



All the Dead Pilots, William Faulkner

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I

IN THE PICTURES, the snapshots hurriedly made, a little faded, a little dog-eared with the thirteen years, they swagger a little. Lean, hard, in their brass-and-leather martial harness, posed standing beside or leaning upon the esoteric shapes of wire and wood and canvas in which they flew without parachutes, they too have an esoteric look; a look not exactly human, like that of some dim and threatful apotheosis of the race seen for an instant in the glare of a thunderclap and then forever gone.

Because they are dead, all the old pilots, dead on the eleventh of November, 1918. When you see modern photographs of them, the recent pictures made beside the recent shapes of steel and canvas with the new cowlings and engines and slotted wings, they look a little outlandish: the lean young men who once swaggered.

They look lost, baffled. In this saxophone age of flying they look as out of place as, a little thick about the waist, in the sober business suits of thirty and thirty-five and perhaps more than that, they would look among the saxophones and miniature brass bowlers of a night club orchestra.

Because they are dead too, who had learned to respect that whose respect in turn their hardness had commanded before there were welded center sections and parachutes and ships that would not spin.

That's why they watch the saxophone girls and boys with slipstream-proof lipstick and aeronautical flasks piling up the saxophone crates in private driveways and on golf greens, with the quick sympathy and the bafflement too. "My gad," one of them — ack emma, warrant officer pilot, captain and M.C. in turn — said to me once; "if you can treat a crate that way, why do you want to fly at all?"

But they are all dead now. They are thick men now, a little thick about the waist from sitting behind desks, and maybe not so good at it, with wives and children in suburban homes almost paid out, with gardens in which they putter in the long evenings after the 5:15 is in, and perhaps not so good at that either: the hard, lean men who swaggered hard and drank hard because they had found that being dead was not as quiet as they had heard it would be.

That's why this story is composite: a series of brief glares in which, instantaneous and without depth or perspective, there stood into sight the portent and the threat of what the race could bear and become, in an instant between dark and dark.

II

In 1918 I was at Wing Headquarters, trying to get used to a mechanical leg, where, among other things, I had the censoring of mail from all squadrons in the Wing. The job itself wasn't bad, since it gave me spare time to experiment with a synchronized camera on which I was working. But the opening and reading of the letters, the scrawled, brief pages of transparent and honorable lies to mothers and sweethearts, in the script and spelling of schoolboys.

But a war is such a big thing, and it takes so long. I suppose they who run them (I don't mean the staffs, but whoever or whatever it is that controls events) do get bored now and then. And it's when you get bored that you turn petty, play horse.

So now and then I would go up to a Camel squadron behind Amiens and talk with the gunnery sergeant about the synchronization of the machine guns. This was Spoomer's squadron. His uncle was the corps commander, the K.G., and so Spoomer, with his Guards' Captaincy, had also got in turn a Mons Star, a D.S.O., and now a pursuit squadron of single seaters, though the third barnacle on his tunic was still the single wing of an observer.

In 1914 he was in Sandhurst: a big, ruddy-colored chap with china eyes, and I like to think of his uncle sending for him when the news got out, the good news. Probably at the uncle's club (the uncle was a brigadier then, just recalled hurriedly from Indian service) and the two of them opposite one another across the mahogany, with the newsboys crying in the street, and the general saying, "By gad, it will be the making of the Army. Pass the wine, sir."

I daresay the general was put out, not to say outraged, when he finally realized that neither the Hun nor the Home Office intended running this war like the Army wanted it run. Anyway, Spoomer had already gone out to Mons and come back with his Star (though Ffollansbye said that the general sent Spoomer out to get the Star, since it was going to be one decoration you had to be on hand to get) before the uncle got him transferred to his staff, where Spoomer could get his D.S.O.

