RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Rainbow and the Rose

Nevil Shute

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When Johnny Pascoe attempts to rescue a sick girl from the Tasmanian outback his plane crashes, leaving him dangerously injured. Ronnie Clarke, who was trained by Pascoe, endeavours to fly a doctor in to help, but this proves more difficult than he imagined. As he waits overnight at Pascoe’s house in order to try again the next day Clarke revisits the past of this unusual man – and reveals the shocking and tragic secrets that have influenced his life.

About the Author

Nevil Shute Norway was born on 17 January 1899 in Ealing, London. After attending the Dragon School and Shrewsbury School, he studied Engineering Science at Balliol College, Oxford. He worked as an aeronautical engineer and published his first novel, *Marazan*, in 1926. In 1931 he married Frances Mary Heaton and they went on to have two daughters. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve where he worked on developing secret weapons. After the war he continued to write and settled in Australia where he lived until his death on 12 January 1960. His most celebrated novels include *Pied Piper* (1942), *No Highway* (1948), *A Town Like Alice* (1950) and *On the Beach* (1957).

Also by Nevil Shute

Novels

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Slide Rule

NEVIL SHUTE

The Rainbow and the Rose

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

When colour goes home into the eyes,
    And lights that shine are shut again
With dancing girls and sweet birds' cries
    Behind the gateways of the brain;
And that no-place which gave them birth, shall close
    The rainbow and the rose:–

Still may Time hold some golden space
    Where I'll unpack that scented store
Of song and flower and sky and face,
    And count, and touch, and turn them o'er,
Musing upon them; as a mother, who
Has watched her children all the rich day through,
Sits, quiet-handed, in the fading light,
When children sleep, ere night.

Rupert Brooke

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JOHN PASCOE MUST have created something like a record for a pilot in civil aviation, because he went on flying a D.C.6b across the Pacific from Sydney to Vancouver as a senior captain of AusCan Airways till he was sixty years old. The Department of Civil Aviation stuck their toes in then. They couldn't stop him flying because he was still perfectly fit and could pass every medical test they could think up. Perhaps they were afraid of what the papers might say if there should ever be an accident. At any rate, they refused to renew his licence for regular airline flying, on the score of age. He took his pension and bought three small aeroplanes out of his savings, and formed himself into a small aero club and superphosphate spreading company at Buxton in Tasmania. Flying was his whole life and he had few other interests, so he went on flying.

He was unmarried; back in the dark ages before ever I knew him there had been a divorce. He was the healthiest man of his age that I have ever met; at the time of his retirement he used no spectacles and still had all his own teeth. He was a very good tennis player. He was athletic in most ways; on his summer leaves he used to go on packhorse trips into the Canadian Rockies for the fishing, and at Nandi in the Fiji Islands where he was based in his last year of airline flying he did quite a bit of skin-diving, using an aqualung. I knew him for nearly thirty years; in fact, he taught me to fly when I was eighteen at Duffington aerodrome near Leacaster where my father was a solicitor.

Buxton is a little place in north Tasmania where the aerodrome is a grass field with no runways. I went there once before Johnnie Pascoe's time. I was flying a D.C.3 from Hobart to Melbourne in the winter in deteriorating weather when an oil pipe on the port engine split just as I was starting on the crossing of the Bass Strait, so that I had to stop that engine. I didn't feel like going on across a hundred miles of sea like that and Area Control agreed with me quite quickly when I put my problem to them on the blower. Hobart had closed in by that time and Launceston wasn't too good, so they sent me in to Buxton which has dead flat country all around. I slithered in over the fence and put her down and boy! was I glad to be on the ground! So were the passengers.

I don't think the population of Buxton can be more than three thousand, though it is the centre of a prosperous grazing district. It has one hotel, so bad that the commercial travellers avoid it and drive long distances to do so. It's not a place that I would care to live in personally, but I'm not Johnnie Pascoe. There was quite a bit of minor flying to be done there, though, and I suppose that's why he went. He had a Tiger Moth fitted up with a canister for spreading fertiliser from the air and he did a bit with that, and he had two Austers for instruction and occasional charter flights. He had a ground engineer called Billy Monkhouse to look after these three aeroplanes, who was nearly as old as he was. He lived in a small house just by the aerodrome and got a woman in each day to do for him; he went duck shooting with the locals in the autumn and trout fishing with the Shire Clerk in the spring. He got the sort of life he wanted, I suppose.

He always looked about the same, from the time I first remember him when I was a boy. He would have been about five foot nine in height with partially grey hair, regular features, rather a fine face, very tanned, a little lined towards the end. He hadn't got a very great deal of

humour in him, rather stiff. Women liked him, but I don't know that he liked them very much; at any rate, he gave the impression of being careful. 'Once bit, twice shy,' he told me once, and I suppose he was speaking of the divorce. 'But that doesn't seem to stop one being bitten …'

He was born a Canadian, in Toronto I believe. He went to England as a flight cadet to train with the Royal Flying Corps in 1915 and he never went back to Canada – not to live, that is, though he must have passed through it often enough. He lived and worked in England and the Far East all the time between the wars, but it was as a Canadian that he got his job with AusCan after the Second War. All the pilots on that line had to be either Australian or Canadian for some point of politics.

