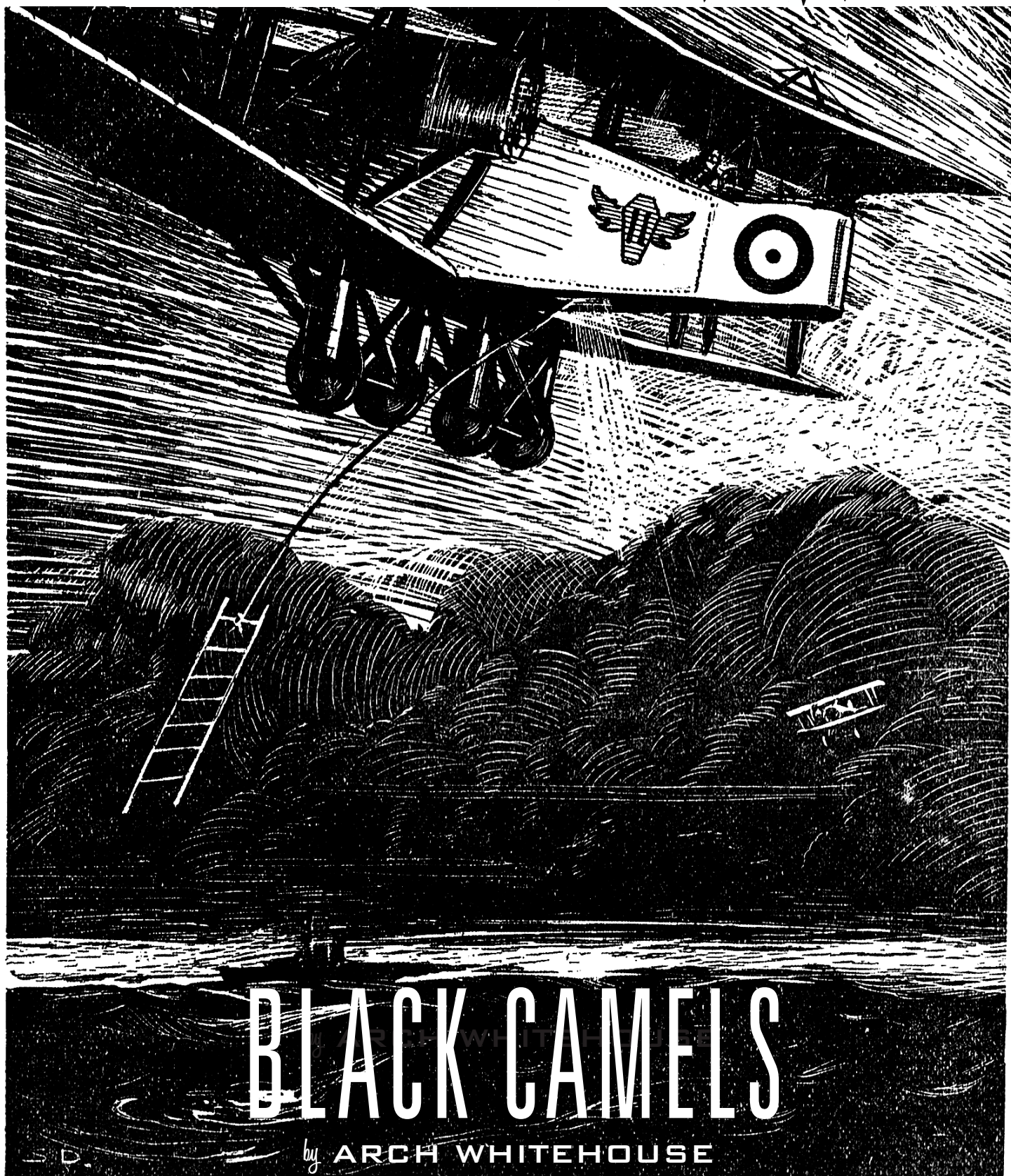


# *the* **COFFIN CREW**



## **BLACK CAMELS**

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*A Black Plague stalked the Channel turning Troopships into Transports of the Dead. And, in France, five Black Camels were Detailed for a Secret Mission that was Destined to give that Crazy Band of Warriors, the Coffin Crew, the Adventure of their Lives!*

## CHAPTER I SPECIAL DUTY



IVE 'EM HELL! It will probably be my last chance to have any fun," growled Phil Armitage, who was huddled back in his corner of the old Handley Page bomber, staring over at the tracers that slashed out of Andy McGregor's front guns.

Lieutenant Graham Townsend heard him, but had no answer. He had not spoken ten words since the notice had gone up on the board two days before. Whatever McGregor felt about it, he had kept to himself, but he certainly seemed to be taking it out on those black ghosts down there.

The waters of the North Sea licked up at their wheels as though jealous of the freedom enjoyed by this wide-winged monster, for No.11 was down low chasing skulking seaplanes of some description that had attracted their attention while returning from a raid on the sheds and railway lines outside Ostend.

They had no right down there—these members of the Coffin Crew, but anything was better than nothing since that order had gone up. Townsend swore under his breath, threw No.11 over on her side, and let Horsey Horlick have a crack at them. Horsey made the most of it while hanging on to save himself from going headlong out of the turret. The black seaplanes slithered away, and could only be spotted by a desultory reply from their rear guns.

Down inside, Sergeant Ryan was braced against the bomb-racks peering out of the dirty isinglass window. Those black seaplanes had him guessing. When No.11 turned back towards Dunkirk he went back and sat down on the catwalk and rammed his shoulder into Harry Brown's back.

"Bah!" he spat, ramming the everpresent short, cold clay pipe into his twisted mouth. "Ut'll niver be the same without him!"

Those black seaplanes seemed to have cast a dismal gloom over him.

"Yer know," Brown chimed in, turning around and barking into Ryan's ear-flap. "There's a lot o' blokes who would be blinkin' glad to get orf this barge and 'ave a go wiv a Camel all on 'is own loike!"

Ryan flared up at this display of disloyalty.

"Ah, an' there's a million more out here who would be glad to get aboard this cloud-cart. Think of all them Tommies down there, who'd give half their livers to get out of that muck, and dance about in this blasted shop. Camels! . . . Bah! Them's for kids what don't know no better. Blinkin' back-breakers, what spin if yer hair's not parted in the middle. What would Mister A-a-armitagc want with wan o' them tilings?"

AND there was the story in a nutshell.

Something had struck the Coffin Crew two days before, and they were still staggering. A mere Daily Order form posted up outside the Orderly Room. Nothing unusual until you let your eye wander down the routine paragraphs until you came to "Transfers."

*Lieut. Armitage, P.H., transferred to Independent Air Force Squadron No.111 for special dully. Struck off strength of No. 127 but will retain quarters there until further notice. Said officer to draw new Camel F.I. from Aircraft Depot at St. Pol and do practice flights of special nature until otherwise ordered.*

Armitage blinked when shown the paragraph. His tanned face paled, he clenched his great fists and stood speechless for several minutes, then he shook his head, turned and wandered off to his cubicle.

But Graham Townsend was more curious. For one thing, he knew of no Camel squadron carrying the numerals "111." Who was the C.O.? And where were they quartered? Major McKelvie had little to offer in the way of information either, but he, too, was plainly worried. Armitage would have been more worried had he known that five other night-flying pilots had been dragged out of Fee, D.H.9 and Handley Page squadrons, all unaware of this strange business that was going on.

But there was a lot more to it even than this. While five pilots beside Armitage were practising with these new Camels in six different areas, weary-eyed men at Montreuil and in London were puzzling over one of the most astonishing—two, to be exact—events of the



war. Two troopships creeping out of Dover for Calais with new regiments to bolster up the battered Fifth Army had failed to arrive. Two days later both ships were found piled up on the rocks below Gravelines, with not a man aboard alive!

The ships had plunged on, unguided while the crew and every man aboard the transport was found dead—snuffed out as though a black plague had swept through the cabins, decks and holds. A few who had had trench warfare experience, had drawn on their masks, but the strange something had eaten eyepieces away and their death was only more terrifying and cruel.

A thorough examination was made of the bunkers and fuel, but there was no evidence of mishandling, of coal-gas fumes, or damage to any of the refrigeration plants. The thing was a complete mystery, and yet all knew that the Germans had something new. Something more terrible and devilish than any weapon of war they had so far uncovered.

“They not only stop our men before they can get into action,” the Brigadier explained after he had boarded one of the transports, “but they do it with so little risk. This note in the skipper’s log—the last he made—mentions the appearance of several black seaplanes which apparently were out to spot them, for they made no attempt to fire on the troopship or to use torpedoes.

Something had to be done, and the master-minds at Montreuil thought up the great idea of taking Phil Armitage and five other night fliers off their bombers and establishing them in a squadron that had never been heard of!

And hence the attitude of Phil Armitage, Lieutenant in the Independent Air Force, who once wanted to fly Camels, but who now wanted to blow up half the British Army because he was being ripped away from the Coffin Crew with whom he so often faced death and adventure.

No.11 came in, drooping and dismal. The flares glowed out for her landing, and Armitage stiffened as she slipped in. Across the lower end of the Cassel aerodrome men were out daubing in a long oblong design with whitewash.

“What the devil?” he snorted. “Giving Jerry something to worry about? He’ll be over one of these nights with some H.E. and blow that out—just to make sure.”

Townsend was puzzled, too, for the design was not the ordinary ground target used by the scout pilots to

improve their dive-aims. It was fairly long, about five hundred feet long and about fifty feet wide.

“Looks as though the Sergeant-Major is going in for some discipline,” Townsend remarked. “New parade ground. Won’t the mechanics love that?”

## CHAPTER II THE NEW MEMBER ARRIVES

**T**HEY GOT IN, rolled up to the tarmac, and clambered down the ladder while the mechanics rammed the wings back and hooked on the tractor. Two other Handleys that had been on a night show came in later, and the aerodrome was a hive of activity. Only the Coffin Crew failed to enter into the spirit of the thing.

McGregor and Horlick shuffled off into the night towards the Armourer’s shed and turned in their guns. Sergeant Ryan went to the bomb shed, turned in the safety pins, showing that all bombs had been released, and then hied himself across to the sergeants’ mess for a spot of hot tea. Brownie was a little more interested in things in general, and loosening his flying-coat he wandered off down the aerodrome to see what all this white-line business was about.

