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**THE BLACK ALBATROSS**

by

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## Synopsis

English Ace, Frank Bardell faces certain death. With guns jammed, Germany's top scoring ace pilot is about to deliver coup de grace. The enemy aeroplane flies alongside, the pilot smiles and waves farewell, leaving Bardell free to fight another day.

Action packed WWI adventure set in the war torn skies above France.

## Chapter One

“Contact!”

“Contact!” he yelled.

The le Clerget spluttered into life, streams of blue smoke pouring from the twin exhausts. He eased the throttle forward warming the engine gently.

Sergeant Williams stood back from the swirling propeller, his thick jerkin up around his ears, giving the thumbs up sign of approval.

Gazing round the field for signs of approaching unheralded aircraft, he opened the throttle fully. The airframe quivered under the full thrust of power. The icy slipstream battered his already cold face.

“Chocks away!” he screamed.

He read Williams's answer from his lips.

With an angry howl of power the Camel lurched away across the field, the torque thrusting it leftwards continually. Giving rudder correction he skimmed the hedgerow at the boundary of the field and climbed for height.

Williams stood there, his face upturned in the bitter wind, watching the Sopwith's progress. A little group of fitters and mechanics stood in the lee of the hangar following the rapidly diminishing speck.

At ten thousand feet he levelled off. In front lay the Front Line system of trenches, a raw gash of mud and zig-zag trenches. Occasionally the flash of an exploding shell would illuminate the still dark surface of the sea of mud.

The German Front Line trenches lay but a hundred yards from their protagonists. It seemed as if the two would merge at some point.

The first crump of Archie bursts didn't even make him jump. Black blossoms opened all around him. Behind the German Lines towards St Omer, there was a patch of snow. Farther east, a vast cloud bank loomed ominously from end to end of the horizon. The winter sun gleamed fitfully below the horizon's rim. The stars seemed reluctant to leave the black bowl, twinkling in cold luminescence in the Western sky.

He tried out both Vickers in short bursts to ease the mechanism from unsuspected faults and the oil from freezing. The noise reassured him. The belts vanished smoothly into the cowling, the spent cartridges rolling over the coaming into the black space below the wings.

He pulled back the joystick, levelled out again at twelve thousand feet. He searched the sky minutely in every direction. Survival demanded ceaseless vigilance. He rolled just to throw unseen enemy aircraft from their aim.

Behind the German Lines, the patchwork effect of the fields was beginning to show in the strengthening light. Here and there a light pulsed in the gloom from some farmhouse window. Beyond, underneath the thickening cloud from the east, a pall of smoke from a group of factory chimneys rose pillar-like into the sky.

Head moving constantly, searching above and below, never flying in a straight line for more than a few seconds at a time he again scrutinised the vault above him.

Without warning, the black explosions of the anti-aircraft guns ceased, the last blooms falling away behind him.

He jerked the stick back, climbed sharply, the le Clerget screaming. He executed a tight Immelmann, every nerve taut with expectation. He rolled the Sopwith from side to side and levelled out again at fifteen thousand feet.

His paralysed with cold, his fingers numb within the gauntlets, he searched above and below him for signs of a hostile aircraft.

He beat his left hand on the outside of the cockpit in an effort to restore circulation, working his mouth in an attempt to restore life to the rubbery flesh.

Old at thirty, he told himself, whilst his mind clinically evaluated the reason for the German Archie's cessation. He could feel the thick wad of letters in the pocket of his Sidcot flying suit. The veterans of twenty-three looked at him with awe at mess-time. He could read their thoughts . . . what the hell is this pensioner doing flying an aeroplane and on the Western front as well? The rookies of eighteen, smiling pink faces, eyed him nervously and the tow of Maltese crosses on the side of his Camel. Thirty, he could see it in their eyes, an old man . . .

He threw the Camel into the famous right hand turn, pulled the stick backwards into his thigh, until the plane stood on its tail. A loose wire parted with a twang, and commenced to lash the fuselage in insistent knocking.

He tried the Vickers once more. The left hand gun jammed after the first few rounds. A fat cartridge bulged in the breech. Cursing furiously, he attempted to free the offending cylinder by banging it with his gloved fist.

He saw the black Albatross flash past as he had almost cleared the weapon. A black hole had appeared in his port wing, and another and yet another.

Via the rear-view mirror he had had Williams fit for him, he saw the Albatross curl round for another run at his tail. He sat back hastily, fixed the seat belt once more, threw the Camel into a tight bank.

