

BALLOON BAIT

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Grim Guardians of a Balloon of Death, three Fokkers Lay in Wait for the Prey that Came with the Dawn and Never Returned—Until “The Major” Sacrificed his Beauty Sleep to Spring a Trap for Camels and Got Away with the Bait.

CHAPTER I A MESSAGE FROM WING

MAJOR MONTGOMERY DE COURCY MONTMORENCY HARDCASTLE, M.C., stirred in his sleep. Hardly surprising, you may think, that his slumber should be of a restless nature with all those names tacked on to him.

As a matter of fact, he usually slept about as well as anybody else, and any occasional bouts of insomnia with which he was afflicted were not due to any such reason. Actually he was as partial to his names as he was to his eyeglass—which was saying a good deal. Not that he used them all, of course. In Scotland he was usually referred to as “His Lordship,” for he was the fourteenth Viscount Arbroath as well as the sixth Baron Cupar. Out in France he was just “Monty” behind his back, or “The Major,” or “Sir” to his face.

No, all that was nothing to do with his restlessness, the cause of which became apparent even as he turned over with a grunt and pulled the bedclothes over his head. The telephone on the sugar-box by his side was calling him. It called shrilly, and was still.

“Bothah!” muttered Major Montgomery de Courcy Montmorency Hardcastle, M.C. But he did not move. Nevertheless he was fighting back the sleep which shrouded his brain. One by one the films fell away, and the last had disappeared by the time the telephone called for the third time.

Now the Major’s hand shot out and grasped the instrument. Although it was pitch dark in the tent he knew exactly where to find it, and woe betide his batman if it should ever happen to be an inch to left or to right of its appointed place. The night air struck chill and he pulled the ’phone down into the bed. Then he shot the clothes back over his head, unhitched his eyeglass, which always spent the night hanging on the instrument, and, sticking it in his eye, lifted the receiver.

“Yes, hullo?” he said, in a tone which suggested that

he was impatient at having been kept waiting.

“The Wing Colonel on the line, sir,” came the reply. “The stars are bright, and I should think that dawn will be clear. West wind about fifteen miles per hour.”

“Thanks, Hepburn, put me through . . . ah, mornin’, sir. . . . Toppin’, thank you, and you? . . . Fine!”

The Colonel got down to business. “What’s the weather your way?”

“Toppin’, thanks . . . er . . . the air’s a bit cool outdoors, don’t you know. . . .” Phew! It was deuced hot under these clothes. What was it Jenkins had said? . . . ah yes! “. . . The stars are bright and the dawn is likely to be clear. Wind west, about fifteen miles per hour.”

WING HEADQUARTERS were eight kilometres distant, yet the receiver was booming as loudly as though the Colonel were there in bed with the Major—and shouting the odds at a race-meeting, at that.

“Bothah the man’s noise!” said Monty, and threw the bedclothes off.

“. . . Send up a flight as soon as it is light enough to take-off,” the Colonel was saying. “Patrol the Somme area, where there’s likely to be trouble. And that balloon in the Mametz salient . . .” there was the slightest hesitation in his voice at this point, “. . . has got to be destroyed to-day, without fail, mind!”

Monty sat up with a sudden movement. “But look here, sir, we’ve shot that nasty sausage down three times in the last fourteen days, and . . .”

“Good,” broke in the ’phone, “then make a habit of it.”

“I was going to add”—the Major’s voice had become hard—“that I’ve lost eight pilots in the process. Now only three of my chappies are sufficiently experienced to do a job over the lines. The others have been here only a fortnight or so, and I’ve only got one flight-commander left. . . .”

“Then send him if you like, but get the balloon! And when they’ve replaced it you’ll have to get that as well. That’s all.”

“Hold on,” said the Major. “In case you don’t realise it, sir, I must tell you that it is sendin’ a man to almost certain death. They’ve got every gun they can lay hold of trained round that sausage. Even so, it is positively uncanny the way they get my fellows every time.”

No reply came from the 'phone, but Monty thought he heard a deep intake of breath. "You there, sir?" he queried.

"Yes." The voice was strangely low. "You seem to be under the impression that I give these orders for my own amusement. I don't. I merely pass them on after protest. The R.F.C. is under Army, unfortunately, and has got to do what it is told. I'd rather go myself than send these youngsters, though I've no more desire to die than they have."

So the old boy's human after all, thought Monty. "Sorry I spoke, sir."

"That's all right, old man, and while I think of it, you're not to cross the lines yourself under any circumstances. There will be no one responsible left in the squadron if you do."

"I won't, sir, good-bye," said Monty. "Unless, of course, I lose my way," he added as he hung up the receiver.

He lifted it again a moment later.

"Sir?"

"Have 'B' Flight called—to leave the ground at four o'clock."

CHAPTER II DAWN PATROL

MONTY GOT OUT of bed and stuck his feet into a pair of gum-boots; he pulled on his British warm and stuffed a split-air cap on his head. He didn't bother to light a candle, for he knew where everything was. He untied the flap of his tent and threw it back, then stepped over the skirting on to the grass. He took a deep breath and stretched himself. The night smelt good.

