ROWLAND WALKER

DASTRAL OF THE FLYING CORPS

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Dastral of the Flying Corps:

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CHAPTER I
DASTRAL WINS HIS PILOT'S BADGE

"One crowded hour of glorious life,
Is worth an age without a name."

--*SCOTT.*

AT the time of which I write, the smoke of battle still filled the air. The freedom of men and nations, the heritage of the ages, hung in the balance, so that even brave men were often filled with doubt and despair.

The German guns were thundering at the gates of Verdun, seeking a new pathway to Paris, for the ever-growing British army had barred the northern route to the capital of France and the shores of the English Channel. But even the attempt to hack a way through Verdun was doomed to failure, and the first rift of blue in a clouded sky was soon to appear.

Against that glittering wall of steel, where the heroic sons

of France lined the trenches against the tyrant, hundreds of thousands of Prussians, Bavarians and Saxons were doomed to fall, and the best blood of Germany was already flowing like rivers, for, though the *poilus* during times of great pressure slowly yielded the outer forts inch by inch, yet the price which the enemy paid for their advance was far too dear.

The future hung heavy with fate, and the civilised world looked on amazed, as the western armies, locked in the grip of death, swayed to and fro. The earth trembled with the shock of battle, and the very air vibrated with the whir-r-r of the fierce birds of prey, the wonderful product of the new age. Land and sea did not suffice as in days gone by, for in the heavens the struggle for freedom must also be fought. And many great men were beginning to say that the side which gained the mastery of the air, would also gain the mastery of Europe and the world.

In no country was this recognised more than in England, and at early dawn even remote villages were often stirred, and the inhabitants thrilled by the advent of the whirring 'planes and air-scouts, whose daring pilots were preparing to wrest the mastery of the air from the enemy.

The most daring of our English youths left the public schools and universities, and strained every nerve, risking death a hundred times, to gain the coveted brevet of a pilot's "wings" in the Royal Flying Corps.

So it happened that, during one fine morning in the early summer of 1916, a group of men, some of them wearing on

the left breast of their service tunics the afore-mentioned brevet, were watching a young pilot undergoing his final test in the air before gaining his wings. The place where this occurred was over an aerodrome, somewhere near London.

"Phew! there he goes again. Just look at that spiral!" cried one of the onlookers.

"Ha! Now he's going to loop; watch him!" exclaimed another.

The daring aviator, who was flying a new two-seater fighting machine with a twelve-cylindered engine, capable of giving over fourteen hundred revolutions a minute, seemed perfectly oblivious of the danger he was in, as seen by those below, for he careered through space at a speed varying from eighty to nearly one hundred and twenty miles an hour, and performed the most amazing spirals, twists, and gymnastic gyrations imaginable.

The people below, even the pilots, watched him with bated breath, and sometimes with thumping hearts. They felt somehow that he was overdoing it, and sooner or later he would crash to earth and certain death Several times even the experts, who were there to judge him, and award him the coveted brevet, felt sure that the youth had lost control of the 'plane, for she swerved so suddenly, and banked so swiftly, as she came round, that one of them exclaimed:–

"Good heavens, he's going to crash!"

"Phew! Just look there, he's met an air-pocket, and it's all over with the young devil," shouted a civilian, evidently a representative of the New Air Board.

But, strange to say, all their prophecies were wrong, for, recovering himself, the daring young flyer, Dastral as he was called, had the machine under perfect control, and was just as easy and comfortable up there at three thousand feet–and far happier–than if he had been in an arm-chair in the officers' mess at the aerodrome.

"There's a nose dive for you!" cried the major who commanded the Squadron at the aerodrome, and who had done more than any one to encourage the lad, and bring him out. As he spoke, the youth was speeding to earth in a thrilling nose-dive which must have been at the rate of anything approaching a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

For an instant it seemed as if the prediction of one of the gloomy prophets would now be fulfilled and the aviator would crash; but no, after a dive of a thousand feet Dastral, as cool as a cucumber, jammed over the controls, flattened out for a few seconds, looped three times in succession, then spiralling and banking with wonderful and mathematical precision, shut off the engine, and volplaned down to the ground, touching the earth lightly at the rate of some fifty miles an hour, taxied across the level turf, and brought up within ten yards of the astonished spectators.

"Humph! He's won his wings, major," exclaimed one of the small crowd.

"So he has," cried another. "He knows all the tricks of the air."

"Yes," exclaimed a third; "if he keeps on like that, he will

prove a match for Himmelman himself, some day, should he ever chance to meet with him."

Now Himmelman was the crack German flyer–the Air-Fiend of the western front–the man who had made the German Flying Corps what it was, and had earned for it the great traditions it had already won.

A moment later, the youth leapt lightly from the cockpit, gave his hand to his observer to help him down, and, stepping lightly up to his Commanding Officer, saluted smartly.

"Capital, Dastral! You shall have your wings to-morrow. If anybody has ever won them you have," exclaimed the major, grasping the lad's hand, and greeting him warmly.

"Thank you, sir. It's very kind of you to say so," replied Dastral.

"Not at all. You've won them yourself, my boy, and I congratulate you. But, I say, you played the very devil up there. There are very few of our fellows who can do those monkey-tricks without crashing. It's a mercy you're alive, boy."

"Oh, it was only an extra turn or two, sir, just for the spectators. But, Jock, here, sir, my observer, is he all right for his brevet also?"

"Yes, he shall be gazetted and granted an observer's wing. I will get them through orders at once."

Once more Dastral thanked his chief, and, followed by Jock Fisker, his chum, who had entered the air service with him, and who was destined to accompany him through many an exciting

air duel in the future, they returned to the machine, which was already being keenly examined by a group of the privileged onlookers, before the air-mechanics returned it to the shed.

Shortly afterwards, as Dastral and Jock were preparing to leave the aerodrome, the major came by, and, seeing that the young pilot wanted to speak to him, he said:–

"Well, what is it, Dastral?"

"Sir, now that I have gained my wings, I should like to be posted overseas as soon as possible, so as to join some active squadron with the Expeditionary Force in France. Would it be possible for you to push my request forward?"

"Humph! Rather early yet, isn't it, my boy?"

"Perhaps it is rather early, sir," replied the youth, blushing like a girl as he faced the C.O. "But I should like to take part in an air-fight before the scrapping finishes."

"We've a long way to go yet, Dastral, before it is finished. Still, as you are so keen, I will see what I can do. But it will take at least another fortnight to get the thing through. At any rate I will communicate with Wing Headquarters, and through them with the War Office. Perhaps General Henderson will accede to your request," added the major, for he well understood the lad's eagerness. He had felt it himself, and had already seen a good deal of that air-fighting of which the youth spoke, as the ribbons below his wings indicated, for he was the winner of the D.S.O. and also the Military Cross.

"Thank you, sir," and the pilot saluted again, but cast a

sidelong glance at Jock, who stood a few paces away, and was already fretting in his soul lest Dastral should be sent away without him.

