



# STRAGGLERS BEWARE!

by CAPN. JOHN E DOYLE, D.F.C.

*The Commander of Jagdstaffel "43" had Evolved a Safe and Simple Method of Eliminating the R.F.C. in General and the Squadron of Major Montgomery Montmorency Hardcastle in Particular. But "Monty" was also a Man of Ideas and the Succulent Bait in his Trap for Fokkers was not Exactly what it Seemed!*

## CHAPTER I THE FORTY-THIRD JAGDSTAFFEL

**T**HE AERODROME of the Forty-third Jagdstaffel was deserted, as was easy to see even in the moonlight. Each of the four hangars was securely closed—and had been for an hour or more. It was a quiet evening and out in front of the hangars there was scarcely a breath of wind. But the tops of the tall trees behind

them rustled gently in the light breeze which swept caressingly across them.

Fine trees such as those were not usually found in close proximity to an aerodrome, but it was the Staffel Commander's order that on no account should any be felled. And after all, there was room and to spare for Fokkers—or any other aeroplane for that matter—to land or take-off on the flying ground. Any pilot who came to grief in them was not fit to be a member of the "Forty-third," whose officers were reputed to be the pick of the German Air Service.

Furthermore, those trees stood in a great park surrounded by a high wall, within which the war seemed remote. To the right of the hangars wrought-iron gates barred the main entrance, behind which the drive extended for nearly a kilometre before opening out in a wide sweep in front of the chateau.

The many windows of that chateau were now heavily shuttered and curtained. Which was wise, for British night-bombing 'planes seemed drawn to light as moths to a candle, though they were not so easily destroyed.

Nevertheless, a chink here and there suggested that the illumination within was brilliant, as was indeed the case. Dinner was over, toasts had been drunk and cigars lighted. It was a boisterous party at the long table, and then Von Vorbei rose—a little unsteadily perhaps—from the Commander's chair at the far end. "*Achtung!*" called the Adjutant from his right, and the babel of talk and laughter died obediently away. All eyes were turned towards Von Vorbei.

"*Verdompte!* I'd forgotten it was Wednesday," whispered *Leutnant* Bade to his neighbour. "I trust he will not be long-winded!"

"Shut up!" hissed the other. "The Adjutant is watching us!"

IT WAS a long-accepted routine that the Commander of "Forty-three" should address the Staffel every Wednesday evening after dinner. He would comment on the war in the air generally and on the performance of his own unit in particular. It was understood that he liked the sound of his own voice, but it had to be admitted that every now and then he said something worth listening to. Which was to be expected, considering that his score was higher than that of any other member of the Staffel.

"Gentlemen," boomed Von Vorbei, "the war goes well!"

Boisterous applause greeted this remark. "More

and more," went on the speaker, when silence had been restored, "have we the command of the air. As usual, the English claim it, but it is we who have it!" More applause followed this statement.

"Not that the enemy is unwilling to fight; far from it," Vorbei continued. "But it is now with the courage of desperation that he does so. For, as you know, the present policy of the Fatherland is to single out the new and inexperienced pilots for attack, rather than to engage in combat with the seasoned fighters. This is the policy which I have continually urged on the High Command, and therefore I am entitled to the credit for its success."

Von Vorbei availed himself of the applause which followed to take a deep draught from his tankard. Then he resumed: "During the past seven days this Staffel has accounted for four such victims, and as you know we have lost one of our number. This is not good enough. We should have scored more victories, and it is owing to carelessness only that we have a casualty to record. And now a word of advice.

"Do not be in too great a hurry to get to grips with English formations. Dive from the sun, fire and zoom up again. Then watch what happens. In nine cases out of ten the newest member of that patrol will fly wildly and become isolated from the rest. There, then, is your opportunity."

Von Vorbei sat down after this effort, and the Adjutant rose to ask if anyone wished to put a question. After a short interval a junior rose from the other end of the table. "If we only attack new pilots, sir," he inquired, "how can we ever finally beat the English in the air?"

Von Vorbei rose with an impatient gesture. "That is a foolish question! But I will answer it just the same. If we destroy young English pilots in ever-increasing numbers before they have had time to gain experience, my boy, we are sure to gain a complete victory in the air. For the strain on the training squadrons will be so great that they will be obliged to send out young men with even less hours to their credit than had those who went before. These will be even easier to shoot down. That is one side of the question.

"The loss of machines has also to be taken into account. And then those more experienced pilots; they cannot go on for ever. Their nerves give way. Yet they cannot be sent back to their country for a rest, for there will be none to take their place. So they in turn will fall when the time comes. It is for you to be always watchful so that you know just when to strike, and there is no reason why, if you act in this way, you should not be still here flying with us when the victory is won.

"I am informed by our Intelligence Service that the average life of English pilots proceeding to the front is fourteen days! I need hardly point out that no country can stand such a drain for long, and soon we will reduce that average to a week.