Light showed from the mess tent, the office and a Nissan hut. "B" Flight hangar was suddenly illuminated. The eastern horizon twinkled with innumerable pale yellow flashes, punctuated here and there by brighter glows from the big guns, or by sustained white patches where Verey lights or parachute flares held the trenches brilliantly illuminated.

From Switzerland to the North Sea, reflected Monty, infantry were standing-to. Yet no sound of that

bombardment reached his ears. For 99 Squadron's aerodrome was far behind the lines, and the west wind blew. On the Auxi-le-Chateau-Frevant road, about midway between those towns, indeed, it was a good distance from any centre of activity. Which had its advantages. It was rarely, for instance, visited by Hun nightbombing 'planes. The nearest farm was over a kilometre away, and the sound of a cock crowing must come from there. Otherwise, only an occasional voice, the clatter of cups and saucers in the mess tent, and the hum of the lighting-plant in the Leyland lorry broke the stillness.

But Monty was only subconsciously aware of these things as he walked across to the mess tent. The tent was empty, save for an orderly. Then Jones entered, closely followed by Rodney and Kirk. They were youngsters all, and still heavy with sleep. They were dressed in Sidcot suits, still open at the neck, and sheepskin thigh-boots. They carried helmets and goggles in their hands.

"Good morning, sir," they chorused.

"Mornin', Rodney, Kirk," replied the Major. Then he glared at Jones, whose pyjama top was revealed beneath his suit. "Why are you not properly dressed?"

Jones began to stammer something.

"Go and get into your uniform at once! I'll see you in the office when you've had something to eat." The Major turned and left the tent.

Jones said nothing, and followed. "Hot air old fool!" he thought. But he wished the incident had not occurred, for he was in the running to command "B" Flight, and must keep in Monty's good books. If the promotion came through in time he'd be able to put up three pips before he went on leave. He already had a D.F.C. ribbon on his tunic, and the two together would look well.

Rodney and Kirk sat down to eggs and coffee. "Damned old swine!" said Rodney. Kirk's mouth was full, but he nodded vigorous agreement. "Ought to be made to fight himself, then he'd have a better sense of values. How'd he ever get the M.C.?"

"His Lordship smiled at a ruddy General, I expect. They used to hand the things out at the Base with the rations, anyway."

Smith entered, followed by Caldwell. "What ho, chaps! How's old Monty woken up to-day?"

"Cave!" hissed Kirk, as the Major returned.

MONTY swallowed a cup of coffee and was soon back in his office, where, five minutes later, Jones

joined him. Jones was furious, but hid his feelings as well as he could. There was that question of promotion.

"Sit down, old man," said the Major, pushing forward a box of cigarettes, and striking a match. "You're to patrol the Somme area and look out for trouble. But don't go into it if the odds are against you. Wait for that until your chaps have a little experience. There's one definite job, however, which must be done. The balloon behind Mametz must be burnt."

Jones stiffened.

"Yes, I know it's a tough nut to crack, but you can do it. The dawn patrol's the best time to tackle it. Get down low to the east and slip along the floor. You'll have it alight before the gunners have time to get to their guns, with luck. That balloon goes up as soon as there's a glimmer of light, and that's the time to go for it."

"No good taking the whole patrol down, is it, sir?"

"Not a bit of use. Leave them up above. Rodney should be able to steer them out of harm's way till you've done your stuff. That's all, get along, and good luck to you . . . no, wait a minute. About that question of uniform. Always be fully dressed when you cross the lines. If you should happen, unfortunately, to be taken prisoner you'd realise the value of my advice. Off you go."

And with mixed feelings Jones went.

As he left the office one of the Le Rhone engines started to spit, then another. Queer chap, old Monty, he thought. He had actually seemed almost human, just now, and then a moment later he gave you a job like that just as calmly as though he were sending an orderly for his pipe. "Damn the darkness!" Jones had fallen over a guy rope. He picked himself up. His leave seemed less certain now, but it was no good thinking about that sort of thing.

His Camel was ready waiting, and when he had explained the patrol to the waiting pilots he climbed in and fastened his belt, while an Ack-emma walked up. Light flooded from the open hangar, all else seemed black as pitch. "Contact, sir," "Contact." The engine started up at the first pull, and he blipped it on the thumb switch till he found the correct setting for throttle and fine adjustment. The four other engines were ticking over quietly, and after two minutes to warm up the oil, Jones ran his up. The revs, were all right, and he waved away the chocks.

Right across the aerodrome he taxied before turning into wind. It was not so dark once one got

away from the lighted hangar, and he could just see the outline of the other four machines, two on either hand. Now he was pushing throttle and fine adjustment forward, checking the eager Le Rhone on the thumb switch while he found the correct positions. For it was still much too dark to see the markings on the quadrant. And tank pressure is apt to vary, anyway.

Jones released the thumb switch and pushed the stick hard forward, only to ease it quickly as the Camel's tail rose. The machine made a determined effort to swing to the right, but was checked by the pilot's foot, which shot out, but came progressively back as speed was gained.

The movements were purely automatic to Jones, who was keeping a watchful eye on the machines on either side. Their positions were clearly indicated by the arc of blue flame thrown out into the cowlings by the whirling cylinders. They were rushing towards that lighted hangar which was growing in size in a threatening manner. Now it was falling below and ceased to have significance, now it had disappeared beneath the Camel's nose.

