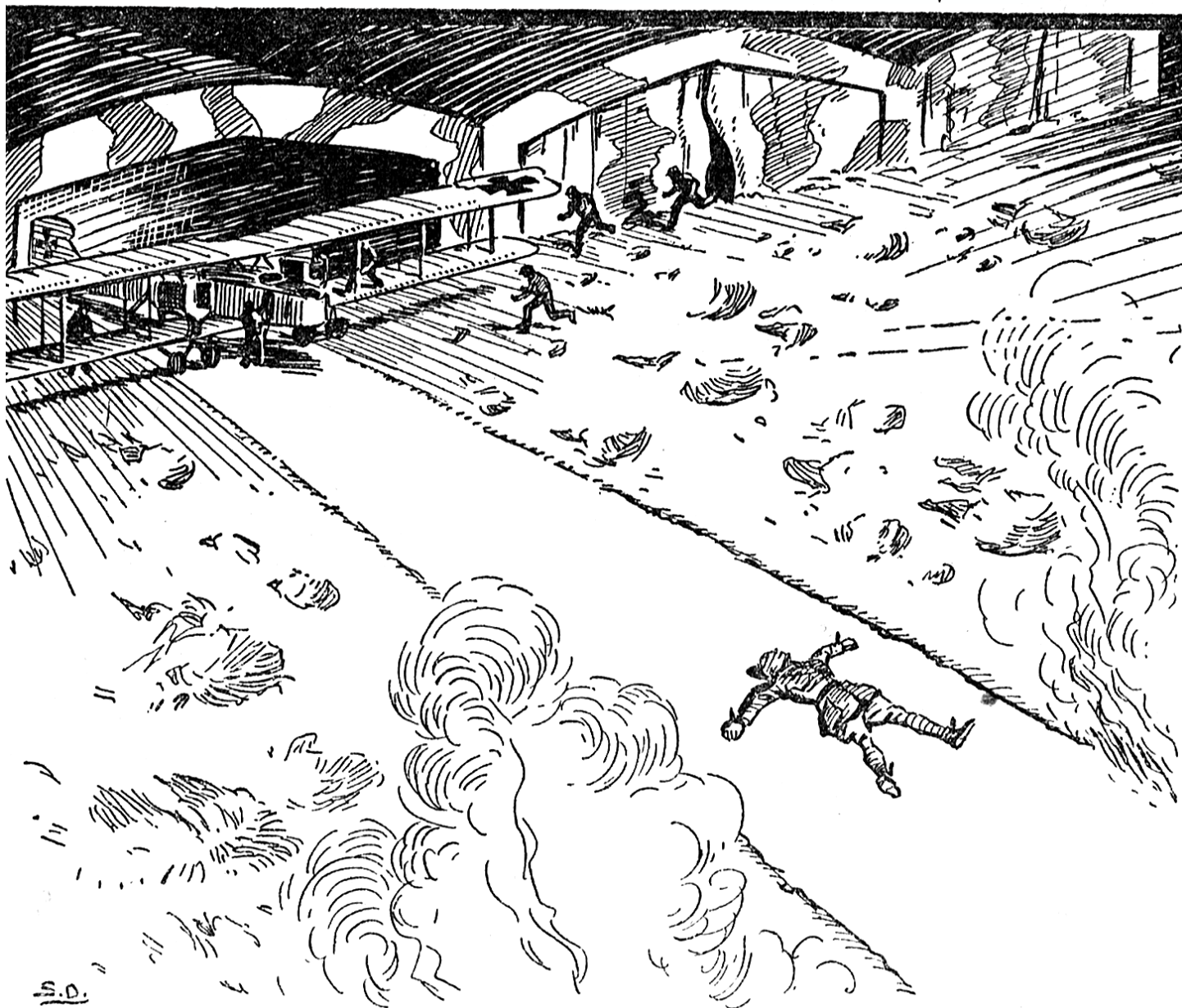


# the **COFFIN CREW**



## HOSTAGE of the GOTHAS

by **ARCH WHITEHOUSE**

*When Treachery robbed the Coffin Crew of their Dare-devil Leader, that Crazy Band of Bombers carried their Hate through the Valley of Death into the very Lair of the Gotha Griffons. And in the Air, a Handley clashed with a Gotha in a Duel for which the Forfeit was a Flaming Death!*

**T**HE PILOT'S POOL at St. Omer was the acid-fixing bath of the Royal Flying Corps. It was the crucible in which careers were moulded or shattered—a gigantic life-and-death lottery in which men were only pawns, puppets on a string. . . .

A man went into St. Omer with hopes and aspirations bright. Bristling with morale. Perfectly normal as one judged mentality in those high days and holidays of hell on earth and in the sky. But when he came out.

Yes, it was different then. You went in hopeful of going to an S.E.5 outfit and probably wound up on Camels. Perhaps you had been trained on Bristol Fighters—in which case you came out with a ticket for a D.H.4 mob. If you had a preference for the Somme front, because your friends were down there, it was a million to one you'd wind up behind Dixmude.

So it went on—and there wasn't a thing you could do about it.

But the disappointment was not the worst feature of the Pool. You must also endure the waiting, the everlasting delays, the maddening mystery of The Board. You sat on long benches and stared at The Board for hours on end, waiting to see your luck. Nothing happened. Then you turned your head—looked back—and your name was posted there. There was your destiny.

There was no system of beating the fate that the Pool wrote down for you. They hurled you into the labyrinthine channels of the Pool developer, and you could not escape. The acid of the discipline—the Red Tab routine—bit into your brain. You were swirled along, helpless, and washed clean of every vestige of *esprit de corps*, of comradeship, that you possessed. They made you a lone wolf—and you had to like it.

There were times when the vortex halted in some bend of the damnable system, when you floated for an hour listening to advice on what to do when taken prisoner—how to put out fires in the air—or watched an illuminated explanation of how to use a shoe-lace as a tourniquet. But these were few and far between. Most of the time you just waited.

Wait and hope. Wait and pray. Wait and suffer.

On through the swirling system you went, shuffled from Corps squadrons to Army outfits and back again. One minute you were headed for No.60—with Bishop's mob—or were a certainty for 56, under the guidance of McCudden. And then the next minute you were back at scratch, waiting again.

Day after day you reported to the naval C.P.O. in charge of the wicket. He was a jovial soul, but his humour fell on stony ground around the Pool; it was like handing a copy of Punch to a man on his way to the gallows. You sat around and tried to make conversation with balloon observers, or got into arguments with artillery spotters. You asked the fellow in front where he got his Military Cross, and learned it was awarded him in '15 for building a parapet with biscuit boxes. . . .

Sit and wait and watch. There goes a transfer from the infantry. There's a veteran back from St. Margaret's. That sergeant-pilot walking with a limp sports the striped ribbon of the Military Medal; somebody murmurs that he shot a Zeppelin down as a gunner—and that his pilot who hadn't fired a shot was awarded the D.S.O. and a majority.

More rumours—more dashes for The Board—more wails from the men who get their papers. Confusion, words, futility—day after day!

IT WAS a combination of all these things, all these annoyances, that made Barry Perone what he was. Barry Perone was a pukka Bristol pilot, his card indicated. He counted on going up to No.22 with Captain McKeever. He came to St. Omer swagger and confident, and for three days he swirled through the acid bath of the Pool. Three horrible days. His uniform lost its T.D.S. smartness and his cordovan boots their sheen. The ramrod stiffness went out of his back and the fire died in his eyes. . . . Lectures, advice, orders. Rumours, hints, and another pamphlet. . . . Ferry pilots sore at their lot. Camel blokes cursing the right-hand spin. S.E. wallahs who couldn't land 'em and R.E.8 guys who would rather be back in Salonika.

Three days of that.

Barry Perone was out writing a letter when his name was posted on The Board. A chalk-faced Ack-Emma with a two-bladed prop on his arm—a pompous ass with polished boots and swagger stick who somehow represented all the formal starched-shirt clowning of the Pool—jabbed a white card into the "Outgoing" slot. It read:

Lieut. Barry Perone, R.F.C.  
Posted to No.129 Squadron.  
Struck off strength of No.112 T.D.S.  
To report at once.

Barry Perone came upon the notice half an hour later, and his blood pressure hit the boiling point. He'd be doubleblank bedamned! What was Squadron 129?

Where were they and what did they do? He had never heard of 129 in any of the official despatches, and he cursed them now to a triple-distilled hell.

After he had raged for ten minutes, the limping sergeant-pilot drew him aside. He explained that No. 129 was never in the despatches because it was part of the mysterious Independent Air Force—that crack-brained, lunatic, madman’s division that was the skeleton in the official cupboard of the R.F.C.

“But I wanted to go with McKeever!” Barry Perone raged.

The sergeant-pilot grinned. “Oh, 129 ain’t that bad,” he said. “Unless they assign you to the Coffin Crew.”

“To hell with them—to hell with their Coffin Crew!” Barry Perone stormed. . . .

The skeleton face of Fate must have grinned when he said that, for wheels were already spinning within wheels, and it was ordained that when the Coffin Crew went to hell, Barry Perone would fly with them.

## CHAPTER II STRANGER FROM THE SKIES



LD NUMBER ELEVEN” was on her way home. The Coffin Crew was coming back, pounding through a sable sky, from another midnight prow over Hunland.

Another night of seeking the Gotha Griffons, their latest, most vehement hate.

For more than a week old No.11 had been welcoming her new neighbours with T.N.T. and fulminate. For seven days they had been dealing out nightly headaches to Baron Harald von Wusthoff and his Gothas. Von Wusthoff—replete with Pour le Merite, Order of the Flouse of Hohenzollern, duelling scars and Boelcke collar—had come into their section breathing brimstone, battle and blasphemy. His bomber squadron, bearing the insignia of a snarling, fabulous animal belching fire from its eagle beak, had been organised to halt the activides of the night-flying Coffin Crew. Fight fire with fire—a thief to catch a thief—and post a Gotha to get a Handley!

“Bah!” von Wusthoff had boasted. “Our glorious Fokkers! Our daring Pfalz! Our fine Albatros staffels! What do they do? Nothing. . . . Nothing to stop those

devils in that Number Eleven. For months they have made our knights in their single-seater chargers look like Panchos on donkeys. . . . But my Griffons will get them! Their flying dreadnought, eh? Our fighters are outgunned, eh? *Bei Gott*, my Gothas will outgun them!”

But his Gothas didn’t.

The Griffons were placed on the field outside Deynze between Thielt and Ghent—directly opposite Cassel, the roost of the Coffin Crew. They were placed there—and there they stayed for more than a week. Every night No.11 came over and pocked their field with enough 50-pounders to make take-offs impossible. With the rest of the load No.11 battered the rail-heads at Thielt and Lederberg to smoking ruins. They harassed the ammunition trains that were supplying the guns behind Hoogdele. Two regimental headquarters were wiped out, and any Fokker that tried to hinder them was sent down in flames or battered into material for the repair depots.

Von Wusthoff swore, and he swore well. Like other German leaders he had no imagination, and blamed all his troubles on Lieutenant Graham Townsend, the pilot of No.11. Townsend would have been flattered had he known, for he considered himself little more than a passenger where the Coffin Crew was concerned. After all, he argued, he was only the pilot. Phil Armitage, the bomber officer, was much more important. Phil could fly and use the bird-cage bomb sight. Then there was Andy McGregor, the Black Watch gunner up front, who had shot down so many Huns he had stopped counting. Or Sergeant Mike Ryan, the bomber sergeant in charge of the toggle-board. They couldn’t do without Mike who set fuses, drew safety pins and sucked on his short clay pipe, no matter how heated the battle became.

In the back pit was Corporal Horsey Horlick, a transfer from some obscure cavalry mob. No one could replace Horsey or fight with such fury. And last—but a hell of a long way from being the least—was little Harry Tate, the Cockney toggle-man who could double in Lewis and first-aid bandages, and pull repairs on a Rolls-Royce at the gallop.

Graham Townsend would have laughed had he known that Baron von Wusthoff blamed him for all the trouble the Griffons had experienced since their arrival on the Flanders front. Laughed loud and long. Especially to-night, for they had poured the old iron into the Gotha crew again, and his heart was light inside him.

Old No.11 was over Roulers, now, heading back to



roost. Townsend was nursing her along, keen and alert, dancing her away from those long tapering blades of searchlight that slashed the inky sky. Beside him Phil Armitage was marking the map, and McGregor and Horlick were ready at their guns. In the dark cabin-chamber Mike Ryan was preparing to squat in comfort and take his ease, disdainful of the stray chunks of metal that the chugging Archie hurled up from below.

The Coffin Crew coming home—

IT WAS cold in the cabin, and Harry Tate huddled close to Ryan against the sharp-cornered struts of the racks. Now and then the searchlights threw stabbing beams across them, and the jerk of the 'plane would throw them apart. Outside the great engines bellowed and snarled.

