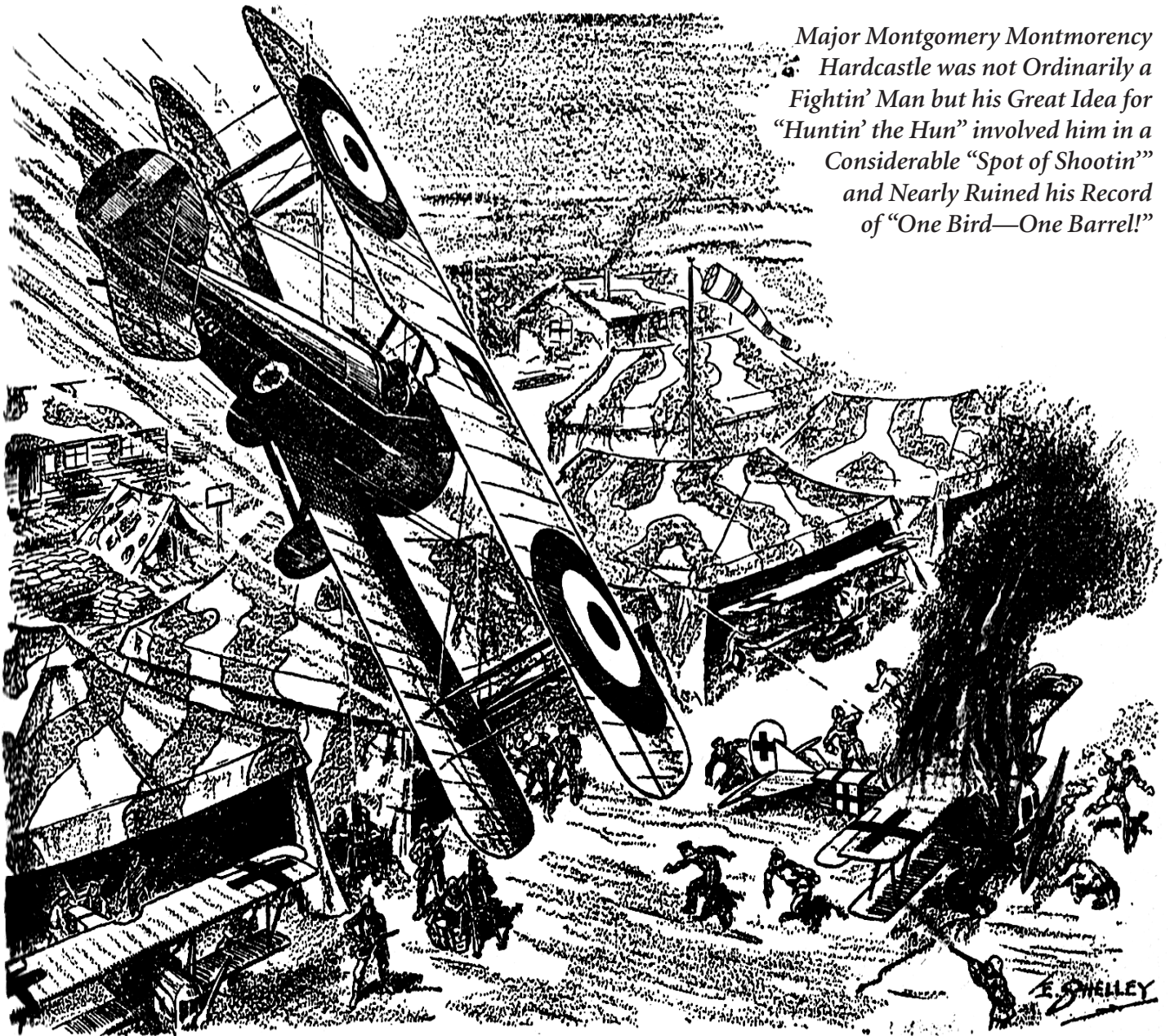


*Major Montgomery Montmorency
Hardcastle was not Ordinarily a
Fightin' Man but his Great Idea for
"Huntin' the Hun" involved him in a
Considerable "Spot of Shootin'"
and Nearly Ruined his Record
of "One Bird—One Barrel!"*



THREE MONTHS TO LIVE

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

CHAPTER I
THE MAJOR IS NEARLY RUDE

THE OFFICE CLOCK STRUCK SEVEN times and then was quiet, save for its eternal tick-tock, tick-tock. Sykes, 99 Squadron's Recording Officer, stopped writing, looked up and yawned. Fancy having to work before breakfast! He glanced across to where Major Montgomery de Courcy Montmorency Hardcastle,

M.C.—known to Debrett as the fourteenth Viscount Arbroath and to his officers as plain “Monty”—was busy filing his nails. Mustn’t disturb him at that job, or there would be the very devil of a row.

And then suddenly the blip of a Le Rhone engine was heard, and another, and another, followed by sustained bursts of full throttle and a rapid crescendo of noise, culminating in a crash of sound over the office roof. Three more crashes, and the shindy faded as the Camels zoomed up and throttled down before coming in to land.

Sykes was alert, listening. “Four,” he said at last.

The Major grunted and surveyed the result of his manicure. “Who’s miss-in’?” he then asked.

Sykes rose and moved over to his side so as to look out through the window. He watched the machines glide in one by one and land. “H’ is not there, so it must be Caldwell.”