The long line of flashes on the horizon was now the only thing to be seen, save for the background of pale sky heralding the dawn. Soon the gun positions were no longer on the horizon, but in the near foreground. The flashes could be seen as they left the muzzles, forming an unbroken line which twisted snake-like northward to the sea, southward to be lost in distance.

Jones wondered whether those five days still to go before his leave would pass quickly, whether London had changed, whether Joan would be as pleased to see him as usual—how he hoped the days would fly by. He wondered why old Monty had not come out on to the 'drome as usual to see them off.

The Major was, in fact, at that moment standing in the shadow between "A" and "B" hangars. The intermittent beat of those five engines was rapidly fading into nothingness . . . now it was gone. A hush had fallen on the camp once more, all, save the guard on duty, having crept back to bed.

Monty walked across the square formed by the three Bessoneau hangars towards "C" Flight, where his Camel was housed. Midway over, he halted, the echo of the Colonel's voice in his ears, warring with his own desire. Then, with a shrug, he turned on his heel and went to his tent, discarded his clothing, hung his monocle on the telephone, got into bed, and was asleep within two minutes.

CHAPTER III A TRAP FOR CAMELS

JONES CROSSED THE LINES a mile or so south of Arras, and at a height of twelve thousand feet. Naturally he was too far north to see whether the balloon behind Mametz were up or no. Even in daylight it would be impossible to tell from that height, and distance.

As a matter of fact the balloon in question was still on the ground, and to judge by the number of officers and men in the vicinity, it was an object of much interest. The gunners from the encircling ring of "Archies," machine-guns and throwers of flaming onions were not yet at their posts. They were congregated round an officer who lay on the grass with headphones on his ears, pencil in hand. This man made a mark on a map, and then sat motionless, listening. The soldiers round him were making a certain amount of noise, as soldiers will, and he angrily motioned them to be silent.

"*Mund halten!*" he snapped.

He listened a while longer, and then scribbled something on a sheet of paper, slipped the headphones off, and picked up a field-telephone. "Give me the *Herr Hauptmann!*" he barked.

Unter-Leutnant Karl Splitzer was well pleased with himself, for this little idea of a listening-post had been thought of by him. The Army had other listening-posts, of course, plenty of them, but they were of a different nature. He had applied the idea to aircraft as, so the German agents informed him, the cursed English did in their defense of London.

The receiver vibrated wildly. The *Herr Hauptmann* was on the line. "*Guten Morgen, Herr Hauptmann.* The English are over. They are some miles to the north and reception is faint, but 'Kamels' they are, and likely they will attack our balloon."

That telephone line was but half a mile in length, and it ran slightly north of east to a hill marked "302" on the Imperial map. And inside that hill—inside it, mark you?—sat the *Herr Hauptmann*. His left elbow rested on the small table which carried the telephone, and his hand held the receiver to his ear. With his free

right hand he smote his thigh a mighty blow—which was his way of expressing great pleasure.

For this scheme of his was working wondrously well. True that Splitzer had thought of the listening-post, but that was a trivial point. What did matter was that he, the *Herr Hauptmann*, had thought out this pretty little scheme in all its cunning detail.

The English were mighty fond of attacking that balloon just before dawn when the gunners could never be certain of hitting their targets. And the English knew that the nearest German aerodrome was eighteen kilometres further back, and that German aeroplanes could not be in two places at the same time.

So he, the *Herr Hauptmann*, had had a small hangar excavated in the eastern slope of Hill "302," and here three Fokker biplanes were housed, safe from detection and from bomb raids, and yet but half a kilo, from that balloon. As soon as the first light of day came that balloon would be sent up to 250 metres, to which height, of course, a Fokker could zoom straight off the ground. The would-be balloon "strafer," having carefully scanned the sky and satisfied himself that no German aeroplanes were around, would fly to the attack. The three Fokkers were always a complete surprise to these Englishmen, who usually never knew by what they were attacked. And these fools of English kept coming—that was the comic part of it all. They never knew when they were beaten, and the *Herr Hauptmann's* score was swelling in the most satisfactory manner with practically no risk to himself.

HE SMILED as he replaced the receiver and glanced through the square opening of his underground hangar to where the three Fokkers were ticking over. They were outside, but hidden from view by the camouflaged awning which was extended over them. Beyond, the eastern sky was pale still, but those wisps of cloud would soon be pink-tipped. And then the sun would appear.

He called an orderly and told him to sit by the telephone, then he slipped on his helmet and climbed into the one empty Fokker cockpit.

Soon the orderly was running out. The "Kamels" had turned south and were nearly overhead, but they seemed to be climbing still. One of the machines, however, had gone west, and was now almost out of sound range.

The orderly returned to the instrument, but left it hurriedly a moment later.

The single "Kamel" was now clearly heard. Its note had risen an octave so it must be diving down.

The *Herr Hauptmann* signed to his two pilots to be in readiness, and then carefully scanned the eastern horizon, where the pale skyline formed a perfect background against which the silhouette of an aeroplane would be clearly revealed. He had not waited long before the top plane of a Camel showed for an instant above the horizon. Then it descended into a hollow and was lost to view.

