

“It’s no good, I can’t stay here! I must do something! Come on. We’ll go over.” They got into her battered four-seater car.

Lady Laura, her face white, came running out of the club-house, and without a word jumped into the back seats.

They tore across the aerodrome, leaping from bump to bump, through a gap in the hedge that was a rutted cattle track, over more fields, down a long steady slope, until at last they came to rest beside the Ford.

The Bishop saw the golden head of Captain Randall bowed over an outstretched figure beside which he was kneeling. Standing beside him, their heads also bare, were Andy and Tommy Vane. Tommy’s hands were bleeding unregarded over the saw he held in them, the saw with which they had extricated Furnace....

Randall placed his handkerchief over the dead man’s head. As Sally came towards them he met her and put his hands on her shoulders. There was a deep pity in his regard.

“He was killed immediately, Sally,” he said gently. “The safety-belt must have broken on the impact, and his forehead was thrown against the dashboard.” His eyes met hers. “He must have died instantly,” he repeated. “Almost before he knew what had happened.”

They put the limp figure in the ambulance....

“If any of us could choose the manner of our death,” said the Bishop gravely to Sally a little later, “I think it would always be to die in the calling one had chosen—the sailor on the sea, the farmer at the plough, the pilot riding the air he strove to master.”

It was Tommy who dashed into town to get Dr. Bastable. Tommy returned in a dangerously short time, the tyres of his little red sports two-seater screeching as he drew up alongside the hangars.

“Bastable’s out on a case. I’ve left a message,” he said. “Perhaps I’d better get another fellow though? I could go over to Market Garringham for Murphy.”

“No, we’d better wait for Bastable,” answered Sally wearily. “He’s a member of the club and a pal of Furnace’s. I’d rather he did everything. Not that there’s anything to be done, anyway.”

Time passed, but the doctor did not appear. At last he sent a message saying that he was still waiting for a future citizen of Baston. Sally tacitly acknowledged that the claims of life were more important than those of death.

The Bishop, after an hour of this, thought Sally looked dreadfully tired and drawn. But she resolutely kept her vigil, and it was not until the afternoon that the Bishop could persuade her to give up her place and get something to eat.

Then the Bishop passed into the darkened room where lay the mortal remains of George Furnace. Sally rose as he came in, and a moment after the Bishop was left alone. He lifted the sheet which hid the face of the dead man and looked at it silently. In his twenty years of priesthood he had seen too many of the spent cases of human souls to be much perturbed by the sight of sudden death. But he felt that to gaze on what had once been the mirror of that soul, and still retained its impress, might bring him more closely in touch with the personality that was gone.

Death had been gentle with George Furnace. There was indeed a ghastly wound on the temple, but the scar whose contrast of colour had disfigured the living features now mingled with the livid hues of death. The Bishop bent closer. Was it a trick of the light? No. Death had frozen on the face of the dead man an expression not of horror, or fear, but of melancholy, despairful reproach.

“Strange,” said the Bishop. He meditated for a while, not replacing the sheet. Uncontrollably his thoughts went straying from the inspiring phraseology that should have occupied his mind to more questionable matters. The Bishop was by calling a clergyman, but because of the variety of duties that had fallen to his lot as a clergyman in lonely parishes in Australia, he was by way of being also a physician. And something in the tension of the features, as well as their expression, instantly aroused his curiosity.

At last he leaned over, raised the dead man’s hand vertically, and let it fall. It curled limply on to his chest and slid to his side again.

The Bishop felt a thin shadow of horror, as if for a moment the forces of evil had invaded the room. Reverently he replaced the sheet, covering the dead man’s face. The deepening shadows of the room found a more than answering depth in the sombre reflection of the Bishop’s countenance.

More hours passed. Evening fell. Outside the Bishop heard Bastable’s hearty tones, modified by professional concern. “Dreadful, Miss Sackbut! George, of all people! Such a fine pilot. I am so sorry I could not get here before. But he was killed instantaneously I understand, poor fellow!”

Dr. Bastable glanced at the Bishop without speaking, and gave a perfunctory peer at the forehead of the dead man. “Tut-tut! Most certainly instantaneous! Well, well!”

The Bishop walked quietly out.

CHAPTER III

INQUEST ON AN AIRMAN

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The Ground Engineer's Evidence.

"I am a ground engineer. My name is Andy Ness. I have been employed by the Baston Aero Club ever since it began ten years ago. I hold Ground Engineer's Licences A, B, C, and D. I passed out the aeroplane XT after its annual overhaul for a Certificate of Airworthiness five days before the accident. Of course I examined the control cables. They had been renewed during the overhaul, and were in perfect condition. The aeroplane had been flown for ten hours after the overhaul by various people without complaint.

"I knew Major Furnace well. No, I know nothing of his home life. I mean I saw a lot of him at the club. I hadn't noticed anything unusual in his manner lately. He seemed quite cheerful before he took XT up. He only took her up to amuse himself for a few minutes, I thought. He often did that first thing in the day. He said it cleared his head. He never allowed his pupils to do acrobatics low down, and I never saw him stunt low myself. I did not actually see him crash. I was working on the tender and had the engine running when Mr. Vane (who was due for a lesson, after the Bishop) rushed in and said Major Furnace had crashed the other side of the aerodrome. We both jumped in and tore straight across. I cannot say what happened. Major Furnace was a first-rate pilot, one of the best. I can't understand it. I don't know any pilot I'd rather fly with. I am sure the cables or the rudder-bar did not jam. I've never heard of such a thing with this type of machine. It's in use in about a hundred clubs and schools, and is considered the best of its kind for all-round safety."

