

# Lady Thief



**Charlotte Mayo**

A "Her TV" Novel

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# LADY THIEF

by Charlotte Mayo

## Introduction

When I was at secondary school – perhaps aged 11 or 12 years old, our young English teacher gave us some short crime stories to read – we were then to write about them and vote them into an order of popularity – I guess it was an exercise in critical thinking. I remember one story was a Sherlock Holmes case and it was entitled *The Speckled Band* but I have forgotten the others – bar one. The one that forms the centre piece of this story in fact – it was a story written by Dorothy L. Sayers and it concerned her great amateur sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey - the story was entitled *The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question*. Why did it grab my attention? Well, it was my first introduction to a male character who was dressed as a woman – a serious female impersonator! I always remembered the story and later bought a copy of the book of short stories by Dorothy L. Sayers which contained it – *Lord Peter Views the Body*.

Of course, at the time, the story was roundly panned by my peers as it was the story of a French, female impersonator, who is unmasked by the great

amateur sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey, not only as a jewellery thief but as a man – I think to the rest of the class thought the idea was too “fanciful” (to put in politely as I am sure non-politically correct terminology would have been used in the 1970’s). The story was written in 1928 and what I have done in this story is to write the back story from the point of view of the French thief namely, Jacques Lerouge aka Celestine Berger. Oh, that such a person existed!

## Chapter One

I wonder if any of you have had the dubious pleasure of reading the story of that English busy body and amateur sloth Lord Peter Wimsey as retold by Dorothy L. Sayers? The story I am talking about is, of course, *The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question*. Although what is entertaining is beyond my meagre intelligence and oh, and mon qui, it is so short! So short! Unlike the sentence I received for stealing the blasted Duchess of Medway’s diamond necklace. Five years in a rotten English jail. The food was the worst thing. You would not feed a French pig the sort of culinary disgrace the English call food. Why can’t the Anglo-Saxons cook? What is wrong with their taste buds? Bon Ami! They are so coarse and unsophisticated compared to us French – culture begins at Marseilles and ends at Calais – that is what my mother used to say and she was right. It is true. So, so true.

The only good thing about my enforced stay in England was that my English was much improved by the time I left and was returned to my beautiful homeland by two burly prison officers who wanted to see the back of me (and I them). They, of course, handed me straight over to the gendarmery (French police) and I received another sentence for crimes committed in France, oh well, such is life.

There is no country in the world as beautiful as France. Everyone knows it to be true. And now I’m in my later years, looking out to sea, across the French

channel, from my small cottage in a fishing village close to La Havre, I wish now to set the record straight. I wish to tell the true, full story of *The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question* not the fictionalised pap that Wimsey passed off as his story – showing his great intellect and resourcefulness, *mon qui* – it is I who have the intellect and resourcefulness. I, without the privilege that Wimsey had – it was I who was the true genius as you will see. The fictionalised clap trap that the arrogant Wimsey told to Dorothy L Sayers – well, *bon ami*, I wish to *set the record straight* as the English say. That is all. And now, in later years, that is what I will do. In my country Lord Peter's ancestors would have fallen victim of La Guillotine and then that smug aristocrat smile would have been wiped off his face and better still, he would not have been around to nose into my affairs. I would have been a free man, or perhaps, dear reader, a free woman – as you will see.

I will take you back to my birth – I was born Jacques Lerouge at the turn of the Twentieth Century – 1900 – in a small village called Carpiquet near Caen which is actually not that far from where I now live in North-Western France. We were a poor family - my father was an agricultural worker and my mother took in washing and worked as a seamstress. There was just me and older sister, Michelle, she was four years older than me. We were happy enough, we went to church, we helped on the farm, we played in the fields, we went to school. My parents were honest, hard-working people. Then my father died in an agricultural accident – I was seven. Life changed then. For the worst. My mother had to work long hours. Her mother – our grandmother - came to live with us to help with childcare so my mother could go out to work and my grandmother also done some sewing and work at home to help with the family income – you see, we had none of the privilege of Lord Peter Wimsey's aristocratic class. So, there were three females in the household and me – young Jacques. My mother just about managed to pay the rent each month but sometimes we went hungry. There was

not a lot of money for clothes so sometimes I would wear my sister's hand-me-downs – smocks and things like that – it was not uncommon in those days, not uncommon at all. My grandmother, who was a good seamstress, refused to alter them – she would say,

“Look Jacques, they are just clothes, so what if some of the other children laugh at you. They are not as poor as we are.”

