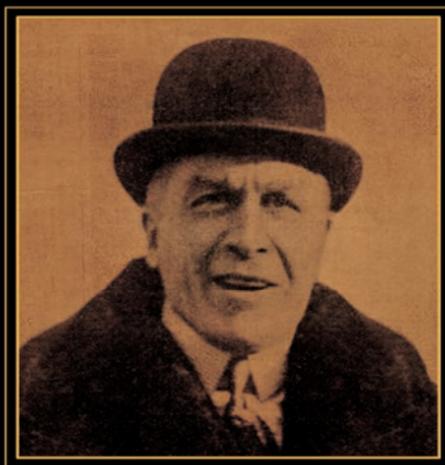


THE  
MAN WHO FELL  
FROM THE SKY

THE BIZARRE LIFE AND DEATH OF  
'20S TYCOON ALFRED LOEWENSTEIN



WILLIAM NORRIS

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**CamCat  
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*The Badger Game*

*A Grave Too Many*

*Make Mad the Guilty*

IT WAS hot enough to make the angels sweat. Their marble faces glistened in the harsh sunlight, sorrowing blindly, as the small cortège made its slow way along the curving path between them to the northeast corner of the vast cemetery of Evere. There were no crowds. The group of curious villagers who had gathered at the gate to see the wealthy and the great pass by was left in puzzled disappointment. Tongues wagged. Was this the way the rich buried their dead?

The flowers were some small recompense for their long wait in the baking heat: great mounds of wreaths and sprays that filled the motor hearse to overflowing, hiding from sight the expensive coffin. Their embossed cards of condolence read like a page from the *Financial Times*. Bankers and boards of directors from around the world had paid their floral tributes. But they had not come to say goodbye. Nor had the donor of the huge wreath of orchids, violets, and pansies, which occupied the place of honor on the coffin lid. And she had been his wife.

Captain Alfred Loewenstein, Companion of the Bath, multimillionaire, aviator and sportsman, friend of kings,

maker and loser of fortunes, was going to his grave almost alone. He was fifty-one years old.

At least he would rest undisturbed. In the cemetery outside Evere, which serves the city of Brussels, there are three classes of graves. For those of lesser means, plots may be purchased for fifteen or fifty years, at the end of which time the occupants are dug up and the plots resold. It is a practical arrangement. No such indignity awaited Alfred Loewenstein. His tomb, covered with a plain black slab of polished marble and occupying the space of three graves, had been purchased in perpetuity. The cost, and the occupancy, was shared with the Misonne family, into which he had married. Above all else, Alfred Loewenstein was a businessman.

The hearse had driven hard to take the empty coffin to Calais on the French coast, collect its occupant, and return. Now it crunched to a halt beside the open tomb. A motley collection of cars, from limousines to taxis, tagged on behind. The mourners emerged from them like beetles, murmuring to each other with as much solemnity as they could muster. There were just seventeen of them, all men, and they perspired freely in the black constriction of their formal grief. They looked with sympathy at the pallbearers, staggering under their load: The massive oak coffin was lined with lead, which was a thoughtful gesture. Alfred Loewenstein had died two weeks before, falling four thousand feet from his private aircraft, allegedly unseen by any of the six other people on board. His condition was less than fragrant.

To the general relief, it was quickly over. A few perfunctory prayers from the cemetery's resident priest, and the coffin was lowered into the vault. The mourners departed, the slab was replaced, and Madeleine Loewenstein's wreath was laid carefully on top. The remainder of the flowers were heaped

haphazardly upon the graves on either side to fade and rot in the sunshine of that spectacular July of 1928.

In the weeks that followed, no mason came to carve the name of the famous man on the marble slab. Nor would they ever come. Alfred Loewenstein had been tidily consigned to the obscurity of an unmarked grave.

If there was little mourning, there was certainly wailing and gnashing of teeth. The death of Loewenstein had brought financial disaster to stockbrokers and small investors across the length and breadth of Europe. Little old ladies and country gentry alike who had clung to his financial coattails in the hope of becoming rich were suddenly poor once more. Dealers in London and Brussels caught on the margins went to the wall as stock in his companies tumbled. In Berlin and Zurich, Paris and Montreal—almost everywhere where men dealt in money—the story was the same. For the best part of a decade, the man they called the Belgian Croesus had commanded the headlines and mesmerized them all with his flamboyance, his daring, and the sheer effrontery of his behavior.

They had danced to his tune, dazzled by his wizardry, hopeful that his Midas touch would transmute their savings into gold. And so it did—while he lived. But the tune was ended, and the melody lingered not. Alfred Loewenstein had wound up bobbing on the cold swell of the English Channel. In a manner as bizarre and strange as the way he lived his life, the third richest man in the world had died and left them holding scraps of paper. They were puzzled, angry, and afraid. And they were much, much poorer.

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IN THE SPRING OF 1984, I knew nothing of this. Loewenstein had died five years before I was born, and though I had worked in the newspaper game for most of my life, I had never even heard his name. And this was odd. Headlines fade and stories are forgotten, but the truly sensational lingers on in some backwater of the journalistic mind. The unexplained death of one of the greatest financial czars of the century ought to qualify him for some sort of place in the reporters' hall of fame. But not Loewenstein. For me, and for the contemporary world in general, the extraordinary life and death of Alfred Loewenstein might never have happened. Until, that is, I happened to visit New York and took a ride in the elevator to the fifteenth floor of the Pan Am building on Park Avenue.

All things considered, it was an odd place for me to be. I had just finished a book that was far from complimentary to Pan Am (*Willful Misconduct*, CamCat Perspectives 2020) and that had had a few unkind things to say about American aviation lawyers. Yet here I was in the heart of the enemy camp, about to visit a friend who was, of all things, an aviation lawyer.

Stuart Speiser was and is, I hasten to add, a lawyer of a different stamp from those I had been writing about. He is also an unashamed millionaire, a writer and thinker of no mean distinction, and an inveterate collector of strange stories. His generosity in passing these on can sometimes be an embarrassment.