The major caught the glance and understood, for he turned sharply round after a few steps, and said:–

"And Jock, what about him?" smiling blandly at the lads.

"He is of age, sir, he can speak for himself," replied Dastral. "But I should like him to go overseas with me. We have done most of our training together, and we thoroughly understand each other, and I know that he's just dying to go with me, sir."

"Is that so, Jock?" asked the major, looking at the Scotch laddie, who had scarcely finished his course at Glasgow University when the war called him from his studies.

"Oh, yes, sir, I'd give all I possess to go overseas with Dastral." And the youth's eyes shone with joy at the very possibility of the event coming off, for he had feared that they were now to be separated.

"Very well. Don't expect too much, but possess your souls in patience for another fortnight or so. Goodbye!"

"Good-bye, sir!" and once more after the customary salute, the youths went their way, wondering how soon they would be in France, within sound of the guns.

For the next fortnight they were busy every day at the aerodrome, trying new machines, testing, carrying out imaginary reconnaissances over the German lines, bombing raids, studying war maps and plans, night flying and a score of other things that

would prove useful when they found themselves in France.

One morning, about two weeks later, a telegram was delivered to Dastral at his rooms. It came from the War Office, and ran as follows:–

"Second Lieutenant Dastral and his observer to proceed overseas forthwith, on one of the new fighting 'planes, and to report his arrival at – Squadron, British Expeditionary Force, France."

After the customary interview with the C.O., it was arranged that early next morning the two aviators were to make their first attempt at flying the Channel.

CHAPTER II
THE FERRY PILOT

IT was an hour before dawn, and the stars had not yet faded from the skies, when a group of air mechanics at one of the aerodromes just north of London were busy about the ailerons and fuselage of a new machine, which was destined to fly across the Channel that day, and to join one of the British Squadrons on the other side.

The secret of the machine had been well kept, and only a favoured few had been permitted to see the "hornet," as she was called. Great things were claimed for her when she joined one of the active squadrons, now fighting in France for the supremacy of the air.

Just a few folk in Old Blighty had been scared by the advent of the Fokker, the new German aeroplane which had recently come into existence, and for which such wonderful things were being claimed daily by the German "wireless."

"Double up there, you sleepy imps!" yelled Old Snorty, the aerodrome sergeant-major, a short, stout, florid, shiver-my-timbers type of disciplinarian. And another squad of sleepy air-mechanics, just out from their blankets, doubled up smartly to give a hand.

In a few minutes the hornet in question was ready for her long

flight overseas. Every wire and strut had been carefully examined and proved, for men's lives depended upon the testing, and oiling, and straining. And now the silent, filmy thing was waiting only for the pilot and observer.

A sound of footsteps upon the soft turf of the aerodrome was heard, and voices carried lightly down the soft morning air.

"Halt! Who goes there?" called the sentry, standing near by, and at the same instant a hand lamp was flashed in the direction of the newcomers.

The sentry, however, appeared to recognise sonic important personality approaching, like the mastiff who knows, as if by instinct, the approach of his master, for, without waiting for an answer to his challenge, he shouted:–

"Guard, turn out!"

And instantly, the men in the guard tent turned out in time to salute the Commanding Officer of the Squadron, who came by with Dastral, the pilot, and Fisker, the observer.

Simultaneously, the air mechanics sprang to attention, as they stood about the hornet. Then, after a couple of minutes spent in chatting with the adventurers, who were about to sail forth on the wings of the morning, the O.C. and the pilot flung away their cigarettes and gave a few apparently casual glances over the framework by the aid of the hand-lamps.

"Better load up with a few twenty pound bombs, Dastral," laughed the O.C. "You may have the chance of using one going over seas. You never know your luck."

"Yes, sir," replied the youth.

A moment later the pilot and observer were seated in the biplane, snugly wrapped in their thick leather coats, their hands encased in huge gauntlets, and their helmets tightly drawn about their ears, ready for the morning adventure.

Dastral gave a final glance around, his hand already on the controls, then gave a nod to the chief of the ground staff.

"Swing the propellor!" came next, followed by "Stand clear!"

"Whiz-z-z!" went the huge blades, and, as the pilot switched on the current, the engines–powerful 100 horse-power ones, capable of some 1400 or 1500 revolutions a minute–broke into their wonderful song, and with a final word of parting from the Squadron Commander, the machine taxied off rapidly over the level turf.

"Burr-r-r-r!"

The air seemed full of a mighty sound, and a terrible vibration filled the heavens. It was the song of the aeroplane.

At a hundred yards, in response to a very slight movement of the joy-stick, the winged creature leapt into the air, then circled around once or twice, climbing rapidly up to a couple of thousand feet, and made off south by south-east.

The first whisper of dawn came out of the east as the hornet headed off towards the great city, for a filmy streak of grey, followed by a saffron tint, appeared in the sky low down on their left hand. The stars overhead began to fade and disappear, as though withdrawn into the vaulted dome overhead. Then the

saffron turned to crimson, and soon the eastern horizon was aflame with light, for, as the machine rose higher and higher, the horizon broadened, and the whole earth seemed to lie at her feet.

Now they were over the city, and the pilot laughed joyously, for he was exhilarated by the bracing air which rushed past him at a tremendous rate.

"Look there, Jock," he cried, pointing down far below, where, through the gloom which still enfolded the lower regions, a faint silvery streak showed where the majestic Thames rolled down under its many bridges to the sea.

Jock Fisker, his chum and observer, who was destined to see many an adventure with Dastral in the near future, peered over the side of the fuselage, and noted the river and the many spires of the great city. He saw the thin spire of St. Bride's reaching up towards him, St. Martin's, and St. Clement Danes'; and then, as the upper rim of the sun appeared above the horizon, he saw the blue-grey dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, and caught the flash of the sun upon the golden cross above it.

"How glorious!" Dastral ejaculated, half turning his head every now and then for Fisker to hear, as some impulse moved him but half the words were lost, or carried on by the rushing air into infinitude.

Soon, they left the southern outskirts of London far behind, and, as the daylight broadened, they looked upon the Surrey Downs, and the wide heath of the rolling countryside. Village after village they passed, with its red tiled roofs and church spire

pointing heavenwards, but onwards, always onwards, they sped towards the white cliffs and the sea.

The slender, filmy thing had found herself this morning, for the R.A.F. engines were working splendidly, doing already nearly fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. Vibrating with an intensity that was perfectly marvellous, considering her fragile build, with every strut, bolt and wire in perfect unison, the hornet sailed majestically along at over eighty miles an hour, as though on a pleasure trip, instead of a life and death errand; for in reality she was bound overseas to join the forces in their fight for freedom's cause.

Now they were in Kent, the garden of England, and far below were the cherry orchards and the hop-fields. With his glasses Jock could now and then pick out a few farm labourers, already trudging along the roads, or working in the fields.

"There is the railway, Dastral!" shouted the observer, as he picked up the narrow thread of metals winding along towards Tunbridge.

