

'We were only having a little bet,' whispered the old man.

'I suppose he bet you a car,' the woman said.

'Yes,' the boy answered. 'A Cadillac.'

'He has no car. It's mine. And that makes it worse,' she said.

'He has bet you when he has nothing to bet with. I am ashamed and very sorry about it all.' She seemed a very nice woman.

'Well,' I said, 'then here's the key to your car.' I put it on the table.

'We were only having a little bet,' whispered the old man again.

'He hasn't anything left to bet with,' the woman said. 'He hasn't a thing in the world. Not a thing. In fact I myself won it all from him a long time ago. It was hard work, but I won it all in the end.' She looked up at the boy and she smiled, a slow, sad smile, and she came over and put out a hand to take the key from the table.

I can see it now, that hand of hers; it had only one finger on it, and a thumb.

Beware of the Dog

Down below there was only a vast white sea of clouds. Above there was the sun, and the sun was white like the clouds, because it is never yellow when one looks at it from high in the air.

He was still flying the Spitfire.* His right hand was on the controls. It was quite easy. The machine was flying well. He knew what he was doing.

Everything is fine, he thought. I know my way home. I'll be there in half an hour. When I land I shall switch off my engine and say, 'Help me to get out, will you?' I shall make my voice sound ordinary and natural and none of them will take any notice. Then I shall say, 'Someone help me to get out. I can't do it alone because I've lost one of my legs.' They'll all laugh and think I'm joking and I shall say, 'All right, come and have a look.' Then Yorky will climb up on to the wing and look inside. He'll probably be sick because of all the blood and the mess. I shall laugh and say, 'For God's sake, help me get out.'

He glanced down again at his right leg. There was not much of it left. The bullets had hit him, just above the knee, and now there was nothing but a great mess and a lot of blood. But there was no pain. When he looked down, he felt as if he were seeing something that did not belong to him. It was just a mess which was there; something strange and unusual and rather interesting. It was like finding a dead cat on the sofa.

He still felt fine, and because he still felt fine, he felt excited and unafraid.

I won't even bother to radio for the ambulance, he thought. It isn't necessary. And when I land I'll sit there quite normally and

* Spitfire: a British aeroplane, flown in the Second World War.

say, 'Some of you fellows come and help me out, will you, because I've lost one of my legs.' I'll laugh a little while I'm saying it; I'll say it calmly and slowly, and they'll think I'm joking. Then when I get out I'll make my report. Later I'll go up to London. I'll take that bottle of whisky with me and I'll give it to Bluey. We'll sit in her room and drink it. When it's time to go to bed, I'll say, 'Bluey, I've got a surprise for you. I lost a leg today. But I don't mind if you don't. It doesn't even hurt . . .' We'll go everywhere in cars. I always hated walking.

Then he saw the sun shining on the engine cover of his plane. He saw the sun shining on the metal, and he remembered the aeroplane and remembered where he was. He realized that he was no longer feeling good; that he was sick and his head was spinning. His head kept falling forward on to his chest because his neck no longer seemed to have any strength. But he knew that he was flying the Spitfire. Between the fingers of his right hand he could feel the handle of the stick which guided it.

I'm going to faint, he thought. He looked at the controls. Seven thousand metres. To test himself he tried to read the hundreds as well as the thousands. Seven thousand and what? As he looked, he had difficulty reading the dial and he could not even see the needle. He knew then that he must get out; that there was not a second to lose, otherwise he would become unconscious. Quickly he tried to slide back the top, but he didn't have the strength. For a second he took his right hand off the stick and with both hands managed to push the top back. The cold air on his face seemed to help. He had a moment of great clearness. His actions became automatic. That is what happens with a good pilot. He took some deep breaths from his oxygen mask, and as he did so, he looked out over the side. Down below there was only a vast white sea of cloud and he realized that he did not know where he was.

It'll be the English Channel, he thought. I'm sure to fall in the water.

He slowed down, pulled off his mask, undid his safety equipment and pushed the stick hard over to the left. The plane turned smoothly over on to its back and the pilot fell out.