"You might be interested in this," he said as I was about to leave. A brown folder was thrust in my direction. "I came across this story years ago. Always wanted to write it, but never found the time. It might make a book for you. I know you like turning over stones and seeing what crawls out."

I made polite noises. Stuart's idea of a good story and my

own did not always coincide. And, truth to tell, I had recently discovered that writing books was a splendid way to live but a lousy way to make a living. I did not need another one. But to refuse would have been impolite, and impecunious writers are not rude to millionaires, even when they happen to be friends. So I thanked him kindly and stuffed the folder in my briefcase. And there it stayed.

My briefcase is a filing system of some sophistication. Papers are added at the top until it is full to the point of bursting—a process that may take weeks or months. Seen in cross-section, the resulting mass of material, when removed, forms a perfect archaeological record of my procrastination. By mere measurement, I can tell almost to the day when I forgot to do something.

The brown folder, when finally excavated, definitely fell into the New York, or “hassle with publishers,” period of my life. I frowned at it, vaguely remembering its origin. Should I read the contents? Well, why not? Whatever lay inside would be an improvement on my preoccupation of that moment, which was paying the telephone bill. I put aside my checkbook. I opened the folder.

There was once a lady named Pandora, who regretted similar curiosity. Investigative writers are supposed to scorn such superstitions. Yet here were demons of a sort. What I held in my hand were blackened photostats of cuttings from *The New York Times* more than half a century old. Some were hard to read, and some downright impossible. But there was enough to tell me that here was the story of a remarkable man who met an extraordinary death. More to the point, that death had never been explained. It was a mystery, the sort of convoluted locked-door puzzle beloved by fiction writers of the 1920s—except that it was more curious than any fiction.

The questions crowded in. How could a man so

prominent, so rich and famous, die violently without any trace of an official investigation? If he had committed suicide, what had driven him to such desperation? There was nothing in the cuttings to indicate the slightest reason. Could it have been murder? If so, who had means and motive? An accident, then? But how do you step “accidentally” out of an aircraft in mid-flight and do so, moreover, without any of your fellow passengers noticing?

The detached attitude of the police, who hardly figured in the stories at all, was curious to say the least. Nor did it seem that Loewenstein’s associates had been anxious to do anything more than staunch the financial bleeding that followed his disappearance. There was certainly no indication that they wanted to find out how he had died. Quite the reverse: Reading between the lines, there was the distinct impression that an embarrassment had been removed from their staid, stiff-collared world of banking. The man had been a bounder. Good riddance to him.

The longer I looked at those faded cuttings, the more convinced I became that they failed to tell the whole story. I had never been an admirer of financiers, and there were clear indications that Loewenstein had not been one of the most attractive of the breed. Yet whatever else one said of him, this had been a man. And no man deserves to die quite so unloved and uncared for, even one as rich, as brash, as arrogant as Alfred Loewenstein.

Yet what good would it do to resurrect it all, even supposing that I could? The man was dead; nothing could change that. And if no one had cared at the time, why should anyone care now to find out how and why he died? Why should I waste my time and money on a wild goose chase after the solution to a mystery more than half a century old?

Fifty-six years is a very long time. Loewenstein’s murderer,

if there had been such a person, would be long beyond the reach of human justice. And witnesses, if any survived, would be senile at best. Or so I thought at the time. As it turned out, I could not have been more wrong.

In short, I found a dozen reasons to forget the whole damned thing. The trouble was that none of them could override my curiosity. I wanted to know the truth, or at least come as near to it as I could. And for some unaccountable reason I found myself caring about Loewenstein himself. It seemed time that someone did. With a slight sinking feeling, knowing that I was hooked, I turned over the pile of cuttings and began again.

I cannot remember whether I paid the telephone bill.

THE LOGICAL PLACE TO start was Loewenstein's obituary. Obituaries seldom tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but so help me God I couldn't think of anything else. There might at least, I thought, be some names, dates, and places that would help me carry the search further. It so happened that I was doing a freelance stint on the foreign desk of *The Times* when I began researching Loewenstein, so I headed for the library—which is known in that once-splendid establishment as the Information Department.

The obit was there: a full column of tiny type. But I found to my disappointment that it told me very little of Loewenstein's origins. Nor did the obituaries from other papers, which the librarians of 1928 had thoughtfully clipped. While they all agreed that he was born in Belgium of German stock, the son of a banker who lost his fortune before Loewenstein could inherit, all had different dates of birth. They ranged from 1874 (*Le Matin*, Brussels) to 1879 (*The Times*). Only the *Daily Express*, which split the difference at 1877, had—I later discovered—got it right.

Accounts of Loewenstein's early life were sketchy. It

appeared that he was almost forty when he came on to the world financial scene from nowhere, a full-fledged millionaire with a passion for ostentation and an apparently inexhaustible supply of ready cash. But millionaires from impoverished backgrounds do not just happen. Somewhere along the line, Loewenstein got rich.

The trouble was, nobody seemed to be sure how he had done it, and this caused me some concern. How could I unravel the story of his death without first knowing how he had lived? The final eight years had been no secret—quite the reverse—but Loewenstein seemed to have drawn a veil behind himself at the end of the First World War, before bursting on to the center of the financial stage. Was there some secret in his past, I wondered? Could it have had any relevance to the way he died?

Some obituarists claimed that he had worked on the Brussels Stock Exchange, placing large quantities of securities in foreign companies. Others romanticized that he had left a cadetship in the Belgian army on the death of his father, and had opened his own small bank with minuscule capital in order to pay off the parental debts. According to this account, business lagged until a mysterious South American businessman appeared and offered him a deal, as a result of which Loewenstein made millions.

It seemed an unlikely story. It was too facile: the sort of thing that Loewenstein, who loved to surround himself with a cloak of mystery in order to gain more publicity, might well feed to some gullible reporter. And yet, the truth, when I finally uncovered it in Canada some twelve months later, was not far removed from this tale.

