Le Queux William

The Zeppelin Destroyer: Being Some Chapters of Secret History

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Chapter One
Over a "Gasper."

"To-morrow? To-morrow, my dear Claude! Why, there may not be a to-morrow for you – or for me, when it comes to that – eh?"

"Yes. You're quite right, old son," was my cheerful reply. "I'm quite aware that these experiments are confoundedly dangerous – and, besides, there are nasty wind-pockets about just now. I got into a deadly one yesterday afternoon, just across the line at Mill Hill."

"I saw you," replied my friend Teddy Ashton, a fellow-aviator and chum at Hendon. "It gave me a nasty moment. You had engine-trouble at the same time."

"Yes," I replied. "I was up over eight thousand feet when, without a second's warning, I found myself in a pocket spinning over. Phew! If ever I nearly came to grief, it was at that moment!"

"I was on the lawn, having tea with Betty, and we were watching you. I quite expected to see you come plumb down," Teddy said. "You righted your old bus splendidly."

"She'll have to have a new dope, I think," was my reply, endeavouring to turn the conversation into another channel, for I did not care to discuss my narrow escape from death over the mishap which was certainly my own fault.

I was standing with Teddy in one of the long work-sheds of the Barwick Aeroplane Factory at Hendon on that bright morning early in October, 1915. The wind was light, the barometer high, and both of us had been up, as we had been testing our monoplanes.

As he stood leaning against a half-finished machine idly smoking a "gasper" – a cigarette in the airman jargon – he presented a fine picture of the clean-limbed young Englishman in his wind-proof aviation suit, with leather cap and ear-pieces, while his goggles had been pushed upon his brow.

Both of us, "as quirks," had learned to fly at the same school at Brooklands before the outbreak of war, and both of us were enthusiastic airmen.

In introducing myself to the reader of this chronicle of fact I suppose I ought – at the risk of using the first person singular a little too much – to explain that I, Claude Munro, aged twenty-five, am son of Sir Reginald Munro, a man well-known as a physician, a prominent prescriber of pills and powders in Wimpole Street.

On coming down from Cambridge I had read for the bar a short time, but finding that my inclination was more in the direction of electricity and mechanics, my indulgent father allowed me to take a course of study at a Wireless School, where I was not long in learning most of the recent discoveries in the field of radio-telegraphy.

One Saturday afternoon, about two years before, my father had taken me in his car to Hendon to see the passenger-flights at two guineas a head, and the excellent Verrier had taken me up with him. Immediately I became "bitten" with aviation, and instantly decided to adopt it as a profession.

At first the governor – as all governors do – set his face firmly against such a risky business, but at last I persuaded him to plank down the fees, and thereupon I began a course of tuition in flying, with the result that I now owned my own big monoplane upon which I was conducting certain important experiments, in association with Teddy Ashton.

"See that in the paper this morning about the new German Fokker monoplane?" I asked him as we both smoked and rested, our machines standing side by side outside.

"Of course, my dear old Claude," was his reply.

"It would be one of the jokes of the war if it wasn't such a grim jest. Remember what they said recently in Parliament – that we held the supremacy of the air, and that it is maintained."

"All humbug," I declared bluntly. "Sad though it is to admit it."

"Of course it is!" cried Teddy very emphatically.

"The fact is that the public haven't yet realised that the joke is against our Government 'experts' who now see all their science set at nought by a rule-of-the-thumb Dutchman who, by the simple process of putting a big engine into a copy of an obsolete French monoplane, has given his own country's chief enemy the freedom of the air."

I agreed with him; and his words, I confess, set me thinking. The papers had been full of the Fokker aeroplane, of its great superiority over anything we possessed, and of it as a real peril to our pilots in Flanders.

"The real fact is," declared Teddy, in the intervals of a deal of hammering, "that there's nothing extraordinary about the Fokker except that it is built sensibly for a definite job and does it, while our own 'experts' have tangled themselves and the British aircraft industry in a web of pseudo-science and political scheming which has resulted in our lack of the proper machines and engines to fight the Zeppelins."

"Yes," I answered with a sigh. "You're quite right, Teddy. But something *must* be done. We must find some means by which to fight the enemy's dirigibles. We have a few good aeroplanes, I admit, but, as you say, those are not the product of the Government factories, but have been produced by private firms. Why? Because airmen have been so badly let down by their experts."

At that moment a shadow was cast before the door of the shed,

and a bright musical feminine voice cried:

"Hulloa, Claude! I followed you hard, right from Hertford."

It was Roseye – "Rosie" of the aerodrome! Roseye Lethmere, daughter of Sir Herbert Lethmere, was my own well-beloved, whom I had taught to fly, and who was at that moment perhaps the most notable airwoman in England.

"Really," I exclaimed, as I advanced to meet her.

"Why, I hadn't any idea you were here. Nobody told me."

"Miss Lethmere is always elusive," Teddy laughed, bowing to her. "Have you been up on your own bus, or on Eastwell's?"

"On Mr Eastwell's. My engine did not run well, so Barnes, his mechanic, lent me his machine," was her reply. Then, turning to me, she said: "I went up only five minutes after you. I wonder you didn't look back when you banked over the railway line at Wheathampstead. I was just behind you then, though I could not overtake you, as my engine seemed a little sluggish."

"That doesn't occur very often in Eastwell's bus," remarked Teddy. "I flew it last Thursday, and found the 150 Gnome ran perfectly."

"Well, Claude, you outdistanced me altogether," declared my well-beloved. "From Hertford, with the wind behind you, you absolutely shot back. I thought that Mr Eastwell's machine would outmatch yours, but, though I put every ounce into the engine, I was hopelessly out of it. It hadn't been tuned up well."

"That's curious, Roseye," I replied. "I had no idea that my bus was any match for his! I thought that his Mertonville machine

was much faster than mine – or than yours as a matter of fact."

"To-day mine is out of the running," she laughed. To you, my reader, I suppose I ought to describe my own beloved Roseye. Well, I am not good at describing women. As the only son of a blunt, white-haired physician who having made expert study of all the thousand-and-one ailments of the eternal feminine, including that affection called "nerves" – mostly the result of the drug habit, I had heard, from my youth upwards, many disparaging remarks upon the follies and the unbalance of the mind of the gentler sex.

This, however, did not prevent me from loving Roseye Lethmere, daughter of Sir Herbert, who had come into my life quite unexpectedly a year ago.

As she stood there chatting with us, attired in her airwoman's clothes, her appearance was certainly workwomanlike. She was dressed in a wool-lined leather coat, and overall trousers, with a knitted Balaclava helmet, and over that again a leather skull-cap, the whole tied down tightly beneath the chin. A huge khaki woollen muffler was around her throat, while a pair of unsightly goggles hanging around her neck completed the picture. She had followed my advice, I noted, and tied her muffler very securely around her chin.

How very different she looked at that moment to when I took her – as I so frequently did – to a play, and afterwards to supper at the Carlton, the Savoy, or Ciro's. She was a girl who, on the outbreak of war, had decided to play her part in the national

crisis, and she certainly had done so.

Three times had she flown across the Channel with me, and three times had we returned in safety to Hendon.

Indeed, only a week before, she had flown by herself on a British-built Duperdussin with 100 horse-power Anzani engines from Brooklands across to France, descending a mile outside Abbeville. She had had lunch at the old Tête de Boeuf hotel in that town, and returned, landing safely at Hendon – a feat that no woman had ever before accomplished.

Roseye Lethmere certainly possessed a character that was all her own.

In her ordinary costume, as a London girl, she was inexpressibly dainty and extremely well dressed. Her curiously soft blue eyes, almost child-like in their purity of expression, were admired everywhere. Whenever, however, her picture appeared in the papers it was always in her flying costume.

Most women, when they take up any outdoor exercise, be it hunting, golfing, strenuous tennis, or sport of any kind, usually acquire a certain indescribable hardness of feature, a sign by which, when they sit in the stalls of a theatre, the mere man at once knows them.