It was infrequent but perhaps it happened to me a lot more than others for we were poorer and there was little to go around. In those days, people helped each other, gave each other food, helped where they could. But I suppose I got used to it. Accepted it. There was nothing frilly or nice about the clothes but I guess they did make me feel feminine, as did living in a house with all women. I guess I picked up their ways, their habits, their gestures, at least subconsciously because, as you will see, female impersonation came very easy to me. Very easy indeed. I wasn't unhappy and I was close to my sister and, if I wore her clothes, it tended to be around the house so my trousers were saved for “best occasions” – like going to church and school. Although sometimes my sister and I would go out together – me in her clothes as you will see.

Then the Great War started – it was 1914 - the Bochs invaded Belgium which led to France and England declaring war. It was exciting. The church bells rang out and people came out of their houses and gathered in the streets.

“What does it mean?” they asked.

Of course, no one knew of the horrors to come in the trenches, the mass mechanized slaughter that would follow – well, there hadn't been a war in Europe since 1870 when the evil Prussians had invaded my homeland and raised poor Paris to the ground. I had learnt about it in history and, like most Frenchmen, hated the Germans. I was fourteen when

the Great War started and too young to sign up but many men did. They all went off to fight. Our little village lost a lot of men as many didn't return.

I was restless. I wanted to get involved. I wanted adventure. The war started to drag on, I turned fifteen. I was desperate to enlist. At the time my head was filled with patriotic nonsense about France and I hated the baby-eating Bochs – they wanted to invade our beautiful homeland again and only the trenches on the Western front kept them at bay.

As luck would have it there was an airfield on the outskirts of Carpiquet. I saw the planes taking off and I became fascinated by them. When they flew overhead, I would look up to the sky and stare at them – I even bought a book on different planes from an old book shop. I had never seen planes before and I was spellbound by them – their spluttering engines, their wobbly flights – their wings lolling this way and that as they gained height – they appeared so unstable, so vulnerable. Sometimes pilots would wave as they went over head – they were like the knights of old in the sky. Whenever I could I read books on them. I loved Louis Bleriot, who had been the first man to fly across the French Channel in 1909 – he was a national hero and I recognised some of the planes his company manufactured flying out of Carpiquet.

I used to go and stand by the perimeter fence and watch the aircraft take off and land, I used to hear the pilots shouting to each other and to the ground crew. I picked up words and phrases. I loved the planes – they were magnificent. Then, one night I sneaked into the airfield and took a look in a cockpit. Looked at all the little, white dials – I played with the joy stick and pretended I was a flyer, calling “chocks away” to the ground crew. I must have spent a good half an hour in the cockpit. I guess I had no sense of fear because I could have been shot by a guard but I didn't care – eventually I was chased off.



“Hey you!” The lumbering guard shouted. “What are you doing?”

I scurried, I ducked down and ran to the woods and made my way back home.

That was me – always in trouble – getting into scrapes the whole time. Our teacher, Monsieur Elliot, had gone to fight in the war – he was a kindly, sensitive man who had rarely resorted to the cane but when his place was taken by sadistic, Mademoiselle Symone, the cane was used on a daily basis. Inevitably, I was in receipt of a thrashing on more than one occasion – my mother, sister and grandmother felt I deserved it as they knew I was badly behaved – on more than one occasion mother asked Mademoiselle Symone to cane me because I had been naughty at home – mother didn’t like to discipline my sister or me so she would send a note to school, via my sister, which read,

*“Dear Mademoiselle Symone, Jacques has been very naughty – she then went into details of my misbehaviour – and ended with the words. It would be most grateful if you could punish him.”*

That would mean, after school, I would receive six of the best when the other children had gone home. If that wasn’t bad enough, because I was a loner and an outside the other *gamins (boys)* knew they could blame me and I would get into more trouble - Mademoiselle Symone was only too pleased to show the class how skilled she was with the awful instrument. It built in me a sense of injustice – I got caned because I was good, I got caned because I was bad and, unlike any other boy in the school, I got caned at school because I was naughty at home.

That was another reason I wanted to get away. Enlist. I hated the school and the petty punishments and rules. So, a few days after I had been chased into the words by the guards I went to see a sentry on the airfield gate (there was a gate on the road but only a partial fence around the perimeter of the airfield

which was why it had been so easy to look inside and aircraft at night. During the day there were a lot of people milling around but at night a sentry or perhaps two sentries - patrolled the airfield with dogs but it was such a bug expanse it was easy to gain access). I approached the sentry and asked to see the person in charge.

The guard smiled. "What do you want with the commander?" He said with a sneer.