A Corporal, who went by the name of Cocky Ward, looked up at him.

“What cheer, Brownie?” he greeted. “Lookin’ for work?”

“Never bin known to,” the Cockney replied. “What’s the game?”

“Blowed if I know. H’orders came through to-night to lay this thing out, and the Major arsked me to do it. ’E don’t seem to know what it’s abart, either.”

“Bloomin’ funny,” Brownie remarked. “Wot’s it supposed to be?”

“Aven’t the slightest. Somethink abart Mister Armitage. ’E’s on yore barge, ain’t ’e? Somethink to do with ’is landings termorrer. ’E’s got to learn ’ow to land on a spot this big, or somethink!”

“S’truth!” Brownie smirked. “Wot do they think ’e is? A blinkin’ crow?”

“Between you an’ me, Brownie,” Cocky Ward replied quietly, “this thing looks like somebody’s in for it. They’re probably going to ’ave ’im land on top of the Kaiser’s blinkin’ railway carriage and spit dahrn the

ventilator. They can't 'arf think up some potty things, them blokes dahn at the base!"

Brownie mooned off without answering, and sought the solace of the gang in the Nissen hut.

Meanwhile Armitage and Townsend had trundled off to the Recording Office to make out a report. There they found Major McKelvie looking like someone who had seen a ghost. He had a sheaf of message forms in his hand which he had been reading. He stuffed them into his tunic pocket and looked guilty.

"Any luck?" he asked with little enthusiasm.

"Four good hits with 112-pounders on the cross-overs," Townsend explained. "The fifties found the sheds, but we only got one small fire."

"Well, you can go and have another smack at them to-morrow," the Major said colourlessly. "See anything interesting?"

"Four seaplanes, painted black, looked like Jerry Brandenburgs," Townsend added. "Looked as though they had come up from somewhere around Calais. Any raid down there?"

But, before they could get an answer, Major McKelvie had slipped into his private office and snatched up the telephone. While Townsend made out his report and had it signed by Armitage, they could hear the Major telephoning quietly, but could catch few words of his conversation. Then he came out again looking paler than ever.

"You can get that Camel to-morrow, Armitage," he said hollowly. "They'll give you a few landings on a Pup first to get your feel back. Then they have a two-seater Camel fixed up for training. You'll get an hour or so on that before they let you fly your machine back. You'll be O.K. then."

Armitage grinned. "I'll be O.K. Probably spin smack in the first time. What's the idea, anyway, Major?"

"I don't know for certain, but it's a special job of some sort. By the way, when you get back sometime in the afternoon take a bit of a rest and then practise landings on that layout they are painting in on the other end of the aerodrome. You'll have to do a lot of sideslipping to make it, but those are the orders."

Both Townsend and Armitage exchanged puzzled glances. What the devil was this all about anyhow?

"Who's taking Phil's place, Major?" asked Townsend, to break up the painful silence.

"A new chap. Came through from the Pool to-night. Name's Joscelyne Jenkins!"

"What? Jostling Jenkins?" crowed Armitage. "What's his first name?"

"Josceline . . . sometimes spelled J-O-S-C-L-Y-N-E. It's a real name. Now don't go making up any clever nicknames for him," breathed the Major, but he knew the poor devil was doomed to "Jostling" already.

"Glory! I'm glad I'm getting off that barge," Phil said ruefully.

"What about me?" moaned Townsend. "I've got to fly with him."

"What's he like?" asked the bomber officer.

"Rolly-poly chap, all ears and teeth. Canadian, I think. Yes, he's a Canuck. Not a bad record. You'll get along with him, Townsend," soothed the C.O.

"Jostling Jenkins," smirked Phil again. "The poor fellow!"

BUT they forgot all about the man with the funny name when the Major went on about the Camel business.

"This is your last flight with the Crew, you know, Armitage," he went on. "I'm sorry to see it broken up this way, but that's the way things go in a war. I remember when I got my majority and was sent up here, I thought I'd never get on without my old gang, but you get over it."

"I hope I have some luck," Phil growled. "Those Camels give me the willies."

"If you feel that way about it, why not carry your old insignia with you," McKelvie offered. "I know how you chaps feel about the Coffin Crew. I'd satisfy myself by painting that damned fool coffin thing on your top wing—or somewhere. That ought to help."

Armitage glowed at the thought: "That's right, then, if any of the boys spot me up there we shall be able to get together now and then and perhaps help each other out. That is a great idea!" agreed the bomber officer.

"I'm afraid you won't see much of the Crew on the job you are going on, Phil. You'd better make the most of the insignia on the machine."

"Why not? He'll be flying at night, won't he?" demanded Townsend.

"Yes . . . but not anywhere where you lads are supposed to be," McKelvie replied.

There was something in that statement that drew the bond between Armitage and Townsend all the tighter. They let it go at that and wandered back to the Mess to look up "Jostling" Jenkins.

They found him immediately through McKelvie's description. He was sitting at a table, a bulbous jovial figure in a disreputable R.F.C. tunic that fitted in

billowing folds and a pair of slacks that had not seen an iron for months.

"He doesn't look like a Josceline," Townsend said under his breath to Armitage.

"They never do," Phil replied. "But somehow they always are."

Jenkins turned and greeted them, stuffing a small thick book into his pocket. Phil and Townsend introduced themselves, and Jenkins greeted them warmly, though he was somewhat awed.

His voice was high pitched and girlish. He spoke rapidly, and clattered on about how glad he was to come to the outfit. But he also displayed envy about Phil's going to a Camel mob.

"Well, you can have it for me," Phil returned. "I'll stay with the Coffin Crew. You're lucky to be with a gang like theirs."

"Well," cooed "Jostling" Jenkins, "they're lucky to get me, too. I'm not so dusty in the air myself. Wait until you see."

"I dread it," Townsend said to himself. "This lad's going to be a damn nuisance, I can see."

"What's your line?" Phil asked.

"Engines!" Jenkins returned quickly. "There's nothing I don't know about engines. I've got ideas of my own about these Rolls-Royces. I'll have them running like clockwork in no time."

"What's the book?" inquired Townsend. "'The Rolls-Royce Handbook?'"

"No. . . . That's a Navy thing. All about the Grand Fleet and the silhouettes of the ships, so that I know them when we see them. We work off the coast a lot, don't we?"

"Now and then," agreed Phil. "What's the idea?"

"Just this. I believe there are lots of Jerries floating about in the North Sea that no one recognises. If we were all trained to recognise all craft by their silhouettes we should be able to nail more of them. I'll bet you wouldn't know a Jerry sub. from ours if you didn't see a flag or something. And how would you tell a German destroyer from ours if they were not fighting one of our trawlers?"

Townsend winced and Armitage rubbed his chin. There was something in what the youngster said, but they had never thought much about it before.

"I'm off to roost," Townsend growled, disinterested. "See you in the morning, Jenkins. Try and get out to the hangars about noon to look the bus over."

"Don't worry, I'll be out there before you," Jenkins replied.

"Let's have a look at that book, Jenkins," said Armitage.

The two of them sat down, and Armitage got his first and most important lesson in ships and the various types of naval craft.

### CHAPTER III THE BLACK CAMEL

**A**RMITAGE LEFT EARLY the next morning by tender for St. Pol. Late that afternoon he came in with a sketchy landing on a new Camel. Leaving an order for the squadron artist to daub on a replica of No.11's famous insignia, he went into the Mess and dropped off to sleep without a word to anyone. The strain of taking over the controls of a single-seater had been pretty hard and he was dog-tired.

In the meantime the Coffin Crew had welcomed its new member officially. The event was something of an eye-opener of course, for Jenkins, now completely and thoroughly "Jostling" to the gang, clambered all over the Handley, had props ripped off and completely mystified the mechanics and bomb men. The racks were overhauled and rigging checked and rechecked until old No.11 began to take on new lines entirely.

"You can't expect to fly if things aren't right," he said, plunging into the tail assembly and checking that. "Now those gun turrets. All wrong, wrong. The spare drums are not right for quick pick-ups for reloading. Have to change that."

Townsend listened wearily, and quietly agreed that everything was wrong, and that it was a wonder the 'plane flew at all. He watched the faces of the rest of them and smiled wanly, for they carried out "Jostling's" orders like men under a spell. A new wave of efficiency began to seep through the Handley, and Townsend began to wonder whether the loss of Armitage would be such a blow after all.

"Of course," he explained to Ryan, "he is a darned nuisance, but you can't get angry with the chap. He does go about it in a nice way. Not too officious, even though he is absolutely sure of himself. Let him enjoy himself for a few days. He'll get over it. They all do."

They let it go at that, and greeted Armitage, who

was coming out again for his landing practice. He was fingering his helmet in an absent-minded manner and staring at the ground as he walked. The new Camel was in an empty hangar at the far end of the 'drome.

"Going to have another go?" Townsend asked. "I see they've put your fighting crest on. Looks great."

"Yes—and now I've got to take it off," growled Phil.

"What for?"

"New orders. Got to paint the kite black. Every inch of it. Nothing but small cockades on the side. What do you make of that?"

"Strike me pink! Sounds like old Collishaw's gag when he had to keep the air clear over Messines. He had black stripes, you know."

"Yes, and this black machine business gives me an idea that I'm to do some sort of a night escort job. Probably a new stunt to protect the bombers. Look here! If I get into the air to-night, I'll try to pick you up just the other side of Dunkirk. You watch out for me, eh?"

"We'll try, but if you're all blacked up, how will we spot you?" asked Townsend.

"Oh, they won't paint her until to-morrow. She'll be up there to-night with the old coffin on her," said Armitage, walking away.

BUT Armitage was wrong about the black Camels. Back at Montreuil the G.H.Q. of the B.E.F. was in another uproar. Somewhere off the coast below Cape Gris Nez another transport, loaded to the gunwales with troops, had gone aground and had broken her back. Again it was found that every man jack aboard was dead. The ship's officers were dead at their posts. The bridge was an amazing morgue of twisted and blackened bodies. The lookout in the crow's-nest hung over the edge of his post, his arms dangling back and forth with the movement of the ship in the swell.

