

THE GHOST  
OF  
CAPTAIN HINCHLIFFE

A NOVEL

BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS

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This is a work of fiction with both real, historical figures and fictitious characters based on actual events which occurred between 1920 and 1930. Some events, dates and locations have been changed for dramatic purposes and artistic license has been taken throughout.

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# CAXTON HALL

Saturday, December 20, 1930.

It was dark and it was cold when Millie arrived at Caxton Hall in a black Daimler sent by the organizers to collect her from Pickwick Cottage. Despite the weather, there were throngs of people under the canopy awaiting Millie's arrival at the front steps. Two festive Christmas trees, decorated with colored lights, stood each side of the entrance. An advertisement in a glass case announced coming events.

TONIGHT 8 p.m.  
MRS. HINCHLIFFE SPEAKS  
LIFE AFTER DEATH

Speed Graphics flashed as Millie elegantly eased herself out of the limousine onto the sidewalk. For a few moments she posed, beneath a striking, red cloche hat, wrapped in black furs, her face radiant. Photographers and reporters pushed forward excitedly around her, calling out their questions.

"Mrs. Hinchliffe, what've you come to tell us this evening?"

"I am overjoyed! And tonight I shall tell you why," she responded.

"Is it true you're writing a book ma'am?"

"How do you feel about airships now?"

Millie closed her eyes, pained. "I'm very sad—and extremely bitter, as you can imagine. I suppose hard lessons have been learned by our government—at least we can only hope so!"

She made her way to the doors and was escorted along a corridor to the rear of the stage in the Great Hall. Caxton Hall, a place of some

notoriety, built of red brick and pink stone, had once been Westminster's town hall. It'd also been a meeting place for British suffragettes, who held a Women's Parliament there and then marched to the Houses of Parliament each year to present a petition to the prime minister. The hall was also used by occultist Aleister Crowley, where his Rites of Eleusis—which some considered blasphemous and immoral—were performed. This was where concerts were held and where the famous performed.

There was an excited buzz in the auditorium filled with mostly older ladies dressed in their Sunday best. At last, the house lights were dimmed and a voice came over the speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Caxton Hall. It gives us great pleasure to bring you a lady who needs no introduction, a person whom the British people have taken to their hearts. A lady who has for the past two years issued dire warnings—warnings from the grave. Mrs. Emilie Hinchliffe will speak to you about her experiences and the subject of ‘life after death’. Please give a big welcome to *Mrs. Emilie Hinchliffe!*”

Enthusiastic applause erupted. All eyes watched the dark blue stage curtains in anticipation. And then, to everyone's delight, came the lamentation of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata in its own mournful, ghostly voice. The Great Hall fell silent. The curtains slowly opened to reveal Millie at a grand piano, dressed in cobalt blue, surrounded by her artwork displayed on easels, each bathed in its own beam of light.

When Millie had finished playing the first movement, she got up and came to the lectern amid cheers and more applause. She looked down into the front row seats into faces she knew well, especially her good friend, Mrs. East. As the applause died, Millie instinctively scanned the auditorium for Hinchliffe. She checked the end seat on the back row. It was the only empty one in the house. A wave of sadness washed over her and her heart almost stopped. He'd gone. She'd be on her own from now on. For solace, she put her hand to her neck, touching Elsie's gold crucifix, preparing herself to begin. But before she did, she thought of Doyle. How she missed him. He'd been so good to her—a protective father figure. She remembered his words, and did as he'd instructed. She lifted her head high and spoke boldly to those at the back of the auditorium.

“Good evening, my name is Emilie Hinchliffe—my friends call me Millie.” More applause. “... I've come here tonight to tell you my story.” She gestured to the relevant subject of artwork as she spoke.

“It's about an heiress, an aeroplane, a ghost, and the *mightiest* airship the world has ever seen.”