"I want to enlist," I said.

"You? What's a peasant like you want with the Armee de l'Air? You'd be better off joining the army; they want cannon fodder like you," he said. He was large and rotund and I guess he had failed his medical - in fact, I was pretty sure he was the large guard who had chased me that night I had creep onto the airfield. The military had probably given a him a "light" duty which caused him some embarrassment with his peers who were enlisting to be real soldiers not guard gate dummies.

I kept my cool. "I have thought about the army but the Armee de l'Air is more appropriate as I can fly, you see."

He looked surprised but could tell by my face that I was deadly serious, after a while he said,

"You'd better some in, then," The surly sentry said. "Where did a peasant like you learn to fly?"

"My uncle taught me," I said, "uncle Louis Bleriot."

That made him stand up and take notice I can tell you! I was an accomplished liar as Mademoiselle Symone told me on many occasions - but, by then, my sense of justice had been warped - I had been caned for things I hadn't done and caned for things I had so, to my teenage mind, it made little difference whether you did right or wrong - the result was the same - punishment.

He took me to the commander and, by this time, he was pleased with himself – he had convinced himself he had found an excellent new recruit. He pulled himself up straight and proudly told the commander I was the nephew of Louis Bleriot – the most famous aviator in all of France and that Louis, no less, had taught me to fly!

“But how old are your *gamin*?” The commander asked.

“Eighteen, Sir,” I said. “I have waited anxiously until I was eighteen to join up and fight for France. Viva la France!” I said and clipped my heels together in what I hope was a military style.

The Commander sat back in his chair. Impressed. “A pilot, you say? Well we need good pilots. On what plane did Monsieur Bleriot teach you?”

“The Bleriot XI,” I said.

The Commander raised his eyebrows, I hoped I had not said the wrong thing.

“Excellent! You know the basics of flying, that’s the main thing.”

So that was that! I joined the Armee de l’Air – the world’s first air force – as a fifteen-year-old who couldn’t fly and who had only sat in a cockpit once. But it taught me a lesson – how easy it was to deceive people. If you had a confident air about you and you seemed genuine, you could convince people of anything. Absolutely anything. It was my first important lesson in life.

## Chapter Two

I loved the uniform. I loved being treated like an adult, which of course I was pretending to be – and being paid. It was such a relief after that awful village school and the evil Mademoiselle Symone. I could not have been happier – sometimes do I not think they

were the happiest days of my life? Carefree and young and respected. I would never see those days again.

Fortunately, for the first element of pilot training, we never went near a plane – it was all square bashing and drills and discipline – though I got to use a gun on shooting practice and a pistol which all pilots carried – if we were shot down and survived we were expected to “do the honourable thing”.

Then, after about four weeks, the pilots were removed from the rest of the new recruits – which had included ground crew - and given lessons in flight. I had read about the basics of aerodynamics so I just listened intently to the instructor and made copious notes. Whilst the others were in the mess drinking, I was in the dormitory reading and re-reading my notes. God, I studied. I studied like had never studied before, learning and relearning parts of planes, names of planes, the dynamics of flight, which was such a new science, and how to be a pilot – I read biographies too – anything to give me a leg up – fortunately we had access to a well-resourced library and I became a familiar sight looking for books on aircraft. I was called a scholar and the other airmen took the micky out of me but I didn't mind. I didn't want to be shown up as being under age and I was scared that if I drunk too much, I may reveal the secret of my age – or say something innocently which gave the game away. I had so little life experience compared to my colleagues so I had to make up a pretty girlfriend and a job as a tenant farmer which at least was something I knew about but I was careful not to trip myself up. No, it was better not to drink... or talk too much. I never touched a drop of liquor the whole time I was training.

To be honest, flying a plane wasn't that difficult. Of course, I was something of a hero being the nephew (on my mother's side) of Louis Bleriot and was expected to do well. And I did. Once you had mastered the basics it was easy and, as I had no sense of fear, I

found I could keep calm whilst others panicked and got things wrong. I just thought back to my notes the whole time. Once you were up in the air it was fabulous. It was like floating in the clouds with the noise of the engine coughing and spluttering a constant reminder that you were in something mechanical. I was quite a good student and passed my exams and the course easily. I gained my “wings” as the British say. I was fifteen years old. Unbelievable really but war brings the best and worst out in people.