Captain Randall's Evidence.

"My name is Arthur Randall. I am a pilot. Yes, I knew Furnace well. He was one of our best civil pilots; a better pilot than I am, although he is less known. He ought to have had a much better job, but competition for the good test pilots' jobs was keen after the war. He often said to me, 'Randall, I suppose my trouble is I can't shoot a good enough line about myself.' And that certainly was his trouble—modesty. No, his lack of success didn't seem to worry him much, but it was difficult for anyone else to guess what he was thinking at any time. He might have been a little depressed these last few weeks, but it may have been just a passing mood.

“I should describe him as a most careful pilot. I simply can’t imagine why the machine did not recover from the spin. It was too far away to see if he was trying to correct it with the rudder, but a pilot of his calibre would do this instinctively at the slightest danger. The type he was flying has never shown any vice in the spin to my knowledge. I was sitting in the office of Gauntlett’s Air Taxis when it occurred. Directly I saw him crash I ran out and got into a car. But I had to go back for the ignition key, and by the time I got there Ness and Vane had done all that could be done and had got him out. It was good work, because one of the longerons had to be sawn to free him, and Vane hurt himself doing it. Furnace must have been dead before they released him, however. His safety-belt had parted and he must have slumped forward against the dashboard. It had penetrated his forehead and killed him. The throttle was closed, but the engine was not switched off. Yes, that is what one would expect if a pilot span into the ground without realizing it. I can’t understand Furnace making such an error. The visibility was quite good—about two miles I should say. His death is a great loss to aviation. Furnace isn’t replaceable.”

Miss Sackbut’s Evidence.

“I am Sarah Sackbut, manager and secretary of the Baston Aero Club. I have managed it ever since it began, and Furnace has always been our instructor. It would be quite normal for him to go up for a short flight by himself. I had a pupil waiting for him on the ground. We have never had any trouble with XT before. The machine belongs to a type used everywhere for instructional and beginners’ flights. Our ground engineer has the highest possible qualifications. It is all nonsense to say Furnace was depressed. That was only his manner. He was always perfectly contented and happy. He was a very popular instructor and a most cautious pilot. He would never allow any pupil to spin to within a thousand feet of the ground, and he would never do it himself except at a flying display. I can’t understand how the accident happened. He span into the ground, that was plain enough. XT would come out of a spin after opposite rudder and forward stick in a couple of turns. Could he have lost consciousness? I can’t understand it at all.”

Mr. Vane’s Evidence.

“I am a pupil at the Baston Aero Club. My name is Thomas Vane. I have had only two hours’ instruction. Furnace quite rightly considered me a slow pupil. He seemed to me to be rather irritable these last few days, but perhaps I should make any instructor irritable. Oddly enough, he span me in my last lesson. It frightened me. I don’t think it’s usual to do it to a beginner. Of course one has to learn it sooner or later before one goes solo. He made no attempt to correct the spin, and I honestly thought for a moment, when nothing happened, that he had lost consciousness. I got frightened and shoved the stick forward and pushed the rudder-bar over the opposite way, which I understood was

the correct thing. Furnace didn't say anything except that what I'd done was correct. Of course he may have been just testing my reaction in an emergency. He was a fine instructor and I'm told he always studied a pupil's psychology. I haven't the remotest idea why the machine crashed. I helped to free him from the fuselage. He was quite dead then, just as Captain Randall said. He must have died instantly, I think."

The Bishop's Evidence.

"I am the Bishop of Cootamundra. I am in England on leave. I have just joined the Baston Aero Club and have never flown. As I only saw Major Furnace once I cannot say whether he was his normal self or not. The machine fell behind a bank of trees, apparently out of control—but I know so little of these matters. I arrived a little time after the crash tender. Then he was quite dead."

Lady Laura Vanguard's Evidence.

"I saw the spin as I was looking up from a map in the lounge. I did not fully realize the machine had crashed until it did not come up again from behind the trees. Then I ran out and found Miss Sackbut and the Bishop about to drive over there and I joined them. As they said, Major Furnace, who was my instructor, was a wonderful pilot, and I can't imagine such a thing happening unless there was something wrong with the machine."

The Technical Expert's Evidence.

"My name is Felix Sandwich, Flying Officer in the Reserve of Air Force Officers. I am in the Department of the Inspector of Accidents in the Air Ministry. Under powers vested in the Secretary of State for Air I inspected the crash and took notes from various witnesses. There was nothing in the machine's condition to account for the accident. The controls showed no trace of having jammed and there had been no structural failure before the impact. The impact was not severe—it rarely is in a spin. It is possible that the pilot tried to regain control at the last moment, for the machine took the main force of impact on the starboard wing, instead of the nose. As a result the shock was not severe, and if Major Furnace had been thrown clear he would probably have escaped with a shaking. It is hardly surprising that the safety-belt parted. It is meant to take only normal flying strains. No, Mr. Foreman, I do not agree that it would be a good plan to make it stronger, as it would do the pilot serious internal injury if he were thrown violently against its restraint. It was pure bad luck that Furnace was thrown against the edge of the dashboard so that his forehead struck it. He might have been thrown clear. He was evidently trapped by the telescoping of the longerons of the fuselage. Many pilots believe in loosening their safety-belts if they see a crash is inevitable, but Furnace (if he saw the danger at all) could only have realized it when a few feet above the ground, otherwise he could have regained control. This type of machine has never shown any vice and recovers easily from a spin. I can only attribute