

Liberator

by
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When Thomas Armitage drifts painfully back to consciousness, the first thing he sees through the brambles is a young woman silhouetted against the starlit sky.

She's about eighteen, angelic in a thin cotton nightdress, and she doesn't seem to notice the winter cold. She's standing on a low stone wall, close enough to touch, her pale feet just inches from his head. But she can't see him as he's well hidden, entangled in brambles. He's not spying on her. In fact, he can't remember quite how he got here from the aeroplane.

In any case, she's not looking for him or at him, she's looking past him, over his head, her eyes sparkling with distant flames. That must be his wrecked B-24 she's watching, burning itself out. So it was a little ambitious after all to try and nurse the wounded Liberator all the way home over the North Sea. At least the rest of the crew baled out as they crossed the coastline.

He can hear voices. Local people shouting as they organise to fight the flames with buckets and stirrup pumps. He tries to turn his head, but it's too painful. He tries to call out, but can't.

"I'm Flight Lieutenant Armitage..." he whispers, weakly, struggling to sit up. Now the girl looks down and sees him.

"547 Squadron... RAF Coastal Command," he says. He groans. It hurts so much. "I need help."

The girl just stares at him, her eyes wider than seem humanly possible, flashing with tears and fire, and she opens her mouth as if to speak or scream...

And then she just flickers out of existence, gone like a blown-out candle flame.

Thomas blinks, surprised. He struggles to his feet. His flying suit is heavy on him but he can move easily enough. He must have blacked out. He rests his hands on the cold, gritty wall, where the girl had stood just moments before, but there's no sign of her.

There's no sign of anybody else, either, and no glow of

flames, nor shouts from the people fighting the fire. No popping of embers and crack of cooling metal. There are no sounds at all, just the big empty silence of a quiet chill night in the countryside.

He looks around. There's an old house ahead of him, big and dark and starlit across a wide lawn of neatly trimmed grass, standing as solid as if it had long ago been carved from granite. Next door to it, through a small iron garden gate, is the parish church; in its churchyard an ancient yew and a brace of dark spreading oaks.

No doubt just beyond that is a village green, and a pond with reeds and sleeping ducks, a rough, sloping cricket pitch and an ancient pub with heavy oak beams and cool flagstones and small thick windows and barrels of well-cellaried beer... not too different from the villages round his own home county town.

He smiles and clammers awkwardly over the wall and walks towards the big house, thinking that it is probably the vicarage, and probably the vicar lives there, perhaps hosting a family from some evacuated industrial town down south. It's certainly a spacious enough place, a couple of hundred years old. Maybe troops are billeted there. Or boffins; it's the sort of place they like.

Oddly, none of the big sash windows has curtains or sign of blackout precautions. But at least it is unlit. The rooms stare blankly outwards, dark.

Where is everybody?

He pulls off his flying helmet and runs a hand through his sweaty, matted hair. He looks at his hand. Not sweat, but blood. He must look shocking. It's no wonder the young girl ran away, but it's a bad show she hadn't fetched help.

He turns round, his back to the house, looking out over the landscape. Drystone walls and fields. A small dark copse broods in the night. Somewhere just behind it his Liberator must have come to rest, but there's no sign of her now. Beyond the trees, black beneath a starlight lining, is the grey, open, rolling farmland that he remembers whipping past underneath so unnaturally fast just before he crashed.

No streetlights, no houselights, no fires are visible anywhere to break the cloak of silvery darkness, right to the black sea perhaps just visible at the edge of perception.

The villagers must have put out the fire and simply gone home, back to bed without spotting him. He can't blame them. He must have been thrown clear of the cockpit and struggled into the safety of the undergrowth by pure animal instinct. A rough end to a routine patrol mission, hunting U-boats over the North Sea; they'd seen nothing this time, but something had

seen them, and hit them hard. They were lucky to make it back to the coast.

And now, the rest of his crew was probably warm in bed somewhere, safe; in hospital, or perhaps even back at the airfield. It must be hours after the crash.

But when he looks up at the stars, clear, cold and glittering, he's not so sure. His navigation course was thorough, he knows his stars, and he can tell the time by the turning of the night sky as easily as a child can tell dawn by the rising of the sun. The stars have not moved, have not wheeled around Polaris; the Big Dipper hangs where it had just before he crashed, chill and distant and preserved in ice.

Something is moving, though, at the house; he catches a glimpse of a flash at an upstairs window. Someone is up there, watching him.

"I say!" he calls. "I need some help!"

But whoever it is just stands there, half out of view in the shadows. Thomas strains to make sense of what he can see, but it's hard by starlight. Something is shimmering; a curtain drifting in the draught? But there's no wind, not even a breeze. And no curtains.

He feels uneasy as he walks closer, looking up, trying to resolve the shape. It's a person, he's sure of it. A young woman, perhaps thirty. But there's something ethereal about her body that makes her hard to focus on. She seems to be staring out into space, to the horizon, as if blind or preoccupied.