"Wot d'yer think of this bloomin' business, Sergeant?" Harry Tate yelled after a pause. "It ain't war, yer know—a-goin' after one special lot like this. Wot 'ave they done to us?"

"Them Griffons?" Ryan returned. "No, they ain't done anything yet—but wait until they get a night of rain, and they can fill in them there holes. They'll do something to us then, my bucko!"

"But Sergeant, 'ow do we know they're arfter us—especial, like? We didn't come up 'ere to 'ave a go at any special lot, did we?"

"Nao? Well pwhat about our sittin' over Gontrode for about three months until we blew the blarsted Gothas clean out o' there? Thot was a'pickin' special, wasn't it?"

"But we wasn't the only lot to go up there, Sarge!" Tate argued. "This 'ere business of pickin' out one bloke and 'is mob, like we're a'doin' ain't 'ardly playing the blinkin' game."

Tate, a true Cockney, had a streak of old English chivalry in his make-up. He could see war as it was fought, and was willing to take his chance with the next. He asked no favours or funk-hole jobs. He hated the enemy with all the fervour of the soldier who has been drawn into the conflict on the strength of war-time emotion, music-hall songs and recruiting posters. But to single out one man, or one group of men, seemed to put the conflict on the sordid and cruel side. He had no personal hate for the Hun. He rather liked him, as a prisoner. As a group, or a nation, he was a tough lad to pick on; but from the individual or personal standpoint, Harry was not quite certain. This business of selecting the Gotha Griffons as their pet hate might have been all right for one show, but to carry it so consistently—

"Yer don't play no game in this wor," Ryan explained, plucking his cold pipe out of his tusks. "The Jarmins over there are out to get us, Harry, me bhoy. It's either them or us, lad. I don't like it neither, but wot can we be a-doin' about it?"

"I thinks we're arskin' for it, Sarge," Tate said. "'Olding our 'ands out for it, like. Ye carn't go on night arfter night, like we're a'doin', an' expect to cop orf every time. It ain't in the books that way, mate."

RYAN grunted. He sat up straighter to watch the greying outline of Horsey Horlick's feet as they moved about on the rear turret platform. Then Horlick's guns began to chatter, and they knew they were in for it again. Enemy attack!

Stoically they sat and waited—for anything. Outside the gunfire raged and spat its venom in all directions. Up front Andy McGregor was sending out his short cruel bursts, smacking into a flight of Albatros scouts that had been sitting up on the roof, waiting their return. The cabin began to dance as it always did. It was like sitting inside a square concrete-mixer. Together Ryan and Tate hung on, braced themselves against the racks and gripped the cross cleats of the catwalk.

*Bang! Ping! Bong! Rattle! . . . Rattle!*

Again the tell-tale searchlights caught the big bomber in its glare and poured a slashed design on the roof of the cabin. The two toggle-men shut their eyes and hung on tighter while the catwalk attempted another fandango.

Once they opened their eyes and exchanged glances. They knew something was going to happen, and the longer it held off the more tense their sensations became. Why didn't an engine conk—a chunk of metal come through the fabric and smack something? A strut go out to flail the parched fabric of the wings? Anything, to break this merciless tension!

But nothing happened—except that the gunfire suddenly stopped. And that was bad. Had they ran out of ammo? Had they been hit and were gliding down into Hunland? Were the men in the cockpit all right?

"Damn!" swore Mike Ryan, peering toward the companionway that led into the cockpit.

"Something queer going on," Tate bleated. "Listen! There's a lone 'plane out there. What is it?"

Ryan crawled to his hands and knees, clambered along the catwalk and managed to get up the two steps that led into the open office in front. He bellowed something, listened for a reply and came back.

A relieved grin split his face.

"It's all right," he announced, squatting down again. "A French Spad out there. Picked us up over Roulers, and helped us through the Jerry defence. Seems to be following us."

"Spad? . . . Spad?" Tate bellowed. "Wot the 'ell does 'e want a' follering us? Bet 'e's a bad 'un. I'm a-goin' to tell 'Orlick to watch out for 'im."

Ryan clutched at the crawling figure that made its way along the catwalk, but Tate was well away and was soon creeping up inside the rear turret where the gunner stood.

Horlick stared at the little Cockney who came up into the Scarff ring. He cupped his hands around his eyes and peered out. The French Spad was directly behind their tail—in a beautiful position for attack.

"Look art for 'im!" screamed Harry Tate. "That blighter's a bad 'un! There ain't no Spad squadrons round abart 'ere. Watch 'im, 'Orsey!"

Horlick nodded grimly. He fired a short warning burst at the Spad's wing tip. The French 'plane veered off and took up a position well off to one side, but still continued to follow the Handley-Page.

"Don't worry, Harry," Horlick roared back at the little Cockney. "I'll watch him!"

But the French Spad continued to follow them all the way back to Cassel.

THE landing was silky and smooth. Townsend brought old No.11 in as gracefully as a swan. Hardly a bump. The night crew was out to greet them and it was but the work of a few minutes to douse the flares and fold back the wings.

"That Spad chap is following us all the way in," Townsend observed as he stood beneath the great nose of the Handley-Page. "Must be lost."

"Some of those Frenchmen would lose their heads if they weren't fastened on tight," Armitage said. "Well, anyway, he gave us a hand with those Albatri. Let's see what he wants."

The trim single-seater came in without the aid of flares and feathered down to a smooth landing. The pilot taxied the Spad up near the front of No.129's hangars, shut off the engine, and clambered out. For a moment he seemed puzzled, staring about in the gloom. He started to walk toward three Bristol Fighters that were warming up along the other side, preparatory to a take-off to escort a flight of D.H.9's to Bruges. Then he hesitated, moved his hands bewilderedly, and came toward the big Handley as if he had at last spotted what he was looking for.

"*Messieurs*," he began, pulling off a glove. "*Je cherche le pilots*—"

"Looking for someone?" Armitage asked, coming toward him.

The pilot of the Spad was tall and dark, a bundled figure in his heavy flying-coat. He said, "Your pardon . . . Zee pilot of zee big bomber machine I seek. Your Handley-Page, she just come in, no?" His English was thick and blurred, heavily accented.

"This is the bus that just came in," Armitage told him. "You helped us out back there over Roulers—damn nice of you. Looking for a bed for the night?" The dark figure gestured. "You are the pilot, *m'sieu*? I weesh to speak to you—"

"What's up?" Townsend asked, coming towards them out of the dark.

"This is our pilot," Armitage said. "Our friend of the Spad has some news for you, Graham."

Townsend extended his hand and strong fingers gripped his own. The dark face of the Spad pilot was grinning and he spoke in a rush of words: "You are zee pilot, yes? Of zee beeg bomber? I 'ave zee verry—zee mos' important message for you. We speak alone, eh, *m'sieu*?"

Townsend shrugged, his eyes narrowed, "Can't you tell me here? These are my men. They can be trusted."

"*Non-non!*" The dark stranger gesticulated. "You do not understan' *mon ami*. Eet ees for you alone I come here. Something I 'ave seen to-night that you should know. Of importance, *m'sieu*, I assure you."

Townsend glanced at Armitage, and again his shoulders hunched. These Frenchies! He pondered a moment, his eyes watching the tractor that was pulling No.11 into the hangar, watching tire armament-sergeants who were taking the guns away. He heard Horlick whisper hoarsely. "Probably goin' to squawk about me taking a shot at him."

"Oh, all right," Townsend said. He slid out of his coat and handed it to his batman. He noticed as he walked away that the others had gathered close to keep an eye on the stranger's Spad. Armitage, Horlick, McGregor and Ryan huddled in a whispering knot. And he noticed, too, that Harry Tate had sidled away from the others and was disappearing now into the shadows of the hangars.

The dark newcomer linked his arm beneath Townsend's. They began to walk slowly toward the Bristol sheds, towards the hum of the warming engines.

The little knot of Coffin Crew men peered after them as the two drew away. Armitage rubbed his hands slowly together, and his voice was puzzled.

"That's a queer one."

"Dommed queer, sir," said Mike Ryan throatily.

They watched Townsend saunter along in his fleece-lined flying boots, hands in the pockets of his leather coat, while the strange pilot poured a torrent of words into his ear. Once Townsend stopped and they heard his laugh float back, thin in the night. The dark stranger waved his arms, and they moved ahead again.

"I don't like this funny stuff,"

Armitage growled. "I——" And his voice suddenly broke off in a gasp.

"Hi, there—!" Horlick shouted.

THE whole evil thing happened in a flashing moment, before they could move or act. They saw the dark stranger step back, saw his arm rise above Townsend's head and smash down swiftly. A lightning blow—and another as the Englishman's body crumpled forward.

Armitage was fumbling for his gun. Ryan and McGregor were rushing forward with Horlick at their heels. But even as they ran the dark stranger had bent down and straightened again with Townsend's inert figure in his arms. Armitage fired once, wildly, over the man's head, and he shot again in warning as he rushed. But the dark pilot of the French Spad had already reached the nearest Bristol Fighter—was dumping the senseless body of his victim into the back seat. He sprang into the front cockpit as Armitage shot once more, cursing as he missed.

The engine of the Bristol opened with a roar.

Horlick was leading the others now, his long legs flying, but the distance was too great. The Bristol lunged against the chocks, shuddered, hobbled over and began to roll away. Armitage was steadying his arm for a final desperate shot when suddenly a black shape appeared out of nowhere, lunging, and hurled itself at the tail of the rolling 'plane.

"Tate!" Armitage gasped. "Hold him, boy!"

The big Rolls-Royce Eagle engine roared to harsh crescendo, trying to drag the tail-heavy 'plane away. But the little Cockney was grappled tight now, trying to kick his foot between the rudder and the elevator—trying to jam it.

"Hold him, Tate!" Armitage screamed, rushing.

But Harry Tate couldn't hold him. In a vague split-second picture that forever after was a nightmare in Phil Armitage's mind, he saw the dark pilot of the Spad turn in his seat, saw the long arm that reached and the hand that seized on the pistol-grip of one of the double Lewis guns mounted on the Scarff ring of

the Bristol. A single tongue of flame lanced out from the muzzle of the gun, and a scream like a woman's—Harry Tate's shrill voice—was horrible in the night. An arm flung out from the huddled figure clamped to the tail, and a slumped body dropped away as the Bristol lurched, staggered, rushed clear.

Again the Lewis flamed as the Bristol moved, and a rattle of lead bit into the noses of the two remaining Fighters that were warming up. Wooden props wailed and screeched and splintered blades went hurling skyward. With a farewell roar the runaway Bristol darted down the field, hoiked its tail, and spouted up into the darkness.

Two streamers of flame, vanishing in the night, marked its path to Germany.

There was hell then on the field of the 129th. Men rushing and voices roaring—pound of feet and questions and shouts. Horsey Horlick, breathing in great gasps, was lifting Harry Tate's slumped figure. Ryan and McGregor had rushed to the French Spad of the stranger and had it ticking over. Armitage bent above the dimly-seen form of the little Cockney.

"Harry—" he gasped. "He got you, Harry?"

A trickle of blood was running from the corner of Harry Tate's mouth. The little fellow's breath was wheezing and his eyes were open wide, staring. "I—I knew 'e was a bad 'un—" Tate gasped. "I—I tried—"

There was a choking in his throat and his body stiffened.

"He's dead, sir," said Horsey Horlick gaspingly.

ARMITAGE straightened, whirling around as Mike Ryan came running towards him. "The Spad, sir!" Ryan was yelling. "We got it runnin', sir!" Armitage stared at him blankly, rubbing a moist hand across his coat. For the first time the realisation struck him hard that the worst had happened. Harry Tate was dead—and Graham Townsend was captive. And their hands were tied—helpless!

"No use, Mike," he said dully. "I'm not sure I could fly it. And anyway—" He shook his head hopelessly. What use to chase the stolen Bristol now? Why try when bringing down the clever thief meant bringing down Graham Townsend?

Other voices shouted at him as he walked slowly beside Horsey Horlick who bore the slumped form of Tate in his arms. He did not answer. They came at last to the Medical Officer's shack and Horlick laid his burden down. The fat M.O. took one look and spread his hands. "What happened, Lieutenant?"

But Armitage just gestured wearily.

As he came out of the shack he saw Ryan and McGregor waiting. Ryan extended a ragged sheet of paper. "Did ye see this, sor? Pinned on th' Spad's dashboard."

Armitage snatched it. In the beam of light from the M.O.'s window he read the careful German script:

To the Coffin Crew:

This should stop you from bombing our field any more. Your pilot will be held as hostage to ensure that fact. He will be staked out on the ground everytime your 'planes come across—so drop your bombs at your own risk, gentlemen. Perhaps now we can contend in the air on terms that are more equal.