Bernard Loewenstein had emigrated from Germany to Brussels some seven years before the birth of his son, had married the daughter of a Belgian banker, and had set up

business as a dealer in foreign exchange. It was not a great success. Young Alfred, however, was undeterred by his father's example, and soon after his twentieth birthday launched into the financial world himself. In partnership with a man named Edouard Stallaerts, he established a business for stock issues and loan promotions on the Boulevard Bischoffsheim in Brussels.

It was not a good time for that sort of thing. At the turn of the century, just when Loewenstein was getting established, the Brussels Bourse was hit by a series of financial crises. His father was pushed into bankruptcy, and though Alfred survived the slump, he was left with the task of clearing the family debt.

For the first time, but by no means the last, Alfred Loewenstein had his back to the wall. His reaction was typical. There was no consolidation, no cautious move; Loewenstein gathered together the remnants of his capital and plunged heavily into electrical and artificial-silk securities. And the gamble paid off. Even so, his recovery might have been modest, had it not been for a pair of trans-Atlantic fairy godfathers.

They were Frederick S. Pearson, an American, and the Canadian William (later Sir William) Mackenzie. Mackenzie was a builder of railroads, Pearson an electrical engineer. They had teamed up to construct tramways and hydroelectric power stations in Brazil, and they did so with great success. First in São Paulo and then in Rio de Janeiro, they succeeded in establishing a virtual monopoly over the transportation, power, and lighting industries.

Pearson and Mackenzie were no ordinary businessmen. They were entrepreneurs and gamblers on a huge scale, operating multinational companies before such things had been even thought of. But their base was in Canada, and

Canada could not provide them with the vast amounts of capital they needed. And so they turned to Europe where, waiting for them, was a young man with much the same adventurous ideas and a compatible lack of scruples. Alfred Loewenstein was just what their company, soon to become known as Brazilian Traction, needed. Or so they thought. Here was a man with a growing reputation for selling the equivalent, in financial terms, of ice cream to Eskimos. He was just the fellow to market the highly speculative stock in their South American ventures.

At first, the relationship went well. Loewenstein, who was already learning to manipulate the financial press, succeeded in selling the securities by the million—not only in Belgium, but in France and England as well. As an added incentive to investors who disliked paying taxes, he persuaded Brazilian Traction to introduce “bearer” stock certificates, which allowed the identity of the shareholder to be concealed. Pearson and Mackenzie were delighted with the results. So was Loewenstein, who was earning a lucrative commission.

In 1908, when a sudden need for fresh capital coincided with a panic in the financial markets of New York, it was Loewenstein who came to the rescue with a daring scheme to go to the European money market with a second issue of Rio Tramway Bonds, with a nominal value of £3,500,000. It was hardly an altruistic gesture: The company’s existence was at stake, and Loewenstein drove a hard bargain. He arranged for the bonds to be underwritten at large discounts, putting them into the hands of brokers on both the English and Continental stock markets for as little as 68.2 percent of their face value. The scheme worked. The issue was over-subscribed, and Brazilian Traction netted sufficient cash to pay off its debts and start building the Rio Tramway.

The price for the company was high. In all, after the

discounts, the bonds had brought in £2,240,000, but the five percent interest had to be paid on the full nominal value of £3,500,000. In effect, Brazilian Traction were therefore paying 7.8 percent for their money, which was a high rate in those days. Nevertheless, the tramway scheme had been saved, and Loewenstein became known in the Brazilian Traction boardroom as “our friend.” In the light of what was to follow, the appellation was ironic.

I was to learn a lot about those bonds. Whether or not he realized it in 1908, that single transaction was destined to play a major role in the life of Alfred Loewenstein and possibly in his death. But all that came later, much later. For the moment I was stuck with my nose in a file of obituaries, trying to find out more about the manner of the man. It was hard going.

On the subject of Loewenstein’s character, *The Times* was tactfully noncommittal. It concentrated on his daring financial exploits, on his extravagant lifestyle and love of display. There were also hints of bitter business rivalries, which I would clearly have to follow up. But what sort of man was he?

“Captain Loewenstein,” *The Times’* obituary writer said, “had a very attractive personality, was loyal to his friends and associates, and enjoyed to an exceptional extent the affection of his subordinates.”

Did he indeed? It hardly fitted the picture forming in my mind. But in its usual subtle way *The Times* went on to add an anonymous “Character Sketch” from “a friend who knew him well,” in order to redress the balance. It seems worth quoting:

Loewenstein was so much a man of impulse that, however close and various his association with others, he remained invariably a rather lonely figure. His astonishing grasp of the minutest details of any enterprise in which he was engaged enabled him to enlist the co-operation of men of the most

diverse character. But he was very intolerant of opposition and generally even of criticism, with the result that he quarreled as easily as he made friends, and his likes and dislikes, always violent, were often unreasonable.

His was a nature which flashed from the depths of depression to the heights of optimism, with but short pauses at any intermediate stage, and which gave him no rest from an intense concentration upon the matter in hand. This concentration resulted in many curious personal traits. He never read a book or a newspaper, and seldom wrote a letter where a telegram would serve. He never smoked and never drank, because he declared that tobacco and alcohol impaired the physical fitness which was the buttress of sustained mental effort.

He had no subjects of conversation except his two passions—business and horses. Every moment that he was awake, even when he was boxing with his private instructor, or being massaged, or taking his bath, or being shaved, he would spend in discussing his affairs. He was as unsparing of others as of himself, and combined, in a high degree the qualities of restlessness and tirelessness.

Although extremely sensitive, he knew many of his own defects, and was used to explaining that he needed other minds to act as brakes upon his hastiness, alike of conception and of temper. When he had offended a business associate he generally recognised that he was a difficult person to work with, but found it very hard to forgive the person whom he had offended.

He was, nevertheless, for all a certain flamboyance, a simple and even primitive personality at heart, capable sometimes of inexplicable behaviour, but capable also of great generosity and loyalty.

If a “friend” could write such a valedictory, I wondered what his enemies might have said. Loewenstein had suddenly become a far more interesting man than a mere tycoon: a man capable of exciting love and hatred in equal measure. A man, perhaps, worth killing.

