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SHERLOCK HOLMES



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COMING SOON:

The
further
adventures of
SHERLOCK
HOLMES

THE PEERLESS PEER

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PHILIP JOSE FARMER

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WITH AFTERWORD BY WIN SCOTT ECKERT

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Dedicated to Samuel Rosenberg, who has embroidered
for the world the greatest Doyle ever.

All the characters in this book are real;
any resemblance to fictional characters is
purely coincidental.

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Foreword



As everybody knows, Dr. Watson stored in a battered tin dispatch-box his manuscripts concerning the unpublished cases of Sherlock Holmes. This box was placed in the vaults of the bank of C and Co. at Charing Cross. Whatever hopes the world had that these papers would some day become public were destroyed when the bank was blasted into fragments during the bombings of World War II. It is said that Winston Churchill himself directed that the ruins be searched for the box but that no trace of it was found.

I am happy to report that this lack of success is no cause for regret. At a time and for reasons unknown, the box had been transferred to a little villa on the south slope of the Sussex Downs near the village of Fulworth. It was kept in a trunk in the attic of the villa. This, as everybody should know, was the residence of Holmes after he had retired. It is not known what eventually happened to the Greatest Detective. There is no record of his death. Even if there were, it would be disbelieved by the many who still think of him as a living person. This almost religious belief thrives though he would, still alive, be one hundred and twenty years old at the date of writing this foreword.

Whatever happened to Holmes, his villa was sold in the late 1950s to the seventeenth Duke of Denver. The box, with some other objects, was removed to the ducal estate in Norfolk. His Grace had intended to wait until after his death before the papers would be allowed to be published. However, His Grace, though eighty-four years old now, feels that he may live to be a hundred. The world has waited far too long, and it is certainly ready for anything, no matter how shocking, that may be Watson's narratives. The duke has given his consent to the publication of all but a few papers, and even these may see print if the descendants of certain people mentioned in them give their permission. Gratitude is due His Grace for this generous decision.

On hearing the good news, your editor communicated with the British agents handling the Watson papers and was fortunate enough to acquire the American Agency for them. The adventure at hand is the first to be released; others will follow from time to time.

Watson's holograph is obviously a first draft. A number of passages recording words actually uttered by the participants during this adventure are either crossed out or replaced with asterisks. The "peerless peer" of this tale is called "Greystoke," but on one occasion old habit broke through and Watson inadvertently wrote "Holderness." Watson left no note explaining why he had substituted one pseudotitle for another. He used "Holderness" in "The Adventure of the Priory School" to conceal the identity of Holmes' noble client. Holmes himself, in his reference to the nobleman in his "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier," used the pseudotitle of "Greyminster."

It is your editor's guess that Watson decided on "Greystoke" in this narrative because the pseudotitle had been made world-famous by the novels based on the African exploits of the nephew of the man Watson had called "Holderness."

The adventure at hand is singular for many reasons. It reveals that Holmes was not allowed to stay in retirement after the events of "His Last Bow." We are made aware that Holmes made a second visit to Africa, going far beyond Khartoum (though not willingly), and so saved Great Britain from the greatest danger which has ever threatened it. We are given some illumination on the careers of the two greatest American aviators and spies in the early years of World War I. We learn that Watson was married for the fourth time, and the destruction of a civilization rivaling ancient Egypt is recorded for the first time. Holmes' contribution to apiology and how he used it to save himself and others is related herein. This narrative also describes how Holmes' genius at deduction enabled him to clear up a certain discrepancy that has puzzled the more discerning readers of the works of Greystoke. American biographer.

Some aspects of this discrepancy are revealed by Lord Greystoke himself in "Extracts from the Memoirs of Lord Greystoke," *Mother Was a Lovely Beast*, Philip José Farmer, editor, Chilton, October, 1974. However, this revelation is only a minor part of Watson's chronicle, one among many mysteries solved, and this account presents the mystery from a somewhat different viewpoint.

Your editor decided for these reasons to leave this explanation in this work. Besides, your editor would not dream of tampering with any part of the Sacred Writings.

— Philip José Farmer



It is with a light heart that I take up my pen to write these the last words in which I shall ever record the singular genius which distinguished my friend Sherlock Holmes. I realise that I once wrote something to that effect, though at that time my heart was as heavy as it could possibly be. The time I am certain that Holmes has retired for the last time. At least, he has sworn that he will no more go a-detectiving. The case of the peerless peer has made him financially secure, and he foresees no more grave perils menacing our country now that our great enemy has been laid low. Moreover, he has sworn that never again will he set foot on any soil but that of his native land. Nor will he ever again get near an aircraft. The mere sight or sound of one freezes his blood.