"To-morrow I go to discuss such matters with the High Command, and I shall expect to hear of good results on my return. Failing which, I will myself lead you on Friday, to give you a lesson in the methods I have described. Gentlemen, you may rise."

"It sounds easy enough," said Schroder, as chairs were pushed back and the babel of noise was let loose once more. "But I bet there's a catch in it somewhere!"

"Don't be a fool!" replied Goertz, with the confidence of one who had several victories to his credit. "It's just common-sense. Wait till you see the old man perform on Friday—he shoots them down for a pastime!"

## CHAPTER II "CLEAR THE SKY"

**T**HREE-THIRTY, SIR, and fine. Leave the ground in forty-five minutes." The batman was undoing the flap of the tent as he spoke. Then he picked up the can of water which he had for the moment deposited on the ground, carried it in and set it down on the box beside the camp bed. "Three-thirty, sir," he repeated, giving the recumbent form a push.

A grunt was the only reward Rogers got for all this effort, but as it was exactly what he had expected he was not disappointed. He left the tent and crossed to the Nisson hut, where he went through a similar routine, returning to the tent half an hour later. "Four o'clock, sir. Leave the ground in fifteen minutes."

There was no response this time, not even a grunt, so he seized the bedclothes and pulled them off. This had an instant effect, for the recumbent figure sat up suddenly and said: "You white-livered skunk; wait till I let daylight into you! . . . Oh! it's you, Rogers. I thought it was . . . was . . ."

"Leave the ground in fifteen minutes, sir."

"You don't give me much time, do you? What day is it? I've got a hell of a thirst! Get me some water, there's a good chap."

Rogers ignored the first question. "Thursday," he replied to the second, "and there's a jug of water beside you, sir."

"Rogers, you're a marvel!"

While the officer drank, the batman hurried from the tent. Outside, the tall, unmistakable figure of the C.O. loomed up out of the darkness. He was on his way from his own tent to the office. "Captain Rodney ready?" he queried, on seeing Rogers.

"Just on dressed, sir."

Major Montgomery de Courcy Montmorency Hardcastle, M.C., was a man of few words, and he passed on without further comment. In general, he found the war a confounded nuisance, but particularly so just now. As a Peer of Scotland, and the owner of one of the finest sporting estates in that country, he found that it interfered with the life he liked to live.

Of course, there were compensations. What finer sport, for instance, could any man desire than to sit in the cockpit of a Camel behind twin Vickers guns; to fly war skies under the obligation of shooting the feathers out of any bird unfortunate enough to carry black crosses on its wings?

But such entertainment was terribly rare these days, for the powers that were did not approve of squadron commanders crossing the lines without their express permission. A major's job should keep him on the ground, they ruled, looking after his unit. And that, thought Monty—to give him the name by which he was commonly known in the squadron was a damned office-boy's work! For all that, he was the best C.O. "Ninety-nine" had ever had. Without his tireless effort the squadron could never have maintained its reputation as one of the best in the R.F.C.

But what was particularly worrying Monty at this moment was the difficulty of getting good pilots to replace casualties, or take over when others were posted to Home Establishment. Some of the lads now being sent out had their work cut out to fly a Camel, let alone fight in one. Some could not even fly. Only yesterday a youngster had got into a spin taking-off, and had killed himself. And in spite of every effort on the part of the flight commanders, the Huns were picking them off before they had a chance to become experienced.

WHEN he reached the office Monty found it empty and in darkness. He switched on the light, adjusted his monocle and glanced round the hut. It was evident that the Recording Officer had not yet put in an

appearance, and he swore softly and turned again to the door, where he collided with Sykes who was hurrying in.

"I beg your pardon, sir!"

"Mornin', Sykes, you're late, and your tie is crooked. I've told you before to be in this office at least half an hour before a patrol is due to go up."

"I'm sorry, sir, but . . ."

"Don't keep interruptin' me. You know it is the duty of those of us who can't fly to be on the spot in case those who do should need us. Don't fidget with your tie, man! We're just the servants of the fightin' men, whether we like it or not. Why don't you say somethin'? Never mind; go and find Rodney. I want him here when he's ready."

"He's a willin' little chap all the same," he muttered to himself when the Recording Officer had departed on his errand. Presently the door opened again to admit Rodney.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

"Mornin', Rodney, take a seat . . . no, sit in my armchair, it's more comfortable. I'll stand—good for me." Rodney nearly exploded as he sank back in the easy chair. "Monty's in a hell of a tear," Sykes had just told him. Yet here he was . . .

"I'm afraid you'll have to take Benn with you to-day," Monty was saying. "He has only been here ten days, but he looks promisin' to me and, anyway, it can't be avoided."

"He's not ready yet, sir."

"I said it couldn't be avoided! I know he's not ready, and it is up to you to take care of him."

"Then shall I keep this side of the lines, sir?"

Monty spluttered, and his eyeglass fell from position.

