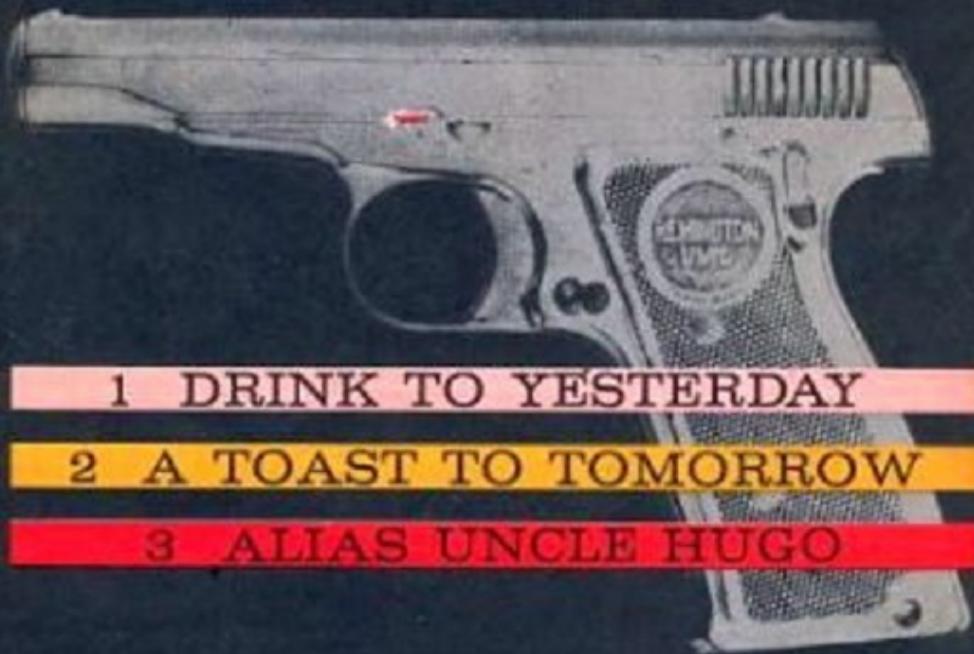


MANNING COLES

ALIAS UNCLE HUGO

THE EXPLOITS OF
TOMMY HAMBLEDON



1 DRINK TO YESTERDAY

2 A TOAST TO TOMORROW

3 ALIAS UNCLE HUGO

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Title: Alias Uncle Hugo

Date of first publication: 1952

Author: Manning Coles

Date first posted: Feb. 8, 2021

Date last updated: Feb. 8, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210246

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Here, by popular demand, are three classic adventures in international intrigue starring the celebrated Thomas Elphinstone Hambledon of British Intelligence. A former schoolmaster, Agent Tommy Hambledon has pursued his hazardous profession on a score of war, postwar, and cold-war assignments in a score of European countries. No one—from Amsterdam to Zagreb—wields a cloak and dagger with more style than Manning Coles’s urbane, dedicated sleuth. In this big, three-book omnibus are:

DRINK TO YESTERDAY
A TOAST TO TOMORROW
ALIAS UNCLE HUGO

Scene: Europe

[Transcriber’s note: This eBook contains only Alias Uncle Hugo]

THE EXPLOITS OF
Tommy Hambledon

MANNING COLES

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
Garden City, New York

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and any resemblance to actual persons,
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Alias Uncle Hugo

To L. Y.

“In her tongue is the law of kindness.”

1

IN the town of Bereghark the Mayor polished up his chain of office, put on a clean shirt although the day was only Wednesday, brushed his hat and went to inspect the Town Guard. They also had taken trouble with their appearance for their uniforms had been washed and ironed and their rifles polished until the barrels shone like silver. They stood, drawn up in two lines of eight men in one row and seven in the other, and the Mayor looked them over carefully.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

The Sergeant said that so-and-so and so-and-so were haymaking, that another absentee had the toothache, that three more were in jail and that one other was getting married.

“Thus arranging to share the fate of the one in pain and the three in prison,” said the Mayor, and the Sergeant laughed obsequiously.

“These three men,” said the Mayor, passing behind the front rank, “should have had their hair cut. This one also.”

“The barber has strained his wrist,” said the Sergeant.

“Someone else should have borrowed his scissors,” said the Mayor.

“His scissors are too blunt to cut. That is how he came to strain his wrist.”

“Then why does he not call in the scissor grinder?”

“Because he is in hospital, having been partially eaten by wolves.”

“Difficult,” murmured the Mayor, “very difficult. I will excuse the uncut hair.” He looked up at the string of small flags fluttering above the entrance gate of the Bereghark Collectivized Farm Machinery Factory.

“The workers,” explained the Sergeant, “put up those little flags in order to make it plain to the Herr Soviet Farm-Productive-Machinery-Inspection Commissar how pleased they are to see him.”

The Mayor nodded. “The intention is laudable. As for the little flags, I have never seen their like before. I hope there is nothing politically unreliable in their curious designs?”

“I think that, subject to your greater knowledge, they mean nothing, being only as it were an outbreak of cheerful colour.”

As a matter of fact they were a string of International Signal Flags—with a few odd ones thrown in—and how they had come to Bereghark, which is three hundred and fifty miles from the nearest sea, is one of the minor riddles of history.

“I particularly like,” said the Mayor, “the one with the red cat on it, clawing. The man who made that had some knowledge of the elements of design.”

The Sergeant glanced up at the flag in question, which was one of the odd ones.

“Yes, indeed,” he said indifferently. “Excuse me, but is not this possibly the car approaching for which we wait?”

The straight road ran for miles across the flat plain and far in the distance a cloud of dust followed a black object which was moving fast.

“Good heavens, yes. Get your men into line, Sergeant. A double line, from where the car will stop to the gate. Quick!”

The factory was on the outskirts of the small town on the road to the north by which the expected visitor would come. The display of bunting and guard of honour had been arranged mainly to ensure that he would notice it and stop instead of rushing past to lose his way in the narrow twisting streets between the tall old houses of Bereghark, which was a town in the days of the Emperor Constantine. The part-time soldiers were hustled into line, the Sergeant drew his sword, the car stopped and the Soviet Farm-Productive-Machinery-Inspection Commissar alighted and looked about him. The Sergeant saluted with his sword and the Mayor took off his hat.

“Is this,” asked the visitor, “the Bereghark Collectivized Farm Machinery Factory?” He spoke German, for that is the language of the country.

“It is,” said the Mayor, “rejoicing at receiving a visit from the Herr Comrade Commissar Peskoff.”

The visitor glanced up at the string of bunting overhead and if the Lion Flag of Scotland meant anything to him he made no sign of recognition. The wooden gate of the factory, which had been ajar, was now flung wide open and a compact group of the managerial staff came out, introduced themselves, and welcomed the Commissar with studied politeness concealing their anxiety, for the shadow of Stakhanov overhangs all such visits. However, the Commissar seemed friendly and even affable, he shook everyone warmly by the hand, returned the Sergeant’s salute, ran a

professional eye over the two ranks of the guard of honour, and was conducted inside.

The Manager's office provided a number of wineglasses and a supply of *slavovic*, which is plum brandy of surprising potency. The Herr Commissar evidently had no objection to plum brandy but when it became apparent that he was expected to drink a glass with every one of the fifteen or twenty in the managerial party, he jibbed, courteously but definitely.

"This is, without exception, the best *slavovic* I have ever tasted," he said, putting down his seventh empty glass, "and I cannot imagine a happier way of passing an afternoon than enjoying it in your hospitable company. But, Herr Company Director, duty is not served in that manner. Let me walk round your factory while I can still be sure whether I am looking at one machine or two."

The Bereghark factory did not make tractors, only the various implements which tractors draw behind them: mowers, hay rakes, reapers, ploughs, harrows and such other weapons as are used for the assault upon the soil. Commissar Peskoff was conducted through the foundry—very hot, the smithy—very noisy, and up and down lanes between lathes, drilling machines, grinders and millers all humming, clanking, rattling and whining after their kind. He paused at intervals to watch some operation, nodded his head gravely and moved on again. He did not ask so many questions as the Managing Director expected or, perhaps, feared, and sometimes he was obviously lost in thought for he would stop and stare blankly at some machine as though he did not take in the meaning of what he saw. When he stopped the whole managerial procession stopped, when he moved off again they all trailed after him. The workers did not lift their eyes from their work, at least, not while they were themselves being looked at, and the whole proceeding was decorous in the extreme. The managerial staff, who had been inspected by Soviet Commissars before, were agreeably surprised.

"The machines all seem to be working," said the Commissar suddenly, and the Directors thought he was employing sarcasm.

"We do our utmost to minimize the occasional unavoidable breakdown," they said.

"I do not doubt it. I meant that your factory is at the moment in full production."

A sigh of relief rippled down the ranks.

"We always are," said the Managing Director, "unless we are held up for supplies of steel."

“I will report that,” said Peskoff, and they entered the paint shop where the completed machines were being given coats of the traditional gaudy colours by painters working by hand with brushes.

“Surely,” said the Commissar, “this work could be done more quickly by spraying the paint.”

“Undoubtedly, Herr Commissar, but there is a difficulty in obtaining air compressors. There is, it seems, a bottleneck somewhere in the supply of compressors.”

“These bottlenecks,” said the Commissar, “the trouble they give us. Except, of course, the kind you keep in your office.”

The Managing Director laughed loudly and all the other Directors joined in. The laugh ran down the length of the procession and quite convulsed those at the back who could not possibly have heard what was said. Commissar Peskoff and party emerged from the paint shop into the air and drew long breaths of refreshment.

“Do you not, then, manufacture self-binders?” asked the visitor.

The company’s faces fell. There had to be a catch in it somewhere if a Commissar were friendly and reasonable, and this was evidently it. They not only did not make them but no member of the firm had ever seen such a thing. Pictures of them, yes, but not even engineers’ drawings. The Production Manager’s knees felt weak.

“No, Herr Commissar,” he bleated, “that is, not yet—the factory is, as you yourself saw, in full production as it is—when we have our new shops erected——”

“The difficulty, I understand,” said the Managing Director, “is in the binder twine. That which we make is suitable for hand tying but will not pass through the machines. We only get a small amount imported, not enough to make it worth while turning out large numbers of these machines.”

The Production Manager looked at him gratefully and the Commissar said that he understood what little was imported came from Belgium by devious routes. The company looked surprised. Commissar-Inspectors are as a rule mere ginger-uppers, one does not expect them to know what they are talking about.

“Another bottleneck,” said the most junior Director with a nervous giggle, the Commissar nodded agreement and the Managing Director said that, talking about bottlenecks, would not the gracious Herr Commissar deign to return to the office and—er—carry his inspection a stage further?

The Commissar smiled but refused politely. He was fatigued after his long journey, he understood that there was a dinner arranged for that night at which he would have the pleasure of meeting most of them again and in the meantime he wished to rest and write up his report—his very favourable report. He talked himself out of the factory, past the guard of honour and into the car, offered the Mayor a lift into the town and drove away.

“A-ah,” said the Managing Director with a long sigh of relief.

“I can’t believe it,” said the Chairman, who had been keeping in the background. “It’s like a beautiful dream, being treated like that.”

“We shall wake up,” said the Production Manager gloomily, “you mark my words. There’s a catch in it somewhere.”

The ceremonial dinner took place that night since the Commissar was leaving early the following morning. He met again most of the men he had already seen including the Mayor, and there were added to the party several local leaders of science, art and industry. It is possible that Peskoff did not find it very amusing especially as there were no ladies present; as the meal dragged on and the toasts followed each other inexhaustibly, he became a little fidgety. Eventually he pushed back his chair and spoke confidentially to those nearest to him.

“If you will excuse the apparent rudeness I will go out for a short time to take the air before retiring. It is a habit of mine. Pray do not let me break up the party. If I may, I will just slip out.”

“Let me accompany you——”

“There is a delightful garden——”

“I will detail a police officer——”

“No, no,” said the Commissar firmly. “Thank you, but I prefer to be alone, forgive me. I will just stroll in the ancient streets of your beautiful town by moonlight and refresh myself——”

“I will not intrude myself,” said the Chief of Police. “You will not know I am there, I will follow——”

“No,” said the Commissar again and for the first time his voice had a rasp in it which they recognized as official. Then he broke into a laugh. “You force me to confess, gentlemen. We are men of the world, are we not? I have heard that there are some charming views obtainable from some of the houses in the quarter near the bridge. The Flower Market, you call it, do you not?”

There was a chorus of “Ah!” and a good deal of laughter. The Commissar continued.

“You will understand that I wish for no escort except for my own man who comes with me. I am sure you could not be tactless, gentlemen! Goodnight, and a thousand thanks for your hospitality.”

He slipped out of the room, ran down the stairs and found his driver waiting in the hall, a tall man with a languid manner, sprawled uncomfortably on a hard chair.

“I thought you were never coming,” said the driver, uncoiling himself in sections.

“That party’s going on till the small hours,” said the Commissar. “Did you find the way?”

“I know the general direction. I didn’t like to ask.”

“Of course not.”

They went out into the street and padded silently along in rubber-soled shoes. Though it was nearly midnight there were still people about, the cafés were open and sounds of music came from some of them.

“That fellow can play,” said the driver suddenly. “That’s a balalaika.”

“Oh, is it?” said the Commissar, who was not musical. “Sounds like a banjo to me. Keep in the shadows. The place is somewhere behind that church, isn’t it?”

They turned off the principal street into a lane so narrow that the tall man, stretching wide his arms, could almost touch both walls at once. Blackened stone walls of ancient houses, six and seven stories high as is common in old cities which once were walled, rose up on either hand; at every kink in the road a street light, high up on the wall, threw dramatic shadows into carved doorways and deep-set windows.

“What a place for a photograph,” said the driver, stopping abruptly and even going a few paces back to get the best viewpoint.

“What a place for an ambush,” said his companion incisively. “Do come on. Scores of people have been murdered in this street already, do you wish to add our names to the list?”

“How do you know?” asked the driver, resuming his long stride.

“My sense of the innate fitness of things.”

“As the street is about seven hundred years old, you are probably right. Left here—I think.”

But the left turning, after wandering a little, led them through an archway so low and deep as to be almost a tunnel into a filthy yard encumbered with dustbins and they turned back. Five minutes later it was unbearably plain that they were lost. It is no use having the most venerable of churches as a landmark if you cannot see it.

“You can’t even see the stars from these narrow alleys,” said the driver.

“Were you proposing to navigate our course through Bereghark? I didn’t know you’d joined the Navy.”

“We shall fetch up in the Flower Market after all in a minute.”

“If we do,” said the Commissar, “there will at least be somebody about we can ask. Here they seem all to have gone to bed.”

He stopped to light a cigar. The street at that point was very dark indeed, he fumbled with his matches and when he did get one out and turn it the right way round it only flashed and then went out.

“Curse these matches,” said Peskoff genially. “I think they were made in a firework factory.”

A small flame sprang up close to his elbow, a hand holding a cigarette lighter appeared out of the darkness and a voice said: “A light, *mein Herr*.”

The form of a man was dimly visible in the tiny flame but his face was in the shadow of the hand holding the lighter, besides, his hatbrim was pulled down over his eyes. The Commissar thanked him and bent his head to draw strongly upon his cigar, which glowed in response. The next second Peskoff’s unemployed hand shot down to grasp the man’s other wrist and a revolver dropped with a clatter upon the cobbles.

“Dear me,” said the Commissar mildly. “Now, I wonder who you are?”

The driver picked up the revolver, struck a match and held it before the man’s face. He was the factory Manager, one of the party who had conducted the Commissar round the works that afternoon and dined with him that night.

“Oh, really,” said the Commissar. “The Herr Wengel, I believe. What the hell do you want to shoot me for?”

“I don’t like Commissars,” said Wengel hoarsely.

“Don’t be so completely ridiculous! Do you go through life shooting people of whose professions you disapprove? Tax collectors, for example? Or is it that you have just taken a dislike to me personally?”

Wengel did not answer and the Commissar went on after a pause.

“I think that after I have sent my report in, this factory will want a new Manager.”

“Why not shoot me now and have done with it?”

“Because you may be of more use to me alive. Of course, you may suffer a good deal more than if I——”

“I don’t care what you do to me,” said Wengel stubbornly, “I won’t talk.”

There was a short silence and when the Commissar spoke again the tone of his voice had altered.

“Let us take a little walk,” he said. “We may be arousing curiosity by standing together here in the dark.” He took firm hold of Wengel’s arm and led him along the street; the driver, armed with Wengel’s revolver, fell in behind.

“On second thoughts,” said the Commissar, “I think I will not mention you in my report after all.”

“You are a very odd Commissar,” said Wengel.

“We are not all alike. It is quite possible that I shall not send in any report.”

Wengel looked at him as they came into a street which was better lighted than the alley they had left.

“In return,” continued the Commissar, “I should be grateful for your help in a small matter.”

Wengel’s arm stiffened. “What is it?”

“Could you direct me to the house of Comrade Groenwald?”

Wengel momentarily checked his steps. “I do not know the man.”

“Come along,” said the Commissar, “and please don’t lie to me. If you don’t know him, why did you start so when I mentioned his name?”

“I don’t know the man.”

“Now don’t be——”

“I don’t care what you do to me,” said Wengel, his voice rising, “that’s all the answer you’ll get.”

“Sh-sh,” said the Commissar, “we don’t want to interest the passers-by in our conversation. It’s a pity you don’t know him because I have come a long way to see him.”

Wengel was silent for a moment.

“Do you come as a friend?” he asked.

“I do.”

“From England?”

“I do.”

Wengel in his turn seized the Commissar by the arm and hurried him along the street. “Come along, come on. You are late, you were expected days ago.”

“Now tell me,” said the Commissar, “why you wanted to shoot me just now.”

“I knew you weren’t a real factory-inspection Commissar, you didn’t scold us and find fault. So I thought you were one of the heads of the M.V.D. come here to hunt out”—his voice dropped—“us Royalists. So I slipped out after you when you left the dinner table, and when you turned off the main street I was sure I was right. For the Flower Market you keep straight on. I got ahead of you down a short cut but you took longer to come than I expected—I didn’t want to shoot the wrong man and your match only flashed, I had to make sure. This is the place.”

The Commissar looked up at a vast ancient building with many lighted windows, it rose straight up from the pavement five stories or more to the irregular Gothic turrets outlined against the stars.

“This was the Bishop’s Palace once,” said Wengel. “Now it is the Citizen Building, a block of workers’ flats.”

It was, in fact, a squalid and overcrowded tenement. The great staircase remained, the marble steps chipped, coated with grime and littered with fragments of rags and dirty paper, but the huge rooms had been divided and subdivided by flimsy partitions into numerous apartments and the sound of talking, quarrelling and even snoring filled the house. Wengel went up two flights, along a passage, up more stairs and along more passages till the Commissar and his driver looked at each other.

“It is all right,” said Wengel. “It is better at the top. The rooms are smaller and have not been cut up.”

He was right, the attics on the top floor had not been tampered with, the passages were airy and comparatively quiet. They stopped at a door in a dark corner and Wengel tapped upon it. A key turned in the lock and it was opened by a white-haired man with the scholar’s stoop and a lined, intelligent face. His clothes were shabby, indeed, but clean; his hands were well cared for. His face lit up at the sight of Wengel; he beckoned them to come in and shut the door behind them.

“The Herr Groenwald,” said Wengel.

The Commissar bowed. “I think that at one time you were Mr. Edward Granger, were you not?” he said, speaking English with no trace of foreign accent.

“That was my name, yes. You are the two whom I was told to expect?”

“That’s right. May I introduce Charles Denton? And my name is Thomas Hambledon.”

2

GRANGER shook hands with them both and they could feel that he was trembling. “To hear English spoken for the first time for seven years,” he said, “I can’t tell you what it means. Never mind that for the moment. I must tell you my unhappy news first. The boy is no longer here, they took him away yesterday.”

“Where to?”

“A training school for boys just outside Poltava. That is a town in the Poltava province of the Ukraine, it is on the river Vorskla, which is a tributary of the Dnieper. It is also on the railway line from Kharkov to Kremenchug.” Granger’s voice broke into something like a sob. “I speak like a tutor still, I whose last pupil has been taken from me only yesterday, gentlemen, only yesterday.” He sat down heavily and rested his head in his hands.

“What is all this?” asked Wengel in German and Hambledon told him.

“I said you were late,” said Wengel agonizedly. “I said you were late—I didn’t know of this disaster. Only yesterday——”

“Why did they take him?” asked Hambledon of Granger. “Did they suspect anything or not, do you know?”

Granger answered in German so that Wengel could understand.

“Who can ever tell what the Russians are thinking? But it is just possible they did not, he was not the only one they took away. You see, he attended the state school, naturally, he had to, and yesterday they came to the school and selected six of the boys there who were among the most intelligent and

who were not living with their parents. They came in soon after the school had assembled, called out their names and led them away to the headmaster's room. Later that morning a man came here and told me to pack up the child's toilet things and a change of underwear because he was going on a journey. I asked where and he would not tell me, I asked if I could see him and that also was refused. So I packed the things and when the man had left I ran all the way to the school. There were guards on the doors who would not let me in so I knew he had not yet gone. There were others at the gate also, little Gregor Edberg's grandfather and Leonhard Hoffenburg's aunt who brought him up, they stood there weeping and others also whom I did not know."

"And did you see them pass?" asked Hambleton gently.

"No. A van drove out, a closed van, we could not see inside. Then the guards were withdrawn and the doors left open, so we knew the children had been in the van. The others all rushed into the school but I went away and walked about. Later, when the headmaster was alone, I went to see him. Not a bad fellow, rather a friend of mine so far as I dare to have any friends. We play draughts together at a café sometimes."

Granger's voice died away and he stared into the empty grate, he had plainly forgotten in his grief that there was anyone else in the room.

"Did he know who the boy was?" asked Hambleton after a pause.

"No. Oh, dear me, no. He thought he was my great-nephew. He liked the boy although he was so naughty and tiresome sometimes, you see, he was bright and clever and a promising pupil. I asked about the school to which he had been sent, one of those places they call a 'gymnasium' out here, you know, a sort of training college. It seems," said Granger, drawing himself up and speaking rather more cheerfully, "that there is no need to be anxious about food, housing, clothing and conditions generally. It is a good school of its type, the boys are being trained to be leaders and administrators later on, they are not bullied or ill treated, so the headmaster said. I hope he is right. It is only what they are taught which is so wrong, all this damned Marxism and Communism and Stalinism and all the rest of the poisonous doctrines they pour into their young minds. All the lies about the Western Powers, the slanders about Britain and the U.S.A. and all the free nations——"

"From what I know of him," said Wengel consolingly, "he will not be a very good subject for their doctrines. He has a mind of his own, our little King."

"That is one thing which terrifies me," said Granger, beating the table with his hand, "that one day he may lose patience and storm at them. Yes, I

know he has been trained to prudence and silence, but he is only thirteen and all alone.”

“I should have thought that would make him even more careful,” said Hambledon.

“I am sure it will, but you don’t know him. He can be alarmingly royal sometimes, it seems to break out.”

“Our little Kaspar,” said Wengel, and suddenly burst into tears.

“Well, it boils down to this, doesn’t it?” said Hambledon, who loathed emotional scenes whatever the provocation. “He is being well treated, he is quite safe for the present and we know where he is. It seems to me that things might very easily be a lot worse, if you didn’t know where he was, for example.”

“Provided that they really do take him there,” said Granger. “They will be allowed to write to us, the headmaster assured me of that.”

“Well, there you are,” said Tommy Hambledon. “As soon as you get a letter, which won’t be for a fortnight if I know anything about Eastern European communications, you can be sure of two things. One, that he is all right and, two, that they have no suspicion who he is. Then,” he went on cheerfully, “we can pull our socks up and make some plans.”

“Plans?” said Wengel, with tear streaks shining down his face. “What for?”

“For getting him out, of course. What did you propose to do about it?”

“Get him out? Oh,” said Wengel, falling on his knees and seizing Tommy’s hand in both his own, “oh, you give me new life!”

“For pity’s sake get up and don’t be such an ass,” said Hambledon irritably. “And there’s another thing I want to say to you. Another time when you think you’re in a tight corner, don’t—do not, repeat not—announce that whatever happens you’re not going to talk. One naturally wonders what you’ve got to talk about, doesn’t one?”

“I suppose so,” said Wengel, struggling to his feet.

“I myself,” said Hambledon, “immediately jumped to the correct conclusion that you were a Royalist.”

“I am a fool,” said Wengel penitently.

“Well, don’t be one again, please. In future, wait to be asked questions, think them over carefully and then say you don’t know.”

“But,” said Granger, “have you any idea how to set about it?”

“None whatever, at the moment. Some scheme will doubtless present itself.”

“I forget my manners,” said Granger, and went to a cupboard. “Won’t you have a drink? Please. My cellar is limited but I have slavovic and even a bottle of vodka. I recommend the vodka. Now, will you tell us, to distract our minds, how you managed to get here? That is, if it’s not a secret.”

“Not from you,” said Hambledon, sipping his vodka. “You see, there really was a genuine Soviet Farm-Productive-Machinery-Inspection Commissar coming to Bereghark but he kept on postponing the trip and we couldn’t do anything to hurry him. That’s why I was late. Well, he didn’t get here so I took his place. That’s all.”

“He’s dead, I suppose,” said Granger.

“Dear me, no. He has slipped—or been slipped—over the frontier into the Western Zone of Austria.”

“But he will proclaim——”

“Oh no, he won’t. There will shortly appear in the press interviews in which he will describe how he saw the light of Freedom faintly gleaming through the Iron Curtain and escaped from Russian bondage to give information to the Western Allies. Oh no, he won’t proclaim anything else, and he won’t come back, either. Would you, in his place?”

“One of the defectors, as they call them nowadays,” said Granger, laughing. “No, I don’t think he’ll come back.”

“That, actually, was what I had in mind,” said Hambledon to Wengel, “when I told you I didn’t think I would bother to send in a report. The Comrade Commissar will leave the country tomorrow morning. Mr. Granger, I wish I could take you with me.”

“Thank you,” said the ex-tutor. “If it were not for the boy I would beg you to take me but they might possibly send him back. For the first time since I came here thirty-five years ago I have no business here. I was tutor to his father, you know, the late King Melchior, God rest his soul. I married a local lady. When King Melchior no longer needed my instruction he made me librarian till, as he said, he should have a son for me to teach. Our Kaspar was born in 1938 so he was six years old when, in 1944, the Russians passed over this country, driving the Germans before them. There was a heavy bombing raid on Bereghark and the King and Queen were both killed. Kaspar, by the favour of heaven, was staying with me at my house in the country. I kept him there and when the Russians came I said he was my great-nephew. I told him—six years old!—to say so too. He did, when they

questioned him. When they asked him where his other relatives were he said: ‘Dead. All dead. All but *mein Onkel*.’ He looked so innocent that they believed him, he never glanced towards me for guidance throughout the whole interview, not once.”

“Magnificent,” said Hambledon, thinking to himself that a boy who could carry that off at six would be something of a handful at thirteen.

“He used to dream about it afterwards,” said Granger. “For more than a year he would wake up crying in the night and beg me to drive the horrid men away. About that time my wife died, I think it was being driven from home. Since then—well, we have continued to live.”

“Does he know,” asked Hambledon, “that I am coming to take him away?”

“Oh yes, I told him. You are his uncle and he is looking forward to meeting you.”

“Splendid. Well, I think I ought to be getting back, even the delights of the Flower Market ought not to detain me much longer away from official hospitality. Let us know through the usual channels as soon as you hear from him. Though I think there is little doubt he has been sent to Poltava.”

“I agree. I think he is there. The headmaster told me that there was a little discussion among the men as to whether they should take him or another boy who is a year older, but at last they took Kaspar because he looked more intelligent.”

“To my mind, that settles it,” said Hambledon. “To them, he was just one boy in a bunch of boys and he has gone straight to Poltava. Goodbye, Mr. Granger. Thank you for the way you received me, may we all meet soon in London. Be careful, run no avoidable risks. Goodbye.”

When they got outside he told Wengel to lead the way back via the Flower Market, for, he said, there might be some people about who knew him if only by sight. To be seen returning from some quite different quarter of the town might impair that reputation for truth and simplicity which was the deceiver’s dearest asset. Did not Wengel agree?

When they reached the Mayor’s house the party was still in progress and Hambledon, who thought it both wise and natural to appear a little drunk and very sleepy, tried to slip past the door unseen and go up to his room. However, the Mayor was looking out for him and seized upon him, disregarding his protests.

“Indeed, indeed, you must be tired. That long journey and the inspection and all. But you must come in for just a moment, there is a colleague of

yours but recently arrived and asking for you.”

Hambledon almost took refuge in instant flight but by this time the reception party were crowding round him, patting him on the back and urging him into the room. There was a newcomer there, a big man with a red face and moustaches as heavy as Stalin’s own.

“Comrade Commissar Ordzinov,” twittered the Mayor, “here is the Commissar Peskoff returned from his wanderings. What a day for Bereghark, to entertain two such notables at one time!”

Ordzinov rose from his chair, staring.

“Comrade Peskoff?”

“That’s me,” said Hambledon cheerfully. There was a long-necked wine-bottle within reach which, promptly used, might give him time to draw his gun. “I hope I see you well, Comrade Ordzinov.”

“I thought you had red hair,” said the Russian.

Tommy laughed. “You are thinking of my brother.” He hiccupped, staggered and apologized to the company. “Had a long day. Delightful day. Charming company. Excuse me. My brother’s the one with the red hair. Used to call him Bonfire at school.”

Ordzinov’s face cleared a little. “That no doubt explains it. I met a man in Bucharest this morning who told me you were working through this area and said he used to know you in Moscow. Thought you had red hair.”

“He was thinking of old Bonfire,” said Hambledon, yawning. “He’s up on the Baltic now.” He yawned again. “Excuse me.”

“I will not keep you from your bed, Comrade Peskoff, longer than to ask you if you are returning to Berlin tomorrow?”

“That’s right. Starting tomorrow morning, today actually. Later today.” Hambledon visibly pulled himself together. “Is there any way in which I can help you by going to Berlin, Comrade Ordzinov?”

“You can take me with you, if you will——”

“A pleasure——”

“My wretched car broke an axle ten miles short of this place and I finished my journey in an oxcart.”

“What misery!”

“It would not matter but that my journey is urgent and important. Intensely urgent, I must at all costs arrive in Berlin not later than the day after tomorrow.” Ordzinov wiped his brow with a crumpled handkerchief

and Tommy noticed with interest that he was really agitated. "I must be there, it is indispensable."

"Let your mind be at rest," said Tommy grandly. "I and my American Chrysler will convey you there as on the wings of an eagle. That is, unless we break an axle too. We will pray together, Comrade Ordzinov, that that may not happen." He looked at his watch. "It is now a quarter past two. Shall we start at seven?"

They started at half past eight, which is quite near enough to seven for a semi-oriental nation like the Russians, though it is only fair to Ordzinov to say that most of the delay was due to Tommy Hambledon. The point was that though they had both been speaking German the night before out of courtesy to their hosts, Ordzinov would certainly talk in his own tongue to the Comrade Commissar Peskoff when they were travelling alone together in a car. Hambledon's Russian was good enough for him to get the gist of what was said in his presence and he could ask for what he wanted in such places as hotels and trains, but no one who heard him would ever mistake him for a Russian. It was no use pretending that Peskoff couldn't speak Russian, so there would have to be a showdown at some point on the journey. Out of consideration for the inhabitants of Bereghark the showdown ought to take place as far along the road towards Berlin as possible, to obviate reprisals on Bereghark. Comrade Peskoff, therefore, would have a severe hangover.

He did. When he was called for breakfast at half past six he groaned so horribly that the servant was alarmed and proposed sending for the doctor. This would not do either. Peskoff said that that was quite unnecessary, another half hour in bed was all that was needed and some coffee, please. Soon after eight he staggered downstairs, holding the banister rail with one hand and his aching head with the other. He was black round the eyes—a little dirt artistically applied—and unshaven. He apologized for his appearance and said that something had disagreed with him. His liver was out of order, some more coffee, please. When somebody kindly pointed out that coffee is bad for a disordered liver, Peskoff snarled. When Ordzinov unwillingly asked if he was well enough to travel he said that of course he was, the air would do him good. The car was brought round and Peskoff immediately spread himself across the whole of the back seat leaving Ordzinov to sit in front with the inarticulate driver. Ten minutes after leaving Bereghark Peskoff was sound asleep.

They stopped for lunch at a small town more than a hundred miles from Bereghark and Hambledon thought it time he began to recover a little.

Besides, he was hungry. In any case, he could not sleep all the way to Berlin, and if something drastic had to be done about the Comrade Commissar Ordzinov it had better happen in a stretch of thinly populated country. He managed to keep his end up over lunch by answering in monosyllables.

When they started again after lunch, Ordzinov said that he was going to sit in the back seat with Peskoff. A little conversation, he said, a little cheerful sympathetic company, would be better for the invalid than dwelling upon his own symptoms. He said this in loud and kindly tones for the benefit of the innkeeper and staff who were fussing round seeing them off; Hambledon, who would willingly have poisoned Ordzinov if he had had anything to poison him with, could only agree. He exchanged glances with his driver and they started.

Ordzinov began by asking whether Peskoff had attended some sort of Farm Productivity meeting in Kharkov that spring, since he had been in that district at the time. Hambledon closed his eyes and grunted, which Ordzinov apparently took to be assent, for he said that though he had not been there himself he had had a full account of it, and what did Peskoff think of the Chairman's remarks? Of the delegate from Pereslavl? Of the white-haired old driveller from Uman who had obviously outlived his usefulness? By the way, Piotr Tcherkasy was there, Peskoff must know him quite well since they both came from the town of Buturlinovka though of course they were not at school together since Tcherkasy was a much younger man.

And so on and so on, with Hambledon holding on as long as he could and wondering when the explosion would come. In that part of the country and, indeed, all over Russian-occupied territory, there are military posts at intervals along the roads whose duty it is to stop all traffic, examine papers, ask questions and generally make nuisances of themselves. Hambledon's—Peskoff's—car had a small pennon on the bonnet which proclaimed its passengers to be above such inquisition and they had driven straight past many such posts without question. About five miles from their lunch stop they were approaching one of these posts at a crossroads when Ordzinov suddenly left off babbling and a revolver appeared in his hand.

“It is time for this nonsense to cease,” he said. “You are not Peskoff and I never believed you were. Your absurd attempt at impersonation would not deceive a Soviet child. You are one of those damned so-called Royalists. Peskoff was sent to Bereghark to hunt them out”—Hambledon spared a moment to admit with surprise that Wengel had guessed right after all—“and I was to meet him there and clear out that nest of vipers. You went out by

yourself, didn't you? If only my car hadn't broken down I would have caught you red-handed. Driver! Stop at that post ahead there."

Charles Denton, who could look as stupid as any village idiot when he chose, immediately slowed the car almost to a stop.

"Not here, fool! At the post yonder, that building. At the side of the _____"

Denton turned in his seat and shot Ordzinov neatly through the head.

"Well done, Charles. I couldn't get at my gun at that moment. Now we can get on."

But the sentry at the road post thought otherwise. He was new to his duties and conscientious, the meaning of little red pennons on car bonnets was still a closed book to him. He signalled them to stop although Denton leaned out and pointed at the pennon. He went on signalling as they came up, shouted at them as they went past and finally fired a wild shot from his rifle which missed the car altogether. Denton put his foot down but Hambleton shouted to him to stop. "Stop and go back!"

"What's bitten you?"

"That's the wrong question. The question is: 'Who shot the Commissar?'"

"Ah," said Denton. He skidded the car to a stop, turned in the road and went back. The sound of the shot had brought out the rest of the post garrison, two more soldiers and a Sergeant.

"Who fired that shot?" roared Hambleton as they drove up. "Who was the"—so-and-so and this-and-that—"who fired that shot? Look what you've done! You have killed the high-office-holding Comrade Commissar Ordzinov, a cousin of Stalin himself!"

The soldiers rushed forward to look into the car and Ordzinov, who had not been killed outright, chose that moment to die.

"There!" thundered Hambleton. "My brother—my more than comrade! You have dared to fire on the flag—Sergeant! What is that pennon for?"

The Sergeant began to splutter but Tommy, who was very anxious to get away before anybody noticed there was no bullet hole in the car, cut him short.

"Lift out the body and carry it into the post. Reverently, now. Slowly and carefully. You will carry on with your duties until relieved, Sergeant, but you are all under arrest. At the next town I come to I will report this and you had

better say your prayers, you'll need them! Driver! Turn the car and drive on, I am in a hurry!"

Denton ducked as expecting a blow, threw Hambledon a terrified glance which was not lost on the Sergeant, turned the car in the road and drove hastily away. Hambledon looked back through the rear window at a miserable little group of four undersized soldiers trying to remove reverently an inert corpse weighing at least sixteen stone.

