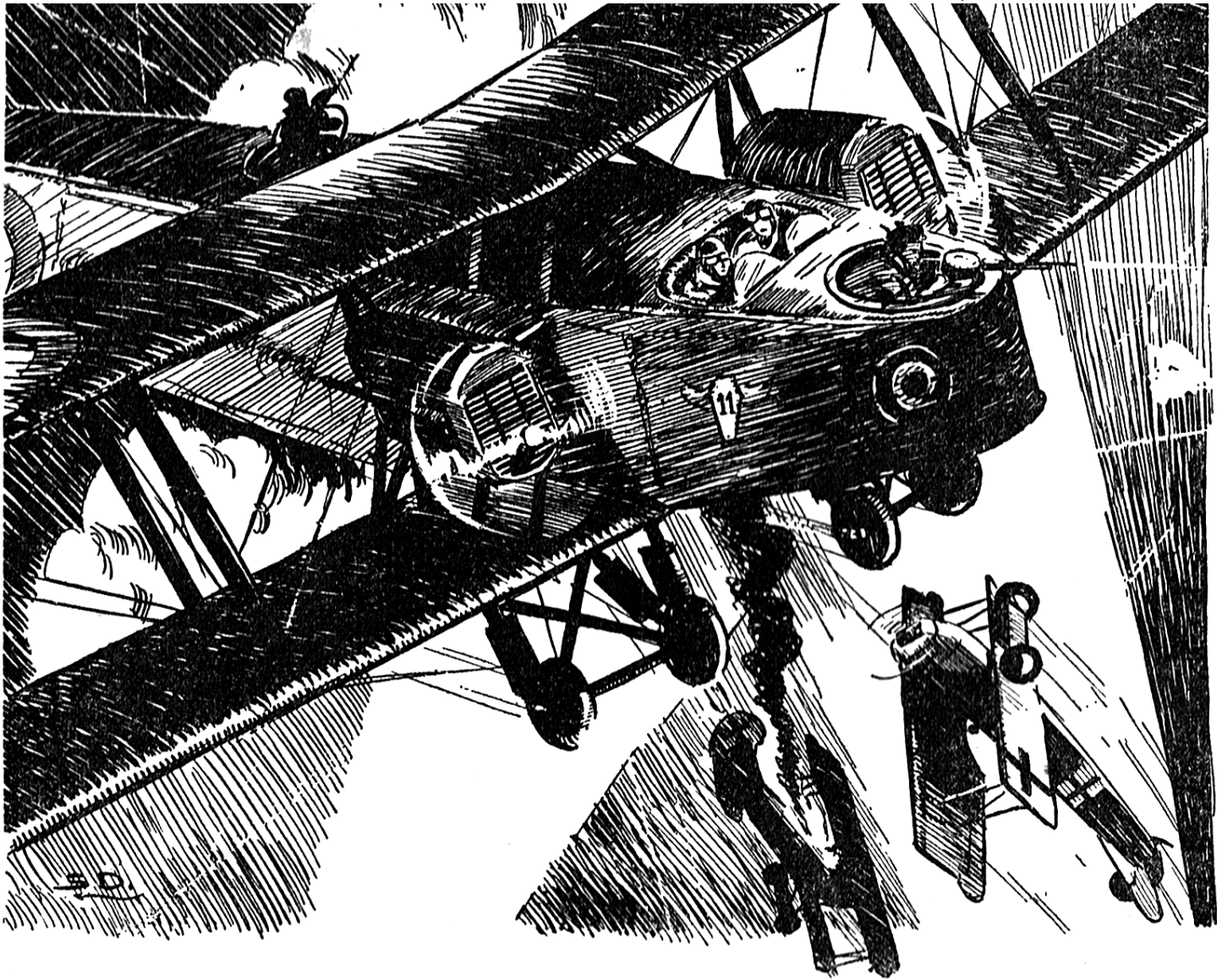


the **COFFIN CREW**



ONE MAN'S WAR

by **ARCH WHITEHOUSE**

When the exquisite Mr. Meridith Lovelace was appointed to the toggle-board of Handley-Page bomber No. II, there were doleful prophecies of the fate that would befall the Coffin Crew—that happy band of R.F.C. warriors whose exploits were known from end to end of the Allied lines. But Mr. Lovelace had his own ideas about winning the war—and the Coffin Crew soon found themselves embarked on the craziest adventure in all their mad-cap career.

CHAPTER I THE NEW MEMBER

THE COFFIN CREW was in executive session beneath the nose of No. 11, that blister-snouted old devil that had brought them safely through from a raid over Thionville two nights before. It was not a particularly exuberant gang, in spite of the fact that Lieutenant Armitage had just put up his D.S.O. ribbon and Andy McGregor was fumbling with a sheet of paper authorising him to wear the red, white and blue decoration of the Military Medal. Decorations were not particularly important unless you went on leave and had a chance to sport them on your square-pushing togs. And with things going on as they were there seemed little likelihood that any member of the Coffin Crew would be getting one of those important little buff furlough forms for some time.

The seat of the trouble was the Jerry Spandau bullet that had buried itself in Pete Barker's tummy two nights before, and for the time being the little Cockney air mechanic would be taking things particularly easy a few miles behind the line amid the clean-smelling confines of a base hospital, drawing on fags offered by sweet-faced old ladies and chuckling at the cartoons by Bairnsfather in dog-eared copies of the *Bystander*. In the meantime someone would have to take his place inside the big bomber. Therein lies the tale.

"MERIDITH LOVELACE!" spat Sergeant Ryan. "Can you catch me trying to tell a bloke with a name like that how to pull toggles and pull detonators in 250-pounders? What the devil is the Flying Corps coming to, any way?"

"Is that really his name?" inquired Lieutenant Townsend, the pilot of No.11. "Sounds like something pinched out of a theatre programme."

"Where the devil did he come from?" broke in Phil Armitage, the Coffin Crew's bombing officer.

"He's been here a week or so now," explained Corporal Arthur Marks. "I've seen him puttering around the test bench. They say he's hot on these Rolls-Royce engines."

"Where is he now? We ought to look him over," went on Townsend.

"There he is. Over there alongside the hangar. Got a hutch of rabbits he's playin' with. Nothing but a kid," growled Ryan, pointing with the short stem of a murky clay pipe. "Come on, let's have another look at him."

The Coffin Crew descended on our Meridith Lovelace in a body. That young man was carefully sticking dandelion leaves through the bars of a small animal cage, carefully constructed out of an ammunition box, some resurrected flying wires and bits of aircraft three-ply that had evidently been scrounged out of the squadron stores. Inside squatted two mangey-looking rabbits that munched contentedly on the proffered tit-bits.

"Well, how's Mr. Barnum and his trained elephants this morning?" greeted Lieutenant Armitage.

"Top hole! How's yourself?" replied the young rabbit-fancier without turning round.

Sergeant Ryan gulped hard and just managed to refrain from swallowing his pipe. Such familiarity from second-class air mechanics with commissioned officers had never been heard of, even in 109 Squadron, where commissioned and non-commissioned officers fought together in the long, black bellies of giant Handley-Page bombers. As the senior non-com., Ryan felt that it was his place to see that regulations were adhered to as much as possible. The pipe came out and Ryan set himself for a bellowing roar, but before he could inflate his bellows, the young naturalist turned and arose from his squatting position.

"They haven't been fed this morning, and I can't seem to find much about for them. You haven't seen a spot of kale or any dandelions around in your travels, have you?" he inquired, addressing Lieutenant Townsend.

That almost finished Ryan completely. Somehow he managed to blurt out:

"Is that the way you address an officer? Stand to attention, man. Where the devil do you think you are?" Meridith Lovelace raised a pained eyebrow. He had hardly expected this.

"I'm sorry, old topper. I thought that now I was to become a member of your outfit I could rather make myself at home. After all, I'm one of you, you know," he explained.

Armitage sensed a tense situation, and he decided to break it up if possible.

"How long have you been in the Flying Corps, Lovelace?" he inquired.

"Oh, not long. They chunked me out of the Bedford Yeomanry, you know. I swiped the Major's charger one day and went out doing a bit of timber-topping, and the old boy got a bit uppish about it. Silly horse fell when I put him over the water trough. . . broke a leg, and they had to shoot him. Offered to pay for it, but they were quite ratty about it and bunged me out," explained Meridith blandly.

