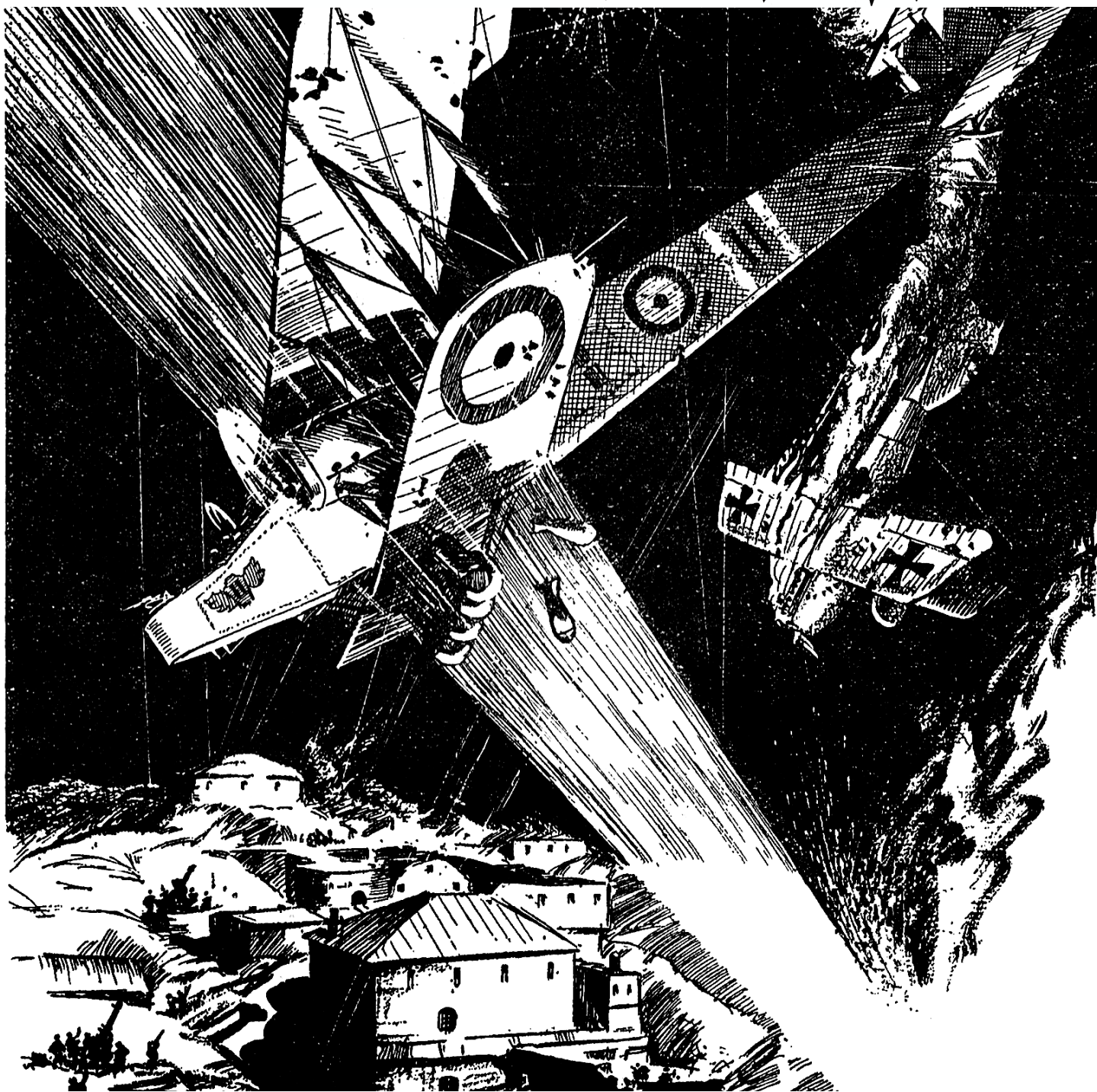


the COFFIN CREW



BOMBER'S LUCK

by ARCH WHITEHOUSE

AIR STORIES (v3n1) JULY 1936

A Raid, whatever its Objective, was All Part of the Game to that Crazy Band of Bombers, the Coffin Crew of the Independent Air Force—until Fate Decreed that the Hand of Sergeant Ryan should be the One to Loose Death and Destruction upon the One Square Mile of Enemy Territory that, to Him, Must Ever Remain Inviolable!

CHAPTER I NO.11 PAYS A CALL

THE DEEP EMPTY RACKS of old No.11 shook and rattled with the discordant notes of jangling steel guides and clanking springs. The great yellow eggs which had rested there fifteen minutes before were now scattered about the German aerodrome at Gontrode amid clods of blasted mould, torn hangar canvas and splintered wreckage.

Once again, the Coffin Crew of Handley Page Squadron No.109 of the Independent Air Force had paid a call, left their visiting cards—and a trail of death and destruction. Back from where they had come, infuriated and badly-scared officers of the Imperial German Air Service hurled their wrath after this mad bomber crew whose amazing daring—and no less amazing luck—was fast becoming legendary on both sides of the lines.

Who were they, this group of mad men? Where had they come from to gather inside the long black belly of their aerial arsenal that spawned high explosive and terror? What strange bond had held them together so long in spite of offers of promotion, transfer and the counter-attacks of enemy “Archie” and Spandau bullets?

Lieutenant Graham Townsend, the pilot who gripped the control-wheel of the big twin-engined Handley, was an Englishman, scion of a long line of ancestors who had borne arms for England and the first heir for five generations to break the tradition of a commission in the Guards. His six feet of brawn and muscle were more at home in the cockpit of a night bomber than in the creaking leather of a saddle.

Lieutenant Phil Armitage, heir to one of the greatest fortunes ever made in Hudson Bay, was a Canadian through and through. He had been to Oxford where he had formed a firm friendship with Townsend and had at once joined the Royal Flying Corps with his English friend when the Empire took up the gauntlet hurled down by the Kaiser. Armitage was co-pilot and

bomber officer, and what Armitage didn't know of the twin arts of bombing and navigation was not worth knowing. He was a mathematical wizard, and his ability with figures made him a valuable asset to the Coffin Crew.

Corporal Harry Atkins, the front-turret gunner, wore the ribbons of the D.C.M. and the M.M. beneath his observer's wing. He'd earned them too, for somewhere amid the musty records of No.109 Squadron might be found the confirmations for at least seven aerial victories.

His boon companion, First Class Air Mechanic Alfred Tate, who assisted in the bombing operations inside the cabin, was a former Rifle Brigade machine-gunner who could do more with a Lewis gun than a magician with a silk hat. Tate was the steadying influence aboard No.11, for his Cockney brand of humour softened the tenseness of a raid, when the wrong word might have resulted in a general flare-up.

At the toggle-board with Tate, was Sergeant Michael Ryan, a true Son of the Auld Sod, who had transferred out of the Irish Fusiliers six months before, tired of trying to keep young recruits from climbing up the parapet to get a better look at the war.

Last, but not least by any stretch of the imagination, was Corporal Arthur Marks, a young and wiry Australian, who had drifted into the R.F.C. as a gunner, in preference to punching a typewriter in the orderly room of an Aussie artillery outfit. His office, now, was the rear-turret of a Handley Page, where he clattered away with an efficient set of twin-Lewis guns at every Jerry 'plane that slithered into range. In addition, he was considered a crack observer who knew the trenches and back areas like the palm of his own hand.

THE COFFIN CREW aboard the giant Handley Page were returning to their home roost. From the exhausts of the wing engines streamed flaming pennons of scarlet. Below, silver blades of light slashed out, seeking to fork out this night marauder. All around crunched and snarled the Ack-Ack fire of the enemy, sending shapeless chunks of burned steel through the tight fabric of wings or fuselage with distinct and disconcerting “pings.”

Harry Atkins, squirming around up front, stared through his goggles at the black sooty skies that

enveloped them. Lieutenant Townsend palmed the big control wheel and blinked at the illuminated compass in front of him. Alongside, on the same seat, sprawled Phil Armitage with his arm curved across the padding of the cockpit coaming, his head snuggled down. He was fast asleep.