Then perhaps the uncle sent him out again to tap the stream where it came to surface. Or maybe Spoomer went on his own this time. I like to

think so. I like to think that he did it through pro patria, even though I know that no man deserves praise for courage or opprobrium for cowardice, since there are situations in which any man will show either of them. But he went out, and came back a year later with his observer's wing and a dog almost as large as a calf.

That was in 1917, when he and Sartoris first came together, collided. Sartoris was an American, from a plantation at Mississippi, where they grew grain and Negroes, or the Negroes grew the grain — something. Sartoris had a working vocabulary of perhaps two hundred words, and I daresay to tell where and how and why he lived was beyond him, save that he lived in the plantation with his great-aunt and his grandfather.

He came through Canada in 1916, and he was at Pool. Ffollansbye told me about it. It seems that Sartoris had a girl in London, one of those three-day wives and three-year widows. That's the bad thing about war. They — the Sartorises and such — didn't die until 1918, some of them. But the girls, the women, they died on the fourth of August, 1914.

So Sartoris had a girl. Ffollansbye said they called her Kitchener, "because she had such a mob of soldiers." He said they didn't know if Sartoris knew this or not, but that anyway for a while Kitchener — Kit — appeared to have ditched them all for Sartoris. They would be seen anywhere and any time together, then Ffollansbye told me how he found Sartoris alone and quite drunk one evening in a restaurant. Ffollansbye told how he had already heard that Kit and Spoomer had gone off somewhere together about two days ago.

He said that Sartoris was sitting there, drinking himself blind, waiting for Spoomer to come in. He said he finally got Sartoris into a cab and

sent him to the aerodrome. It was about dawn then, and Sartoris got a captain's tunic from someone's kit, and a woman's garter from someone else's kit, perhaps his own, and pinned the garter on the tunic like a barnacle ribbon. Then he went and waked a corporal who was an ex-professional boxer and with whom Sartoris would put on the gloves now and then, and made the corporal put on the tunic over his underclothes.

"Namesh Spoomer," Sartoris told the corporal. "Cap'm Spoomer"; swaying and prodding at the garter with his finger. "Dishtinguish Sheries Thighs," Sartoris said. Then he and the corporal in the borrowed tunic, with his woolen underwear showing beneath, stood there in the dawn, swinging at one another with their naked fists.

III

You'd think that when a war had got you into it, it would let you be. That it wouldn't play horse with you. But maybe it wasn't that. Maybe it was because the three of them, Spoomer and Sartoris and the dog, were so humorless about it. Maybe a humorless person is an unflagging challenge to them above the thunder and the alarms.

Anyway, one afternoon — it was in the spring, just before Cambrai fell — I went up to the Camel aerodrome to see the gunnery sergeant, and I saw Sartoris for the first time. They had given the squadron to Spoomer and the dog the year before, and the first thing they did was to send Sartoris out to it.

The afternoon patrol was out, and the rest of the people were gone too, to Amiens I suppose, and the aerodrome was deserted. The

sergeant and I were sitting on two empty petrol tins in the hangar door when I saw a man thrust his head out the door of the officers' mess and look both ways along the line, his air a little furtive and very alert. It was Sartoris, and he was looking for the dog.

"The dog?" I said. Then the sergeant told me, this too composite, out of his own observation and the observation of the entire enlisted personnel exchanged and compared over the mess tables or over pipes at night: that terrible and omniscient inquisition of those in an inferior station.

When Spoomer left the aerodrome, he would lock the dog up somewhere. He would have to lock it up in a different place each time, because Sartoris would hunt until he found it, and let it out.

It appeared to be a dog of intelligence, because if Spoomer had only gone down to Wing or somewhere on business, the dog would stay at home, spending the interval grubbing in the refuse bin behind the men's mess, to which it was addicted in preference to that of the officers. But if Spoomer had gone to Amiens, the dog would depart up the Amiens road immediately on being freed, to return later with Spoomer in the squadron car.

"Why does Mr. Sartoris let it out?" I said. "Do you mean that Captain Spoomer objects to the dog eating kitchen refuse?"