Men in khaki lay about in strange disorder. Groups had huddled together with their heads buried under other bodies, as if they had tried to creep out of the sight of a grim spectre that had eaten away their lungs and twisted their faces into masks of agony.

Another division would be without reserves for days. The Staff swarmed about from telephone to telephone, demanding wildly that someone do something, and as usual they picked on the R.F.C.

Seaplanes from the naval bases scoured the Channel and the North Sea. Coastal blimps went beyond their regular areas, but could find nothing. One and all they sought a flight of black Brandenburgs, of which no one knew anything, or even where they came from.

But gradually a trap was being set. The aircraft-carrier "*Furious*," probably the first of its kind, was racing out of the Firth of Forth down the east coast of England for a rendezvous with Death. Scattered about France, six Camels were carrying out strange manoeuvres and practising night-landings.

But the Coffin Crew and old No.11 had to carry on and batter away at the German railheads and supply dumps. There was nothing they could do about it, although unknowingly, they had already stumbled upon the first clue to the mystery.

While No.11 was being loaded and fuelled for the night show, Armitage stuck to his task and gradually got the hang of the delicate-sticked little single-seater and was getting his landings down to perfection. "Jostling" Jenkins paid little or no heed to the streaking Camel, but worked away with all the enthusiasm of a newcomer on the bomber, tightening guys, speeding up the action of the toggle-levers and making certain that the three-way cocks from the tanks were clean and working correctly. He checked the oil and fuel several times, and then made some hurried calculations. He was not satisfied about something, and while he kept his worries to himself, he continued to putter around the carburettors and fuel lines until it was time to take-off.

## CHAPTER IV No.11 GOES INTO ACTION

**N**O.11 ROARED AWAY into the night, her slipstream throwing the flares that marked the corners of Armitage's layout over so that the flame seared the parched grass. Then they climbed fast and headed towards the line. Down inside Mike Ryan and Brown huddled together, sick at heart. This was the first time in months they had taken-off without Armitage in the front seat.

"That blighter's going to fight the war according to King's Regulations," Brownie moaned. "E'll probably inform the Jerries just when and how they are to be bombed. These blokes give me a pain in the whiskers."

"Ye hadn't better have no whiskers on this barge," the Sergeant warned.

"He gave me hell for not having shaved before



we bombed-up. Next thing we know he'll be having inspection before patrol to see that all our buttons are polished and our ears are set back properly for the best streamline!"

"Rum blighter," agreed Brownie. "When we was up at Lar Basse in '15 . . ."

"Never mind," snapped Ryan, feeling for his pipe. "We heard that one." That settled that, and they returned to their places on the catwalk and waited events.

They soon happened. Already the searchlights were flashing across the sky behind Dixmude, seeking the raider whose engines they had picked up with the microphones. But Townsend hurled No.11 across with little respect for their silver blades. Jenkins sat back, awed, but keeping up a Napoleonic attitude.

"Why don't you head further north and avoid them?" he barked at Townsend.

"Because we have to come back the other way," the pilot growled back. "You didn't expect to come back the way you went in, did you?"

"Oh!" replied "Jostling" Jenkins, subdued, but not entirely satisfied.

Townsend hurtled on and crossed Dixmude, and set his course for the Thourout-Eerneghem road and headed north-west towards their objective. Two black Pfalz scouts darted at them as they swept blinded out of a searchlight beam, but Horsey Horlick drove them off with a spurt of fire that battered into the nose of the leader. Jenkins stood up, majestically drew a Webley and stood with one knee on his seat, as though he expected to finish off anything that got by the little gunner. There was nothing to do, so he sat down again and began to check their position.

Then Mac went into action on something that slashed by underneath. His guns chattered in short barks, so marked in Mac's form of defence.

"What's he shooting at?" demanded Jenkins, trying to peer over the side.

"There's a chap down there he doesn't like," smirked Townsend. "He always takes a shot at him like that. No other reason."

"I won't have that . . . personal grievances do not belong on board here," snapped Jenkins.

But suddenly a crude glow flamed out below them. Then an echo of an explosion, and Mac turned back with a grin to Townsend.

"What's he laughing at?" Jenkins demanded. He could not know that the wily Jock had scored a flamer on an Albatros that had tried to sneak up on them.

"Ask him. I don't know," snorted Townsend turning back to his work—but actually thinking about Armitage.

THEY reached their objective with little trouble outside of the blinding rays from the ground lights that slashed back and forth to get them. Horlick put one lamp out of commission with a long wild burst that had Jenkins leaping up and down in agony. But finally he gave up and went down and aroused the toggle men. Ryan slapped at Brown and they clambered up the catwalk to the board and took their posts.

Townsend nodded to Jenkins, who was in position over the birdcage. He was checking the drift with his stopwatch and nodded that he was ready. Down she went, hell-bent for election, and Jenkins started swinging his arm. The bomber lurched as the 112-pounders leaped out and scrawnched past the guides.

Into the inferno tore four Fokkers, bent on nailing them before they could get in their blows. Horlick poured it to them and hung on as Townsend hoiked No.11 up and shot her away for the next rush. Jenkins was dancing up and down on his seat with enthusiasm. Below them were three glaring pyres. Two explosions threw splintered wood and mangled elephant iron toward the sky.

"Get those Fokkers, Mac!" screamed Townsend.

"Where?" roared Jenkins, drawing his pistol again. But the pilot slammed him in the buttocks and shoved him back towards his sight.

"Get back there and heave old iron!" roared Townsend. The "Jostling" one got the idea and waited, poised over the sight, while Townsend raced at the dump and railhead again. Mac was slashing away at three black shadows tipped with exhaust flame. A black demon broke out in flinty flame, struggled to right itself, fell over on its back and belched flaming petrol.

Now the dump was coming up at them madly. Jenkins hung on and flailed his arms with toggle-signals. Inside, Ryan and Brown were hanging on to rack struts answering the flashes of Jenkins' arm with tugs at the toggle board. Into an inferno of sparks, smoke and flaming debris bashed old No.11, while Jenkins, terror-stricken for the minute, signalled the release of still more death.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! BONG!*

The last salvo of fifty-pounders had caught the magazine. There was a deafening explosion and great





steel vaults blew apart, hurling flame, concussion and metal. Small-arms ammunition spattered and peppered death into the racing guards. Light shells blasted out, adding chunks of steel to the insanity. Large gun-cotton charges erupted blindly, biting sheds down with their flame-tusks and blowing stacks of food supplies into a tangle of crates, sacks, boxes and slashed canvas.

"No more?" yelled Townsend.

Jenkins stared at his watch, raced down the companionway and went sprawling as the pilot ripped her up into a mad climbing turn. Ryan was under him somewhere, and Brown had slipped into a rack and was kicking wildly to get out.

Townsend knew by the way she handled that there was nothing left in the racks, for Jenkins had ordered them released in wild flurries. Nothing like the cool and collected manner of Armitage.

In a minute Jenkins came up sheepishly wiping a gob of blood from the corner of his mouth where his teeth had slit his upper lip, and nodded that they were through. Townsend grinned and began throwing the Handley all over the sky, for the Fokkers were after them with a vengeance now and Horlick was battering away with everything he had. Mac tried to get a shot at them through the wings and almost drove Jenkins crazy. He could see them losing half a dozen struts.

But the Fokkers were insistent, and they heard someone battering away through the tunnel.

Jenkins sensed it and barked out: "Who gave that man permission to break out a gun?"

"No use waiting for you," replied Townsend. "Sit back and hold tight, and leave it to the boys. Now, when Armitage was here. . . . Hello! Here he IS?"

Jenkins stared up at a two-winged vulture that slashed down on the Fokkers like the wrath of Satan. His guns were screaming and Mac looked up, waved wildly as he caught the insignia on the side and took a shot at a Fokker which had been driven out of the play.

Then began a running fight for the coastline, the nearest friendly sector. The Camel kept above the Handley-Page and rasped into the Fokkers with dive after dive. The two gunners aboard the bomber kept the enemy 'planes off Armitage's tail, and Horlick finally managed to get one in his sights long enough to splinter the prop. There was a loud squeal and the wooden blades disintegrated in mid-air. The Mercedes ran wild and finally ripped itself clean off the bearers and dropped with a clank into the cowling. The Jerry pilot slewed off, leaving but two to worry the bomber gang.

The lights of Dunkirk came into view and then the lighthouse that flashed the letters "A" and "N" to guide the night bombers back to safety.

Armitage made another valiant effort to drive off the last two Fokkers, and he slashed down at them and came into the fire of one that had edged off to watch the winged Fokker go down. That was a bad move, for he felt slugs bite into his machine from beneath and the longerons rattled with the thunder.

Like a flash he slipped away and cleared the wing-tip of the bomber, drawing a Fokker after him. .

"That's just what Mac wants," beamed Townsend. Hardly had he muttered the words than the Scot's guns spoke in short deadly bursts.

*Brat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

The Fokker caught it full in the midriff. It staggered an instant like a boxer clipped unexpectedly. Then it rolled over on one side and fell into a sideslip. Horlick spotted it, and drove home a torrent of lead that seemed to batter it over smack on its back. That was all.

The other Fokker sheered off under the fire of Mac and Horlick, and they were able to settle down to their business of getting back across the line. Ahead the blinker of the lighthouse flashed out with its welcome.

But nowhere could they see the Camel!

It had headed toward the dunes and was not seen again.

When they got back to Cassel, it had not reported.

The Coffin Crew were desperate with anxiety, but there was nothing they could do about it.

## CHAPTER V DEATH ON THE DUNES

**B**UT ARMITAGE HAD ONLY GONE down to the dunes near the lighthouse to check his machine. There had been too many shots in his tail section to please him. He knew that you could get away with a lot on a bomber, but to fool around with a battered Camel was putting your hand out and asking for it. He eased off, saw the twin exhaust streaks of No.11 swing clear and head across the line, shut off his engine and set the Camel in an easy glide and eased toward the long swirling dunes that crept down to the North Sea. The

wires sang an eerie dirge, and the prop swished over with the strange rasping sound uttered by rotaries.

"I'll take it easy," Armitage said. "Then, if she looks all right, I'll barge on back to Cassel. If not, I'll try the emergency sheds near the lighthouse."