“Maybe he’ll turn up later—we’ll see what they have to say about it. But if he’s gone west, Sykes, you can write to his next-of-kin. I’m tired of the job, and look!” Monty held up an ink-stained first finger. “I did that yesterday writin’ to Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . . somethin’ beginnin’ with S—name I’ve heard before . . . what was it . . . ?”

“Smith, sir,” Sykes put in calmly.

“Of course! Stoopid of me to forget, especially as it was the cause of an inky finger. Where’s the ink come from? French stuff?”

“No, sir, Ordnance.”

“And those pens—nasty things! Get hold of somethin’ better than that. How d’you get ink stains off? I’ve tried pumice, but it irritates the skin. Couldn’t stay in bed after it got light this mornin’—kept comin’ across that inky finger every time I turned over. Somethin’ll have to be done about it!”

The door opened to admit Rodney, Kirk, Carruthers and Frost.

“Good shootin’?” queried the Major.

“No, sir,” replied Rodney. “I lost Caldwell in flames—we got mixed up with seven Fokkers . . .”

“Get any?”

“Nothing for certain, unless Archie can confirm.”

“Well hurry and get your reports written, and then trot along and play. I’m very busy.”

“You going back to bed?” Carruthers whispered to Frost as they waited their turn at the writing-pad.

“No, I think I’ll have a walk when I’ve cleaned up—or what about our playing out that ping-pong match? Ping-pong before breakfast!—ought to set up a new Squadron record.”

Carruthers agreed, hastily scribbled a copy of what Frost had written, and followed him from the hut.

“WHAT was I talkin’ about, Sykes?” Monty asked when they were alone once more.

“Pens, ink and stained fingers, sir.”

“Quite. Which reminds me that I was about to ask you to get me the Pilot’s Pool. Get through to them now.”

Sykes spoke into the telephone and hung up the receiver again. After an interval the bell rang, and he answered it and then handed the instrument to the Major.

“Whose speakin’?” Monty inquired in languorous tones.

“Adjutant, Pilot’s Pool, sir,” was the reply.

“Well, I want Major Kelly!”

“I’m afraid he’s not up yet, sir.”

A pleased look appeared on Monty’s face. “Then give him my compliments and say I’d like him on the end of the line . . . wait a minute . . . say sorry to bothah him and all that sort of thing, but that it’s most important!”

Monty put a hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Sykes. His pleased look had turned to a grin of triumph. “Have I ever before been at work so early, laddie?”

“No, sir, quarter to nine was your previous best.”

Monty nodded delightedly. “Then we must make the most of the occasion! Hush, here he is.”

“Kelly here,” growled the ’phone. “What the devil d’you mean by sending for me in the middle of the night?”

“Hush!” reproved Monty. “You might shock my operator, and he has a weak heart. Besides, it’s the middle of the day here, and we’ve been workin’ and workin’ away for hours.”

“What the devil d’you want?”

“I’m tryin’ to tell you, only you keep interruptin’. I want replacements, of course—plenty of ’em, and good. What have you got?”

“Nothing, in the way of experienced men, that is. I have a couple of dozen youngsters with round about thirty hours’ solo flying to their credit, and I’ll send you some of those. How many do you want?”

“I’m seven short at the moment, but I must have someone with experience to command ‘C’ Flight. What are you goin’ to do about that?”

“Can’t do anything, I’m afraid. I had a few old-timers yesterday, but posted them away immediately.”

"And you didn't think of sendin' me one?" Monty's voice became ominously quiet, and Sykes, conscious of an electrical tension in the atmosphere, glanced across to where the Major sat.

"... well, you see," Kelly was explaining, "both 56 and 60 Squadrons had prior claims. But, I had forgotten for the moment, I did send you a man yesterday. Wait till I look at the list... yes, here it is. Yapp, Percy H. He was out before, but was invalided home. Now they've patched him up and bunged him out again, on Camels. Looks frightfully ill still, but you may find him all right."

There was a knock at the office door at that moment, and Sykes rose and walked across.

"If that's your idea of a joke," Monty was saying, "I don't think much of it. Is it?"

"No, Hardcastle, of course, it isn't," Kelly started to explain.

But Monty was in no mood for details once the main fact was established that he was being sent yet another "crock" as a replacement, and his voice cut across Kelly's words. "I think you are junior to me by one day, so that I can talk to you in a suitable manner. This was the finest fightin' squadron in France at one time. Would be still if it had half a chance. But it doesn't have one. All because a mouldy base wallah like you sees fit to turn it into a hospital for sick children. I suppose you think we all spend our days in bed—like you do—with soft-footed nurses flittin' around with dainty meals...!"

Sykes coughed.

"... Yapp! ... Percy H., indeed! I'll give you Yapp...!"

Sykes coughed again, but more loudly. "Stop coughin', Sykes, can't you? It is impossible to hear oneself thinkin'... Yapp, indeed! What have you to say for yourself, Kelly?... Hullo... hullo... so you've hung up. Perhaps it's just as well. I had a feelin' I was goin' to be rude."

MONTY hung up the receiver and swung round. There stood Sykes, looking very uncomfortable, and by his side was the queerest specimen he'd ever seen wearing the uniform of the R.F.C.