But the sergeant was not listening. His head was craned around the door, and we watched Sartoris. He had emerged from the mess and he now approached the hangar at the end of the line, his air still alert, still purposeful. He entered the hangar. "That seems a rather childish business for a grown man," I said.

The sergeant looked at me. Then he quit looking at me. “He wants to know if Captain Spoomer went to Amiens or not.”

After a while I said, “Oh. A young lady. Is that it?”

He didn’t look at me. “You might call her a young lady. I suppose they have young ladies in this country.”

I thought about that for a while. Sartoris emerged from the first hangar and entered the second one. “I wonder if there are any young ladies any more anywhere,” I said.

“Perhaps you are right, sir. War is hard on women.”

“What about this one?” I said. “Who is she?”

He told me. They ran an estaminet, a “bit of a pub” he called it — an old harridan of a woman, and the girl. A little place on a back street, where officers did not go. Perhaps that was why Sartoris and Spoomer created such a furore in that circle.

I gathered from the sergeant that the contest between the squadron commander and one of his greenest cubs was the object of general interest and the subject of the warmest conversation and even betting among the enlisted element of the whole sector of French and British troops. “Being officers and all,” he said.

“They frightened the soldiers off, did they?” I said. “Is that it?” The sergeant did not look at me. “Were there many soldiers to frighten off?”

“I suppose you know these young women,” the sergeant said. “This war and all.”

And that’s who the girl was. What the girl was. The sergeant said that the girl and the old woman were not even related. He told me how Sartoris bought her things — clothes, and jewelry; the sort of jewelry you might buy in Amiens, probably. Or maybe in a canteen, because Sartoris was not much more than twenty.

I saw some of the letters which he wrote to his great-aunt back home, letters that a third-form lad in Harrow could have written, perhaps bettered. It seemed that Spoomer did not make the girl any presents. “Maybe because he is a captain,” the sergeant said. “Or maybe because of them ribbons he dont have to.”

“Maybe so,” I said.

And that was the girl, the girl who, in the centime jewelry which Sartoris gave her, dispensed beer and wine to British and French privates in an Amiens back street, and because of whom Spoomer used his rank to betray Sartoris with her by keeping Sartoris at the aerodrome on special duties, locking up the dog to hide from Sartoris what he had done. And Sartoris taking what revenge he could by letting out the dog in order that it might grub in the refuse of plebeian food.

He entered the hangar in which the sergeant and I were: a tall lad with pale eyes in a face that could be either merry or surly, and quite humorless. He looked at me. “Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” I said. The sergeant made to get up.

“Carry on,” Sartoris said. “I don’t want anything.” He went on to the rear of the hangar. It was cluttered with petrol drums and empty packing cases and such. He was utterly without self-consciousness, utterly without shame of his childish business.

The dog was in one of the packing cases. It emerged, huge, of a napped, tawny color; Follansby had told me that, save for Spoomer’s wing and his Mons Star and his D.S.O., he and the dog looked alike. It quitted the hangar without haste, giving me a brief, sidelong glance. We watched it go on and disappear around the corner of the men’s mess. Then Sartoris turned and went back to the officers’ mess and also disappeared.

Shortly afterward, the afternoon patrol came in. While the machines were coming up to the line, the squadron car turned onto the aerodrome and stopped at the officers’ mess and Spoomer got out. “Watch him,” the sergeant said. “He’ll try to do it like he wasn’t watching himself, noticing himself.”

He came along the hangars, big, hulking, in green golf stockings. He did not see me until he was turning into the hangar. He paused; it was almost imperceptible, then he entered, giving me a brief, sidelong glance. “How do,” he said in a high, fretful, level voice. The sergeant had risen. I had never seen Spoomer even glance toward the rear, toward the overturned packing case, yet he had stopped. “Sergeant,” he said.

“Sir,” the sergeant said.