But that one glimpse was enough for the *Herr Hauptmann*. It told him that it was a “Kamel” about two kilos, distant, hedge-hopping towards the best known and most greatly feared balloon on the Western front. His raised arm dropped, the throttle went forward, and the three Fokkers were gathering speed over the uneven surface of the field. The pilots had no fear of detection against the murky west.

This little maneuver was becoming second nature to them, and as it involved but little danger, it had developed into a thrilling sport far transcending that of big game shooting in the Bavarian forests. With wing-tips snicking the blades of grass they came round until they were converging on their unwitting quarry.

Jones was pleased with the way his attack was developing. Success seemed within his grasp, provided the sausage would burn—there was always that doubt. For surely those gunners could never get going in time. Yes, there was the balloon. His sense of direction had been sound. Its fat belly was tinged with pink, and the sun must be about to rise. In ten seconds he would zoom, and then friend sausage would turn to fiery red. He glanced round for one final searching of the sky above and behind. It was clear, and, indeed, there seemed small chance that he could be surprised under such conditions.

He eased the stick an inch towards him, and the Camel bounded skywards as a thing of life, happy to leave a gloomy earth.

The Fokkers had opened out, and with their superior performance were rapidly closing in on the Camel, the *Herr Hauptmann* directly behind, and the others, one each on either flank. They shot upwards two seconds after the Camel had zoomed. The flank men had the little machine in their sights, but out of the corner of an eye they watched for the leader’s signal. When the first tracer left a gun—then their thumbs would go down!

But he was a terror for holding his fire. It was maddening the way he would wait when surprising his quarry. Why, they’d ram him in another two seconds. Ah! A tracer sped. Six Spandau guns belched lead.

The Camel shot vertically up . . . fell on its back. The torn top plane sagged in the middle under the weight of the fuselage, and a mass of wreckage tumbled earthwards.

The sun peeped over the horizon as though to see what all the fuss was about. In a week or so the diligent readers of *The Times* might notice the name: “Lieutenant Brian Jones, R.F.C.” in the column headed: “Missing.”

CHAPTER IV THE CLUE OF THE TRACERS

AT EIGHT O’CLOCK exactly, the Major was called by his batman. He rose in leisurely fashion and ambled to the shower-bath. This was housed in a hut which had been built for the purpose, and which stood next to his tent. That the water had to be brought five miles by lorry worried him not at all. The jolly old war could not be allowed to interfere with a chap’s daily “dooty,” as he had often remarked. Back in his tent, he was shaved by his batman, and then dressed with his usual care. His hair was very troublesome that morning, and the parting simply would not go exactly right. His batman helped him into his glistening field-boots.

“Why didn’t you clean these, MacPherson?” the Major suddenly asked.

“But I did, sir,” MacPherson replied brightly.

The Major’s eye wandered round the tent to finally rest on his Sam Browne belt, which lay gleaming on the camp bed. “Then go and clean that belt. And bring it to me before nine.”

“Certainly, sir.” The batman gathered up the belt carefully so as not to spoil its lustre, and left the tent. With the belt over a shoulder he made his way to breakfast, and there was no little merriment when he entered the men’s tent, hung the offending piece of leather over his chair, and sat down.

“Always do your work thoroughly, MacPherson,” growled Wallis, exquisitely mimicking the tone and manner of the Sergeant-Major. “It always saves you trouble in the long run, me lad.” But “Mac” was not worrying. He knew well enough that when he took the untouched belt back to the Major, he would put it on without a murmur. “T’poor old boy’s worrit,” he said.

"Why?" asked Randall. "Did you tell him about Mr. Jones?"

"Crikey, no! If I so much as opened my mouth wivout being asked, he'd jump down it."

"How uncomfortable," remarked Wallis. "For the Major, I mean. But if you didn't tell him, how'd he know?"

"Blimey, how should I know? Reckon he's a thought-reader, but I can tell he's wise to it."

When the Major had polished his monocle to his satisfaction—this was a job he would allow no one else to perform—and when he had fixed it at the precise angle, he strode across to the mess. The grass was still wet with dew, and he picked his way carefully.

The atmosphere in the marquee was one of profound gloom, as he had anticipated. It was not so much that Jones had probably been killed. That was bad enough as far as it went, for he had been a popular fellow. But casualties were everyday affairs, and must not be taken too seriously. It was this invincible balloon which had stretched the Squadron's morale to breaking-point. It seemed like trying to knock down a wall with a chap's head. One by one the pilots were going west in the attempt. Whose turn would it be next?

The trouble was that 99 Squadron, more than any other in France, were renowned for their balloon-strafting achievements. But then Armstrong, pioneer of that particular art, was gone. So were Franklin, Dobson, Doherty and the rest. And sausages, meanwhile, had become twenty times as hard to approach, the one behind Mametz being the most difficult of the lot. Army, of course, did not consider such matters. If a balloon was a nuisance, then the R.F.C. must destroy it, and naturally it was a job for the balloon-strafting squadron.

"Mornin', fellahs," said the Major cheerfully.

"Good morning, sir," replied Captain Baker, the one remaining flight-commander. An unintelligible sound came from someone else's throat, but otherwise there was no response.