But the beauty of Miss Rosie – as she was known at Hendon – in spite of her many exciting and perilous exploits in the air, was still soft and sweet, as it should be with any fresh healthy girl of twenty-two.

The workmen started hammering again, fitting a new

propeller to a machine in course of hurried completion for the front, so we all three went outside, where our own machines stood close together.

Theed, my mechanic – who had been the governor's chauffeur before I took up flying – was busily testing my engine, and I could hear it missing a little.

"Hulloa!" I cried, looking up at a big monoplane at that moment passing over us. "Why, Eastwell's up in Thorold's new bus!"

"Yes," answered Roseye. "I passed quite close to him behind St. Albans."

The October morning was bright and sunny, with a blue, cloudless sky, just the morning for trial flights and stunts, and, in consequence, two pupils were out on the aerodrome with their instructors, preparing for their lesson.

Roseye noticed this, and smiled across at me. She remembered, probably, how carefully I used to strap her into the seat, and how, more than once, she had gasped when we made a nose-dive, or volplaned for an undesired landing. Yet, even in those days, she had betrayed no fear in the air for, apparently, she reposed entire faith in my judgment and my capabilities at the joy-stick.

We stood watching Eastwell as he banked first on one side, then on the other, until at last he made a graceful tour of the aerodrome and, swooping down suddenly, landed quite close to us.

"Morning!" he cried cheerily, as he slowly unstrapped himself and climbed out of his seat. "Morning, Miss Lethmere," he added, saluting. "Well, how does my bus go? You had a little engine-trouble, hadn't you?"

"Yes. I couldn't overtake Mr Munro," she replied, laughing. "Were you watching me?"

"Yes. I've just come back from Cambridge. I left here this morning as soon as it was light – " Eastwell, in his aviator's leather jacket, fur helmet and goggles, presented a tall, gaunt, rather uncouth figure. Yet, in his ordinary clothes, he was something of a dandy, with light brown hair, a carefully-trained moustache, and a pair of shrewd grey eyes.

Roseye had been acquainted with him for over two years, and it was she who had first introduced us.

They had met at Wiesbaden, where her father, Sir Herbert, had been taking his annual "cure." Eastwell had been at the Kaiserhof Hotel where they had also been staying and, being a young Englishman of means and leisure, an acquaintanceship had sprung up between them.

Lionel Eastwell was a great lover of music, and for that reason had been at Wiesbaden, where, in the Kursaal, the programme in the pre-war days was always excellent.

On their return to London Eastwell called at Cadogan Gardens, and Sir Herbert had then ascertained that the pleasant young man – who for two years had taken such a great interest in aviation – was possessed of a very comfortable income, was a

member of the aero club, and lived in a very snug set of chambers half-way up Albemarle Street.

At the Royal Automobile Club he was also a well-known figure in the select circle of rather go-ahead airmen who made that institution their nightly rendezvous.

As a result of hearing Lionel Eastwell speak of the pleasures and exhilaration of the air, and after watching his flights at Hendon, Roseye had at last determined to seek the new sensation of aerial navigation, and in taking her lessons she and I had met.

Airmen and airwomen form a very select coterie practically unknown to the world outside the aerodrome. They fly; they risk their lives; they make their daily experiments with their new engines, new wings, new airscrews, new strainers, new magnetos, and all sorts of newly-invented etceteras, all the time risking their lives in a bad nose-dive, or with a buckled wing.

Our quartette, all of us enthusiasts, and all holding our own views regarding the British supremacy of aerial navigation in the war, stood chatting for ten minutes, or more, until turning to Roseye, I said:

"Well, I'm going over to see what Theed is up to." Then, together, we left Eastwell to go back to his own machine.

Yet, in that second, a strange thing occurred. Perhaps I may have been unduly suspicious – if so, I regret it and offer apology – but I felt certain somehow that I saw in Roseye's face a look of displeasure that I should have taken her from the man whose sudden appearance had caused her countenance to brighten.

And, at the same time, as I glanced surreptitiously at Lionel Eastwell, while in the act of offering him a “gasper” from my case, I most certainly saw a strange and distinctly sinister expression – one that caused me through the next hour to reflect very deeply, and ponder over its cause.

Chapter Two
The Murder-Machines

An hour later I made another flight in order to try my new gyroscopic stabiliser, which – for the benefit of those unversed in aerial navigation – I may say is an invention which incorporates a horizontal reference plane of accuracy and integrity to which all angles can be referred.

I flew across to the Thames, and followed the winding silvery streak with dotted blotches of houses up to Windsor and back, finding that the invention rendered my machine a platform which was not only steady, but was also held in constant relation to the horizontal.

That morning was ideal for flying and, on my return, I was not surprised to find that both Teddy Ashton and Roseye were up again. Indeed, as I brought my machine to earth I saw Roseye flying at a great height coming in from the south.

Two or three of the school-buses were up, circling the aerodrome, including an unwieldy one that always reminded us of poor Cody's "cathedral."

As soon as I landed, Eastwell came across again, eager to inquire how the new gyroscope arrangement had worked, for, like myself, he was a great enthusiast over all new notions, however wild they might be. Indeed, I believe he had tried every

newfangled idea produced during the past couple of years.

I having pronounced it good, he begged me to let him try it, and a few moments later he was in the pilot's seat. Then after Theed had spun the propeller, our friend rose quickly, and went out to meet my well-beloved on her return.

Roseye, seeing my bus, thought I was flying it, but as she circled gracefully down she realised at last that it was Eastwell, and both machines, after making several fine circuits of the aerodrome, came to earth almost at the same moment.

I had been watching Roseye. For a woman, she was certainly a most intrepid flyer. Crossing to her, I glanced at her self-registering altimeter and saw that she had been up over eight thousand feet.

"I've been across to Dorking," she laughed gaily, as she sprang out of her seat, raised her goggles and pulled off her heavy leather gloves. "I followed the railway from Dorking along to Guildford and met two men up from Farnborough. At Guildford I kept over the South Western line to Surbiton, and then steered back by compass."

She also inquired how my stabiliser had worked, and I told her that Lionel had been trying it.

Later, Eastwell was full of most glowing praise of the new invention, after which I put my machine back into the hangar and, taking Roseye with me in my two-seater, deposited her at home in Cadogan Gardens in time for lunch.

Then, as was my habit, I went on to the Royal Automobile

Club in Pall Mall, and, after my meal, sat in the window of the big smoking-room chatting with three of the boys – airmen all of them.

George Selwyn, a well-known expert on aircraft and editor of an aircraft journal, had been discussing an article in that morning's paper on the future of the airship.

"I contend," he said firmly, "that big airships are quite as necessary to us as they are to Germany. We should have ships of the Zeppelin and Schutte-Lanz class. The value of big airships as weapons of defence cannot be under-estimated. If we had big airships it is certain that Zeppelin raids – more of which are expected, it seems – would not be unopposed, and, further, we should be able to retaliate. We've got the men, but we haven't got the airships – worse luck! The Invisible Hand of Germany has deceived us finely!"

"That's so," I chimed in. "The Germans can always soothe their own people by saying that, however dear food is and all that, yet they can't be strafed from above – as we unfortunately are."

"I quite agree," declared Charlie Digby, a well-known pilot, and holder of a height-record. A tall, clean-shaven, clean-limbed fellow he was lying back in the deep leather armchair with his coffee at his side. "But is it not equally true that, if we had aeroplanes of the right construction and enough of them, we could give the night-raiders in Zeppelins a very uncomfortable time?"

"Quite so. I'm all in favour of suitable aeroplanes," Selwyn

admitted. “We must upset this Zeppelin menace by some means or other. Here we are – the greatest and most powerful nation the world has ever seen, worried three times a month by the threat of these German gas-bags! It is quite possible to obtain such aeroplanes as would enable us to fight the Zepps. As somebody wrote in the paper the other day regarding the future range of the naval big guns, it is useless to send up half-trained quirks on soggy seaplanes accompanied by still less trained spotting officers equipped with short-range wireless which cannot receive. The gun-spotter in a Fleet action should be a fully trained and experienced gunnery-Jack, seated in a comfortable observation-car where charts and navigating instruments can be used with accuracy. Therefore, if we can’t get the proper aeroplanes, we must have airships for the purpose, as they are at present the only apparent vehicle for scientific gunnery in a Fleet action.”