“Sergeant,” Spoomer said. “Have those timers come up yet?”

“Yes, sir. They came up two weeks ago. They’re all in use now, sir.”

“Quite so. Quite so.” He turned; again he gave me a brief, sidelong glance, and went on down the hangar line, not fast. He disappeared. “Watch him, now,” the sergeant said. “He wont go over there until he thinks we have quit watching him.”

We watched. Then he came into sight again, crossing toward the men’s mess, walking briskly now. He disappeared beyond the corner. A moment later he emerged, dragging the huge, inert beast by the scruff of its neck. “You mustn’t eat that stuff,” he said. “That’s for soldiers.”

IV

I didn’t know at the time what happened next. Sartoris didn’t tell me until later, afterward. Perhaps up to that time he had not anything more than instinct and circumstantial evidence to tell him that he was being betrayed: evidence such as being given by Spoomer some duty not in his province at all and which would keep him on the aerodrome for the afternoon, then finding and freeing the hidden dog and watching it vanish up the Amiens road at its clumsy hand gallop.

But something happened. All I could learn at the time was, that one afternoon Sartoris found the dog and watched it depart for Amiens. Then he violated his orders, borrowed a motor bike and went to Amiens too.

Two hours later the dog returned and repaired to the kitchen door of the men’s mess, and a short time after that, Sartoris himself returned on a lorry (they were already evacuating Amiens) laden with household effects and driven by a French soldier in a peasant’s smock. The motor

bike was on the lorry too, pretty well beyond repair. The soldier told how Sartoris had driven the bike full speed into a ditch, trying to run down the dog.

But nobody knew just what had happened, at the time. But I had imagined the scene, before he told me. I imagined him there, in that bit of a room full of French soldiers, and the old woman (she could read pips, no doubt; ribbons, anyway) barring him from the door to the living quarters.

I can imagine him, furious, baffled, inarticulate (he knew no French) standing head and shoulders above the French people whom he could not understand and that he believed were laughing at him.

“That was it,” he told me. “Laughing at me behind their faces, about a woman. Me knowing that he was up there, and them knowing I knew that if I busted in and dragged him out and bashed his head off, I’d not only be cashiered, I’d be clinked for life for having infringed the articles of alliance by invading foreign property without warrant or something.”

Then he returned to the aerodrome and met the dog on the road and tried to run it down. The dog came on home, and Spoomer returned, and he was just dragging it by the scruff of the neck from the refuse bin behind the men’s mess, when the afternoon patrol came in.

They had gone out six and come back five, and the leader jumped down from his machine before it had stopped rolling. He had a bloody rag about his right hand and he ran toward Spoomer stooped above the passive and stiff-legged dog. “By gad,” he said, “they have got Cambrai!”

Spoomer did not look up. "Who have?"

"Jerry has, by gad!"

"Well, by gad," Spoomer said. "Come along, now. I have told you about that muck."

A man like that is invulnerable. When Sartoris and I talked for the first time, I started to tell him that. But then I learned that Sartoris was invincible too. We talked, that first time. "I tried to get him to let me teach him to fly a Camel," Sartoris said. "I will teach him for nothing. I will tear out the cockpit and rig the duals myself, for nothing."

"Why?" I said. "What for?"

"Or anything. I will let him choose it. He can take an S.E. if he wants to, and I will take an Ak.W. or even a Fee and I will run him clean out of the sky in four minutes. I will run him so far into the ground he will have to stand on his head to swallow."

We talked twice: that first time, and the last time. "Well, you did better than that," I said the last time we talked.

He had hardly any teeth left then, and he couldn't talk very well, who had never been able to talk much, who lived and died with maybe two hundred words. "Better than what?" he said.

"You said before that you would run him clean out of the sky. You didn't do that; you did better: you have run him clean off the continent of Europe."