The Albatross had the advantage of speed and height. He saw the wings thin out into black lines, the engine nacelle become a black blob. Orange fire leapt from the nose of the German machine.

His windshield vanished as if removed by extra terrestrial agency. A bullet ricocheted from the engine cowling, a row of holes appeared in the starboard wing.

He pulled the stick back into his groin. The Camel streamed in protest. The Albatross was behind him now, slightly below, the Maltese crosses stark in their circles of white. Orange fire again flared from the black tubes on the cowling. He thrust the stick forward, kicking out right rudder. The tracer swam lazily past him. Praying that the wing would not tear loose from the lashing that loose wire was giving it, he threw the machine into an opposite turn. There was perspiration on his forehead.

The German wasn't going to waste ammunition. He was working in closer, using his superior performance with telling effect.

At the top of a loop he flattened out, upside down, hoping.

The German pilot realised he had been outmanoeuvred and attempted to correct, but the Albatross was firmly in his Aldiss sights.

The Albatross was completely black from end to end, save for the circles in which the Maltese crosses had been painted. The pilot's head was without a helmet, blond hair flying in the wind.

The Vickers commenced their harsh rattling. Bits of canvas jumped from the side of the Albatross. The holes were stitching their way steadily towards the cockpit.

Both guns jammed.

He felt his heart almost give out.

He could see the expression on the enemy pilot's face, a mask of horror, which changed in seconds to relief as the Vickers ceased their growling.

The Albatross swerved away in a tight turn, rolling to avoid the deadly machine on his tail. He had the German pilot's head in his sights, could see the dials in the dashboard compass and altimeter.

Hammering away at the bulging cartridges in the breeches in angry frustration, he could not clear the swollen mass.

The Albatross suddenly vanished from his sight.

He ceased pounding the breech of the Vickers and looked around him. The Albatross was at the bottom of a dive, flattening out and beginning to come up underneath him.

The Camel swung over in a tight peel-off, the Albatross vainly trying to avoid his intention, by swinging back and forth in a see-saw motion. The pilot's face was up-turned gazing at him. The cockpit swam into his sights. He hammered again at the jammed breech. The Vickers refused to clear.

The German pilot was watching him, a look of horror and consternation on his features as the Camel went past. Their wing-tips were but a yard apart.

The Albatross was on his tail in a flash, gaining rapidly.

He cringed down in the cockpit waiting for the terrible agony and the ripping of flesh. He felt cold, without panic or fear. In a few seconds it would all be over . . . and he could just be another name on a long casualty list. The twenty year olds would nod wisely, and the eighteen year olds would bite their lips.

The expected terror did not arrive.

Astounded, he saw the Albatross level out beside him, the man's face smiling at him across the void. The German waved his arms in a fanwise motion over his head. He stared in disbelief. The German stabbed his finger down towards his Spandaus, shook his head, smiling. Then he waved again.

Despite himself, he waved back. He managed a weak smile against the cold torture of his flesh. The German gave him the thumbs up signal, threw his machine into a steep climb.

"You unutterable bastard," he shrieked into the roaring wind. "Got me cold, and now you murder me after smiling."

He watched as the Albatross climbed steadily above him, awaiting the lightning turn that would herald the attack.

To his utter astonishment, the Albatross continued to climb up and away from him. In a minute he was alone in the sky with the swirling arc of the propeller and the lashing of the loose wire against the fuselage.

He swung the Camel round in a tight run westwards. The black blossoms commenced once more.

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## Chapter 2

He roared for Williams as soon as the Camel came to a stop, the mechanics hanging onto the wing-tips.

“Sir?” Williams was helping him out of the cockpit, his expert eye looking at the black holes in both wings.

“Both those fucking guns jammed this morning,” he snapped.

Williams’s face was impassive. “I will see to it, sir.” He was ramrod stiff, Welsh face impervious of expression.

“And that flying wire . . . broke loose soon after take-off,” he grated, pointing to the limp wire.

“Aye, sir.” Williams didn’t move, standing to attention.

“I trust you, Williams,” he said, icily. “And I don’t want that trust abused.”

“No, sir,” said the sergeant.

“Well? What explanation have you to offer, sergeant?” he snapped.

The semi-circle of fitters and mechanics round the aircraft were watching the two men.

“I will investigate . . . make a report later, sir,” said Williams stiffly, his face cold.

