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Our Man in Camelot

Written by Anthony Price

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Anthony Price (1928–)

Anthony Price was born in Hertfordshire and educated at Oxford. His long career in journalism culminated in the editorship of the *Oxford Times*. He is the author of 19 novels and has won the CWA Silver and Gold Daggers.

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Our Man in Camelot

Anthony Price



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For John Grassi

THE MAILMAN DELIVERED the packet just as Captain Finsterwald and Airman First Class Merriwether had finished searching Major Davies's cottage.

The click of the letterbox flap caught Harry Finsterwald halfway down the stairs. With letter-bombs uppermost in his mind he froze where he was and waited until the delivery had been accomplished. By that time, however, he was reassured about the packet's contents, because with the treatment it had received, if it could ever have exploded it would have done so already. It had been too wide for the aperture, and folded double it was almost too fat, but not quite; with a dry rasp of disintegrating paper it tore its way into the cottage, hung for a moment by a tattered corner, and finally dropped with a dull thump on to the mat.

Merriwether's black face appeared round the sitting room door as the sound of the mailman's footsteps died away in the distance.

"He got some mail?" Merriwether sounded surprised.

Finsterwald looked down at the crumpled packet. "Some sort of catalogue. Or maybe a circular." He turned it over with his foot. "Nothing interesting."

"That figures. You finished upstairs, Harry?"

Finsterwald nodded. "Uh-huh. He's clean."

"Same here. He's so clean it hurts."

"*Was* so clean. Nothing in the desk? Nobody, write to him?"

"If they did he didn't keep their letters. Just bills in the desk, and not many of them. Seems he liked to pay cash."

Finsterwald frowned at him. "You don't reckon so clean is too clean, maybe?"

The big negro shrugged. "Nothing to say it is, and they checked him out good before he did that little job for them in Israel. No next-of-kin, no girlfriends, far as we know, so

no one to write him. Like they say, he was a loner. Some pilots, they're like that."

Finsterwald grunted disapprovingly. "Just a goddamn bird-watcher, and birds don't write letters."

"Not his kind, anyway." Merriwether wiped his face with his handkerchief. "There's a pile of his bird books back there ..." He thumbed over his shoulder, "... funny thing though ..."

"Funny thing?"

"They's all brand new, almost never been opened. You'd have thought, the way he was always looking out for them, they'd have been more—dog-eared, I guess. Like my Air Force Manual."

Finsterwald nodded. It had become a standing joke between them which no longer required even a smile, the Air Force Manual. "Maybe he knew it all too."

"Which is more than we know about *him*." Merriwether looked round uneasily. "Eighteen years in the service, but nobody really knew him. High security rating, flew planes, watched birds. Period."

"He was one damn good pilot. Remember that citation in the file for those Hanoi bridge pictures—like he was a little bird perching on the girders?"

Merriwether looked down at the Busy Lizzie plant on the window-sill. It was just beginning to droop for lack of water.

He shrugged again. "So he was a good pilot. But not good enough when it came to the crunch."

"We don't know that, Cal." Finsterwald sat down on the stairs.

"That's right. We don't know that. Nice day, not too high, not too fast, no malfunctions, navigator transmitting, radar plot on course—then *pow*! No pilot, no co-pilot, no plane, no *nothing*." He pointed a long brown finger like a stick of milk chocolate at Finsterwald. "And that's what we got—nothing."

" 'Like it was a missile'," quoted Finsterwald.

"Except we know it wasn't, because there was nothing in that whole bit of sea to throw it at them."

"Which the British confirm," agreed Finsterwald. "And

their radar cover's on the top line in the Irish Sea these days, you can bet." He paused. "So it had to be the plane —okay. So we'll recover the wreckage and then we'll know. Don't get so hot."

"Then we'll still know *nothing*—" the chocolate finger jabbed the air savagely "—because we'll still not know *why*."

"Means they got a man on the base at High Wodden."

Merriwether laughed. "Oh, man—tell me something I don't know. They got a man at Wodden—we got a man at Archangel. Every base with a major nuclear strike capability we got men at, they got men at, sweeping away the snow, tending to the garbage, delivering the goddamn laundry ... But you tell me, Harry—you just tell me why their man 'ud want to knock down one little old RF-4c on a routine training mission over the Irish Sea."