Inside the bomber sat Sergeant Ryan and Alfred Tate. Their rest was won by sitting crosswise over the slatted catwalk with their backs to the bomb-racks and their feet braced on the framework on the opposite side.

Tate was painfully attempting to write a letter with the aid of a short pencil which went into his mouth after every word. A small, thick pad of note-paper was his stationery. Ryan sucked on the end of a cold clay pipe and watched the contortions of Tate who was attempting to catch up with his correspondence.

Outside, the mad chorus of war was tuning up again. Evidently, observed Ryan to himself, they were approaching the line. Tate sucked on his short pencil and glared at the paper which glowed under the thin beam of a small pocket torch.

Bang! Crash! Whee-e-e-e! Bang!

The A.A. gunners were at it again. Engines screamed, wires screeched and high explosive roared a raucous chant of destruction.

"A hell of a foine time to be a letter-writin'," observed Sergeant Ryan. "The banshees o' doom are rappin' on the canvas outside, an' here's you a-writin' of letters. In your flyin' time, too."

Tate thoughtfully watched the thick upper jaw of his mate, lip-reading the words that failed to rise above the din and racket. Suddenly an idea struck him.

"Banshees!" he spluttered. "Why that's the blinkin' word I've bin 'untin' for to describe all this. Just wot I wants. Thanks Sarge."

"A foine crew we has. The bomber-officer's asleep up in the control pit. That blitherin' Aussie's havin' a Cook's tour out there in the back parlour. And I suppose Atkins is drawing a few pretty pictures. I hope Mr. Townsend hasn't popped orf for a little catnap as well!"

"Don't worry, mate. We could have a little shut-eye on the way 'ome any time, an' this old barge would get back orl on 'er own," boasted Alfred. "By the way, Sarge, if yer carn't spell a word, can yer draw it?"

Ryan cast a vitriolic glance at the love-sick Tate, and spat dryly at the opposite bomb-rack. Then he turned to look at the pair of legs that appeared on the platform of the rear-turret. The limbs in question were encased in the usual long fleece-lined flying-boots.

One rubber sole was cocked across the instep of the other foot, indicating that the owner was tortuously going through varying moves to relieve the tedium of long standing.

The sergeant sniffed and continued to watch the pantomime of pedal extremities as they changed positions. Suddenly Ryan cocked his head to one side, withdrew his clay pipe and watched more closely.

The feet had assumed an attitude of alertness. The knees gradually bent into a half crouch. The two heels came up, just a little, like the movement of a panther about to spring.

The bomber-sergeant tapped Tate on the shoulder with the stem of his grubby pipe and pointed to the tell-tale legs. Alfred raised his eyes from his correspondence, lifted questioning eyebrows, cocked his head to one side and observed.

"Looks like the Aussie is abart to give us a tune, eh, Sarge?"

The catwalk went up at a crazy angle. Bomb-racks creaked again. The Australian's guns began their mad chatter and the wild, high-pitched chorus was taken up by the guns in the front turret.

No.11 was doing a little snarling.

High-velocity shells barked. Shrapnel screamed through the ply-wood flooring. Wires twanged and the steel throats of the Rolls-Royce engines took up the challenge.

OUTSIDE, stabs of flame leaped out. Sparking flaming onions trickled up slowly but menacingly from below. From above, two coffin-nosed Fokkers curled down with streaky tails of scarlet streaming back from red-hot exhausts.

The sergeant rolled into a bomb-rack with a curse. His pipe went bouncing down the cat-walk towards the step that led up into the pilots' compartment. Tate made a grab for the sheets of his *billet doux*. The fabric of the long gloomy fuselage flapped and strained against No.11's sides. The world was having another spasm.

"What ho!" yelled Tate. "The blighters have turned up again!"

The cat-walk was climbing skyward once more. A bullet spanged with a clatter into the steel springs of a rack and Tate ducked—into the high leather collar of his coat, for protection. The sergeant was crawling on his hands and knees up the slats towards the control cockpit.

Behind, Corporal Marks was to be observed, by

watching his legs, handling his twin-Lewis outfit. Empty drums were yanked off and sent rattling into the fuselage. The flying-boots flexed and tightened as the mad action went on.

The nose of the Handley went down and Tate went tumbling in a crazy ball towards the sergeant who was clambering through the narrow doorway of the control-pit. There were some indistinguishable yells and curses. Something had gone wrong.

"Stand by, right here!" ordered Ryan.

Tate stuffed the notes of his letter into the breast pocket of his flying-coat with a scowl of annoyance. Couldn't a man get a minute to himself to write a letter?

The sergeant disappeared into the control-pit. The Cockney mechanic steadied himself somehow, and prepared to bring in a body. Someone had evidently stopped one.

THE Handley Page was performing all sorts of wild gyrations now, and it was almost impossible to keep one's feet. Tate straddled the cat-walk and rammed his insteps against the supports for the bomb-racks. Suddenly a pair of rubber-soled shoes came through the opening. Tate grabbed with one arm and pulled. Next came the tails of a flying-coat, damp and wrinkled.

"Who is it?" screamed the Cockney mechanic.

No one answered him, but a body slipped out, fell forward and a trickle of blood spread slowly across the chest of the astonished and awe-stricken Tate.

"Mr. Townsend! Lumme, sir! Are you 'urt—much?" gasped Tate.

The nose of the Handley came up and Tate and the wounded pilot rolled down the cat-walk together and brought up with a dull crash against the bomb-racks. Blood trickled from Townsend's helmet into the face and collar of the frenzied Tate, as they struggled to get to their knees.

Outside the guns barked. Suddenly a great blaze went up and flickered through the slats of the fuselage, lighting up the interior for a few seconds. Tate and Townsend stared at one another like startled ghosts.

"Well, there goes one of 'em, sir," grinned the air-mechanic.

"Yes. Wonder who got him," muttered the gore-streaked pilot, rolling back against a rack support.

The stained head lolled back. The gleam of light went out, and Tate scrambled across the cat-walk and snatched at the leather strap and buckle below Townsend's chin.

The Handley levelled off for an instant. The guns chattered again from both the fore and aft turrets. It was not over yet, evidently.

The pilot turned and stared at the control-pit entrance. The lights on the instrument-board blinked and flickered. He smiled and lolled back while Tate fumbled at the sodden helmet.

"I'll 'ave you right as rain in a minute, sir. Just take it easy a second."

From the corner of his coat front, Tate ripped out a khaki-covered packet. With his teeth, he tore it apart and yanked out a first-field-dressing. The pad was tenderly laid on the ugly scalp wound and the bandage tightly bound around to staunch the flow of blood.

Chalk-faced, Townsend bit his lip and tried to smile. Tate turned up the corner of the pilot's leather coat and found another dressing. This, too, was applied and the patient was tugged into an easier position.

"You'll 'ave a bit of a narsty 'ead-ache in the morning, sir," observed Tate. "But 'ave a spot of this. It'll make yer feel a lot better. I've 'ad it by me for weeks—thought it would come in 'andy-like some day."

Townsend smiled and took a swig from a small medicine-bottle placed to his lips by the shaking Tate. Army-issue rum, doled out in daily tablespoonfuls during the winter months when cots were damp, flying-boots soggy in the short walk from the hut to the hangar, and half-frozen men were fighting pneumonia as well as the Jerries.

"Thanks, Tate. You're a brick! I'll—I'll see that you get it refilled at the officers' mess soon as we get back. Think—think—I'll have a nap now."

Without a word, the little air-mechanic sidled nearer his pilot and placed himself in an uncomfortable position so that Townsend could rest against him. Just one of the reasons why the Coffin Crew stuck together so long.

The guns were strangely silent now. Only the rhythmic roar of the engines outside on the wings gave hint of the ninety-mile-an-hour speed they were making back towards those three tiny dots of flame that appeared ahead. Armitage had taken over the controls. Ryan was in the bombing officer's seat. Harry Atkins, up front, was snuggling down within his turret to shelter his shivering body from the cold that cut like a knife through leather and flannel.

Down in the fuselage, Tate stared at the legs of the Aussie corporal which were again assuming the poses

of relaxation.

"Wonder who got that Jerry," mused the air-mechanic. "I'll have to tell Lizzie about that. Where's that letter?"

His numb hand went inside his breast pocket and withdrew a wad of gore-soaked sheets. For an instant he stared at his work.

