

BOYD CABLE

AIR MEN O'

WAR

Boyd Cable
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FOREWORD

It has been my endeavour throughout these tales not only to chronicle some of the wonderful work done in the air, but also to show the connection between it and that of the Armies on the ground, the assistance rendered in so many ways by the air arm, and its value in a battle and in a campaign. I hope that my stories may show something of the skill and daring of the air men and – what is less well known to the public – how much they are doing to save the lives and cut down the casualties of the men on the ground, and to help our arms to victory.

Already I have been rebuked for exaggerating and making my characters perform impossible feats, so I may forewarn the reader that I have written nothing here for which I cannot find an actual parallel – and in some cases even more wonderful – fact. Practically every incident I have pieced into my tales has, to my own knowledge, occurred, and I have left untold many which for sheer sensationalism would beat these hollow. There are many in the Air Force who will recognise incidents and feats, but will not recognise the characters I have attached to them, because – mainly at the urgent wish of the men themselves – I have used entirely fictitious characters and names throughout. Because most of the writing was done while the R.N.A.S. and R.F.C. were still in existence I have left this as written.

I ask the indulgence of critical readers amongst the air men to any technical errors they may discover (knowing how keenly they will look for them). I make no pretence to being a flying man myself, but because I have done flying enough – or rather have been flown, since I am not a pilot – to know and appreciate some of the dangers and risks and sensations of the work, and have lived for over a year in the Squadrons at the Front, I cherish the hope that I have absorbed enough of the nature and atmosphere of the work to present a true picture of the life. I shall be very well content if I have been able to do this, and, in any slightest degree, make plain how vital to success a strong Air Force is. I have had experience enough of the line, and have gained enough knowledge of the air, to be tremendously impressed with the belief, which I have tried in this book to pass on and spread, that every squadron added, every man trained, every single machine put in the air, helps in its own measure to bring us to final victory, more quickly, and at a less cost in the long and heavy "butcher's bill" of the war.

I

SILVER WINGS

An old man working in one of the aircraft factories once complained that he was not very satisfied with his job. "I've got three boys out Front, all in the infantry; and I keep thinkin' to myself, Why shouldn't I be doin' some sort of munition work that 'ud help my own three boys? I don't know a livin' soul in the Flyin' Corpse; why should I be workin' for them, an' not makin' shells or bombs or suthin' that 'ud be helpin' my own three boys?"

And then somebody told him how he *was* helping his boys, what the work of the air services really meant, how the artillery observation, and photographing, and bombing, and directing the guns on to hostile batteries and machine-gun emplacements, and so on, all worked up to the one great end, to making the task easier for the infantry, to saving the lives of the men on the ground; and told a few stories of some of the ninety and nine ways this help works out.

The old man was fully satisfied and grateful for all that was told him, and declared he'd go back to his job with twice the heart – "just knowin' I'm doin' mebbe the best work I could, and that I'm givin' real help to my own three boys."

Amongst the tales told him the one of "Silver Wings" perhaps impressed him most, and that, probably because it bore more plainly its own meaning of help to the infantry, was more easy to make clear than the technicalities of artillery observation and the rest.

And just because it is such a good instance of how, after all, the chief or only end and aim of the air services is the helping to victory of the men on the ground this story of "Silver Wings" may be worth the telling here.

Hard fighting had been in progress for some days, and the flying men had been kept desperately busy from dawn to dark on the various branches of their several works, when a "dud day" – a day of rain and squalls and hurricane winds – gave them a chance to rest.

Toward afternoon the weather showed signs of abating a little, and word came through to the Squadron to which "Silver Wings" belonged asking if they could get a machine in the air and make a short patrol over the line on a special reconnaissance. A heavy and unpleasantly gusty wind was still blowing, but a pilot and machine were picked for the job and presently made the attempt. An anxious Squadron Commander and a good many of the pilots watched the trial and saw the quick result. The machine was brought out with mechanics hanging to the wing-tips to steady her against the gusts, the engine started and given a trial run up; then the pilot eased her off, looked round, felt his controls, ran the engine up again until his machine was throbbing and quivering to the pull of the whirling propeller, and waved the signal to haul away the chocks that blocked his wheels. His machine began at once to taxi up into the wind, still swaying and swinging dangerously, and then, in answer to the pilot's touch, lifted clear of the ground, ducked a second, rose again and swooped upward. The watching crowd let go a breath of relief as she rose clear, but before the breath was out it changed to a gasp of horror as the machine, caught by some current or eddy of wind, swerved, heeled, righted under the desperate effort of the pilot, slipped sideways, and with a sudden swoop plunged and crashed on the ground. The machine was hopelessly smashed and the pilot was dead when they ran and came to him and picked him up.

The Squadron Commander would have abandoned or postponed the attempt to get a machine up, but the pilot of "Silver Wings" spoke to him and urged that he be allowed to have a try. "I'm sure I can get her off," he said. "I'll take her right over to the far side of the ground clear of the currents round the sheds. I know what she can do, and I'm certain I can make it."

So the Major gave a reluctant consent, and they all watched breathlessly again while "Silver Wings" fought her way along the ground against the wind, lifted suddenly, drove level for a hundred

feet, swooped sickeningly again until her wheels were a bare six feet off the ground, hoicked up and away. Everyone could see by her dips and dives and sudden heelings and quick righting how bumpy and gusty the air was, and it was not until she was up several hundred feet, and came curving round with the wet light shining on her silvery planes that the watchers on the ground heaved a sigh of relief, watched her streak off down wind, and swing in a climbing turn that lifted her farther and farther into the safety of height.

"He's all right now," said one. "Only, the Lord help him when he comes to land again." The hum of the engine droned down to them, and the shining wings wheeled again close up against the dark background of the low clouds and shot swiftly down wind towards the lines.

Over the lines she turned again and began to fight her way across wind and moving slowly north. The wind constantly forced her drifting over Hunland, and in accordance with his orders to hold close along the front, the pilot had to keep making turns that brought him facing back to the west and fighting slowly up wind, edging off a little and slanting north and watching the landscape slide off sideways under him. And so, tacking and manoeuvring buffeted and wind-blown, he edged his way along the front, his eyes alternately on the instrument-board and on the ground and puffing shell smoke beneath, his ears filled with the roar of his engine and the shriek and boom of the wind beating about him, his hands and feet in constant motion, juggling with controls, feeling, balancing, handling the throbbing horse-power and the wind-tossed fabric under him. And so at last, at the end of a hard-fought hour, he came to the spot he sought, circled and "sat over it" for five minutes, and watched and tried to pick up the details of the struggle that spluttered and spat in smoke-puffs and flashing jets of fire and leaping spouts of earth and smoke beneath him. He began to piece together the meaning of what he could see, and of what he had been told before he set out. A body of our infantry in the attack had gone too far, or their supports had not come far enough, with the result that they had been cut off and surrounded and were fighting desperately to hold off the infantry attacks that pressed in on them under a heavy supporting artillery fire. The cut-off party were hidden from the view of our front line by a slight ridge and a wrecked and splintered wood, and their desperate straits, the actual fact of their still being in existence, much less their exact location, was unknown to our side. This much the pilot knew or was able to figure out; what he could not know was the surge of hope, the throb of thankfulness that came to the hard-pressed handful below him as they saw the glancing light flash from his hovering "Silver Wings." They made signals to him, waving a dirty flag and straining their eyes up for any sign that he saw and understood. And with something very near to despair in their hearts they saw the shining wings slant and drive slowly up into the wind and draw away from over their heads.

"No good, Jones," said a smoke and dirt-grimed young officer to the man still waving the flag. "He doesn't see us, I'm afraid. Better put that down and go back and help hold off those bombers."

"Surely he'd hear all this firing, sir," said the man, reluctantly ceasing to wave.

"I think his engine and the wind drowns any noise down here," said the officer. "And if he hears anything, there's plenty of heavy gunfire all along the front going up to him."

"But wouldn't he see the shells falling amongst us, sir, and the bombs bursting, and so on?" said the man.

"Yes; but he is seeing thousands of shells and bombs along the line from up there," said the officer; "and I suppose he wouldn't know this wasn't just a bit of the ordinary front."

Another man crawled over the broken débris of the trench to where they stood. "Mister Waller has been hit, sir," he said; "an' he said to tell you it looks like they was musterin' for another rush over where he is."

"Badly hit?" said the officer anxiously. "All right, I'll come along."

"He sees us, sir," said the man with the flag, in sudden excitement. "Look, he's fired a light."

"Pity we haven't one to fire," said the officer. "But that might be a signal to anyone rather than to us."