"Interesting," went on Armitage. "You won't get borrowing a Handley to go home on leave with, will you? They rather frown on that, you know." Townsend turned to hide a chuckle that was almost choking him.

"Where do you come from?" went on the bomber officer. "I mean, where's your home?"

"Home?" replied the precocious youngster. "Can't say I have a home, just now. Born on a liner going down to South Africa. The old boy's a Canadian, I think. Mother's English.

They schooled me in Hong Kong for a while and since then I have been in the States, Alaska, Germany and the Argentine."

"Struth! Where's yer old man now?" broke in Corporal Marks.

"Not quite certain. Last I heard of him, he was in London doing something for the Government. The mater's got a hospital outside Paris, I understand. I hear from them once in a while," went on the strange youth, prodding at one of the nibbling rabbits with a crust of bread.

LIEUTENANT ARMITAGE instantly took a strange liking to this rosy-cheeked boy. He felt sorry for him.

"What made you transfer to this lot?" he probed.

"Oh, I thought it would be a change, so I wrote to the Air Ministry about it and they sent me out here. I've always wanted to do a bit of flying, somehow. Beats school, all hollow."

"When were you at school last?" inquired Townsend.

"Up until a few months ago, but they threw me out of there, too. Officers' Training Corps, you know. I let a field-gun get away from me. It rolled down a whacking great hill and knocked the front out of a row of village shops. What a riot!"

"It must have been," growled Ryan. "But let me tell you, my boy, there'll be no letting a Handley-Page run down hill in this mob. You'll have to behave yourself!"

"Oh," replied Meridith. "Thought the Flying Corps was a place where individuality was appreciated. I hope you don't get sticky about rules and all that bother."

"You'll have to do as you are told," warned Townsend. "You will go with us to-night, you know. Report to Sergeant Ryan at ten-thirty. He will give you your instructions."

"You'd better pop out to No.11 this afternoon, and I'll show you how to handle those toggles in the 'bus. Get your flying kit at the Stores, too," snapped the Irish non-com.

"Don't worry, I'll be there," replied Meridith turning back to his pets without the formality of saluting his superiors.

The rest of the crew walked away, somewhat startled.

"We've got a lovely handful in that digger," grinned Marks.

"It's a daned shame," growled Ryan. "There's plenty of good lads in the ranks here without picking up a bird like that. Why, he's likely to do anything up there."

"Ye're right. Ye can niver tell what yon lad wul do. He may turn out to be a wheeler," agreed Andy McGregor, who up until this time had said nothing.

"But how the devil did he get pull enough too get on the toggles this quick?"

"The Major said it was orders from the Wing. The boy must have someone behind him somewhere."

"He'll have the toe of my boot behind him with a rush if he tries any of his 'timber-topping' in No.11," growled Ryan again.

"I have an idea we're in for some fun with Mr. Lovelace aboard," responded Armitage with a chuckle.

"Good Lord! Meridith Lovelace!" grinned Lieutenant Townsend.

CHAPTER II DRESSED FOR WAR

NO.11 WAS PANTING on the tarmac that night, her belly full of bombs and her tanks full of liquid power. Andy McGregor was up in the forward turret adjusting his Scarfl mounting and putting his drums on the steel pegs of the rack. Out on the broad green wings the two great engines were warming up with a convincing hum of power. Lieutenant Townsend was scanning his map with Armitage, who relaxed against the great tyre of the landing wheel. Inside, Sergeant

Ryan was checking his bombs, toggles and slides. Corporal Marks clattered about in the rear turret and I adjusted his guns for the action expected.

"You all ready?" inquired Major McKelvie, suddenly appearing from around the tail of the machine.

"I think so, Major," replied Townsend. "We're all here, except this Lovelace fellow. Where the devil is he?"

"Damn the man, anyway," growled Armitage. "I'll go and hunt him up."

"All right, I'm coming," twittered a voice from near the hangar. "I'll be right with you in a minute. You chaps get in and we'll be all ready."

Mr. Lovelace was speaking to his superior officers.

Major McKelvie tensed for a tiger-like spring, but somehow the lunge never materialised, for out of the gloom and into the spotlight glaring down from the rear of the towing tractor slithered the most gorgeous display of aerial make-up ever put on view in France.

A symphony of bright calf leather, Triplex lenses, Burberry raiment and Dunhill delight smote the eyes of the speechless flying men.

"Gug!" went Townsend.

"What the . . . !" snorted the Major.

"Holy dogfish!" bellowed Armitage. "What the devil's blown in here?"

Mr. Meridith Lovelace was ready for the air. And how! His beaming countenance was encased in a fur-lined leather helmet, for which about three hundred Swiss yodellers must have hunted the elusive chamoix for years to get such priceless skins. On top of this rested the finest pair of Triplex glass goggles money could buy. Their lenses were bound in silver bands and the mask-pad was downy with sleek beaver. Beneath the turned-up leather collar of a gaudy flying-coat was wrapped a scarf that would have made Joseph and his Biblical coat go out and take the veil—evidently Meridith's school colours. The coat in question was a natty garment cut for a musical-comedy aviator, but which must have put a heavy crimp in Mr. Lovelace's Pay and Mess Book No. 54. Beneath that glistened the most polished pair of knee-length, fur-lined flying-boots ever turned out of Bond Street. And then, as if this were not enough for one evening, Mr. Lovelace sported a pair of flying gauntlets, fur-lined, of course, and a long ebony cigarette-holder that glowed at its tip like the gleam of a rapier that is just about to puncture someone's mess department.

"For Lord's sake!" whispered Armitage huskily. "Where did you get that outfit? How long have they been issuing kit like that?"

"Not Army issue," explained Meridith, flicking his cigarette holder with a little finger. "I sent for it. Knew I'd need it when I started flying. I like things that fit well . . . one can't fly in uncomfortable clothes and really do one's best, you know."

The Major strode over like a man in a dream and fingered the leather coat. He tried to force a smile, but somehow one wouldn't come.

"See here, Lovelace," he finally uttered. "If you get this coat shot about much, I'll send you to Dartmoor for life. When you do get yourself conked, take one through the dome and bend over so the blood doesn't dirty the coat. I want that—some day."

Meridith drew calmly on his long cigarette-holder and smiled:

"Of course, Major," he went on, "if you would like one like this, and the old exchequer is a bit low, I probably could advance you a few quid."

Armitage yanked him away just in time to miss a wild swing from the foaming McKelvie. He shoved him up the narrow ladder and bellowed:

"You rattle-brained idiot! Get in there and go to work! You've got your chance to fly now. Let's see what you've got!"

Meridith was bundled up into the pilot's cockpit, and he sat down alongside Townsend.

"No, you ruddy fool!" bellowed Armitage again. "That's my seat. You're inside with Ryan, on the toggles. Get in there!"

The symphony of leather, lenses and languor went spinning through the narrow aperture from the control cockpit and finished up spreadeagled inside on the catwalk between the bomb racks.

"Holy blithering gumboils!" ejaculated Ryan, in amazement. "Who shot the fat-headed calf?"

But there was no time for Meridith to answer. No.11 picked up her tail and scampered off down the field. Sergeant Ryan slumped down on the catwalk, braced himself against the bomb rack and enjoyed the heartiest laugh he had had since coming out to France.

UP FRONT McGregor was settling down in his turret, making the most of a cold proposition. No.11 charged into the obscure night, her engines screaming their mad song of power. Her wires twanged and added to the insane chorus with high-pitched wails like demons on the warpath. He turned once and watched the grinning gargoyle faces of Townsend and Armitage as they conversed with exaggerated lip

movements and expressive eyes that grinned through goggles. He knew they were enjoying the initial air adventure of Mr. Lovelace. It was funny, he admitted to himself, but his canny Scotch intuition had considerable respect for the precocious youngster. He had seen them before.

The great bomber ceased her circling climb and soon headed almost due east. The uneven vibration settled down to a soothing burr of smooth flying that trickled off the main spars and down the longerons. The great engines out on the wings eased themselves into three-quarter throttle and tuned their steel throats into even songs of wartime melody.