The newcomer was short, and so slightly built that the small tunic he wore hung in folds on his frame. His face was devoid of colour, except for a faint yellowish tinge. But Monty was instantly attracted by the fellow's eyes, which looked so intently into his. For all his affectation of languor, he was a shrewd judge of character, and decided that the frail figure before him

possessed those resolute and determined qualities for which he was ever searching.

The new arrival smiled as Monty returned his gaze, saluted and announced himself:

"Yapp, sir, Percy H."

For once the imperturbable Monty was at a loss for words. He fidgeted with his monocle. Then, suddenly, he smiled back.

"Sit down, Yapp. 'Fraid I was bein' rude about you when you came in. Just forget it if you can."

"That's all right, sir, I'm accustomed to that. I've got here, that's the main thing."

"Meanin'?"

"I was beginning to be afraid I'd never be able to get out to France again. You see, the docs, have given me three months to live—three months at the outside—and they wanted to keep me in hospital until I popped off. That would have been ridiculous, of course. But if it hadn't been for my uncle—General McCracken—who was able to pull a few strings, and for the fact that we're so short of pilots, that's where I would have had to stay. I'd much rather die in the cockpit."

"H'm," grunted Monty, fingering his eyeglass, "arrangin' that shouldn't be difficult—no you are here. But about go in' over the lines. I usually give a chappie a few days to find his way about after a spell at home. What d'you say?"

"I'd like to get right on with the job, please, sir."

"Splendid fellah! Knew you would say that. I'll give you "C" Flight, and you can take them over at eleven." Percy looked disappointed, and seemed about to speak when the 'phone bell rang.

"Wing Colonel, sir," said Sykes, handing over the instrument to the Major.

"Hullo," said Monty, "hullo, sir, yes, speakin'... L.V.G., crossed the lines, you say. That'll be for high photography. What height was it when sighted?... Quite. Well, we can't get a Camel up to twenty thou'—unless the pilot gets out and pushes...! All right, sir, we'll do our best—try to frighten it if nothin' else... Good-bye... toppin', thanks, and you?"

Monty hung up and looked at Yapp. "What weight are you?"

"Six stone."

"Then you should get a Camel higher than anyone else in the Squadron. Not twenty thou', mind, but you might get near to it. There's a new machine bein' got ready now. Let's go and look at it." Monty jumped up; Yapp rose.

Arrived at the hangar they discovered that the machine was not yet ready. There only remained the two Vickers guns and the CC gear to be put in and connected up, but that would take “two hours good,” the ack-emma assured them. But it was a fine engine, so it seemed, “best they’d had for a long time.”

“Pity!” said the Major. “We’ll have to find you another.”

“Let me take that machine, sir, please,” Yapp urged. “She might make the height without guns and ammunition. It’d be no use having the guns if I couldn’t get near the Hun.”

Monty was surprised and looked hard at Yapp—deep into those strangely set eyes of his. “All right,” he said suddenly, “you shall. Wheel her out, Flight, and get her filled up right away.”

“Very good, sir,” said Flight-Sergeant Spratt, with the slightest shrug of his shoulders. What was the Flying Corps coming to—going up to fight without guns, indeed!

CHAPTER II A BLUFF THAT WORKED

RUMOUR TRAVELS FAST, and by the time Yapp had unpacked and put on his flying kit, the whole of the Squadron seemed to have found something to do at the hangars. Carruthers and Frost had been in the middle of establishing that record by playing a ping-pong match before breakfast when Rogers of “C” Flight had burst in with the news.

“Our new Flight Commander has arrived, you chaps. Bats in the belfry! He’s going to shoot down an L.V.G. without any guns! Pity poor “C” Flight!” The speaker vanished to spread the news further afield, and was closely followed by the other two.

“What’s the idea of a crazy stunt like that?” Brough asked Douglas as they watched the new arrival climb into the Camel.

Douglas was not in a good temper. It was too early in the day, for one thing, and for another he had hoped that he would have had “C” Flight himself. “Trying to show off,” he said. “It’s easy to be brave on a stunt like that! Wait till he leads you fellows over the lines—then you’ll see what he’s made of. Monty seems to be positively encouraging him!”

The Le Rhone was being run up . . . now it was throttled back and the chocks were withdrawn, and then, without further delay, it was tearing away from the hangars at the head of a whirling cloud of dust. It rose quickly, made one climbing turn towards the lines, and then settled down to gain height.

With a six-stone pilot and an exceptionally good engine, and relieved of the dead weight of guns and ammunition, that Camel climbed amazingly fast. Visibility was not too good up to eighteen thousand feet, owing to hazy conditions.

At that height, however, the Camel emerged into a crystal-clear sky, and the haze resolved itself into a semi-transparent sea, the surface of which shone in the brilliant sunshine a few hundred feet below.

Yapp had not done any high-flying of late, and he found breathing a laboured business. So did the Le Rhone, and he pulled the fine adjustment a trifle back to compensate for the reduced supply of oxygen. The flickering rev. counter needle became steady.

At nineteen thousand feet he made a further minute adjustment, and turned south to avoid crossing the lines. After a while he headed north, turning in a wide circle to avoid loss of any of that height so laboriously gained.