He turned to crawl after the man who had brought the message, and at the same moment a rising rattle of rifle-fire and the quick following detonations of bursting bombs gave notice of a fresh attack being begun. Still worse, he heard the unmistakable tat-tat-tat of renewed machine-gun fire, and a stream of bullets began to pour in on them from a group of shell-holes to their right flank, less than a hundred yards from the broken trench they held. Under cover of this pelting fire, that forced the defenders to keep their heads down and cost them half a dozen quick casualties amongst those who tried to answer it, the German bombers crept closer in from shell-hole to shell-hole, and their grenades came over in faster and thicker showers. The little circle of ground held by the group belched spurts of smoke, hummed to the passage of bullets, crackled and snapped under their impact, quivered every now and then to the crash and burst of shells. They had been fighting since the night before; they were already running short of ammunition, would have been completely short of bombs but for the fact of the ground they had taken having held a concreted dug-out with plentiful stores of German bombs and grenades which they used to help out their own supply. The attack pressed savagely; it began to look as if it would be merely a matter of minutes before the Germans rushed the broken trenches they held, and then, as they knew, they must be overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. Waller, the wounded officer, had refused to be moved. "I'll stay here and see it out," he said; "I don't suppose that will be long now;" and the other, the young lieutenant who was the only officer left on his feet by this time, could say no more than a hopeful "Maybe we'll stand 'em off a bit yet," and leave him there to push along the trench to where the fire and bombing were heaviest and where the rush threatened to break in.

The din was deafening, a confused uproar of rifles and machine-guns cracking and rattling out in front and banging noisily in their own trench, of bombs and grenades crashing sharply on the open or booming heavily in the trench bottom, of shells whooping and shrieking overhead or *crumping* savagely on the ground, and, as a background of noise to all the other noises, the long rolling, unbroken thunder of the guns on both sides far up and down the lines.

But above all the other din the lieutenant caught a new sound, a singing, whirring *boo-oo-oom* that rose to a deep-throated roar with a sharp staccato *rap-tap-tap-tap* running through it. He looked up towards the sound and saw, so close that he half ducked his head, a plunging shape, a flashing streak of silver light that swept over his head and dived straight at the ground beyond his trench, with stabbing jets of orange flame spitting out ahead of it. A bare fifty feet off the ground where the Germans crouched in their shell-holes "Silver Wings" swooped up sharply, curved over, dived again with the flashes of her gun flickering and streaming, and the bullets hailing down on the heads of the attackers. It was more than the Germans, lying open and exposed to the overhead attack, could bear. They scrambled from their holes, floundered and ran crouching back for the shelter of deeper trenches, while the lieutenant, seeing his chance, yelled and yelled again at his men to fire, and seized a rifle himself to help cut down the demoralised attack. He could see now how close a thing it had been for them, the weight of the attack that presently would have swarmed over them. The ground was alive with running, scrambling grey figures, until the bullets pelting amongst them cut them down or drove them headlong to cover again. Then his men stopped firing and watched with hoarse cheering and shouts the dives and upward leaps of the silvery shape, her skimmings along the ground, her upward wheeling climbs followed by the plunging dives with fire spitting and sparkling from her bows. The Germans were firing at her now with rifles and machine-guns until she turned on the spot where these last were nested, drove straight at them and poured long clattering bursts of fire upon them until they were silenced.

Then she turned and flew over the broken British trenches so close that the men in them could see the leather-clad head and arm of the pilot leaning over the side, could see his wave to them, the flung packet that dropped with fluttering streamers down amongst them. The packet carried a note jerkingly scribbled in pencil: "Hang on. I'm taking word of where you are, so that they can send help to you. Good luck."

The lieutenant, when he had read, handed the message to a sergeant and told him to pass it along round the men. And they read and shouted cheers they knew he could not hear to the pilot lifting the "Silver Wings" steadily into the sky and back towards the lines. He was high enough now for the "Archies" to bear on him again, and from their trenches the men watched with anxious hearts and throbs of fear and hope the black puffs of smoke that broke rapidly above, below, and about the glinting silver. He made desperately slow speed against the heavy wind, but fortunately had not far to go before he was far enough back to be over the lines and out of reach of the Archies. Then just when it seemed that he was safe, when the Archie shells had ceased suddenly to puff about him, the watchers saw another machine drop from the cover of a cloud, dive straight down on the little silver shape, saw the silver wings widen as they turned sharply upward to face the enemy, wheel and shoot sideways to avoid the dive. With beating hearts and straining eyes they watched the two dipping and curving, lifting and diving, wheeling and circling about each other. The battle noises drowned all sound of their guns, but they knew well the rapid rattle of fire that was going on up there, the exchange of shots, the streaming bullets that poured about both, thought at last they could catch the sound of the firing clearly, could see the black cross and circled red, white, blue, that marked enemy and friend as the two machines drifted back in their fighting down wind until they were almost overhead. Once the watchers gasped as the enemy dived on "Silver Wings" and she slipped sideways and came down a thousand feet nose first and spinning in dizzy circles. The gasp changed to a cry of relief as the "Silver Wings" righted, zoomed sharply up, whirled round, and in turn dived on the enemy machine, that had overshot his pursuing dive and come below her. And the cry changed again to a yell of applause, a burst of cheers, as the enemy swerved suddenly, slid drunkenly sideways and down, rolled over, and fell away in a spinning dive, swoop after sickening swoop, that ended crashing in a clump of wood half a mile away. A wind-blown torrent of streaming black smoke marked the place of the fall and the fate of the enemy. "Silver Wings" turned again, and fought her way back towards the lines, with the Archie shells puffing and splashing about her.

Down in their trenches the isolated cluster of men set about strengthening their defences with new heart, made with a new hope preparations to withstand the next attacks. It was not long before they had help – a help that the guns, knowing now exactly where they were although they could not see, could send in advance of the rescuing attack. A barrage of shells began to pound down beyond them, out to their right and left, and even behind them. "Silver Wings" had dropped her message, and the shells brought the answer plain to the cut-off party. They knew that they were located, that the guns would help out their defence, that rescue would come to them as speedily as might be.

The actual rescue came presently in the shape of an attack over the ground they had covered the day before. Before it came they had to beat off one or two more enemy rushes, but this time the help of those barraging shells stood them in good stead, the sweeping shrapnel prevented the enemy creeping in to occupy in comparative safety the shell-holes round the position, the steady fall of high explosives broke down the enemy trenches and checked free movement in them. The Germans were badly pounded on that portion of front, so that when the rescuing attack was made, it fought its way rapidly forward, and the isolated party were able to do something to help it merely by hanging to their position, by rear and flanking fire on the Germans who held the ground between them and the attacking line. The attack resulted in the whole line being pushed forward to the ridge behind the separated party, holding it, and thrusting forward a little salient which took in the ground the party had hung to so stoutly, consolidated, and held it firm.

The rescued men were passed back to their lines, and – most of them – to the casualty clearing stations. And when the lieutenant brought the remnant of his company back to the battalion, he told the Battalion Commander his end of the story, and heard in return how the message of their whereabouts had been brought back and how it had directed the movement that had got them out. The lieutenant wanted to send a word of thanks to "Silver Wings" and her pilot, but this the C.O.

told him he could not do. "The pilot was lifted out of his machine and taken straight to the C.C.S.,¹" he said. "He was wounded by rifle-fire from the ground when he first dived to help you beat off that attack. No, not seriously, I'm glad to say, but he'd lost a lot of blood, and he got rather knocked about landing and broke his machine a bit I believe."

"Wounded," said the lieutenant slowly, "and at that time. So he kept on diving his machine about and fighting after he was wounded; and went through that air fight with his wound, and shot the Hun down, and then came on back and gave his message – " "Dropped a note straight into the signallers at Brigade Headquarters," said the C.O.

The lieutenant drew a deep breath. "We knew we were owing him a lot," he said. "But it seems we were owing even more than we thought."

"And I'm beginning to think," said the C.O., "that all of us here on the ground are owing more than we've known to those fellows in the air."

¹ Casualty Clearing Station.

II BRING HOME THE 'BUS

For ten minutes past the observer had been alternately studying his map and the ground 20,000 feet below, and now he leaned forward out of his cockpit, touched the pilot on the shoulder, and made a slight signal with his hand. Immediately the machine began to swing in a wide curve, while the observer busied himself with his camera and exposed plate after plate.