With this we all agreed.

“Another point,” I said, “was advanced by a clever writer in the *Aeroplane* the other day. It was pointed out that in the matter of fighting Zeppelins, however good aeroplane patrols may be, they must depend on their eyes to find enemy airships. One may silence engines, but one cannot silence air, and, though one may shut off and glide slowly, yet there will always be enough whistling of wind round wires and struts to wash out any noise of airship engines, gears, and propellers, unless they are very close indeed. An airship, on the other hand, can shut off and float.

There may be some creaking of the girders, and stays, but there will be no continuous whistling. Therefore an airship makes a perfect listening-post for enemy aircraft of all kinds."

"I'm quite sure of that," declared Charlie Digby from the depths of his chair. "If we are to win the war we must fight the Zeppelin. We want a real good man at the head of affairs and we should allow him a free hand, and put a stop to the endless committees and conferences and confabulations which have been the curse of this country in every department since war began – and before. Let that man have the advice of all the specialists he may require, and let him encourage people with ideas to offer their advice, instead of turning them down, as is the custom of most people in commanding positions."

Those same sentiments I had read in one of the papers that very day.

I said nothing more. It was time for me to be off, so I rose and left, having an appointment with Teddy Ashton.

As I passed through the big hall of the club I reflected how true were Digby's words. If we were to win the war we must fight the Zeppelins effectively.

But how?

That same question had occupied the minds of both Teddy and myself for many months, long indeed before the first Zeppelin had crossed the North Sea. Both of us had realised the deadly peril of those huge murder-machines against which we would be utterly powerless.

During the first year of war the public had laughed at the idea of Zeppelins coming over to drop bombs on undefended towns, or making an air raid upon London. The popular reply to anyone who ventured to express fear of such a thing as had been openly threatened in the German Press was: "Bah! they haven't come yet!"

But at last they had come, and they had dropped bombs upon inoffensive citizens. There were some writers already crying, "Never mind the Zeppelins!" In the sluggish apathy which refused to worry as to the state of our air-defences they discovered a sort of heroism! "Surely," they exclaimed, "civilians, including women and children, ought to be really glad and proud to share the risks of their sons or brothers in the trenches."

A poor argument surely! The unarmed people of London and the provinces, when summoned to confront the hail of fire and death, had showed an imperturbable coolness worthy to compare with the valour of the soldiers in the field. On that point, testimony was unanimous. The people had been splendid. But they expected something more than passive heroism. It was so very easy to shut one's eyes to the ghastly record of suffering a hundred miles off, easy, as somebody had said, to doze under the hillside with Simple, Sloth and Presumption.

Long ago I had agreed with Teddy that some means must be found to fight effectively the German airships now that anti-aircraft guns had proved unreliable for inflicting much damage,

except in a haphazard way. In conjunction, therefore, we had been actively conducting certain secret experiments in order to devise some plan which might successfully combat the terror of the night.

Zeppelins had flown over the coast towns and hurled bombs upon its defenceless inhabitants. Each raid had been more and more audacious in its range, and in its general scheme. London and the cities of the Midlands had been, more than once in sight of the enemy's airships. Yet a certain section of the Press were still pooh-poohing the real significance of the attempt to demoralise us at home.

Out in St. James's Square – on the cab-rank which the Club had taken for its own – I jumped into my car and drove away down to Gunnersbury, beyond Chiswick, where, in a market-garden, I rented a long shed of corrugated iron, a place wherein, with Teddy, I conducted the experiments which we were making into the scientific and only way by which Zeppelins could be destroyed.

While the world had been wondering, we had worked, and in our work Roseye constantly assisted us. It was hard and secret work, entailing long and patient study, many experiments, and sometimes flights necessitating much personal risk.

Failures? Oh! yes, we had many! Our failures were, indeed, of daily occurrence. More than once, when we thought ourselves within an ace of success, we found that we were faced with the usual failure.

Many, alas! were the disappointments. Yet we all three had one goal in view, keeping it ever before us – the fighting of the Zeppelin.

Little did we dream of the strange, dramatic events which were to result from our secret scientific investigations, undertaken in all our enthusiasm.

Could we but have foreseen what the future held for us – or the power put forth against us by the Invisible Hand!

Chapter Three
The Brown Deal Box

Six days had gone by.

The weather having continued bright and fine, with a high and steady barometer, all of us at Hendon, quirks and pilots alike, had been up on many occasions.

In secret, I had placed upon my machine – a Breguet monoplane with a 200 horse-power Salmson – another new invention which, with Teddy's aid, I had devised, and was testing. We were keeping the affair a profound secret. Nobody knew of the contrivance evolved out of my knowledge of wireless, save we two, Roseye and my mechanic Harry Theed.

Carefully concealed from the eye it was carried in a large locked box, while, as further precaution, after testing it each time, I put it on my car and took it away to my chambers with me, for we were not at all anxious for any of the mixed crowd at the aerodrome to pry into what we were doing, or to ascertain the true direction of our constant experiments.

One afternoon down at Gunnersbury Teddy, in mechanic's brown overalls, was busily engaged repairing a portion of the apparatus which I had broken that morning owing to an unfortunately bad landing.

To the uninitiated the long shed with its two lathes, its tangle

of electric wires across the floor, the great induction coils – some of them capable of giving a fourteen-inch spark – the small dynamo with its petrol engine, and other electrical appliances, would no doubt have been puzzling.

Upon the benches stood some strange-looking wireless condensers, radiometers, detectors and other objects which we had constructed. Also dressed in overalls, as was my chum and fellow-experimenter, I was engaged in assisting him to adjust a small vacuum tube within that heavy, mysterious-looking wooden box which I daily carried aloft with me in the fuselage of my aeroplane.

We smoked "gaspers" and chatted merrily, as we worked on, until at last we had completed the job.

"Now let's put a test on it again – eh, Claude?" my friend suggested.

"Right ho!" I acquiesced.

It was already dusk, for the repair had taken us nearly four hours, and during the past half-hour we had worked beneath the electric light.

The shed was on one side of the large market-garden, at a considerable distance from any house. Indeed, as one stood at the door there spread northward several flat market-gardens and orchards, almost as far as the eye could reach.

Presently, when we had adjusted the many heavily-insulated wires, I started the dynamo, and on turning on the current a bright blue blinding flash shot, with a sharp fierce crackling, across the

place.

"Gad! that's bad!" gasped Teddy, pale in alarm. "Something's wrong!"

"Yes, and confoundedly dangerous to ourselves and to the petrol – eh?" I cried, shutting off the dynamo instantly.

"Phew! It was a real narrow shave!" remarked Teddy. "One of the narrowest we've ever had!"

"Yes, my dear fellow, but it tells us something," I said. "We've made an accidental discovery – that spark shows that we can increase our power a thousandfold, when we like."

"It has, no doubt, given the wireless operators at the Admiralty, at Marconi House, and elsewhere a very nasty jar," laughed Teddy. "They'll wonder what's up, won't they?"

"Well, we can't help their troubles." I laughed.

"I expect we've jammed them badly," Teddy said. "Look the aerial is connected up!"

"By Jove! so it is?" I said.

I saw what I had not noticed before, that the network of phosphor-bronze aerial wires strung beneath the roof of the shed had remained connected up with the coils from an experiment we had conducted on the previous afternoon.

"I'll pump Treeton about it to-morrow. He'll be certain to have heard if there has been any unusual signals at Marconi House," I said. "They'll no doubt believe that spark to be signals from some new Zeppelin!"