Well now. I emigrated to Australia when I got married just after the Second War. I was in the motor trade at first, but then I got a job instructing with the aero club at Ballarat which got me back into the aircraft world. I joined Australian Continental Airways some time ago, and I've been a captain with them for the last five years. In July of last year I was on the Sydney-Melbourne run flying a Viscount with Dicky Powell as first officer. On that tour I used to take up Flight 82 in the late afternoon, get a three hour break in Sydney, and bring the last flight back, Flight 156 that left at 20.25 and got to Essendon at half past ten at night. I didn't like that duty much, for several reasons. One got to Sydney after the shops shut and with too little time to go into the city for a movie. If possible I like to be at home in the late afternoon because of reading to the kids before they go to bed. One sees so little of them, otherwise. I like to help them making models, dressing dolls, and all that sort of thing. Instead, I had to stick around for three hours at Kingsford Smith airport five hundred miles away from them, reading a book in the pilots' room, listening to the radio, or just snoozing in a chair.

That year we had a terrible July. I was sitting there one evening half asleep, listening to the radio and the wind outside and the rain beating on the window. The seven o'clock news was just coming on, and I stayed to listen to that before going in to tea. I sat dozing through all the stuff about Egypt and the Middle East, and all the stuff about the floods along the Murray. Then there came a bit that jerked me suddenly awake. The announcer said something like this:

> 'It is reported from Tasmania that a pilot flying a small aeroplane upon an errand of mercy crashed this afternoon on a small airstrip on the west coast. The pilot, Captain John Pascoe, was attempting to land to bring a child into hospital, Betty Hoskins, aged seven, who is suffering from appendicitis. There is no practicable land route to the Lewis River and all communications normally take place by sea, but no vessel has been able to enter the river for the last ten days owing to the continuing westerly gales. Captain Pascoe is reported to have sustained a fractured skull.'

I was a bit upset when I heard this news. We all knew Johnnie Pascoe because for a time Sydney had been one of his terminals and he still passed through now and then. The world of aviation is a small one in Australia. But I knew him better than anyone, of course, because I had known him off and on for thirty years, ever since he taught me to fly in England at the Leacaster Flying Club. In 1942 I had met him in Cairo when he was flying a courier service to England in a Hudson. In 1944 he had flown me back to Lyneham from Calcutta in a Liberator after I got shot up in Burma. I had met him many times since then, particularly in Australia. All through my life I had known Johnnie

Pascoe, quiet, grizzled, and competent. He was a part of my experience.

When I went for briefing and ran through the flight plan with Dick Powell I asked the Control Officer, 'Did you get any more on Johnnie Pascoe than was on the news?'

'Not much,' he said. 'Hobart sent a machine out just before dark, but it didn't get far. It's clamped down over the mountains.'

'Is it right he got a fractured skull?'

'So they say.'

'They got that over the radio?'

'That's right. They've got a transceiver at the Lewis River.'

I had already got the weather gen for my flight, but I went back and saw the Met Officer again. I asked him, 'What's the form for tomorrow – on the west coast of Tasmania? I'm wondering how they're going to get Johnnie Pascoe out.'

He turned to his chart, and stood tapping his pencil against his teeth, silent. Then he laid it on the chart. 'There's this depression stationary at the eastern end of the Bass Strait. It's been there for four days. There seems to be another forming down to the south-west – *here*.' He traced a little circle on the chart. 'Might push it away.'

'Get a clear interval before the second one comes up?'

'We might. I could tell you better tomorrow morning. If we do, it'll deteriorate again. It's like that at this time of year, of course.'

I went out to the aircraft and put all this out of my mind. You must do that and I had got into the habit of it years before; when you're doing pre-flight checks you only want to think about the pre-flight checks. It was a miserable night with a strong gusty south-west wind that was going to make us fifteen minutes late on schedule, with drifts of rain lashing against the machine.

Presently I got my clearance from the Tower and taxied out to the runway, and took her off. When we were on our way and climbing upon course I had time to think about Johnnie Pascoe again, and the more I thought the less I liked my thoughts. The west coast of Tasmania must be one of the most inaccessible districts in the world. It's only about a hundred miles from Hobart but there are no roads there at all and only one bush track that you can walk along, and that doesn't, go within forty miles of the Lewis River. The mountains stick up in pinnacles all over the country, sort of haphazard, not in definite ranges. The valleys that meander in between and all around these islands of mountain are filled with bush so dense that you cannot penetrate it on foot but have to cut your way through yard by yard with a machete. When you get towards the coast you come upon occasional plains, but these are button-grass plains where no feed grows that will sustain a horse. You can't work a horse in that country at all. If you want to get in to the Lewis River you must go on foot packing all you need for the next fortnight on your back, hacking your way through the horizontal scrub yard by yard. Or you can go round the coast in a fishing boat if the weather is good enough for entering the estuary, which is uncharted and unbuoyed. Or you can fly in to their tiny airstrip. That was what Johnnie Pascoe had tried to do.