"Looks like a blinkin' meat bill stuck on top of a sirloin, but she'll 'ave to take it, and lump it. I can't write it all over again. Blimey! She'll think I've been 'it, or something."

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGENESS OF SERGEANT RYAN

THE COFFIN CREW made its way gingerly down the narrow ladder that led out of the gaunt throat of the Handley Page to the oil-stained floor below. Marks and Atkins screwed and swore at their guns and drums. Armitage clicked off his instrument-lights. Sergeant Ryan slid stiffly out of the front seat and into the black tomb of the fuselage. He found Tate arguing with Mr. Townsend about their being back and telling him that he ought to get up and go to his bunk.

Ryan stuck his short pipe into his teeth and without a word hooked his gloved hand under the pilot's armpit. Between them they got him to his feet and up to the trap-door. Someone guided the rubber-soled feet into the rungs of the ladder while Tate and Ryan turned the dull-eyed pilot around. Somehow they got him down and led him away. Atkins, from his high perch in the forward turret, looked down upon the silent group below. Then like an automaton he removed his guns, crooked them into his arm and crawled down the narrow companionway into the control-pit.

Marks' head came out of the other burrow, and the two begoggled faces grinned at each other like strange gargoyles.

"Jolly good work, Arthur," enthused Atkins. "You certainly gave him beans!"

"Me?" exclaimed the grinning Aussie. "He wasn't mine, digger. You got him fair dinkum."

"Chuck it, Aussie," replied the little gunner. "You got him and you know it."

"C'm on, you blokes. How long are you going to sit

up there, arguing? Soon be morning, an' you ought to be in bed. Want to stay up all night?" growled a voice at the bottom of the ladder.

"Coming, mate," responded the Aussie, dropping his guns into the waiting hands of a sleepy armourer sergeant.

The argument continued all the way to the Nissen hut, where Ryan stopped it by bringing up the subject of Mr. Townsend's wound.

"Cripes! I 'opes it don't keep him down long," reflected Tate.

"He ought to get a Blighty trip out of it, anyway," offered Marks, kicking off his flying-boots.

"I'll bet ten francs he's with us on the next trip," said the sergeant, as he lit his pipe.

"Let's hope so. I heard Major McKelvie say something about a trip to Metz on Friday night," growled Atkins. "I'm not much on it without Townsend in the cockpit."

"Metz?" half-whispered the startled sergeant. "Did you say Metz?"

"Of course he said Metz," barged in Tate. "Didn't you 'ear 'im?"

Sergeant Ryan did not answer. He turned away to his cot and blankets with a strange glint in his eye. A spluttering candle flickered in the top of a bottle, and from his knapsack, laid across the head of his cot, he drew forth a packet of letters.

"Come on, Sarge. Douse the ruddy glim and let's get some shut-eye," growled Corporal Marks.

"Turning right in. Want to make certain of something. Just a minute," replied an unusually subdued Ryan.

From the handful of letters he drew forth an envelope, postmarked "Waterford." For the tenth time in as many days he had perused that short note from his mother. He had known this moment was bound to come some day, and he had dreaded the thought of it. He had watched the squadron orders like a hawk for the rumoured attack on Metz and now, within a few hours, he would have to go up there with the rest of the Crew and fight through that mad barrage of hate to hurl spinning missiles of death and destruction into the one square mile of German territory that, to him, must ever remain inviolate.

This raid couldn't go on. Yet the Coffin Crew would never understand—and even if he explained, it could make no difference. Gontrode, Cologne, Bruges—even Berlin, if necessary. But not Metz. Anywhere but Metz. Sergeant Ryan's face was a grim mask as he shoved the letter back into its packet.

"Nighty-night, Sergeant. Put yer letters under yer pillow, and pleasant dreams," spoke Tate from beneath a pile of blankets.

THE non-com. members of the Coffin Crew were outside the mess-hut early next morning. There was a lecture on the new 250-lb. bomb and its delayed-action detonator, before noon. Then there was a short trip into the village for a beer or two and a few of those silk-embroidered French postcards. Corporal Marks had invaded the officers' mess to find out how Lieutenant Townsend was progressing, and he returned with the cheerful news that the bullet had only creased the Handley Page pilot, and that he would be fit enough to pilot the machine on Friday night's big job.

Handley No.4 was standing by for a raid on Gontrode, which was expected to be called within a few hours. The idea was to go up to the noted German aerodrome and blast the daylight out of the landing-field while the Gothas were away on a raid on the east coast of England. It was a comparatively easy job for the giant bombers, for Gontrode was only about forty miles beyond the British lines in Northern Belgium. These raids usually resulted in heavy damage to the Jerry 'planes that managed to get back from the raid on the English towns.

This was Thursday, and the Crew faced an evening off before preparing themselves and their machine for the big raid that had been awaited for weeks. The sharp eyes of Corporal Marks had picked up night activity along the back roads near Fort de Queuleu, and the efficient work of Allied secret service agents had discovered that an enormous amount of ammunition, high explosive, shells, arms, mobile batteries and other front-line equipment was being brought up in anticipation of a great thrust against the new British troops that had recently taken over a section of line from the badly-battered French armies.

After the bomb lecture that afternoon, Major McKelvie brought up the subject of the raid again and congratulated Corporal Marks on his observance while acting as a gunner. He turned to Ryan.

"You know, Sergeant, you'll have a great responsibility on your hands to-morrow night. This will be the first of a series of raids on Metz. If it is successful, the Wing plans a concerted raid with every Handley Page on the front taking part," he explained.

Sergeant Ryan winced and lowered bloodshot eyes to the rough planking of the floor.

"You will have the toggles and a great deal of the success of the raid will depend upon your prompt co-operation with the bomber-officer. Above all, you must see that these new detonators are set correctly, or they will go off before the bomb has completely pierced the walls or roof of the arsenal that is your main objective."

Still the sergeant said nothing. He was peering through the murky windows of the orderly room, seeing the vision of a little old lady in a thatched cottage in Ireland who patiently scrawled a note to him every day.

"You gunners will probably have a large-sized scrap on your hands," the Major was continuing. "Make certain that every drum is carefully loaded. Take no chances with anything. You have done well in the past, and your work is not going unheeded. By the time you get back on Friday night I may have some interesting news for all of you."

"Any questions, Sergeant?" inquired the Major, noting the obvious distraction of the man he was addressing.

Ryan looked up startled.

"Questions? Questions, sor?" He fell into his brogue when he was embarrassed. "No, sor. I was just thinkin'. I hope we have a foine trip, sor."

The other members of the Coffin Crew stared at Ryan as if trying to interpret the strange mood that had fallen upon the usually genial Irishman. But Ryan gave them no opportunity of conversation, and immediately the interview was over, he hurried away from the group, obviously determined to avoid questioning.

CHAPTER III

THE COFFIN CREW ARE ALARMED

NO.11 WAS BEING GROOMED for the big raid. Armourers, riggers, fitters, and bomb experts clambered all over the great vulture, adjusting her venomspawning racks, her deep-throated engines and inspecting every wire and turnbuckle of her controls and rigging.

Armitage and Graham sat under the wide wing with a map spread out before them. The pilot wore a

narrow gauze bandage around his head which threw back a shock of close curly hair, giving him a bantam-like appearance.

They traced their proposed course across the lines from in front of Nancy. From there they hoped to pick up the Moselle River and head for the railroad tracks that ran into Ateliers. Following the silver bands that carried important German supplies from the railheads to the advanced bases, they hoped to be able to pick out the railroad junction at Le Sablon and then turn east for the fort and its arsenal.

"I've been wanting to have a crack at Metz for some time," observed Townsend, tracing their course over the map with his pipe-stem. "When I was a kid I used to read about the battles around Metz in the Franco-German war in 1870. Old von Steinmetz had his famous First Army there and gave the French a hell of a dusting."

"Well, I don't know anything about the Franco-German war, but if they are collecting supplies and troops there for a smack at our lads, I'm interested in stopping it," offered Armitage. "From all accounts, our troops are all new men and nowhere near ready yet for the brunt of a push."

