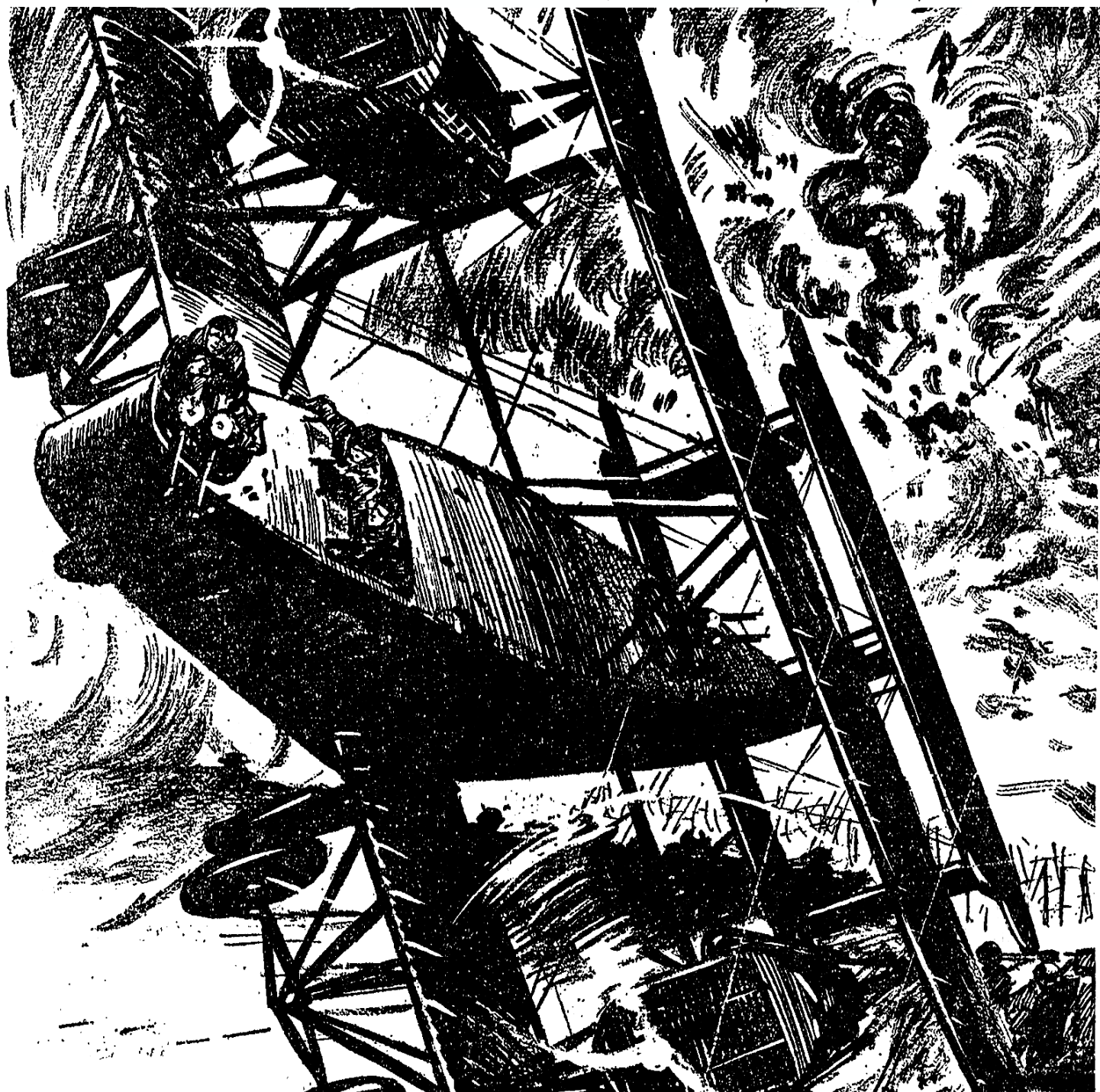


the **COFFIN CREW**



TARTAN FLIGHT

by **ARCH WHITEHOUSE**

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Into the Very Shadow of Death Flew the Coffin Crew, the Craziest Band of Warriors in the Independent Air Force, to Discover the Secret of that Sinister Mound of the Dead, Hill 60, and its Strange Effect upon Corporal Andy McGregor, Aerial Gunner!

CHAPTER I

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF ANDY MCGREGOR

WHEN IT WAS ALL OVER, the members of the Coffin Crew realised that Corporal Andy McGregor had had good reason for his actions, and of the three things that happened any one might have provided the clue to his strange behaviour.

First, there was a letter postmarked “Monymusk” which Lieutenant Townsend remembered was a small town near Aberdeen. Secondly, Andy had shown unusual interest in an American regiment that was heading for the front line and trench warfare training with General Gough’s Fifth Army. Andy had stood at the top of a sunken road that ran along the side of the Cassel aerodrome, and watched the column of tall young Americans who were heading for the fighting lines, eyes bright, heads erect and, to Andy’s way of thinking, carrying their rifles on the wrong shoulder.

Then there was the new officer, an American Air Corps captain, who had come up for duty with 109 Squadron of the Independent Air Force, and was acting as squadron recording officer to get acquainted at first hand with R.F.C. practice. His name was Wilbur J. Preston, and McGregor had taken a special interest in him from the day the Americans had tramped through towards Poperinghe.

But the Coffin Crew did not remember these trifling events when Andy went “barmy,” as Alfred Tate, the toggle-man put it. And that’s exactly what Andy did—went completely crazy when they flew over Hill 60 heading for the railway dump at Roulers.

Without a word of warning or a signal of any kind, Andy suddenly leaped to his feet in the front turret, swung his double guns around and began banging away at the ground, six thousand feet below. Both drums were blasted out, and the sky was etched in scarlet tracer that curled in crazy designs over the sable sky.

Armitage, the Canadian bomber officer sitting in the control pit with Lieutenant Graham Townsend, who was pilot, yanked himself up and peered below. Townsend whirled the great Handley Page back and forth to give Mac a better view of whatever it was he was firing at. In the rear turret, Corporal Arthur Marks swung his guns around, too, and tried to see what McGregor was strafing. He turned back, frantic and puzzled. There was not a Jerry ’plane within ten miles!

ARMITAGE turned and stared at Townsend: “What the devil’s he firing at?” he yelled.

Townsend shook his head and stared over the side again. The Scot still stood up in his front turret, his Black Watch kilt—which he refused to change for R.F.C. “breeks”—flapping in the slipstream beneath his short leather flying coat.

Armitage could stand it no longer. Slapping the cowl of the Handley’s gaunt snout to gain Andy’s attention, he began yelling. The Scot took no notice, rammed on two more drums and continued his mad display of tracer.

“The confounded idiot!” raved Townsend, “he’ll have the whole blinkin’ German Army on to us. Stop him, Phil!”

But Andy would not be stopped.

Brat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! sang the twin Lewis guns, spitting a stream of cupronickel at the earth below.

Then came the gusty reply of Ranting Rupert, the Ack-Ack gun that had been giving the Independent Air Force so much trouble of late.

Bong! Bong! Bong!

Three range-finding shots crashed out around them. One wing of No.11 went up and Armitage went sprawling across Townsend’s controls.

Bong! Bong!

Another splash of lemon-coloured flame and a broadside smack with an invisible sledge hammer knocked the big twin-engined bomber into a sickening side-slip.

The bomber officer scrambled back from Townsend’s wheel cursing and swearing with all the ardour of a Canadian backwoodsman.

“Mac! . . . Mac! . . . You infernal idiot! Stop that blasted firing!”

Bong! Bong! Bong!

A shower of shell splinters rained down on them, battering taut fabric like giant drumsticks. Townsend ducked, yanked the Handley back on its course and sought the highway that ran from Dixmude to Roulers.

"I'll knock his head off!" screamed Armitage, diving under the instrument board. "Giving the show away like that!"

He disappeared up the tunnel, and came out to find his head up against Mac's legs. His nose was rammed against the gleaming dirk that was stuffed into the Scotsman's stocking. He dropped on his chest and yanked at the capering legs in front of him. The gunfire ceased abruptly.

"Awa' mon!" screamed Andy, slapping at the octopus that had grabbed his calves. "Let me be, mon!"

Armitage crawled to his knees and hung on. Finally, he swung the Scot round and yelled at him.

"What the devil are you playing at, McGregor? Stop that firing!"

"Ah moost, sor," gasped Andy. "Let me be . . ."

Smack!

Armitage's short crushing hook came round and exploded on the little man's chin. He went down in a heap of greasy leather and dark green tartan.

"Sorry, old fire-eater," Armitage apologised, "but I had to do it. You'll feel better when you come round."

With a last glance at the unconscious gunner draped across his guns, the bomber officer crawled back into the control pit and resumed his seat beside the pilot.

"What was the matter with him?" bellowed Townsend.

"Don't know," answered Armitage with a shake of the head. "Let's get going before Jerry's tripehounds come up after us. Went crazy, I think."

Lieutenant Townsend was mystified and not a little worried. This was not the McGregor they knew, by any means. He steadied the Handley, glanced over the front turret where no alert Black Watch gunner now stood, and aimed the snout at Roulers.

DOWN inside the long black body, Sergeant Michael Ryan was squatting on the catwalk, his legs braced against the opposite bomb-racks. From his mouth, an upturned clay pipe, cold of bowl but comforting nevertheless, hung dejectedly. He was cold—it was always cold in there. His eyes flashed back and forth, first at the expressive feet of Arthur Marks on the rear gun platform, and then at the door which led into the control-pit up front.

Sitting opposite him was Alfred Tate, the Cockney toggle man. He, too, was watching Marks's feet. The pedal extremities of the Aussie gunner were reliable tell-tales of what was going on outside. Alf ran his fingers down inside the legs of his short flying boots and scowled. No puttees. They always made them take off the tight-binding leggings when they went on patrol as a preventative against frost-bitten feet. But Alf, like Sergeant Ryan, did not approve of this no-puttees business. What if you were taken prisoner? Wouldn't you look silly walking about a Hun prison camp without any puttees on?