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NEXT DAY, I headed for the London suburb of Colindale, where, in a building of appalling ugliness, the British Museum houses its newspaper library. Colindale is a town uncertain of its role, where lower-middle-class suburbia rubs uneasy shoulders with light industry, and the Police College at Hendon is the toss of a tear-gas grenade down the road. But in its newspaper library, so unpromising on the outside, it houses one of the treasure stores of the world. Here, in vast unwieldy volumes brought on carts from the dim recesses at the rear, is almost every newspaper ever published. Some few have been reduced to microfilm, but most are the musty yellow originals—the genuine article.

This is history, written as it was, before the politicians and historians move in with their subtle and distorting art. It is a researcher’s demi-paradise, a place to visit for the sheer fascination of finding out. Somewhere among these millions of pages, I was sure, would lie the clue about who did what to Alfred Loewenstein, and why.

I ordered a few volumes more or less at random and went to work. As my starting point I chose the editions of July 5,

1928, the day following Loewenstein's death, working forward as the story developed. I began with the "quality" newspapers: *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Financial Times*. But it soon became evident that the richest sources, and those that had devoted the most intense coverage to the sensational story, were the more popular journals. The *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror*, and in particular the then newly born *Evening Standard* and *Daily Express* had sent reporters far and wide to garner the gruesome details. The foreign press, too, had spared no effort, for Loewenstein's reputation had been worldwide. Day after day the stack of volumes beside my reader's desk grew and multiplied.

There was no shortage of material. The problem was that much of it was contradictory. The names of those involved were spelled in a dozen different ways, and accounts of the same events varied widely. To sort out the true from the false was a matter of constant cross-checking, of weighing one source against another and trying to make objective judgments. On such a story, when competition among reporters is intense and the pressure from news editors for the latest angle becomes stronger by the hour, imagination has been known to overcome regard for truth. At a distance of fifty-six years, the difference between fact and fiction is not easy to spot, but I did my best. What follows is what one might call the "authorized version" of the death of Alfred Loewenstein. Some of it may even be true.

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ON ONE POINT there is no dispute: Alfred Loewenstein's last journey began at Croydon Airport, on the southern outskirts of London, on the early evening of July 4, 1928. Croydon Airport today is a sad relic, a patchwork of playing fields and

scattered factories, long made useless for aviation by the relentless growth of the city. But in 1928 it was the hub of British commercial aviation, home of British Imperial Airways and the fashionable place from which to fly. The once splendid art-deco terminal still stands forlornly, a forgotten gateway to nowhere. For one man that day it was the gateway to death.

Loewenstein's latest toy, a Fokker F.VIIa/3m monoplane, was already warming up on the tarmac outside the terminal when the two black limousines came to a smooth halt. In the cockpit, mechanic Robert Little jiggled the throttles and checked the magnetos on the three Armstrong-Siddeley Lynx engines while the pilot, Donald Drew, stood by the doorway to receive his passengers. It was a fine evening for flying, warm and still, with hardly a cloud in the sky. Drew was looking forward to a smooth trip to their destination: Haren Airport, Brussels.

Ray Foster, Loewenstein's liveried chauffeur, climbed from the open driving seat of the first Hispano-Suiza to open the rear door. The man who emerged was of medium height, stockily built, with slicked-down greying hair. His features were powerful rather than handsome: thick lips, a heavy nose, and dark eyes deep-set in a swarthy face. Not an attractive man, but a personality to be reckoned with. With a brief wave to Drew, Alfred Loewenstein turned on his heel and strode into the terminal building.

Four people emerged from the second limousine and boarded the aircraft. One was a little man, built like a jockey. Fred Baxter was Loewenstein's valet and traveled with him everywhere he went. The second, taller and in his mid-thirties, was Arthur Hodgson. Hodgson was the financier's secretary, perhaps his closest confidant. With his impeccable pinstripe suiting, the inevitable umbrella, neat moustache,

and the air of one born to greater things, it was hardly surprising that no one ever seemed to know his Christian name.

The two men stood aside to let the two women in the party board first. Eileen Clarke and Paula Bidalon were stenographers: vital adjuncts to any trip by Loewenstein, who had been known to wake up shorthand typists from their hotel beds in the middle of the night in order to dictate some urgent letter that had just occurred to him. They carried their notebooks in the expectation that Loewenstein would, as usual, have work for them on the journey.

The party was not kept waiting long. Loewenstein had merely stopped by the KLM office in the terminal to make a call to Sir Herbert Holt, a Canadian financial magnate and business ally who was in London at the time. The conversation was overheard by an airline pilot, Captain Bob McIntosh. The two men, he said later, had been arranging a dinner appointment for the following week.

Shortly after six o'clock, with Loewenstein safely on board, the Fokker taxied away from the terminal on to the grass runway and turned its nose into the almost nonexistent wind. A small group of onlookers saw the financier wave through the large glass windows. They said later that he smiled. It was a perfect take-off. Drew set his course to the southeast, directly towards Brussels, as the aircraft climbed steadily into the evening sky.



THE FOKKER WAS ALMOST BRAND new. Loewenstein, who had owned a fleet of smaller aircraft over the years, had long coveted this particular model and had had it fitted out to his own specifications. It was designed as a flying office, with a

well-upholstered chair for the owner at the front of the cabin, facing backwards. A glass partition separated the passenger accommodation from the cockpit, making it possible for Drew and Little, if they wished, to see what was going on behind them. Extra soundproofing had been installed; it was an arrangement that, in theory, would allow Loewenstein to give dictation to his stenographers while in the air. In practice, there is reason to think that the noise of the three 225-horsepower engines in close proximity defeated him.

At the back of the cabin was a windowless door leading into a small compartment containing a toilet and washbasin. From this, on the port side of the aircraft, a second door formed the sole means of entrance and exit from the outside. This door was fitted with a small window, and was directly opposite to anyone using the toilet. The door to the cabin would have been on such a person's right hand, and any confusion between them would be unlikely, if not impossible.