As he fell, he opened his eyes, because he knew that he must not become unconscious before he had opened his parachute. On one side he saw the sun; on the other he saw the whiteness of the clouds, and as he fell, as he turned in the air, the white clouds chased the sun and the sun chased the clouds. Suddenly there was no longer any sun but only a great whiteness. It was so white that sometimes it looked black, and after a while it was either white or black, but mostly it was white. He watched it as it turned from white to black, and then back to white again, and the white stayed for a long time but the black lasted only a few seconds. He seemed to go to sleep during the white periods and to wake up just in time to see the world when it was black.

It was white when he put out a hand and touched something. He took it between his fingers and felt it. For a time he lay there, letting the tips of his fingers play with the thing which they had touched. Then slowly he opened his eyes, looked down at his hand and saw that he was holding something which was white. It was the edge of a sheet. He closed his eyes and opened them again quickly. This time he saw the room. He saw the bed in which he was lying: he saw the grey walls and the door and the green curtains over the window. There were some roses on the table by his bed and beside the roses was a small medicine glass.

This is a hospital, he thought. I am in a hospital. But he could remember nothing. He lay back on his pillow, looking at the ceiling and wondering what had happened. He was staring at the smooth greyness of the ceiling which was so clean and grey, and then suddenly he saw a fly walking upon it. The sight of this fly touched the surface of his brain, and quickly, in that second, he remembered everything. He remembered the plane and he remembered the dial

showing seven thousand metres. He remembered jumping out. He remembered his leg.

It seemed all right now. He looked down at the end of the bed, but he could not tell. He put one hand underneath the bedclothes and felt for his knees. He found one of them, but when he felt for the other his hand touched something which was soft and covered in bandages.

Just then the door opened and a nurse came in.

'Hello,' she said. 'So you've woken up at last.'

She was not good-looking, but she was large and clean. She was between thirty and forty and she had fair hair. He did not notice more than that.

'Where am I?'

'You're a lucky fellow. You landed in a wood near the beach. You're in Brighton.* They brought you in two days ago, and now you're better. You look fine.'

'I've lost a leg,' he said.

'That's nothing. We'll get you another one. Now you must go to sleep. The doctor will be coming to see you in about an hour.' She picked up the medicine glass and went out.

But he did not sleep. He wanted to keep his eyes open because he was frightened that if he shut them again everything would go away. He lay looking at the ceiling. The fly was still there. He was still watching it when the nurse opened the door and stood to one side while the doctor came in. He was an Army doctor with some military ribbons from the last war on his chest. He had a cheerful face and kind eyes.

'Well, well,' he said. 'So you've decided to wake up at last. How are you feeling?'

'I feel all right.'

'You'll soon be walking again.' The doctor took his wrist to

* Brighton: a town on the south coast of England.

check his blood pressure. He said, 'Some of the lads from your base were ringing up and asking about you. They wanted to come and see you but I said they'd better wait a day or two. Just lie quiet and rest for a bit. Got something to read?' He glanced at the table with the roses. 'No. Well, the nurse will look after you. She'll get you anything you want.' Then he went out, followed by the nurse.

When they had gone, he lay back and looked at the ceiling again. The fly was still there and as he lay watching it he heard the noise of an aeroplane in the distance. He lay listening to the sound of its engines. It was a long way away. I wonder what it is, he thought. Let me see if I can recognize it. Suddenly he moved his head to one side. Anyone who has been bombed can tell the noise of a German Junkers 88. It is a noise one cannot mistake.

He lay listening to the noise and felt quite certain about what it was. But why was there no alarm and no guns? That German pilot was certainly taking a risk coming near Brighton alone in daylight.

The aeroplane was always far away and soon the noise faded into the distance. Later there was another. This one, too, was far away, but he was sure he recognized the sound. He remembered the noise clearly from air battles he had fought.

He was puzzled. There was a bell on the table by the bed. He reached out his hand and rang it. He heard the noise of footsteps down the corridor. The nurse came in.

'Nurse, what were those aeroplanes?'

'I don't know. I didn't hear them. Probably fighters or bombers. I expect they were returning from France. Why, what's the matter?'

'They were German. I know the sound of the engines. There were two of them. What were they doing over here?'

The nurse came to the side of his bed and began to straighten the sheets.