Five hundred ladies and a handful of men listened in rapt attention, eager for answers. Nearly three years ago, Mrs. East, whom Millie had come to know and love, had been as equally transfixed at her kitchen table, next to the fire-grate oven. The old woman had sat watching the planchette on her Ouija board move slowly from letter to letter. Keeping her left hand on the wheeled gadget, with her right, she'd written down an incoming message in wobbly block capitals with a thick, black pencil.

### PLEASE HELP ME I AM A DROWNED PILOT

Later, when Millie read those words, they'd made her cry. She smiled at Mrs. East and went on, “I know you've read the story of what happened to me, and to my husband and to many of his friends recently. Tonight, I'm going to tell you the *whole* story. During and after that terrible war, Ouija boards became an obsession. How could they not, with so many of our husbands, sons, fathers and brothers lost—not to mention our sisters who went to nurse those very men at the Front in those fields of death, to comfort and to heal. and who were, themselves, killed. My husband always called them 'our Angels of Mercy'. There wasn't a family that hadn't lost *someone*. First, I'm going to tell you about the man I love and why at this moment I'm so happy. No, it's not about the money, although that will help of course, and guarantee our family's future, which Raymond so desperately wanted.”

At this, applause broke out again accompanied by cheers—they'd heard all about *that*.

“Life was perfect. Raymond was a vibrant man, full of life and energy—and still is, I want you to know! He was a decorated war pilot, having shot down six enemy planes. Then he, himself, was shot down in the dark of night, crash-landing in a tree in Nieppe Forest. He never spoke of the horrors of that night—even to me. He didn't like to think about it.”

The audience was giving Millie its undivided attention.

“Getting shot down cost 'Hinch' his left eye, and caused a bad leg injury. But this horrendous event didn't stop him, or diminish his love of flying, nor did it reduce his great sense of humor. He spent six months in hospital and three months at a convalescent home. He continued flying, getting certified in just about every plane there was.

After the war, Raymond joined the new Royal Dutch Airline KLM, becoming their chief pilot. It was there, in Holland, that we met. I was at art school and working for KLM part time as a shorthand typist. A year later, we were married at a lovely, little church here in England. Many of his friends were in attendance—some of whom sadly are no longer with us, due to recent tragic events.

“After six blissful years of marriage, we had two beautiful daughters. Most days, he was off flying passengers to the Continent, at first with KLM, and then later with Imperial Airways. They loved him, but he said some passengers were a little fearful being flown by a one-eyed pilot.

There were a few chuckles at this.

“He pioneered new routes for Imperial with his close friend, 'Johnny' Johnston 'the Navigator'. They'd flown to India, Ismailia and Baghdad.

“One year, Hinch was asked to go to an aerodrome in France to *discreetly* retrieve a German Fokker war plane, which many of the French had taken exception to. They didn't want it anywhere near their Paris Airshow—and who could blame them for *that*?”

## THE FOKKER

Monday, June 15, 1925.

Water splashed into the hedgerows from the brown and khaki war limousine as it rushed along the country roads near Thiepval toward Hinchliffe's old aerodrome. He'd been based there during the war—one of several places. He sat in the back seat. Smoke swirled from a cigarette he held in his left hand. In his right, between his thumb and forefinger, he rolled a string of worry beads with its black cat lucky charm—something he'd picked up at the souk in Baghdad and carried with him always. At this moment, being alone, his rugged face was haunted, his jaw set, his piercing gray eye, searching. Memories were still vivid, especially in *this* place. He heard the rat-a-tat-tat of Fokkers on his tail; saw exploding Archie and black smoke around him, planes on fire, men in flames, friends leaping out in death agony.

He was jarred from his reverie as the car slowed to turn onto the aerodrome. He resumed his determined air, taking a last drag on his cigarette before throwing it out. At the airport building, the car came to a stop and Hinchliffe clambered out with a word of thanks to the driver. He drew up his six-foot-one frame, his back ram-rod straight, and marched across the gravel parking area, his slight limp just discernible. He entered the office building. Two young secretaries looked at him approvingly, and then at one another.