By modern aviation standards, the access door to the Fokker was a joke: a light wooden frame sandwiched between two sheets of thin plywood, approximately six feet high and four feet wide. It was attached to the fuselage at the forward edge by two insubstantial hinges on the outside frame, pivoting on a pair of simple bolts dropped in from the top. The rear edge was fastened by a crude spring-loaded catch, controlled by a short metal handle on the inside. It was an arrangement that would have looked more at home in the average kitchen. The only other means of security consisted of two small interior bolts, which were fastened by Drew or Little as part of their duties before take-off. Nevertheless, the door was regarded as adequate by the air-safety authorities of the day for the height and speed at which the Fokker flew. And it probably was. Nobody was ever known to fall out. Nobody, that is, except Alfred Loewenstein.

As Drew had expected, there was no turbulence in the air. The Fokker climbed smoothly and steadily to its cruising altitude of four thousand feet and settled down to a speed of 110 knots. They crossed the coast near Dover and headed out over the Channel.

Loewenstein, according to the reported accounts of those on board, was reading a book. Soon after they crossed the coastline he marked his place, got to his feet, and went to the toilet compartment in the rear. He smiled as he went and exchanged a few words with Hodgson.

Ten minutes later, he had not returned. There was a short conversation between Baxter and Hodgson, and the valet was dispatched to see if Loewenstein was all right. He knocked on the dividing door. There was no reply. Feeling increasingly anxious, Baxter opened the toilet door. But there was no one there. The toilet compartment was empty. Alfred Loewenstein had disappeared.

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IN THE NOISY confinement of the cabin, there was consternation. Hodgson rushed forward to bawl at the pilot through the partition, but his words were lost in the roar of the engines. Finally he scribbled a note and thrust it in front of him. CAPTAIN'S GONE, it said.

By this time, the aircraft was approaching the French coast, and the nearest airfield was about five minutes flying time away at St. Inglevert, between Calais and Dunkirk. It lay almost exactly on their course and may well have been in sight from the cockpit on that clear summer evening. But for reasons that he chose never to divulge, Drew did not head for St. Inglevert. Instead, he throttled back and pointed the nose of the Fokker towards a beach, backed with steep sand dunes,

which lay dead ahead. With considerable skill he brought the heavy aircraft down to a perfect landing on the smooth wet sand below the high-water mark and climbed out with his remaining passengers to wait for someone to arrive.

Unknown to Donald Drew, the beach on which he had chosen to land the Fokker, at St. Pol, near Dunkirk, was military territory. It was under the control of the First Battalion, Artillery Artificers, stationed at Fort Mardyk. From there, the battalion adjutant, a certain Lieutenant Marquailles, saw the machine come down at 7:29 p.m. Marquailles was annoyed. Civilian aircraft were not supposed to land on his beach. He dispatched a party under the command of a sergeant, Albert Bereau, to place the occupants under arrest.

The actual point of touchdown was out of sight behind the sand dunes. When Bereau and his men clambered over the crest, perhaps six minutes after the landing, they found the crew and passengers standing disconsolately beside the Fokker. He took them to the guardroom, where they were closely questioned by Marquailles and later by the police.

By Marquaille's account, given to a *Daily Express* reporter the following day, it was a curious interrogation. Though Drew and the others immediately admitted that they had lost their employer over the Channel, it was at least half an hour before they would reveal his name. Eileen Clarke said they had no authority to do so, and eventually it was the secretary, Hodgson, who told the police what they wanted to know.

"Believe me," said Marquailles, "it could not have been playacting. It would have been impossible for those on the aircraft to have acted as they did if M. Loewenstein had not met with some terrible fate. The two girl typists were in tears, the valet was greatly affected, his teeth chattered with fright and perspiration poured from the brow of the secretary,

Hodgson. It was obvious to me that something dreadful had happened.”

Something dreadful had indeed happened, but what? Inspector Bonnot of the Sûreté was sent to the scene and said: “This is a most unusual and mysterious case. We have not yet made up our minds to any definite theory, but anything is possible.”

Bonnet arrested no one. Drew and Little were permitted to fly the Fokker to St. Inglevert, where common sense said they might have landed in the first place, and thence to Croydon the following day. The rest of the party were driven to Calais, where they stayed overnight at a hotel before going on to Brussels by train.

And within twenty-four hours of Loewenstein's disappearance, all French police enquiries into the case had been abandoned. It was odd, to say the least.

The official explanation from Paris was scarcely credible. Because, it said, the incident appeared to have happened outside the three-mile territorial limit, it was outside French waters and therefore no concern of theirs. The Belgians, in due course, took the same view. So did the British. According to legal custom, it seemed, anything that happened on board an aircraft over international waters was nobody's affair.

Alfred Loewenstein, financier extraordinary, had fallen to his death through a crack in the law, and no one cared enough to find out how or why.

BUT WAS HE DEAD? In the darkness of absent fact, the rumors grew like mushrooms. With hindsight, most were patently absurd, but Loewenstein's extravagant lifestyle and unpredictable personality made anything seem possible.

The *Exchange Telegraph* news agency found a French fisherman from the nearby village of Bray-Dunes who had been out in the Channel that evening. He swore he saw a parachute descend, and a yacht sailing towards the spot where it had hit the water.

The London correspondent of *The New York Times* was told by one source that Loewenstein was driven off in a car when the aircraft landed on the beach, and by another that he had never been on the plane at all. To do the New York paper credit, it did not believe a word of it, describing such stories as concocted by "daring applicants for honors in imaginative fiction."

"Although he loved to live spectacularly," the editorial writer pointed out, "Captain Loewenstein had nothing to gain and everything to lose by such folly. He could never reappear

in financial circles, and for him the financial game was the whole pleasure and absorption of his life.”

One of the applicants for fictional honors, however, turned out to be *The New York Times*' own man in Calais, who next day filed the following story:

No definite information can be obtained tonight on reports in circulation that Captain Loewenstein's plane, before it made a landing on the beach at Mardyk, was seen by persons in the locality to make a brief landing on a deserted beach some distance from the village of Bray-Dunes on the Channel coast. These reports give color to one hypothesis that the banker, desiring to make his disappearance from the financial world after reaching an understanding with his personnel, had himself landed and instructed those employees to tell the story of his plunge to death. Other reports say a plane was seen flying along the coast beyond Dunkirk almost as far as the Belgian frontier, and that it turned at Teteghem to land at last at Mardyk where the tragedy was first recounted.