The peculiar adventure which occupies these pages began on the second day of February, 1914. At this time I was, despite my age, serving on the staff of a military hospital in London. Zeppelins had made bombing raids over England for two nights previously, mainly in the Midlands. Though they were comparatively ineffective, seventy people had been killed, one hundred and thirteen injured, and a monetary damage of fifty-three thousand eight hundred and thirty-two pounds had been inflicted. These raids were the latest in a series starting the nineteenth of January. There was no panic, of course, but even stout British hearts were experiencing some uneasiness. There were rumours, no doubt originated by German agents, that the Kaiser intended to send across the channel a fleet of one thousand airships. I was discussing this rumour with my young friend, Dr. Fell, over a brandy in my quarters when a knock sounded on the door. I opened it to admit a messenger. He handed me a telegram which I wasted no time in reading.

“Great Scott!” I cried.

“What is it, my dear fellow?” Fell said, heaving himself from the chair. Even then, on occasions, he was putting on overly much weight.

“A summons to the F.O.,” I said. “From Holmes. And I am on special leave.”

“Sherlock?” said Fell.

“No, Mycroft,” I replied. Minutes later, having packed my few belongings, I was being driven in a limousine toward the Foreign Office. An hour later, I entered the small austere room in which the massive Mycroft Holmes sat like a great spider spinning the web that ran throughout the British Empire and many alien lands. There were two others present, both of whom I knew. One was young Merrivale, a baronet’s son, the brilliant aide to the head of the British Military Intelligence Department and soon to assume the chieftainship. He was also a qualified physician and had been one of my students when I was lecturing at Bart’s. Mycroft claimed that Merrivale was capable of

rivalling Holmes himself in the art of detection and would not be far behind Mycroft himself. Holmes reply to this “needling” was that only practise revealed true promise.

I wondered what Merrivale was doing away from the War Office but had no opportunity to voice my question. The sight of the second person there startled me at the same time it delighted me. It had been over a year since I had seen that tall, gaunt figure with the greying hair and the unforgettable hawklike profile.

“My dear Holmes,” I said. “I had thought that after the Von Bork affair...”

“The east wind has become appallingly cold, Watson,” he said. “Duty recognises no age limit and so I am called from my bees to serve our nation once more.”

Looking even more grim, he added, “The Von Bork business is not over. I fear that we underestimated the fellow because we so easily captured him. He is not always taken with such facility. Our government erred grievously in permitting him to return to Germany with Von Herling. He should have faced a firing squad. A motor-car crash in Germany after his return almost did for us what we had failed to do, according to reports that have recently reached me. But, except for permanent injury to his left eye, he has recovered.

“Mycroft tells me that Von Bork has done, and is doing, us inestimable damage. Our intelligence tells us that he is operating in Cairo, Egypt. But just where in Cairo and what disguise he has assumed is not known.”

“The man is indeed dangerous,” Mycroft said, reaching with a hand as ponderous as a grizzly paw for his snuff-box. “It is no exaggeration to say that he is the most dangerous man in the world, far as the Allies are concerned, anyway.”

“Greater than Moriarty was?” Holmes said, his eyes lighting up.

“Much greater,” replied Mycroft. He breathed in the snuff, sneezed, and wiped his jacket with a large red handkerchief. His watery grey eyes had lost their inward-turning look and burned as if they were searchlights probing the murkiness around a distant target.

“Von Bork has stolen the formula of a Hungarian refugee scientist employed by our government in Cairo. The scientist recently reported to his superiors the results of certain experiments he had been making on a certain type of bacillus peculiar to the land of the Pharaohs. He had discovered that the bacillus could be modified by chemical means to eat only sauerkraut. When a single bacillus was placed upon sauerkraut, it multiplied at a fantastic rate. It would become within sixty minutes a colony which would consume a pound of sauerkraut to its last molecule.

“You see the implications. The bacillus is what the scientists call a mutated type. After treatment with a certain chemical both its form and function are changed. Should we drop vials containing the mutation in Germany, or our agents directly introduce the germs, the entire nation would shortly become sauerkrautless. Both their food supply and their morale would be devastated.

“But Von Bork somehow got wind of this, stole the formula, destroyed the records and the

chemicals with fire, and murdered the only man who knew how to mutate the bacillus.

“However, his foul deed was no sooner committed than detected. A tight cordon was thrown around Cairo, and we have reason to believe that Von Bork is hiding in the native quarter somewhere. We can’t keep that net tight for long, my dear Sherlock, and that is why you must be gotten there quickly so you can track him down. England expects much from you, brother, and much, I am sure, will be given.”

