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# THE AMIR'S RUBY

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

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# THE AMIR'S RUBY

# CHAPTER I

## Where Fate Leads

"Morning, Standish!"

"Good morning, sir. You sent for me?"

"I did," rejoined Mr. Truscott, Resident Managing Director of Far Eastern Airways, Limited. "You've put in for fifteen days' leave, I understand."

"Yes, sir."

"Urgent?"

"To a certain point—yes," replied Colin Standish. "As a matter of fact I have entered for the Middleweight Championship at the Londesboro' Hall, and I want to do a bit of training."

Mr. Truscott gave a quick, appraising glance at the athletic-looking youth. What he saw was good. Outwardly at least Colin Standish was as physically fit a fellow as anyone could wish to see. Above middle height, with clean-cut features, sparely built, and with an alert bearing, he had all the bodily qualifications for a successful air-pilot. Already he had a reputation for being not only a skilful airman, but one who did not hesitate to take risks of which many of his *confreres* would have fought shy.

"Didn't know you were a bit of a bruiser, Standish," continued Mr. Truscott. "However, my reason for bringing you here is a very different matter. I've just received a very important and undoubtedly hazardous commission—one in which grit and absolute secrecy are essentials. I had you in view for the business, but if you decide to take the leave that is due to you then there's no more to be said. I'll put Santley on to the job, or rather, I'll give him a chance to volunteer."

"I'll take it, sir," decided Standish, without a moment's hesitation. "When do I start?"

"But the championship?"

"That's a side issue, sir. I was rather keen at having a shot at it, but it really doesn't matter."

"I'm glad that I'm able to count upon you, Standish. You'll probably be required to set out for a flight to Bakhistan before the end of the week. Do you know where Bakhistan is, by the by?"

Standish knew the place well—by repute. And it had not an enviable reputation. It was a small, independent state situated between Persia and the frontiers of Afghanistan and Baluchistan. Only a few hundred square miles in area, almost every part of it was mountainous. The tribesmen were—well—to say the least, troublesome, and had been a thorn in the flesh of the Indian Government for the last seventy years.

There was no record of an airman ever making a landing, forced or otherwise, in Bakhistan, for the simple reason that it was well away from the recognized aerial routes; but there had been instances of Royal Air Force machines making flights over the district when the tribesmen were more troublesome than usual.

No wonder Colin Standish looked just a little surprised at the Resident Managing Director's announcement.

"I've heard of Bakhistan by repute, sir; but I haven't been within three hundred miles of it."

"It's those three hundred miles that count," rejoined Mr. Truscott grimly. "Mind you, this is a volunteer's job. I'm not ordering you to go, as if it were in the ordinary course of your duty. It's a pretty steep proposition, I give you my word, and the risks you'll run won't end if and when you leave Bakhistan on your return flight. In fact you'll be downright lucky if you come through with a whole skin. And secrecy, absolute secrecy is even more essential to success than mere skill and daring in airmanship. I know you possess the two latter qualifications. I hope for your own sake and for others' that you are able to keep a still tongue when necessary."

Perhaps you'd like time to consider the proposition? I cannot give further details, but the few hints I have thrown out ought to help you to come to a decision, one way or another. Mind you, I reiterate there's no compulsion, and, honestly, knowing what little I do concerning the actual nature of the task, I would not take it amiss if you declined."

"I've already said I'll take it on, sir," declared Standish quietly.

"Then jolly good luck to you!" exclaimed Mr. Truscott heartily. "If you win through it will be a feather in your cap and a priceless slap on the back for Far Eastern Airways. One minute. I'll ring up our client and get him to fix an appointment with you."

He picked up an instrument from the desk.

"Trunk call, please: I want Malton four double-nine seven. Eh? Through to Malton exchange, am I? ... What's that? No such number? Sorry to have to contradict you.... What? No, no! I don't want Maldon, I want Malton."

He rang off.

"These trunk calls are a confounded nuisance, Standish," he remarked. "Apart from the fact that one's conversation is apt to be overheard. Now I'll try again. Exchange, please!"

The second attempt was successful.

"Is Sir Rugglestone at home?" pursued Mr. Truscott at the telephone. "Good! Will you kindly ask him to speak to Mr. Truscott? ... Yes, Truscott, Far Eastern Airways.... Ah, is that Sir Rugglestone? This is Truscott speaking from Bere Regis Aerodrome. We received your letter this morning, sir. I've arranged for one of our pilots.... Oh, yes, absolutely dependable.... I would suggest I send him to you for your instructions.... At seven? Would not that interfere with your— Quite! Quite so! ... Yes, sir! I have already done so. You may expect Mr. Standish.... S for Sam, T for Thomas.... Sorry, Sir Rugglestone, I didn't think you'd caught the name. At seven, then.... Confound it! I'm cut off!"

During these fragmentary scraps of conversation, Standish literally sat up and took notice. Without a doubt, Mr. Truscott's client was Sir Rugglestone Gorton who a few years previously had been much in the public eye in connexion with Indian affairs. His firm action—one that no soldier could fail to take in the circumstances—had nipped an insurrection in the bud. Had he not acted promptly and drastically the result would have been far-reaching and disastrous to the British *Raj*. But unfortunately there was an outcry at home on the part of an ill-informed section of the community. The Cabinet, fearful for its own stability, gave way to the clamour of its supporters, and Sir Rugglestone Gorton was relieved of his command and recalled home. Since then he had lived in retirement—fortunately for him he was a very wealthy man—at his country seat at Haxthorpe in Yorkshire; but amongst those familiar with Indian affairs he was still spoken of as one of the shining lights in the history of the Indian Empire.

Standish's surmises proved to be correct.

"I've fixed up an appointment with Sir Rugglestone Gorton at seven this evening. Incidentally that includes an invitation to dinner—informal, of course. His place is Haxthorpe Hall, a few miles from Malton in Yorkshire. Here it is on this map—two hundred and forty miles as the crow flies. It is now eleven-thirty. Make your own arrangements provided you arrive at Haxthorpe not later than six-thirty. And remember: absolute discretion or, although you may reach Bakhistan, you'll never see England again!"



## CHAPTER II

### At His Own Risk

With this decidedly ominous warning ringing in his ears, Colin Standish left his chief's sanctum and made his way towards the hangars. In spite of veiled hints of what might happen he felt distinctly elated. Whatever the nature of the task committed to him by Sir Rugglestone Gorton, it certainly smacked of adventure and danger. Ordinary flying, in the course of his professional duties, entailed both; at the same time there was a monotony about regular air-line flights that sooner or later made the pilot feel that he was merely engaged upon "the trivial round, the common task".

Yes, this was "it".

He knew perfectly well that he would not have to make a solo flight to the wilds of Bakhistan. There would be a reserve pilot and a mechanic. The choice of these would be left to him. Mr. Truscott never interfered in such matters. But the sole responsibility of the whole business from the time the long flight commenced until the plane returned to its shed at Bere Regis Aerodrome (if it ever did) would be his and his alone.

"Hello, Standish, old bird!" hailed a well-known voice. "Whither bound? Off for a chuck-up?"

Colin stopped and looked behind him.

The speaker was a young pilot who had flown with him on several previous occasions, but for the last two months had been making solo flights on one of the shorter stages of the British-Australian mail route, which, since speed was the primary consideration, Far Eastern Airways ran in a series of relays.

"Hello, Grey!" he replied. "You back again?"

"That's a fact," admitted Grey, touching his left arm. "Just off the sick-list. Some bat-eyed Arab mistook my bus for a vulture and let

rip with his rifle. Quite a fluke, of course, but the bullet tickled my arm."

"Oh?"

Such trivial incidents hardly evoked interest. In fact Standish had been "potted at" by nomads in the Transjordan Desert more times than he chose to remember.

"What's your move?" reiterated Grey.

"Just a joy-flick," replied Standish. "Solo."

He volunteered no further information. Much as he liked and trusted his former flying comrade it was not advisable, in view of Mr. Truscott's warning, to give his destination.

Don Grey was certainly curious. It was unusual for first-class pilots to be employed upon "flicks" or individual flights of short duration; but he had sufficient sense to desist from making further questions.

"Good luck, then, old man."

"When will you be able to go up again?" demanded Standish.

"Now—why?" rejoined Grey, surprised at the bluntness of the inquiry.

"Oh, nothing much. May see you in the mess to-morrow."

Outside the hangars Standish was met by the ground foreman.

"No. 19 ready, Symes?"

"Yes, sir; overhauled on Monday and she hasn't been up since."

"Right, I'll take her."

No. 19 was one of a fleet of high-powered, double-seated monoplanes used primarily as aerial taxis. With all-metal body, slotted wings, and a perfect stream-line, she was capable of doing 150 miles an hour.

The foreman unlocked the door of the hangar. He was the only person with authority to do so. Even the Chief Engineer, that magnificent, highly-paid official who invariably wore light-coloured gloves when he went his periodical rounds of inspection, had to apply to the watchdog-like Symes to gain admission to the sheds.

The Company took no risks as regards unauthorized and possibly malicious attention to their fleet of aircraft!

The foreman blew a whistle. Three groundsmen came hurrying up. The monoplane was wheeled into the open and swung round head to wind.

Standish left nothing to chance. However conscientious the foreman was in attending to his duties, the pilot himself made sure that No. 19 was in a fit condition for flight. He examined the oil and petrol levels of the gauges, tested controls and made sure that the petrol flowed freely through the carburettor. Symes watched him without any resentment. He had an admiration for any pilot who was not content to take his word that the bus was fit for service.

Everything proving satisfactory Standish placed his suitcase in the after-cockpit, his aerial map in the non-inflammable celluloid case on the dash, donned his helmet and gloves and settled into the bucket-seat.

Symes produced his ground log-book. Glancing at the clock Standish saw that it was 2.15 p.m.

"Destination, sir?" inquired the foreman.

"Brighton!" replied the pilot.