The line was reached in another twenty minutes and their arrival was greeted with the usual bursts of tracer Archie that were sent up in an effort to ascertain their height and range. Below ran the trickling line, marked out plainly by silver flashes like giant spikes that hurled back encroaching humans. At intervals a large pom-pom of flame burst out, as though the devilish decorators had tried to add to the festoon of fire that swung in stringy loops from Dunkirk to the Swiss border.

A pretty picture in a way, but McGregor knew that it only marked Death Drive, where men were being slashed into ribbons by snarling machine-guns. Where great steel shells were plopping down blasting humans into pulp. Where war-weary sentries were focussing bloodshot eyes across a strip of gnarled and festering ground dotted with slimy waterholes.

Inside, Sergeant Ryan sat and observed his new assistant. Once Mr. Lovelace inserted his cigarette tube in his mouth and actually started to strike a match. With a growl Ryan tore the fag from the shiny holder.

Mr. Lovelace looked pained, and retaliated with an accusing stare at the short clay pipe in Ryan's monkey-like mouth. The sergeant explained by slicking his finger in the bowl, indicating that he was only sucking on a cold pipe for comfort. That seemed to satisfy Meridith, and he contented himself by drawing a giant automatic from one of his voluminous pockets of his coat and carefully aiming it at one of the bombs.

Bang! went the automatic. Ryan suffered a tense nerve reaction and shot into the air in exactly the same position he had been sitting. Meridith sat staring at the smoking weapon, and then calmly peered into the muzzle, as though he was unable to realise what had caused all the noise and confusion. He hurriedly and guiltily returned it to his pocket and resumed his sucking on the cigarette-holder.

"You blasted fool!" yelled Ryan. "What the devil did you do that for?"

Mr. Lovelace pondered a minute, and replied:

"I wasn't sure it was loaded, and I . . . I wanted to know," he yelled back.

Ryan struggled for breath, sat back and prepared for the worst. The shot had passed a juicy 250-pounder, and for ten minutes he sat trying to figure what would have happened had the bullet struck it. Mr. Lovelace resumed his silent contemplation of the interior of the Handley-Page. In the rear turret Corporal Marks was having a fit looking for a phantom Hun that had fired *one* shot at him.

THEN from nowhere came that damning finger of accusing light. Like a silver swordblade it shot up from below and put the Handley in a circle of blazing phosphorescence. The expected salutation came with it in the form of snarling shells that flung great chunks of hot steel through fabric, splintering struts, snapping spars and playing general high-pitched havoc. Four of them boomed out and Townsend had to do some delicate stickwork to slide the rumbling Handley out of the range.

Suddenly the two visible legs in the rear turret whirled and crouched. Ryan indicated the move with the stem of his short pipe. Meridith turned and watched the expressive feet of the little Australian corporal. Then the Lewis gun began to chatter. A twanging burst of leaden hail replied and spattered through the black body. Ryan's pipe went into bits in his gloved hand like a clay in the mouth of a blindfold girl on a music-hall stage. Lovelace's new goggles went spinning across the catwalk and spattered their Triplex lenses against a post. Meridith stared at them for a minute and then leaned over and picked them up gingerly. The shatter-proof glass was decorated with a weird spiderweb design. The strap had been clipped neatly and Mr. Lovelace went on the warpath.

"Where you going?" roared Ryan, snatching for the coat-tails of the youngster. He was too late. Mr. Lovelace was crawling on his hands and knees up the catwalk that had suddenly decided to do the tango. In one hand he held the massive automatic, and in another minute he was fumbling between Mark's feet and scrambling up into the narrow rear turret. For an instant the Corporal wondered what had happened. A leather-clad madman slid up alongside of him and started blazing away with a blue-steel automatic. For several seconds the Australian watched this bit of

action, somewhat puzzled. Then he, too, went into action. His great flying glove was carefully placed on Mr. Lovelace's muzzle and with a severe downward pressure that gentleman went out of the picture and flopped back to the catwalk. Mr. Marks continued where the Lovelace lad had interrupted him, and a Hun two-seater went down in flames.

Ahead, McGregor was having his hands full, too, but his Lewis put up a deadly barrage of bingo and another two-seater was driven off.

On roared old No.11 as straight as a die for her objective, a newly discovered "ammo." dump just beyond Metz. The wedges of flame continued to finger through the wisps of cloud searching for the black phantom of droning doom. Townsend handled his wheel, picked his spots and managed to keep clear of the tell-tale beam. All around them growled anti-aircraft crumps, but none were any too close to be dangerous. Armitage leaned over the side of his cockpit, adjusted his bomb-sight, and then inspected the layout below. Tapping Townsend on the shoulder he pointed to a square black splotch below over which was trickling five golden insects of some description. The noted night-flying squadron of single-seater Fokkcrs was taking the air to intercept the Handley-Page.

Townsend frowned. The dump was still far enough away. He rapped on the cowling to attract McGregor, and Armitage pointed out the pennons of flame that were streaking out from the Fokkers below. McGregor stared down and his face became a study in frosted putty.

The throttles went forward another notch or two and the great engines responded a pitch or two higher. Through another barrage of black crumps they went, wires singing, struts taking the strain and the great four-bladed props biting out massive chunks of atmosphere.

ARMITAGE stretched himself, arose and put one knee on his seat. The bomb-sight was adjusted again and with that he went inside the long black body to see that all was ready. Sergeant Ryan was still sitting on the floor watching Mr. Lovelace like a cat contemplates a mouse. The gentleman in the expensive raiment was pounding up and down the catwalk in high dudgeon. He looked much like a window model on a rampage. From somewhere he had brought out a flat leather map case that hung from his shoulder on a strap. Off the other shoulder streamed a binocular case, gaudy

and brown. To his belt he had affixed a first-aid kit in a metal container that rattled and clanked like a sabre.

"What's his Nibs bargaining about now?" yelled Armitage at the sergeant.

"I dunno, sir. Wants to get out on the wings and have a go at them with his pop-gun or something. He tried to get into Marks' coop and take over the artillery. The blighter's balmy. This is his last trip—or mine," bellowed the sergeant.

"He'll be all right. We'd better get ready. Be there in a few minutes," explained the bombing officer.

"All ready, sir. But I won't be responsible for this egg!"

Armitage went back to the control pit, and Mr. Lovelace had an idea. He followed and popped his head out between the two officers in the front scat. Townsend turned, startled. Armitage grinned and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, but Meridith refused to take the hint.

"Where we heading for?" he demanded.

Armitage pointed ahead to where a river wound its silver band under a railroad bridge.

"Just ahead, where you see that black triangle. That's their new dump."

"Whose?" inquired Meridith blandly.

"Whose?" rattled the bombing officer. "Why the Germans' of course!"

"Are we over Germany?" demanded Mr. Lovelace in amazement.

"Are we over. . . . Where the hell did you think we were?"

"I don't know. You keep me down there. How can I see where we are?"

"Well, we're well over the lines now and you'd better go back and help get rid of the bombs. Go on, now. Push off. You're cluttering up the office."

Mr. Lovelace withdrew, plainly hurt. He went back to talk it over with Sergeant Ryan.

"He said we are over Germany, and we've got to throw off the bombs, prodded Meridith.

"That's right. Just like I showed you this afternoon. You have to pull them toggles one at a time on the signal from the bombing officer up front. You take the 112's and I'll take the big ones. Understand?"

BEFORE Meridith could answer, a battering crash resounded outside. They were over their objective and fighting their way through the steel barrage of snarling shrapnel. Armitage was standing peering through his sights, one arm raised. Ryan watched him. It went down like a knife slicing a great cheese.

The toggles were yanked. Guides squeaked, and two great yellow eggs slid down the ways and into the night. Ryan turned to see that Meridith was still at his post. He was.

Like a madman he was running up and down the catwalk, yanking every toggle he could lay hands on. The black belly of the Handley Page spawned eggs as fast as a machine-gun spits bullets. For a second or two Ryan stood spellbound. Then he flung himself at the blazing-eyed Mr. Lovelace.

The Handley heeled over on one ear and they both went to the floor in heap. Meridith scrambled to his feet and yanked two more. Ryan was climbing up, his coat-tails streaming.