I turned to Holmes, who looked as shaken as I felt. “Surely, my dear fellow, we are not going to Cairo?”

“Surely indeed, Watson,” he replied. “Who else could sniff out the Teutonic fox, who else could trap him? We are not so old that we cannot settle Von Bork’s hash once and for all.”

Holmes, I observed, was still in the habit of using Americanisms, I suppose because he had thrown himself so thoroughly into the role of an Irish-American while tracking down Von Bork in the adventure which I have titled “His Last Bow.”

“Unless,” he said, sneering, “you really feel that the old warhorse should not leave his comfortable pasture?”

“I am as good a man as I was a year and a half ago,” I protested. “Have you ever known me call it quits?”

He chuckled and patted my shoulder, a gesture so rare that my heart warmed.

“Good old Watson.”

Mycroft called for cigars, and while we were lighting up, he said, “You two will leave tonight from a Royal Naval Air Service strip outside London. You will be flown by two stages to Cairo, by two different pilots, I should say. The fliers have been carefully selected because their cargo will be precious. The Huns may already know your destination. If they do, they will make desperate efforts to intercept you, but our fliers are the pick of the lot. They are fighter pilots, but they will be flying bombers. The first pilot, the man who’ll take you under his wing tonight, is a young fellow. Actually, he is only seventeen, he lied to get into the service, but officially he is eighteen. He has downed several enemy planes in two weeks and done yeoman service in landing our agents behind enemy lines. You may know of him, at least you knew his great-uncle.”

He paused and said, “You remember, of course, the late Duke of Greystoke?”¹

“I will never forget the size of the fee I collected from him,” Holmes said, and he chuckled.

“Your pilot, Lieutenant John Drummond, is the adopted son of the present Lord Greystoke,” Mycroft continued.

“But wait!” I said. “Haven’t I heard some rather strange things about Lord Greystoke? Doesn’t he live in Africa?”

“Oh, yes, in darkest Africa,” Mycroft said. “In a tree house, I believe.”

“Lord Greystoke lives in a tree house?” I said.

“Ah, yes,” Mycroft said. “Greystoke is living in a tree house with an ape. At least, that’s one of the rumours I’ve heard.”

“Lord Greystoke is living with an ape?” I said. “A female ape, I trust.”

“Oh, yes,” Mycroft said. “There’s nothing queer about Lord Greystoke, you know.”²

“But surely,” I said, “this Lord Greystoke can’t be the son of the old duke? Not the Lord Saltire, the duke’s son, whom we rescued from kidnappers in the adventure of the Priory School?”

Holmes was suddenly as keen as an eagle that detects a lamb. He stooped toward his brother saying, “Hasn’t some connexion been made between His Grace and the hero of that fantastic novel by that American writer — what’s-his-name? — Bayrows? Borrowes? Isn’t the Yank’s protagonist modelled somewhat after Lord Greystoke? The book only came out in the States in June of 1914, I believe, and so very few copies have gotten here because of the blockade. But I’ve heard rumours of it. I believe that His Grace could sue for libel, slander, defamation of character and much else if he chooses to notice the novel.”

“I really don’t know,” Mycroft said. “I never read fiction.”

“By the Lord Harry!” Merrivale said. “I do! I’ve read the book, a rattling good yarn but wild and woolly. This heir to an English peerage is adopted by a female ape and raised with a tribe of wild and woolly...”

Mycroft slammed his palm against the top of the table, startling all of us and making me wonder what had caused this unheard-of violence from the usually phlegmatic Mycroft.

“Enough of this time-wasting chitchat about an unbalanced peer and an excessively imaginative Yankee writer!” he said. “The Empire is crumbling around our ears and we’re talking as if we’re in a pub and all’s well with the world!”

He was right, of course, and all of us, including Holmes, I’m sure, felt abashed. But the conversation was not as irrelevant as we thought at the time.

An hour later, after receiving verbal instructions from Mycroft and Merrivale, we left in the limousine for the secret airstrip outside London.



Our chauffeur drove off the highway onto a narrow dirt road which wound through a dense wood of oaks. After a half a mile, during which we passed many signs warning trespassers that this was military property, we were halted by a barbed wire gate across the road. Armed R.N.A.S. guards checked our documents and then waved us on. Ten minutes later, we emerged from the woods onto a very large meadow. At its northern end was a tall hill, the lower part of which gaped as if it had a mouth which was open with surprise. The surprise was that the opening was not to a cavern at all but to a hangar which had been hollowed out of the living rock of the hill. As we got out of the car, we pushed from the hangar a huge aeroplane, the wings of which were folded against the fuselage.