Townsend looked at his chum and smiled:

"We're a queer lot, Phil," he mused. "Here's you refusing to join a Canadian outfit, even though you'd be among your own crowd; Corporal Marks turns down a chance to get his wings in the Australian Flying Corps; Atkins could have fallen into a cushy job in the armourer's shed, but refuses to take it; and Sergeant Ryan continues to fly as a bomber and pull toggles, rather than get his wings as a sergeant-pilot, or take a ground-instructor's job."

"And on top of all that," laughed Armitage, "you get your scalp creased, and refuse two weeks' leave when you hear we are going to Metz. No wonder they call us the Coffin Crew. But speaking of Ryan, have you noticed how he's taken the news of this Metz raid? Almost seems as if he were funking it."

"Ryan funk it?" laughed Townsend. "Why, man, that can't be right. He's the wildest man of the lot. That crazy Irishman wouldn't question going to Berlin."

"That's what I thought until I noticed him yesterday when McKelvie was talking over the plans. He was scared of something all right. Went as white as a sheet and fumbled about with that damned delayed-action detonator until I thought he would drop it and blow us all to glory."

"Hm," mused Townsend. "Sounds queer. Wonder

whether he's had a token or something. These Irishmen have some strange intuitions at times. Probably had a dream that he will be shot down over Metz, and thinks it's about to come true. You know, this is the first time he has ever been there. He joined us just after we gave over that sector to the new De Havillands."

"There's Marks. Let's talk to him about it. Maybe he'll have heard something about it in their hut."

"CORPORAL!" called Townsend. "Hi, Marks! Come over here a minute, will you?"

The little Australian trotted over from a portable gun-bench where he was watching the cleaning of his guns before they were put up into the Handley Page.

He snapped a friendly salute and joined the two officers around the map.

"Yes, sir?"

"Oh, Corporal," opened Townsend with a friendly smile. "About this Metz trip. Has Ryan said anything about it to you?"

"Ryan? The Metz trip?—Well, that's funny, sir. He has acted a bit queer about it, ever since it was first mentioned. We can't quite make him out."

"I know. But has he said anything about it that would make you think he didn't want to go on it?"

"Not exactly, sir," answered the Aussie gunner.

"You might say, though, he's been acting pretty queer and a bit quiet—for Ryan. Last night he got up on his own and mooched out to the hangar. I followed him, thinking he was feeling a bit sick, or something. Then when he went into the bomb shed, I felt that something was up."

"Went into the bomb shed? What on earth for? Where was the guard?"

"He'd just gone around to the other side of 'A' Flight hangar, sir."

"Did you follow Ryan into the shed?" inquired the pilot.

"I barged right in after him and found him unscrewing a detonator cap. He seemed startled to see me, at first—I felt kind of silly, too."

"What did he say? What was his explanation?"

"Said he couldn't sleep, sir. Wanted to get up and look over the bombs again and see that the detonators were all O.K. He had two out and had screwed the nose-caps back on without replacing them. He put them in again, though, when I reminded him."

"Took out the detonators. What's the idea?" stormed Armitage.

"He asked me to say nothing about it, sir. Said he couldn't sleep, and had to do something. I don't like splitting on a pal, but since you've asked me, I suppose it's the Crew's business after all. We waited until the guard had gone around again and then nipped back to the hut without waking Tate or Atkins."

"You bet it's the Crew's business," growled Armitage. "Where's Ryan now?"

"Over in the hut, sir, writing letters. He's had a lot of mail from Ireland lately, sir. Says it's from his mother."

"You stay here. Townsend and I will go over and talk to him."

"Yes, sir," saluted the Aussie, with a worried look on his tanned face.

THE two officers went across the corner of the aerodrome to the Nissen hut that housed the three noncommissioned members of the Coffin Crew.

"I can't imagine that Ryan has fallen for any of this Irish rebellion stuff and is trying to put something over on us," observed Armitage. "Yet what's his idea in prowling about the bomb shed at night and fooling about with detonators and bombs?"

"I can't make it out, either," answered Townsend. "But we'll get it out of him somehow."

Sergeant Ryan was in his shirtsleeves, hurriedly writing a letter when the two officers walked in. Tate and Atkins were nowhere to be seen. The Irishman stood to attention when the two men walked in.

"All right, Ryan. Sit down. We want to have a little chat with you," explained Armitage.

"Talk with me, sor? Yes, sor. What is it?"

His rugged face was chalk-white, and he nervously shuffled the sheets of paper on which he had written into a large envelope.

"What's all the trouble about this Metz trip, Ryan?" opened Armitage.

"Metz— Then Marks has told you about last night, sor?"

"He didn't tell us. We asked him about you and out of fairness to the rest of the Crew he had to tell us. What is it all about?"

"It's nothing, sor. I was a bit worried about those bombs, and I wanted to make sure. That's all there was to it, sor."

Armitage's face showed his disbelief in this ingenious explanation.

"Aren't you feeling well," he pressed. "Don't you want to go to-night? Speak up, man. There's nothing

to be ashamed about. We all get these spells of—well, that we'd like to miss a certain trip. I've felt the same, and if you want to be let off to-night, I'll see Major McKelvie and get you a substitute. But play fair with us. We are taking as much chance as you, you know."

"That's not it, sor," pleaded the perspiring Irishman. "I want to go—but—but oh, you wouldn't understand at all, sor! I'll tell you all about it when we get back. I want to go, all right, Mister Armitage, sor. We can't break up the Crew, sor."

"I don't know what to say, Ryan. Your actions have been mighty strange the last two days. We want you with us, of course, but in the mood you're in at present, I'm not at all sure whether you'd pull your weight. We shall have to think this over. I'll let you know to-night, just before we start, whether you're coming or not."

"I'll be there, sor. Thank ye, sor." The two officers strode out of the hut, and Sergeant Ryan, left alone, took out his packet of letters and drew one out again to re-read it for the fiftieth time.

CHAPTER IV THE RAID ON METZ

A HEAVY-FOOTED MECHANIC strode into the Nissen hut at eleven o'clock that night and shook the shoulders of the four non-com. airmen, who were getting in a few winks before patrol time.

"You've got twenty minutes to dress and get some hot tea, Lieutenant Townsend says. Better keep your eyes open." The creaking door closed with a bang. From each corner of the hut a candle spluttered out, casting a wavering light over each rude cot. Silently, the sleepy airmen clambered into their long flying-boots, donned sweaters, scarves and short leather coats. With shuffling feet, Sergeant Ryan, holding a shiny mess-tin like a chalice, stumbled out of the door and into the night.

Three pairs of eyes watched him with mute appeal. The door banged a second time and Marks turned to the other two, who still stood staring after the vanished sergeant.

"Poor old Sarge. What the devil's the matter with him, anyway?"

"Strewth! 'E looks like a blinkin' ghost. 'E 'll come back with a bellyful of shrapnel, as sure as pork grows in pig-sties. I've seen blokes with the pip like that before. They always gets it," explained Tate with no uncertain seriousness.

"You're a nice comforter, Alf," chided Atkins. "He's probably had some bad news from home, or something. We can't tell."

"Well, let's 'op off and get a swill of tea. Probably the Sarge'll feel better after a spot of Lipton's," advised Tate.

A few minutes later the Coffin Crew were gathered together under the wide wing of old No.11 receiving their last instructions.

"All right, Ryan," snapped Lieutenant Armitage. "Get in. You know what you have to do. And when we get there, handle those toggles snappily. Just remember you're still one of the Coffin Crew."

A strange glint came into Ryan's eyes. He fumbled with his helmet, stuttered something to his bombing officer and then led the way up the narrow ladder and entered the throat of the big bomber.

Major McKelvie was on hand to see them off. Two staff officers were also beneath the wings, talking to Corporal Marks. Evidently the young Australian was being advised to watch for certain movements on the ground during the coming trip.

With a brief salute, Marks finally left the group of Red Tabs and made his way up into the belly of the great black bomber. The engines were started with a sudden roar. Lights flickered, flaming penions streamed back from the exhausts, tiny lights twinkled on the instrument board, and three ground flares blossomed out as the great machine swung around and began its ungainly waddle down the field.

Like an old lady who lifts her voluminous skirts to cross a street, the dignified old aerial barge with its load of sudden death, went bouncing, skidding and slithering across the turf. For what seemed hours she fluttered and careened, and then suddenly her awkward movement ceased as she pulled herself together and streamed up into the night.