He was excited, though he fought against it. For excitement was bad for him—especially bad at nineteen thousand three hundred. The “doc.” had told him to read books, but nothing of an exciting nature. He started to laugh at the recollection, and then to cough. His body shook, as did his hand on the stick, and the Camel lost a hundred feet. This would not do. He must keep very calm, adopt the poker face. For this was to be a game of bluff, the biggest bluff he had ever tried. If the enemy should decide to see his hand, it would be found worthless.

But L.V.G. pilots were usually of a timid breed, and when they were occasionally challenged at their own great altitude, they were likely to put their noses down in an endeavour to reach their lines. A fatal procedure for several reasons. The rear gunner, for example, was unable to stand up against the force of wind, and so could not deliver a counter attack. The British pilot could therefore dose up at his leisure, and the Jerry would dive more steeply still. And L.V.G.’s had an obliging habit of shedding their wings when urged to hurry in this way.

THERE was a dot against the azure to the north-west. It was no bigger than the mark of a pencil-point

on an artist's skyscape. Percy was watching it, but he was not sure. It hung motionless as in the picture. . . .

The dot had grown in size, or had he imagined it? Certainly it had grown! It almost had shape now. It was coming this way. They should meet as they were flying now.

It grew rapidly in size and form. It was a two-bay biplane, and it held unflinchingly on its course to Hunland. One of those two pilots would have to give way presently, or they would ram each other. But that was silly, of course, for something would have to happen before that.

There was nothing timid about this fellow, Percy reflected. They must have changed the breed since he was last in France. And there was something different about the machine, familiar yet unfamiliar.

But Percy had no time to consider what the change might be, for this Hun absolutely refused to be scared. He did not change course one hair's breadth, not even so that he might bring his front gun into line with the Camel. In fact the Camel might not have been there for all the notice the Hun took of it. The gunner was crouching down in the rear cockpit, and the machine-gun hung idly from its mounting.

Percy's bluff had been called, and he turned away to let the thing pass. And only then did he see the tri-coloured circles of the R.F.C.; only then did he recognise the familiar features of a D.H.4.

"A mouldy Four," he gasped, "instead of a juicy L.V.G.!"

The Four passed majestically on its way east. But the gunner was standing now, standing and waving frantically, and pointing. Percy turned to look. There was an L.V.G.—how could he have been such a damn fool?—a mile or so to southward. Its nose was tucked well down, and it was running for the lines at a height something less than that of the Camel.

Percy waved acknowledgment as he swung his scout round in an attempt to head the Hun off. He lost height on the turn, to judge by the way the Four seemed to climb away. But the L.V.G. was lower still, and trying to pass underneath the Camel's course. Percy dipped his nose, and the engine's note rose to a whining scream. That gunner was taking aim as the machines converged. Some tracer sped from the gun and vanished into the sky. Percy swerved and dived for position under the tail, but he was not quick enough.

The L.V.G. was diving steeply now, and the gunner was no longer to be seen. There was no need to get underneath, but Percy kept dead behind and tried to close the distance. The engine was yelling like a

thousand demons, and the Camel vibrating madly. The pistons would melt in a minute at this rate, but he was gaining steadily . . . now he wasn't. The L.V.G. was leaving him cold, and he dare not dive the little machine any steeper. But how could that two-seater go down like that? Percy wondered. Then he saw the reason. The Hun's fuselage was going on in front, whilst the wings fluttered down in a more leisurely if no more dignified manner.

Percy relaxed, and pulled the Camel gently out of its dive. Then he started to cough.

CHAPTER III THE MAJOR HAS AN IDEA

PERCY DID NOT GET to the mess tent for breakfast until nine-thirty, but that did not matter, for the meal went on intermittently from three o'clock till about ten. He had the place to himself for a while, then Monty slipped in.

"That was a very cunnin' idea of yours!" he said, as he drew out the chair next to Percy and seated himself. "Very cunnin'! I fancy we've not used enough brains in the runnin' of this little war. We must try to do better." Percy looked at Monty and grinned. This C.O. was a good fellow, and not in the least the sort he had expected to find. It made the war much more jolly to have such a human bloke in charge.

"I'll put my thinkin' cap on," Monty was saying, "and when you come back from patrol I'll show you what's hatched out."

The next hour slipped by and soon Percy was climbing into his clothes for the eleven o'clock patrol. He was not looking forward to it, for he hated the idea of leading other people to possible death. Then he knew nothing of these fellows, except their names. There was Rogers, fat little fellow with pudgy cheeks, Bacon, who always answered to the name of Shakespeare, and Trent, who had only done one trip over. That was the lot, for "C" Flight was still two under strength.

The wind was in the south, and they took-off into the sun and climbed quietly towards the lines. Percy had no intention of struggling for every foot of height this time. They crossed at thirteen thousand, north

of Arras, and then he turned south. Away to the east some Fokkers were circling, getting their height. Eight of them, Percy counted. Then they were joined by a further eight. Not wanting to be lower than that mob, he opened up his engine and kept close to the lines. Five S.E.'s appeared overhead and circled around as though inviting co-operation. Then they made off east with the apparent intention of diving on the Huns, but the Fokkers pushed off till the S.E.'s had disappeared down Albert way, and then returned to watch the Camels.

The Fokkers were out-climbing the Camels, and the two formations were level at seventeen thousand. The Huns were getting bolder and edged a little closer to the lines, but Percy kept at a discreet distance. Time was slipping by, tanks were getting low, and he must soon be turning back. War was a gentle affair when played to this tune. Even "Archie" seemed half-hearted this morning.