"What will they do with him, Charles? Just park him and sit waiting patiently to be arrested?"

"In their place," said Denton, "I should drop the remains down the nearest well and go for a walk. A long, long walk."

3

THEY reached Berlin that evening as dusk was falling; the British Sector did not appear to be so quiet and orderly as usual. As Hambledon and Denton came within earshot of the Tiergarten angry noises could be heard; shots, shouted orders, yells of defiance and occasional screams.

"I think we'd better leave the car here and walk. Cars don't dodge quickly enough," said Hambledon.

"'Hans Breitmann gifte a barty,' " quoted Denton, stopping the car and getting out, followed by Tommy.

"Sounds like it. I seem to remember something about an election being held shortly, would this be it, d'you think?"

Denton nodded. "Local elections of some kind. Parish councillors?"

"Let's veer off to the right, we don't want to be involved in their tribal riots."

"Peace at any price," agreed Denton.

But there was a sudden rush of rioters towards them followed by a body of British Sector Police backed up by troops. The rioters seemed to think the odds a little too long and retreated hurriedly in no sort of order, bearing their hammer-and-sickle flag with them. Some shots were fired and the bullets whistled over their heads, for the British troops were purposely firing high.

There is something insulting and exasperating about an enemy who fires to frighten but not to kill, and a blue-shirted gentleman within twenty yards of Hambledon lost his temper completely. (The German Communist Party wear blue shirts.) He knelt down in order to make a steady rest for his heavy revolver and fired four shots deliberately at the police. He was a good shot, or lucky, for two of the police fell. One was not much hurt for he sat up and clasped an injured leg, but the other one lay very still.

Hambledon and Denton, who had already taken cover behind a convenient ruin, went completely flat just in time. There was a burst of firing from the upholders of law and order, not aimed high, and the Communists turned and ran. The Sector Police chased them off and that part of the battleground became suddenly deserted.

Denton put his head up and said: "I think that's all for the present. Shall we move on?"

Hambledon rose to his feet and agreed. The wounded policeman was being helped away, the dead one lay very still and so did the Communist who had shot at him.

"I think, as he doesn't want his identity papers any more, I might, without unkindness, take them, don't you? I shall want some Soviet papers and I don't think Peskoff's will be any help at all, now. In fact, quite the reverse."

He turned the dead Communist over and took his identity papers. Such papers do not bear a photograph and the personal descriptions are not particularly helpful. Denton looked about him in the light of the street lamps and said that there was a canal just over there, what about submerging Hans? He was not pretty and unless Hambledon wanted him for a memento——

"The last thing I'd want——"

"Well, you could have him stuffed and fitted up as a lamp standard in your flat."

"Don't be silly, I should never get him past the customs. There's a heavy duty on electric-light fittings."

So they picked up the Communist, carried him to the canal bank and rolled him in. If Hambledon were going to use his papers it would be better if there were no trace of the original bearer. Hambledon put a stone in the envelope containing Peskoff's papers and threw that in also. They walked away together.

"Who are you, now?" asked Denton, referring to Tommy's new identity papers.

“Oh, I don’t know, I’ll look presently. The riot seems to be abating but it might be wiser not to stand under a street light even now. Well, I’m going to headquarters, what about you?”

“I’m going to get something to eat, still more to drink, and then go to bed, I’m tired. If headquarters want to see me tomorrow will do. You can give them my awe-struck regards, can’t you? I turn off down here. See you in the morning.”

“Right,” said Hambleton. “Goodnight, Charles.”

Denton went down a side turning and Hambleton walked straight on. The streets were quiet now and there were a few people about, not rioters but citizens upon their lawful occasions. The trouble seemed to be over and Hambleton stepped out cheerfully until he rounded a corner straight into the arms of a group of police.

“Halt. Papers, please.”

Hambleton hesitated; the police noticed it and immediately closed in.

“Your papers.”

He handed them over, the police Sergeant examined them, compared the name with a list and looked surprised but pleased.

“Hugo Britz. Are you Hugo Britz?”

Hambleton wondered what on earth the late Britz had done.

“Those are my papers,” he said coldly.

A police Inspector came up and the Sergeant spoke to him.

“This seems to be Hugo Britz, *Herr Inspektor*.”

“What? The man who strangled a woman in a cellar in Goethe Strasse and then stabbed a soldier?” The Inspector looked Hambleton up and down like a judge of cattle at an agricultural show. A little more, he felt, and the man would run a hand down his shins. “He does not, to my mind,” continued the Inspector, “look a particularly dangerous character. He looks like an ironmonger’s assistant.”

“Them quiet ones,” said the Sergeant ominously.

“Doubtless. Doubtless. Take him into custody, Sergeant. Handcuff him to that post there, don’t take any risks. I’ll send the van along to pick him up.”

The Inspector walked away and Hambleton was duly attached to the post. About ten minutes later the police van came; rather a long ten minutes for Hambleton since everyone who passed naturally stared at him. Both by

nature and by training he disliked publicity and he was as conspicuous as a mediaeval rogue in the village stocks. The van stopped, the guards were told who he was, the door was opened and he was pushed inside with his hands handcuffed together in front of him. There were three men in the van already but they appeared to be obsessed with their own troubles and took very little notice of him. He took out his notebook and wrote a note in it for the officials to read when they examined it.

“I am a British Intelligence agent and wish to keep under cover. Please tell no one and call me out for questioning as soon as possible.”

He put the notebook back in his pocket and waited for the journey to end. The van turned a sharp corner, went in under an arch and stopped. When the door was opened he could see that they were in a courtyard and the gates under the arch were being closed. He was taken from the van to a waiting room and from the waiting room to an office where a desk Sergeant entered particulars in a ledger. He was then thoroughly searched and everything except his pocket handkerchief taken from him, listed and boxed up. The notebook was among these things and Hambledon was pleased to see that it attracted some attention. He was then led away along passages and pushed into a cell which contained one prisoner already. The door shut and a key turned in the lock.

The prisoner was a tall man in the late forties with untidy hair retreating from his forehead and a thin lined face. He looked up anxiously as the door opened and Tommy was pushed inside.

“Good evening,” he said in Russian.

“Good evening,” said Tommy in German. “I regret that I cannot speak Russian.”

“It does not matter, I can speak German.”

Tommy bowed. “Hugo Britz,” he said, introducing himself and wondering whether the name would produce any such effect as it had had upon the German police. But it was obvious at once that this man had never heard of him.

“Feodor Gerardov,” he said, rising to his feet in order to bow politely and immediately sitting down again upon the edge of his bed. There was a second bed in the cell so Hambledon sat down upon it.

“These tiresome mistakes,” he said affably, “how they interfere with one’s business. I was on my way to a most important appointment when I had the misfortune to encounter some of our officious police.”

“Did they, then, imagine that you were concerned in the rioting?”

“I assume so. I was concerned to the extent that I ran into it on my way and spent some time lying in a muddy puddle behind a heap of brickbats. My clothes,” said Tommy, disdainfully flicking off small dabs of half-dry mud, “I must apologize for my clothes.”

“These things happen,” said Gerardov. “At least there are no bullet holes in them.”

“Most fortunate,” agreed Hambledon. “I dislike draughts.” Gerardov smiled faintly and Hambledon said that no doubt the Herr’s undeserved incarceration in this miserable cell was the result of a similar error. “They seemed to be arresting people wholesale.”

“Exactly similar,” said the Russian gloomily.

“That being so, it is only to wait until the Herr is interrogated and he will then be released.”

Gerardov shrugged his shoulders. “Can one expect justice from these courts?”

“It depends, I think,” said Hambledon cautiously, “upon one’s political affiliations.”

The Russian looked up sharply and Hambledon raised his hand in the Communist fashion with clenched fist. Gerardov sprang to his feet, called him *brat*, which, believe it or not, means “brother” in Russian, and kissed him upon both cheeks. Hambledon bore it without flinching and called Gerardov “brother and comrade” in German.

“Now we can talk,” said Gerardov. “My anxiety is caused by the fact that I should not be here.”

“Mine also,” said Tommy in a surprised voice.

“I mean, here on this side of Berlin.”

“I see,” said Hambledon in the tone one uses when one does not see at all.

The Russian fidgeted. “It is difficult to explain.”

Hambledon looked sympathetic.

“I have enemies,” said Gerardov.

“What man of initiative, drive and force of character, such as I perceive the Herr to be, has not?”

“I should not have said enemies. We are all comrades in the Communist Party.”

“Of course, of course. But there remains the innate fallibility of human nature.”

“You are right, Comrade Britz. Such things as jealousy and the imputation of unworthy motives.”

“Is it not your considered opinion,” said Tommy in the cheerful tone of one starting a really congenial discussion, “that in the course of time, when the principles of Communism are world-wide and have been so for several generations, the unworthier aspects of our human nature will by degrees shrivel up and vanish away? When there has not within living memory been any occasion for jealousy and self-seeking and ambition? Ever since the time of the ancient philosophers man has looked forward to the Millennium in some form or other, coloured of course by the degree of political maturity prevailing in the age——”

“I believe it firmly,” said Gerardov, who did not in the least want to discuss the Millennium when his own affairs were so much more interesting. “In my case the trouble is that I have erred through excess of zeal. I have, I admit it frankly. I am—I have the—I hold a high position in the ranks of our Party, unworthy as I am, and I was entrusted with a most important and urgent mission.” He took out a rather grimy handkerchief and wiped his forehead. “I was sent by the Politburo itself.” He sighed.

“Indeed,” said Tommy reverently and managed to give the impression that if he had been in the habit of crossing himself he would have done so. He remembered in passing the luckless Ordzinov who also had had important business in Berlin and had turned pale and mopped his brow whenever he thought of it. Such a reaction seemed to be the natural result of important business in the Soviet Union.

“You understand,” said Gerardov gratefully. “I had to meet a man who was in our sector of Berlin and my time for the journey, the interview and the return was all stated. When I get here, what do I find? He knows I am coming and he crosses over into the British Sector! Fool!”

“What,” said Tommy in horrified tones, “he has not——”

“Oh no. No, nothing like that. There is no reason to doubt his unswerving loyalty. He had business to do, he had permission to come and he came. But he ought,” said Gerardov, marking his words by thumping the table, “he ought to have waited for me.”

“Exactly. Of course. Naturally. Obviously.”

“I knew where he was, I saw a chance which might not recur. I slipped across the line, mingling with the people, unsuspected, unobserved——”

“And then all this happens.”

“Precisely. And here am I locked up in jail. These miserable British will report my name, my enemies will say I have deserted, it is true I broke the wise and eminently-to-be-respected regulations, I have not performed my mission and unless I can get back immediately to repair the disaster, I fear—I don’t know—what will they say of me in Moscow?”

There was a painful silence.

“We must get out, that’s all,” said Hambledon.

“Out? Get out? How?”

“I don’t know yet. But people have got out of jails before this. Frequently. What man has done man can do. I also have a pressing need to escape.”

“Why, what have you done?”

“My case is nothing like so grave as yours,” said Tommy modestly. “Nothing really serious. Only a couple of murders.”

“Oh.”

“That is, the hidebound authorities here call them murders, but of course they were not. They were acts of necessity in the Cause of Freedom.”

“No doubt the miserable wretches deserved their fate,” said Gerardov politely.

Hambledon waved the miserable wretches away with a careless hand. “They are dead, let them lie. I was in the act of making my way to the Russian Sector when I encountered those *dummkopf* police. I have never been there, I am looking forward to seeing with my own eyes the civilizing influence of Soviet Russia. The light of Communism——”

There came the sound of steps along the passage outside, they stopped at the door. Hambledon’s eyes brightened.

“I am not acquainted with the rules of this place,” he said. “Would this, perhaps, be supper coming?”

“I could not say,” began Gerardov, but the door opened to disclose two warders, one of whom addressed Hambledon.

“Hugo Britz. Come with us.”

“What for?” asked Hambledon, picking up his overcoat.

“Interrogation.”

Hambledon threw the coat down again. “In that case I suppose I shall be returning shortly. *Auf wiedersehen, mein Herr.*”

Gerardov waved his hand, the door shut and the procession of three started along the passage. There were cell doors on either hand and from nearly all of them came the sound of talking; evidently the prison was crowded.

“Your hotel appears to be popular tonight,” said Tommy affably. “House full, as they say?” But all he got in reply was a growled “*Sprechen verboten*” from the warder in front and a nudge in the back from the warder behind. They went upstairs, along another passage and into a room which, if not comfortable, was civilized enough to contain several chairs, a large desk, a filing cabinet and a rug in front of the fireplace. There were four men in the room: the Governor of the prison, his Head Warder, a clerk busy at the filing cabinet and a friend of Hambledon’s who was a Major in British Intelligence. They all looked up as the door opened, Tommy’s eyes met the Major’s and neither gave the slightest sign of recognition.

“The prisoner Hugo Britz,” said one of the escort. “Cell 17, Floor A.”

“Very well,” said the Governor. “You may go, men,” to the escort, “and you too,” to the clerk. When they were out of the room he turned to the Major and said: “Do you know this man?”

“Er,” said the Major, and flicked an eyebrow in the direction of the Head Warder.

“That will be all for the moment, Mulder,” said the Governor, “but I shall want you again in a minute.”

The Head Warder saluted and went out also and the Major said: “Yes, sir, I know this gentleman very well indeed. Tommy, old hunter, what are you in here for? I suppose you want to come out, don’t you?”

“No, thank you,” said Tommy politely, “at least, not in your compromising company.”

“Do sit down,” said the Governor, bringing up a chair for him. “Cigars in that box on your left and may I offer you some whisky?”

“Herr Zellerhoff,” said the Major, “is most helpful and co-operative.”

Tommy beamed on the Governor, said he was quite sure that Herr Zellerhoff was the most amiable of men and added that he would love some whisky if it did not mean bringing anyone else into the room to provide it. “Or shall I stand stiffly to attention near the door? I don’t mind a bit if it’s any convenience.”

“No need,” said Zellerhoff. “I have a locked cupboard.”

“This place is getting more like home every moment,” said Hambledon.

When their wants had been fulfilled the Major asked Hambledon to “spill it” and Tommy said it was all quite simple, really. “I’ve got to go into Russia on a small matter of business,” he said, addressing the Governor, “and I think the best way will be to get someone on their side to take me in. I seem to have been lucky in my fellow prisoner if even half what he says is true, so I suggest getting out of here and taking him with me. He seems very anxious to go.”

“Who is he, do you know?” asked Zellerhoff, going to the filing cabinet.

“One Gerardov. Feodor Gerardov.”

“What, that man? Good gracious, do you mean to say that we caught him among the minnows? I haven’t had time to go carefully through the list yet,” said Zellerhoff, fingering through a card index. “Yes, here it is, Cell 17, Floor A. Gerardov, Feodor, and Britz, Hugo. Good gracious.”

“Is he such a big fish?” asked Hambledon.

“Yes, but listen,” said the Major. “If this fellow is really Feodor Gerardov, we don’t want him. He’s really important and we don’t want trouble. He’s hot stuff. There will be arguments and abuse and endless Russian notes and requests for extradition and heaven knows what. Take him away, Tommy, take him away. Remove the inconvenience.”

“Is this the man?” asked Zellerhoff, showing a photograph in a fat album.

“That’s him all right.”

“I am surprised,” said the Governor, locking his album up again, “that he should have been mixed up in that rioting this evening. It was a very proletarian affair.”

“He became entangled in it by accident,” said Hambledon, “just as I did.”

“I take it,” said Zellerhoff, “that you want to be allowed to slip out when nobody is looking?”

“Oh no,” said Tommy, “nothing so simple as that. Something violent, dramatic and, if possible, bloody. Listen.”

He drank off his whisky, allowed his cigar ash to fall into the ash tray, leaned his arms on the Governor’s desk and talked.

“I WILL call Mulder, my Head Warder, into consultation,” said the Governor, “if I may. He is intelligent and completely trustworthy: I have had him under me for years.”

He came in, a middle-aged man with dark hair greying at the temples and a quiet, resolute face.

“We spend our days, Mulder,” said the Governor, “preventing prisoners from escaping. Tonight we are going to reverse the process, we are to arrange an escape.”

Mulder looked amused but all he said was: “Very good, sir.”

“This prisoner here,” pursued Zellerhoff, pointing at Hambledon, “is not what he seems.”

“No, sir.”

“For reasons into which I need not enter, he will go out tonight together with the other prisoner in his cell.”

“Very good, sir.”

“The escape has to be made convincing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And that is why we have called you into consultation.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Hambledon felt that at this rate dawn would be upon them and nothing done. “Perhaps I might explain, with your permission, what I had in mind.”

“Please,” said the Governor. “Er—sit down, Mulder.”

Mulder sat squarely on a chair and turned an enquiring gaze upon Hambledon, who leaned forward and addressed him personally.

“The Governor has told me that you are a man to be trusted, Mulder, and now I have seen you I believe him entirely. I am a British Intelligence agent and I am going into Soviet Russia on a small job.” Mulder’s eyebrows went up but he did not interrupt. “I must somehow get the complete confidence of the man in my cell, he seems to be a person of importance in his own country and he can help me a lot if he will. He is very anxious indeed to get out of here”—Mulder smiled—“even more eager than most people, and if I can get him out his gratitude will be worth having. But he must be

convinced that I have managed the escape myself, there mustn't be the slightest suggestion of collaboration from anybody or he will smell a rat."

"I see, sir. You want the escape to be what you might call showy."

"Exactly. We must put on an act and it must be convincing. I ring the bell for the warder and when he comes we overpower him, take his keys and let ourselves out; that was the general idea. If you had some man who would enter into the spirit of the thing and could be trusted to hold his tongue afterwards——"

Mulder retired into thought and the Governor said that the warders did not, as a rule, carry the keys of the outer doors as well as those of the cells.

"This one will have to," said Hambledon.

"That can be arranged, we will make up a special bunch. The passages will have to be clear——"

Mulder looked up and the Governor stopped in mid-sentence.

"I have a young warder," said Mulder, "who will, I think, do the business admirably. He has not been with us long, a little over two years, but he is intelligent and I consider him trustworthy and reliable. All my men are that or they wouldn't be here, but Kantor has this advantage, he was once an actor. I expect he would have been acting still but you know how things have been. Is it your wish that I should call him in?"

"Please."

Mulder left the room and Hambledon asked if there were any simpler way out of the prison than by the front door and the main gate. "A little public, I feel."

"Certainly," said Zellerhoff, "there is a small door to the outer world down a short passage off the corridor in which is your cell. Mulder will show you."

"Thank you. Now your job," said Tommy, turning to the Major, "is to find me something to drive away in. I can't keep on being rearrested every twenty yards all across Berlin. If you can find me a jeep from the car pool, leave it outside the side door and issue general orders that jeep number so-and-so is to be let pass and not stopped by anybody, that will save a lot of bother."

"It shall be done," said the Major.

"Don't leave it exactly outside the door, of course. Leave it so that when I come out I turn—left? Or right? Whichever is best."

"Turn right," said the Major. "There's more length of road that way."

“Turn right, good. Somewhere just down the road. And it will be a good jeep, George, not one of your wrecks you’re always trying to wish off on the unsuspecting. I know your jeeps. It needn’t look natty, but it must go.”

“It will,” said the Major. “Cross my heart.”

“And you’ll see that everybody’s warned about it?”

“Consider it as already done.”

Mulder came in followed by a broad-shouldered young man in warder’s uniform.

“This is Kantor, gentlemen. I have given him an idea of what he is required to do.”

Kantor saluted, looked round the company and asked in a particularly pleasant voice which of the gentlemen was going to do him the honour of attacking him.

“I am,” said Hambledon, smiling.

“With the Herr’s gracious permission, might I suggest a little rehearsal? I understand we shall have an audience whom it is necessary to convince.”

“Certainly,” said Tommy, getting up. “What do——”

“The odd-numbered cells—forgive me—on Floor A are arranged like this,” said the young man, picking up a straight-backed chair from a row along the wall. “The Governor permits that I set the stage? Thank you. This door is the cell door, there is a bed there along that side, this chair represents it, and another bed along that side. Another chair. There is a table screwed to the wall opposite the door—this armchair—and two small chairs beside it, thus. Now, I open the door,” he backed out of it, “and come in, so the Herr _____”

“Does this,” said Hambledon, catching him by the wrist with one hand, using a jujitsu hold with the other and neatly throwing him across the room. The Governor roared with laughter, the young warder picked himself up, grinning, from the ruins of the wastepaper basket and Hambledon apologized for having damaged the office property.

“You’re staging a scrap, not an Apache dance,” objected the Major.

“The Herr Obersatz is right,” said Mulder, “and if you walk into cells like that, Kantor, somebody will do that to you one of these days. You stop in the doorway, prepared for violence.”

“But he’s got to come in,” objected Hambledon.

“I have a reason to come in,” said Kantor triumphantly. “The reason is that the other prisoner is sick and that is why the gracious Herr rang the bell.”

The other prisoner—the Russian—is lying upon his bed holding his stomach and uttering horrible groans.”

“Excellent,” said Tommy, “but don’t call me ‘the gracious Herr’ then, or you’ll give the show away.”

“Certainly not,” said Kantor in a pained voice, “it would be out of the part. I shall be harsh with you.”

“Remember not to shut the door behind you,” urged Mulder, “remember there is no keyhole or handle on the inside.”

“I leave the door ajar,” said Kantor, “and in an angry voice order the gracious Herr to get back in his corner. Over there, please. Then I enter cautiously and lean over the bed——”

“And I attack you from behind,” said Hambledon, springing at him as he spoke. The warder turned in a flash to fend him off and the stage was occupied with struggle.

“My hat, you’re strong,” gasped Hambledon. “Fall down, you ass, I want to strangle you.”

The warder fell heavily and Hambledon, kneeling on his chest, gave a lifelike demonstration of choking him. The warder kicked, drummed with his heels on the floor and collapsed suddenly. Hambledon rose to his feet, dusting his hands together with an expression of Satanic glee, and the audience said that that was much better. Much. Quite good, actually.

“Then I take your keys and walk out,” said Tommy.

“Remembering to lock the cell door after you,” said Mulder. “Then, unless anyone switches on the light from outside the door where the switch is and looks in through the grille, the escape won’t be discovered till the morning.”

The corpse sat up. “There’s one other thing,” he said. “If the gracious Herr will turn me face down when he takes the keys it will be much easier for me. It is hard indeed to keep the features motionless when lying face up, and the Russian might come and bend over me.”

“I’ll remember that,” said Tommy, “though I won’t give him time to gloat. Well, is everybody satisfied now?”

Kantor said he thought the act should go over well. He tidied away the stage props, picked up the wreck of the wastepaper basket, saluted smartly and went out grinning.

“I can’t thank you and your man enough for your good offices,” said Hambledon to Mulder. “Please tell him so from me. You couldn’t have been

more helpful if it had been your own escape we were planning.”

“Sir,” said Mulder, “I have spent thirty-five years of my life preventing, as the Governor has said, prisoners from escaping. I cannot tell the Herr what a delightful change it is to do something different for once.”

“But we must not let it become a habit, Mulder,” laughed the Governor.

“No, sir, indeed not. Shall I make the arrangements for the passages to be empty at the time? It is only the length of the corridor and the short passage to the side door.”

“Please. Oh, and make up a bunch of keys to include the side-door key. It is bigger than the others,” he added to Hambleton.

“Certainly, sir,” said Mulder.

“And come back yourself when I ring for the prisoner to be returned to his cell.”

“Very good, sir,” said Mulder, and went out of the room.

“Let me refill your glass,” said the Governor. “A little restorative after your exertions. Now, tell me what else I can do to help you.”

“There is only one thing,” said Hambleton. “I have an unimportant report to make and if I tell the story to the Major here in short words and simple sentences he may remember enough of it to keep my employers quiet for a time. If you have an unoccupied cell to which we could retire——”

“You will stay here,” said the Governor, “for it is quite true that this is the time when I walk round my little kingdom to see that all is well for the night. Believe me, I was going to ask you to excuse me for a quarter of an hour. I will return when I have done my rounds. The whisky is on the table,” he said, walking towards the door, “help yourselves.” He nodded kindly and went out.

“Good chap, that,” said Hambleton.

“One of the best,” said the Major. “Now tell me all about it.”

Hambleton told him in full but rapid detail how he had gone to Bereghark only to find that the boy Kaspar had been sent away to Poltava in the Ukraine. “So I am going after him, it seems the only thing to do. I left poor old Granger, the boy’s tutor, in Bereghark for the present, but if I do get the boy away the old chap should be got out if possible. I’ve got these Hugo Britz papers to go on with.”

“With regard to Hugo Britz,” said the Major, “as soon as I heard that a man of that name was claiming to be one of us, I picked his dossier out of

the files and brought it along. He was in the Berlin branch of the Communist Party and his immediate boss was one Franz Twedt. Remember him?"

"Not at the moment."

"You may not have met him. I knew him though he wasn't aware of me. An elderly respectable workman, the kind who'd be a trade-union man at home. He was killed in a bombing raid in Berlin at the very last, at least they think so, they never found the bits. Franz Twedt," said the Major, spelling the surname, and Hambledon repeated it. "Britz's two buddies were men named Ludwig Rubin and Johann Ultsch. They lived together at one time in a hole in the ruins."

"I remember Rubin," said Hambledon, "quite well. Tall red-haired feller with a bashed nose and a limp. He got the limp in the war."

"That's right. Ultsch is a Swiss by birth, German by adoption. Man in the twenties. Mad on fishing."

"Where is he now?"

"In the jug at Wiesbaden for black-marketeering. He won't worry you for a couple of years. Here's your Party card, you'd better memorize the number and date. Of course the authorities have taken it from you."

Hambledon stared at the number and muttered it repeatedly.

"Other friends were Rethmann, Melcher, Nyberg, Gottal——"

"Stop," said Hambledon. "Not too many. That'll do."

"I hope you won't meet anyone who knows Britz personally," said the Major.

"It's not very likely after I leave Berlin, he was a German Communist, you know. If I do I shall just say, 'So what? Of course I've got Britz's papers.' With the reputation for violence which I hope shortly to earn I trust that people will think twice before they cross-question me. Anyway, the risk has got to be taken."

The Major nodded. "We haven't got anybody at Poltava," he said.

"Can't be helped. I doubt if I'll get a word through to you till I come back myself complete, I hope, with the boy Kaspar, and if he gives me any trouble I'll clout him, King or no King. Well, here's luck, George."

"All the best, Tommy."

The Governor returned to be thanked with the utmost sincerity and all the personal charm which Hambledon could so well exercise when he chose. "I hope to come back here someday before long," he said, "and then perhaps I'll be able to tell you, my dear Zellerhoff, what you have done tonight. I

can't tell you now but someday, if I come back, I will." He took his leave of the Governor, shook hands with the Major, and went back to his cell under Mulder's personal escort.

"The way to the outer door is here," said the Head Warder in a whisper. "Through this door. You see, it looks like a cell door but there is no number on it." He opened it a little way. "There is only a passage inside, you see, and at the end of the passage is the outer door." He closed the door again. "It is not locked, as you see. There is your cell, seven doors further on on the same side. All right? Good. Now, how soon will the fun start? Kantor is ready."

"Not for half an hour at least, probably longer. They have to leave a car outside for me and give some orders."

Mulder nodded. "Whenever you ring, we are ready."

"Don't come too soon," said Hambledon anxiously. "Keep me waiting."

"Let not the Herr be anxious. It shall all be done according to rule. Here we are." Mulder unlocked the cell door and gave Hambledon a rough push. "Get inside, you," he snarled, and slammed the door.

Gerardov, who was lying on his bed, sat up and said that the Comrade had been kept a long time. "Did they hurt you much?"

At that moment the cell light went out but there was a faint glimmer through the high barred window from a street lamp outside. Hambledon felt his way across to his bed and sat down on it.

"I wasn't interrogated all the time," he said. "I had to wait a long while before I was called in. There was a bit of a roughhouse," he added truthfully, "but it didn't amount to much. A man has to be tough in these days. How did you get on?"

"I haven't been interrogated yet," as Hambledon already knew. "I had only been here about an hour before you came in. Later, perhaps, they will come for me. Sometime in the small hours. It is more difficult to retain one's poise in the small hours, the vitality is at its lowest. These brutes know that."

"From what I saw," said Hambledon, "the enquiry has closed for the night. I was the last and when I came away the Governor was preparing to go home."

"What? They do not go on all night? What slackness, what incompetence! It is typical of the decadent bourgeois so-called democracies, is it not? They do not even know how to interrogate prisoners. Now, in the Soviet Union, we study psychology. We——"

“I noticed several interesting things while I was on my way back,” said Hambleton. “The day shift, when the warders go about in pairs, went off duty and the night shift, who work singly, came on. You saw it yourself, didn’t you? Two men took me away, one man brought me back.”

“I suppose they are shorthanded,” said Gerardov indifferently. “In the Soviet Union we manage better.”

“We are two men in here,” said Hambleton pointedly, “and I said just now that at night the warders go about singly.”

Gerardov sat up. “You have something in your mind?”

“As a rule, yes,” said Tommy acidly. “That is what a mind is for, is it not?”

The Russian apologized. “I meant, of course, in connection with the warder.”

“So did I. There is a bell in this room somewhere. I propose to ring it and keep on ringing until the warder comes. Then we will knock him down, take his keys and walk out. You said you were anxious to get back quickly, did you not?”

“But—but he won’t come in. He will switch on the cell light from outside, uncover the grille in the door and speak to us through that.”

Hambleton sighed impatiently. “He will not only speak, he will also see and hear. What will he see and hear? I will tell you. He will see you rolling about on your bed holding your stomach and hear you groaning with agony. He will also hear me demanding medical assistance.”

“Then, if he is a merciful man—which I doubt—he will go and fetch the doctor.”

“What? Without finding out first whether the complaint is real?”

“He will probably tell us to stop that noise and wait till the morning.”

“All right,” said Hambleton, flinging himself back with such force that the bed shook, “if you don’t want to get out, stop here and rot. You are going to be interrogated in the morning and I hope it keeps fine for you.”

There was a short pause.

“What, exactly, did you want me to do?” asked Gerardov nervously.

“Merely to lie on your bed and groan. Like this,” said Tommy, and produced some very lamentable noises.

“I think I could do that,” said the Russian, and tried to imitate him.

“More desperate, not so cowl-like. You merely sound as though you want milking. Try again.”

Gerardov did so.

“That’s better. Draw in your breath with the throat open, like this. Aah-ugg! Try that.”

The Russian did so and wound up with a fit of coughing. “It rasps the throat,” he explained.

“Of course it does. Now whimper a bit. You must have heard people whimper. Yes, that’s quite good, you evidently have. Now mix the noises artistically,” said Hambleton, who began to feel as though rehearsals had gone on for hours. Gerardov began to enter into the spirit of the thing and Mulder, who was listening outside the door, smiled to himself and went softly away to tell Kantor that it wouldn’t be long now.

“You can roll about in agony, holding your stomach, can’t you, or do you want to practise that?” Now that Hambleton’s eyes had become used to the dim light he could watch the Russian’s movements. “No, don’t kick. People with stomach-ache don’t kick, it jerks the stomach muscles. Draw your knees up, hunch yourself, and roll from side to side. That’s better.”

“I am really becoming distressed with all the exertion.”

“All the better. You ought to be in a cold sweat. Put your face and hands under the tap. Don’t dry them, just shake the water off. Now I’m going to ring the bell, it will be some time before it is answered if I know prisons. Where’s the bell—here it is by the door. Lie down and get ready to groan and go on doing it all the time. Keep it up while he’s talking, go on when he comes in and don’t stop till I tell you. Leave the man to me. Understand?”

“Yes,” said Gerardov meekly. “Shall I start now?”

Tommy Hambleton put his thumb on the bell push and kept it there.

5

KANTOR answered the bell eventually but he was so long about it that Gerardov’s groans had acquired an undercurrent of painful exhaustion which was really quite moving. The warder switched on the cell light, pushed back the shutter over the grille in the door and put his face against it.

“What’s the matter here?” he asked roughly. “Bad dreams?”

“I demand a doctor,” said Hambledon urgently. “This man is dangerously ill. I think he has taken poison.”

“The doctor isn’t here. He’ll come in the morning. Give the prisoner a drink of water and then slap his back.”

“I’ve tried that and it only makes him worse. I’ve tried everything I can think of. You must do something.”

Gerardov produced a noise so unearthly that it startled even Hambledon, it sounded like a banshee down a well. He followed it up by wailing that he was dying, his entrails were on fire.

“He certainly does sound bad,” said the warder hesitantly and Hambledon followed this up by appealing passionately to their common humanity. He was kneeling by the Russian’s bed holding him up. “Try to be sick,” he crooned, “try to be sick.”

Kantor’s face disappeared as though someone had snatched it away, there came the sound of a key being fitted in the lock and Hambledon whispered to Gerardov to keep it up, keep it up. “You’re terribly good.”

The door opened and Kantor appeared, scowling. His face was red; Gerardov took it to be a sign of anger but it might equally well have been due to suppressed laughter.

“Now then,” he said sharply. “I suppose I must see to you myself and if you’re shamming I’ll give you something to howl for. You,” to Hambledon, “get back in that corner and if you move a finger you’ll spend the next week in chains. Get back!”

Kantor stood in the doorway until Hambledon had detached himself from Gerardov, who clung to him and implored somebody to tell his wife he died faithful to her. Hambledon backed hastily away and Kantor came in. He took the Russian’s wrist, held it professionally and said: “Ha. Sweating.” He then took his eyes off Tommy and bent over the Russian, apparently to unbutton his shirt, though what this could be for was not clear since warders do not carry stethoscopes as part of their equipment. Hambledon sprang at him, Kantor turned swiftly and they struggled violently together.

At this point Gerardov introduced an unrehearsed episode into the act. He leaped from his bed, flung his arm round Kantor’s neck from behind and kicked him hard on the ankle. This was too much; the warder had been told to be tender with Hambledon but he had had no instructions about the Russian. He shook off Tommy and Gerardov in one movement, turned, and hit the Russian on the ear with all his strength. This blow is shattering when

properly delivered; it makes the head sing, the eyes are dazzled and the brain is stupefied. Gerardov went back, hitting the other side of his unfortunate head against the wall, and slid down upon his bed little more than half conscious.

Hambledon seized the opportunity to attack Kantor again and this time the warder gave way. He fell heavily upon Gerardov with Tommy on top of him and the weight of three men was too much for the bed, which collapsed with splintering sounds. The protagonists picked themselves up and went on with the battle, leaving Gerardov among the ruins holding his stomach and making crowing noises, for he had been effectively winded. It was as in a dream that he heard thumps and grunts which made him shudder, for if these two men were giving each other such blows as he had just received, what horrifying toughs they must be.

The noises died down, there came a drumming sound as of heels beating upon a floor, and then silence. Gerardov opened his eyes to find Hambledon standing over him dabbing a bleeding knuckle which had come into contact with the edge of the table. Hambledon was laughing silently and the Russian shrank away from him. Such men were not human.

“Come on, get up,” said Tommy. “We’d better get out quickly.”

“What—what’s happened?”

“Only that they’ll say I’ve committed a third murder. Come on, I’ve got the keys.”

He jangled them as he spoke and Gerardov struggled to his feet. It was all true; there, within a yard of him, was the body of the strong young warder flung face downwards on the floor like a discarded rag doll.

“You are a prince among men,” said Gerardov passionately.

“What an odd expression,” said Tommy crisply, “there are no princes in the Soviet Union, are there? Can you walk?”

He pushed Gerardov out into the corridor, locked the cell door behind them and switched off the light. He led the way along the corridor with slow and measured stride, jangling the keys. “A familiar sound,” he explained to Gerardov, shambling unsteadily behind, “everyone knows who’s about when they hear keys jangling. You’ll feel better when you are out in the fresh air.”

They went through the door without a number and down the short passage to a small but heavy door in the outer wall of the prison. Hambledon left the keys hanging in the lock inside; he had no wish to give trouble by taking their keys away and Gerardov was past noticing details like that.

“Now,” said Hambleton, taking him by the arm, “step out. We’re not going to walk far; if I can find an unoccupied car we’ll just take it and drive _____”

He broke off in the middle of the sentence for there was a man standing by a lamppost who bore the unmistakable stamp of a plain-clothes detective and he must have seen them come out. Tommy told himself that orders had been given that they were not to be stopped; that is to say, that the jeep was not to be stopped, but they had met this man before they reached the jeep and he looked as though he had every intention of stopping them, by force if necessary.

“Halt!” said the detective sharply. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Gerardov obeyed at once, but Hambleton curved one hand round his ear, walked humbly up to the man and said: “I beg your pardon, what did you say? I am nearly stone-deaf.”

“I said,” began the detective, but Tommy uppercut him, hitting in real earnest this time. The detective’s head went up and he fell with a heavy thud on his back across the gutter. Somewhere behind them there came the whine of a self-starter.

“Come on,” said Tommy desperately, dragging Gerardov along, “run, you fool, run! They’re after us!”