"Funny the old boy looks without it," thought Rodney, as he watched the Major retrieve his monocle and restore it deliberately to its appointed place.

Monty placed his hands on the table, and, leaning forward, glared through the bit of glass down at his Flight Commander. It was a disconcerting stare. "What does 'O.P.' stand for?"

"Offensive Patrol, sir."

"Exactly. And how can you be offensive to birds who keep to their own side of the lines if you don't cross over?"

"Well, sir, I only thought that for to-day . . ."

"Well, don't think anythin' of the kind. All the same, laddie"—Monty's expression softened—"you need not go far over this time. A mile say, yes, that will be enough. . ."

The 'phone bell was ringing. Sykes answered it, and then, placing his hand over the mouthpiece, passed the instrument to the C.O. "Wing Colonel, sir," he announced.

Monty took it. "Hullo . . . hullo, ah hullo, sir!"

"That you, Hardcastle?" said the Colonel. "Good. Has that patrol left the ground yet?"

"No; it is only eleven minutes past."

"Good! I'm glad of that. Brigade tell me Army want your sector kept clear of E.A. to a depth of five miles behind the lines, so please instruct your patrol accordingly. That clear?"

"Painfully so, sir! What about lettin' me have some fightin' pilots? I can't carry on indefinitely without them."

"You know I can do nothing about that!" The Colonel's voice gave hint of rising temper. "Get in touch with the Pool. That's all. Good-bye." Monty hung up the receiver and turned to Rodney, who was now standing and drawing on his helmet. "I'm afraid you'll have to keep five miles over, laddie."

"I know, sir; I could hear every word." Rodney closed the door behind him as he spoke.

Monty sank back in his chair, and with elbows on arm-rests and fingers beating a tattoo against each other, he sat there for a while, a deep frown on his face.

Sykes stirred. "Would you like to sign these indents now you're here, sir?"

"Shut up!"

The sound of several Le Rhone engines spitting reached them. Now one was being run up, and a loose board in the roof of the hut began tapping in sympathy. Its rhythm was that of a Spandau machine-gun. "Hell!" ejaculated Monty, and jumped to his feet. He left the office and the door banged violently behind him. Sykes started.

Five Camels were taxying away from the hangars, just clear of which they criss-crossed to take up their appointed positions in the formation. Monty hurried over to them and stopped beside the machine which stood just behind Rodney's right wing.

"Keep your eyes open, Benn," he shouted to the helmeted figure in the cockpit. "And stick close to your leader."

"Yes, I know, sir," was the cheerful reply. "Rodney has just told me the same thing."

Monty stood back. Rodney raised an arm as a signal, and when he dropped it the five Camels moved forward in rapid acceleration and disappeared in the uncertain light to the south. A moment later they passed over the hangars, headed for the dawn.

### CHAPTER III COLD MEAT FOR JERRY

**A**T SIXTEEN THOUSAND FEET it was cold and clear. Below, even in the half-light, the trench lines were clearly to be seen. Rodney held on his easterly course, confident that he could not be surprised against that pale background of sky. Later, when the sun was up, it would be a different matter.

Evidently, also, the Camels showed up clearly from below, for at that moment a pin-point of black appeared ahead, on exactly the same level as the 'planes. The pin-point of black grew and changed to a dirty grey smoke. Rodney flew straight towards it while he counted five slowly. Then he altered course to northeast, keeping a watchful eye on Benn as he did so. The fellow was certainly keeping close—too much so for quick movements—and he waved him farther away.

A great crop of "Archie" bursts flowered and grew away to the right—fifty of them at least, Rodney thought—and he swung round once more and flew towards that cloud of drifting smoke. Benn was slow in starting to turn, then he banked suddenly and got in front of the formation. Rodney stuck his nose down and drew ahead again, but at a lower level. He opened his engine full out and climbed slowly up to him. "Why the devil didn't the chap watch out?"

"Archie" was very determined this morning, Rodney decided. "Turn again, Dick Whittington," he murmured, and threw on bank as the signal. But it was too late. *CRASH!* They were caught in the middle of a salvo of bursts. It was enough to split the ear-drums, and each Camel reacted to the concussions.

Rodney shot his stick forward and dived as Benn flashed over his head. "Damn the idiot!"

But Benn had suffered a direct hit, or so it seemed to him. The Camel was apparently out of control. Yes, there was a great hole in the right aileron. Never had he imagined anything so awful as that! And yet the machine was answering his movements now. Heavens! where was Rodney, where the patrol? He swung wildly round in a circle and examined the sky in every direction—but it was empty save for those clouds of dissipating smoke.

He was in a muck-sweat, his clothing sticking to him; his scalp was tingling and seemed to be creeping about under his helmet. He saw some black bursts, but they were on a lower level, and even as he looked down some machines flew through the smoke. They were the patrol—thank God for that! He throttled back to glide down and pick up formation. He felt limp and waved weakly at Rodney.