“Make it sooner rather than later, Williams, I don’t want that happening again.” He tried to stop his hand trembling as he peeled off his gauntlets. If Williams saw it, he gave no sign.

He began rubbing his face, stamping his feet to restore circulation, staring at the semi-circle of faces watching him.

“Well?” roared the sergeant at the staring faces. “What are you monkeys staring at? Get back to work!”

The men scattered.

His hands wouldn’t stop trembling, and his knees felt rubbery. Williams held his hand under his elbow. “You alright, Captain?” he asked, gruffly.

He tried to grin, but it broke down into a grimace of utter weariness. “Yes, I’m alright, Sergeant,” he muttered. “As right as I’ll ever be.”

When he judged he could walk without falling over he began to walk over to the mess. He could see Gresham staring out at him through the squadron office window watching his unsteady progress.

“What’s biting you, Frank?” he asked, his grey face twitching with a mass of tics.

“I had a run-in with that black Albatross over St Omer . . . both guns jammed.”

Gresham’s grey face went greyer. “What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing . . . he just flew alongside me, waved and then flew off . . . he could have had me just like that . . .”

“Come and have a drink,” offered Gresham, hand on his arm, pulling him into the mess.

“That sonofabitch let me off the hook two months ago . . . the day we lost Ashworth and the other two replacements.”

“What happened to you?”

Gresham lit a cigarette, sucking the acrid smoke into his lungs in long draws. "We were escorting those DH 9s when Vorche's Jagdstaffel jumped us. The two lads got it in the first thirty seconds . . . from those new Fokker D5s. Ashworth got into difficulties two minutes later. I winged one of them, but the other fellow came round in one of the tightest turns I've ever seen . . . that black Albatross with the crosses inside the white circles . . . wasn't wearing a helmet as far as I could see . . . blond fellow. He shot pieces out of my starboard aileron and my kite wouldn't come round fast enough . . . I dived down to about four thousand feet expecting the bloody wings to come off any minute and the Albatross behind me. He wasn't. He went after Ashworth . . . got him with the first burst . . . poor bastard never had a chance . . . straight through the floor into the cockpit. Then he came down for me . . . my kite wasn't too cracky after that hit in the aileron, wouldn't turn . . . at least only slowly. We were over our Lines by then and I was losing height. The Hun was behind me . . . I could see that blond hair in the wind and he was pulling out the trips on the Spandaus. You can imagine my feelings . . . then he was alongside me over our Lines, waving . . . all friendly like . . . grinning all over his Hun face. I jerked the kite round . . . or tried to, hoping to catch him napping . . . no chance . . . he was away and behind me again . . . could have dropped me any time, but he didn't . . . just waved and flew off . . ."

"What do you make of it?"

Gresham shook his head, the crow's feet round his eyes wrinkling. "Ask me another . . . thought it wouldn't make you feel so bad if you knew."

"Damned decent of you, Alan."

Gresham stubbed out his cigarette, lit another, fingers trembling violently. "It's not . . . I'm worried about you."

"You worry about everyone."

"I have to."

He watched Gresham's face with its mask of twitchings, the horrible pallor and the way his mouth jerked at each drag on the cigarette. "You'll kill yourself," he said.

"Damn it," yelled Gresham suddenly. "Why does everyone think I'm on the verge of cracking up?" He sank down into an armchair, puffing away nervously, holding it between forefinger and thumb.

The barman and the waiter looked down studiously at their work.

"Sorry, Frank," muttered Gresham, shuddering as if from cold. "Get a bit edgy when those replacements are due in."

"Have another drink, old man." Frank signalled the waiter.

Gresham eyed the man malevolently as he put the whisky down in front of him on the table.

"Get your hair cut, man," he yelled, jabbing out the cigarette in the same motion.

"Yessir," said the waiter, not looking at the Squadron Leader.

"Impudent swine," muttered Gresham. "That's what comes of all this bloody socialist crap that's being bandied about; nobody keeps their station any more."

Frank said nothing. His feet felt almost normal and his face was less like concrete.

Gresham lit yet one more cigarette, looked at his Flight Commander. "Now, listen to me, Frank . . ." he began.

"Don't go on about Deirdre, Alan," he begged. "That's my problem."

"You've got to do something about her, old chap," said the young-old man, pushing back his blond hair.

He still said nothing. Gresham was becoming maudlin with the alcohol, and it was still only eight a.m. Why deny him his analgesic?