If Monty noticed the tense atmosphere, he gave no sign of the fact. He sank into the chair the orderly drew out for him in a manner suggesting that the walk from his tent had greatly wearied him. "I think I might toy with somethin' light, a small omelette, say, yes, that's my mark, waiter."

"And coffee, sir?"

The Major nodded. Everyone seemed to be finishing his breakfast very suddenly, and the marquee was almost empty already. His own meal was quickly

served and as quickly eaten, and then he rose and left. His batman was waiting outside, belt in hand. "Thanks, MacPherson, that's much better," he told the man, as he slipped it on. "Clean it always like that."

The batman's face was an impassive mask. "Very good, sir."

SYKES, the recording officer, was in the orderly-room when the Major entered. "Good morning, sir."

"Mornin', Sykes. Let me see those combat reports."

"On your table, sir."

"Splendid fellah." The Major sat down and perused the documents, but there was no information here. "No news of Jones yet?" he inquired at length.

"None whatever."

"Let me have the name and address of his next-of-kin."

"On your table, sir."

"Splendid fellah. I'd better see the rest of the patrol, bring 'em along." Sykes vanished from the hut. When he returned he was followed by Rodney, Smith, Kirk and Caldwell, all looking sullen with resentment.

The Major glanced up and readjusted his monocle. "I think I'll see you chappies one at a time, please."

There was a stampede for the door, and Caldwell was last. He turned reluctantly to face the Major, who asked: "Did you observe Jones when he attacked that kite-balloon?"

"No . . . sir."

"Did you see the balloon; did you see anythin'?"

"Nothing at all—it was too dark."

"Then trot along, and send in the next man."

Kirk entered as Caldwell left the hut. There was some curiosity outside to know what the old devil wanted. "Only wanted to know if I saw what happened to poor old Jones," Caldwell explained.

"As though he cared what happened!" Smith was livid with rage. "I'd like the job of killing him myself!" The idea appealed to Caldwell. "How'd you do it?" he inquired. "Put him in oil and bring him to the boil?"

Smith shook his head. "No, I don't want to be vindictive. I'd give him some of his own medicine. . . . I'd let the Huns deal with him. . . . I'd like to be leading five squadrons of aeroplanes. Then I'd put our gallant Major in front and drive him over the lines. He'd be for it the moment he showed signs of turning tail. . . ."

Kirk came out of the door at that moment. No, he'd seen nothing. Nor had Smith, who followed. Rodney went in last.

In reply to the Major's questions he said he had not been able to see the balloon. He had seen nothing,

in fact, except a little tracer, far down—just two converging lines for about two seconds. Monty was sprawling in the easy chair he had picked up one day in Beauval. His head sagged forward and his eyeglass seemed about to fall from position. Rodney began to think he was asleep. “Is that all, sir?” he inquired softly.

No answer came from the easy chair, and he felt convinced that the man was asleep. Was any other squadron in the whole of the darned war handicapped with such a mouldy vegetable for an O.C.? he wondered. He turned quietly to go—he would slip out and let it sleep away the day.

“Just a moment, laddie.” The Major must have woken. Rodney faced round again, guiltily. “I thought that jolly old balloon was bally well surrounded with guns. Isn’t it rather quaint you saw only two or three converging lines of tracer . . . ?”

THE telephone shrilled, and Sykes jumped to answer it. “Wing,” he announced with a hand on the mouthpiece. Monty took the instrument.

The Colonel was going off like a firework display, and the Major held the receiver twelve inches from his ear. That became tiring, so he laid it down on the table and sank back in his chair. He motioned to Rodney to be seated also. The voice from Wing filled the room comfortably.

“... and let me tell you that that balloon is causing a hell of a lot of trouble to the infantry, and that Division has put a complaint up to G.H.Q.—G. . . H. . . Q., mind you!” The old chap’s voice rose to a wailing scream of horror. “And I get the kicks! What are you going to do about it? Is yours a sq . . . sq . . . squadron of fighting pilots . . . or . . . a . . . a . . . school for white mice? I’ve a good mind to have the unit disbanded . . . sent home and formed into a canteen to supply weak coffee to war-weary Waacs . . . yes, weak coffee, but nothing else, mind . . . !”

Rodney was sitting bolt upright in his chair. He was learning things. Perhaps it wasn’t entirely the Major’s fault that 99 Squadron was condemned to die one at a time in an attempt to get near a ruddy sausage. But the ’phone was still spluttering.

“... is that what I’m to do? If not, I want results, d’you hear? RESULTS! Why the hell don’t you answer . . . you there? . . . hullo . . . hullo . . .” Monty roused himself and reached for the instrument. “Yes, I’m here,” he drawled. “You want results, Colonel, and results you shall have. We’ll get that sausage to-morrow mornin’ . . .” Rodney stiffened, he couldn’t help it.

“... at dawn to-morrow. And if we fail, send us to that canteen or to run a seminary for the daughters of decayed gentlewomen. Good mornin’, good mornin’, sir.” The Major replaced the receiver, and looked at Rodney.

“So you only saw two or three lines of tracer,” he mused aloud. “That seems strange, very strange!” He was quiet for a while. In fact he sank back into his comfortable chair, and his eyes closed. Then he sat up with a sudden movement and pointed at Rodney. “How long have you been out in France?”

“Three weeks, sir . . . four on Saturday.”