"Yes, I see it now," replied his comrade, bringing his glasses to bear on the object for which he had been keenly searching for some minutes.

"Straight road now. Give her a few more points eastward."

Dastral altered the controls a little, and, banking slightly, the hornet came round smartly upon her new course, which, for the rest of the journey to the coast, was almost due east.

The continuous roar of the engines and the whir-r-r of the

propeller made conversation almost impossible, except for a few short, jerky sentences, uttered in a loud, shrill voice, and accompanied by corresponding gestures.

The world beneath them was waking up now, for the two aviators could see the smoke ascending from the chimneys of a few scattered farmhouses and cottages. The birds, too, were astir, and the larks, mounting up towards the sun, made sweet music which was drowned in the whir-r-r of that strange-looking bird of prey, which sailed serenely above them. Instinct, however, made the songsters shrink and flee away from that hawk-like menace with stretched-out wings, for they evidently feared that it might swoop down upon and destroy them.

"Dover!" shouted the observer suddenly, as the Cinque Port came into view.

"Yes, by Jove! So it is. I hope they won't turn the guns of the fort upon us."

"No fear. They'll have been warned of our coming by now."

A minute later, they opened out the sea, the forts, and Shakespeare's Cliff, and within another three minutes they had crossed the boundary of sea and land, and at a tremendous altitude were gliding over the Channel.

"Nine thousand!" yelled Dastral, turning his head towards Jock, after casting a brief glance at his indicator.

"Now let her rip," cried the other, for in climbing to get the required height to rush the Channel, the machine had lost speed.

"Right-o!" came the answer.

So, in order to get speed quickly, Dastral did a little nose dive of about three hundred feet, then flattened out again, intending to rush the Channel at one hundred and twenty miles an hour, lest they should slip unconsciously into an air-pocket.

As he did so, he noticed a flash of fire followed by a puff of white smoke down at the Castle.

"A signal!" shouted Jock, who had noticed the occurrence at the same instant.

"Yes, they want to speak to us," and with a circling sweep the machine came round as Dastral pulled the joy-stick hard over, and swept back again until he hung right over Dover Castle.

"Can you make it out, old man?" asked the pilot.

"Yes, I have it," cried Fisker, whose eyes had been glued to a spot on the Castle grounds just at the top of the hill overlooking the naval harbour.

"What is it? Do they want us to go down?"

"No. The Commander of the fort says there are several enemy submarines in the Channel, and requests us to keep a sharp look-out for them as we cross over."

"Cheery-o, Jock! That's good news. I'm going to drop down a bit, then. There's a D.S.O. for you if you spot one. Here goes!" And with that, Dastral jammed over the controls again, and did a neat nose dive of two thousand feet, looping the loop once or twice just to express his joy, and give vent to his feelings.

Jock had picked up this information from a few white strips of calico, which had been stretched out in a curious fashion within

the Castle grounds. To a trained observer like Fisker, it was mere child's play to read a code signal like that.

And now the daring joy-riders, keenly watched by hundreds of eyes far down below, left the shore once again, and the naval harbour with its shipping, and headed for the French coast, watching the surface of the sea as though they would read its secret.

"East-south-east, Dastral! That's the course till we sight the opposite shore," shouted Jock to his comrade, who, he thought, in his excitement and eagerness to spot a submarine lurking in the depths, might miss his way, as many a brave aviator before him had done.

"Right-o!" came the answer to this reminder, for the French coast was hid as yet in the morning mist. Then the course was altered slightly once again, in order to make a proper landfall on the other side.

They were flying low now, much lower than the usual regulations permitted, for it is necessary to keep a good altitude in crossing the Channel, not only because of the chance of running into a stray air-pocket, but to enable one to 'plane to safety should anything go wrong with the engines, for only a seaplane can ride the waves like a ship; and this was no seaplane they were riding to-day.

Far down below them they could see the patrol boats hunting for their prey. They could also see the mine-sweepers at work, clearing the fairway from those foul nests of floating mines which

the crafty foe had been busy laying with their submarines. Once or twice they thought they could make out some dark-grey object like a mine or sunken vessel beneath the surface of the water.

A string of mine-sweepers were stretched out below them now. They could see them distinctly, could see even the long nets that trailed between them, for the sun was gaining power and the morning mists were rolling away. The grey expanse of water took on another hue, changing from a dull grey to a greenish tint, with patches here and there of deep blue, where the water deepened, or the surface of the mirror reflected a corresponding patch of the azure above.

Keenly now they searched the face of the deep for any dark speck, for, from an aeroplane, it is possible to look far down, often even to the bed of the sea; but as yet they saw nothing, save an occasional piece of wreckage, which had probably detached itself and floated from the treacherous Goodwins, away to the eastward and the northward–those treacherous shoals which hold the remains of so many gallant barques and vessels, from the Roman galley to the modern liner.

They had not long left the mine-sweepers on their port quarter when Jock, through his glasses, noted something like a string of porpoises, which, owing to the motion of the waves, appeared to be travelling along. They seemed so regular and orderly in their movement, however, that he was about to pass them over. Thinking, however, that he would like to call Dastral's attention to them, he shouted:–

"Starboard bow, Dastral! Look at 'em! What are they? Not mines, surely. Look like porpoises, only they're not dark enough, and they don't tumble about much."

Dastral peered over the side of the cockpit and looked down.

"Can't say," he ejaculated.

"Let's go down a bit lower, old man," said Fisker.

"Aye, aye. Hold tight!" cried the pilot, for he noticed that Jock was standing up and leaning over, unstrapped.

"Right away! I'm all right," replied the observer, squatting down, and pressing his knees against the knee-board, which is the life-line of the aeroplane.

And down they went in a graceful nose-dive till they were within five hundred feet of the surface of the water, with the engines shut off. Then, as they flattened out, both men peered over the side again, and Dastral was the first to exclaim:–

"Porpoises be hanged! They're German mines. A whole string of them floating about in the fairway, ready for the first ship that comes along. The dirty Huns!"

"Snakes alive! So they are. Now I can make them out quite plainly; I can even see the horns and contacts through my glasses. Phew! There'll be a deuce of a mess shortly unless they're cleared up."

"Look alive, old man, or there'll be trouble!" shouted the pilot.

"How so?"

"See that ocean tramp coming up Channel. She's a seven thousand tonner, and her cargo's worth a couple of hundred

thousand. She'll be right on the string of mines directly, and then–gee whiz!–there'll be fireworks, and another valuable cargo will have gone to Davy Jones' locker."

The mine-sweepers were about a couple of miles away by this time, but the Commodore of the little fleet had seen the rapid nose-dive of the hornet, and knew that something unusual was happening.

He had already strung out the signal for a boat to detach its nets and proceed at full steam to the spot, for he thought that the machine was coming down with engine trouble.