Soon we were deployed to the Western Front and I was flying over German lines – initially doing reconnaissance with a photographer in the back of my Nieuport 10. I loved that. It was great: drinking Cognac in the Mess, mixing with other pilots – who told stories and jokes and being part of a tight brotherhood – for once I was a flyer, I was no longer scared of being found out – who would believe that a fifteen-year-old was mixing with men? Flying? No one. No one would want to. They were great days. Halcyon days. The war was a great opportunity and I literally joined up a boy and became a man. I learnt so, so much – if the war had never happened, well, *I* would never have happened – my life of crime, my celebrity. Oh, I owe it all to the Great War and then some. It was the making of me. It was a fine adventure.

Eventually, I moved to fighters – a Hanriot HD1 and then Spade X111's which I loved for their manoeuvrability, that was what I wanted. Dog fights, adrenalin, crazy loop the loop acrobatics, it was mad and it beautiful. The Armee de l'Air painted pictures in the sky with their sleek planes turning and twisting and the men in the trenches would look up to the skies and shout and cheer as the aerobatic gladiators went into combat. We were heroes.

I even shot down my first Hun in in Fokker E.111 Eindecker. That was a great dog fight: blasting away at each other until I came out on top. My first kill. You see the thing that separated me from the crowd was a lack of fear. I had no fear at all. No nerves. I

could think calmly in a crisis, always have done. It was knack. I was cool headed, I reacted well under pressure. I don't know if it was my dad dying when I was seven but for some reason, I didn't fear death. I wasn't reckless, I got on with my job. I saw a lot of scared men though. In the mess - their hands shaking as they sipped their drinks, being sick in the toilet, smoking constantly. But not me. I was unfazed by it all. As my commanding officer said to me, "I had what it takes" another Officer said to me, using a British expression, "you don't get the wind up, Jacques, do you?"

"No, Sir," I replied. For nothing fazed me. Nothing at all. And that's more than half the battle for a soldier, sailor or airmen - having nerves of steel.

In truth I was probably a fairly average flyer which, considering I was fifteen and most of the pilots were in their twenties, proves just how good I was - it's a huge comment on my skills and abilities. I was a cut above the rest. Always have been. I can outthink most people. Outsmart them. Even that aristocratic idiot Wimsey. And certainly, the useless Gendarmerie.

As soon as I could I grew a moustache to make myself appear older as I often got comments about my small stature, my slight build and my smooth skin. But I was accepted, looked up to - it was because of my lack of "flunk" or cowardice as the British would say. One day, after a dogfight during which we had taken on six Hun and sent them scurrying a fellow pilot said to me;

"My word, a nephew of Bleriot! God, you have inherited his genes in spades! Louis would be pleased of young Jacques."

"Merci," I replied. Little did he know just how young I was.

Three more kills followed my first - I always made sure I finished them off - there were no soft landings

for my prey – I followed them down shooting all the way – I wanted the baby-eating Bosh bastards to die in flames. If it meant one less Bosh pilot then that was all for the good – some of my peers didn't like that – they thought pilots should be gallant like Manfred Von Richthofen – The Red Baron - but in my book it was war. Total war. They thought there should be “honour” but there was no honour it was just kill or be killed. We all needed to kill as many Germans as possible. Protect France. That was our mission to stop the jackboot marching into our great land. Stop the Kaiser in his tracks.

Then I was shot down – over German lines. I wasn't paying attention. A German came out of the sun – the “Hun in the sun” is what we called them - and shot me from behind. I managed to land the plane but as soon as I did there were three grey coated Bochs around me in their daft, brass pointed helmets, prodding their bayonets in my direction.

“Achtung!” One said. I clambered out of my plane and put my hands on my leather flying capped head. The war was over for me. Or so I thought.

Being a pilot gave you status - they treated you well. I was taken in a lorry to a small town which had been shelled by the British and interrogated which meant giving the German officer my name, rank and number. They realised I was fairly junior and had not had a lot of experience so I was taken back to German to be incarcerated.

I was transported to a small prisoner of war camp in Northern Germany. There were many nationalities there, Russian, British, Canadian even some Negroes from the British and French colonies which I had not seen before.

It wasn't good at all. The worst thing was the boredom – there were few books to read so men just sat around playing cards or played football or rugby but there was only so much of that you could take, the food was so awful to imagine – meagre rations you

wouldn't feed a rat – and there were plenty of those running around too – and cockroaches – lovely cockroaches which crawled all over you when the lights were out – there horrible black bodies travelling over your skin in the dark. Evil little bastards. I wrote to my sister and my mother, I played chess, I read whatever books I could get – I taught myself a bit of German and I turned sixteen.