"You damned fool! What the hell are you doing—playing a blinking pipe organ? Let them toggles alone!"

"We're over Germany, and he said drop the bombs, didn't he?" roared Meridith.

"not like that, you damned fool! One at a time! There's only a couple left now. You've wasted them all."

In front, Armitage was still standing over his bomb-sight, his arm raised. Suddenly he turned and stared ahead. A torrent of blazing fire had billowed up beyond them. Great booms of explosion roared out over the scream of the engines. Something had happened that was hardly on the books. Half of Germany was on fire or popping off. What the devil had happened?

Up went his arm again and down it slashed once more. Ryan leaped to the remaining taut toggles and yanked. Another 250-pounder went floundering out. Over went the Handley again, spilling Mr. Lovelace on his face down the catwalk. He wound up on his back, feet up, staring into Mark's cockpit. The little Australian was spurting a spray of '303 dead into a single-seater Fokker.

They flattened out, screwed around into the wind, and down went Armitage's arm again. The last toggle squeaked in reply and a great yellow tube with a silver tail went spinning out. Ryan rushed forward to the opening into the control pit.

"That's all!" he yelled, washing out with a lateral movement of his hand. "They're all gone. The kid let 'em all go at once."

Armitage blinked and stared at Townsend. The pilot was satisfied at that. Armitage sat down without a word and stared over the side at the glorious conflagration going on below. Whoever had dropped them, and regardless of how many had gone, they certainly had done their work, he agreed.

CHAPTER III RUNNING REPAIRS

RYAN STAGGERED BACK to the catwalk and sought Mr. Lovelace. He had convincing intentions of blacking both of his eyes. But as the Handley banked, he reeled and fell against the isinglass window near the forward part of the body. Outside he spotted the destruction illuminated by flaming tongues of fire that were licking up and devouring frame buildings and stacks of tarpaulin-covered explosive. Great streaks of gushing pyrotechnics billowed up and fell away with a train of sparks. Geysers of fire spewed out in all directions. Great piles of shapeless masses fell splashing out a flood of giant torches that tumbled and spun in strange designs. A splash of metal against the side of the bomb-rack yanked him out of his reverie. They were getting it from the Fokkers now.

Where was Lovelace?

Sergeant Ryan spun around and searched for the youngster everywhere. He had last seen him spinning down the catwalk, displaying the seat of his breeches for all who cared to gaze. He was nowhere in sight now. . . . *Er* . . . yes he was . . . his boot soles glared back at him from the slatted floor of the 'bus. He was lying on his stomach firing a Lewis gun like mad through the opening at the bottom of the rear turret.

A yell from Marks above indicated that something had happened. Ryan rushed forward. Something had. Mr. Meridith Lovelace had put a Fokker down in flames. He still rattled away with what was left in the drum and then he returned, spitting and spluttering, from the fumes of the cordite.

"Well, I got one of them," he growled. "Wish I had known this thing had been going on before. Didn't know we were over Germany."

"Just your luck, too," responded Ryan. "Here I've been going over on this game for months and have never even had a shot at one. You make one blinking trip, swipe a gun and get one with your first burst."

"Well, that's what I came out here for, wasn't it?" replied Mr. Lovelace. "What do we do now?"

"You sit here and mind your own business until we get back. Then you can buzz off to bed and get ready

for another trip to-morrow—that's if we do get back," explained Ryan with a snarl.

"Is this all there is to it?" went on Lovelace.

"That's all. Nothing to do until to-morrow, now . . ."

But that was as far as the sergeant got. A wild swing of the Handley put them up a corner in a heap again, and they sensed the bitter fire of machine-guns, both for and against. Up front, McGregor was howling and swearing in his true Hieland-fling tempo. His gun was skirling like a demented piper. Townsend threw the 'plane all over the sky and Armitage rammed himself in his corner—and hoped.

Marks' guns were chattering too. Ryan curled over and sat still. Lovelace wound up on his hands and knees staring up the catwalk that was now keeping time like a monstrous baton to the raging music of battle outside.

"What the hell's the matter?" bellowed Mr. Lovelace.

"We're in it. The Fokkers have got up. We're having to run for it now. Be ready to do anything. I've been in messes like this before," advised Ryan, gripping a bomb-rack stay. "Hang on now, and hope."

Lovelace stayed there, crouching like a shivering puppy. The Handley gave another lurch and he went flat on his face. He came up holding his nose, which was trickling claret—all over his new flying coat. He grabbed his nasal organ and snuffled into his glove. A fine spray of scarlet gore streamed out between his fingers.

"Get on yer back and lay quiet," ordered Ryan, shifting over from the deluge.

"Ug . . . my nose is bleeding . . . bashed . . . ug . . . it on the floor . . . blooming nice thing . . . ug . . ." he gurgled, and then fell back and sniffed into a khaki handkerchief he had snatched from his pocket. Ryan watched him for a few minutes and settled back, prepared for anything. Outside the same mad crescendo of clatter went on. Guns rattled and chattered. Engines sang their high-pitched songs. Wires wailed and unseen 'planes screamed down on them spattering bullets into every stretch of fabric visible in the uncertain light between the tell-tale exhaust streamers.

Suddenly the Handley lurched and screwed around. They all sensed a sickening feeling at the pit of the stomach. One engine had conked, or had been conked, by the Fokkers. Lovelace sat up like a puppet on strings. The handkerchief was dabbed at his nose twice and he scrambled to his feet and groped his way up the catwalk.

"What's the matter?" he yelled through the aperture.

Townsend was fumbling with the switch and staring out at the slowly revolving prop. There was a couple of bangs in the exhaust.

"Petrol line cut!" yelled Mr. Lovelace. "Bullet, eh?"

"How the hell do we know?" snapped Armitage.

"Get back there and sit still; we'll get home somehow . . . maybe."

Mr. Lovelace withdrew and sat on the little steps and began to think. Suddenly, he jammed his hand in his pocket, drew out his cigarette-holder, stuck it between his teeth and waddled down the catwalk towards the rear turret. Then he pulled his first-aid kit open and selected a small spool, and carried on.

FOR the second time that evening Corporal Marks was annoyed by an uninvited visitor in his narrow cockpit, but this time he was not quite so rude. As a matter of fact he was so astonished by what followed that he did little but try to ask questions.

"What do you want?" he bellowed at Mr. Lovelace.

"Nothing. I've got it," Mr. Lovelace seemed to reply. Without further ado, In calmly clambered through the Scarf mounting, putting his foot on Corporal Mark's chest to do so, and started to work his way along the top of the fuselage.

"Hey, you damn fool!" Marks finally spluttered. "Where the hell are you off to?"

But Mr. Lovelace was giving an excellent imitation of a wild-west Indian crawling up the old stockade. His coat flapped madly in the slip-stream. His eyes streamed with water. Inside, Sergeant Ryan had decided that a couple of Fokkers were making a landing-ground of the roof. But Mr. Lovelace continued on until he reached the space beneath the wide wings. Kicking the top of the fuselage he sensed where the tanks began and then slithered over the side and narrowly escaped being swept off completely. With a tearing of fabric he dropped to the rear main spar and clutched frantically at dim flying wires.

From there Mr. Lovelace fell to his knees and sought the rear lower braces of the engine. His hands ran along a sharp jagged metal member, and somehow he realised that here was the seat of his trouble.

His nimble fingers ran along the tube and suddenly became damp, as he thought. Actually he had found the break in the fuel line that ran up the giant carburettor and the pumps were still sucking some of the petrol from the tanks inside the fuselage.

"Got it," he yelled, and Armitage, who had been leaning over a map beneath the hooded instrument-

board light, swung around as though a bony ghost had tapped him on the touchy part of a boil.

"What the devil is that out there?" he shouted.

"S'matter now?" bellowed Townsend as he watched his pal rear up and peer over the side. Behind, Marks was still fighting a wild rearguard action with two Fokkers, and the pilot was giving him all the opportunity in the world to miss being hit. On the other hand, our Mr. Lovelace was having a devil of a time keeping his position, in spite of his good intentions.

Armitage stared again, fully expecting to see a gentleman with a pronged fork jump at him from the wing and pierce his jugular vein. For a minute he continued to peer over, and then it all came to him. Mr. Meridith Lovelace was having a constitutional around the old barge, to well—to kind of keep himself interested, he supposed.