It was his duty, therefore, to save the men, and, if possible, salve the aeroplane also. Dastral saw the signal through his glasses, and watched the vessel cast off her nets to come up. His immediate concern, therefore, was for the tramp steamer surging up Channel, and nearing the end of her long voyage from Valparaiso to London. At all costs to the aeroplane, she must be saved from the deadly mines towards which she was now heading directly. The tide was with her, and she was coming up rapidly. In another five minutes she would be in the cunningly laid trap.

For the moment, Dastral continued to circle over the mine bed, hoping thereby to warn off the tramp. Of this she appeared to take no notice, though undoubtedly a score of eyes were watching his gymnastic gyrations from the deck and bridge of the vessel.

"Try the gun, Jock. Quick!"

"Rip-r-r-r-r-r!" went the Lewis gun, as Jock pressed the

button and fired off half a drum of ammunition.

Even yet, the tramp steamer did not seem to understand, for her captain did not charge her course.

"Is she fitted with wireless?" yelled Dastral.

"Yes," answered the observer, putting down his glasses into the socket for an instant.

"Then give her a message on the international code. It's her last chance. She'll be on the infernal things in another two minutes."

"Right-o! Here goes!" and, uncoiling the long aerial wire, he tapped out just one word on the sending key:–

"M I N E S!!!"

"Good. If that fails, the ship's done for!" ejaculated Fisker, as he watched eagerly for the ship to change her course.

On came the vessel, quite oblivious of the danger. She was less than a cable's length from the string of mines, and still steaming fast, when Dastral noted some movement about the deck, where a dozen or so of the crew stood just for'ard of the bridge, in the waist, gazing intently at the 'plane.

"Heavens! It's too late!" gasped the pilot, as he saw the steamer's bows running dead on towards the very centre of the floating mines.

"No, she may just do it," he ventured to his observer, as he saw the sudden commotion on board.

Suddenly, out of the wireless room, the operator, evidently carrying the message, dashed up the companion way to the bridge, flourishing a piece of paper in his hand, and shouted:–

"Mines in the vicinity, sir!"

Then it was that the captain realised the danger he was in, for the mine-sweeper coming up on the starboard bow was also flying the signal for her to heave to.

Dashing to the wheelhouse door, a few paces away from where he had been standing, the captain shouted to the man at the helm,

"Hard-a-starboard!"

And though the tide was with her, the good ship swung round smartly, only in the very nick of time, for, as she turned, one of the deadly mines was within two feet of her stern, and the wash from her screw and the rapid movement of her rudder as she came round, caused the nearest mine to come into contact with a piece of wreckage, at which there was a terrific roar, and a huge column of water was lifted up and hurled some two hundred feet into the air.

Then followed a more terrible spectacle, for one after another the whole string of mines went off, as though they had been countermined. It was just as if there had been a sub-aqueous earthquake, for a prolonged roar of thunder, earsplitting and nerve-racking, immediately followed, while the sea for hundreds of yards around rose up like a huge waterspout, and for some minutes the whole surface of the water, hitherto placid, broke into tumultuous waves.

The tramp steamer received fifty tons of water upon her decks, but save for a slight starting of the plates in her stern, she was untouched. Nevertheless, she had to keep the pumps

constantly in use for the remainder of her voyage.

After circling round the spot for another few minutes to speak with the Commodore of the fleet of mine-sweepers, Dastral turned the hornet's head once again towards the enemy's coast, and the captain of the tramp steamer dipped his pennant and gave a long blast on the siren, as a token of gratitude for the service rendered.

The aviators were well pleased with themselves for the part they had taken in the little adventure, which had not been without its thrills, and a spice of danger.

They were now almost in mid-Channel, and could see both shores. There were the white cliffs of Old Albion behind them, while in front, a little on their left, Cape Grisnez rose out of the water. Below them several liners, transports and colliers, could be seen making either up or down Channel, or for one of the ports on the English or French coasts. Turning round to Fisker, the pilot shouted through the speaking tube:–

"Sorry it wasn't a German submarine, old fellow. There'll be no D.S.O. for us for picking up a string of floating mines."

"Ah, well. Better luck next time," called back the observer.

"The place is too well patrolled now for the Huns' submarines to show themselves about here. Gemini! but I'd give my brevet and six months' pay to spot one this journey. It would be some find."

The observer did not reply immediately. He was keenly searching the opposite shore to find the breakwater at the

entrance to Boulogne harbour.

"Can you see it yet?" called the pilot, noting an anxious look on Jock's face. "Yes," replied the latter. "Better give her another two points south, and then we shall just about hit the canal below the town. Our instructions were to follow it to the main aerodrome."

"Aye, aye," answered the pilot, altering the controls slightly, and bringing her head round upon a more southerly course.

Shortly after this, the town and harbour of Boulogne came into full view to the naked eye. Their intention was to leave it a little on their left, and, then making a landfall of a certain railhead and canal, take a short cross-country flight to the big aerodrome behind the British lines. They now began to regard themselves as nearly at the end of their journey, and had no expectation of a still greater adventure before them–an adventure which would prevent them reaching their destination, at any rate, that day.

Only some five or six miles of sea now lay between them and the land, and they were right over the track of the transports, which made a continuous line of traffic between the two shores, when Fisker, who had taken up his glasses again in order to watch a batch of troopships, escorted by a couple of destroyers, suddenly turned them on to a large four tunnelled hospital ship, which, coming out of the harbour, crowded with wounded and war-worn men, was ploughing its solitary way towards Old Blighty, without any other escort or protector than the Red Cross flag.

Suddenly, as he watched the stately vessel moving along at twenty-five knots, with the huge combers falling away from her bow, and a long milk-white trail from her stern, he started suddenly, and lowered his glasses, almost shrieking at the top of his voice:–

"See there, Dastral! Quick!"

"Where away?" cried the pilot, turning round sharply, and catching a glimpse of Fisker's horrified face.

"There!" exclaimed the observer, laconically, pointing with his hand in the direction of the hospital ship.

Dastral looked in the direction indicated.

"The brutes!" he gasped. "Not if I can prevent it."

That which had called forth these horrified expressions was nothing more or less than a lurking German submarine, hidden beneath the water, but with a few inches of periscope above the surface, manoeuvring to bring the huge hospital ship within its range. It had evidently watched the procession of transports pass by, but, fearing that it might be rammed by one of the destroyers if it revealed its presence, it had waited for some other tasty morsel to come along. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could touch but this hospital ship.

With any other nation, a vessel flying the sacred emblem of humanity, which floated from the masthead of the ship, would have been immune from attack. But to the Hun no code of morals seems to hold good. Nor was any crime to be regarded as such if only some damage could be inflicted upon the enemy.

"Ach, wohl, mein herr!" the German ober-lieutenant in the submarine was remarking to his superior officer at that moment. "The verdomt transports are gone, and there's nothing but a big 'hospital ship steaming by. Shall we loose a leetle tin fish at her? You can't trust these English; they're probably transporting materials of war. There are sure to be some staff officers on her decks anyhow. What say you, mein herr?"