After that, events proceeded swiftly — too swiftly for me, I admit, and perhaps a trifle too swiftly for Holmes. After all, we had been born about a half century before the first aeroplane had flown. We were not sure that the motor-car, a recent invention from our viewpoint, was altogether a beneficial device. And here we were being conducted by a commodore toward the monstrously large aircraft. Within a few minutes, according to him, we would be within its fuselage and leaving the good earth behind and beneath us.

Even as we walked toward it, its biplanes were unfolded and locked into place. By the time we reached it, its propellers had been spun by mechanics and the two motors had caught fire. Thunder rolled from its rotaries, and flame spat from its exhausts.

Whatever Holmes' true feelings, and his skin was rather grey, he could not suppress his driving curiosity, his need to know all that was relevant. However, he had to shout at the commodore to be heard above the roar of the warming-up motors.

“The Admiralty ordered it to be outfitted for your use,” the commodore said. His expression told us that he thought that we must be very special people indeed if this aeroplane was equipped just for us.

“It's the prototype model of the Handley Page 0/100,” he shouted. “The first of the ‘blood-paralyser of an aeroplane’ the Admiralty ordered for the bombing of Germany. It has two 250-horsepower Rolls-Royce Eagle H motors, as you see. It has an enclosed crew cabin. The engine nacelles and the front part of the fuselage were armour-plated, but the armour has been removed to give the craft more speed.”

“What?” Holmes yelled. “Removed?”

“Yes,” the commodore said. “It shouldn't make any difference to you. You'll be in the cabin, and it was never armour-plated.”

Holmes and I exchanged glances. The commodore continued, "Extra petrol tanks have been installed to give the craft extended range. These will be just forward of the cabin..."

"And if we crash?" Holmes said.

"Poof!" the commodore said, smiling, "No pain, my dear sir. If the smash doesn't kill you, the flaming petrol sears the lungs and causes instantaneous death. The only difficulty is in identifying the corpse. Charred, you know,"

We climbed up a short flight of wooden mobile steps and stepped into the cabin. The commodore closed the door, thus somewhat muting the roar. He pointed out the bunks that had been installed for our convenience and the W.C. This contained a small washbowl with a gravity-feed water tank and several thunder-mugs bolted to the deck.³

"The prototype can carry a four-man crew," the commodore said. "There is, as you have observed, a cockpit for the nose gunner, with the pilot in a cockpit directly behind him. There is a cockpit near the rear for another machine gunner, and there is a trap-door through which a machine gun may be pointed to cover the rear area under the plane. You are standing on the trap-door."

Holmes and I moved away, though not, I trust, with unseemly haste.

"We estimate that with its present load the craft can fly at approximately 85 miles per hour. Under ideal conditions, of course. We have decided to eliminate the normal armament of machine guns in order to lighten the load. In fact, to this end, all of the crew except the pilot and co-pilot are eliminated. The pilot, I believe, is bringing his personal arms: a dagger, several pistols, a carbine, and his specially mounted Spandau machine gun, a trophy, by the way, taken from a Fokker E-1 which Captain Wentworth downed when he dropped an ash-tray on the pilot's head. Wentworth has also brought in several cases of hand grenades and a case of Scotch whisky."

The door, or port, or whatever they call a door in the Royal Naval Air Service; opened, and a young man of medium height, but with very broad shoulders and a narrow waist, entered. He wore the uniform of the R.N.A.S. He was a handsome young man with eyes as steely grey and as magnetic as Holmes'. There was also something strange about them. If I had known how strange, I would have stepped off that plane at that very second. Holmes would have preceded me.

He shook hands with us and spoke a few words. I was astonished to hear a flat mid-western American accent. When Wentworth had disappeared on some errand toward the stern, Holmes asked the commodore, "Why wasn't a British pilot assigned to us? No doubt this Yank volunteer is quite capable, but really..."

"There is only one pilot who can match Wentworth's aerial genius. He is an American in the service of the Tsar. The Russians know him as Kentov, though that is not his real name. They refer to him with the honorific of *Chorniy Oryol*, the French call him *l'Aigle Noir* and the Germans are offering a hundred thousand marks for *Der Schwarz Adler*, dead or alive."

"Is he a Negro?" I said.

“No, the adjective refers to his sinister reputation,” replied the commodore. “Kentov will take you on from Marseilles. Your mission is so important that we borrowed him from the Russian. Wentworth is being used only for the comparatively short haul since he is scheduled to carry out another mission soon. If you should crash, and survive, he would be able to guide you through enemy territory better than anyone we know of, excluding Kentov. Wentworth is an unparalleled master of disguise...”

“Really?” Holmes said, drawing himself up and frostily regarding the officer.