The barman polished glasses in the silence, the waiter emptied ashtrays round them. The rumble of artillery from the front shook the old farmhouse building.

“Listen!” Gresham leapt to his feet, ear cocked to one side. He made violent motions to the mess staff to be silent.

Coming closer was the sound of a lorry, gears whining, engine coughing asthmatically.

“The replacements from St Pol, Frank,” said Gresham, smoothing the creases in his uniform, rubbing his boots behind his trouser leg.

The sound of the approaching lorry was suddenly drowned by the ear splitting roar of an aero engine being tuned.

“Blast that Williams creature,” shrieked Gresham, his face working. “He did that deliberately . . . I’ll have him on a charge for insolence . . . that’s what I’ll do . . .”

He was still yelling and bawling imprecations at the absent Williams when the door burst open to admit a blast of cold air and six apprehensive young men.

They hesitated in the doorway on hearing the yelling Squadron Leader.

“Well? What’s the matter with you lot? Why the devil are you staring at me like that?” he shouted. “Come in and shut that bloody door.”

The rearmost newcomer swung the door after him. They all stood just inside the door, looking uncertain.

Frank made a signal to Tracey the barman, who poured drinks without so much as moving a face muscle. The six young men shuffled forward awkwardly. One of them managed a weak smile. “We’re from the Replacement Pilots Pool,” he offered tentatively.

“I know where you’re from,” snapped Gresham.

The mess waiters handed the glasses to the young men, who still stood in a tight bunch in the doorway.

“Shut the door,” snarled Gresham. “You’re letting the cold air into the room.”

One of the waiters, passing, gave the door a phlegmatic kick as he passed.

The roar of the le Clerget ceased abruptly, exposing the sound of the crackling logs and the clink of glasses, under the gentler carpet of the artillery from the front.

Gresham passed a hand wearily over his face, shrugged his shoulders, as if awakening from a bad dream. The crow’s feet at his eyes creased into a smile. “Welcome to the 98<sup>th</sup> Squadron, Camels,” he said, smiling. “Take off your togs and come and sit down.” He saw their hesitation. “Come on, you fellows . . . sorry if I bit your head off just then.” His voice was wheedling.

The group of young men began divesting themselves of coats and scarves, looking uncertainly round for pegs to hang them on.

“Over there.” Frank pointed to a pine board, four inch nails protruding on the wall.

They followed one another in dutiful procession, before returning to the fireside, straightening their creased uniforms.

“Who are you all?” asked Gresham, his back to the fire, whisky glass in hand.

“I’m Wilson,” offered a lanky youth, “. . . sir,” he added hastily. He offered his hand to Gresham, who ignored it.

“Good . . . what’s your first name?”

“Archibald, sir,” said Wilson, a twisted smile on his face.

There was a subdued snigger from the young men.

Gresham looked up sharply, an eagle seeing its prey. “A man can’t help the name he is given at birth,” he snapped. “Who’s next?”

“Scott-Jones,” drawled a thin youth, in an unmistakable Oxford accent.

“Jones . . . sir,” said Gresham. “Never could stand this hyphenated crap.”

“I say, but my name is Scott-Jones, sir . . . I have it written on my paybook,” protested Scott-Jones, producing his new-looking paybook from an inner pocket.

Gresham's mouth began to work again, the tics prominent. He looked expectantly at the next man, ignoring Scott-Jones.

"Markham, sir," said the short, squat youth. He had a square jaw, thick chest. "Toby."

Gresham nodded approvingly. "Good work, Toby," he said.

He moved on just as the door burst open. A tall, thin man entered, his flying jacket open, fur boots unlaced. He was plainly the worse for drink.

"Good evening, sir, my name's Frost . . . and I'm the replacement flight leader for 98 Camel Squadron." He burst into a fit of giggling, weaving back and forth unsteadily.

"Captain Frost," thundered Gresham. "Pull yourself together. This is not Paris and you are on duty."

Frost giggled again, swaying. "You know your trouble, Alan, don't you? You are a prig . . . an insufferable, pontificating prig . . . and I hate your guts."

He lurched into the mess, knocked over a table in his progress towards the bar. "Gimme a large one, Tracey, old chap," he said, thickly. "Come on man, what're you waiting for? Think I'm drunk, don't you? . . . Well . . . well . . ." he giggled again. "I am completely sloshed."