“Good! Then it’s time you did somethin’. Colonel’s right, this Squadron is goin’ to the Devil. You’re all disheartened . . . no guts left. But . . .” the Major’s voice became quiet. “... you will get that balloon to-morrow mornin’, and confidence will return, you hear? . . . Good! . . . Then run along and play.”

CHAPTER V

SHELL-HOLES WITHOUT SHADOWS

WHEN RODNEY HAD LEFT, the Major tackled his work. There were reports to make out, indents to sign. Then he wrote to Jones’ mother. Three times he tore up what he had written, and started afresh, but at length he was satisfied with the result, and put it in an envelope, which he sealed and franked as having been passed by censor. Then he rose and took helmet, coat and goggles from their hook on the door. He paused.

“I’m going up for some fresh air, Sykes. It’s stuffy down here . . . and full of cobwebs. See that letter goes off.” He went out.

He called MacPherson and sent him for his binoculars. He ordered out his Camel and climbed in.

Smith and Kirk came out to the hangars when they heard the Le Rhone spitting—just to see who was going up.

“It’s the Major, sir,” an ack-emma told them.

“He’s a pretty pilot,” Kirk acknowledged grudgingly, as he watched the Major take-off.

Smith had to admit the fact. “All the more reason why he should have to fight like the rest of us.”

“Suppose someone’s got to run the Squadron.”

Monty headed straight for the lines, and soon

caught sight of the twisting Somme curling gently through green meadows and orchards. Further to the south-east it flowed through brown, shell-torn earth. You could see some shells bursting now if you watched very carefully. "Mustn't cross the lines," the Colonel had said. But how was a mere major of a scout squadron to know where the lines were? The deep belt of brown indicated the general position, but you couldn't tell exactly where the trenches were from that height. Without an eyeglass, too.

Behind the brown belt the earth was green again. Out of range of the field artillery, of course. But the big stuff could reach back there, and the ground was studded with shell-holes—brown stains on a green carpet. The sun cast a shadow on the side of each shell-hole. "Archie" was very quiet. Those shadows made the shell-holes look like mounds of earth instead of hollows. Funny the tricks a chappie's eyes played on him. Now the shadow was on the south side of the brown patch, which proved it was a hollow, for the sun was in the south. Now if the sun were in the north, of course . . . but never mind about that.

Monty had a theory. There might be nothing in it, of course. Rodney had started it all by saying he had seen only two or three lines of tracer, and just short bursts. Now, when a balloon was attacked, hundreds of machine-guns were brought into action. But this business had been so quick that it seemed more like guns from aeroplanes firing at close range.

Monty reasoned the thing out. "Aeroplanes couldn't be always flyin' round a balloon at a hundred miles an hour in the dark," he mused. "If they did, they'd miss a Camel, approachin' low down from the east. Ten to one they'd miss it. If they were not flyin' round the bally thing, on the other hand, they must have some advance landin' ground where they could wait for some signal.

"There was the jolly old sausage—lookin' so innocent and harmless." Monty picked up his binoculars and peered over the side of his Camel. Now, there was a field which he would have chosen as a landin' ground. It was a fine big one, but they could not be usin' it for that purpose because it had seven or eight—yes, eight—shell-holes in it. Aeroplanes could not take-off in the dark from a field with a lot of shell-holes in it—that was obvious. And here was another optical illusion. Those shell-holes had no shadows in them.

The sun was still shining, of course. He looked up to verify the fact, and at the same time to assure

himself that there were no Huns about. He looked down again.

The shell-holes outside the field had shadows, inside they had none. What did it mean? No sooner had he asked himself the question than he knew the answer. This was no illusion. The shell-holes had been filled in, of course. Filled in so that that very field might be used as a landin' ground. They probably had a concealed hangar somewhere, but that didn't matter one way or the other. He'd found what he wanted to know.

"Got it!" he exclaimed.

CRUMP! An "Archie" shell had burst a little way below, and slightly in front. Monty saw the ugly red flame shoot through the dirty black smoke. There was a terrific concussion. The Camel leapt, and Monty dropped his binoculars.

"Lost 'em! Bothah!" he shouted.

IT WAS very dark when Rodney took-off the following morning. The lighted hangar grew . . . sank . . . and disappeared. To the east the opposing gunners were celebrating their daily hate. He headed south-east, for the Major'd told him to work round from the south and "... make certain of it this time!" It was easier to give orders than to carry them out.

Which was exactly what Monty was thinking at that moment. Blast Army for disturbin' his sleep in this way he thought, as he climbed into his Camel. He had ordered his machine out after Rodney had left the ground—apparently as an afterthought. The ack-emmas had looked surprised.

Monty took-off down wind and disappeared into the night. Then he headed north-east, flying low and fast. Soon he was crossing the British heavy artillery lines, the gunners below busy with their job of hurling metal at the enemy, crashing concussion following vivid flash. Then the field-guns passed beneath his 'plane, and sharper and more frequent barks reached his ears. Those must be the front-line trenches, with men standing-to, shoulder to shoulder, and shells bursting on the parapet.

Through that barrage flew Monty, over No-Man's-Land and through the British barrage on the Jerry trenches. The air was rent with a thousand explosions. If Jerry had a listening-post to detect British 'planes in the dark, thought Monty, he'd have his work cut out to pick him up down in this shindy.