We flew at twenty-three thousand feet, and even at that height we had a rough trip. When we were half an hour from Melbourne I spoke to Essendon Tower and got clearance to let down. We were the only aircraft in the air that night, so when we were steady on the let-down I spoke to the controller again and asked if there was anything fresh on Johnnie Pascoe.

'We've been monitoring their frequency,' he said, 'but there's been nothing fresh. I don't suppose there will be till the morning. The woman's there alone.'

'What woman?' I enquired. 'Over.'

‘They’re tin miners,’ he explained. ‘Mr and Mrs Hoskins and two children. They’ve got a surface working. They just dig up earth and wash the tin out of the soil, I think. They’ve got a diesel-engined boat. Don Hoskins took it round to Hobart a fortnight ago to fetch stores, leaving his wife and children in the house. Now he can’t get back.’

I frowned. ‘They’ve got some neighbours? Over.’

‘There’s not another house for thirty miles.’

‘For the love of Mike!’ I said. ‘Who’s looking after Johnnie Pascoe?’

‘The woman is,’ he replied. ‘She pulled him out of the machine and got him to the house.’

I thought very quickly. ‘What’s the strip like?’

‘They land an Auster there in fine weather,’ he said. ‘Somebody was saying it’s only about a couple of hundred yards long, on top of a little hill.’

‘Is there a data sheet for it?’

‘I think there might be. Would you like me to look and see?’

‘I wish you would. I’ll come up to the Tower when we land.’

We got in to Essendon at about a quarter to eleven. I waited till the passengers were all off and then left the machine myself, hurrying through the rain to our office. The weather was even worse here than it had been at Sydney, as dark as pitch and with quite a high wind. In the warmth and light of the office I glanced at the movements board. There was a Dakota freighter scheduled to leave for Hobart in Tasmania at one o’clock in the morning. I asked the night clerk if that flight was still on, and he told me they were loading the machine.

I left the office and ran through the rain to my car in the park, and drove to the Tower. The controller was up there waiting for me. He had the data sheet for the Lewis River airstrip on his desk, and he handed it to me. ‘It’s not a licensed field, of course,’ he said.

It certainly wasn't. The plan showed it as one tiny runway six hundred and thirty feet long, little more than two hundred yards, and only forty feet wide. It ran approximately north-west and south-east, more or less across the prevailing wind. The approaches were quite unobstructed, and it had a hard surface. It was built upon a ridge because the ground fell away quite steeply towards the west; at one point it was marked: 'Cliff 50 ft.' only a few yards from the runway. To the east the slope was more gradual and here was the legend: 'Ground soft and uneven'. The homestead was marked upon the plan about a quarter of a mile from the strip, and a secondary plan showed the general position of this lot in relation to the Lewis River and the surrounding country. There was a mountain two thousand four hundred feet high about four miles to the north-east which might be a bit of a trap for young players in bad weather, and a lot of little hills and escarpments dotted about. The altitude of the strip was five hundred and thirty feet above sea level.

The rain beat and drummed on the glass walls of the control room all around us as I stood looking at this data sheet, taking it all in. 'It's pretty small,' I said at last.

He nodded. 'They don't use it much. The Hobart club fly in to take them the mail once a week, but they don't very often land. Generally they drop the mail and parcels as they fly over. They *do* land light aircraft there, though, in fine weather.'

I waved the data sheet. 'This is the only strip in the vicinity?'

He nodded again. 'They used not to have a strip at all. Then they made this about two years ago. I suppose it was the best that they could do. It's a big job, of course, just for one man and his wife.'

I stood there, thoughtful, looking down on Runway 260, still lit up. 'Any more on Johnnie Pascoe?'

‘Not since I spoke to you. I should say they’ve closed down for the night. They’ll be speaking on the morning schedule, at seven o’clock.’

I turned to him. ‘How did all this begin?’

‘The kid got sick two days ago,’ he told me. ‘The mother got on the radio about it, and they got the doctor on the other end. He diagnosed appendicitis, and said she’d got to be brought into hospital at once.’

‘Easier said than done.’

‘That’s right. Rhys-Davids knows the form out there better than anyone. He’s the pilot-instructor at the Hobart club. Actually, he’s the only man who’s ever landed an aircraft on that strip, and he’s the one who always takes their mail. He’s in hospital with a hernia, and they won’t let him out till next week. He had the operation on Monday.’