"No doubt. But we may thank our stars that we're safe. Both

of us could very easily have been either struck down, or blown up by the petrol-tank. We'll have to exercise far more caution in the future," declared Teddy.

Caution! Why, Teddy had risked his life in the air a hundred times in the past four months, flying by day and also by night, and experimenting with that apparatus of ours by which we hoped to defy the Zeppelin.

Those were no days for personal caution. The long dark shadow of the Zeppelin had been over London. Women and babes in arms had been blown to pieces in East Anglia, on the north-east coast, and every one knew, from the threats of the Huns, that worse was intended to follow.

Our searchlights and aerial guns had been proved of little use. London, the greatest capital of the civilised history, the hub of the whole world, seemed to lie at the mercy of the bespectacled night-pirate who came and went as he pleased.

As is usual, the public were "saying things" – but were not acting. Both Teddy and I had foreseen this long ago, for both of us had realised to the full the deadly nature of the Zeppelin menace. It was all very well for a Cabinet Minister to assure us on March 17, 1915, that "Any hostile aircraft, airships, or aeroplanes which reached our coast during the coming year would be promptly attacked in superior force by a swarm of very formidable hornets."

Events had shown that the British authorities at that time did not allow sufficiently for the great height at which Zeppelins

could travel, or for the fact that, while the airship could operate successfully at night-time, darkness was the least suitable time for aeroplanes in the stage of development which they had reached, on account of the difficulties of starting and of landing in the dark, as well as of seeing or hearing the airship from a machine flying aloft.

The German Government and the German people had thrown their fullest energies into the development of aircraft for war. Unfortunately we had not, and it is not too much to say that, during the first few months of the war, the responsible authorities in this country did not take the aerial menace seriously.

We, as practical airmen, had taken it up seriously – very seriously, and, as result, had devoted all our time and all our limited private means – for my governor was not too generous in the matter of an allowance – towards combating the rapidly increasing peril of air attack.

The first German attempt had been on Christmas Day in the previous year. As I happened to witness it, it had fired me with determination.

Shall I ever forget the excitement of that day. I had gone down the Thames to spend Christmas with my old friend, Jack Watson, of the Naval Flying Corps, when, under cover of a light fog, a German airman suddenly appeared.

We first saw him over the Estuary, slightly to the south of us, flying at a height that we estimated at about 9,000 feet. There was great excitement. Anti-aircraft guns at once opened on him,

but they failed to hit him. Lost to our view in a mist, he was not seen again until well up the river, and from the reports afterwards published it seems that fire was once more opened on him from our guns. Rising higher to escape our shells, he made a complete half-circle. By now, several British aeroplanes were in pursuit, and the German, seeing that it was hopeless to attempt to go farther, turned back. Thousands of people had a good view of this – the first real air-battle on the British coast. Shells were bursting in the air apparently all round the German. Time after time it seemed that he had been hit, yet time after time he escaped. Men could not fail to admire the skill with which he handled his machine. At one point a sudden dip of the aeroplane seemed to show that a shot had got home. Still, however, according to what I heard afterwards, he kept on, circling, dodging, twisting, climbing and diving with almost incredible swiftness to escape his pursuers. He made straight for the sea – and escaped. Weeks afterwards a rumour was received that some fishermen had found a body away out in the sea which was believed to be that of the German airman, but no satisfactory confirmation was ever published.

It was that incident which first set me thinking of how to combat hostile aircraft. At once I thought of aeroplane versus aeroplane, but when three weeks later, two Zeppelins came over to the east coast to reconnoitre, and dropped nine bombs, blowing to pieces two old people, then my attention was turned towards the Zeppelin, and in Teddy Ashton I found a ready and

enthusiastic assistant.

This raid, and those which followed on points on the north-east coast, small as their immediate results were, yet demonstrated one thing. The German Press proclaimed that German genius had at last ended the legend that England was invulnerable owing to her insularity. An English writer had pointed out that it was certainly proved that the seas no longer protected England from attack. She was no longer an island. Should she hope to keep her shores inviolate, and to allow her people to live in the safety that they had enjoyed for so many centuries, she must be prepared to meet invaders from the sky, as well as on the water. Both Teddy and myself saw that the coming of the German airship was the beginning of a new chapter in the history of this country.

The real German defence was summed up in a semi-official message published, which read: "The German nation has been forced by England to fight for her existence, and cannot be forced to forego legitimate self-defence, and will not do so, relying upon her good right."

Her good right! Had Germany a right to drop bombs blindly on open villages, and kill our women and babes at night?

That had fired us both, and the result had been that long shed, and the great mass of electrical apparatus it contained.

Sometimes, when I begged more money from my father for the purposes of those experiments, he had grumbled, yet always when I pointed out what Teddy and I were actually doing, he was

ready again to sign a further cheque.

Teddy was, of course, richer than myself. His father had been a cotton-weaver who had lived in Burnley, and had died leaving his whole fortune to his only son. Therefore my friend was possessed of considerable means, and had it not been so, I fear that we should never have been able to establish such an extensive plant, or go to the big expenses which we had so often to incur.

The secrets of that shed of ours had to be well guarded. Our night-watchman was a retired police-sergeant, John the father of my faithful mechanic, Harry Theed, and in him we reposed the utmost confidence.

"If anyone ever wants to get into this 'ere place, sir," old Theed often said to me, "then they'll have to put my lights out first – I can assure you."

"Well," Teddy exclaimed presently, as he slowly lit a fresh cigarette. "Let's adjust things a bit better, and we'll then try how she goes – away out on the pole. It's getting quite dark enough to see – especially with your glasses."

"Right you are," I said, and then, after another ten minutes of manipulation with the wires, during which I "cut out" the aerial and several big glass-and-tin-foil condensers, all was ready for the experiment.

Teddy had drawn a heavy wooden bench in front of the door, and upon it I placed the big box of brown-stained deal which contained our mysterious apparatus from which we both

expected such great things. Indeed, that curious machine, had just escaped bringing upon us instant death.

Yet that mishap to which we had been accidentally so near had revealed several things to me, causing me to reflect upon certain crucial and technical points which, hitherto, I had not considered.

In that square, heavy box, connected up by its high-tension wires to three of the big induction coils upon the table was, we believed, stored a power by which the Zeppelins could be successfully destroyed and brought to earth.

It was nearly dark when I opened the door of the shed situated opposite to where I had placed the box, and looked out to ascertain if anyone was about, as we wished for no prying eyes to witness our experiment.

I walked out, and around the building, but nobody was near. Then, when I returned to the door, I stood for a moment gazing away across the wide area of market-gardens to where, perhaps half a mile distant, stood a high flag-pole which had been erected for me a couple of years before, and which had, before the war, borne my wireless aerial.

The little white hut near by I had built, and until the outbreak of war, when Post Office engineers had come and seized my private station, I had spent many hours there each evening reading and transmitting messages.

The pole, in three sections, which in the falling darkness could only just be discerned, was about eighty feet in height and stayed by eight steel guys, each of which was in three sections connected

together by green-glazed porcelain insulators, so that any leakage of electrical current could not go to earth. Affixed to the pole and protruding some two feet above it was a copper lightning-conductor with four points, an accessory which I had had put up recently for experimental purposes.

"Nobody's about," I said to Teddy when I returned. "Will you run the dynamo, if all is in order?"

Then, after a final examination of the various electrical connexions, he started the engine and the dynamo began to hum again.

I drew over a switch at the side of the box, when a loud crackling was heard within – a quenched-spark of enormous power. Afterwards, I quickly seized my binoculars and going out through the open door, taking great care not to pass before the lens, – where in the place of glass was a disc of steel – something like that of a big camera, forming the end of the box, I focussed my glasses eagerly upon the flagstaff.

"Hurrah! Teddy!" I cried in glee. "It works – Gad! come and look! At last! *We have it at last*!"

Next moment, my friend was eagerly at my side, while at the same instant we heard a light footstep and Roseye, in her big motor-coat, stood unexpectedly before us.