V

I think I said that he was invulnerable too. November 11, 1918, couldn't kill him, couldn't leave him growing a little thicker each year behind an office desk, with what had once been hard and lean and immediate grown a little dim, a little baffled, and betrayed, because by that day he had been dead almost six months.

He was killed in July, but we talked that second time, that other time before that. This last time was a week after the patrol had come in and told that Cambrai had fallen, a week after we heard the shells falling in Amiens. He told me about it himself, through his missing teeth.

The whole squadron went out together. He left his flight as soon as they reached the broken front, and flew back to Amiens with a bottle of brandy in his overall leg. Amiens was being evacuated, the roads full of lorries and carts of household goods, and ambulances from the Base hospital, and the city and its immediate territory was now interdict.

He landed in a short meadow. He said there was an old woman working in a field beyond the canal (he said she was still there when he returned an hour later, stooping stubbornly among the green rows, beneath the moist spring air shaken at slow and monstrous intervals by the sound of shells falling in the city) and a light ambulance stopped halfway in the roadside ditch.

He went to the ambulance. The engine was still running. The driver was a young man in spectacles.

He looked like a student, and he was dead drunk, half sprawled out of the cab. Sartoris had a drink from his own bottle and tried to rouse the

driver, in vain. Then he had another drink (I imagine that he was pretty well along himself by then; he told me how only that morning, when Spoomer had gone off in the car and he had found the dog and watched it take the Amiens road, how he had tried to get the operations officer to let him off patrol and how the operations officer had told him that La Fayette awaited him on the Santerre plateau) and tumbled the driver back into the ambulance and drove on to Amiens himself.

He said the French corporal was drinking from a bottle in a doorway when he passed and stopped the ambulance before the estaminet. The door was locked. He finished his brandy bottle and he broke the estaminet door in by diving at it as they do in American football. Then he was inside.

The place was empty, the benches and tables overturned and the shelves empty of bottles, and he said that at first he could not remember what it was he had come for, so he thought it must be a drink. He found a bottle of wine under the bar and broke the neck off against the edge of the bar, and he told how he stood there, looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar, trying to think what it was he had come to do. "I looked pretty wild," he said.

Then the first shell fell. I can imagine it: he standing there in that quiet, peaceful, redolent, devastated room, with the bashed-in door and the musing and waiting city beyond it, and then that slow, unhurried, reverberant sound coming down upon the thick air of spring like a hand laid without haste on the damp silence; he told how dust or sand or plaster, something, sifted somewhere, whispering down in a faint hiss, and how a big, lean cat came up over the bar without a sound and flowed down to the floor and vanished like dirty quicksilver.

Then he saw the closed door behind the bar and he remembered what he had come for. He went around the bar. He expected this door to be locked too, and he grasped the knob and heaved back with all his might. It wasn't locked. He said it came back into the shelves with a sound like a pistol, jerking him off his feet. "My head hit the bar," he said. "Maybe I was a little groggy after that."

Anyway, he was holding himself up in the door, looking down at the old woman. She was sitting on the bottom stair, her apron over her head, rocking back and forth. He said that the apron was quite clean, moving back and forth like a piston, and he standing in the door, drooling a little at the mouth. "Madame," he said. The old woman rocked back and forth.

He propped himself carefully and leaned and touched her shoulder. "Toinette," he said. "Où est-elle, 'Toinette?" That was probably all the French he knew; that, with vin added to his 196 English words, composed his vocabulary.

Again the old woman did not answer. She rocked back and forth like a wound-up toy. He stepped carefully over her and mounted the stair. There was a second door at the head of the stair. He stopped before it, listening. His throat filled with a hot, salty liquid. He spat it, drooling; his throat filled again. This door was unlocked also. He entered the room quietly.

It contained a table, on which lay a khaki cap with the bronze crest of the Flying Corps, and as he stood drooling in the door, the dog heaved up from the corner furthest from the window, and while he and the dog looked at one another above the cap, the sound of the second shell

came dull and monstrous into the room, stirring the limp curtains before the window.