"For the love of Mike," he howled at Townsend. "That damned fool is out there on the wing taking the bally engine apart or something to see what makes it go!"

"What!" yelled the pilot. "Lovelace out on the wing? How the devil did he get there?"

"Don't ask me. He must have cut a hole in the side or something. But he's there at any rate!"

MEANWHILE the much abused Mr. Lovelace was discovering the break in the copper tubing. His hands yanked it clear of the strut binding and then like a fiend, cutting the heart out of a victim, he started to twist the ragged ends somewhat even. At last he succeeded after a fashion, and with a broad grin snatched the long cigarette-holder from his mouth, calculated how much he would require, snapped it off, and proceeded to force the ends of the broken piping into it. Strangely enough, it fitted reasonably well, as Mr. Lovelace knew it would. He had had breakdowns with Rolls-Royce engines before. Not in the air, of course, but he knew a thing or two. He admitted it later.

"What the dickens are you doing out there, Lovelace?" bellowed Armitage. "Get inside, man. We're lost in the fog. You can't do any good out there."

"Mind your own business. I'm the air mechanic on this kite," Mr. Lovelace remarked—though not loud enough for Lieutenant Armitage to hear him.

It took but a minute to bind the tube reasonably airtight with a length of adhesive tape procured earlier from his first-aid kit, and then, like a craftsman who

is proud of his work, he turned and grinned up to where Lieutenant Armitage had last yelled at him. Strangely enough he could see nothing. A thick mist had enveloped the whole machine.

"Well, I'm blowed," stated Mr. Lovelace.

The sudden curtain of mist had protected them from the onslaughts of the Fokkers, but it had also provided a new danger. Mr. Lovelace scrambled back to the side of the fuselage and crawled up on top and started his ramble back to the rear turret. The fabric was dripping with oil and condensed mist, and the slippery surface assisted him in slithering down the flat roof full into the arms of the still amazed Marks.

"Where the devil do you think you are barging about?" demanded Marks, yanking Mr. Lovelace back into the turret.

"We can't get home on one engine, can we?" bellowed Meridith.

"Now I wonder what he meant by that," reflected Marks as Meridith dropped inside the fuselage again.

Without explaining to Sergeant Ryan, Lovelace pounded on and bobbed into the control pit again. Armitage turned and gazed at him, much like a benevolent schoolmaster might view a truant just before applying the rod.

"All right. Switch her on again," roared Mr. Lovelace.

"Switch on what again?" snapped Townsend.

"The engine, of course. I've fixed it, I think."

Townsend stared at Armitage. Armitage leaned over the side and gazed out to the black splotch that marked where the idle Rolls hung between the two wings. He half expected to find it gone.

"Go on. Give her a bit, and switch her on. She'll go." insisted Mr. Lovelace.

Still staring at the youngster, Townsend felt for the port engine switch and waggled the throttle. He shoved his wheel well forward and from somewhere outside rattled the spitting of cylinders into a cold exhaust port. He cleared her again and tried it once more. This time she jerked the 'plane around and blossomed out into a full, though hoarse-throated, roar.

Armitage stared out to the wing again, amazed. Townsend squinted at his twinkling dials. The port engine was picking up her revs, beautifully. Another minute and she would be taking her share of the burden.

"All right?" inquired Mr. Lovelace with the air of a patronising expert.

"No, it isn't all right," snapped Armitage. "Look, the

compass has gone. That damned Hun blasted it out and we're lost, wandering around, wagging our tail behind us. Get the idea. Look at the perishing fog. Nice evening, isn't it?"

"Want a compass? Only one compass?" inquired Mr. Lovelace pensively.

"Yes. We want a compass. That will at least give us a chance to find our way back to the right side of the line. If we've got to crash, we want to crash among friends. Get the idea?"

"Line . . . need a compass. Must get over the right side of the line. . . That's the idea . . . need a compass," mumbled Mr. Lovelace. It was plain to see that he was going through the tortuous process of thinking.

Suddenly he blinked twice. Then he cocked one ear up like the famous dog before the gramophone. It was all coming to him now. With a grin that almost lifted his helmet from his head, he rammed one hand down into the pocket of his flying coat. It came out with a dim black object.

"Here's one. Had an idea we might need it. What a lark! I swiped it off the Major's Spad just before we left. Knew *he* wouldn't need it to-night, and we might. . . . We do," he explained with satisfaction.

Townsend took the thing as gingerly as if it had been a Mills bomb. Almost automatically he handed it across to Armitage, who also inspected it, hardly knowing whether to laugh or dive over the side. He leaned forward and with a tug lifted the shattered compass from the metal socket and inserted the new one. Three pairs of eyes watched the graduated float swirl round and show "N-E" in the tiny window.

"You're going the wrong way!" yelled Mr. Lovelace.

"I know it now, you damned fool," replied Townsend, snapping the wheel over until the letters "S-W" appeared on the face of the compass.

Mr. Lovelace leaned forward and grinned. Armitage glared down at him hardly knowing whether to kick him in the teeth or hand him a medal.

"Quite a Boy Scout, aren't you? 'Be Prepared' is your motto, eh, Lovelace? Brought everything, didn't you? Don't happen to have a copy of *The Times* in your back pocket, do you. I'd like to have a quiet read."

"No," explained Mr. Lovelace thoughtfully, "but if there's anything else. A bit of chocolate, a sandwich, a small bottle of Cognac or some toothpaste, maybe."

"Unless this fog lifts," roared Armitage, "you'd better start digging down for a new undercarriage."

CHAPTER IV A DAYLIGHT RAID

THE LAD'S CUCKOO," declared Armitage the next morning, "but we've got to admit he did his best to get us home. Did you see the way he spliced that feed line? And if he hadn't come up with that compass, we'd have been sunk."

"I give him credit for all that," admitted Townsend, "but we can't have a bird like that barging all over the kite. Ryan tells me he threw all the stuff overboard at once. Went running up and down the catwalk pulling toggles like mad."

"Well, he dropped the lot on the right place. The rest didn't do any damage at all," went on the bomber officer. "It's dumb luck, I'll admit, but we need plenty of it in this game. I vote we keep him."

"He'll drive Ryan balmy in a week," growled Townsend. "And wait until we get back. The Major will have him slaughtered for swiping that compass. After all, there are some rules we have to observe."

"But the kid got us back!" insisted Armitage. "We have to give him that much credit. You know how far we would have got on one engine, even if we could have got through the fog. Those Fokkers would have popped us off in no time."

They were standing beneath the wings of old No.11, which was getting a quick overhaul at an R.F.C. aerodrome outside Estres on the Somme front. It was the only aerodrome available with the fuel they had, and only a chance break in the mist gave them their opportunity of getting down with reasonable safety. They had spent the night at the squadron and Townsend had given the Bristol Fighter pilots an evening's entertainment, that is from one o'clock in the morning when they landed, until nearly breakfast, with a descriptive account of Mr. Meridith Lovelace's first bombing raid. Strangely enough, Armitage had defended the lad and made his efforts seem worthy of consideration, but once the Bristol pilots spotted him in his musical-comedy make-up, it was impossible to take the adventure seriously.

They had managed to get a few hours' sleep. No.109 Squadron had been advised of their forced landing,

and the Major told of the activity of Mr. Lovelace. He hung up the receiver with a noise that sounded something like a man hollowing for help at the bottom of a cistern.

"He knows his game," went on Armitage. "He handles guns well, and they must have taught him something in that Yeomanry outfit. I think he'll turn out a good man once the novelty wears off. Let him alone, he won't kill anybody—except Germans."

"I'm not even so sure of that," closed Townsend, turning to greet Sergeant Ryan, Corporal Marks and Mr. Meridith Lovelace, who had just snatched a meal in the N.C.O.'s mess.

"You chaps get fixed up all right?" inquired the pilot.

"We did, sir, Marks and I," explained Ryan. "The Gumboil here didn't get much. He was barging about the Bristol hangars since about five o'clock this morning. We rescued him just in time to get him a swill of tea and some oatmeal."

"Hello! What were you up to this time, Lovelace?" demanded the pilot.