(Signed) The Golhas 33rd,  
Von Wusthoff, Commanding.

Blood rushed up in the pale face of Phil Armitage. He tried to speak, choked, and his hand that held the script trembled violently.

"What's up?" a voice demanded—the harsh voice of Major McKelvie.

"Look! Look at this, sir," Armitage blazed. "He has taken Townsend, killed Tate, and now throws this in our faces. He can't do that!"

The Major took the slip and moved inside the M.O.'s office to read it carefully. "Can't do it, eh?" he answered quietly, withdrawing his blue-plumed Dunhill. "But he has!"

The Major stalked over, took one look at Tate, and turned around again. "Well, what are you going to do about it?" he snapped.

"But they can't do that!" Armitage raged again. "It's against all decent laws of war. Townsend's a prisoner, and is entitled to the rights of a prisoner. What the hell sort of a war is this, anyhow?"

"You make me laugh, Armitage," the Major snapped. "War! Of course it's war. There are no laws in war, man! If they want to stake him out for you to bomb, they can stake him out. What can you do? Capture a Jerry, and stake him out on top of your fuselage. What can they do about it? This is war, man!"

"Stake a Jerry out on my cabin top, so that they won't shoot at me?" gasped Armitage. "You're crazy! I wouldn't do a thing like that. Neither would you. That's not our game."

"Of course it isn't," the Major replied coldly. "Neither is it the game of the average German, but evidently it's the game of this man—this von

Wusthoff! Don't say you weren't warned. We told you and Townsend two weeks ago what you were up against, but you treated it as a lark and went out every night and peppered their field so that they couldn't get off. We told you that von Wusthoff is a devil—a madman, perhaps—but you both laughed at our warning. Instead of blowing them out bag and baggage, you played a sporting game and peppered their field. Lovely! I expected any night to find you had been down there and offered to play them at rugger, tiddly-winks or some other such gallant gesture. Now he's laughing!"

"But the international laws of war!" Armitage ranted on stubbornly. "They can't do that to Townsend. They've got to put him in a prison camp, care for his wounds and officially inform us through some neutral country that he has been captured. They can't make him play a part like that. He's an officer—"

"Bosh!" the Major snorted. "You'll never learn, Armitage. Ever hear of Nurse Cavell, Captain Fryatt, the *Lusitania*, poison gas at Ypres, or of *flammenwerfers*? If this blighter wants to stake Townsend out on the 'drome, who's going to stop him?"

"We wull, sir," a voice came from out of the dimness beyond. It was Andy McGregor. "We'll stop 'em, sir! Ye'll gie us the wur-r-rud! They canny do thot tae Muster Toonsend."

"No?" replied McKelvie, after a few seconds. "Well, go ahead and stop them. You have my best wishes."

IF IT was McKelvie's purpose to infuriate them, he succeeded even beyond his own expectations. Armitage stopped talking with a word half uttered and his jaw clamped, his mouth drew into a light, thin line. The colour drained from Horsey Horlick's face, and his big hands clenched at his sides. Mike Ryan stiffened, held himself even more erect—but it was Andy McGregor who took it hardest.

The raw-boned, dour Scot was a man who rarely showed emotion, but his Highland blood was boiling now and the fury of wrath blinded him. He wanted to strike out, to maim and kill—and his seething anger could be held no longer. Frank tears were in the corners of his eyes, and his face was drawn and twisted. He stared around at all of them, and his blurred voice rasped in the quiet room:

"If ut's murther they ask forr"—his whole body trembled—"we'll gie it to 'em. Upon ma hear-a-a-rt. Ah swear that not until enemy blade or bullet hae battered ma breast will Ah gie up the ficht to bring



back Muster Toonsend and score revenge fra the death of yon lad lying there.”

He was glaring at McKelvie. Now he spoke to the others. “Are ye wie me?” Horsey Horlick, his hands clenching, nodded without a word. Ryan hesitated, then advanced from the shadows stiff as a ramrod. McKelvie glanced at Armitage.

The bomber officer’s face was set and hard. His chest heaved as he breathed deeply. He knew that in McKelvie’s eyes he was a fool—a hysterical fool making a child’s futile gesture. But somehow—

“We’re with you, Mac,” he said huskily. “Until Townsend is back and Tate is avenged—or until we’re all in hell together.”

### CHAPTER III MISSION OF VENGEANCE

**T**HEY BURIED HARRY TATE the next morning. One of the splintered four-bladed props, battered by von Wusthoff, was made into a cross and planted over the mound. The Coffin Crew stood about the grave until someone started to throw earth down on the rough pine coffin, and then they turned away, feeling a strange cold stiffness in their hearts.

In a group, they walked back toward the Administration Buildings, silent, choked, a pack of tramp-weary dogs. The burial party remained behind to finish their work, and the clank of shovels against rock pounded in their ears as they wandered down the hill.

Without knowing why or how, they came up to the Orderly Room, and stood about as if expecting some sort of order. Airmen revolve around the Orderly Room like blind moths about a flame. They should have gone into St. Omer and drawn on the fleshpots and tinsel palaces of the war-streaked boulevards. The American Bar, Charlie’s place, the postcard shop opposite the battered railway station. Anywhere, but the Orderly Room.

A tender came up the cinder pathway, crunching and clanking. The Coffin Crew watching it disinterestedly, saw two men get out. One was a Royal Flying Corps officer with new wings on his tunic breast. The other a tall, gangling private of a Yeomanry outfit.

The officer was of medium build, had regular features, carried himself well, and offered a challenging glance, smileless. He stared coldly at the nondescript group that stood before the squadron bulletin board: an officer, a ragged sergeant, a corporal, a Jock still in his Black Watch kilts—all chumming together like a lot of Covent Garden porters. With another puzzled glance, the officer peered up at the Orderly Room door, and strode in.

The private, with tin helmet cocked jauntily over one eye, with cavalry bandolier, high leather field boots, and a horsy-looking tunic, grinned at the Crew in a friendly manner. McGregor spotted the crossed rifles and wreath with the letters M.G. embroidered on the lower half of his left sleeve, the mark of a sniper and machine gunner.

“Well, ’ow’s the bloomin’ flying machine business?” the trooper greeted, not noticing Lieutenant Armitage in the group. “They sent me up ’ere to fly. Wot a lark! And me never bin in anythink farster than a tramcar.”

“You fly!” snapped Sergeant Ryan. “You’d better beat it off back to yer long-faced chums—your horses. This is no place for a cavalry-man. If Jerry ever spots you in that make-up he’ll complain to the Hague. . . .”

“That’s wot I told ’em back at ’Esdin,” the cavalry trooper replied with a grin. They liked him for that. “I’ve lorst me washin’, ain’t ’ad any grub for about forty-nine ’ours, and nah they want me to go up there, flingin’ these blinkin’ machine-guns abart.”

“What is this outfit,” growled Horsey Horlick, “The League of Nations?” Armitage went up to the trooper, smiled, and asked him where he’d come from.

“I’m Trooper ’Arold Brown, sir. No.18769—No.1 Troop—Third-First Regiment, Notts and Bucks Yeomanry—Fifth Army Corps, sir. Bin out since 1914, and ’aven’t ’ad a shot at anythink since Jerry chased us out of Lar Basse—except a duck, on a pond, what I missed. Bin a’guardin’ and escortin’ prisoners down the line ever since, an’ it’s ’ard on yer cigarette issue, sir. These bloomin’ Jerries never ’ave a smoke on ’em. ’Ave to give ’em everythink! They’ll be a’wearin’ our socks next.”

Armitage nodded. “What are you doing up here?”

“I’m come to fly, sir. Them there battleplanes, I think. I’m a machine-gunner. ’Ere’s me badge. I’m’ot on No.2 stoppages. Trained on Maxims at Hythe.”

“Fine!” Armitage said ironically. “We use Lewises here. Ever see one?”

“Lewis? Them guns wiv the bobbin on top? No, sir. We don’t use them in the cavalry, sir. Them’s for the



blokes up in the slots—the gravel crushers. But I could get used to them, I suppose. Many stoppages, sir?”

Armitage shrugged. “Well, start off and report. If you’re marked up for No.11 bomber, bring your stuff over to that Nissen hut over there, on the end. That’s where our gunners roost.”

“Right, sir,” replied Arold Brown, clicking his spurs and saluting. “I’ll be there.”

HE DISAPPEARED through the doorway, and out came the officer who had gone in before. He sauntered up to Armitage, tapping a cigarette on his thumb-nail.

“I’m Perone—Barry Perone,” he announced. “The C.O. tells me I’m to fly with you. Hope you can put up with me. I’m a Bristol pilot, and don’t know which end of a Handley goes first. You’re unlucky!”

“Thanks,” responded Armitage. “We’re getting used to it. Major McKelvie tell you why we needed two men?”

“Yes. Quite dramatic and theatrical, eh?” Perone said, quietly taking in the challenging glances of McGregor, Ryan and Horlick. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You’ll fly as bomber-officer for the time being,” Armitage told him. “You’re damned unlucky, for we’re out to—well, to get Townsend back, and you’ll have to go with us. You and this chap Brown, I suppose.”

“Brown’ll love it. Had a chat with him on the way up. Has visions of shooting up the Strand in Berlin, or whatever they call it there. Quite a character. He should fit in—judging by what I hear of your outfit.”

Armitage’s eyes narrowed. He cocked his head sideways.

“You don’t like us?” he finally remarked.

“No. Can’t say that I care for this dramatic stuff, Armitage. I came out expecting to go to a Bristol outfit. And I get a job with a mob on a Handley-Page. Not only that, but I find that I’ve been thrown in with a mad lot known as the Coffin Crew. That’s certainly not tempting. On top of it all, I’m told that you are all balmy—swear revenge, and promise all sorts of idiotic foolishness.” McGregor leaped forward with a low growl. Armitage threw up his arm and stopped him.

“Steady, Mac,” he snapped. “Give him a chance. He doesn’t understand. You men pop off to your hut. I’ll be over with you in half an hour. I want to talk to Mr. Perone.”

The non-com. members of the Crew eased away.

“Come over to the diggins. You’ll have to bunk with me,” Armitage explained. “The orderly can come back for your things. . . .”

It was an hour later before Armitage came into the Nissen hut that housed the gunners. When he did arrive, he sported a black eye, a white complexion, and the knuckles of his right hand were skinned.

“Mr. Perone and I have been talking it all over,” he explained stiffly. “He’ll go with us to-night, as bomber-officer. I’ll leave it to you to explain to Brown, Sergeant. You take him in hand this afternoon. Show him the toggles, the whole ’plane and have the Armourer take him for an hour with the Lewis. I’ll see you all to-night at eleven sharp.”

NUMBER 11 was waiting, anxious to be off. Pier racks were filled, her tanks booming with gallons of petrol, the great engines thundered. Sergeant Ryan had shown Brown up into the bomb cabin and indicated where he should sit. That afternoon he had given the newcomer full instructions as to where he should stand while pulling toggles, and the happy trooper—minus his puttees and forage cap, but beaming in his new leather coat, fleece-lined boots, gloves and helmet—was as anxious as old No.11. He pranced up and down the catwalk inspecting the hanging bombs and peering out of the isinglass windows. He could see Armitage and Perone poring over a map, talking quietly, while Major McKelvie stood off, puffing on his inevitable pipe. Off to one side Brown could see the flame of McGregor’s and Horlick’s guns as they tried them in the test pit before fixing them in the Scarff mounting shackles. It was all new and bubbly to Harold. No nags to groom, no harness to clean, no horse-lines to picket, no feeds to mix. How long had this Flying Corps business been going on?

“You know where we’re going?” Armitage was saying. His tone was belligerent.

Perone, sporting a plaster over a slit chin, scowled up: “We’re supposed to be going to Mulebeke to bomb the railhead,” he snarled. “But you’ve stretched the compass course to reach Deynze, which is about fifteen miles further on. Just fifteen, that’s all. About twenty minutes longer to tempt the chap with the long sickle. Wonder if every squadron out here is run this way?”

“No, it isn’t,” snapped Armitage.

“But to-night this machine is being run the way I say—and will be until we get that lad out. Understand?”

“No, I don’t understand. How can anyone understand a man who has gone mad? Are you still proposing to try to get this man out?”

“Why not? He’s alive. He’s a Coffin Crew member, isn’t he?”

"I suppose that justifies risking the lives of five other men, eh?"

"But don't you understand, Perone?" pleaded Armitage. "Didn't you ever play in a team—or go to a school, or belong to a gang? Can't you see our side?"