On the ground, the chugging tractor gargled and spluttered back into the hangar. The ground lights were doused, tool-boxes rattled as they were dragged inside, and sleepy-eyed mechanics returned to their heaps of greasy blankets again.

Lieutenant Townsend was at the control wheel, guiding the big bomber down the line to Chalons from where they would cross the salient in front of Verdun

and make their dash for Metz. Lieutenant Armitage was screwing away at a brass knob on his bomb sights, and staring at the face of a small stopwatch. On the back of a map he made a few calculations and then adjusted the cross-guide wires of the sight.

Atkins and Marks were fussing over their guns and preparing for a long, cold flight. Drums were inspected again and the cocking handles tested for returnspring strength. Inside the black tomb, Sergeant Ryan and Tate were going over the bomb releases for the last time.

AN HOUR rolled by and still the great engines roared. Fabric flapped, and the cold night began to lay its icy fingers on every piece of metal on the machine. Ryan and Tate sat huddled together on the cat-walk and stared at the great yellow eggs that hung nose-downward in the racks. Neither spoke a word, but took turns in staring at the active legs of Corporal Marks in the rear turret and the shoulders of Lieutenant Armitage in the control-pit.

Then they got it. Blinding stabs of light blazed out from below and painted strange designs on the walls and ceiling of the fuselage. Anti-aircraft shells spat and rolled their wrath. Splinters of steel pinged through the fabric and clattered among the long oval eggs. The engines roared, the cat-walk climbed and twisted as the Handley Page was guided through the maze of hate and determined opposition. Ahead lay the sparkling waters of the Moselle.

For a moment the racket subsided as the searchlights lost the big bomber. Then a new tune joined into the crazy chorus. The deep tattoo of Spandaus echoed in the cabin and promptly, in reply, Corporal Marks played the opening bars of his Rattling Rhapsody. His twin-Lewis stuttered, warmed to its job and then screamed out with a stream of lead that literally cut the struts out of an Albatros. A crunch of spruce-spars and metal fittings and the German attacker folded up like a box-kite.

Tate, on the inside, had moved over to get his back nearer a broad-beamed 150-pounder. He turned to watch Corporal Marks' feet again, but they had relaxed, and he knew that the opposition had been driven off for the time being. He turned to look at the sergeant.

Ryan was sitting on his haunches, his face buried in the folds of his great arms. Alf turned to lay a sympathetic hand on the non-com.'s shoulder, but even as his finger-tips reached the leather coat of the

sergeant, Ryan leaped to his feet, his face a mad mask of insanity.

"We can't go to Metz—not Metz! —Anywhere but Metz!" he screamed! "My God! Not Metz—I can't do it!"

Tate sat and stared at the man who strode up and down the narrow cat-walk. Outside Spandau bullets were pencilling the sky again and Marks and Atkins were answering the blistering fire.

Suddenly Ryan turned in his mad pacing, and stared at the great bombs that hung in the racks. Like a panther he leaped for the toggles and yanked the first in line.

There was a click, a scraping of metal against metal, the ping of the guide spring. A long 150-pounder slid out of the rack and disappeared. Tate and Ryan watched it fascinated. Then Alf went into action. This had gone too far.

"You damn fool! What the 'ell are you playing at?" he bellowed, grabbing Ryan by the arms and staring into his startled eyes. "Them bombs is for Metz, you blighter? We're only just over the line. What's the blinkin' game, Sergeant?"

Ryan, held in the vice-like grip of the little air-mechanic, stared blindly at his adversary. He struggled to get back to the toggle-board again, but Tate braced himself against the racks and held on, pulling the sergeant away.

The bomber roared up into another zoom and they both slithered down the cat-walk to come up with a bump against the bottom of Corporal Marks' turret. Tate swore volubly. Ryan struggled to get his arms free, but the wiry little Cockney seemed to have the strength of two men.

"Chuck it, Sarge," he yelled. "I'll break your blinkin' jaw if you don't lay off them toggles. What the 'ell's the matter with you, anyway? What's Lieutenant Armitage goin' to say when 'e sees wot you've gone and been and done?"

The sergeant suddenly relaxed. He turned and stared at the dim bomb-rack. He blinked and stared again. The bombs apparently were still there. Then he noticed the gaping space where one 150-pounder had hung.

"Only—only one gone?" he whispered to Tate. "I—I only let one go, didn't I? Tell me, Alf—tell me straight—I only let one go, didn't I?"

The puzzled little Cockney stared at him for a moment and then without replying, walked up the cat-walk and sat down.

CHAPTER V SERGEANT RYAN SEES RED

OUTSIDE FLASHES OF LIGHT streamed up again. "Archie" burst around them. Marks and Atkins were fighting like madmen. Guns chattered and stopped. Dull booms roared out. Engines screamed and wires wailed in the stress of mad manoeuvres. And inside the belly of the Handley one member of the Coffin Crew had gone insane.

The great bomber leaped and shivered as a shell burst close beneath them. A giant bird streamed down blazing away with two Spandau guns, and as its lead found a target on the great bomber there was a scream from somewhere up front. Two Lewis guns fell silent.

"What was that?" shouted Ryan, tearing down the cat-walk.

"Somebody's stopped one," observed Tate, still sitting on the floor.

Lieutenant Armitage stuck a pale, oil-stained face through the control door.

He spoke to Ryan and moved over so that the sergeant could climb through. Behind, Marks' guns were still chattering away madly.

"Blimey," observed Tate. "They've got poor old 'Arry."

Ryan went through without a word. Tate got up and peered into the control-pit. Armitage came down and gave him a few terse instructions. Then he turned and saw the empty bomb rack.

"What's happened here?" demanded the bombing officer. "Where's this egg?"

Tate went pale. The honour of the Coffin Crew was at stake now, yet he couldn't let his pal down.

"It—it slipped out, sir," he lied. "I was messin' about with the toggles, sir. It slipped out before I knew what 'ad 'appened. I'm sorry, sir."

Armitage looked at the empty stall, back through the opening to where Ryan had slipped through and then at Tate. He saw his flying-coat was much askew, his helmet pulled down over one eye, and a tell-tale scratch lay across his cheek."

"You're a damned liar, Tate," he muttered quietly. "But I think I understand. You'll handle the toggles on this trip. Ryan will stay up front. Understand?"

Tate nodded silently and took up his place at the toggle-board.

Ryan had slipped past Townsend and Armitage, his momentary madness forgotten now in his anxiety for the wounded Atkins in the front turret.

Through the narrow companionway between the pilot's cockpit and the forward turret he crawled and made his way to the wounded gunner. He was a member of the Coffin Crew again. Who the devil were these Jerries to be knocking off his pals? He cursed bitterly, his voice drowned in the ear-splitting shell bursts whose concussions tossed the great bomber all over the sky.

He felt Harry's boots first. The gunner had fallen across his Scarff-mounting and his legs had slithered down into the companionway.

"Harry! Harry!" bellowed Ryan. "Harry, boy, are you all right?"

But Harry never answered.

RYAN clambered through, and his hands pawed up the legs and body of the gunner. His gloves were off and he gasped as his fingers felt their way to a wet mass about Atkins' chest.

"The swine!" he cursed, pulling Harry off the mounting and sliding him gently to the floor. "Harry! Harry! Are you—can you hear me?"

Ryan's face went white. Harry was dead. Gone, never again to fly with the Coffin Crew. And he had let him and his mates down by pulling that toggle.

"Harry!" he screamed. "Harry! I'll get them for you, boy. I'll bomb Metz for you . . . I'll do it, brother or no brother. He isn't any more to me than you were, Harry."

The gunner was shoved down into the covered companionway, and Sergeant Ryan, the Sergeant Ryan the Coffin Crew knew, went back to his guns.

"Come on, ye spalpeens!" he bellowed pulling down his goggles and searching the sky for attackers. "I'm ready for ye. Come on, all of ye!"

And Atkins' guns barked out again under the guiding hands of the wildest Irishman who ever went aloft in the gun-pit of a Handley.

