

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Curtains for Biggles

by Simon Luckhurst

EXTRACT

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Curtains for Biggles

Scene 1.

The stage is dark. We hear the noise of a bus as it approaches. It stops, and then pulls away from the curb again. In the silence that follows we hear a voice.

BIGGLES: Who's there? Is that you von Stalhein? Damned Hun. You won't get me. Do you hear? You won't get me!

There is silence briefly until we hear Biggles' voice again.

BIGGLES: Who is it? Who's making all that noise? Stop, or I'll shoot. Where's that bally pistol?

A torch snaps on, and various members of the audience are singled out by Biggles as he speaks again.

BIGGLES: Good God! Is that you, Bertie? But you died years ago, old bean. I told anecdotes at your funeral. Solemn ones, of course. Like the escape from the Chateau. We made it out of there, but I've been a prisoner in this old people's home for ten years. What's that?! Have you brought someone with you. Ginger? But- I saw you die in Cambridge Hospital. This must be part of some crazy plot of von Stalhein's. Crikey! Algy? Air Commodore Raymond? What do you all want from me? You're dead! You can't be real. Ah, there you are, von Stalhein. I knew you were behind this. Talk to me, man! What devilish plan have you hatched this time? At least when you

were alive I knew where I stood, even if it was usually at the end of a well-made German automatic pistol. But you won't get away with it, you know. I'll work out your fiendish scheme. Except- I read the autopsy report. One bullet tore your left lung apart. Another destroyed your kidney. You're dead, too, aren't you? What do you want from me? Is this the queue for Valhalla? Where are my pills? Where are they?

The torch clicks off, and we hear Biggles rustling for something in the dark. Then the lights snap on, and Biggles is revealed. He is in a hospital bed and is swallowing his pills. Behind him is a hospital screen. Also prominent in the room are a pedestal fan and two bookcases. The bookcases are mounted on wheels and have two shelves each, the lower one about a metre and a half above the ground.

BIGGLES: Another nightmare. The chaps are calling me. When will they stop? They're getting worse. They should know I'm waiting for a bus and the chance of a dignified exit. Here I am a world famous pilot, waiting for the imminent arrival of a ghastly bus! But before it arrives I have one last adventure to recount, this time in my own words. All my other stories were written by Captain W.E. Johns. You know, in every biographical instalment my aviator's insights were omitted. What could have been a lasting literary monument was reduced to a stack of adventure stories. True, the stack was a pillar in its own right- 97 books, if memory serves. I suppose it's possible to achieve a view of sorts once you ascend to the top, although admittedly it's a somewhat shaky one. Arguably similar to the perspective offered by flight, but not identical. This is the story that Johns never told. One misty, rain shrouded evening in London I was visited by Air Commodore Raymond. He was due to retire the next day.

'There are three of them and Hebblethwaite,' he told me. I didn't understand. He explained there was a mole, a deep penetration agent, who had infiltrated our group. That's right, one of them was a spy. I was to go back through the records and find out which of the four it was: my cousin and lifelong companion, Algernon Lacey; my youthful protege, Ginger Hebblethwaite; my friend Lord Bertie Lissie; or my arch-enemy who defected to us in '58, Erich von Stalhein. One of them was a traitor.

'There are three of them and Hebblethwaite.' One of my comrades, was, well, a *comrade*. A blasted double agent. And had been for years, the swine. We were all old by then. We sat together and told stories: tales of the war and the small spaces between the fighting when there were other people to be shot, smugglers and spies, drug pedlars and arms runners. This is the story Johns never printed, because Johns was already dead. All those literary dinners meant the arteries around his heart were full of more fat than a European sausage. And so I began my journey into the past. The first incident to come to mind concerned Algy, during the Great War. Just over the water our boys were pushing back the Hun. There were hundreds of us signing up. Thousands. Millions, I suppose. I ran down to the RFC recruiting office.

RFC RECRUITING OFFICER: Why do you want to fly?

BIGGLES: Er, I thought it might be quite fun. I'm keen to enter the game. Do you really think it's going to be over by Christmas?

RFC RECRUITING OFFICER: Why would you make a good pilot?

BIGGLES: Well sir, I do like the larger amusement park rides. And my eyesight is rather keen. They said I was ideally suited. In your life there are some moments you never forget. My first time in the air was one of them. My connection to the world changed, and it became a place to visit. It was never my home again. We trained for

ages, two weeks, every day. Most of us had a good six hours flying time under our belts by the time we were shipped over to France. We laughed about the butterflies in Freddie Sutcliffe's stomach. Three days later it was full of bullets. All except two of the chaps I trained with had gone for a Burton within a few days of arriving. That first week was like an initiation, turning us from boys to men. We started keeping count, how many of them, how many of us. Possibly there were some who would have traded the experience for a few more overs against the first eleven. Looking back from the comfort of the Baron Manfred von Richfochten Retirement Haven for Old Pilots, it seems astounding we kept score in such a dangerous game. Not the cricket. The war. My first kill was some frightened little boy probably fresh from training. He was in a Pfelz, a slow machine. It was a dogfight, planes all over the sky. Below us the fields of French wheat lay like a golden carpet. I felt I had some control over my Sopwith Camel by then. I twisted to avoid a stream of bullets. Banked left, and when I came level he was right in my sights. Beetling along, flat and slow. I lined him up and fired. He jerked back in his seat. His machine fell onto its side, and plummeted. I saw it crash, like a rock, into the wheat. He never survived his initiation. When I got back to the aerodrome there was a strange chap there. A rum sort of cove, I remember thinking.

CAPT. W.E. JOHNS: My name's Captain W.E. Johns. I'm from The Times. Mind if we have a chat?

BIGGLES: I was still shaking. He must have noticed.

CAPT. W.E. JOHNS: Come on, old man. Do you drink?