"Sink the blamed hooker, Fritz! We can say that she tried to ram us, when we make out our report. No one will be any the wiser, for dead men can't tell tales. He, he! Ho, ho!"

And already the commander's hand was upon the lever in the conning-tower which controlled the torpedo tubes in the bow. Hesitating just for a second, as though battling with the last shreds of a lingering conscience, he pulled the lever.

"Swiss-s-s-h!" came the sound as the deadly missile left the tube and entered the water.

"Good heavens! She's fired!" exclaimed both the aviators, as, in the very middle of a dangerous nose dive they saw what had transpired, and followed for an instant, even in that downward dive, the wake of the deadly torpedo.

Fortunately, at that very moment the captain of the *Galicia*, the big four-funnelled boat, having had his attention attracted to the spot by the nose-dive of the warplane, saw the periscope of the enemy's submarine, and, starboarding his helm, swung the huge vessel just sufficiently to port for the first torpedo to miss his stern by a few feet.

Then commenced a stern chase, for the *Galicia*, seeing the imminent danger that she was in, sought refuge in flight. Placing her stern towards the oncoming submarine, she fled down Channel, hoping thereby to save her precious cargo of wounded heroes.

"Donner and blitz!" exclaimed the commander to his lieutenant. "We have missed her. That will never do. We must sink her now at any cost, or the American cables will be full of the affair, and the anger of the neutral world will be turned against us once more."

"What shall we do, mein herr?" asked the lieutenant of the submarine. "She can do twenty-five knots and we can only do seventeen while we are submerged."

"We must run her awash, and give her three-inch shells with the deck guns. The transports and patrols are some distance off now."

"She will be calling back the destroyers by now with her wireless, mein herr."

"Gott in Himmel! but we must risk it. There may just be time. I wish we had let the blamed hooker go by."

Then, with a few round oaths, he switched down the periscope, pulled over the lever that drove the water out of the ballast tanks, and, as the boat came to the surface, he had the hatch unshipped, and ordered his gun crew to stations, calling them dachshunds, and a few more vile names.

As soon as the submarine came to the surface, the electric

motors were stopped, and the surface engines started so that every knot could be got out of them.

"All clear!" had been reported to him by the lieutenant, and as regards the narrow horizon which can be surveyed from the periscope of a submerged vessel, all was indeed clear, for they had not seen the hornet which was buzzing overhead, silently dipping and nose-diving with her engines shut off, and rapidly manoeuvring like an angry wasp, waiting but an opportunity to get at its victim.

So intent was the submarine commander upon his prey, with one eye on the hospital ship and another on the horizon, watching for the patrol boats, which he knew would be sure to return, that he had even got his deck-gun to work, and was firing rapidly at the *Galicia*, when to his dismay he heard, just over his head, the whir-r-r-r-r of the aeroplane, as Dastral started his engine again.

"Mein Gott, was ist das?" he cried.

"Ach, Himmel, but we are lost!" came the cry from the gunners and the ober-lieutenant.

"Dachshunds!–you verdomt fools, turn the gun on the aeroplane!" yelled the irate commander, but he realised that he had lost the game.

Nearer and nearer came that dreaded enemy, with its angry buzz, till but a hundred feet above the broad, whale-like back of the submarine, for Dastral, having but the two twenty-pound bombs in his carrier, determined not to miss his chance.

"Be careful, Jock!" he shouted. "Drop it right on her conning-

tower. Take no risks."

"Right-o, old fellow!" Jock had replied, his hand on the bomb release. "She's giving us shrapnel, though. Look out!"

"Spit . . . Bang! Spit . . . Bang!" came the bursting shrapnel from the quick-firing gun on the deck of the submarine, and a shot hitting the left aileron of the warplane, just as the observer was releasing the first bomb, caused her to roll and bank so much that the bomb fell into the sea, just a few inches from the starboard beam of the boat.

"Great heavens, you've missed him!" shouted Dastral, as the bomb, which was fitted with a contact fuse, sank down harmlessly into the sea.

Jock bit his lips, which were white with anger at his failure, and placed his hand once more on the bomb release. It was his last bomb. If they failed this time they were done, for already they had lost several struts and wires, and the planes had been holed in a score of places.

Even Dastral's face was pale, though not with fear, as he jammed the rudder bar over with his feet, and using the joy-stick as well, came round swiftly once more, dropping down to within fifty feet of his enemy.

"Great Scott! She's preparing to submerge, Jock. For heaven's sake don't miss her this time!"

Jock did not reply, but taking true aim just as they were directly over the boat, he dropped his second and last bomb fairly and squarely on the conning-tower.

"Whis-s-s-h! Boom-m-m!" came the sound as the bomb descended swiftly and exploded right amidships, splitting the conning tower open, just as it was being closed ready for the boat to descend.

A blinding sheet of flame shot up into the sky, scorching both the pilot and the observer, and a crashing noise followed the explosion, as the submarine, her deck split open and rent in twain, opened out, then sank like a stone, carrying down with her the twenty-two men who manned her.

A few minutes afterwards the only trace of the pirates was an ever-extending patch of oil which floated on the surface of the water, punctured here and there by the air bubbles which forced their way through the patch.

So suddenly did she disappear from view that even the airmen, scorched and bruised and bleeding from slight shrapnel wounds, were amazed at the work of their hands. Dastral was the first to recover speech, however.

"Well done, Jock!" he cried. "Thus may all pirates perish who fire on the Red Cross flag."

The observer did not reply, however, for he had fallen forward in a dead faint, from sheer excitement and loss of blood; perhaps most of all from sheer fear of failure with his last bomb. And now his head was resting against the wind screen just in front of the cockpit.

"Jock! Jock! What's the matter?" Dastral called to him.

The observer made an effort to rouse himself, for he had only

momentarily lost consciousness. He lifted up his head, tugged at his leather helmet, and managed at last to pull it off.

"Great Scott! You're wounded!" exclaimed Dastral as he saw the blood streaming from his companion's face.

"It's all right now. I feel better, Dastral. Carry on! The petrol tank overhead here is leaking, and we're about run out. But I've sent a message to the destroyers on the wireless and here they come."

Dastral turned sharply, and looked in the direction which Jock had indicated by slightly raising his hand.

"Yes. Hurrah! Here they come!" he cried.

And indeed there was no mistaking that long trail of black smoke just a couple of miles away, nor the white trail of foam as the combers broke and fell away from the two snake-like boats, which were coming up full pelt, for they had been drawn to the spot by the sound of the firing even before they had picked up Jock's message.

Nor did they come a moment too soon, for the aeroplane was wounded as well as her crew. Her work was done, at any rate for the next few days, until she had been overhauled by the smart air-mechanics, fitters and riggers of the Royal Flying Corps. The engine was missing too, very badly, for the petrol tank was pierced in several places, and the supply had almost run out. The planes and struts were damaged and in parts shot away, so much so, that, as Dastral jammed over the controls and banked to bring her round, with her head towards the rapidly

approaching patrols, one of the wings collapsed, and she slithered down, slipping sideways into the sea, now only some thirty feet below her.