The twin-Lewis guns were swung around, front, rear and on all sides. Bursts of blazing ammunition went out with skilful trigger work, picking off ghostly shapes that slid in and out as they attempted to get within range of the great bomber. Burst after burst belched out, to nick ailerons, props, control wires and struts of the opposing Fokkers. One by one they

were driven off, and Ryan was revelling in the work. He screamed, bellowed and shouted his challenges. The two officers in the front seat stared amazed at this reincarnation. Their eyes met, and they grinned. Ryan was back with the Coffin Crew.

BELOW twinkled the silver rails of the railroad junction at Le Sablon. Searchlights stabbed out their blinding fingers in an attempt to pick up the elusive Handley Page. Gunners below blasted away with shrapnel in hopes of winging the invader. Blasts of light flickered out strangely, but the flaming penions of the Rolls-Royce engines continued to stream back in triumph.

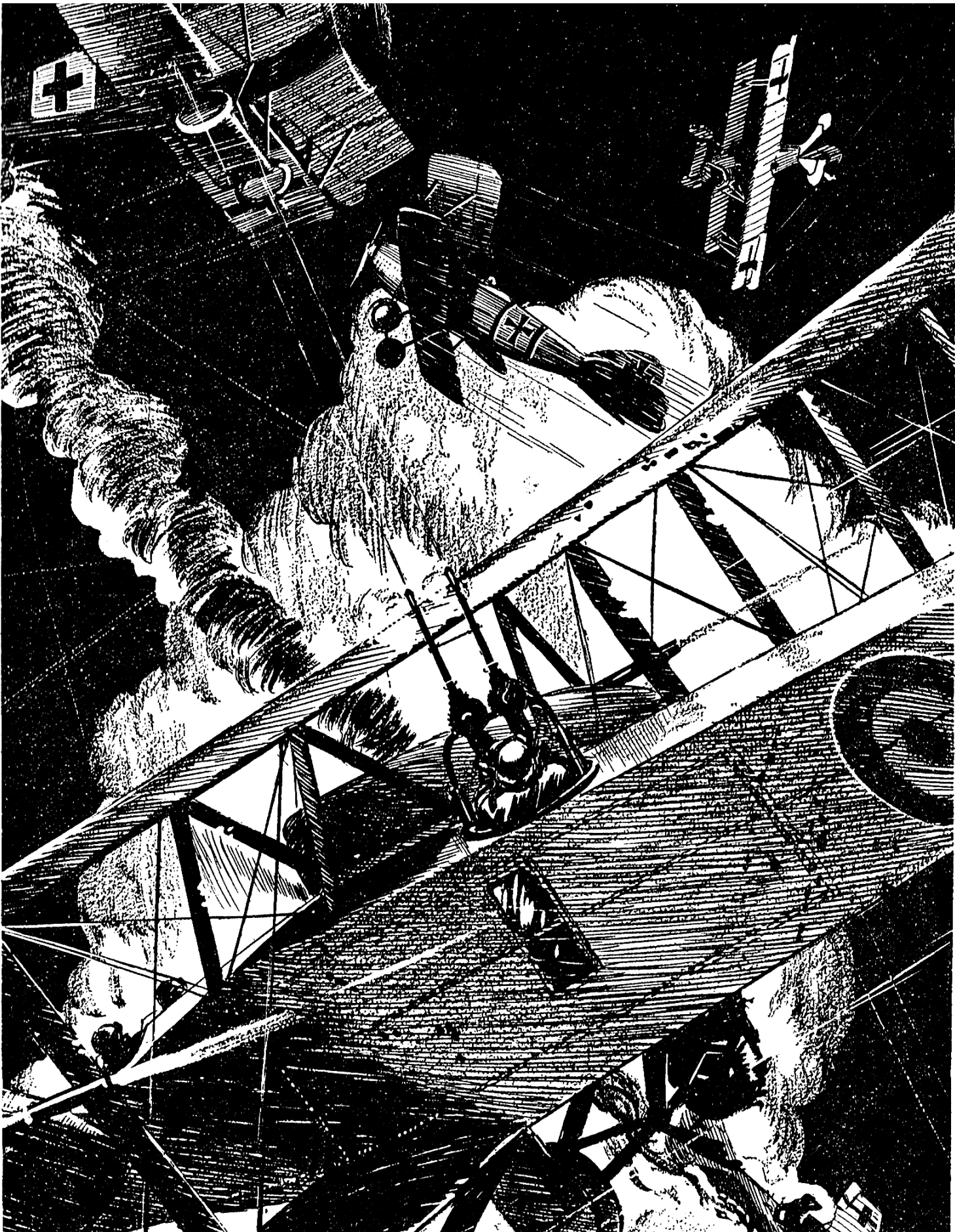
They wheeled to the east, and Armitage began to prepare for his part of the offering. His sight was checked again with the stop-watch. His map was consulted as they searched for the grim old fortress at Queuleu where the enormous stores of high explosives, artillery ammunition, bombs, trench mortars, rifle grenades, flying pigs and "Jack Johnsons" were being collected for the counter-thrust against the expected initial attack of the new army that had just arrived to replace the exhausted troops in that sector of the front.

Lieutenant Armitage was strangely cool. He had set himself for this raid. He had been planning for it ever since Corporal Marks had first noticed the unusual road activity around the old Fort de Queuleu. It was he who had first interpreted its meaning. To-night was his night.

Open country suddenly appeared ahead, and then, below, the grim grey fortress walls came into view.

Lieutenant Armitage had raised his eye from the bomb-sight for a second, to see whether Tate was at his post, when suddenly the world went mad. Sound detectors had picked up the bomber's engines and the gunners who guarded the sacred precincts of the old fort had the range to a nicety. From every quarter came a barrage of steel and high-velocity shrapnel. It pinged, whined, screamed, screeched and clattered all around the big bomber. Townsend gasped and clutched his wheel as he fought the bounding concussions. Armitage gripped the sides as he bent over his sight. Inside, Alf Tate stood expectantly at the toggle-board, keyed up for his first big effort inside the rumbling carrier of death.

Ahead, Ryan was searching frantically for a target. His trigger-finger itched and trembled. He was half-frozen out there in the blast of the night air.



Suddenly he remembered the bombs. He turned and stared at the control-pit and its two passengers. Armitage was standing there with his gloved hand raised in preparation for releasing the first bomb. With a yell of protest he dropped the spade grips of his gun, leapt up on top of the turret cowl and bounded over into Armitage's seat.

Townsend dodged the flying feet of the crazy sergeant as, without any perceptible halt to find the narrow doorway, Ryan dove through into the fuselage. Armitage turned, startled.

"What the hell was that?" he gasped.

But Townsend had not time for chatter. He was too busy trying to keep the machine on an even keel and he couldn't hear Armitage anyway.

"Give me them toggles," roared Ryan, bursting down the cat-walk. "That's my job—and I'm doing it!"

Tate started to protest, but he was swept to one side, and Ryan stood at the board, his frozen fingers feverishly manipulating the toggles. He stared ahead to the dim form of Lieutenant Armitage. The bombing officer's hand went down and in the same instant Ryan yanked his first toggle. A great yellow egg squeaked and slid away into the night. Ryan laughed—the shrill laugh of a madman.

"We'll bomb Metz! We'll show 'em what the Coffin Crew can do!" he roared.

THE great bomber was almost dead over the grim fort now. The cat-walk climbed up again and Tate struggled to keep his feet. Marks' gun chattered and snarled.

Over they came again and roared nose down at the grey walls below. Down went Armitage's hand again. Up came a toggle and three 50-pounders slid away. A roar followed—the big 150-lb. bomb had found its billet. Over went the cat-walk again and the remaining bombs clattered in their guides. They levelled out, and down came Armitage's hand. Screech went a toggle and another big 150-pounder went out into the night.

For ten minutes they flew back and forth over the great fortress. For ten minutes Armitage glued his eyes to his sights and great globes of high explosive slithered through their guides and went spinning to earth where they crashed through masonry, wood, concrete and steel emplacements.

Still they had not found the heart of the arsenal. There was but one more bomb left—a great cylinder of rough yellow steel that hung in its rack, heavy with death and destruction.

Tate stared at it, and remembered the great bomb that Ryan had released before. How they needed that bomb now! Then, through a hail of steel and lead, the Handley blasted through for its final dash. Townsend watched his dials and the grim fortress below. Grimly, he concentrated every effort on the growing target. They must not miss. They couldn't go through that screen of death again to-night. They must find the dump without fail.