“Bonjour, mesdemoiselles,” Hinchliffe said.

“Bonjour, monsieur,” the girls said together.

“I'm Captain Hinchliffe. I'm here to pick up the Fokker for KLM.” His English was tinged with a Scouse accent. He repeated it in French.

The girls' eyes met again knowingly. One licked her lips.



"Zee Fokker is 'ere, waiting for you, monsieur," one said. Hinchliffe smiled to himself. A small, balding man fluttered in from an adjoining office, a look of disdain, a permanent smell under a bulbous nose.

"So, you 'ave finally come to remove this piece of junk from French soil, monsieur!" he snapped.

Hinchliffe grinned, unfazed—prone to toy with such people.

"I understand your sentiments exactly. I've had my share of encounters with these lousy Fokkers. I've had them shooting at me on *many* occasions."

The little man was suddenly interested. "Ah, really, monsieur?"

"One thing I can tell you though, these Fokkers are *not* junk!"

"It is *junk*, I tell you! Pah!"

Hinchliffe winked at the secretaries. "Bon après-midi, mesdemoiselles," he said, as he turned and walked out the glazed doors.

"Good riddance to you, English pig, and to your damned Fokker!" the airport manager snapped as the door closed.

"Beautiful English pig!" one girl purred.

Hinchliffe walked round the building to the plane: a gleaming red Fokker DR1 triplane. Hinchliffe caught his breath when he saw the black German crosses emblazoned on the side and tailplane. He'd seen these things in the Red Baron's flying circus. They used to swarm in masses of thirty or forty. They'd been imposing, although not always ready to engage.

He was joined by a mechanic, who told him the plane was gassed up, checked and ready. They nodded to each other, and after Hinchliffe had physically made his own inspection, he climbed aboard, pulling on his leather flying cap and goggles. He checked the gauges and worked the rudders and ailerons. Everything appeared to be in order. He ritualistically pulled out his lucky black cat on its chain of worry beads and hung it on the instrument panel and then gave the signal for the mechanic to prime the engine. This was done with a couple of turns of the propeller. The mechanic stood back.

Hinchliffe shouted, "Clear!" After turning on the magnetos, he gave another shout, "Contact!"

The mechanic swung the propeller. It caught first time with a pop, and the chocks were pulled away from the wheels. Hinchliffe eased on

the throttle and with a roar, the Fokker pulled away. With a wave to the man, he moved toward the grassy runway.

Hinchliffe gave it full throttle and the aeroplane charged forward. The mechanic stood watching; in moments, the shiny machine was airborne, tearing into low cloud. The manager, who was watching from the window, stood with his hands behind his back, relaxed, pleased to get that horrible reminder of the war removed from his aerodrome. He nodded in satisfaction. But this was short-lived. Suddenly, they heard the unmistakable screaming whine of a plane descending from a great height above their heads—the sound of a crashing plane.

A broad grin filled Hinchliffe's face in the inverted Fokker's cockpit as it sped toward the airport building. The little Frenchman rushed back to the window, where he saw the Fokker speeding toward him at an elevation of twenty feet. The girls threw themselves under their desks. After skidding across the polished parquet floor, the manager dived down to join them.

In the cockpit, Hinchliffe whooped with glee and then pulled the plane up at the last moment. The tail missed the roof by inches and the building shook violently. Hinchliffe rolled twice, turned right side up, and climbed away into the clouds.

“Well, so much for discretion!” he muttered. He banked the plane around and set course for Holland, leaving a glorious red sky in his wake.

## PICKWICK COTTAGE

Tuesday, June 16, 1925.

The following afternoon, Hinchliffe made a return flight with a plane full of passengers from Amsterdam to Croydon Airport. On arrival, he climbed into his sporty, dark green Bentley Continental and sped home. He always loved to get home to Millie and their three-year-old daughter, Joan. They'd bought the cottage with a small inheritance from his aunt in Lancashire and they'd built a modern, glazed addition, complete with a stone fireplace, as a studio for Millie. The blend of old and new set off the ancient cottage exceedingly well. They'd also built an extension at the other end, adding a bedroom and bathroom for guests.