"It works! Roseye! It works, darling! Mind! Don't pass in front of the box. Do be careful!" I cried in warning, while at the same time Teddy Ashton, with the binoculars at his eyes, gasped:

"By Jove, Claude! It's wonderful. Yes! You're right! *We have*

success at last!”

Chapter Four
Concerns the Secret

In our eagerness, Roseye and I set out to walk towards the pole, leaving Teddy in charge of the apparatus.

To approach the spot, we had to leave the market-garden and take a road lined by meagre cottages, then at last, skirting two orchards and yet another market-garden, we came out upon a second road, which we crossed, and at last found ourselves at the disused wireless-hut.

There a strange spectacle greeted our eyes for, the darkness having by that time become complete, we saw, around the lightning-conductor on the pole and over the steel stays, blue electric sparks scintillating.

"Look, darling!" I cried. "See what we have at last produced by the unseen directive current!"

"Yes," replied my well-beloved. "Look at the sparks! How pretty they are! Why – they seem to be jumping across the insulators from one stretch of wire-rope to the other!"

"That effect is exactly what Teddy and I have for so long laboured to produce," was my answer, as I stood there fascinated by the sparks and the slight crackling which reached our ears where we stood.

The fact was that though our apparatus was half a mile away,

yet upon those steel strands, as well as upon the copper lightning-conductor, the electric waves which we were discharging – a new development of the discovery of Heinrich Hertz – was such as to spark over all the intervening gaps, even though the space where the insulators were inserted was quite three inches.

It was a phenomenon such as had never before been witnessed by any experimenter in electricity. The theories I had formed and so often discussed with Teddy were now proved to be quite sound, for they had resulted in the construction of that apparatus which must, I knew, be most deadly to any Zeppelin.

The sparks, as we watched them, suddenly ceased.

For a moment I stood surprised, yet next instant realised that Teddy had, no doubt, some very good reason for stopping the engine. Somebody might have come upon the scene, and we were always extremely cautious that nobody should know in what we were engaged. The neighbours knew us as airmen, and believed we were engaged in making some kind of new propellers.

What I had seen in those few minutes, the flashing crackling sparks running over the surface of those porcelain insulators and, indeed, over part of the wooden pole – for it happened to have been raining until an hour before, and all the surfaces were damp – was, to me, sufficient to cause me to hold my breath in excitement.

"We have made a great and most important discovery to-day, Roseye," I said as calmly as I could, as together we walked back to the shed. "This discovery is undreamed of by Germany. It

will give us power over any Zeppelin which dares to come to our shores, providing that we can approach sufficiently near."

"Ah! if you can," replied the girl at my side. "No doubt we shall increase the range," I replied. "We have, this evening, established the one most important fact that our apparatus is really capable of directing the rays, and that between metal and metal we can now, as Hertz endeavoured to, set up an electric spark from a distance."

"You certainly have done that – but I don't yet see the trend of your argument, Claude. I know I'm only a woman and unversed in technicalities, so please forgive me, won't you?"

"Well," I said as we walked, my arm linked in hers. "First, as you know, a Zeppelin is constructed mostly of aluminium, its stays and practically all its rigid parts are of that metal except some of light steel. It consists of a number of ballonets filled with highly inflammable gas, and around those ballonets are ribs of aluminium and steel. There must be joints in these ribs, and over those joints we have now proved that we can create sparks from a considerable distance. From the ballonets there is a constant leakage of gas, therefore if we charge the aluminium and steel so that they spark wherever there is the slightest gap we shall ignite that escaping gas and cause the whole airship to explode with terrific force. Do I explain it clearly?"

"Quite, Claude," was her slow, thoughtful reply. "I see now in what direction all these wonderful and patient experiments have been made. To-night you have certainly produced sparks."

"And ere long I hope we shall increase our range, and be able to do without half the current and all its consequent paraphernalia," was my confident reply. "I'm certain," I said, "as certain as we are walking here together, that we have at last established a sound means of protecting Great Britain against Zeppelin raids."

"I hope you have, dear," Roseye replied. "Oh! what a great thing it will be for the country. You and Teddy will deserve monuments – if you really can succeed."

"We *shall* succeed, darling – with your assistance. I'm confident of that!"

"I – how can I help?"

"In many ways. You've already assisted us enormously," I said. "Teddy was only saying so to-day," and I gripped her arm more tightly, as we turned the corner and approached the shed where Ashton was, we knew, awaiting us.

"Splendid, my dear fellow!" I cried as we re-entered. "Sparking beautifully, all over – like fireworks!"

"Pretty dangerous fireworks!" my friend remarked. "I cut off the current just now."

"Yes," I said. "Why?"

"Well, do you know, old chap, I thought I heard somebody about!" he replied. "Even with the dynamo running I fancied I overheard voices. Therefore I cut off at once, and went outside to see. Strangers seemed to be somewhere at the back."

"Did you find anyone?" Roseye asked.

"Nobody – yet I'm quite certain I heard voices," he insisted.

"Some of the men from the market-garden perhaps," I remarked.

"I don't think so," was Teddy's reply.

"Why not?" I demanded in surprise.

"Well – because what I heard – and I tell you, Claude, I heard it quite distinctly – was a sudden exclamation of surprise."

"Surprise!"

"Yes. As though somebody had made an unexpected discovery," Teddy said. "I had just been watching the effect on the pole through your glasses, and had returned inside when I heard an exclamation, followed by some quick words of surprise that I could not catch. It was a man's voice."

"Surely there could not be anybody else watching the sparking upon the pole!" I exclaimed in quick apprehension.

"That's just what I believe has happened," Ashton replied seriously. "We've been watched – as I suspected we were."

"You've said so all along, I know."

"And now I'm quite convinced of it. And whoever has watched us making our experiments now knows that to-night our efforts have been crowned with success."

"Well," I remarked after a pause. "If what you say is true, Teddy, we shall have to be very wary in future. I know there are a great many unscrupulous persons who would be ready to go to any length in order to learn this secret discovery of ours which, when fully developed, will, I feel convinced, mean the buckling-

up of the Zeppelin menace."

"That's quite true, Claude," Roseye declared. "At Hendon and elsewhere there are, I know, a number of men intensely jealous of your success, and of the one or two ideas which you have patented, and which are now adopted in the construction of our military aeroplanes."

"It's really astonishing how many enemies one makes quite unintentionally!" declared Teddy, leaning against the bench. "Claude has more than I have, I believe – and I never disguise from myself that I've got a really fine crop."

"Only the other day, when Lionel dined with us, he was speaking to dad about spies," Roseye said. "He told us that he felt sure that we had men in our air-service who sent every new development and idea to Germany. Do you think that's really a fact?"

"A fact!" I echoed. "Why, dearest, of course it is! We've seen the result of it many times. As soon as we had that integral propeller the Germans knew, and copied us; the secret of Jack Pardon's new dope was known in a few days, and the enemy are using it on every one of their machines to-day. Nothing is secret from those brutes."

"But who does all this?" asked Roseye.

"Why, what I call the Invisible Hand," was my reply. "The Invisible Hand was established in our midst in about 1906, when the Kaiser sat down and craftily prepared for war. He saw himself faced by the problem of the great British power and patriotism,

and knew that the Briton would fight every inch for his liberty. Therefore the All-Highest Hun – the man who will be held up to universal damnation for all time – proceeded to adopt towards us the principle of dry-rot in wood. He started a system of sending slowly, but very surely, his insect-sycophants to burrow into the beam of good British oak which had hitherto supported our nation. That beam, to-day, is riddled by these Teutonic worms – insects which, like the book-worm, are never seen, yet, directed by the Invisible Hand, are only known by their works."

"Then you think there really are spies at Hendon?"

"Of that I'm quite certain," was my reply. "We all know that there are spies at every aerodrome – while in the higher ranks those who control our air-services, though patriotic enough, seem to suffer by reason of the still higher control which divides responsibility."

"Have any spies been lurking about here to-night?" asked Roseye very anxiously.