Over time, I began to notice that some women would come to the camp each day and would work in the German quarters. I observed them and I got to know that they did washing and cooking and household chores for the German guards who were deployed at the camp (and if truth be known were as bored as the inmates) – it was paid employment and they came in and out of the camp with pass cards. An idea formed in my head. As a boy I had occasionally worn my sister's smocks and more than once a passing tradesman or hawker had mistaken me for a girl. At first, I had found it annoying but then I had started playing the part a bit, pretending I was a girl if I was called one by a tradesman. In fact, my sister lent me her clothes on occasions and we would go out of the village on our bikes and I would walk around the next town hand in hand with my sister – there, I would pretend I was a girl too. She thought it was a fantastic prank and would laugh and really enjoy herself if passers-by addressed us as *la filles* (girls). It bound us together. My mother, well, she was too soft to say anything, and my grandmother took a somewhat ambiguous attitude to it - so it was never stopped but I knew it wasn't something other boys did so I never mentioned it – it was out little secret – just a game we played.

Anyway, I started to observe as much as I could: I learnt where the women went and what they did and what time they arrived and left the POW camp. One day I told a guard I was bored and wanted to help out in any way I could around the camp. Most of the lazy prisoners were quite content to sit on their backside and see out the war – knowing that at least they



would have survived it - but I was restless – I wanted out.

A few days later the guard took me to the commander. I stood to attention in front of his large, oak desk, over which hung an oil painting of Kaiser Wilhelm III in full military regalia – though what fighting he ever did I do not know. Those that start wars often stand well back when the first shots are fired.

“Look Sir,” I said, trying to use a spluttering of German. “I am just an honourable Frenchman fighting for my country as I am sure you are an honourable German fighting for yours. I don’t want this war and I am more than happy to spend my days in this camp until the Germans are victorious – which I am sure they will be - and then I will go back and work in France. I have to be honest and say the French Armee de l’Air is full of cowards, conmen and low-achievers. Oh, how I wish I flew for the Germans and the great Red Baron’s Flying Circus – how proud I would be. The British are no better – their Royal Flying Corps is just a thrown together outfit of flankers and toffs and contains not one true flyer.”

The Commander raised his eyebrows and looked mighty pleased at my treacherous talk. I had learnt that those in power like praise, they like to be stroked and patted and massaged and told how good they are so I carried on,

“I do not see you as an enemy and because of that, unlike my fellow POWS, I am more than happy to work for you in your canteen, in your laundry, anywhere but these days are so boring in the camp with nothing to do I beg of you to give me a chance to work for you for free.”

The Commander was delighted to hear such words. Such words of praise. Such words of conciliation (or is that treason?). Maybe he was thinking of the money he would save – that if I worked for free others might follow and that would mean more

money for beer in the local bars for him and his guards.

“I will give it some thought Lieutenant Lerouge,” he said as if uninterested but I could tell I had pricked him. He went back to reading and signing boring papers.

The next day a sentry came and found me and I was detailed to help the washer women in the laundry. I worked hard. I barely spoke. I did all the odd jobs and rough work they gave me. I carried this and I carried that and I did not complain.

*Scrub the floor* – I was on my hands and knees.

*Carry the wet washing inside* – I did it in a flash.

*Put the sheets through the mangle* – I heaved and pulled and sweated.

The other POWS hated the fact I was assisting the enemy and I was given the cold shoulder – “sent to Coventry” is what the British say. I didn’t care. I even grassed on a few POWS who were planning to escape and they got put in solitary confinement – it all earned me points with the Commander – I could be trusted; I was secretly loyal to the Kaiser – or if not loyal I didn’t care which side won the blasted war.

I worked in the wash house and the cook house for weeks – perhaps even two months – carrying, skivvying, making myself useful – the thing in life – and I knew this intuitively – is that you need to play the long game not got for the quick, easy wins. And then I spied my chance. There was a young girl called Christina, she was seventeen and she helped her mother. She smiled at me and we became quite flirtatious. I guess there was not many men of a similar age around the town so even though I was French (but I was an *airman* – something everyone seemed to love) she didn’t mind flirting with me and I returned her flirtatiousness and attempted to make small talk.

At that time, I was still a virgin and had no experience with the opposite sex in terms

of dating and seducing them but I tried my best by just being friendly. She was more than

forward and eventually I got her alone in the laundry room – everyone else had left for the day.

I had used my spare time in the camp to make a knife, I had stolen a cutlery knife from the canteen and slowly sharpened it so it was a dangerous implement. Poor Christina thought she was going to get hugs and kisses but instead I grabbed her from behind, placed the knife to her throat and told her to remove her clothes. Christina cried and pleaded with me not to rape her or to kill her.