The lighthouse in question was not a tower to guide mariners, but was one of the four or five that had been erected in France for the benefit of the night-flying squadrons who felt a need for such a guide, after their usual hair-raising experiences on the other side. As most lights were doused at night they required some definite marker that would not betray ground positions but could be used to distinguish certain pin-points on the map. These positions could be determined by the Morse flashings of the lamp. In this case the Dunkirk light, which was actually seven miles from Dunkirk up the coast, flashed alternate A's and N's. The light itself was nothing more than a steel skeleton tower about fifty feet high with a small hut set below it for the convenience of the R.A.F. men who were appointed every two weeks to man it and keep it in action.

There was an off-shore wind, and Phil had to go well out to sea to come into it. He eased around neatly and then set the Camel's nose down for the final glide. Then he tried to start the engine, but discovered that he had choked her completely by not closing his butterfly valve.

"Cripes!" he blustered. "This will never do. Good thing I have plenty of height. Believe I can make it."

It turned out that he had plenty. The Camel floated in, cleared the edge of the turf by a few feet and then finally settled down on a long stretch of packed sand and rolled on into a depression. Phil snapped the switch, loosened his belt and climbed out. Stretching his legs, he peered around and saw that he was almost shut in a natural dune bowl. The flash of the lighthouse threw a sheen across the dune top, but there was not enough light to make any sort of examination.

"Can't tell whether a longeron is snapped or not," he growled. "Plenty of lead in the tail surfaces though. Think I'll go up to that light-shack and see if I can raise some help."

He clambered up the sand and started over the top towards the lighthouse, which appeared to be nearly half a mile away. "Well, the walk won't do me any harm," he grinned, feeling for a cigarette.

The case was in the breast pocket of his R.A.F. tunic, and he took one out, stuffed the case back and fingered his fusee-lighter. Then, before he could get

a glow to the wick, something caught his ear. The thunder of an engine, a Mercedes, along the shore ahead. Throwing the cigarette away, Armitage began to run towards the lighthouse.

"Something queer going on up here," he snorted. "That's a jerry machine."

Across the rolling folds of the dunes he raced, panting and pounding. Gradually the skeleton framework of the lighthouse assumed some degree of design and then he noticed several men in earnest conversation outside the door of the shed. Something made him settle down and take things easy, for he suddenly realised that he was unarmed. His Webley had been left in the cockpit holster.

"I'm going to find out what's going on up there, if it's the last thing I do," he snarled.

THE rumble of the Mercedes settled back to a low moan. As he crept forward now on his hands and knees, Phil could see that it was a black Brandenburg seaplane.<sup>1</sup> He could catch snatches of conversation, quick hurried sentences in a foreign tongue. He stopped, lay flat, and buried his eyes in the crook of his arm.

Now he could hear plainly, and with the blinding of his eyes his hearing became more acute. He caught the words, "Camels are all black, like mine," in German, which he understood fairly well, although he did not speak it fluently. He lay still, caught a rumble of words again, and then sensed the words "position of cruiser, 51,15 north; 2,28, east. Same deck markings. Midnight!"

Armitage's mind raced and picked up a memory picture of a chart.

"That's off to sea, almost dead north from here and about opposite Ostend or Middlekerke," he muttered. "Must remember that."

There were a few words he could not catch, until they broke into a slower conversation. Then he sensed the word "Americans" and "Kenilworth Castle."

"Now what the devil is the game?" he argued with himself. "A point off Dunkirk and now Kenilworth Castle, which is in England."

But there was no more said except some hurried farewells and a man raced down the beach, struggled with the floats of the Brandenburg, and shoved the 'plane around and climbed in. The Mercedes boomed

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<sup>1</sup> The Brandenburg, one of the most successful of German war-time seaplanes, was a 2-seater low-wing monoplane with 160 h.p. Mercedes. It had a speed of 97 m.p.h. ; a range of 500 miles and was armed with a Spandau and a Parabellum.

and the black seaplane roared away, leaving a wide foam-tipped wake.

PHIL lay there for several minutes and then started to crawl again. Hardly had he started, however, when a new sound roared out from somewhere behind the lighthouse. He flattened again and waited. He knew what that was. A Clerget rotary. And in a minute or two a Camel, as black as night, tore down the sands towards him and swept up into a climbing zoom and turned east.

"Well, I'm dashed," Phil gasped. "What the devil's this, a nightmare?" There was nothing left to do now but to go through with it. Giving them time to settle down again, he finally rose to his feet and boldly walked up to the door of the shed and knocked. Above, the lighthouse blinked away all unaware of the treachery that was going on beneath its guiding beam. Inside there was a hurried shuffle of feet and a man in R.N.A.S. uniform came to the door. As he stared at Armitage his face blanched. Then he remembered his rank and stiffened to a salute.

"Who are you?" Armitage demanded. "Petty Officer Hustling, sir. Of No.9 Squadron R.N.A.S. Posted for duty at this lighthouse."

"Um. . . Anyone else here?"

"Well, sir, Sub-Lieutenant Dawson is here, too, but he's . . . he's in Dunkirk just now, sir. Can I do anything for you?"

Armitage decided to play a waiting game—until he could make a move.

"I've just had a forced landing with a Camel down on the beach," Armitage explained. "Could you give me a hand to drag it up here where we can get some light and see how much damage there is?"

"Certainly, sir," said the shifty-eyed P.O. "You were shot down?"

"Not exactly. Got into a scrap over Furnes somewhere, and didn't want to take a chance on my tail. She took a few too many."

"It's . . . it's not a black Camel, is it, sir?" the man asked.

"Black Camel? . . . No, just an ordinary Camel."

"You didn't see a black Camel, did you?" the P.O. asked cautiously. "There's been one flying about here for some time. Wondered what he was doing up there at this time of night." Armitage watched the man out of the corner of his eye as he took off his flying coat and tossed it into a chair.

"No. . . Haven't seen a machine since I had this scrap half an hour ago with some Fokkers that were trying to nail a Handley Page."

"Half an hour ago?" the R.N.A.S. man started. "How long have you been down, sir?"

"Just landed, climbed out, and walked over to the lighthouse," lied Armitage.

"Oh," gulped the Petty Officer. "Well, let's go and drag her up. We can probably fix her up in the morning. Can you stay here to-night? We have room."

"Can I telephone?"

"No, sir, no line in yet, but a despatch rider comes in first thing in the morning. He can take a message through for you. Where are you from, sir?"

"Cassel," replied Armitage. Then, with a new twist in his voice. "All right, I'll stay, and we can look her over in the morning, eh?"

"Right, sir. I can get you off before the despatch rider can get a message through," smiled the P.O.

They strolled back over the sand and found the Camel in the hollow dune. The P.O. hoisted the tail-skid to his shoulder, Armitage twisted the prop into a horizontal position and pushed. Away they went, struggling across the sand, tugging on the rises and running down the falls.

Once they halted for a breather, and Armitage knew the game was up. There on the sand, breaking up his line of footprints, was the tell-tale depression where he had lain, listening to the strange conversation. If the P.O. saw it, he showed no trace of his discovery, but hoisted the tail again and continued on until they had the Camel stowed away in a small hangar that nestled under the shadow of the lighthouse.

With that he clapped his hands together to remove the sand, and then helped Armitage close the canvas flap that made up the door. Without a word they started back, but Armitage had his Webley this time, and was ready for anything.

But he was not quick enough! The P.O. opened the door, walked into the shack, wheeled quickly, and before Phil could draw his pistol, the man fired point-blank at his heart. Something struck him in the chest with a sledgehammer blow, and he fell forward on his face. The P.O. leaped forward, turned him over, and saw that the tunic was slowly sopping up a scarlet stream that surged out of the hole in the pocket.

"So you didn't see a black Camel, eh?" the P.O. snarled. "Well, you'll never see another . . . you lying swine!"

And with that he dragged the body across the floor and stuffed it under a bunk, turned out the light and went out.



## CHAPTER VI A DEAD MAN COMES TO LIFE

**T**HE NEXT MORNING the members of the Coffin Crew wandered about the aerodrome like haunted men. Even “Jostling” Jenkins was worried, for he had had his taste of aerial warfare and it had left him sick at heart. And he had taken quite a fancy to Armitage, who had been the only one to take him seriously.

Major McKelvie had reported the matter to Montreuil and the Staff in turn had sent out flight after flight to seek the missing Camel, but by noon there was no trace of it. Enemy agents on the other side of the line were informed and told to look out for it, but there was little hope from that direction. Destroyers swept the coast seeking traces of possible wreckage, and still no word.

McKelvie was all the more worried because by lunch-time black Camels were coming into the Cassel 'drome one by one from unknown points. The pilots landed, ran their machines into the spare hangar and reported. Why or to whom, no one seemed to know. But they were quartered with the Handley Page mob and fed there. At lunch no one had been able to get a word out of the three who had arrived in time for the noon-day meal, and mystery surrounded everything. By four o'clock five had turned up and now they were all practising landings on the layout chalked in for Armitage. An hour later they all disappeared and headed north-west. No one knew where or why.

The gunners were in their Nissen hut about five, lolling about like men condemned. Their faces were unshaven, their tunics unbuttoned and their kit lay around in disorder.

The Crew were through! The loss of Armitage from the front cockpit had been one thing. They could stand that as long as he was somewhere around. The business of his helping them out last night had been an example of that; but his death—or capture—had put the top-hat on it completely.

The Crew were through!

“Let's 'ave a game of cards,” Brownie growled, trying to liven the party up.

“Shut up!” barked Horsey.

“Did I ever tell you about ‘Tin-whistle Tomkins?’” asked Brownie, undiscouraged.

Ryan reached for a flying boot, but just then there was the clatter of a P. and M. motor-cycle outside and a rap came to the door as they sat listening.

“Come in!” rattled Ryan, putting the flying boot back.

The door opened and an R.F.C. despatch rider came in.

“Bloke 'ere named McGregor?” he asked.

“Right over there,” replied Ryan, pointing to Mac, who lay staring at the ceiling.

The despatch rider stalked across the room, dropped an envelope on McGregor's chest, turned on his heel and stalked out without a word. The motor-cycle clattered again, and the man raced away before Mac sat up and fingered the envelope.