"Oh, nothing. Just blistering about. Having a look around," replied the fish-headed one.

"I'll bet he's got half a Fighter in his coat pocket," grinned the bomber officer.

"Get himself hanged yet," growled Ryan.

"Well, we've got to get back right away. The Major just 'phoned again and wants the 'bus back for a thorough overhaul. By the way, Marks, you can pop off when you like. The Major said it would be O.K."

"The corporal wants to run up and look up his brother," he explained, turning to Armitage. "He's with the Australians, and they're out at Peronne. Good chance for him to see him again. I'll get you a short-leave warrant in the office here right away. You'd better get back by to-morrow night."

"Thanks, sir," responded the little Auzzie. "I'll just take my coat. I have a cap with me. Guess the guns, gloves and goggles will be all right with Ryan, eh, sir?"

"Certainly. Come on. We'll get you fixed up right away. You'll be able to hop a lorry and be up there in no time. Hope you find him O.K."

HALF AN HOUR later the members of the Coffin Crew, minus little Arthur Marks, roared out with No.11 and lumbered into the air. Mr. Lovelace sat rather dejectedly on the catwalk with Sergeant Ryan. At times he turned and gazed at the aperture that led into the rear turret, now lonely and desolate for

want of the expressive feet and legs of the active little Australian.

Up in front, Andy McGregor half-dozed in his cockpit. The gun hung leadenly from the Scarff mounting. He was cold. The breakfast had been hurried and the tea cold and filmy. He was plainly uncomfortable. There was nothing to do but doze. Nothing to look for. They were well over on their own side of the line. In another hour they would be back at their own 'drome and he could flop into his own blankets and really rest.

Armitage sat with his arms folded, staring at the compass. Every few minutes a broad grin spread across his face when he recalled the mad incidents that had led up to its being placed there the night before. He pondered on the strange Mr. Lovelace. Who the devil was he, anyway? His papers said he was nineteen, but if he was a day over sixteen he'd eat his puttees. Nothing but a kid, a precocious kid, of course, but one knew what some of these youngsters were. Years away from home in strange boarding schools had given them an independence that few lads assumed until they were well out of their teens. Only the wizen-faced Cockney Kids and the New York East Side urchins ever approached anything like it.

No.11 nosed south-east and soon left St. Quentin, that red-bricked bone of contention, behind off her left wing-tip. Soissons lay dead ahead, and beyond that, off to the left again, nestled the battered town of Rheims. Lieutenant Townsend took things easy, his gloved hands resting lightly on the polished wood wheel that guided the great bomber through the mid-day glare. It was something of a novelty to be flying in the daylight again, and he was making the most of it. The Handley-Page roared serenely on.

But this was to prove no day for joyriding. Off to the right lay the great Trench artillery works, just behind Compiègne. It was strange, but all too true, that the German High Command had decided on an air raid on the plant that was turning out those devastating 75's. It was time a stop was put to the production of those wicked weapons. Records now have it that they selected the day that our Mr. Meridith Lovelace was being flown back to the 109 Squadron aerodrome partially in disgrace, but still something of an hero.

OF COURSE, if Corporal Marks had been in that rear turret it is ten to one that they would have been spotted sooner. But Corporal Marks was jolting a

weary way up to Peronne just at that time and his thoughts were far from looking out for Jerry 'planes.

McGregor spotted them first, just as he was having another stretch. His goggled eyes turned skywards and spotted a row of white puffs that looked like Christmas decorations that had blown off a butcher's window. He stared again at the strange white blots. He was unused to seeing anything but black inky Archie bursts, and it was several seconds before he could unscramble the cobwebs and get the old grey matter moving. Then he registered finally and pointed upwards.

Armitage uttered a gulp and swallowed.

Townsend allowed the Handley to almost tumble into a spin.

What the devil were those Huns doing this far over the line? There were three Gothas, attended by at least twelve Fokkers. What an armada to run into! And they were hardly two thousand feet above the Handley—less than a mile away. And Corporal Marks barging into Peronne on the tailboard of a lorry.

What to do? A lumbering old Handley-Page was no weapon to hurl at a veritable flotilla of Fokkers and bristling-nosed Gothas, and yet, something had to be done about it.

By this time, however, there was no choice, for a flight of single-seaters, that up to now had been doing nothing but play nurse-maids to the Gothas, decided to liven up the afternoon and have a go at the old bomber below that had barged into the picture like a drunk at a football match.

Down they came, a flying wedge of hatred. They were no quirks, for they held their fire until they could see the whites of their rings. Then they let fly with every Spandau available.

The first blanket of flying lead struck old No.11 full in the hide and she cringed in a big way like a hippo under the barrage of elephant guns. She seemed to shake her head uncertainly and weather the first blow. From her snout spurted a blaze of retaliation guided by the horny hand of McGregor, a short snarling burst that plucked the struts out of the Hun leader and flopped his wing back over the fuselage.

Chalk up one to No.11.

The rest were attempting to hold their offensive formation, but the loss of the leader seemed to have upset them a trifle and they wound around as if to reconsider their attack on this snarling old lady.

While they were thus engaged there was a one-minute conference going on inside. Sergeant Ryan was still comfortable on the catwalk, and Mr. Lovelace sat

staring at the much-scratched toes of his new flying boots.

Then came the sudden lurch brought on when Mr. Townsend first spotted the opposition, out of formation, as it were. Meridith scrambled to his feet after rolling over into Ryan's lap. They glared at one another for a minute, and then the barrage of hail swept through the battered old body. Mr. Lovelace was almost thrown to the floor again when spinning lead slapped down through the roof and tore his beautiful coat into strips. Something slapped at his leg, and the white fluffy lining of his boot suddenly foamed out like the froth on top of a pint of bitter.

HE SPUN on one toe like a dancer and dived for a small locker at the rear. Out came a Lewis gun and a couple of drums. Up into the rear turret he clambered, swearing like a trooper. The gun was slapped on the open fixture, the arm swung over and the thumb-lug screwed down tight. With another oath, and a glare up at the black-crossed 'planes that were curling over for another dive, Mr. Lovelace banged on the drum, smacked at it with the palm of his hand and yanked back the cocking-handle. They were in position now and it was but a matter of seconds before the second deluge of doom began to spit out. Lovelace smacked the side of the drum again and again withdrew the cocking-handle.

"You dirty lengths of tripe, you!" bellowed Mr. Lovelace. "You'll slit my flying kit about, will you? Well, here's something for you to distribute among yourselves!"

The spitting gift was generously donated with a purposeful pressure on the Lewis gun trigger. The self-appointed leader of the Hun formation was just getting his eye up against the telescopic sight when he suddenly found it wasn't there. Neither were his front two centre section struts. And for that matter that sudden vibration indicated that his prop, had gone, too. What the devil had happened to everything, anyway?

Mr. Sub-Leader von Fokker curled away to avoid losing any more important parts of his 'plane, but he evidently forgot that several other machines were following him. He was not used to flying as leader. There was a strut-crunching crash, a scream of tearing sheet metal and two Fokkers locked wings, buried what was left of their props into one another and fell away.

McGregor, from the front turret, was attempting

to pick off a couple for himself, but he was hardly able to get in a real burst owing to the angle of the top plane against his arc of fire. All he could do was to stand up, his kilt flapping in the wind and scream his enthusiasm. Armitage wondered what had happened to the yelling madman. He looked back and saw the two Hun 'planes floundering down a thousand feet below. He was not quite sure what had caused it, but he had an idea.

Like a shot he turned and dived down into the fuselage. Ryan was yanking black drums from the locker and throwing them at Mr. Lovelace's feet. Armitage grabbed a gun and flopped on the floor, opened the lower turret and looked for something to shoot at.

"Three out of six!" yelled Mr. Lovelace bending down and offering the latest war news. "Come on, let's get the rest of them. Who the devil do they think they are, bunging around on our side of the line?"

Armitage drew back and grinned. Something seemed to tell him that this was a good idea. Somebody had to stop the Huns; why not a Handley-Page? He'd go and speak to Townsend about it. Sergeant Ryan stood in the centre of the catwalk, his arms full of drums, swearing at the top of his voice.