Harry Finsterwald stared at his feet. "Well, it sure wasn't because they didn't want us to see something, because Davies wasn't on a fixed mission course. They wouldn't know where the hell he was going until too late."

"Right. And if I wanted to keep something under wraps in that whole area I wouldn't turn it into an air-sea rescue zone." Merriwether shook his head.

"And it wasn't just to screw us up, because they'd have taken out an F-111, not an RF-4c."

"Right again. So it has to be the crew—and the way young Collier checks out all the way down the line he wasn't the one. One will get you ten he was an innocent bystander. And for my money, one will get you a hundred that it was Davies, clearance or no clearance." Merriwether looked round the hallway suspiciously. "I can't put my finger on it, man, but there's something about this place that doesn't feel right. Like there's something I've missed."

"They should never let aircrew live off base," grumbled Finsterwald. "They got every last thing they need there, for God's sake."

"Except birds, maybe."

"They got those too. With feathers and without."

"But he was only interested in the feathered kind. He even

used to walk down the runways spotting them."

Their eyes met in perfect disbelief and perfect accord. What was too good to be true could never be safely accepted: it was the vacuity of Major Davies's personal file that was damning. Because like nature, the CIA abhorred a vacuum.

"So we re-check everything," said Finsterwald.

"Every last goddamn thing, man." Merriwether smiled at his partner. "Starting with the mail."

Finsterwald bent down and picked up the packet.

Major David Davies, USAF,
c/o Rosemary Cottage,
Middle Green,
Paynsbury, Wiltshire.

He turned it over.

James Barkham & Son,
New, Second-hand and Antiquarian Bookseller,
7-9, Archdeacon's Row,
Salisbury, Wiltshire.

The buff-coloured, manila envelope was already ripped down one side, revealing the edge of a thin grey booklet. Finsterwald inserted his finger in the tear and completed the job.

He stared in wonder at the booklet. "Oh, brother ..." he murmured. "Oh, brother!"

Merriwether frowned. "You got something?"

Finsterwald read the address again.

Major David Davies, USAF ...

"Harry, what have you got?" Merriwether said sharply.

"What have I got?" Finsterwald looked up for a moment, then down again. "I've got *The Welsh Latin Chronicles: 'Annales Cambriae' and Related Texts. By Kathleen Hughes. Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, British Academy 1973. Price 30p net. From the Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume LIX (1973) London: Oxford University Press.* That's what I've got, Cal."

Merriwether shrugged. "So they sent him the wrong thing. He asked for *Birds of Britain* and they glitched the order. It happens."

Finsterwald opened the pamphlet.

"I guess so ... There's a letter here, anyway—and a bill—so whoever it was—" He stopped suddenly. "Uh-uh, it's for real, because it's addressed to him—*Dear Major, Herewith, as per your esteemed order, a copy of Kathleen Hughes's Rhys Memorial Lecture on the Welsh Latin Chronicles ...*" He looked up again to meet Merriwether's frown. "There's no mistake. This is what he wanted and this is what he got. There's a lot of other stuff about it."

"Okay, okay. So read the letter, man, read the letter," said Merriwether.

"Well, there's nothing about birds in it—that's for sure."

"So he'd gone off birds, that makes sense. Read the damn thing or give it me, for God's sake."

"All right. Where was I?" Finsterwald bent over the typescript.

"You were up to Welsh Latin Chronicles."

"I've got it—

.... Welsh Latin Chronicles ... As I foresaw, it contains no information of special interest to you, except perhaps a passing reference to Badon on page 7, at the foot of paragraph one, in which it concedes the importance of the battle as a reason for its inclusion in any British chronicle. You will, of course, note the footnote on that page, with its cross-reference to page 13. I can no doubt obtain for you the paper by T. Jones in the Nottingham Mediaeval Studies and K. Jackson's 'Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages'; L. Alcock's 'Arthur's Britain', mentioned in the same note, you already possess.

"I have so far been unable to obtain the relevant issues of The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodrian, but these are notoriously difficult to track down.

"As to the—"

Finsterwald stopped abruptly, as though his pickup arm had been lifted off the record.

"Go on," commanded Merriwether. "Don't stop when you've gotten me hog-tied, man."

Finsterwald cleared his throat.