"Probable time of return?"

"Say noon to-morrow, Symes."

"Right, sir."

"O.K.," shouted Standish to the attendants. "Contact!"

Although the monoplane was equipped with the standard self-starter the pilot preferred the older method. It saved "juice" and the starter might be wanted badly before the flight was over.

The engine fired promptly. Gathering way the machine ran for less than a hundred yards over the closely-cropped level turf before she rose swiftly and steeply into her natural element.

Standish had plenty of time. He swung the bus eastward. Even at this stage of his adventure he had no intention of stating his immediate destination even to the trustworthy Symes.

Flying steadily and without attempting to open out, Standish was over Brighton in less than an hour. Having cleared his conscience he altered course to the northward. Now, as far as pilotage was concerned, all was plain sailing. He had no need to consult his map. First the main line of the Southern Railway, and, beyond London, the North Eastern line would be a clear and infallible guide. Nor was he alone. Swarms of light aeroplanes were on the same route, carrying business men to and from the Metropolis. At frequent intervals, though at a lower altitude, were cross-country aerial routes; while refuelling planes, distinguishable by their vermilion and yellow bodies and wings, hovered overhead, ready at the recognized signal to swoop down over an airplane or dirigible that might be running short of petrol. And, naturally, with this vast increase of aerial traffic, steps had to be taken to enforce in the air regulations that had been drafted for the safeguarding of life and property. Hence the presence of "air-wardens" flying in swift machines capable of three hundred miles an hour and painted in colours that left no doubt as to the nature of their duties.

It was the first time that Standish had flown north of London. Compared with the wide open spaces of the Far East, the country beneath him looked a maze of roads and railways. As far as York the going was easy, but beyond that his map would have to come into service.

He was, however, mistaken on that score, for just south of York he passed over one of the great aerial junctions. Here, set in white stone let into a vast expanse of grassland, were enormous arrows radiating from a common centre. On each pointer were given the names of the principal towns.

Following the Scarborough route, which was crowded with aerial week-enders on their way to that watering-place, Standish noticed what appeared to be a silvery thread winding through dense masses of trees—the River Derwent.

He slowed down to sixty, keeping a sharp look-out for landmarks and comparing their positions with his map.

Presently, set between two masses of trees on a steep hillside—although at his present altitude the shadows alone gave him the information that it was a hill—he sighted a white building the plan of which resembled a squat letter H.

That was his immediate destination—Haxthorpe Hall.

Something, he knew not what, prompted Standish to glance back, over his left shoulder. He was not altogether surprised to find that a two-seater biplane was hovering over his tail. Yet the presence of this other plane did arouse his curiosity.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment Standish banked steeply and swung his monoplane through half a circle. She bumped in the wake of the other craft, the pilot of which had to climb steeply to avoid collision.

It was foolhardy on Standish's part. It was in direct contravention of aerial traffic rules, but quite unaccountably Colin felt annoyed and wanted to "make the other fellow sit up". Had the biplane purposely followed the machine bearing the Far Eastern Airway's markings because of Standish's mysterious commission?

"That's put the wind up the blighter!" he said to himself as the biplane set off in an easterly direction. "Now to make Sir Rugglestone's acquaintance."

He made a faultless landing, close to the open doors of a hangar. Two mechanics took charge of his machine. A young man, announcing himself as Sir Rugglestone's agent, offered to conduct him to the house.

Ten minutes before the appointed time Colin met his future temporary employer.

"I needn't ask you for your credentials, Mr. Standish," was his somewhat remarkable greeting. "I've taken the precaution of having your telephoto sent me. Now to business," he continued briskly. "You are, I take it, quite prepared to run more than ordinary risks. Good! Mr. Truscott has assured me that you are a man whose discretion is beyond reproach. I need hardly ask for your pledge of secrecy. Even if on hearing my requirements you think it wise to back out, I know that you will keep silent on the subject until the time for secrecy is past."

Standish, taking stock of his host, was rather impressed by his manner. Sir Rugglestone was about fifty years of age, slight and rather under average height, with a reddish complexion, blue eyes, and iron-grey hair turning white. Although it was late in the afternoon he had not got into a dinner jacket but wore a loose-fitting sports coat and rather exaggerated "plus fours". When he spoke he did so rapidly, yet distinctly, the while fixing his listener with his keen eyes.

"I'm not in the habit of backing out, Sir Rugglestone," rejoined Standish.

"Glad to hear it," replied the baronet. "All the same, when you've heard what you're expected to do, I shouldn't be surprised if you did. I'd only be disappointed. Now, then, this in brief is the proposition: in 1916 I was holding a military appointment that brought me in touch with Mir Ghani, Amir of Bakhistan. In fact, I got the old gentleman out of a very nasty hole when his subjects had all but been bought over by Mid-European agents. After the war, Mir Ghani, knowing I was going on the retired list, asked

me to take his son and heir to England and be responsible for his education. I did so and at eighteen Abdullah, educated as far as our public schools could deal with a rather difficult Asiatic, returned to his native land. A few months ago Mir Ghani died—under decidedly mysterious circumstances, by the by—and Abdullah reigns in his stead. I fancy Abdullah's out for trouble, because, like Amanullah, late of Afghanistan, he's keen on introducing Western ideas to a fanatical crowd who won't have them at any price. Evidently Mir Ghani wasn't ungrateful, for on his death he left me the Atar-il-Kilk ruby, a gem that is supposed to be the third in magnitude in the world. That knowledge is common property. But—and here's the important point—the gem is to be handed over either to me or to my accredited agent by Amir Abdullah himself at his palace at Hakaab, the capital, if one can describe a collection of hovels as a capital, of Bakhistan. I don't mind confessing that at my age I don't hanker after another jaunt to Bakhistan. There are also other considerations that prevent that undertaking. But I do want that ruby, not exactly for myself, but for—well to be perfectly candid—for a wedding present to my youngest daughter. So I want to have the gem in my possession not later than the 30th of this month. That hasn't left any too much time, so that I have to have it fetched by air and you're the man to whom I look to carry out the job.

"And it's not going to be an easy one. In the first place the Bakhistanis aren't at all keen on letting the priceless ruby out of their country. They've got an idea, based upon a two-thousand-years-old prophecy—and that was long before Mohammedanism sprang into existence—that Bakhistan would lose its independence if the gem crossed its frontiers. Curiously enough, although wedged in by three relatively powerful states, Bakhistan has never been overrun by invaders and that's a record for Asia.

"Then another problem is the evasion of the gang of international crooks, who, knowing that the gem is coming to England, will

be on the alert, leaving no stone unturned in order to seize this priceless booty."

"But, surely, if they did they couldn't dispose of it?" remarked Standish. "One of such a size would be unmarketable unless offered by a genuine owner."

"Agreed," replied Sir Rugglestone. "But there's nothing much to prevent the gem being sent to, say, Amsterdam, and being divided and recut. Each of a dozen pieces would be worth a fortune. And then there's the British crook to take into consideration, and he's not behind his continental and American *confreres* in skill and courage—far from it. So that's what you're up against, young man."

"A tall order, certainly, sir," admitted Standish. "But, given secrecy——"

"Ah!" interrupted Sir Rugglestone. "You've hit upon something there."

"It should come off all right," resumed Colin. "By the by, I ought to mention that a fellow in a biplane tracked me here."

His host smiled.

"Oh, that's Burt, my air-chauffeur," explained Sir Rugglestone. "He was just keeping his hand in, so to speak. I knew he was up this afternoon. Not a bad pilot within limits. For instance he runs me over to Paris and so forth. But he's hopeless off the beaten track. Early this year I wanted to attend a conference in Barcelona and he landed me in Majorca! Oh, no! Burt is too stupidly honest. He wasn't spying on you, my dear sir!"

But Sir Rugglestone Gorton was woefully mistaken in his opinion of Alfred Burt, for at that very time the man under discussion was intently listening by means of a skilfully concealed microphone to the confidential conversation between his employer and Colin Standish!



## CHAPTER III

### The Mysterious Warning

Colin flew back to Bere Regis Aerodrome on the following morning. All necessary arrangements and instructions had been given him, including a "letter of introduction" in the shape of a thin sheet of silver about the size of a playing-card and inscribed with weird Eastern characters.

"That's a feather in your cap, Standish," declared Mr. Truscott. "And in the Company's, too, provided you succeed. Honestly, I haven't any knowledge of what you're going for and I'm not asking! You're taking the *Condor*, I suppose? She's the speediest ten-seater we have, and you'd better not be cramped for room. How about a crew?"

"Three, sir, all told. I would suggest Grey as Second Pilot."

"No fault to find with your choice, there. And who else?"

"Metcalf, as engineer, sir."

"That Yorkshireman? Steady fellow but a bit slow in the uptake at times. Right: get on with it. When do you propose starting?"

"At dawn to-morrow," announced Standish.

Having warned his crew for duty—to the unconcealed delight of young Donald Grey, at least: Jack Metcalfe receiving his orders with stolid acquiescence—Standish consulted the ground foreman with a view to preparing the *Condor* for her hazardous voyage.

"I'll want her ready in all respects by four to-morrow morning, Symes," he ordered. "You might unship the wireless."

"Why, whatever for, sir?" inquired the mystified Symes. "Supposing you're in a crash?"

"Then the gear wouldn't be of much use to me, I fancy," rejoined Standish. "I'm not using it, so please return it to store."

As Colin walked away the foreman gazed in perplexity at his retreating form.

"Well, of all things!" he muttered. "What monkey-tricks is that youngster up to, I wonder?"

On approaching the outskirts of the village, Standish caught sight of a placard announcing the forthcoming boxing tournament to be held at the Londesboro' Hall, Bournemouth. Over the face of the placard was a pasted strip bearing the words in bold black letters: "Postponed till the 30th September."

"By Jove!" ejaculated the would-be competitor. "And I'm due back by or before then. Wonder if I'll be able to have a shot at it?"