He looked up and out a moment as there came to his ear, dully but unmistakably above the roar of the engine, the hoarse "*woof*" of a bursting anti-aircraft shell. The black smoke of the burst showed a good hundred yards out to their left and some hundreds of feet above them, and the observer returned to his photographing.

"*Woof*" came another shell, and then in quick succession another and another, the last one dead ahead and with such correct elevation that, a second later, the machine flashed through the streaming black smoke of the burst. The pilot looked back inquiringly, and the observer made a sign which meant "Do what you please," and sat back to wait until the pilot took such steps as he thought fit to disarrange the aim of the gunners below.

The harsh rending cough of another shell came so close beneath the machine that both men felt her distinctly jolt upward, twisting from the wind shock. The pilot waited no more. He jammed the controls hard over and flung the machine out in a vicious side-slip, caught her at the end of it, tipped her nose over and plunged straight down with the engine full on for a thousand feet, banked sharply, pivoting fairly on his wing-tip, and shot off at right angles to his former course for a quarter of a mile; then, climbing slightly as he went, swung hard round again, dipped a little to gather speed, hoicked hard up, and in a few seconds was back somewhere about the position at which he had first departed from the course.

Back about the point where they had last turned a string of black smoke-puffs flashed out rapidly. The pilot shut his engine off for an instant. "Fooled 'em that time," he yelled back, and grinned gleefully at his observer. The observer peered out carefully and exposed another plate, turned and passed another signal to the pilot. Instantly the engine roared out, and the machine tipped her bows down and went plunging earthward. The observer watched the needle of his height indicator drop back and back through 20,000, 19, 18, 17, 16, hang there an instant, leap up again to 16 and 17. There it stayed quivering for ten seconds, while the machine hurtled forward at a hundred miles an hour on a level keel. There the pilot dropped her nose a little again and went slanting down with the engine full on, and the needle of the speed indicator climbing up and up until the speed touched 140 miles an hour and the height indicator dropped to a 14,000-foot level.

The Archie shells were spouting and splashing round them in all directions, but their erratic course had sufficiently upset the gunners to bring the bursts well out and clear, and the pilot made the last steep dizzying plunge that brought him to the 10,000-foot height his observer had asked for. But at this height they were well within the range of smaller Archie batteries, and the observer jerked the handle of his camera to and fro at intervals, with the racking cough of the shells sounding perilously close, and the reek of their burst at times swirling past as the machine tore through their smoke. Three times heavy splinters *whurred* viciously past them, and once a sharp crack and rip left a gaping black rent in the cloth of the body close astern of the observer.

For a good ten minutes the machine circled and swung and darted to and fro, while the observer hung on and snapped his plates at such objects as he wanted on the ground below; and for all that ten minutes the Archies continued to pitch a stream of shells up round and over and under them.

Then the observer signalled "finished," and the machine jerked round and streaked off at top speed in a series of curves and zigzags that carried her westward and homeward as straight as the pilot

dared drive in avoiding the shells that continued to follow them. The pilot kept her nose down a little as he went, so as to obtain the maximum speed, but when he began to run out of range of the Archies and leave their smoke bursts well astern, he tilted up and pushed straight west at top speed, but on a long climb that brought him up a thousand feet a mile. Presently he felt the signal cord looped about his arm jerk and jerk again, and, tilting the machine's nose slightly downward, he shut off his engine and let her glide and twisted round to the observer.

"Huns," yelled the observer. "Six of 'em, and coming like stink," and he pointed up and astern to half a dozen dots in the sky.

"Would you like a scrap, Spotty?" shouted the pilot. "Shall we take 'em on?"

"Don't ask me," shouted Spotty. "Ask the Hun. He'll scrap if he wants to, and you and your old 'bus can't help it, Barry."

"Thought you knew the old 'Marah' better," retorted Barry. "You watch"; and he twisted in his seat and opened his engine out.

Now the "Marah" was the pride of her Squadron, and, most inordinately, of her pilot. Built line by line to the blue-print of her class, fraction by fraction of an inch in curve, straight, and streamline, to the design of her sisters in the Squadron, differing no hair's-breadth from them in shape, size, engine, or propeller, she yet by some inscrutable decree was the best of them all in every quality that counts for best in a machine. There are theories to account for these not uncommon differences, the most popular and plausible being that the better machine is so merely because of some extra skill and minute care in her and her engine's building, last touches of exactness and perfection in the finish of their parts and their assembling.

The "Marah" could outclimb anything in the Squadron with the most ridiculous ease, outclimb them in feet per minute, and in final height; she could outfly them on any level from 100 to 20,000 feet, could "out-stunt" them – although here perhaps the pilot had as much to say as the machine – in any and every stunt they cared to challenge her on. Barry, her young pilot, literally loved her. He lost no chance of trying her out against other types of machines, and there were few of the fastest and best types even amongst the single-seater scout machines that could beat her on a level fly, or that she could not leave with her nose held slightly down. No two-seater Barry had ever met could come anywhere near the "Marah" in stunting, in the ease and speed at which he could put her through all sorts of fancy spins, loops, side-slips, and all the rest of the bag of air tricks. How much of her superiority was due to her own qualities and how much to her pilot it is hard to say, because certain it is that Barry could climb her nearly a thousand feet higher, and drive her several knots faster, than any other pilot who had flown her.

It is because of all these things that Barry had preferred to make this particular photographing trip a lone-hand one. It was a long-distance journey far back behind the German lines, to a spot known to be well protected by long-range Archies, and of such importance that it was certain to order out fast fighting machines to cut off any flight taking back reports or photographs. Barry's arguments for his single-handed trip were simple, and, as the Squadron Commander had to admit, sound. "One machine stands much more chance of sneaking over high up without being spotted than a whole flight," said Barry. "When we're there I can chuck the 'bus about any old how to dodge the Archies, while Spotty snaps his pictures; and if we're tackled by any E.A.,² the old 'Marah' could probably outfly them by herself. And since you're so beastly positive that this isn't a scrapping stunt, I'd sooner be on my own and free to dodge and run and use clouds and so on without having to think of keeping formation. Don't you worry. We'll come through all right."

The Squadron Commander gave in. "Right oh," he said reluctantly. "And do keep your eyes skinned for Huns and run from 'em if you've a chance. This information is wanted badly, remember,

² E.A. Enemy Aircraft.

and you mustn't risk getting scuppered with it. And, besides we can't afford to lose the 'Marah' out of the Squadron. You don't count of course, but the old 'bus is too good to lose."

He hid a good deal of anxiety under his chaffing, and Barry, reading that and the friendship that bred it, laughed and took the same light-hearted tone. "You won't lose her," he said. "If a Hun punctures me and Spotty we'll just jump overboard and tell the old girl to push along home on her own. She's jolly near got sense enough to do it too, I believe."

Now all this was in Barry's mind when Spotty told him of the pursuing enemy, and so he set himself to take every ounce of advantage he could. The machines behind were travelling faster, because they had sighted him from a much higher level, and had all the additional speed that a downward slant gave them, while the "Marah," still held on a slightly upward incline, lost something of her top speed thereby.

Barry knew there were Archie batteries to be passed over on the way back, and if he meant to keep a straight course it was necessary that he should be as far above them as possible. He leaned out and peered down at the landscape wheeling and unrolling under them, picked out the spot he was watching for – a village where he knew Archie batteries were located – and altered course slightly to give it a wider berth. In another minute the Archie shells began to bark about them. At the first one that came dangerously close the "Marah" hoicked abruptly upward 500 feet, wheeled sharp south for half a mile, swung again and drove straight west. Twice she had to swerve and dodge in similar fashion before she cleared the zone of the Archies' range, and these swerves and their faster downward passage allowed the enemy craft to overhaul her considerably. Spotty swung his machine-gun round in readiness and trained it aft and up on the hostiles.

Two single-seaters were half a mile ahead of the other four and looming larger every minute. They were within long range now, and, presently, one of them loosed off a dozen rounds or so at the "Marah." Spotty jerked a signal that he was going to fire, and taking careful sight rapped off about twenty rounds. The range was too great yet for him, and the Huns made no sign of a swerve from their direct path, so Spotty ceased firing and waited, glancing over his sights at one machine that had forged slightly ahead of the other. Barry looked back over his shoulder and up at the two machines. They were still a good thousand feet above the "Marah," but Barry was satisfied enough with the way the game was running, because while they had dropped from perhaps 20,000 feet to 15,000, the "Marah" had gained 3,000 to 4,000 as she flew.