Perone stared at Armitage for several seconds, as if trying to peer into his brain and discover this strange something that was driving him on. The appeal to sportsmanship, team loyalty and friendship, had touched a new chord. He turned his face away, somewhat sheepish, and started for the metal ladder that ran up into the throat of the great bomber. . .

THE throat hatch closed with a bang, and the tractor chugged away to clear the track. No.11 ready to go. Heads appeared over the snug cowling of the control pit. Andy McGregor swung the front turret mounting, tested its movement, and sat down. Horsey Horlick waved to a mechanic at the tail, and hooked his elbows over the Scarff ring, facing forward to brace himself for the bouncing shocks always experienced in taking-off.

Armitage, still scowling through the small opening in his night-flying helmet, glanced across at Major McKelvie, shrugged, and turned to his instrument board. He gave both engines the throttle and they went rumbling away. Over the sparse orchard that blocked off one side of the field they climbed, leaving the flickering flares to be doused by the Ack-Emmas.

Into a steady climb the pilot put her. Her nose aimed at the grim war-fester of Ypres—the muddy ham-shaped lake which had been the stumbling-block in the enemy's mad last-effort rush toward Paris.

Into the cold, flame-flecked night they roared. McGregor snuggled down and sought cover behind the grim snout of the H.P. Perone sat quiet, staring ahead and wondering what lay beyond that barrier of mud, blood and fire that stretched from Ostend all the way to the Swiss border. At last he was on the front. Bcfojre, it had all been a strange land, vaguely pictured by wounded men who had come back, by voiceless infantrymen home on leave who could not explain it, or by puzzling word-pictures painted daily and weekly in the newspapers and magazines.

He had expected to see it in the daylight, flying his own 'plane. Now he was trying to pick it out of a jumbled bit of crumpled black velvet, decorated with exotic brilliants—like a woman's gown thrown on the floor in a darkened room. It was nothing like what he had expected. There had been no warm friendship to greet him and make him feel at home. Instead, an

argument and blows. Suspicion and doubt. Men in the rough khaki of the non-com., all mixed up in a madman's pudding bowl, known as a Handley-Page.

Then came the first thud of fear. An Archie belched up and screeched at him, making Perone wince and edge over closer to Armitage. Another and another.

Gun thunder!

Into the centre of the blazing triangle Armitage guided the big bomber. The next salvo blasted out yards ahead and lower. Armitage turned and grinned at Perone, but he was stiff and tense.

"There's the Ypres-Roulers road," Armitage yelled, pointing down.

Perone scowled and looked over puzzled. He thought they were at least somewhere between Ghent and Antwerp. But he glanced back at the clock again and found that they had only been in the air half an hour—not two hours, as he had believed. He stared over again, and went blind.

Snooping Sarah, the betraying wench hidden behind Iseghem, slashed up and bathed them in silver. Perone threw his gloved hands up to break up the glare.

Another silver blade slashed out and was passed back and forth in front of them.

"The old devil," swore Armitage. "Got us the first time. Hang on!" Then the loaded Handley was put into her dance. No dancer under a spotlight ever squirmed or flung herself about as did No.11 that night. She whipped into a stall, fell away and then lanced into a wicked side-slip losing hundreds of feet. Perone hung on, terror-stricken. Armitage fought with the wheel and rudder and got her clear for an instant and then ran smack into the other. Again the Handley struggled to get clear of the betraying beam.

Suddenly McGregor shot up out of his crouch and snatched at the guns.

## CHAPTER IV SQUADRON OF DEAD MEN

**B**ACK, DEEPER into enemy territory, a new phase of the drama was being played. The scene was a gaunt, slab-walled room set in the centre of a broad-backed wooden hut. The characters were set about a "U"-shaped table, covered with reasonably clean

napery, a few plates and dishes and a conglomerate collection of cutlery. A few glasses were on the table, fewer bottles, and dim throbbing electric lights, glowing with the power churned out by a wheezy dynamo mounted on a truck outside, provided the highlights of the scene.

Around the table the cast of characters, sat. Men in strange grey or bottle-green uniforms. Coloured piping edged their Boelcke collars, epaulettes and cuffs. Oblongs of silver graced their sleeves and were topped by bright brass buttons. Their regimental insignia, mounted on their collars, gleamed and flashed down on the trim rows of buttons that fastened their tunics. Gleaming leather belts with brass buckles could be seen where their wearers sat back to get a better view of the speakers at the head of the table.

The uniforms matched in a general way. Some had been cavalymen, some artillery officers, and some had escaped from the trenches. A few hung to a mark here and there that told of their former regimental associations, as men strangely will. But one uniform in particular stood out. It was khaki, well cut and fitted. Open-throated and neatly lapelled. A Sam Browne belt drew in the sleek waist, and the shoulder strap, slipped under an epaulette that showed two stars, slashed down toward the left hip and cleared a pair of silk embroidered wings of the R.F.C. Beneath the wings glowed the blue-and-white ribbon of the Military Cross.

The tanned, well-chiselled face of Lieutenant Graham Townsend was turned to the main section of the table. He was breaking bread with the Gotha Griffons, the men of Baron Harald von Wusthoff. Men who had passed from the rolls of many noted staffs. Men whose names were already on the Honour Rolls of many cities of the Fatherland. Men who had died, to return again and become members of the Gotha Griffons. Men who had been supposedly shot as spies, or had gone west in flaming Fokkers.

There was *Observer-Offizier* Emil Nekel, supposed to have perished aboard the ZL-2 when it was shot down in flames over the North Sea. There was *Stellvertreter-Offizier* Heinrich Goettsch, who had crashed into a balloon over Albert—and had returned. There was the man with half a face, the other half mercifully covered with a metal mask so tinted and moulded that it was hard to tell which side was artificial and which was his own; but the mask gave him a countenance which made it imperative that he stay at the front. Another had a mysterious steel arm. Two were listed as missing from a Rumpler that had

gone into Allied territory to pick up a Belgian spy. It was important that the Allies should believe them dead. And so on around the table, sat men who had passed onto return again to fight from the turrets and bomb platforms of the Gotha Griffons.

Of course. Lieutenant Townsend could not know of all this. He naturally pondered on the strange collection of men who made up this squadron. He instinctively compared them with the youthful, cheerful lads who made up the squadrons of the R.F.C. He was wondering about all this when the hush settled about the room. He looked up and saw that it was well after eleven o'clock. A strange time to eat—but the men of the Gotha Griffons had saved this meal of honour until they could come in from their work out on the aerodrome, and pay their respects to the man they felt had been the cause of their trouble.

The man at the head of the table, a tall heavy-chested individual, signalled again for quiet, and in clipped sentences introduced the British airman. There were a few generous hand-claps. Chairs were moved so that the occupants could get an even better look at the man they had hated so much.

Baron von Wusthoff turned and smiled on his captive, as a professional animal trainer might beam on a new jungle specimen. He was proud of his coup.

"Lieutenant Townsend," he beamed, speaking in harsh English that made him stick his lower jaw out and display a set of beautifully even teeth, "most of my men understand your language, so I will question you here in your own tongue. No. Nothing unfair. We know the rules, and expect you will claim your just rights. We are simply interested in you—and your work."

"You must be," Townsend said, rubbing the back of his head, "to take a chance like that to get me. What was the idea?"

They all smiled as they recalled his being brought in the night before, with a lump on the back of his head as big as a walnut.

"We had to do it. Your lot was not playing the game," responded von Wusthoff. "Not quite what we expect from the English."

"What do you mean?" Townsend asked, frowning.

"Mean? . . . Good *Gott*, man! Do you call it sporting to bomb our aerodrome so that we cannot get off and meet you in the air—in man-to-man conflict?"

FOR a minute Townsend was speechless. This was a new angle on the German. He floundered for words, and his hesitancy only made his case all the more black.

"But . . . but . . . I . . ." he stumbled on. "You have the right to come over and bomb us!"

"Bomb your aerodrome?" von Wusthoff rapped. "Of course, but how can we? You will not let us off the ground. We haven't had a machine in the air since we landed here. Is that what you call cricket? Would you duel with us and deprive us of our blades? Would you play football and remove our boots? Would you . . . ?"

But the Baron could get no further. A hum of growls went up around the room.

"But your fighting staffels?" parried Townsend. "They can get off and stop us, can't they?"

"Our fighting staffels, bah!" von Wusthoff snorted. "They are mere babies. They are frightened of your gunners. They can only fight slow artillery two-seaters and lame-ducks who get out of formation. Until we can get our Gothas into the air there can be no—no fair play, as you British put it." Townsend drew a design on the tablecloth with the prong of a fork. "I'm afraid I can't see your argument, Baron," he finally answered. "After all, we risk a lot coming here every night. There are the anti-aircraft batteries to elude—the searchlights—and your night fighters, little though you may think of them, are a real menace. We knew you had been brought in here to stop us, and the most sensible thing we could think of was to stop you before you got started. Hence the bombing of your 'drome."

"Very clever—but unfair," charged the Baron. "With that in mind we went and got you—to prevent any more such raids."

"What do you mean?" Townsend prodded, still unable to see the German's idea.

"Don't you see?" The Baron grinned and glanced around as if to bask in the admiration he expected from his men.

"Your friends will not pepper our 'drome to-night. They know now that you are being kept here as a hostage!"

"But you can't do that," Townsend stormed, half-rising. "I demand the rights of a prisoner of war!"

"That's one right you will not get until your men stop bombing my aerodrome," snapped von Wusthoff.

Townsend sat down, glared around the room, and caught the full force of their glaring hatred.

"Go ahead," he snapped. "They'll be back to-night, just the same—if I know my gang. I'll take my chance."

"You certainly will," grinned the German. "When they come over to-night—and they're on their way now—they'll see a man staked out, tied to four cavalry

horse-line pegs under the glare of a floodlight. They'll recognise your uniform, and if I know Englishmen they won't drop an ounce of explosive."

"You—you wouldn't dare do that!" ranted Townsend. "You can't do that!"

"Oh, but we can," von Wusthoff said. "You must remember that your famous Coffin Crew is no more. They have lost their pilot and a gunner. I killed one who tried to hold on to that Bristol's tail when I was taking-off with you in the back seat."

"You killed . . . ?" Townsend gasped.

"Yes, one of them. I do not know which. A long burst from the rear guns. Now your much-vaunted Coffin Crew is broken up. They have lost their pilot and one gunner. What is left? Nothing but a skeleton of the former band. In your place, I have learned to-night is a new Bristol Fighter pilot. Imagine that! A Bristol Fighter pilot trying to fly a Handley-Page—and a gunner, who does not know the Lewis gun, a half-wit from a Yeomanry regiment. What has become of your Coffin Crew now?"

"A Bristol Fighter pilot in my seat?" Townsend whispered. "And a Yeomanry gunner?"

"Yes. A Bristol Fighter pilot. His name is—let me see—Barry Perone," von Wusthoff announced, staring at a piece of paper he had drawn from his pocket.

"Barry Perone!" Townsend almost shouted. "Did you say Barry Perone . . . ?"

But no one was listening to him. The Baron glanced up at the clock on the wall, nodded to two guards who had been standing at the door, and stuffed the paper back into his pocket.

"Barry Perone!" the Englishman said in a low husky voice.

But he could say no more. Hands took him by the elbows and started him toward the door. The Baron was about to carry out his threat.

## CHAPTER V THE LAIR OF THE GOTHAS

**B**ARRY PERONE stared at McGregor as the Scot clutched at the guns. Amid the blinding glare of the searchlight he could just make out that the front gunner was aiming at something above. The twin-guns bellowed, slowly warming up to their task. Short wicked bursts



snatched out and the trickle of scarlet from the tracers went off into the night.

"What is it?" Perone yelled.

"I don't know!" Armitage bellowed. "Leave it to Mac. Watch that road and see that we stay on the course all right." But Perone was stiffened by this sudden change of action. He finally realised that they were being attacked, and was thankful that the man in the rough tartan kilt had spotted them. He was beginning to see these non-com. gunners in a new light.

The mad drama went on. The searchlight slashed back and forth like a great broadsword. Then the tell-tale hammering somewhere behind told that the enemy was peppering them. McGregor turned with a fierce scowl and aimed his guns full over the edge of the top wing.

Again the two guns chattered in short scolding bursts. Suddenly they stopped. A low roar started from somewhere above and a winged comet came thundering out of the sky, pelting past the wing-tip of No.11, flinging back a fiery tail of surrender.

McGregor directed another short battering burst at it as it went away. Perone shuddered as he watched the fighting Scot peer over at his tumbling victim.

Inside the big bomber, Harold Brown was running up and down the catwalk like a kid trying for a position in a Saturday afternoon movie queue. He tripped, stumbled and fell several times, but always clambered up a rack strut and went tearing back again. Breathless, he hung on and peered out of the stained isinglass windows and tried to get a glimpse of the war. As the rattle of gunfire echoed through the flying cavern he would turn and watch Horsey Horlick's feet as they danced in rhythm with his movements inside the rear turret Scarff ring.