Having made a few purchases in the village, Standish returned to the aerodrome. In view of the early start he turned in immediately after dinner, giving instructions to be called at 3 a.m. Then, possessing the happy quality of not worrying over coming events, he was soon in a sound and healthy sleep.

He had not been asleep for more than an hour—actually it was a quarter past nine—when he was aroused by a tap on his door.

"Hello! Come in!" replied Colin, instantly awake.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," announced the mess-steward, "but there's an express letter for you."

"Thanks," replied the young pilot, stretching out his hand.

The envelope bore a Devonport postmark and was addressed in a feminine hand. Inside was half a sheet of paper on which was written:

"Take care! The Down 'Em Gang will be on the look-out for you on your return flight. E.M."

"Will you be wanting to send a reply, sir?"

"No thanks."

The steward went out, leaving Standish to examine the postmark of the mysterious warning. It had been posted at noon at Plymouth on that same day. He'd never heard of the Down 'Em Gang. Who were they, and why was he warned to look out for them on his homeward flight? What flight? Surely not the one to bring home the Atar-il-Kilk ruby? The actual reason for his flight to Bakhistan was known only to Sir Rugglestone Gorton and himself. It was beyond reason that the secret should have leaked out, that a gang should be able to make plans to intercept him, and that some unknown person, supposedly a woman, had learnt of the intentions and had sent him an express letter to warn him—all within the space of twenty-four hours.

Standish was still puzzling his brain when there was another knock upon the door. Without further warning the door was thrown open, and Mr. Truscott, looking very excited, bounded into the room.

"Glad you're awake, Standish!" he began, brandishing a copy of a London evening paper. "Read this! Cat's out of the bag with a vengeance. Someone's been talking and it was a secret between two people. And one of them is you! Hang it all, Standish! The Far Eastern Airways will be badly let down over this business. The deal will be off! Sir Rugglestone will——"

The excited Resident Managing Director paused for lack of words to express his astonishment and indignation.

"Well, what is it, sir?" asked Colin quietly.

Mr. Truscott handed him the paper.

On the front page in heavy-ledged letters appeared the heading:

#### "AIR DASH FOR AMIR'S RUBY

"A sensational flight by an experienced young pilot of the Far Eastern Airways—Mr. Colin Standish—will be undertaken in the course of the next few days. Mr. Standish has been specially selected by Sir Rugglestone Gorton, Bart., of Haxthorpe Hall,

Yorkshire, to fetch home the great ruby known as the Atar-il-Kilk, recently bequeathed him by the late Amir Mir Ghani of Bakhistan."

It went on to say that the pilot was expected home on or before the 30th instant, and concluded with a description of the gem; its weight, history, and of the probable use its new owner intends to make of it.

"Well, sir, that's torn it!" remarked Standish, equally at a loss to understand how the jealously-guarded secret had leaked out.

"Torn it? Absolutely and utterly pulverized it, you mean," stormed Mr. Truscott. "Come along with me to the telephone. We'll see what Sir Rugglestone has to say. I guess I know that already!"

Waiting only to throw on a dressing-gown and thrust his feet into a pair of slippers, Colin accompanied his chief to the latter's private office.

It took some time for the exchange to get through to Haxthorpe Hall, but when connexion was made Sir Rugglestone answered the call in person.

"Yes, I know," he replied. "I've just seen it in the *Yorkshire Herald*. I've been expecting you to ring up.... Yes, it's unfortunate, very."

"I suppose our contract is cancelled?" asked Mr. Truscott.

"Not at all," declared Sir Rugglestone briskly. "Not at all. Unless, of course, Mr. Standish decides, in view of these revelations, that the attempt is too risky. In that case——"

"One moment, sir," interrupted the Managing Director. Then turning to Colin: "He wants us to carry on. The risk of being held up is enormous! But we must consider our reputation. Are you still willing? For goodness' sake say yes, Standish!"

"Yes," replied the young pilot.

"Mr. Standish is ready to carry on, Sir Rugglestone," reported Mr. Truscott.

"Then just let him carry on," rejoined Sir Rugglestone. "That's all. Goodnight."

And he rang off.

## CHAPTER IV

### In the Thick of It

The big passenger-carrying Condor biplane loomed up like a gigantic grasshopper against the pale grey dawn. Although her impending mission was supposed to be a secret, there was nothing secret about her construction. She was all-metal, with totally enclosed fuselage. Her generously staggered wings were of corrugated duralumin and fitted with safety slots. Her undercarriage was supported by massive wheels, capable when required of being raised into watertight recesses on the underside of the body. This device enabled her to "land" with equal facility upon the surface of the sea or upon the ground.

Her twin engines, which "all out" gave her a maximum speed of 180 miles an hour, were driven by heavy oil. King Petrol, as far as modern long-distance aircraft were concerned, had been dethroned in favour of a liquid with such a high flash-point that it was practically non-inflammable except while under enormously high compression. No blow-lamp or similar out-of-date contrivance was employed to give these motors primary ignition, neither did they have to rely upon the use of a magneto—that troublesome detail of petrol motors. The initial explosions took place by means of an electrically-heated platinum tube, after which firing took place automatically. While there was fuel supplying the engine that engine would continue to function, stopping only at the will of the human being controlling it.

Although the hour was so early, practically all the available staff at the Bere Regis Aerodrome turned out to speed their fellow-airmen on their journey. A running fire of cheery remarks and jests greeted Standish and his two companions as they appeared upon the flying ground. In addition, there were about a dozen pressmen, who, having by some means common to their calling learnt the time of the *Condor's* departure, had gained admission to the aerodrome.

Never before in the history of Far Eastern Airways Limited had a flight projected in deep secrecy been launched in the full glare of journalistic publicity.

Except that speed was a necessary condition the Amir's ruby might be brought home by mail-boat from India at far less cost and possibly at far less risk.

Cheerfully replying to his well-wishers' remarks, Standish clambered through the narrow door in the side of the bus, deposited his suitcase in his cabin, and then made his way to the control station. Metcalfe, the mechanic, was already at his post—one that entailed, thanks to the simplicity and semi-automatic action of the motors—very little attention or exertion on his part.

Don Grey's arrival completed the biplane's complement. Even with a crew of only three there was very little spare space in the *Condor*. The ordinary passenger quarters were chock-a-block with provisions sufficient to last the whole trip and an additional supply of oil fuel to enable her to cover five hundred miles more than the distance to Bakhistan and back, without having to depend upon outside resources.

"All O.K., sir!" reported Symes, presenting his log-book for the pilot's signature. "Only I wish you hadn't had that wireless gear removed, sir!"

"It's too late to think about now in any case," rejoined Colin cheerfully as he returned the signed document to the ground foreman. "Right-o, see that the skids are removed, please."

"Cheerio, Standish!" shouted Mr. Truscott, who had entirely recovered from his fit of irritation. "Keep your tail up and do your best for the credit of the Company."

"Trust me for that, sir," replied Colin, hand upon the switch controlling the ignition system. "Both engines primed, Jack?"

"All ready, sir," was Metcalfe's answer.

The motors fired almost simultaneously. The four-bladed propellers began to revolve, slowly at first but with rapidly increasing revolutions as the seemingly ponderous plane waddled awkwardly over the turf. Thanks to her highly efficient silencers there was hardly any sound from her exhausts. Only the whirr of the accelerating propellers broke the stillness of the early morn.

Then, amidst a burst of cheering from the spectators, the *Condor* leapt from the ground, and rising to a height of eight hundred feet was soon gliding swiftly above the treeless Purbeck Hills.

Don Grey, having stowed away his personal gear, made his way to the pilot's "office", or control cabin, where Standish, having set the gyro stabilizers to maintain a certain compass course at an altitude of one thousand feet, was able to let the *Condor* take care of herself.

"We're away, laddie!" began Grey, offering Colin his cigarette case. "By Jove! After that give-away in the newspapers do you think we'll be up against a rough house?"

"Quite possibly," replied Standish. "But not on the outward flight. They, whoever they are, wouldn't gain anything by that. It's when the Atar-il-Kilk ruby is on board that we'll have to keep our eyes skinned and our wits about us. It's not only the Voriloff Air Pirates we've got to take into consideration. Ever heard of the Down 'Em Gang? I haven't before yesterday."

"The Down 'Em Gang!" echoed Grey. "My giddy mother's sister! I should just say so. Don't you remember the Allerby Jewel Case?"

"Can't say I do," replied Standish. "Must have been abroad at the time. What of it?"

"A robbery at Allerby Grange, in Hampshire," explained Don. "Thieves who had been living in the place for nearly a twelvemonth—one as chauffeur, t'other as butler—splendid testimonials both of them had—forged, of course—got away with fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels. The strange part about the



whole thing was that they managed to gas everyone else in the house. There was a dinner party at the time and the owner and his guests knew nothing about it until they woke up in a hospital three days later. And it was the same with the servants and even a couple of dogs, except that the dogs weren't carted to hospital. Experts were called in to determine the nature of the jolly old gas, which didn't seem to have the slightest after-effects, but they had to admit they were up against something they knew nothing about— Hello, fog!"

"Looks like it," agreed Colin. "Pretty high bank of it too."

"What are you going to do? Climb?"

"Take a jolly lot of climbing," declared Standish. "Doubt whether twenty thousand altitude would skip it. I'm cutting straight through, and the sooner we do so the better."

Short of turning back, and such a step was out of the question—Far Eastern Airways' pilots, like Caister lifeboatmen, never turn back—the only thing to be done was to dive through the fog-bank and trust blindly to altimeter and compass.

Had Standish but known it he was about to encounter one of those stupendous banks of fog that at rare intervals hold vast areas of Western Europe in their grip, sometimes for days and nights on end.

With nerve-racking suddenness the *Condor* plunged into the almost vertical wall of vapour. The sensation was akin to that experienced in a train that rushes from dazzling sunshine into the sulphurous smoke of a tunnel. In spite of the anti-condensation film the triplex glass screens were rendered almost opaque. The *Condor* was blindly rushing through space at the speed of 120 miles an hour, or twice that of an express train.