Time was up, and Percy fired a Verey light in the direction of the enemy and turned west. They landed at a quarter to one, and mechanics came out and caught hold of struts. The ack-emmas glanced at the machines as they were taxied up to the hangars. It did not seem that they would have much to do this time. They exchanged glances. There was not a bullet-hole to be seen.

Monty came strolling out and looked pleased with life. Percy unfastened his belt and raised himself. Then he slipped back again.

"Not hurt, are you, sir?" inquired the rigger.

"Good Lord, no. My hand slipped, that's all."

He made a further effort and got out. The other three pilots were walking away with heads close.

"The chap's windy!" exclaimed Rogers. "Never saw such an exhibition in my life!"

"I rather enjoyed it, myself," Bacon remarked. "It was like sitting in the front row of the dress circle instead of being on the stage."

Trent was quite satisfied, but then it was only his second show over the lines. He kept his mouth shut.

But Rogers was indignant. "The Huns'll soon get cocky if we act the goat like that much more! They'll be nosing over our side of the lines soon!"

"I quite agree," said Bacon. "As a general habit it would get us nowhere, but once in a while it is a pleasant rest and gets full marks from me. Besides, you didn't really expect . . . what's his name . . .?"

"Yelp, I think."

"Well then, you didn't expect Yelp to go barging down into that crowd, did you?"

"No, fathead, I didn't, but we could have dived and zoomed and shot 'em up a bit if he'd had the sense to go for them before they'd got to our level."

"Think the wily birds would have waited underneath while we dived on them? Not they!"

"At least he could have tried it! I tell you the fellow's yellow. You've only got to look at him. He'll let us down one of these fine days, as sure as little apples!"

"Shut up!" retorted Bacon, who was fed up with the argument. "What's the use of chewing the fat over it? Let's go and grab a drink or two before lunch."

THE Major passed them by with a nod and went on to join Percy.

"Good shootin'?" he shot his usual query at the new Flight Commander.

"No, sir, there was none."

Monty's eyeglass dropped from its usual position. It was a rare occurrence, but one which annoyed him considerably when it did happen. He restored it with a hurried gesture. "No shootin'? But that's awfully bad! I was sure the old Circus would have been out—has been every day for a fortnight at the same time."

"They were out all right, sir, but I gave them a miss."

"Gave them a miss!" echoed Monty in tones of horror. "Why? Jumpin' Jupiter why, man?" He looked at the frail figure by his side. "Never mind now, come and have a drink in the office, and then I'll tell you the plan I've been hatchin'."

The office was deserted when they entered, and Monty burrowed in a cupboard and produced whisky, syphon and glasses. He extracted a cigarette case from a pocket and put it on the table. "Help yourself."

"Don't smoke, thank you, sir. Starts me coughing."

Monty took up the case again, opened it and extracted a cigarette in silence. Then he thought better of it, put it back again, and restored the case to his pocket. "Have a drink, then. Say when."

"When," said Percy promptly.

"Soda?"

"Please . . . when." Percy lifted the glass and sipped.

"Now," said Monty, "tell me why you gave the Huns a miss."

"Well, sir, the fact is I don't want to be a Flight Commander or to lead patrols. I just want to fight, by myself for choice." Monty nodded encouragement.

"I led patrols once or twice before when I was out on S.E.'s, and the last time I made a mess of it. There were five of us over the lines when the Huns set their

usual trap, and a couple of scouts passed underneath. I peeped between my fingers at the sun, and there I saw the whole circus, but I meant to draw them down and started a dive. I pulled out again immediately, and we all got mixed up in a dog-fight. All but Simmons, that is. It was his first time over, and I'd made him promise he'd watch me closely. But in the excitement, I suppose, he went straight on down like a bat out of hell. The next time I caught a glimpse of him—there wasn't much time for looking around—his cockpit was full of flame. I shan't forget it as long as I live!"

"Cheer up," said Monty. "Life's so uncertain for all of us that it's no good worrying about a thing like that."

Percy looked surprised. The Major was safe enough in all conscience.

"A week or two back I sent a smart young fellah after a balloon," Monty was saying. "Told him exactly how to set about it, and told him wrong, though I didn't know it at the time. He got shot down. We all make mistakes, but as long as we do our best . . . well, what more can a chap do?"

Percy was about to speak when Monty went on: "But now I'll tell you that little scheme I've hatched out. Concernin' that Circus, too. They've been up every day, mornin' and afternoon, for weeks. And just about the same time as my patrols, what's more. Seems as though they flew for their especial benefit. But they swarm behind their own lines waitin' for my lads to barge in, just as they did to-day. They all come up together, and when they are down again there's not a Hun in the sky—exceptin' two-seaters."

Monty rose and placed a finger on a map on the wall.

"That's their 'drome, at Epinoy, on the Arras-Cambrai road. There are two of them really, one on either side of the road. Now a Fokker can stay up for two hours, and a Camel an hour and three-quarters, with care. If the Circus gets off the deck at three o'clock they must be down again at five—probably sooner, but five at latest. Get my meanin'?"

"Not exactly, sir, but I gather that you would like me to attack them when they are going down."

"What I'd like is nothin' to do with it, laddie. This is a bit of private sport I'm suggestin' for your amusement. If the idea appeals to you go to it, if not, just forget I spoke."