"Jump, Jock! Jump!" cried Dastral. And both the aviators, having managed to free themselves, leapt out as the singed and broken air-wasp lightly struck the waves.

Fortunately the life-saving jackets, which all the ferry pilots are compelled to wear when crossing the Channel, ensured their safety, once they managed to disentangle themselves from the wreckage of the 'plane.

"This way, Jock. Let us keep together. Here come the destroyers!" shouted the pilot. And the next instant, they heard a strong voice shout out–

"Hard-a-starboard there! Jam her over, man!"

And immediately after the same voice shouted to the man at the engine room telegraph–

"Full speed astern!"

Two minutes later both the aviators were safe on board the destroyer. A signal from her slender masthead caused the other boat to sweep round, pick up the wrecked warplane, which was already settling down, and to tow her into port.

So ended the adventure of the ferry-pilot and his companion. And next morning, after a good night's rest at the Hotel de l'Europe in Boulogne, a short message in a pink envelope, which was placed on the breakfast tray, informed the youthful and daring heroes that–

"His Majesty, King George the Fifth, desires to congratulate and to thank Lieutenants Dastral and Fisker, of the Royal Flying Corps, for, when on active service, their gallantry and courage in attacking and sinking the enemy submarine U41, and to confer upon them the COMPANIONSHIP OF THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER."

CHAPTER III
OVER THE GERMAN LINES

"WE must have been born under a lucky star, Jock, to win the D.S.O. as well as the thanks of the King, for that trifling little incident which occurred yesterday," said Dastral as they sat down to a substantial breakfast that morning, in the dainty little coffee-room which looked out on to the English Channel.

"It was a stroke of luck, anyhow, to encounter that U boat just when we did. We should have made a landfall in another five minutes, and then we should have missed her altogether," replied his companion, pausing for an instant in his attack on the coffee and hot rolls.

"And the hospital ship?" queried the pilot.

"Ah, the brutes! But we were one too many for them," replied Jock. "I had the time of my life during that short fight. I'd just love a scrap like that every day. Almost wish I'd joined the R.N.A.S. now. What say you, old fellow? Besides, the odds were all on our side. The Hun never so much as suspected our presence, else he wouldn't have shown himself as he did."

"Just wait a few days, Jock, till we join our fellows down at the Squadron, and you'll have all the excitement you want."

"You mean?" went on the observer, looking up into the pilot's face as he helped himself to another portion of grilled ham and

fried eggs.

"I mean," Dastral continued, without waiting for Jock to finish his sentence, "I mean, wait till we get orders from the new Squadron Commander to go over the German lines. The odds will not be so much in our favour."

"H'm! I wonder what it's like to be over there with the shrapnel bursting all around you, and miles and miles of trenches below you, with the 'Archies' spitting at you all the time with continuous bursts of fire, and the very heavens full of air-pockets."

"And half a dozen Fokkers coming up out of the horizon to scuttle you, and give you a spinning nose-dive of ten thousand feet into No Man's land, with your petrol tank blazing, and your engine missing, eh? Go on, you veritable misanthrope!" and here both the young heroes burst into a fit of laughter at the woeful, nerve-shattering picture which they had both been drawing.

Thus they continued to talk about the future which lay immediately before them. Yet all these things they were to see, and much more, ere they were many months older. They were full of life and vigour, and in action they were to prove daring and resourceful; yet they were wise in this, that they did not under-estimate either the task that lay before them, or the enemy they were to meet.

Their chief concern for the present, however, was centred on the broken aeroplane, with which they had started from England on the previous day for their first flight overseas. "I wonder what's become of the hornet," said Dastral, a few moments later,

as they sat by the fireside, and settled down to a smoke.

"We shall hear shortly, as you have wired to the O.C. reporting the incident. Besides, the destroyer is sure to have brought her in, even if she is badly damaged."

Shortly after this the telephone bell in the corridor rang. A maid appeared, and after a very pretty French curtsey, said:–

"Monsieur le Commandant Dastral, s'il vous plait?"

"Ah, oui, Mademoiselle, qu'est-ce que vous voulez?" asked Dastral, rising to his feet, and returning the pretty maid's curtsey.

"C'est pour vous, ce message téléphonique."

"Merci, mam'selle," replied Dastral, as he hastened to the telephone box.

"Hullo! Who is that?" asked a voice some twenty or thirty miles away.

"Lieutenant Dastral, of the Flying Corps. Who is that, please?"

"Major Bulford, Squadron Commander, speaking from the aerodrome at St. Champau."

"Yes, sir!" replied Dastral smartly, springing unconsciously to attention, although the voice was so far away from him.

"Good-morning, Dastral. Congratulations, my boy. I have heard all about your adventures yesterday from my Adjutant. You've started well! You're just the man we're wanting here. We're having warm work with the Boches this week. You're a lucky dog to run into a German submarine on your first trip over."

"Oh, it was my observer, sir. He spotted the blamed thing, and bombed her. It was as easy as winking. Just a stroke of luck, sir, that's all."

"Well, I hope your luck 'll keep in. We shall be glad to see you as soon as you can come over. Are you both all right?"

"Yes, sir. Quite all right, 'cept for a slight chill through being in the water for a few minutes."

"Well, better stay where you are a couple of days if you are comfortable, and then come on here."

"Thank you, sir. Yes, we're quite comfortable here, and we'll report at the aerodrome in a couple of days."

"Right. Good-bye. Oh, I say! Are you there?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was going to tell you that the machine arrived here about an hour ago. It's some 'bus' and I like the look of her, except that she's badly smashed, and will be in the hands of the riggers and mechanics for four or five days before she can be used again."

"Oh, that's not so bad. I feared she would be useless after the crash she got, sir. How did you get her there so quickly?"

"Oh, we received word from the harbourmaster that she had been brought in by a destroyer, and we immediately sent down a couple of tenders with trailers and brought her on here this morning. Good-bye. The fellows here are all anxious to meet you."

"Good-bye, sir."

As soon as he had rung off Dastral rushed back into the room

to tell Jock all about his chat with the O.C. of the Squadron at St. Champau, and especially about the two days' extra leave.

"Good!" ejaculated his friend. "Seems a decent sort of chap, eh?"

"Rather a sport, I should say, old man."

"Capital. That little affair of ours yesterday seems to have done us no harm. It'll probably give us a good entree into the new mess. Hope they're all decent fellows there."

So they spent half the morning resting after their exciting adventures of the previous day, and reading the papers, some of which gave censored accounts of the event. The two days passed all too quickly, and on the third morning they were both awakened just before dawn by the rep-r-r-r of a motor bicycle, which pulled up sharply outside the hotel.

It was "Brat" the despatch rider of the – Squadron, who had come post haste from Major Bulford, with an urgent message which ran as follows:–

> "To Lieutenant Dastral, D.S.O.,"
> Hotel de l'Europe,
> "Boulogne-sur-Mer.
> "Be prepared to join Squadron immediately.
> Tender will call for you within an hour."
>
> *JOHN BULFORD,*
> *Major."*

Two hours later both the young officers were on their way to St. Champau, where they arrived before noon.