For some minutes neither pilot spoke. Standish had switched on the light over the instrument-board, mainly with the idea of being able to continue smoking!

"'Bout time we were out of this," remarked Grey. "We've had twenty miles of it, and there's no sign of it easing. Thank goodness we're well away from the Croydon-Paris route; but what's going to happen if we fall foul of another bus?"

"A most unholy smash, young fellow," replied Standish cheerfully. "And we won't have time to worry about it, if it's a head-on crash. Remember when we sat on the back of a French airship in that sandstorm on the Syrian desert, and you thought we'd made a forced landing at eight thousand feet?"

"Do I not?" rejoined Don. "We bumped lightly. If we'd been going in the opposite direction instead of overtaking her——"

"We shouldn't be here now," added Colin coolly. "I'd like to know what the Frenchmen thought when they found a tail-skid track on the envelope! Just see what Metcalfe's doing, there's a good sort. I fancy the port engine is running a bit irregularly."

Left to himself Standish could not help thinking about the conversation. He had hitherto ignored the possibility of a collision. It was a very remote chance, but a chance it was. The fog, too, baffled him. Never before had he experienced one of such a vast extent; and to make matters worse, although he had allowed for a fifteen-miles-an-hour nor'-westerly drift, it was possible that the force of the wind had increased and its direction had changed. He began to wish that he hadn't dispensed with the wireless apparatus, even though it would have meant an additional member of the crew as operator. Had he retained the set he would have been able to ascertain his position from any of the British or French aerodromes.

Another hour passed. The port engine was now running normally. The Yorkshireman had reported a slight choke in the feed pipe that had evidently cleared itself. Still the fog persisted.

"Dashed if I like it," thought Standish. "We must be somewhere over Orleans by this time. Better give her another thousand altitude just in case."

Not until the altimeter registered nine thousand feet did the pilot feel satisfied. It was bitterly cold, notwithstanding the fact that the cabin was heated by pipes from the exhaust. The pipes were almost too hot to touch, and yet at a few feet away his fingers were numbed by the cold.

Suddenly the needle of the altimeter dropped and continued to do so until it registered 1500 feet in the space of a few minutes, although the gyroscopic stabilizers kept the bus practically in a horizontal position.

Standish realized what that meant. The *Condor* had encountered a deep air-pocket or what actually was a sudden downward air-current. And 1500 feet was about the height of the ground above sea-level.

In vain he strove to check the downward drop. Then momentarily the rush of air dispersed the mist. To his horror there appeared in sight the *tourelles* of a château.

It was the work of a moment to put the rudder hard over. The *Condor*, still under the action of the gyro stabilizers, responded with maddening slowness. There was no time to switch off the current actuating the mechanism.

Round swung the biplane, her starboard wing-tips missing the red tiles by inches; then, caught by an upward draught, she leapt rapidly away from the danger-zone, to be enveloped once more in the blinding mist.

She was still climbing when Grey re-entered the cabin.

"Bit of a stormy passage, what?" he remarked. "Any idea where we are?"

Standish shook his head. Although a bit rattled he did not want to betray his feelings to his subordinate. Nor did he want to alarm Grey by informing him that only the merest chance had saved the tiles of a Frenchman's château from being broken—to say nothing of a crash with fatal results to the biplane and her crew.

It had taught Standish a lesson not to employ the stabilizer in thick weather. The *Condor* was too hard on her helm under gyroscopic action. However much it saved the pilot from physical strain in clear weather it was a source of danger when rapid manoeuvring became necessary.

"Hello! you've cut out the gyro!" exclaimed Grey.

"Just to give me something to do!" replied Colin mendaciously, as he corrected what promised to be a terrific lurch of the storm-tossed aircraft.

"Your trick's up," Grey observed.

"I'll carry on a bit," declared Standish. "Wait till this muck clears—if it ever does clear," he muttered under his breath. "Hang it! It can't be like this over the Mediterranean, and by now we should be approaching the coast."

Conditions were getting worse. In addition to the fog the *Condor* was encountering a baffling succession of eddies and pockets. In vain the pilot climbed to nearly ten thousand feet in the hope that he would escape the blinding mist and find a calm stratum in the upper air.

At about the end of four hours the sorely-tried biplane emerged from the fog to find herself confronted by a lofty mass of snow-clad mountains. Another half-mile and she would have charged a precipice that rose sheer from a valley still shrouded in mirk.

In a trice Standish swung the now docile *Condor* at right angles to her former course. More snowy peaks confronted him. He dodged and commenced to gain additional altitude, brushing so close to a steeply-sloping peak that the wake of the swiftly-moving airplane set up a terrific avalanche, the noise of which completely outvoiced the loud whirr of the propellers.

In a succession of steep spirals Standish continued to climb—or at least attempted to do so. On all sides were enormous mountains towering high above the trapped biplane. How she had managed

to find her way into that maze of snow-clad pinnacles without crashing was a mystery never to be solved.

Soon it became apparent that the *Condor*, in spite of the pilot's efforts, was not gaining altitude. Some invisible force was holding her down. In the midst of a ring of mountains, unable to exercise sufficient lift to clear their forbidding crests and with a mist-shrouded pit beneath her, where landing would be out of the question except as a terrific crash, she was doomed to destruction unless by a miracle there was a way of escape.

Apparently there was none.

## CHAPTER V

### Scraping Through

For the seventh time in succession Standish steered the trapped biplane round what was roughly an oval course. Do what he could he was unable to gain altitude. The *Condor*, heavily laden with stores and oil fuel, and already in rarefied air, was opposed by a steady downward current. It would seem that the cold air in the vicinity of the irregular ring of snow-clad mountains was sinking; yet, so far, there was no compensating upward draught of warm air.

To make matters worse, not only did the fog hold persistently to the valley beneath but wreaths of watery vapour were collecting round the peaks and tending to unite with the lower stratum. In that case the *Condor*, pinned in between those stupendous precipices, would be doomed to utter destruction.

"If we got rid of our spare fuel——" thought Standish.

"Hello, what's that?" exclaimed Grey, pointing to what appeared to be a snake-like coil of rope at the southernmost part of the valley.

A ray of hope flashed across Colin's mind. Snatching up his binoculars he took a hasty look. It was one of those mountain roads, so common in the Alps, that have to wind, loop, and twist in order to maintain a practical gradient in a very limited space. Here and there it vanished from sight as it tunnelled through projecting crags or had to be roofed in to protect it from the ever-present danger of avalanches.

Where that road went—and it must lead somewhere—the biplane could assuredly follow.

Steadying the *Condor*, Standish made straight for the pass. The old bus was now going at her maximum speed and even then there was little reserve of lift. At the rate of a mile in every twenty-five seconds there was little time for either thought or action.

Rolling, rocking, and plunging in the complicated air-currents the biplane dashed into the defile. Ahead, the beetling cliffs appeared to meet in an unbroken rampart. Whether the exit lay to the right or left Standish had not the slightest idea. All he hoped was that the turn would not be too acute even for the nimble manoeuvring powers of the airplane.

More than once it seemed as if the wing tips would collide with the cliffs on either side. The noise was stupendous, the whirr of the propellers echoing and re-echoing in the narrow defile; while in the wake of the *Condor* tremendous masses of snow and rock, dislodged from their precarious resting places by the air vibration set up by the swiftly-moving biplane, crashed into the still invisible valley with a roar outvoicing that of a tropical thunderstorm.

The man who felt the strain of the tense situation most was Grey. He had to sit idly behind the pilot, trusting entirely to the former's sound judgment and yet finding himself thinking that he would act differently if he were at the controls. It was a feeling shared by most motorists when they happen to be riding in someone else's car. Jack Metcalfe, standing by the motor, fortunately had no such fears. Seeing nothing, although he realized that they were all in a tight fix, he was spared the sensations experienced by Don Grey.

As for Standish he was too busily occupied to think of danger. He knew that the danger was there and his job was to avert it, if humanly possible.

The wall of rock confronting him was within a hundred yards before Colin discovered that the rift in which he was flying made almost a right-angled junction with another gorge. He had to decide—and that quickly—whether he should swing the biplane right or left. He had nothing to guide him. At that point the road had vanished, tunnelling into the rock a quarter of a mile behind.

"Right to chance it!" whispered something in the pilot's brain.

Even then there was very little clearance. The *Condor* reeled under the back pressure set up by her approach to the vertical rocks, sideslipped, recovered herself, and tore down the right-hand valley.

So far Standish's choice was a sound one. A bridge, carrying the same mountain road, crossed the defile by a single arch. The biplane cleared the coping by less than three feet.

Beyond that point the gorge opened and presently the gallant *Condor* emerged into brilliant sunshine, with the wide fertile plain of Lombardy spread out eight thousand feet below.

Standish was now able to fix his position. He recognized the peculiar contour of Lake Como. There was no mistaking that.

With a gesture of utter relief he connected up the gyro stabilizers.

"Fine navigation, I don't think!" he remarked to his assistant. "Either the compass is out or the wind's chopped completely round, and we hadn't a chance to observe it. Now we'd better follow the Adriatic coast-line of Italy. Yes, take over, please! I admit I've had enough for the time being."

Don Grey slid into the vacated pilot's seat.

"We've been jolly lucky, anyway," he remarked.

They had been—more so than they knew!



## CHAPTER VI

### Foiled!

In a room of a small inn overlooking the harbour of Hyeres five men were conversing in whispers. Although the door was locked, they were taking no chance of being overheard.

Not that they looked like conspirators. Judging by their appearance a stranger would have been inclined to put them down as English tourists. Their faces, taken individually, courted confidence. And yet they were members of the infamous Down 'Em Gang, whose name was familiar to thousands, yet, so far, neither Scotland Yard nor the Prefecture of Paris had been able to lay them by the heels.