Sergeant Ryan withdrew the comforting clay and pointed at the doorway that led into the front cockpit. Alf turned his head, too. They knew what had happened up in front, and were worried.

"That Jock," yelled Ryan. "There's something up with the laddie. He's never been himself for days now."

Tate crawled across the catwalk to hear better.

"He's seeing the banshees," yelled Ryan into his ear-flap. "The man sore needs a rest."

"Carn't make 'ead nor tail of'im, lately," agreed Alf, bellowing back.

"Went orf 'is onion, proper, didn't 'e?"

"There must be something worrying him, though," replied Ryan, shaking his head. "Andy's not the one to go off on a barney like that for nothing. But it was a crazy thing to do right then. We were just away past old Rupert, and then he must go and give the whole show away."

Bong! Bong! Bong! went Ranting Rupert below, angry at having missed old No.11.

The 'plane heeled up again, and the two toggle men went toppling down the catwalk. Alfred Tate came up with a thump against one of the racks and suffered a bash over one eye. He crawled to his hands and knees, a trickle of gore making a red track across his face and disappearing under his chin piece. Ryan was on his stomach staring up at Arthur Marks's feet.

"Look! Get up to that toggle-board!" he yelled.

Tate looked. Marks's feet had assumed the crouch of a boxer. There was the retching screech of a Scarff mounting and another Lewis went crazy. Corporal Marks was blasting the fabric off a Fokker D.7 that had slid out of the mist.

Tate and Ryan went blind for an instant. A silver glare from below leapt up and bathed the bomber in a garish sheen. It streamed through the grey-green belly of the Handley Page and splashed a grid design on the roof, painting the two men in bars of black and white.

"The toggles!" roared the Irish sergeant. "Mister Armitage's ready."

They scrambled up the dancing cat-walk and stumbled against the board that carried the release mechanism. They could see Armitage standing in the companionway between the tanks, bellowing and gesticulating.

No.11 had reached her objective, the rail-head at Roulers. It had come up to them suddenly as they sat and pondered over the strange behaviour of Andy McGregor. Three Fokkers were there to greet them—and there was no Andy McGregor in the front turret to return the fire. Townsend shook his head as he slithered out of the searchlight beam for an instant. They would miss McGregor's help, those cold, calculating bursts that spat out from his guns when Huns were in the air.

But Corporal Marks, at least, was already on the job. First his upper gun blasted out over the top plane. Then the tunnel gun spat out of the belly of the Handley. A Fokker in flames went screaming down the sky to bury its nose in a railway yard—a vivid torch for Armitage to set his sights on.

"Now for it!" barked Armitage, nodding to Townsend.

CHAPTER II

No.11 GOES INTO ACTION

WITH A LAST REGRETFUL LOOK at the empty forward turret, Townsend put the Handley into a dive. Armitage twirled the brass knob of his bomb sight and glanced at his stop-watch. With a sidelong glance down inside the fuselage, he caught a glimpse of Sergeant Ryan standing with his hand poised over Tate's shoulder.

Old No.11, every strut creaking and every wire singing its paean of war, went down the sky 'chute and nosed for the rail-head. Armitage crouched over the wires of his sights and flashed his hand down. Ryan smacked Tate across the shoulders and the little Cockney yanked two toggles.

Scrawnch! Scrawnch! went the 112-pounders out of their guides. The Handley gave a lurch with the release of the spinning missiles that almost sent Armitage over

the side. He swore and clung to the cowling. Up came the nose of the Handley again as the first two bombs billowed out.

Crump! Crump!

The bomber leaped under the concussion like a harpooned whale. A blinding glare of flame spat twice somewhere below. In the rear turret, Arthur Marks was holding off another Fokker that was lancing in with two scarlet fangs twinkling from its nose. He let go one burst at it and the lights went out. But almost immediately there came a choking cry of pain and Marks dropped heavily to the floor of the turret platform.

Creased!

The toggle men, hanging on as the Handley leapt over into a curling climb, watched Marks drop and roll out from the turret. The glare of a searchlight beam illuminated his gore-streaked face.

"Confound McGregor!" yelled Armitage. "Why doesn't he wake up and do something?"

Townsend was banging his free hand on the cowling: "Come on! Come on! Get rid of that damned stuff!"

Armitage wheeled and caught his meaning. He dived back to the bomb-sight and steadied himself as the bomber nosed down again.

The Fokkers were on their trail now—and there was no gunner to ride them off!

Armitage sighted his wires on the two piles of burning ammunition and flipped his arm down again.

Scrawnch! Scrawnch!

Two more giant eggs went trickling out and nosed down for Roulers. Armitage was watching over the tail even as his arm dropped. The Fokkers were diving into position.

Crump! Crump!

Again 240 lb. of splintering death smacked home. The blast threw No.11 over on to her side and Armitage flopped heavily into Townsend's lap. The slip saved his life, for, as he dropped, a burst of Spandau smashed through the struts and ripped out the instruments on his side of the panel.

"Stick it out!" yelled Townsend., "Get rid of it all!"

He was slithering out of the beam of another searchlight when something bobbed up in front of him.

"McGregor!" screamed Townsend and Armitage in unison.

The little Scot staggered up like a drunken man. He wiped the back of a gloved hand across his mouth and peered about him like a man in a daze.

"Come on Mac!" yelled Armitage, gripping the sides of the cockpit and sprawling across to the bomb-sight again. "Give it to 'em!"

Andy looked about him, at the blazing target below, at the men in the control pit, at the diving Fokkers.

Then with a sudden snarl, he whipped the double guns round on the Scarff mounting, and aimed them over the top plane. Townsend watched him with satisfaction, guiding the Handley with automatic movements.

Andy drew a bead on the nearest Fokker, and held it. Like a cobra he crouched and waited.

"Shoot—for God's sake, shoot, Mac!" roared Townsend.

"Give it to 'em, Mac!" added Armitage above the shrill scream of the Rolls-Royce engines.

But Andy was not to be hurried. He watched the dancing red tip on his wind sight and waited. At last the Fokker slewed into the ring. He pressed the triggers.

Brat-a-tat-tat!

That was all. One short burst—but it was enough. The Fokker pilot doubled up as though hit in the stomach with a sledge-hammer. He coughed once, fell over his stick and a dead hand guided the black scout into the earth a quarter of a mile away.

THE remaining Fokker dived and tried to come up from below, but he had Andy to reckon with now. Holding the gleaming guns with one hand, Andy signalled to Townsend with the other.

The pilot whipped the Handley over as though he were guiding a Camel. Andy braced himself, swung the Scarff mounting round and poured a short burst into the Fokker from above.

Another night-flying Fokker pilot died—with half a dozen 303's in his spine.

"Good work, Mac!" yelled Armitage, as Townsend slewed over and shot for the towering columns of smoke that climbed up from the wreckage around Roulers station.

No.11 was her old self again, except for the wounded Marks. Townsend watched Armitage as he flashed his hand up and down for a salvo of forty-pounders to clutter up the roadways.

Crunch! Bong! Crunch! Bong!

At last all the racks were empty and rattling their empty guides. With a scream the Handley Page slewed around, flung itself into a screening column of cordite smoke and headed north-east for Hooglege. It was no use trying to return the way they had come.

The Coffin Crew made some attempt to re-organise itself. Armitage wanted to crawl over the cowling and embrace Andy, but that Highland worthy was busy snarling across his sights, still looking for Fokkers. Under the gleam of the exhaust ports, his eyes held a strange glint—more like the flinty stare of a man insane than the excited flash of a fighter's eyes.

Inside, Ryan and Tate were crawling along the catwalk towards Marks. The Australian corporal was still unconscious. His helmet had been slashed open across the top, and tufts of sticky hair could be seen along the slashed edges.

In a minute they had him on his back on the catwalk. Ryan's coat came off and went under the corporal's head. Out of the lower corner of his tunic he ripped a tan-covered first field dressing, and while he tenderly removed Marks's helmet, Tate bit the end off the dressing and pulled out the billowing white bandages and the pinky-white pad of gauze. They slapped it across the "creaser" and Tate went back to the cupboard and got the brandy that Armitage had bought and put there for just such an emergency as this.

No.11 was skating in and out in her attempt to evade the defenders and Ryan had difficulty in keeping his hand under Marks's head while he poured a few gulps down the Australian's throat. Tate watched the precious liquid trickle across Marks's face with anxiety. Finally, he could stand it no longer. With a sweep of his gloved forefinger, he curled it under Marks's chin, scooped up a drop or two and ran it across his tongue.

"Blimey!" he husked under his breath. "It's almost worth a creaser to get a swig of this poured down your bloomin' neck!"

BUT all was not yet over.

Lieutenant Townsend shot No.11 over Staden and then headed due west on a course that would bring him across the lines at the intersection of the Yser. A few desultory shots spat up at them, but the worst of the clamour had now been left behind.

Both Townsend and Armitage, snuggling back in their cold cockpit, watched the Scotch gunner up front, as he crouched behind his spade-grips like a skinny-necked eagle, peering down at the shell-churned line around Hill 60.

"What the devil's he looking at now?" mused Townsend. "Must be seeing things."

Armitage, too, was puzzled. "Something seems to be worrying him, all right. I wonder . . ."

At that moment, McGregor jerked upright, slewed round in his turret and gripped the top of the Scarff ring. He reminded Townsend of one of those grim gargoyles that scowl down from the towers of Lincoln Cathedral.

"Hi, Mac!" shouted Armitage. "What is it—a Fokker?"

The Scotsman suddenly wheeled on them and began to point towards Hooge and Hill 60.

"Down there, sir—go down there!" he screamed above the concerted roar of the Rolls-Royces.

"Can't!" bellowed Townsend. "Can't go back the same way we came in—you know that."

McGregor could not hear what the pilot was saying, but he well knew what the objections would be. But still he flung his left hand out, stabbing it down, again and again, in imperative command.