"I say, miss!" he calls. "Can you help? Have you a telephone?"

She looks down at him, surprised, and fades from view like slow steam, and then there's no one there, and perhaps there never was anyone or anything there at all, except some trick of the light.

He feels a cool finger down his spine, his heart pounding. He hasn't felt this way for years, since his brother convinced him the ghost of a murdered traveller drifted with the mist in the hedgerows down their lane, waiting to wreak revenge on the living. He no longer believes in that sort of thing, but what does that matter at midnight in an abandoned rectory? Perhaps he should check the pub instead, or a farmhouse.

"Nonsense!" he says out loud.

He trots briskly up three stone steps to French windows that give out onto the lawn. He peers through the grimy glass into the dark dining room beyond.

What's this! A dinner party for ghosts and gloomy spirits! No. It's just that every chair, table and wall-mounted object is

covered with white dust sheets. He laughs out loud, but it sounds forced. He tries the door, but it is locked.

He steps back and looks up. Someone, peering down. A woman. Not the same one; she's older. So there are two people at least in the house. Perhaps three if you count the girl on the stone wall. What is this, an austere nunnery where the inmates have to keep the sheets on the furniture and discreet covers on the paintings?

"Hallo!" he calls, impatient. "I must use your telephone!"

Then he stops. If it's a family of refugees they might be scared of him, might think he's a German paratrooper. Surely not now? At the end of 1944? But who can truly know what horrors other people have experienced and what they still fear, and why.

He walks round the corner of the house and down the side, past well-tended plants. Clearly the place is not neglected. At the heavy front door he raps loudly on the wood, not caring if he wakes the whole damned village.

"I must contact my squadron!" he shouts again. Again there's no reply but silence, spread over the village like a blanket of snow. Thomas gets the odd feeling that even if he was to set all the church bells ringing, or even let off a bomb, no one in the village would take any notice.

He peers in through the sitting room window, to find yet more dust sheets and the air of a place un-lived-in for many years. Perhaps he should break in? Find somewhere to sleep for the night, and get on in the morning.

Suddenly, he's aware of a presence inside... and he's looking at a woman in her fifties. Her eyes are shadowed but twinkling and they're fixed on him. She hovers on the edge of memory; does he know her? She looks friendly. She must know him. He has met her before, he's sure of it...

Of course! She's his wife! She opens her mouth, to speak, perhaps, and tell him things, how the children are doing at school and university, and she slides towards him, her arms reaching out to him. But her diaphanous body is drifting; she's flickering, a force of electrical energy in a thunderstorm. And suddenly she pops, like a soap bubble, and is gone.

Thomas jerks back, astonished, shaking his head. He isn't married. He has no children.

He steps backwards and stumbles against a raised flagstone and trips, slamming onto the cold hard ground and banging his head.

He hardly notices if he blacks out again or not, but when he opens his eyes a grey-haired woman in her mid-seventies is

there silhouetted against the stilled stars, kneeling beside him, looking at him intently. Worried. She too is familiar, someone he ought to know. She is close. He can see her eyes close up, glinting. They're like the eyes of that young girl who simply disappeared. She's crying, and she blinks rapidly, but she can't stop staring at him.

"Don't worry," he says, hurriedly. "I'm British. Flight Lieutenant Armitage. Coastal Command. Please help me."

She is scared, but whatever fears she has she seems determined to conquer them. She forces him to his feet and round to the side of the house, away from the front door, to the churchyard, as though she is frogmarching him to a police station for interrogation. He feels strangely powerless.

"Please, missus, I must use a telephone..."

"No!" she says, suddenly. "Only I can help you!"

And she takes him through the little iron gate into the churchyard, under the ancient spreading oaks, and walks him down a dirt path strewn with faded leaves and she shows him a weathered headstone.

He reads the inscription: Flight Lieutenant Thomas Clark Armitage. 13th December 1917 to 21st December 1944. 547 Squadron. Celer ad Caedendum. RAF Coastal Command. Per Ardua ad Astra.

And he realises what is happening as though he has always known it would, and a peace falls on him.

"How long?" he says.

"It's the year 2004 now," she says.

He knows she is right. "So many years," he breathes. "So many things must have happened..."

She looks closely at him, searching for the lines of age that did not come, the hair that did not turn white, but she cannot look into his eyes. "And so many things have not," she says in the end.

"And you? You've been here all this time?"

"I've seen you before," she says, staring at the headstone, calm now, no longer nervous. "Just a few times. Always on clear nights like tonight." She turns, and stares straight into his eyes. "Like that first night. The night I saw you die."

And now that she has finally said it Thomas falls to his knees on his grave, pulled to the ground, feeling an intense sense of loss, of something so near but far away: a long life and love and walking by cool mountain streams in the sunlight.

"You never grew old, just as that poet promised," says the old woman, smiling sadly. "Now, rest in peace."

And she sets him free.

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