"Go on, ye spalpeen!" bellowed Ryan, drawing his feet up to give the cantering Yeomanry-man a chance to pass up and down. "Keep moving! It'll keep ye from goin' mad. They all go as balmy as Paddy's pig, the fust toime!"

Again the bitter fire broke out fore and aft. The charging roar of the flaming Fokker caught Harold's ear and he plunged to the window again. The tumbling man-ignited meteor went screaming past the wing-tip just as Brown got there.

A streak of withering flame.

"Hi! . . . Hi! Sarge!" he bellowed. "Come an' 'ave a look at the ruddy big things they're a' 'eaving up at us! Jack Johnsons ain't in it. Flamin' onions? . . . These bloomin' things are 'arf as big as an 'ouse!"

"Yeh?" responded Ryan, removing his pipe a minute. "Them ain't shells. Just pip-squeaks. Wait till we get up there. You'll see somethin', Brownie."

The catwalk began to dance again. Splotches of light blossomed out all round them. The great silver blade slashed back and forth across the sky, catching the bomber every now and again, and throwing that amazing cross-hatch design through the strips of the catwalk on to the roof of the cabin.

"Yer goin' to see some queer stuff to-night, Brownie," confided Ryan. "Thot Muster Perone up there. He's a queer 'un."

"Queer? . . . Ah, aye," Brown agreed, flinching under the sudden thump of an Archie. "But a good 'un just the same, I think."

"You think!" snapped Ryan. "He's a bad 'un, bad cess to him. An' for why won't he go in wie us? Thinks we're all bog-trotters and not good enough for the likes of 'im."

"Well, Sarge," explained Brown. "You can't 'ardly blame the bloke. Arfter all, it *did* sound a bit potty when we first got 'ere. Blokes in 'Andley-Pages a'wantin' to go into 'Unland arfter another bloke who 'ad been pinched by another wart by the name of von Wurstopfit or some think?"

Ryan's homely face slipped out of one mask of wrinkles into another—meaning that he actually smiled. But Archie took up the game again, and broke up the conversation.

Lieutenant Perone came down the companion-way, scuffled around in the sooty light, and found Ryan. Brown bobbed up, too, and indicated that he was ready for anything.

"We're about there, Ryan," he bellowed.

"Aye, aye, sor," yelled the sergeant. "Where are we heading for?"

"He's going to Deynze . . . not Meulebeke," bellowed the bomber officer.

"Then he's going up to get old von Wusthoff!" Ryan beamed. "Come on, Brown. On the toggles, me lad!"

THE 'drome of the Gotha Griffons loomed ahead through the tangled night mist that swept up from the Lys. A timid moon, like a silver scimitar, hung over the bomb-pocked field, making the silhouette of the town beyond resemble the cardboard background of some strange movie setting. The great canal that ran from Deynze to Bruges glistened in the half-light.

More Archies—more thrusts from scarlet-nosed Fokkers and Pfalz—more slashes from the

searchlight blades—but old No.11 continued on like a widewing vulture. McGregor and Horlick stuck to their guns, and no single-seater could get within sight-range of her. But more were on their way up. They could see the tell-tale flame-spouts of the tiny midges below go crawling across slaty surfaces. Hell would break loose soon. The Devil was mixing his formula. A few Fokkers, a dash of Spandau—throw in a Handley-Page and stir well with a searchlight blade until she began to boil. After that—take cover.

Armitage watched a flaming onion come up, struggle to hold its position, and fall away spluttering.

“You’ve got a slight drift to the southwest,” he bellowed at Perone who was adjusting the cross-wires on his bomb-sight. “We’ll go in from the north-west corner, so allow for it. Going down to two thousand before we let ’em go. I’ll dive for about five hundred. Get it?”

Perone’s face went ashen.

“Down to two thousand?” he gasped. Then dive five hundred? . . . It’s insane! Get us with Emma-Gee!”

“Haven’t yet,” responded the other.

McGregor was picking the struts out of a D-5 Pfalz. He watched it screw away and then suddenly give up the ghost by vomiting its wings. He turned and grinned at Armitage and stuck up two fingers.

“There’s the field!” roared Armitage, pointing over the cowling. “Look, we’ve made a patchwork quilt of it already. They’re still working on it. Queer, they’ve given us a light this time.”

Perone peered in the direction of Armitage’s gloved finger and finally caught the irregular outline of an open space. On two sides were blackish blocks which indicated barracks, buildings and sheds. Then, peering even harder so that his face twisted up into a grimace, he saw a broad splash of light that lay like a fan on the bomb-pocked ground.

“Looks queer!” he yelled. “What’s the idea of lighting it up?”

“A come-on. Waiting for us, perhaps. Well, we’re here now. Let’s go!”

THE throttles came back and the engines ceased their thunderous roar and eased into a low whine. Armitage slipped the Handley well to the rear of Deynze, planning to make his bomb dives so that they were roaring toward home if anything went wrong.

Perone nodded grimly, shrugged his shoulders and set himself for his first bombing raid. Somehow he felt suddenly cold, bitterly alone. He pawed at the knurled brass knobs on the bomb-sight again, and checked

the stop-watch. Nothing seemed to take his mind off himself and the tragedy that lay ahead. He wished he’d joined the Engineers now.

But at last respite, in the way of action, came. Armitage was screaming at him. The engines had opened up. McGregor was standing, huddled over the blue-black drums, staring back at him, waiting to make sure that he would go through with his job. Mac still wondered about Barry Perone.

“Now!” Armitage was bellowing. “Now!”

The Handley suddenly stood on her nose. McGregor was pouring death in 303 capsules over the side into the hump-backed hangars. Perone stiffened and felt cool. He glued his face over the birdcage, drew the two lines together and waited for the field to slide into the sight. He had to hang on, for the ’plane was bouncing madly amid the concussions from the Jerry Q.F. guns. Shot pinged through taut fabric. Lead splattered against the metal cowling and twanged flying wires. He raised his arm, waited again, and when the fan-shaped patch of light began to slide into the sight he slapped his arm down.

There was a throbbing jerk as two 220’s went out from the toggles of Harold Brown.

“God!” screamed Armitage.

“No! . . . No!” roared McGregor. As they yanked out of their mad dive the light below was splotted with a grey-green figure, staked out to four horse-line pins. The figure of a man in a khaki uniform.

It was too late. The bombs had gone. McGregor gave another roar and fired blindly. Armitage drew the wheel back with a jerk and almost flew the fuselage clean through the biplane wings. He heaved her over on one wing-tip. Looking back they saw two great yellow designs leap up from the fan-shaped patch of light. A figure went up with it, flapping and floundering.

Perone stared wild-eyed at the pilot beside him. Phil Armitage’s jaw had dropped, leaving his mouth gaping.

“He did it . . . staked him out . . . on the aerodrome.”

“We—we hit him. I saw him—his body go up!” croaked Perone.

They could not hear what each other said, but the mouthing of the words was enough. They were conversant in the exaggerated lip language of the air.

“The filthy dirty skunk!” Armitage bellowed.

McGregor was pouring a terrible torrent of Lewis lead into the hangars below. Behind, Horlick was battering two Pfalz scouts to ribbons—and taking plenty in return.





"Right . . . all right!" snorted Armitage. "There's nothing we can do now. Let's finish it. Go ahead!"

THEN began the wildest fifteen minutes in the history of the Coffin Crew. Absolutely unmindful of the battering fire, the concussion and hate thrown up from the cartwheel mountings below, they went down and finished the job.

Back and forth—starting with the rest of the 220's on through the 112's and then into the 50's—they tore through their insane repertoire. Perone hung over the sight and signalled as calmly as a man working a crane. The great bomber humped, jerked and pounded through her paces as the heavy projectiles went slithering out of their racks, leaving jangling steel guides and black openings. Inside the bomber, Brown and Ryan were hanging on for dear life as the catwalk did its capers. Ryan split his chin on a rack top, and Brown lost his footing once and rolled head over heels all the way down to the rear turret platform. He came up swearing, yelling and holding his nose, which had been flattened against the rear locker. Still Perone's arm went up and down. Bombs went out into the night, started their spin, and then buried themselves to blow up with low rumbling roars.

Hangars caved in. Sheds regurgitated their metal innards, throwing cogs, lathes, belting and shafts in all directions. A motor-lorry went skyward, threw away its rear end and dropped with a plunk on top of a bomb-proof ammo, shelter. A stack of petrol in five-gallon tins took a twenty-pounder smack in its middle and gave an impromptu display of flame, smoke and rattling metal. A corner of a hut, caught in the maw of a "fifty," left a gaping wound in the building and wound up on top of a hangar twenty-five yards away.

Old No. 11 was skating back and forth like a giant darning needle, spitting fire from her exhausts, guns and bomb-racks. Behind her, frantically trying to stop her mad careening, slammed two Pfalz. But while they sprayed the sky with enough Spandau lead to have stopped a tank, old No. 11 somehow continued to flounder on. The gunners, blackened with cordite and perspiration, swore, ranted, cursed and—stuck on more drums.

Their sights did not circle Pfalz or running men—but a limp, battered figure in khaki that had been staked out on the field below. They wrestled with stoppages. They bellowed curses and made their Scarff mountings wail. They hung on, loaded again, spewed lead—

Berserk !

Amok !

A man, staked out on the 'drome they had come to bomb, had been blown to atoms. And there was nothing they could do about it.

## CHAPTER VI A SPAD TAKES-OFF

**T**HEY GOT BACK—licked. There was no fight left in them. Armitage was silent as he clambered down the ladder and stared with unseeing eyes at Major McKelvie.

Perone still sat there in his cockpit seat, peering at the instruments. McGregor came along the tunnel from his front turret, leaving his guns for the first time in history. He crawled out like a whipped cur and stumbled off for the Nissen hut that lay across the field. Horlick, cradling his guns in his arms, dropped them through the hatchway into the arms of an armourer-sergeant and tapped Perone on the shoulder.

"Come on, sir," he said gently. "They'll be putting the barge inside in a minute. You're all right, ain't you?" Nodding like a man suddenly awakened from a sound sleep, Perone struggled to his feet. Someone shoved his toe into the ladder rung and he let himself down.

Brown came down the ladder, stared about in the glare of the portable arc, mounted on the tractor, and began to argue with Ryan, who was behind him.

"Wot'd we come back for?" demanded the little trooper. "Old 'Orlick 'ad two full drums left!"

"Got to start conservin' a bit," Ryan snapped. "The ruddy war's a bit over the budget already!"

They all staggered away into the darkness, unmindful of reports of guns, or the returning of safety-pins from the bomb noses.

The Major, pipe under forced draught, watched the despondent parade from the shadow cast by the tractor. He waited until the wings had been folded back and then went off after McGregor. He found him curled up on his bed.

"What happened, Mac?" the Major asked, moving into the glare of a Primus lamp. "Old von Wusthoff do it?" The Scot unwound himself, straightened his kilt, and got up.



"Never mind. At ease. What happened?"

Mac drew the harsh flannel of his shirtsleeve across his eyes. "Ay, sor!" he moaned. "We didn'a see him until it was too late, sir."

"Staked out?"

"Ay, sor. Bang in the middle o' the acr-r-rodome. They even ha' a light on him. A flood tae show us. We didn'a see ut until ut was too late."

"Kill him?"

"Kill him? A 220 smack in the muddle o' the light, sor. We saw—saw him go up—a-danglin' and a-spraddle i' the air, sor. No que-e-estion."

"Um," observed the Major. "What then?"

"Na'thin'. We joost gie 'em the rest. The whole field agin."

"Um," observed the Major again.

The Scot stiffened to attention, and watched the C.O. go out of the door.

THIS pleasant man-to-man exchange of confidences between the C.O. and the Scots gunner might have been staged by the Great Director as a contrast to another, played on the same stage but in another section of the camp.

The cubicle of Phil Armitage was now shared with him by Lieut. Barry Perone.

The two had stumbled in, attempting to respect the quiet due the others who were now sleeping. The switch of the dangling electric light was snapped on and they stood under the circular glare, facing each other. For what seemed minutes, they stood there, swaying on their feet. Then Armitage stuck his hand back and felt for the edge of his folding bed. Perone sat down, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Well," opened Armitage, "that's war in a Handley-Page, Perone. How do you like it?"

"Bah!" was the reply. "That's war—war, anywhere, I expect. I'm sorry it had to be me, though."

"You? . . . What are you talking about?"

"I mean . . . on the sight. I gave it to him—the bombs."

His hands writhed as he clenched them fiercely.

"That was tough luck, Perone," Armitage agreed.

"But I'm glad it was not me, if you understand. He was my pal. I never had one like him before. . . . It's a hell of a war!"