The pilot and bombing officer exchanged puzzled glances through their goggles.

Finally, Armitage gave Townsend a nod of assent. It was as much as to say: "Go on, let's see what his game is."

With a shrug of resignation, Townsend wheeled the big bomber over and pointed its nose at the grim hill that had seen the deaths of nearly 200,000 brave men. Andy's parchment face relaxed its tension and, without taking his eyes off the grim mound, he swung the mounting round slowly and crouched behind it.

"Is the damned fool going to start shooting again?" growled Townsend to himself. "If he is, I'm not waiting. No sense in putting your hand out and asking for it. Damned tracers'll give us away beautifully."

They tore on unhindered through a fleckless sky. In a few minutes they were racing across St. Jean and leaving the battered ruins of Ypres under their right wing-tip. Then came Hooge and Hill 60. They were flying at about six thousand feet and the terrain below stood out boldly with its chalk-banked trenches showing up like festering scars on a blackened body.

Then, once more, Andy McGregor went mad. His guns, gleaming with double drums, swung their glistening snouts down towards the ground. The triggers were pressed as he crouched over the right sight, his gaunt chin resting on his right fist. Both Townsend and Armitage started in alarm as they caught sight of the hate-frenzied face behind the guns that were now trained dead on the sharply defined German trenches that opposed the British at Hill 60.

Brat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Again there came that mad hail of gunfire, an ear-splitting chatter of bucking Lewises that was kept up until both drums were exhausted.

Then, with a snarl, Andy ripped off the empty drums, grabbed two more, slapped them on the pegs and yanked both cocking handles back twice.

Again the glistening snouts went down and sprayed the saffron earth below with a stream of spinning lead that had lost all its force by the time it hit the ground.

Another pair of drums exhausted, Andy yanked them off and sent them crashing to the floor of the turret as he sought for more.

"The man's as mad as a hatter," yelled Townsend. "Can't you do something about it?"

But Armitage's reply, if he made one, was drowned by the roar of Ranting Rupert replying in full measure.
Bong! Bong! Bong!

The first shell blinded them by its brilliance. It belched out its yellow yolk about thirty yards in front of them and sprayed their whole frontal area with a hurricane of splinters. Two struts disappeared as though sliced by a knife, one prop., a chunk bitten off one of the tips, started to whistle, and the Handley vibrated madly until Townsend yanked the throttle back and eased the engine down. The wicked vibration softened to a tingling purr that ran along the main spars and down the steel longerons.

"I told you!" yelled Townsend, whirling round on Armitage. "That damned fool's just about bought it for us, this time!"

Bong! Bong! Bong!

Slashed flying wires flailed the taut fabric of the wings. The two severed struts flapped back on their base lugs and added to the nerve-wracking din.

"Can you make it?" yelled Armitage. "Just about. Damn good thing we've got some height. Have to ease that port engine or she'll chew herself out and take the whole ruddy wing with her."

They slithered off on a wing-tip and slid out of range, a little closer to Hill 60. Ranting Rupert coughed harmlessly astern, and red carnations of other ground guns were blooming well off to their right.

"Hope McGregor's satisfied now," grumbled Townsend, as he set himself to the task of coaxing old No.11 back to the aerodrome more or less in one piece.

CHAPTER III THE MYSTERY OF MCGREGOR

THEY GOT BACK, SOMEHOW. How, no one knew. Townsend, with his delicacy of touch, brought No.11 in and dabbed her down as gently as possible. The petrol-tin ground flares were glowing and sending up their pall-like streamers of stinking black smoke.

"If I ever go through another night like that, I'm transferring to the Tanks," growled Townsend. "Of all the crazy idiots, that man McGregor's the worst!"

Armitage shook his head as he watched the ground crew manoeuvre the small tractor out to tow No.11 in. McGregor's behaviour had completely baffled him. Hitherto the little Scot had always been the sanest man aboard when things went wrong, cold and dour however hot the battle. But to-night—well, it defeated Armitage.

The trap-door was opened below and the narrow metal ladder placed against it. Ryan and Tate were dragging Marks up the catwalk, though the Aussie corporal fumed and protested that he was unhurt and needed no help. They rammed his rubber-soled flying boots down the trap and anxious grimy hands stretched up to take him.

Major McKelvie, his stick tucked under his arm, was among the first to greet them. His practised eye took in the slashed prop-tip and the broken struts. He knew No.11 had "been through it" again. He helped get Marks on to a stretcher and saw him off to the M.O.'s hut.

"E's only got one wot parted 'is 'air," explained Alfred Tate, coming down the ladder stiff-legged. "Won't 'ave to use no Danderline on 'is curly locks next week."

But Ryan was silent, and stood at the bottom of the ladder waiting for the others.

Armitage came first and, with a word or two to McKelvie, stared around the group that had gathered under the snout of No.11. He caught sight of Captain Preston, the American, an interested spectator of the proceedings.

Next down the ladder was Townsend, and finally the stocky legs of Andy McGregor came through the trap-door.

As McGregor's feet reached the ground, Townsend grabbed his shoulder and swung him round.

"Now then, McGregor!" he began, no longer able to suppress his anger, "What the devil have you got to say for yourself? What sort of game do you think you were playing up there?"

McGregor pulled himself to attention, saluted, and then, without a word, stepped back two paces, turned on his heel and stalked away towards his Nisson hut. For the first time in the squadron's memory he even forgot to take his beloved guns across to the armourer's shed.

"McGregor!" burst out Townsend again.

"Let him go," whispered Armitage, "we'll get to the bottom of it later. Come on, let's make out our reports."

He glanced towards the Major, standing aloof and silent on the fringe of the gathering, and the C.O. turned and joined the two officers as they made their way to the Recording Office. Major McKelvie was completely mystified by Townsend's sudden outburst. Never before had it been necessary to emphasise differences in rank to maintain discipline among the Coffin Crew, but McKelvie was too understanding a C.O. unnecessarily to interfere with his officers.

The squadron tractor began tugging and puffing, and old No.11 was towed inside, where a dozen mechanics awaited her with tools, spare parts, fuel and fabric to repair the damage and have her ready for her next midnight foray.

"MOST amazing thing you ever saw, sir," Armitage began, as the three officers entered the Recording Office. "We were no sooner over Hooge than Mac went completely off his head."

"Off his head?" broke in McKelvie.

"Yes, sir, completely crazy—started blazing away at something below. We thought he'd seen a Jerry of some sort, but there wasn't a thing in sight except the guns blasting at Hill 60."

Captain Preston came in and shut the door behind him. McKelvie nodded casually to him and he sat down, listening with evident interest to Armitage's strange story.

"Then, before we knew what had happened," Armitage continued, "Rupert opened up and had a perfect range on the first salvo. I thought that was strange, but, before we could do anything about it, a couple of Fokkers came out of nowhere, just as if they had been hanging there waiting for us. Queerest thing

I ever saw. We expected them over Roulers, but, Jove! they were on us before we were two miles inside the lines."

"I'm not surprised," growled McKelvie, "if McGregor started giving the show away like that with tracers. Easiest thing in the world at night to pick a target from tracers. They know how long they burn and at what point they die out. Just check the two and you have the height range at least. If the fire has any angle at all, the rest is easy. Besides," he added, "firing into German lines gives you away at once. They know you are British going over and not one of their own machines coming back."

"But I stopped him once, sir," broke in Armitage with a grin. "Clipped him on the jaw and put him out for a minute or two. Then more Fokkers, tripe-hounds or something, came in again over Roulers and Marks stopped one. Just then Mac came out of his stupor and potted two of them—he's entitled to those, by the way—and we thought he'd got over his fit."

McKelvie listened in amazement as Townsend and Armitage went on with the story. Captain Preston, too, put in a few questions, inquiries that might be expected from a man who was new to the game but anxious to understand what all the fuss was about.

"Hm!" remarked McKelvie, when Armitage had finished. "Wonder what's behind it all? McGregor's not the sort of man to do things like that without reason, though, as a matter of fact, I've noticed he's been behaving rather queerly for some days. Hm-m! Hooge . . . Hill 60," he went on. "Now, if my memory's correct, there are no Scottish divisions up there now. They are all down near Lille, so it couldn't be that he's got it into his head that he's helping some of his pals out. Sort of crazy thing he might do, you know."

"Ryan did tell me that McGregor had a letter from Scotland a couple of days ago," broke in Townsend. "Perhaps he's had some bad news that's affected him in some way."

At this point Captain Preston broke into the conversation.

"Look here," he suggested, "why not let me have a word with this man in the morning? As you probably know, I've had some experience in handling men and he may be more inclined to open up to me as an outsider, if it's some personal matter, than he would to either of you as his officers."

"What do you think, Armitage?" inquired McKelvie. "You know McGregor—is the idea worth trying?"

"I don't like the idea of anyone else butting into a Coffin Crew matter," snapped Armitage, moving

over to one of the rough deal tables to make out his bombing report, "but if Captain Preston thinks he knows the man better than we do, why let him go ahead."

"Anyway, we're all probably making a mountain out of a mole-hill," remarked Townsend, who was ever ready to overlook slips made by the gunners under him.

"I don't think so," concluded Major McKelvie. "I know McGregor, and I know that something very much out of the ordinary must have occurred for him to stage a scene like that. There's more behind Hill 60 than a few guns and a regiment or two of gravel-crushers. And I wouldn't mind laying a fiver that it's a man in uniform, and I don't mean a kilt, either. Good-night, gentlemen."

And with that cryptic remark Major McKelvie went out into the night and left his Recording Officer to take care of the bombing report. A few minutes later he was in the sick-bay talking to the M.O. and the sore-headed Corporal Marks.