"As to the Leningrad Bede, I can confirm that this is in the Leningrad Public Library (CLA XI, No. 1621), and that it is a handsome manuscript with fine ornamentation, probably copied from the author's original by four scribes at Wearmouth or Jarrow not later than A.D. 747. A complete facsimile of this was published by Arngart of Copenhagen in 1952. I have written to a colleague of mine in Copenhagen with reference to this, but I do not believe that it contains more of interest than the Cambridge MS which you have already examined. I must advise you that the cost of obtaining this would be considerable, but I will await your instructions in this regard.

"No information is forthcoming from the Russian Embassy about the Novgorod Bede. The official on the cultural attaché's staff to whom I spoke had never even heard of it, and I frankly do not place much reliance on his promise to enquire further into the matter. (For the record, incidentally, the splendid euphony of 'Nizhni Novgorod', where the MS came finally to rest, was replaced after the Revolution by the name 'Gorky', after the celebrated revolutionary of that name, so that we should properly refer to the 'Gorky Bede'. But I cannot bring myself to do this).

"The origins of the Novgorod Bede are certainly mysterious, not to say romantic. Legend has it that the MS travelled eastwards to 'New' Novgorod with the great spread of Russian monasticism after A.D. 1200. Although not as fine as the Leningrad MS it is without doubt very ancient indeed. There is a story, though an unsubstantiated one, that it was damaged by fire, possibly during the Revolution but alternatively during a German air raid in 1941 or 2. Gorky was certainly bombed by the Germans, and it was the objective of a great sweeping drive up the Volga from the South—the drive which took them to Stalingrad (formerly Tsaritsyn and now Volgograd —the Communists have no poetry in their souls).

"But I digress—I'll say he digresses—"

"Go on."

"Okay. *But I digress. A friend of mine in Cambridge tells me that there is a particularly acute essay on Badon by the late*

Professor Bullitt in the 1935 volume of the Transactions of the Cambrian Archaeological Society. TCAS volumes rarely if ever come on the market, but there are complete sets in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and the Public Library at Cardiff.

"As per your instructions, I enclose a full account of your purchases, rendered to the above date.

"Wishing you all success in your continuing researches,

Yours very sincerely,

James Barkham"

Merriwether was silent for five seconds. "That's the lot?"

"The lot?" Finsterwald stared at him. "What more d'you want for God's sake? He was in communication with the Russian Embassy—a serving officer on active duty. That's not just breaking the rules, boy. That's the rule book down the toilet."

"Hell, man—he asked some bookseller about a book, he didn't ask them himself. And an old book too. So let's not go into orbit till we know what this Bede-thing is. One in Leningrad and the other in Gorky—you know what it is?"

"Never heard of it. Leningrad and Gorky are both non-strategic targets. They're industrial/population primaries—iron and steel, oil refineries, major generating centres. They'd maybe figure in a second strike."

Merriwether started to giggle, then checked himself quickly. "Harry, Harry—he's talking about history books, not nuclear warfare. Old books and old history."

Finsterwald examined the letter again. "Well, he sure isn't talking about birds, and that's the truth," he admitted grudgingly.

"Now there you've got a point," Merriwether agreed. "It looks like his bird watching was strictly for the birds. Seems he was doing one thing for our benefit and another for his own, and *that* is kind of suspicious. Let me have a look for myself."

Finsterwald watched in silence as his partner read the letter.

" 'Wishing you all success in your continuing researches',"

Merriwether repeated finally. "Whatever he was doing, sounds like he meant business ... You ever heard of this battle of —what was it?—Badon?"

Finsterwald shrugged. "Search me. But it'll be easy to look up—unless it's some kind of code-word."

"Uh-uh." The negro shook his head. "If Davies wasn't on the level and this was coded it'd be about birds, not battles."

"Then why the hell the bird cover?"

"We don't know it was a cover. He could have been interested in battles as well as birds. No law says what a man does in his own time."

"And I say it still doesn't add up. It smells from here to —to Novgorod."

"Could be you're right at that ..." Merriwether flipped over the typescript to reveal the bill beneath it. For a moment he stared at the list of items casually, then he stiffened. *"Jesus!"*

"What is it, Cal?" His partner's sudden excitement hit Finsterwald like a shock-wave. "Pay dirt?"

