



R 101 on Saturday afternoon. (FLIGHT Photo.)

The rest of the story we must try to reconstruct from the stories of survivors. It is not an easy matter, as many accounts have reached this country and they do not all tally. The most circumstantial, and in our opinion the most credible, was given by Mr. A. J. Leech, foreman engineer, who was not a member of the crew but was on board as an official of the Royal Airship Works. The account which we are using was given by Mr. Leech to a well-known civilian pilot who had flown over to Beauvais. As the airship approached Beauvais the rain became "terrific." Mr. Leech, who was in the control car, denies that the weight of rain brought the airship down too low. She was flying at the height ordered, which, perhaps, was the same as at 1 a.m. (B.S.T.), namely, 1,500 ft. Flight-Lieut. Irwin was taking the watch, as one would expect of the captain on the first night with unfavourable weather expected. Sqdn.-Ldr. Johnston, the navigator, was also on duty, probably in the chart room, which was just above and aft of the control car. We have no information as to whether Major Scott was up or in bed. Reuter has stated that there was a watch of 12 men on duty. We know that at 2.44 Irwin asked for his position. There were probably still clouds below him. The captain seems to have been uneasy, for Leech says that he slowed down the engines to consider the position. We may wonder did Irwin have any idea that he was in a particularly difficult bit of flying country. Four miles to the south-west of the spot where the crash occurred there is a hill rising to 850 ft., and when a south-west wind is blowing the downward current of air off that hill is exceedingly strong. More than one aeroplane has come to grief there, and the pilots of Imperial Airways sometimes have to use all their engine power to get out of this valley or depression.

#### The Crash

Irwin may have come down a bit lower to have a look at the ground, though we have no evidence to that effect. Leech is reported to have said that there had been increasing difficulty in working the controls, but we are not clear as to

whether that meant physical difficulty in moving them or that the ship was unduly slow in answering. Then a few minutes past 3 a.m. Irwin held a conference, presumably with Johnston, in the chart room, and it was decided not to arouse the rest of the crew or the passengers. That showed uneasiness but not despair. Then the order was given for the engines to be put to full power in order to get higher by dynamic lift. This is not corroborated by the two engineers, Bell and Binks, who escaped practically unharmed from the rear central engine car. They said that the last order was to slow the engines down, but an order for full power seems much more probable. It was too late. The airship, it appears certain, had already been caught in the fatal downward current. The next thing which Leech knew was that the floor of the control car came up at him. A second later everything went up in flames. He has no clear idea of how he got out, but he has a recollection of Irwin standing at his post giving orders. After he had fallen clear on the wet grass, Leech says that he still saw Irwin standing at his post, but it was impossible for him to get at him to help him. Possibly, Irwin's last act was to release the emergency water ballast from all the tanks in a despairing but vain effort to save his ship. We know that water from a tank fell on to the rear engine car and helped to save Bell and Binks by drenching them to the skin. Other accounts tell of the airship diving steeply once or twice, but righting herself; until the second or third dive drove her nose against the ground. This tallies with the theory of downward currents of air. The two forward wing engine cars were driven up into the hydrogen bags, and doubtless it was they which set the gas alight—at any rate, there is no need to look for other causes, for after the crash to the ground a fire was inevitable.

A wireless operator, Mr. Disley, escaped from the sleeping quarters of the crew, which were immediately behind the chart room and the captain's cabin on the lower deck. Two riggers, Radcliffe and Church, got out somehow, both very badly burnt, and both afterwards died in hospital.