There was a jeep standing only a few yards ahead and there was nobody in it. Hambleton leapt into it, started the engine and began to move off as the Russian fell into the seat beside him. Behind them, thirty yards back along the road, the police patrol car also started and the undulating wail of the police siren came to their ears.

The patrol car had had trouble with its wireless and had consequently missed the Major’s orders. It had pulled up in the quiet street beside the prison in order that the wireless operator should decide whether the fault was one he could rectify himself or whether they must go off patrol and report it; the unlucky detective had merely got out to stretch his legs. The patrol in the car saw him speak to someone and immediately fall in the road, he was still lying there under the lamp when they swept past in pursuit of the jeep.

Hambleton naturally assumed that when the police saw the jeep’s number they would drop back and let him go, but they did not. Even when they must have been able to see it easily they still came on, overhauling him

and sounding that infernal siren. Evidently something had gone wrong and if these people caught him the game was up, after all that trouble——

He put his foot down hard on the accelerator.

Hambledon was a good driver, even a very good one, but he had not handled a jeep before. When he took a sharp turn at speed the two inside wheels came up and Gerardov clung to the door handle. Left, right and right again, round a square and out of it through an archway which still stood up although the hotel above it was in ruins, down a short street across an intersection where the Constable on point duty peered at his number plate and waved him on. By this time the police car was only fifteen yards behind but the Constable grasped the situation at once, for Hambledon looked in the driving mirror and saw him stop the patrol car and rush across to talk to the driver. Matters having been suitably arranged at last, Hambledon prepared to enjoy himself. He knew Berlin, for he had spent some time there before going to Bereghark. Gerardov wanted some fresh air and he should have it.

They spun round corners down narrow streets with dangerous-looking ruins staggering above their heads. There was a deep hollow where a canal had been partially filled in with rubble and bulldozers had blazed a way; they ducked down into this, skidded right round on the muddy bottom and came up again the way they had gone in. Tommy looked at Gerardov and slowed down suddenly.

“What’s the matter?” asked the Russian.

“Nothing, now. We have thrown off the pursuit. We can now drive more quietly towards the Soviet Zone. I thought you didn’t look well.”

“I don’t feel well.”

“Let us talk about something interesting, that will distract your mind,” said Tommy kindly, and began to drive faster and faster as though unaware of what he was doing. “In your enlightened system of factory management, of course the workers have a large share in—there’s a Military Policeman, we’d better avoid him.” They did, on two wheels round a lorry, mounting the pavement and missing a shop front by inches. “I was saying, the workers have a large share in factory management, no doubt, do tell me how it is arranged. Please, I am most interested.”

“Meetings,” said Gerardov between his teeth. “Oh, I thought you hadn’t seen that lamppost.”

“Meetings, no doubt. With an elected Chairman, or is he appointed and, if so, by whom?” Tommy swung suddenly into a side turning which had a broad dotted white line across it and ignored some shouting which arose

behind him. “What I particularly want to know is how your social system—some more people shouting, what’s the matter with them?—has solved the problem of selecting the leaders——”

Several shots were fired by some men with rifles and one of them hit the near wing with a clang which even Hambledon felt he could not ignore. He applied the brakes and the jeep slithered to a stop in a quiet, ill-lighted square.

The soldiers who had fired came running, and Hambledon saw—as he expected—that they wore Russian uniforms.

“We are in the Soviet Sector,” he cried triumphantly, and flung his arms round Gerardov. “We are free!”

“You are both under arrest,” said the officer in charge of the party. “Men, drag these fellows out and——”

But Gerardov was at home now and once more a person of importance and authority. He got out of the jeep and addressed the officer with a fluency of malediction which astonished Hambledon. His meek prisoner had become a tiger. It was the High-Secretariat-of-the-Politburo-member Feodor Gerardov whom the illiterate numskull of a soldier had dared to fire upon, and if the soldier did not want to lie in a dishonoured grave while all his relations finished their beastly lives in the salt mines he would be a very great deal more careful in future. Hambledon missed a good deal of the address because Gerardov’s Russian went too fast for him to keep up with it, but that was the general gist of his remarks. Hambledon expected a real comrade-to-comrade argument to start, but discipline is much more strict in the Soviet Army than would be tolerated in more democratic countries. The soldier merely stood to attention till Gerardov had finished and then saluted smartly and withdrew. Silence fell upon the empty ill-lighted square.

“You are my rescuer and preserver,” began Gerardov, tenderly rubbing his damaged ear, which still hurt him, “to you I owe my life, my liberty _____”

“And the pursuit of happiness,” concluded Hambledon.

“Now we will drive to my hotel.”

They did so, there were few formalities for the honoured guest of such as Feodor Gerardov, and Hambledon was glad to have supper and retire to bed. It seemed a very long time indeed since he had driven away from Bereghark with the late Commissar Ordzinov early that morning; the moment Tommy’s head was upon the pillow he fell asleep.

The hotel had been a good one once, but the Russian Army is contemptuous of gracious living. It was a little as though the Savoy had been taken over by a factory canteen committee. Hambledon naturally made no comment, and when he saw in the restaurant a waiter whom he had known there in better days, he avoided the man. The sooner he was out of Berlin the better; at any moment somebody might come in who had known the late Hugo Britz, and though he was confident of being able to talk himself out of any such situation, it would be better still if no such situation arose.

Gerardov appeared to be busy that first day and Tommy saw little of him until the evening when the Russian came in smiling and saying that the man whom he had to meet had returned from the British Sector and that another hour or so in the morning would complete that business.

“And what do you do then?”

“I go back to Moscow by the evening train, for such are my instructions,” said Gerardov. “My mission is completed within the specified time and all is well, thanks entirely to you. I shall be deeply in your debt for the rest of my life. Let me know, please, what I can do for you. Not in return, for, until I have the felicity of saving your life under conditions of unspeakable horror, that will be impossible. I hope merely to be able to restore in some measure my own self-respect.”

Hambledon waited, with a suitably modest expression, for the flood to turn and then said that he had been thinking over his affairs during the day and that two courses of action appeared to him desirable. One was to have a new set of identity papers and the other was to leave Berlin at the earliest possible moment.

“You and I,” he said, waving his cigar gracefully, “men of the world, men of action, fighters in the Cause of Freedom, know how to estimate at their true microscopic value the lives of any who seek to impede the March of Communism. But I must face the fact that in the eyes of the British authorities I have—shall we say—caused the deaths of three people, for murder I will not call it. It is better to face a fact than a firing party. I know that I am safe in the Soviet Sector but, my dear Comrade Gerardov, I am still in Berlin and some accident might happen. I might be decoyed across the dividing line. There is, for example, a blonde in the British Sector——”

Gerardov broke in with genuine horror to say that surely no girl was worth endangering the life of——

“Oh, I agree. In cold blood and with a calm mind, I agree. But I am a martyr to boredom, Comrade, to me it is a slow torture, and if I were to sit here doing nothing in particular for days on end there is no knowing what

folly I might not commit. I am a man of action, Comrade,” said Hambleton, uncoiling suddenly like a spring and banging the table so that Gerardov started back, “I cannot vegetate. Help me to leave Berlin, I beg.”

“Certainly, certainly. Nothing can be easier. Will you not come with me to Moscow, where I can introduce you to powerful friends?”

This was a reasonable suggestion, but there was an undertone of nervousness in Gerardov’s voice which suggested that he did not want the invitation accepted. Tommy gathered quite correctly that Gerardov was not a person of nearly so much importance in Moscow as he made himself out to be. Besides, Hambleton did not want to go there.

“Someday,” he said, “I will remind you of that invitation and come to Moscow, it will be a merry meeting, will it not? But, at the moment, let me spend a few months studying at first hand your remarkable economic system so that I may not come as a raw outsider knowing nothing. Will you? I speak frankly. I would like a post in a factory somewhere for a time, I desire greatly to work in a Soviet factory.” He stopped and smiled faintly in an embarrassed manner. “I don’t mean to say that I burn for heavy mechanical labour. I have had some experience of administration and——”

“Of course not. You, labouring at a workbench! What an idea! Besides, it is quite unnecessary. We have plenty of labour. What we do need is a larger number of men of suitable capacity and education for administrative posts. Inspectors, co-ordinators, organizers, men who can iron out kinks in the chain of industrial production. I will speak to a friend of mine and it will be all settled.”

Hambleton paused to admire the picture of ironing out kinks in chains.

“Do you know Poltava in the Ukraine?” he asked.

“I know of it, of course. I have never been there.”

“There is a ‘gymnasium’ there for the education of promising boys to posts of leadership——”

“There is,” said Gerardov, nodding eagerly, “there is. It is a good school, some of my friends have sons there. Did you, then, think of applying for a mastership?”

Hambleton hesitated, but only momentarily. The idea was attractive at first sight but no doubt he would be expected to live in under fairly strict discipline, he would be much freer outside. Besides, he had been a schoolmaster once and did not intend to resume that career. Life in a Soviet school would be really hard work.

“What,” he said, “with my inadequate smattering of your language? ‘If you please’ and ‘thank you’ and ‘may I have a glass of tea,’ that is the extent of it. Your bright boys would laugh at me, and quite rightly. No, I was about to say that I have an orphaned nephew there, my dead sister’s child. I am not married, Comrade Gerardov, I have no son to keep me young. This boy is a young imp by what I hear, I haven’t seen him since he was learning to walk, but he is all I have. I ought to see something of him, I owe it to Marya’s memory.” His voice softened.

“Most creditable,” murmured Gerardov. “Most conscientious.”

“Besides,” said Hambledon, cheering up, “he needs a sound parental influence. The school is all that could be desired, I know, but the fatherly talking-to, the occasional clout on the head, you know!” He laughed heartily. “We had it in our day, didn’t we?”

“Certainly,” said Gerardov, who was at the moment being actively sorry for any small boy who might be spanked by this lion of a man. “Certainly, but one has to be sure one knows one’s own strength, doesn’t one? It would not do to, as it were, damage the child.”

Hambledon stared for a moment and broke into a laugh of genuine amusement. “I wouldn’t hurt him for anything,” he said; dropped his voice and added: “I could not, when he looks at me with Marya’s eyes.”

Russians are basically sentimental about obvious things like the family, children, flowers and the beloved dead. Gerardov was so moved that tears rose in his eyes and Hambledon hurried on.

“What I would really like is a post in a factory in the same town if possible. Then I can go and call on his housemaster and perhaps take the boy out sometimes, eh?”

Gerardov wiped his eyes with his handkerchief and said that he did not know of any actual factories in Poltava. “It is an almost exclusively agricultural district, you know. But there is a large establishment there for the assembly of agricultural machinery of which the component parts are manufactured elsewhere. I was reading an article about it in *Pravda* not long ago.”

“Nothing could be better. I have, quite recently, been in touch with the latest developments in agricultural machinery,” said Tommy, thinking of his tour of the Bereghark Collectivized Farm Machinery Factory.

“Splendid. Splendid. Leave it to me. Tomorrow I will speak to some friends who will advise me what to do.”

“And the papers,” urged Hambledon. “New identity papers.”

“Ah, yes. That will be more difficult,” said Gerardov. “In Russia, we do not permit the use of pseudonyms or the changing of names. It makes for confusion.”

“Quite right. It does,” said Hambleton, thinking of Stalin, whose name is Josef Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili. “But that, surely, is why one does it, is it not?”

6

GERARDOV returned to the hotel at midday next day, beaming happily and saying that he had had an idea, an inspiration. Hambleton, already assuming the onset of boredom, barely looked up.

“Glad to hear it. What is it?”

“When I had finished my business I went to the station to book a place in tonight’s train to Moscow, but it is already full, so I can’t travel till tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

“But I have a great friend, a friend from childhood’s days, Andrei Varkin. We went to school together, we played together, roamed the woods
_____”

“Hunted the neighbours’ cats.”

“Experienced the onset of manhood together——”

“And together courted the innkeeper’s daughter.”

“How did you know? We joined the Party on the same day and rose in it together. We both did well but he even better than I, for now he is very high advanced in the M.V.D. At the moment he is at Amberg on the Oder, just this side of Frankfurt, conducting an important enquiry into a case of sabotage. It is only forty miles or so from here, we will obtain a car this afternoon and drive there. I will introduce you to him, he is the man to issue your fresh papers. That is a matter for the M.V.D. alone.”

Tommy thought it time to take a languid interest in the story. He threw down the Russian paper he had been trying to read and gave Gerardov some attention.

“He is the man to appoint you to the assembly works at Poltava. The train from Berlin to Moscow stops at Amberg, I will travel by it tomorrow evening.”

“It all sounds quite a good idea,” said Tommy approvingly. “I will go and throw my new shirts and my new toothbrush into my new suitcase”—for as a friend of Gerardov’s he had been privileged to buy at the state stores—“and we can start whenever you like.”

“Ten minutes to pack my few rags,” said Gerardov, who was in fact quite smartly dressed for a Russian, “and we will go. I will now order a car. Shall we take food and eat as we go? The sooner we are in the good company of Andrei Varkin the happier I shall be.”

Amberg turned out to be a horrible modern town whose houses were either ferro-concrete blocks of flats for the “indispensables” and departmental managers, or rows of depressing mud huts half below ground for the workers. Hambledon, who had an eye for good architecture when he had time to look at it, was heartily repelled, but did not say so.

“One of the Soviet’s more recent creations, evidently,” he said, nodding approvingly. “An interesting specimen of town planning.”

“Only think,” said Gerardov, “ten years ago there was nothing here but marsh. Today the great factories you see on the extreme left are turning out machine tools for us at a most unbelievable rate. Driver! Ask that man where is the office of the M.V.D.”

The driver stopped an elderly man who was plodding down the road with a sack on his back. The man gave directions clearly and civilly but without a smile; when the car moved on Hambledon, looking in the driving mirror, saw him turn and look after them and ceremonially spit upon the ground.

“Rash,” said Tommy to himself, “very rash. Someone ought to tell him about driving mirrors. Suppose,” he went on aloud, “suppose your friend Andrei Varkin is too busy at the moment to receive us? It is, after all, only seventeen hours by my watch.”

“And by mine. I also have a watch though it is true that it does not always go. If Andrei Varkin is still engaged in hearing evidence, we will wait. We have all the night before us and all tomorrow. What a pleasant sensation it is, not to have to hurry.”

But Andrei Varkin was coming out of his office door as the car drove up. Feodor Gerardov leapt out of it, calling his friend’s name, and the two old comrades fell into each other’s arms, embracing with little cries of joy while

the M.V.D. guards looked on with wooden faces and such of the townspeople as were passing by averted their eyes. Hambledon waited with an expression of polite sympathy until his turn came to be introduced to Varkin.

“This,” said Gerardov, with one arm round Varkin’s neck, and the other round Hambledon’s shoulders, “is a man after your own heart. Comrade Hugo Britz, my old comrade Andrei Varkin.” He hugged them both so enthusiastically that he almost bumped their heads together and Tommy wished that someone had told him whether or not Russian men kissed each other on both cheeks when first introduced. However, Varkin merely clasped Hambledon’s hand in both his own and bade him welcome in the name of an old friendship and the promise of a new one.

“Let us all go to my flat,” he said. “We will spend the evening together renewing old ties and making new ones. Does the Comrade Hugo Britz speak Russian? Never mind, we will talk German, the language of science and philosophy. You must learn Russian, Comrade Britz; it is the language of poetry, the language the flowers speak when they talk to each other. Did I say we will spend the evening together? We will make a night of it. Driver! Straight on and turn left when I tell you.”

Andrei Varkin was a tall well-built man and, so far as form and features were concerned, would be considered handsome in any company, but he had an oddly white face which contrasted sharply with his black hair, eyebrows, and thin moustache. If Hambledon had been in a position to choose his company he would not have chosen Varkin, but under the circumstances he had no choice and prepared willingly to spend the evening making himself agreeable. This was not difficult; both the Russians were charming to him, a little over-effusive by Western standards but that was only natural. Gerardov, who apparently had no secrets from Varkin, told him all about the unlucky trip into the British Sector which had ended in jail and gave a highly coloured account of Hambledon’s method of getting him out.

“He is a lion, this Comrade Britz, a real tiger. He strangles a warder as easily as a woman wrings out a wet towel, he strolls down the prison corridor jangling the keys with me tottering behind, one would think him the Governor at least. He opens the door, we reach the street and come face to face with a plain-clothes policeman who had seen us come out! My dear Varkin, I saw death sitting on the end of my nose, but biff! he knocks the fellow down, steals a car—a jeep—and drives through the streets of Berlin on two wheels mainly, like a trick cyclist on a bicycle. Whenever I have too indigestible a supper, I shall dream of that drive.”

“Well, we didn’t hit anything, did we?” laughed Hambledon.

“The only thing that puzzles me a little is how you knew where to find that outer door. I was in a dazed condition at the time but I am sure you did not hesitate.”

Hambledon laughed again. “I did not tell you before and, indeed, it is of no importance, but it was not the first time I had been in that prison. Oh, nothing serious, merely a breach of regulations.”

“A thing which might happen to anyone,” said Varkin cheerfully. “These regulations! I do not speak of our own, of course, they are sensible and well considered, I refer to the regulations in the Western so-called democracies. There was an article in *Izvestia* about them recently.”

The dinner had been excellent and the vodka plentiful. Hambledon liked vodka and had a head as hard as a millstone, but as the late hours wore on and little gaps in the conversation began to recur he thought he might without rudeness suggest retiring to bed. “I have had a long day,” he said, “and seen many interesting things. Your good vodka and your sparkling company conspire to overwhelm me. If you will permit me to excuse myself—I have still to find an hotel——”

“My dear Comrade Britz,” said Varkin, rising, “heaven forbid that we should fatigue our guests——”

“Heavens, what an idea! It is not you——”

Varkin patted his back and threw a friendly arm round his shoulders.

“No, no. I did not mean that at all. You are tired, let me show you to your room. You—and Feodor, of course—are staying with me.”

“But,” protested Hambledon, “I could not presume——”

“Don’t talk nonsense, my dear Britz. The hotel here is for the workers only, it is not of a fit standard for the administrative grades. Besides, there is nothing to thank me for. There are suites of rooms in this building which have been taken over for my Commission of Enquiry and they are available for the guests of the Soviet, the honoured guests such as you, Comrade, to whom my old friend Feodor owes so much.”

“Assure me, at least, that I am not disturbing you and Comrade Gerardov in your reunion.”

“Certainly you are not. We shall drink another glass or two and talk of old days and old friends at home before we retire. Let me show you the way—permit me——”

When Hambleton had been conducted to his room with affectionate courtesy, the two old friends returned to the sitting room and refilled their glasses.

“Well, Feodor? Do you really mean to tell me that that dramatic escape story of yours is all true?”

“On my honour, Andrei Varkin. This man is a find. He is resourceful and brave and, above all, a good Communist. By the way, his Party membership card and identity papers were of course taken from him in prison, he wants some new ones.”

Varkin nodded. “He told me his Party number without a moment’s hesitation when I asked him and I made a note of it. He is Western Division, of course. I will put a call through to Berlin tomorrow to get the details confirmed.”

“I brought him to you because I thought he might be useful in an emergency, Comrade. We must consider our careers. One never knows when one may need a man like that. Such initiative! Such lightning decisions! Such courage and strength!”

Varkin nodded at each point. “You are right, Comrade, and you were wise to bring him here. He will do what he is told, you think, in return for a few small services?”

Gerardov hitched his chair nearer the table. “There is more in it than that. He is a murderer, three times a murderer, and the British Sector Police want him very badly.”

“Oh-ho! Indeed. So we have a strangle hold on Comrade Britz, have we? ‘Do what you’re told or we hand you back,’ eh? Good, very good. What does he want?”

“New papers. He did not actually say so, but I think he wants Soviet citizenship, he is a German, of course. Also, he wants a job at that agricultural machinery assembly plant at Poltava, he has a young nephew at the school there, his dead sister’s child. He wants to be near the boy, he has no son of his own.”

“It is natural,” said Varkin unaffectedly. “Because a man is violent and cunning and clever, it does not mean that he has no natural feelings. I was impressed by him tonight, he was frank and simple, he was not showing off.”

“If we are so impressed, others who meet him will be so too, Comrade. But he has his faults. He is violent-tempered, he flares up and then there is trouble. You will get that from his records, I also made a few enquiries. He

is easily bored and then becomes rash and irresponsible. My dear Andrei, I had the utmost difficulty in persuading him not to slip back into the British Sector to see a girl he knows, just because we had two days in our sector before we came away and he was bored. Of course, he could not talk to anyone very much, his Russian is not good enough to converse in, he can ask for what he wants and that's about all."

"I noticed that myself," said Varkin. "Doubtless he will soon pick up some more when he hears Russian spoken all round him. I will look after him, Feodor Gerardov. I will give him papers making him answerable only to me so that if he gets into trouble I shall be informed of it. He shall go to Poltava certainly, that is simple. Thus, we shall have him under our hands when we want him."

"And if he turns awkward——"

"We can put the screws on. Simple."

In the meantime the body of the Commissar Ordzinov still lay in the military post on the Berlin road from Bereghark where Hambledon and Denton had left it. When their car drove away the Sergeant and his three men carried it inside the door and put it down hurriedly, for it was heavy. It sprawled on the floor and they stood round and looked at it.

"This is a bad business," said the Sergeant. "You, Private Ivan Pakhol, you shot him so no doubt you will be shot yourself. The rest of you will be sent to the salt mines and I shall be degraded to the ranks."

Private Pakhol said that it was a hard fate to be shot because nobody had remembered to tell him about the little flag on the bonnet.

The Corporal said that the whole business was undoubtedly deplorable but as it was nearly dinnertime and this was the room in which they ate, would it not be a good idea to remove the dead hero elsewhere?

Private Pakhol said that if they were all going to be shot so soon, was it worth while bothering about dinner?

"You only say that," roared the Sergeant, "because it is your turn for kitchen duty today. Besides, we are not all going to be shot, only you. Go and fetch the stretcher, we will convey him reverently to the washhouse."

Private Pakhol grinned sheepishly and brought the stretcher. The buildings which housed the road post had originally been a small farm with the cottage facing the road and cowsheds, pigsties and a stable behind. The washhouse was also behind, a fairly big shed with two laundry tubs with holes in them still propped against the wall, a cow-tail pump and a drain

which only accepted water in dry weather. There was also at the far end a long shallow wooden trough for salting bacon; this was not only in good condition but even in use, for there was a side of bacon in it which was in process of being turned every day and having salt rubbed into it. The Russians had found, by falling over it, a strayed pig in the road one night. The Russians got up again but the pig did not.

The four men arranged the body of Ordzinov upon the stretcher in seemingly fashion with the hands crossed upon the breast, carried it out to the washhouse and set it down upon the floor at the opposite end from the pig. They had no sheet to spread over it but they covered it with clean sacks taken from Private Pakhol's bed and the Sergeant gathered a small bunch of wild flowers which he placed between the thick fingers before they stiffened.

"We do not know anything about him," said the Sergeant, "but he——"

"Except that he was a cousin of Our Beloved Father and Comrade, Stalin," said the Corporal.

"But in death all men are equal. I was about to say that perhaps some woman loved him. A mother, perhaps, will weep for him tonight. That is why I gathered these poor flowers."

"They will also, with luck, make a good impression when the relief party comes to arrest us," said the Corporal crisply.

But the day passed and no relief party came, as threatened by Hambledon, from the nearest town to arrest them. The squad were out on road-post duty for a fortnight at a time and they had still ten days to go. The night passed without incident and also the next day.

"He—that other Commissar—was in haste to get to Berlin," said the Corporal. "He did not stop at the next town, he waited to report us until he reached headquarters."

"His name was Peskoff," said the Sergeant. "He had been at Bereghark to inspect the factory there. A lorry driver told me so yesterday. They thought, at the factory, that he was not very well or, perhaps, suffering from some bereavement. He did not find fault with anything. They did not know what to think, he was so quiet and pleasant."

"Indeed?" said the Corporal. "They ought to have seen him here. Perhaps he had, by then, recovered from his bereavement."

"Your tendency to sarcasm will get you into trouble one of these days, Corporal."

“I am in enough trouble already on account of Comrade Commissar Ordzinov in the washhouse,” said the Corporal, for they had seen the name on the identity papers.

“Yes. Talking about the washhouse——”

“I know, I’ve noticed it. We cannot have him tainting the bacon.”

The Sergeant shuddered. “But it will not matter much if we are not here to eat it,” he said mournfully. “It is the hot weather. We were told to keep him reverently.”

“But we were not told what to do about the odour of sanctity.”

The Sergeant looked despairingly at him but the Corporal took no notice.

“We will wait until tomorrow morning and see what happens then,” said the Sergeant, but nothing happened next morning, they were not disturbed.

The Sergeant, about to enter the washhouse, met the Corporal coming out.

“You’ll have to do something about the comrade in there,” he said abruptly.

“I was told to keep him,” said the Sergeant obstinately.

“But he isn’t co-operating. Look here, I’ve got an idea. Let us take the bacon out of the salt trough and put him in instead. If he’s well rubbed with salt twice a day, that ought to help.”

“Who will rub him?” asked the Sergeant with a hand at his chin.

“Pakhol, of course. He shot him.”

Private Pakhol protested, complained, wept and became almost insubordinate.

“Men of the Soviet Army,” roared the Sergeant, “obey orders however distasteful. Go and do it at once, or I will shoot you myself.”

“I think I’d rather be shot,” snivelled Pakhol, “especially if I’m going to be shot anyway, Sergeant.”

The Sergeant drew his revolver in a menacing manner and Pakhol trotted miserably out to the washhouse.

“That was a good idea of yours, Corporal,” said the Sergeant two days later.

“It seems to be working, doesn’t it?” said the Corporal.

“My hands are getting sore with all that coarse salt,” said Private Pakhol. “Can’t somebody else take a turn?”

“You shot him,” said the other Private firmly.

On the following morning a lorry came through from Berlin and the driver, who had known the Sergeant for years, pulled up for a drink and a gossip. After a time, the driver asked if they had seen anything of a Commissar Peskoff who must have passed their post a week earlier. He had been inspecting factories in Bereghark.

The Sergeant and the Corporal exchanged glances.

“We saw a Commissar’s car go by,” said the Corporal quickly, “but of course we didn’t stop him. The pennon, you know.”

The driver nodded.

“He was killed that night,” he said cheerfully. It is always a pleasure to be the first to tell a tragic story.

The Sergeant staggered and the Corporal caught him by the arm.

“What’s the matter?” asked the driver.

“Nothing,” said the Sergeant. “Turned my heel on a stone. What happened to the Commissar?”

“Well, there was a riot going on in Berlin along of the municipal elections, and what with crowds rushing about and that I suppose the Commissar lost his way. It is confusing in Berlin now with all these sectors, you know. Anyway, one of our observers in the British Sector reported seeing the Commissar’s car—they knew it was that one, being a Chrysler—drive into the British Sector just where there was quite a shemozzle going on. The car stopped and two tallish men got out, at least, one was tall, that would be Commissar Ordzinov——”

“What?” said the Sergeant feebly.

“Who’s he?” asked the Corporal in a loud voice, to cover him up.

“Ordzinov. He came with Peskoff from Bereghark, they got it from the Mayor there that the two men went off to Berlin together in the Chrysler. Well, as I was saying, our man saw two men get out of the Chrysler to take cover, no doubt, and just then there was a burst of firing and they both fell. Our man had to run for it but he says he’s no doubt they were both dead.”

“Didn’t they find the bodies?” asked the Corporal, since the Sergeant appeared to have been stricken dumb.

“Oh no. Them British, I expect they just threw the bodies in the canal there. We got the Chrysler back, though,” said the driver, starting his engine and moving his gear lever into first. “Nice car, that. Well, I’ll see you on Thursday, coming back.”

He drove away while the Sergeant and the Corporal returned to the guardroom together and sat down heavily upon chairs.

“Well, that’s all right,” said the Corporal. “Now we can bury him. Tonight, after dark.”

“We can begin the grave at once,” said the Sergeant eagerly. “Out of sight of the road.”

“Pakhol can dig it,” said the Corporal. “He shot him.”

Pakhol said his hands were sore and the other Private nobly offered to lend a hand with the digging, for which Pakhol thanked him sincerely. Then his face brightened.

“There’s one thing,” he said. “We can put the pig back now, can’t we? More natural-like, pigs.”

7

VARKIN put a telephone message through to Berlin asking for all possible details about Britz, Hugo, Party number alleged to be 3774789. He did this very late on the night when Hambledon arrived at Amberg and a muddy despatch rider brought him an answer before noon of the next day. Varkin showed the brief statement to Feodor Gerardov at a time when Hambledon was not in the room.

“It looks all right,” said Varkin. “The Party number is correct and here are two murders, a woman strangled in a cellar and a British soldier shot dead. Britz said that the soldier strangled her and then shot himself, he—Britz—heard the shot and went into the cellar to see what was the matter. Two British Sector Police also heard it and went in to find the soldier in the act of dying and Britz standing over him with a smoking automatic in his hand. He did not wait for them to say anything but broke away from them and got clear. That is two murders. Incidentally, his story does not hold water. He had been seen about with the girl and the soldier had only just arrived in Berlin, that was the evidence at the inquest.”

Gerardov looked a little shocked. “He told me that they were enemies to the Cause of Freedom.”

Varkin laughed. “What did you expect him to say? Incidentally, he did not say what Freedom they opposed, did he? They were opposing his freedom of action, no doubt. I think he is rather witty. Didn’t you say three murders?”

Gerardov nodded. “The third was the prison warder he strangled in my presence.”

“Of course, of course. You told me. Another enemy to the Cause of Freedom—yours and his.” Varkin turned the page, there were two typewritten sheets. “They cannot check his statements about his early life because he was born and brought up—he says—in the Rhineland and our people have no access to official records there. They were probably destroyed anyway. They have got quite a dossier about him since 1945 when he joined the Communist Party in Berlin. There is a list of his associates and some account of their doings. I will examine him on these.”

“After I have gone,” suggested Gerardov. “It will look better. I brought him here as a friend, but your case is different. If you are to give him new papers it is only natural that you should examine his credentials.”

“You’re afraid of him,” said Varkin.

“I believe you’re right, I think I am—a little. Remember, I’ve seen him in action.”

“Never mind, we have clippers for your tiger’s claws. Still, I will leave the examination till after you have gone. As you say, it might be a little embarrassing.”

“You are a good friend, Andrei Varkin,” said Gerardov gratefully.

He left for Moscow on the evening train and on the following morning Varkin invited Hambleton into his room.

“Our good comrade Feodor Gerardov tells me that your papers and your Party card were taken from you at the prison, so naturally you want some new ones.”

“That is so, Comrade Varkin. I can’t go about without anything to show.”

“Of course not. Now, you will forgive me if I ask a few questions, you understand that I am the official responsible for the issue of these things and it is my duty to make sure that people are what they say they are,” said Varkin with a smile which reminded Hambleton of the wolf who interviewed Little Red Riding Hood. “Though in your case it’s a mere formality, we still have to do it. I have to fill up forms about you, you know!”

“Of course. Please ask me anything you like,” said Hambledon, leaning back easily in his chair and blessing the thoughtful foresight of his friend the Major of British Intelligence. This fellow Varkin, he thought, has had plenty of time to telephone Berlin about me and has certainly done it.

“Thank you so much, I was sure you would understand. Party number?”

Hambledon rattled off “Three-seven-seven-four-seven-eight-nine” at such speed that Varkin really did not catch it and had to ask him to repeat it.

“Date when you joined?”

“The—wait a moment—yes. The seventeenth of January 1945.”

“At . . . ?”

“At Berlin. There was a meeting at a small hall place, I’ve forgotten its name. We didn’t generally meet there and it was destroyed soon afterwards.”

This was quite true, and Hambledon had known it at the time. The owner of the hall had let it for quite another purpose, and when he found that the Brotherhood for the Preservation of Individualism was really the Communists he was so angry that he had reported it. He died soon afterwards.

Varkin made a few entries of what he had been told and went on with some more questions. Hambledon began to find some of them a little awkward to answer, so he began to talk himself.

“Conditions were very difficult in Berlin at that time as you can imagine, Comrade Varkin. Unless perhaps you were there yourself?”

Varkin said no, he was engaged upon another part of the front.

“Apart from the bombing, which affected us equally with all the rest of the Berliners, things were not too bad in the early stages of the investment of the city. We Communists were able to make ourselves useful by collecting and passing information to the advancing Soviet armies and generally hampering the German war effort in various ways. But when the battle drew nearer and shelling was added to the bombing, when the crisis became imminent and there was fighting in the streets, any sort of organization became almost impossible. Meetings were out of the question, there was nowhere to hold them. Even arranging to meet one or two men was ludicrously difficult. One could not get to the rendezvous oneself, or one’s friends failed to arrive or the meeting place was blown sky-high at the last moment.” Hambledon laughed shortly. “I remember trying to meet Franz Twedt in a cellar we both knew, I was making my way towards it in short rushes when, just as I came in sight, somebody dropped a bomb on it and ——” Hambledon gestured pieces flying upwards. “Some of the bits fell a

lot too near me to be comforting and one of them was a round thing that rolled. You can guess what it was, of course, poor Franz's head. Quite recognizable too, extraordinary. Well, I just turned round and went home again, and what became of the message he was carrying nobody will ever know. A pity, he was a good Communist and a good comrade. He joined the Party a long time before I did."

One of the items in the dossier upon Hambleton which Varkin had been studying was headed "Associates," and one of the early names was Franz Twedt, "missing believed killed in Berlin April 1945."

"He was a loss," said Varkin gravely. "He was one of the founder members of the Berlin branch."

Hambleton nodded. "An elderly man, very serious. I did not know him so well as I did some of those who joined when I did. We new recruits were always a little in awe of him. My own intimates were Johann Ultsch and Ludwig Rubin, we used to share a"—he paused—"you couldn't call it a room. It was a space under the wide stone stairs of what had been a block of flats and we built up a sort of wall with rubble and found a door to shut it up with. Then somebody stole the door and we had a curtain of sorts instead. Rubin was a tall red-haired fellow with a crooked nose, he'd had it broken in a fight. He limped, half one foot was missing after the battle on the Schiphol airport early in the war. He was killed in a road accident, oh, about two years ago. He used to do our cooking. Johann Ultsch was much younger, he was Swiss by birth naturalized German. When the bombing was bad we used to tell him it was his own fault for being there at all, he ought to be making cuckoo clocks in Zurich. So far as I know he's still alive, I've had no news of him since before Rubin died. Very keen fisherman, one of those fellows who sit by the side of a canal with a pole for hours and hours and never catch anything. We used to call him Peter."

Varkin listened with unwavering attention and then asked if he had ever met a man named Melcher.

"Man with a scarred face," said Hambleton instantly. "Yes, I knew him but not intimately as I did Ludwig and old Peter. You see, things didn't get a lot easier in Berlin when the fighting did stop so far as meeting people was concerned. It's true one no longer got killed at every street corner, but there was still nowhere private to meet and when the Allied Occupation started it was as hard as ever to get about."

Varkin leaned back in his chair and started to fidget with his pencil. Hambleton took the hint.

“I am boring you stiff with my reminiscences,” he said, “and we’ve hardly started on my history as a Party member. Do forgive me. In 1948 I went down to Silesia——”

“I have been so interested in what you were saying that I have forgotten the passage of time,” said Varkin, laughing. “I started out to make sure that you were the real Hugo Britz and here we are, still sitting. You must tell me some more of your adventures some other time, if you will. I shall be most interested. I have put in an application in your name for the post at Poltava, I hope we shall hear soon. I have no doubt that the answer will be favourable.” He got up and Hambledon immediately did the same.

“I have kept you,” he said, “I do apologize——”

“Not at all. I will make out your new papers this evening, I have to go to the office now.”

“Your unmerited kindness,” began Hambledon.

“My dear Comrade Britz! A duty as well as a pleasure.”

Hambledon gathered that he had passed with credits in all subjects and his belief was confirmed when he received his new Party card and identity papers that evening. They were all that the heart could wish, and his personal identity card carried also a few words in Russian signed Andrei Varkin, Commissar, M.V.D. Western Section, and several office stamps. When he went to bed that night he spent some time with a Russian grammar and dictionary making out what the words meant. He had to start by deciphering Russian handwriting, which is like nothing else on earth, but he had had some practise with it in Central America a couple of years earlier. Eventually he made it out.

Indispensable. Assist and protect. Answerable only to the undersigned.

“Well, well,” said Hambledon to himself. “Couldn’t have been better if I’d ordered it.”

“Almost too good to be true,” said himself in reply.

“Oh, quite,” answered Hambledon. “I wouldn’t trust that charming fellow Varkin with a used tram ticket.”

He put his precious papers carefully away and went to bed and to sleep.

Andrei Varkin rang up his friend Feodor Gerardov in Moscow.