That’s the sort of thing that always happens, of course.

He went on, ‘They sent a machine out from Hobart, twice. They couldn’t make it over the mountains either time, and they hadn’t got the range to go round the south coast in anything that could make a landing on the strip. Then Pascoe said he could make it from Buxton. It’s about a hundred and ten miles from Buxton, flying down the coast from the north. He tried early yesterday morning in an Auster. It was clear when he took off, and raining heavily by the time he got there – visibility less than half a mile. He waited for it to clear, circling over the sea until his fuel was getting low, and then came back to base. He went off again yesterday afternoon.’ He paused. ‘The woman said that he made three attempts to land – touched his wheels each time and took off again. The fourth time, she said, the machine turned upside down in a gust and fell off the edge of the runway.’

‘Over this place where it says, “cliff”?’

‘Could be.’

I glanced down at the paper in my hand. It was several hundred yards to the homestead. ‘She got him to the

house?’

He nodded. ‘She couldn’t carry him, of course. But she must be a pretty good kind of a girl. She had the child out there at the runway in her arms ready to pop it into the machine, so that the pilot wouldn’t have to leave his seat. She put the child down and pulled Pascoe out of the wreckage. She says he’s got a big dent in his head where the skull’s caved in, a broken thigh, and possibly other injuries.’

‘Christ!’ I said softly. I could imagine the scene – just one woman in the rain and the wind, with all that on her plate. ‘What did she do then?’

‘She did all right,’ he said. ‘She left him lying on the ground and ran back with the child to the house. Then she ran back again with a couple of hot water bags and blankets. She knows about shock, apparently. Then she ran back to the house again and got on the blower to Hobart. She’s got the standard medicine chest and they told her what to give him – morphia or something. She gave him that and then she went and got their tractor and a sled, and put him on the sled, and got him to the house and into bed.’

It was just about as bad as it could be. ‘He’s unconscious?’

‘Semi-conscious. He asked for a cigarette and smoked it while she was getting the sled.’

‘What’s the form about the weather?’

‘They’re hoping for a few hours clear tomorrow. Then it’s likely to close down again.’

A sudden gust of wind whistled about the Tower. ‘Do you know what they’re planning to do?’

‘I haven’t heard,’ he said. ‘If it clears they’ll almost certainly send out a machine from Hobart. They’ll probably take a doctor.’

‘Is there anyone at Buxton now? I mean, if it *doesn’t* clear? Any other pilot who could fly an Auster down from there?’

He shook his head. ‘I haven’t heard. They may be sending somebody up there tonight. So far as I know, Pascoe was the only experienced pilot there.’

I stood in thought for a moment while responsibility descended squarely on my shoulders. Johnnie Pascoe had taught me to fly, and whoever they had at Hobart in the absence of Rhys-Davids it was quite unlikely that he’d have one half of my experience. I couldn’t let this rest. I’d have to go over and do what I could to help.

I turned to the controller. ‘Mind if I use your telephone?’

I got on an outside line from the Control Tower and rang Peter Fosdick at his house, our operations manager. He was in bed, but I got him out of that. I told him what the form was, and asked if he could spare me for a day or two to go over on this thing. He grumbled a good bit, but he’d got plenty of time to rearrange the crews because I wasn’t flying till the afternoon. He couldn’t very well refuse, and besides, he knew Johnnie Pascoe, too.

The controller had heard all of that, of course, because I was speaking from his desk. I replaced the telephone. ‘I’m going over on Flight 117, the freighter,’ I told him. ‘There’ll be a change in the flight plan. I’m going to ask them to go in to Launceston and drop me off before they go on to Hobart. I’ll go straight to Buxton and see what the form is. I believe that’s the best place to be. When you’re speaking to Hobart, would you tell them that’s what I’m doing, and I’m on my way? I’ll be talking to them on the land line first thing in the morning.’

I folded the data sheet about that rotten little airstrip and put it in my pocket, and went down to the car. I looked in at the office and told the clerk about the freighter stop at Launceston. I grabbed one of the Tasmanian maps and went out to my car again, and drove off home. I live in the suburbs at Essendon not very far from the aerodrome, in a fair-sized single-storey house on the corner of two streets. I

left the car out in the road instead of driving into the garage, and went into the house.

Sheila had gone to bed; she came out in her dressing gown to meet me in the hall. ‘You’re late, Ronnie,’ she said. ‘Did you have a bad trip?’

‘Not too bad,’ I told her. ‘But there’s been a bit of drama in Tasmania. Johnnie Pascoe’s bought it.’

‘I heard it on the news. I’m sorry. Why did you leave the car outside?’

‘I’m going over there,’ I said. ‘See if there’s anything that I can do. There’s a freighter in about an hour’s time. I want my leather coat and helmet.’