The advantage of height was half the battle, and Barry wanted to snatch every inch of it he could gain. For that reason he passed a signal back to Spotty to open fire again, and Spotty obediently began to rip out a series of short bursts. The two men had flown so long together that each knew the other's dodges and ideas to an extent precious beyond words, and had a code of brief signals in head-noddings and jerkings and hand motions that saved much waste of time and breath in shutting off engine to shout messages or yelling through the communicating 'phone. Spotty figured now just the plan Barry had in mind, a plan to hustle the enemy into making his attempt before he was at the closest effective range for a diving attack. The plan succeeded too. His bullets must have been going somewhere close, for Spotty saw the nearest machine swerve ever so slightly, as if her pilot had flinched or ducked instinctively. Then Spotty saw her nose dip slightly until it was pointed straight at the "Marah," the machine-gun firing through her propeller broke out in a long rapid burst of fire, and the "tracer" bullets³ came flashing and streaming past in thin pencils of flame and smoke. What followed takes a good deal longer in the telling than it did in the happening. All three machines were travelling, remember, at a speed of anything round a hundred knots, a speed that rose at times as they dipped and dived to nearer perhaps a hundred and thirty and forty. While they were flying on the same course with little difference in speed each airman could see the other closely and in detail, could watch each little movement, look over at leisure small items about each other's machines. Mere

³ Tracer bullets emit smoke and flame to allow the shooter to follow their flight.

groundlings cannot get nearer to the sensation than to imagine or remember sitting at the window of a carriage on the slow lumbering sixty-mile-an-hour express, watching the almost equally slow mail rushing over the rails at sixty-five miles on a parallel line, and seeing the passengers at her windows scanning deliberately the shape of your hat or colour of your hair.

In just such fashion Spotty saw the pilot of the leading machine rise slightly and glance astern at his companion, saw him settle himself in his seat, saw him raise a hand and motion downward. Instantly he jerked the cord fast to Barry's shoulder, signalling "look out," and with swift clockwork motions snatched the almost empty drum of his machine-gun, and replaced it with the full one he held ready clutched between his knees.

Vaguely in the swift ensuing seconds he felt the machine under him sway and leap and reel; but his whole mind was for that time concentrated on his gun sights, on keeping them full on the bulk of the machine astern of him, in pressing the trigger at the exact critical second. He saw the round bow of his nearest pursuer lift and for one long breath saw the narrow tapering length of her underbody behind it. That was a chance, and he filled it full and brimming with a fifty-round burst of which he saw the bullets flash and disappear in the fuselage above him. Then in a flash the underbody disappeared, and the rounded bow of the hostile came plunging down on him, growing and widening as it came full power and speed of engine and gravity pull. He was dimly conscious of her firing as she came, and he kept his own gun going, pumping bullets in a constant stream, his eye glued to the sights, his finger clenched about the trigger. Somehow he knew – just knew, without reasoning or thinking it out – that his bullets were going to their mark, and it gave him no slightest touch of astonishment when he saw his enemy stagger, leap upward, lurch and roll until she stood straight up on her wing-tip, and so, banking and deflecting from the "Marah's" course, flash in a split fraction of a second out of the fight.

He had no more than a glimpse of a gust of fire and gush of black smoke from somewhere about her before she vanished from his sight, and he was training his sights on a second shape that came swooping and plunging down upon him. This second enemy made better play with her gun. With deadly slowness and persistence, as it seemed, she closed, yard by yard. Spotty trained his gun full in the centre of the quivering light rays that marked the circle of her whirling propeller, and poured burst after burst straight at the jerking flashes of the machine-gun that blazed through her propeller. He felt an agonising jar on his ankle ... but the drum of his machine-gun snapped out its last cartridge, and Spotty smoothly and methodically whipped off the empty drum, stooped and lifted a full one, fitted it in place, and looking over his sights rapped his gun into action again; while all the time the bullets of his adversary hailed and ripped and tore about and upon the "Marah," riddling the rudder, slashing along the stern, cracking in the whip-like reports of explosive bullets about the observer's cockpit, lifting forward and rap-rap-rapping about the bows and the pilot's stooped head. The "Marah" leaped out suddenly and at full stride in a hundred-foot side-slip, checked, and hurtled upward; and in that breath of time the pursuer flicked past and down and out of the vision of Spotty's sights.

It was all over so quickly that Spotty, looking overside, could still see the first enemy spinning down jerkily with black smoke whirling up from her fuselage, spinning helplessly down, as he knew, to hit the earth 15,000 feet below. Spotty felt suddenly and surprisingly sick and faint. His particular story blurs somewhat from here on, because he himself was never able to supply it in detail. He was able to answer Barry – Barry turning to shout his question while the "Marah" tore along at her full 110 knots – that he'd been hit somewhere about the foot or leg, and didn't feel much, except sick. This Barry was able to gather with some difficulty, after juggling with the wheel beside him that shifted angles of incidence, and more or less stabilised the "Marah's" flight, abandoning his controlling "joy-stick," clambering up on his seat, and hanging back and over to bring his head into the observer's cockpit and his ear within reach of Spotty's feeble attempts at a shout. He himself was rather unfit for these acrobatics, owing to certain unpleasant and punishing wounds just received. While he attempted to carry on his laboured inquiries, the "Marah," her engine throttled down and her controls left to

look after themselves, swooped gently and leisurely, slid downwards on a gliding slant for a thousand feet, pancaked into an air-pocket, and fell off into a spinning dive.

While she plunged earthward at a rate of some hundred feet per second Barry finished his inquiries, dragged or pushed back into his seat – it was really down into his seat, since the "Marah" at the moment was standing on her head and his seat was between the observer's and the bows, but the wind pressure at that speed made it hard work to slide down – took hold of his controls, waited the exact and correct moment, flattened the "Marah" out of her spin, opened the throttle and went booming off again to westward a bare 5,000 feet above ground level.

He had, it is true, a moment's parley and a swift summing up of the situation before he turned the "Marah's" bows definitely for home. And the situation was ugly enough to be worth considering. Spotty (Barry thought of him first) was in a bad way – leg smashed to flinders – explosive evidently – bleeding like a stuck pig (wonder would the plates be spoiled, or was the camera built water-tight, or blood-tight?) – very doubtful if he'd last out the journey home. Then Barry himself had wounds – the calf of his left leg blown to shreds, and the toes of his left foot gone, and, most upsettingly painful of all, a gaping hole where his left eye should be, a blood-streaming agony that set his senses reeling and wavering and clearing slowly and painfully. This last wound, as it proved, was the result of a ricocheting bullet which, flicking forward as Barry had turned his head, cut his left eye clean from its socket.

The summing up was very clear and simple. They were a good thirty miles from the lines; Spotty might easily bleed to death in less than that; he, Barry, might do the same, or might faint from pain and exhaustion. In that case done-finish himself, and Spotty, and the "Marah," in a drop of 5,000 feet and a full hundred-mile-an-hour crash below. On the other hand, he had only to move his hand, push the joy-stick out and sweep the "Marah" down, flatten her out and pick a decent field, land, and he and Spotty would be in the doctor's hands in a matter of minutes, both of them safe and certain of their lives at least. In seconds they could be "on the floor" and in safety – and in German hands ... the two of them and ... and ... the "Marah." It was probably the thought of the "Marah" that turned the scale, if ever the scale really hung in doubt. "We can't afford ..." – what was it the Squadron Commander had said? – "can't afford to lose the old 'Marah' from the Squadron." No (Barry's vision cleared mentally and physically at the thought), – no, and, by the Lord, the Squadron wasn't going to lose the "Marah," not if it was in him to bring the old 'bus home.

He knew it was going to be a close thing, for himself and for the "Marah"; and carefully he set himself to take the last and least ounce of the chances in favour of his getting the "Marah" across the line. It would be safer to climb high and cross the fire of the Archies that waited him on the line; safer so far as dodging the shells went, but cutting down the limit set to his strength and endurance by the passing minutes. On the level, or with her nose a little down, the "Marah" would make the most of the time left her, or rather left him. His senses blurred and swam again; he felt himself lurching forward in his seat, knew that this was pushing the joy-stick forward and the "Marah's" nose to earth, shoved himself back in his seat and clutched the stick desperately to him ... and woke slowly a minute after to find the "Marah's" bows pointed almost straight up, her engine struggling to lift her, his machine on the very verge of stalling and falling back into the gulf. He flung her nose down and forward hastily, and the "Marah" ducked gracefully over like a hunter taking an easy fence, steadied and lunged forward in arrow-straight flight.