Credence was given to these stories by the apparent reluctance of those on board to name Loewenstein when questioned at Mardyk, and by the account of an Imperial Airways pilot, a Major Rogers, who was flying only eight hundred yards behind Loewenstein's aircraft as it crossed the Channel. Rogers was quoted by the Paris newspaper *L'Oeuvre* as saying that he was in a position to see whether a body fell from the plane, and he did not.

The rumors went on. A “mysterious passenger” was seen to get off the cross-channel ferry *Flamande*, which had left Dunkirk at midnight on the night of Loewenstein's disappearance and docked at Tilbury at six-thirty the

following morning. And Loewenstein was said to have drawn \$500,000 from his bank before leaving London. One of the most elaborate tales came from a French newspaper that claimed to have discovered that Loewenstein was having an illicit affair with a young female inmate at a local insane asylum and that the two had eloped together.

It was entertaining nonsense for the readers, but for many people, the question of whether Loewenstein was alive or dead was a matter of crucial importance. Not the least of these was Mme. Madeleine Loewenstein, his wife.

Her concern was not merely emotional: There was little emotion in the marriage of Alfred and Madeleine Loewenstein. For his part, he only had time for business and his beloved horses. For Madeleine it seems to have been enough that she should be seen, superbly dressed, in the right places at the right time. They occupied separate bedrooms and lived separate lives. Madeleine, according to one who knew her well, was lacking in emotion and uninterested in sex. She rarely joined her husband on his business travels, preferring, according to the time of year, to stay in Brussels, Biarritz, or Thorpe Satcheville with her unmarried sister Didi.

They were a strangely matched pair. Didi was as ugly as her sister was beautiful—as volatile as Madeleine was calm and remote. “Just like night and day,” I was told by a friend who knew them both. Yet they were inseparable. A more cynical age might have wondered at the nature of their relationship, but I encountered no suggestion that it was anything other than sisterly.

As a couple, the Loewensteins were not on bad terms. They were not really on any terms at all. At least they appear to have had a mutual respect for each other, and in that sense it was not a disastrous marriage. Alfred was said to adore his wife and to be proud of her beauty, though it is impossible to

escape the feeling that it was much the same pride as he would have felt in owning a thoroughbred mare.

Madeleine was indeed a thoroughbred, one of four daughters of the socially prominent Misonne family of Brussels, who had married Alfred, some years her senior, in 1908. They had one son, Robert, who was eighteen at the time of his father's death. The Loewensteins' marriage seems to have been a marriage of convenience: She provided him with social cachet and the distinction of having an extremely beautiful woman on his arm. He indulged her expensive tastes.

This was no small task, even for someone as wealthy as Alfred Loewenstein. Madeleine was rated as one of the best-dressed women around the most fashionable racecourses of Europe. She maintained lavish homes in England, France, and Belgium, where the housekeeping bills alone were estimated at \$100,000 a week, and owned jewellery which, at today's values, was worth about \$24 million.

The pride of Madeleine's collection was a necklace. Perfectly matched natural pearls, 177 of them, were strung with diamonds set in platinum. It was insured for a quarter of a million dollars, which translates to about \$10 million in today's devalued currency.

On the night of October 16, 1926, this necklace vanished. That day the Loewensteins had been together, for once. They were staying at their summer place in Biarritz, the Villa Begonia (though to call it a villa would be roughly analogous to describing Buckingham Palace as a cottage), and they were doing a little entertaining. Some sixty guests were in the house, including minor European royalty and a host of celebrities, all enjoying the famous Loewenstein hospitality. The staff, as was usual on such occasions, was mostly housed

in the seven other villas that Loewenstein owned or rented in Biarritz.

The financier, at the time, was licking his wounds after a business reverse (of which more later) and was pursuing a scheme to recover a few million. The party seems to have been in aid of public relations, but it turned sour overnight when a thief crept into Madeleine's bedroom and stole the necklace. At least, that was Loewenstein's story, and he stuck to it.

By the Belgian's account, given to the police, the burglar had entered the house from the beach, forced the window of the Chinese room, and had gone straight to his wife's bedroom where she lay asleep. There he had taken the key of the safe from beneath a pile of handkerchiefs in her dressing-table drawer, unlocked it, and removed the necklace. For good measure, he had then gone into Loewenstein's own bedroom and that of a guest, stealing cufflinks and other items of jewelry. In support of the story, grains of sand from the beach were found on the carpet in the bedroom corridor and in the bedrooms themselves.

The insurance company was dubious. It sent an assessor from London, a man named John William Bell, to investigate the claim. In the best tradition of the private detective he set out to re-enact the crime. He went down to the beach and tramped around until his shoes were covered in sand. Then he followed the supposed route of the thief. He did it again, and again. But each time he found that the sand had fallen off his shoes long before he reached the bedroom corridor.

That was not the only problem. The Loewensteins were both known to be light sleepers, and that night they had not gone to their separate beds until 2:30 a.m. The theft had been discovered when the masseur woke them at six-thirty. Between those hours, if Loewenstein's account was true, the thief had not only made his entry, located the key, and opened

the safe, but had also paused to remove the jewel from a dress stud and leave the setting, and steal the links from Loewenstein's discarded dress shirt. All without disturbing a soul. He had ignored an imitation-pearl necklace.

Bell, who had contacts in criminal circles (he later served a prison sentence himself), went to a man whom he knew led a gang of Continental jewel thieves. "Swell mobsmen," as they were called in the slang of 1926. But this real-life Raffles denied being involved. His intelligence department, he said, had not told him there was so much valuable property in the Villa Begonia, otherwise he might have done something about it.

Frustrated, Bell pursued enquiries in Belgium, Canada, and the United States. He got nowhere. Nor did the French police, who in December 1926 sent a team to New York after a tip-off that a gang of international crooks had smuggled the loot to America. A reward of ten thousand pounds for the recovery of the necklace went unclaimed. And in the end the Geneth Insurance Company of Paris paid up.