The cottage, mostly of brick, had been painted with red paint at one time and this grinned through the white stucco in some places, adding a patina. An old stable and barn served as a garage and workshop. Some parts of the house were clad with white clapboard. The roof was thatched. It'd become their dream house. They named it 'Pickwick Cottage'. Millie liked the sound of it.

The glass studio was Millie's domain, for her art, photography and piano. In that room, she kept an old Steinway grand—not much to look at, but it sounded beautiful. She kept it in tune herself. As well as being a fine artist, Millie was an accomplished pianist. She'd had lessons in Holland as a girl, and although they said she was 'exceptionally gifted', she refused to pursue a career in music. She never felt comfortable playing in front of people. Hinchliffe always thought her talent wasted, which was true. Millie only had to hear a piece of music once, and she could play it back note for note. Similarly, if she saw something or someone once, she could draw them, or paint them. With the piano, as with her art, Millie released her emotions through her expressive, beautifully shaped hands, stroking

and caressing the keys with tenderness, or sometimes pounding them. The melody ebbed and flowed, becoming a rushing torrent of a tidal river at one moment, and then a cascading waterfall another, or the calmer waters of an estuary, running smooth and deep.

Hinchliffe sped through the Surrey lanes into Kent, crossing a farm to their small hamlet of Toys Hill. This location was handy for Croydon Aerodrome and they could still live in splendid isolation. The village boasted a tiny post office and combined general store, a pub—the Coach & Horses—a beautiful 16<sup>th</sup> century Gothic church—St. Saviour's, and one of the brand-new, red phone boxes, which were sprouting up all over the country. Presently, after climbing the hills overlooking the Weald, he spied the cottage over the fields in the distance, located across the lane from Barney, the Blacksmith's shop. The cottage sat cozily between green walnut trees and hedges. Beside it, he noticed sheets billowing on the washing line. Millie had been busy. He had an idea.

He knew Millie would be in the garden on such a fine, sunny afternoon. She called it her 'little piece of heaven on earth'. In addition to other things, she was an avid gardener. The cottage was set in a typical English garden, an explosion of color from spring through autumn—a haven for birds of every kind. Their favorite place was the secret garden, enclosed by high, ancient red brick walls and tall boxwood hedges. A heavy, arched door closed off the entry, which could be bolted from the inside. They liked to sit on the park bench in that peaceful setting and read, or meditate under the walnut tree, while taking in the fragrances of blooms around them. Hinchliffe had slung a hammock between the wall and a small oak tree in which Millie liked to snooze, or lie naked in the summer sun.

Hinchliffe was trying to give up cigarettes and would sometimes sit in the garden puffing his Sherlock Holmes calabash pipe, listening to birds and buzzing insects and the gurgling brook nearby. Things were going well in their lives. With Millie's backing, he was making a good living, flying full time, and once in a while, transporting some VIP or other on a long-distance journey. Such VIPs included Ramsay MacDonald, the previous prime minister, Lord Thomson of Cardington, the past minister of state for air, and Alfred Lowenstein, one of the richest men in Europe—not exactly a friend, but Hinchliffe was probably the closest thing to a friend Lowenstein actually had. Hinchliffe and Millie were a good couple, deliriously happy, supporting each other's needs. But all that was about to change.

Hinchliffe turned slowly into the long, gravel driveway, passing the white picket fence he'd started building months ago. He needed to get

on and finish that one of these days. He cut the engine and coasted toward the washing lines. All was silent, except for tweeting birds and the faint pounding of Barney's hammer at his forge across the lane. He could see Millie, her back to him, standing at her easel under the wooden pergola. She was working on an oil painting of the brook and rustic outbuildings. Two magpies dominated the scene. She was carefully brushing in reeds at the water's edge with a fine sable brush.

