter he crouched behind a gorse bush, only to dart out again as soon as he heard the German plunge, shouting, into the bushes. A moment later he was in the Fokker's cockpit, and he had but to swing the machine round to get the full take-off run.

It was child's play for a pilot of Monty's calibre. He cleared the trees with plenty to spare and banked for the lines.

He was thankful to find the sky clear beyond the trenches, and promptly headed for Villers. As he flew, he chuckled. After all his efforts, and all the seeming hopelessness of his task, this 'bus had fallen straight out of the sky into his lap.

Then the engine spat.

"Bothah!" ejaculated Monty, who guessed the petrol had run out.

The engine coughed to a standstill, and Monty picked out his landing-place even as he pushed the Fokker into a glide. It was a better landing-ground than many a war-time aerodrome, and Monty so judged matters that he came to rest but a stone's throw from a farmhouse. Here there might be a telephone.

As he clambered out of the cockpit a girl came running out into the open.

"*Bon-jour, Mademoiselle,*" Monty greeted her as she came up to him. "*Avez-vous le telephone?*"

"*Mais certainment, Monsieur* Tommie, but first you buy some of my cakes, *nest ce pas?* Why have you all keep away so long?"

Truly, thought Monty, the wench was good to look upon. Aloud he said: " First, I telephone. After that I will buy your cakes and anything else you like, Madeleine."

"Lucille is my name," corrected the lady as, delightedly, she slipped her arm in Monty's and led him away.

A FEW miles away from the Matthiew farmhouse the Squadron was in a state of considerable excitement and tension. So far, but three pilots had returned from a fight that was long to be remembered, and they had had much to tell a delighted Sykes in the office. Never had there been such a battle or such a victory. They had only suffered three casualties, but at least ten Huns had been shot down. Unfortunately, poor Rodney had gone down in flames.

But the most interesting point about the whole affair was that Monty had turned tail the very moment Huns had been sighted.

To Sykes, however, this seemed the worst news of all. How unlike the old days, he thought, days when the C.O. had invariably been in the thick of the fighting. But, of course, things were bound to be different nowadays. Majors had no chance now.

There was also talk of an unknown pilot who had shot Huns off other people's tails for a pastime. But there was rather a mystery about that and soon the conversation returned to Monty.

"Wonder where he is?" Smith remarked.

Just then, Sergeant Hancock rapped on the window that overlooked the 'drome.

"Major's coming in now," he announced. "And several others. He's flying *X*. She's over there." He stretched an arm to the sky.

Then, even before an interested group had got to the window, the 'phone bell rang. Sykes answered it.

"Who's that? . . . " he asked. "Who ? . . . Oh yes, sir . . . very good, sir . . . yes, sir, immediately." He hung up, looking half-dazed.

"What's bitten you, Bill?" inquired Roy Smith. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I . . . I've been talking to one," said Sykes, and then corrected himself. "At least I've been talking to the Major. That was no ghost. The ghost must be out there flying *X*. The Major's down at the Matthiews' farm."

"What!" came in chorus.

"Lucille!" said Roy. "The sly old dog!"

"He wants a tender sent out at once with petrol and coloured dopes. I must see to it." He got up and left.

The pilots trooped out to the 'drome, all except Tutt who was too busy wrestling with the intricacies of a court of inquiry to bother about other details.

"Poor Sykes has gone balmy," announced Roy. "There's Monty coming in now."

"I'm not so sure of that," Fry mused. "What d'you suppose dope's wanted for at Lucille's if not to change identification marks on a certain Camel? Remember we've proved that the missing *Z* was there. I'm beginning to get the hang of it all."

But Fry's deductions were sadly upset when Rodney emerged from the mysterious *X* and, back in the squadron-office with the rest of the patrol, told his story.

It was a story far too incredible to be accepted by everyone, especially since Rodney had obviously been through a rough time and was still badly shaken. Speculation, in fact, was still going on some considerable time later when the door opened to admit Monty himself.

He seemed in the best of humours, and his monocle shone with carefully-polished brilliance.

"Run along and play, laddies," he said, and the amateur detectives quietly withdrew.

"I think I'm beginning to see day-light," said Fry outside, and then changed the subject. "What a fight!"

"Ah," agreed the others. "What a fight!"

Inside the office, meanwhile, Tutt roused himself.

"About this court of inquiry, sir," he began.

"Yes," encouraged Monty affably. "What about it?"

"In regard to the missing *Z*, sir."

"Which is standin' just outside the window," said Monty.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Tutt. "But what am I to do?"

"Refer the matter back for fresh instructions, and don't bothah me with any more trifles. Now then, Sykes, laddie, we'll get some of that work you've been talking about off our chests."

"Yessir," said Sykes eagerly.