After this Barry concentrated on the faces of the clock, the height and the speed indicators. Once or twice he tried to look overside to locate his position, but the tearing hurricane wind of the "Marah's" passage so savaged his torn face and eye that he was forced back into the cover of his windscreen. Five minutes went. Over, well over a hundred the speed indicator said the "Marah" was doing. Nearly 5,000 up the height indicator said (must have climbed a lump in that minute's haziness, concluded Barry), and, reckoning to cross the line somewhere inside the 500 up – which after all would risk machine-gun and rifle fire, but spare them the Archies – would allow him to slant the

"Marah" down a trifle and get a little more speed out of her. He tilted her carefully and watched the speed indicator climb slowly and hang steady.

And so another five minutes went. Two thousand up said the indicator; and "*woof, woof, woof*" grunted a string of Archie shells. "Getting near the line," said Barry, and pushed the joy-stick steadily forward. The "Marah" hurtled downward on a forty-five degree slant, her engine full out, the wind screaming and shrieking about her. Fifteen hundred, a thousand, five hundred pointed the needle of the height indicator, and slowly and carefully Barry pulled the "Marah's" head up and held her racing at her top speed on the level.

Fifteen minutes gone. They must be near the lines now. He could catch, faint and far off through the booming roar of his engine, the rattle of rifle fire, and a faint surprise took him at the sound of two strange raps, and the sight of two neat little round holes in the instrument board and map in front of him. He looked out, carefully holding the joy-stick steady in one hand and covering his torn eye with the other, and saw the wriggling white lines of trenches flashing past close below. Then from the cockpit behind him broke out a steady clatter and jar of the observer's machine-gun. Barry looked round to see Spotty, chalk-faced and tight-lipped, leaning over the side with arms thrust out and pointing his gun straight to earth with a stream of flashes pouring from the muzzle. "Good man," murmured Barry, "oh, good man," and made the "Marah" wriggle in her flight as a signal.

Spotty looked round, loosened his lips in a ghastly grin, and waved an arm signalling to turn at right angles. "Nothin' doin', my son," said Barry grinning back. "It's 'Home, John' for us this time. But fancy the priceless old fellow wanting to go touring their front line spraying lead on 'em. Good lad, Spotty."

A minute later he felt his senses reel, and his sight blacken again, but he gripped his teeth on his lip and steered for the clump of wood that hid his own Squadron's landing ground.

He made his landing there too; made it a trifle badly, because when he came to put rudder on he found that his left leg refused its proper work. And so he crashed at the last, crashed very mildly it is true, but enough to skew the wheels and twist the frame of the under-carriage a little.

And as Spotty's first words when he was lifted from his cockpit were of the crash – "Barry, you blighter, if you've crashed those plates of mine I'll never forgive you... You'll find all the plates exposed, Major, and notes of the bearing and observations in my pocket-book" – so also were Barry's last of the same thing. He didn't speak till near the end. Then he opened his one eye to the Squadron Commander waiting at his bedside and made an apology ... ("An apology ... Good Lord!..." as the Major said after). "Did I crash her badly, Major?" And when the Major assured him No, nothing that wouldn't repair in a day, and that the "Marah" would be ready for him when he came back to them, he shook his head faintly. "But it doesn't matter," he said. "Anyhow, I got her home... And if I'm 'going West,' the old 'Marah' will go East again ... and get some more Huns for you." He ceased, and was silent a minute. Then "I'm sorry I crashed her, Major ... but y'see, ... my leg ... was a bit numb."

He closed his eye; and died.

A pilot lost doesn't very much count.
(But don't tell his girl or his mater this!)
There's always another to take his mount,
And push the old 'bus where the Archies miss.
But a 'bus that's lost you can't renew,
For where one works there's the want of two
And all they can make are still too few,
So we must bring home the 'bus.

III

A TENDER SUBJECT

The telling of this tale in the Squadron Mess came about through (1) a mishap, (2) a joke, and (3) an argument. The mishap was to a fighting two-seater, which landed on the Squadron's 'drome with a dud engine. The pilot and observer made their way to the Squadron office and, after a brief 'phone talk to their own C.O., borrowed a tender and pushed off for their own 'drome. The leader of "A" Flight walked down to the tender, chatting to them, and four of the Squadron's pilots took advantage of the chance of a lift in to a town the tender had to pass on the journey. All of them heard and all were a little surprised, at "A" Commander's parting word to the two visitors. "I've told the driver to go slow and careful," he said. "You fellows just watch he does it, will you?"

The joke began to dawn on the four just after the tender had carefully cleared the first bend of the road from the 'drome and the driver began to open her up and let her rip. The joke grew with the journey, and the four on their return to the Squadron that afternoon burst into the full ante-room and, announcing it "Such a joke, oh, *such* a joke!" went on to tell it in competing quartette to a thoroughly appreciative audience. It appeared that one passenger – "the pale-faced nervy-looking little 'un with pink eye-rims" – had showed distinct uneasiness when the tender rushed a dip-and-rise at top speed, and his observer – "a reg'lar Pickwick Fat Boy, quakin' like a jelly" – complained openly and bitterly when the tender took a corner on the two outside wheels and missed a country cart with six inches and a following gust of French oaths to spare.

When, by the grace o' God, and by a bare hand's-breadth, they shaved past a lumbering M.T. lorry, "Pink Eye" and "Fat Boy" clung dumb to each other and plainly devoted themselves to silent prayer. The dumbness deserted them and they made up all arrears of speech, and to spare, when the tender took four heaps of road-metal by the wayside in a series of switch-backing hand-springs. "Course we twigged your joke by then," said the four to "A" leader. "I suppose you delivered the driver his go-slow order with a large-sized wink and he savvied what you meant." It appeared that Pink Eye had asked the four to make the driver slow down, or to kill him or something. They pretended innocence and said he was a most careful man, and so on. Fat Boy nearly wept when they met a Staff car travelling fast and, never slacking an ounce, whooped past with a roar; and after a hairpin bend, which the tender took like a fancy skater doing the figure-of-eight, Pink Eye completely broke up and swore that he was going to get off and walk. "He'd have done it too," said the four delightedly, "if we hadn't eased her up. But you never saw such a state of funk as those two were in. Kept moppin' their brows, and apologisin' for their nerves, and fidgetin' and shiverin' like wet kittens every time we took a corner or met a cart. It was too funny – really funny."

This led to the argument – whether men with nerves of that sort could be any good in air work. "I know I'd hate to be a pilot with an observer of that kind watching my tail, almost as much as I'd hate to be an observer with Pink Eye for a pilot," said one, and most there agreed. A few argued that it was possible for men to be brave enough in one kind of show and the very opposite in another – that one fellow could do the V.C. act seven days a week under fire and take every sort of risk in action without turning a hair, and yet go goosey-fleshed on a Channel crossing in a choppy sea, while another man might enjoy sailing a boat single-handed in a boiling white sea, and yet be genuinely nervous about dodging across the full traffic-tide of a London thoroughfare. Most of those present declined to believe these theories, maintaining stoutly that a good plucked 'un was always such, and that an obvious funk couldn't be anything else – except in novelettes and melodrama. Then came the story.

"Did y'ever hear of 'Charger' Wicks?" said the Captain of "A." "No? Well, you're rather recently out, so you mightn't, but – well, he's fairly well known out here. He's rather a case in point –"

Being told by an expert to an audience of experts, his tale was put more briefly, technically, and air-slangily than I may hope to do, but here is the sense of it.

"Charger" Wicks was a pilot in a well-known fighting squadron, and was so called from a favourite tactic of his in air fighting and his insistent advice to the rest of the Flight he came to command to follow his plan of attack. "Always charge straight at your Hun if you get a chance," he would say. "Drive straight and hard nose-on at him, keeping your gun going hot. If you keep straight, he'll flinch – every time; and as he turns up, down, or out, you get a full-length target underneath, topside, or broadside. If you keep on and shoot straight, you're bound to get a hatful of bullets into him somewhere."

The plan certainly seemed to work, and Charger notched up a good tally of crashed Huns, but others in the Squadron warned him he'd try it once too often. "Charge straight at him, and he'll dodge," said Charger. "Wait," said the others. "Some day you'll meet a Hun who works on the same rule; *then* where'll you be?" "Yes," said Billy Bones, Charger's observer, "and where'll I be?" But although he pretended to grumble, Billy Bones was, as a matter of fact, quite in agreement on the nose-on charging stunt and believed in it as firmly as Charger himself. It took nerve, he admitted, but if you had that – and Charger certainly had – it worked all right. As it happened, the nerves of both were to be "put through it" rather severely.