"Yes, you young fool!" thought his Flight Commander. "I know just how you are feeling, and it is all your own fault. There are some Fokkers behind us, and thanks to your behaviour they are now higher than we are!" He pointed to the sky astern, but Benn merely waved back. Rodney watched a Fokker dip its nose and come diving down, and he turned at that moment. He turned left so as not to ram Benn. There was a crash of bullets, the Fokker zoomed and was gone.

The patrol was now flying west, but still turning. Benn was not with them, though. Rodney took in the sweep of sky at a glance. Ah! there he was, headed straight for the sun, suspended just above the horizon like an overgrown orange. Two Fokkers were after him, and Rodney dived away in vain pursuit. The nose of that solitary Camel dropped suddenly, and then the machine went hurtling earthwards like a plummet. "Dead as a doornail!" muttered Rodney, and broke off the hopeless chase.

He turned north once more and looked at the clock. Time was up, and he steered west. "Archie" started up again, but it was easy to fool him now, and, crossing the lines without further incident, the three pilots glided down towards the aerodrome. There would be time for a couple of hours more sleep before breakfast.

AFTER breakfast there was Monty to be faced. "Well?" he inquired.

"Lost Benn, I'm afraid, sir," confessed Rodney.

Monty nodded. "I know that. Did you get a Hun?"

"No, sir."

"No shootin'?"

"No, sir, we didn't get a chance. The devils wouldn't come down to our level. 'Archie' was a bit persistent—nothing to worry about—but Benn went all wild immediately and I had to lose height to get back to him. Then, when the Fokkers took some long-range shots, he went off east like a bat out of hell." Then "C" Flight went out—that five-mile order held good until mid-day—and came back minus their newest pilot.

“B” Flight were luckier, for they went up after lunch and returned intact. When “A” Flight did their second show that day they were two short of full strength, but though they only numbered four machines and though they saw Huns in the sky, they were not attacked.

It was an understood thing that the fortunes of war should not be allowed to interfere with the atmosphere of the mess. Though the day had brought disaster the evening must be a festive affair. On this occasion, however, dinner was a gloomy meal. There was an attempt at gaiety, it is true, but it was so obviously forced that after a while it collapsed. Neither whisky nor champagne seemed to have their usual effect, for instead of becoming merrier as the evening advanced, the company relapsed into silence or started to quarrel over trivial incidents.

Only Monty—outwardly, at any rate—was his usual untroubled self. “He’s got the hide of a rhinoceros!” Caldewell grumbled to Stacey as the meal drew to a close. “Nothing gets under it. I don’t believe he’d turn a hair if the whole lot of us went and got shot down tomorrow! He’d just ring up the Pool and order eighteen new pilots.”

“Stow it!” said Stacey. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, with a leave warrant in your pocket. I wouldn’t think another damn thing about the war for a fortnight if I were in your shoes. You’re enough to make the cat’s aunt air-sick!”

“My leave’s not coming off; that’s just the trouble.”

“Rot!”

“Think it out for yourself,” persisted Caldewell. “There are four of us in ‘A’ Flight now, and that’s really not enough to carry out patrols. If I go to-morrow morning they would have to be amalgamated with either ‘B’ or ‘C,’ and that’d mean doing fewer shows. Can you imagine Monty standing for that?”

Stacey could not, for however up against it “Ninety-nine” might be, the squadron always did all or more than its full share of work. But while he was debating the point Monty rose, glass in hand.

“Gentlemen, the King!” he toasted. “King!” echoed everyone.

“Absent friends!” then called Monty, as brightly as though he had never heard of such things as war and sudden death.

“Absent friends.” This time the echo was subdued and had a hint of sullenness in it. Altogether, it was one of the most miserable meals Caldewell could remember, and he was not sorry when it was over. He

had decided to escape to his tent, there to read until he could sleep, when he saw Monty bearing down on him.

“About that leave of yours, laddie,” the Major said. “I think it would be as well to postpone it for a few days, if you don’t mind.”

“As if what I minded had anything to do with it!” thought Caldewell bitterly. Though he had expected the blow, it lost none of its sting. “As you wish, sir,” he replied.

“That’s settled, then,” said Monty. “A good thing is all the better if a chappie has to wait for it,” he added brightly.

#### CHAPTER IV IN SEARCH OF TROUBLE

**D**AWN BROKE WITH RAIN pattering cheerfully on tents and huts. It was a comforting sound, and any pilots who happened to wake turned over thankfully and slept again. But by eleven the clouds parted and a hot sun drew steam from the soaking ground. The brief interlude over, war was on once more. Monty sent for his flight commanders and gave them an outline of the day’s work.

“A” Flight was to go out at mid-day. There were no special instructions—such as keeping the Huns five miles from the lines—but Rodney was to go well over and look for trouble. “I want you to hit back to-day, laddie; understand that?”