A large sunhat obscured her beautiful face and long, shiny locks. A paint-spattered beige smock covered her ample bosom, slender waist and slim hips, from her neck to her ankles. Their daughter, Joan, was playing with a frog she'd snatched from the brook, watched by Butch, a black Labrador who loved to splash around in that water. In all her twenty-eight years, Millie had never been so happy. He'd be home soon. Good. She listened for the Bentley's growl.

Hinchliffe stealthily slipped out of the car and up to the washing. He unpegged one of the sheets, threw it over his head and crept toward Millie and Joan, waving his arms and making spooky noises. "Ooooooooooh! Ooooooooooh! Ooooooooooooooh!"

Suddenly, Butch spotted the ghost and went on the defense, rushing at Hinchliffe, barking ferociously. Joan was frightened at first, until she recognized the flying boots at the ends of the legs, under the sheet. Millie turned from her painting, her big, blue eyes wide, mildly surprised for a moment. She shook her head as she put down her brushes and pallet. Joan ran to her daddy, arms spread-eagled like an aeroplane. Hinchliffe swept her high into the air, making plane noises, while she giggled. But the dog persisted.

"That's enough Butch! It's only daddy, silly," Millie scolded. She gave Hinchliffe a big kiss. They came together in big unified hug and Butch, finally calm, stood on his hind legs, paws on Hinchliffe's hip.

"Come on, Captain Hinchliffe, I'll make you a cup of tea," Millie said brightly, plucking her painting from its easel.

Hinchliffe glanced at it. "Lovely picture! You just love them magpies, don't you!"

"As long as there's more than one," Millie answered.

Hinchliffe patted her behind as they trooped into the kitchen. Jars of freshly bottled jam stood on the table. They were followed in by Whiskey the tabby-cat, who jumped up, purring and mewing like mad at Hinchliffe. Millie opened the fireplace oven and took out one of her fresh baked loaves and a batch of scones. Hinchliffe breathed in deeply.

"You've been busy, I see. This place smells like heaven," he exclaimed, seizing the cat and nuzzling her.

"You've come to the right place," Millie said. She put the kettle on and got the cups out. "Perhaps you'd drop a loaf and a couple of jars of jam over to Barney later, Hinch."

"Anything for you and ol' Barney," Hinchliffe said, grabbing Millie. He danced her and the cat around the kitchen, bursting into song, "Just Millie and me, and Joanie makes three, I'm happy in my green heaven—it's a cozy place, with a fireplace and a studio ..." He continued with his adaption of the song, now popular on the radio. Joan was delighted to be included.

"You're a good dancer—but the singing—not so much. You'd better keep your job with Imperial Airways," Millie said with a laugh. Hinchliffe frowned. She'd struck a nerve.

With a tray of tea and scones, they moved to Millie's studio, the largest room in the house. Its French windows along the entire back wall overlooked the garden. Millie set the tray down on her work table. Paintings and photographs adorned the walls—one or two done by Hinchliffe (he wasn't a bad artist himself). Propped up on a display shelf were two almost identical portraits of Alfred Lowenstein, wearing a business suit and a shiny top hat. In the second version, he was rather bland—meek even. In the first, his face displayed cunning and ruthlessness.

"I see you like old Lowenstein so much you painted him twice," Hinchliffe said.

"No, I don't like the man much, but I like the painting—the first one, that is. I'll keep it to show. I'll send him the second one," Millie replied.

"Poor old Lowenstein—he's *all right*! Somehow, I don't think he'd like the first one, though."

"Probably not."

"Good luck getting paid," Hinchliffe said with a smile.

Lowenstein had asked Millie many times to paint his portrait and, in the end she did reluctantly. She hadn't liked the way the man's eyes wandered all over her body. But she did it for Hinchliffe's sake. Lowenstein had the reputation of being a bully and of his business practices not always on the up and up. But he'd treated her husband all right, so far. He had a bad aura about him—much of it dark, unlike her husband's which she found to be a thing of beauty.