'You're imagining things. You mustn't worry. Would you like me to get you something to read?'

'No, thank you.'

She brushed back the hair from his forehead with her hand.

'They never come over in daylight any longer. You know that,' she said. 'They were probably British.'

'Nurse.'

'Yes?'

'Could I have a cigarette?'

'Of course you can.'

She went out and came back almost immediately with a packet of cigarettes and some matches. She gave him one, and when he had put it in his mouth she struck a match and lit it.

'If you want me again just ring the bell.' She went out.

Later, he heard the noise of another aircraft. It was far away, but nevertheless he knew that it was a single-engine machine. It was going fast; he could tell that. It wasn't a British aircraft. It didn't sound like an American engine either. They make more noise. He did not know what it was and this worried him greatly. Perhaps I am very ill, he thought. Perhaps I am imagining things. I simply do not know what to think.

That evening the nurse came in with a basin of hot water and began to wash him.

'Well,' she said, 'I hope you don't think that we're being bombed.'

He did not answer. She rubbed some more soap on him and began to wash his chest.

'You're looking fine this evening,' she said. 'They operated on you as soon as you came in. They did a marvellous job. You'll be all right. I've got a brother in the RAF,'* she added. 'Flying bombers.'

* RAF: (British) Royal Air Force

He said, 'I went to school in Brighton.'

She looked up quickly. 'Well, that's fine,' she said. 'I expect you'll know some people in the town.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I know quite a few.'

She had finished washing his chest and arms. Now she turned back the bedclothes so that his left leg was uncovered. She did it in such a way that the rest of his injured leg remained under the sheets. She took his pyjama trousers off and now began to wash his left leg and the rest of his body. This was the first time that he had had a bed-bath and he was embarrassed. She laid a towel under his leg and began washing his foot. She said, 'This soap is awful to use. It's the water. It's so hard.'

He said, 'None of the soap is very good now and, of course, with hard water it's hopeless.' As he said it he remembered something. He remembered the baths which he used to take at school in Brighton. He remembered how the water was so soft that you had to take a shower afterwards to get all the soap off your body. He remembered that sometimes the school doctor used to say that soft water was bad for your teeth.

'In Brighton,' he said, 'the water isn't . . .'

He did not finish the sentence. He had thought of something; something so unbelievable that for a moment he felt like telling the nurse about it and having a good laugh.

She looked up. 'The water isn't what?' she said.

'Nothing,' he answered. 'I was dreaming.'

She wiped the soap off his leg and dried him with a towel.

'It's nice to be washed,' he said. 'I feel better.'

That night he could not sleep. He lay awake thinking of the German aircraft and of the hardness of the water. He could think of nothing else. They were German, he said to himself. I know they were. But it is not possible, because they would not be flying around so low over here in daylight. I know that it is true, and at the same time I know that it is impossible. Perhaps I am ill.

Perhaps I am imagining all this. For a long time he lay awake thinking these things, and once he sat up in bed and said aloud, 'I will prove that I am not crazy,' but before he had time to think any more, he was asleep.

He woke just as the first light of day was showing through the gap in the curtains at the window. He remembered the Junkers 88 and the hardness of the water; he remembered the large pleasant nurse and the kind doctor, and now the doubt in his mind began to grow.

He looked around the room. The nurse had taken the roses out the night before. There was nothing except the table with a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. The room was bare. It was no longer warm or friendly. It was not even comfortable. It was cold and empty and very quiet.

His doubt and fear grew so that he became restless and angry. It was the kind of fear one gets not because one is afraid but because one feels that there is something wrong. He knew that he must do something; that he must find some way of proving to himself that he was either right or wrong, and he looked up and saw again the window and the green curtains. From where he lay, that window was right in front of him, but it was ten metres away. Somehow he must reach it and look out. The idea took hold of him and soon he could think of nothing except the window. But what about his leg? He put his hand underneath the bedclothes and felt the bandages around what remained of his right leg. It seemed all right. It didn't hurt. But it would not be easy.

He sat up. Then he pushed the bedclothes away and put his left leg on the floor. Slowly, carefully, he swung his body over until he had both hands on the floor as well; then he was out of bed, kneeling on the carpet. He looked at what remained of his right leg, wrapped in bandages. It was beginning to hurt. He wanted to lie down on the carpet and do nothing, but he knew that he must go on.

