

WENDY DARLING, RFC

By R. Garcia y Robertson

THE INFANTS' CLASS

It was amazing because it was so beautiful, little silver specks far up in heaven . . .

—New York Times, 14 June 1917

* * * *

WENDY FIRST SAW THE WONG-wongs from her old nursery window. She had the afternoon session, so she was lunching with Mother in the garden, demolishing cucumber sandwiches — when she heard the drone of engines, growing louder, filling the summer sky.

“Aeroplanes, Mum.” She set down a half-eaten sandwich and dashed into the house, taking steps two at a time.

The tiny square of blue above the garden was hopeless for aircraft spotting, but the nursery was three floors up. As a girl Wendy had flown about it in her nightshirt; now it was littered with back numbers of Flight and Aero. A Montaul poster advertised the Grande Semaine d’Aviation held at Rheims before the War — a woman in bold print colors waved at aeroplanes and balloons rising on the red dawn wind. The window opposite was always left open for Peter. Wendy flung it wide.

Roofs and chimneys poked into endless sky. From the direction of Woolwich came the double throb of inline engines working in pairs — the Wong-wong that gave Gothas their nickname. She slung a foot over the sill, held tight to the sash and leaned out. Pavement lay in wait thirty feet below.

“Watch yourself,” Mother warned.

“Tosh, Mum, don’t be a snooze.” At twenty-two, working as a war-time temp, Wendy was no longer practiced at climbing rooftops. She no longer believed pixie dust and lovely thoughts would keep her aloft. But this was the window Peter had flown through. She never expected to fall from it. If she did, Peter was bound to be there to catch her— or so she supposed. Leaning farther out, she saw little silver specks in diamond formation, three miles above the Royal Albert Docks. As they got closer she counted seventeen, coming up the Thames in a slow stately progress over the heart of the city.

People peered out windows or stared up from the street. A woman shouted, “Hun bombers.”

Neighbors scoffed. “Not ‘ere. Not over London.”

“Bloody Wong-wongs,” the woman insisted. “I heard them over Maidstone last month.”

Wendy saw nothing alarming about the orderly formation — until white puffs of anti-aircraft fire appeared in its path. When they reached Liverpool Station she saw bombs start to fall, and yelled to Mother, “We’re under attack. They are bombing Tottenham Court. I can see the smoke.”

“Twenty to noon,” Mother reminded her.

Wendy swung back into the nursery. She’d be late for afternoon session, and she had the infant’s class. What did sixty-four quarrelsome kindergartners know about the war and air raids? She dashed downstairs. Mother pressed a fresh cucumber sandwich into her hands. “Here, eat this on the bus.” Wendy fled the house.

From atop a belching omnibus she saw the tiny specks separate, one gaggle headed south across the Thames, the others turning north toward Dalston. She was not the least frightened by this grand show, put on free for the citizens of London. People craned their necks in the street. No one searched for shelter. Nothing matched the innocence of that first daylight raid.

At the North Street stop an officious bobby told her, “Take care. Bombs been falling hereabouts.”

She nodded hastily. “I work in a basement.” The infant’s class in North Street School was below ground level, in a large partitioned basement with three stories of older children’s classes overhead. Wendy could not picture a safer spot — protected by God’s Grace and tile floors.

The peeler touched his helmet. “Then you’d best get to your work.” She started off fast, to please the bobby— not afraid, just late. Heavy smoke hung over Southwark. Warehouses were burning, but the planes themselves had vanished. The double beat of their engines faded over the East End— new to being bombed, she supposed the raid was over. Wendy Moira Angela Darling was as raw as the rest of London.

Half a block from the school she came on the crowd, and heard the clanging firetrucks. She jostled her way to the front. Frantic mothers combed the throng, jerking dazed children around to search their faces. Cries of thanksgiving mixed with agonized wails. Wendy grabbed a teacher. “What’s happened?”

“Angela, where were you? It came through the roof, dragging an older child with it.”

Wendy let the woman go, pushing into the school, descending into the wrecked basement. The bomb had hit the roof, split in two, and punctured three floors before exploding — as though an invisible hand guided it to the infant’s class. Sailors carried out the wounded in blankets, sobbing as they worked. Only the dead remained at their desks. Wendy began brushing off dust and rubble, straightening limbs, trying to make her still charges comfortable. She had seen maimed children before, scores of times — but always in Neverland, where death and life are dreamlike things. In London it was too horribly real. All she could do was cry and wipe at blood with the hem of her dress.

A week later, a full quarter of the infant’s class was lowered into a common grave at East End Cemetery, with the Bishop of London doing the services. Condolences came from King and Queen. Black floral wreaths read —”To our children murdered by German airmen.” Only two of the dead were more than five years old. Feeling ran so high the King swiftly changed the royal family’s name — Windsor sounded more British than Saxe-Coberg-Gotha.

Wendy never went back to North End Schools. She never wanted to be in the building, which heartless people were busy repairing. What could she say to the children who survived? She hardly knew what to say to herself. She had always lived full out, with a child’s absolute abandon — now she felt ragged and faded, overrun. The War had been a far-off brainless endeavor that tootled along without her, as distant as Neverland, something in the papers to be taken with morning tea. Zeppelins prowled at night, scattering bombs. Endless “pushes.” Draft after draft of young men sent off. Michael was a railway engineer —exempt. John was a balloon observer, somewhere in France. Peter was in Neverland, fighting pirates. One was as real as the other.

Mother used to rummage through her mind at night, tidying up unpleasant thoughts. But now Wendy had grown up — a day ahead of other girls -and she lacked Peter’s knack for forgetting. Images stayed with her, a smashed chair, charred rubble atop a broken child. If she could not forget, she needed to do something, or die inside. Mother thumbed through the papers, hoping to find a place for her. “They say they need nurses’ aides.”

“Shouldn’t wonder,” Wendy grimaced, “trying to patch up boys as fast as rapid-fire guns puncture them — there’s a useless task.” She had seen enough of mangled young bodies.