“Yes, sir, but we’re up against Fokkers, and they have a better ceiling than our ’buses. If they won’t come down I can’t make them.” Rodney had a liking for the C.O., but at times he was unable to explain to himself just why. At the moment, for instance, it was like trying to explain air warfare to a civilian at home. The fellow just didn’t understand what one was up against.

“Give them the chance, anyway,” was all Monty’s comment to that. “‘C’ Flight will patrol at three, ‘B’ at six, and with luck there will be only one show each for you to-day. That will be all for the moment.”

The flight commanders saluted and withdrew. “Now we will be gettin’ on with that work,” Monty said, and Sykes, obviously relieved, gathered up a pile of documents and deposited them on the C.O.’s table.

For some time there was no sound in the office save for the intermittent scratching of a pen or an occasional question and answer. Then a Le Rhone engine started up, and Monty glanced at the clock, threw down his pen and rising, began to pace the hut.

"I'm glad we've got that work up-to-date, Sykes."

"Yes, sir, but . . ."

"And now I'm goin' to take the jolly old atmosphere."

Sykes immediately gave visible signs of distress, and the uneasy movement of his lips was not lost on Monty.

"What's bitin' you, laddie?"

"The Colonel, sir!" exploded the Recording Officer, relieved that the question gave him an opening. "He's sure to ring up soon . . . what can I say to him? Then there's that matter of replacements; you see, we lost two more pilots yesterday and unless we get on to the Pool pretty soon . . . I . . . I . . ."

Sykes broke off in amazement, for his C.O. was laughing in his face. Now what could he have said that was in the least amusing? The situation was a most serious one.

"Laddie," chuckled Monty, "you think of everythin'! You tell me the Colonel will ring up, and you suggest the way to deal with the situation—all in one breath. My compliments to the Colonel, and tell him that you think I have gone to the Pilots' Pool to deal at first hand with that most important question of replacements."

"Yes, sir, very . . ." Sykes stopped short, for already Monty had snatched some clothes from the door and had vanished from the office. He congratulated himself that the Major was going to the Pool on his suggestion. All the same, he could see no cause for merriment in the idea, but there, Monty often saw a joke where no humour was.

OUT in front of the hangars four pilots were having a final word before getting into their waiting Camels. "Anyway, mind you chaps stick close!" Monty heard Rodney say as they broke up.

Then the four machines taxied out across the aerodrome, turned, and after a short interval came rushing with tails up towards the hangars. Monty watched the little machines as they left the ground, rose in a climbing turn and circled once before heading for the lines. He stepped into his Sidcot suit and pulled the garment over his shoulders, still watching the vanishing patrol. Then he turned to his pet Camel which was being wheeled out by the observant rigger, and got in.

The fitter came running out. "Switch off, suck in, sir."

Monty repeated the words.

"Contact, sir."

"Contact."

The engine's response was instant, and Monty "blipped" it on the thumb-switch while he adjusted throttle and fine adjustment till it was ticking over quietly. Then he slipped on helmet, fastened belt and finally ran up the Le Rhone—it was an excellent engine! He throttled back and waved away the chocks, and then was going full-out down-wind across the grass.

The moment his wheels left the ground he dropped a wing, and turning north-east climbed in the direction in which "A" Flight had disappeared. The early rain had cleared the air and visibility was good.

Far away to the south-east a formation was returning from the lines. Monty judged they were S.E.'s, though he could not be sure at that distance. A moment later they passed close enough for him to see that his surmise had been correct. Now he sighted the four Camels of his own patrol up in the north. They were crossing the lines near Arras. Over in Hunland the sky seemed clear, and he headed due east and put his machine at its best climbing angle. No, there were no Huns in the sky to-day, unless they were below the line of the horizon. In that case they might not be seen at a distance against the background of earth.

There *was*, however, a Hun formation climbing for height. Rodney saw them the moment they reached the sky-line. Long before he could recognise those machines he knew by the size of the patrol that it was the famous Vorbei circus. He must try to keep them in sight. The trouble was that his rate of climbing was so slow owing to Kirk's dud engine. It had been unsatisfactory for some time, but to-day it was worse than ever, to judge by the way that 'plane hung back.

Matters grew worse and worse, until Rodney decided that he must get rid of Kirk. It was far better to have three good machines than it was to have four, one of which had a dud engine. That was simply asking for trouble, for at the moment they were only just maintaining their height.

He looked round to signal the pilot to return, only to find that he was not there. Oh, yes, he was below, diving ahead. Then he had decided to quit. Good! Yes, there came the Verey light and the Camel headed west for the lines. Rodney breathed a sigh of relief and opened his throttle wide so as to make up for lost time.

## CHAPTER V MONTY TAKES A HAND

**T**HAT ANXIETY DISPOSED OF, he searched the sky for the Huns, but could not see them anywhere. He was now flying south and supposed they had turned north, but felt sure he would see more of them before long. He would not let them surprise him if he could help it.