Already Percy's eyes were sparkling at the prospect. "There's nothing I'd like better, sir!" he stammered with excitement. Then he started to cough.

"Fine!" said Monty, when the spasm had subsided.

"'A' Flight goes up on the afternoon show at three. You follow soon after, and keep your eyes open. You should see somethin' of the Circus as soon as you've crossed the lines, and if they are still climbin' you'll be able to calculate how long they've been up. Then you come back here and fill your tanks, timin' it to leave the ground when the birds have been on the wing for an hour. Get me?"

"Rather!"

"Good! It should be pretty sport, and hold out for quite a while. I'm beginnin' to wish I could join you, but it would be rather dangerous for me." Percy looked up in surprise, and at a loss how to take this remark.

"You see," Monty explained, "Wing won't let me cross the lines, and if I did and they were to find out, I might get into warm water. And now that's settled, come and have lunch. You must be hungry, and you'll have time for forty winks afterwards."

The meal was half over when the two entered the tent, and a hush swept down the long table.

"Birds of a feather wot fighteth never!" whispered Rogers to his neighbour. "How's that for poetry, Shakespeare?"

CHAPTER IV A TRAP FOR FOKKERS

PERCY H. YAPP TOOK-OFF according to plan at ten minutes past three. He was feeling better after an hour's sleep. "A" Flight's four Camels were still visible against the sky, and he headed after them, keeping his machine at its best climbing angle. By the time they reached the lines he was above them, and turned north till Arras was in view.

The station had come within gun range since the Huns' recent advance, and was now but a mass of ruins. His eye followed the road, which ran a little south of east towards Bapaume. It was as straight as though ruled on a map. Bapaume itself was not in view, but lay just beyond the point where the road faded into the mist.

Epinoy village was visible as a knot in a piece of string surrounded by green fields, but the distance was too great to distinguish the aerodrome or individual buildings.

“Hope to make your closer acquaintance later,” thought Percy.

The sky was clear up here, but down south “Archie” was obligingly indicating “A” Flight’s position with a trail of smoke. When his altimeter needle pointed to eighteen thousand, Percy turned towards the line of bursts, and then he saw the first of the enemy—a cluster against the sky, far over. He flew on towards them. “Archie” shells were no longer bursting below, and he searched the country for the Camels. There they were, crossing the big wood and flying due east . . . now over the corn country. What were they up to? Ah, yes, there were some more Fokkers down there—six of them at least—and the two formations were rapidly approaching each other.

Percy raised his eyes, to find that the top patrol was much closer now, and nearly over the converging machines. They were Fokkers, all right, a dozen of them, and evidently working with the lower formation. It was wonderful, he thought, how they could time their movements to such perfection, and must be the result of long practice.

A shell burst unpleasantly close, and was almost immediately followed by a salvo all round the Camel. A hole appeared in the top ’plane, and Percy half-rolled and came out flying northwest. He had seen enough, and must hurry back to get ready for the second phase of the programme.

And then the Camel turned east again. Those sensitive little machines had a habit of translating the pilot’s thoughts into action, and Percy had suddenly felt that he couldn’t tear himself away just yet—not with “A” Flight in that perilous position.

The top formation was flying north, with noses low. They would be diving in a minute, and Percy shot down in an endeavour to get closer. The Fokkers’ noses suddenly dipped steeply and down they went like a swarm of bees. They were higher than the Camel at first, but soon were level ahead, and then they had gone on down. The nearest machine was a good three hundred yards off, but Percy took aim and fired. He held the triggers down for three seconds until a hundred rounds had rapped from the jumping guns. The Fokker turned on its back and fell earthward, leaving behind a plume of black smoke.

It was a pure fluke that would not happen once in fifty times, but what did that matter? It had happened, and the effect was magical, for the formation broke up instantly, zoomed, and turned in search of their unseen foe. But Percy was diving for the lines,

and diving in an erratic manner, for his body was convulsed with coughs.

WHEN the Camel had landed and taxied up to the hangar it immediately became the centre of considerable activity.

“Sit where you are, sir,” said the Flight Sergeant. “No need to move; we won’t be two jiffs.”

Already two ack-emmas were busy changing plugs, another had mounted a trestle and was unscrewing a filler cap, yet another waited ready to hand up funnel and petrol cans. The rigger walked slowly round the machine, his experienced eye taking note of every familiar detail. He climbed on to the wing and examined the hole in the top ’plane with expert touch. Only the fabric had been cut.

Monty approached. “Well?” he inquired.

Percy told him what he had seen and done.

The Major’s face lit up. “Good lad!” he said. “But you must get off again at once, for there’s no time to be lost . . . and I’m comin’ with you as far as the lines,” he shot over his shoulder as he made off towards his own ’plane.

Percy took-off, followed by Monty. On the way to the lines he saw two of “A” Flight limping home. There’d be no one left in the Squadron soon, he thought grimly.

The trenches lay thirteen thousand feet below when Monty shot ahead, waved, and turned away south. Percy nosed down so as to use up his height in the fifteen miles to Epinoy. The wind sang pleasantly in the wires. The sky was a desert; “Archie” slept—but not for long. A puff appeared a quarter of a mile ahead, and the pilot changed course in anticipation of a lively bombardment. To his left the sky was suddenly plastered with black, and he doubled back as though to fly through the smoke, then headed once more east and glanced to his right at the result of the gunners’ redoubled efforts. “Archie” was getting really interested, and it was a shame to tease him so.