Armitage remembered that missing bomb, too. He swore within himself as he stared at the wires of his sight. He turned to see whether Ryan was on his toes and then snapped back to watch the earth below slide through his sight. Then came the crucial moment. Down came his hand, but no answering creak responded. He turned like a tiger to the doorway that led into the fuselage.

"What the—!" he started to bellow.

But something had caught in the rack and the bomb refused to slide out. Tate rushed forward and rattled the steel guides. Suddenly the bomb slid away. It was too late. They had passed over their objective. Ryan was speechless. He stared at Armitage who had leaped into the fuselage.

"You dirty hound—!" opened the officer.

But before he could finish his sentence, a roar like a million Niagaras billowed up from below. The Handley went over on her wing-tip and slid off into a sideslip. The three faces changed as if some unseen magician had made a dexterous pass before their eyes. Ryan's eyebrows went for altitude. Tate grinned from ear to ear and the astonished bombing officer stared in amazement at the rattling rack from where the last bomb had slid into the night.

They grabbed for supports as the big Handley slithered back to a fairly, normal flying position.

"Strewth!" chuckled Tate. "We've found it."

"With the last egg, too," breathed Ryan.

"That must be what they call delayed action," grinned Armitage.

CHAPTER VI
SHOT DOWN

BELOW, a massive cloud of blinding smoke billowed up. Ragged steel huts, pits of burning cordite, shattered concrete walls and splintered buildings made up a ghastly panorama of death and destruction.

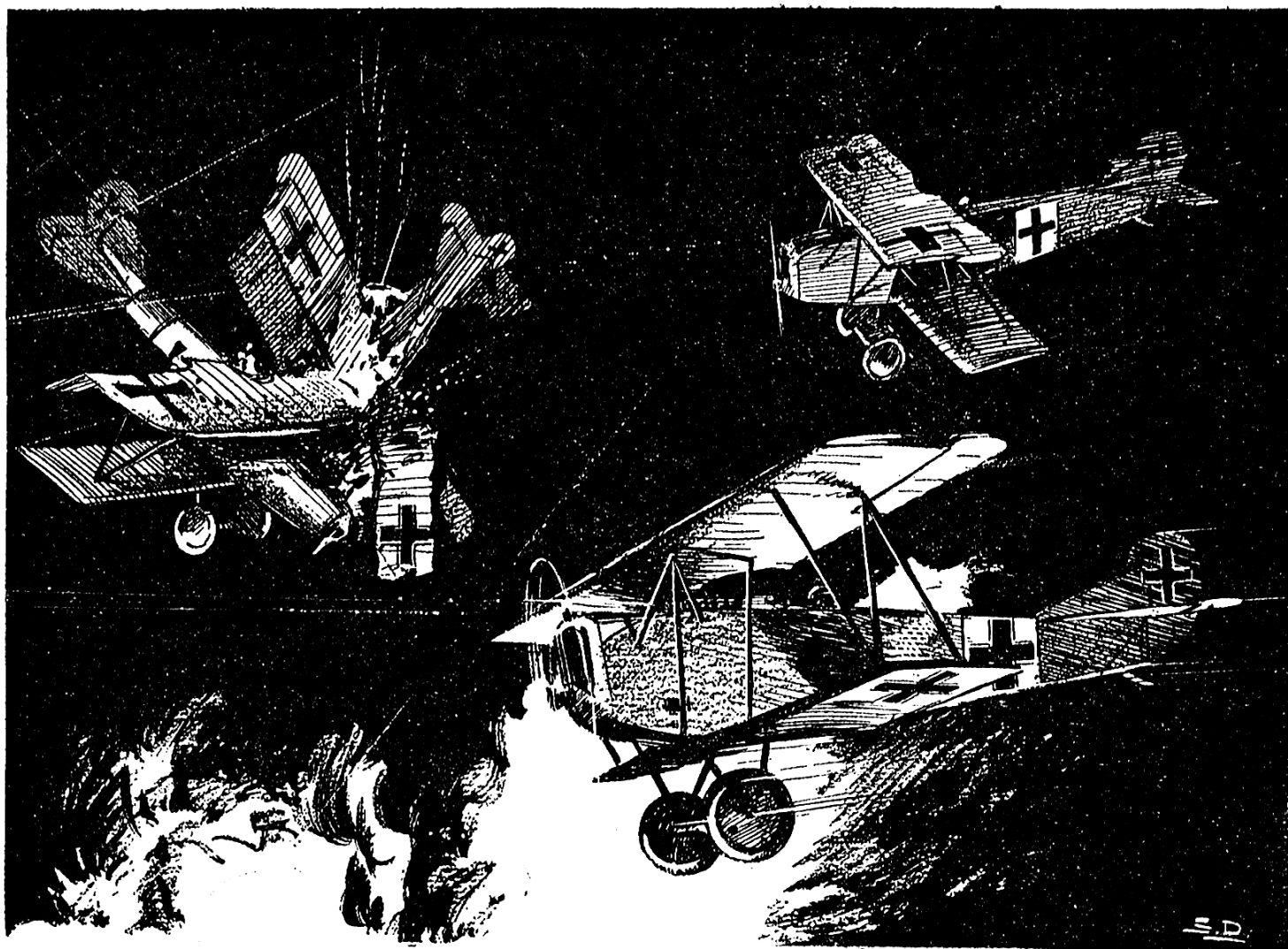
Flames shot up and died down as spluttering handfuls of cordite caught and flared up. Shells exploded and flew off into the black night above. Temporary sheds teetering on the edge of gaping craters tottered and fell into newly blasted holes, and grenades caught fire to explode and send showers of sparks, steel and stones in all directions.

But the battle was not over. Out from the north

streamed black-crossed vultures, their Spandau fangs set for a killing. Madmen at their controls saw the destruction and desolation below, and swore eternal vengeance. The work of nine solid months of toil, sweat and careful planning had gone up in one tremendous blast. There was nothing left to do but to ensure that the messengers of death in that accursed bomber were sent to their doom in the havoc they had created.

A silver sword blade of light splashed up and picked out the Handley Page. The Fokkers and Albatris sped in for the kill. From above and below they fanged and spat their leaden venom. Corporal Marks picked off one with a short burst, but six more took its place. His guns screamed and sprayed the dull sky with lead. He twisted and turned. His Scarff mounting swung to left and right. Drums were exhausted and tossed away and others went on with a metallic crash.

Ryan, his toggle job completed, let out a roar and dived through the doorway into the control-pit. Townsend screamed something as he leaped up on the cowling, kicked off a triplex windshield and pitched into



the forward turret. He reappeared in a second and was bellowing challenges and pouring a burst of mad fire into a Fokker that screamed up into a wild zoom.

On they roared towards their own lines, not many miles away, but far enough with those Fokker fiends that surrounded them. Marks fought with the grim fury of desperation. Ryan swore and shouted his way through another drumful of Lewis fire. His eyes blazed as his fingers pressed the steel triggers. He turned and grinned at the two officers who were helpless to do anything but hope. Townsend stared at his instruments and fought his control wheel. Armitage stood up, swearing like a trooper as he surveyed the battle raging all around them.

Wires sang, and then changed their note as Spandau bullets nicked and cut them. Great spruce struts splintered and collapsed. Fabric was slit and then ripped back as the slip-stream caught beneath the rents. It could not last much longer. Control wires went. An aileron flapped wildly. Steel-jacketed lead battered into radiators and ricocheted off steel cylinders.

Suddenly Townsend yelled: "The port engine's gone!"

He grabbed at the throttles in front of him. The big 'plane slewed around in a sickeningly flat turn.

"Shut off the other one and take a chance on gliding in," bellowed Armitage.

INSIDE the belly of the bomber, Tate sat against the bomb racks. He felt the sudden shutting off of the engines. Outside there was plenty of evidence that they were still far from home. The Coffin Crew were through. Nothing to do but sit there, stare at the rattling bomb-racks and wait. He picked the spot through which he would climb if there was enough strength left in him after the crash, and grabbed a pair of wire-cutters with stark expectancy.

Another black-crossed vulture roared down from above; a withering fire volleyed from its guns and the old Handley shuddered like a winged grouse. It would soon be over.