Monty, also, had an eye on those Fokkers at that moment. They were several miles to the north, and climbing fast. Actually, they were now at about the same level that he was. Then he saw the glint of sun on their wings and knew that they were turning, probably in his direction.

"A" Flight was farther to the south and much lower. Monty had seen the Verey light and watched the Camel leave the formation. Now, after one further glance round the sky, he closed his throttle somewhat and dived to the rear of the three 'planes. His lips were set in a grim, determined smile as he sank to the level at which his young flight commander was flying.

Rodney, meanwhile, was keeping his usual careful watch, turning his head for a searching rearward glance every two minutes or so. Not that he anticipated trouble while he still held his southward course. He had quickly lost sight of Kirk.

Presently, while looking back, he spotted those Fokkers once more, much higher and still far to the north, but coming his way. Never mind, they would do no more than take a dive or two—if he knew anything of their ways. There would be no stragglers to-day, which was a comfort.

Now Rodney lowered his eyes to his own formation, and what he saw shook him badly. For there were still three Camels following him, though the third, it was true, was some way behind. Caldewell was keeping good station on the right, as was Smith on the left. But that other—Rodney began to feel that tingling sensation which sometimes came to him in the neighbourhood of his spine—that other was just about the worst straggler he had ever had.

Then he took some comfort from the thought that the pilot must be an experienced one from a Camel

squadron farther north, and that he was out looking for a spot of bother by himself. Something of which surmise was perfectly correct.

For it seemed impossible, Rodney argued to himself, that Kirk's engine could have recovered sufficiently for him to have been able to climb back again in so short a time. Or was it possible? It was only a matter of minutes, surely, since he had been diving away westward.

One thing was certain, and that was that this straggler was following him, for, as he altered course—as he did mechanically from time to time in order to bother "Archie"—the lone Camel turned as well. On the other hand he seemed to be making no effort to close up.

"I suppose it must be Kirk, after all," muttered the patrol leader, as with an impatient movement of the hand he partly closed the throttle. "I'll have his blood for this . . . if the Huns don't, that is!"

It certainly seemed that Rodney would be saved the unpleasant duty, for with the Le Rhones running light the Fokkers were coming up fast. And, as was now easy to see, they were a formidable proposition. Thirteen of them Rodney counted, and they were easy to count. They were flying in that perfect formation which comes of long practice—the long practice which long life enables those who fly with caution on their own side of the lines to attain. They were composed of two groups of six, with another Fokker by itself in the lead.

Now, in wartime, "thirteen" was held to be an unlucky number, though in this instance it did not need a great stretch of the imagination to connect the bad luck with the Camels generally, and with that straggler in particular. In spite of the throttled engines the fellow was not closing up. So Rodney went full out again. After all, the fellow could make a dash for the lines if he wished.

But that was about the last thing Monty wished to do. He was now having a very clear demonstration—if such were needed—of the method by which his new pilots were being shot down, and he was determined to make such tactics expensive to-day—even if he died in the attempt. For if things were allowed to continue unchecked, the morale of his squadron was bound to suffer. Which was a thing not to be tolerated.

SO ARGUED Monty while waiting for the battle to begin, and having justified himself for disobeying a definite order not to cross the lines, he was now prepared to get the maximum amount of enjoyment



out of the game. He screwed his head round to inspect the sky astern.

The Fokkers were very near now, almost as close to the Camel as was Monty to the formation to which he pretended to belong. As a squadron commander, he knew something of the enemy air units on that front, and he concluded that those 'planes belonged to the Forty-third Jagdstaffel. That being so, the pilot of that isolated Fokker could be none other than Von Vorbei himself.

Monty hoped that this might indeed be the case, for there was many an old score he wished to settle with that gentleman.

As for Von Vorbei, he had no fault to find with the way things were turning out, and even as the nose of his Fokker dipped suddenly to a diving angle he was mentally chalking up another victory. He was in jovial mood also, for his visit to the High Command had brought him much praise, as well as the highest honour the Emperor could bestow. And he could find no fault with the performance of the officers under his command during his absence, for they had accounted for two Camels and an R.E.8.

So it was rather as a reward for good conduct, than as the threatened punishment, that he had himself come up to-day. It was entertainment he was providing his officers; he was not giving them a lesson which they must learn. Naturally they would benefit by watching closely—that was understood—but this was purely voluntary.

The Fokker was diving very fast now. Rodney watched it with a feeling of nausea. He was rocking his Camel in an endeavour to attract Kirk's attention—if Kirk it were. But it was obviously too late for the poor chap to save himself. And yet perhaps not! Rodney saw the little machine bank suddenly and start to turn, and he wheeled round so as to be able to give assistance if possible. There might be a chance for the fellow. It is very hard to hit a 'plane in such a manoeuvre.

Von Vorbei was probably thinking much the same thing, for there was small chance that he would be able to line up his sights on the target this time. As was well known, he hated to have to dive on the same machine twice, and he would be particularly annoyed to-day since he was giving a demonstration to his pilots. Now he had flattened out of his dive and was hurtling along on the same level as the Camel which crossed his sights at that moment, but without giving him time enough even to press his triggers. Then he zoomed again.