They were up with the Flight one day, Charger with Billy Bones leading in their pet 'bus Y221. They ran into a scrap with odds of about two to one against them, and in the course of it Charger got a chance to put his old tactic to the proof. The moment he swung Y221 and headed her straight at a Hun scout, Billy knew what was coming, and heaved his gun round ready for any shot that offered as the Hun flinched past. But this time it looked as if the Squadron's old warning was going to be fulfilled and that Charger had met the Hun with the same rule as himself. Charger's gun began to rattle at about one hundred yards' range, and the Hun opened at the same moment. Billy, crouching with his gun at the ready and his eyes glued on a scarlet boss in the centre of the Hun's propeller, saw and heard the bullets stream smoking and cracking past and on their machine. It does not take long for two machines travelling about a hundred miles per hour to cover a hundred yards, but to Billy, staring tense at that growing scarlet blot, each split fraction of a second was an age, and as the shape of the Hun grew but showed no sign of a changing outline, Billy's thoughts raced. Charger, he knew, wouldn't budge an inch from his line; if the Hun also held straight ... he still held straight ... the slightest deviation up or down would show instantly in the wings, seen edgewise in thin lines, thickening and widening. The bullets were coming deadly close ... and the red boss grew and grew. If the Hun didn't give now – this instant – it would be too late ... they must collide. The approaching wing-edges still showed their thin straight line, and Billy, with a mental "Too late now!" gasped and gripped his gun and waited the crash.

Then, at the last possible instant, the Hun's nerve gave – or, rather, it gave just an instant too late. Billy had a momentary vision of the thin wing-edges flashing wide, of the black crosses on the under side, of a long narrow strip of underbody and tail suddenly appearing below the line of the planes; and then, before he could move or think, he felt the Y221 jar violently, heard horrible sounds of splintering, cracking, tearing, had a terrifying vision of a great green mass with splashed ugly yellow spots rearing up over the top plane before his startled eyes, plunging past over his ducking head with splintering wreckage and flapping streamers of fabric whizzing and rushing about his ears. Y221 – whirling, jolting, twisting all ways and every way at once apparently – fell away in a series of sickening jerks that threatened to wrench her joint from joint. Billy's thoughts raced down ahead of them to where they would hit the ground 15,000 feet below ... how long would it take ... would they hit nose-first or how ... was there anything he could do? – and before his mind shaped the question he had answered it – No, nothing! Dully he noticed that their engine had stopped, that Charger apparently was busy at the controls; then – with a gleam of wondering hope, dismissed at first, but returning and

growing – that the lurching and rolling was steadying, that they were coming back on an even keel, were ... yes, actually, were gliding smoothly down.

Charger twisted and looked down overside, then back at Billy and yelled, "D'ye see him?" Billy looked over, and next instant saw a vanishing shape with one wing folded back, saw another wing that had torn clear floating and "leafing" away on its own. The shape plunged plummet-wise until it was lost in the haze below. Billy turned inboard. "Broken in air," he shouted, and Charger nodded and turned again to his controls. Billy saw that their propeller was gone, only one jagged splinter of a blade remaining.

They made a long glide back and a good landing well behind the lines on a grass field. "What happened?" said Billy the moment they had come to rest. "He flinched, of course," said Charger. "Ran it a bit fine, and our prop caught his tail and tore it up some. I dunno that we're much hurt, except for the prop and that broken strut."

And, amazingly enough, they were not. The leading edge of a top plane was broken and cracked along its length, one strut was snapped, the propeller gone, a few jagged holes from bullets and Hun splinters ripped in their fabric. "God bless the people who built her!" said Charger piously. "Good stuff and good work in that old 'bus, Billy. That's all that brought us through."

Billy mopped his brow. "Hope we don't meet any more of that breed of Hun," he said. "I find I don't like collisions – not one little bit."

"He flinched at the finish, though," said Charger simply. "They all do."

When they got Y221 back to the 'drome and overhauled her they found her wrenched a bit, but in a couple of days she was tautened up into trim and in the air again.

And the very next morning, as if this weren't enough, Charger and Billy had another nerve-testing. They were up about 12,000 and well over Hunland when they ran into a patch of Archies, and Charger turned and led the formation straight towards a bank of white cloud that loomed up, solid looking as a huge bolster, before them. The sun was dead behind them, so Billy at first sat looking over the tail on the watch for any Huns who might try to attack "out of the sun" and its blinding glare. But as it was dead astern over the tail Billy could see clearly above and behind him, so that there was no chance of a Hun diving unseen from a height, and they were moving too fast to be overtaken on the level "out of the sun." Billy turned round and watched the cloud they were driving at. The sun was full on it, and it rose white and glistening like a chalk cliff – no, more like a – like a – Billy was idly searching his mind for a fitting simile, when his thoughts broke and he yelled fiercely and instinctively in warning to Charger. But Charger had seen too, as Billy knew from his quick movement and sudden alert sit-up. The cloud was anything round a hundred yards from them, and they could just see the slow curling twisting movement of its face. And – what had suddenly startled them – they could see another machine, still buried back in the cloud, and looming large and distorted by the mist, but plainly flying out of it and straight at them.

What followed was over and done in the space of seconds, although it may seem long in the telling, as it certainly was age-long in the suspense of the happening and waiting for the worst of it. Billy perhaps, powerless to act, able only to sit tense and staring, felt the strain the worst, although it must have been bad enough for Charger, knowing that their slender hope of escape hung on his quick thinking and action. This was no clear case of following his simple plan of charging and waiting for the Hun to flinch. The whole success of the plan depended on the Hun seeing and knowing the charge was coming – on his nerve failing to meet it. Charger didn't even know this was a Hun. He might be one of ours. He might have seen them, and at that very second be swerving to miss them. He might be blinded in the cloud and know nothing of them driving full-on into him. All this went through Charger's mind in a flash, and almost in that same flash he had decided on his action and taken it. He thrust the nose of Y221 steeply down. Even in the fraction of time it took for him to decide and his hand to move the control lever he could see the difference in the misty shape before him, could judge by the darkening, hardening and solidifying outline the speed of their approach.

And then, exactly as his bows plunged down, he saw and knew that what he feared had happened – the other pilot had seen him, had thought and acted exactly as he had. Charger saw the thin line of the edge-on wings broaden, the shadowy shape of the tail appear above them, just as he had seen it so often when the Hun he charged had flinched and ducked. But then the flinching had meant safety to him driving straight ahead – now it meant disaster, dipping as he was fairly to meet the other.

Again for the fraction of a second he hesitated – should he push on down, or turn up? Which would the other do? And again before the thought was well framed it was decided and acted on. He pulled the stick hard in, zoomed up, and held his breath, waiting. The shape was clearer and harder, must be almost out of the cloud – doubtful even now if Y221 had time and room to rise clear – all right if the other held on down, but —

The nose of his machine swooped up, and as it did, and before it shut out his view ahead, Charger, with a cold sinking inside him, saw the outline ahead flash through changing shapes again, the wings narrow and close to edge-on view, open and widen again with the tail dropping below. Again the other man's thought and action had exactly followed his own. No time to do more; by the solid appearance he knew the other machine must be just on the edge of the cloud, and they were almost into it, its face already stirring and twisting to the propeller rush. Charger's one thought at the moment was to see his opponent's nose thrust out – to know was it a Hun or one of ours.

Billy Bones, sitting tight with fingers locked on the cockpit edge, had seen, followed and understood every movement they had made, the full meaning of that changing outline before them, the final nearness shown by the solidity of the approaching grey shape; and the one thought in his mind was a memory of two men meeting face to face on a pavement, both stepping sideways in the same direction, stepping back, hesitating and stepping aside again, halting, still face to face, and glaring or grinning at each other. Here they were doing just the same, only up and down instead of sideways – and here there was no stopping.

He too saw the spread of wings loom up and out of either side of them, rushing up to meet them. The spread almost matched and measured their own – which meant a nose-to-nose crash. The cloud face was stirring, swirling, tearing open from the rush of their opposing windage. Had Charger time to – no, no time. They must be just ... it would be on the very cloud edge they would meet – were meeting (why didn't Charger turn, push her down, do something – anything) ... meeting ... (no escape after this collision – end on!) ... *now!*

Next instant they were in darkness – thick, wet, clammy darkness. No shock and crash of collision yet ... or yet. Billy didn't understand. Was he dead? Could you be killed so instantaneously you didn't feel it? It wasn't quite dark – and he could feel the cockpit rim under his hands – and —

They burst clear of the cloud, with trailing wisps sucking astern after them. He was bewildered. Then, even as Charger turned and shouted the explanation, he guessed at it. "Shadow – our own shadow," yelled Charger, and Billy, nodding in answer, could only curse himself for a fool not to have noticed (as he had noticed really without reasoning why) that the blurred, misty shape had grown smaller as well as sharper as they approached. "I didn't think of it either," Charger confessed after they were back on the 'drome, "and it scared me stiff. Looked just like a machine in thick cloud – blurred, sort of, and getting clearer as it came out to the edge."