Ahead lay the twinkling flashes that marked the front lines. How far?

"Stick it, Graham," encouraged Armitage. "Hold her up as long as you can. Marks is keeping 'em off from the rear."

He slapped the coaming between the control-pit and the forward turret. Ryan turned from his red-hot guns.

"Come back in here!" yelled the bombing officer. "Get ready for a crash."

Townsend grinned.

"Crash be damned! I'll put this barge down as light as a feather," he snapped to himself.

"Bring your guns in, we might need them," ordered Armitage at the top of his voice.

Ryan turned a bar, lifted his guns from the mounting and tossed a couple of drums to Armitage. With the guns under his arm he ducked and crawled into the low companionway, and suddenly realised that Atkins still lay there.

But there was no time for sentiment. Ryan went down on his knees, edged the gun forward, placed his knee on Atkins' bloody chest and crawled over the stiffening body and into the control-pit.

"Poor old Harry," he grunted as they helped him through.

"Get inside with Tate until we get down. Looks like the front line—one side or the other, so be ready for anything when we get down."

The wind whistled shrilly in the flying wires as they glided down. Armitage stared over the side. He was tired and numb with cold. Bullets were still pecking at them from above and below. The faint bluish haze of the earth crept up to meet them.

Slowly the altimeter needle sank towards the zero mark. Townsend stared over the edge of the cockpit. His face was pinched with strained tension. His hand yanked something beside him, and garish lights glowed out from both wing-tips and rippled along struts and wires until the whole dark shape of No.11 stood out in bold relief. There was the ground below, pygmy figures with upraised arms crouching against a brick wall, shots blazing out and more fabric flailing.

Together Townsend and Armitage pulled back on the big wheel. It stuck—a control wire had jammed. They both pulled with every ounce of their strength. Then came the crash that snapped heads forward and bashed faces into the glass of instruments.

Ryan, peering through the cockpit door, saw the starboard engine rip loose from its bearers and hurl itself forward carrying struts, wires and wreckage with it. No.11's nose melted into a crumple of fabric and splintered wood. Behind, everything tore loose and shot forward with the roar of an avalanche.

CHAPTER VII A MEETING IN NO-MAN'S-LAND

EVERYBODY ALL RIGHT?" bellowed Armitage when the din had at last subsided.

There were several whispered replies and then a gruff warning:

"Easy, Phil. Not so loud. You'll have the whole German army down on us. We're in the Jerry lines, I think."

There was some tearing of fabric and two heads appeared out of the wrecked fuselage. Corporal Marks, his face splashed with blood, crawled along the top of the cabin and dropped to the ground.

"Come on, let's get off," advised Townsend, staring at a wrist-compass. "This way. Got those guns, Ryan?"

There were some more grunts and a couple of curses as a dark figure stumbled into a shell-hole.

"Follow me; this way," whispered Ryan. Here's an old communication trench. It ought to go up to somebody's front line."

Armitage, Tate and Townsend followed. Marks went back for a flashlight, wiping the gore from his eyes as he stumbled forward.

They waited for the young Australian and then turned to follow the Irishman. He rounded a bend in the battered trench, and almost immediately there came the sounds of a struggle. Townsend was first around the bend and ran into two struggling figures that punched, wrestled and cursed.

"What the devil!" snapped the Handley pilot, drawing his revolver.

"Who's that, Ryan?" bellowed Armitage.

Tate stepped around them and plunged headlong into the melee. Fists, feet, elbows and knees thudded into flesh. Grunts and more curses went up.

"Quiet! For Heaven's sake, quiet," pleaded Townsend.

The fight stopped as suddenly as it had started. Tate stared at Ryan. Ryan stared at the third figure of the three-cornered battle. The Irishman edged forward and stood squinting into the stranger's face. His fingers went slowly up to the man's chest. For half a minute they stood there, tense, staring like men who looked on ghosts.

Marks came around the corner of the battered trench. His torch glared out on the strange scene. Everyone blinked.

"Damn you, Marks," bellowed Townsend. "Put that light out!"

But the flash had been enough. Ryan tried to speak and finally gurgled:

"Pat! Why—you son of a gun!"

THE other man, dressed in the nondescript garb of a prisoner, with his number stencilled in white, Teutonic figures on a blue circle of cloth stitched into the breast of his coat, gasped, he flung his arms wide and exulted:

"Mike! If it isn't the auld devil himself!"

The rest of the Crew stared in amazement as the two men rushed towards each other, jabbering meaningless sentences.

Finally, Tate broke the spell:

"What's the blinkin' game, Ryan? Who's this bloke, anyway?"

Gradually the Irish sergeant realised that there were others in the trench.

"Who is he?" he gloated. "Why, isn't he me own brother, Patrick, the broth of a boy?"

"Your brother?" the two officers echoed.

"Yes, sor—my brother. He's escaped—I thought he was a Jerry hiding in here, and—well, I went for him, and we had a foine old family set-to."

"An escaped prisoner, eh?" muttered Armitage.

"Yes, sor," broke in the other Ryan. "I was at Metz, working in the arsenal, until last night. They've a lot of Allied prisoners up there. They think you won't bomb the place."

"You were at Metz, you say?" interrupted Townsend. "Then how did you get away?"

"I broke out last night, but they nabbed me again this morning, and locked me up in a small gaol in Gorze," explained the other Ryan.

"Then how did you manage to get here? Did you get out again?"

"Get out? No, sor. I was blown out!" grinned the Irish prisoner.

"What are you talking about man?" demanded the now hopelessly-puzzled Townsend.

"Well, sor, an hour or so ago, they were locking us up for the night when suddenly a bomb was dropped from an airypine and it blew out the corner of the lock-up. I went with it, and found myself outside and most of the guards and sentries knocked out. Most of

them were battered to bits. I had a map I had made while I was at Metz and was making for our lines when I saw your bit of trouble and was coming over to see if any of you was left alive. Thought you might need a hand, maybe."

The Coffin Crew stared at the man in amazement. Tate glanced across at Armitage. Sergeant Ryan looked over at the bombing officer. All three were thinking of an empty bomb-rack.

"You say you have a map?" inquired Townsend at last. "Do you know where we are then?"

"Sure and I do, sor. We're about two hundred yards from the front line. I slipped through the Jerry line while they were all potting at your airyplane with the big lights on it. That's what guided me to you.

"And thank heavens it did," was Armitage's fervent comment. "And now let's get moving for home. Can you lead the way, Ryan?"

"Can I? Just watch me, sor, I was taken somewhere along here. I know the layout like the palm of me hand. Just you follow me, sor."

"Wait a minute," ordered Townsend. "I want to straighten something out while we are all together. We might get lost in the coming shuffle."

The weirdly-assorted group halted and turned to the young pilot.

"Look here, Sergeant Ryan," went on Townsend. "Did you know your brother was a prisoner at Metz?"

The Irishman gulped, stared at the muddy trench floor, and screwed the toe of his boot into the earth.

"Yes, sor. My mother wrote and told me about it a week ago. One of the boys who had escaped a month

ago, wrote to her from Holland and let her know where Pat was."

"So that's why you acted so queerly when the Metz trip was first mentioned. But why on earth didn't you say something?" demanded Armitage.

"What good would that have done, sor?" replied the sergeant. "I couldn't let the Crew down, could I, sor. An' it wouldn't have made it any easier for you, or for me, if you'd known it was my own brother you'd likely to be blowing to bits."

"I understand, Ryan! What a devil of a predicament to be in," breathed Armitage. "Poor old Sergeant, you certainly were up against it."

"But you forgot all about it when we got to Metz," broke in Townsend. "What happened to you then, Ryan?"

"It was poor Harry, sor, that did it. I think I went mad when I put my hand on his chest and felt the bloody pulp there. I forgot all about my brother and just wanted to get square with the devils who'd done in young Atkins."

"But I still can't understand how your brother got out of that gaol at Gorze. Wonder who else was on a bombing trip to-night?" remarked Townsend.

Lieutenant Armitage grabbed him by the shoulder and started him down the old trench.

"You'll never know, old man," he said, with a wink at Sergeant Ryan—"that is, not until after the war. Let's get going."

And the Coffin Crew crawled out across No-Man's-Land and made for their own lines, led by a man who wondered what it was all about.