At fairly long intervals they had successfully carried off several daring coups. Although in almost every case the stakes were high, they worked for the sheer excitement of criminal adventure rather than the monetary gain resulting therefrom.

And now they had foregathered at this Mediterranean seaport with the express intention of gaining unlawful possession of the Atar-il-Kilk ruby. They explained their presence at Hyeres to a credulous audience, by saying that they were English and American pleasure-seekers engaged upon a cruise round the Mediterranean in a chartered flying-boat, but that owing to slight engine defects they had perforce to remain in harbour until mechanics arrived from Marseilles to make good the trouble.

"Nothing through from Creeper, I suppose?" inquired Tony, whose surname no one there but he knew.

"Not a word," replied Jim, the leading light of the gang. "He's still hanging on at Haxthorpe Hall in the capacity of old Sir Somebody Gorton's chauffeur-pilot. He'll be there when we want him, never you fear. But I have a cablegram from the Major. Took me some time to decipher it, or I would have been here before now. He

says that this Standish fellow is starting to-morrow morning for Bakhistan. He has only two with him."

"Well?" prompted a little lean man of about twenty-five, known to his associates as Slimer.

"Well! It's as easy as winking; that is, if Bud will do his celebrated drop-change stunt."

"Waal and why?" drawled Bud, who a few years ago had been a stunt pilot in the employ of a famous American film company. "I sure don't get you."

"It's like this," explained Jim. "Even if the airplane doesn't carry radio she'll have to report at one of the French air-ports on this bit of coast. I've made it all right for an operator at this place to get the report sent in at once. He'll push it across to me, or his relief will if he's off duty. Trust me to see to that. We'll have half an hour's clear warning, perhaps more. I reckon we have twenty miles per hour more than Standish, so in any case we can hold on his track till the chance offers."

"And then?" again prompted Slimer, who was always on the alert, ready to lay a finger upon the weak spot in any of the gang's plans.

"And then we'll sort of sit on the biplane's tail and Bud will drop upon the cabin top with his pistol——"

"No you don't, Jim," expostulated Slimer. "I thought it was an agreed thing that the boys shouldn't use firearms. It's too mighty risky, and I for one don't fancy myself dangling at the end of a rope. If I'm ever unlucky in my get-away and find myself pinched by the narks I'll take my medicine for what I've done. But dashed if I'll ever shoot. That's a mug's game."

"Quite right, Slimer! I admire your sentiments, sure!" exclaimed Bud. "But where do I cut into the pictur', Jim?"

"I wasn't suggesting the use of an automatic, Slimer," explained the leader of the gang. "Now this, I take it, is the situation. If Standish thinks he's going to meet trouble over this ruby stunt it's a dead

cert he won't expect it on the outward run. He'd argue that no one would play rough with him until he was returning with the ruby in his possession. Well, that's where we score. Bud will use the gun he did the Allerby Grange business with."

"But where do I cut into the pictur', Jim?" persisted the ex-movie "stunter".

"You can drop upon the cabin top."

"I guess I can," admitted Bud. "Done it twenty times already."

"The short drop—say six feet—is all I want you to do this time, Bud," explained Jim, with a grim smile. "Then all you have to do is to fire one charge through the ventilator into the pilot's cabin. You'll be wearing your gas-mask, of course. Then you nip in—it's certain Standish will be using the stabilizers so there's no chance of the bus stalling or nose-diving. Standish and his pal won't know whether it's Christmas or Easter for the next twelve hours or more. So you take charge and bring the biplane down."

"If there's a guy to do that, Bud's that guy!" declared the American vaingloriously. "I reckon that a cinch. What next?"

"We'll come down alongside you; take Standish and company aboard the seaplane, and you and Fox will run them back here. If necessary you can keep them unconscious for ten days; but it would be better if you paid the skipper of a French tramp to take them for a joy-ride across to Brazil! Meanwhile Tony, Jim, and I will make ourselves at home in the biplane. Standish is bound to have his letter of introduction to the Amir of Bakhistan, and I don't suppose he'll go to the trouble of comparing Standish's photograph with my features. We get the ruby handed over and that's that."

"Is it?" broke in Slimer swiftly. "What do you propose doing with the ruby? It's too big to be marketable."

"In its present form, yes," agreed Jim. "We'll fly, say to Karachi or Bombay, take steamer to the Dutch East Indies—I know a Dutchman out in Batavia who will pay up and ask no

questions—and the Atar-il-Kilk will cease to exist as such. So all we have to do is to stand by until the French wireless operator tips us the wink."

They "stood by". At eight next morning a cipher cablegram was received stating that the *Condor* had left Bere Regis Aerodrome, and that the route would be over Marseilles, Corsica, Messina, Crete, and Alexandria. The message also stated that an account of the projected flight to Bakhistan had appeared in the evening papers.

"How did that leak out?" inquired Tony. "I'll swear Creeper never let out a word. There'll be trouble for Standish at the other end if by any chance he slips through our fingers. But we'll get him right enough."

The morning wore on. No reassuring information came from the bribed French wireless operator at Hyeres Aerodrome, but the midday journals appeared with startling accounts of the "greatest fog within living memory ". All England south of the Trent, Holland, the Rhine valley, and seven-eighths of France were in the grip of the demon fog. In consequence all air-mail services in the affected area were suspended. Pilots of well-equipped craft that were already aloft managed in most instances to find the recognized aerodromes that were provided with anti-fog flares. But of private aircraft the toll of casualties was naturally of alarming proportions. Many pilots, utterly lost, wandered aimlessly until their petrol tanks were exhausted. A few succeeded in making forced landings without losing their lives. Others were able to fly out of the blind areas and descend in favourable conditions; but while the fog persisted—it lasted for sixty hours—there were close on two hundred fatalities to airmen. Coming so unexpectedly, for September was otherwise a quiet month, it brought home to civilization the fact that the air, like the sea, can be a hard taskmistress—but with this important difference: a ship can rest on her natural element, an airplane cannot.

"That's put the brake on!" commented Bud to his fellow gangsters. "I guess that Standish guy's crashed. We'd better make tracks for Yorkshire and pay a call on Sir Rugglestone and offer to fetch the ruby."

"Don't you fear, Bud," rejoined Jim. "Standish has got grit. I happen to have his record. We'll hear about him before very long."

They did. At 6.30 p.m., Mid-European time, the *Condor* was reported from Brindisi. She was flying in a south-easterly direction at an estimated height of 2000 metres.

"He's done us properly, boys!" declared Jim. "He took that route to throw dust in our eyes and he's won the first round."

"I give the guy full marks for that," agreed Bud thoughtfully. "I reckon he'll work the same stunt on his way back, sure!"

"And we'd better pack up at once and go home," added Slimer.

"I'm with you there," declared the leader of the gang. "Yes, we'll make tracks for York, get in touch with Creeper and find out when Standish is expected at Haxthorpe Hall with the ruby. Slimer will let us in—his lordship thinks no end of Alfred Burt as a devoted servant—and then we'll round the old boy up, give him and Standish a whiff of gas and get away with the Atar-il-Kilk ruby!"

## CHAPTER VII

### Rescued!

"Standish, old son! There's a boat down there!" announced Don Grey, lowering his binoculars and giving a vague indication with his hand towards the waste of foam-flecked water, five thousand feet below.

"Really!" replied the pilot indifferently. "We should sight a good many when we cut the steamer track between Port Said and the Western Mediterranean."

"But this is a small rowing boat," persisted the Assistant Pilot. "It looks as if——"

"Then that alters the case, somewhat," agreed Colin. "Hand me those glasses, will you?"

The *Condor* was flying against a strong sou'-westerly wind in a position, according to dead-reckoning, eighty miles due south of Cape di Leuca, the extremity of Italy's heel. According to programme she would skirt the western coasts of the Morea and of the island of Crete and make a landfall over Africa, somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Nile Delta.

The biplane was now automatically controlled. The crew, having snatched a hasty meal, had gone to the pilot cabin to enjoy a smoke. According to the instruments, the *Condor* was doing a hundred miles an hour against a wind of perhaps twenty miles an hour on the surface. At her present altitude the velocity of the upper air-current might be considerably more.

"Switch off the gyro, Don!" ordered Standish, "or we'll overrun the boat. Bring her round and keep her turning until I can see if there's anything wrong with the craft."

As soon as Grey had taken over the controls, Standish brought his binoculars into action. It was some seconds before he was able to "pick up" the object of his attention owing to the strength and small

field of the powerful prism-glasses and to the fact that the biplane was already swinging round to starboard.

Then the boat appeared to leap into the field of Standish's binoculars.

It was one of a type common in the Mediterranean, with high stem and sternposts and an exaggerated sheer. Although to the naked eye the sea from an altitude of five thousand feet looked as calm as the proverbial millpond, the glasses showed that there was quite a nasty lop, short steep seas breaking heavily. Yet the boat was riding lightly as the solitary occupant, standing and facing forward, laboriously pushed at the pair of heavy oars.

Obviously something was wrong. Eighty or a hundred miles from the nearest land was no place for an open boat with only one man in her. If, as might have happened, she had been blown offshore by a storm, why should the rower attempt to urge the craft against the now prevailing breeze and consequently head away from land? By the build of the boat, Standish knew that she was not one carried by merchant vessels; consequently the man was not a survivor from a wrecked ship.

Closer examination showed that there was a considerable amount of water sluicing about over the bottom-boards and that the man's movements were those of one who was on the point of physical collapse.

Standish replaced the binoculars in their case.

"Although we're in a bit of a hurry," he remarked, "we must render assistance when life is in danger. That chap looks pretty well all-in. Stand by the motors, Metcalfe, and house the landing-wheels. Better get hold of a coil of light line, Don. It will be wanted badly in a few minutes."

Relieving Grey at the instrument-board, Standish made the biplane dive steeply, turning her head to wind with the intention of alighting a short distance to lee'ard of the boat.