CHAPTER IV IN THE GUNNERS' HUT

NEXT MORNING, THINGS WENT ON at Cassel as though nothing unusual had happened. The S.E. outfit on the other side had a long daylight raid to escort. They came back reporting three Huns down and the loss of one machine which had crashed on top of a Belgian church. The flight of Bristol Fighters did a highly dangerous photography show with fair success, and another group was standing by for a promised balloon strafe at Passchendaele. In one corner a Fee, painted black, was being groomed to slip across and pick up a spy who had gone over three nights before in a spherical balloon with a favourable wind. All was grist that came to the Independent Air Force mill.

By noon the Handleys were trim and ready for the scheduled raids on various sectors of the German back areas. Even old No.11 was in place, sporting a new prop., several glistening struts and a few more daubed patches.

The noon mess bugle brought out the gunners who had been on No.11. Ryan, still stiff-legged and bleary-

eyed, waddled across to the Sergeants' Mess in quest of something to "buck him up." As he ambled down the cinder pathway he was met by Captain Preston. They exchanged active service salutes, which meant they stabbed at their forelocks with crooked forefingers and let it go at that.

"Oh, Sergeant," said Preston, "where is this Nisson hut of yours . . . where you gunners park?"

"Hut? Oh, yes, sor. It's the end one in this row. We're by ourselves, you know, sor."

"Thanks. Is McGregor in there, do you know?"

"Andy's there, sor. But he isn't what you could call matey this morning, sor. Can't get a civil word out of him, an' that's the truth, sor."

"Never mind. I just want a word with him. Anyone else there?"

"Only Donnegal from No.9, sor."

WHEN Preston entered the gunners' hut there was no one there but McGregor. The little Scotsman was sitting on the edge of his bed, fully dressed and swinging his army dixie between his bare knees. His knife, fork and spoon were stuffed into the top of his gaiters.

"Hello, McGregor," greeted Preston, walking in and closing the creaky door behind him. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Andy started gingerly to get up and stand to attention, but a friendly gesture from Preston put him back on the edge of the bed.

"Ah'm na sae good this mornin' sir," whispered Andy. "It's a vurra bad nicht Ah've gone through."

"Well, don't worry about it. You did your best. They're giving you credit for two Huns, I understand," went on Preston.

Andy did not answer. He continued to stare at the floor, still swinging the shining dixie between his legs. Two more Huns did not mean much to him just then.

"What's ta-nicht, sir?" he asked finally, looking up.

"Back area bombing on railway between Courtrai and Roulers," Preston replied. "The British are expecting a heavy attack on the Hooze front tomorrow morning and are trying to spike it by holding up the reinforcements and ammunition. No.11's to go alone on the show."

"A push at Hooze?" gasped Andy. "Ye mean that it'll start ta-morrer?"

"More than likely, McGregor," agreed Preston.

"You'll probably be able to nail a lot of them as they move in from the support trenches."

"Aye!" nodded Andy, despondently. "Muster

Aaa-rmitage and Muster Toonsend," he went on, "are they mad at me still?"

"No," consoled Preston. "Don't worry about that. Naturally, they were a bit sore because you drew the Archie fire, but they'll have got over it by to-night."

For a minute, Andy raised his head and stared at the gleaming yellow window. A light was beginning to dawn on him.

"That's richt. I shouldna done it. Ah drew the fire o' Rantin' Rupert. Ye should ha' tauld me, Muster Preston."

"Now, don't be foolish, McGregor. Those Huns would have dropped down on you, anyway, and as for the Archie, it was just a lucky break that they got your range so quickly," argued Preston, moving over closer to McGregor.

"Ye doon't mean thot, Muster Preston," accused Andy. "Ye ken what Ah deed. I shouldna done it. Ah must see Muster Toonsend, an' explain."

"Don't be a fool, McGregor," growled Preston. "They wouldn't see your side of it. They only think of themselves. You should feel responsible for—well—you know who for, and do what you can for them. In your position you can do more, at a pinch, than a whole regiment. Think it out. Are you going to let him down?"

McGregor's face was that of a man in torment. His head went down. His shoulders heaved and he let his dixie go clanging to the floor. There was silence in the hut.

"Listen," broke in Preston at last. "Leave it to me. You carry on as before. Every chance you get, blast hell out of that area and I'll do the explaining to Townsend and Armitage. I'll make up some yarn that will excuse you. We'll only have to pull it once or twice more and they'll be out and back in rest billets."

FOR several minutes Andy sat silent, a look of concentration on his set features. Finally he got up, grabbed his dixie and turned to the American.

"You're richt, sir, Ah'll hammer hell oot o' 'em. You tell the tale to Muster Toonsend for a few days, an' Ah'll do ma best."

"I'll see to that, Mac, don't you worry. I'll tell 'em that you're sure you've seen some Germans starting a mine sap, and you think they're trying to blow up your old regiment. That'll satisfy them, I think."

"Ay, maybe, but yer ken the Watch is noo behind Loos?"

"Never mind that. I'll fix it. You keep your mouth

shut and don't answer any questions unless they put you on the carpet officially."

McGregor went out first and cut across the aerodrome to the mess tent. Preston stayed behind a minute or two and finally strolled over to the Officers' Mess where he sat down next to Townsend.

"Just had a talk with that Jock gunner of yours, Townsend," he opened. "Quite a character, isn't he?"

"A damn fine man to have up front, Preston. As good as they come," said the Englishman. "But did you get anything out of him about that crazy show of his last night?"

"Nothing very definite," parried the American, "but he seems to have an idea that the Jerries are attempting to mine Hill 60, and thinks he saw them actually working on the sap-head. I gathered he's under the impression that they're trying to blast his old regiment out of it—and wanted to give them a helping hand."

Townsend whirled around in his chair: "Good Lord! Then why the devil couldn't he say so? Where's McKelvie?"

"Easy, Townsend," protested the American, surprised by the sensation his "news" had created. "I only got that impression from what he said. There's nothing certain about it."

"But, damn it all, man! It's devilish important! If the Germans are going to have another bang at Hill 60, the Red Tabs ought to know about it. You don't know Mac. If he thinks he's seen a mine-sap, you can bet your last shilling he has. He knows enough about trench formations to spot a mine head when he sees one."

CHAPTER V THE MINE ON HILL 60

ARMITAGE WAS IN THE C.O.'S OFFICE discussing the coming night's raid with McKelvie when Townsend, having shaken off Captain Preston and his repeated protestations, burst in through the door. The two men listened in silence until the excited pilot had finished his account of Andy's discovery on Hill 60 and then McKelvie strolled casually across the room, closed the door and turned to the two officers.

"Now we seem to be getting somewhere," he said, quietly, "and for the first time in the last twenty-four hours you're showing a little sense in this matter. No, don't misunderstand me," he went on, as both Townsend and Armitage showed evident signs of interruption. "You were perfectly right in tackling McGregor as you did—it was your duty to do so—but it ought also to have been obvious to you both that there was something more behind the whole business than a sudden attack of craziness on McGregor's part.

"Where you really fell down on the job," continued McKelvie, "was in letting Preston talk to Andy. One of you should have done that—if all I hear of the comradeship of the Coffin Crew is correct—and by not doing so and getting to the bottom of the matter you've made matters very much more difficult than they would have been. Because, gentlemen," McKelvie's face grew suddenly stern, "while McGregor certainly never saw any signs of it, there does happen to be a new mine at Hill 60!"

Armitage and Townsend exchanged amazed glances and turned in obvious bewilderment to McKelvie.

"Yes, there's a new and very dangerous mine there," the C.O. went on, "but, as I say, McGregor never saw it last night or any other night—because it was only started early this morning. The information came to me a few hours ago from Intelligence and we have since confirmed the fact and spotted the loads of T.N.T. being brought up to charge it."

"Holy Smoke!" gasped Townsend, "then how the deuce could McGregor have known anything about it? And if he didn't, what's his idea in making up a story like that?"

"That, I think, is what you might now try and find out for yourselves," was McKelvie's reply. "Oh, and by the way, I shouldn't say anything to Captain Preston about our chat or your visit to McGregor, if I were you—might hurt his feelings, you know. No doubt he meant well. That's all. Good-night."

The door slammed, and two astonished officers were left staring at each other. For several seconds they stood silent, gathering the import of McKelvie's parting words.

"A hint," suggested Armitage, at length.

"A definite hint," confirmed Townsend.

"Let's go and get it out of Mac," finished Armitage, making for the door.

THEY found the gunners' hut, dimly lit with army issue candles stuck in shiny petrol tins that had been

cut in half to make reflectors. Tate was sitting on his bed, a doubtful-looking structure built of wood from engine crates, F.E. tail-booms and strips of green canvas that looked suspiciously like the covers that were usually placed over the blades of mahogany props. The little Cockney was in his underwear, but he still wore his shapeless helmet and one flying-boot. He sat with his mug cupped in his hands. Over in a corner, Sergeant Ryan was leaning on an open window-sill staring out across the fields. He had taken his flying-coat off, but still wore his long flying-boots, which billowed down in shapeless rolls about his calves.

Pacing up and down the centre of the room was Andy McGregor, still wearing his bonnet and kilt. He had taken his tunic off and was in his shirt sleeves. His dirk gleamed in the half-light of the candles as he strode back and forth like some caged animal.

There were no other gunners there. Marks was in the sick bay. Donnegal and Murphy were on a show with No.19.

As the two officers entered the hut Andy whirled round upon them. It was almost as though he had been waiting for them.

"I never thought about Rantin' Rupert," he cried. "Believe me, Muster Toonsend, sir, I'd clean forgotten all about that gun!"

"All right, Mac, all right," soothed Townsend. "I believe you, but we want to get this thing straightened up once and for all."

"I shouldna done it, if I'd remembered, sir, but that Captain Preston had me fair crazy with worry and I just clean forgot."

Armitage and Townsend exchanged significant glances at the mention of Preston's name.

Then the bomber officer turned again to the distressed McGregor.

"Sit down, Mac," he suggested. "Let's get this straight right from the beginning. We may be able to help you."

Andy sat down, his brawny knees flashing beneath his kilt. Phil Armitage drew out a kit bag and sat on it. They motioned Tate and Ryan to come up, too. A couple of ammo, boxes provided seats for all.