He was only six thousand feet up now and went down more steeply to increase the speed. Those twin aerodromes were clearly to be seen. The one to the north showed considerable activity. Several machines were taxiing up to the hangars and the waiting mechanics. Two more, on the far side, seemed just to have landed, and there were no others up. Wait, though . . . one, no two, were coming in over the trees.

“Archie” was quiet—outraged. There was an ominous stillness—the lull before the storm. Percy’s

heart was thumping unpleasantly, but that would stop when he got to grips.

The southern field was bare. But those stationary dots there by the hangars, they were men, the white specks their upturned faces. They, at any rate, had seen him.

He flattened out at three thousand feet, for half of the Circus must still be up. He searched the sky, but it was bare. He was conscious of a curiously depressed feeling due to his being low down and far over the lines. It was, he thought, as though he were in deep water at the bottom of a well the walls of which were smooth and slimy. And dozens of eyes were peering down front above, ready to strike should he succeed in climbing.

He turned his Camel sharply, to gasp with surprise as his rising bottom 'plane revealed, immediately below him, a large formation of Fokkers gliding in to land!

CHAPTER V ONE BIRD—ONE BARREL

LEUTNANT SCHULTZ WAS THE ADJUTANT of the 53rd *Jagdstaffel*, quartered at the southern field at Epinoy. He had come out to watch the formation land, for it was a good sight to see them gliding in so close they seemed to touch each other. These pilots were so clever that it was no wonder they scored many victories. There they were, now, coming in low from the south-west. He would be able to count them in a moment, which was well, for there had been a rumour that one had been shot down.

"Himmel!" But what was that hovering about above? An English machine, so it appeared from the markings.

Leutnant Schultz was not familiar with English aeroplanes, for he fought the war on the ground. It was true that in the orderly room there was a whole series of silhouettes of enemy machines, but they were for the pilots to memorise, and he was not a pilot.

He called an orderly: "Fritz!"

"Ya, Herr *Leutnant*?"

Schultz raised an arm. "You see that?"

"*Donnerwetter nochmal!*" exclaimed Fritz. "*Ein Kamel!*"

"I don't need to be told the make, *dummerkopf!* Go and ring Douai. You may be in time to catch the patrol before' they take-off. Tell them a young fledgling in a Camel has fallen out of its nest; tell them to make sure it does not got back—that should be easy."

"*Ja wohl! Herr Leutnant,*" said Fritz, and hurried away.

Now Schultz was able to make out the incoming machines more clearly. Though they were so close to one another he could just count them. They opened out arrow-like in two straight lines from the leader. There were five on each side, which, with the leader, made eleven. Then rumour had been right. But no. There was another in the rear. He was keeping bad formation in the centre, but some way back, and lower. He had engine trouble, perhaps, which was a pity, for it spoilt the symmetry of the formation. The others looked so beautiful. Like a flight of plover.

Which was just what Monty was thinking at that moment. For he had found irresistible the chance of such magnificent sport, and, crossing the lines shortly after he had waved farewell to Percy, his eagle eye had soon picked out the Fokkers. Dodging "Archie" till out of range, he had stalked them as they glided northward to their quarters. That the Huns did not see him was due partly to his careful approach from the sun, and partly to the fact that the close formation which they always kept in the vicinity of their aerodrome was a sufficient occupation for each pilot. Moreover, they would hardly expect hostile aircraft so low and so far over.

Monty had had his eye on young Percy for some time when the fun started, but Percy did not see Monty until he was actually diving to the attack. He got a surprise, with a vengeance, but it was a pleasant one, and told him that his first impression of his commanding officer was correct.

Monty was not so pleased when he saw his new Flight Commander coming down, because he had planned to open fire when the birds were actually alighting, and hoped to knock off two or three with his first few rounds. Not quite such good sport, perhaps, but there would be plenty left to take the wing again; plenty of opportunity for some fast shootin'.

But if that young Yapp were to loose off at long range and give the show away, then he would be really annoyed.

For Monty had been brought up from the cradle to believe that one bird should be brought down with one barrel, and one barrel only. He had altered this

slogan to meet war conditions into one short burst for one bird, and a chap couldn't do that by blazing off at long range. He moved over from the centre and took up position behind the rear Hun on the right.

Percy was closing up on the other side . . . he was nearly level. Monty pushed throttle and fine adjustment forward to close the range. A warning Veré light shot up from the aerodrome. He eased the stick a trifle back and the fuselage of the Fokker came into his Aldis . . . he pressed.

The Fokker's rudder went hard over in one convulsive movement, the tail swung out and the airscrew bit into the pilot's seat of the neighbouring machine. The two 'planes fell, locked together.

MONTY was aware of a glow of flame on his left, but for the moment he was too busy to take notice. The birds were flying strongly. Now one from the rear on his side had pulled up in a climbing turn to the right, but the Camel was on to it before the pilot had time to locate his attacker. A short burst from the guns and a blade of the Fokker's airscrew snapped off and the engine was wrenched from its bearers by the vibration. Fuselage and wings dropped tail first to the ground.

