

The Soul of a Patriot

Story of a Fight Between an Aeroplane and a Submarine

By ROBERT BARR

Editor's Note.—This story was written about three years ago by the Canadian-English editor of the London "Idler Magazine," and is now published for the first time by special arrangements with his widow.

MR. PORTER possessed a gift of dramatic expression out of all proportion to his size and occupation. We encounter this small man of lathes and diagrams half-running, half-walking up the Mall towards Buckingham Palace, his clenched fists raised heavenward; calling vehemently upon his gods.

The blasé Londoners whom he met in his course turned, gazed after him, and resumed their several ways. But one leisurely individual, with the face of a farmer and the roll of a bargee, was so impressed by the spectacle that he wheeled about and followed Mr. Porter, and overtaking him, tapped him upon the shoulder.

"I beg your pardon," said the burly stranger, "but my name is Elijah Hunt, of Sacheverell, Hunt, Brotherhood and Hunt, Ltd., of London, Bristol and Adelaide; and master of the steamship Good Fortune, 8,500 tons register, and . . ."

"Unfortunately in need of a little present assistance, no doubt?"

Captain Hunt ignored the rude insinuation.

"And I thought, as I saw you shaking your fists in that ridiculous manner towards the palace, that you might be an anarchist in eruption, in which case you would amuse me; or that you might be some poor devil of a mechanic out of a job, in which case I might possibly render you—er—a little temporary assistance, or perhaps a drink, or possibly even a job," and Captain Hunt grinned the grin of a ploughman, and hitched the hitch of a bargee.

Mr. Porter gazed up, fuming, into the Captain's rosy smile, and suddenly it came to him that his

anger was a very ineffectual little thing. The thought of ineffectuality reminded him again of his tragic position; his helplessness, his utter isolation, possessing no friends but his own paid craftsmen at Cricklewood and Milford.

"Oh," said Mr. Porter, uncertainly, and then his innate sense of humour came to the rescue.

"Well then, Captain, suppose we start off with the drink."

"You see," explained Mr. Porter, across the marble-topped table, "my main trouble is this: the machine is a compromise. In every respect but one, there is some other machine on the market that is superior; to get that one effect I have had to sacrifice a certain proportion of efficiency in every other direction. Now, take the Chatteris monoplane; it is very nearly perfect as a land scouting machine; its wing surface is variable; in the air you can contract the wings, and project yourself like a dart, with incredible speed, or you can extend them, and very nearly hover. But what is the use of these virtues at sea in the absence of a seaplane's absolutely essential qualities? The machine won't float, and can't be made to float—leave alone to rise off the sea. When its wings are fully extended, it will rise with a run of fifty feet; well, you can get that length all right on any big deck, but what about the wing spread? The thing demands a path fifty-four feet wide, which you can't get unless you build a ship for it. And if you contract the wings to their minimum spread of thirteen feet, the machine requires a clear run of seven hundred yards before it begins to rise. Now, on no normal ship—particularly a warship—can you engineer a run-way that is either very wide or very long. Of vertical space, however, you can have as much as you please in these unrigged days. My machine takes off with her wings vertical, like a butterfly at rest, and so requires a very small breadth of path—ten feet, to be exact."

He unfolded some well-thumbed diagrams.

"As soon as she is clear of the ship, this worm gear is set automatically into engagement with the engine, and, in less than three-quarters of a second the wings are brought down so, into the horizontal position, where they lock. The strain, of course, is terrific, but she is built to stand it. The power of the three engines combined is tremendous, over four hundred horse-power. You must have it; there must be no doubt, no hesitation, on the part of these wings. She doesn't begin to rise till the wings are locked down; I have had the launch cinematographed and measured. Sometimes she picks up before she reaches water; more often there is just a kiss of the floats, and she is up and away; sometimes she races along the surface like a wild duck, rising slowly.

"But once in the air, I grant you she is not so handy as some planes; she is stiff and cumbersome; swift and darting in flight; safe as a house, you understand, but a trifle unwieldy. Power is the life of my machine.

"There you have all the vice that is in her; the price, in fact, of her efficiency in other directions."

"And the Admiralty won't look at it?" asked the Captain.