“There are great cries for young women to do munitions work.” Wendy made a mouth. “Totally ghastly. Sitting in rows, screwing fuses into shells. A thundering bore, unless your shop chances to blow up. I’d rather be a balloon observer.”

“Really, dear?”

“My, yes. Open air work, getting God’s own view of France. I could plot

shell bursts as neat as John.”

“No doubt. But they aren’t asking women to do that.”

“Or I’d even bomb a German aerodrome.” Wendy had no desire to kill Germans — not the way she and Peter had cut pirate throats when she was a child. But bombing them back seemed letter perfect. “They say the Wong-wongs are based in Belgium.”

“They don’t want women for that either.”

“Why not? The Russians have women pilots. Two princesses have already signed up.”

“What would you expect when the prime pastime is flogging the serfs? Makes America seem civilized.” Mother gave her the sweet mocking smile that reminded Wendy of Peter, showing off the one kiss you could never get.

There was the usual riff in Parliament over the raid. The Minister of War proudly announced, “not a single soldier had been killed.” Not just a lie, but a stupid one as well. The MP for the City of London wanted the bells of St. Paul rung backwards in case of attack— “So bank clerks would be warned to get the money back in the vaults.” Young Winston Churchill’s prewar promise that enemy aeroplanes would be met by a “swarm of hornets” was sarcastically recalled. Wendy doubted any man in office cared a fig for the infants’ class, until she read a crack fighter squadron was to be brought back from the front. “The best machines. The best pilots,” she crowed. “To be based in Bekesbourne, between London and Flanders, directly in the path of the attack. There’s my billet. Fliers straight from the front, probably in desperate need of mothering.”

Mother raised an eyebrow. “We don’t know the Royal Flying Corps wants young women hanging about their aerodromes.”

“Oh Mum, it would be a pilot’s dream.”

She took the train to Canterbury — in cricket weather, a beautiful hot blue day with hardly a cloud. Perfect bomber weather as well, with southeast England laid out like a plate. Getting to the aerodrome was alarmingly easy. Fliers from Fifty-sixth Squadron were roaming the streets of Canterbury, searching for willing young women. She was swept up in a crowd of pretty barmaids and errant school girls. By dinnertime Wendy was standing in an evening dress at the edge of the field, sipping French champagne, while a pair of pilots stunted to impress them. White tables glittered with silver and china.

The planes were like nothing Wendy had ever seen, brand new Scout Experimentals. SE5 biplanes, bristling with machine guns, speed built into every line,

their long lean fuselages half taken up by Hispano racing engines. Climbing a thousand feet a minute, they looped, rolled, and plunged into screaming dives— all without the least sign of coming apart in midair. And she never expected the fliers to be so young. One of the stunters, Ryan Donnelly, was introduced as an “old man” — at it over two years — a strapping young Irishman who had survived the Fokker scare, the Battle of Somme, Bloody April, and the latest push in Flanders. That spring he had turned nineteen. At twenty-two, Wendy felt twice his age.

She danced with this pink-cheeked killer under a candle-lit marquee, while the squadron band played brassy music — “Pack up Your Troubles” and “Swanee River.” Ryan was able to say the most appalling things in a sweet Irish brogue. When she complimented the band, he laughed briskly. “Thankee. The Major scouts the depots. Aims to have the best squadron band in the bloody RFC. Whenever a new horn player or violinist shows up, he swaps them for some fellow who’s lost his nerve.”

She mentioned the raid. Ryan replied, “Capital bit of work. God bless Old Jerry. God bless the Gotha.” He sounded like Peter giving a cheer for the pirates. “Hope the Kaiser gives them all medals.”

“You can’t really be glad it happened?” She thought of children dead at their desks.

“Lord yes. A week ago I was doing dawn contact patrols against really nasty Huns, brutes who were having us for breakfast. Damned active and dangerous. Now I’m sailing about on a head full of bubbly, with a smashing girl in my arms. Not above time, if you ask me.”

She was surprised, and pleased, being called a girl again, even by a smiling madman in RFC khaki. “Smashing” was mere icing on the cake. Was this Peter grown up? Wendy no longer waited by the nursery window, but still had Peter in her heart— the wild terrible boy who had taken her beyond the sky, vowing never to give her up, then forgetting to come back. Ryan had the wildness, the cool cutting disdain, but he was more cynical and clear-sighted than Peter could ever hope to be. He spun her around the dance floor, then led her out onto the long grass, buoyed by the band music. A single SE5 scout stood parked at the near end of the field, gaunt and angular, its upper wing topped by a Lewis gun, reminding everyone what Fifty-sixth Squadron’s business was. What the party was about.

“Kiss me now,” he suggested, holding tight to her waist, hair tousled, tunic open. This was what war demanded—lightning dalliance. Instant love making. No time for tedious romance. Posters on every street corner proclaimed the only man worth having was in uniform— but you had to kiss him quick. Death was in the wings. “Ten days and I’ll be gone.”

“Ten days?” She was aghast.

“Back to France.”

“What about London?”

“Come, do you think a government that wastes two-thousand a day in the trenches frets over babies and shopkeepers? Only more bombing will bring us back.”

She insisted that was barbaric.

He gave a snort. “A flier fresh up from school lasts barely a fortnight at the front — that’s barbaric. Ten days is a lifetime. Two months and you’re an arrant coward, or a stone cold assassin. Maybe both.” Ryan did not need to add that he had been at it two years. “Do you know what we’d do if we got our hands on one of your baby-killing Gotha pilots?”

“Folks in the East End aim to bring back the rack and bumming irons.”

“We’d give him dinner and bubbly, treat him to a concert, then pack him off to a prison camp. Because there is no enemy more barbaric than the bloody Royal Flying Corps.” The band played “Tipperary” in the background. This lost boy’s hands had gotten inside her wrap, one in the small of her back, the other working down her spine, pulling her closer.

“So you have no scruples?”