She stared at me, astonished. ‘Your *leather coat*? I haven’t seen that for years.’

‘We haven’t given it away?’

She wrinkled her brows. ‘I don’t think so.’ She stood in thought. ‘I remember wrapping it up in newspaper so that it wouldn’t make other things dirty … I put mothballs in with it … I think it might be in the trunk under Diana’s bed, underneath my stole.’

‘Would the helmet be with it?’

‘It might be. Peter had that last, two years ago, when he went to that fancy dress party at school.’ Diana woke up when we pulled the trunk out from under her bed, and sat up sleepily, ‘Wha’s the matter?’

‘It’s all right, darling,’ Sheila told her. ‘Go to sleep again. We just want Daddy’s coat. He’s going flying.’

At eight years old one is easily satisfied. ‘Is that all?’ she said. She lay down and turned on her side; I pulled the bedclothes over her and tucked them round her shoulders for the night was chilly, and she went to sleep immediately. The coat was there in newspaper and we found the helmet in the chest of drawers in Peter’s room. Sheila said softly, ‘He puts it on sometimes, in front of the looking glass.’

We closed the door quietly behind us. ‘You’d better have something, Ronnie,’ she said. ‘Dripping toast and cocoa?’

It was a good idea, because I should be up all night. She went into the kitchen and I went into the bedroom and stuffed a little haversack full of pullovers and warm clothes. There wasn't room for pyjamas but I could do without those in favour of long woolly underwear. Whatever things were like at Buxton, I was going to be damn cold at some time or another. I could see that sticking out a mile.

Sheila was busy in the kitchen. I put the haversack down in the hall beside my coat and wandered out into the workshop. Peter and I were planning a surprise for Diana, because we were going to build her a doll's house, a big one with six rooms, for Christmas. I had got the plywood and the lengths of small, sawn timber, and we had laid out the baseboard. I stood looking at the drawing, pondering this thing. I had another project on hand for Peter for Christmas, a flying model aeroplane with a small diesel motor, but that I was building in a corner of the workshop at the aerodrome to make it a surprise.

I stood pondering the doll's house in the workshop, savouring my home. Sheila came to me in a few minutes. 'Don't stand mooning there,' she said. 'The toast's ready.'

'What colour shall we have the drawing room?' I asked.

'Pink,' she said. 'Pale pink walls. She likes pink. Now come and eat your toast.'

I left the workshop and went through to the kitchen and ate the little meal she had prepared for me. Presently I glanced at my watch, and it was time to go.

She said a little anxiously, 'Don't go and buy it yourself, Ronnie.'

'I won't do that,' I promised her. 'There's trouble enough over there already.'

I put my old leather coat on in the hall, and kissed her; she came to the door with me. 'Will you be able to ring me?' she asked.

I thought for a moment. 'After dark,' I said. 'I'll ring you after dark tomorrow night and let you know the form.'

I drove back to the airport and locked the car up in the park. In the office the flight crew were getting ready to take off the freighter. We exchanged a few words about Johnnie Pascoe and went out to the machine; we took off on time and settled down to a long flight against the head wind. I sat on the floor with my back against the freight, dozing a little; it was very cold and draughty and noisy in the unfurnished shell. I was glad of my leather coat. It was nearly half past three in the morning when they put her down at Launceston and taxied in.

We had radioed the airport control to ask them to get a car to meet us, to drive me sixty miles to Buxton. It was waiting for us with a very sleepy driver, and I got in beside him and we started off. It was a quarter past five when we got near the little town, and the driver asked me where I wanted to go.

‘Better take me to the hotel,’ I said. I remembered it from my forced landing, years before. ‘What’s its name?’

‘The Post Office Hotel,’ he said. ‘They won’t be open yet. They don’t get out of bed till about nine.’

We drove into the deserted street, black and silent and wet. ‘Well, take me there, anyway,’ I said.

He stopped in front of the hotel. I got out and knocked on the door for a few minutes, with no result. Then I went exploring round the back with my small torch and found that the kitchen door was unlocked. I went back to the street and paid off the taxi, returned to the hotel kitchen, and switched on the light.

It was a pretty dirty sort of place, and smelt a bit. It was warm, though, with the residue of heat from the stove. I was hungry again and there was nothing much to do for an hour, so I started ferreting around and found the larder, smelling a good deal worse than the kitchen. There was an electric cooker there, so I made myself a cup of tea and boiled a couple of eggs and cut some bread and butter.

It was still dark outside at half past six, and there was still no movement from upstairs in the hotel. The controller at Essendon had said that the woman at the Lewis River would be speaking on the morning schedule at seven o'clock; before then I must get to a radio and find out what was happening. I wrote a note for the hotel on a page torn from my diary and left it on the table with a ten bob note to soothe any ruffled feelings there might be, and went out to the yard, and so to the street. I could see the length of it now in the faint light, but the wind was still high and there was a little rain with it.