They received a warm welcome at the mess and were congratulated upon their recent adventure. They soon found that plenty of work and adventure awaited them on the morrow. The incessant roar of the British artillery, which was carrying out an intense bombardment of the whole front, amazed and bewildered them, for preparations were already in progress for the Somme "push."

Away to the eastward, the line of battle was clearly demarked. Shells were bursting in mid-air, and during the afternoon a huge mine was exploded under the enemy's trenches, which shook the earth for twenty miles around, and hurled thousands of tons of timber, rocks, and clay into the air, making a crater of huge diameter, towards which the British advanced and later in the day captured and consolidated the position.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, a flight of aeroplanes, which had been over the German lines, returned. Two of them had been badly hit and one of the observers had been seriously wounded. They reported having encountered several flights of enemy 'planes, which, however, had avoided them and made off eastward. They also reported some unusual activity behind the enemy's lines, but, the weather having become dull, and the sky overcast, they were unable to make a full reconnaissance.

"H'm. There must be a further reconnaissance at dawn," the O.C. had remarked, after receiving their report. Then, turning to Dastral, he said:

"Lieutenant Dastral."

"Yes, sir," replied the young pilot, advancing towards his superior officer, and saluting smartly.

"The mechanics and riggers have been working day and night on your new machine since we received it. They will continue the work through the night, and I want you to supervise it, so that it will be ready before to-morrow. I want you to use it as soon as possible. We have lost so many of our machines lately over there," and here the O.C. made a gesture with his right hand towards that line of fire and blood, where the British and French troops held back the enemy's hordes.

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure, sir," replied the intrepid youth, glowing with pride at the thought that he was to be made use of so quickly.

"And–er–I want you to carefully study the map of the section in which we are working. It will be absolutely necessary for you to know every road, hamlet and village marked on that map, before you go over. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get to work at once, my dear fellow. I have great hopes of you, and if you continue as you have begun, I can promise you it will not be long before you are made a Flight-Commander."

Dastral blushed deeply at this compliment, for he was but a boy in years, despite his courage and resource. Leaving the Commander's presence, he went direct to the shed, where he found Jock, who was not only a brilliant observer but a first-rate mechanic, and already had the work in hand, having been drawn

there by his affection for the filmy thing that had already brought them across the seas, and had served them so well during at least one great adventure.

"Well, how is she, Jock?" were his first words.

"Ripping!" replied the observer, handling the delicate creature as though she were a lady. "I've already been round her. The engine and propellor are quite sound now. The new petrol tank and feed are already fitted, and in another couple of hours she'll be as perfect as when she left England."

"Good!" exclaimed Dastral, who had the greatest confidence in the lad's judgment in these matters, and was prepared to back him against any expert in aerodynamics, or the mechanism of any aeroplane in existence.

"What say you to a trip in her this evening? There'll be plenty of time before dusk, old fellow."

"Yes, I'm quite agreed, even if it's only a joy-ride to try her, for to-morrow we go over there," said the pilot, flinging away the stump of his cigar, and jerking his thumb in the direction of his shoulder.

"Over where?" asked Jock, straightening himself from the stooping position he had assumed, to examine the baffle-plates on the propeller.

"Over the German lines," came the reply.

"Really! You mean it, and so soon?"

"Yes, to-morrow at dawn we go over on a reconnaissance; C.O.'s orders."

"Good!" exclaimed the observer, throwing down a spanner which he still held in his hand.

"And here's a map of the section in front of our lines. We must spend the evening over it."

So that evening, after the machine had been got quite ready for her next flight, they spent four hours over the map, scaling it out, and committing to memory the names of villages, hamlets, rivers, canals, roads and railway lines, so that when they retired to bed, the whole of the map was actually photographed upon their minds.

Morning came at length, and at the first whisper of dawn, having received their detailed orders from the Squadron-Commander, four or five aeroplanes were wheeled out on to the aerodrome, then taxied off quickly and disappeared in the dark. The last of the flight was the hornet, with Dastral and Jock starting on their first real venture over the enemy's lines.

After climbing rapidly, and circling round the aerodrome once or twice, the machines made off, each to reconnoitre the section of the line allotted to it.

The hornet carried two Lewis guns, with plenty of ammunition, for when an aerial patrol sets out on a flight, one never knows what duels he may have to engage in before he returns. The hornet had this advantage over the other machines, which were of an older pattern: she had a higher speed, was a better climber, and with her improved controls she could manoeuvre more quickly than any other machine yet made.

"Gee whiz!" cried Jock down the speaking tube, which ended close to the pilot's ear, "but she's climbing."

"What is it?" yelled back the pilot, half turning his head so that his mouth came near to the end of the tube.

"Three thousand feet," came the answer.

"Good! Then we'll make a bee-line and cross the trenches. Look out for 'Archie'!"

The dawn had broken by now, and away in the east the gloom was lifting, but down below it was still wrapped in mist and darkness. It was the hour of standing-to. Down below thousands of eyes would be straining through the obscurity to find that speck in the heavens whence came that whir-r-ring sound.

But upward and onward went the hornet With a stern, strong beat of power in her twelve-cylindered engine. Nearer and nearer she came to that long line which stretched from the sand-dunes of Belgium away to Switzerland. The observer was already keenly surveying the landscape through his glasses as the light broadened, and the countryside revealed itself.

A silvery streak lay beneath them; it was the River Ancre. Now a broad white patch of roadway came into view. It was the main road from Albert to Bapaume. As they came out of a bank of rolling mist and fog, a few red roofs and a church tower next came into view, standing just where four roads met.

"Contalmaison?" queried Dastral, and Jock, after a brief reference to his waterproof map, called back:

"Yes, and Bazentin on the left."

They were now almost over the trenches, and far beneath they could discern hundreds of tiny points of fires.

"What are they?" asked the pilot again, and the observer who had been scanning those red sparks for a couple of minutes replied,

"Fires in the British trenches. Men cooking their morning rations. Can't you smell the bacon?"

Dastral laughed and sniffed the keen morning air, as though in reality he could make out the fragrant aroma of the morning dish, about which those cold, wet, and shivering heroes of the trenches were standing, ankle-deep in mud and clay.

"The poor devils!" added the pilot, altering his controls slightly, and wheeling round to the south to pick up the enemy's lines more clearly at a point where they made a sharp curve.

They could now clearly see both the British and the German trenches. Three long, scarred and ragged lines of brown earth showed clearly where the enemy's front-line, reserve and support trenches stood. Long, twisting lines of similar demarcation showed where the communication trenches ran.

Now they were over No Man's land, sailing along serenely, and the artillery down below had already opened the morning concert on both fronts, when–

"Biff, puff–!" came a time-fuse shrapnel and burst scarcely a hundred feet in front of the machine. Then another and another as the "Archies" below spotted the hornet, and tried to give her a packet.