“Only wanted to know if you had a comfortable journey. Oh, splendid. Glad to hear it. Yes—yes. So glad. By the way, I had a long talk with our mutual friend this morning. Perfectly satisfactory. Yes, no doubt about it in my mind. What? Yes, of course I will. It is the right man, and I have given

him papers such as many a works director would give his ears for. I shall keep him here for a fortnight or so just to get to know him better. Something to our advantage might slip out, one never knows.”

The days passed, therefore, and the transfer to Poltava seemed to be delayed somewhere. Varkin blamed it upon “office red tape” and Hambledon, whose opinion of governmental red tape was as poor as anybody’s, had to admit even to himself that the excuse might be valid. It was a little difficult to keep on asking about it, it was obvious that a very considerable favour was being shown him and any enquiry must sound as though he were trying to hurry them up. In fact, Varkin said so.

“My dear friend and Comrade, why all this anxiety? The appointment and the permits will arrive in due course. What is the matter? Are you not happy here?”

Hambledon said that he felt he was wasting the Soviet Union’s time.

“Nonsense. I’m sorry I have to be out so much, this enquiry is a serious and complicated matter. You are getting bored, that’s what it is, and no wonder.”

In point of fact, the more Varkin was out the better Hambledon was pleased. Their conversation had an awkward way of harking back to his activities as Britz and here he was on thin ice. He had been in Berlin at the time when the city was being divided into the various sectors; Franz Twedt was already dead but he had met Rubin, who had talked more than he had intended, and Melcher, a man whose face was hideously scarred by a shell fragment. Tommy felt on reasonably secure ground when talking about Berlin in 1945, he probably knew a lot more about it than either Varkin or the compilers of his dossier, but when it came to more recent times Hambledon was lamentably ill informed. The ice was not merely thin, it had large black holes in it.

His face lit up with a brilliant idea.

“I have thought of something really useful,” he said triumphantly. “Perhaps, Comrade Varkin, you would help and advise me.”

“Certainly, anything I can do—what is it?”

“I should like to take Russian lessons. I feel——”

Varkin thoroughly approved. “I think that is a splendid idea. Now, who can we find for a teacher? Someone with a reasonable standard of education and yet with a good deal of spare time.”

“Someone elderly,” suggested Hambledon, “or, since I shall not be here long, someone convalescing after an illness or an accident? A broken leg,

for example, does not impair the faculty of speech.”

“I think you have hit it. I will have enquiries set about, it shouldn’t be difficult to find the right man. I remember, by the way, being told by more than one foreigner learning our language that it was terribly difficult as a study, but that if a good grounding was acquired the rest was best learned by talking to people, anyone, anywhere. You pick it up as you go along, he said, once you have a basis.”

Varkin was both helpful and prompt. He produced a young man who had originally trained as a teacher but who had been drafted into a factory instead. He had had his right arm broken and the hand crushed in a factory accident and was pleased and happy to find something he could do. Sick benefits are not high in the Soviet Union.

Hambledon enjoyed himself. He and his teacher would stroll about Amberg talking, always talking; the names of everything they saw, every little occurrence in the streets gave them subjects for conversation. The young man enjoyed it also, this was the work he had always wanted to do and his pupil was kind, considerate and intelligent. He used to give Hambledon homework to do so that now, in the evenings, instead of fending off Varkin’s curiosity about Communism in Berlin, Hambledon was questioning him about Perfective and Imperfective Tenses or the Declension of What. Also, when Varkin wanted to be told stories about Britz’s adventures, Hambledon would look up with an appealing face and say: “Please, I am so sorry to be a bore, but may I speak Russian?” Then the story would become hopelessly involved and end in gales of laughter.

At the end of a fortnight Varkin gave it up. There was no getting anything compromising out of Britz and he found himself turning into a language tutor, which bored him. Hambledon’s appointment as Supernumerary Director of the Poltava Agricultural Machinery Assembly Plant came through, complete with permits, passes and reservations. Since from Frankfurt an der Oder to Poltava in the Ukraine is a journey of eight hundred miles as the aircraft flies and nearly a thousand miles by rail, he went by train to Warsaw, by air to Kharkov and by train again to Poltava, spending two nights on the road. It is eighty miles from Kharkov to Poltava and takes five hours; by starting soon after eight in the morning Hambledon reached Poltava in the early afternoon and found a decrepit tram at the station which would take him to the works. Hambledon went there first to present his credentials and introduce himself, arrange to have his meals in the “best” dining room at the works and see about getting a comfortable billet.

His Russian teacher at Amberg had told him a great deal which surprised him about factory management in Soviet Russia, and one item which had impressed him was about the four dining rooms. The best is for the Administration and is really good; the second for the technical staff, not so good but passable; the third for the pacemakers, the workers' *corps d'élite*, and the fourth class for the ordinary workers—soup, potatoes, porridge and bread. Hambledon gathered that the harder that men work in Soviet factories the less they get to eat, which seemed to him to be thoroughly unsound, but he was not in Russia upon a reforming mission. He realized at once that it was necessary to have his meals in the best dining room, not only for his own comfort but as a matter of prestige, and as prestige was all that was keeping him alive it was very important indeed to uphold it. Besides, he liked his meals.

The tram rattled and groaned through the not very inspiring streets of the town, crossed the river Vorskla and turned along the side of it to a group of very new factory buildings on the flat water meadows. It was a pleasant site outside the town, not yet built over; there were green fields all round the works and trees by the river. The tram stopped at the main gates, Hambledon entered and was directed to the head office, where he asked for the Director. "Tell him I am the Comrade Hugo Britz from Berlin."

He was shown into a room on the ground floor where there were already five men sitting round a long table apparently engaged in conference. They rose when he was announced and the Director, who had been at the head of the table, came anxiously to meet him.

"You are very welcome, Comrade Britz. I am Gregor Mantov, the Director. Let me introduce my colleagues. Comrade Birman, the trades-union organizer——"

"Delighted," murmured Hambledon, shaking hands with one after another.

"Comrade Larin, technical administrator and my right hand. Comrade Zolkin, my chief engineer. Finally, on your left, Comrade Dadyan, our Party Organizer."

The name struck a chord in Hambledon's memory at the same moment as he turned to greet a man who stood by his left elbow. His face was familiar, too—of course. Dadyan, Party Organizer, had been introduced to him before at the Bereghark Collectivized Farm Machinery Factory when he himself had been the Commissar Peskoff. Of all the damnable chances——

"Delighted," said Hambledon again, and shook hands with him.

“The delight is entirely mine,” said Dadyan, staring hard at him with an expression of malicious amusement. The recognition was mutual, there was not the slightest doubt about it and for a moment panic seized Hambleton. This was the end, in a moment he would be denounced and probably shot out of hand. He considered escaping at once, even, since Dadyan was between him and the door, diving out of the window, but there was only the factory yard outside and if he ever got away through the main gate there were only the flat meadows beyond it.

The moment of panic passed and still Dadyan did not speak, someone else was talking. The Director, of course, asking, of all things at such a moment, whether he had had lunch.

“You will, naturally, take your meals with us in the administrative dining room, Comrade Britz. It is true that the usual lunch hour is past, but our efficient staff will be happy to make a special effort, Comrade. You have only to say what you would like done. I should like to show you also the room which I have put at your disposal as a private office, Comrade Britz. I hope it will meet with your approval. If not, any alteration which you suggest will, naturally, be carried out at once.”

He stopped and still Dadyan did not speak. Hambleton pulled his wits together.

“Thank you, Comrade Director, thank you.” The man’s terrified of me, how exceedingly funny. “Now that you mention it, my breakfast was not only sketchy but a long time ago. Anything they have—something cold _____”

The Director babbled something and left the room, Hambleton noticed that Dadyan went out with him. The explosion would now take place at any moment.

He stood there talking to the other three men. They were all men in their early thirties although holding responsible positions in the new plant, they talked politely but nervously about indifferent subjects. Poltava’s annual Fair; not what it was but still an interesting survival if looked at with an indulgent eye as a sort of local festival. “It has been purged, of course, of all its undesirable religious and feudal features and now consists of open-air dancing, singing of our good Communist songs instead of the former mediaeval nonsense, and a series of addresses by various speakers to improve the political education of the workers.”

“Some say,” said Zolkin, the chief engineer, “that that sort of thing is all nonsense and should be swept away. But I am a local man and I know how deeply rooted such customs are in the country peasant. We always find, do

we not, Comrade Birman, that the output improves surprisingly after our annual Festival.”

“That is true,” said the trades-union organizer. “Of course, we hold it now on Stalin’s birthday instead of upon the reputed anniversary of some absurd so-called saint and we make it, as Comrade Larin has said, an opportunity for political indoctrination. The workers are satisfied and it does them good.”

“It seems to me an excellent idea,” said Hambledon, whose voice seemed to himself to be creaking like a rusty hinge. Dadyan was now telling the Director——

“Are you interested in sport, Comrade Britz? There is a stretch of marshes about four miles down the river where, at the right season, there are snipe. A dish of snipe——”

Hambledon lost the end of the sentence because heavy footsteps approached the door but they passed by along the passage.

“I have never had any experience of snipe-shooting,” he said. “My acquaintance with them is limited to meeting them on a plate. Fishing, now, I am fond of as a pastime. Even if one is not very successful there is the quiet, the fresh air, the pleasant scenery and the soothing effect of the river running past.” He stumbled over his words and apologized. “I have been studying your beautiful but difficult language, Comrades, but I fear I am anything but adept. The fish,” he said, achieving a smile which made his face ache, “are not themselves linguists nor expect their captors to be. I hope that——”

The door was flung open, two men in police uniform marched in and halted. They were followed by Dadyan, looking triumphant, and the Comrade Director Mantov, looking as though he were about to faint. Hambledon’s three companions recoiled from him as though he were plague-stricken and Dadyan stretched out a dramatic arm.

“That is your man,” he said, pointing at Hambledon. “The Comrade Hugo Britz here, the Commissar Peskoff at Bereghark. He is an impostor and I demand his immediate arrest.”

Hambledon was so relieved at hearing “arrest” instead of “death” that he almost thanked Dadyan.

“This is a ridiculous outrage,” he said angrily. “When this absurd affair is cleared up, those who have instigated it”——he glared at Dadyan——“or even allowed it without protest”——his eyes rested momentarily upon the Director, who shrank——“will repent it bitterly.”

Dadyan grinned, the office staff said nothing, the police closed in upon Hambledon and took hold of his arms.

“Now, then. March!”

8

HAMBLEDON was not particularly anxious now that it appeared that he was not going to be shot out of hand. He had the papers Varkin had given him and particularly his personal identity card with Varkin's all-embracing endorsement upon it, and he knew that the one thing which does not happen in Soviet Russia is for a subordinate to disregard the orders of his superior. Varkin was immeasurably more important and powerful than that tiresome gadfly Dadyan. He had not produced his identity card at the works because he assumed that Dadyan would snatch it from him and destroy it; he would wait until his arrival at the police station, produce it there, and return in triumph to the works accompanied by, if possible, the local chief of police as escort. Dadyan could then be deflated, discredited and demolished at leisure. It was, at first sight, an unfortunate chance that the Party Organizer Dadyan should have been transferred from Bereghark to Poltava at just the right moment to see Hambledon in both places, but if Tommy could start his career in Poltava by smashing the awe-inspiring Party Organizer, what prestige he would acquire. He squared his shoulders and stepped out between the two policemen, for they were walking the mile or so back to the town.

A little later, misgivings once more crept upon him. He had heard sad stories of persons arrested by the Russian police being cast into prison to await trial and then being forgotten. Since even in Russia it is not creditable to forget a prisoner unless it is done on purpose, after a time no one will admit that he is there, ever was there, or had any real existence to start with. This leads naturally to his ceasing to have any existence at all. There were many things about Russia which Hambledon did not know, and one of them was the relation between the political and the civil police. These two men were civil police, he knew that much. He also knew that there was an M.V.D.—political police—branch in Poltava, Varkin had told him so.

“You are taking me to the M.V.D. office, I assume,” he said loftily.

“That’s right,” said the elder policeman.

“You are?”

“That’s right.”

“Not to the civil police station,” said Hambledon, determined there should be no mistake.

“No.”

“That is well,” said Hambledon. “It is to the M.V.D. office that I wish to go.”

The two policemen glanced at each other.

“This prisoner isn’t right in the head,” said the elder.

“That’s right,” said the other.

The walk continued in silence.

The M.V.D. branch in Poltava was a small one consisting of one officer, two subordinates and a jailer. Dadyan had, naturally, telephoned to the M.V.D. in a matter of such importance, but when they had arrests to make they usually employed the local police to make them. They had done so in Hambledon’s case.

The party reached the M.V.D. headquarters, an old house built of dark stone in a side street. As they approached the door two old women coming along the street scuttled across the road to avoid them and Hambledon saw a look of pity on their faces.

He was taken through a stone-flagged hall into a reception room occupied by one desk and two chairs in which two men were sitting smoking cigarettes. Judging by the condition of the floor, either they were rapid non-stop smokers or the place had not been swept for days. The two men glanced up as the policemen entered.

“The prisoner,” said the elder policeman.

“All right, Comrades,” said the man at the desk. “You can go. You,” he added to Hambledon, “come here.”

The policemen went out and Hambledon strode up to the desk.

“Are you the officer in charge of this branch?” he asked.

“No. Your name is Britz, Hugo, charged with impersonation?”

“I wish to see the officer in charge,” said Tommy firmly.

“You’ll see him soon enough. Is your name——”

“I will speak to him and to no one else.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the man indifferently, and touched a bell on the table. “Have it your own way, Comrade.”

The door opened and the jailer came in, an elderly man but plainly of great strength, having a broad peasant face entirely devoid of expression.

“Search,” said the man at the desk and leaned back in his chair to attend to his nails with the point of a pocket knife.

“I protest,” said Tommy furiously. “I am an emissary of Comrade Varkin and I demand——”

The jailer walked up to Hambleton and began to empty his pockets. Hambleton hit him hard on the jaw and the second man, who had not spoken so far, picked up a truncheon and brought it down on Hambleton’s head.

When he came round he was in a small and dirty cell about six feet by ten with one small barred window some eight inches square high up in the wall opposite to the door. He was lying on a straw mattress laid upon planks and the only other article of furniture in the cell was a shelf screwed to the wall which bore a jug of water and a small enamelled bowl. His head ached violently and there was a painful lump on the top of it.

The man at the desk gathered up all the papers, including the identity card, which had been taken from Hambleton’s pockets. He did not examine them because reading was an effort to be avoided if possible. He put them all neatly together in a cardboard folder, filed the folder itself in a cabinet under the letter B, and locked the cabinet carefully. The other man was standing against the window, looking out.

They did not speak because they spent so much time in each other’s company that there was nothing left to say. The new prisoner was not a matter of enough importance to call for comment.

The officer in charge of the M.V.D. at Poltava was taking a day or two away from office duties. Lazar Filline had a good war record and had been in his day one of the “Heroes of the Soviet” for gallantry at the defence of Stalingrad. In those days he was quite extraordinarily good-looking with the chiselled features, large dark eyes and thick curling hair so well described by Victorian novelists. He was slim and held himself well; when he was not actually plastered with mud and crawling with the lice of the trenches he took pride in being clean and smart and in having a uniform which really fitted him. He was, in short, one of Nature’s film stars. Russians are naturally susceptible to beauty and young Filline’s good looks, charming manners and perfectly genuine heroism made him something of a cult in

Moscow. Generals' wives mothered him, their daughters looked after him as he went by and parties were given in his honour. At that time there were a number of films being made of Russia's war effort, for the most part quite genuine documentaries, but if there was a call for a gallant young man to stand in a post of danger awaiting with calm resolution the onrush of the foe, Filline was the man for the job. Wounded, he crawled back through the tangled undergrowth carrying upon his shoulders some comrade worse injured than himself; dying, he exhorted his comrades to struggle on for country and Stalin; dead, his faultless profile sanctified the mud or illuminated the snow.

The natural result of all this was that the boy was hopelessly spoiled. Men detested him and, when his delicate charm turned to not so delicate impertinence, women tired of him and their daughters looked elsewhere. He was only occasionally invited to parties given in someone else's honour; after he had come, rolling drunk, to an official reception given by Molotov to a party of British Socialists, even the occasional invitation ceased. He loitered about Moscow, getting into trouble and outlasting his welcome until one woman, who remembered him as he was, pulled strings to get him sent away out of sight and, it was hoped, out of mind.

He had been at Poltava for three years when Hambleton came there. Local society had welcomed Filline, remembering only the hero of Stalingrad and knowing nothing of the arrogant young waster he had become. They can drink in the Ukraine and their daughters are less haughty than the daughters of pride in Moscow. Filline's smart uniform had to be let out at the seams and let out again, that eagle profile became blurred and there were bags under the dark eyes of romance. He was only twenty-eight and not even a noble ruin, he looked like a minor devilkin who has given up every ambition but insolence and wine.

He came back to the office after two days spent with friends and a day in bed to get over them. His head ached and his eyes were hot; his two subordinates recognized the symptoms, kept out of his way and did not bother him with trifles.

On the fourth day he felt better and his conscience pricked him for neglecting his work. Not only conscience, but fear, for he knew very well that if he were found wanting in this, his last chance, he would never have another. He strode into the office in the late afternoon, the two underlings busied themselves elsewhere, and Ivan, the jailer, came up to his desk to ask for a signed authorization for another set of Class IV rations.

"What the devil d'you want another set of rations for?"

“For the prisoner, Comrade Filline.”

“Prisoner? What prisoner?”

Ivan did not know. Just the prisoner.

Filline unlocked the filing cabinet and found the new folder. Dadyan’s written deposition had been added to Hambledon’s papers and he read this first. Impersonating a Commissar, coming to Poltava under a false name, why, the prisoner was as good as dead. Probably his papers were forged, too. He took out Hambledon’s identity card and looked at it.

It bore a number of highly official stamps and written across the bottom was the endorsement. “Indispensable. Assist and protect. Answerable only to the undersigned, Andrei Varkin.”

Filline’s jaw dropped and perspiration broke out on his forehead, for he knew Varkin. Their paths had crossed in Moscow and Varkin was one of the men who did not like him. “Impertinent film-struck puppy,” was only one of Varkin’s phrases, the others were less complimentary.

“Where is this prisoner?” roared Filline.

“In Cell Number 2, Comrade,” said Ivan simply. “He has been there four days.”

Filline called upon the Maker he had officially disowned.

“Shall I bring him in?” said Ivan, dimly aware that something had gone wrong.

“I’ll come myself,” said Filline, and started to rise but his shaking legs would not support him. “Yes, bring him here at once.” He turned to a cupboard beside him, snatched up a bottle of vodka and gulped down several mouthfuls without troubling with a glass. Almost before he had put back the bottle the door opened and a storm burst in; Hambledon, dirty, unshaven, in crumpled clothes, half starved and in a towering rage.

“Are you the incompetent fool hitherto in charge of this branch? What the hell do you mean by it? Are you aware that I have been locked up in one of your filthy kennels for four days? Stand up when I come into the room!”

Filline leapt to his feet. “Comrade Britz, I cannot sufficiently apolo
_____”

“You’re quite right, you can’t! What sort of an office is this where honoured guests on a mission from headquarters are maltreated by thugs
_____”

“Comrade, I implore you——”

“Have all their papers stolen——”

“Here are your papers,” said Filline, feverishly gathering them up and thrusting them into Hambledon’s hands while Dadyan’s accusation floated unnoticed to the floor, “for pity’s sake, Comrade——”

“For four days I have been insulted by your oaf of a jailer. I told him I had a most important mission to you personally and he was revoltingly and repeatedly rude. Did he report it? Or were you not here to receive the report?”

This shaft sank to the feather and Filline, wilting visibly, clung to the edge of his desk.

“Stand up straight! Was it by your orders that I have been fed upon fish heads and not too fresh at that? I have eaten fish heads until I am growing fins, damn you. Answer me.”

Ivan’s head appeared round the edge of the half-open door. “That was why I asked for the ration order, Comrade,” he said timidly.

Filline pulled himself together. “Comrade Britz, a frightful mistake has been made and the most exemplary punishment shall be dealt out to the culprit.”

“Start with yourself! As though what you have done to me was not enough, you have given the real criminal four days to escape in. He is far away by now, no doubt.”

“The real criminal?”

“The so-called Party Organizer Dadyan, of course. It was he who lodged that ridiculous accusation, was it not?”

“Yes, that is so, I believe that is so. His deposition is here somewhere.” Filline scabbled desperately among the papers on his desk, but Dadyan’s statement was not to be found since it was out of sight on the floor behind the coal scuttle. “He said—he had the insolence to say—that you appeared at Bereghark calling yourself the Commissar Peskoff and then you came here calling yourself—excuse me—Hugo Britz. What his motive can be for such an appalling set of lies I cannot imagine.”

“They are not lies,” said Hambledon calmly. “His story is all perfectly true.” He pulled a chair towards him and sat down.

“Excuse me, Comrade,” said Filline, “I do not understand what you mean.”

“Blockhead. You have seen my identity card. You read the endorsement upon it. You have heard of Comrade Andrei Varkin, you know the position he holds.” Filline nodded his head at each of these points. “Very well, then. I

went to Bereghark as the Commissar Peskoff and I am now here as Comrade Hugo Britz. Now you understand.”

Filline only understood that he had run his head against matters much too high for him. “Of course,” he said hastily. “Naturally. Absolutely. The matter is now entirely clear.”

“It is now anything but clear,” said Hambledon acidly, “for the mess you and Dadyan have made of my very delicate and secret mission, with your four days’ delay, is unpredictable.”

Filline picked up the telephone. “I will have him arrested at once,” he said.

“He is probably beyond the Urals by now,” said Hambledon, “if he has any sense.”

Filline rang up the police station and instructed them to arrest Dadyan at once and bring him to the M.V.D. office for questioning. Then he set down the receiver and, since Hambledon seemed to have gone off the boil, asked in a nervous voice if he might offer his distinguished Comrade a small glass of vodka. Hambledon nodded.

“It will, perhaps, take the taste of fish heads out of my mouth,” he said. “Even the filthy liquid supplied to me as drinking water tasted of fish.”

He took the glass from Filline without thanks, swallowed the contents and held it out for a refill.

“And now,” said Filline, pouring it out, “you will tell me what I am to do first in order to begin to atone for the horrible mistake to which I was a party.”

“A cigarette——”

“At once,” said Filline, presenting his case with a flourish which spilt half its contents on the floor. “Allow me—a light. And next?”

“A bath. Shaving facilities. A meal, and it had better be a good one. No fish.”

“At my house—at my private house, not this kennel, there are excellent facilities for washing. And shaving. As for the meal, it shall be the best Poltava can produce. I will, with your permission, do myself the honour of being your host.”

“Remember,” said Hambledon, standing up, “no fish.”

“Certainly not,” said Filline, practically wagging his tail, “definitely no fish. Excuse me one brief moment.”

He went to the door and shouted for his two subordinates, who came running. He told them that the police were bringing in the so-called Party Organizer Dadyan for questioning in connection with a vicious slander which practically amounted to sabotage. "You can start on him," he said. "I'm going out to dinner, I'll see him when I come back." He conducted Hambleton to his car with a care and ceremony appropriate to something between a beloved invalid and a reincarnation of Lenin, and they drove away.

His two subordinates, who had been talking to Ivan the jailer in the intervals of listening at the door, looked at each other and strolled into the office. One picked up Filline's cigarettes from the floor and shared them out while the other tidied up the desk. Dadyan's denunciation came to light behind the coal scuttle.

"What shall we do with this?"

"What? That statement? Better file it again, you never know. Give it to me."

He put the paper tidily away in its folder and filed it again in the cabinet under letter B. He looked at it for a moment and then locked the cupboard door.

"You never know," he said again.

"This fellow Dadyan," said the other. "What's he done?"

"Sabotage, he said."

"Oh."

They sat down comfortably in the two chairs to smoke Filline's cigarettes while they waited for Dadyan.

Hambleton came out of Filline's house looking much refreshed. He had had a bath and a shave, clean underclothes had been provided and his suit sponged, brushed and pressed. Filline, noticing with delight the comparative amiability of his expression, frisked round him like a penitent dog who hopes to be forgiven.

"What is your name?" asked Tommy, pausing as he entered the car.

"Filline, Comrade. Lazar Filline, at your service, Comrade."

Hambleton had seen some of the Soviet war films and remembered something of Filline's history, but did not say so. They drove to an hotel where the Russian's telephoned orders produced a meal which was surprisingly good and attractively served. Hambleton thought it wise to relax into guarded friendliness.

“I must show up at the office tomorrow,” he said casually. “This wine is really very pleasant. No doubt you will have a word with the Director, what’s his name? Mantov? We do not want to give the poor man heart failure.”

“I have already done so, I rang him up from my house. Dadyan has been arrested—he was still there—and Mantov asked me to say how delighted he and all his staff will be to see you again. I am glad you like the wine, it is from the Crimea. Let me refill your glass. Dadyan, for some reason, does not appear to have been liked in the office.”

Hambleton smiled slowly. “He was not liked at Bereghark either,” he said significantly.

“Oh, indeed? It is not to be wondered at.”

“Let us turn to pleasanter subjects. I have a young nephew, Comrade Filline, at the ‘gymnasium’ here. I was very happy when I was asked to come here, it will give me a chance of seeing him. He is an orphan and I am his only living relative.”

“He is fortunate to have such a relative,” said Filline enthusiastically.

“He has not seen much of me so far. Duty, Comrade Filline, you know what it is. One is sent off here and recalled to go there, one cannot say, ‘Oh, but I must visit my little nephew!’ ”

“What one sacrifices to serve the Party!”

“Yes, indeed, and how willingly. But I am all the more glad to be near the child for once. I take it that Mantov knows I shall not be keeping the usual hours at the factory?”

“I will make sure he does know.”

“I am not sure,” said Hambleton mysteriously, “how much Mantov has been told. You understand.”

“Of course, of course. I am sure you will find Mantov helpful and co-operative. A most reasonable, reliable man.”

“I’m sure of it. But there’s no sense in burdening with secrets those whom it is possible to spare.”

“How good you are——”

“There’s another small matter,” began Hambleton.

“Please tell me what I can do.”

“It really is a small matter, only a question of billets. I am sure that whatever I am provided with will be clean, comfortable, and of a certain

standard; what I should like, if possible, is to be somewhere near the school. I don't know the geography of your town although I have spent four days here, you know."

"Don't remind me, please, Comrade Britz. I shall never forget my horror—my dreams will be haunted for years——"

"About the school," prompted Hambledon.

"Oh, yes. It is on the same side of the town as the factory, only further south, the other side of the river. If you were billeted somewhere near the West Bridge it would be convenient for both."

"Let us have another bottle," said Hambledon genially. "If I am not careful, this Crimean wine of yours will become a habit."

9

HAMBLEDON had asked Filline to telephone to the Director of Studies to expect him at the school on the following morning. "My papers, as you know, cover my official status but nowhere do they proclaim that I am the true and only uncle of an imp of a boy called Kaspar Groenwald. No doubt the Director of Studies knows you; if you will kindly assure him that I am to be trusted, it will save a lot of trouble."

Hambledon was shown into the Director's room and noticed for the hundredth time how the characteristics of a profession pass all frontiers. Here were the bookcases along the walls, the two or three worn leather chairs, the big desk with a pile of examination papers upon it, the Turkey carpet, all of which had once been so familiar and so important. The tall narrow windows looked out upon a playground where small boys rushed about in mysterious excitement, there was even a Virginia creeper growing up the walls and swinging loose trailers from the porch roof.

The Director of Studies came in and the only odd thing about him was that he did not wear an academic gown. Otherwise he was just Headmaster Itself, stooping a little because he was a tall man, careworn, kindly and very wary, as men become who spend their lives with horribly ingenious small boys. Hambledon liked him at sight.

Filline had said his piece, giving the impression that Tommy was a sort of human archangel, terrible but good. The Director therefore shook hands and Tommy said that among so many boys he did not expect him to remember offhand one inconspicuous brat especially as he was quite a new boy. "He's only been here about a month, I believe."

"That is so," said the Director, "that is so. But your nephew is not exactly what one would call an inconspicuous boy." Hambledon's heart sank. "He has a way of impressing himself upon one's mind."

"I must admit frankly," said Tommy, "that I shouldn't know the boy if I saw him. I have not seen him since he was trotting busily about after his mother, poor soul. What age are children when they trot aimlessly about? Three? I have only had very amateur snapshots of him since, and not even those since my sister died."

"I will send for your nephew," said the Director, pressing a bell. "There will be a little delay, quite short I trust, but a little." The door opened and a harassed young man, wearing incredibly strong glasses, put his head into the room.

"Bring me," said the Director, "Kaspar Groenwald. See that he is washed and brushed."

"Isn't he generally?" asked Hambledon in an amused voice.

"As a rule he is slightly tidier than the others, but—do sit down—at the moment he is just completing two days in the punishment cell."

"Dear me!"

"Let there be no mistake. Unless I am wrong, and I have had years of experience, the boy is unusually intelligent. I hesitate, after so short a time, to call him brilliant, but I think I shall be doing so a year or two hence. He is eminently the type of boy we want, we train leaders here as no doubt you know. Kaspar, if I am not mistaken, is a born leader. Our Selection Committees, there is no doubt, are extraordinarily good at their job. The way they go down to these country schools, look over the children and bring back the right class of lad, is quite astonishing. What," said the Director, putting the tips of his fingers together, "is still more surprising, is the high proportion of boys here from the country peasant class. Quite as high as of town boys who are superficially smarter."

"Our Beloved Leader, after all," said Hambledon, with a glance at the inevitable portrait over the mantelpiece, "was himself a country boy. But do tell me, what has my little wretch done to deserve the punishment cell?"

The Director of Studies smiled slowly. "Your nephew has, among other minor faults, an uncomfortable gift for practical joking."

"Oh, dear," said Hambledon, and meant it.

"We grow very fine tomatoes here," said the Director, apparently going off at a tangent. "I know of no finer tomatoes in the district. The boys do most of the work in the gardens and the tomatoes do them credit."

"Excellent."

"Two nights ago our kitchen staff produced for our benefit a large tureen of tomato soup. It was placed before me to serve out and I must say I never saw such beautiful tomato soup. There was a ring of tiny bubbles round the edge and a smooth creamy appearance on the surface. Most appetizing."

"You make me feel quite hungry."

"The first helping went to my science master. He is an elderly man, Comrade Britz, one of the old school but an excellent teacher. He has suffered from hay fever all his life and his senses of smell and taste are both affected. He had consumed most of his helping before some of the other masters called my attention to a peculiar flavour in the soup."

"For pity's sake, what was it?"

"Soap, Comrade Britz. Good wholesome carbolic soap."

"The young devil! Actually, I doubt if carbolic, taken internally, is so very wholesome, Comrade Director. Your unfortunate science master——"

"Our science lessons have had to be suspended for two days," said the Director, turning a laughing face to Hambledon, "but I think my poor old friend will be back on duty tomorrow. The effects may even be ultimately beneficial."

"I am sure I hope so! You have no doubt, Comrade Director, that it was indeed my sister's child who allowed himself to be so lost to all sense of propriety as to do this?"

"None whatever. He was the only boy who was loitering round the kitchen at the right time and, when taxed with it, he admitted it frankly. He said he put it in to make it nice and frothy."

Hambledon dissolved into laughter. "I shall keep an eye on him if I take him out to a meal at any time. Will you permit me to take him out sometimes? I am, as I believe you know, the only near relative he has and I am anxious to gain his trust and confidence."

"Certainly. In the afternoons the boys exercise in the open air, but I will excuse him whenever you want him. He should be back at eighteen hours at

latest for the evening preparation.”

“Thank you very much indeed,” said Tommy, “I am most grateful. I don’t expect to be here long—two or three weeks—so I hope to make the best of the short time.”

The door opened to admit a boy and closed again behind him. He was small for his age but held himself proudly, he had thick dark hair recently subdued with a damp brush, dark eyebrows and eyelashes and intensely blue eyes; Hambledon said to himself that never before had he seen eyes which were really the colour of a sapphire. Kaspar’s features were still in the unformed childish stage but ended in an unmistakably determined chin.

He bowed to the Director of Studies and waited to be addressed.

“Groenwald,” said the Director, “here is your uncle come to see you.”

“My uncle?” said the boy, turning an enquiring look upon Hambledon.

“Your Uncle Hugo,” said Tommy quickly, and held out his hand. “You won’t remember me, but——”

“Oh, but I do,” said the boy, coming towards him, “at least, I think I do, you gave me a wooden engine, didn’t you?” He took Hambledon’s hand in both his.

“That’s right, fancy your remembering that.”

“There was a photograph of you my mother had, riding a horse, wasn’t there?” Kaspar’s voice began to tremble. “She used to talk about you—my mother——” He suddenly burst into sobs and flung himself into Tommy’s arms.

“I think I will leave you for a few minutes to make each other’s acquaintance,” said the Director of Studies, and kindly left the room; Kaspar continued to cling and sob until the door was shut. Then he drew himself away and looked at Hambledon with eyes which were completely dry.

“Decent old chap, that,” he remarked. “One can’t help liking him, actually.”

Hambledon looked at him with something like awe.

“Suppose he hadn’t gone away, he would have seen you hadn’t really been crying.”

“Oh no, he wouldn’t. One sticks one’s finger in one’s eye. Quite simple, actually.”

Hambledon was startled into saying: “I think you’re a little horror.”

Kaspar looked down for a moment, when he lifted his head again Hambledon had another shock. The face was the face of a child but the hard disillusioned expression was that of a grown man.

“When one has had to play a part for years,” he said slowly, “it is quite easy.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Tommy impulsively, and Kaspar smiled.

“I think I’m going to like you,” he said. “Will they let you take me out?”

“Oh yes, I’ve fixed that up. Any afternoon.”

“Oh, good. Can we go down to the river? I like fishing.”

Hambledon made a grimace. “I’m a bit off fish for the moment.”

“Oh, that won’t matter, I never catch anything, at least, I never have yet. Why have you gone off fish?”

Tommy laughed. “I understand you’ve been in jail for a couple of days,” he said. “I sympathize, I had four days of it and they fed me on fish. Not nice fish, either.”

“Tell me about it. What had you done, who sent you there?”

“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. I’ll ask if you may come out with me tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh, good,” said Kaspar with a little skip of joy.

“Listen,” said Tommy. “Do behave yourself, for if you landed in the cells again just when I wanted you it might be awkward.”

“I’ll be a little angel. I can when I like, you know. ‘Yes, Comrade. No, Comrade. Certainly, Comrade.’ ” He scowled suddenly.

“What’s the matter?”

“All this Comrade business—insolence!”

“Sh-sh! Don’t even think that.” The door opened and the Director of Studies strolled in, Kaspar looked round, smiling happily at him.

“Well!” said the Director.

“May I take this young scamp out with me tomorrow afternoon?”

“Not today?” said Kaspar, with drooping lip.

“No. I’m busy today.”

“Oh.”

“Certainly he may go,” said the Director. “Any time after fourteen hours. Run along now, Groenwald.”

“Goodbye, Uncle Hugo.” Kaspar bowed to the Director of Studies and bolted out of the room.

Hambledon went to the works and was greeted with great cordiality by the Comrade Director Gregor Mantov and his staff.

“Believe me,” said Mantov, “we are all delighted to see you here again.” He shook Hambledon warmly by the hand and looked as though with the faintest encouragement he would kiss him on both cheeks, but Tommy maintained his distance. “We feel, also, that we were right in our intuitions, and that is a very satisfactory feeling.”

“It is, indeed.”

“And when we heard the news about Dadyan this morning we were not very surprised. Doubtless it was the knowledge that his attack on you had failed which drove him to it.”

“Drove him to what?”

“Suicide, Comrade Britz. He hanged himself sometime during the night on one of those trees by the river, the left-hand one of that group, you can see it from here.”

“Indeed,” said Hambledon, looking as directed out of the window. Since he knew that the M.V.D. had arrested Dadyan the night before he smelt a large and dubious rat. The M.V.D. do not, as a rule, arrest highly suspected persons only to let them go again a couple of hours later. “Hanged himself out there, eh?”

“One of the local peasants on his way to the farm found him at half past five this morning. He very rightly informed the police, who came out here at once and cut him down. They also called out our works doctor, he lives on the premises so he was the nearest, of course. He told me himself that the man had not been dead long, indeed, he was not quite cold. Two hours or less, he said.”

“Half past three or four,” said Hambledon thoughtfully. “Comrade Director, let us not harbour rancorous feelings towards Dadyan. His attack upon me was not the act of a sane man. He accused me of being a Commissar Somebody——”

“Peskoff——”

“Peskoff, whoever he is. I am pretty sure that if we could see this Peskoff there would be at least some superficial resemblance between us. Who knows what miserable turmoil was raging in the mind of this unhappy man? Even the M.V.D., apparently, thought it not worth while to keep him. Let him rest in——”

Mantov embraced Tommy so suddenly that he could not, without rudeness, avoid it. "You have a mind of the most unexampled nobility," he said in a broken voice. "I did not know there was your like left in the world since my dear grandfather died. He was a saint, Alexis Nikolaievitch, my grandfather, and so are you."