It didn't take me long to find the police station. There was a light on in the front office, and when I opened the door a young constable got up from a desk. Behind him on a table was the black metal case of a transceiver. I had come to the right place.

He said, 'Guid morning,' in a strong Scots accent. 'And what can I do for you?' He could not have been in the country very long.

'My name is Clarke,' I said. 'Have you heard anything about me?' He shook his head. 'Well, I'm a captain with Australian Continental Airways.' I went on to tell him briefly why I'd come to Buxton. 'They told me at Essendon that Mrs Hoskins would be speaking on the morning schedule at seven o'clock. Mind if I listen in?'

'Not at all,' he said. 'There'll be others coming to hear that. Mr Monkhouse, the ground engineer, for one, and Sergeant Farrell from the house. Nae doubt they'll be making a great effort to get him out of it today.'

I nodded. 'Have you heard a weather forecast this morning?'

'Only what came through on the six o'clock news.'

'What was that?'

'Stormy, with low cloud and rain.'

I offered him a cigarette and we stood smoking for a time, not saying very much. Presently a very old Ford

Anglia drew up in the street outside; the constable glanced out of the window. ‘Here’s Mr Monkhouse.’

He was an oldish man, shaved and presentable, dressed in a roll-neck sweater under a soiled sports coat. He had once had red hair, now turned mostly to grey. He had a merry face and, I guessed, some affinity for beer that might have prevented him from rising higher in his life than ground engineer at a small Tasmanian aero club. His face struck a faint chord of memory in my mind; I introduced myself, and then I said, ‘We’ve met before, haven’t we?’

‘Burma,’ he said. ‘Cox’s Bazaar and Akyab. I was with the Army, servicing L.5.s of 82 Div. You were in 607, Spitfires.’

‘You’ve got a memory,’ I remarked.

‘Cor,’ he said, ‘I remember you before that. I was a G.E. with the Yorkshire Club at Sherburn-in-Elmet back in 1930. You came over for a Pageant one time, in a Bluebird. You learned to fly at Leacaster.’

I smiled. ‘That’s right. Captain Pascoe taught me to fly. He was at Leacaster instructing.’

‘So he was.’

I glanced at him. ‘You’re English?’

‘Not me – I’m Aussie. But I been all over. Went to England after the First War and never come back till 1946, except one time. I’m from West Australia.’

‘You’ve been in aviation a long time.’

He nodded. ‘Pretty near as long as Captain Pascoe, and that’s saying something.’ He glanced at me. ‘You come to fly him out?’

‘We’ll see what the form is,’ I replied. ‘The Hobart club may have got something laid on by this time. What have you got here?’

‘There’s an Auster and a Tiger,’ he said. ‘Tiger’s got a super canister in the front cockpit.’

‘Take you long to get it out?’

‘Three or four hours. But the Auster would be better. Got a blind-flying panel. Stick a stretcher down in the rear fuselage of that, too.’

‘It’ll take a stretcher?’

He nodded. ‘Captain Pascoe had it modded, special. Both of them. We got a special stretcher, narrow each end like a coffin lid. Take out the front passenger seat and it fits just nice.’ He paused a moment in thought. ‘He had it with him yesterday, so I suppose it’s bust. Knock you up another one in half a day, do for the time being.’

‘Is the Auster okay?’

‘Filled her up and did the daily last night,’ he said. ‘Case anybody wanted her.’

The sergeant came in from a door that led into the house, buttoning his jacket. He went to the transceiver and turned it on to warm up, and we stood silent, listening. Presently it came to life, and Hobart came upon the air. The sergeant adjusted the tuning a little.

The announcer said, ‘This is 7HT. 7HT calling all regular stations. Good morning, everybody. This morning I’m taking 7KZ first, and after that we’ll take the regular schedule. 7KZ, if you are listening, will you come in, Mrs Hoskins.’

There was a momentary pause, and then, ‘This is 7KZ,’ said a woman’s voice. ‘How are you today, Mr Fletcher?’ And then, ‘Over.’

‘I’m fine. How are your two patients? Over.’

‘Well, Betty’s better, Mr Fletcher. There’s no doubt of that. Her stomach doesn’t feel so rigid, and she drank a little milk. Captain Pascoe, he seems just about the same. I gave the second injection at midnight, like the doctor said.’

‘Is he conscious?’

‘Well, it’s hard to say, you know. I don’t think he can say anything. I don’t think he’s feeling much pain, though. Sometimes his eyes are open, and then it’s as if he’s looking at things in the room, you know. It’s hard to say. Over to you.’

‘I’ll put you through to the doctor in a minute, Mrs Hoskins. Before I do that, tell me about the weather. What’s it like with you this morning?’

‘Just the same, Mr Fletcher. There don’t seem any difference to what it was yesterday.’