Aware that he had made a gaffe, the commodore changed the subject. He showed us how to do with the bulky parachutes, which were to be kept stored under a bunk.

“What happened to young Drummond?” I asked him. “Lord Greystoke’s adopted son? Wasn’t he supposed to be our pilot?”

“Oh, he’s in hospital,” he said, smiling. “Nothing serious. Several broken ribs and clavicle, liver that may be ruptured, a concussion and possible fracture of the skull. The landing gear of his craft collapsed as he was making a deadstick landing, and he slid into a brick wall. He sends his regards.”

Captain Wentworth suddenly reappeared. Muttering to himself, he looked under our blankets and sheets and then under the bunks. Holmes said, “What is it, captain?”

Wentworth straightened up and looked at us with those strange grey eyes. “Thought I heard bats,” he said. “Wings fluttering. Giant bats. But no sign of them.”

He left the cabin then, heading down a narrow tunnel which had been specially installed so that the pilot could get into the cockpit without having to go outside the craft. His co-pilot, a Lieutenant Nelson, had been warming the motors. The commodore left a minute later after wishing us luck. He looked as if he thought we’d need it.

Presently, Wentworth phoned in to us and told us to lie down in the bunks or grab hold of something solid. We were getting ready to take off. We got into the bunks, and I stared at the ceiling while the plane slowly taxied to the starting point, the motors were “revved” up, and then it began to bump along the meadow. Within a short time its tail had lifted and we were suddenly aloft. Neither Holmes nor I could endure just lying there any more. We had to get up and look through the window in the door. The sight of the earth dropping away in the dusk, of houses, cows, horses and waggon and brooks and then the Thames itself dwindling, dwindling caused us to be both uneasy and exhilarated.

Holmes was still grey, but I am certain that it was not fear of altitude that affected him. It was being completely dependent upon someone else, being not in control of the situation. On the ground Holmes was his own master. Here his life and limb were in the hands of two strangers, one of whom had already impressed us as being very strange. It also became obvious only too soon that Holmes, no matter how steely his nerves and how calm his digestion on earth, was subject to airsickness.

The plane flew on and on, crossing the channel in the dark, crossing the westerly and then the southwestern part of France. We landed on a strip lighted with flames. Holmes wanted to get out and stretch his legs but Wentworth forbade that.

“Who knows what’s prowling around here, waiting to identify you and then to crouch and leap and destroy utterly?” he said.

After he had gone back to the cockpit, I said, “Holmes, don’t you think he puts the possibility of spies in somewhat strange language? And didn’t you smell Scotch on his breath? Should a pilot drink while flying?”

“Frankly,” Holmes said, “I’m too sick to care,” and he lay down outside the door to the W.C.

Midnight came with the great plane boring through the dark moonless atmosphere. Lt. Nelson crawled into his bunk with the cheery comment that we would be landing at a drome outside Marseilles by dawn. Holmes groaned. I bade the fellow, who seemed quite a decent sort, good-night. Presently I fell asleep, but I awoke some time later with a start. As an old veteran of Holmes’ campaigns, however, I knew better than to reveal my awakened state. While I rolled over to one side as if I were doing it in my sleep, I watched through narrowed eyes.

A sound, or a vibration, or perhaps it was an old veteran’s sixth sense, had awakened me. Across the aisle, illumined by the single bulb overhead, stood Lt. Nelson. His handsome youthful face bore an expression which the circumstances certainly did not seem to call for. He looked so malignant that my heart began thumping and perspiration poured out from me despite the cold outside the blankets. His hand was a revolver, and when he lifted it my heart almost stopped. But he did not turn toward me. Instead he started toward the front end, toward the narrow tunnel leading to the pilot’s cockpit.

Since his back was to me, I leaned over the edge of the bunk and reached down to get hold of Holmes. I had no need to warn him. Whatever his physical condition, he was still the same alert fox - an old fox, it is true, but still a fox. His hand reached up and touched mine, and within a few seconds he was out of the bunk and on his feet. In his one hand he held his trusty Webley, which he raised to point at Nelson’s back, crying out to halt at the same time.

I do not know if he heard Holmes above the roar of the motors. If he did, he did not have time to consider it. There was a report, almost inaudible in the din, and Nelson fell back and slid a few feet along the floor backward. Blood gushed from his forehead.

The dim light fell on the face of Captain Wentworth, whose eyes seemed to blaze, though I am certain that was an optical illusion. The face was momentarily twisted, and then it smoothed out, and he stepped out into the light. I got down from the bunk and with Holmes approached him. Close to him, I could smell the heavy, though fragrant, odour of excellent Scotch on his breath.