Mac rammed a great finger under the flap, took out a sheet of paper and read.

“By the bonnet o' Robert o' Bruce!” stormed the big Jock. “Ut's from Muster A-a-a-rmitage! He says for us to meet heem o'er Dunkirk at eleven-thirty!”

“To-night?” Ryan gasped.

“When else would he mean?” growled the Scot.

IT WAS growing light when Armitage came to and rolled gingerly from under the bunk. He stared about him and sensed that he was stiff and heavy about the left side of his chest. He blinked, sat up and stared at the window through which the dawn was just creeping.

“What the devil?” he muttered, feeling himself.

“How did . . . ? Cripes! that's it. That lad fired at me . . . but I'm alive. How does that work out?”

His hand felt the torn breast-pocket, and he saw that it was still wet with scarlet liquid. He blanched, and then a broad smile crept across his face. He drew out the thin steel cigarette case, battered and bent. A deep dent was visible on its polished surface.

“But the blood?” he asked himself. “The blood. Where did that come from?”

He fingered gingerly through the hole, and his fingers caught some sharp substance. Cracked glass. He felt in the top of the pocket and drew out two lengths of glass tubing. He stared at it for several seconds and drew a deep sigh of relief.

“Wow! That scared me all right. It's that glass tube for my bank indicator. I had forgotten to replace the other.” The scarlet liquid had drained from a bubble-bank indicator used on all scout 'planes of the Camel

type. He remembered drawing an extra one from the St. Pol stores before he left the day before, and had intended having it replace the broken one aboard his own machine.

But now, having satisfied himself that all was reasonably well, he felt for his pistol again and decided to look around. It was evident that the Petty Officer had ducked. "But what about this chap Dawson he had mentioned. He should be back by now."

He got up gingerly, lit the lamp again, and began a search. Something attracted his attention under the bunk again. He bent down, peered under—and whistled.

"So! That's where the Sub-Lieutenant went. They finished him off, too, eh?"

He dragged the stiff form out and revolted inwardly at the thought of having laid beside the body for so many hours. A bullet through the forehead of the little Royal Naval Air Service officer had finished him off without a struggle. Then he covered it up with a length of canvas and decided to lay low and see what happened next.

"So they were contacting German seaplanes, eh?" he recalled. "And a bloke flying a black Camel is in on it. I'll bet he's one of these lads mixed up in the same thing I am, but he's worked his way inside somehow and plans to break it up. Whatever it is." He went over the matter of the map position and the mention of Americans and Kenilworth Castle, but it still didn't make sense. He got himself some coffee, found some bread and then, as it was well on towards daylight, decided to make a more thorough search now that he could watch outside better.

There were books, maps and papers that seemed to have no place in a lighthouse shack. Then he found a list of ships. Their names included some he remembered as transports, and among them the name *S.S. Kenilworth Castle*. Gradually the idea came to him.

"So that's it. They are laying for the *Kenilworth Castle* that is bringing American troops over from England, eh? Then, probably the cruiser they mentioned is going to nail her before she gets into Calais. There's a catch, somewhere."

As he pondered over the matter he heard the putter of a motor-cycle and remembered the despatch rider. He waited until the man came across a path that wound over the dunes from the main road. At last it stopped outside, and the man came up whistling cheerily. Armitage let him in.

"Petty Officer Hustling here, sir?" the man saluted.

"No. Come in, I want to talk to you," Armitage replied.

"How long has Hustling been here?" asked Armitage when the man had entered.

"About two weeks, I should say, sir. Yes, two weeks to-morrow. He goes off then, and a new couple comes on."

"Ever notice anything queer about here when you have been coming in?"

"Queer? No, sir. But Hustling is a bit of a strange card, if you know what I mean. Don't say much, and never asked me in."

"When did you last see the R.N.A.S. officer?"

"Lieutenant Dawson, sir? About a week ago. Not since."

"Oh. Did Hustling ever give you any special messages to deliver?"

"Once or twice. . . . To an R.F.C. officer at the 'drome behind Berques.

A Mr. Saunders, his name was. Had a Camel there last time I saw him. Funny too, because they only have D.H. 9's there. He was always asking me about transports coming in to Calais, when I have come up from there. And you know, sir, thinking about that, it is funny, as those ships never turned up . . . or else went on the rocks like they did."

"What do you mean?" asked Armitage.

"Hadn't you heard, sir? Three transports in the last few days didn't land. They found 'em on the rocks—everybody dead on board. Nobody knows how it happened, or where. They just didn't turn up, and now they're worried stiff about the *Kenilworth*; she's due in to-night with a lot of Americans, they say. Thought you had heard of it, sir."

"Well, I had," lied Armitage, thinking hard. "But it's not wise to talk about those things. Look here, have a smoke while I write a message. Can you stop at Cassel, No.127's aerodrome?"

"Glad to, sir. It's on my way. Going through to St. Omer, and I can go the Wormhauddt-Cassel road."

"All right, but remember. Nothing about seeing me here, and give it to no one but Corporal McGregor, and answer no questions of any sort."

## CHAPTER VII BROWNIE HAS AN IDEA

**F**OR THE REST OF THE DAY Armitage paced up and down the little shed with occasional glances at the dead R.N.A.S. officer's body, and pondered on the whole situation. Gradually he was piecing together the whole story beginning from the day that he had been taken off the bomber and put to work on landings in a Camel, and now he was sensing a plot that made his blood curdle.

About noon he decided to take a chance on going outside to the hangar. The Camel was still there, intact, and there were several drums of petrol and oil, so that he could refuel. The damage to the tail section was pretty bad, but he worked on it with wire and wood from petrol boxes and strengthened it considerably. He was satisfied that it would hold under reasonable circumstances.

About five o'clock he got a new thrill, for overhead swarmed a formation of black Camels which seemed to be seeking something. All day he had noticed flights of single- and two-seaters racing up and down, and something told him that they were seeking him or his machine. But by the time he had satisfied himself that this was just another searching group, a queer thing happened. Out of the mist that lay in a thin sheen over the North Sea came a broad-beamed battleship. At once Armitage, remembering the lesson he had learnt from "Jostling" Jenkins' book of battleship silhouettes, recognised it as the aircraft-carrier *Furious* of the North Sea fleet.

"Now what the devil's going on?" he demanded of himself. "Hello! They are making landings on that damn thing. I wonder . . ."

But already the first Camel had gone down in answer to the panel signal, and was caught by the waiting seamen. Another and another followed suit until the whole five were down. Then, after some time, they took-off again and tried it one at a time with regularity until it appeared they were all satisfied that they could perform the difficult manoeuvre with reasonable precision.

"I'm beginning to get the idea," he mumbled,

watching the activity through the window with his binoculars. "They're practising to land on that thing after working out on a ground diagram. Now let's see how far it goes after that. We had to do night-landings too, so it is evident that this is the next step before doing night-landings on her."

He pondered some more and tried to piece the whole thing together. The business of the cruiser, mentioned by the man the night before, figured in it somewhere and a new twist came up.

"He said it would have the same deck markings," Armitage pondered.

"I wonder if they plan to substitute another ship for the *Furious* so that these poor devils will make the mistake of landing on a German ship. The time was midnight, which about fits in with my ideas. Well, I'll give that black Camel laddie the shock of his life when he gets upstairs to-night—if he does." But while Armitage could see the possibility of such a move, he could not see where it fitted in with the despatch rider's story about the transports that failed to arrive. There was a connection somewhere, but he knew he would have to wait developments to discover just what it was.

He little knew what the development would be.

THE gunners and toggle-men were puzzled at the message from Armitage, and were not quite sure how to handle it.

"It looks to me," said Horlick, "that he expected you to handle the matter from this end. But I can't see why he didn't send it direct to Mr. Townsend."

Jock sat staring at the message, pondering.

"I can see why he did it," Ryan broke in after a few comforting tugs on his short clay pipe. "He reckoned that if he told Muster Townsend, he'd be duty bound to report it to the Major, who would start a search which will probably spoil his plans."

"But we can't let Mr. Armitage down, if he has planned something," Horsey went on. "We've got to get over Dunkirk by eleven-thirty."

"Ay," McGregor answered, "an' we can do ut, too. Patrol time is eleven o'clock. But we're supposed tae go tae Bruges and bomb the sheds along the canal. That's a lang way oot o' our way."

"If we tell him now," Horlick mumbled aloud, "he'll probably go straight to Major."

"Well," Brownie broke in. "I have an idea!"

"You can take it and fill it with concrete and sink it somewhere," Horlick growled. "We've had enough of you for one day."



"But look here," Brownie persisted. "You know what the Army bible says: ' Surprise is the most valuable weapon in any attack,' quoted from William Shakespeare, I believe."

"So what?" demanded Horsey, blinking.

"Pull it on 'im," Brownie confided. "Say nothing abart it until we get 'im in the air, and then when we are up toward Dixmude, old Mac can slip him the paper and let him work it out for hisself."

For a minute the gang sat speechless. Finally, Ryan took another draw on his clay and squinted across at the waiting Cockney.

"There are times,me bho," he allowed, " when you actually show a grain of common sense."

BUT there were other things to worry about before No.11 went off that night. The black Camels which had returned just before nightfall were getting all the attention from the bomber-men and armament officers. Major McKelvie skidded about like a wet hen, ignoring his beloved bombers to give his full attention to the mysterious single-seaters.

Townsend and Jenkins went about their duties silently, but not a little hurt over the fact that they were not considered in this business of war in the air. Once they broke off and wandered over to the spare hangar and watched the activity. Two staff officers and McKelvie were in earnest conversation with the Camel pilots, who looked like men who were overtrained, anxious and moved with nervous jerks.

There was a Captain Saunders, who seemed to be occupying the centre of the stage, and evidently it was his machine that was to lead the outfit, for he personally supervised the placing of two red, white and blue streamers on the king-posts of his elevators, indicating that he was the leader.

"I don't like that bloke," Jenkins informed Townsend, as they watched the activity from the background.

"Don't like his face, and his manner seems all wrong to me."

Townsend was not quite certain what he meant, but he let it go at that. He didn't like the man named Saunders either, but he didn't know why, except perhaps that he, no doubt, was taking the place of Armitage.