“Gawd, I hope not. Can’t afford ‘em in my line of work. Not if yew plan ta die of brandy an’ old age.”

With their lips about to touch, she whispered, “Promise to take me flying.”

“Impossible.” He pulled back, looking askance.

“Why?”

“An SE has only one seat.” Ryan nodded at the plane, silhouetted by the bandstand.

“There are plenty of other types.” Wendy was heartless. Paris might be one big knocking-ship, with Red Cross nurses handing out condoms in the rail stations—but decent opinion expected Ryan to die without ever fucking a real English virgin. Besides, she knew she would get nowhere by being the accommodating doormat. “What if I told you I had already flown beyond the stars?”

He frowned. "I'd say you had wandered. Gone with the Faeries. I'd get in trouble — rules forbid taking female mental cases up for a fling."

She leaned closer, letting one hand cup her breast. "How much trouble?"

"Done deal." He kissed her, harder than Peter ever had. A lewd sensual kiss, his tongue exploring the comers of her mouth. French girls must have taught him that. Wendy came away feeling a good deal less of a virgin.

"Now, take me up," she told him.

"Not tonight." Ryan eyed the party sprawled over the field. "Too chancy."

"When?"

"Tomorrow at twilight. Got to get the right bus."

"Get one with dual controls."

He looked shocked. "Where does a proper young lady learn about dual controls?"

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

"Righto. Dual controls." They walked back hand-in-hand.

Next evening a big angular two-seater waited alongside the SE5. Ryan met her at the edge of the aerodrome with a flight helmet and leather jacket. "Here, take these. I'll help you aboard. Curl up in the front cockpit, so the mechanic won't see you when he spins the prop."

"What sort of plane is it?"

"BE2c. Prewar bus. Grandmother could fly it, and probably did. Built to give Jerry something to shoot down." Both the BE2 and the SE5 were Royal Aircraft factory designs. Side by side Wendy saw the family resemblance -a stately old Lady and her ripping young grandson. Ryan gave her a dash of quick instruction, with cheerful references to ground loops, dead stalls, and spinning out. Then he helped her into the front cockpit, through a tangle of bracing wires. "Keep your head down, while I fetch the mechanic."

Wendy waited, head between her knees, bursting with anticipation, listening to Ryan whistle a jaunty air and joke with the mechanic. To be safe, she did not look up until they were aloft. When she did look, she gasped. She was flying again. Not flying free like with Peter — but suspended in a fabric box, with nothing to hold it up, just a madly racing engine and wires everywhere. Air pressure bellied the wing

fabric. Thirty-seven feet of wingspan might seem ample on the ground; up here it was nothing as much a marvel as pixie dust and lovely thoughts. After years of living with memories, it was like touch or sight returning. Flat landscape slid beneath the lower wing, green woods, dark brown fields, gray cloud shadows. Dim blue lines of smoke rose from towns and country houses. Far off, beyond Dover was the sea, a sharp blue arc on the horizon. She felt free for the first time since leaving the infant's class.

Ryan cut the engine. Dead silence. She expected to fall, but they kept on flying. He tapped her on the shoulder, shouting, "You're in a glide. Try the controls. But don't pull back the stick. You'll stall us out."

Gingerly she pushed the stick forward. The nose dipped. The glide became a dive. Seeing the ground rush up, she eased back. "Not too far," Ryan shouted. "Try a left bank."

She banked left. God, it worked. She had done it. Land rushed by between the wing tips, getting closer. "Keep going, into a turn. Righto. Rudder. Ailerons." She leaned into the turn. The machine leaned with her. Over we go. Think wonderful thoughts.

"Good girl. Try the other way. Aim for that field to starboard." She turned again. Ground hurtled at her. At the last instant Ryan restarted the engine. She hopped hedges and trees, setting down in the fallow of a Kentish field.

Wendy was wildly exhilarated. "Now let me do a takeoff."

"Too risky," Ryan told her, doing his utmost to take advantage of her exhilaration, though there is only so much advantage to be had in an open field from an excited female wearing a full-length dress, layers of petticoats, and a leather flight jacket.

She jerked his hands out of her jacket. "Teach me to take off, or I'll find a flier who will."

"Gawd, you're the one with no scruples."

"Can't afford 'em."

He let her take off. She saw sunset from the air, a rim of fire sinking into black cloud banks. Darkness spread over the earth. Wendy imagined she hung alone under the first evening stars — with Neverland below. A rattling taxi took her back to Canterbury.

For more than a week she stole flights. Ryan called her a born pilot, but it was really all that flying with Peter. She found herself hoping the Good Old Gothas

would return — before Fifty-sixth Squadron was sent back to the front. Two days shy of the deadline, she saw the squadron scrambled. Men raced for their planes. SE5s roared into the air. But the Wong-wongs disappointed everyone, barely crossing the coast to bomb Felixstowe Naval Air Station, breaking windows in Harwich and slaughtering a flock of sheep. None of the pilots scrambled in Kent so much as saw a bomber.

On Ryan's last night she took him to London. The Bloody RFC did not let its fliers dance in public, but Wendy discovered a club in Kensington that flouted the law, supplying fliers with drinks, music, and a dance floor. Red-coated old doormen, smiling hostesses, and a Black jazz band conspired to give airmen on leave a good time— couples swayed illegally around the dance floor to sentimental favorites and ragtime. The club's motto hung above the bar: Work Like Hellen B. Mary.

She spent half the night drifting with the rhythm, her head on Ryan's shoulder. Then they took a turn standing on the roof walk, a narrow sooty platform looking over chimney tops onto the lights of Kensington Gardens, where Peter first ran off to be with the faeries. For Peter's sake she had tried to avoid growing pains, but now she was putting childhood behind her. At twenty-two it was not before time. Feeling a sudden urge to say what she liked, she whispered to Ryan, "Don't go. Stay here. Keep teaching me to fly."

"Afraid the Huns will shoot me down?"

She nodded.