"First of all, Mac, tell us what you were firing at down there on Hill 60," opened up Townsend. "Tell us the truth now, and we'll see you don't suffer. You should have told us right from the start."

"Ay, Ah noo," agreed Andy, dropping his head into his hands. "Ah should hae told ye."

They waited patiently for him to begin. Finally

Andy raised his head, turned and reached back behind his bed and drew out his knapsack. From it he brought out a letter, addressed to him in shaky but clear handwriting.

"This is whut staarted it," he began, holding it out in front of him and staring at the postmark. "From ma mither in Monymusk. It's aboot ma brither, Bruce."

"Your brother," snapped Townsend. "I never knew you had a brother, Mac. What regiment's he in?"

"Ay, that's it," continued Andy. "The lad's bin awa' from hame for years . . . in the States."

"You mean in the United States?" broke in Armitage. "Where does he live?"

"Bruce went tae New York, and stayed there wie a fine concern an' was gettin' along vurra weel. He's a braw lad, sir."

"Well, what happened?"

"The war . . . in Amurrica. The United States came in as ye ken, and ma brither joined up wie a New York regiment. He didna tell me a worrud. Ma mither sends me a letter saying Bruce has come over wie the Amurricans and is somewhere in France. Then one day this Captain Preston coom here. He was a nice laddie and quite chatty, like. He asked me aboot the trenches and lots o' things, an' Ah takes a bit o' a fancy tae him.

"One day I ask him if he knows aboot ma brither's regiment, and he tells me that the division he's in is up in this sector. Ah'm surprised, but he says that they're a-helpin' the British behind Hooge. But that isna a' there was tae it."

"But where's all this leading to?" broke in Armitage. "It's quite true that a couple of American divisions are getting trench training with our men and that the 29th, a New York outfit, is up there somewhere. But how does that affect you?"

"Ah, weel," went on Andy. "That's what Ah thought at first, but Muster Preston he says things that makes me feel bad, vurra bad, sir. He said the English had pulled oot o' a bad sector and left it tae a lot of green Amurrican troops who hadna been properly prepared for trench warfare. A lot o' nasty things, sir, aboot how the English had quit and left them tae hold the whole Prussian Guard division at Hill 60. He said ma brither would probably be killed quick oop there."

"That's a damned lie!" snorted Townsend. "The English are still there, helping the ruddy Yanks all they can, and taking their turn in supports, second line, and up front. It would be suicide to go out and leave those new troops there like that. Preston ought to know

better than to talk such rot. Trying to show off his knowledge, I suppose.”

“Ah,” agreed Andy, “but Ah didna think o’ that. All Ah thot aboot was ma brither Bruce. That’s why Ah’ve been firing at the Jerry line behind Hill 60 every time Ah gets a chance. It wasna because Ah wanted tae do anything agin orders, sir, or tae get the crew into danger. Ah wanted tae help him an’ the Amurricans oot all Ah could. It was wrong, Ah ken that noo.”

“WHEW!” puffed Armitage. “So that’s what’s been worrying you, eh?”

“Aye. An’ it breaks ma heart tae think of that braw lad up there wie the Amurricans. I saw him a few days ago, passin’ through. He looked gr-r-rand, sir. A fine braw lad, and Ah couldna think o’ him being up there wie’out some help, if what Muster Preston had said was true.”

“You saw him? Did you speak to him?” asked Townsend.

“Aye, Ah saw heem. A gr-r-rand lad he was, too, sir, but Ah didna get a chance tae speak tae him. He didna see me. Somehow, Ah didna want him tae see me in ma kilt. It would hae made him—well, sir, ye ken what the sight and the swagger o’ the kilt does tae a Scotsman, and Ah wanted him tae be a good Amurrican soldier.”

“I know,” snapped Armitage, leaping to his feet. “Mac’s right. The Americans up there in front of Hooge and Hill 60 are in a tough spot, but it’s no fault of our men. The Yanks are in the war and they’ve got to take their chance with the rest of us now, but there’s no reason in the world why any outfit should have to go into the line for the first time and face the prospects of a Jerry mine, and that’s what’s going to happen to them unless we stop that shaft.”

“Jove, that’s right,” agreed Townsend.

Ryan and Tate edged in closer.

“Then there is a mine being sunk oop there, sir?” asked Andy in surprise. “I thought Captain Preston was just a-makin’ it up as a kind of blind for me!”

“Oh, that was the idea, was it?” replied Armitage, thoughtfully. “Well, as it happens, there is a mine there, Mac, and they’re bringing up the T.N.T. for it at this very moment. If we can nail it before it goes up, there’s a big chance that they’ll never try it again.”

“McKelvie will have to let us,” snapped Townsend. “Are you game, men?”

“Let’s go now!” offered Ryan.

“Book me in, sir,” said Tate.

“No, not to-night. Let’s wait until to-morrow night when there will be more evidence to work on. How about a rear gunner, Marks won’t be fit yet?”

“I’ll get one,” Armitage decided. “And he’ll go if I have to go to General Pershing for the authority.”

“General Pershing?” Townsend queried.

“Yes. Our rear gunner on this trip will be Captain Preston. It’ll give him an idea of what this war is really like and show him that the Coffin Crew are quite able to manage their own affairs without interference from outsiders.” The assembled members of the Coffin Crew gave vent to a low rumble of agreement.

“He’ll go, all right,” went on Armitage. “He’s up here to learn something about aerial warfare, and he can’t learn it sitting in an Orderly Room reading reports. We’ll give him a chance of some first-hand information, right from the rear-turret of a Handley Page. And we’ll also teach him not to spoil damn good aerial gunners!”

Later, when McKelvie was acquainted with the situation and the plans of the Coffin Crew for the morrow, the opposition that Armitage expected to his proposal to enlist Captain Preston was not forthcoming. In fact, Major McKelvie’s only comment was a chuckle and the rather cryptic remark, “Remember to bring your rear gunner back with you—we may be wanting him again very shortly.”

CHAPTER VI

A RECRUIT FOR THE COFFIN CREW

THE MEMBERS OF THE COFFIN CREW were up bright and early the next day—long before mid-day, in fact. No.11 was being prepared for the mad trip from the minute the day-squad of mechanics reported on the tarmac. Armitage and Townsend were busy in the hangar office working out a compass course. Ryan and Tate were superintending the loading and fusing of the special bombs that would be carried. Even Major McKelvie was on hand in his university blazer, khaki slacks and a big woollen scarf.

McGregor, blissfully happy over his return to the fold and the sharing of his secret burden, had no desire to mingle with the crowd in the hangar as yet. Few knew just what was in the wind, and his dressing down

of the night before was still the topic of whispered conversation on the wing engines and down in the dim caverns of Handley Page cabins.

The American officer reported to the orderly room at the usual time in the morning and prepared to take over his routine duties when Major McKelvie came in, puffing away at his pipe as usual.

"Good morning, Preston," he greeted, flicking over a sheaf of the day's orders. "Oh, by the way, Preston, you've had Lewis gun instruction and firing, haven't you?"

"Lewis gun, sir?" replied Preston. "Why, yes. Had a lot of it, and would have gone on through if they hadn't discovered that something was wrong with my heart, or lungs, or something. Never make a pilot, they said, and gave me one of these damnable desk jobs."

"Well," went on McKelvie with a reflective air, "how would you like to make a trip up the line to-night as a rear gunner? We need one on a small job, and it struck me that the experience might help you."

Preston searched McKelvie's face for several seconds before answering. A steely glint flashed in his eyes as he replied.

"Do you know, sir, I think that might be rather a good idea. I'd like to try it. The experience should be worth quite a lot to me."

McKelvie was puzzled. The man actually seemed pleased at the proposition.

"It's not compulsory, you know," he explained, "but since you are up here to get some knowledge of our working methods, I thought it a good chance for you to gain some actual experience. They're not going over far."

"I'd be glad to try it, sir," Preston answered at once. "What time am I to report?"

"Oh, drop around about 11:30 and report to Lieutenant Townsend on No.11. Better take the rest of the day off if you're going to fly to-night. It'll just be a gunner's job so there's nothing for you to worry about."

"What's the show, sir?"

"I'd like to keep it quiet for a time, Preston, if you don't mind," replied McKelvie. "We're waiting for some special information from G.H.Q. before we can complete the details. You push off for the day. There's a tender going into St. Omer. Perhaps you'd like to go in with it and break the monotony a bit."

"Thanks, sir. And thanks for the chance of going over the line," closed Captain Preston, still with the flinty gleam in his eye.

"FUNNY," mused the C.O., as he tramped over to get his breakfast, "the blighter actually seemed pleased

at the prospect of getting a chestful of lead. Can't make him out at all."

"What a break!" the American captain was thinking as he shuffled his papers together and took them across to the Recording Officer's desk. He was actually gleeful.

He, too, went across to the officer's mess and pecked away at some bacon and toast. No one there seemed to know anything about No.11's coming show and he decided to try a few inquiries at the hangar.

"So you're coming along with us tonight, eh, Preston?" greeted Armitage, with a grin.

"Yes, rather. What's the show?"

A warning cough came from Townsend who was standing with the flight sergeant. Armitage took the hint.

"Nothing definite yet, Preston," he said, "but we're working out compass courses for Audenarde."

"Audenarde? Why, the C.O. said it was to be only a short hop. Not far over the line."

"Well, that's where we're working out courses for, but, of course, there might be a last minute change, you know."

Armitage was lying. A course from Cassel to Audenarde would take them straight across the top of Hill 60, but he preferred that that noted mound should not be mentioned for the moment.

Preston walked away puzzled, and a few minutes later he was in his cubicle changing into a newly-pressed uniform and slipping a small package into his pocket.

He went out, crossed the aerodrome and sought the S.E. flight. A pilot came out of the hangars to greet him and they chatted a minute over a packet of American cigarettes.

"You on patrol to-day?" asked Preston.

The S.E. pilot nodded: "Dixmude to Ostend."