Suddenly they were in a cloud of yellow smoke and half-poisonous fumes, which made them gasp and sputter. Then, owing to the bursting of the shells and the heavy concussions they found themselves in a succession of air-pockets.

"Look out, Jock!" cried Dastral, as the machine rocked and swayed, banking over once or twice as though she had been hit.

For several minutes they ran the gauntlet of this heavy fire from the German A.A. guns, but the terrific speed at which they were travelling–now nearly one hundred and twenty miles per hour–soon carried them beyond the range of the enemy's guns.

Then it was that the day's work really began. Their orders were to reconnoitre behind the enemy's lines and to report by wireless code any occurrence, such as the threat of a massed attack by infantry, the moving of transport columns, or the locating of heavy artillery. It was also necessary, above all, to watch the skies for the appearance of hostile aircraft.

The other 'planes which started with the hornet that morning are seen low down on the horizon, to the north and the south. They also are searching all the terrain for any signs of activity on the part of the Boche.

Spurts of flame, like jets of fire, are seen in many places. These are the German fieldguns firing upon the British trenches. The observer does not make any particular note of these; he is out for bigger game.

Suddenly, the observer steadies his glasses, resting his arm for a moment on the side of the fuselage. The loop line of the

Combles-Ginchy railway is just ahead of them and slightly on their right. Though it is very early yet, Jock notices that the line about Ginchy is crowded with traffic.

"Ahoy there, Dastral!" he calls down the speaking tube.

"Yes," comes back the laconic answer.

"Railway line blocked with traffic. Troops detraining, I think. Put her over a bit."

"Right-o!"

Dastral jams over the rudder bar with his foot and, responding to her huge tail rudder the hornet comes round in a swift circle, banking a little as the joy-stick is also put over. Then Jock takes another view, exclaiming, as he does so,

"Yes, by Jove, there must be a whole division of them. Here goes!"

And dropping the glasses into the pocket prepared for them, he rapidly uncoils the long pendant wire, and begins to tap the keys of his instrument.

"Caught them on the nap, Jock, eh? Stroke of luck. Case of the early bird. Tell the heavies to give 'em hell, old man," shouted Dastral, but the conversation was carried away into the morning breeze, for jock was already sending the message which would shortly bring the thunder.

"Zip-zip-zip, zur-r-r-r, zip!" went the brief coded message, back over Longueval and Ginchy; over Contalmaison and the trenches to where the British heavy batteries were waiting.

Behind the Ancre, in a little dug-out, an expert operator

catches up the message. He has been waiting for it impatiently since dawn. The brief tapping which his receiver picks up, tells him exactly the spot on the terrain behind the enemy's lines where the thunder is needed. The whole map is scaled out into tiny sections and sub-sections, each with a number or letter to indicate the point where the concentrated fire is needed.

"Quick!" cries the operator to the little exchange. "Give me H.Q. Heavy Batteries." Then as the reply comes through he gives:

"A-2-3. Concentrated fire!"

Within four minutes, while the hornet still circles over the luckless Germans, now alive to their danger and rushing over each other in their haste to finish the detrainment of the column, flashes of fire are seen away to the west, and through the air comes a heavy explosive shell. It is followed by another and yet another. As they explode, the observer sees the earth blotted out from view for a few seconds. He notes how near the first shots fall to the target. Then he taps his keys once more.

"Zur, zip-zip!" cries the machine, and the next shell falls into the midst of the column, destroying nearly a whole train. And so for another ten minutes the airmen remain, altering the range until at least a dozen direct hits are scored, and the damage done to the railway, the trains, and the division or so of men is tremendous.

Very quickly, however, the men are scattered and placed out of danger, hiding in the woods, and under hedges and trees where they cannot be seen.

The Germans, aware of that dangerous pest overhead, have rushed up anti-aircraft guns to deal with it, and have also telephoned to the nearest aerodromes for their beloved Fokkers. So shortly after, having done as much damage as possible in a short space of time, the hornet moves off to reconnoitre further afield.

"Watch for their verdomt Fokkers, Jock," cries the pilot. "They may appear at any minute. Himmelman himself may be in the neighbourhood."

"Himmelman?" queries Jock, more to himself than to his comrade, as he looks round uneasily, for on the previous day he had heard some tall tales of the doings of this crack German flyer.

Then as they move off and open out the engine to gain speed, Jock sweeps the horizon for a sight of enemy 'planes, for a strange curiosity grips him at the thought of Himmelman, and he wonders half aloud whether it will ever be his fate to meet this renowned airman, who was said to have brought down more machines than any other man living.

But there is little time for soliloquy in the life of an airman in war time. He must ever be on the *qui vive*. And so for another half an hour, seeing no enemy 'planes to engage and remembering that he is out first of all for a reconnaissance, he watches the ground more and more closely.

They have moved south some distance by this time, and have crossed the railway near Cléry. Below them they see the narrow

waters of the Somme, glistening in the sunshine, for by now the sun is up, and there is the promise of a brilliant day. Jock is keenly watching the white road that leads from Peronne to Albert.

"Ah! Ah!" He gasps. "What is that dark object that breaks the white, sunlit road, as though some dark shadow has fallen across it?"

He points it out to the pilot, with a few gestures, and Dastral spirals round, and makes off towards the place at a rapid rate.

As they approach the spot Jock scrutinises it yet more closely, for it looks suspicious. Then suddenly putting aside his glasses once more, he calls out,

"Enemy column on the march!"

"The deuce it is?" queries the pilot.

"Yes, ammunition column, I think, but we'll soon find out."

Then the tapping begins again, and the message is flung across the battle-ground and is picked up. With a swift mental calculation the observer has reckoned up when the head of the column will reach a certain point in the road, where a bridge carries the road over a tributary of the Somme.

"Swis-s-s-h! Boom-m-m-m!" comes the first heavy fifteen-inch shell.

It is a little short and another message on the keys is necessary.

This time the shell falls plump right into the middle of the column, for so accurately are the guns trained, that, though they cannot see the object they are firing at, if the message sent only

gives the exact position on the map, a direct hit is soon gained.

The consternation of the Germans can be better imagined than described. Thinking themselves in comparative security so far behind the lines, a huge shell without the slightest warning explodes near by, and the next lands clean in the middle of the column.

The object hit was a motor lorry conveying ammunition up to the guns. The first explosion is followed by another, more terrific than the first, for a couple of hundred shells are exploded, and when the smoke and dust have cleared away the observer and his pilot look down, and there is a huge gap in the column, for two of the lorries are blazing, several have been overturned, and one has disappeared entirely from view.

Not only so but the road is blocked for the next six or seven hours for all traffic, and not only will guns go short of ammunition but more than one battalion of the German army will go short of food for the next twenty-four hours.

For half an hour the guns continue to shell the rest of the column, which by that time has managed to get the undamaged motors away, by dashing blindly down any side turning that leads to anywhere, out of that terrible inferno.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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