With two arms and one leg, he crawled over towards the window. He would reach forward as far as he could with his arms, then he would jump and slide his left leg along after them. It was painful but he continued to crawl across the floor on two hands and one knee. When he got to the window he reached up, and one at a time he placed both hands on the sill. Slowly he raised himself up until he was standing on his left leg. Then quickly he opened the curtains and looked out.

He saw a small house standing alone beside a narrow lane, and behind it there was a field. In front of the house there was an untidy garden, and there was a green hedge separating the garden from the lane. He was looking at the hedge when he saw the sign. It was just a piece of board nailed to the top of a short pole, and because the hedge had not been cut for a long time the branches had grown out around the sign so that it seemed almost as if it had been placed in the middle of the hedge. There was something written on the board with white paint. He pressed his head against the glass of the window, trying to read what it said. The first letter was a G, he could see that. The second was an A, and the third was an R. One after another he managed to see what the letters were. There were three words, and slowly he spelled the letters out aloud to himself as he managed to read them. G-A-R-D-E A-U C-H-I-E-N, *Garde au chien*. * That is what it said.

He stood there balancing on one leg and holding tightly to the edges of the window sill with his hands, staring at the sign and the letters of the words. For a moment he could think of nothing at all. He stood there looking at the sign, repeating the words to himself. Slowly he began to realize the full meaning of the thing. He looked at the cottage and the field and he looked at the green countryside beyond. 'So this is France,' he said. 'I am in France.'

* *Garde au chien*: Beware of the dog in French.

Now the pain in his right side was very great. It felt as if someone was hitting the end of his missing leg with a hammer and suddenly the pain became so bad that it affected his head. For a moment he thought he was going to fall. Quickly he knelt down again, crawled back to the bed and got in. He pulled the bedclothes over himself and lay back on the pillow, exhausted. He could not forget the words on the sign.

It was some time before the nurse came in, with a basin of hot water. She said, 'Good morning, how are you today?'

He said, 'Good morning, nurse.'

The pain was still great under the bandages, but he did not wish to tell this woman anything. He looked at her more carefully now. Her hair was very fair. She was tall and big-boned and her face seemed pleasant. But there was something a little nervous about her eyes. They were never still. There was something about her movements also. They were too sharp to go well with the relaxed manner in which she spoke.

She put down the basin, took off his pyjama top and began to wash him.

'Did you sleep well?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' she said. She was washing his chest. 'Someone's coming to see you from the Air Ministry after breakfast,' she went on. 'They want a report. How you got shot down and all that. I won't let him stay long, so don't worry.'

Later she brought him his breakfast but he did not want to eat. He was still feeling weak and sick and he wished only to lie still and think about what had happened. And there was a sentence running through his head. It was a sentence which Johnny, his commanding officer, always repeated to the pilots every day before they went out. He could see Johnny now saying, 'And if they get you, don't forget, only give your name and number. Nothing else. For God's sake, say nothing else.'

'There you are,' she said. 'I've got you an egg. Can you manage all right?'

'Yes.'

'Good. If you want another egg, I might be able to get you one.'

'This is all right.'

'Well, just ring the bell if you want any more.' And she went out.

He had just finished eating when the nurse came in again.

She said, 'Wing Commander Roberts is here. I've told him that he can only stay for a few minutes.' She signalled with her hand and the Wing Commander came in.

'Sorry to bother you like this,' he said.

He was an ordinary RAF officer, dressed in a rather badly fitting uniform. As he spoke he took a printed form and a pencil from his pocket and he pulled up a chair and sat down.

'How are you feeling?'

There was no answer.

'Pity about your leg. I know how you feel. I hear you fought well before they got you.'

The man in the bed was lying quite still, watching the man in the chair.

The man in the chair said, 'Well, let's finish this quickly. I'm afraid you'll have to answer a few questions so that I can fill in my report. Let me see now, first of all, where had you flown from?'

The man in the bed did not move. He looked straight at the Wing Commander and he said, 'My name is Peter Williamson and my number is nine seven two four five seven.'