“I just want your clothes, your stupid bitch,” I said. “And your pass.”

I made her sit on a chair in her underwear. Then, I quickly fastened her hands and feet with rope stolen from the kitchen. I placed a large piece of tap over her babbling mouth. Next I stripped off and got changed into her old skirt and blouse. I had managed to secure some basic make up by stealing it from bags in the wash room and, of course, I had shaved off my moustache a few weeks earlier. I quickly powdered my face and put on some lipstick. I had managed to steal a head scarf and I placed that over my head too. I gathered up Christina's washing basket, took some money (I had squirrelled some Deutschmarks away when I had robbed other women's bags) and walked from the laundry room hoping against hope I made the gate before Christina was discovered, trussed to a chair. My heart beat like a drum. I was sixteen years old; I had blagged my way into the air force, I had shot down three German planes and then been shot down myself and now I was attempting to escape from a POW camp.

Fortune was on my side; the bored German sentry only gave me and my card a scant glance and re-

leased the gate. I was free. I tried not to rush once out of the gate as I knew it was a long way to the town (one advantage of working with the women was that I had been able to discover where we were and how far the nearest town was and in what direction). I made for the woods in what I hoped was an unhurried, leisurely manner, there was a path through the woods which led onto a main road into town but as soon as I was out of site, I left the path and dashed into the woods, gathering up my skirts as I ran. When I felt safe, I paused to take stock. I ditched the laundry basket, left the woods and re-joined the main road (in effect a one-track road suitable for motorised transport) and started walking along it to the town.

Fortunately, a lorry stopped and gave me a lift to the town – though he was suspicious of my lack of German – he clearly didn't think I was a POW – probably just a refugee. I asked him to drop me just outside the town and walked up some side streets. I was free but I had made a big mistake – I had no male clothes! Like a fool I had left them in the wash basket – I had meant to change in the woods but I had been so anxious to escape, and put distance between myself and the camp, I had just left the basket at the earliest opportunity. I loitered in the town for a while looking at shops and then decided to hide out in the woods until nightfall.

I knew the Germans would be looking for me but that news of my escape would probably not have reached the town for a while. Still I wasn't going to take any chances and hid out in the woods. I made a fire to keep warm and cooked some food I had stolen from the kitchen. They were meagre rations indeed and I did not have long to eat for soon I was dampening down the fire as the sound of lorries arriving in the town was evident that the sentries were looking for me. German jackboots were on the pavement. I heard shouts to passers-by about an escaped prisoner. I had already worked out my plan of escape which meant diving into a fast-flowing river. Dogs were sent into the woods but I knew they would not

be able to pick up my scent. I hid close to the bank so I could breathe under cover of undergrowth – in fact I hid under the roots of a tree that was perched preciously on the river bank.

Cold and wet I waited in the river. I had had to put stones in my skirts to stop them rising up and occasionally I ducked below the water when a sniffing Alsatian seemed too close.

When the hue and cry had died down, I emerged, cold, wet and hungry. Fortunately, I had buried my money prior to ducking in the river: I retrieved it and went to town. It was after midnight.

Firstly, I broke into a barber's shop and stole a cut throat razor and gave myself a much-needed shave in the sink for my beard growth was starting to show. It was strange standing over the sink in the barber's shop shaving - the blinds were down and no one could see in though I was aware the owner lived above the shop – oh, what a scene he would have seen – a man in skirts having a shave. I kept the blade and made good my escape.

The decision I made next changed the course of my life. I could easily have broken into a gentlemen's clothes shops and stolen a shirt, suit and tie and travelled onwards as a man. I didn't. Something inside me told me that I would be less conspicuous as a woman (I was proved right on that assertion) and so I found a woman's clothing shop, went around the back and broke in. I found I was a natural at it – I found I had a robber's eye for detail – the rickety door, the window which had not been closed properly. So, I climbed on a shed and through an upper window – fortunately the proprietor did not live above the shop.