"That is my firm conviction," was Teddy's reply to her. "I believe that there have been two strangers here. One was, perhaps, gazing through his glasses at the pole and, seeing in the darkness the sparking over the insulators set in the steel guys, ejaculated the natural expression of surprise that I overheard. But they got away noiselessly, and all my search failed to discover them."

"Well – we must be very wary, my dear Teddy," I repeated. "They must not get at this secret of ours, otherwise from the

gondola of a Zeppelin they will be able to use the invisible force against any of our aeroplanes in a stronger and greater degree than we could ever hope to do it. Then we ourselves would be destroyed by the secret power we have invented."

"They shall never know the secret from me," was my friend's fierce reply. "Only we three know it – while Theed has, of course, learnt something. That could, not be helped."

"We must not forget the words I read out to you the other day from the *Berliner Tageblatt*," I replied. "That paper said: 'The fires and devastation caused by our Zeppelin squadron in England represented a victory greater and more important than could be achieved in a single battle.' That," I added, "is the triumphant boast of Major Moraht, Germany's most prominent military critic."

"Yes, and it went further," exclaimed Teddy, turning to Roseye. "The paper declared that if the Germans were as brutal as they were accused of being, their naval airship squadron could long ago, in memory of the Baralong, have set London afire at all four of her corners."

"That's just what we intend to prevent," I declared very emphatically. "That is what, notwithstanding the efforts of prowling strangers who are seeking to know in what direction our experiments are being conducted, we intend to achieve. To-night, Roseye, we have made one great and astounding discovery – a discovery which has placed within our hands a power which Germany, with all her science and investigation, little dreams.

We now know the true secret which will eventually prove the undoing of the Kaiser and his barbarous hordes."

"Yes, dear," was my well-beloved's reply. "At all hazards, no spy of Germany must be allowed to wrest this secret from us."

"But they are clever – devilishly cunning and entirely unscrupulous. The Invisible Hand, well provided with money, lurks everywhere, ready to grasp what it can in the interest of our octopus enemies," I declared warningly. "Therefore let us be ever on the alert – ever watchful and mindful, in order to avert the relentless talons with which this unknown and Invisible Hand is furnished."

Chapter Five
The Raid on London

It was the night of the fourteenth of October, in the year 1915.

Sir Herbert and Lady Lethmere, with Roseye – who looked charming in pink – were dining *en famille* in Cadogan Gardens. The only two guests were Lionel Eastwell and myself.

"Terrible – is it not?" Lady Lethmere remarked to me, as I sat on her right. "We were at the Lyric Theatre when the Zeppelins came last night. We heard the guns firing. It was most alarming. They must have caused damage in London somewhere. Isn't it too awful?"

"And at other places, I fear," remarked Sir Herbert, a fine outspoken, grey-haired, rather portly man, who had crowned his career as a Sheffield steel manufacturer by receiving a knighthood. He spoke with the pleasant burr of the north country.

"Well, the noise of the guns was terrific," his wife went on. "Fortunately there was no panic whatever in the theatre. The people were splendid. The manager at once came on the stage and urged us all to keep our seats – and most people did so. But it was most alarming – wasn't it, Herbert?"

"Yes, dear, it really was," replied her husband, who, turning to me, asked: "What were you doing at that time, Munro?"

"Well, Sir Herbert, to tell the truth I happened to be out at Hendon with my friend Ashton, preparing for a flight this morning. I got hold of a military biplane which had just been finished and had only had its last tests that afternoon, but as I had no bombs, and not even a rifle, I was unable to go up."

"And if you had gone?" Eastwell chimed in. "I fear, Claude, that you would never have reached them in time. They flew far too high, and were, I understand, moving off before our men could get up. Our Flying Corps fellows were splendid, but the airships were at too great an altitude. They rose very high as they approached London – according to all reports."

"And the reports are pretty meagre," I remarked. "I only know that I was anxious and eager to go up, but as I had not the necessary defensive missiles it was utterly useless to make the attempt."

"Nevertheless, I believe our anti-aircraft guns drove them off very quickly, didn't they?" Lionel asked.

"Not before they'd done quite enough damage and killed innocent old persons and non-combatants. Then they went away, and bombed other defenceless towns as they passed – the brutes!" said Lady Lethmere.

"And writers in to-day's papers declare that all this is really of no military significance," remarked Sir Herbert, glancing fiercely across the table, a stout, red-faced man, full of fiery fight.

"Military significance is an extremely wide term," I ventured to remark. "London heard the bombs last night. To-day we are no

longer outside the war-zone. We used, in the good old Victorian days, to sing confidently of our 'tight little island.' But it is no longer tight. It seems to me that it is very leaky – and its leakage is towards those across the North Sea who have for so long declared themselves our friends. Friends! I remember, and not so very long ago, standing on the Embankment and watching the All-Highest Kaiser coming from the Mansion House with a huge London crowd cheering him as their friend."

"Friend!" snorted Sir Herbert. "He has been far too clever for us. He has tricked us in every department of the State. Good King Edward knew; and Lord Roberts knew, but alas! our people were lulled to sleep by the Kaiser's pretty speeches to his brave Brandenburgers and all the rest, and his pious protests that his only weapon was the olive branch of peace."

"Yet Krupp's and Ehrhardt's worked on night and day," I said. "Food, metals, money and war-materials were being collected each month and stored in order to prepare for the big blow for which the Emperor had been so long scheming and plotting."

"Yes, truly the menace of the Zeppelin is most sinister," said Roseye across the table. "How can we possibly fight it? We seem to be powerless! Our lawyers are busy making laws and fining people for not creeping about in the darkness at night, and asking us to save so as to pay ex-ministers their big pensions, but what can we do?"

"Rather ask whom can we trust?" I suggested.

"But, surely, Claude, there must arise very soon some real live

man who will show us the way to win the war?" asked Roseye.

I drew a long breath. She knew our secret – the secret of that long dark shed out at Gunnersbury which was watched over at night by the sturdy old Theed, father of my mechanic, he being armed with a short length of solid rubber tyre from the wheel of an old disused brougham – about the best weapon of personal defence that could ever be adopted. A blow from that bit of flexible rubber would lay out a man senseless, far better than any iron bar.

"Well," said Sir Herbert, re-entering our discussion. "The Zeppelin peril must be grappled with – but who can enter the lists? You airmen don't seem to be able to combat it at all! Are aeroplanes too slow – or what?"

"No, Sir Herbert," I replied. "That's not the point. There are many weaknesses in the aeroplane, which do not exist in the big airship – the cruiser of the air. We are only the butterflies – or perhaps hornets, as the Cabinet Minister once termed us – but I fear we have not yet shown much sting."

"We may, Claude!" interrupted Roseye with a gay laugh.

"Let's hope we can," I said. "But all these new by-laws are, surely, useless. Let's hit the Hun in his home. That's my point of view. We can do it – if only we are allowed."

"I'm quite sure of that, Claude," Roseye declared. "There are lots of flying-men who, if given bombs to-morrow, would go up and cross to the enemy aircraft centres in Belgium or Schleswig and drop them – even at risk of being shot down."

"Well, Sir Herbert," I ventured, laughing, "the situation is not without its humour. I don't know whether it has ever occurred to you that, in order not to unduly alarm the public, we may yet have certain regulations posted upon our hoardings that may prohibit Zeppelin commanders from cruising over England without licences; that they must have red rear-lights; they must put silencers upon their engines, and must not throw orange peel, paper bags, bottle or other refuse within the meaning of the Act into the streets in such a manner as to cause any danger to foot-passengers or create litter such as would come beneath the powers relegated to inspectors of nuisances of Boroughs. Such regulations might, perhaps, make it a penal offence if Zeppelins did not keep to the left in traffic; if bombs were dropped in places other than those properly and purposely illuminated for the purpose, or if they did not travel at a rate faster than the British aircraft."

"Really, Claude, that's an awfully humorous idea," remarked Sir Herbert as all at table laughed.