Madeleine Loewenstein never saw her necklace again. Now, almost two years later, she had a greater financial problem. Her husband was missing and, under Belgian law, if the body was not found the liquidation of his estate would be delayed for at least four years. There could be no death certificate, and the will could not be read until he was proven dead. Meanwhile, the household bills were mounting.

It seems that from the very first moment, Madeleine Loewenstein had no doubt that her husband was, in fact, dead. She was in Brussels at the palatial family home on the Rue de la Science when she was told of his disappearance, and she immediately changed into full mourning. Accompanied by Colonel Daufresne, who had traveled with the couple to New York three months previously, she drove through the

night to Calais, arriving at the Hôtel Metropole, where Drew and his passengers were staying, at about 5 a.m. According to the hotel proprietor, interviewed later, she presented a forlorn, distraught figure, dressed entirely in black.

However, she was not too distressed to attend to the essential details. Drew and Little were ordered to take the aircraft back to England, and then to charter a tug from Dover to search for her husband's body. On the French side, she let it be known that she would give a reward to whoever found it. The fishermen went quickly into their boats.

Then she went to St. Inglevert to inspect the Fokker, searching, it was said, for some message from her husband. But the only things she found on board were his collar and tie. Madame Loewenstein looked at the aircraft in disgust. "Let it be sold," she said. "I don't ever wish to see it again."

Two hours after she had arrived, Madeleine was back in her car and being driven home to Brussels, leaving Hodgson, Baxter, and the two girls to follow on by train with Loewenstein's four suitcases. There she retired to her room, with a doctor in frequent attendance.

Drew and Little did as they were told and flew back to Croydon. The French police appeared to have lost all interest in the case and no examining magistrate had been appointed, so they were free to go. When they arrived in London, however, the aircraft was immediately impounded by the Ministry of Aviation accident inspectors. This process was somewhat delayed because the crew, whose evidence was needed, had left at once for Dover, where they chartered the harbor tug *Lady Brassey* and set sail in search of the body.

They quartered the Channel for two miserable days. The weather had turned foul and the sea was high, and they found nothing. When they returned to London, they received fresh instructions from Madame Loewenstein. They were to

proceed at once to Brussels, where an inquiry into Captain Loewenstein's death was to be held at the Palais de Justice.

This inquiry, which occupied three and a half hours on the morning of July 9, was less than impressive. For a start, it was not an official inquiry at all, but merely a hearing summoned at the request of Madame Loewenstein with the object of obtaining a death certificate. It was conducted by Judge de la Ruwiere, the local magistrate for the district of Brussels where Loewenstein had his home, at the *Première Chambre de Tribunal Civile*. No records were kept, and no one was asked to give evidence under oath. However, all the leading players in the drama were present, and all told their stories once again.

This time there was a significant addition. Donald Drew and Robert Little, who had brought with them drawings of the Fokker F.VIIa/3m and charts of their route, told the judge that while on their way back to England from St. Inglevert four days before, they had tried an experiment. They had each in turn gone to the rear of the aircraft when it was at full cruising speed and had attempted to open the door. It had, they said, opened easily. And they explained that this was because the fuselage narrowed at that point.

The judge was not an aviation expert, and there was no other qualified witness in court. Though the two men were not under oath, he had little option but to take their evidence at face value. "I consider it proved," he said at the end of the brief inquiry, "that Captain Loewenstein was in the plane, and that he did not get out at some other point, and that the accident theory is probable."

It was a cautious verdict, which seemed to reflect Judge de la Ruwiere's general unhappiness with the way the affair had been conducted. He was especially critical of the French for closing their investigation so quickly and failing to appoint a

*juge d'instruction*. Under the French judicial system, this is an examining magistrate responsible for the initial investigation of criminal cases. "If there had been an accident attributable to negligence by the crew, or a crime, the *juge d'instruction* would have had absolute powers," he said. "He could charge everyone, find manslaughter or murder, and be permitted to put all suspects under arrest and hold them incommunicado for three days. In the interests of truth, this would perhaps have been useful."

*Le Matin* agreed, saying: "Brussels lawyers are a bit astonished at the haste with which the French police have closed their enquiry. For all one knows here, the first statements of the witnesses were very vague, very laconic, and not a little contradictory."

But there was nothing more the Belgian judge could do. If there had been a crime, he said, it had been committed by foreigners, abroad, and it was out of his jurisdiction. The examination of the aircraft, which was of British registration, was up to the English.

Judge de la Ruwiere's doubts were clearly substantial, but he lacked the legal power to do anything about them. There was only one course open to him, and he took it: He refused to grant the death certificate that Madeleine Loewenstein had wanted so badly. The will would remain unopened, and the Loewenstein fortune would remain like a fly trapped in amber. Until they found the body.

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ALFRED LOEWENSTEIN, clad in nothing but a pair of silk underpants, silk socks, and shoes, made his reappearance at 4:20 p.m. on Thursday, July 19, 1928. He was floating face

downward in a gentle swell, ten miles to the northeast of Cap Gris Nez.

The man who made the discovery was Jean-Marie Beaugrand, skipper of the fishing vessel *Santa Theresa de l'Enfant Jésus*—a craft somewhat less impressive than its name. Beaugrand and his mate, Louis Legris, trawled the body to the side of the boat with an improvised net of sailcloth and hauled it unceremoniously on board with a gaffe. It was abundantly evident that their prize was beyond caring.

The corpse was in an advanced state of decomposition and stank alarmingly, but Beaugrand knew all about the promised reward for finding Loewenstein and steeled himself to examine the watch strap on the man's wrist. There, on a metal plate, were engraved the words "Alfred Loewenstein, 35 Rue de la Science, Brussels." It was the end of fishing for the day.