Sun streamed through the roof skylights onto another painting—an unfinished one—on its own easel. They sat beside it and had their tea and scones, smothered with jam and cream. Joan worked on a crayon drawing on the oak floor boards. Millie took fresh flowers she'd cut from the garden and laid them on the table. She began arranging them in a vase.

"I suppose, since your little 'Fokking expedition', we're permanently banned from France now, are we Hinch?" she asked, one eyebrow raised.

Hinchliffe cracked up. He was studying the unfinished painting. It was of a man standing by his plane—obviously Hinchliffe. "When are you going to finish this? Well, I just wouldn't plan your holidays there, if I were you, sweet pea."

Millie stopped to peer at the unfinished work. "Oh, I don't know, I'm thinking about it—probably when you finish my fence!"

Hinchliffe chuckled and gave her one of his 'touché' looks.

"And I suppose Scotland Yard will be knocking on our door any time soon, will they?" Millie added.

Hinchliffe loved what she'd done with this room. Much of the wall space was taken up with pictures and professional quality photographs of the children, Hinchliffe, local scenes, flowers. In the far corner, next to her dark room, a plate camera stood on a tripod. A smaller camera lay on the piano. On another easel was an enlarged photo of Hinchliffe in his wartime army lieutenant's uniform. Hinchliffe admired himself.

"You know, I hadn't realized I was so good looking."

"You ought to—you know you're my favorite subject. ... Oh, we had a letter from Kate Sinclair this morning. She said Gordon has lost his job and they don't have a roof over their heads—at least they won't in week or so."

"Tell them they can stay here as long as they like—we've got plenty of room—providing you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind. But let's hope *you've* still got a job by the end of the week!"

Hinchliffe coughed. He peered at the picture again. "When did you say you'd finish this?"

"I'll get around to it sometime, maybe. I need some materials."

"This isn't bad. You must finish it. We'll get you some more materials at the end of the month. The aerodrome manager was rude about the plane. That's all. Don't worry, it'll blow over."

“You and your precious *Fokker!*”

Hinchliffe grinned. It tickled him when she said that in her sexy Dutch accent. “Hey, you watch your language, Emilie Hinchliffe!”

After dinner, they went to bed early. Joan was in the next room. After a passionate hour, they lay together, sharing a cigarette. Hinchliffe's eyes scanned the walls, which were also adorned with photos: Hinchliffe and Millie standing together in their courting days, two years between them, an inflated inner tube around their necks, Hinchliffe standing beside his Sopwith Camel in a leather flying coat, collar up, his flying goggles pushed up over his flying cap—the indomitable ace. On the side of the plane were the marks of his six kills and the plane's name: *Allo Lil Bird*.

At times like this, they liked to chat, sometimes for hours. They talked about many subjects. They spoke about God and religion. Millie had attended Catholic church as a girl, but over time her faith had fallen by the wayside. It had been the same with Hinchliffe who'd attended the Church of England as a boy. Both of them were not 'religious', although they believed in 'something'—a superior being. After his brush with death and miraculous escape during the war, Hinchliffe was more than a little open minded about these things. Millie though, had premonitions, usually small things that happened. She supposed everyone did. Hinchliffe teased her about it sometimes, wiggling his nose and calling her 'my beautiful white witch'.

Hinchliffe kissed her cheek and grimaced. “Millie, I love you and the children more than anything, but you know, if I can't fly, I'll go nuts.”

“Why, what's up?”

“They're dreaming up new regulations for one-eyed pilots.”

“Nervous passengers?”

“Yup, I've gotta find something else.”

It was on this night that Millie had the first of a recurring dream she was to have over the next couple of years. After a long kiss goodnight, they put out the lantern and fell into a deep sleep. A little after 3:00 a.m., Millie awoke from a dream. She sensed the presence of a man standing over her. He was more of a dark shape than anything—a shape without a face. She didn't feel threatened or frightened. Quite the reverse. Strangely, she was comforted by it. She drifted back to sleep with a feeling of calmness and well-being.