"In addition, it might be suggested that the heads of all dogs, ducks, cats, parrots, and the horns of gramophones might be encased in cotton-wool to conceal their whereabouts, that no smoking be permitted, and no artificial light between one hour before sunset and one hour after sunrise."

"Exactly," I laughed. "And an inter-departmental committee of the red-tabbed might be charged with the due execution of the regulations – all offenders to be shot at sunrise following the

day whereon any breach of the Defence of the Zeppelin Act were committed."

"Really you're too bad!" declared Eastwell, laughing heartily as he held his glass poised in his hand.

"Well," I protested. "Here we've had Zeppelins killing people. Surely something must be done! Either regulate the Zeppelin traffic, or else fight them."

"I'm all for the latter," declared Roseye.

"So am I," was my remark.

"And I also," declared Eastwell. "*But how*? – that's the question!"

Roseye exchanged glances with me, and I wondered whether he noticed them.

Somehow I had just a faint suspicion that he did, for I detected a curious expression upon his lips – a look such as I had never seen there before.

He made no remark, but busied himself with the excellently-cooked snipe before him.

Fortunately Lionel Eastwell was not aware of our secret – the secret of that brown deal box which we were so rapidly perfecting.

Only on the previous day Roseye had been up in the air with me across Hampstead, Highgate, and out as far as Hatfield and home to the aerodrome, making a further test of the potent but unseen power which we had been able to create, and which must, if further developed, be our strong arm by which to strike a very

deadly blow against enemy airships.

"Personally," declared Sir Herbert, in his bluff, matter-of-fact way, "I think the whole idea of air-defence from below is utterly futile. A gun can never hit with accuracy a moving object so high in the air and in the dark. What target is there?"

"Exactly," exclaimed Eastwell. "That has always been my argument. I've been interested in aviation for years, and I know the enormous difficulties which face the efforts of those who man our anti-aircraft guns. Searchlights and guns I contend are inadequate."

"They've hardly been tried, have they?" queried Lady Lethmere. "And, moreover, I seem to recollect reading that both have done some excellent work on the French front."

"But London is not the French front," Eastwell protested. "The conditions are so very different."

"Then what do you suggest as a really reliable air-defence?" Sir Herbert inquired.

"Fight them with fast aeroplanes and bombs," Eastwell said.

"But you've just told Munro that had he gone up last night from Hendon his flight would have been quite useless, as he would never have been able to mount sufficiently high in the time."

"Quite so. But we ought to have efficient air-patrols at night," was his reply.

"Combined with properly illuminated landing-places," Roseye added. "Otherwise more than half the airmen and

observers must kill themselves through landing in the dark without any knowledge of the direction of the wind."

"That could all be arranged – as it no doubt will be in due course," I said. "The Government are not such fools as some people seem inclined to believe. I'm not one of those who blame the whole Government for a few mistakes of its subordinate departments, and the incompetency of men pitchforked, in the hurry of an unexpected war, into places for which they are entirely unfitted. We all know of glaring cases of that sort. No. Let's take heart, and look on the best side of things. Britain is not vanquished yet, and the heart of the true Briton beats quicker and is fiercer than ever in its patriotism over the base enemy outrage of the kind that was committed upon innocent Londoners last night."

"Only yesterday I was reading a popular book called *Can Germany Win*? written by an anonymous American," remarked Sir Herbert. "The writer gaily informs the public that even well-directed rifle-fire can bring the vaunted Zeppelins down, and to secure any accuracy of aim themselves, the airships must descend to an altitude which brings them well within the range of modern guns."

"I know!" I laughed. "The rubbish written about Zeppelins is simply ludicrous. I've read that book, which has no doubt been read by thousands of patriotic Britons. I remember quite well that, in it, we are gravely informed that as far as Zeppelins were concerned the British public may sleep comfortably in their beds.

The great thing is, we are urged, to discount as far as possible, by reason supported by scepticism, the terrorising tales of the Zeppelin's worth and doughty prowess which are so brilliantly 'press-agented' in Germany. The writer has further told us that talk never broke any bones, and the Germans are doing a good deal of talk at the present moment to hide the defects in their monster pets which have been detected as useless by the test of War. The Zeppelins, the writer told us, are comparatively negligible quantities. Last night's raid is the commentary."

"Yes," said Roseye, "something must really be done to prevent such raids."

"But how?" queried Lionel Eastwell across the table in that slow refined voice of his. "It's all very well to talk like that – but you must *act*."

Roseye and I again exchanged glances. She knew well what was passing in my mind.

And I remained silent.

Chapter Six
Theed's Strange Story

The following morning while I was writing letters in my room Theed entered, saying that his father had called and wished to see me.

A moment later the sturdy old ex-police-sergeant came in, his felt hat in his hand, and when I had sat him beside the fire I saw an unusual expression upon his grey, furrowed countenance.

"I've come up, sir," he said, "because something curious 'appened at the shed lars' night."

"Happened – what's happened?" I asked, staring at him.

"Well – something I can't quite make out, sir. But I thought I ought to report at once."

"Tell me, by all means, Theed," I said, instantly interested.

"Well, sir. There were strangers about lars' night."

"Strangers! Who?" I asked, recollecting Teddy's allegations on the night of our successful test.

"Well – it was like this, Mr Munro," the old fellow began. "I went on at nine o'clock as usual, and met Harry there. We talked together about half an hour, and then he left. I 'ad a pipe in front o' the stove and sat readin' the war news – as I always do. I expect I must 'ave dozed for a bit, but I woke up at eleven, 'ad another pipe and read a bit more of my paper. I heard Chiswick church-

clock strike twelve, and then, after makin' up the stove again, I 'ad another doze, as I generally do. Of a sudden I was woke up by hearin' low whisperin'. My lamp was out – it 'ad gone out because I 'adn't much oil. But I was on the alert in a moment, for I saw the light of an electric torch a movin' about at the other end of the shed, and two figures were a gropin' about and whisperin'. I'll swear one was a woman!"

"A woman!" I gasped. "What did you do?"

"I took up my bit o' rubber tyre, bent down, and crept noiselessly along. It seemed as if they were examining those three electric coils, and were perhaps a tryin' to find the box what – "

"Happily, I took the precaution to bring it away yesterday afternoon, and have it here, in the next room," I interrupted.

"Good. Excellent, sir! My idea is that they were after that there box. I'm dead certain of it," old Theed said. "Well, I bent well below the benches and nearly got up to 'em in order to flash my lamp, an' so take 'em by surprise, when, of a sudden, somebody clipped me hard over the 'ead, and I knew nothing more till I awoke at daylight, and found this!" he added, pointing to a spot on the back of his head upon which was a big lump and a large piece of black sticking-plaster.

"Then there must have been a third person present – eh?"

"There must! He'd evidently been a watchin' me, and struck me down, just as I was a comin' up to the pair with the torch."

"You say you saw a woman. Did you also see the man's face?"

"No, I didn't. And I only knew that there was a woman there

by the black fur she wore around her throat. I was right at the opposite end of the shed, remember, and I only saw 'er just for a second – a biggish woman's white face and the black fur."

"You didn't see the person who knocked you down?"

"No, I didn't – the cursed blackguard," was old Theed's quick reply. "Had I seen him, I'd 'ave given 'im a taste of my bit o' rubber – I tell yer. He wouldn't 'ave been sensible yet – you bet!"

"But how did they get in?" I asked, amazed at his story.

"Get in? Why, they seem to 'ave 'ad a latch-key. At any rate they opened the door with a duplicate key that they'd got from somewhere. There's no sign of 'em having broken in."

For a few moments I stood in silence, then Theed's son having called a taxi, I got in and took our faithful night-watchman down to Gunnersbury.

There, on the spot, he explained to me exactly what had occurred in the night, giving a dramatic demonstration of how he had crept up to the intruders, and pointing out the spot where he had fallen, and where, indeed, there were some palpable blood-spots from the wound in his head.