Frank stepped forward before Gresham could intervene.

"Come on, Tom, I'll give you a hand," he said. He pulled Frost towards him, slung him over his shoulder in any easy fireman's lift.

Gresham stood watching him, his hands clenching and unclenching in a quiet frenzy. The frantic nervous ticks became pronounced once more.

Frank kicked open the door, stepped out into the cold morning air. He nearly fell as Frost struggled on his shoulder. "Gotta get back," mumbled Frost. "Damned Huns . . . always one better than us . . . bloody Albatrosses, and now they have that Fokker D5 . . ." He rambled off into an unintelligible mumble of words and cursing.

He flung open the door to Frost's solitary Nissen hut, allowed the long figure to subside onto the bed. He pulled Frost's boots from his feet, followed them with trousers and jacket. As he lifted the trousers by the turn-ups a letter floated to the floor. It was followed by a family photograph.

"Leggo, you oaf . . . whaddiya think you're doing?" growled Frost from his drunken jumble.

"Sleep well, mate," he said, giving the letter and photo a contemptuous kick under the bed . . . Deirdre and that bastard Randolphe . . . the Right Hon Randolphe . . . right hup, you bastard . . . you miserable sonofabitch . . . like Tom and Nancy . . . two kids, lovely home . . . he heard it all before . . . why did they do it . . . why did any of us do it . . . where were we, here in this stinking bloody war that nobody ever won? . . . killing to live . . . like a jungle . . . like that Hun in the black Albatross . . . a decent bloke . . . could have killed half the upper class nits in the squadron if he wanted, but he didn't want . . . probably just wanted to go home like all the rest of us . . . Stephen darling . . . do come home with us after the show . . . what show? . . . the music hall or the war . . . whilst my husband is in France trying to get himself killed . . . a her, my husband, Stephen . . . winning the war for us . . .

He gazed down at Frost who was snoring. "You and me, both, mate," he murmured. "Have a few hours of oblivion . . . it could be permanent tomorrow."

Back in the mess, Gresham was in fine fettle, having recovered from his tantrum. Half a dozen whiskies had cured his psychosis, temporarily. Scott-Jones, predictably, was at the piano . . . it would have to be Scott-Jones . . . playing fields of Eton and all that crap . . . just like the Rt Hon . . . he kicked the door open with violence in time to hear the theme song of the RFC.

So stand with your glasses steady,  
Your face unto the sky,  
Here's to the dead already,

Here's to the next man to die.

He cursed as he heard it . . . for no particular reason. It was all such a bloody awful mess, the war, the killing and Deirdre and the Rt Hon Stephen Randolphe, Bart, DSO, bar, MC.

"Where've you been, Frank?" roared Gresham, grinning like a Cheshire cat. His face was flushed, he eyes unnaturally bright. "I've been waiting to introduce your new flight members to you. Come on in, old man." He turned to the sea of youthful faces, children most of them, still in their teens. "Gentlemen, I would like you to meet Captain Frank Bardell . . . top scoring ace of the 98<sup>th</sup> . . . top scoring ace in this sector of the front . . . twenty five victories to his credit . . . he's well on the way to being . . ."

"Do stop it, Alan," he pleaded.

"I won't stop." Gresham scowled. "These blokes are going to be in your flight tomorrow . . . they must know something of the capabilities of the man who is going to lead them." Gresham turned on his heel as he'd heard that Kitchener often did . . . the Sirdar . . . hero of Omdurmann and the Nile. "Tracey, fill 'em up again . . . on my bill."

Tracey's large moustache twitched distastefully as he began lining the glasses up for one more round. A deep wooden tray full of dirty glasses lay at the end of the bar.

"I've assigned Wilson and Scott-Jones to your flight, Frank . . . to replace Ackerman and Jolly . . ." He came to a stop as the room went quiet. "Blast it, what's everyone gone quiet for . . . we're in a bloody war, aren't we? People get killed in wartime . . . so what's all this funeral business about?" yelled the Squadron Leader. His voice was becoming hysterical. "Could be me, tomorrow, could be you, Frank, or that clown Frost . . . so what? You all want to live forever?"

"How much flying have you don?" Frank asked Scott-Jones, ignoring Gresham's outburst.

"Ten hours on FEs, sir, and ten hours solo . . . Avros," said the young man, quietly.

"Are you deliberately ignoring me, Frank?" demanded Gresham, pushing his face close up to Frank, his breath foetid from the alcohol. "I can't stand insolent subordinates."