Once inside I went to work. I found a floral dress, satin lingerie, hosiery and even a wig from a mannequin. I quickly got changed leaving my drab, wet clothes in the shop. Again, I used my pitiful supplies of make-up to make up my face. Fortunately, the

shop also sold shoes so I found a pair that fitted my small feet and a red wool coat (that some unfortunate employee had left) as well as a hand bag and a hat. When I was ready, I left the shop through the front door. Now nicely dressed, I walked to the next town in my low-heeled, sensible shoes and caught the morning train to Berlin. It was gone 7am by that time and I had not slept at all, I was so tired I fell asleep on the train as it speed through the German countryside. But I was free. I arrived in Berlin just after 9am and moved through the ticket barriers with ease. There was the bustle and noise of a capital and soon I became lost in the crowd. Oh, it was such a relief to be free! How happy I was! I bought some more make-up and a suitcase and went to a ladies toilet to improve my look and then I checked into a hotel called the Centrale Hotel in a more run-down part of the city where there would not be many staff which would many less questions. In fact, there was one portly, middle-aged German and his wife running the hotel. I checked in at midday and then, I undressed, fell onto the soft mattress and slept for the first time in two days as the soft sounds of the city washed over me: the trolley buses, the horses and carts, the cyclists. I slept and I slept and I slept.

The next day, I shaved all my body hair off with the razor I had stolen and dressed as a woman again – that meant the same neat clothes I had stolen from the shop near the POW camp. I went into town and bought a map to plan my escape from enemy territory.

Fortunately, Berlin was bustling which meant a stray hand could obtain purses and wallets from unsuspecting residents. I was indeed very good at pick pocketing. I bought a new wig and more clothes – a full skirts, blouses, boots and more lingerie. I enjoyed my time in Berlin, preening in front of the mirror in the bedroom of my small room. If the hotel manager was suspicious of a single woman travelling on her own, he did not appear so. I even managed enough German to say my husband, Hans, had been killed at

the front and I was here to sort out his affairs as he had worked in Berlin and our solicitor was here. (Fortunately, I had been able to steal a wedding ring from a wash room in the Frederiksted).

“But I fear he’s left me nothing,” I cried, “I have but now discovered he had a mistress and it seems he left it all to that bitch!”

Oh, what an actress I had become! The sixteen-year-old boy from Carpiquet in Northern France. The boy without a qualification or a penny to his name who had blagged his way into the Armee de l’Air; who had said he was a pilot when he had never once left the ground in his whole life! Who had shot down three Hun planes, who had been shot down and taken prisoner; who had walked out of a POW camp dressed as a woman and found his way to the heart of the enemy country – a Frenchman – amongst the baby eating Bosh! Telling stories and getting such sympathy the kind owner of the hotel reduced my payments for my stay and all I could say was...

“Thank you, thank you and forgive me if I slip into French – it is the French finishing school I went to, you see, and now I fear I have the habits of those course, vulgar, amoral people!”

“Do not worry Mademoiselle Richthofen,” the commissar said. “I, for one, like the French language though better not be heard to say that by the Kaiser.”

I laughed, “Oh, you are so sweet!” I flirted.

How lies did trickle from my reddened lips! Oh, and how I enjoyed it! Being someone else, acting a part. How I enjoyed it for its own sake and did it not make the robbing of pockets and handbags so much easier? After all, who expected that gloved female hand to to in a pocket or handbag?

I enjoyed my stay in Berlin - in fact, I stayed there for ten whole days – I was in no rush to get back to France and once again getting into a rickety Spads.





Whilst I enjoyed flying being shot down had made me realise how close fliers were to death – what did they say? The average life expectancy for a flier on the Western Front was three weeks? Well I intended to live a lot longer than that I can assure you.

Also, I have to admit I rather enjoyed my masquerade as Christina Richthofen – in many ways Berlin was where my love for female impersonation and mimicry was born. Walking around the streets of Berlin as a woman was glorious and the strange thing was, I knew if I were caught, I may be shoot as a spy but I became so confident in my abilities that it did not faze me at all. Also, there were rich pickings to be had. The Germans did not seem to be affected by the war as we French were – despite the fact they were fighting the Russians on the Eastern front and the Allies on the West – so I “repatriated” German money and jewellery from purses and jackets – took what I could steal and never once did I ever come close to being caught. I was naturelle. Still, I knew it was dangerous to stay too long so one day I packed my suitcase with the mixture of female and male clothes I had purchased in Berlin and took a train to Switzerland.

### **Chapter Three**

I knew my big problem was going to be crossing over the border into Switzerland and back to France. I had given it much thought and decided that if I could get to Switzerland, which was neutral, I would then be able to get back over the border into France. The problem was I had no papers. But what I did have was my guile and my intelligence. Dressed as a fashionable woman, in a long grey skirt, black shoes, a grey linen jacket with a fox stole and a hat - I took a train to the Swiss border and lodged in a large hotel.