"It was as bad as that beastly Hun," said Billy, "or worse"; and Charger agreed.

Now two experiences of that sort might easily break any man's nerve, and most men would need a spell off after an episode like the collision one. But Charger's nerve was none the worse, and although Billy swore his never really recovered, the two of them soon after put through another nose-on charge at a Hun, in which Charger went straight as ever, and when the Hun zoomed up and over, Billy had kept his nerve enough to have his gun ready and to put a burst of bullets up and into him from stem to stern and send him down in flames.

Everyone in the Mess agreed here that the two were good stout men and had nothing wrong with their nerves.

"Not much," said the narrator, "and they're still goin' strong. But you remember what started me to tell you about them?"

"Let's see – yes," said one or two. "We were talking about the joke of that couple to-day being so scared by a bit of fast driving on a clear road."

"Right," said the other, and laughed. "Heaps of people out here know those two, and it's a standing joke that you can't hire them to sit on the front seat of a car or a tender or travel anything over fifteen miles an hour in anything on wheels."

He waited a moment for some jests and chuckles to subside, and finished, grinning openly. "They are the two I told you about – Charger Wicks and Billy Bones!"

There was dead silence for a minute. Then, "Good Lord!" said one of the quartette faintly, and "Wh – which was Charger?" faltered another. "In their flying kit we couldn't – "

"The smallest – the one you called the pale-faced, nervy-looking little 'un," said "A" Flight Commander.

"Help!" said the other weakly. "And I – I recommended him 'Sulphurine Pills for Shaken Nerves.' Oh, help!"

"Yes," said the last of the demoralised quartette miserably, "and he thanked us, and said he'd write it down the minute he got back."

There was another pause. Then, "Such a joke!" said someone, quoting from the opening chapter of the quartette's story – "*such* a joke!" And the Mess broke in a yell of uproarious laughter.

The quartette did not laugh.

IV A GOOD DAY

Half an hour before there was a hint of dawn in the sky the Flight was out with the machines lined up on the grass, the mechanics busy about them, the pilots giving preliminary tests and runs to their engines. There had been showers of rain during the night, welcome rain which had laid the dust on the roads and washed it off the hedges and trees – rain just sufficient to slake the thirst of the parched ground and grass, without bringing all the discomfort of mud and mire which as a rule comes instantly to mind when one speaks of "rain" at the Front.

It was a summer dawn, fresh, and cool, and clean, with the raindrops still gemming the grass and leaves, a delicious scent of moist earth in the balmy air, a happy chorus of chirping, twittering birds everywhere, a "great," a "gorgeous," a "perfect" morning, as the pilots told each other.

A beautiful Sabbath stillness, a gentle calm hung over the aerodrome until the machines were run out and the engines began to tune up. But even in their humming, thrumming, booming notes there was nothing harsh or discordant or greatly out of keeping with the air of peace and happiness. And neither, if one had not known what it was, would the long heavy rumble that beat down wind have wakened any but peaceful thoughts. It might have been the long lazy boom of the surf beating in on a sandy beach, the song of leaping waterfalls, the distant rumble of summer thunder ... except perhaps for the quicker drum-like roll that rose swelling every now and then through it, the sharper, yet dull and flat, thudding bumps and thumps that to any understanding ear marked the sound for what it was – the roar of the guns.

Already the guns were hard at it; had been for days and nights past, in fact; would be harder at it than ever as the light grew on this summer morning, for this was the day set for the great battle, was within an hour or two of the moment marked for the attack to begin.

The Squadron Commander was out long before the time detailed for the Flight to start. He spoke to some of the pilots, looked round, evidently missed someone, and was just beginning "Where is –" when he caught sight of a figure in flying clothes hurrying out from the huts. The figure halted to speak to a pilot and the Major called impatiently, "Come along, boy. Waiting for you." "Right, sir," called the other, and then laughingly to his companion, "Worst of having a brother for C.O. Always privileged to chase you."

"Flight Leader ought to be first, Sonny, not last," said the Major as the boy came up. "Sorry, Jim," said the boy, "I'm all ready," and ran on to his waiting machine.

One by one the pilots clambered aboard and settled themselves in their seats, and one after another the engines were started, sputtering and banging and misbehaving noisily at first in some cases, but quickly steadying, and, after a few grunts and throaty *whurrunphs*, picking up their beat, droning out the deep note that rises tone by tone to the full long roaring song of perfect power.

The Major walked along the line, halted at each machine, and spoke a word or two to each pilot. He stood a little longer at the end machine until the pilot eased his engine down and its roar dropped droning to a quiet "ticking over."

"All right and all ready, Sonny?" said the Major.

"All correct, sir," said Sonny laughingly, and with a half-joking salute. "Feel fine, Jim, and the old bus is in perfect trim."

"Think the rain has gone," said the Major. "It's going to be a fine day, I fancy."

"It's just topping," cried Sonny, wrinkling his nose and sniffing luxuriously. "Air's as full of sweet scent as a hay meadow at home."

"Flight, got your orders all clear to start?"

Sonny nodded. "Yes, we'll show you the usual star turn take-off all right. You watch us."

The Major glanced at his wrist-watch and at the paling sky. "Almost time. Well, take care of yourself, Sonny." He put his hand up on the edge of the cockpit, and Sonny slid his glove off, and gave an affectionate little squeeze to the fingers that came over the edge.

"I'll be all right, Jim, boy. We're going to have a good day. Wish you were coming with us."

"Wish I were," said the Major. "Good luck," and he stepped and walked out in front of the line of machines, halted, and glanced at his watch and up at the sky again.

The half-dozen machines, too, stood waiting and motionless, except for the answering quiver that ran through them to their engines' beat. Down from the line the throbbing roll of the gunfire rose louder and heavier, with a new, an ugly and sinister snarling note running through it. The flat thudding reports of the nearer Heavies came at quicker and closer intervals, the rumble of the further and smaller pieces ran up to the steady unbroken roar of drum-fire.

The wind was coming from the line and the machines were lined up facing into it, so that the pilots had before them the jumping, flickering lights which flamed up across the sky from the guns' discharge. Earlier, these flashes had blazed up in broad sheets of yellow-and orange-tinted light from the horizon to half way up the height of the sky, leaped and sank, leaped again and beat throbbing and pulsing wave on wave, or flickering and quivering jerkily for seconds on end, dying down, and immediately flaring up in wide sheet-lightning glows. Now, in the growing light the gun-flashes showed more and more faintly, in sickly pallid flashes. There was no halt or pause between the jumping lights now; they trembled and flickered unceasingly, with every now and then a broader, brighter glare wiping out the lesser lights.

The pilots sat watching the battle lights, listening to the shaking battle thunder, and waiting the Squadron Commander's signal to go. The birds were chattering happily and noisily, and a lark climbed, pouring out long shrill bursts of joyful song; somewhere over in the farmyard beside the 'drome a cock crowed shrilly, and from one of the workshops came the cheerful clink-link, clink-link of hammers on an anvil.

It was all very happy and peaceful – except for the jumping gun-flashes and rolling gunfire; life was very sweet and pleasant – unless one thought of life over there in the trenches, and what the next hour or two would bring. Everyone knew there was "dirty work" ahead. It was the first really big "show" the Squadron had been in; they had been in plenty of the ordinary O.P.'s (Offensive Patrols) and air-scraps, but this was the real big thing, a great battle on the ground, and a planned attack on the grand scale in the air, which was to sweep the sky of Huns ... and the gunfire was still growing ... and the lark up there was bursting his throat to tell them what a pleasant place the world was on this summer morning, with the raindrops fresh on the grass and the breeze cool in the trees.