"You chaps buzz off out of here," ordered McKelvie gruffly. "No use wasting your time around here. Better get your bomber ready. You'll have all you can manage without bothering your head about anything

up here." Saunders moved out of the group, too. "Yes," he smirked. "Take those barges out of our way. You Handley Page blokes only block up the sky. Get off as soon as you can. We're going to need all the air we can get when we go into action."

Townsend scowled, but said nothing; but Jenkins flared up immediately. He'd seen Handleys in action, and he was out to defend them.

"If you Camel wallahs are so brave," he retorted, "why do you have to black up so that no one will see you?"

"Well, the Brandenburgs are all black," growled Saunders. "Why should we give them any advantage?"

"Brandenburgs?" husked Townsend. "Is that what you lads are after, the black Brandenburgs?"

"Shut up, Saunders!" barked McKelvie. "You talk too damned much. This is a secret job, and you go blurting it all over the shop. Buzz off, Townsend!"

But the secret was out. Townsend and Jenkins wandered back to No.11, which stood under the shelter of the hangar, holding their voices until they were clear of the spare hangar.

"So that's the game, eh?" Townsend smiled. "The Brandenburgs, eh? Do you know, Jenkins, we had a go at those devils the other night—the night before you arrived. I knew there was something queer about all this."

"And this chap Armitage went west somewhere up there, didn't he?" asked the pudgy bomber officer. "Wonder if there can be any connection?"

"Keep thinking hard," Townsend advised. "You'll get an idea yet."

"There's nothing to work on until we get an idea where Armitage is, or what happened to him," moaned Jenkins.

"Well, keep thinking. Something will crop up. In the meantime let's collect the gang and get started. I have a feeling in my bones that something is going to happen to-night. Somehow, I don't feel like dropping bombs at all. I'd like to get into a damned good scrap!"

## CHAPTER VIII A TRAP FOR CAMELS

**N**O.11 WAS READY, and apparently in splendid shape by 10:30. The gunners and toggle-men worked like beavers around the wheels, in the racks and at the gun-test pits. Scotty McGregor was blasting away at the sandbags with a vengeance, a beam of satisfaction across his face. Horlick actually sang as his guns screeched and rattled under the test drum. His song was hardly less tuneful than the rattle of cocking handles, but he meant well.

Brownie and Ryan were removing the safety pins from the nose-caps and stowing them away when Townsend came up the ladder. He greeted them coldly, and then caught the trickle of smiles that slipped across their faces.

"Hello, what's up now?" he rumbled to himself.

In a minute Andy McGregor's head came up through the throat hatch. There was a crocodile grin across the lower half of his face that somehow could not be accounted for. Without a word McGregor crawled on through the tunnel and came up in the forward turret where he fastened on the guns with a strangely cheerful air. Townsend frowned and stared about, trying to solve the mystery of the sudden cheerfulness. Had he found Phil Armitage sitting next to him he would have understood it, but, so far, there was no explanation.

In a minute he started the two Rolls-Royce engines and let them idle for warming. "Jostling" Jenkins came up with maps, gun and binoculars at the alert, and the usual line-up of wrist instruments buckled on.

He gravely consulted the instruments, the dash thermometer and then went back and gave the tanks the onceover. He came back, preening and officious, drew up the metal ladder, clapped the throat-hatch shut and stowed the ladder in the companionway. Townsend watched the activity with puzzled interest.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Never can tell. We might have to use it," Jenkins explained coldly. "Suppose, for instance, we had to come down along the sands. How would we get out?"

"As we're going nowhere near the sands to-night,"

Townsend argued, "it seems a bit balmy. Also, I'd like to know what the devil is going on aboard this barge to-night. Everybody seems daft!"

"I understood that was the normal state of the Coffin Crew at any time," Jenkins replied. "However, let's shove off. It's eleven o'clock, and I want some sleep to-night."

AT EXACTLY the same instant that No.11 rolled down the 'drome under the scornful eyes of Captain Saunders and his Camel pilots, who were supervising the moving out of their single-seaters, Phil Armitage was getting his battered Camel out of the hangar that snuggled under the lighthouse. Hours before he had turned on the automatic flash beam just as though nothing unusual had happened. The 'plane was ready, and responded quickly to his starting moves after he had chocked the wheels well.

Out across the dunes he could see the leaden sea working itself up to a mild furore. Whitecaps began to twinkle across the rollers, indicating that there would be a blow before the night was over. He smiled and wondered how they would fare in getting aboard the *Furious*.

He checked his watch and let the Clerget warm slowly. Then he eased her down, removed the chocks and climbed in. He tightened his chin-strap, drew up the hydraulic pump handle that provided pressure for his gun gear, and with a last look around began to taxi carefully away. Once out on the open dunes, he was clear, and prepared to shoot away, but his keen ears caught the thrum-thrum-thrum of engines.

"Here they come," he muttered. "I only hope the gang gets here to help out."

The Camel with the Coffin Crew insignia went into the wind and made a wild climbing turn. Up she shot like a javelin and speared the black sky, foot after foot. The Clerget screamed, and the wooden prop bit in madly to yank the craft higher and higher. Almost overhead now, the formation roared out towards the sea, dipping slightly now and passing over Armitage, who suddenly remembered the chart position crackled out by the German voice the night before.

"51.15 N., 2.28 E.," he muttered, glancing quickly at his map and making a quick calculation as to just how far it would be off the shore. "About ten miles north from here. Hope I can get in on the fun before anything serious happens."

He set himself to catch up with the black Camels, and got every ounce of power out of the Clerget,

by judicious fingering of the air valve. But he remembered his experience of choking her in her glide the night before and determined not to let it occur again.

The black Camels were directly above him now, and he wondered what their next move would be.

Then he caught the next move, and wondered more. Ahead, not two miles away, lay the outline of an aircraft-carrier. The Camels above were nosing down now.

"The leader's firing a green light," Armitage said, as a sparky arc of poisonous-looking fire curled up from a cockpit and marked its path across the sable sky. "Evidently a signal." The black Camels above were circling carefully now, and Armitage had plenty of time to rush ahead and inspect the ship. That statement, heard across the dunes in the dark of the night before, continued to rattle through his mind. "Same deck markings."

"Let's have a look and see if they are the same markings," Phil said to himself. "If they are, there's something queer, for if I remember 'Jostling' Jenkins' warning about German and British mastheads, that ship down there is not the *Furious*!"

HE TORE forward and caught the beam of the floodlight that slashed across the flat deck of the ship below. There he saw the long white line, stretching from the lip of the landing-deck and running the full length of the stage. Twenty-five feet ahead of the lift-well was painted a white circle, the spot at which the landing crew were supposed to halt the wheels.

But Armitage was not looking at the deck. It was the mast with its narrow crow's-nest and steel crosstree that caught his eye. Then there was the queer flame-damper that capped the squat funnel.

"The dirty skunks!" he roared to himself. "That's not the *Furious*. That's a faked-up German dreadnought battle-cruiser of the 'Seydlitz' class. Jenkins pointed that feature out to me on those silhouettes. They've lowered the after-funnel and just covered the superstructure over with a wooden platform to make it look like the *Furious*. And those lads are falling for it!"

With a bellow of rage he swung back and charged at the black Camels above in an effort to head them off.

But before he could get into action the black Camel in the lead, flaunting the two streamers from its tail, suddenly darted down at him, spraying lead in generous doses. The other four followed in stiff

formation, but did not make any attempt to join in the battle.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Armitage raved. "This is the swine who was at the lighthouse last night, and he's trying to get rid of the rest of 'em, for some reason."

Then Armitage put on a show that was worth a million pounds in any country's money. While frantic signals flashed up from the deck of the spurious aircraft-carrier, he drew the formation of black Camels away towards the shore. He chopped away with his own Vickers now and then, but always managed to hold his fire long enough to give the enemy scout a chance to clear—towards Dunkirk.

But gradually the man in the leading black Camel spotted his game and started back towards the battleship. Then, with a surge of rage, Armitage raced in again and engaged him with all he had. Back and forth they slashed, tracer and exhaust flame adding fire to the black backdrop of the sky. From the surface vessel below more flashes streaked up appealing for action and a continuation of their plan. It was this that Armitage hoped to break up.

"Hello! The others are going to have a smack," he grunted, noting for the first time that other streaks of tracer were coming at him.

Then began a fight for life. The Camel with the Coffin Crew insignia came in for a battering from all sides. Armitage was flying and fighting like a madman, trying to keep his bursts on the streamered Camel while he avoided fire from four others. But his case was hopeless. Gradually his machine fell away under the battering. Strips of fabric streamed back in the slipstream. Struts were cracked and displayed fringed holes where the spruce was splintered with bursts of .303. The engine began to pound and the prop suddenly threw away a splintered blade.

"Damn!" swore Armitage, swinging away and shutting off quickly. "This about finishes it. Where the devil is Townsend?"

The Camel dropped sharply, and he tried to stretch his glide to get as near the shore as possible. The waves below licked their chops hungrily as the black Camels came down on him, fired another heated salvo and left him to his fate. They saw it wobble under the battering, nose down sharper and steady again for the last few hundred feet of height, and then slope down on the inky waters with a splash.



## CHAPTER IX THE COFFIN CREW JOIN THE PARTY

**N**O.11 ROARED AWAY, leaving the aerodrome behind, and the mechanics to douse the take-off flares. Townsend set his course from Cassel to Dixmude, puzzled and worried. Mac sat down, huddled up in his big leather coat and his bonnet flapping in the slipstream. Jenkins took up his duties in his usual officious manner, popping back and forth to the bomb chamber and making certain that all was ship-shape. He, too, began to sense that something was up, for Ryan and Brown only stared at him as though he were a strange biological specimen. He couldn't understand their enigmatic smiles, but put it all down to the crazy history of the Coffin Crew.

Back in the control pit, he nestled down, too, and watched Townsend's skilled hands guide the big bomber towards the line. Ahead lay the deadly jewelled necklace that was strangling little Belgium. The front line, blazing with throaty Stokes mortars, "Minnies," Spandaus and anti-tank guns. Star shells trickled up and betrayed working parties that were out trying to carve paths through the tangle of barbed wire.