"They might. But if I don't go, the RFC surely will. Refusin' ta fight is business for a firing squad. I don't fancy standing with my hands tied and a hanky over my face, puffin' a cigarette while nervous blokes pot shots at me from twenty paces. Bloody Red Baron's more sportin' than that."

She stared hard, betting that behind that fine spoiled conceit he was scared down to his socks. "Have you ever killed a man?"

"Several for sure."

"And seen them die?"

"The last time was a Rumpier over Poelcapelle. Engine caught fire. The pilot jumped at fifteen-thousand feet, to save himself from burning. Observer rode the bus all the way in. Not the same as sticking someone wi' a bayonet and seeing him squirm — still a fairly raw business."

"But you never held someone down while two boys slit his throat?"

“Not much call for that in the Flying Corps — one of the reasons I like my line of killing.” He asked where she ever got such notions?

She shrugged. “Oh, I’ve done it. Scores of times.”

“You’re more mad than I am.”

“Much more.” She looked up at the stars. One twinkled down at her, saying, “Silly ass.”

They took the train back to Canterbury. At dawn she stood at Bekesbourne aerodrome watching the squadron rev up. The SE5s took off, formed into flights, and wheeled toward France, disappearing into a glorious cloud-free sky. Twenty-four hours later the Gothas returned, flying in neat fan-like formation into the heart of London. No horns gave warning. No sirens sounded. Their approach was so low and leisurely no one around Wendy supposed the aeroplanes were German until the bombs began to fall.

Peter struck. John clapped his hands on the ill-fated pirate’s mouth to stifle the dying groan . . . and the carrion was cast overboard. A splash, and then silence.

“One!” (Slightly had begun to count.)
—Peter Pan, J.M. Barrie

STRAIGHT ON TILL MORNING

* * * *

BY SEPTEMBER the bombers came only at night. No one called them Wong-wongs anymore— Londoners knew the name Gotha all too well. The thrill of first being bombed was long forgotten. When the Prime Minister toured the East End, mobs of women rioted, jeering at the bobbles sent to force them back to factory and kitchen. Wendy did not join in, but she understood, and planned her own revenge. Planes were brought back from the front— but not Fifty-sixth Squadron. Aircraft went straight from the factories to Home Defense, despite howls from the RFC brass, who hated the notion of even a single flier escaping the carnage in Flanders. Fortress London was ringed with airbases, balloon aprons, and anti-aircraft guns, which merely forced the raiders to return by night. People learned a new phrase to go with Gotha -”the bombers moon.”

At first there were parties in the Underground, people drinking and joking long after “All Clear.” Bobbles had to be sent down to drive them back out onto the streets. As moonlit nights dragged on, the parties ceased, sanitation overflowed, tube stations reeked, trains stopped running, fights started — the poor of the East End, always in the path of the bombers, took to sleeping in the Essex countryside. Wendy herself never sought cover, not expecting a bomb would get her until she did what

she meant to do. At night she strolled past omnibuses abandoned in the middle of wide thoroughfares, like wrecks on a moonlit sea bottom. Walking was the only way to get about. There was not a taxi to be had, or a light to be seen except for the stab of searchlights and the flashes of anti-aircraft batteries. Thousands of shells were thrown into the night sky by blinded and deafened gunners, firing until their barrels were red hot despite torrents of water pumped over the guns. Some nights falling shells caused near as many casualties as bombs—but they had yet to bring down a bomber.

In Flanders a new push was on, full of blood and fury. Wendy had no worry of it winning the war before she got her whack in. Ryan had written her, “the brightest lights on our general staff are best fit for bucketing out latrines—this is another absolutely brilliant scheme to move the mud about, and kill countless boys.”

She did not see Ryan again until he tipped her that he would be visiting a French aerodrome near Dunkerque. Wendy took the cross-channel steamer to France. The French did not mind their fliers getting female attention. Wendy was feverishly entertained by the Third Escadrille of Les Cigognes, the Storks. The RFC acted as if it was ashamed of its airmen, but the Aviation Militaire took a Parisian approach to pilot morale—the top French and American fliers were grouped in special escadrilles, with special insignia and first rate fighters. Nothing was too good for Les Cigognes—cases of champagne, pretty blonde mistresses, a pet lion cub that Wendy got to play with. Pretending to be entranced by her school-girl French, they gave her the Cook’s tour of the aerodrome, hoisting her into the cockpit of a high-compression Spad to feel the controls, escorting her through the hangars, explaining the workings of a motor-cannon.

Wendy noted stacks of aerial grenades, asking what they were for. Her guides assured her they were for “Le Boche.” They pantomimed pulling the pins and the bombs exploding. Wendy nodded. “Pour le Boche.”

Right on schedule Ryan arrived. He had come to show Les Cigognes what an SE5 looked like, so the Storks wouldn’t shoot them down by mistake. While the men inspected the British fighter—running its engine and shouting comments—Wendy picked up her bag and walked casually back to the hangar. Opening her valise, she stuffed four of the small bombs inside it, cushioning them with a change of underwear. She was back on the flight line before anyone missed her—thinking how if she had taken Mum’s advice, and gone into munitions work, she would never have needed to be so devious.

The Storks wanted more than a look at the SE5, so a mock tournament was arranged, with Wendy as fair lady. Ryan got her scarf. Guynemeyer, the ailing star of the Stork escadrille, was lifted into one of his three personalized Spad fighters, to be matched against Ryan in the SE5. Frail as glass on the ground, Guynemeyer was an absolutely nerveless flier, with the cold hard eyes of a corpse-fly. Wendy saw her brave knight bested a dozen different ways. The Frenchman’s Spad was all over the

SE5, above, below, and on its tail. There was no way that Ryan could have ever gotten a shot off. When it was over, Ryan shook Guynemeyer's thin white hand, and returned the wipe to Wendy, saying "Lass, I never claimed to be the best." It was a delight to see him all the same, lurching on sweet wine and sugar cakes in the French mess.