"Pay dirt?" Merriwether's lip curled. "Man—I've been slow. I've been one stupid black son-of-a-bitch."

"How?"

Merriwether held out the bill. "Look at it—just look at it."

Harry Finsterwald looked at the list.

The Observer's Book of Birds.

A Guide to the Birds of Britain.

The Bird-Watcher's ABC.

"So he did bird-watch," said Finsterwald.

"He bought a pile of bird books," corrected Merriwether. "That was four months ago—see the date?"

Edward Grey: The Charm of Birds.

British Birds in Colour.

Gildas. De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae. Trans.

Nennius: Historia Britonum. Trans.

Malory: Le Morte d'Arthur. Trans.

Bede: Historia Ecclesiastica. Trans.

"Bede." Finsterwald looked up sharply.

"Keep going, man."

PROLOGUE:

Captain Finsterwald and AIC Merriwether

Geoffrey of Monmouth: Historia Regum Britanniae. Trans.
Alcock: Arthur's Britain.
Morris: The Age of Arthur.
Chambers: Arthur of Britain.
Bullitt: Britain in the Dark Ages (Two vols.).
O'Donnell Lectures: Angles and Britons.
Stenton: Anglo-Saxon Britain.

Finsterwald's eye ran on down the page—

Continued overleaf

"For God's sake—it goes on forever," he protested. "He must have spent a goddamn fortune!"

"Not a fortune. About £220—say about 500 bucks."

"But just on books."

Merriwether grinned. "In four months? On his pay that was just the loose change. If it was women or horses you wouldn't think twice about it."

"But these are—hell, they're weird." Finsterwald slapped the list as though it offended him. "*The Archaeology of Post-Roman Britain.... A Gazeteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites.* Just those two set him back—nearly 25 dollars. Cash money."

"Cash money." Merriwether echoed the words happily.

"Sure. It says 'cash' down here." Finsterwald consulted the list. "As of this moment he owes just 38 pence—30 for the pamphlet and 8 for the postage."

"Exactly right, man. He paid cash money for everything he bought—that's what his cheque counterfoils say. And from the dates on that bill he must have called at that bookshop almost every week to pick up what he'd ordered. Only the last time he must have asked for a full list of what he'd bought —'as per your instructions' it says. And when he didn't turn up last week the bookseller just popped the latest thing in the same envelope and brought him up to date with the news."

Finsterwald nodded. "Okay—so what?"

"Harry—" Merriwether spread his hands "—so this is probably the first letter Barkham ever wrote to him. If he called in every week, and paid cash for what he bought, there

wouldn't be any need to write to each other. And the guys who cleaned this place out must have known that. They just didn't know there was a letter in the post."

Finsterwald opened his mouth, then closed it.

"The guys who—? What guys?"

Merriwether waved his hand, for the moment ignoring him. "I knew there was something wrong with this place—it's got a wrong feel to it, like 'who's been sleeping in my bed, man?'. Only I was dumb, and I just had to go looking for something that 'ud tell me I had the right feeling."

"For Pete's sake—what guys?" Finsterwald pleaded.

"Who knows what guys? The ones who stopped Davies's mouth. The guys from Nijni Novgorod, maybe, I don't know. But for sure someone's been here before us."

"How do you know?"

Merriwether pointed. "That piece of paper you're holding tells me how. Because there's not one of the books on that list in this house but those five bird books—" He thrust four chocolate fingers and a chocolate thumb at Finsterwald. "So where those books go? They didn't fly away like birds, man. 'And good luck with your continuing researches'—what researches? There's not one scrap of paper in his desk says he was researching anything, nothing ... And you can't tell me someone who buys all those books doesn't make a single note 'bout what he's working on."

Finsterwald stared at the list.

Keller: The Conquest of Wessex.

"There must be forty—fifty—books here," he said finally.

"Not here now, there aren't. Just five—on bird-watching." Merriwether's derision was unconcealed. "And we nearly bought it, Harry. We came looking for a pilot who watched birds, and that's what we got, and that's what we were meant to get. Until the mailman delivered the mail."

"But for God's sake—" Finsterwald lifted the list "—what would anybody want with *this* lot? It's crazy."

"Not to somebody, it isn't. Looks like the Major researched into the wrong piece of history."