Monty continued to climb on full engine, for he wanted to take stock of the position. The Circus had completely disappeared. No! There were two of them immediately below, playing ring-a-ring-a-roses with young Yapp, who seemed to be worryin' them no end. Ah! One of the Huns lit up . . . and . . . yes, the other was trying to break away. That was a silly thing to do, with that little lad on his tail.

"Good shootin', Percy!" the Major nodded approvingly as the other Hun swooped down, to crumple in a mass of tangled wreckage by the roadside. But how many more of them were there? Monty banked up and turned.

It was a manoeuvre that saved his life, for three Fokkers had sprung from nowhere and were on his tail. Bullets cracked past, but the Huns' aim had been upset by the sudden movement. Monty whipped right round and flew straight at the centre machine. A hole appeared in the Camel's windscreen and one Vickers stopped barking. He pushed the stick forward, and the machine ducked under the Fokker's wheels. Near thing, that! If the Hun had dived instead of zooming . . . ! But to zoom was instinctive, and Monty had done the other thing.

He pulled up and looked round, to see that two

Fokkers were above and coming down. The third was gliding down as though his engine had packed up. There was a crash of bullets, and something struck Monty behind the ear. His chin-strap fell from position, the buckle cut cleanly by the bullet. Something warm was trickling down his neck. He pulled up and took a pot shot with one gun. The other must have been hit—yes, a bullet had smashed into the lock.

The Fokkers had turned and were diving again. They were stickers, these two. Things were looking ugly. Ah! A Hun burst into flames as a Camel flashed across. Good old Percy! The two scouts turned after the remaining Hun who was diving away, but they could not get within range and gave it up. The fellow would not get far, as his tanks must be empty. He was going down now . . . he was flattening out on a piece of plough-land . . . now he was vertical on his nose.

Monty was flying round counting up the crashes. Those two together; they were his first blood—about an hour ago it seemed, though actually only three-quarters of a minute had passed since the first shot had been fired. There were two more . . . and two, that made six . . . Percy's flamer was still blazing . . . seven . . . nine . . . ten. Young Yapp had done remarkably well, then. But one was missing—must look for him.

Percy was over at the northern field-up to mischief, for certain. Yes! A Fokker was taking-off . . . now he wasn't. Good lad! But where was that other Hun? Pity to let one slip.

Monty dived on the hangars below him, and a group of men scattered. He tore across the 'drome and up over the 'phone wires skirting the road . . . down on to the other flying field, where there were lots of machines and mechanics. A 'plane obligingly burst into flame in front of the hangar. Nuisance about that gun. And then the bullets stopped flowing from the other, and a hurried glance told him that the belt had run out.

That was too much of a good thing altogether, and Monty banked away to the far end of the field and, throttling back, landed. Percy was still flying around—good lad! Monty pulled off his gauntlets, his woollen gloves and the silk pair under that, and proceeded to take the partly-used belt from the one gun and feed it into the other. It took time, and it was a dirty job. There was no reason why belts should be covered with oil, and he must remember to tick off those ack-emmas about it. He would tie a knot in his handkerchief.

Someone was shooting at him. Ah, yes, someone had brought a machine-gun on a tripod out in front of the hangar. "Damned nerve," thought Monty. But Percy was looking after him. "Thanks, laddie!"

THE belt was changed at last, and only just in time, for five Fokkers were coming down from the north. Monty saw them as he took-off, and decided that he'd call it a day. Percy sidled up alongside and they made off south-west, climbing gently. Had those Huns seen them? Monty looked over his shoulder. They had, and what was more, they had enough height to overhaul them, and were proceeding to do it. There'd be some more shooting yet.

Monty screwed his head round to the left, then back and round to the right. Whatever else happened he did not intend to be taken by surprise. Those Huns were coming on all right, but they were still five hundred yards behind. He and Percy would have to start zig-zagging when they came within range. Already some bullets were streaking past, but that was childish. Keep goin' straight for the lines.

Percy was flyin' in a funny way, bobbin' up and down. "What was the mutter with the fellah? Coughin, of course. Yes, he was all doubled up. Ah! The Huns were gettin' a bit close now. The cracks of the bullets were very loud. Better turn and twist a bit. Come on, Percy."

Monty turned away to the right and then back again, but Percy flew straight, except for the unsteady

lift and fall of his Camel to the accompaniment of that bobbing head.

The lines were not far off now. "Come on, Percy, throw her about a bit, there's a chappie." Monty waved an arm, but that was useless, for the laddie's head was hidden in the cockpit.

And then it happened. The nose of Percy's machine flicked down, and the Camel went singing vertically down to the earth which waited to receive it such a little way below.

Something seemed to snap in Monty's brain. Before Percy had hit the ground he was on his back in a half-roll . . . then he was pulling up under a Fokker, and his one gun was doing its best. But he was robbed of his prey by a flight of S.E.'s which came streaking down as he climbed up under the Hun. A moment later the Fokkers had disappeared, and Monty turned west, his mind a jumble of thoughts.

"Stout laddie . . . three months at most. . . . How long had he been with the Squadron? Eight hours—that was all. But he was right . . . eight hours of glorious life and then death with your feet on a rudder-bar. That was the way for a man to go out."

Gravely the Major raised a hand in tribute to a brave man's passing—but already his mind was busy with new persuasions to use upon a harassed adjutant at the Pool. Pilots, good and bad, courageous and afraid, came and went, but the Squadron was greater than them all and its work must go on.