Wentworth looked at the revolver in Holmes’ hand, smiled, and said, “So — you are not overrated, Mr. Holmes! But I was waiting for him, I expected him to sneak in upon me while I should be concentrating on the instrument board. He thought he’d blow my a*s off!”

“He is, of course, a German spy,” Holmes said. “But how did you determine that he was?”

“I suspect everybody,” Wentworth replied. “I kept my eye on him, and when I saw him talking over the wireless, I listened in. It was too noisy to hear clearly, but he was talking in German. I caught several words, *schwanz* and *schweinhund*. Undoubtedly, he was informing the Imperial German Military Aviation Service of our location. If he didn’t kill me, then we would be shot down. The Hun must be on their way to intercept us now.”

This was alarming enough, but both Holmes and I were struck at the same time with a far more disturbing thought. Holmes as usual, was more quick in his reactions. He screamed, “Who’s flying the plane?”

Wentworth smiled lazily and said, “Nobody. Don’t worry. The controls are connected to a little device I invented last month. As long as the air is smooth, the plane will fly on an even keel all by itself.”

He stiffened suddenly, cocked his head to one side, and said, “Do you hear it?”

“Great Scott, man!” I cried. “How could we hear anything above the infernal racket of those motors?”

“Cockroaches!” Wentworth bellowed. “Giant flying cockroaches! That evil scientist has released another horror upon the world!”

He whirled, and he was gone into the blackness of the tunnel.

Holmes and I stared at each other. Then Holmes said, “We are at the mercy of a madman, Watson. And there is nothing we can do until we have landed.”

“We could parachute out,” I said.

“I would prefer not to,” Holmes said stiffly. “Besides, it somehow doesn’t seem cricket. The pilots have no parachutes, you know. These two were provided only because we are civilians.”

“I wasn’t planning on asking Wentworth to ride down with me,” I mumbled, somewhat ashamed of myself for saying this.

Holmes didn’t hear me; once again his stomach was trying to reject contents that did not exist.

Three



Shortly after dawn, the German planes struck. These, as I was told later, were Fokker E-III single-seater monoplanes equipped with two Spandau machine guns. These were synchronised with the propellers to shoot bullets through the empty spaces between the whirling of the propeller blades.

Holmes was sitting on the floor, holding his head and groaning, and I was commiserating with him, though getting weary of his complaints, when the telephone bell rang. I removed the receiver from the box attached to the wall, or bulkhead, or whatever they call it. Wentworth's voice bellowed, "Put on the parachutes and hang on to something tight! Twelve ****ing Fokkers, a whole staff coming in at eleven o'clock!"

I misunderstood him. I said, "Yes, but what type of plane are they?"

"Fokkers!" he cried, adding, "No, no! My eyes played tricks on me. They're giant flying cockroaches! Each one is being ridden by a Prussian officer, helmeted and goggled and armed with a boarding cutlass!"

"What did you say?" I screamed into the phone, but it had been disconnected.

I told Holmes what Wentworth had said, and he forgot about being airsick, though he looked no better than before. We staggered out to the door and looked through its window.

The night was now brighter than day, the result of flares thrown out from the attacking aeroplanes. Their pilots intended to use the light to line up the sights of their machine guns on our helpless craft. Then, as if that were not bad enough, shells began exploding, some so near that our aeroplane shuddered and rocked under the impact of the blasts. Giant searchlights began playing about, some of them illuminating monoplanes with black crosses on their fuselages.

"Archy!" I exclaimed. "The French anti-aircraft guns are firing at the Huns! The fools! They could hit us just as well!"

Something flashed by. We lost sight of it, but a moment later we saw a fighter diving down toward us through the glare of the flares and the searchlights, ignoring the bursting shells around us. Two tiny red eyes flickered behind the propeller, but it was not until holes were suddenly punched in the fabric only a few feet from us that we realised that those were the muzzles of the machine guns. We dropped to the floor while the great plane rolled and dipped and rose and dropped and we were shot this way and that across the floor and against the bulkheads.

"We're doomed!" I cried to Holmes. "Get the parachutes on! He can't shoot back at the plane and our plane is too slow and clumsy to get away!"

How wrong I was. And what a demon that madman was. He did things with that big lumbering aeroplane that I wouldn't have believed possible. Several times we were upside down and we only kept from being smashed, like mice shaken in a tin, by hanging on desperately to the bunkposts.

Once, Holmes, whose sense of hearing was somewhat keener than mine, said, "Watson, isn't the aeroplane shooting a machine gun? How can he fly this plane, put it through such manoeuvres, and still operate a weapon which he must hold in both hands to use effectively?"