"Here's a packet of Fatimas. Drop them at Eerneghem. Open it a little so that it will—you know. I'm off to-night. Hope you like the fags."

The S.E. pilot paled for an instant, but finally turned so that the mechanics could see him pocket the precious packet of American cigarettes. They looked on with envy.

"I'll take care of you within ten days. Keep your eyes open for ground signals at the usual place," Preston continued, eyeing the S.E. pilot. Then in a louder tone he added, "I've got a day off. Going into St. Omer on the squadron tender. How's that sound?"

"Some chaps have all the luck," grinned the S.E. pilot. But he wasn't thinking of St. Omer.

CHAPTER VII DEATH FLIES AT NIGHT

No.11 WAS OUT ON THE CAB-RANK, her two engines warming up. Major McKelvie stood under the nose of the big bomber talking in quiet tones to Armitage and Townsend. Captain Preston, looking unfamiliar in a new Sidcot suit and carrying his Lewis gun in his arms, stood behind the two pilots and listened.

"It's all there for you, Townsend," explained the Major. "They're still bringing the stuff up and it's covered with a netting camouflage just off this communication trench, here." He indicated the spot on a photograph taken that afternoon, which he held under the glow of a small pocket torch. Preston moved in closer to look, and as there dawned upon him the nature of the patrol he was about to make his set face reflected his hardly-suppressed rage. But he said nothing.

"Where's the sap-head, sir?" asked Armitage.

"They've started it here," explained McKelvie. "See the new earth. They've tried to camouflage it by spraying it with some sort of liquid, but the late afternoon sun has brought out the uneven mounds. It's a complete give-away."

"Where shall we make for first, sir?" asked Townsend.

"Better take the forties and give it to them at the T.N.T. dump. If you can get a 'hit' there, you'll have all the light in the world to see the sap-head activity. Use your 112's there. They're detonated for delayed action and should go in deep before exploding."

"The same flight course, sir?" went on Townsend.

"Yes. Go right into their lines as far as Menin and run back to Hill 60. After that, it's up to you, and I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, sir," was Armitage's quiet response.

"And you, Preston," went on the Major, "you'll have to keep that gun hot and watch your tail. If you get a chance, rake their second line with all you've got. You'll be able to tell it by the difference in size of the dug-outs. They'll all be big funk holes."

"You mean, sir, that we're going down as low as

that—so that we'll actually be able to see their dug-outs?" said Preston in amazed tones.

"Well, that's the usual practice of the Coffin Crew, I believe, Preston. But this is purely a volunteer show, you know. If it seems too hot, you can pull out, if you wish."

"Oh, no!" Preston said, and gulped. "I'll go. It will be a fine experience, and I need it."

"Good man!" beamed McKelvie. "And I hope you get back safely!"

THEY guided Preston up the metal ladder and into the cabin of the Handley. There, Sergeant Ryan put his gun on the Scarff mounting for him and showed him where the extra drums were kept. By now he seemed fairly well reconciled to his fate and even joked with Tate as he went down the catwalk. Ryan eyed him anxiously, but said nothing.

"Do you men have any weapons?" asked Preston.

"Only those," explained Ryan, nodding at the bombs in the racks.

"No guns, revolvers, or anything?"

"What for?" asked the sergeant bomber.

"Nothing. I only wondered," said the American, climbing up on his platform and testing out the Scarff mounting.

Then out of the darkness came Andy. Of his normal flying kit he wore only his helmet and a pair of goggles. He had left his flying coat and flying boots in the hut.

"What's the idea, McGregor?" growled Armitage, as the dour-faced Scot came through the trap-door.

"Ah canna stand a' that clobber aboot me when Ah'm fightin'. The kilt will be enough."

"But you'll freeze to death, man!"

"Och, no, sir! A fightin' Scot is never kilt wie the cold or cold wie the kilt," answered Andy, dropping on to his hands and knees and crawling up the tunnel to the forward turret.

"What the deuce does he mean?" growled Armitage. "Well, he's certainly stripped for action—no mistake about that!"

Townsend stuck his compass course paper on the dashboard and settled himself in the cockpit. The ladder was taken away and Sergeant Ryan closed the trapdoor. The engines were opened up with a roar and the rev-counter needles quivered and moved up to the red line. No.11 was ready for the fray.

The chocks were removed and McKelvie waved his stick, rammed his Dunhill back between his teeth and walked away, head down. Old No.11 snarled and

fumed at the delay until, finally, Townsend gave her her head and she started to rumble away.

Like a fussy old lady, she hoiked up her skirts, flipped up her tail and went lumbering across the field, leaving a streak of wind-blown grass behind her. Pennons streaked back from her engine exhausts, the rumble of the undercarriage died away and No.11 skimmed aloft with her cargo of canned death and headed straight for the line.

ONCE they were off, McGregor became the Andy of old. He fussed with his guns and tweaked at the wind sights. He ran his fingers over the first layer of cartridges in every drum to make certain that they were free in their guides and slots. He fretted and fumed about his turret until Armitage wanted to throw something at him and make him sit quiet. Finally, the bomber officer got up and went down the companionway to see that Ryan and Tate were at their posts. They were, and he continued on to see how Captain Preston was faring.

"Like old times, this flying game," Preston greeted him as he gained the rear turret. "You chaps certainly have the life."

Armitage grinned and slapped him in a friendly manner across the back.

"Is that so," he thought. "You wait a few minutes, my lad, and you'll soon be wishing you were back in Texas, splashing about the sand with a Curtiss Jenny." He went back to the control-pit and noted that Townsend was screwing back and forth to get a little more height before crossing.

"How's Preston?" bellowed the pilot.

"Thinks it's a joy ride," responded Armitage.

"Let him enjoy it—it won't be for long," growled Townsend, with a grim smile.

Another five minutes of ploughing through the night mist, fighting the wheel to force the great craft ever higher, brought them up to six thousand, and Townsend decided to ram her across.

"Might as well take a chance with her here as anywhere," he argued to himself.

Across the line they rumbled unhindered for several minutes. Hill 60, the festering scar of the Belgian battle front, glared up at them and Andy rose from his crouching position and stared over. For a minute, Armitage thought the Scot was about to start shooting again, but his guns were hanging idle in their slot. The two pilots exchanged knowing grins.

Gheluvelt came up to them, and the battered

Menin road lay ahead. Finally they got a desultory burst of Ack-Ack. The shells burst well ahead and they crashed through the black carnations of smoke while the airmen held their noses. Again Andy stood up and stared about him. There was not an enemy 'plane in the sky, but a flight was taking-off from the Moorseele field south-west of Courtrai and they could be expected within a few minutes.

Suddenly Andy stiffened in his turret and peered backwards. He stood up on tip-toes and finally climbed on to the cowling between his turret and control pit—and continued to stare towards the rear turret.

"Now what's the matter with him?" exclaimed Armitage.

"Is the silly devil going off his nut again? He'll be blown off in a minute . . . kilt and all," said Townsend to himself, trying to see past the flapping tartan of the wild-eyed Scot.

"Captain Preston!" yelled Andy, dropping down and leaning over to Armitage. "Captain Preston! He's gone, sir! Not in his cockpit!"

"Damn!" spat Armitage, staring over at Townsend. "What's the silly fool playing at, leaving his turret?"

The pilot shook his head in dumb despair and indicated that Armitage should go back and have a look.

"Just our luck!" growled the bomber officer to himself. "He's probably fallen overboard and's half-way to heaven by now!"

He turned in his seat to slip down the companionway—and looked into the black barrel of a Colt automatic. It was held in the steady hand of Captain Preston.

CHAPTER VIII

ANDY SQUARES AN ACCOUNT

WHAT the—?" gasped Armitage. "What's the game, Preston?" Townsend started to say.

"Get back to your seat, Armitage," bellowed Preston, edging farther forward, so that he commanded a full view of the three members of the Coffin Crew. McGregor still crouched in his precarious position on top of the cowling.

The Handley Page went hurtling on towards Menin,

guided by the clenched hands of Townsend who was convinced that they had a madman aboard.

"Sit down there, Armitage, and fold your arms!" commanded the American, bellowing into the bomber officer's ear. "And you, Townsend, stick to that wheel and put this 'bus down on the Moorseele aerodrome. They're waiting for you!"

Armitage and Townsend exchanged amazed glances. Andy was staring at the gun in Preston's hand, trying to make out what it was all about. He couldn't hear what the American was saying, but he had a pretty shrewd idea of what was happening.

"What did you say?" yelled Armitage, screwing round in his seat.

The automatic went into his chest like a piston rod.

"Sit quiet, and you'll be all right," snarled Preston. "Come on, Townsend, swing her over and put her down at Moorseele."

"Like hell, I will!" snapped Townsend. "You're crazy, man! Moorseele's a Hun aerodrome!"

Smack! Preston struck the Englishman across the mouth with the flat barrel of the gun. It drew blood and Townsend spat as he brushed the back of his gloved hand across his mouth.

"Now put her down, or I'll blow the top of your head off," screeched Preston. "Shut off and get her down on that field!"

He pointed over the edge of the cockpit to the Moorseele 'drome. Three blinking ground flares were laid out.

Slowly Townsend swung the bomber round and edged the throttles back, all the while watching Preston out of the corner of his eye. The American was bellowing into Armitage's ear.

"They're paying a big price for you lads," he yelled. "Been trying to get you for weeks. I tried to kid McGregor into getting you in a jam, but it didn't work. And when you gave me this opportunity to come along I couldn't believe my ears! I tipped them off this morning that I'd be bringing you in to-night—the Coffin Crew, all present and correct! How's that for good staff work, eh?"

Slowly, the bitter truth was beginning to dawn on Armitage.

"So you're a German agent, are you?" he said.

"Of course I am. Planted in Texas when the United States came in. And damned glad I'll be to be back with my own crowd to-night."

Armitage watched Townsend as he brought the 'plane down lower. Suddenly, a group of Fokkers

loomed up out of the night and poised above their wing-tips. Andy made a jerky move to get down into his turret, but in a flash Preston had whipped his gun round and was holding the Scot covered.