During the course of the *Condor's* descent, the occupant of the boat heard for the first time the whirr of her propellers. He looked up, dropped his oars, and then threw himself face downwards upon the bilge-sluiced bottom-boards.

"Might have held on a bit longer," thought Colin. "This complicates matters somewhat. Since he can't come to us, we'll have to fetch him!"

Considering the state of the sea the biplane made a fairly good landing. She was now virtually a boat driven by a pair of aero-propellers. The vertical rudder was of little use. Manoeuvring had to be accomplished mainly by the action of the propellers working independently, the revolutions being regulated so as to give the bus sufficient way and no more.

It was a risky business—a decidedly risky business! An error of judgment might easily result in the relatively thin metal plating of the fuselage being stove in against the boat's gunwale or stemhead, or one or both of the propellers being shattered by contact with the same objects. To complicate matters the boat was drifting at a rate that could only be conjectured, with a strong wind and fairly high sea.

"You'll have to swim off to her, Don!" shouted Standish, after making two fruitless attempts to close the boat. "The blighter can't help himself! Take a line with you, hitch it round his waist, and then swim back. We'll hike him out of it all right. Are you game?"

"Right-o!" asserted Grey, as he proceeded to divest himself of his clothing.

Colin was loth to give his companion these instructions. Grey was not a physically strong individual. He was small and wiry, but what he lacked in size he made up for in cool and calculated courage. Standish, on the other hand, was powerfully built, and excelled in muscular strength. He was the one for the task, but as Senior Pilot duty compelled him to remain at his post.



Looping a coil of rope over his shoulder, Grey opened the entry-port, the sill of which was now about five feet above the surface of the sea. Waiting only to lower a rope ladder to facilitate his return, the young Assistant Pilot took a clear header.

The *Condor* was now almost stationary at a distance of about twenty yards from the boat.

Don swam strongly. He was a good swimmer and the water was deliriously warm. With very little exertion he gained his objective, hauled himself over the listing gunwale and prepared to loop one end of the line round the prostrate figure on the bottom-boards.

At the first touch the man sprang to his feet and drew a knife from his sash. Don leapt back hurriedly. He was not lacking in nerve, but the suddenness of the action, together with the fact that he felt decidedly at a disadvantage in his birthday suit, made him exercise discretion.

The man looked extremely ferocious. He was below middle height, and so thin that every rib showed distinctly through his olive-hued skin. His hair was in crisp curls, and he wore a straggling beard which added to his maniacal appearance. His attire consisted simply of a pair of blue trousers secured round his waist by the red scarf from which he had produced the knife.

The shock of surprise passed quickly as far as Grey was concerned. The fellow was obviously "weak on his pins". Had he attacked, Don could easily have leapt overboard and swum back to the *Condor*.

But having "put his hand to the plough", the young airman was not going to turn back.

"Cheerio, *amigo!*" he exclaimed. "We're here to help you."

The man lowered his knife, turned, and looked at the airplane. Then he gave a sort of conciliatory laugh.

"*Inglees? Bueno!*" he rejoined.

"That's so, Antonio!" asserted Don. "We're English."

Without another word the man plunged overboard and struck out for the *Condor's* ladder. Waiting only to recoil the rope, Grey followed. Good swimmer as he was he had difficulty in keeping up with the obviously famished man, who actually gained the ladder first. But he was too weak to climb, and it was not until Metcalfe came to his assistance that he was able to scramble through the entry-port.

"You all right, sir?" hailed the Yorkshireman.

"Quite, thanks!" replied Don.

The entry-port closed with a clang. Don went off to resume his clothes; while Colin, having been informed that rescuer and rescued were safe on board, thankfully took the *Condor* to an altitude of two thousand feet.

"What have we shipped aboard this time?" he inquired when Grey rejoined him.

"Dago," replied Don. "Had a sticky time of it, I should imagine. Touch of the sun, since he drew a knife at me."

"So I saw," remarked Standish. "It gave me a turn until I saw you had the situation in hand. What's he doing now?"

"Wolfing," replied Don significantly, "and drinking as much water as Jack Metcalfe will let him."

"Well, warn Metcalfe to go slow with it. By the by, we'd better get hold of that knife."

"Might cause more trouble if we did," objected the Assistant Pilot. "He might get peeved. He has no cause to use his knife against us."

"Perhaps you're right," conceded Standish. "Stand by a little, will you? She's quite steady on her course. Four hours ought to bring us within sight of the African coast. Meanwhile I'll go and interview our passenger."

Colin's knowledge of foreign languages was limited to a smattering of French and rather less German, but that did not mean he was unable to communicate with the rescued Italian. On board each passenger-carrying airplane of Far Eastern Airways Limited was a volume of "Conversational Phrases" whereby it was possible, although it was a somewhat laborious business, for a Japanese, Javanese, or Cingalese to make himself understood by a Frenchman, German, Italian, Greek, or Egyptian through the medium of English.

But when Standish commenced to point to questions in the Italian section he soon made the discovery that the rescued man was unable to read.

At most Standish was able to read sentences with what he hoped was an Italian accent, but, when the man replied, he was at a loss to find the corresponding translation in English. So the attempt resulted in direct statements on Colin's part with an occasional gesture and a torrent of incomprehensible Italian in return.

"We are landing you at Alexandria," read Standish. "You will be able to obtain assistance from your Consul."

This evidently did not please the man. Several times he repeated a sentence in which the words "Porto Said" and "Kafshirbin" occurred several times.

"Why is he so keen on Port Said?" thought Standish. "And what and where is Kafshirbin?"

He went to the navigating room to consult an atlas. Here he found that Kafshirbin was a small island in Lake Menzaleh, about fifteen miles east of Port Said.

"Well, it can't be done," he decided. "He'll have to be satisfied with being landed at Alexandria, and he ought to be jolly thankful for that. It's no use attempting to ask him how he got adrift in that boat eighty miles or more from shore. Perhaps we'll be able to find that out at Alexandria."

"Floating or landing?" asked Don.

"Since we've housed the landing-wheels we'll try a floating berth," decided Standish. "I'm not particularly keen upon the new drome at Alexandria and there's plenty of shelter inside Fort Mex."

When, an hour behind scheduled time, the *Condor* alighted within the limits of Alexandria Harbour, it was almost sunset. According to recent regulations laid down by the Egyptian Government, no aircraft belonging to any foreign nationality was allowed to arrive or proceed during hours of darkness unless by permission previously obtained from the Egyptian Minister of Aviation.

"In that case we'll make the best of it and have a good night's rest directly we've landed our passenger," remarked Standish to the lieutenant of police who had come off in a launch to go through the necessary formalities.

"Passenger, you say?" rejoined the "Gippy" officer, who, having been educated in England, spoke the tongue of that country with tolerable fluency. "You were reported having left Bere Regis Aerodrome with a crew of three and no passengers. Now you declare that you have one. Has he a passport?"

"I rather fancy he's mislaid it," replied Colin grimly. "As a matter of fact we picked him up out of the sea about a hundred miles from the Italian coast. We are going to hand him over to the Italian Consul——"

"Where is the man?" demanded the lieutenant.

"On board. Come and see for yourself."

To the surprise of the crew of the *Condor* the Egyptian accepted the invitation with considerable alacrity. He stopped only to order two of his men to follow him, and—most significantly—drew a revolver from his holster.

By this time the sun had set and night was drawing in. Metcalfe switched on all interior lights and stood aside to allow the Egyptian to enter. He did so with the loss of a certain amount of dignity, for

his scarlet tarboosh, coming in contact with the top of the entry-port, was whisked from his head and fell into the boat alongside. The fact that the Yorkshireman grinned broadly at the incident did not improve the lieutenant's temper.

"Where is the Italian?" he demanded, replacing his retrieved headgear and twirling his moustache with his left hand while he held his revolver in the other.

"In there," replied Standish civilly, indicating one of the cabins that, for this particular flight, had been stripped of furniture.

The lieutenant slid back the door.

The cabin was empty.

Followed a systematic search until it was certain that the Italian was no longer on board.

"Apparently he's given us the slip, and swum ashore," observed Standish, glad to be so easily rid of his protégé.

"If he has, there trouble for you will be," threatened the lieutenant of police angrily. "You have aided and abetted the entry into Egypt of one of the most desperate criminals of the Levant. He is none other than Angelo Malagrotto!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### Kidnapped

Colin Standish shook his head. The name Angelo Malagrotto conveyed nothing to him. He had never heard of it. But what riled him was the arrogant tone of the fat lieutenant of police. Since the day when Great Britain restored to Egypt her independence the attitude of the majority of Egyptian officials towards Englishmen was that of studied insolence. During the period under which Egypt was virtually a British protectorate, saved by British bayonets from the horde of fanatical Dervishes who threatened her existence, and set on her feet, both financially and socially, by British brains and money, such arrogance would not have been tolerated. But directly British troops in Egypt had been withdrawn to the Canal Zone and that country was allowed to manage or mismanage her own affairs, every opportunity was seized by the native officials to affront and insult British subjects within her gates.

"'Aided and abetted'—try again, my dear sir," replied Standish calmly. "We rescued the man. In the circumstances we could not do less. Probably he is a desperate criminal—he certainly looked it—but we cannot be held responsible for that! Neither did we know that he had given us the slip. By the by, how did you know he was Angelo What's-his-name?"

The lieutenant threw out his chest pompously.

"It is our business," he replied. "We received news by wireless from the Italian police that Angelo Malagrotto, sentenced to perpetual imprisonment for the attempted assassination of a certain high official and confined in the castle of Serpentara at Brindisi, had made his escape. A boat was missing next morning. Italian destroyers were searching for him. And now you have picked up the miscreant and allowed him to land on Egyptian territory. But for that I would have laid hands on him or shot him dead if he had

resisted. And a reward of twenty thousand lire dead or alive! That you have me cheated!"