"I'm not being insolent, Alan, I just want to find out from my flight members just what they've done . . . and what we're up against tomorrow."

"I warn you, Bardell . . . I want none of that crap you usually start on about whenever we get replacements in . . . not enough Major Gresham . . . give them time . . . well, we ain't got any time, Captain Bardell . . . we're up against Vorsche's Jagdstaffel . . . his horde of Hun bastards . . . at fifteen thousand feet above St Omer . . . and they'll come out of the sun . . . scatter us like bloody shrimps . . . then shoot us up one at a time."

"Stop it, please, Alan . . . don't start alarming these fellows before they even had a chance." Bardell was quiet.

"You think I ought to hide it from them, that those Hun swine have got better machines than ours do you, Captain? That their pilots are better trained . . . more hours in the air before they are sent to the slaughter . . . not like the stiff upper lipped English . . . sent into the kill with less than twenty hours to their credit . . . well, do you?" Gresham's face was mottled with red and white patches, the rash of tics jumping again.

"I don't think this is the time or the place to discuss it, Alan," he said, uneasily, aware of the youthful faces, bright, eager, puzzled, unsure.

"Oh, you don't eh, golden boy?" Gresham walked up to him once more. "Well, just in case you've forgotten . . . I'm still the CO around here and what I say . . . you do . . . understood?" The veins on the Squadron Leader's neck stood out in thick cords. His eyes were wild and unfocussed.

"Very well, Alan." He kept his temper with difficulty, only too conscious of the young eyes watching this evidence of nerves.

“And I’ll tell you something else before you get on your hobby horse, Bardell,” screamed Gresham. “We’re going to fly a full patrol over St Omer tomorrow . . . on orders from the Great Man himself . . . General Sir Fitzhubert himself . . . Commanding His Britannic Majesty’s Fifth Army.”

“Alright, Alan,” he said, restraining the urge to punch the drunken face before him with its staring eyes and blotched complexion. “I’ve already told you what I feel about sending these fellows out before they are trained . . . let’s forget it, shall we?”

He knew, with awful prescience, what was about to happen, but was too stunned to prevent it.

Gresham’s open hand slapped the side of his face with a loud clap. He saw stars for a moment, a red roaring tide of fury engulfed him, the urge to murder was strong.

With an almost iron control, he prevented himself taking the action every molecule shrieked out for him to do.

Gresham was the first to react to his own action.

His face crumpled, minute tics appeared in a rash all over his features. The ugly patches gave way to a pasty white. A cry of anguish broke from his lips, followed by dry sobs.

“Go!” he shouted at the awe-stricken replacements who had witnessed this performance with horror. “At the double.”

The young men jumped as if stung, before making for the door into the harsh sunlight.

“You too, Tracey, and your men,” he said to the barman. “We’re closing the mess for the time being.”

After the departure of the other ranks and the replacements, the only sound was Gresham’s wracking sobbing and his stentorian breathing.

He led the shaking Gresham to a chair. “You are due for leave, aren’t you, Alan?” he asked, the side of his face smarting under the blow.

The Squadron Leader merely sat there, staring before him, his eyes opaque and empty.

“Alan,” he said, sharply, giving the man’s shoulders a shake. “Pull yourself together.”

Gresham stared up at him, his face filled with an awful void of expression, a wax mask. He said nothing.

“Come on, man, this is no way to behave.” He deliberately made his tone acid and neutral.

“I suppose you are going to report me for that, aren’t you?” whispered Gresham at last.

“Don’t talk such rubbish . . . why the devil should I?” he snapped.

“I struck you, Frank,” muttered Gresham, his hands rising and falling like stricken birds.

“We are all under stress, Alan,” he snapped. “Now come on . . . pull yourself together,” he repeated.

Gresham appeared relieved at once. A crafty look crossed his features, he brightened perceptibly. “You aren’t going to report me?” he asked, voice stronger.

“We need you, Alan, and you wouldn’t be much help to anyone under court martial proceedings.”

Gresham stood up, buttoned his tunic, brushed his hair back from his forehead. “Well, now, that’s pretty decent of you, Frank. How many chaps would let a superior officer get away with that?”

“I’m not letting you get away with it, Alan,” he said, wearily. “You’ve been under duress . . . I’m putting it down to fatigue, stress and strain of command.”