"Hurry up!" he yelled at Townsend, "or those Fokkers will be getting impatient. They've quite a few debts to settle with you fellows and they won't need much encouragement to start things."

Armitage sat back, a look of despair in his eyes. So this was the end of the Coffin Crew. Betrayed by a German spy in the uniform of an American officer. He stared ahead, trying to think of a plan. His eye fell upon McGregor still crouched on the cowl, and he saw the gunner's fingers creep along his bare knee towards the gleaming hilted dirk in his hose-top. As Preston crouched lower over Townsend's side of the cockpit, the fingers reached the dirk. Then he struck . . .

THE kilted man took the longest chance of the war as he dived from the top of the cowl, his dirk aimed at Preston's throat. The spy's gun spat once, but Armitage chopped the arm down with a quick flick of his left hand, and the bullet crashed into the dashboard.

"Ye dommed Hun trickster, ye!" screamed Andy, slashing at Preston. "Ah'll carve ye wind-pipe oot!"

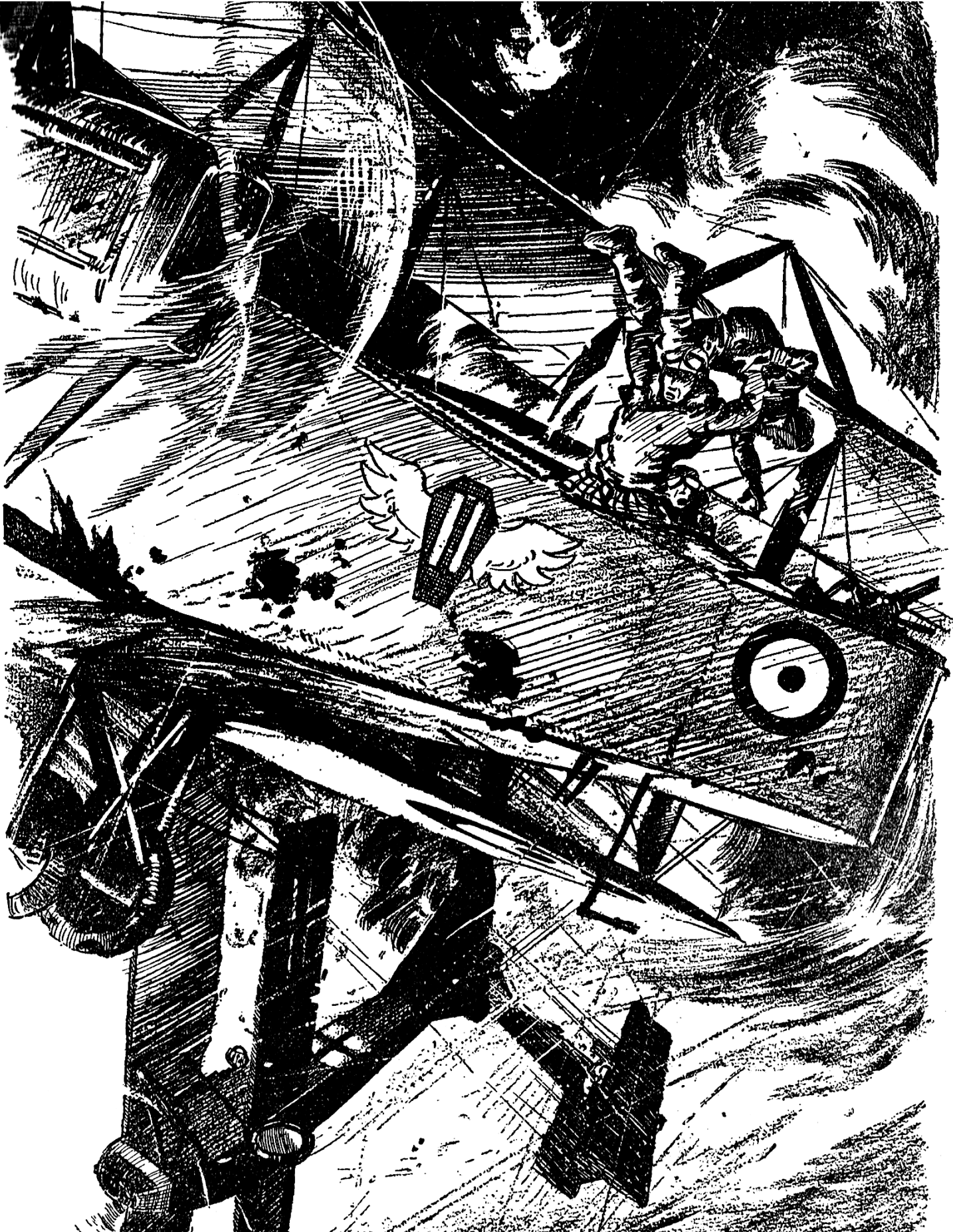
Preston went back, his gun blasting away in the narrow cockpit. He screamed and the scream was suddenly choked off into a throaty gurgle. Townsend opened up the engines and yanked the Handley up, while the three men wrestled together in the narrow cockpit. Amid it all, sparkling streams of tracer came biting in from above. The pilots sent up to convoy the captured Handley in had seen the fight in the cockpit and were joining in, regardless of friend or foe.

"Take care of him, Mac!" screamed Armitage. "I'll take the rear gun."

He dived down the companionway, tumbled over Sergeant Ryan who was tied up on the catwalk and fell against the unconscious form of Alfred Tate. Without stopping, Armitage clambered up on the rear platform and was soon answering the Fokker fire.

Up in front, the enraged Andy was still grappling with the German agent. His dirk had slashed Preston cruelly, the spy's gun was empty and now, after a final knife-cut that almost severed Preston's head from his shoulders, Andy picked him up in his bear-like arms and tossed him over the side of the cockpit.

"For God's sake, Mac!" screamed Townsend. "Don't do that!"



But it was too late. A gory, mutilated figure went hurtling down through the night to meet merciful oblivion not twenty yards from the tarmac of the Moorseele field.

“Ma dur-r-rk!” gloated Andy, slipping the scarlet-stained knife back in his hose-top. “Ye canna beat a dur-r-rk at close quar-r-r-ter!”

Then with a leap and another flourish of bare knees and flashing green tartan, he was over the cowering again and blazing away with deadly short bursts at the Fokkers. Two were driven off out of control. Armitage drilled the engine of another and it burst into flames. Deterred by this sudden and disastrous onslaught, the remainder made off towards a screening cloud as Townsend slewed the Handley Page round and started back for Hill 60.

“Whew!” he gasped, watching the enraged Andy searching the sky for winged targets. “What a trip!”

THE immediate danger past, Armitage relinquished his post in the rear turret and went down into the cabin, where he untied Ryan. Together, they gave Tate a nip of brandy and swabbed a gash in his forehead with iodine solution.

“The blighter made me truss old Ryan up, sir. What’s ’is gime?” gasped the Cockney, as he gathered his wits about him. “Put a bloomin’ gun in me back, ’e did, and then swiped me one across the forehead and knocked me silly.”

“Well, he won’t knock anyone else,” soothed Armitage. “Mac’s attended to him. Now, if you can manage it, get up there on the toggles. We can’t waste any more time.”

The bomber officer clambered back into the control pit and looked round amazed. He stared at the blood that was spattered over the cockpit floor, gleaming up under the instrument lights.

“Where is he?” he demanded of Townsend.

“Mac dumped him!” was the laconic reply.

“Struth! The blood-thirsty old devil!” gasped Armitage, staring in amazement at McGregor, who was now giving his undivided attention to Hill 60 up ahead.

“Well,” he remarked at length, “that’s that, and now I suppose we’d better get on with the job.”

Townsend nodded and stared ahead for his point. Andy’s nose pointed over the front turret dead on it. Armitage began to set his bomb-sight.

CHAPTER IX

No. 11 RUNS THE GAUNTLET

THE SHELL-SLASHED SIDES OF HILL 60 glinted with its firefly eyes. The scratches that represented the trenches, saps and communications meandered about its base as if trying to scale its pock-marked sides. Townsend selected his target and nodded to Armitage, who rose and peered down the companionway. The still ruffled Ryan was at the board, while Tate, bearing up gamely under a gigantic bandage, was fumbling with the toggles.

The sky belched flame and sheaves of pointed lances. The gunners in the back area were clambering under their waggon-wheel mountings and hurling bursts of Spandau at this impudent giant of the sky. Townsend screamed something and rammed his wheel forward. Into an inferno of silver and gold fire, shot the Handley. Andy’s guns ranted, raved and bucked on their Scarff mounting as he directed lines of quicksilver into the dim holes that spread out in front of the parapets. There, he knew, were the enemy’s machine-gun emplacements.

The Handley gave a convulsive jerk. Armitage’s hand had gone down and jerked toggles had released a trio of forty-pounders.

Crump! Crump! Crump!

“Damn and blast!” yelled Townsend, whipping her over for a return. They had missed. Armitage swore and raved as chunks of cockpit coaming flew past his face. He set the sight quickly again and shook his fist at the stopwatch.

“Now for it,” shouted Townsend, nosing down once more. “Give it to ’em in the bread-basket!”

Andy’s guns caught a group of grey figures that were scampering like ants from a partially-uncovered pile. These were the men who were still bringing in the T.N.T. under the cover of darkness, but this winged devil of destruction was not in the programme.

Scrawnch! Scrawnch! Scrawnch!

The Handley leaped again as it vomited three more eggs. Townsend fought the wheel and held her in a dive as long as he dared.

Crump! Crump! Wherro-o-o-o-o-m!

A sheet of lemon and scarlet flame leaped up at them. The controls of the Handley suddenly went loggy and Townsend shook the wheel back and forth, yelling at the top of his lungs. Armitage went to his knees as the floor of the cockpit rushed up at him. Andy fell across the Scarff mounting and almost bit his tongue off.

They had caught the T.N.T. dump fair and square.