Standish was quick to grasp the fact that it was not the Italian's escape but the loss of what had promised to be easily earned money. He had no wish to find himself under arrest over a trumped-up charge.

"I tell you I can't be held responsible for Malagrotto getting ashore," he declared. "If your men had been keeping a sharp look-out they should have spotted him swimming. That's neglect on their part and I'm sure your Chief of Police will haul you over the coals for it. But perhaps we can put you on the fellow's track."

"Yes, do!" exclaimed the lieutenant eagerly, anxious to retrieve his reputation and to gain the reward offered by the Italian Government.

"He wanted me to land him at Kafshirbin."

"Kafshirbin!" echoed the Egyptian. "You fool of an Englishman would have had a nice reception! Malagrotto and his friends would certainly have knocked the three of you on the head and made off with your aeroplane."

"With what idea?" asked Standish.

"They would have made a good try for the Bakhistan ruby," was the astonishing reply.

Colin and his companion could not help showing surprise. Even a very minor Egyptian Government officer seemed to know about the flight to bring back the Atar-il-Kilk ruby.

"Well, now is your opportunity to raid Kafshirbin and collar the whole gang," suggested Standish.

It was a rather unfortunate remark, though its offensiveness was quite unintentional. The criminal colony at Kafshirbin, which was only a few miles from Alexandria, had been in existence only since the declaration of Egyptian independence. The police, no

longer officered by Britons, were powerless to eject the ruffians who composed it, or perhaps they were afraid to make the attempt.

"You jest, but you will regret it!" stormed the lieutenant. "You are under arrest."

He levelled his revolver at Colin's head.

"Enough of that!" exclaimed Standish sternly. "Remember this is a British aircraft. You have no jurisdiction here."

The Egyptian broke into a torrent of oaths.

"What do we care for the British?" he shouted in a high-pitched voice, and proceeded to express his opinion of the British Constitution from its Head downward. At least he commenced at the top, but he didn't get very far.

Knocking up the levelled revolver with his left wrist, Standish let drive with a powerful right. It caught the Egyptian lieutenant fairly on the point of his jaw, lifted him completely off his feet and sent him staggering against the two native policemen behind him.

Before the latter could recover from their surprise—and neither possessed much stamina—Colin relieved them of their weapons, bundled them into the cabin lately occupied by the missing Angelo Malagrotto and turned the key of the door.

"That's the right stuff to gi' 'em!" exclaimed Jack Metcalfe.

"Bear in mind you two have had no hand in this business," exclaimed Standish. "The responsibility's mine! Now, Don, cast off the mooring-wire! Jack! Start up the engines! We're off out of this, regulations or no regulations!"

Before the rest of the crew of the police launch realized what was happening the *Condor* drifted clear of the mooring-buoy. Both motors leapt into activity. The biplane gathered way, and, amidst a smother of foam, rose gracefully and swiftly into the darkness of the night.



## CHAPTER IX

### Brought to Heel

"So much for our quiet night!" remarked Grey, looking into the control cabin to inform his chum that the lieutenant was showing indications of "sitting up and taking notice". "Well, that's torn it, old son, I fancy! We'll be at loggerheads with the Egyptian Government for this. It may lead to a diplomatic incident."

"It won't," declared Standish. "I'll see to that. Right-o! Take over for a bit. Keep her jogging along. We'll probably have to land our latest passenger at Port Said. Thank goodness British prestige is still upheld there!"

"And so it is here," thought Grey, as his companion made his way aft. "By Jove! Old Standish ought to get something more than the O.B.E. for this; but he'll be jolly lucky if he doesn't find himself in the clink!"

"Ay, that were a right nice knock-out you gave t'Gippy!" observed Metcalfe as Standish passed through the motor-room. "A reckon he's feeling sorry for himself come now!"

"That remains to be seen," rejoined Colin. "But I mean to put the wind-up the blighter before I've done with him!"

The Yorkshireman grinned approvingly. Never before had he seen Standish so apparently vindictive.

The lieutenant was soon sitting up and taking notice. The podgy fingers of his right hand were gently caressing his jaw, while his left hand was furtively feeling for the revolver that was not in its holster. Finding himself unarmed and without the support of his two men, all the bombast went out of him. He stared apprehensively at the tall young Englishman who had so effectively dealt with an affront to his country.

"You told me that there is a local regulation forbidding the arrival or departure of aircraft at night," began Standish without any

preamble. "Well, I've broken it. You are now several hundred feet above Alexandria, and, so far, the forts have not attempted to enforce the order by opening fire."

"You will be sorry for this," said the Egyptian sullenly.

"Possibly; but not so sorry as you will be before this business is finished. You came on board, I did my best to help you concerning the presence of Malagrotto. You were not only over-zealous, you were insulting—not only to me but to my country. You went out of your way to level a revolver at me. Very well; you want to arrest Angelo Malagrotto, primarily, I take it, to obtain the reward. I am still going to help you to carry that out."

The lieutenant moistened his dry lips.

"How, sir?" he asked.

With inward gratification Standish heard the Egyptian address him as "Sir" for the first time. That was a step in the right direction. The fellow was learning his lesson.

"By landing you at Kafshirbin," announced Colin. "You will have two of your men with you, and, backed up by the authority of the Egyptian Government, you'll be able to arrest him without difficulty."

"You cannot do that!" almost shouted the terrified lieutenant of police. "You do not understand! Kafshirbin teems with international criminals. It will be sending me to my death."

"In the execution of your duty the fact that your life is in peril should be a secondary consideration," remarked Standish with thinly-veiled sarcasm. "Well, I've given you a chance to distinguish yourself and you throw it away. After all's said and done I can't compel you to land at Kafshirbin. It has saved me some trouble and delay, but it is a thundering pity you don't take advantage of my offer if only to save your face." "Save my face?" repeated the Egyptian to whom the phrase was unfamiliar in spite of the fact

that he had been educated in England. "I do not quite understand, sir."

"I'll explain," continued Standish cheerfully. "You, accompanied by two armed policemen, have allowed yourself to be knocked down and kidnapped. What excuse will you make when you have to report to your superiors? Bear in mind you brought it upon yourself entirely. If you had accepted my offer—and I fancy you could buy your men's confirmation of your story—you might have reported that you accepted my offer for a flight to Kafshirbin, to effect Malagrotto's capture. Now, as things are, you'll jolly well have to be landed at Port Said, and if you're wise you'll keep your mouth shut concerning your attitude and reception here!"

The Egyptian did not reply for some moments. He was weighing up the situation. Much as he would like to revenge himself upon his captor, he realized that Standish had put his finger upon the weak spot when he pointed out that some sound explanation would have to be made to the Chief of Police at Alexandria.

"If you will land me at Port Said, sir," he said humbly, "I will arrange matters satisfactorily. I will——"

"I don't want to hear your excuses," interrupted Standish. "But let this be a lesson to you. We British as a race are an easy-going crowd up to a certain point. But there are limits, and you for one have exceeded them. Let me tell you that you're confoundedly lucky to have got off so easily. Had you said half what you did to a Frenchman, you would not have been able to sit down for a week. In English public schools language you would have been 'hoofed'. Perhaps in your earlier days you were familiar with that form of endearment! So that's that. Now go and rejoin your men and make up your fairy tale for the entertainment of your superior officers!"

With that Standish unlocked the cabin door and signed to the lieutenant to enter. Then he strolled for'ard, feeling rather pleased with the result of the interview. It was certain that the kidnapped

men would keep silent regarding the actual circumstances of the involuntary "flip" in the *Condor*.

As he passed through the motor-room Colin stopped and picked up the three revolvers which Metcalfe had placed upon a shelf. He snapped open the breech of each weapon in turn, caught the ejected cartridges in the palm of his hand and tossed them into a bin containing used rag and other rubbish.

"Ditch them at the first opportunity," he ordered. "And while you're about it, Metcalfe, you might file off the projections on the hammers of these weapons. We'll have to hand their revolvers back to them, and they may have more cartridges; so I'm taking no chances!"

But the lieutenant and his two men gave no further trouble. When, two hours later, the *Condor* made a faultless landing on the brilliantly electric-lighted canal entrance at Port Said, Standish quite forgot to restore them their revolvers.

A police launch came alongside.

The motor-launch was manned by a British crew and commanded by a young officer whose accent left no doubt as to his nationality.

"Hello! Where do you hail from?" he inquired.

"*Condor*—Far Eastern Airways—outward bound," replied Standish.

"Are you, by Jove?" rejoined the officer. "Hope you get back with the Atar-il-Kilk ruby all right. Didn't know you were paying us a visit. And what are these Gippies doing?"

"This gentleman will explain that," replied Standish. "I'll ask you to give him and his men a passage to the beach. We'll be off again at sun-rise."

"Come ashore, then, and have a drink at the Club," suggested the English police officer hospitably. "All of you. I'll see that your bus

won't be interfered with when we've towed her into a berth where she'll be out of the way of traffic."

It was an attractive proposition, but Standish felt obliged to turn it down.

"Thanks awfully, but we'd better hang on here," he replied. "We've arrears of sleep to make up as it is, you understand?"

"Quite; but this gentleman?" persisted the British officer indicating the Egyptian lieutenant. He extended the invitation to him in French.

"I will explain," began Standish's former passenger. "We are on the track of Angelo Malagrotto."

"Angelo Malagrotto!" exclaimed the officer commanding the launch. "That bird can't be anywhere about here. The Italian wireless reported that he got away from Brindisi only a few hours ago."

"Well, he's here, within say a hundred miles of us," announced Colin. "Quite by chance we picked him up and brought him into Alexandria, when, for reasons known to himself, he elected to give us the slip."

"He did, did he?" rejoined the British police officer. "All I can say is 'Keep your weather eye lifting' while Angelo Malagrotto is anywhere about. It wouldn't surprise me one little bit to hear that Malagrotto is already plotting with some of his fellow sports to try and get hold of your precious ruby, Standish!"