“Nevertheless, I’m obliged to you, Frank, it was unpardonable.” He walked over to the deserted trestle that did duty as a bar. “Let’s have a drink together . . . to forget it.”

Bardell shook his head. “Thanks . . . but no, if you don’t mind,” he said.

The door opened to admit Captain Macey, the Adjutant, his face devoid of expression. He took in the two men in a glance.

“If this is private, I’ll come back,” he said.

“Just leaving,” said Bardell, moving towards the door.

“You might like to hear this, Frank,” said Macey, holding out a piece of paper towards Gresham.

Gresham took it, glanced at it, then looked at Frank once more. “A communication from our august leader of men, Sir Fitzhubert . . . telling us that he has organised a diversionary offensive to aid our allies, the Frogs, who, it seems, are in trouble with the Hun.”

Macey looked at Frank, behind Gresham’s back, shrugged his shoulders expressively.

“Is that all?” asked Frank, rubbing the side of his jaw where he could still feel the individual fingers of Gresham’s blow.

“Nothing else, except that this is the reason why those poor sonsofbitches have to go up today . . . Sir tells us that he wants every available man up in the air to prevent Vorsche’s flyers from seeing what’s going on.”

“You know what this means, don’t you, Alan?” said Frank.

Gresham looked at Bardell again, his eyes all crafty.” You wanna take the point up with Sir, do you?” he snarled.

“If I’m ever given the opportunity, I will,” said Frank, quietly. “It’s pure madness, expecting those poor sods to fight with even a reasonable chance of success against the kind of firepower Vorsche can put up against us.”

“How many hours solo did you have before you went up against the Hun, Frank?” asked Gresham, his voice reasonable, silky like a snake’s skin.

“That was last year, which wasn’t as bad as it is now . . .” said Frank.

“1916, 1917, will it ever be any different?” demanded Gresham. “When does a war become more comfortable to live with?”

“Look, you know my views on sending those boys up against Vorsche’s circus. We’ll never break out of this vicious circle unless we make a move now. We’ll have more replacements tomorrow and more the day after, and all we do is provide the Hun with cannon fodder . . . target practice for those new D5s.”

“Even if they had fifty hours solo on Avros and a hundred on Camels, you know as well as I do, there is no substitute for combat experience . . . you are at risk all the time you are in the air . . . you, me, Frost, we’ve all survived, not because we’re any better than those kids out there, but because we’ve been lucky . . . and you know it.” Gresham’s voice was rising again, the timbre of near hysteria approaching.

“And you think that some practice at shooting would be a waste of time, do you? How many of those replacements have had any practice at shooting at other aeroplanes? Supporting one another in formation? Aerobatics? What to do with a crate that packs up on you over the enemy Lines? . . . basic stuff like not crossing the Line under fifteen thousand feet . . . well, is all that crap? Are they ever told this back at Biggin or Heston?”

He became aware that the tics in Gresham’s face had ceased. The facial tissue was as smooth as glass, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had vanished as if by some necromancy. Gresham looked his four and twenty, not fifty.

He recoiled from this Dorian Gray apparition.

“What’s the matter with you, Frank?” Gresham was staring at him in turn. Macey had seen the transformation in Gresham and was open-mouthed.

“Nothing . . . nothing at all.” He looked at the broken Hanoverana propeller over the door to the mess . . . a relic of one of his earlier encounters with an enemy bi-plane over the Line last October.

“You look as if you’d seen a ghost.” Gresham lit another cigarette with steady fingers.

“You want me to issue orders for a full patrol this afternoon, Alan?” asked Macey, his dark face anxious.

“Not this afternoon . . . at noon,” stated Gresham, harshly. “Twelve o’clock on the nail. Briefing at 1100 hours in the mess.”

Frank went to the door. “Where are you going?” demanded Gresham.

“To bed,” he said, shortly. “I’ve had enough cat and mouse for one day.”

Deirdre’s photograph stared back at him from the top of his bedside table. Serious, thoughtful, lips curved, quizzical expression in her eyes. Blast you and the Rt Hon Randolphe he cursed silently . . . why can’t I rid myself of you . . . forever . . . what have you got that all other women haven’t got? . . . in more or less the same measure . . . why are your strings tight round me when I know what I know?

He undressed slowly, staring at the framed photograph. She seemed to be telling him something . . . the pure arch of those eyebrows, the sensuous curve of her mouth seemed to be offering him a way . . .



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