Nearly time! The Flight Leader ran his engine up again, its humming drone rising to a full deep-chested roar. The other pilots followed suit, engine after engine picking up the chorus and filling the air with deafening and yet harmonious sound. A man stood just clear of the wing-tips to either side of each machine holding a cord fast to the wood blocks chocked under the wheels; another man or two clung to each tail, holding it down against the pull of the propeller, their sleeves, jacket tails, and trouser legs fluttering wildly in the gales which poured aft from the whirling screws and sent twigs and leaves and dust flying and dancing back in a rushing stream. So the pilots sat for a minute, their faces intent and earnest, listening to the hum and beat of their engines and note of their propellers' roar, watching the Flight Leader's movements out of the tail of their eyes. He eased his engine down; and promptly every other engine eased. He waved his hand to right and left, and the waiting men jerked the chocks clear of his wheels; and five other hands waved and five other pairs of chocks jerked clear. He moved forward, swung to the right with a man to each wing tip to help swing him, and rolled steadily out into the pen; and five other machines moved forward, swung right, and followed in line astern of him. He wheeled to the left, moved more quickly, opened his engine up, ran forward at gathering speed. Moving slowly his machine had looked like a lumbering big fat beetle; skimming rapidly across the grass, with its nose down and its tail up, it changed to an excited hen racing with

outstretched head and spread wings; then – a lift – an upward swoop and rush – and she was ... a swallow, an eagle, a soaring gull – any of these you like as symbols of speed and power and grace, but best symbol of all perhaps, just herself, for what she was – a clean-built, stream-lined, hundred-and-umpty horse, fast, fighting-scout aeroplane.

The Squadron Commander stood watching the take-off of the Flight with a thrill of pride, and truly it was a sight to gladden the heart of any enthusiast. As the Flight Leader's machine tucked up her tail and raced to pick up speed, the second machine had followed her round her curve, steadied, and began to move forward, gathering way in her very wheel-tracks. As the Leader hoicked up and away, the second machine was picking up her skirts and making her starting rush; and the third machine was steadying round the turn to follow. As the second left the ground, the third began to make her run, and the fourth was round the turn and ready to follow. So they followed, machine by machine, evenly spaced in distance apart, running each other's tracks down, leaping off within yards of the same point, each following the other into the air as if they were tied on lengths of a string. It was a perfect exhibition of Flight Leadership – and following. One turn round the 'drome they made, and the Flight was in perfect formation and sailing off to the east, climbing as it went. The Commander stood and watched them gain their height in one more wide sweeping turn and head due east, then moved towards the huts.

The hammers were still beating out their cheery clink-link, the birds chirping and twittering; the lark, silenced or driven from the sky by these strange monster invaders, took up his song again and shrilled out to all the world that it was a joy to live – to live – to live – this perfect summer morning.

And the guns replied in sullen rolling thunder.

The last red glow of sunset was fading out of the square of sky seen through the open Squadron-office window. The Major sat in his own place at the centre of the table, and his Colonel, with the dust of motor travel still thick on his cap and coat, sat by the empty fireplace listening and saying nothing. A young lad, with leather coat thrown open and leather helmet pushed back on his head, stood by the table and spoke rapidly and eagerly. He was one of the Patrol that had left at dawn, had made a forced landing, had only just reached the 'drome, and had come straight to the office to report and tell his tale.

"I have the Combat Report, of course," said the Major; "you might read it first – and I've some other details; but I'd like to know anything further you can tell."

The lad read the Report, a bare dozen lines, of which two and a half told the full tale of a brave man's death – "*as he went down out of control he signalled to break off the fight and return, and then for the Deputy to take command. He was seen to crash.*"

"That's true, sir," said the lad, "but d'you know – d'you see what it – all it meant? We'd been scrappin' half an hour. We were on our last rounds and our last pints of petrol ... against seventeen Huns, and we'd crashed four and put three down out of control ... they were beat, and we knew it, and meant to chase 'em off."

He had been speaking rapidly, almost incoherently, but now he steadied himself and spoke carefully.

"Then *he* saw their reinforcements comin' up, one lot from north, t'other from south. They'd have cut us off. We were too busy scrappin' to watch. They had us cold, with us on our last rounds and nearly out of petrol. But *he* saw them. He was shot down then – I dunno whether it was before or after it that he saw them; but he was goin' down right out of control – dead-leafing, then a spin, then leafing again. And he signalled – " The boy gulped, caught and steadied his voice again, and went on quietly. "You know; there's half a dozen coloured lights stuck in the dash-board in front of him – and his Verey pistol in the rack beside him. He picked out the proper coloured light – goin' down helplessly out of control – and took his pistol out of the rack ... and loaded it ... and put it over the side and fired his signal, 'Get back to the 'drome – return home,' whatever it is exactly – we all knew it meant to break off the scrap and clear out, anyway. But he wasn't done yet. He picked another

light – the proper coloured light again ... and still knowin' he'd crash in the next few seconds ... and loaded and fired, 'I am out of action. Deputy Flight Leader carry on.' ... Then ... he crashed..."

The boy gulped again and stopped, and for a space there was dead silence.

"Thank you," said the Squadron Commander at last, very quietly, "I won't ask you for more now."

The boy saluted and turned, but the Major spoke again. "There's a message here I've just had. You might like to read it."

The pilot took it and read a message of congratulations and thanks from Headquarters on the work of the Air Services that day, saying how the Huns had been driven out of the air, how so many of them had been crashed, so many driven down out of control, with slight losses of so many machines to us. "On all the fronts engaged," the message finished, "the Squadrons have done well, and the Corps has had a good day."

"A good day," said the boy bitterly, and spat a gust of oaths. "I – pardon, sir," he said, catching the Major's eye and the Colonel's quick glance. "But – Sonny was my pal; I was his chum, the best chum he had – " He checked himself again, and after a pause, "No, sir," he said humbly, "I beg your pardon. *You* were always that to Sonny." He saluted again, very gravely and exactly, turned, and went.

The Colonel rose. "It's true, too," said the Major, "I was; and he was the dearest chum to me. I fathered him since he was ten, when our Pater died. I taught him to fly – took him up dual myself, and I remember he was quick as a monkey in learning. I watched his first solo, with my heart in my mouth; and I had ten times the pride he had himself when he put his first wings up. And now ... he's gone."

"He saved his Flight," said the Colonel softly. "You heard. It's him and his like that make the Corps what it is. They show the way, and the others carry on. They go down, but" – he tapped his finger slowly on the message lying on the table, "but ... the Corps 'has had A Good Day.'"

(To the tune of "John Brown's Body.")

Half the Flight may crash to-day and t'other half to-night,
But the Flight does dawn patrol, before to-morrow's light,
And if we live or if we die, the Corps still wins the fight,
And the war goes rolling on.

V

A ROTTEN FORMATION

The Major lifted his head from the pile of papers he was reading and signing, and listened to the hum of an engine passing over the office and circling down to the 'drome. "One of ours," he said. "Flight coming down, I suppose. They're rather late."

An officer lounging on a blanket-covered truckle bed murmured something in reply and returned to the sixpenny magazine he was devouring. The noise of the engine droned down to the ground level, ceased, stuttered, and rose, sank again, and finally stopped. The C.O. hurried on with his papers, knowing the pilots of the Flight would be in presently to make their reports.

In three minutes the door banged open noisily, and the Flight Leader clumped heavily in. Such of his features as could be seen for a leather helmet coming low on his forehead and close round his cheeks, and a deep collar turned up about his chin, disclosed an expression of bad temper and dissatisfaction.

"Hullo, Blanky," said the Major cheerfully. "Made rather a long job of it, didn't you? Any Huns about?"

Now Blanky had an established and well-deserved reputation for bad language, and although usually a pilot is expected more or less to modify any pronounced features in language in addressing his C.O., there are times when he fails to do so, and times when the C.O. wisely ignores the failure. This apparently was one of the times, and the Major listened without remark to a stream of angry and sulphurous revilings of the luck, the Huns, the fight the Flight had just come through, and finally – or one might say firstly, at intervals throughout, and finally – the Flight itself.

"Three blessed quarters of a bloomin' hour we were scrappin'," said Blanky savagely, "and I suppose half the blistering machines in the blinking Flight are shot up to everlastin' glory. I know half the flamin' controls and flyin' wires are blanky well cut on my goldarn bus. And two confounded Huns' brimstone near got me, because the cock-eyed idiot who should have been watching my plurry tail went hare-in' off to heaven and the Hot Place. But no-dash-body watched any-darn-body's tail. Went split-armin' around the ruddy sky like a lot of runaway racin' million-horse-power comets. Flight! Dot, dash, asterisk! Formation! Stars, stripes, and spangles – "

He broke off with a gesture of despair and disgust. None of this harangue was very informing, except it made clear that the Flight had been in a fight, and that Blanky was not pleased with the result or the Flight. The Major questioned gently for further details, but hearing the note of another descending engine Blanky went off at a tangent again. Here one of them came ... about half an hour after him ... wait till he saw them ... he'd tell them all about it ... and so on.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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