Because the smell was offending his crew, who were threatening to mutiny if he kept the corpse on board, Beaugrand wrapped it in a sail, attached it to the end of a line, and dropped it back overboard. Then they towed it slowly back to Calais, reaching port at 6:40 p.m. and mooring beside the steps at the Port de la Colonne. The port commandant, Captain Gréquer, recovered the body and had it taken to the local morgue, where Dr. Poulsey, a police surgeon, started an examination. Captain Gréquer lost no time in telephoning Brussels.

Within hours, representatives of the Loewenstein family had arrived in Calais. They were Madeleine's brother, Lieutenant Misonne, and her sister's husband, a lawyer named Convert. They promptly paid Beaugrand his reward of ten thousand francs—about \$320 in the exchange rate of the day. It probably seemed a lot of money to the fisherman, though it left a fair bit of change from the fortune of \$55 million that his discovery had liberated.

It might have been supposed that officialdom would now take over and go through the formal procedures of autopsy and inquest. It did not happen that way. Though an autopsy was performed, it was done privately and solely at the request of the Loewenstein family. They summoned a Dr. Paul from Paris, who examined the body and took away various organs for further tests by himself and a fellow pathologist, Dr. Kohn Abrest. Without further ado, what was left of Alfred Loewenstein was then put in the coffin brought from Brussels and taken away to its lonely burial at Evere.

With the authorities showing no interest, and with the death certificate now firmly in their hands, it was perhaps surprising that the family bothered with an autopsy. Convert explained, in a statement made in Paris on July 20, that they wanted to dispel the rumors of murder or suicide that were then circulating. Since Loewenstein's brother-in-law knew of no apparent motive for the latter, and there had been no evidence of a fight on board the aircraft, his own explanation was that Loewenstein had taken ill and fallen overboard accidentally. There remained, however, the possibility of poison.

The press pricked up its ears. "We consider that a crime is not impossible," Convert said. "We do not suspect anyone. We do not wish ill on anyone. But we do not wish that in fifteen days, three weeks or a month or more later, when the body of Captain Loewenstein has been buried, some newspaper or financial correspondent will tell us that he could have been poisoned before being pushed out. That is why we have asked Dr. Paul to perform an autopsy."

In the weeks that followed, a steady dribble of information flowed from the Paris laboratory where the two doctors seemed to be spending an unconscionable amount of time on the study of Alfred's entrails. They announced at an early

stage that they had found a massive wound in his stomach, probably caused by contact with a rock, and that every bone in his body was broken by the force of the impact. Neither of these findings was surprising or particularly interesting.

Then, on August 14, the Boulogne correspondent of *The Times* reported tersely that Dr. Paul had found “toxic matter” in the organs being examined.

The news went round the world, only to be denied the following day in a report from Paris. The postmortem examination, it was said, was not yet complete. The results would not be forwarded to “the competent authorities” for at least a week.

In fact, it took a good deal longer. On August 28, Dr. Kohn Abrest traveled from Paris to Boulogne, where he conferred with the local *juge d’instruction*, a M. Monmessin. It seemed that at long last the authorities might be taking an interest. For some undisclosed reason, the doctor took back with him to Paris a bottle of seawater collected from the Channel in the area where the body was found. Speculation was renewed.

It was certainly turning out to be an unusual, as well as a prolonged, autopsy. On September 2, *The New York Times* reported that Dr. Kohn Abrest was trying to discover the state of Loewenstein’s nerves in the hours before his death. To which end, apparently, he was going to use the quart of seawater—though he never explained how. Wisely, the doctor emphasized that he could not perform miracles, and in the event nothing more was heard of this original line of research.

Finally, on September 10, 1928, the autopsy report was released. *The New York Times* of the following day carried this story:

All doubt as to the cause of the death of Captain Alfred Loewenstein was set at rest today by the official report of Dr.

Paul and Dr. Kohn Abrest, who have just completed a detailed autopsy. Not a single trace of poison was found in his body, they declared, and all the evidence was conclusive that death was due to the fall of 4,000 feet.

The investigation of the physicians disclosed nothing that would support the theory that the financier sought his own death, and the doctors are of the opinion that the fall was accidental. The quantity of alcohol found is regarded as normal.

Sensational rumors of violence are also rejected with emphasis, no indication of this character having been discovered by the doctors in the course of their exhaustive investigation. The report adds that Captain Loewenstein was still alive when he struck the water.

The *Associated Press* correspondent embellished this report by added that the postmortem had discovered "lesions" on Loewenstein's heart and kidneys that would have made him subject to fits of giddiness, amounting possibly to loss of consciousness.

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IN THE QUIET of the Colindale library, I read these reports through several times. Something jarred, but I could not quite put my finger on it. And then I remembered: The "friend" who had written Loewenstein's obituary report in *The Times* had made a particular point of the fact that the financier neither smoked nor drank. He had been a fitness fanatic, outspoken against both tobacco and alcohol.

So how was it that the autopsy report said that "the

quantity of alcohol found is regarded as normal”? For Loewenstein, the only *normal* quantity of alcohol in his body would be zero. Zilch. Yet there had been alcohol there; the two good doctors, who had been so emphatic about the absence of any toxic substance, had said so. And nobody, so far as I could see, had noticed the discrepancy. His family, who had ordered the autopsy, must have seen it instantly. But they had said nothing.

It was too soon to say what it meant, but it had to mean something. I had found a clue.



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# HOW A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE VANISHED INTO THIN AIR

Captain Alfred Loewenstein was known as many things during his glamorous and gaudy life. Companion of the Bath, friend of kings, an aviator and sportsman, a maker and loser of fortunes, and a multi-millionaire. And then, there was his mysterious death.

On a July evening in 1928, Loewenstein boarded his aircraft with six others to travel from England to Brussels. He never arrived. While flying over the English Channel, Loewenstein fell through an exit door of the airplane on his way to the lavatory.

People were quick to explain his mysterious death, but no official inquiry ever took place. Investigative journalist William Norris develops a theory of how and why this rich, famous man died so violently without a proper investigation. Did Loewenstein fall, did he jump, or was he pushed from his own aircraft?

William Norris is the author of numerous true crime books and novels inspired by his years as an award-winning investigative journalist. Look at the end of the book for a book club discussion guide and a preview of *A Talent to Deceive*.



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