As a matter of fact, *Unter-Leutnant* Karl Splitzer was very busy with his listening-post at that moment,

but his instrument was pointing to the sky to southward, and he was excited. He called up the *Herr Hauptmann* and told him the good news. The “Kamels” were coming again, but to the south to-day, and so far there was but one of them.

“*Kolosaal!*” chuckled the *Herr Hauptmann*, and smote his thigh. “They deserve to be killed, these fools!” He climbed into his waiting Fokker. Already the eastern sky was brightening, the balloon had ascended. An orderly came out to say that the English machine was diving down, still going east. Doubtless he would turn at any moment. The *Herr Hauptmann* screwed his head round to watch to east and to south. His Mercedes engine sounded good, his Spandau belts were well filled, all was ready for the kill.

The two *Leutnants*, each in his machine, were also watching. *Leutnant* Bauer had very good eyesight, and saw the “Kamel” first. He waved to attract the leader’s attention, and without delay the three Fokkers were tearing over the ground.

As soon as they were in the air the *Hauptmann* started the circle which should bring him in behind his quarry. Now he was flying north . . . now north-east. He kept very low, for that way he could not be seen.

CHAPTER VI THE MAJOR TAKES A HAND

THE THREE FOKKERS were flying due east when Monty suddenly saw them. He was at the time following the old Bapaume railway track in a southerly direction. The Huns crossed his path but a few hundred yards ahead, and turning left he closed in behind. He was determined to get one of them by surprise, for three to one was rather too long odds when a chappie was down on the ground behind the lines. But they were fast, these Fokkers, and he had to keep his engine all out to hold them, even though the Mercedes were not under full throttle. He chose the machine on the left. He was at the same height, and the range was about a hundred yards. If he was gaining, it was but slowly, and time was the essence of the business.

He was a hundred feet above the ground and he pushed his nose down to gain speed. Now he was

almost beneath them and he pulled up under the Fokker’s belly. Only a little deflection would be needed at that angle, and he aimed at the nose of the machine.

His thumbs went down on triggers and two Vickers guns jumped madly. The streams of tracer leapt skywards seeming to encircle the Fokker without hitting it. But tracer is deceptive stuff, and the Hun lurched sideways, the nose dipped, and it struck the ground, the mass of wreckage instantly bursting into flame.

It was all over six seconds after the first bullet was fired, but already the other two Huns had opened out, the leader banking left, the other right. Monty whipped to the right, and the dog-fight started. This was the sort of game he really enjoyed.

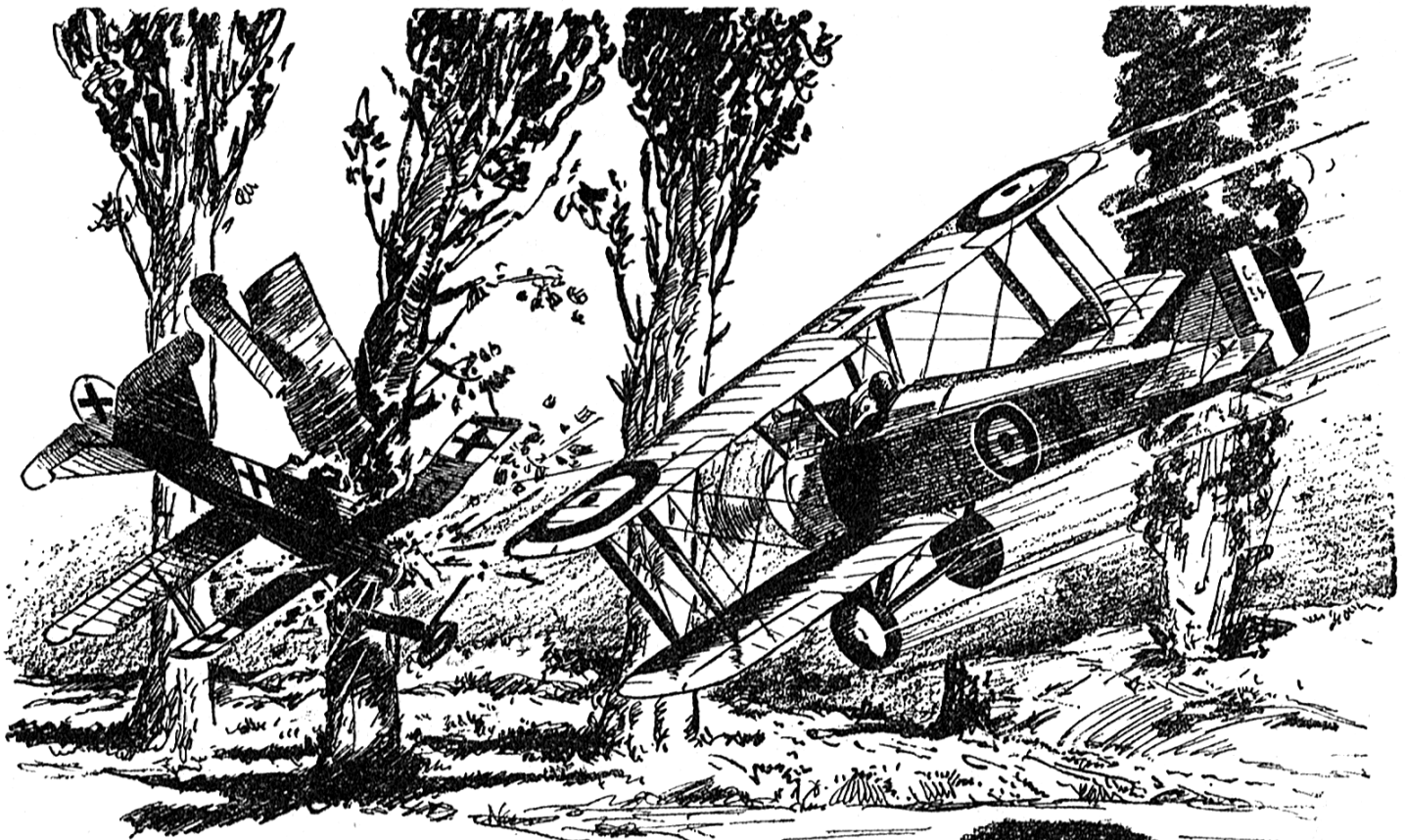
Now the Hun was trying to turn inside him, which was silly, for no Fokker ever built could turn inside a Camel handled by Monty. He’d got his Aldis on the fellow’s tail now, and it was creeping steadily up the fuselage . . . past the point where the control wires emerged from the fabric . . . past those weird markings . . . now it was on the pilot’s seat, but that was without allowing deflection. . . .