"If I'd waited a second more—let the glare come full into the sight—I might have spotted him. But I suppose I was too anxious. Too much of a greenhorn. He must have been a nice chap, Armitage. I suppose

this about breaks up your little group, eh? . . . That is, unless—unless I can fill in for the time being."

"It's going to be hard," Armitage replied. "Frankly, I don't like you, and it doesn't make it any easier having you in here in his corner. One of us will have to get out."

Perone winced. He knew that Armitage was still holding a grudge over their conversation outside the Orderly Room.

"I'm sorry," he finally muttered. "I'll get out. Perhaps find another berth somewhere about the shop. I think I understand, Armitage."

"That's it," Armitage nodded. "I couldn't have you in his corner, using his shelf, shaving into his mirror. I'd feel that he objected. There's so much here that's his. I might clean it all out, and still he'd keep cropping up. . . . Look . . . There's a letter for him. Probably came in to-night's post. You see, it will be hard for a while."

Perone stared across at the letter that lay on a petrol-box table. A smooth cream-coloured envelope, addressed in a feminine hand.

"Ah, yes—letters," agreed Perone, looking at it.

THEN he suddenly stiffened, stared harder, and turned to face Armitage with a blazing, accusing glance. He snatched at the letter and held it tight between his two thumbs and forefingers.

"Good God, Armitage!" he flared.

"Why didn't you tell me his name was Townsend?"

Armitage steadied himself by bracing his hands against the edge of the bed. "You *knew* his name was Townsend!" he said dully.

"Townsend—yes. But I didn't think of *him*. . . .  
a' m Townsend!"

He glared at the letter he was crumpling in his hands.

"You know—you knew him?" Armitage rasped.

"Knew him? . . . Knew him?" Perone was raging. Then suddenly he subsided, sat down and laid the letter back on the rude table. "Yes, I knew him. Of all the rotten luck. . . ." Armitage sat studying him for several seconds, pondering on the secret of the letter. Perone was deep in thought. Then he leaped to his feet.

"But I couldn't have done that!" he ranted, glaring at Armitage. "My God, Graham Townsend, of all men?"

Then he stopped, pawed at his chin, and stared at the floor. Armitage still watched him, puzzled, trying to piece together the queer sections of a mad story.

"You mean . . .?" Armitage prodded. "You mean you didn't know—didn't realise that this man

Townsend, who had been captured, was the man you say you know. Didn't the name Townsend, when I mentioned it, when it was on the Squadron orders, mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing," Perone answered in a dull monotone. "I came out here determined to have no fears, no inhibitions about the war. The man whose place I was to take was to be no person who might have lived. I tried to evade the fact that I was taking a man's place—a man who had been killed, perhaps. I was determined to be Barry Perone, not a man who was replacing a man who had gone West. I didn't listen when you mentioned his name. I didn't read the name of the man I had come to replace. I didn't want to know him, or ever hear about him. Can't you understand?"

Armitage nodded. "I've never thought of it that way. It was a good idea. But you *did* know him, after all. How?"

Perone stiffened. "No! . . . I can't tell you just now. Not now, Armitage. Let me think."

"Go ahead and think. I'm getting a drink. Have one?"

"Just one," replied Perone, staring at the floor.

A minute later he took the brandy, drank it slowly and seemed to respond to its warmth at once. Then, without looking at Armitage, he said: "No, that's the chance I have to take. If they didn't to-night, they will the next time."

"What?" said Armitage, puzzled. "What did you say?"

Perone stared strangely at Armitage, as if he had been caught talking to himself. "I—I didn't say anything, did I? . . . By the way, when do we go up there again?"

"To Deynze? . . . Hard to say. If the 'bus is in any sort of shape, probably to-morrow night. If not, we probably won't be sent off until the following night. Won't make much difference, we gave them enough to take care of for two days."

"I hope we don't—I mean, go until the next night," said Perone, again as if talking to himself. Then turning back to Armitage, he smiled faintly and said: "I'll pop around a bit and look for a berth, old chap."

He started for the door, glanced around the room, took another look towards the letter on the table, and went out.

For several minutes Armitage sat pondering on Perone's strange actions and speech. Then, frowning slightly, he got up, finished his drink and picked up the letter. He'd seen several like this before, recognised the handwriting. Then, still thinking of Perone, he turned

it over and caught the return address written in the same small script.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he gulped. "So that's how he knew of Graham Townsend, eh?"

Then, before he could put the letter down, the roar of an engine beat a mad tattoo in the still night air. He stiffened, listened and sensed that it was a Hisso. He frowned. There were no Hisso engines on the Cassel 'drome. Then it came like a flash.

Someone was taking off in the Spad left behind by Baron von Wusthoff.

## CHAPTER VII

### A MESSAGE FROM HUNLAND

**N**O, not to-night," Major McKelvie was saying. "Let them fix up a runway and get a machine into the air. You'll have to get him that way, if you really are after the Baron. I feel that something will break by then."

"What?" snapped Armitage, a grey ghost of his former self.

"Anything. This letter, the fact that Perone stole that Spad last night, and a few other things, make me believe that he didn't sneak off just to get another room."

"But Judas, Major!" Armitage ranted. "We can't stay here and do nothing. That Hun staked him out and. . . Well, what's the use of going over that again? We've got to get him and his whole damn tribe. The Crew—or what's left of it—won't rest until we do."

"Look here!" the Major replied, yanking out his pipe. "You chaps have sworn to get either Townsend or the Baron. Are you going to let Townsend and Tate down? You can't do anything while you go bargaining about like a lot of Kaffirs on the rampage."

"You've got to keep your heads," the Major went on. "You've lost them twice, and lost two men. A third has gone potty somewhere with a Spad. This damned Coffin Crew business will get us all hung! For God's sake obey *one* order of mine a month!"

"Right," snapped Armitage. "We'll give it until to-morrow night. After that, we're going up there to get that lad if we have to swipec a French Voisin to do it!"

"That's the most sensible thing you've said

in weeks. Now look here. This chap Perone has something up his sleeve. He knew that Spad would be out in the field while they were putting the Handleys away. He kidded the Flight-Sergeant to help him start it up, and took-off."

"Right!" agreed Armitage.

"Now Perone—whether you like him or not—is not the sort to run away from anything. Put yourself in his place, considering all the angles, that he is her Brother—I mean the brother of Miss Joan Perone, the girl who has written so many letters to Townsend. What would you have done?"

"Done? . . . God! I'd probably have gone crazy. Signalling the toggle that finished him like that."

"A lot of men would. But not Perone. I have looked up his record. He's all right. Lightweight boxing champion at Oxford. Marvellous swimmer—saved two kids at Whitstable two summers ago and got the Albert Medal for it. Does a quarter-mile with the best, and was selected to play against Ireland in an international rugger match."

"Good Lord!" gasped Armitage. "You'd never know that by his manner. But he did give me a neat pasting behind the hangar."

"All right. Knowing all this, I think Perone has something up his sleeve. I expect almost anything to happen. You sit tight for about twenty-four hours, and things will happen."

So they sat tight and waited.

THE next twenty-four hours were torture for the Crew—except for the cheery atmosphere furnished by the not-to-be-daunted Brown. He was all over the place, working on the Lewis gun, studying the toggle-board and clambering all over the machine until he knew every nut, bolt and wire. He spent two hours in the pit, blazing away at the sand-bags and remedying stoppages. He climbed all over the bomb-shed and puzzled over the various types of bombs and their fuses. He tinkered with the racks, releases and toggles, until he knew almost as much about them as Sergeant Ryan himself.

"These 'ere bombs," he explained in all seriousness, "ain't just wot they ort to be."

"No?" snorted Ryan. "You ought to invent a few yourself. Had a lot o' experience, I suppose. You tell Mister Vickers how they should be loaded, eh? Go on, let's hear about how you bombed 'em at High Wood!"

"Ah, them was the days," reflected Brownie. "We 'ad to make our own out o' jam tins. Plugged 'em up

wi' amatol. Stuffed 'em wi' nuts, bolts an' razor blades, then slapped a wad o' mud on top and shoved the lid down."

"Lovely!" Ryan muttered.

"Then we stuffed a length of fuse in the 'ole. We used to bite orf wot seemed enough to go five seconds. Sometimes we bit too much and it didn't go orf in time and the Jerries flung 'em back at us. Sometimes we didn't bite enuf, and the ruddy things used to go orf in yer 'and."

"Lovely!" agreed the Irishman again.

"But we did 'ave larks, them days," went on Harold. "I remember once along the Lar Basse Canal. I threw one at a Jerry bloke. It went orf, bolts, stones an' razor blades. Ripped 'is bloomin' uniform clean orf and—"

"Well, what else?" prodded the Irish sergeant.

"It actually—this is a right-un, Sergeant, take me path op it—it actually gave 'im a shave!"

Before Ryan could recover from this, Brown was pounding along again.

"Now ..." he went on. "If we wuz to load these 'ere bombs somehow like that we couldn't 'arf do some damage."

"Fill 'em full of old scissors, sickles, broken bayonets and grindstones, I suppose," the sergeant added with resignation.

"Ah—that's it. You're gettin' the idea, Sergeant. One bang from one o' them, and we could chop down their 'angars, cut the bloomin' guy wires, slash the wind-sock down and ..." He paused for emphasis.

"And trim old von Wusthoff's whiskers," growled Ryan. "Look here, my lad. You stop bothering your head about bombs, and worry about pulling toggles at the right time. That's as much as we can expect from you—for a time. You'll be havin' all you can tend to when Mister Armitage starts on old von Wusthoff."

"Well, why don't we bung orf and 'ave a go at 'im?" growled 'Arold. "A sittin' 'ere wastin' our time like this. I want to 'ave a shot at 'im meself."

"You'll probably get it," warned the sergeant, marching away. "You go through them stoppages again, and pack up. Ye'll be a-needin' all the rest ye can get."

ALL this may or may not have had its effect on what was to come. The Coffin Crew, except for Harold Brown, was huddled away licking its wounds and pondering on the startling and fearsome events of the past two days. Mechanics worked on No.11 with all the conscientiousness of trained jewellers. Not a thing was missed. Every part weighed, measured

and tested. Ammo, was double-tested, drums aligned and gib-springs changed. Fingers ran along control wires, seeking the pin-pricks that would detect a worn cable. Petrol was filtered twice through new chamois skins. Oil checked for weight and viscosity. Nuts were tightened, new cotter pins put in, lock washers changed, and Raf wires twisted to the right angle.

Nothing was left to chance. Riggers and fitters from other hangars were brought over and sent over No.11 to see if they could find anything her own crew had missed. They found a crystallised spark-plug, a bent feed tube, and replaced them. Bullet holes were patched, slashes were sewn and re-covered. No one bothered with green dope to paint them up, and these new scars only added to her grotesque appearance. Only her squadron numeral gleamed brightly, as if in defiance of all the von Wusthoffs in the world.

But with all this, one little incident played an even greater part in this war drama. A piece of wood, no longer than a foot, roughly carved out of a side of a Krupp ammo. box. On first inspection it might have been taken for a child's toy boat. It had a little mast made from a wooden meat skewer, on which was fastened a square sail made from the flexible brown paper cover of a New Testament issued by the Y.M.C.A. Nailed securely to the upper side, to resemble the superstructure, was a shallow block of wood.

The little boat was picked up by Sapper Henry Hardcastle, of the Royal Engineers, who had been attempting to strengthen the piers of the much-battered bridge that spanned the muddy Yser where it joined the canal a few miles north of Dixmude.

"Um," observed Sapper Hardcastle, who had sought shelter from the attention of a sniper by ducking under the bridge. "Here's a queer one. A bit of a boat, eh? Some kiddie in Hunland was probably a-playin' with this yesterday. Let's see. The Yser. . . No, it can't be the Yser. That runs up 'ere from the south-east. It must be that other one what comes in from the other side what brought this along."

Sapper Hardcastle looked at his ordnance survey map and pondered. His stubby finger ran along a blue line that crept out of Lichtervelde in occupied Belgian territory. Due east it ran in a scraggy line through the fields of Flanders until it joined up with the Yser river and canal north of Dixmude.

As he pondered, he looked down at the bit of wood again. Then the familiar brown cover of a Testament caught his eye. He had one in his breast pocket, just like it. That fact set him pondering.

"I wonder," he went on, "if this could 'ave come from the Testament of one of our blokes who is a prisoner. If it is, 'ow did it get 'ere?"

He puzzled over it again.

He was an engineer, and he began to figure the current speed of the little tributary. He stared at his watch and figured that it probably was put into the water the night before. Otherwise the German bridge sentries would have spotted it floating down toward the Allied lines.

"S'truth!" he gasped. "It must 'ave been put in the water by one of our chaps. But what for?"