A torrent of stone, dirt, shattered duck-boards and vomiting sandbags showered down all around them, biting great gashes in the fabric of their top plane. Planks, elephant iron, parapets, revette-work and charcoal braziers went sky high, to fall in jumbled havoc behind the trench-lines. Andy swore, got to his feet and blazed away again.

"Got it," exulted Armitage, panting to get his breath. "Now for the shaft-head, and we'll bottle the devils up!"

Townsend was still fighting the stick in an effort to get some response to the controls. Now he rammed the throttles wide open to obtain more force on the control surfaces, and shoved the bomber's nose hard down.

"Trench strafing in a Handley Page," he laughed wildly. "This is certainly the Coffin Crew's night out!"

THE bomber responded to the controls again and the pilot whipped her over on one wing-tip in an almost vertical bank that made Andy hang on for dear life. Down inside the fuselage Ryan and Tate were lying in a jumbled ball beneath the rear turret platform. They scrambled out and began climbing up the catwalk like men going up a ladder. The Handley whipped down again and they rolled head first against the tanks.

"The toggles! The toggles! Get to them toggles!" roared Ryan.

Alfred Tate, puffing and panting like a grampus, crawled up the strut of a bomb-rack and found the toggle-board. Ryan crawled through his legs and hung on where he could see Armitage.

Through a fire-curtain of M.G. and Minnies charged No.11, with what fabric and struts she had left. Her engines bellowed and raged as she nosed in and out like a winged dragon seeking its victim. Clouds of smoke from the T.N.T. blast were rolling across the trenches as if to blot out the target.

At last they found it, a gleaming black eye set in a yellowish-white socket. There had been no time yet to camouflage the dirt.

The Handley went down on it like a dart. Townsend caught Armitage's eye, grinned, and turned back to his controls. In the front turret, Andy was ramming more drums on, frantically feeding the double Lewis that was bringing death, swift and sudden, to the grey-clad figures huddled in the trenches below.

Into another inferno plunged the battle-scarred Handley, heading nose first at the black eye of the shaft head. Armitage was gripping the edge of the cowl with his right hand, ready to give the signal to Ryan with the left. Down his arm slashed—twice. Ryan, on his hands and knees, elbowed Tate in the legs. Alf yanked twice and two big 112-pounders went out. The Handley leapt with the released weight.

Bong! Bong!

"Back again!" roared Armitage. "We've got two more!"

Andy in his front turret was steadying himself on a turn that almost put their wing-tip into the British trenches. Suddenly he lunged forward and just saved himself from going over the edge. With a scream that could be heard even above the roar of the engines, he gave the Coffin Crew his news.

"That's them!" he roared. "That's them—the Amurricans in wie the British. Doon there, Muster Armitage!"

But Armitage, though he had caught a word or two of Andy's cry, held to his bomb-sight until they were back over the sap-head target and twice more his arm dropped in signal to the toggle men.

Scrawnch! Scrawnch!

Bong! Ber-r-r-r-o-o-o-o-m!

The last 112-pounder had found its mark and had plunged on through the shale crust of Hill 60 and plumbed the depths of the German mine. A low growling concussion told the rest. A death-charged aerial torpedo screwing its spinning nose into the shaft had exploded and blasted the timbered tunnel into a battered tomb for a hundred brave men. Their tunnel that was to get beneath the British lines had been stopped for good.

"Home, James!" yelled Armitage. "I'll take the rear gun!"

He left the cockpit, dived down the companionway and went scrambling down the cabin catwalk to the rear gun platform. In a second or two the gun was chattering away and sweeping the enemy trenches with a torrent of fire. Up in front, Andy was giving the rear area communication trenches a fierce beating, his tracers carving a line of death along parapets and sandbags.

Townsend was fighting his wheel like a madman in an effort to get the big bomber round. Andy halted in his gunplay for an instant and stared back at the pilot.

Something was wrong!

They were still several hundred yards inside the German lines, and only about two hundred feet off the ground. Townsend could tell that the elevators had been hit by the strange vibrations that came up the wheel shaft. At any moment, the controls might go. With a desperate effort, he managed to get the nose up, skidded round in a dangerously flat turn and, with engines throttled back to ease the strain on a possibly fractured structure, headed for the British lines.

CHAPTER X THE WAT CRY OF THE MCGREGORS

OUT ON THE TARMAC of Cassel aerodrome a worried Major McKelvie paced up and down, stopping every now and again to cast an anxious glance up into the night sky and to listen for the welcome drone of a homing bomber. No.11 was overdue and unless the Intelligence Officer who now stood discreetly silent in the shadow of a hangar was a liar, it seemed highly improbable to Major McKelvie that the Coffin Crew would ever again be seen at Cassel or any other Allied aerodrome.

Suddenly, McKelvie stopped his restless pacing. His practised ear had caught the first faint sound of an approaching aircraft. Rapidly, the noise grew louder and soon it was possible to recognise the characteristic beat of twin Rolls-Royces. Other ears, too, had caught the warning, and men rushed out to light the landing flares. One by one, in quick succession, a line of waste-stuffed petrol tins leapt into flame, forming a giant L up the long arm of which the incoming pilot could land with the assurance of heading directly into wind.

But this pilot, it seemed, had no need—or no time—for such niceties. Flying low, the machine came lumbering crazily towards the aerodrome, one wing well down, and fabric trailing from planes and fuselage. Over the far boundary of the aerodrome the nose of the Handley dropped—and the bomber all but plunged into the ground. A skilled hand at the controls plucked it up and straightened out in the nick

of time, but an instant later the tail rose again, the undercarriage hit the ground and was wrenched bodily off. The sudden impact sent the machine over on to one side, there was a rending-crash as the wing tore off in a tangle of splintered wood and fabric and, swerving violently, the bomber slid forward on her belly to travel a hundred yards along the ground before she came to rest. Old No.11 had come home.

Major McKelvie was the first on the scene of the crash, closely followed by a small army of willing helpers who had been helpless spectators of the disaster. But there was no need for their ministrations. Townsend, expecting just such a landing every moment of their hard-fought way back from the lines, had been ready for it when it came. He had cut the switches before the bomber had hit and, apart from a collection of cuts and bruises that would give the M.O. a busy half-hour, the Coffin Crew had survived their sensational arrival unscathed.

Gingerly they clambered down and out of unexpected rents in the fuselage and stood around surveying the battered remains of No.11, while Armitage, as unperturbed as if a flying-boat landing on an R.F.C. aerodrome was quite a normal method of arrival, approached Major McKelvie, saluted and reported their successful bombing of the targets. Townsend, as the one responsible for the landing, kept a discreet distance behind the bomber officer.

But McKelvie's eyes were still searching the little group of Coffin Crew members, and now he turned to Armitage with a sharp inquiry.

"Where's Captain Preston?" he snapped. "I don't see him here."

"No, sir, we—*er*—dropped him on the way," Armitage began, and then, seeing the concern in McKelvie's face, proceeded to recount the story of their adventurous night and the berserk revenge of Andy McGregor.

"I UNDERSTAND," McKelvie said, when he had finished. "And perhaps it was the best way out. But if you hadn't gone off so promptly we could have nailed Preston before you went. Five minutes after you'd taken-off, this officer from U.S. Intelligence," he nodded towards the American officer who had been standing beside him throughout the conversation, "arrived with a squad of men to collect Preston. It seems they'd been trailing him for weeks, but he'd given 'em the slip by faking transfers to this squadron for instruction attachment."

"Well I'm damned!" was Townsend's blunt comment upon this startling news. "And to think that we never once suspected that he was a wrong 'un. Of course, his whole game's as clear as daylight now!"

"He was certainly pretty smart, though," reflected Armitage. "That stunt of his in getting Mac to spring the trap for us on Hill 60 very nearly put paid to the lot of us."

"Smart, yes," McKelvie agreed, "but, like so many smart people, he very nearly overdid it in the end!"

"How was that, sir?" Armitage asked in surprise.

"He invented a new mine shaft on Hill 60 that was actually there," explained McKelvie. "He thought he was misleading us with a faked story, but, as it happened, it was the truth. I began to have my suspicions of him from that moment, but when he seemed so willing to go on this show with you to-night, well, I hesitated—and that's where I let you fellows down badly, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense, sir," Armitage objected warmly, "it was the best thing that could have happened. Jerry got blown sky high by his own mine and *Herr* Preston met his death at the hands of the man he had done his best to have killed. In fact, the only one who lost on the deal and didn't deserve to was poor old No.11," he concluded sadly, with a reflective glance at the mangled heap of wreckage on which mechanics were already busily at work.

"Well, luckily, it did turn out all right," remarked McKelvie. "And now you'd better be getting your reports made out. I'll come with you—oh—and I think we'd better have McGregor along, too. His—

er—disposal of Preston was a little irregular and an unofficial word with him now may save a lot of trouble later."

Andy was called over from the admiring group that had gathered round the Coffin Crew gunners and, led by McKelvie, the little party moved off towards the squadron office.

OUTSIDE the office, standing easy, were four American privates, the escort that had accompanied the Intelligence Officer sent to arrest the masquerading Captain Preston. Towering head and shoulders above his companions was a tall, husky doughboy, and, as the little squad came to attention at the sight of the approaching officers, a curious transformation came over the tall Yankee. Incredulously, he peered beyond the advancing group at the kilted figure of Andy McGregor and then, his surroundings obviously forgotten, he cast his rifle aside, gave vent to a stentorian shout and charged madly forward.

"Ard Choillie!" he shouted and, as the famous McGregor war-cry reverberated across the aerodrome, Andy started in amazement, took one look at the charging figure and leapt to meet him.

"Ard Choillie-ee-ee!" he yelled, and next moment Private Bruce McGregor, U.S. Army, and Corporal Andrew McGregor, R.F.C., were executing an original form of Highland fling on the tarmac, blissfully oblivious to the presence of a highly amused Major McKelvie and a scandalised captain of the U.S. Army. The McGregors were re-united.