Rodney was, of course, still watching. There was at the moment nothing else he could do, except avoid

flying directly below that big formation. The straggler had been granted a respite, but it could only prolong the agony.

But, for the moment, the Huns were too engrossed in the spectacle of their commander despatching a British straggler to take any action of their own. Schroder especially wished to see how the trick was done, for he still felt that there must be a catch in it somewhere, or rather that there would be when the time came for him to do such work himself.

Goertz had brought off several such victories, and had often watched his chief, and so for him there could be no doubt about it. But he never tired of seeing Von Vorbei in action—his attack was so swift, so positive.

Yet he had missed the boat on that first dive, had not fired even a single round. Then came another surprise, for, as the Fokker lifted its nose to zoom, the little Camel was seen to flick out of its turn into a steep climb. Tracer streamed from the barrels of its guns. Nor was it just a wild burst of firing—that was obvious. There was a deadly aim, even though the whole action was over in a couple of seconds. For the bullets could be seen ripping through the aeroplane.

Goertz took in a deep breath, spellbound. Schroder, hanging over the side of his 'plane in his anxiety to watch, nearly collided with the machine on his right. The whole formation, indeed, was one no longer—just a shapeless, straggling mass of Fokkers.

VON VORBEI had kicked on rudder and spoiled his zoom. Evidently he did not know where those shots had come from. Now he was flying level, but zig-zagging as though fearful there was a Camel on his tail. Now he saw that British straggler again. The lone Camel was flying due east, as stragglers often do when they have lost sense of direction.

The Fokker suddenly went up on a wing-tip and swung round as though the pilot wished to take stock of the sky. The movement reminded Goertz of an angry bull which has been baulked of its prey. Then, still in a vertical bank, bottom rudder went on, the tail came up and the machine swooped down on its prey, wings levelling up as it dived.

Rodney was climbing on full engine. He had a feeling that that Camel pilot was able to take care of himself, and now he was on a level with the top formation. All the same, he was a little worried as he watched that second dive.

Monty was not, however. He knew just what was happening without looking round, for he had a mirror

in front of him. He was climbing at eighty miles an hour, for he was not a believer in speed when fighting. The Fokker was coming down at a prodigious rate. It was, thought Monty, like a bull charging across an arena under full throttle and with nose well down. At the right moment the matador stepped aside, and the animal, unable to change its course in time, went headlong by, receiving the darts the man threw with unerring aim as it passed.

Von Vorbei had already had one such experience, and he was not his usual calm and collected self at the moment. Monty knew as much when he saw pin-points of light in the Spandau muzzles. "A bit premature, my friend!" he muttered, and held on his course for another second.

Then he heeled over and began to turn once more. This was more than the infuriated German could stand, and he tried to cover the Camel's movements, which put him in a vertical dive, then over the vertical. he was standing on the rudder-bar and his body left the seat and hung against the belt. His forehead struck the butt of a gun. And he certainly had not got the Camel in his sights either.

Monty was ready for him as he passed, and dropped in a flash after him. The Fokker's wheels were uppermost in his Aldis sight. He was sorry it should end like this, and would have liked to give the fellow another chance. But he had seen a red light curve in the sky above, and six Huns were even now diving in formation. So his thumbs went down.

The Fokker flattened out with a horrid jerk to level flight, still on its back. It was an intolerable strain, and the extensions on the top planes folded in. A body catapulted from the cockpit, the safety-belt still fastened round its waist. Monty made ready for battle.

He was just getting warmed up, so were his guns. He felt that he and his Camel were welded into one—a powerful yet perfectly controlled fighting force. His brain was working fast.

He weighed up the situation, argued the pros and cons, all in the space of a second. He could repeat the method he had just used on the half dozen now approaching at speed. He would have to be a bit more nippy, perhaps. But that would fetch young Rodney down in all probability. And that would be a confounded nuisance. A chap needed room to hit out on a job like this. Couldn't have Camels flittin' all over the place! Besides, they'd only bring the other flight of Huns down, and he needed Rodney and the others. Then the other idea occurred to him.

"Toppin'!" he exclaimed. "We'll draw the birds!" And with the words he dropped his nose and closed the throttle. But he did not dive far—he hated diving at speed, considering it both needless and undignified. He immediately zoomed gently up, stalled and toppled over sideways. He gathered speed and rose again, hovered and went into a falling-leaf movement. He tumbled out of that on to his back and then went into a spin—two turns and out. He was using up height rapidly, and his general direction was east.

## CHAPTER VI MONTY DRAWS HIS BIRDS

**A**LL THE TIME HE WAS WATCHING those Huns. Sure now of their man, they had quickly come out of the dive and zoomed up because they wanted to be sure that they were not being followed by those other Camels. Then they dived again at Monty, now far lower.