Hambledon laughed him off and suggested a tour round the works. He simply did not believe that Dadyan had been released by the M.V.D. or that he would have hanged himself if they had. Much more likely to do so if they had kept him there for the sort of treatment they would probably give him. Hambledon reminded himself that people have not always died at the place where they are found hanging.

"What did he hang himself with?" he asked suddenly in the middle of a clatter of reaper-binders in various stages of assembly.

"With a piece of our factory rope, Comrade. It has a green thread through it, look," said the Director. There was an enormous ball of thin rope suspended over the packing counter exactly as balls of twine hang, ready for use, over shop counters in England. Tommy examined it, there was a green thread as the Director had said. "That was introduced to check pilfering," said Mantov. "This rope makes excellent laundry lines, you see."

"And was he in this department yesterday?"

Mantov enquired and was told that the Party Organizer Dadyan had not been seen in that department for at least a week.

"There you are," said Hambledon gravely. "He had been considering this desperate act for days before ever I came here. Poor man, poor man."

He got rid of Mantov and spent the rest of the day walking about the factory talking to foremen and workers as much as he could, which was not a great deal. His Russian was still not yet fluent and these workmen did not, as a rule, speak more than a few words of it. Their language was Ukrainian, which is a totally different tongue. Hambledon drifted away and talked to an old man near the gate who was lounging about doing nothing in particular. He could speak Russian fairly well and told Hambledon that he was the night watchman at the main gate, waiting to go on duty.

"I am an old man," he said, "and this job suits me. The Comrade Director Mantov is a humane man, he put me into it."

"I don't suppose you are disturbed at night very much," said Tommy.

"Not unless there is a rush on and we are working a night shift. Then we're busy enough."

“I expect so. There was a bit of a disturbance here last night, wasn’t there?”

“Last night? No. The Comrade means early this morning when the police came to call out the doctor. That was quite late, only half an hour before I go off duty.”

“Of course, yes. You didn’t hear anything before that?”

The old man looked blank.

“I mean,” went on Hambledon, “you didn’t see the Party Organizer Dadyan at any time?”

“Not after he went off duty at the usual time.”

“I see. I thought he might, perhaps, have been wandering about here and come up to the gate. Or merely passed by within sight.”

“No. No, I never set eyes upon the Party Organizer Dadyan after he went off duty.”

Hambledon gave him a cigarette and walked away towards the town. A few words with the M.V.D. officer Lazar Filline might be rewarding. Filline was in his office, dutifully engaged in reading reports. A copy of Stalin’s famous book, *Problems of Leninism*, lay upon the desk as it should.

They greeted each other cordially; Hambledon accepted a glass of vodka and offered a cigar.

“About this fellow Dadyan,” he began.

“Yes,” said Filline guardedly. “You have heard that he hanged himself?”

“Oh yes. The works were all agog over it this morning. They would be, of course.”

“Of course, naturally. Er——” Filline stopped.

“You were about to say something, Comrade Filline?”

“Only that it was a not unfortunate ending,” said Filline. “He was not much loss, was he?”

“Did you hang him?” asked Hambledon bluntly.

“Oh no,” said Filline in the accents of truth. “We had not finished with him. No, he hanged himself, upon my honour.”

Hambledon nodded, it did not really matter one way or the other.

“I have a suggestion to make,” he said, “that is, if you have not already sent in your report.”

“I was about to draft it when you came in.”

“The last thing I should ever wish to do,” said Hambledon earnestly, “is to tamper in even the smallest degree with your conscientious sense of duty.”

“As though you needed to assure me of that!”

“But, at the same time, it does no harm to be sensible.”

“Please go on, Comrade Britz.”

“We all know what head offices are. If you send in a full report of my arrest and detention, of Dadyan’s denunciation of me, of your questioning him, of his suicide——”

“I know,” said Filline drearily. “There will be a perfectly endless enquiry. There will be reams to write, explaining the affair in full detail over and over again. I shall have to report at headquarters for a series of interviews each more trying and difficult than the last, I shall be severely reprimanded for our treatment of you though of course I deserve that, I shall almost certainly lose my post here and shall be lucky if I don’t end up in Siberia. I have been sitting here,” he said with a deep sigh, “all the afternoon thinking about it.”

“Whereas,” said Hambledon briskly, “with a little common intelligence all that can be avoided. Listen. I was never arrested at all and consequently was never in prison here. I myself have no intention of reporting it and I will see that the works staff don’t.”

“They wouldn’t, anyway,” said Filline, beginning to glow with delight, “it isn’t their business——”

“No, but they might let it out. I’ll see they don’t. Furthermore, since I wasn’t arrested Dadyan never accused me of anything. You called him in here to consult with him upon a routine matter—you can think up something”—Filline nodded eagerly—“he left here at about—what shall we say—midnight? And you never saw him again. You did notice one thing, however. He was very strange in his manner.”

“Very strange in his manner?”

“Yes, because the works staff noticed it, too.”

“Oh, did they?”

“Yes, Comrade Filline. We were talking about it this afternoon. The poor man had been overworking and had become mentally deranged. The idea that he had seen me at Bereghark was just one of his illusions. It is all very sad, Comrade Filline. Poor Comrade Dadyan died as a result of his excessive devotion to duty.”

“I think you are quite the cleverest man I have ever met,” said Filline with conviction.

“We cannot bring him back to life,” said Hambledon in a melancholy voice. “The least we can do is to safeguard his reputation.”

Filline laughed till the tears ran down his face.

“All you have to do is to make sure that you have no entries in your books in either his case or mine,” said Hambledon.

“Oh, that’s all right. There never were any. My fellows can hardly write and I’ve got behind with the bookkeeping.”

“Splendid,” said Hambledon. “Well now, all you have to do is to write and inform headquarters of the lamentable tragedy, and there we are.” He got up to go.

“Must you go? I do so enjoy your company.”

“I am going to order a wreath for the funeral. There is a florist’s here, of course.”

“Oh yes, several. What will you write on the card? You know, the usual well-chosen phrase.”

Hambledon turned in the doorway. “‘Nothing is here for tears,’” he said. “Shakespeare. We read it at school, didn’t we?”

Filline’s peals of happy laughter followed him out into the street. Ten yards from the door Hambledon hesitated in his stride.

“Not Shakespeare,” he murmured, “Milton. Never mind, he doesn’t know any better.”

He proceeded upon his way.

10

HAMBLEDON called for Kaspar the following afternoon. It was a warm sunny day and Kaspar, loaded with a fishing rod, landing net, basket and a small folding stool, suggested that they might go down to the river and fish unless his honoured uncle had some other idea in mind. “I can easily put these things away again,” said the polite little voice, plainly audible at adjoining

windows and to anyone passing by. “I just thought you might like to go fishing.”

“As you like,” said Hambledon. “But what’s the stool for?”

“For you to sit on, my Uncle. The damp grass, you know.”

“Damp grass my foot. You know it hasn’t rained for a week. Take it back.”

“Certainly,” said Kaspar cheerfully. “Will you just take these other things a minute while I carry it back?”

He transferred the fishing rod, landing net and basket to Hambledon and danced indoors with the stool. A moment later he returned empty-handed and, saying that they must go out at the main gate but after that there was a short cut to the river, led the way down the drive in a colourful imitation of the paces of a horse. “Trotting,” he said. Then, as Hambledon lengthened his stride, “Cantering! In a minute I’m going to gallop. Watch me gallop, Uncle!”

“Halt,” said Hambledon firmly. “Wo-back, stop. Stand, you half-trained cab horse. Come back and carry your own tackle.”

“I am so sorry,” said Kaspar, returning instantly. “Thoughtless of me.”

“Very,” said Hambledon drily. “I’ll keep the basket. Now carry on.”

They walked through a couple of fields to the river bank, which here was almost opposite the assembly plant and the clump of trees upon one of which Dadyan had been found hanging. Kaspar spent some time fitting the rod together. It was a good rod.

“Is that your own?” asked Hambledon, remembering the state of poverty in which the boy had been living with his tutor at Bereghark.

“Dear me, no. Let’s talk German, shall we? It belongs to one of the other boys, he lent it to me.”

“Very nice of him.”

“Yes, wasn’t it? When I am Commissar of Foreign Affairs I’m going to make him Ambassador to Washington.”

“Good gracious. Do you mean to say that on the strength of that he lent you his good fishing rod? He must be a singularly trusting lad.”

“Oh, he is, actually. Besides, I said I’d do his maths for him tonight. He can’t do maths.”

“And you can?”

“They don’t worry me much,” said Kaspar carelessly, and threaded the line through the rings.

“Well, remember not to do them too well.”

Kaspar turned a solemn face upon Hambledon. “I bet you were a corker when you were at school.”

“I merely wanted to ensure that you won’t be in the lockup——”

“Yes, I know. I will be careful. Have you got a camera?”

“Not with me at the moment. Why?”

Kaspar looked about him and across the river. “I only thought you might amuse yourself taking photographs of the scenery while I’m fishing, Uncle Hugo.”

“I think this is almost the dullest and most uninteresting scenery I’ve ever been in. It’s as flat as a board for miles.”

“But that clump of trees opposite makes an interesting feature, don’t you think?”

Hambledon, sitting on the bank with his knees drawn up and his hat tilted over his eyes, did not even look at the boy and the next moment Kaspar went on: “Are you any good at putting worms on a hook?”

“No.”

“Let me show you,” said Kaspar, and brought his horrid task to Hambledon’s side. Then he dropped his voice and said: “Have you been at Bereghark?”

“About three weeks—four weeks ago.”

“How is my tutor?”

“Well, but anxious about you. Have you written to him?”

“Yes, soon after I got here. We are allowed to write once a month. Allowed—to write—once a month. And then they read our letters.”

“I suppose so,” said Hambledon, lighting a cigarette.

“How are we going to get away?”

“I have not the faintest beginnings of the vestige—if you know what that is—of an idea.”

Kaspar looked at him with genuine wonder.

“Do you mean to say you just floated down here to find me hundreds of miles inside Russia without any plans for getting out again?”

“Some scheme will doubtless present itself. It’s silly to start making plans before you know what things are like, isn’t it?”

“You are a lad, aren’t you?” said Kaspar, still staring.

They spent the afternoon by the river, had tea at Poltava’s best restaurant, which is not saying much, and afterwards returned to the school. Kaspar’s basket, which contained no fish, held instead a substantial cake and some chocolate.

“Don’t eat it all yourself,” said Hambleton, “you’ll have a pain.”

“I couldn’t anyway. You forget,” said Kaspar acidly, “we are in process of being Sovietized, Comrade Uncle.”

“If that’s going to teach you to share out your tuck it’s just as well, Comrade Nephew. You’d do that wherever you went to school.”

Kaspar stopped just out of earshot of the main gate.

“You’re English, aren’t you?”

“I’m your Uncle Hugo Britz. Don’t be silly.”

“Sorry, that was silly. When are we going out together again?” he added, walking on.

“Not tomorrow. Possibly the day after. I’ll ring up and ask for leave.”

He took Kaspar to the front door and caught in passing a glimpse of the Director of Studies in his room, Kaspar thanked Hambleton in model phrases—and in Russian—for a happy and instructive afternoon, and went indoors, and Hambleton walked briskly away.

It was quite obvious that if his cover were to be convincing, he must work for it; merely to walk about looking mysterious would not be nearly enough. He therefore spent two more days walking about the works watching all the processes of assembly and particularly the order in which the various operations were carried out. One did not need to be an expert upon agricultural machinery or even upon factory production methods to see that there was a great deal of time and energy wasted which could easily be saved. Machines underwent one operation in Shop A, were conveyed half round the works for the next and all the way back to Shop A for the next again. Hambleton had once been shown round a factory where cars were mass-produced and the “belt” system had made a deep impression on his mind. The system was easily applied to a large number of identical products but would have to be much more elastic to suit the variety of machines with which the Poltava factory dealt. He was a little surprised at the muddle; he had always understood that the Russians had a genius for planning though

the performance sometimes fell short. The fact was that the Director, Mantov, was an excellent engineer thrown away in a place where no real engineering was done; he was not a particularly good organizer. However, he had been sent there and told to organize the new factory, and he was doing his honest best.

Hambledon, having arranged his ideas in some sort of order, took Mantov for a walk round the works and explained what he had in mind.

“Here’s an example on a small scale,” he said. “Here’s the small components shop where you assemble spare parts. The various bits come in from the store and are bolted or riveted together, adjusted, tested and what-have-you. Then they all have to be taken up to the back end of the shop, right up there, to be packed, labelled and addressed. When that’s done, they have to be carried right down the length of the shop again to the door, don’t they? Look at these three fellows now.”

Three men came down the whole length of the long narrow building carrying between them a horrible object like a gigantic comb some ten feet long with curved steel teeth. Attached to it were the connecting bars; tied to these were small cotton bags containing nuts and bolts. The men sidled down the alleys between the workbenches, bumping into things and interrupting the workers.

“That is quite true,” said Mantov. “The packing ought to be near the door, anyone can see that. But, you see, these machines and workbenches were already set down as you see them when I came here. To move them all along would mean cracking up and relaying the concrete floor and that would hold up the work here for a week or more, which is not to be thought of. Besides, I should have to submit plans to a higher authority for an important operation like altering the layout, and you can imagine for yourself what it would be like trying to convince someone who has never seen the place of the necessity for holding up production for even a few days. Then, unless I could prove, with figures, that there was a definite improvement, it might appear that I had interrupted production for no purpose. That is a very serious matter indeed. It might amount to sabotage. No one risks an accusation of sabotage.”

“So it is better to go on with inefficiency than to risk such an accusation,” said Hambledon.

“Good heavens, what have I said——”

“Don’t be alarmed, I am not trying to catch you. Believe me, I have only been sent here to help you and I am trying to do so.”

Mantov's agitation subsided. "I do believe you. Come outside where we can talk freely."

"What happens," said Hambleton, when they were out of earshot of the work people, "if anyone has a bright idea for doing some job more quickly, or avoiding some snag?"

"It has to be examined very carefully. It is very difficult indeed to say how an idea will work until it has been tried."

Hambleton waited in silence.

"And if it is tried," went on Mantov nervously, "and it is a failure; if time has been wasted; still worse, if damage has been done, the consequences may be disastrous. It only needs someone to raise the question at one of our factory gatherings and the simplest mistake or error of judgment can be made to look like wrecking." He dropped his voice. "Our trades-union organizer, Birman——"

Hambleton nodded, he had not liked what he had seen of Birman.

"So it comes to this," he said. "It is better to struggle on as you are than to take the risk of introducing new ideas."

"That is so. Unfortunate, but true."

"Though in the case of the shop we have just left," said Hambleton in a more cheerful voice, "I did not have any such radical reorganization in mind."

"What was your idea?"

"There is clear ground behind the shop. Cut a door through at the other end."

Mantov looked at him for a moment and then burst into laughter in which Hambleton joined.

"So simple," gurgled Mantov, "so obvious, when it is pointed out. It shall be done tomorrow. My dear Comrade Britz, what must you think of me?"

"As a man doing his best under difficulties."

"Thank you, Comrade. You see, I am not a factory organizer, I am an engineer. Believe me, I often sit in my comfortable room with a stove to warm me in the winter, or dine in the best room, or buy food and clothes in the state stores, and wish that I were still working with my hands on machines that I know and understand. One didn't live so well but one hadn't so much worry. These committees, these reports, these inspections—I tell you, it isn't the difficulties of production that daunt me."

“What is it, then?”

“Fear,” said Mantov, and abruptly walked away.

“Poor devil,” said Hambledon, and left the factory to go and call for Kaspar. When he arrived at the school the Director of Studies asked him to come to his room.

“I only wanted to say that it would be as well if you took things quietly with your nephew this afternoon. He has not been well.”

Hambledon had an unpleasant vision of Kaspar being overcome by measles or mumps. How long did quarantine last with children? Six weeks? “What’s the matter with him?” he asked sharply.

“Oh, nothing to alarm the most devoted uncle. He has eaten something which has disagreed with him, that’s all. He and three other boys in the same bedroom. The disturbance began just before getting-up time this morning and continued for some hours. The usual symptoms, you know. We had to excuse all four from lessons this morning.”

“You think he is well enough to go out?”

“Oh, I should think so. I imagine the trouble has cleared itself. We cannot think what it could have been, they have had the same food as all the others.”

“I gave him a cake and some chocolate——” began Hambledon.

“Three days ago, it couldn’t be that. Some allergy which we have not yet discovered, perhaps, though it’s odd that the four roommates should all have it.”

Hambledon laughed suddenly and the Director asked what amused him.

“A most disrespectful thought, forgive me! I wondered whether perhaps your ill-used science master was taking an appropriate revenge.”

The amused Director said that he did not think that such a scheme would ever occur to the good Kaganovich. “He has not that sort of mind. But perhaps it would be unwise to suggest it.”

Kaspar came out looking a little pale and less overflowing with energy than usual, but said he was quite well enough to go out for a quiet walk somewhere. Down by the river, perhaps?

They strolled off together and Hambledon asked him if he often had attacks like this. Kaspar smiled politely and said no, not as a rule. He shot Hambledon a look out of the corners of his eyes and Tommy immediately rounded on him.

“Come on, what have you been up to?”

“Oh, nothing much. I think it was the pork made us sick, it was rather fat. Either that or chewing raw—what do they call it? Let’s speak German now we’re alone—raw rhubarb.”

“Heavens above, boy, is that what they feed you on here?”

Kaspar chuckled. “Oh no, Uncle Hugo. We found it in a hut down by the river. A sort of log-cabin place, rather fun.”

“When was this?”

“Last night. Or early this morning. I haven’t got a watch but Eugene can tell the time by the stars. His father taught him, he’s a sailor.”

Hambledon took Kaspar by the arm, led him to a sunny bank by the riverside and sat him down with a salutary bump.

“You’ve been breaking out,” he said.

“Oh yes, Uncle Hugo. Such fun.”

“I’ve a darned good mind to thrash you myself,” said Hambledon angrily. “Or give up this ridiculous attempt to get you out of the country. You’re quite old enough to know better. Didn’t I tell you the other day to keep out of trouble at all costs? I thought you could understand a simple order like that. You are a fool. I think I’ll just go home and report that you are not worth troubling about. Don’t open and shut your mouth like a fish”—for Kaspar was trying to break in between every sentence—“you annoy me.”

Kaspar bent his head and did not answer. He had never been spoken to in that manner in all his life and the impact was staggering.

“I thought you promised me that you would behave yourself.”

Still no answer.

“You know very well how much hangs on all this and yet you haven’t got the common intelligence to do what you’re told.”

Hambledon glanced at him and saw a tear rolling down the averted cheek.

“I’m sorry,” snuffled Kaspar, “but it isn’t as simple as you think.” He produced a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

“I’d better tell you all about it,” he added meekly.

“I should jolly well think you had!”

Kaspar sighed deeply and started. “There are four of us in one little room. I think they were built for studies or something, anyway, we sleep in

them now. They're not in the house, they're sort of wooden buildings in the grounds."

"I've seen them."

"Well, Nikolai, Eugene, Dmitri and I sleep together. It's so easy to slip up the window and get out. You just step out," pleaded Kaspar.

"Isn't there anyone about at night?"

"Only the old watchman and he walks about with a lantern. It's easy to dodge him."

Hambledon reflected that if boys were not caged up more effectively than this it was absurd to expect them to stay in their rooms all night. No boy would.

"Are you the only ones who get out?"

"I think so. The others—they know it wouldn't be allowed so they don't think of doing it. Nikolai, Dmitri and Eugene were like that, too, till I talked to them."

Hambledon's memory reproduced the voice of the Director of Studies saying: "Kaspar, in my opinion, is a born leader."

"Well?"

"So we took to roaming round the grounds—look here, do light a cigarette, won't you? You don't look nearly so savage when you're smoking."

"Get on with the story!"

"Yes, Uncle Hugo. We found a place behind a clump of bushes against the wall where there's a sort of passage under the wall. Do you call it a culvert? I'm not quite sure what a culvert is, actually. It used to be where the drains ran out into a ditch but they don't use it now."

"I should hope not," said Hambledon.

"So we've been slipping out that way at nights, oh, for weeks. Ever since soon after I came here. But, Uncle Hugo, after you told me to keep out of trouble I didn't go again, not till last night, I didn't, honestly, Uncle Hugo!"

"Then why go last night?"

"Because Dmitri, Nikolai and Eugene wanted to know why I suddenly wouldn't go. That's what I meant just now when I said it wasn't so simple as you think. You see, if you suddenly leave off doing something you've always been keen on doing, people want to know why. Don't they?"

“There is that,” admitted Hambledon. “But couldn’t you think up a reason for not going any more?”

Kaspar shifted uneasily. “That wasn’t so simple, either, actually. These Russians, you know, don’t seem to think along the same lines as we do, if you know what I mean. They don’t do things for the same reasons as we do. Haven’t you noticed that?”

Hambledon nodded.

“They would stop going out because they were afraid of being caught, or because one of the other fellows had seen them and would tell on them. They’re taught to tell on each other, actually, it’s a sort of civic virtue.”

“Kaspar.”

“Yes, Uncle Hugo?”

“Do you think you could make a determined effort to stop saying ‘actually’ in every sentence?”

“Oh, do I? I’m so sorry. I don’t know I do it, you know.”

“Carry on,” said Hambledon, taking out his cigarettes and lighting one, an action which Kaspar noticed with relief but without comment.

“It’s no use telling the Russians you’ve suddenly got religious convictions because they don’t have them. It’s no use saying you don’t think it’s fair to the others. It’s no use saying anything, they’d only think I was finking after last time and I can’t have——”

“After last time?” said Hambledon sharply.

“Oh, Uncle Hugo, how you do catch one up! If one stops doing anything there’s always a last time, isn’t there?”

“What happened on the last time you went out before last night?”

“Nothing special,” said Kaspar stubbornly.

“Which night was it?”

“Can’t remember.”

“All right. Let’s go back to the school and I’ll ask Nikolai, Dmitri and Eugene.”

Kaspar turned scarlet with fury. “How dare you! Because I have to let you pretend to be my uncle! When we get out of here to somewhere civilized you’ll have to call me ‘Sir’! Remember that, please!”

Hambledon threw back his head and laughed till the tears came. “Sorry, Your Majesty,” he spluttered.

Kaspar's anger subsided and a slow grin spread across his face.

"You know, anybody'd think you were a schoolmaster," he remarked.

"I was, once. A long time ago. Well now, having thoroughly insulted each other, let's get back to the story."

"Actu—sorry. I really don't know why I'm jibbing like this except—well—I don't like to talk about it. I don't even care to think about it, actually."

Hambledon let the word pass and asked gently: "What did you do that night?" A look of surprise crossed Kaspar's face and Tommy hastily changed the question to: "What did you see?"

"Some M.V.D. men hanging a dead man. On one of those trees over there. You knew about it, did you?"

"No. I guessed, that's all."

"We found a boat," said Kaspar, talking faster and faster, "so we paddled across the river. We'd just got up near the trees when a car came along and stopped and some men got out so we scooted behind those bushes. The car had come from the factory, we thought that was queer. We thought somebody'd been stealing something and was going to hide it, they were carrying something. Then they got nearer and it was a man. One of the M.V.D. men climbed up a tree with a rope and the other two held the man up and the man in the tree did something—he tied the rope, of course—and then the other two let go and he dangled." Kaspar gulped. "I was sick. You know," he added as one expert to another, "it's very difficult to be sick quietly."

"It is, isn't it?"

"Well, then the M.V.D. men stood about and one said he'd got a bright idea. He——"

"For heaven's sake," said Hambledon, "how far away were you?"

"Oh. About as far as that stone."

Twenty yards or so. "Go on," said Hambledon.

"He said now they'd got the car why didn't they go back to the factory and load up with—I didn't know the word but Nikolai told me it was binder twine. His father's a farmer. Then they'd swap it for half a pig from that farm over there," said Kaspar, pointing across the river. "Then one of the others said they'd be shot for that, taking pork into the office, and the first one said, 'Not the office, you fool. My little hut down by the river.' So they went back to the car and turned and went back to the works. Oh, the man

said the farmer'd cook it for them, too. We hung around and they weren't in the factory long. They drove away again and went off up the turning to the farm and we went home."

"I see," began Hambledon.

"So you do see, don't you, how difficult it was to refuse to go again after I'd been sick and the others weren't? Nikolai and Eugene said he was dead before they'd hung him up and Dmitri went and waggled his foot and said he was nearly cold then. They'd seen lots of dead men but I never have as it happens. I couldn't admit that so I said I'd seen a woman burnt alive and she squalled like a dozen tomcats. It wasn't true," said Kaspar, turning his incredibly blue eyes on Hambledon, "but one must keep one's end up, mustn't one?"

Hambledon blinked. "Oh, by the way, how did you know the M.V.D. men?"

"Everybody knows them. People point them out to each other. It was broad moonlight that night, if you remember."

"And last night's expedition?"

"Eugene knew where their hut is, the gardener told him. We didn't see why brutes like that should have pork after what they'd done because I expect they'd killed that man, hadn't they?"

"Actually," said Hambledon and Kaspar laughed aloud. "In point of fact," amended Tommy, "I believe he committed suicide. About last night?"

"Nothing in it," said Kaspar. "We went to the hut, got the door open, found the pork in a tin box and took it away. There wasn't an awful lot, not nearly half a pig. We were hungry so we ate a lot of it and threw the rest in the river, coming home. It was rather fat and we felt a bit queer after it and Dmitri said that rhubarb had a medicinal effect and would do us good. I didn't know what it was, the word he used I mean, but when he showed me I knew, of course. There's some in the garden of that burnt house along there, so we pulled some sticks and ate them. We knew better than to eat the leaves," he added proudly. "They're poisonous, aren't they? Dmitri's father is a doctor. Then we came in and went to bed. But not for long," said Kaspar, and sighed.

"We'd better go back," said Hambledon, and got up. "Come on, Kaspar. I think the sooner I get you out of Poltava the better."

Kaspar put his arm through Hambledon's. "In point of fact," he said primly, "I am inclined to agree with you."

HAMBLEDON was fairly well pleased with his progress so far. He had arrived at Poltava, routed Dadyan, established himself at the factory and won Mantov's confidence, got the upper hand of the M.V.D. leader Filline and been accepted as Kaspar's devoted uncle. So far, so good, now to get away out of the country and take the boy with him. Not only out of the country but right out of the sphere of Russian influence, beyond the Iron Curtain, a journey of nearly a thousand miles in a straight line as the aeroplane flies to the nearest point, Vienna. It was no use going south, that would only take him to the shores of the Black Sea with no means of crossing it to Istamboul. Vienna, then. There were three means of transport: train, road and air. The railways were practically impossible, so strict is the Russian system of controls, permits to travel and continual inspection of papers en route. Hambledon had learned a great deal about rail travel in Russia on his journey to Poltava and then he had been upon official business. No, trains were out of the question.

Road travel was not much easier. It was impossible to buy a car for private motoring even if he had the money and his job at the Poltava factory did not require the use of an official one. He considered changing his job for one which did require a car, but the prospect was obscure to put it mildly. Besides, it would certainly mean his leaving Poltava. It would therefore be necessary to steal a car. Tommy had no moral objection to car-stealing and probably it could be done, but there was sure to be a permit system for obtaining petrol. And, probably, passes to show one's right to take a particular journey. Perhaps Filline had some in the M.V.D. office, Hambledon filed that idea for further consideration. Money would be needed for a journey like that and he had very little money. His pay was not large since food and accommodation were provided for him; Varkin had advanced him his first month's salary but it did not amount to much. Finally, there was the boy; so difficult to explain away, so easily recognizable.

If Kaspar could be made to appear to have something the matter with him which was only curable by some specialist in Berlin. Nonsense. Hambledon was not a doctor to know what was required; Kaspar could not be expected to keep up any pretence well enough to deceive a genuine doctor and finally, if he were really believed to be ill, he would be sent to a Russian hospital. Nonsense.

By air, then, and Hambledon could not himself fly any aeroplane. He would have not only to steal the aircraft but also to coerce the pilot. Persons who have someone else's revolver chilling the backs of their necks are readily persuadable as a rule, but a thousand miles is a long run and pilots are usually alert and energetic young men. Imagine trying to fly a thousand miles with one eye on the map, the other on the country below if it were visible and—er—a third on the pilot? Besides, he did not know the country over which they were going to fly. A compass course. Yes, but how was he to know when he had arrived in safety? What was to stop the pilot agreeing cheerfully to everything he said and then landing the aircraft within Soviet territory—or faking engine trouble—the pilot would know perfectly well that one does not shoot the pilot of an aircraft one cannot fly oneself any more than one shoots the driver of a fast-moving car. Bluff, and a thin bluff at that.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Tommy to himself, “I have bitten off something this time. If there is a possible scheme, will it kindly present itself?”

It would be a help to have somebody as well as Kaspar in the aircraft with him if only to intimidate the pilot while Hambledon conned the route, but he could trust no one. As the British Major of Intelligence had told him in the jail in Berlin, we had nobody in Poltava.

In the meantime, the neighbourhood seemed to be suffering the onset of an attack of jitters. There was not any ascertainable reason for it but there was nervousness in the air and it was spreading. Mantov, the factory Director, had spoken to Hambledon about it.

“Something is going to happen,” he said. “I feel it as one feels the imminence of thunder.”

“You are overworking,” said Hambledon. “You are too conscientious, you're letting the work get on your nerves. You want a holiday.”

“Heaven knows I do but I shan't get one. No, Comrade Britz, it's more than that. I have lost the confidence of my workers. We were, considering all things, a fairly happy family in the factory and my workers knew they could talk to me openly, either in the shops or at my house after hours. Now they never address a word to me and if I try to talk to them they hardly answer. If they're talking to each other they stop when I come along.”

Hambledon frowned, for he liked the man. “Do you think there's some story going round?” he said. “You know what workers are like, and not only workers if it comes to that! Some incident misinterpreted, some remark misunderstood——”

“That’s always liable to happen in any community, but until recently they would have come to me and said: ‘Comrade Mantov, we have heard—’ so-and-so. No, it’s more than that,” repeated Mantov drearily.

“Someone starting a whispering campaign?”

Mantov nodded.

“Any idea who it is?” continued Hambledon.

Mantov looked at him. “I have no sort of proof.”

“There never is in these cases. Tell me, among so many people who are looking worried, is there anyone who looks pleased? Not openly, of course, but when he thinks himself unobserved?”

“You are very acute, Comrade. Probably, but I have not seen it. That is one drawback of being the Director, you know, people see one coming.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open on your behalf,” said Tommy.

“Oh, they see you coming, too.”

A sudden light dawned upon Hambledon. “Is it on my account, do you think, all this mistrust?”

Mantov hesitated. “No one has said so, but I think it may be. I hate to say it, Comrade Britz, since if I may say so I regard you as a friend. It is probably your background. It is no secret that your identity card was endorsed by Andrei Varkin, who is already high in the M.V.D. and likely to rise higher. Forgive me, he is probably a friend of yours, I don’t mean anything personal. No doubt he is a charming man. Also, it is plain that you have Filline in your pocket and he is the M.V.D. to us. You must know that everyone fears the M.V.D., that is what you are for, is it not, to be feared?”

“I am not, myself, a member of the M.V.D.,” said Hambledon steadily. “I give you my word of honour for that.”

Mantov sighed with relief. “I could not think you were, you are not that type,” he said frankly. “But you must admit that it’s no wonder people think you are.”

“I suppose not.”

“And they ask themselves for what purpose is an M.V.D. man planted in our factory?”

“Quite. What shall we do about it? Put a notice on the factory notice board? ‘Comrade Britz disclaims the honour of any connection with the M.V.D.’?”

Mantov did not smile. "Perhaps some occasion will arise for making it plain," he said. "There is also a certain amount of trouble in the town."

"What? Well, that can't be on my account, I'm hardly ever in the place."

"When a hawk hangs over a farm all the chickens scatter."

"Oh. Oh dear. I don't know what I can do about it, do you? Let's hope it dies down, shall we?"

When the factory closed for the day Hambledon rang up Filline.

"Haven't seen anything of you for a long time. Come and have dinner with me in my rooms tonight, will you? My landlady can cook."

Filline overflowed with thanks and came. The dinner was not particularly good but Tommy preferred to entertain Filline at home rather than visit the M.V.D. office himself or be seen with the man in one of Poltava's restaurants. They talked of indifferent matters while the woman was coming in and out with dishes of soup, a stew of unidentifiable ingredients and cheese. Filline was quite amusing about some of his film experiences and Tommy gave him a good mark for not referring to the fighting round Stalingrad. Finally the woman cleared the table and left them with glasses and a bottle of Crimean wine.

Hambledon refilled his guest's glass and asked how his parish was behaving.

"Quite well, Comrade, thank you," said Filline slowly. His forehead wrinkled and he added: "At least, I think so."

"What? I thought you knew the inmost secrets of every heart."

"Not quite, Comrade Britz. I know more than they think I do, which is always something."

"It is indeed. Will you have a cigar? Or a cigarette?"

"Cigarette, thank you very much. No, the town's apparently quiet enough."

" 'Apparently,' Comrade?"

"Yes. I have not, myself, noticed anything but the local chief of police, who, of course, makes regular reports to me, says that everybody's got the wind up."

"Really?" said Hambledon in a surprised voice. "What on earth about? American atomic bombs?"

"No, Comrade, no. Merely some local uneasiness. Nothing much, you know, only a lot of little things that do not make sense. For example: the

Mayor is a widower with five daughters looking after him, aged—what—sixteen to twenty-eight, I suppose. One of them is quite pretty,” said Filline reminiscently. “Well, he has packed them all off to an aunt in Moscow, he says their health requires a change. I daresay it does, but why send all five off at once and leave himself with one frowsy old servant to cook for him?”

“Unreasonable,” agreed Hambledon.

“People have been selling things. I myself was offered a very nice emerald ring, heaven knows to whom it belonged originally. I did buy a silver cigarette box through so many intermediaries that I don’t know who was selling it. And so on.”

“What does it all add up to?”

Filline seemed to think that he had been talking rather too much. “Probably nothing at all. You know what provincial towns are. Everybody is everybody else’s cousin and whenever some silly rumour gets started they all run together and whisper violently in corners.”

“Yes, but surely they whisper about something.”

Filline shrugged his shoulders and emptied his glass, which Hambledon promptly refilled.

“There is always a chatterbox or two, Comrade Filline. Take one of them out to dinner and make him drunk.”

“I did. Three of them, separately. They knew nothing, of that I am sure.”

“Make love to the ladies.”

“That is the most suspicious symptom of all, to my mind. I am no longer allowed to visit the ladies.”

“Shattering,” said Tommy, and Filline laughed.

“Very boring, anyway,” he said, and seemed about to embark upon anecdote but Hambledon cut in first.

“But surely you know whether it’s something they’re doing themselves or something they are afraid will happen to them?”

“I think the latter,” said Filline slowly. “People don’t try to get away if they’re engaged in something important.”

“Such as a little local revolution, for example?”

“Have you heard anything, Comrade?” asked Filline bluntly.

“Not a word,” said Hambledon. “There’s only one thing I have noticed, and that’s so slight that I may be imagining it all. I did think that people are

not now so willing to talk to me as they were when I first came. It may be only my novelty wearing off, of course.”

“What is worrying me,” began Filline, upon whom the good Crimean wine was beginning to take effect, “I’m worried.”

Hambledon refilled the Russian’s glass.

“In what way? Have a cigarette.”

“Thanks. What I want to know is, do I report it or do I not report it? Eh?”

“I should say that that depended entirely upon whether you have anything definite to report, doesn’t it? If you send in a lot of rather vague stories and there’s nothing behind it all——”

“I shall lose my job an’ get shent to Shiberia.”

“That seems rather drastic,” said Hambledon.

“Ah. You do not know what happened in Moscow. Very—very tricky place, Moscow,” said Filline, screwing up his classic nose in a most unexpected manner.

“I expect so. Well, suppose something happens and you haven’t reported all this?”

“I get shent to Shiberia.”

“Well, if you’re going to be sent to Siberia anyway, why not have an easy time while you can?” said Tommy, who certainly did not want hordes of official investigators in Poltava while he was there.

“Comrade Britz, you are quite right. Are you not?”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything in it, really.”

“Comrade Britz, you are very wise.”

“Splendid,” said Hambledon, and soon thereafter speeded the parting guest. Filline sober and on his best behaviour was a bore, but Filline drunk and becoming confidential was a shocking bore. Hambledon had found out what he wanted to know: Filline knew nothing and had not reported any of the symptoms.

Early next morning Hambledon rang up the Director of Studies at Kaspar’s school and asked, as he always did, for permission to take the boy out that afternoon.