As he sat there, he began to unravel in his own slow, methodical way, the possible reason for it. Then he looked at the brown paper sail again, and caught some writing .

"Ullo ! 'Ere's 'is name. . . No? . . . My word, this is a bit queer. *'Deliver to Major McKelvie, No. 129 Squadron, at Gassel, at once. Urgent and Important!'* What-ho. Where's that bloomin' despatch rider?"

It was but the work and walk of a minute or two before he was jabbering to a weary-eyed motor-cycle man, huddled in a funk-hole along the road where he waited for his regimental runner.

"Righto! I'm going through to St. Omer in fifteen minutes if that blasted runner don't get pasted before 'e gets out. I'll leave it with the Major meself. I know that lot. Balmy as blazes, but they're top-hole on a cold night. Free wiv their rum issue."

And Sapper Hardcastle went back to his bridge, little knowing that he had played a big part in the career of a mad night-flying Handley-Page outfit.

## CHAPTER VIII

### No.11 RUNS THE GAUNTLET

**M**AJOR MCKELVIE'S office was a splendid example of the old adage, the calm before the storm. He sat pulling on his Dunhill, reading the latest communique from H.Q., raising his eyebrows at odd paragraphs and generally settling himself down for a normal evening. Across the room sat Phil Armitage, fingering the little boat-shaped piece of wood.

"But what does it mean, Major?" Armitage persisted, studying the writing on the cardboard sail.



"I'm trying to figure it out myself. If it's from Perone, what's he doing in Germany?"

"Probably went over to get the Baron—or Townsend."

"But you say Townsend is dead. . . . You saw him killed."

"Well—*er*—we did, as far as we know."

"Then you're not certain it was Townsend staked out there?"

"How could we from that height? But we saw someone in a R.F.C. tunic."

"Urn." The Major turned back to his paper after a glance at the clock.

"I wonder if he means something about a ship?" Armitage prodded again.

"You mean, he's got Townsend under one arm, the Baron under the other and he's somewhere out in the North Sea with a square-rigged ship?" asked the Major, with disdain.

"Oh, hell!" snorted Phil. "Why didn't he put a message of some sort inside it?"

"Thank God!" blurted the Major, turning around quickly. "I was wondering how long it would take you to figure that out. How do you know he hasn't put a message inside it? You haven't even looked!"

With that he tossed a rusty screwdriver across the table.

Armitage's jaw dropped. He stared at the battered tool and then at the ship.

"Go on. What are you waiting for? You've only got half an hour before you go off. Rip the damned top off, man. I've given you an hour to think of it!"

Armitage suddenly galvanised into action. He rammed the blunt edge of the screwdriver under the wooden block nailed on the little boat. Then with a wrench he pried it up—and snatched at a sheet of folded paper hidden beneath.

"Look!" he breathed. "A message!"

"What did you expect? A copy of 'Barrack-Room Ballads?' snorted the Major. "What's it say?"

All the time he was reaching for his helmet and goggles.

"It's from Perone! Listen: '*Von Wusthoff taking-off to-night, midnight. Have one runway clear. Pick me up at 11:45 if possible. Vital importance.*'"

"Good Lord! He went further than I thought," the Major gasped, taking the sheet of paper and reading it again. "But look here! What docs he mean? He says, 'To-night.' Did he mean last night, or did he realise how long it would take to get to us and hope we would take it to mean to-night?"

"How the devil are we to know? I'm wondering how we'll get down there and find that one runway, as he calls it. Do you believe he means us to go there with the Handley?"

"Look here," explained the Major, regaining his calm again, and lighting the Dunhill once more. "He must mean to-night. If you did all the damage you said you did they couldn't get a space cleared long and wide enough to get a Gotha off in any less time. It must mean to-night!"

"Then he means we're to go down on that stretch, pick him up and barge off again before they can get a Gotha away. But what for?"

"I'm sorry," replied the Major with icy sarcasm, "but I haven't a screwdriver that will explain that for you. We wasted enough time on the other gigantic problem. Come on, let's get into the air."

The Major knew how to get action—and he got it.

"I'm dumb," agreed Phil, buttoning his tunic, and reaching for a drink in almost the same moment. "But I seem to remember that Perone said something about if they didn't do it that time, they would this. I'm beginning to see daylight."

"You will, if you don't hurry up," the Major snorted, sliding into his short leather coat.

NUMBER ELEVEN was ready, anxiously panting as her two engines were warming up. The racks groaned with the weight of the explosive carried in their skeleton walls. The tanks boomed with the rolling bulk of the fuel. The tractor backed away, turned around and poured the glow from her portable arc light full on the metal ladder that ran up to the throat hatch of the cabin. Men in strange dress moved back and forth in the black and silver glare. Hooded and masked men, bearing strange weapons, moved about like wooden dolls of a fantastic pantomime. Steel gleamed, leather creaked, petrol fumes assailed the nostrils and low voices spoke strange sentences.

The night above was inky, with greying streaks of cloud that tried to blanket out the glint of the stars. All was hushed under the great black bowl except the low hum of the engines. Off to the east a throbbing murmur told of the grim struggle that was going on between nations. It was as if the great heart of man was panting in exhaustion against the monstrous battle it was being called on to fight.

The Crew—what was left of it—went up the ladder, silent and subdued. Only Brown seemed to have anything left to offer.

"A bloomin' Cook's tour," he grinned at the Flight-Sergeant. "Ave a first-' and glimpse of the carnage. Personally conducted by the Coffin Crew cupids. What ho!"

It was plainly evident they had all been told the objective of their trip—and none was too confident of its success. If the truth were known, most of them considered that they were going on a fool's errand. After all, why go to pick up Perone? He had done nothing to warrant their loyalty or support. The incident of the little boat was interesting, but it proved nothing. It didn't explain why he had taken the Spad and gone into the enemy lines. After all, how did they know that it might not be part of an ingenious plan to get them—'plane and all—dead cold?

Only the fact that the Major himself was going along as bomber-officer gave them even the slightest breath of trust in the whole thing.

The babbling of Brown broke up the moody tenseness of the embarking. He chuckled like a schoolboy as he bantered with the mechanics and gunners. He beamed with all the enthusiasm of one going to a picnic. His helmet was awry and the goggles dangled somewhere under one ear-piece. His coat was buttoned askew and the belt flapped behind him like the tail of some mudslapping water animal. He bulged and displayed strange angles about his waistline and boasted that he had brought the pickles, tea and margarine for the picnic. Some grinned, some grimaced, some growled. But none could take the grin off Harold Brown's face.

"Did I ever tell yer about the time I wuz an undertaker's assistant?" he bellowed out of the rear-gun pit to Sergeant Ryan, who was still down on the ground, awaiting final orders from the Major.

"Get back there in ye rabbit-hutch, and shut up," growled the Irishman.

"The first bloke I worked on, he died wiv 'is knees up," Brownie went on. "The boss told me to lean on 'em and straighten 'im out. But yer see, rigger-mortise 'ad set in, an' when I bent over to push 'is knees down, 'is bloomin' 'ead came up! Did I bolt! I thought the blighter 'ad come to life agayne! I knocked the widow over on the way out, kicked over a bucket of embalming fluid, and. . ."

"I know—I know," moaned Ryan, with resignation. "You swiped a tram-car to get away and ran it up the wrong street. You always do that in your stories. Have a weakness for tram-cars, haven't you? Now get back on that cat-walk. You'll break your neck in that Scarff ring!"

THEY got away, somehow, in spite of Harold Brown and his Punch and Judy antics in the rear turret. Armitage huddled over the wheel, peered past McGregor's leather helmet. The Major hunched his right shoulder into his corner and closed his eyes. He was trying to think it all out.

The sooty light of the evening seemed to envelop them in a frozen blanket. The heavy air threw back the bellow of the engines so that it seemed that they must be heard all the way to Berlin. It appeared unusually damp and cold. The Major sniffed and stared out towards the wing-tips. The dew that had settled on the upper surfaces was now condensed and was streaming off the wings like spray from a shallow waterfall.

"We're going to have a spot of wet." The Major yelled to Armitage.

"Anything to help out!"

On they roared, their engine bellows and prop screams reaching an even higher and more thunderous octave. The line was reached, and they stared down on the grim gashes carved through the mud where men huddled for shelter from the belches of flame and jagged steel. A desultory burst of Archie came up and splashed egg yolk against the black sky. Stinking smoke raced through their struts and wires.

Over Ypres and turning south-east towards Menin they plunged. Into a damp curtain of spray they hit, and the first tingling needle-points of rain caught them, making the exposed portions of their faces go scarlet with pain.

"Wonderful!" Armitage growled, pulling his chin-piece up higher. "This looks like a lovely night. Hope Perone has an umbrella."

"Damn!" the Major responded. Then he leaned up and slammed on the top of the cowling. McGregor turned around.

"Watch your guns, Mac!" the Major yelled. "Rain gets in the barrels!" Mac nodded, took off his gloves and rammed them down over the muzzles.

For another fifteen minutes they plunged on, dancing in the gusty storm that was increasing as they clicked off the miles.

Then thunder below—

Archie snarled, and Armitage let her slip away. The Major hung on, glared at the pilot, and settled back again. The searchlights were opening up and forking about the rain-drenched sky for the marauder, but there was no luck for them to-night! The silver beams were washed out as they crawled up the sky, and lay ahead like tapered bands of watered silk.

AT MENIN, Armitage cut north-west again to avoid the defences at Courtrai, allowing the writhing Lys to slither by under his right wing-tip. Over Waereghem he cut back toward the Escaut and went thundering on until he picked up the single-track railway that ran from Audenarde to the main line between Deynze and Ledeberg. Then they ran into their first dose of trouble.

Three night-flying D-5's came out of the rain-slashed sky and ran smack into the fire directed by Horsey Horlick. McGregor scrambled up, ripped the gloves from the muzzles of the Lewis guns, and swung the ring around to bring his guns to bear on the diving Albatri.

*Ber-ip-pip-pip-pip-pip!*

The guns sang slowly, spluttering dull blasts of flame. The Major half rose to his feet, sensing that something was wrong.

"Damned rain!" he shouted over his chin-piece. "Got in the drums!"

The fire from above continued to fang at them from three angles. The gunners fought back like madmen, but the guns were slow to take up the action. Short, damnably slow spurts went out and seemed to creep up the sky.

At last Mac got one burst in and drove a D-5 off, struggling to keep its balance. The remaining two came in again and poured two converging sprays of steel at the rear portion of the Handley. A low scream went up—a splash of glinting blue flame that reflected off the glistening struts of the wings—and the rear turret was silent.

"What the . . . ?" the Major yelled, turning and darting down the companion-way.

Mac roared a Highland war cry, and let fly again. This time his guns responded, as if eager to score a revenge burst. An Albatros flipped up struggling for height. Mac screamed, raised his arm and snapped his open hand downward to the right. Armitage caught his signal, threw the wheel over hard and the Handley managed to squirm away from a falling scout that was going down with a consuming scarlet carnation at its throat.

DOWN inside, the Major went floundering over the legs of Ryan and Brown. He reached the rear platform and caught an inert body as it dropped in a shapeless heap on the foot-boards. He drew the struggling Horsey Horlick out, straightened him on the catwalk, and stared down as Ryan crawled along with a pocket torch.

"Stopped one . . . two," Ryan announced glumly. "Through the shoulder. Sticky, but not bad."

They fought with him and strapped him to the catwalk, while Ryan plugged the bullet holes with wads of gauze from his first-field dressing. The Major rammed a brandy flask against Horlick's teeth and tilted it. The game trooper was swearing, fuming and struggling against the belts that had been used to lace him down.

"Take ut easy," Ryan was yelling. "Ye'll rip 'em all out, man!"

"Take some more of this and go to sleep," the Major was yelling.

"The—guns!" Horsey bellowed. "They got the guns!"

"What is he talking about?"

Then, out of nowhere, came Brownie, bearing two battered drums.

"Them blighters 'it 'em," he yelled, holding out the magazines. "Look! All the way through. Even 'it the feed arms. They won't never fire!"

The Major stared at the two battered drums and swore.

"Take them off! There's another single gun in the locker under the platform. Break that out and mount it on the single swivel. Understand?"

"Right, sir!" barked the trooper. "Can I 'ave a go at 'em?"

"All you want. Let yourself go!"

Horlick was moaning into a dull sleep. His body twitched, his legs jerked, and they threw a blanket over him. In the rear turret Brownie was fumbling with the lugs and removing the battered guns. Lewis guns without feed arms were about as much good as inflated pig bladders tied on sticks. In a minute he had the other mounted and was testing it. Rain dripped down off his leather coat and formed shapeless pools on the worn platform. The Major gave Horlick another look and then went back up to the control pit.