They could not be sure he was out of control, guessed Monty, and as if in confirmation of this a burst of bullets came down after him. But it was wild shooting. It is not an easy matter to hit a scout which is doing a falling-leaf, and one is apt to overshoot before one can get aim. Three Fokkers, in fact, went diving past, and the others climbed again.

Monty put on his engine to free it from surplus oil, and kicked his 'bus into a spin. The Le Rhone put out a cloud of smoke, and the Huns might have been excused had they thought the Camel on fire, for their stationary engines did not behave in this way. But now the ground was near, and after two more turns the scout came out, dived, flattened and shot far along a field.

Monty took a rapid glance at the sky and saw the Fokkers leaping down after him. He had drawn his birds. "Toppin'!" he murmured a second time. He kept a few feet from the ground and that put an end to further diving. He half-closed his throttle and flew at a steady seventy miles an hour.

The "field" was strung out behind and overhauling him fast. First came two abreast; neither wanted to give way, it seemed, for they were converging on each other rapidly. "Come, laddies," Monty murmured. "One at a

time! You can't both get in the middle." He was turning gently and rising as required to hedges and trees, then dropping down again.

Then he saw those Fokkers turn away together, and he laughed. But another shot between them as they parted, devouring the distance. Monty rose on a wing-tip, flicked round, and was behind the Hun as he streaked past.

"Brrrrrrrrrp," went both guns, and there was no doubt that bullets went home. But he did not stop to see, for at that moment he got a burst himself. Something struck his cheek and his goggles splintered. He raised a gloved hand to his face and then looked at it. It was covered with blood. He hated blood as he did dirt. He lost his temper and saw red.

"Messy devils!" he growled, as he flicked round for the second time. Two Fokkers were flying head-on at him. The nearest was thirty feet up or so, and he shot under it and put a burst into the nose of the other, which was very low down.

"Brrrrrrrrrp," went his guns, and he darted off at an angle. The Hun was also turning, but a wing-tip touched the ground and it piled up.

Already Monty was round and reaching up at the Hun which had passed over his head. But it was a long shot, and he did not fire. There should be three more of those birds somewhere, but for the moment he could not see them. He rose to cross a wood, and there was one approaching from the right. Monty banked right and left like a swallow and closed in. The fellow was trying to turn, which was ridiculous at that speed. Why, Monty could spin round twice to his once if he wanted to—which, of course, he did not.

"Brrrrrrrrrp," sang the Vickers.

That Hun was still turning on the outside of that circle, in a vertical bank and evidently with full engine. Monty, on half-throttle, and with planes tilted at forty-five degrees, was looking through his Aldis sight on to the top of the pilot. Those bursts should have done the chappie some good! Ah! The fellow's head was sagging slowly forward. So that was the end of that!

THE fight had been drifted by the wind slowly across to the far side of the wood. Here was a farmhouse set in peaceful surroundings, but now suddenly brought into close contact with the violence of aerial warfare. A farmer stood in the yard and, with arms outstretched gazed horrified aloft. The three remaining Fokkers were returning in formation,

clearly determined to put an end to this impudent Englishman. They were coming up fast from the far side.

Monty swung round the house, below the level of the chimney-pots, causing the pigs at the back to scatter in panic. He twisted and turned, keeping out of the way of several bursts of lead which came cracking round.

Those Huns were stickers, determined on vengeance. But they were not in form to-day, for in trying to follow that darting little 'plane two of the Fokkers touched wing-tips as they passed over the farmhouse. They parted and flew in circles, converged again and met head-on to drop into the building and turn it into a blazing ruin.

"Sincere apologies, my good man," said Monty, with one eye on the farmer and one on that other Fokker. He had hopes of making a clean sweep this time and flicked his throttle wide. But it was no good, the German machine was too fast, and he turned regretfully away.

Moreover, time was getting on, and he should now be back in his office chair; must be back in time to see the patrol in. That was his job. He felt like Cinderella after midnight as he hedgehopped towards the lines. There were many temptations on the way, such as a fat D.F.W., which he almost frightened into a spin. But he overcame them all. Duty before pleasure.

Three Camels were specks in the east when he landed. He hurried to the office and sent Sykes for some plaster.

"Have you had an accident, sir?" questioned the alarmed Recording Officer.

"Aye, laddie, but nothin' serious."

Presently Rodney came in. Monty looked up, hand to cheek.

"Good shootin'?" he inquired of his eager young flight commander.

"Rather, sir!" exclaimed the excited Rodney. "Never saw anything like it! Kirk went off with a dud engine and came back and joined up again a few minutes later, as I thought. But I find he is back here, which is a good thing, 'cos he was shot down by six Huns and six were left on top and we got two, and . . . and . . . but I'm afraid you can't understand what I'm talking about."

"Don't worry," said Monty. "I can see it all like a picture—almost as though I had been there myself. Carry on, and make out your reports."