"While I lay 'ere, sir," he added, "the three of 'em, of course, just pried into everything they wanted to see, and then went out, closin' the door after them. It was just after eight this morning when I came to, and I tell you I felt quite dazed, and horrible bad!"

"What time do you think all this happened?" I inquired.

"In the middle of the night – between two and three o'clock

– I should say."

Careful investigation which I made of the whole apparatus disclosed that nothing whatever had been interfered with – except one thing. Two wires connecting the big induction coils had evidently been disconnected, for they had been wrongly connected up, thus showing that the strangers, whoever they had been, might have made certain experiments with our plant.

Happily, however, that big brown deal box had not been there, and I smiled within myself at the bitter disappointment which must have been theirs. In any case, our great secret was still safe.

"Well," I said. "You certainly had a most exciting adventure, Theed. We'll have to set a trap for these gentry in future. Just think out something, will you, and Mr Ashton and I will help you. If they come again we might put in a little electric 'juice' which will effectively stop them from meddling with our things in future. They might get a very nasty jar," I added, laughing.

"But 'ow do you think they got hold of that duplicate key, sir?" asked the grey-haired old pensioner.

I hesitated. The whole affair was a most complete mystery, and only went to bear out Teddy's declaration that, on the night of our test, somebody must have been about and expressed sudden surprise at its astounding result.

From the telephone call-box inside Hammersmith Broadway station I rang up Teddy at Hendon, and asked him to meet me there after lunch.

This he did, and as together we walked away from the hangars,

so as not to be overheard, I related to him the strange story, as told by old Theed.

He stood astounded.

"Somebody knows, my dear Claude! Who *can* it be?"

"Who knows? Only ourselves, Roseye and the Theeds. Nobody else," was my quick reply.

Then, suddenly, he said: "I suppose Roseye couldn't have dropped any hint to her father? If so, the latter might have spoken to Eastwell – or somebody else!"

"Roseye made to me a solemn promise of secrecy, and I trust her, Teddy," I said very quietly.

"So do I, my dear fellow. So do I," he assured me.

"Well – I can't fathom the mystery at all. Evidently they were on some desperate errand – or they wouldn't have knocked poor old Theed senseless – eh? And the woman! Who could she have been?"

"Who knows?" I asked. "Nevertheless, we must make it our business to find out, my dear chap," I added in earnestness. "We've got secret enemies somewhere – probably around us here. Indeed, that has been my firm conviction for some time."

"And mine also. So let us keep open eyes everywhere. Where's Roseye? Is she coming over this afternoon?"

"I expect her every minute. She'll be astounded and excited."

"You won't tell her – shall you? It will only alarm her, Claude – and I never advocate alarming a woman."

I paused. Instantly I realised the weight of such an argument,

for Roseye was, after all, a dainty and highly-strung little person, who might worry herself over the mystery far too much.

"Yes, Teddy," I said somewhat reluctantly. "I quite agree. At present we'd best leave matters as they are, and keep our own counsel."

Hardly were those words out of my mouth when we saw my well-beloved, with face flushed in glad welcome, coming across to us. She had evidently arrived in her car, and already put on her air-kit, for, it being a fine afternoon, she intended to make a flight.

The Zeppelin raid upon London had set the whole aircraft world agog. Every one at Hendon and Brooklands was full of it, most men criticising the air-services, of course, and declaring vaguely that "something must really be done."

It was so very easy to make such a declaration. Old men in their easy-chairs in the London club-windows were saying that very same thing, but nobody could, with truth, point out any real effective remedy against what certain Hide-the-Truth newspapers described as "the German gas-bags."

A lot of people were about the aerodrome that afternoon, and Teddy went off to test his engine, while Roseye, drawing on her thick gloves, mounted into her machine which her mechanic had brought out for her.

"I shall run over to Aylesbury and back," she told me. "I know the railway line. Shall you go up?"

"Probably," I replied, as I stood beside her Duperdussin

watching her man adjusting one of the stays which he seemed to think was not quite tight enough. Then, a few moments later, she shot from me with a fierce blast of the exhaust, and in a few seconds had left the ground, rapidly rising in the air.

I watched her for some minutes as she skimmed over the tree-tops and rose higher and higher, then satisfying myself that her engine was running well. I turned and crossed to the shed wherein stood my own bus, with the ever-patient Theed awaiting me.

The Breguet was brought out, and with a few idlers standing about me, as they always do at Hendon, I climbed into the pilot's seat and began to test my big engine. It roared and spluttered at first, but gradually, with Theed's aid – and he was a splendid mechanic by the way – I got it to run with perfect evenness and precision.

Why, I don't know, but my bus usually attracted some onlookers. About the aerodrome we always have a number of idle persons with a sprinkling of the eternal feminine silk-stockinged hangers-on to the pilots and pupils who, not being able to fly, do the next best thing, become friends of flying-men. In that little knot of people gathered about my machine – probably on account of the Zeppelin sensation – I noted, in particular, one podgy fat-faced little man.

As I strapped myself into the pilot's seat, after examining my altimeter, compass, etc, and adjusting my self-registering thermometer, I chanced to glance at the people around, and had noticed the man in question. His strange-looking bead-like eyes

fascinated me. Upon his round white face was a look of intense interest, yet those eyes, rather narrowly set, struck me as queer-looking and uncanny – eyes such as I had never seen before.

Suddenly I wondered if their gaze upon me was some evil omen.

Next second I laughed within myself at such an absurd thought. It was the first time in all my life that such an idea had ever crossed my mind, therefore I at once dismissed it. Such thought was most foolish and utterly ridiculous.

Yet, again, I glanced at him, unable to withdraw my gaze entirely. Those dark, beady eyes of his, set slightly askew, were certainly most uncanny. Their gaze seemed cold and relentless, and yet at the same time exulting.

Sight of them sent through me a strange creepy feeling, but, with resolution, I turned away, busying myself in my preparations for starting.

Perhaps it was knowledge that strangers had been prying into our experimental plant out at Gunnersbury that had somewhat upset me, yet, after all, though they had cruelly assaulted poor old Theed, no very great success had been theirs.

Who were they? That was the vital question.

Just as I was on the point of starting I saw Lionel Eastwell coming from the hangar, walking behind his own machine, which was being pushed out by his man Barnes and two others.

I waved to him from my seat, and he waved a merry greeting back to me.

Then, all being ready, I motioned to Theed to let her go, and with a deafening rush I shot forward, leaving behind a pungent blue trail from the big exhaust.

I rose quickly and had begun the ascent, the engine running beautifully, when of a sudden, before I was aware of it, something went wrong.

A sharp crack, a harsh tearing sound, and one of my wings collapsed. Across the back I was struck a most violent blow just as she took a nose-dive, and then, next instant, all knowledge of what had happened became blotted out by a dark night of unconsciousness.

Chapter Seven
Reveals a Plot

The next that I recollect is, with my brain awhirl, I tried to open my eyes, but so painful were they, that I was compelled to close them again in fearful agony.

Somebody whispered close to me, but my mind was too muddled to understand what was said.

My eyes burned in their sockets; my brain seemed unbalanced and aflame. I tried to think, but alas! could not. When I tried to recollect, all remembrance of the past seemed as though it were wrapped up in cotton-wool.

How long I remained in that comatose state I have no idea.

Some unknown hand forced between my teeth a few drops of liquid, which with difficulty I swallowed. This revived me, I know, for slowly – very slowly – the frightful pain across my brow decreased, and my burning eyes became easier until, at last, blinking, I managed to open them just a little.

All was dead white before me – the white wall of a hospital-ward I eventually discovered it to be – and as I gazed slowly around, still dazed and wondering, I saw a man in black, a doctor, with two nurses standing anxiously beside my bed.

"Hulloa, Mr Munro," he exclaimed softly. "You're better now, aren't you?"

"Yes," I whispered. "But – but where am I?"

"Never mind where you are. Just go to sleep again for a bit," the doctor urged. "You're all right – and you'll very soon be up again, which is the one thing that matters," I heard him say.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.