Weeks later, back in London, Wendy read that Guynemeyer was dead, shot down in flames over Poelcapelle. Just like Ryan's Rumpler. It was sobering to know that being the best was not near good enough.

Her next letter from Ryan did not come from France—it was posted from a London hospital. Wendy was off in a shot, without checking on visiting hours. The hospital confirmed her view of wartime nursing being cram full of the war's wrecks and rejects, stitched up boys too badly maimed or blinded to be of use—if they were aircraft they would have been broken up for spares. Since they weren't aircraft they were filed away in a big building watched over by underpaid women and offensively chipper young doctors. A useless exercise that Wendy was well glad to be clear of. Expecting to find Ryan flat on his back, looking like a day-old corpse, she was cheered to see him in prime spirits, sitting between clean sheets — fed, bathed, and flirting with the nurses, who claimed he had been the perfect patient. "Didn't ask for his Mum more than once an hour."

Wendy shook her head. "Good old Hun did it again?"

"Righto, he got me another leave." Ryan reached down and patted his leg, swathed in bandages, but plainly still there. "Couldn't have placed the bullet better myself."

Now that she saw he was going to live, she felt free to sit down and cry, shocked at how much she had come to love him.

"Here, here." He took her hand. "Come, stop crying. 'Tis the bunion on my good foot that hurts the worst." Ryan did his best to be breezy and charming, full of that refuse- to-grow-up boyishness she so loved in Peter. Not fit to be turned loose in a drawing room, but a sure friend and would-be protector— all set to be her beau sabreur. Lifting his bandages he showed off the red puckered mark the bullet had put in his leg. "All my own fault, really. Tangled with an Albatros two-seater over Passchendaele. The Hun was poking along, taking his pictures, being a friend to the world. I thought I'd bag him. You know, boost my record—Heaven knows what for. But he bagged me instead."

He assured her other chaps were doing far worse. "Did I tell you Rhys-Davids is dead?" Wendy shook her head. "And Cecil Lewis was jumped by one of the new Pfaltz scouts— shot in the back and nearly spun in. They got him working Home Defense. Squadron's not what she used to be in the old days back at Bekesbourne." By that he meant three months before.

As soon as Ryan was up and limping, showing a bit of his old bounce, Wendy begged him to take her flying. At first he was aghast. “Not for a colonel’s commission an’ a cup o’ tea.” But she worked him around to where he consented, “weather permitting.” He got the use of a BE2d attached to a flying school. “Told them I was keen to keep my hand in—frightfully eager to get back at the Hun — bloody idiots believe anything from a sod who sounds anxious to fight.”

The BE2d was an “improved” version of the old BE2c, twice as ungainly, with greater range and a gravity tank. Ryan stored it in a small shed, where Wendy could get in the front cockpit and slump down without being seen. He would open the doors and get someone to swing the prop, or swing it himself while Wendy kept the throttle from opening too far. Then it was taxi out and take off. Right away Wendy was doing vertical turns, stalls, loops, spins, and split-arse spirals. All that flying in Neverland had made her a natural pilot. Ryan called it uncanny. “Normally a BE2 lumbers like a busted lorry. Never seen a student put the old trot through her paces so neatly.”

Wendy shrugged modestly. “Angel is my middle name.”

“Right. Well, don’t let anyone catch you at it,” he warned. “The RFC will put you in pants and hustle you into combat.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

“They’re mean an’ desperate men.” War in the air was going as bad as always. At mid-month Zeppelins had stalked the Midlands, scattering bombs from Hull to Sheffield. Now the October moon was getting full again. Bombers hung off the coast.

But Ryan’s warning did not stop Wendy from showing up in a flying suit for the flight school’s Halloween dance. Ryan came dressed as the Red Baron, full of his customary impertinence, with a cardboard and tinsel Pour le Merite around his neck. The dance was held in an open hangar, under a big full Halloween moon. But it broke up early as the London defenses banged into action— firing at Gothas trying to get in. The flight school CO came around, silencing the band, saying the party was done with. Ryan asked who put the wasp in his pants. “Why can’t we keep at it? Dancing’s not going to draw bombers.”

The CO fixed him with a constipated glare. “Fraid it’s not just London. They’re hitting Dover, Margate, and the Camps around Canterbury. More bombers are crossing the coast between Harwich and Southend. Could hit here anytime.”

Wendy pulled Ryan aside. “Do you love me?”

“Of course, lass. Terrific time to ask.” Ryan was still royally pissed at the

CO. He slipped an arm around her. "I've not been riskin' life an' reputation all for the thrill of seeing you fly. I mean to parlay this game leg into a cushy billet, tourin' lady's clubs, tellin' tall tales of combat — never gettin' closer ta France than Brighton. Then after the War . . ." After the War was the pilot's pat line.

She reminded him there might be no after the war. "So say you love me now."

"Yes I love you. Ye forward hussy." He kissed her and came away smiling. "So let's go somewhere private an' compare birthmarks."

"Not tonight," she told him, "I've got too much to do in the morning." She let him kiss her again. A long lingering kiss that took total possession of her mouth.

When the couples were gone, and the bomber's moon filled the sky, Wendy stole back across the field, soft-footed as she could, still in her flight suit. Her time was now. Not one to procrastinate or play-act, she did not mean to wait about, like she waited for Peter, trying vainly not to grow up. Opening the shed gates, she slung her valise full of stolen grenades into the BE's front cockpit. She leaned in, cracked the throttle, then went to spin the big four-bladed prop. Never having done it before, she took several heaves getting the 90hp RAF inline to turn over. Its roar shattered the early morning silence. Racing around to get in the cockpit, she was nearly too late. As she pulled herself aboard, the BE2 gathered way, bouncing out of the shed, dragging Wendy with it.

She had set the throttle too bloody high. Luckily controls were in neutral, and the BE2 was "inherently stable." Particularly when still on the ground. The aeroplane charged onto the dark field like an overeager racehorse — through the starting gate with her jockey half in the stirrup. Wendy managed to tumble headfirst into the front cockpit, working the rudder pedals with her hands, easing back on the throttle. The big plane turned to face the runway, rolling to a stop. Ready for takeoff. She scrambled into her seat, muttering, "Well begun is half done."