‘There should be a fine spell this morning, according to the Met. It ought to be clearing soon from the west, away over the sea. Is there any sign of that?’

‘Well, to tell the truth I haven’t looked, Mr Fletcher, only just out of the window. If you’ll hold on a minute I’ll go out and see.’

‘I’ll wait, Mrs Hoskins. Take your time; there’s no hurry.’

We waited silent, staring at the set. If it was true there was a break coming, I would try and make it in the Auster. That was, if Hobart had nothing better to suggest. I said as much to Monkhouse in a low tone, and he nodded.

In a few minutes she came on again. ‘Mr Fletcher? This is Mrs Hoskins here. It’s quite right what you said. It’s showing a little line away over on the horizon, like as if it was clearing behind the rain.’

‘Good-oh. They forecast a fine morning and it looks as though you’re going to have it. I’m going to switch you through now to the doctor; he’s waiting on the line. Before I go off, though, we shall want to speak to you again before the machine takes off, to get the latest weather from you. Can you be listening again at half past eight?’

‘I’ll be listening at half past eight. After I’ve spoken to the doctor, can I speak to Don? Over to you.’

‘He’s here with me, Mrs Hoskins. I’ll put you through to the hospital now, and Don will speak after that.’

I lit another cigarette and we stood listening to the consultations. The doctor took the child first, and from the tenor of the conversation there seemed to be no doubt that she was better. The pain and the inflammation were less than they had been, and the temperature was now below a hundred. So far as Pascoe was concerned, there did not

seem to be much change. The doctor was principally concerned about infection of the head wound, and he gave her very elaborate directions about dressing it, making her write them down as he dictated slowly.

In the end he said, ‘Well, that’s all for now, Mrs Hoskins. I’ll be speaking to you again from the airport at half past eight, before the machine takes off. It’s just possible I might be coming out with the machine. But anyway, I’ll speak to you again then. Now back to the control.’

We listened while the woman talked to her husband, but there was nothing much in that. He was weatherbound, as all the fishing boats were in Recherche or Southport at the entrance to the D’Entrecasteaux Channel; the report from the Maatsuyker lighthouse on the south coast showed the weather to be quite impossible for small craft. Don Hoskins was still in Hobart tied up at the quay, judging it better to remain available rather than to be lying anchored somewhere out of touch.

The announcer allowed them two or three exchanges, and then he cut them short. He said, ‘Before we go on with the morning schedule, has any other station anything to say about Lewis River?’

At the set the sergeant touched a switch and spoke into the microphone. ‘This is 7PC, Buxton. There is a Captain Clarke here wants to speak. Over.’

‘Okay Buxton. Put Captain Clarke on.’

I went to the microphone and said, ‘Clarke speaking. Have you heard anything about me from Essendon? Over.’

‘Yes, we had a message to say you were coming. We’re very glad to hear that there’s a pilot at Buxton. What aircraft have you got there?’

‘There’s an Auster fuelled and serviceable,’ I said. ‘There’s a Tiger with a canister in the front seat that could be made serviceable in half a day.’

‘Okay. Did you hear me talking to Mrs Hoskins?’

‘We heard all of that.’

‘This break in the weather that’s coming won’t last longer than two or three hours, according to the Met. After that it’s going to clamp down again for an indefinite period, days perhaps. The Met don’t think there’s going to be much reduction in the wind velocity. If that’s right, we shan’t be able to go round the south coast from here unless we take the Proctor, and that’s not got a hope of landing on that strip. We shall try it with an Auster taking the doctor as a passenger, with his operating gear. We don’t expect to be able to land properly, but in this wind force we hope to be able to fly so slowly across the strip into wind that he’ll be able to jump out without hurting himself. But we’ll have to go over the mountains to get there at all, and that may not be possible. Over to you.’

‘Clarke here. The wind’s dead across the strip, is it? Over.’

‘It is at present, and not likely to change much, according to the Met.’

‘It’s a job for a parachute doctor, surely?’ I said. ‘Over.’

‘I know it is, but we haven’t got one. The R.A.A.F. are sending down a Lincoln with a parachute doctor and a parachute nurse, but it’s got to come from Brisbane and I don’t think it’s taken off yet. It can’t be here before the early afternoon, and then we’ll have to brief them. It doesn’t look as though this break will last so long as that. Over to you.’

‘I can make the Lewis River down the coast,’ I said. ‘Tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it. Over.’

‘Are you willing to try and put a doctor down?’ he asked. ‘Over.’

I paused before replying. It was years since I had flown anything like that, but I had been good on Austers once, when I was instructing at Ballarat before I joined the airline. ‘I’m game to try it,’ I said. ‘I know what you want. Whether I’ll succeed in landing him – well, that’s another thing.’

‘What’s the weather like with you, now?’ he asked. ‘Any sign of this break?’