As he circled the table the dog moved too, keeping the table between them, watching him. He was trying to move quietly, yet he struck the table in passing (perhaps while watching the dog) and he told how, when he reached the opposite door and stood beside it, holding his breath, drooling, he could hear the silence in the next room. Then a voice said:

“Maman?”

He kicked the locked door, then he dived at it, again like the American football, and through it, door and all. The girl screamed. But he said he never saw her, never saw anyone. He just heard her scream as he went into the room on all-fours. It was a bedroom; one corner was filled by a huge wardrobe with double doors.

The wardrobe was closed, and the room appeared to be empty. He didn't go to the wardrobe. He said he just stood there on his hands and knees, drooling, like a cow, listening to the dying reverberation of the third shell, watching the curtains on the window blow once into the room as though to a breath.

He got up. “I was still groggy,” he said. “And I guess that brandy and the wine had kind of got joggled up inside me.” I daresay they had. There was a chair. Upon it lay a pair of slacks, neatly folded, a tunic with an observer's wing and two ribbons, an ordnance belt. While he stood looking down at the chair, the fourth shell came.

He gathered up the garments. The chair toppled over and he kicked it aside and lurched along the wall to the broken door and entered the

first room, taking the cap from the table as he passed. The dog was gone.

He entered the passage. The old woman still sat on the bottom step, her apron over her head, rocking back and forth. He stood at the top of the stair, holding himself up, waiting to spit. Then beneath him a voice said: "Que faites-vous en haut?"

He looked down upon the raised moustached face of the French corporal whom he had passed in the street drinking from the bottle. For a time they looked at one another. Then the corporal said, "Descendez," making a peremptory gesture with his arm. Claspings the garments in one hand, Sartoris put the other hand on the stair rail and vaulted over it.

The corporal jumped aside. Sartoris plunged past him and into the wall, banging his head hollowly again. As he got to his feet and turned, the corporal kicked at him, striking for his pelvis. The corporal kicked him again.

Sartoris knocked the corporal down, where he lay on his back in his clumsy overcoat, tugging at his pocket and snapping his boot at Sartoris' groin. Then the corporal freed his hand and shot point-blank at Sartoris with a short-barreled pistol.

Sartoris sprang upon him before he could shoot again, trampling the pistol hand. He said he could feel the man's bones through his boot, and that the corporal began to scream like a woman behind his brigand's moustaches.

That was what made it funny, Sartoris said: that noise coming out of a pair of moustaches like a Gilbert and Sullivan pirate. So he said he stopped it by holding the corporal up with one hand and hitting him on the chin with the other until the noise stopped. He said that the old woman had not ceased to rock back and forth under her starched apron. "Like she might have dressed up to get ready to be sacked and ravaged," he said.

He gathered up the garments. In the bar he had another pull at the bottle, looking at himself in the mirror. Then he saw that he was bleeding at the mouth. He said he didn't know if he had bitten his tongue when he jumped over the stair rail or if he had cut his mouth with the broken bottle neck. He emptied the bottle and flung it to the floor.

He said he didn't know then what he intended to do. He said he didn't realize it even when he had dragged the unconscious driver out of the ambulance and was dressing him in Captain Spoomer's slacks and cap and ribboned tunic, and tumbled him back into the ambulance.

He remembered seeing a dusty inkstand behind the bar. He sought and found in his overalls a bit of paper, a bill rendered him eight months ago by a London tailor, and, leaning on the bar, drooling and spitting, he printed on the back of the bill Captain Spoomer's name and squadron number and aerodrome, and put the paper into the tunic pocket beneath the ribbons and the wing, and drove back to where he had left his aeroplane.

There was an Anzac battalion resting in the ditch beside the road. He left the ambulance and the sleeping passenger with them, and four of

them helped him to start his engine, and held the wings for his tight take-off.