After the wild taxi onto the field, her first solo takeoff was anticlimax. Throttle forward, get her rolling. Forward elevator. Wendy felt the tail go up, and eased farther back on the stick. Wheels up. She was airborne.

And blind as a bat. The huge round Halloween moon threw precious little light into the cockpit, which was not lit for night flight. She sat in a black inkwell, unable to see her instruments, with no indication of air speed, engine revs, or oil pressure. She was fairly confident she could fly by feel -but what if something went out? Well, if it did, she was sure to know. Even worse, she could not see her compass. How was she going to find the Gotha fields in Belgium with no bloody compass? Wouldn't do to dump her French grenades on Sheerness, or Switzerland.

She pulled back on the stick, climbing toward the full blue bomber's moon.

There were patchy clouds over Essex. Once clear of them she could see the biggest compass of all— the great inverted bowl of the sky, blue-black and studded with stars. Putting the Dippers over her left shoulder she headed south and east toward the channel, and Flanders.

London hove to on her right, a vast dark mass crouching behind her defenses. No blackout could hide Europe's largest city. She saw gunflashes over the East End, and a big blazing fire set by incendiaries. Keeping the fire under her right wing tip, Wendy searched for the shining ribbon of the Thames, knowing she could follow the broad river down to the sea.

Without warning, ghostly lines appeared in front of her, hanging from huge swaying shapes. A balloon apron. Wendy swerved, dodging the dangling steel cables. Without a compass course, she had cut her angles too close, brushing the inner defense ring. Searchlights winked on. A shell burst beside her with a bang you could have heard in Scotland. Someone below had heard her engine. More shells exploded — weird faerie shapes, full of smoke and singing steel. Gunners were throwing up a barrage to bring her down.

Wendy cut her telltale engine and dived, banking left. She headed east toward the fighter patrol lines — a wide gun-free zone prowled by night fighters from Hainault, Sutton's Farm, and Biggin Hill. She tried to remember everything Ryan had told her about the fighter lines— set patrols at standard heights of 10, 000, 11,000, and 12, 000 feet. Righto. The Good Old BE2 could barely touch 10,000. She'd pass under them. Nothing to worry about until she got to the Green Line. Alone in her black cockpit she had to laugh— bent on bombing the Germans, her biggest problem was escaping London defenses. Trying not to get shot down before she started. "Peter. Tink. Are you there? We could use a hand here."

No answer.

"Well, gift, we'll just have to go it alone."

Lighted aerodromes guarding the city formed a glittering ring. Flying on, she did not know she had crossed the Green Line until a searchlight beam swept over her. The beam whipped back, pinning her plane to the night sky. Wendy sideslipped. More searchlights converged, trapping her in a cage of light. Guns opened up, blowing big smoky holes in the night sky. Wendy cut her engine again, pushing the stick forward into a screeching dive. Wind sang in the wires. Flack banged to wake the dead. The whole machine shook. Blinded by the lights, she screamed — "Don't kill me, you bastards. I'm British."

As she burst through the outer ring firing stopped. Pulling out of the dive, Wendy glided silently over Kent, leaving the flack and searchlights behind. Below lay a new landscape, softly moonlit, cut by pale roads and dark hedgelines. Rooftops shone above lighted windows. She passed over a train that snaked along following

two glittering tracks, throwing up a great feathery plume of smoke. Michael might be the driver. Forget following the Thames. She was not going back into that hell of guns and lights. Restarting her engine, she climbed, parting the clouds. The stars grew closer. Light from the big friendly bomber's moon bathed the wings and fuselage, turning the BE2 into a ghost ship.

Without clock or instruments the flight became timeless, like her first trip to Neverland. Ahead she saw the black shape of a steamer, and the shining V of its wake, headed out to sea. The way to Neverland lay over the water. "Second star to the right, and straight on till morning" was what Peter had told her, but he said whatever popped into his brainless head.

"Peter, you said you would come for me."

No answer, just the throb of the engine.

She banked, putting the North Star off her left wingtip, pointing the BE's nose toward morning. Dark air streamed past. Sea turned to land. In the distance Wendy made out a thin silver of light. First light already? She was amazed. Dawn ought to be a ways off. How much time and fuel had she used up, dodging balloon cables and searchlights? She meant to be deep in Hunland before the sun was up.

Flying straight for the red glow, Wendy watched the shining spread in both directions, separating into ten thousand pinpricks of light. It was not dawn at all. It was the front. A "push" was on. Flares were falling. Artillery fire rayed the trenches, bathing Flanders in a ghastly manmade glow visible from two miles up. Night turned into day by magnesium and cordite — a sickly reminder of what business Wendy was about.

The smoky glare of the guns passed beneath her. Wendy was over Hunland, occupied Belgium. All she needed was to find an aerodrome, hopefully a bomber base — drop her bombs — then head home. "Easy enough." Only here aerodromes weren't lit up like Hainault and Biggin Hill. A morning fog was rising making it impossible to just fly low and look about. She had expected this bit to be titchy. Ryan told her the Gotha bases were well back from the lines. The farther she went, the better her chance of pouncing on a bomber base at first light, but she would have the Devil's own time getting back— unarmed and low on fuel. Wendy had not brought a machine gun, a noisy nuisance that should never have been invented. The added weight of gun and ammo would have made her fuel shortage that much worse. She cut the engine and let the ship glide, to save fuel and think clearly. Black velvety silence descended, turning her into a noiseless wraith, an avenging angel, silent and invisible. The false dawn of the front faded behind her. Fog thickened below.

Halloween night was past. It was All Saints Day, when the gates between the worlds open and the dead mix with the living. A bright star shone in the East. Wendy thought it might be Venus — but it came toward her, growing bigger, until it was

about the size of her fist.