The other three Jerries had swung off. Knocking down Handley-Pages was no cinch, they decided, and it was more comfortable up with the rest of the boys.

They slewed off, while Mr. Lovelace helped them along with generous bursts of Lewis confetti.

CHAPTER V MR. LOVELACE ENTERTAINS

LIEUTENANT ARMITAGE SCRAMBLED back to the control pit again and conferred with Townsend. Conferred is a queer term for yelling at the top of your voice into a man's ear, but that's exactly what it amounted to. For a minute Townsend resembled a man who has swallowed an oyster before the bivalve had been removed from its shell.

"We can do it," bellowed Armitage. "Lovelace got two of 'em! He's up in Marks' turret blazing away like seventy-five 75's. He's a knockout! Come on, let's have a smack at 'em!"

Townsend took one look at McGregor. The big Scotsman was giving a fine imitation of a man who was about to climb up on the top wing and have another crack at the flotilla above. He gave a quick glance over his instruments, grinned at Armitage, stuck out his hand and spun the wheel over.

The bomber officer gripped, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"The old Coffin Crew, boy!" he roared, and disappeared down the narrow companionway again.

The throttles went forward several notches and old No.11 bolted for it. From her wings two great engines bellowed out their snarling battle cry. The props, screamed and the back-draught ripped great slits in the fabric of the tattered wings. Splinters of spruce bristled through the top 'plane and two flying wires snapped and flailed against the drum-like surface of the lower 'plane.

Townsend felt alone in the control pit. True, McGregor was up front, but the flaming-eyed Highlander was reverting to his ancestry that had stormed the heights with Robert of Bruce. Somewhere inside him the McGregor battle-cry: "*Ard Choille*" rattled and thundered. The old clan heritage "*Coir a' Chlaidheimh*" (the right of the sword) tempered in the clan wars of the fourteenth century, bubbled and boiled within him. To-day the sword had been displaced by the wailing machine-gun, and McGregor wanted to go.

It was madness, Townsend was certain. Sending a Handley-Page into battle against a fleet of fast German scouts. It was like shooting a paddle-wheel ferry-boat against a dreadnought. He swore against it—and yet, he could not help himself. Suddenly, he realised what had caused all this. That damned fool kid, Lovelace. He'd broken through and knocked off a couple of Jerry single-seaters. He'd touched the fuse that had fired the insane imagination of Armitage, and when that crazy bomb merchant got going Hell wouldn't hold him. Look at McGregor! The wild Highlander was panting for blood. He was no longer the silent dour Scot. He was a raging maniac thirsting for revenge. He'd bet that even Ryan down inside was probably sharpening a knife on his boot-sole or ripping out a strut for a club. The whole damn crew had gone mad. All because of one Meridith Lovelace!

"Damn Meridith Lovelace!" snarled Townsend. But he gripped his wheel all the harder, headed after the flight of droning Huns—and wished he had a machine-gun.

The Handley climbed after the invaders and gained

on the slow-moving Gothas, who were gorged with bombs. The escort 'planes were riding at half throttle and doing S-turns to keep position. Townsend put the old girl to it like a whip-snapping tyrant. Up, up she went, fighting with every ounce of her power. Once three Fokkers turned back as if to intercept them, but evidently believing that a joke was being played on them, turned back and joined the "boom-boom" party again. McGregor crouched in his turret. His great hands fondled his gun. At intervals he *bir-upp-upp-ed* his gun to keep her hot.

"If we can only get over them a bit we might get a couple of them," breathed Townsend, staring past the Scot's broad shoulders at the battle line of Jerries. They were level with them now and the bombers were still heading down the Aisne toward the Foret de Compiègne and the giant works of the French artillery.

Suddenly he thought of Lovelace in the back seat. That wouldn't do. From above them the crazy kid would not be able to shoot from the top turret very well. Maybe they had better get them from below first. Yes, that was it. Go under them, and stick close and take a chance.

The nose of the Handley went down slightly and the throttle snapped the engines into even greater power. She could stand it for a while. Before he realised what had happened they were in it.

MCGREGOR barged in first with a drumful that was sprayed up into the lot like a garden hose. There was a snap at the drum. Off it came and another was on in a split second. Off the mad Scot blazed again. From behind more guns chattered. Lovelace was spewing lead from his gun and Armitage rested another against the steel combing and crouched between Meridith's straddled legs. Inside, Ryan was screaming at the top of his voice and handing drums of death up to the frantic gunners.

They were getting it back, too. The Fokkers were pelting out from every side. Struts went out like matchsticks. Bullets pinged off metal and stay-wires were clipped. Ryan was handing a drum of ammunition up to the yelling Armitage when suddenly it went flying out of his hand and crashed into a corner. Ryan swore and snatched at another.

"Keep at 'em," yelled Mr. Lovelace. "We're breaking them up. Look at the blighters swerving off!"

McGregor held his fire now. Just short spiteful bursts, left and right, that put sneaky single-seaters out of the play. He was like a skilful swordsman who, with

his back to the wall, was keeping half a dozen snarling dogs at bay. One Fokker slid off queerly and suddenly disappeared in a billow of smoke. Another climbed up into a foolish curling stall, fell back and spun down through a streaky layer of mist.

Townsend curled the lumbering 'bus in and out of the sparky lines of enemy tracer. He was after the three Gothas now. So was McGregor. That's why he had been holding his fire. Suddenly they slid into a heated blast of leaden torrent that streamed down from the fuselage tube of a Gotha just ahead. McGregor took a bead on her and let drive. One drum went out at a burst, and another went on with a bang. *Brip-pip-pip-pip!* went the front turret Lewis again. Townsend curled under and looked up. The great Gotha simply disintegrated into a scatter-puzzle of wings, scrambling humans, struts, strips of fabric, spinning engines and smoke.

There was a roar of terror with all this. The Handley seemed to run up against an invisible wall and halt for a second. Townsend yanked the wheel over to dodge the falling mass of destruction that threatened them. The upper wing-tip just skimmed under a shapeless mass of struts, wings and wires that were being propelled earthwards by a monstrous engine.

From behind rattled another salvo of wrath. Mr. Lovelace was speaking another piece. His Lewis turned its impudent snout up and steadied a stream of spinning lead into the cellar door of another Gotha that seemed to be wondering whether to turn back or go on. Mr. Lovelace decided for them. There was a splintering of longerons and a clatter of metal. A gunner leaning over the rear cockpit of the German machine threw up his arms and sprawled over the side and went tumbling past a brace of rattling Fokkers and disappeared. The Gotha struggled, wagged its great maw and fell off on one wing. Townsend watched it recover, and finally struggle into a painful curling glide.

Two of the bombers out of the mad picture. Where was the other?

Meanwhile, however, McGregor had been lancing at the Fokkers with his Lewis. They were fighting back like madmen, and the old Handley was rapidly being shot out of the skies piece by piece. One aileron streamed back on a remaining hinge. Half of the biplane tail had disappeared completely, and on top of that only one gun was pounding away in the back seat now.

ARMITAGE was “out” on the catwalk with two Spandau bullets through the thick of his back. Ryan was slashing away at his leather coat and uniform. The bomber officer screamed in pain. Something clattered alongside of him and the Irishman snatched at the metal first-aid kit tossed by the bellowing Mr. Lovelace. The whole Coffin Crew was walking the tight wire between insanity and complete obliteration.

“We can’t go on much longer,” roared Townsend. But McGregor never heard him. He sent another burst of lead into a Fokker that was curling down from the sun, and the scout kept on down—with a tongue of flame streaming from its engine cowling.

“Got to get out, hardly a flying wire left!” screamed Townsend.

McGregor stared at him, wondering what the devil he was yelling about. But there was no time for idle chatter. They had to get that other Gotha. Where the devil was it? He scanned the sky, high and low for the broad-winged devil. Finally, he spotted her. She was nosing down gamely for her objective. McGregor turned and pointed. Townsend winged over gingerly and put the old boiler after her, and sat back to watch the wings rip away.