"I don't know," I confessed. At that moment both of us were dangling from the post, falling only because of our tight grip. The plane was on its left side. Through the window beneath my feet I saw a German plane, smoke trailing from it, fall away. And then another followed it, becoming a ball of flame about a thousand feet or so from the ground.

The Handley Page righted itself, and I heard faint thumping noises overhead, followed by the chatter of a machine gun. Something exploded very near us and wreckage drifted by the window.

This shocked me, but even more shocking was the rapping on the window. This, to my astonishment, originated from a fist hammering on the door. I crawled over to it and stood up and looked through it. Upside down, staring at me through the isinglass, was Wentworth's face. His lips formed the words, "Open the door! Let me in!"

Numbly, I obeyed. A moment later, with an acrobatic skill that I still find incredible, he swung through the door. In one hand he held a Spandau with a rifle stock. A moment later, while I held on to his waist, he had closed the door and shut out the cold shrilling blast of wind.

"There they are!" he yelled, and he pointed the machine gun at a point just past Holmes, lying on the floor, and sent three short bursts past Holmes' ear.

Holmes said, "Really, old fellow..." Wentworth, raving, ran past him and a moment later we heard the chatter of the Spandau again.

"At least, he's back in the cockpit," Holmes said weakly. However, this was one of the times when Holmes was wrong. A moment later the captain was back. He opened the trap-door, poked the barrel of his weapon through, let loose a single burst, said, "Got you, you ****ing son of a *****" closed the trap-door, and ran back toward the front.

Forty minutes later, the plane landed on a French military aerodrome outside of Marseilles. The fuselage and wings were perforated with bullet holes in a hundred places, though fortunately no missiles had struck the petrol tanks. The French commander who inspected the plane pointed out that more of the holes were made by a gun firing from the inside than from guns firing from the outside.

"Damn right!" Wentworth said. "The cockroaches and their allies, the flying leopards, were crawling all over inside the plane! They almost got these two old men!"

A few minutes later a British medical officer arrived. Wentworth, after fiercely fighting six men, was subdued and put into a straitjacket and carried off in an ambulance.

Wentworth was not the only one raving. Holmes, his pale face twisted, his fists clenched, was

cursing his brother Mycroft, young Merrivale, and everyone else who could possibly be responsible excepting, of course, His Majesty.

We were taken to an office occupied by several French and British officers of very high rank. The highest, General Chatson-Dawes-Overleigh, said, "Yes, my dear Mr. Holmes, we realise that he sometimes has these hallucinatory fits. Becomes quite mad, to be frank. But he is the best pilot and also the best espionage agent we have, even if he is a Colonial, and he has done heroic work for us. He never hallucinates negatively, that is, he never harms his fellows — though he did shoot an Italian once, but the fellow *was* only a private and he *was* an Italian and it *was* an accident — and so we feel that we must permit him to work for us. We can't permit a word of his condition to get back to the civilian populace, of course, so I must require you to swear silence about the whole affair. Which you would have to do as a matter of course, and, of course, of patriotism. He'll be given a little rest cure, drying-out, too, and then returned to duty. Britain sorely needs him."⁴ Holmes raved some more, but he always was one to face realities and to govern himself accordingly. Even so, he could not resist making some sarcastic remarks about his life, which was also extremely valuable, being put into the care of a homicidal maniac. At last, cooling down, he said, "And the pilot who will fly us to Egypt? Is he also an irresponsible madman? Will we be in more danger from him than from the enemy?"

"He is said to be every bit as good a pilot as Wentworth," the general said. "He is an American.."

"Great Scott!" Holmes said. He groaned, and he added, "Why can't we have a pilot of good British stock, tried and true?"

"Both Wentworth and Kentov are of the best British stock," Overleigh said stiffly. "They're descended from some of the oldest and noblest stock of England. They have royal blood in them, as a matter of fact. But they happen to be Colonials. The man who will fly you from here has been working for His Majesty's cousin, the Tsar of all the Russias, as an espionage agent. The Tsar was kind enough to loan both him and one of the great Sikorski *Ilya Mourometz* Type V aeroplanes to us. Kentov flew here in it with a full crew, and it is ready to take off."

Holmes' face became even paler, and I felt every minute of my sixty-four years of age. We were not to get a moment's rest, and yet we had gone through an experience which would have sent many youth to bed for several days.

Four



General Overleigh himself conducted us to the colossal Russian aeroplane. As we approached he described certain features in answer to Holmes' questions.