Then he was back at the front. He said he did not remember getting there at all; he said the last thing he remembered was the old woman in the field beneath him, then suddenly he was in a barrage, low enough to feel the concussed air between the ground and his wings, and to distinguish the faces of troops. He said he didn't know what troops they were, theirs or ours, but that he strafed them anyway.

“Because I never heard of a man on the ground getting hurt by an aeroplane,” he said. “Yes, I did; I'll take that back. There was a farmer back in Canada plowing in the middle of a thousand-acre field, and a cadet crashed on top of him.”

Then he returned home. They told at the aerodrome that he flew between two hangars in a slow roll, so that they could see the valve stems in both wheels, and that he ran his wheels across the aerodrome and took off again. The gunnery sergeant told me that he climbed vertically until he stalled, and that he held the Camel mushing on its back. “He was watching the dog,” the sergeant said.

“It had been home about an hour and it was behind the men's mess, grubbing in the refuse bin.” He said that Sartoris dived at the dog and then looped, making two turns of an upward spin, coming off on one wing and still upside down. Then the sergeant said that he probably did not set back the air valve, because at a hundred feet the engine conked, and upside down Sartoris cut the tops out of the only two poplar trees they had left.

The sergeant said they ran then, toward the gout of dust and the mess of wire and wood. Before they reached it, he said the dog came trotting out from behind the men's mess. He said the dog got there first and that they saw Sartoris on his hands and knees, vomiting, while the dog watched him. Then the dog approached and sniffed tentatively at the vomit and Sartoris got up and balanced himself and kicked it, weakly but with savage and earnest purpose.

VI

The ambulance driver, in Spoomer's uniform, was sent back to the aerodrome by the Anzac major. They put him to bed, where he was still sleeping when the brigadier and the Wing Commander came up that afternoon. They were still there when an ox cart turned onto the aerodrome and stopped, with, sitting on a wire cage containing chickens, Spoomer in a woman's skirt and a knitted shawl. The next day Spoomer returned to England. We learned that he was to be a temporary colonel at ground school.

"The dog will like that, anyway," I said.

"The dog?" Sartoris said.

"The food will be better there," I said.

"Oh," Sartoris said. They had reduced him to second lieutenant, for dereliction of duty by entering a forbidden zone with government property and leaving it unguarded, and he had been transferred to another squadron, to the one which even the B.E. people called the Laundry.

This was the day before he left. He had no front teeth at all now, and he apologized for the way he talked, who had never really talked with an intact mouth. “The joke is,” he said, “it’s another Camel squadron. I have to laugh.”

“Laugh?” I said.

“Oh, I can ride them. I can sit there with the gun out and keep the wings level now and then. But I can’t fly Camels. You have to land a Camel by setting the air valve and flying it into the ground. Then you count ten, and if you have not crashed, you level off. And if you can get up and walk away, you have made a good landing. And if they can use the crate again, you are an ace. But that’s not the joke.”

“What’s not?”

“The Camels. The joke is, this is a night-flying squadron. I suppose they are all in town and they don’t get back until after dark to fly them. They’re sending me to a night-flying squadron. That’s why I have to laugh.”

“I would laugh,” I said. “Isn’t there something you can do about it?”

“Sure. Just keep that air valve set right and not crash. Not wash out and have those wing flares explode. I’ve got that beat. I’ll just stay up all night, pop the flares and sit down after sunrise. That’s why I have to laugh, see. I can’t fly Camels in the daytime, even. And they don’t know it.”

“Well, anyway, you did better than you promised,” I said. “You have run him off the continent of Europe.”

“Yes,” he said. “I sure have to laugh. He’s got to go back to England, where all the men are gone. All those women, and not a man between fourteen and eighty to help him. I have to laugh.”