Somehow they held, and McGregor was leaning forward, his gun at the alert. Behind, Lovelace was staging a battle royal with two Fokkers that had cleared through and were attempting to make one last effort to get the Gotha and her bombs through. Mr. Lovelace was not partial. He sprayed first one and then the other. Finally, one fell off into a side-slip and left the action. The other kept on for a few minutes, blazed a final burst at the flapping tail of old No.11, and screwed off home. That burst was enough, however, for it smacked Mr. Lovelace in the shoulder. The wind-vane sight of his gun went clattering off and the gunner spun around, grabbed at nothing, and sprawled into the interior of the body.

McGregor failed to notice the removal of Mr. Lovelace. He was too intent on getting the remaining Gotha before she spawned her steel-clad venom. Townsend, keeping most of his flying surfaces as intact as possible, felt a strange trickling sensation up and down his spine. Something was wrong. Not that things had been any other since they left No.109’s ’drome last night; but this was different. He cocked his ear back and heard the bellows of pain Ryan was shouting at the top of his voice—and not a gun back there was chattering.

But it all went suddenly. Streaks of colour splashed

back and forth below them. Not black crosses this time, but garish circles of red, white and blue, fighting for height and position. Spads, Nieuports, S.E.5’s, Camels . . . where the devil had they come from? McGregor turned and grinned. Then he leaned forward and his gun spoke.

Townsend looked ahead and yanked his wheel back just in time. He had almost flown smack into the tail of the lone Gotha. As her nose went up, McGregor’s body arched forward with it and he drilled a full drum slap into the German bomber. That was all. They heard an ear-splitting report and instinctively they knew a wing had come away. The pilot curled the Handley around and saw the doomed ’plane going down in a sickening spin.

“She can’t last like that,” roared Townsend.

He had hardly uttered the words when the other wing went out and floated away gently, leaving the great coffin of destruction to hurl itself into an open field. There was a puff of dust, a choking volume of smoke, and then a roar of confined explosive that ripped a crater in the ground big enough to bury a regiment.

Townsend sighed, eased back on his throttles and wheeled the old barge around. Suddenly he realised that their ’drome lay just ahead of him. He was glad of that, for he was strangely tired. His hands quivered on the wheel. His teeth chattered. He felt like a man who drives the hearse for his father’s funeral. Had he looked back he would have seen that he was the leader of the strangest formation that ever gathered on the Western front. Behind him ranged looping Spads, saucy Camels, glittering Nieuports, thundering Snipes and an odd dozen Bristol Fighters and De Havillands.

His tired eyes, twitching and half blind, stared ahead and saw one racing scout roar ahead and make for 109’s aerodrome. Good chap! Going to tell them to get the reception committee ready. He hoped he could hold the barge together long enough to get her in.

Another ten minutes that seemed as many hours was sat through, and finally old No.11 brought her nose down towards the long runway. He could see the gathering of the clans ahead of them. They were huddled around the Spad that had gone on to tell the news. A fine package he was bringing back to them. It looked like the last of the Coffin Crew.

The spluttering engines moaned and growled as he played his throttle for the landing. Finally, the tall grass came up and started to race away beneath their wing-tips. The wheel came back and from somewhere

below the great oleo undercarriage began to rumble and complain. The wings fluttered and creaked. More rumbling and bumping below and they were—HOME.

CHAPTER VI A.W.O.L

TO THIS DAY Lieutenant Townsend does not remember taxiing No.11 up to the hangar. It all seems but a mad dream, but somehow parts of it stand out in bold relief. He saw some red tabs in the crowd, one in particular, with about forty yards of gold braid around his hat. Who the devil was that?

McKelvie waved, tried to give orders and explain something to the red-tab gent. Then a million scouts landed alongside and joined the crazy party. Thousands of pilots, mechanics, red tabs, majors, padres, medical and orderly officers swarmed out to the wheels of old No.11.

Like a man released from bondage Townsend shut off his engines and relaxed. He stared over the side and got the full force of three hundred questions aimed at him at once.

They brought the ladder out and the trap-door was slammed open. Sergeant Ryan was out first, yelling at the top of his voice. They all disappeared inside, and still leaning over the edge of his cockpit Lieutenant Townsend saw them bring young Lovelace out.

"Where is the young devil?" roared the red tab.

Townsend wanted to answer him, but somehow that gold braid made him choke. He leaned over and listened again. Young Lovelace was staring at the guy in the staff-officer's make-up.

"Hullo, Guv'nor!" he grinned, his face the colour of a rag doll that has been left out in the rain. "When did you drop in?"

McKelvie grinned. Townsend almost fell out of the cockpit.

The General, for a general it was, leaped forward and ruined a perfectly good tunic by hugging the lad. Gore from Mr. Lovelace's new flying coat stamped a crimson design on his chest.

"You silly . . . beloved . . . ridiculous . . . brave little fool!" muttered the General, tears streaming down his face and mingling with his cavalry whiskers. "Whatever did you do it for?"

"Oh, just a lark, Guv'nor. Got winged for my trouble, too . . . right through here, as clean as a whistle," raved young Mr. Lovelace. "But we stopped the blighters . . . all three of 'em . . . didn't we Ryan?"

Townsend stared down at the mad scene below. Who the devil was young Lovelace talking to? McKelvie answered this question.

"Well, General Lovelace," he barked. "Let's get these boys into the mess, where the medical officer can attend to them. Where's the rest of them?"

"General Lovelace? . . . General Lovelace?" muttered Townsend still staring down unheeding of the bellowings of those below him. "I wonder if that's his old man?"

Then he spotted a stranger in the uniform of a second-class air mechanic who was assisting Mr. Lovelace, *the* Mr. Lovelace, across the tarmac to the officer's mess. Somehow his tired brain began to unravel the mystery. This bird was *the* General Lovelace of the Fifth Army Corps. Young Lovelace was his son and the other chap must be his brother. He certainly looked like him.

Someone came up and roused him from his weary stupor. Then McGregor crawled through from the front cockpit, pale and drawn. His gun still hung on the mounting like a body on a gallows.

"Ah think we shud be gettin' doon, Mr. Toonsend," mumbled Mac. "We shud be gettin' tae bed."

INSIDE the mess hut young Lovelace was sitting on a deal table stripped to the waist. A surgeon was dressing his wound, which was a beauty. Clean and neat. Would heal up in no time, he said. Across the room an orderly was dressing two great gashes from where the doctor had just extracted two Spandau bullets. Armitage squirmed and swore. Finally, they gave him something to drink and he lay with his forehead on his hairy arm and listened to the crazy conversation going on between the bird with the red tabs and Major McKelvie.

"We got him out of the Yeomanry because he was under age," General Lovelace was saying. "Then, to please him, we let him join up with the O.T.C. at Woolwich. He came home on leave two weeks ago, at the same time as Eric here. Eric had just received his draft orders and had them in his kit. That night, this silly little fool, bless him, got up out of bed, took his brother's uniform and draft warrant and nipped off down to Dover and gets aboard the transport that leaves early the next morning."

"Must have wanted to get out here, sir," broke in the Major.

"He's a Lovelace, damn his eyes," grinned the Red Tab. "Then, to put us off, he changed the first name and squadron number on the draft and managed to get here. I'd already arranged for Eric to get in some of this flying business, and had decided that he should have a taste of a ranker's life. Do him good, you know. That's how this young hellion got out here. We were almost two weeks chasing him, after we realised what had happened. Well, he ought to have had his fill for a time, anyway."

"Well he's a rasper, all the same, according to Sergeant Ryan," remarked McKelvie. "Brought down four or five Huns and raised the devil in particular. He even swiped a dozen extra drums of ammunition from that Bristol squadron this morning, because he thought they 'might have some fun' on the way

home—and they certainly did. Whoever heard of a Handley-Page attacking a formation of Huns and downing most of them, including their bombers?"

"Well," smiled the General. "It all sounds great, but he's got to go home. This is no place for a sixteen-year-old kid. I can see that."

"I don't blame you, Sir," went on McKelvie. "But, of course, he will be eligible for a decoration, won't he?"

"That's up to you."

"You'd better give it to him, Major," growled a voice from across the room. "He'll snatch it somehow. Wait until you start looking for the compass you think is in your Spad. And, by the way, when he gets to London you'd better tip off the Beefeaters in the Tower. He'll have all the blooming Crown jewels two days after he gets there!"

And with that Lieutenant Armitage turned over and capitulated to a shot of morphine.