‘Hold on.’ I spoke rapidly to the sergeant, and he led me outside. Twenty yards up the street there was a gap between the houses and a view across flat country to the west. There was a line of blue sky down on the horizon.

I hurried back to the police station and the microphone. ‘Clarke speaking,’ I said. ‘It’s breaking over to the west, about twenty miles away. With this wind it might be clear here in half an hour. Over.’

‘The Met only give it about three hours before it clamps again,’ he said. ‘I’d like to fly our doctor up to you, but I don’t know that there’s time for that. Have you got a doctor there with surgical experience, who would be willing to try it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. I turned to the sergeant and asked him. ‘Is there a doctor here?’ He replied, ‘Dr Turnbull.’ I said, ‘You’d better speak,’ and he took the microphone.

‘This is Sergeant Farrell,’ he said. ‘Dr Turnbull lives here. He does surgery on accidents and that.’

Hobart said, ‘I don’t know him. Is he young and active, or is he an old man?’

The sergeant said, ‘He’s young. Only come out of medical school two or three years.’

We left it that the sergeant should take me to see the doctor and we would speak again at half past eight. Hobart went on with other stations and the constable sat down to monitor the conversations. I turned to Billy Monkhouse.

‘We’ll have to hop around now, Mr Monkhouse,’ I said. ‘Will you go to the aerodrome and run that Auster up? I want to do two or three landings on her before I take off for the Lewis River. I’ll go with Sergeant Farrell now to see this doctor, and I’ll come out to the aerodrome immediately after that. Then we’ll come back here and see what the form is at half past eight.’

‘Take the dual out?’ he asked.

‘Oh – yes. We shan’t want that.’

He went off and got into his little car and drove away, and I went with the sergeant to the police car. As we got in I said, ‘Tell me about Dr Turnbull. We’re going to his house?’

‘He hasn’t got a house,’ he said. ‘He lives with the Reverend Haynes – he’s the vicar. He has two rooms in the vicarage and Mrs Haynes does for him.’

‘He isn’t married?’

‘No.’

‘Does he have his surgery in the vicarage?’

He slipped the gear in and looked over his shoulder as he backed the car out. ‘He’s got a surgery in a room in the office building, over Woodward’s shop. That’s where he sees people mostly, but he won’t be there yet. I’ll take you to the vicarage.’ He swung the car round into the road. ‘We never had a doctor here in Buxton till he came, two years ago,’ he observed. ‘He’s squatting, you might say. We used to have to get a doctor out from Devonport before.’

‘Do people like him?’

‘Oh, aye. He’s Tasmanian – his father has a fruit farm on the Huon River. He’s only a young chap, you know.’

We drove about a quarter of a mile up to the church. It was a stone-built church with a square tower, very like an English church as many in Tasmania are. Beside it was a forbidding, two-storey vicarage with Gothic windows and a slate roof. There was a brass plate on the gate leading into the front garden, unpolished for a fortnight. We parked the car and went up the front steps of the house and knocked on the Gothic, ironbound, hardwood front door. We pressed a button and a clockwork bell rang on the inside of the door.

Presently the handle clanked, and it was opened by a boy of ten, in grey shorts and a sweater. The sergeant asked if we could see the doctor. He stared at us without speaking, and then he ran back to the kitchen at the rear of

the house, leaving the door open. We heard him say, ‘Mum, there’s people to see Alec.’

The vicar’s wife came to us at the door, a little grey, a little portly, with a good-natured face, wearing a rough apron over a black dress; she smoothed worn hands upon it as she came because she had been getting breakfast. ‘Good morning, Sergeant,’ she said. ‘Did you want to see the doctor?’

‘If we can,’ he replied.

She stood smoothing her hands on the apron. ‘I was letting him lie,’ she said. ‘He was out till four in the morning with Mrs Jardine’s baby. Is it anything urgent?’

‘It’s Captain Pascoe,’ the sergeant said. ‘We want him to fly down to Lewis River.’

‘Oh … Had I better wake him, do you think? He’s only had three hours in bed.’

‘I think you’d better, Mrs Haynes. There’s not much time to lose.’

‘Well, come upstairs.’ She turned and led the way up polished and uncarpeted stairs to the top floor. Here the boards were out of sight of the front door, and were unpolished. She opened a door for us. ‘Just wait in there and I’ll tell him.’

It was the doctor’s private sitting room, and it wasn’t much. There was a square of threadbare carpet in the middle of the floor, an oval table with a knitted doily in the middle of it and an ashtray upon that. There were two upholstered chairs with broken springs before a fireplace in which no fire had burned that winter, and one small wicker-seated chair at the table. There was an antique, horsehair sofa with one leg missing, supported on a chunk of wood. A faded print of the Good Shepherd hung above the fireplace. A small bookcase housed an array of medical volumes, some copies of the *Australian Medical Journal*, and three or four paper-backed novels.