VII

When July came, I was still in the Wing office, still trying to get used to my mechanical leg by sitting at a table equipped with a paper cutter, a pot of glue and one of red ink, and laden with the meager, thin, here soiled and here clean envelopes that came down in periodical batches — envelopes addressed to cities and hamlets and sometimes less than hamlets, about England — when one day I came upon two addressed to the same person in America: a letter and a parcel. I took the letter first. It had neither location nor date:

Dear Aunt Jenny

Yes I got the socks Elnora knitted. They fit all right because I gave them to my batman he said they fit all right. Yes I like it here better than where I was these are good guys here except these damn Camels. I am all right about going to church we dont always have church.

Sometimes they have it for the ak emmas because I reckon a ak emma needs it but usually I am pretty busy Sunday but I go enough I reckon. Tell Elnora much oblige for the socks they fit all right but maybe you better not tell her I gave them away. Tell Isom and the other niggers hello and Grandfather tell him I got the money all right but war is expensive as hell.

Johnny.

But then, the Malbroucks dont make the wars, anyway. I suppose it takes too many words to make a war. Maybe that's why.

The package was addressed like the letter, to Mrs Virginia Sartoris, Jefferson, Mississippi, U.S.A., and I thought, What in the world would it ever occur to him to send to her? I could not imagine him choosing a gift for a woman in a foreign country; choosing one of those trifles which some men can choose with a kind of infallible tact.

His would be, if he thought to send anything at all, a section of crank shaft or maybe a handful of wrist pins salvaged from a Hun crash. So I opened the package. Then I sat there, looking at the contents.

It contained an addressed envelope, a few dog-eared papers, a wrist watch whose strap was stiff with some dark dried liquid, a pair of goggles without any glass in one lens, a silver belt buckle with a monogram. That was all.

So I didn't need to read the letter. I didn't have to look at the contents of the package, but I wanted to. I didn't want to read the letter, but I had to.

— Squadron, R.A.F., France.

5th July, 1918.

Dear Madam,

I have to tell you that your son was killed on yesterday morning. He was shot down while in pursuit of duty over the enemy lines. Not due to carelessness or lack of skill. He was a good man. The E.A. outnumbered

your son and had more height and speed which is our misfortune but no fault of the Government which would give us better machines if they had them which is no satisfaction to you.

Another of ours, Mr R. Kyerling 1000 feet below could not get up there since your son spent much time in the hangar and had a new engine in his machine last week. Your son took fire in ten seconds Mr Kyerling said and jumped from your son's machine since he was side slipping safely until the E.A. shot away his stabiliser and controls and he began to spin.

I am very sad to send you these sad tidings though it may be a comfort to you that he was buried by a minister. His other effects sent you later.

I am, madam, and etc.

C. Kaye Major

He was buried in the cemetery just north of Saint Vaast since we hope it will not be shelled again since we hope it will be over soon by our padre since there were just two Camels and seven E.A. and so it was on our side by that time.

C. K. Mjr.

The other papers were letters, from his great-aunt, not many and not long. I don't know why he had kept them. But he had. Maybe he just forgot them, like he had the bill from the London tailor he had found in his overalls in Amiens that day in the spring.

. . . let those foreign women alone. I lived through a war myself and I know how women act in war, even with Yankees. And a good-for-nothing hellion like you . . .

And this:

. . . we think it's about time you came home. Your grandfather is getting old, and it don't look like they will ever get done fighting over there. So you come on home. The Yankees are in it now. Let them fight if they want to. It's their war. It's not ours.

And that's all. That's it. The courage, the recklessness, call it what you will, is the flash, the instant of sublimation; then flick! the old darkness again. That's why. It's too strong for steady diet. And if it were a steady diet, it would not be a flash, a glare.

And so, being momentary, it can be preserved and prolonged only on paper: a picture, a few written words that any match, a minute and harmless flame that any child can engender, can obliterate in an instant. A one-inch sliver of sulphur-tipped wood is longer than memory or grief; a flame no larger than a sixpence is fiercer than courage or despair.

The End