The Camel’s controls went soft—just a hint of it—and he eased her. No room to spin here. They were only a few feet from the ground, and the wind was drifting them towards a row of tall poplars lining a road. Bullets cracked round the Camel. The *Hauptmann* was diving and zooming and diving again. Firing as he dived. Let him. It was a difficult shot, and if he got one home . . . well, good luck to him. But the Colonel would be annoyed.

The Hun didn’t like it, so it seemed, for he was straightening up his plane. He may have meant to reverse the bank, but no one will ever know, for the moment he was on an even keel, Monty let drive with both barrels. The Fokker smacked into the trunk of a poplar, snapping it like a match, and then there was only one.

Monty zoomed over the row of trees, missing a tall poplar by inches, bobbed down on the far side, and banking vertically, flew parallel to them with his wheels a few inches from the ground. He had lost number three. Ah! there he was on the other side of the road—he would cross it in a couple of seconds. Here he came.

The Camel shot upwards in a climbing turn, reaching up at the Fokker. Had the pilot seen him? Probably, for he was throwing on bank. A deadly burst tore through it when it was up on its side. Monty saw



The Fokker smashed into the trunk of a poplar, snapping it like a matchstick, and then there was only one.

the pilot crumple, and the machine turn on its back. Flaming petrol was pouring from the cockpit . . . and then it was just another bonfire on the ground.

Monty didn't wait a second, but shot off west. The balloon hove in sight, it was back on the ground now, still intact. Where was Rodney? Over the other side, most likely. He had probably fired all his ammunition into the gas-bag without result. Sausages were like that. Hydrogen will not burn unless mixed with air.

Bullets went skimming from Monty's Camel along the top of the bag, ripping it here and there. Gas must surely be escaping now and mixing with the atmosphere. Surely a tracer would put it up! Pity he had no Buckingham in his belt. Those gunners must be asleep, Monty thought, for they were not firing. Now one had started up.

"Ah!"

A tiny flame appeared at the highest point of the envelope. It seemed to hover for a while, neither growing in size nor moving. Now it was running along

the bag, cutting it as a tailor divides his cloth. Then, suddenly, the envelope fell apart, thousands of cubic feet of gas shot upwards, and flames leapt, roaring after it, as though fearful some might escape.

RODNEY was on his way back to the aerodrome. He had fired all his ammunition without result. It was a hell of a war! And then he looked back and saw the leaping flame. His heart bounded for joy. He—Dick Rodney—had broken the spell. The good old Squadron would be all right again now. He turned his Camel round to see this bonfire he had lighted, and he did not notice that other Camel slipping along the carpet below.

Monty landed as the old clock in Beauval church-tower struck five. He had sneaked into the aerodrome—a dead-stick landing—and only his fitter and rigger saw him arrive.

“Put her away, laddies,” Monty said. “Look her over later, not now. I believe some rude fellow has been shootin’ at me, and it almost seems I must have drifted over the lines. It was rather dark. I’m goin’ to bed, and am not to be disturbed. Better turn in yourselves.”

“Very good, sir, thank you,” said the fitter.

He picked up the Camel’s tail as he spoke. Jock, the rigger, glanced at his mate. He pointed to many bullet holes in planes and fuselage, and one eyelid closed slowly and lifted again. The other nodded, grinning.

There were great rejoicings at breakfast that morning. The Squadron was itself once more, and Rodney was the hero of the hour.

“We’ve got the best of old Monty this time,” said Caldwell, “The old swine!”

“You leave Monty out of it!” said Rodney strangely, and with warmth. “He knows how to run a Squadron, which is more than we chaps do.”

The Squadron thought there might be something in that point of view, but then the Squadron was itself once more.