Then, the next morning, I paid my bill dressed as a woman before returning to my room to change into the male clothes I had bought in Berlin – clothes for outdoor Alpine walking. I then filled my haversack

with provisions I had bought or stolen: maps, a compass; food and water and I was ready to leave the room. Left behind in the chest of drawers, wardrobe and in my suitcase were all the female clothes I had purchased – the silk knickers, the stockings, the suspender belt and chamises and in the wardrobe the dresses and skirt/suits and shoes I had purchased in Berlin as well as the wig and make -up – the char lady was going to get a nice surprise when she came to clean the room later!

When I was ready, I put a deer stalker hat on my head and picked up my long walking stick. I left my room and snuck out of the hotel – there was no chance anyone would suspect I was the woman who had entered the hotel the day before. Then it was a walk: long and bitterly cold, up hills and across rivers. The area was sparsely populated – a few goat farmers who took little notice of a casual rambler. It took two days to reach the border – which in fact was hard to locate because it was fields and wood land – all I knew was that the compass needed to point in a Westerly direction. It was easy to just cross the border and finally enter Switzerland only the maps and my compass gave a clue to my route. From there I made my way to Geneva and handed myself into the authorities – I told them I was a French flyer who had been shot down over German lines, taken prisoner and then escaped a POW camp.

The French authorities came to collect me, and not for the last time in my life, I was escorted back to France by two gendarmes. I was taken to a small police station, on the other side of the broader, and de-briefed by French Secret Service – for at first, they thought I might be a German spy. I told my interrogator my full story – how I had dressed as a woman to escape as a POW – they were most impressed by ingenuity.

“As soon as I could I get out of those horrid female clothes I did – I broke into a gentlemen’s tailors and stolen a suit and then travelled onto Berlin,” I lied.

I gave them dates, details of my squadron, my rank, my (doctored) date of birth. Checks were done on my identity and it was discovered, that indeed, Jacques Lerouge, had been shot down and a certain Jacques Lerouge had been captured and taken to a POW camp – then he had escaped. My story stood up – it wasn't a lie. Even so one of my interrogators, from the French Secret Service, Claude, smelt a rat.

“How did you, a lone Frenchman, survive in Berlin?”

I told them the hotel I had stayed at, how I had travelled around Berlin collecting items to make good my escape.

“It is not possible,” The savvy interrogator said. “Not in war.”

It was then that I told the full story – in fact, realising a Frenchman would stand out, and may be subjected to questioning and arrest, I had actually dressed as a woman the whole time until I could escape Berlin.

My interrogator, Claude, slapped me on the back.

“Ah, and you were afraid to be unmasked – the fact you had had to disguise yourself as a woman! But bravo young, Jacques, you have proven yourself most worthy. Of course, no man wants to admit to dressing as a woman but you have shown tremendous courage and initiative.”

My secret was out!

I was taken back to my squadron – a horse parade awaited me – I even had my picture in the paper. Of course, the War Ministry loved the propaganda – a Frenchman had got one over the Bosh. A decorated one at that as I even received a medal for bravery.

I suppose, looking back, it went to my head a bit – being lauded – I found girls were interested in me –

men admired me. It was something I had thought very little of up until then but others seemed to think I was very brave and daring... I was a French hero. One newspaper headline read,

*“Brave French airman makes daring escape from German POW camp dressed as a washer woman - Jacques Lerouge says, “I didn’t like dressing as a woman but it was something, I felt I had to do – I just wanted to re-join the Armee de l’Air and fly my Spad again. I couldn’t wait to go back to fighting the Boch. Unfortunately, I had to stay dressed as a woman for a week in Berlin whilst I planned my escape from enemy territory. I knew a Frenchman would stand out like a thumb most sore in Berlin.”*

There were pictures of me, of course. Lots of them. One even showed me with my mother and sister as I received my medal for bravery. Jacques Lerouge was a hero.

When, I returned to the squadron, I enjoyed myself: I drunk, I smoked and I made love for the first, second and for a third time – different women, of course. They were falling over themselves to meet me. By then I was seventeen years old going on twenty-five. I was enjoying life. I felt immortal. I felt on top of the world and my flying improved no end – I was made a Flight Lieutenant and was marked out as a squadron leader. Seventeen, don’t forget!

Then two men from the French secret service visited me. They thought I would make a good spy – Claude had recommended me it seemed – he said I showed initiative and could work on my own. I didn’t want to go but it seemed I had no choice in the matter – the French top brass had decided it was best for France. I was sent away for training (and here I learnt about detonation, safe cracking, break- in skills and the like) I took to it easily and was a model pupil. But then it all went wrong. Badly wrong. My life of lies literally blew up in my face.