The fist-sized spark lighted on her stopped propeller blade, danced along the engine nacelle, and came to rest on the windscreen. At the center of the glow sat a pretty well-rounded girl, no larger than Wendy's hand, wearing a square low-cut leaf.

"Tink! Tink! After all this time." Tears shone on Wendy's face. High over Belgium she knew again that Neverland was real. She had not dreamed it.

Tink answered in a burst of chimes, "Silly ass."

"Tink, guide me. You'll do it won't you?"

The faerie did not reply. Instead she rose, whipped through the maze of wires and darted off, ahead and to the right. Wendy gunned her engine and banked tight. She knew Tink would take her there. Tink hated her passionately. In Neverland Tink had led her right into an ambush—only an acorn button saved Wendy from an arrow in the heart. If there was a Gotha's nest ahead, bristling with guns, Tink would lead her to it.

Dawn, real dawn, showed in the east. On the outskirts of Ghent the faerie dived down into the fog. Wendy cut her engine and followed. The light in the east was not nearly enough to penetrate the night and fog over Ghent. She kept her nose pointed at Tink's glow, wondering if the faerie meant to lead her smack into the ground. Wendy didn't expect such low meanness even from Tink; she looked for a more subtle betrayal.

More faerie lights appeared. Two pairs, one on each side of Tink. Surprised by faeries flying in formation over Ghent, Wendy eased back on the stick, slowing her dive. She cut her engine and listened. That small hesitation saved her. From out of the fog came the double roar of engines. A giant tail marked with black crosses reared in front of her. Sideslipping frantically, she kept from stalling out, nearly gliding into the Gotha. What she thought were faeries were the glowing exhaust stubs of paired Mercedes engines.

Wendy heard Tink laugh. More Gothas were circling above and below, propellers churning through the murk, their familiar Wong-wong filling the fog. Ahead she saw searchlights, not beating about like over London, but standing straight up, marking the limits of a runway. She had barged straight into the landing pattern at a bomber base. Instantly she gave the BE full throttle, shooting straight ahead, knowing nothing botches a landing in fog like a plane bursting out of nowhere. Roaring through the landing pattern, she grabbed up the grenades she had stolen from the Storks. With nothing to aim at but the searchlight beams, she sideslipped, pulling the pins and hurling the grenades one by one at the vertical columns of light.

“That’s for the infant class,” she called out smugly.

Wendy doubted anyone heard her, or that the grenades hit their targets — but the effect was magical. Searchlights winked out. Machine guns stuttered below her. German 77s began to bang wildly into the fog proving Hun gunners were as flack happy as their British rivals. As she pulled up a Gotha sailed past, one engine afire, weaving frantically through the flack. Dodging the bomber, she climbed out of the witch’s cauldron, into the upper air. Whatever went on below, Wendy had done her best.

Putting dawn at her back, she headed for home, drained and exhilarated. Going flat out, the BE2 could not manage much above 70 mph. Dawnlight filled the cockpit, and she saw she was dangerously low on fuel— still she had to push for altitude, taking up time and gas. Flying low over the front would be begging for a bullet. Too many keyed-up gunners crouched in the trenches, pounded by artillery and aching to shoot back.

Tink fluttered back and forth, doing rings-around-the-windscreen.

“Can you spare some pixie dust? We may need it.”

Tink chimed back, “Silly ass.”

Every half minute Wendy would glance over her shoulder, into the blinding glare of an angry sun, imagining black specks dosing in behind her — “Beware of the Hun in the sun.” But she saw nothing. Half an hour and she would be across the lines. Clear and free.

Despite constant effort, Wendy never saw the hunter coming. One moment the sky was clear as new blown glass. The next moment it was filled with the mad stutter of twin Spandau machine guns. Wendy very near gave birth, rolling sideways. Tracers zipped by her wing, leaving lines of smoke like paper party streamers. Horrified, she searched frantically over her shoulder. All she saw was the white evil-eye of the sun.

Another stutter. More zinging tracers brought Wendy up sharp. She did a violent skid to port. A black machine hurtled past, with rounded wingtips, a sharp nose and shark-like body. A jet-black Albatros with white crosses. The Hun, fooled by the lumbering pace of the BE, had overshot. If Wendy had a gun she’d have gotten a good clean whack at him — but she was totally unarmed. Even her grenades were gone.

Taking the measure of his victim, the killer did a slow Immelmann, a half-loop half-roll — full of lazy contempt. He had her helpless. Terrified, sweating in her flight suit, Wendy watched him curve above her. Sunlight played on his wings. The black

bird of prey could outrun, out turn, and out climb her. “Inherent stability” made the BE2 hopeless in a dogfight.

“Please, Peter. What can I do?”

No answer. At the top of his arc the Hun nosed down to bring his guns to bear. Wendy had only one trick in hand. She jerked back on the stick, standing the BE2d on its tail, cutting the engine, bringing herself to a stop in the air.

Tracers zipped by— red hot rivets trailing smoke, short and to the right.

Before the Hun could correct she kicked her rudder over, falling off to the left, into a flat spin whirling like a dead leaf. Sky spun around her. Sunlight flashed through the cockpit. Wendy kept her gaze pinned to her altimeter. Feet ticked away . . . 6,000 5,000 4,000 . . . No sense looking up to see what the Hun was doing. That would mean dizziness. Vertigo. Wendy needed desperately to think. She had a pair of poor choices. She could spin straight into the ground. Smash up. End it there. Or she could push her stick forward and stop the spin. But if the Hun had a half-ounce of killer instinct he would be following her down, making sure she hit the mud. When she came out the bastard was bound to be waiting — 7.62mm bullets would rip through her, tearing big bloody holes. Whirling right into the ground might be better.

Tears stung her eyes. Where was Peter? If she fell, she always thought he would catch her. In her giddiness she heard him.

Hullo Wendy.

“Hullo Peter.”

Have you come to fly with me?

“I’ve forgotten how to fly.”

Then what are you doing here?