“I am sorry, Comrade Britz. I’m afraid it is impossible this afternoon.” The Director’s voice sounded tired and strained.

“Oh. That’s a pity. May I ask why, Comrade Director?”

“There has been a—er—a certain unfortunate and distressing occurrence here, Comrade Britz, and the police have ordered that none of the boys are to be allowed out today. They are, in fact, confined to their classrooms.”

The police! What the hell had Kaspar——

“Is my wretched brat involved in it, whatever it is?”

“Let me reassure you, Comrade Britz. There is no evidence whatever to suggest that your nephew had the faintest connection with the affair.”

“I am delighted to hear it,” said Hambleton.

“I am sure you are. If I may say so without offence, Comrade Britz, your sigh of relief was fully audible at this end of the wire.”

Hambleton laughed, but the Director did not.

“I am sorry,” said Tommy sympathetically, “that you have been involved in any sort of trouble.”

“Thank you. Will you ring again tomorrow morning? Perhaps the restrictions may be lifted by then. I hope so. Goodbye.”

“Now what the plague,” said Hambleton, replacing the receiver, “is all that about? Police, indeed.”

He took up his hat, for he had spoken from his own rooms before going out, and departed for the factory. It was immediately plain that something serious had happened, for all Poltava’s town police seemed to be on duty at once. Hambleton did not go through the town on his way to the factory but he had to cross the West Bridge, an uninspired iron structure, and pass along a few hundred yards of unimportant streets tailing off into lanes such as are found upon the outskirts of every country town. There were a couple of policemen at each end of the West Bridge, stopping everyone, examining their papers and asking them, it seemed, one question. All the passers-by replied with a shake of their heads and were then allowed to go on. Hambleton came up to the bridge in his turn.

“Your papers, please, Comrade.”

“Certainly, Comrade.” He handed them over to be cursorily glanced at and returned.

“Now, Comrade, have you seen five boys in the uniform of the Poltava State Gymnasium anywhere about this morning?”

“No. No, I certainly haven’t.”

“Thank you. Pass on, please.”

The school uniform, which was of a rather violent shade of blue, consisted of a loose blouse held in at the waist with a leather belt, knickers, stockings and rather low boots. It was topped off with a flat blue cap with a shiny black peak. Kaspar's opinion of it was as nearly obscene as his limited vocabulary allowed; he said, and rightly, that it made him look like a baggage porter. It was quite obvious that there had been a breakout from the school but that, unlike Kaspar and his three fellows, these boys had not returned before the morning light. In fact, not at all.

"Poor little beasts," said Hambledon to himself, "what will happen to them when they're caught?"

The police were systematically searching the houses in the street as Hambledon passed along. It was a poor district, the wooden weather-board houses were in bad repair, their roofs patched and panes missing from the small windows. They stood a little back from the street with dusty patches of ground in front which should have been gardens; sagging lengths of wire between uneven posts took the place of fences. The police procedure was simple; house by house they ordered the inhabitants out upon the road in all stages of disarray, age, sickness or infancy, searched the house and ordered the people back. They were not taking anybody's word for it that they were not harbouring truants. Hambledon had to go into the road to pass one of these little groups and he noticed that they were all silent. No complaining, no jibes, not even backchat. No "Turning into boy-catchers? Try a butterfly net," no helpful suggestions about looking for footprints or borrowing old so-and-so's ferrets. They just stood there looking frightened.

"I think your police are wonderful," murmured Tommy sarcastically, and went his way.

12

HAMBLEDON was allowed to take out Kaspar on the afternoon of the following day and Kaspar himself suggested that they might go for a nice long walk if Uncle Hugo did not mind. "I haven't had any exercise since the day before yesterday," he said. "One gets sort of stodged, doesn't one?"

"One does," said Hambledon, and set a good pace along one of the long straight roads leading out of Poltava. There were flat fields on either hand

stretching for miles towards the horizon with neither hedge nor fence to divide them. Indeed, why should they be divided since they were no longer owned by different people? Only the changing colours of various crops chequered the countryside and that only at long intervals, for this was Collectivized Farming at its most collective. It is said that there are fields in the Ukraine so vast that they are measurable in miles, not acres; a tractor man starting to plough a furrow in the morning will finish the same furrow that night twenty miles away. Hambledon remarked that whatever might be said in favour of collectivized farming it made the countryside most deplorably dull.

“I think the whole place is,” said Kaspar. Hambledon looked at him with raised eyebrows and he amended his remark. “Not dull in the sense of nothing happening, but depressing. Like a prison.” He waved an explanatory hand at the wide fields. “Uniformity, uniformity,” he said.

Hambledon reminded himself that Kaspar had spent the whole of his life so far being tutored by a professor of English literature. “By the way,” he said suddenly, “how many languages can you speak?”

“German, of course. English, French and enough Russian to scramble along in. I’m not getting on very fast with Russian,” he added. “Speaking it is one thing but writing and reading it is quite another.”

“It’s their awful alphabet,” began Hambledon and realized at once by the glance Kaspar threw him that he was missing something. He laughed and asked what it was.

“Obvious. So convenient. If you’ve put something wrong in an exercise you can always say that wasn’t what you meant at all. It’s just an error in expression.” His face clouded. “I don’t mind real lessons about mathematics or geography or languages, but oh, their dreary politics. That weary Lenin, that foul Communist ideology, that filthy list of deviationist Trotskyism and all the other minor prophets. Uncle Hugo, is it fair to have to cram up all that muck at my age? It isn’t fair, is it? We had a long lecture this morning on the evils of Menshevism. Hang Menshevism!”

“I don’t even know what it is,” admitted Tommy.

“Lucky you, that’s all.”

“Must you listen?”

“In order to write an essay about it,” nodded Kaspar.

“Oh lor’. Oh dear. Do you have much of this sort of thing?”

“At least an hour every day and two and a half on Sundays.”

Hambledon contemplated with awe the abysses of boredom laid open before him. “You aren’t having too easy a life, are you, Kaspar?”

Kaspar’s face suddenly took on the prematurely adult look which had so startled Hambledon at their first meeting. “I haven’t been taught to expect it. Kings don’t have easy lives.” Then his expression changed to impishness. “Bombs,” he said dramatically, “pistols and daggers, yes. An occupational risk as you might say. But I never expected anybody would set out to bore me to death!”

“About what happened yesterday morning,” said Tommy. “Would you rather not talk about whatever it was?”

Kaspar gave a little skip. “Good. I’ve won! I thought you’d simply have to bring up the subject if I kept off it for long enough.”

“Five boys broke out, didn’t they? That’s all I’ve heard about it. The Director told me that there was no evidence to suggest that you knew anything about it.”

“Nice old boy, the Director.”

“Yes, isn’t he?”

“Did you believe him?” asked Kaspar, walking backwards in front of Hambledon in order to watch his face.

“It might have been true. If they were in a quite different section or class or whatever you’re divided into, you might not even know them by sight. It’s a big school.”

“You’re quite right, Uncle Hugo. If one of them hadn’t been Leonhard Hoffenburg from Bereghark I shouldn’t have known anything about it. The other four were Greeks, they were stolen away from their homes when they were quite kids and brought up in Rumania. They’re big boys now, like Hoffenburg, all sixteen or so, but they haven’t forgotten Greece.”

“I don’t know much about it personally,” said Hambledon, “but I understand that Greece is not a country one forgets.”

Kaspar nodded. “I haven’t been there myself,” he said, “but Hoffenburg’s people lived there for years, so he could speak the language. That’s how he came to pal up with them. When they made plans to get out they offered to take him too, they said they’d look after him when they got home.”

“When,” said Tommy. “I think the outlook is pretty poor.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Uncle Hugo. They’re well away now. Slow but sure, you know. You see, it all happened like this——”

The six boys from Bereghark were not encouraged to cling together at the school, they were in different classrooms and dormitories, but they naturally met in the gardens and at meetings if not forcibly parted. Leonhard Hoffenburg was the eldest and Kaspar the youngest, but there was that about Kaspar which overpassed mere differences in age.

Hoffenburg loitered near Kaspar, who was setting out seedling lettuces for the good of his soul—he loathed manual labour—and asked in an audible voice if Kaspar had done with the line.

“In a minute, Comrade. When I’ve got to the end.”

“All right,” said Hoffenburg, and waited till some adjacent fellow gardeners had moved beyond earshot. “Listen, Groenwald,” he said, dropping his voice, “I and those four Greek fellows are making a bolt for it tonight.”

“You’re mad,” said Kaspar briefly.

“Not mad at all. You know those barges tied up at the factory wharf opposite? They’re loading machinery for the Crimea. Those big cases.”

“I’ve seen them.”

“We’ll open one of the cases, drop the junk in the river and get inside. We’ll take some cord and put it through knotholes or something in the side of the crate we’ve opened so that we can pull it shut from the inside.”

“What are the crew going to be doing all that time?”

“Getting drunk ashore. The porter told me, one of them is courting his sister and he’s getting leave tonight to attend the party.”

“But five of you can’t live in a packing case all the way to——”

“Certainly not. When we’re well away we come out.”

“But they’ll only give you up.”

“Oh no, they won’t. There’s only two men on the barge and there’s five of us, all armed.”

Kaspar’s eyes rounded. “What with?”

“Dinner knives, ground sharp on both edges. One of the Greeks did them yesterday on the grindstone when he was supposed to be sharpening shears. It’s only to get over the wall here and we’ll manage. Mustn’t talk any more, they’re beginning to look. Let me help you finish this row.”

Kaspar handed him some spare lettuces and said: “No need to get over the wall. I’ll show you. You must mind the night watchman too. He carries a light, you know.”

“I know that. We can dodge him. Do you mean there’s a way out?”

Kaspar nodded. “Quick, there’s somebody coming. What time? Hour after lights out—right—meet you by the potting shed—thank you very much, Comrade Hoffenburg, you have helped me a lot. Shall I roll up the line for you?”

The rest of the day dragged. Evening prep, supper, a talk on Soviet factory organization and bed. Lights out. The footsteps of Authority walking up and down the passages to ensure that the boys were settling down; outside the uncurtained window the darkness gathered slowly.

“Kaspar!”

Kaspar moved sluggishly.

“What is it, Dmitri?”

“Going out tonight?”

“No. Too tired. All that gardening.” He yawned audibly.

“So’m I,” said the voice from Nikolai’s bed. “Shut up and go to sleep, Dmitri.”

“I’m thirsty.”

“There’s some water on the shelf.”

“I want an apple.”

“Well, you can’t have one,” said Kaspar indignantly. “Even if we were going out we couldn’t start for another hour yet. There’s still people about. Have a drink and go to sleep.”

Dmitri obeyed and presently deep breathing told Kaspar that the other three were asleep. He slipped out of bed and dressed in careful silence. All very well to say an hour after lights out, how was one to know when an hour had passed? He watched from the window and drew back as a lantern came wavering along the path outside, the night watchman on his rounds. The light stopped and there was a muffled metallic rattle. Kaspar ventured a peep through the window and then a horrified stare. The night watchman had upended a bucket and was sitting on it apparently removing his boots.

At least, he took one off, shook it upside down and put his hand inside as Kaspar could see by the light of the small lantern. The night watchman paused for a long moment, took his knife from his pocket and began to work away at a nail which had come through the sole of his boot. Kaspar, biting his fingers with impatience, realized that of course this was fine for the fellows getting out but what must they think of him, he was late, they would be waiting——

The night watchman shut up his knife, put it back in his pocket and resumed his boot. He sat still for a little longer enjoying the comfort of having no nail pricking him and rose slowly to his feet, for he was elderly and rheumatic. He put the pail back against the wall and walked away, his lantern swinging at his knee. He turned a corner and in an instant Kaspar was out and after him. The trouble was that he was walking towards the potting shed. Kaspar, who had eyes like a cat in the darkness, made a detour to get ahead of him but there was not enough time. He came from behind the shed to see the lantern standing on the ground; within its weak circle of light the watchman was lying face downwards upon the earth and his body was surrounded by legs. Upright legs, with boys standing upon them in the ordinary way; it was only the macabre lighting which had startled him for a moment.

“Hoffenburg!” he whispered. “What——”

Somebody moved like a flash, the lantern seemed to leap at him with a shining blade at its side.

“All right,” said Hoffenburg. “Hide that light——”

“What have you done? You’ve killed him.”

“Sh—sh,” whispered Hoffenburg and one of the Greeks said something in a low voice and laughed softly.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing much,” said Hoffenburg, coming round to take Kaspar by the arm. “That pays for his mother, he said. Are you scared?”

“Of course not,” said Kaspar indignantly, controlling his trembling knees. “You have absolutely got to get away now. This way. Give me the lantern. They look out of the windows sometimes to see if he’s on the watch, I’ve seen them do it. Better keep it moving. Keep back, idiots, d’you want everyone to see you?”

The procession moved at the night watchman’s pace past the laboratory towards the outer wall.

“I’ll leave the lantern here, he doesn’t come further than this. Cover it with a flower pot, Hoffenburg, there are some just beyond you. No, don’t put it out, I’ve got no matches. Come on. Mind your heads when I tell you.”

“So I just led them out through the culvert,” said Kaspar to Hamledon, “and put them on the track to the river. I told them there was a boat but they said if they took it it would be a pointer which way they’d gone. They said they would go round by the bridge. I thought that was pretty risky. I felt I ought to go with them and row the boat back but honestly I didn’t think I

could, singlehanded. It was all the four of us could do to get it across the other night, it's so heavy. But I still feel I ought to have tried. What do you think?"

"Certainly not," said Hambleton curtly. "Out of the question. Don't think any more about it, you did quite enough for them."

"I don't know," said Kaspar doubtfully. "You see, one of them was one of my people."

They were sitting on the bank at the side of the road for a rest before returning to Poltava, and Hambleton looked sideways at his small companion. At thirteen he should have been entirely occupied with school lessons; food; various hobbies such as photography, silkworms and postage-stamp collecting; football, cricket and/or squash racquets and the prospects for the holidays. As it was he dealt capably with corpses and escaping prisoners—for what else were the Greeks—and lived among people who he knew perfectly well would certainly have him knocked on the head like a rabbit if they knew who he really was. If he lived to grow up he would be King either *de jure* or *de facto* of a small Middle European kingdom and, as such, a target for slander, intrigue and assassination. Even now, at thirteen, he was a pawn on the chessboard of international politics and this was why Hambleton had been sent to bring him to England. His Government-in-Exile wanted him there, under their own hands.

Kaspar looked round suddenly and said: "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. What did you do then?"

"Went back under the wall into the grounds. My idea was to wander round the grounds with the lantern as the watchman used to do. The later he was missed, the longer time they'd have to get away, naturally. So I went back to where we'd left the lantern and started to stroll round. It was a very dark night——"

Kaspar stopped abruptly.

"Carry on," said Hambleton, after waiting a moment.

"I—I'm ashamed of this bit."

"Just a moment, I believe I've got some chocolate in my pocket," said Hambleton. "Yes, here we are. I got it for you." He made some ceremony of unwrapping it and breaking it into squares, not looking towards Kaspar as he did so. "I hope it's all right, it's all I could get."

"Thank you," said Kaspar indistinctly, "it's jolly good."

“Queer things, corpses,” said Tommy conversationally. “One knows perfectly well that they can’t and won’t move but it’s very difficult to believe it. Especially in the dark, or with a small light.”

“Oh, does everybody find that?” said Kaspar in a joyful tone. “I thought it was me being a rotten funk.”

“Heavens, no. Everyone gets that crawly feeling. Nothing to be ashamed of at all.”

“You know,” said Kaspar, butting his head suddenly against Hambledon’s shoulder and then retreating again, “I am so glad we met. You are doing me no end of good. You are, ac—in point of fact, quite a ‘guy.’ ”

“American pictures penetrate to Bereghark.”

“Oh boy, and how!” said Kaspar in English.

“Let us continue to talk German. I imagine you soon found it was practically impossible to keep on walking round with that lantern.”

“Yes, that’s right. And I could not make myself go anywhere near the potting shed and it’s so difficult to avoid. All the wretched paths seemed to lead to it. So I had an idea. There’s a goat in the orchard, he keeps the grass down and eats the fallen apples if we don’t get there first. He’s tied up, of course, but they move him about. I wanted a bit of string but it’s kept in the potting shed, so I took a piece of that bast stuff off the tomatoes—they’re tied up with it—and I went and untied Trotsky. That’s what his name is. He has a collar, of course. I tied the lantern, it’s got a ring at the top, to his collar with the piece of bast and we went back into the gardens together and walked about. I was quite happy for a bit with Trotsky and he was so good! Then I began to think about the watchman again——”

“And I hope you went back to bed,” said Hambledon.

“Well, yes. Uncle Hugo, I tried not to look, but all the shadows looked like—pieces of—things——”

“Don’t I know! They always do. Kaspar, listen. Your trouble was that you hadn’t got enough to do. If you’re terribly busy getting some work done, no matter what it is, you don’t have time to worry about things. Your mind’s occupied. But just hanging about waiting for time to pass is, believe me, Kaspar, the most difficult thing there is. It would get on anybody’s nerves, anybody’s.”

“Even yours?” asked Kaspar and Hambledon looked at him quickly, but there was no trace of mischief this time. Kaspar really meant it.

“Heavens, yes. I’ve been frightened stiff times without number.”

“I feel better,” said Kaspar with a deep sigh. “I got into my room all right and the boys were asleep. I looked out of the window and there was Trotsky simply haring about and the lantern swinging like mad. The next I knew it was morning and they were ringing the rising bell. We had our breakfast in hall as usual but all the masters looked so stern and worried I knew they’d found the watchman. Then the police came and were all over the place and the M.V.D. men and all and we didn’t see the Director of Studies all day. Some of the boys said he’d been arrested but he was there this morning. We were all taken in for questioning one by one.”

“Including you?”

“Oh yes. Me especially because they’d seen Hoffenburg and me talking in the garden the day before. They asked me if he’d said anything to me about escaping and I said, ‘Oh no, Comrade, please, Comrade, he didn’t say anything to me.’” Kaspar looked at Hambleton with his eyes as round as moons and the childish mouth drooping at the corners. “‘Please, Comrade, he only wanted the garden line.’ So they said among themselves that of course he wouldn’t tell a baby like me anything and the M.V.D. man who presided, they called him Comrade Filline, he kept on nearly falling asleep, he said: ‘What’s this child’s name?’ and when they said it was Groenwald he told them to let me go, he knew my uncle. So that ended that.”

“Good. I do know Filline. What happened to the goat Trotsky?”

“Nothing. They thought he’d got loose. He woke up one of the masters by knocking over the garbage cans by the back door at about five o’clock. So the master got up to take Trotsky back to the orchard and tie him up again and on the way he found the watchman.”

“And the lantern?”

“They found that down near the main entrance. I expect the bast broke or came untied or Trotsky rubbed it off, I don’t know. I expect he got tired of it, it got in the way when he wanted to eat. They thought he was just—er—incidental.”

Hambleton sighed with relief. “Well, I think you got out of it extremely well. Mind you, you had some luck but I think you deserved it. Don’t worry any more about being scared in the garden, anybody would have felt the same.”

“Oh, I shan’t,” said Kaspar, thrusting his arm through Hambleton’s. “I shan’t think any more about it. If you can be frightened I can.”

THE PARTY ORGANIZER DADYAN, who hanged himself in his cell at the M.V.D. office in Poltava, was a person of more importance than anyone in Poltava realized. He was a factory inspector of high rank and considerable reputation among the inner circles of Soviet authority; his willingness to go from place to place as a mere Party Organizer without the circumstance of high office or the assumption of great power only made his work the more effective. There are thousands of Party Organizers in the Soviet Union and Dadyan, who was not in any way imposing in appearance, passed as merely another of them. In point of fact he was sent wherever it appeared that muddle and inefficiency were holding up production and his reports and recommendations were received with an attention which would have surprised and pained those who daily associated with him. He talked all the time about Party Organization—how he talked!—but there was very little about factory management which escaped those sharp little eyes. Small provincial factories were his line of country; when he had completed his report about the Collectivized Farm Machinery Factory at Bereghark he had been sent on to Poltava.

When, therefore, Filline's careful account of Dadyan's "suicide while of unbalanced mind" was received at headquarters, it was not filed away and forgotten. It was read with interest, commented upon and finally disbelieved. Dadyan was not the sort of man to overwork himself into a fit of depression, let alone commit suicide. He was self-confident to a fault, energetic and possessed of great vitality, and even his most intimate companions in Moscow had never been allowed to discover his weak point, an absolute terror of physical pain.

An enquiry was ordered into the alleged suicide of Comrade Dadyan. Andrei Varkin, who had finished the investigation of sabotage at Amberg, was told to take up the case. He did so, with more than usual interest. Poltava, that was the place to which Comrade Britz had gone, that capable but violent man. Hambleton had done his best to give himself a desperate reputation and would have been pleased if he could have known how well he had succeeded. Varkin genuinely thought him capable of anything and departed for Poltava quite prepared to find that Dadyan had annoyed Hambleton and been destroyed in consequence.

Varkin arrived at Filline's office without notice, early in the morning before Filline came to work. His two subordinates were there and unlocked

for their alarming visitor the filing cabinet where the case records were kept; they were then ordered out of the room while Varkin browsed through the papers. There were very few records of a date later than Hambleton's arrival in Poltava; in less than five minutes Varkin was reading with absorbed interest Dadyan's account of meeting a Commissar Peskoff at Bereghark and a Comrade Britz at Poltava who were one and the same. He read it carefully twice and was drumming his fingers on the desk and thinking that here was a motive if ever he saw one, when the door opened and Filline rushed in.

Varkin looked up. "Good morning, Comrade Filline."

"Good morning, Comrade Varkin. Forgive me for not——"

"Is this the usual hour for you to arrive at your office?"

"No, Comrade. I was out upon an enquiry when one of my men came to tell me that you were here and I immediately——"

"It is a good custom for a man in authority to shave before going out in the morning," said Varkin, looking the young man over with an unfriendly eye. "It is also advisable to button the tunic correctly and not in the manner in which you have fastened yours."

Filline, who had sprung from bed and finished his dressing as he came through the streets, looked down and blushed hotly. "I was in great haste—I apologize, Comrade Varkin—I put duty before appearance——"

"Evidently," said Varkin coldly. "You are a sloven." He dropped his eyes to the paper he had been reading. "What do you know about this?"

"May I see, Comrade?"

Varkin threw the paper at him and Filline recognized it with horror.

"I thought this had been destroyed long ago," he said unwisely.

"Destroyed! Why? An official denunciation by a trusted Party official? Are you in the habit of destroying papers of this nature? How dare you give me such an answer?"

Filline pulled his wits together.

"Out of respect for the memory of a dead comrade. There is no doubt that the late Comrade Dadyan was not in his right mind when he wrote that. He had been strange in his manner for days, even the factory staff had noticed it."

"Indeed."

"Yes, Comrade."

“I will see the factory staff. In what way did you consider his manner to be strange?”

Filline had not thought it necessary to discuss with Hambledon any details of Dadyan’s mental lapses. This was a very awkward question, suppose the factory staff gave a quite different account?

“He maundered on, as it were. He talked a lot but there was no sense in what he said. He would start a sentence and finish with a—a—an inappropriate ending. He accused people of the most extraordinary things. Like this,” said Filline, tapping the paper.

“That denunciation does not strike me as at all maundering. On the contrary. It is definite, concise, and particularly well expressed.”

“Perhaps when it came to writing he pulled himself together, as it were. A slower process than speaking and he would be able to read what he had written.”

“I am glad you thought him still capable of doing that,” said Varkin acidly.

“This may even be a fair copy,” persisted Filline. “In any case, one cannot expect a madman to be consistent.”

Varkin gave him a long stare and rose slowly to his feet, putting Dadyan’s denunciation in his pocket. “I am going to the factory now and we will see how far their account agrees with yours. In the meantime, you had better spend the morning tidying your papers, the condition of your records is a disgrace.”

“Yes, Comrade Varkin. Whatever you say——”

“It will at least make matters easier for your successor,” said Varkin, and walked out of the office without any form of farewell.

Filline waited until it was certain that Varkin was not coming back and then leapt at the telephone to ring up Hambledon at the factory.

“That you, Comrade Britz? Filline here. Comrade Varkin has been here and is on his way to the factory. He is here to look into Dadyan’s suicide.”

“Thank you,” said Hambledon’s voice at the other end. “What did you tell him?”

“That the poor man was out of his mind.”

“Well, that’s all right. If we all tell him that——”

“But he doesn’t believe it,” babbled Filline. “He says there’s nothing unbalanced about the denunciation——”

“The what?”

“Dadyan’s denunciation of you. I thought you took it with your other papers that time—you know, in my office, the first day we met. I gave you back your papers. When you were released from the cell. Comrade Britz, are you there? You came into my office, very angry, and I gave you back your papers. You must remember. I thought you had Dadyan’s statement with the rest. Comrade. Are you there?”

“Yes,” said Hambledon. “I remember now. You said something about a denunciation, so you did. So Varkin has got it. You had it there all the time. I see.”

“It was filed in the cabinet. I didn’t put it there. I didn’t see it again. I thought you had it, I didn’t even look for it——”

“I see,” said Hambledon again. “Never mind. We must manage somehow. Thank you for ringing up. Goodbye.”

He replaced the telephone and sat alone in his little room, looking at it. No use blaming the foolish Filline, it was his own carelessness. Filline had mentioned a denunciation and even quoted from it, but Hambledon had been in such a state of fury, hunger, thirst and general discomfort that he had not grasped the implications of the remark. He had been told that there was a written denunciation and he had not made sure that it was destroyed; after Dadyan’s death he had not thought about it again.

“I’ve slipped up,” he said. “Badly. And Varkin will be here any minute. I’d better go and warn Director Mantov. He’s got the jitters badly enough already, I hope this doesn’t send him right round the bend. I’d like a nice strong whisky and soda. I’d like a regiment of Household Cavalry and a couple of batteries of field guns. I’d like to wake up in bed at home and find this was all a dream. I’ve got something to talk myself out of this time, by heck I have, and there’s Kaspar too. My nephew, Kaspar. My nephew. If I get into a mess they’ll start thinking about Kaspar, who comes from Bereghark. Commissar Peskoff—that’s me—was at Bereghark. If they begin asking themselves questions about Kaspar——”

He got up abruptly, kicked the unoffending wastepaper basket and went to find Mantov, the factory Director, in the room with a carpet on the floor.

“Good morning, Comrade Mantov.”

“Good morning, Comrade Britz. Come in and sit down, I am very glad to see you.”

Hambledon did so. “I have a piece of news for you.”

“Good news?” asked Mantov.

“Oh, not too bad,” said Hambledon cheerfully. “I only thought you would like to know in advance that we are about to receive a visit from Comrade Andrei Varkin. He——”

Mantov slumped in his chair. “Andrei Varkin, the Deputy Assistant Chief of the M.V.D. for the whole Western area. Good God, what have we done to deserve this? I shall be ruined.”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Hambledon. “You have nothing to fear. Why should you be ruined?”

“I shall be. You will see, when he comes. He would not come all this way for nothing.” Then a happier thought occurred to Mantov and his face lit up. “Unless, of course, he has merely come here to see you. You are a friend of his, are you not? He was, perhaps, somewhere in the neighbourhood and he naturally seized the opportunity to come and see you. Anybody would. Is that, do you think, the explanation?”

“He is coming to enquire into the death of Party Organizer Dadyan, that’s all. You had no hand in it, you have nothing to fear. I said so, just now. It is only to answer all his questions frankly and freely.”

“Am I to tell him that you were arrested and dragged off to jail?”

“Of course. If you don’t, someone else will and then he will want to know why you suppressed the information.”

Mantov shivered. “I am to tell him everything, then? That the poor man was strange in his manner, too, or will he not like to hear that?”

“You all noticed that about him, did you not?”

“Certainly we did, Comrade. Larin, my Technical Administrator, and Zolkin, my Chief Engineer, were talking about it only yesterday. They said that for some days before he died he was odd in manner, not seeming to take in what was said to him and laughing when there was no joke.”

Hambledon was familiar, as we all are, with the backward-reflecting power of events upon men’s minds. There is no tragedy in life where someone does not say: “Ah, I knew something was going to happen to him, he was not himself for days beforehand.” In this case enough time had elapsed for the idea to spread from one mind to another until everyone who had encountered Dadyan in his last days remembered having noticed distinct signs of aberration. Great is the power of self-deception.

“Of course you will tell Comrade Varkin all about it. As I said just now, if you don’t others will, and it is material to the enquiry since it was the reason why he killed himself.”

“True,” said Mantov. “Very true.” He sighed deeply. “I used to think that Comrade Dadyan did not find it easy to understand what was said on account of our local Ukrainian accent, but no doubt I was wrong. It was more than that.”

“Poor man,” said Hambledon reminiscently.

Footsteps approached along the passage, the door opened and Varkin was announced. He came across the room with long strides and a happy smile, seized Hambledon’s hand in both his and shook it warmly.

“Comrade Britz, this is indeed a pleasure. There was a little business to be done here so instead of sending a subordinate I came myself for the pleasure of seeing you. How are you? I hope I see you very well. Is this _____”

“The Comrade Factory Director Gregor Mantov,” said Hambledon, “the Comrade Andrei Varkin.”

Varkin shook hands in the most friendly manner with Mantov, whose face showed such a mixture of emotions that Hambledon was reminded of the tragi-comic mask which laughs on one side of its face and weeps on the other.

“I am honoured,” stammered the Director, “honoured and delighted. Please sit down, here, in my chair. What can I offer the Comrade? A little vodka, some of the wine of the country, such as it is——”

“It’s extremely good,” put in Hambledon.

“Or a glass of tea? It is already becoming a little cold in the mornings now.”

“Thank you,” said Varkin, sitting down and beaming from one to the other, “I think a little vodka would go down very well. That is, provided you will both drink with me. Even the best vodka tastes better when shared with friends.”

Mantov appeared to be deprived of speech and produced in silence and with a shy smile the necessary equipment. They clinked glasses and drank.

“I am very glad,” said Varkin, “to see how happily you work together, it was obvious the moment I came into the room.”

“It would be impossible not to be happy working with Comrade Britz,” said Mantov earnestly. “His deep interest in all our little problems, his ingenious suggestions for dealing with our little difficulties—I should like to take you round the factory if you can spare the time, Comrade Varkin, and show you at least half a dozen improvements in layout and method which

were his ideas. I estimate that, at the end of the first full month since Comrade Britz came here, production will have gone up at least five per cent on his account alone.”

Varkin was quite genuinely surprised, and looked it. “You told me, Comrade Britz, that you had had some experience of production methods but I did not realize that you were an expert.”

“No, no,” said Hambledon with an embarrassed laugh, “Comrade Mantov rates my few poor suggestions far too highly. This is a new factory, as you probably know, and I arrived just at the moment when the inevitable small errors in layout and disposition began to be obvious. Comrade Mantov and I merely discussed them together and thrashed out the solutions.”

“I see this, at any rate,” said Varkin. “I sent down a stranger among strangers and I find a band of brothers.”

“That is very true indeed,” said Mantov. “Let me refill your glass.”

There was a pause which lasted long enough for Hambledon to say to himself that this was the moment, things would begin to happen now. Varkin turned to him and he braced himself for attack.

“Now tell me,” said Varkin, “how did you find your young nephew?”

Hambledon smiled lazily. “Very well indeed. Quite a bright lad and the Director of Studies seems pleased with him.”

“He’s being a good boy, then,” pursued Varkin.

“Oh, I think so,” said Hambledon indifferently, for he was anxious to keep Kaspar well in the background. “Mathematics seem his best subject, which will probably prove useful. How kind of you to remember him.”

There was another pause.

“The unimportant matter which was my excuse for coming here,” said Varkin, “was the unfortunate suicide of Comrade Dadyan.”

“We were all most upset about it,” said Mantov.

“Did you meet him?” said Varkin to Hambledon.

“For a brief moment only,” said Hambledon with perfect truth.

“What did you think of him? I want your frank opinion.”

“I thought he was mad,” said Hambledon bluntly.

“Did you? Why?”

Filline had said that Varkin had read the denunciation. It was probably in his pocket.

“He accused me of being an impostor and there was something of a scene. He said he had met me somewhere else—I forget where—under another name which also I forget. It began with a B. No, a P. Pestchanik—no.”

“Peskoff,” said the Director.

“Peskoff, of course.”

“And what did you think?” asked Varkin, turning to Mantov.

“I was horrified. Of course, I had only just met Comrade Britz for the first time but there was that about him which impressed me most favourably. Then Comrade Dadyan dragged me out of the room and started a tirade against him. I tried to calm him but it was no use. He had been odd in manner for some days before and we had all noticed it, but who would expect a man to break out like that?”

“And what happened then?”

Varkin dragged out the whole story, which was news to him, of Hambleton’s arrest, his imprisonment and release, Dadyan’s arrest and almost immediate release and subsequent suicide. Hambleton’s motive for murdering him grew stronger every moment.

“Let me get the timing right,” said Varkin. “You were released before Dadyan was arrested.”

Hambleton saw very plainly how Varkin’s thoughts were running. “That is so, but I didn’t see him at all that night. I was busy celebrating with your local chief, Filline. We had dinner together and after that he came along to my billet with me. We sat together talking until quite late.”

“So Filline was not at the office when Dadyan was brought in.”

“He couldn’t have been, he was with me. Probably that was why Dadyan was not detained.”

“Probably,” agreed Varkin, and relapsed into thought. In point of fact he did not believe a word of the story, he was convinced that Hambleton had killed Dadyan and staged a suicide to account for it. It was just the sort of thing he might be expected to do and Varkin rather admired the way he had managed the affair. Mantov, whose transparent honesty was obvious, plainly believed the suicide story, but such as Mantov would be clay in the hands of a man like Comrade Britz. Dadyan was dead, nothing would undo that, and Comrade Britz had proved his ruthless efficiency once again. Also, here was another strangle hold upon him, after this he would have to obey orders whatever they were. Varkin decided then and there that Dadyan’s death should remain suicide.

But Dadyan's account of having seen Britz at Bereghark calling himself Commissar Peskoff was quite another matter. If it proved to be true Britz was a double-crosser and probably a spy, certainly too dangerous to be allowed to live. A pity, when he might be so useful. There was a simple way of proving it and Varkin set about it at once.

He awoke from his abstraction with a start and apologized for it. "It has just occurred to me that I came away from my office without giving a most important order. I must be getting old, my memory is beginning to fail me. I must get to the telephone at once or the consequences may be disastrous. If you will excuse me——"

"Use my telephone, Comrade," said Mantov eagerly, "it is there before you. We will leave you with it, no doubt your business is highly confidential _____"

"Thank you most sincerely," said Varkin, who had no illusions about the silence and secrecy of office telephones, "but I must refer to some papers I have left in the town. I will come back this afternoon, if I may, I must collect some more evidence about poor Dadyan to complete the case. Have you a shorthand typist I could borrow—oh, splendid. I don't mind telling you that I'm sure you are right, the poor man was deranged and committed suicide, but we must go through all the formalities, you know. Then, when all that is cleared up, perhaps we could enjoy a few hours together this evening? Oh, how kind of you, I shall love to be your guest, Comrade Britz." He went out, exuding geniality with every gesture and left Hambledon and Mantov looking at each other.

"That went off very well," quavered Mantov, "didn't it?" He sat down with a bump as though his knees had failed him.

"Of course it did," said Hambledon stoutly, "why shouldn't it?"

"If only this afternoon's enquiry goes off as well," said Mantov doubtfully.

"We will go out tonight and celebrate," said Hambledon, clapping him on the shoulder. "Cheer up. There's the dinner bell, you'll feel better when you've had something to eat."

VARKIN'S enquiry into the death of Dadyan proceeded smoothly. The shorthand typist sat in a corner of a room and took down verbatim accounts from various witnesses of how Dadyan had spent his last days on earth. None of these accounts was particularly interesting but they all agreed that he was mentally unbalanced till even Varkin began to wonder whether it might not be true. One of his witnesses was the factory's doctor who had examined the body.

"In my opinion, suicide," said the doctor, and added his reasons for thinking so.

"Were there any marks of violence upon the body?" asked Varkin. "Marks of blows, bruises, anything like that?"

"He had some bruises of an indefinite kind. I mean, there were no regular marks such as are left by a flogging, for example, but he had bruised himself in various places shortly before death. It looked to me as though he might have fallen downstairs, or something like that. It happened indoors, whatever it was, there were no gravel abrasions such as one finds in, for example, a bicycle accident."

"I see," said Varkin thoughtfully, for the prospect of spending hours interviewing witnesses in an attempt to establish whether or not Dadyan had fallen down unspecified stairs in an unidentifiable house was not such as to appeal to a busy man. "It has been suggested to me that he was suffering from some kind of mental disturbance, can you tell me anything about that?"

"Not of my own knowledge," said the doctor. "I had not had occasion to speak to him for more than a week before his death, our paths did not cross very often. There was no reason why they should, our duties were entirely separate, as no doubt you know."