"What happened?" screamed Armitage.

"Horlick's got a Blighty! Two of 'em." The Major squatted down. "Both guns out of action, too. The undertaker's assistant is back there with a single. Anything can happen. Jove! Isn't it raining?"

Mac was trying to shield his own guns, gloves over the muzzles and hugging the drums. It was battering into him in sheets now.

"Here we are!" bellowed Armitage. "There's the 'drome of the Gotha Griffons!"

The Major peered through the lancing fire of rain and spotted the Deynze field. They cut wide, eased back on the throttles and started to glide.

"Watch out for that runway!" the Major bellowed. "He said it ran—no, he didn't say which way it ran, did he, the fool?"

"I've got it," Armitage answered, as a shell came up from somewhere with a crash. "Down that way. . . . Look!"

A flare of M.G. fire came up from a distant corner. Mac leaped up, cleared his muzzles again, and returned it. Flares gleamed up from the ground below, bringing out in high relief a long narrow track that ran from the far corner, all the way across the field to slither into the flat oily tarmac in front of one of the hangars.

"Well," he said, "come down and get him," Armitage barked. "What about it?"

"What do you think we came for?" snorted the Major. "Go on down. Plenty of room if you take it well on the far side."

"Right! You're the boss. Let's go!" Mac was battering away with his guns. The Major was standing up, setting the sight. Flaming onions came hissing up and gun-fire from below crackled and sang. Then suddenly Mac's guns stopped. There was a dull report and he threw up his hands.

Armitage yelled, "Look! The guns exploded. The barrels! Look at 'em!"

"Never mind him," the Major ranted back. "Look down there!"

Armitage eased the great 'plane around, peered quickly over the side and saw a flare spread fanwise across the open runway. It showed the figure of a man in R.F.C. kit staked out flat on his back.

THEY exchanged glances of horror. McGregor pawed at his face which was streaming with blood. A chunk of steel had punched out a gash over one eye and the gore was blinding him. The Major reached in his pocket and brought out a great handled jack-knife.

"Go on down! I'll get him," he snarled.

The big black bomber hung over the boundary of the field. Then, with the beating rain pounding on her wide wings she began to drop. Armitage blipped the engines and brought her in. Her wheels hit with a booming roar and she went thundering along the ground.

Behind, Brownie was peppering away at flashes of gunfire. McGregor was swearing and pawing at his face. The big 'plane came to a halt and the Major opened the hatchway, let down the ladder and disappeared.

All around them blazed fire. Shots rang out and bullets sizzled through the driving rain. Armitage sat,

puzzled as to what to do. Ahead, not ten yards away, lay the staked-out figure. Then, as he watched the Major race on toward it, another figure came crawling out of the darkness.

"Who's that?" barked Armitage.

He stared, amazed, and saw the figure—another man in khaki—run toward the man on the ground. He began slashing away at the rope bonds that held the staked prisoner.

At that instant the Major reached them and joined in.

Armitage gasped. "That's—that's Perone . . . and it's Townsend! . . . Townsend!"

He saw the three men flounder under the glare of the light. The man who had been staked out struggled to his feet and threw an arm around the Major's shoulder. They turned and struggled back toward the pounding, broad-winged Handley.

"Come on! . . . Come on!" cheered Armitage. "Look! . . . Look, Mac. It's Townsend!"

But the little Scot was still pawing at his face and trying to fumble with his spiked guns. He was swearing at the top of his voice.

Then out of the blackness came more figures. Figures in German grey with glinting bayonets. Armitage bellowed over the cabin to Brown, but the trooper was firing a gun that spluttered and choked like a weary motor-cycle.

"Brown!" screamed Armitage. "Get those men!"

Then the lone gun stopped.

"Hell and damnation!" stormed Armitage.

The three men, backing away, were trying to fight it out. Perone had a pistol and was dropping men with every shot. Still they came on. The Major had Townsend at the foot of the ladder and was screaming up the hatchway. Armitage ducked around, reached down and dragged Townsend up into the cabin.

"Come on, Major!" he yelled.

But the Major had gone back. Back to help Perone.

McKELVIE'S gun spoke once and a gigantic German sprawled on his face. A torrent of M.G. fire came out of the darkness and pounded through the struts of the bomber. Armitage climbed back to his seat, and peered over again. He could see Perone battling with a man in an officer's uniform.

Behind him, Armitage sensed that someone was crawling about on top of the cabin. He stared ahead again and drew a pistol. He could see a German raise the butt of a rifle, charge forward and bash Perone in the chest with it. The Englishman went over backward.



Then from somewhere behind a garish light flared up. Armitage turned and saw a trickling, sparky thing go looping away towards the group of Germans.

*Bang!*

Dull screams went up. Chunks of metal slashed through the air. Armitage climbed on the seat, looked back, and saw Brown standing on top of the cabin with a glinting tin can in his hand. He struck a fuse match on a metal brassard that was strapped to his right arm. The match flared. He set it to a short black fuse and looped it up in the air.

It went high, came down and dropped plunk into the group of grey-clad soldiers.

*Bong!*

The glare lit up a mad scene of the Major dragging Perone away by the coat-collar. In a second he was at the foot of the ladder again. Armitage reached down again and yanked another figure up and tossed it at Ryan, who let it drop alongside Townsend and Horlick.

He kicked the ladder away, threw the hatch door over after the Major was in and clambered back into his seat.

“Right! Get away!” the Major shouted.

Armitage, panting, eased the throttles forward. The big bomber began to move. There was a scuffling on the roof behind, and he sensed that Brownie was sliding back to the rear turret. He hoped he made it. The big ’plane struggled, waved her great wings and then bumped over several forms that lay on the runway. The bounce was enough to get her off.

She struggled, nosed into a bitter curtain of gunfire and screamed on towards a row of hangars. As Armitage held her down for the last few yards before risking yanking her up and over, they saw a grim black ’plane come thundering out of the hangar toward them. A glare of light from a landing flare brought out the lines of a great Gotha, gleaming in new dope and sporting a flaming scarlet insignia of a Griffon across its blunt prow.

“That’s him!” yelled Armitage. “Give ’em the stuff, Major!”

But it was too late. The Handley-Page had struggled into the air, her wheels, still spinning, barely clearing the hump-backed shelter.

“Next time. Come on back!” the Major bellowed. “What the hell was it that blew all those Jerries over?”

“You’ll call me a liar, sir,” grinned Armitage. “But if my eyes have not gone back on me, it was jam-tin bombs. That trooper, Brown, had them stuffed in his flying coat. Seemed to know how to use them, too!”

## CHAPTER IX BOMBER MEETS BOMBER

**A**RMITAGE put his machine up into a climb and then banked around and sought the Gotha. On the way over, the Major leaned over the bomb sight and was slamming his hand up and down as fast as he could. Inside, Ryan was stumbling about, yanking toggles and releasing bombs as fast as he could tug. The great ’plane danced about as the heavy loads went out of the racks and buried their noses into the sheds, hangars and tarmac. A gigantic roar went up—a dozen of them. No.11 danced and ploughed her way through the smoke, *débris* and splintered flame that shot up.

Ahead they could see the Gotha turning in the glinting rain. Armitage shot for it, and then realised that they had little or nothing to face it with.

He stared ahead and jerked. The Scot was not in his cockpit!

“Where the hell is Mac?” Armitage screamed.

The Major stared ahead, ducked down and crawled up the tunnel. In a second or two he appeared in the front turret.

“Not here!” he yelled, raising his arms in resignation.

They were approaching the Gotha now, which was slightly below them. The front gunner on the German craft was peppering away with his movable Parabellum. Bullets spat through the wires and splintered the drenched struts. Flames leaped up behind them and bathed the rain-splashed ’plane in scarlet and gold.

The Gotha slashed by beneath them like a winged dreadnought. All guns came to bear on the Handley now.

“Beat it!” yelled the Major. “We can’t fight with nothing.”

Then from behind came the tell-tale staccato fire of a Lewis. Short, pounding bursts. No one on the whole front fired a gun like that—but Andy McGregor!

The Major stood up and peered along the top of the cabin. He came back grinning.

“Never mind. It’s Mac. He must have fixed up a gun somehow with spare parts. Listen to him! Let’s go after ’em.”

Over went the Handley-Page, full tilt into the fray again. Armitage raced her, lowering his nose to catch up, and the Gotha turned at the same time. The battle of the behemoths was on. One lone gun against three.

Back and forth, back and forth, crossing and banking to get the best arc of fire, the Handley plunged. Mac fought like a demon, his lone gun picking struts out of the Gotha as neatly as a marksman breaks pipes in a shooting gallery.

They went down again on the floundering Jerry, and dived for the kill.

"So . . . Baron von Wusthoff!" roared Armitage. "You thought you could stop the Coffin Crew, eh? Well, get down on your marrow-bones. Here we come!"

They shot over the Gotha. McGregor's gun flamed the final burst. Then out of the darkness behind glared a sparkling cluster of light. It shot up in an arc, fell away and dropped smack above the open control-pit of the Gotha.

*Bong!*

And Harold Brown's last jam-tin bomb blew the heart of the Gotha to smithereens. The great winged bomber struggled hard, jerked her snout around, nosed down and rammed her two engines smack into the ground.

THEY lunged down a new throat ladder and carried Horlick and Townsend into the M.O. shed. A fire gleamed in a tin stove. Hot toddy steamed on the long table. They gulped it down and waited for the M.O.'s decision on Horlick before anyone spoke.

"He'll be all right. I'll have this hardware out of him in a minute. You go on with your chatter. It helps a bit."

"Lord, Graham," gulped Armitage, "I never thought we'd see you again, boy. Thought we'd blown you to Kingdom Come!"

Townsend, weary-eyed, muddy, garbed in a strange collection of khaki kit, sat staring into the fire.

"No . . ." he mumbled. "That was not me the other night. A dummy, in my uniform. They thought that would scare you off. Glad it didn't."

"It didn't. We didn't see it until Perone here had signalled for the release of the bombs. Then it was too late."

"But, look here, Perone," demanded the Major. "How did you know they had used a dummy?"

"I didn't," Perone replied sheepishly.

"I only took a chance. I couldn't believe any man—German or British—would do that. I realised, however,

that since we had apparently taken no notice of it, they would stake him out the next time. After all, we had given them a wicked pasting."

"Must have felt nice," broke in Townsend, smiling, "to feel that you had blown up your future brother-in-law."

"So that's the angle, eh?" the Major snapped.

"Yes," Perone added. "We were none too keen about each other, either, before to-night. You know how a chap feels about the bloke who is rushing his sister. I felt that Joan—for no reason, of course, except a daft, brotherly feeling—was too good for anyone. I know different, now. If he's accepted by the Coffin Crew he certainly has my approval."

"APPROVAL!" gagged Townsend. "You call it approval to land in Hunland to pick me up, like that? I'd say you could be accused of high-powered brotherly love."

"Well . . . I had to think of Joan, in all this," Perone admitted quietly.

"So that's why you said: 'If they didn't to-night, they will the next time,'" grinned Armitage. "You meant that if they hadn't actually staked Townsend out that night, they'd get mad and actually do it the next time?"

"Did I say that?" asked Perone, frowning and puzzled. "I didn't realise. Well, anyway, I felt that I was responsible for Townsend. What was more, I was not particularly keen about staying here—so the only thing left was to go over and get Townsend back if he was still alive. If he hadn't been, I think I would have finished off von Wusthoff and then taken a chance on getting back through the lines."

"I'll see that you get to a Bristol Fighter outfit all right, Perone," beamed the Major. "What's the rest?"

"Nothing much. I just went over, landed the Spad and hid it. Then I sneaked along a brook that passed near the field at Deynze and watched them working on the space to take-off. I overheard the mechanics say that the next time they were going to stake that damned Englishman out for keeps. Then I worked my way back to the river and dropped the boat into the current, hoping for the best. It worked—and here we are."

"And all O.K. except for poor old Tate," muttered Armitage. "But Brown made up for that. By the way, how the hell did you get those jam-tin bombs up there, Brown?"

The beaming trooper came out of the shadows.

"I potted abart the cook-'ouse just before we started, sir," he explained. "Spotted them empty jam-tins, and thought as 'ow they might come in 'andy—just in case like. I 'appened to 'ave a tin of amatol in me kitbag, an' I filled 'em up wiv old iron and rusty nails, just like we used ter do in 'fifteen. Thought I'd take 'em along with us, just in case, like." He smiled innocently.

"A tin of amatol in your kitbag?" Townsend gasped.

"Good Lord!" the Major rasped. "Do you travel about carting stuff like that with you all the time? A tin of that stuff would blow this whole 'drome up!"

"Well, you never know, sir," the trooper confided. "You never know. Sometimes it does come in quite 'andy like!"