"Precisely that. 'Will it alight on deck?' they ask me. Of course it won't. No aeroplane can land on any normal deck. If you erect a sort of polo-field on stilts above the deck, I can land on that as well as any other aviator—if you call that landing on deck. The authorities did send a man down to see my experiments once, but at the very first trial a run-wheel broke, a thing that might

have happened to the railway carriage he came down in—I wish it had—the machine left the rails, carried away a piece of the hulk it was launched from, turned head over heels into the sea, broke a selection of my bones, and gave me pneumonia; that was last year. Since then the authorities have been sceptical; they are unreasonable, immovable and hopelessly impractical. That is why I am going to take my machine to Germany."

Hunt almost jumped out of his chair.

"Surely you would not do anything so impractical?"

"Indeed I would. What has this heaven-forsaken country done for me except ruin me? I was once a relatively rich man, Captain Hunt; now I have spent everything, and mortgaged every scrap of



"He unfolded some well-thumbed diagrams."

property up beyond the hilt. I have reduced my staff to its lowest limit, and pared down their wages to an unreasonable minimum. My handful of skilled workmen remain only because they believe in me; there isn't one who could not double his money by leaving me. I can pay their absurd wages for just two more months, and then I am bankrupt.

"Meanwhile, I have a letter in my pocket from Messrs. Rudolf Werner, of Essen, offering me a well-paid position on their experimental staff. Rudolf wants the aeroplane, and by gad, Captain Hunt, I don't see why he shouldn't have it. I showed our own authorities the letter this morning; the cynical beggars congratulated me; said Werner was fortunate in securing my services; hoped they had not influenced me in hesitating to accept the offer. Hinted that I might learn a thing or two at Essen; would like to see me on my return. They won't see me again, because I shan't return. I shall call myself 'Packtruger,' and remain."

"I should be sorry," observed Captain Hunt, "to see that machine leave the country." He was endeavouring to analyze his own patriotism. "I remember being thrashed at school," he went on, "for failing to translate a certain Latin phrase to the effect that it is both pleasant and decorous to die for one's country."

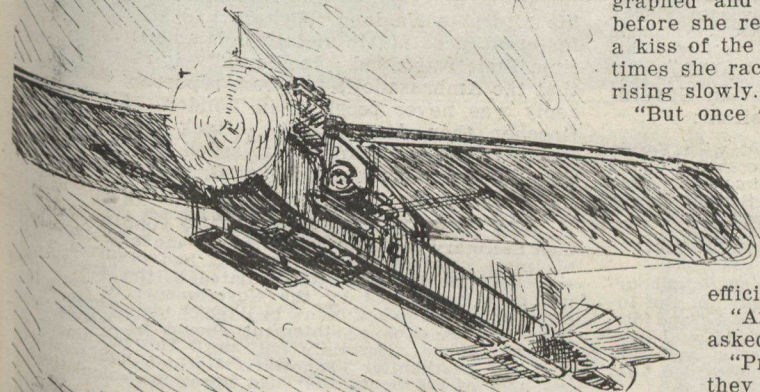
"Perhaps," replied the cynic, "it was worth while to be a Roman citizen in those days; maybe it is worth while to be a German one to-day. But what's the good of dying if one can live? I don't want fame, or baronetcies, or rubbish like that, which I can't use, but I do want to live and work. After all, if a man has a duty to his country, the country has a duty to its man. Now, I know a man called Muller, some sort of a German lieutenant; not the kind of man who goes about dying for countries, but a very sound mathematician and engineer. I met him in London with Rudolf Werner. He was superintending the construction, at government expense, of a large sea-going submarine of his own invention. Absolutely untried, you understand, but his government not only consents to examine his plans, but when it sees the possibilities of them, it pays him gold; votes him an extra salary, excuses him his ordinary duties, gives him absolute control over the experimental ship's construction, and tenders him expert advice which he is free to accept or reject. That is the sort of country I could get patriotic about. Yet here is my own machine, built at my own expense—at my ruin, in fact—complete, tested and successful, and they won't even condescend to look at it. No, I'm going to Germany. Herr Packtruger I shall be. This British patriotism is too damned one-sided for me."

Captain Hunt was no debater. If the engineer's logic was refutable, the Captain did not see the refutation. His own sense of patriotism was something in the nature of a creed, one of the essential things, like sunrise and clothing and the log of the S. S. "Good Fortune"; something one did not argue about.

"How far would a thousand pounds take you?" he asked, with no definite idea in his brain.

"One thousand or ten; any lump sum short of a million would see me just so many months or years

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"Covered by the rifles of German seamen"