As a matter of fact the doctor had found Dadyan one of the world's most insistent bores and had avoided him whenever possible.

"Thank you very much, Doctor. Well, I think that's all," said Varkin, getting up from his chair. "If you will let me have three copies of those reports, Comrade Typist, I shall be grateful. Tomorrow morning will do, I shall be here again tomorrow." He patted the girl's shoulder absent-mindedly and strolled out to find Hambledon. It did not really matter whether Comrade Britz had liquidated Comrade Dadyan or not, it almost began to look as though he were innocent. This business about the Commissar Peskoff was much more serious if it were true, but tomorrow morning would settle that. A pleasant evening could therefore be enjoyed with a tranquil mind.

Hambleton also was thinking about his identification with Peskoff. Varkin was no fool and it would not be enough to discredit Dadyan's testimony. Hambleton put himself in Varkin's place, asked himself what he would do and answered himself that he would summon someone from Bereghark, show him Hambleton and say: "Have you ever seen that man before?" Then the someone from Bereghark would recognize him with a glad cry and the balloon would go up. Hambleton broke into a chilly perspiration and considered methods of escaping then and there. Stealing Varkin's car, for example, but there is not much the matter with the Soviet Union's telephone system and he would not get far before he was stopped. Besides, there was Kaspar.

There were no aeroplanes kept at the Poltava airport, which was not, properly speaking, an airport at all but merely a landing ground and refuelling point. Perhaps the best scheme would be to take Varkin out that night, shoot or stab him and drop him in the river with a little something to keep him down. But Varkin was important and the uproar arising from his disappearance would be colossal.

There came a tap at his office door and Varkin came in, saying cheerfully that he had mopped up that case and now let them enjoy themselves. "Let's take Mantov, shall we?" he said. "Let's take him out and make him tight. Do him good. Release his inhibitions and all that. Good little chap but he worries too much. Doesn't he?"

So they went out together, all three of them, and at two in the morning Hambleton found himself having to sleep in his armchair because Mantov, who had collapsed, was occupying his bed. Where Varkin was spending what was left of the night was not at all clear, certainly not in the hotel room which had been booked for him. Hambleton realized that if he had decided to kill Varkin he had been given absolutely no opportunity to do so and he wondered whether this had come about accidentally or whether Varkin had thought of that himself and taken precautions.

The morning came, Hambleton ministered to Mantov's aching head with aspirins and strong coffee and they went to the factory together at the usual time since there seemed to be no alternative. Varkin did not accompany them and the hours crawled slowly past until the bell rang for the midday dinner. The administrative staff, about a dozen all told including Hambleton, gathered in the "best" dining room and sat down to bowls of soup. Five minutes later the door opened and Varkin walked in, followed closely by a man whom Hambleton could not at first see because he was masked by the welcoming form of Director Mantov. Presently the group

parted and Hambledon saw that the newcomer was Wengel, the factory Manager from Bereghark.

He looked round the table from one to another and his eyes passed over Hambledon's face without even a glimmer of interest.

The diners all rose to their feet as introductions were made, "a friend of mine," said Varkin, "who is interested in factory management, so I brought him along." When the introductions were finished there was a sort of polite scuffle as two fresh places were laid; Hambledon distinctly saw Wengel turn to Varkin and shake his head slightly. Varkin, with a careless arm thrown round Wengel's shoulder, murmured something in his ear and Hambledon, whose hearing became unnaturally acute, could have sworn that Wengel answered: "No. None of them."

As soon as darkness fell upon the city of Bereghark, in the evening of the same day upon which Varkin arrived at Poltava, the Herr Wengel, Manager of the Bereghark Collectivized Farm Machinery Factory, hurried furtively through dark alleys to the great mass of the Citizen Building, once the Palace of the Bishops of Bereghark. He went up the stairs and along the same passages through which he had led Hambledon and Denton and tapped at the same door, it was opened to him by Kaspar's tutor, once a scholar of Trinity College, Oxford.

"Come in," said Edward Granger, "come in, my dear Wengel. I am glad to see you. Will you share my coffee? I have just made some."

"Thank you," said Wengel, "that would be very pleasant. The nights are beginning to turn cold." He sat down and loosened the scarf round his neck. "I have come to ask your advice. No, not quite that since it is too late for advice, I have come in the hope that you will tell me that I have done the right thing." He clasped and unclasped his hands, pulling at the fingers, and the lines of worry were deep across his forehead.

"I am quite sure," said Granger, taking a second mug from the cupboard, "that whatever you have done is for the best. Drink this, it is at least hot though I am sorry I have no sugar."

"Thank you," said Wengel, and began his story. "This afternoon there came a messenger from the M.V.D. office here to the factory and the managerial staff were called together to hear what he had to say. He asked first whether we had all been present when the Commissar Peskoff——"

"Ah," said Granger.

“—came to inspect the factory. We all said that we had been present. He then said that one of our number was to be ready to go by air to Poltava at six o'clock tomorrow morning.”

Wengel stopped for comment but Granger said nothing. He seemed to have been struck into immobility, one would almost have said that he did not breathe.

“To Poltava,” repeated Wengel. “The messenger said he didn't care who went but it must be someone who had seen Peskoff. Whoever was chosen to go must present himself at the airport at five-thirty without fail, for if the plane were kept waiting we should all regret it. Then he went away. I am not a quick thinker, Herr Granger, you will remember that our friend the Herr Hambleton said I was a fool and no doubt he was right, but I had plenty of time to think while all my colleagues found excellent reasons why they could not possibly go to Poltava. When I had cleared my mind I said that it was obviously my place to go. I am the Manager, I said, and if they have any questions to ask about our production methods I am the one to answer.”

“And they all agreed at once,” said Granger, moving at last.

“They all embraced me, said many flattering things about my courage and devotion to duty and stood me drinks,” said Wengel drily. “Now I want you to tell me whether I was right to volunteer to go.”

“I think you were not only right but very brave and quick-witted,” said Granger, and laid an affectionate hand on Wengel's knee.

“You talk like my colleagues,” said Wengel with a laugh so abrupt that it was more like a snort. “As for being brave, I am so frightened that I feel sick. But do you not agree that it looks as though Hambleton has reached Poltava? And that, by some frightful mischance, there is someone there who saw him here? For I do not believe for a moment what I told my staff, that they only want advice about our production methods.”

“I am sure you are right,” said Granger. “Otherwise, why this insistence that it must be someone who saw Peskoff?”

“Exactly,” said Wengel, drinking up his coffee. “So I shall go in the aeroplane tomorrow morning and if I do not die of fright before I get there I shall be in Poltava in three or four hours, I suppose.” He sighed and added simply: “I have never been in the air before and also there is the errand.” He seized Granger's hand. “Pray for me that I may not do anything stupid!”

“My dear fellow. My dear friend. You are so good and so devoted, I am sure you will do well. Listen. I cannot tell, of course, how it will be managed, but by some means, I am sure, you will be brought face to face

with Hambledon, either alone or among others. You have only to look blank and say you never saw him before in your life. It is only to seem uninterested, do not look at him more than at anyone else. Make yourself think that you don't know him."

"And if he greets me?"

"He won't," said Granger decidedly. "Do not worry about that, he won't. There is no fear of that."

"No. No, I suppose not. Of course not, he is far too clever. How I wish this were all over and I were back here again. I suppose there will be no chance of asking about our Kaspar? Would it not be reasonable to enquire about the boys from Bereghark?"

"I wouldn't," said Granger unwillingly. "It is tempting but you had better not. No, don't do it, Wengel, it is never safe to ask questions in the Soviet Union. It is not even as though you were one of the relations. No, leave that alone."

Varkin cheered up and his spirits became uproarious. He told stories that set the table in a roar, but for a few minutes Hambledon's head was singing so loudly that he could not hear what was said. He was thankful to be able to sit down again at the table and go on with his meal, though he had to discipline severely the hand which held the spoon because it was inclined to shake. After the dinner was over most of the company excused themselves as having work to do and left the room; Varkin, Mantov, Wengel and Hambledon gathered round the head of the table with a bottle of Crimean wine. Hambledon noticed with approval that Wengel was abstemious and pleaded gastric ulcers as a reason. "Also, my stomach was a little upset by the flight this morning, it was the first time I had ever been in the air. No doubt that sounds strange to you, Comrade Varkin, probably you fly from place to place every day."

"I do fly quite a lot," said Varkin, "it saves so much time. I am sorry if you were airsick."

"I don't think I was, really," said Wengel. "I think it was sheer fright. I am not a brave man and when the aircraft first took off I shut my eyes and was afraid to open them again. However, it soon passed off and by the time we landed here I was beginning to enjoy it."

"By the time you get home again you will be a seasoned air traveller," said Mantov politely. "Are you staying with us long, Comrade Wengel?"

“I am not sure,” hesitated Wengel, “how long my business will take,” and he glanced at Varkin.

“I think the Comrade will be with us for two or three days,” said Varkin. Hambledon took little part in the subsequent conversation and managed to give the impression that he found Wengel rather a bore. A nice fellow, but dull. Hambledon’s mind was bent upon the aeroplane, here was a chance which might not recur and if it was possible to arrange an escape Wengel could be relied upon to help him. Two or three days, surely something could be done in that time.

Varkin got up and said that he had some correspondence waiting at his office for him. “I must do it myself even if I only shut my eyes and tear it all up,” he said with his loud laugh. “May I leave Comrade Wengel with you for a little while, Comrade Mantov? You and he are in much the same line of business, you know. You can put each other up to all your swindles, can’t you? We’ll meet at the hotel later,” he added to Wengel, and patted Hambledon on the shoulder in passing. “You’re my guest tonight, Comrade Britz. We will show Comrade Wengel all the attractions of Poltava.” He went out of the room and a few minutes later they saw him pass the window in the blue Mercedes he drove himself.

Varkin was quite genuinely pleased with his experiment. The man from Bereghark—what a bore!—had not recognized the Commissar Peskoff, so Comrade Britz had been cleared of suspicion. Dadyan’s accusation was, therefore, all moonshine, those who said that he was out of his mind were probably quite right and his death was almost certainly suicide. However, there was still a little something to clear up at the M.V.D. headquarters since it appeared that Britz had been imprisoned there for at least three days, a fact which had emerged from Varkin’s enquiry at the factory. Britz, good fellow, had not complained, perhaps he thought that a few days in jail was a routine matter for newcomers to the Soviet Union, but there was something very wrong with the office organization. No up-to-date list of prisoners; in fact, no recent list at all, no mention in the office diary of Britz’s arrest, confinement and release, or of Dadyan’s visit on the night when he died. That fellow Filline was totally incapable, his appointment to Poltava was a piece of flagrant favouritism—Varkin objected on principle to favourites unless they were his own—and the sooner the appointment was terminated the better. He stormed into the office and found it tenanted only by one of Filline’s subordinates and the jailer, Ivan.

“What is your name?”

“Georg Chubar, Comrade.”

“Chubar, where is Comrade Lazar Filline?”

Chubar said that Filline had gone to a certain village, which he named, some twenty miles away, to look into a case of alleged hoarding of grain. Actually, Filline had gone there to be out of Varkin’s way.

“When do you expect him back?”

“To—tomorrow evening, Comrade.”

“Where is your companion?”

“This is his afternoon off, Comrade. I expect he has gone fishing. Shall—shall I go and look for him?”

“Certainly not. Send me in the jailer.”

Chubar rushed out of the room and the next moment the jailer came slowly in and stood just inside the door, holding it open as one prepared for immediate flight.

“Come inside. Shut that door. Come over here.”

“Yes, Comrade,” said Ivan, and unwillingly obeyed.

Varkin was in the habit of interrogating witnesses and in a quarter of an hour he had got the whole story out of Ivan, who could not lie because he was incapable of invention. The police had brought in the prisoner Britz, who had refused to answer any questions and become violent when searched.

“He hit me,” said Ivan, caressing his jaw, “hard. One of my teeth is still loose. So we locked him up until the Comrade Officer Filline returned from leave. How long? Oh, two or three days, not long. Yes, he objected very much. Prisoners do, you know, we did not take any notice. When Comrade Filline returned I asked him to sign a ration order for the prisoner, but when the Comrade Officer had looked at the prisoner’s papers he told me to release him.”

“Well?”

“So I did, please, Comrade.”

“What happened then?”

“Comrade Filline took away the prisoner Britz and an hour or so later the prisoner Dadyan was brought in.”

“By whom?”

“By the police, Comrade, who else?”

“By whose orders?”

“Comrade Filline’s, I heard him giving the order over the telephone. This telephone, Comrade.”

“Then?”

“Then the Comrades Chubar and Karas worked on the prisoner for a bit, I heard him squealing. After a time they called me in, he was sitting on the floor crying. They told me to put him in a cell, so I did. Later on I went along and looked into his cell in passing, he had hanged himself with his tie, Comrade.”

“And what did you do then?” asked Varkin with deceptive gentleness.

“Told Chubar and Karas and they came and looked at him. He was quite dead, Comrade, so we left him there till Comrade Filline came back from having dinner with the prisoner Britz. I suppose I ought to call him Comrade Britz now he is no longer a prisoner?”

“To you, all the men in the world are either Comrade so-and-so or prisoner so-and-so.”

“Yes, Comrade. To a jailer, that is how all men appear.”

“I see. What happened when Comrade Officer Filline eventually returned?”

“Chubar and Karas told him what had happened so he went along and also looked at the prisoner.”

“Go on. What did he say?”

“The prisoner? Nothing. He was dead.”

“Comrade Filline, blockhead. What did he say?”

“I do not know, Comrade. He and Chubar and Karas went into the office and shut the door. I was tired so I went to bed.”

“Leaving the prisoner Dadyan hanging?”

“Not for long, Comrade. We cut him down, put him in Comrade Filline’s car and drove out to the factory. Chubar went in for a few minutes and came out with a piece of the factory rope. Then we took the prisoner down to the trees by the river and hung him to a branch. That is all, Comrade. It did him no harm at all, being already dead.”

“I thought you said you’d gone to bed.”

“So I did, Comrade, but they got me up again. They are not very considerate, but I suppose they have to do their duty.”

“No doubt,” said Varkin, still in the same ominously gentle voice, “no doubt. We all have to, do we not? That will do, Comrade Jailer. Go now and

send me in Comrade Chubar. And Comrade Karas, if he has returned from his fishing.”

Ivan went out and found that Karas had returned, he and Chubar were discussing Varkin’s visit in anxious whispers.

“You are to go in, Comrades,” said Ivan cheerfully, “he wants to see you both. There is nothing to fear, he is very nice when you get to know him. He has a nice gentle voice, has Comrade Varkin. It is a pleasure to meet him.”

15

HAMBLEDON endeared himself to Mantov, who was busy, by offering to take Wengel upon a tour of the factory. It gave them an opportunity for private conversation; Hambledon had originally intended to discuss a scheme for escape which was beginning to form itself in his mind but he found Wengel in such a deplorable state of nerves that it was plainly inadvisable to burden him with a further prospect of excitement and danger.

“I wish they would let me go back at once,” said Wengel. “Why are they keeping me here? I was so sure that they only brought me here to recognize you, and Granger agreed with me. What else can they want me for? Two or three days, he said. I am terrified, Herr Hamb——”

“Comrade Britz.”

“There you are. I am absolutely terrified of doing something stupid and I have just given you an example. Can I not be taken ill and go to bed? Please?”

Hambledon privately thought this an excellent idea since the prospect of spending a couple of days with his heart in his mouth every time Wengel opened his was putting years on to his age. But Varkin was both intelligent and suspicious, if Wengel retired to bed a doctor would almost certainly be sent in.

“We’ll keep that idea in mind,” said Tommy soothingly, “and if things get too difficult that’s what we’ll do. But I don’t think we’ll do it now, Varkin might think it a little odd and we don’t want him thinking anything is odd.”

“Good heavens, no——”

“Try not to be so nervous, you are doing wonderfully well. You have only to sit and look amiable and not say much. Thank goodness, Varkin talks nineteen to the dozen and so do I, I will arrange it so that you can hardly get a word in even if you want to. By the way, have you really got gastric ulcers?”

“No. It was the only reason I could think of for refusing to drink any more. Why?”

“It doesn’t matter. You can go on using that as an excuse, it’s quite a good one. We are going to spend the evening together tonight, tomorrow morning it will be quite natural to stay in bed late to get over it. If he thinks you rather a sissy it can’t be helped, and——”

“He can think me blind, dumb, idiotic and semiparalytic for all I care,” said Wengel energetically.

“That’s the stuff. Tomorrow afternoon, if I can manage it, I’ll take you to the school to see someone you know.”

The evening dragged a little. Wengel, observant to Hambledon’s hints, merely sat and smiled; amiability, though a virtue in itself, is not enough to make a whoopee party and Varkin found him dull company. The Russian drew Tommy aside.

“Dull dog, this, isn’t he? I apologize for inflicting him upon you, but one must be civil. He could have gone back this evening but I may want his plane.”

“He can go back by train, can’t he?”

“It will take him nearly three days and I am not supposed to deprive factories of their managers to indulge my whims.”

“You brought him here to check Dadyan’s story, didn’t you?” said Hambledon with a laugh.

“Of course I did. I didn’t really believe it, my dear Britz, but it’s my job to make sure. No ill feelings?”

“Of course not! I should have done the same thing in your place.”

“I am very glad,” said Varkin, flinging an arm round Hambledon’s shoulders, “that it isn’t true. Very glad. Now, I’m going to ask you to do something for me, will you?”

“Delighted, whatever it is,” said Tommy enthusiastically.

“Nothing very much. These fellows at the M.V.D. office here are a set of incompetent slackers. No method, no routine. Filline spends his days drinking and chasing the girls, those two oafs he has got in the office can

hardly read and the jailer's half-witted. I have spent the afternoon getting the whole story out of them—Filline's away so they talked. You were abominably treated, why didn't you complain to me?"

Hambledon shrugged his shoulders. "Why should I? What's four days in jail when they're over? I didn't want to make trouble, besides, for all I knew, it might have been some kind of test."

"Which you passed with honours. No, I had nothing to do with it. What I want of you is this. Filline comes back tomorrow evening, I shall be told when he arrives and then I am going down there to arrest the lot of them. Well, I'm not nervous, but there are four of them all armed. Filline's a bonny fighter if nothing else, M.V.D. men are not sissies or they wouldn't be accepted, and I am all alone. I didn't even bring a driver with me. Will you come along and back me up? I'll give you a gun."

There was no affectation about the warmth of Hambledon's response, he fairly hugged Varkin.

"You do enjoy a scrap, don't you?" said the Russian. "You are a lad. I kept back the aircraft just in case I wanted to fly Filline away if he turned really nasty, but I don't suppose he will. We will lock them all up in their own cells and go out to dinner. A little abstinence won't hurt them. They will be replaced the following morning."

"They can have some fish-head soup," said Tommy viciously. "That's what they fed me on."

"That hurt, didn't it? Then we can send our friend here off in his plane—look at him, he's gone to sleep—and celebrate happily together. What?"

"Absolutely splendid," said Tommy, and meant it. The plan could not have been better if he had arranged it himself, with the minor modification that Varkin should be locked in with the others. Then he and Wengel and Kaspar—must make some arrangement with Kaspar—would quietly walk out to the airfield, board the plane and take off. The pilot must be bluffed first and later persuaded to fly them on to Vienna.

The evening came to an end at last and the participants went to bed. Wengel did not come to the works in the morning but as nobody wanted him it did not matter. In the afternoon Hambledon took him to the "gymnasium" to see Kaspar and the other four boys from Bereghark. Wengel was not in the least interested in the other four boys but it was necessary to treat them all alike.

"But where is Leonhard Hoffenburg?" he asked.

"Skipped it," said Kaspar briefly.

“Run away? But how did that happen?”

While the other four were telling Wengel, Hambledon and Kaspar strolled aimlessly away together.

“Kaspar. Show no surprise, don’t even look interested.”

Kaspar looked up at him once and then his face took on the aloof and wooden expression of a small boy who is being talked to for his own good and does not intend to profit by it. He thrust his hands deep into his tunic pocket and kicked at small stones along the path.

“I don’t want to raise your hopes too high, but there is a chance that we may be able to get out tonight.” Tommy heard the boy catch his breath. “Steady, now. I tell you frankly it may not come off, but if it doesn’t this time it will some other time, so you must not be too disappointed. Listen. What time do you think you will be able to slip out?”

“It’s getting dark earlier now——” began Kaspar.

“I am not urging you to get out early, I am only trying to arrange to meet you. Better make it two in the morning rather than run any risk of being seen. Midnight?”

“Oh, earlier than that. We go to bed at nine o’clock, lights out half an hour later. The masters don’t go to bed till after ten but not much after. They have to be up at six. As soon as the lights go out in the ground-floor rooms. Say half past ten or a quarter to eleven. It all depends, it’s not always the same time——”

“Of course not——”

“But you don’t want to leave it too late. People sleep sounder in the first couple of hours,” said Kaspar.

“Quite right, they do. Now, do you know where the M.V.D. office is?”

“I think so,” said Kaspar. “One of the fellows pointed it out to me once. It’s in the street behind the Church of St. Nicholas, the street has an arch over it at this end, you cross the Square of the October Revolution and it’s to your left.”

“That’s it——”

“And the M.V.D. place is on the right-hand side but I’m not perfectly sure which house. We didn’t actually pass it, we were crossing the Square and he told me it was down there.”

“It’s about fifty metres along the street, a stone house, very black and dirty, two windows each side of the door and they are all barred. It stands

back from the road a little, there's a sort of courtyard in front. Can you remember all that?"

"Of course. Am I to walk in?"

"Heavens, boy, no. If there are still lights in the windows, get into a dark corner and wait till I come out. If it's all dark I shall be outside waiting for you, I shall see you coming. So don't rush getting away from here, choose your time. I'll wait for you. I won't come to meet you, we might miss each other. Let's turn round and stroll back now, shall we? You're quite sure you can find the way, or shall I send Wengel to meet you?"

"For goodness' sake don't," said Kaspar, "or I shall spend half the night trying to find him. I know the way perfectly well, we go through the Square once a week. How are we travelling? By car?"

"By aeroplane. Wengel came in it and it's waiting to take him back tonight."

"Are we going to Bereghark, then?"

"Oh dear, no. Much further on, I hope."

Kaspar drew a long breath and Hambledon looked down at him. "You're sure you can manage, Kaspar? It won't be easy, spending the rest of today looking absolutely normal."

"I've had a lot of training in that sort of thing."

Some of the boys came towards them and Kaspar slipped his hand through Hambledon's arm.

"When are you coming to take me out again, Uncle Hugo? Tomorrow?"

"I can't manage tomorrow but I might on Friday if you can get leave."

"Oh do, Uncle Hugo. Ring up the Comrade Director of Studies and tell him I shall have a nervous breakdown if I can't go. Please, Uncle Hugo."

That evening Hambledon went to Varkin's hotel to wait with him for the news of Filline's return. The time went on and still the telephone did not ring. The pilot of Wengel's aircraft came in for instructions.

"Be ready, that's all I can tell you," said Varkin.

"I am ready, Comrade, at any moment. It is only to warm up the engines and away."

"You'd better wait here, I think," said Varkin, but the pilot demurred.

"With respect, Comrade, I would rather be with the machine. I shall be sure, then, that nobody is climbing about trying to work the controls."

“As you wish. By the way, this is my trusted colleague, Comrade Britz. If he brings a message from me, act on it.”

“Very good, Comrade.”

Ten o'clock, half past ten, eleven. Hambledon had to make a determined effort not to glance up continually at the clock on the wall; a pendulum clock with a square flat face having a raised border round it like a picture frame and its strike was at once harsh and solemn. Face and frame were of unstained, unpolished wood, the face was perfectly plain but the border was gaily painted in primitive patterns in the primary colours. If it had been made in the Black Forest of Germany, thought Tommy, its weights would have been cast in the mould of fir cones, but these were plain cylindrical lumps of lead.

“Almost looks as though the fellow wasn't coming,” said Varkin, stretching and yawning. “Excuse me.”

“Yes, doesn't it?” said Hambledon casually, and yawned in his turn. Kaspar would be out by now if he had got out, he would be hurrying along the road to the town, he would be threading the dark streets, crossing the Square——

A quarter past eleven, twenty past.

“I shan't wait much longer,” said Varkin, and at that moment the telephone rang and Varkin picked up the receiver.

“Good,” he said. “Thank you,” and rang off. “That's him,” he added, getting up. “Got your gun? Let's go.”

They walked to the place since it was only two streets away. Hambledon kept a sharp lookout for a small figure slinking from shadow to shadow but to his relief saw nothing of it. The few people they met recognized the dreaded M.V.D. uniform and turned away from them. Filline's car was standing outside the door.

“Have your gun handy,” said Varkin. “I shall walk straight in, follow me closely.”

They entered the front door; there was the sound of voices from the room on the left.

“I am going away again tomorrow morning early,” said Filline's voice.

“But the Comrade Varkin said——”

“I can't help that. I must go to——”

Varkin walked in with Hambledon close behind him. Filline was standing at the far side of the room and his two men were side by side

behind Filline's big desk.

"Where were you proposing to go, Comrade Filline?" asked Varkin.

"I—I have heard——"

"Hear me instead. You are under arrest, all of you. You will be replaced tomorrow morning by men who know how to do their duty. Put your guns down on the table. All of you. At once!"

The two subordinates, Chubar and Karas, obeyed. They took their guns out of the holsters and laid them side by side upon the blotting pad in the middle of the desk. Karas then stepped back smartly but Chubar was not quite satisfied. The revolvers were not exactly parallel and one was nearer the edge than the other. He adjusted them carefully before drawing himself up and stepping back to join Karas against the wall. Their faces were entirely free from any emotion, neither fear nor anger nor even surprise. They had been given an order and obeyed it properly, that was enough for the moment. This talk about arrest was beyond understanding; if it meant anything no doubt someone would say so later, if not, all the better.

Hambledon had been watching these two men closely since he took it that that was what he was there to do; Varkin was quite capable of caring for Filline singlehanded. Tommy took up the guns from the desk, put them on the window sill out of the men's reach and then turned his attention to their officer.

Filline was standing exactly where he had been when they came in, near the end of the desk against the wall opposite to the door; it came into Hambledon's mind that he looked as though he were already dead. He did not appear to be breathing, his face was the colour of clay and his eyes merely reflected the light.

"Filline!" said Varkin sharply.

Filline drew a long slow breath and slowly came to life. He shut his eyes and opened them again, this time they were furiously alive. His face crimsoned, the colour ran up under the skin until it met his hair and then ebbed again, leaving him deadly white. Hambledon thought that if ever a man looked dangerous this one did, but he answered Varkin at once.

"Yes, Comrade," he said meekly and took his revolver from its holster. He looked at it and began to turn towards the desk as Hambledon said to himself that that was that.

He was wrong. Filline spun round and fired three shots into Varkin's body at a range of about six feet. Varkin staggered back against the wall and slid slowly to the floor.

Filline burst into a yell of laughter abruptly checked and turned his blazing eyes and smoking gun on Hambledon, but Tommy was too quick for him and shot him through the head before he had time to fire again.

“Britz,” gasped Varkin. “Britz.”

Hambledon bent over him.

“I’m done for. Do the best you can.”

“I mean to,” said Tommy between his teeth.

“Britz. I knew you were all right.”

Varkin’s body collapsed, his head fell to one side and he died without another word. Hambledon turned his attention and his gun upon Chubar and Karas beyond the table. They had their hands raised above their heads and appeared to be trying to leave the room by pressing themselves backwards through the wall.

“Now then, you two——”

A voice broke in from the doorway and Hambledon spun round. “Hands up,” it said, “and drop that gun.”

It was the jailer, Ivan. He stood in the doorway from the entrance hall and held a revolver in his right hand which he steadied with his left. The weapon was levelled at the middle of Hambledon’s chest and, though the hand which held it was wavering, he felt that he as target was so large and near that the fellow could hardly miss. Hambledon dropped his gun upon the floor and put his hands up also. This, of course, was the moment when Chubar and Karas would come to life and in a moment or two the affair would be all over. Kaspar——

But they did not, they remained pressed against the wall as before and did not move. Ivan’s finger was upon the trigger and seemed to be afflicted with a nervous twitching, Hambledon watched its apparently unconscious jerking with growing horror, and at the same time it dawned upon him that the man had not the least idea what to do next. His mouth hung open and he stared vacantly.

“Put that gun down!” roared Hambledon, but Ivan took no notice. When he had taken what seemed an endless age upon a process of thought, he addressed his two colleagues.

“Come round and pick up his gun,” he said.

“Put yours down, then,” said Karas indignantly, “you know you can’t shoot. You’ll be potting us next.”

“If I do put my gun away,” said Ivan reasonably, “he will pick up his gun himself and shoot us all. It will not be safe.”

“Matters appear to have reached a deadlock,” remarked Hambledon, and even as he spoke he saw a small form, stooping low with something like a bar in its hands, come creeping across the hall behind Ivan. The next moment the bar crashed into the back of Ivan’s knees, which naturally collapsed, and he fell to the ground in a heap, firing off his revolver as he fell. The bullet whistled over Tommy’s head as he stooped for his own gun and as he did so he saw Kaspar raise himself to his full height, swing back the bar over his head and bring it down with all his force upon the top of Ivan’s skull.

“Don’t come in here,” said Hambledon urgently. “Wait for me out there.”

“I can’t come in unless I climb over him,” said Kaspar, and indeed the inert form of the jailer was completely blocking the doorway. “I think I’ve killed him, don’t you?”

“Oh no,” said Hambledon cheerfully. “Not a bit of it. He’s only stunned.” He looked for Chubar and Karas, who were gone from sight, but they were only flat on the floor behind the desk. “Get up at once!”

Karas stood up and held his hands above his head.

“Chubar! Karas, kick him in the ribs.”

Karas obeyed as usual and Chubar rose up reluctantly. Hambledon shepherded them out of the room over Ivan and paused only to take the keys from the jailer’s belt. He marched them down the passage; Kaspar said something as they passed but Hambledon did not catch it. When he had locked the two men into separate cells he came back, switching off lights as he came. The office and its contents fell into darkness. “Go to the door, Kaspar, will you? The hall switch is here, I’ll follow you.”

But a small cold hand took firm hold of his and Kaspar said that it would perhaps be better if they kept together. Things seemed to happen so suddenly, didn’t they?

They left the place dark and silent, locking the door after them and dropping the keys into an adjacent water butt. Hambledon set a brisk pace along the street but Kaspar had some difficulty in keeping up. He was shivering violently.

“What you want,” said Hambledon sympathetically, “is to go into a dark corner and be thoroughly sick.”

“I think you’re probably—oh gosh!”

After a decent interval they moved on more comfortably.

“Where are we going? To the airport?”

“Yes,” said Hambleton. “The sooner we’re out of this place the better, don’t you think?”

“Yes. We must have broken several of their laws, mustn’t we?”

“I should think at least forty-seven,” agreed Tommy.

“And where is Wengel?”

“At the airport, I hope. I went to his room this evening—he was at the same hotel as Varkin—and told him to watch from the window till he saw Varkin and me go out. Then he was to go along to the airport and tell the pilot to get the engine warmed up and stand by to take off as soon as Comrade Britz arrived. Varkin told him this evening to take orders from me so I trust he will.”

“If not, you can always shoot him, can’t you?” said Kaspar calmly.

“Certainly not. I shouldn’t think of doing such a thing,” said Hambleton indignantly.

“Why not? You shot Filline.”

Hambleton disregarded the second half of this remark and merely said that he himself could not fly an aeroplane.

“Oh, I see. Can’t you, what a pity. I thought perhaps you’d got a quota or something and it was full up.”

Tommy looked down at his companion in the light of a convenient street lamp and Kaspar smiled at him angelically.

“Kaspar. At what point did you arrive on the scene?”

“I was there before you came. Behind that water butt you dropped the keys into. That’s where I found that piece of pipe I hit that man with.”

Hambleton dropped a hand on his shoulder.

“You did extremely well and I was uncommonly glad to see you.”

“We have our uses,” said Kaspar. “I am a little anxious about Wengel,” he added more seriously. “Are you sure he’ll find his way?”

“Why not? He came along that road from the airport only yesterday morning.”

“Oh. Oh, then I should think——”

“Listen!”

From somewhere not far away there came the sound of an aircraft engine starting up; it stuttered, steadied, stuttered again and settled down to a level roar.

“Is that ours?”

“Almost certainly. And that means Wengel’s got there.”

They quickened their pace.

“He may be a bit soft,” said Kaspar judicially, “but he is, after all, one of my people.”

“Oh, quite,” said Hambleton.

16

THE pilot of the aircraft made no comment when he was told that Hambleton and Kaspar were to travel in it with Wengel, though his eyebrows rose a little when he saw that one of his passengers was a small boy. A flight of steps was set to the door in the fuselage and they entered the aircraft, Wengel stood back for Kaspar to precede him and showed a tendency to hover deferentially which Hambleton nipped in the bud by kicking him hard on the ankle and apologizing volubly. The aeroplane was a small twin-engined plane with accommodation for six passengers, the pilot saw them into their seats and fastened their safety belts while a couple of men of the airport ground staff pulled away the steps and stood by the wheel chocks. The runway lights were on, the pilot went forward to his compartment and the engines began to roar up. He signalled to the ground staff and the aircraft began to move, bumping roughly, for the runway was not all that could be desired. The lights rushed at them more and more quickly, the bumps became yet rougher, then intermittent and then ceased altogether.

“We’re off,” said Hambleton. He was sitting behind Kaspar, Wengel was across the centre corridor. Hambleton leaned forward so that the boy could hear him above the noise and repeated: “We’re off. This is fine, isn’t it?”

Kaspar turned a beaming face upon him and said it was marvellous. “There’s only one thing——”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to be hungry again soon.”

Hambledon, who had even thought of that, handed him a couple of biscuits of the puppy variety and pointed out the lights of Poltava slowly revolving below as the pilot climbed and turned to get on his course for Bereghark. He was quite a young man with a round, humourous face and an air of competence without fuss, once or twice he turned in his seat and looked back to see how his passengers were settling down, grinned at Kaspar and turned away again.

Since Bereghark could not be far off the direct line to Vienna, Hambledon let an hour go by before he went forward to speak to the pilot, who looked up with a smile and motioned Hambledon into the co-pilot’s vacant seat.

“Getting bored?” asked the pilot.

“Not really. I just thought I would come and talk to you for a few minutes.”

“Very welcome. A nice clear night, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said Hambledon. “Tell me, have you ever flown to Vienna?”

“Vienna. No, never. Why?”

“Because that’s where we’re going,” said Tommy. “The orders have been changed.”

“Very good,” said the pilot. “We can refuel at Bereghark.”

“We are not, now, going to Bereghark.”

“But we must refuel somewhere, Comrade. I have only enough petrol to reach Bereghark and it is on the direct line to Vienna.”

“Then we must refuel somewhere else,” said Hambledon firmly, for he had no intention of running the risk of being recognized at Bereghark, either for himself or for Kaspar. “My orders are to avoid Bereghark.”

The pilot bent over his map and the shaded light reflected from it illuminated his face. Hambledon looked for a sign of distrust or obstinacy but saw neither; instead, the pilot looked faintly amused. He pointed out an airfield marked on the map with a code sign.

“That means an emergency refuelling station,” he explained. “I think it may be better for our purpose than an important place like Lemberg.”

“Better in what way?”

“More convenient,” smiled the pilot. “Fewer head-office formalities about scrutinizing permits and signing in triplicate for the petrol required. Such a bore, always. No doubt you have authority for changing the destination?”

“Of course,” said Hambledon. “When we land, I will talk to the people in charge.”

The pilot looked straight at him and spoke pointedly.

“It will be necessary to state your destination, you know. They calculate about how much petrol this machine will take to go there, add a bit on for things like a head wind or having to stooge round in a fog before landing, and then grant permits for the issue of the total amount, whatever it is.”

“But if they are told to fill up the tanks——”

“They wouldn’t do it. They’ve heard of that one.”

Hambledon looked sharply at the pilot but he was absorbed in the processes of navigation. Tommy sat back and thought that he had quite obviously been given a hint that to name Vienna as his destination would not be a good idea. He knew that, of course, and had never had any intention of doing so. Vienna was a point where the Iron Curtain touched the ground, it was in joint occupation like Berlin and it would be far too easy for a machine authorized to go so far to fly a handful of miles further and land in British or American territory. Any Russian aircraft going to Vienna would, he guessed, be extremely official and inconceivably reliable in every respect. What was interesting was the question why the pilot had warned him, for the tone of the man’s voice when he spoke of naming the destination had conveyed an unmistakable warning. Why, because he had only to remain silent and watch Hambledon being hopelessly entangled by the first question the refuelling officers would ask him. And then: “They’ve heard of that one,” could only refer to the quite numerous cases of aircraft being stolen or the pilot being coerced to fly refugees out of the sphere of Russian domination. In other words, the pilot had seen through Hambledon’s pretences and knew he was trying to escape.