What was she doing? It was hopeless to tell Peter about the infant’s class. About her grand design. “I’m fighting pirates, Peter.”

Hullo, what fun!

Wing shadows whipped past. Three thousand feet . . . 2,000 feet . . . Below 1,000 her altimeter was worthless. Wendy nosed down. The ship gathered airspeed and came roaring out of the spin. Instantly she heard the thwack of bullets hitting wings and fuselage, the ping of wires parting. The black Albatros hung on her tail firing merrily into her machine. She’d had it now. No safety anywhere. A bullet-hole appeared in her windscreen, ringed by a web of broken glass. Sick with fear, she

looked for a place to crash.

Bullets punctured the gravity feed tank, spraying gasoline over her goggles, onto the hot cylinder heads. Tearing off the goggles, she cut the engine. Too late. Gasoline burst into flame. Smoke shot back in her face, filling the cockpit. She could no longer see the ground, or where she was going. Her engine was a roaring grease and oil inferno. Fire in the air. The ultimate horror. She felt the heat through her gloves and flight boots -smelled the leather on her flying suit start to fry. Pulling her feet off the rudder, she scrambled up atop her seat, putting inches between her and the flames. Trying to steady the stick with one hand, she clung to the cockpit rim. Wind whipped through the wires, threatening to hurtle her into space.

The shooting had stopped. A tiny comfort. She was headed for a crash with her engine afire. Choking on smoke, she straddled the burning cockpit, changing hands on the stick to keep her gloves from catching fire. What could she do? Peter. Tink. Where are you? What had Ryan told her? She remembered his story of the Rumpier pilot who jumped to keep from burning. A ghastly choice. Death either way. The man in the rear cockpit had ridden the burning two-seater into the ground.

Of course. It hit her like a brick. Rear cockpit. The Good Old BE had dual controls. She scrambled back over the rear windscreen, sitting in the instructor's seat, seizing the second stick and rudder.

She sideslipped, to blow the smoke away. Able to see again, she looked for a flat spot to crash in. Treetops shot by. A field ahead. Stick back, she flattened out, slowing her fall, trying not to fan the flames. Smoke poured from the front cockpit in a great gray plume. Steady, don't stall. Plowed field flashed under her wings. Ease her down— don't fly into the ground. That's it. Brown furrows rose to meet her. Wheels touched. Bounce. Bang. Now a wingtip. Ground loop. Oh God, over we go.

Almost a landing, not quite a crash. One you could crawl away from. Wendy looked up and saw the black Albatros flash past her, plowing nose first into the field just ahead— making a much worse job of it. She scrambled out of the cockpit and watched her Good Old BE2 burn.

The Albatros did not burn. Nor did its pilot get out. The fighter just stood nose down in the plowed earth, its big rounded tail pointed at heaven. Wendy walked curiously over. The German pilot was slumped against his instrument panel, one goggle lens smashed, his tunic bright with blood. The red gash in his throat made hideous gargling sounds.

A wild, cocky crow rang in the air, echoing in Wendy's ears — Peter's victory call.

German shock troops came running up waving their Mausers. She turned to

face the rifles, spreading her hands apologetically. "I'm afraid he is dead."

The shock troopers hardly knew what to make of her after they washed the soot from her face and found she was a woman. Wendy was half sure they would just shoot her, the way they shot Nurse Cavell. Two weeks before the French had marched the Dutch dancer Mata-Hari out onto a Vincennes parade ground and shot her dead. But since Wendy was wearing a pilot's uniform the troopers merely took her to the nearest aerodrome, the Gotha base at St. Denis. There she had the satisfaction of seeing four newly wrecked Gothas that had come down in the fog, victims of botched landings and German ground fire. Four grenades, four bombers — not a bad bowl.

Shock troopers also handed over the pilot's papers and the Pour le Merite he had worn around his neck. The ribbon supporting the iron cross was soaked with blood. Asked for an explanation, a trooper shrugged and drew his thumb across his throat. How an expert pilot could get his throat cut in midair was a mystery to this simple foot soldier. But one sees so many strange things in wartime.

Wendy knew, but said nothing. The Huns thought her mad enough already.

The men of the England Geschwader, whose main business was to bomb London, were totally mystified by Wendy— but delighted nonetheless. Any woman who would fly a toothless old biplane forty miles over enemy lines, for whatever reason, had their instant respect. Particularly if she was young and pretty. They toasted her with captured champagne and a boy with a beautiful baritone got up to sing "Tipperary" and "God Save the King." Afterward the squadron commander drove her to the border, handing her over to some suspicious but non-belligerent Dutch border guards. He made a halting speech in broken English, explaining that German fliers did not make war on women.

Not if they are above the age of five, thought Wendy, but she let him have his say. She had done what she came to do.

Nervous about their neutrality, the Dutch put her on a boat to Norway. In Bergen she caught a convoy back to England. With four downed Gothas to her credit, and that black Albatros (which she had shared with Peter) -Wendy was an ace, alongside Guynemeyer, Ryan Donnelly, and the Bloody Red Baron. But she was determined to retire. The RFC would have to soldier on without her. Lot they cared.

In little more than a year, to everyone's vast surprise the war was done with — and the England Geschwader abolished, along with the whole German Air Force. The Bloody RFC was already gone, absorbed into the new Royal Air Force. Wendy and Ryan were married, he in his pilot's uniform, she in white with a pink sash. Up until the very last she thought Peter would alight in the church and forbid the banns.

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Artist Kent Bash drew his inspiration for our cover from R. Garcia y Robertson's "Wendy Darling, RFC." Most of the story is true: the infant's class, Les Cigognes, the musical 56 Squadron's 10-day defense of London, and the deadly fog in Flanders following the Halloween bombings. Rod promises more Wendy stories in the future

AvoNova published one of Rod's other series for F&SF as the novel, *Spiral Dance*. He has sold the company two other books, *American Woman*, a fantasy novel about the West, and *Virgin and the Dinosaur*, based on another set of short stories.