"So far, the only four-engined heavier-than-air craft in the world has been built by the Russians," he said. "Much to the shame of the British. The first one was built, and flown, in 1913. This, as you can see, is a biplane, fitted with wheels and a ski undercarriage. It has four 150-horsepower Sunbeam water-cooled Vee-type engines. The Sunbeam, unfortunately, leaves much to be desired."

"I would rather not have known that," I murmured. The sudden ashen hue of Holmes' face indicated that his reactions were similar to mine.

"Its wing span is 97 feet 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; the craft's length is 56 feet 1 inch; its height is 15 feet 5 and seven-eighths inches. Its maximum speed is 75 miles per hour; its operational ceiling is 9,843 feet. And its endurance is five hours — under ideal conditions. It carries a crew of five, though it can carry more. The rear fuselage is fitted with compartments for sleeping and eating."

Overleigh shook hands with us after he had handed us over to a Lieutenant Obrenov. The young officer led us up the steps into the fuselage and to the rear, where he showed us our compartment. Holmes chatted away with him in Russian, of which he had gained a certain mastery during his experience in Odessa with the Trepoff case. Holmes' insistence on speaking Russian seemed to annoy the officer somewhat, since, like all upper-class people of his country, he preferred to use French. But he was courteous, and after making sure we were comfortable, he bowed himself out. Certainly, we had little to complain about except possibly the size of the cabin. It had been prepared especially for us, had two swing-down beds, a thick rug which Holmes said was a genuine Persian, oil paintings on the walls which Holmes said were genuine Maleviches (I thought they were artistic nonsense), two comfortable chairs bolted to the deck, and a sideboard also bolted to the deck and holding alcohol beverages. In one corner was a tiny cubicle containing all the furniture and necessities that one finds in a W.C.

Holmes and I lit up the fine Cuban cigars we found in a humidor and poured out some Scotch whisky, Duggan's Dew of Kirkintilloch, I believe. Suddenly, both of us leaped into the air, spilling our drinks over our cuffs. Seemingly from nowhere, a tall figure had silently appeared. How he had done it, I do not know, since the door had been closed and under observation at all times by one or both of us.

Holmes groaned and said, under his breath, "Not another madman?"

The fellow certainly looked eccentric. He wore the uniform of a colonel of the Imperial Russian

Air Service, but he also wore a long black opera cloak and a big black slouch hat. From under his floppy brim burned two of the most magnetic and fear-inspiring eyes I have ever seen. My attention, however, was somewhat diverted from these by the size and the aquilinity of the nose beneath them. It could have belonged to Cyrano de Bergerac.⁵

I found that I had to sit down to catch my breath. The fellow introduced himself, in an Oxford accent, as Colonel Kentov. He had a surprisingly pleasant voice, deep, rich, and shot with authority. His drink was also heavily laced with Bourbon.

“Are you all right?” he said.

“I think so,” I said. “You gave me quite a start. A cloud seemed to pass over my mind. But I’m fine now, thank you.”

“I must go forward now,” he said, “but I’ve assigned a crew member, a tail gunner now but once a butler, to serve you. Just ring that bell beside you if you need him.”

And he was gone, though this time he opened the door. At least, I think he did.

“I fear, my dear fellow, that we are in for another trying time,” Holmes said.

Actually, the voyage seemed quite pleasant once one got used to the roar of the four motors and the nerve-shaking jack-out-of-the-box appearances of Kentov. The trip was to take approximately twenty-eight hours if all went well. The only time we landed was to refuel. About every four and a half hours, we put down at a hastily constructed landing strip to which petrol and supplies had been rushed by ship, air, or camel some days before. With the Mediterranean Sea on our left and the shores of North Africa below us, we sped toward Cairo at an amazing average speed of 70.3 miles per hour, according to our commander. While we sipped various liquors or liqueurs and smoked Havanas, we read to pass the time. Holmes commented several times that he could use a little cocaine to relieve the tedium, but I believe that he said that just to needle me. Holmes had brought along a work of his own authorship, the privately printed *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, With Some Observations Upon the Segregation of the Queen*. He had often urged me to read the results of his experience with his Sussex bees and so I now acceded to his urgings, mainly because all the other books available were in Russian.

I found it more interesting than I had expected, and I told Holmes so. This seemed to please him, though he had affected an air of indifference to my reaction before then.

“The techniques and tricks of apiculture are intriguing and complex enough,” he said. “But I was called away from a project which goes far beyond anything any apiculturist — scientist or not — has attempted. It is my theory that bees have a language and that they communicate such important information as the location of new clover, the approach of enemies, and so forth, by means of symbolic dancing. I was investigating this with a view to turning theory into fact when I got Mycroft’s wire.”

I sat up so suddenly that the ash dropped off my cigar onto my lap, and I was busy for a moment

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