They thundered on, heading for the battered town of Dixmude where new Jerry divisions were huddled waiting for the word to attack again on the battered British and Belgian divisions. They knew now that reinforcements were due, but that something was stopping them from getting across the Channel. It was a pleasant feeling for the Germans, a godsend to cheer them up during those terrible months that followed Bloody April.

Now the first fingering shots from Ranting Rupert began to belch out around them. Jenkins ducked and then grinned sheepishly. The searchlights began to stab the sky and seek the marauders. Flaming onions waltzed up and danced tauntingly before them, but Townsend kept on. He was used to this game, and carried on unconsciously. Jenkins admired this, and hoped that he, too, one day, would be able to smile at Jerry's efforts.

Then, as they reached the battered fringes of the town, McGregor suddenly got up, turned around, reached into his pocket with a grin, and passed

a folded sheet of paper across to Townsend. The Englishman frowned through his goggles, steadied the wheel between his knees, and spread it out. Moving forward, he held it under the light and read:

*"Meet me over Dunkirk at 11:30. Important, so don't let me down. Still have the Camel."*

*"Armitage."*

Townsend read it again and again. Then he noted the date, which indicated that it had been written earlier in the day. He stared at the clock on the dash, threw the wheel over to Jenkins, who accepted it gingerly, while Townsend dived down the tunnel towards Mac's turret. He tugged at the Jock's legs and bawled at him.

"When did you get this?" he demanded.

"Aboot five o'clock, sor," grinned McGregor.

"Why didn't you tell me before? How did you get it?"

"A despatch-rider brought it, and daddled oof. Ah didn'a want tae te'l ye befoor, sor, 'cause we thought ye'd not do ut. Thought perhaps ye'd tell the Major an' he'd get up a paa-a-rty on his own, an' we wouldn't be in ut, sor."

Townsend stared up at the big Scot's homely dial and grinned back.

"You know, Jock," he finally said. "I had an idea the Coffin Crew had broken up, but I'm not worrying now. We can just make it."

"Ay, sor. We'll make ut," agreed McGregor.

IT TOOK several minutes to satisfy Jenkins, but when he turned and saw Ryan fingering an automatic in the companionway, he lost all his points of argument.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead. I'll stick with you, but I'll bet it's a blind."

"I'd know Phil's handwriting anywhere," assured Townsend, a new vigour pounding through his frame. "Come on, you'll see some fun this time."

"What was that we saw last night? A petting party?"

No.11 had whipped around, and was heading back towards the coast now. Townsend gave the engines plenty, and they responded nobly. For a quarter of an hour they roared on, the gunners alert for night raiders. Then came the silver festooned coastline, and they settled back for anything.

"Look! Look!" Mac screamed. "Machines a'fightin'. . . See the tracers?"

They stared ahead through the black night and gradually discerned the flashes the keen-eyed Scot had caught. Townsend gave the engines full juice and

No.11 tore on. The battle was in full swing now, well below them. They nosed down into it, and then saw a bright Camel being set on by five black vultures.

"That's Armitage's 'plane!" raged Townsend. "Saw the insignia for a second. He's going down!"

Mac crouched and blasted into the flurry of black machines, and remembered the black Brandenburgs. They saw the Camel hit with a splash, and then watched the others swirl back towards a black mass ahead from which flamed signal lights and floodlights.

"He's down!" Townsend screamed. "Down in the water! They got him, the swine!"

"Well, go on down and see what we can do," replied Jenkins, peering over the side.

"Can't do anything with this boiler. He's on the water, man!"

"Go on down! You can't tell until you get there."

With a last glance up at the black Camels that were re-forming for their second attempt to land on the ship below, Townsend dropped the big bomber so steeply that Mac nearly went head over heels out of the turret. Jenkins broke out a portable lamp, switched it on and set the focus for long distance.

The beam fell on the battered Camel, and showed the pilot clambering out of the cockpit to get to the hump of the fuselage.

"I knew that ladder would come in handy," beamed Jenkins.

"What are you going to do, you fool?" Townsend barked back. "What do you think this is, a canal barge?"

"Drowning men clutch at straws," quoted Jenkins, dropping the lamp and reaching under his seat for a tie-down rope used for picketing-out at night. "We'll give him something to clutch at."

Townsend swore again and dropped lower. In a minute he caught sight of Jenkins bending over the throat-hatch which he had ripped open. He was dropping the metal ladder through, between the two sets of wheels, by the rope which he had knotted to the upper rung.

"He's climbed up on the top plane!" screeched Jenkins. "Now let's see you do your stuff. Go down and let him grab this thing."

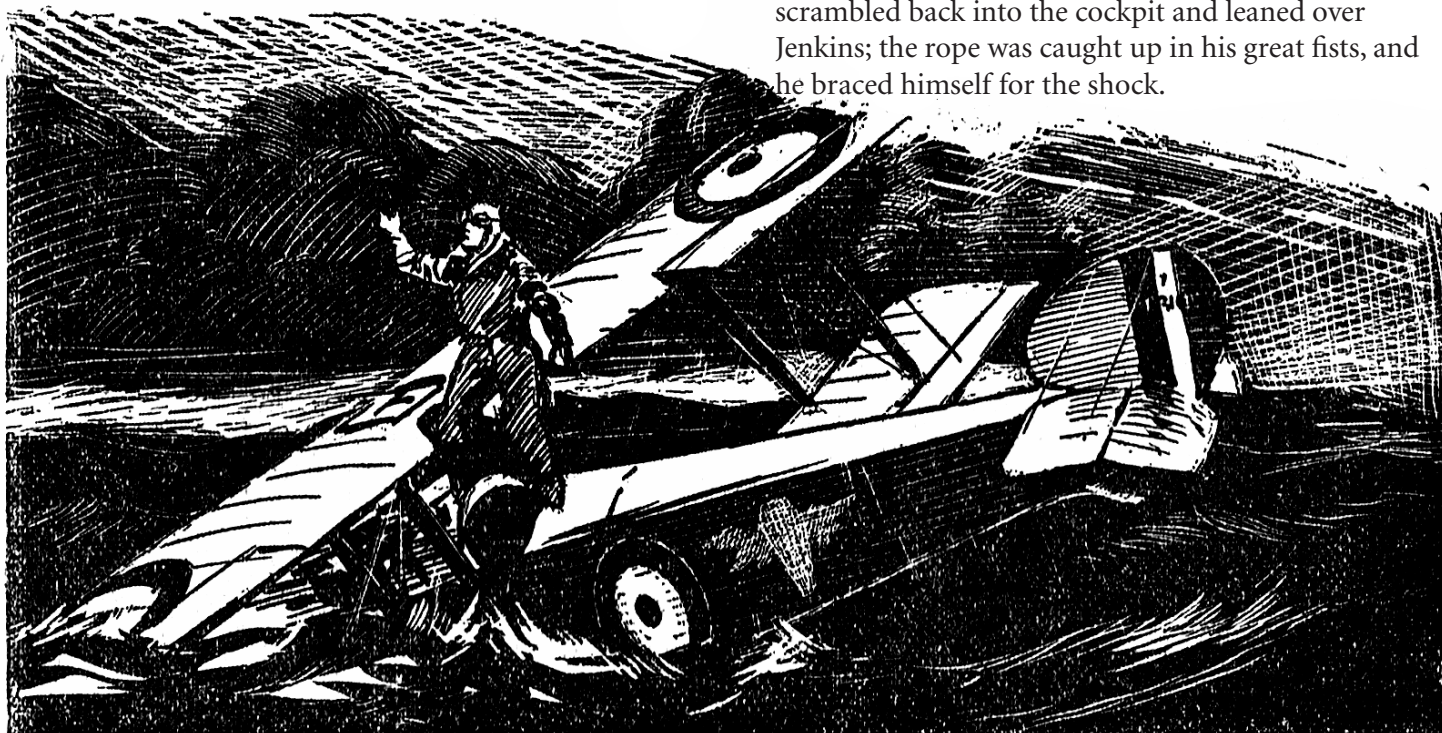
"What, at fifty-five miles an hour?" roared Townsend. "You'll kill him if it hits him."

"Well, he'll drown, anyhow, and it's easier to stop one on the conk," rasped "Jostling." "Go on down, and stall her as much as you can. You've got to take some risk."

Wagging his head hopelessly, Townsend went down lower and shot towards the floundering Camel. He could just see Armitage crouching on the top wing as he nosed down so that his wheels almost touched the water.

"Careful! You'll knock him off," screamed Jenkins from his prone position. "Damn! He's missed it. Go back the other way into the wind, you idiot!"

AROUND went No.11 like a skittish old woman. Her wing-tip almost picked up water, but Townsend could get a better view of the Camel now. Mac scrambled back into the cockpit and leaned over Jenkins; the rope was caught up in his great fists, and he braced himself for the shock.



Back they came now, in a sickening stall. Townsend was flying her beautifully, and the ladder dangling below the bomber swung clear away from the slipstream of the engines. On and on it came towards the crouching pilot. He watched it carefully, judged the timing, and then stiffened. The ladder swung at him, but he caught it between his gloved palms. It smacked hard and made his wrists crack, but his toe went through the rung and with a spine-jolting jerk he was yanked clear. Breathless, he hung on while the big engines high above him boomed out with a bellow that yanked the machine up just in time, for the white-capped rollers had caught their spray on the black rubber tyres.

Up inside, Jenkins and McGregor hung on, although the pudgy one almost went out of the hatch headlong. Mac steadied him, and together they began to draw the dangling ladder up while Armitage swung back and forth until they feared he would fall off. Finally the ladder came up to the edge of the hatch and together they tugged and dragged the drenched pilot through.

"Quick!" gasped Armitage. "After those Camels. They can't land on that carrier. It's a Jerry . . . faked up!" Mac moved first, while Jenkins spluttered. Armitage watched him close the throat-hatch, and then crawled forward into the cockpit and clutched at Townsend's shoulder.

"Great work, boy. Go get 'em," he gasped, pointing towards the fake aircraft-carrier. "Blow 'em out of the sea!"

"But it's our's, isn't it?" yelled Townsend in amazement.

"Like hell. It's a Jerry, and they're copping those Camels so that they can't stop the Brandenburgs. Go get 'em!"