“How far on is it to Vienna from this point?” he asked, indicating the refuelling station.

“Three hundred and fifty—call it four hundred miles. I wouldn’t care to fly this crate over the Carpathians in the dark if it could be helped. I’d rather go a bit south and avoid them.”

Hambledon nodded and called up a mental picture of the map of Europe. Some other place within the Russian orbit at about the same distance as

Vienna. He became aware that the pilot was talking, apparently to himself, it was just barely possible to hear what he said.

“Danzig. Vilna. Minsk. All nice places.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The pilot looked at him solemnly. “I was only saying that when I was a boy about his age,” with a jerk of his head towards Kaspar, “I spent a lovely summer among the orchards not far from Vilna.”

That settled it. The Russian knew perfectly well what Hambledon wanted to do and to stop it he only had to say two words to the ground staff at the refuelling point. Tommy moved sideways in his seat and a revolver appeared in his right hand pointing at the ribs of the pilot, who glanced round and saw it. A faint smile curled up the corners of his wide mouth.

“May I ask,” he said, “whether you are by training an air pilot?”

“Why?”

“Because, if you are not, it might be a mistake to shoot me. These buses are quite easy to fly but landing them is seldom quite so simple.”

“I should hate to shoot you,” said Hambledon, “unless it is unavoidably necessary.”

“So glad. And in order to avoid it?”

“You have only to be careful—very careful indeed—not to say one word to the ground staff there.”

“I shall be extremely careful.”

“You are taking this very calmly,” said Hambledon suspiciously.

“Pilots are trained to resist the onset of panic,” said the young man, and smiled amiably upon Hambledon.

As there seemed to be nothing more which could usefully be done at the moment, Hambledon returned to the passengers’ cabin and sat down. Wengel opened a sleepy eye, smiled vaguely in answer to Tommy’s reassuring nod, and snuggled down again. Kaspar, curled up in his seat and with half a biscuit still clutched in one grubby hand, was soundly asleep, but Hambledon had never felt more broad awake in his life. He was tormented, not only by anxiety but by a feeling of helplessness to which he was quite unaccustomed, since it was evident that he was completely at the pilot’s mercy and could do nothing whatever about it. Even his attempt to intimidate the young man had failed completely and he was now sure that he had been foolish to try it. The pilot was of a type which is not readily intimidated and he could land the machine wherever he liked.

However, time passed and the aircraft flew steadily on. The night was clear; Hambledon, with his face pressed against the cabin window, could see the stars and sometimes the street lights of a sizable town; so far as he could tell they were keeping on a straight course. At the end of another hour and a half the sliding door to the pilot's compartment opened and the pilot's hand beckoned him. Hambledon got up and went forward to sit again in the co-pilot's seat.

"Those are the lights of Bereghark over there," said the pilot. "I thought you might like to see them."

"Are they expecting us?"

"I really don't know. They should have been informed but whether they have been is quite another matter."

"How much longer before we reach our landing ground?"

"A little over a quarter of an hour. I sincerely hope that somebody will be awake, because I am going to circle round and ask permission to land by light-signals. Our radio, I think, will have broken down." The pilot smiled widely. "One is obliged to give aircraft identification by radio, you know. If I give the right ones, Bereghark may think it curious if they are expecting us, and if I give the wrong ones our landing ground will be curious."

"I think our radio had better be out of action," agreed Hambledon.

"I shall occupy my time while we are down in putting it right. You can do all the talking and fill up the forms."

"I've never had this to do before," said Hambledon, "I've only been a humble passenger. What will they want to know?"

"Everything. Your name, age, parents' names, place of birth, Party number if any. Same for me. They will want to see your identity papers and the passengers'. And mine, of course. Where did we come from, where are we going and why. The answer to that one is 'on official business,' of course, it always is. You wouldn't be flying if it wasn't. They will then want to see your permits to travel."

"Are they indispensable?"

"Quite. At least, I've never known anyone fly without them. Or travel in any other way, if it comes to that."

"Anything else?"

"You will sign to show you have landed there and the aerodrome people will sign to show that they saw you. You will also sign for the petrol, of course."

“Anything else?”

“I can’t think of anything else at the moment, but if there is, they will tell you. Excuse me now, I had better put my mind on what I’m doing. Will you go and put the safety belts on, including your own?”

Hambledon did as he was told. Kaspar asked questions and received very absent-minded answers; Wengel said that he had complete confidence in Comrade Britz’s courage and resource. Hambledon just stopped himself from saying that he only wished he shared the confidence and the aircraft began to circle with a light flashing from either side of the cockpit. Eventually the signals were answered and the runway lights went on. Tommy, sitting behind Kaspar, held the boy firmly in case the bumps were severe but the landing was pleasantly easy and the pilot taxied towards the control tower and stopped. Figures came out from the buildings and ran towards them; the pilot put his head into the cabin and said: “Now I repair my faulty radio.”

Hambledon undid his safety belt, stood up and drew a long breath. Now for it. He went to the door in the fuselage and opened it and a man climbed in with an untidy roll of printed papers sticking out of one of his pockets. He blinked in the cabin lights, laid down his papers on one of the seats and asked what they wanted. He spoke in a dull voice and mechanically, as one who repeated by rote a sentence in which he took no interest, he looked at them also as though he hardly saw them. The pilot’s head appeared in his doorway for a moment and his eyebrows went up.

Hambledon said that they wanted petrol, the official merely nodded and asked how much. Hambledon said that the tanks should be filled right up, he was on official business and bound for Vilna. The official looked out of the door and told someone outside to bring up the tanker and fill right up, he then sat down in the nearest seat and looked at the floor.

Hambledon waited a full minute, which can seem a very long time, and then strolled forward to speak to the pilot.

“What’s the matter with him?” asked the pilot. “Drunk?”

“Don’t think so. He doesn’t smell of it.”

The landing-ground official lifted his head suddenly as one who has come to a decision. He picked up his papers without looking at them or, indeed, at anything in particular, and put them back in his pocket. He then went out at the door, climbed heavily to the ground and walked slowly away without another word. Hambledon and the pilot looked at each other and then watched the man enter the control tower and shut the door behind him.

There was a long wait until there came the sound of a motor vehicle approaching and the pilot said: "At last."

"What is it?"

"The petrol wagon—I hope."

It was. The crew, working fast but without an unnecessary word, connected up the hoses, filled their tanks full and went away again. The pilot came and stood beside Hambledon at the open door.

"Nobody about?" he said.

"I can't see anyone," said Hambledon in an anxious voice. "What are we supposed to do?"

"I know what I'm going to do," said the pilot. "I'm going to get out of this place. At once." He shut the outer door and returned to the cockpit while Hambledon attended once more to the safety belts. The engines started and the pilot turned the aircraft close in front of the aerodrome buildings to taxi to the far end of the runway.

There was a large window in a room at the foot of the control tower and a bright light inside showed the interior like a scene on a stage. The official who had just interviewed them, if those brief proceedings could be called an interview, was sitting at a bare wooden table upon which there was nothing whatever except a large automatic pistol. As they passed slowly by the window he stretched out his hand and picked up the gun. The aircraft turned and the scene inside the window closed upon them.

"Uncle Hugo. Uncle Hugo, what was that man going to do with that gun?"

"Clean it, Kaspar. Always clean your gun before you go to bed. Regular as cleaning your teeth."

Hambledon went forward to the cockpit as soon as they were airborne and the pilot asked him what he made of that.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"I expect so. Bit of luck for us, wasn't it? You know," said the pilot, turning a frank smile on Hambledon, "if it hadn't been for meeting you like this I should probably have been doing that myself before long. I take it you are getting out?"

"Yes, if possible. My idea was to get to Vienna. I can manage after that. Do I understand that you want to get out too? Of course you know that if you come out willingly with us you'll never be able to go back?"

“Unless we land with you holding a revolver against the back of my neck, yes.”

“I’ll do that if you like,” said Hambledon. “I don’t want to mess up your life if—er——”

“If it can reasonably be avoided, as you said before. I should rather like to know what your standard of reasonable avoidance is. But no, I also wish to get out and if I do I never intend to go back. I have a brother in America, he is much older than I, fifteen years older. He got out of Russia when I was a baby, he is running a garage in a place called Detroit. There is a place called Detroit? Yes. I remained behind with my parents until when I was ten they shot my father, my mother died and I was put in a school for orphans. Nobody knew I had a brother in America till about six months ago when he made enquiries for me through some friends in Yugoslavia and the message got through. So now I am ‘politically unreliable,’ you understand. I think I should not have been flying much longer and I am not, by nature, a salt miner. So I take the first chance to go.”

“I should have thought that you had plenty of chances.”

“Oh no. It is the petrol control, I thought I had explained that. We do not get enough petrol to fly out of the country. That poor man tonight, he was mad or we should not have got it.”

“Oh yes, we should,” said Hambledon. “I generally get what I want if I want it badly enough. It was you I was worrying about, I can’t face all ways at once.”

The pilot laughed.

“And when a faint hope began to dawn on me that you might possibly be on my side, or at least benevolently neutral,” went on Hambledon, “the skies cleared quite a lot. I don’t suppose they keep a large staff on at night in a place like that.”

“Tell me, if I am not too indiscreet in asking, what nationality are you?”

“English.”

“Ah,” said the pilot. “I have heard stories about the English.”

“About landing at Vienna. We don’t want to come down in the wrong zone and if you have never been there——”

“No need to come down at Vienna itself unless you really want to, we have now enough petrol to fly on some distance. The difficulty is that my map has been cut along the twenty-fifth degree of longitude and we flew

over the edge of it just now. I cannot even be sure of finding Vienna, but I can keep on flying due west. We should get somewhere.”

“I don’t want Vienna particularly,” said Hambleton, and yawned suddenly.

“We’ll deal with that when we come to it,” said the pilot. “Why don’t you go and get some sleep?”

17

SOMETHING awoke Hambleton with a start and he stared about him, it was broad daylight. Wengel, opposite to him, looked scruffy but happy; Kaspar, leaning over the back of the seat in front, was looking into Hambleton’s face with an expression of delighted impishness which immediately prompted the conclusion that he had been responsible for the sudden awakening. Hambleton opened his mouth to utter a reproach but there came a sound which he recognized at once as that which had awakened him. One of the engines was spluttering.

“Uncle Hugo. You do look funny when you’re asleep, you twitch your nose like a rabbit.”

The engine missed and spluttered again. On no account show the slightest concern in the presence of the passengers. Hambleton stretched luxuriously.

“Uncle Hugo. When is breakfast?”

“I was wondering that myself,” said Tommy casually. “I think I’ll go and ask the pilot. He ought to know.” He got up and went forward to the cockpit to find the pilot for once not smiling.

“What’s the trouble?”

“One engine is cutting out. It may be a block in the fuel feed but it doesn’t really matter what it is because I can’t do anything in flight.”

“Any idea where we are?”

“Not very much, I’m afraid. I told you my map did not extend beyond Soviet territory and I have merely been flying west by the compass. Any idea how far it is to Vienna?”

“From Poltava? Nearly a thousand miles,” said Tommy, who had measured it off on a map of Europe in his office at Poltava.

“There doesn’t appear to be anything readily recognizable about this country,” said the pilot, looking down on a wide expanse of rolling farmland, “even if one had seen it before to be able to recognize it. What small fields they have here, ever since it got light I have noticed that. Why do they cut up their fields into such small pieces?”

“Because they belong to different owners, perhaps, or are growing different crops. The engines seem to be running all right now.”

“The trouble may have cleared itself, I hope——”

The starboard engine, as though it were listening and had been reminded, spluttered again, backfired and stopped altogether.

“Why did you say that?” asked the pilot. “Now see what you’ve done!”

“Can you carry on on one engine?”

“Theoretically, yes, but in practise I doubt it. Look at the altimeter.”

Tommy, with an unpleasantly cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, saw the altimeter needle beginning slowly to go back, steady itself, drop back and still back.

“What will you do?”

“Look for somewhere to land. I don’t like this country much for the purpose, probably a road would give us the best chance if I could see a nice straight one. Go and see to the belts again, will you?”

“I’ll tell the passengers we’re going down for breakfast,” said Hambledon; as he rose to go back the pilot touched him on the arm and pointed a little to the left. A shallow valley was opening before them and a road, straight in several long sections, ran up it.

“I’ll try that if it keeps clear of traffic.”

Hambledon went back to the passengers’ cabin and helped Kaspar with his safety belt. “I told the pilot you were hungry so he’s going to take us down now. Wengel, can you manage? Let me look. No, tighter than that.”

The nose of the aircraft went down, Hambledon staggered and clutched at the back of a seat.

“Are we, then, among friends now?” asked Wengel. “I would rather not travel much further in this aeroplane, my stomach——”

“Uncle Hugo, sit down and put on your belt. I order you to!”

“All right, Kaspar. I’m coming.”

Hambledon took a hurried glance at the road ahead. It was coming up to them fast and seemed to be clear of traffic. He sat down hastily, fastened his belt and took firm hold of the boy.

“Hold on tight, it may be bumpy.”

Down and down. A clump of trees, but they would clear that. They did, with not much to spare. Then a yell from the pilot and a string of curses. Coming straight towards them in the middle of the road was a jeep.

The pilot opened the throttle full and swung the aircraft to the left, banking and trying to climb, but the one remaining engine would not have it. They side-slipped, dropped, as it were paused and then the port wing touched the ground. They slid up the gentle slope of the hillside with a terrifying sound of grinding and splintering crashes as the wing and undercarriage folded up, ploughing a deep furrow in the soft earth, and came to a stop.

For Hambledon the outstanding sensation of the next few seconds was the sudden silence. It was broken by Wengel asking anxiously if Kaspar were dead.

“Of course I’m not! Uncle Hugo——”

“Anybody hurt?” asked the pilot, appearing suddenly at his door and holding his nose, which was bleeding. “That damned jeep——”

“We seem to be all right,” said Hambledon, struggling to his feet in a cabin which was canted at a steep angle. “That jeep, an army one, is it?”

The pilot peered out.

“Men in uniform.” He came to open the door in the fuselage, fortunately it was not jammed. Hambledon went to help him and also saw the jeep, which had stopped. There were men getting out.

“Russian uniforms,” he said under his breath, and the pilot nodded.

Fortunately the door was at that side of the fuselage which was away from the road. Hambledon pushed Kaspar and Wengel into the pilot’s arms and dropped out after them. They were completely hidden by the wreck of the aircraft.

“Lie down here,” said Hambledon to Kaspar, “instantly. Lie quite flat and on no account move until I come back for you. Your promise, please.”

“I promise,” said Kaspar steadily and obeyed him.

“Wengel. Lie down beside him and don’t move.” The pilot had walked round the tail of the aircraft. “What are they doing?”

“Standing in the road. Talking together. Looks like an officer and three other ranks. The officer is coming this way.”

“Very well,” said Hambleton, “I will come and talk to the officer.” He looked down at Kaspar and Wengel lying at his feet. “I will try not to be long. Keep still and quiet.”

He walked round the aircraft and joined the pilot. The road was about two hundred yards distant from them down the slope of the hillside, they had landed in a field of stubble not yet ploughed for the autumn sowing. The jeep was stopped in the road with three uniformed men standing by it and their officer was walking up the field with long easy strides.

“I’ll do the talking,” said Hambleton to the pilot. “You’d better be fussing round examining the damage.”

“There is plenty to look at, certainly,” said the pilot. He turned to the machine and began to walk about it, stooping to look under it and reaching up to see the port engine. Hambleton stood watching him until the officer drew near, the stiff stubble crackling under his boots. Hambleton went forward to meet him.

“You seem to have encountered trouble, Comrade,” said the officer with a pleasant smile.

“Serious trouble,” said Hambleton abruptly. “Had it not been for your jeep we were going to land on the road and we should probably have been all right. The engine trouble could then have been attended to, it was not a serious matter according to my pilot.”

“I am sorry that my arrival should have proved so ill timed. I did not expect——”

“I did not say it was your fault. The results, however, are serious. I am upon a mission of the utmost urgency and secrecy and I call upon you to help me on my way. I am sorry, but I must commandeer your jeep. Your men will guard this aircraft until relief comes.”

The officer looked at him as though he were mad.

“Who are you to make these peremptory demands——”

“Hugo Britz, Party member, acting for the M.V.D. Commissar Andrei Varkin. Look at this,” said Hambleton, and thrust his identity card upon the man.

The officer read the endorsement aloud. “‘Indispensable. Assist and protect. Answerable only to the undersigned, Andrei Varkin.’ Yes, but how am I to know that you are the man to whom this card belongs?”

“Are you suggesting that I stole it?” roared Hambledon.

“With respect, yes.”

Hambledon looked at him and broke into a laugh.

“You are frank, anyway, Lieutenant.”

“I have my duty to do,” said the officer stiffly. “I can tell by your speech that you are not even a Russian.”

Hambledon ceased to be amused.

“If you will have the infinite goodness to give that card the attention it deserves, you will see that it is there stated that I am German by birth. I can speak German, it is my mother tongue. I will further illuminate your darkness by telling you that that is why I was selected for this mission. Austrians speak German, I can speak German. Therefore I am sent to speak to Austrians. I hope I make myself clear.”

“Show me your Party card.”

Hambledon gave it to him and the man examined it carefully, or made a show of doing so, for it was plain that he was taking time to make up his mind. Finally he handed back both cards and saluted.

“I am at your disposal, Comrade Britz.”

“Thank you.”

“I hope that you will not hold my doubts and suspicions against me.”

“On the contrary. Had you acted otherwise I should have reported you to your superiors for laxity in the execution of your duty.”

“I will conduct you down to the jeep and post my men to guard this aircraft. Can you drive a jeep, Comrade Britz? Or probably your pilot can. Here, you——”

The pilot came round the end of the wing with, to Hambledon’s horror, a big German Mauser in his hand and shot the Lieutenant dead on the spot.

“What the hell d’you think you’re doing?” demanded Hambledon furiously. “You fool, just when I’d——”

“No good,” said the pilot calmly. “He knew me. There’s one thing to be thankful for, we can’t be far from the frontier. He is an officer of the Frontier Guard. Get down, they are going to fire at us!”

They ran and threw themselves into the deep furrow scored in the earth by the sliding aircraft and even as they did so half a dozen bullets sailed over their heads. There was a perceptible pause before they heard the tat-tat-tat of the tommy gun which had fired the shots from the jeep.

“I’ve a damn good mind to hand you over to the men down there. What the blazes did it matter if he did know you?”

“Quite a lot. He was up on the Polish frontier when the news came through about my brother, I knew this fellow quite well. I was sent back from the frontier, politically unreliable, I told you. Not trusted so near the edge of things. This man knows I had no business to be here, didn’t you see his face change when he recognized me?” The pilot appeared to be struggling, in his awkward position, with his weapon and Hambleton saw that he was fitting a wooden stock to it.

“What’s that you’ve got?”

“My greatest treasure, my most secret delight. More to me than diamond necklaces or a castle in the Urals. A nine-millimetre German Mauser, semi-automatic, sighted up to a thousand metres.”

“Can you shoot with it?”

The pilot smiled slowly. “I hope to give you a demonstration shortly. Shooting has always been my hobby.”

No more shots came from the road and Hambleton risked raising his head enough to see what was happening, the three men were standing by the jeep together. “They are discussing,” said Hambleton, “whether they will come up here and finish us off or whether they will go away somewhere to fetch reinforcements.”

“If they go away,” said the pilot, completing the assembly of his gun, “we shall not be here when they come back.” He also peered over the edge of the furrow—it was like a narrow ditch—in which they were lying. “They also have thought of that. They are coming. One of them will hose us with his tommy gun to keep us down while the other two run forward. Then he will run forward while one of the others fires at us. The usual drill.” The pilot found a small break in the earth parapet, settled his weapon in it and snuggled against the stock. “The Comrade is, no doubt, accustomed to war?”

“I have seen some. I wish you good shooting. Later, if they come near enough, I may be able to help you but this thing,” patting the revolver Varkin had given him, “is no use at that range.”

Two of the men, spaced apart, were beginning to run up the field while the third raised his tommy gun and fired; the bullets passed over with a shrill whine.

“Firing high,” said the pilot. He picked on the left-hand man and fired once, missing him; fired again and missed him again; at the third shot the man stumbled and fell. “One.”

“I should think you would be very useful to your brother in Detroit,” said Hambledon.

“I hope so, but in what way?”

“Collecting bad debts.”

The pilot smiled. The tommy gunner by the jeep stopped firing, the runner dropped to his knee in a slight fold of the ground and began to fire in his turn while his fellow took up the running. This time the tommy gunner was pulling to his left, Hambledon could hear the bullets smacking into the wreck of the aircraft. From where he lay he could not see Kaspar and Wengel, but the thought of them diverted his attention for a moment until he heard the pilot say: “Two.”

“Excellent,” said Hambledon. “Pretty shooting.”

“Thank you. I cannot now see the third man, he is down in that fold of the ground.”

“He will emerge, this way or that. If I were he I should go home. By the way, I want that jeep.”

“He shall not take it if I—there he goes.”

The man was running away down the hill, zigzagging as much as was consistent with speed. The pilot waited his moment and fired and the runner seemed to leap forward, fell and rolled over like a shot rabbit.

“Well, that’s that. Thank you,” said Hambledon, and got up to go and see how Kaspar and Wengel had fared. He came round the tail of the aeroplane to find Wengel lying face downwards on the ground. Kaspar was kneeling upright with tears running from beneath his closed eyelids and his hands clasped in prayer. Hambledon, walking quietly, came up in time to hear the closing words.

“Et requiem aeternam dona ei.”

Hambledon took off his hat.

“My dear boy. I am so sorry.”

Kaspar scrambled to his feet and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“It isn’t so much—I can’t find my handkerchief.”

“Here is mine.”

“Thank you. This was my fault.”

“Come away,” said Hambledon, for Wengel had plainly been shot through the head. “We can’t do anything for him and it was a quick and

merciful end.” He led the boy away. “Why should you say it was your fault?”

“Because he wouldn’t have been here if it hadn’t been for me. He would have been at home in Bereghark, going to the works every day and breeding white mice as a hobby. Did you know he bred white mice?”

“No.”

“He did. He gave me some once.”

“He was a kind little man,” said Hambleton. “As for his being here on your account, that is not literally true. He really came to Poltava to save me from exposure.”

“And you came to Poltava for me. I do not like that side of kingship, to be a danger to one’s friends.”

“Put it out of your mind, Kaspar. Look, there’s the pilot waiting for us. He is a brave man and a good shot, he has killed four of your enemies and now we are going to take their jeep and drive away.”

Kaspar walked up to the pilot. “My uncle tells me, sir, that I am indebted to you for a very gallant action in my defence. I am greatly obliged to you, sir. Perhaps someday I may be in a position to make some more fitting recompense.” He held out his hand and the pilot shook it awkwardly.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and added an aside to Hambleton. “Anyone would think he was someone royal, like what you read about in old books.”

“He—er—gets like that sometimes,” said Hambleton. “Walk on with the lad, will you? I want this officer’s coat and hat.”

They collected another uniform coat and hat for the pilot on their way down to the road. Hambleton got into the driver’s seat with the pilot beside him and Kaspar, protesting bitterly, sitting on the floor of the back seat.

“But there is nobody about. I never saw such a deserted road. Why can’t I sit on the seat? It is very uncomfortable down here, I haven’t got enough room for my legs and the floor is hard.”

“I wish I knew where we were,” said Hambleton, starting the engine.

“We can’t go far wrong if we drive west,” said the pilot, fitting a fresh clip of ammunition into his Mauser.

“I suppose not,” said Tommy, and turned the jeep round in the road.

The pilot turned and handed his Mauser to Kaspar. “Will you look after that for me, please, and hand it to me very quickly if I ask for it? Don’t play about with it. I will reload the tommy guns,” he added to Hambleton, “they will arouse less comment if we are seen to have them.”

“Quite right. But are you sure that that was wise?” said Tommy with a gesture of the head towards an armed Kaspar behind them.

“Oh, I’ll keep an eye on him. He is regarding it with awe-struck respect at the moment. I thought it would keep him quiet and the safety catch is on. Besides, I hadn’t anywhere much to put it.”

“So long as the awe-struck respect doesn’t wear off,” said Hambledon dubiously, “we may be safe.”

They drove on along the road for several miles, meeting very infrequent traffic mainly with agricultural affiliations, some peasants walking and once a handful of soldiers, four men and a Corporal, trudging along in the dust. They saluted and Tommy returned the salute.

Presently, upon rounding a bend, there came into view a small building by the roadside. It was too small for a cottage and too substantial for a shed; it had a flagpole beside it from which flickered the red of the Soviet Union. There was a road barrier at that point, it consisted of a contrivance like a gate with a hinge-post and top bar only and it was painted in bright stripes of red, black and white. It was in fact a frontier post of the usual type and at the moment it was standing wide open because there was a cart stopped there in the road.

The cart was of a familiar country type with high wooden sides and ends, it had two large wheels under the body and, in front, one smaller wheel which swivelled. It was drawn by two small but heavy horses which were waiting quietly while their peasant driver was talking to a soldier in the road. The driver appeared to be protesting, for he was waving his arms in the air, but the soldier to whom he was talking was plainly paying no attention. He had his rifle slung across his back, he was smoking a cigarette and looking at a girl who was driving cows across a pasture opposite. There were two more soldiers, also with their rifles slung, who were standing in the cart rummaging among its contents; they were stooping, heaving things over and stooping again, the high sides of the cart came up to their thighs. It was a peaceful scene.

The soldier in the road, who was the Sergeant in charge of the post, heard the jeep coming. He stepped forward and held up his hand to stop it.

“Kaspar, lie down flat,” said Hambledon. He put his foot down on the accelerator and hooted insistently for passage. The road was intentionally narrowed at that point and the cart left very little room.

“Will you get through?” asked the pilot.

“I think so—just.” Hambledon hooted again but the Sergeant stood his ground.

“I don’t think you will,” said the pilot. He raised his tommy gun and fired a short burst towards the group at the barrier. It would seem that the horses were gun-shy, who knows what associations their memories held? They started violently and immediately bolted; they came tearing along the road at full gallop with the cart rocking wildly and the two soldiers in it clinging to the sides like monkeys. They passed with a clatter and a cloud of dust and the road was clear except for the Sergeant and the peasant driver.

They stood their ground for a moment, staring, and the peasant was the first to awake. He made a leap for the door of the guardroom, dragging the Sergeant backwards after him. It was not clear whether he was trying to save the Sergeant or whether he had become, in the hurry of the moment, entangled with the Sergeant’s equipment. As the jeep swept past the door it could be seen that there was in progress something between a tug-of-war and a ceremonial dance as the Sergeant struggled to release the sling of his rifle from the peasant, who had become in some way attached to it. Apparently he succeeded, for after the jeep had passed the post a shot was fired after it and there was a hollow metallic clang from somewhere in the rear.

“We’ve been hit,” said the pilot.

“I heard it,” said Hambledon, “but she’s still going, isn’t she? Are you all right, Kaspar?”

“Quite, thank you. How many people did you kill that time?”

“None at all,” said the pilot. “I wasn’t trying to, I fired over their heads to frighten them. It did.”

“I should never have believed that those stumpy-legged cart horses could go like that,” said Hambledon. “Now I know why they start horse races with a pistol. Or do they?”

18

HAMBLEDON did not slacken speed for more than a mile and the jeep bucked and bumped on the uneven road.

“Our passenger behind is having a most uncomfortable ride,” said the pilot.

“I think I could ease up a bit now,” said Hambleton, and did so.

“We ought to have cut the telephone line,” continued the pilot, with an eye on the wire swooping from pole to pole beside the road.

“You can try shooting it down if you like, I’m not going to stop. If they were going to telephone they’ve done it by now.”

“I expect so. Have you any idea how wide the neutral zone is between the frontiers here?”

“Not the faintest, especially as I don’t know where ‘here’ is. Some miles, I expect.”

They came into a straight stretch of road and saw, coming towards them, some half-dozen Russian soldiers running. They were more or less in single file, they carried their rifles “at the ready” and as they ran each heavy step raised a little spurt of dust which eddied round their feet and left a fading trail behind them like the wake of a launch.

“Reinforcements?” said the pilot.

“Probably. There’s a side turning here, I’m going to take it. Hold tight, Kaspar.”

“What to? *Ouch!*”

They swung into a farm lane and went steadily up it with the pilot watching the road to see what the Russian soldiers would do.

“It’s all right, they’ve gone straight on past. Did you hurt yourself, my lad, when we turned that corner?”

“Only banged my head again. Uncle Hugo!”

“Yes, Kaspar?”

“I do not wish to be the harbinger of evil tidings,” said Kaspar precisely, “but there’s an awful stink of petrol in the back here.”

Hambleton said: “Oh dear,” and the pilot: “That shot,” at exactly the same moment and the jeep, as though anxious to bear its part in the conversation, coughed and misfired. They had just reached the top of a low rise and before them the road sloped down gently to a farm a couple of hundred yards ahead in the valley. Hambleton held out the clutch and they coasted down the hill.

“I want to hide this vehicle,” he said. “If there’s room in one of those barns—the yard gate is open.”

Running downhill had at least refilled the carburetor with what was left in the bottom of the tank. The engine picked up again as Hambledon turned into the farmyard and crossed it through a flurry of poultry to the open door of a barn. There was room inside, he drove straight in and the engine stopped of its own volition as he reached out his hand to switch off.

They got out and walked into the yard. It seemed at first that there was no one about, but even as they turned away a woman came from behind one of the sheds. She took one look at them and ran for the house door, which was open. Hambledon called to her but she only rushed inside and slammed the door. There followed the sound of bolts being shot and immediately afterwards all the ground-floor windows closed one after the other.

“She doesn’t seem to like us,” said Kaspar drearily.

“She doesn’t like Russian uniforms, I expect,” said Hambledon.

“But I want my breakfast.”

“Oh dear. We’ll go on somewhere else and I’ll get you something to eat. I’d rather she didn’t see us too clearly. Come on, there’ll be other farmhouses.”

The lane came to an end at the farm and they walked on across fields and skirted the edge of small woods while the sun rose in the sky and the autumn day became hotter and still more hot. Kaspar began to lag behind and merely looked sullen when told to keep up.

“When I think,” said the pilot, “that I left a packet of meat rolls in that crashed aircraft——”

Hambledon and the pilot hid their Russian uniforms in a patch of brambles, they were hot and heavy besides being an object of alarm to the local peasantry. Soon after this they came to a farm where it seemed possible to get some food, but the farmer loosed two savage dogs at them so they went on their way. At about two in the afternoon they reached a cottage, a poor enough place indeed but the woman was kindly and gave Kaspar cooked potatoes and milk. Hambledon and the pilot refused to accept anything from her poverty and when they paid her for Kaspar’s meal she wept.

“You could have taken all I had and given me nothing, but you leave me enough for myself and even pay for what the child has eaten. You are Christians.”

“I know nothing about this frontier,” said the pilot, “but I take it that it is not a straight line ruled upon a map and running approximately north and south. It weaves about, does it not, like any other frontier?”

“I believe so, but as I don’t know where we are I can’t be sure. There may be odd lengths of straight line in it here and there if you see what I mean. Why?”

“I was only wondering whether we are wandering longitudinally along this neutral zone like men walking along the middle of a wide road, instead of crossing it laterally, if I express myself clearly?”

“Horribly clearly,” said Tommy. “Half left, beyond that barn, do you see what I see? Yes, Russian soldiers. Fortunately they do not appear to be hurrying but I think we’d better. Away to the right there’s a wood, let us go and sit in it. Then, if we are still pursued, we can climb a tree until our pursuers go away, like Charles the Second of England when the Roundheads were after him.”

“Who was he?” asked the pilot.

“He was a King,” said Kaspar, trotting beside Hambledon’s long strides, “and the Roundheads were his rebellious subjects, but they didn’t catch him, did they, Uncle Hugo? He got safely away and——”

“Get a move on,” said Hambledon.

“And came back again to his own country years later and took his place upon the throne.”

“You talk like a book,” said the pilot.

“Did they see us, d’you think?” said Hambledon.

“I don’t think so and in any case we’re out of sight now. I shall not be sorry to sit down for a little while, I’m tired.”

They rested for a time and the Russian soldiers did not follow them, then they moved on again and the long afternoon dragged to its close. Kaspar became silent and began to stumble in his walk, Hambledon looked at him and saw that in spite of the hot day his face was white between the freckles. The pilot also noticed it.

“The boy cannot go much further,” he said in a low voice.

“I know,” answered Hambledon. “I’ve had nearly enough myself.”

“And I. You and I have had nothing to eat.”

“And you no sleep last night. There’s a farm ahead of us, we’ll go in there. We are two armed men, we can at least get food. They may be friendly. Better let me talk, they will speak German here.”

They walked up to the door; the farmer heard their steps and came out to meet them with the old pre-Hitler greeting. “*Grüss Gott*,” he said.

“*Grüss Gott,*” answered Hambledon. “We have walked far and are tired and hungry, may we come in?”

“Come in and welcome.”

They went in, Kaspar stumbled upon the doorstep and nearly fell, when Hambledon caught his arm he swayed upon his feet.

“The poor little one,” said the farmer’s wife, “he is tired to death. Are you hungry, too? Supper is on the table, sit here, little one.”

Kaspar lifted heavy eyelids to look round the room, the bare scrubbed table with bowls upon it of something between soup and stew, wooden stools to sit upon, four round-eyed children staring and against the wall an old and shabby couch.

“Thank you so very much,” he said. “You are very kind. May I lie down on that couch for a little while? I would rather not—rather not eat——”

Hambledon picked him up, carried him across the room and laid him upon the couch; he was already asleep.

“Let him sleep,” said the farmer’s wife. “If he were to eat first he would only vomit. When he wakes he will be hungry again. Ernst, Rupp’, Marta, Ferdi, take your suppers outside, do not go far from the door.” She shooed the children out, flapping her apron as though they were chickens. “Come and sit and eat, gentlemen. There is more in the pot, and God be thanked for it and all His mercies.”

Hambledon and the pilot sat to meat with the farmer and his wife and for a time no one spoke. The stew was hot and nourishing, it had small pieces of meat in it which Tommy took to be goat and it was thick with barley and potato, he thought it the most delicious meal he had ever eaten. After a time he could feel warmth and strength flowing through his limbs again, it was like coming to life after being halfway to death.

“That is better, eh?” said the farmer, who had been watching them.

“I think you have saved our lives,” said Hambledon and the pilot looked up from scraping out his bowl to nod his agreement.

“You will stay with us tonight,” said the farmer’s wife. “We have not beds for all, it is true, but the little one can sleep there where he is and there is clean straw in the barn.”

“*Gna’ Frau,*” said Tommy, “clean straw in a barn is, at the moment, my idea of heaven. Nonetheless, we must get on and if the boy is still asleep we must carry him.”

“Not tonight,” said the farmer, “surely not tonight. Look out at the door, it is dusk already and soon it will be dark.”

“All the better,” said Hambledon, “for our purpose. I must be frank with you. I will not sleep tonight until we and the child are across the frontier.”

“Across the frontier! I thought you had come across the frontier. We have had so many here, tired and hungry like you, and they have all——”

“You cannot take the child further tonight, it is brutal,” said the farmer’s wife indignantly.

“It will be much more brutal if I do not. Is it far to the frontier from here?”

“Five—nearly six kilometres,” said the farmer. “Too far, much too far.”

Hambledon’s ready suspicions awoke. This fellow would keep them, would he, and while they slept he would call in the police or the soldiers. They would wake to find men standing over them and never, never be so near freedom again. Never again. He staggered to his feet, for, having once relaxed, his legs felt as though they would not bear him. They would have to bear him, he would not be recaptured now.

“Can you guide us to the frontier?” he asked.

“I can,” said the farmer irritably, “of course I can. But why anybody should want to walk six kilometres in the night in order to pass into the Russian Zone is quite past my understanding. If you must be so mad, surely tomorrow would do?”

Hambledon turned slowly, incredulously.

“Are we across—where are we, then? In heaven’s name tell me the truth.”

“You are in American-occupied Austria and the Austrian frontier is six kilometres behind you. I see now, you thought you were still in the neutral zone. You must have passed the frontier two hours ago.”

Hambledon sat down heavily upon his stool.

“You do not, now, wish to go any further?”

Tommy shook his head, his powers of speech seemed temporarily to have deserted him but his expression of face appeared to satisfy the farmer.

“So the little one can have his sleep out after all,” said the farmer’s wife. “It is well. Here, he is safe.”

“Here, he is safe,” repeated Hambledon.

The pilot looked up and Hambledon smacked him on the shoulder.

“We’ve done it, my lad. We’re out. We’re free. In a few days’ time we’ll be in London.”

“Free?” said the pilot. “Tell me, how does it feel, to be free?”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Alias Uncle Hugo* by Manning Coles]