"By Heavens, you're right!" husked Jenkins over his shoulder. "That's no British fighting-top!"

Horlick's turret.

"Get that lad with the streamers!" he bellowed. "Leave the others. They're all right, but they don't know what it's all about."

Then up the dancing catwalk he charged again and snatched up a signal-lamp, and began clacking away with the shutter button, to try and get the news to them. The fake carrier lay just ahead now and Armitage saw that one Camel had already dropped down and was being trundled along to the lift platform.

"That's it. Head the others off," he screeched. "Don't let them on!" Mac opened fire across the noses of the Camels while Armitage ran down and bellowed at Ryan. In a minute he was back over the sight, shoving Jenkins down the companionway. Townsend watched him closely and then rushed at the bobbing carrier. A few Camels charged in and tried to head the interfering bomber off, but Mac drove them off with flaming bursts that threatened their props.

Over the gleaming deck raced No.11. Armitage's hand slashed down once—twice. The bomber jerked as two 112's fell away and caught the frail landing platform. The lone Camel on the stage disappeared in a welter of flame, splintered lumber and smoke. Another belch of flame plumed up at the lip of the stage and carried the stern away. Smoke poured out in a blinding cloud, and obliterated every chance of ever getting aeroplanes down on that stage again.

But the guns aboard the treacherous carrier, which so far had been silent, suddenly boomed out and spangled three-inchers at them as they turned for another charge. Grim shells shrieked past their wings and burst a quarter of a mile away, for they were too close for fuse-setting. On tore No.11, and the Coffin Crew. Again Armitage's arm flashed up and down, and again the big bomber jerked, and Brownie and Ryan tugged toggles and let the rest rain down on the hulk below.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! B O O M !*

A torrent of debris shot skywards in front of No.11, and Townsend had to bank sharply to miss it. Over went the Handley, clearing with one wing-tip in the splintered flame that gushed out from the stricken raider. More debris fell around them, and then they raced into the plume of smoke and avoided the last revengeful chugs of the anti-aircraft guns. Already the vessel was heeling over, for one of the 112's had fanged through with a delayed action fuse and had burst with a roar in a magazine. The rest was easy. The magazine

## CHAPTER X THE FLOATING DEATH

**I**NTO THE INFERNO AGAIN they swept. Mac was trembling, but ready for anything. Armitage waddled back to the cabin, clapped Ryan on the shoulder, took the proffered brandy flask from him and gulped hard. Then he rambled on towards



exploded and blew out twenty plates and demolished the engine room.

"Get out of here!" screamed Armitage. "Get those Camels with us. Here come the Brandenburgs!"

He leaped and snatched at the Aldis lamp again, and began shooting signals at the Camels. One by one they caught it, for they had been swirling around the melee wondering what it was all about. Finally, they began to get the sense of Armitage's message and rallied round.

Below them, skulking down just inside the coast, roared the black Brandenburgs. The Camels spotted them and headed them off. Armitage raved in ecstasy and shouted with glee. The Brandenburgs, fighting mad, turned back and made their great mistake.

While the rear gunners tried to keep off the Camels, the pilots tore back north and fell under the guns of the ravaging Coffin Crew.

Both Horlick and McGregor had a field day. Their bursts, from above, pounded down on the heavy seaplanes and rammed them nose-first into the surf. The Camels, having staged their sheep-dog tactics, charged into the fray, too, and battered a Brandenburg to ribbons. It fell with a swirl, exploded before it hit, and threw its wings into the path of another.

There was splintering of fabric and spruce, the rending of sheet metal, and another nosed into its doom. Townsend darted in at one, daring the fire of the rear gunner, and gave Mac a chance to fork into it from the rear. The raging Scot took his time and then turned a spray of death full into the swaying cockpit. The 'plane staggered under dead hands, nosed down and bashed its great blunt head full into the water. Then a strange thing happened. Across the leaden waters of the North Sea a colourless curtain of mist crept up from the shattered hulks of the destroyed seaplanes.

The men aboard the Handley Page watched it for a few minutes, fascinated. The swirling mist that slipped across the water under the sweeping breeze that breathed out from the shore, crept silently on towards the hulk of the fake aircraft-carrier. More swirls of strange mist swept up from the other Brandenburgs and together they seemed to join a few chains' lengths away, and sweep on towards the sinking vessel.

Armitage watched it as the Camels drove in the last two Brandenburgs for the gunners to finish off. Mac poured out his lead and Horlick added his drumful. The two Brandenburgs, caught in a trap, swerved to avoid the two torrents of terror, and smashed headlong into each other and went down, a shapeless bundle of

wreckage. Again that queer mist crept up and started to wander across the sea towards the vessel which was now over on its side. The poor devils who had escaped the explosions and cleared the wreckage took one gulp, stiffened with a scream and went black. They sank to the deck, never to know what had killed them.

BUT the Camels had had enough by now. There was nothing left to do but to wonder, and they realised that they had better do their wondering ashore, so they headed back to Cassel.

"Let them go," Armitage grunted. "We're going down on the beach near that lighthouse. There may be something interesting down there. You got landing flares?"

"Jenkins has this barge loaded with everything," said Townsend, grinning. "How would you like a ten-course meal? He probably can dig one up."

"Later on. You plank us down on the beach near the lighthouse."

Armitage waited until they were gliding in, and then went and got Horlick to unship a gun and be ready to go down with him. They stood ready over the hatchway, and the instant the bus hit the sand and stopped rolling, they were down the ladder and charging toward the shed. Mac stood up and covered them.

But the guns were unnecessary. At the table, his head snuggled in his arms, sat P.O. Hustling. He stared wide-eyed at Armitage as he walked in. He tried to say something, but the words would not come. Armitage searched him quickly, but he had no gun. He had thrown it away hours before.

"So you came back, eh?" Armitage said. "Came back hoping they would come and pick you up, eh? Well, they won't, for they're all down. We nabbed the lot, including your fake aircraft-carrier. Did you hear the fun out there?"

"I ... I heard it," the man gasped. "I knew it was all up when I found you had gone. Well, what now, sir?"

"You're going back with us to Cassel and tell this whole story. It must be interesting. What about those Brandenburgs? We got them all, you know, but they acted queerly."

"Gas!" replied P.O. Hustling. "It was Baumite, the new discovery. Bad stuff, sir."

"Is that what they were using to stop those transports?" Armitage snapped. The P.O. nodded in resignation.

"Then they were after the *Kenilworth Castle* tonight, eh? Well, that's one they won't get."

"And you sank the decoy carrier?" Hustling asked quietly.

"Sank her, and not only that, but she was caught in the gas that swept out of the Brandenburgs. We couldn't help that. Just luck."

"Well, sir," said Hustling. "If you got the vessel, and she was swept by gas, you got the lot."

"What do you mean?" Armitage asked.

"Well, you must have got Professor Baum, the inventor of the gas, for he was working aboard that ship, turning the stuff out. You see, it was so deadly they would not risk making it ashore, so the ship you sank out there carried the inventor and all his secrets with him."

"Moses!" gasped Armitage. "What a stroke of luck!"

"It's funny, isn't it?" said the P.O. wanly. "An hour ago I thought I was a lucky man. I had been promised a thousand quid for my end in this thing. They were to take me back to Germany and let me lie low until it was all over, and I thought I was in clover. Now in less than an hour the whole world topples in, and you, whom I thought dead, come out on top. This is a funny war. Well, I gambled and lost. You gambled a bit, too, but you won. See?"

"Yes, I see, but there's nothing to be done about it now. We'll take you back with us in the Handley."

"And that's funny, too, sir," said Hustling, marching towards them. "I've been in the R.N.A.S. for four years, and I've never been in the air yet. I think if they had let me fly, I wouldn't have gone wrong. But now my first flight will probably be my last."

## CHAPTER XI A MYSTERY IS SOLVED

**B**ACK AT CASSEL the Coffin Crew was met by a puzzled group of Camel pilots, a squad of tabbed staff officers and Major McKelvie. They clambered down the ladder leading P.O. Hustling, who was still somewhat dazed by his first experience of flying.

They rallied around him and all moved off to the Orderly Room, where hot drinks and warm blankets for Armitage were ready.

"So you spotted their game, eh, Armitage?" beamed the Major. "Good work."

"Give all the credit to 'Jostling' Jenkins, here, sir," Armitage replied. "If it hadn't been for his showing me the difference in silhouette outlines of ships, I would probably have muffed it. But look here, what was that Camel stunt?"

"Quite simple. You lads were to land on the *Furious*, and she was to ease along in the mist until you were tipped off that the Brandenburgs had arrived to slosh it into the *Kenilworth Castle*. You see, we didn't know how long you would have to wait for them, so we timed it as near as we could and planned to have you leave the aircraft-carrier the minute they were caught on the ship's microphones. Then you could have nailed them before they got there."

"Why didn't you leave them on board this afternoon, when they were already there?"

"That devil Saunders talked us out of that, saying someone would spot them and tip the Brandenburgs off. It sounded reasonable at the time, because it was essential that the thing be a complete surprise."

"It was. Anyone who did not know all about it, except us, must have been deaf and dumb. If it hadn't been for that despatch-rider I'd never have caught on," smiled Armitage.

Well, no matter. You, who apparently knew nothing about it, did the best job. What really happened?" A

Armitage sat back and told the story and got the R.N.A.S. man to confirm his statements. They all listened in silence, and when it was all over the Major released a low whistle, and had another drink.

"So what becomes of us night-bombers who were so suddenly put on Camels?" demanded one of the puzzled pilots who had been all through this.

"Nothing. You just go back to your old squadrons. The job is apparently done—finished—and damn well too!" a staff officer explained.

"What about 'Jostling' Jenkins?" asked Armitage. "Can we keep him?"

"I should say not!" bellowed a staff officer. "Think we can waste him on a bomber . . . with the Coffin Crew? He's too valuable. From now on he'll be in charge of active service instruction, showing you lads how to tell Handley Pages from Camels. That's all. Good night!"

"That blighter 'Jostling' Jenkins will wind up a full-blown 'orse's chambermaid in the 'Ouse' old Cavalry before he's finished," remarked Brownie as the Coffin Crew, reunited once more, filed out.