"But the fellow's been in quod for more than twelve months, I understand," said Colin. "How could he know?"

"I'll bet a month's pay he does," was the other's astonishing remark. "He probably was able to overhear some of your conversation."

"But he didn't understand a word!"

The English officer chuckled.

"That's one up to Malagrotto. The blighter hasn't lived seven years in Soho for nothing. He speaks English right enough. Well, I must be getting back. Quite sure you won't come along to the Club? Cheerio, then, and don't forget that I warned you about Angelo Malagrotto!"

## CHAPTER X

### The Baited Trap

"Amigo! I tell you the task is easy!" declared Angelo Malagrotto. "It was very good fortune to find myself on board the English aeroplane. I confess at first I thought it was one of the seaplanes from Taranto. I drew my knife, intending not to be taken alive. Then I saw by the marks of identification that the aeroplane was English and not Italian."

"Fortunate indeed for you!" agreed one of his audience.

"Fortunate for us all," conceded Malagrotto. "I kept my mouth shut, except that I indicated to the Englishmen I wished to be set ashore here at Kafshirbin. Therein they were unaccommodating. Hence I had to swim ashore. An accursed police launch nearly ran me down, but the pigs who manned her saw me not—the saints be praised!"

A few hours had made a difference to the escaped criminal's appearance. His ragged beard had been cut and trimmed, his moustache clipped and waxed at the ends. His curly locks had been shorn and coaxed into some resemblance of straightness by the aid of grease. His scanty garment had been replaced by those affected by fairly well-to-do Levantines. Also he had fed and drunk.

With five other spirits hardly less criminal than himself, Malagrotto was holding a sort of congratulatory reception in an underground room in one of the crowded hovels of Kafshirbin, where either through fear or by being heavily bribed, the Egyptian police never paid a visit. To them it was a decidedly unhealthy place.

Of the five two were Malagrotto's compatriots. The third was a Greek; an ex-Turkish airman, who hardly ever forgot to revile Mustapha Kemal Pasha, was the fourth of the group, the fifth being Ivan Ulvitch, a Russian of Jewish parentage, who once held

an assistant commissar's post under the Soviet regime. A good indication of his character might be deduced from the fact that the Supreme Council at Moscow was afraid to have him assassinated, but had gone to the extent of ordering his banishment. Ulvitch had shaken the dust of Russia from his feet three years previously, taking with him about a quarter of a million roubles, much of which he had lost in the gambling houses of the Levant.

The five, whose intelligence service was remarkably efficient, had already given their attention to the Atar-il-Kilk ruby when quite unexpectedly their leader rejoined them. By pure chance he was able to give definite information concerning the *Condor* and her crew.

"It is useless to attempt to intercept the three Englishmen on their return flight," declared Ulvitch. "If they went by way of Alexandria they are not at all likely to return by the same route. Did you overhear them discuss their plans, Angelo?"

Malagrotto shook his head.

"They said nothing concerning their plans," he replied. "I, too, agree with what you say, Ivan. They might return by way of Constantinople. It is like chasing one mosquito on the Campagna marshes! Now, listen: the nearer we cast our net to their place of departure on their return from Bakhistan the better. In other words if we hope to gain possession of this gem we must do so almost as soon as their aeroplane takes off from the Amir's palace."

"That's all very well," grumbled the Russian, "but how are we—the six of us will be necessary for the task—how are we to arrive in Bakhistan without being objects of suspicion to a thousand hillmen? I flatter myself that I could journey from Wadi Haifa to Wadelai disguised as a Sudanese and not a native would penetrate my disguise. But I know not a word of the language of Bakhistan, nor of the habits and customs of its people. How, then, could six of us hope to penetrate into that country without being shot at by the tribesmen? Tell me that!"



"Listen," said Angelo Malagrotto.

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Shortly after noon on the following day four French tourists, claiming to be *savants* of the University of Toulouse, called at the offices of Mehallut and Samahiyeh's Egyptian Touring Agency at Cairo and asked whether it would be possible to charter one of their passenger-carrying airplanes for a three days' flight over the Sinai Peninsula.

Monsieur le Professeur Deschamps, the spokesman of the party, explained that they were anxious to take aerial photographs of certain recent excavations. The four tourists, having produced their passports, offered to pay any sum within reason for the hire of the plane, including insurance.

This was rather an unusual request, since the fleet of aircraft belonging to the Touring Agency generally limited their excursions to Luxor and other famous places in the Nile Valley below Korti. Why not charter an English machine, suggested Ali Samahiyeh, the Junior Partner. There are several to be hired at Gaza.

Monsieur Deschamps was desolated! He pointed out that if he hired an English aeroplane the rascals who piloted her would certainly take aerial photographs too, and that was what he particularly wished to avoid. The excavations were originally discovered by a Frenchman, and he, Professeur Deschamps, wanted to be the first to display photographs of his compatriot's discovery. No, it would not do to employ an English aeroplane. Photographs of the Sinai excavations would appear in the London illustrated journals long before he returned to Toulouse.

The sight of a fat roll of bank-notes turned the scale in the Professeur's favour. One of the Company's latest type of passenger-carrying planes piloted by an Egyptian airman who had made extensive flights over Western Arabia was to take charge.

Early next morning a smart saloon motor drove up to the Egyptian Touring Agency's aerodrome a few miles from Cairo. Professeur

Deschamps and his three companions alighted. Their luggage was transferred to the waiting plane.

An hour and a half later the aeroplane was well over the rugged, sun-baked Sinai Peninsula at a height of two thousand feet, when Monsieur le Professeur, cautiously lifting the sliding partition at the rear of the pilot's office, deliberately shot the luckless Egyptian in the back of the head.

Even as the dead pilot's body slithered sideways to the floor of the cockpit, Ahmed the Turk took the controls; while Angelo Malagrotto, ejecting the still smoking cartridge, thrust the automatic back into his hip-pocket.

"Drop that carrion overboard, Ivan Ulvitch!" he ordered. "He is not likely to be found in that desolate land. If he is no one will notice that bullet-wound. Now, Ahmed, prove your ability as a pilot."

The aeroplane swung round and steadied on a westerly course on her 1800 mile flight to Bakhistan.

That night they landed on the desert. The markings on the machine were painted out and those of a French machine substituted. Ostensibly the four villains were members of a private expedition on its way from Le Bourget to Cochin China. They even had forged passports in their possession.

During the course of the following day their track converged on and made a junction with that of the recognized air route to India. From that point until it became necessary to break off for Bakhistan they constantly sighted other aeroplanes. There were British air-mail liners, British passenger-carrying craft, British Royal Air Force machines, whose number compared with those of other nationalities gave the four desperadoes an object lesson concerning Britain's aerial superiority in this part of the globe. Twice they sighted planes with the straight-bladed sword as their distinguishing mark, showing that they were units of the Iraki Air Force. There were small double-seaters, too, belonging mostly to rubber-planters in the Federated Malay States who were either

going for or returning from their leave in the Old Country, or to Australians and New Zealanders who, now the trail was most efficiently blazed, recognized the value of time saved over the usual sea voyage to and from the Motherland.

F987—that being the designation given her by her captors—continued her flight, her crew keenly alert but refraining from approaching other aircraft. They laboured under one great disadvantage. They were not provided with wireless and in consequence were unable to pick up any broadcast information that might help them regarding the movements of the *Condor*.

At Jask, Malagrotto and his companions descended to obtain petrol, their visit occasioning no suspicion on the part of the aerodrome officials. They even went to the length of inquiring if the *Condor* had passed that way—for there was public, almost wide-world interest in Standish's flight—but no information was forthcoming.

"It is to be hoped that we have not overtaken the *Condor*" observed Ulvitch as F987 resumed her flight. "She would then sight us as she approached her outward destination."

"Unless she has made a forced landing it seems unlikely," replied Angelo Malagrotto. "No doubt she has taken a more northerly course. We shall see."

At length Malagrotto and his companions arrived upon the scene of their intended coup.

Thirty miles due west of Hakaab, the principal town of Bakhistan, is a deep valley in the Khiri Kush, the rocky frontier of Bakhistan that rises almost perpendicularly to a height of 15,000 feet above sea-level. On the western side of this formidable range commences the desert of Dasht-i-hut. Obviously no pilot bound for Hakaab from the west would attempt to climb several thousand feet when a way lay open to him through the valley.

Ten miles short of this convenient gateway F987 descended, alighting upon a waste of sand of sufficient firmness to allow her to "take off" when required. The spot had been admirably chosen. Low ridges of rocks enclosed her on almost all sides, leaving sufficient space for her to rise yet affording protection from any storm that might spring up. Yet the pseudo French airplane was fully exposed to sight from any aerial observer who passed over within ten miles of the place.

Which was just what Malagrotto and Co. wanted. For here they waited, ready with Verey lights by night or smoke clouds by day, to lure the returning *Condor* by means of false signals of distress.

It was a skilfully baited trap—one that by the traditions of land, sea, and air could not fail to draw would-be rescuers into its jaws.

And the only other aircraft within four hundred miles of the trap was the *Condor*.

## CHAPTER XI

### The Amir Abdullah

"Nearly there, old son," was Colin Standish's greeting to the Assistant Pilot, as Grey, his "watch below" over, entered the control cabin. "There's the Khiri Kush—the frontier of Bakhistan."

Don levelled his binoculars on the serrated range of mountains rising sheer from a sea of sand and standing out darkly against the glare of the newly-risen sun.

"Tough proposition if we have to fly over 'em," he remarked. "One blessing, they don't appear to cultivate fogs in Bakhistan. The air's as clear as anywhere I've seen—even in South Africa."

"We don't have to climb," declared Standish. "That is if we can find the gorge Sir Rugglestone Gorton mentioned. It's not shown on this map, but perhaps that wasn't considered necessary as it's off the beaten track. Metcalfe awake?"

"Yes, and standing by," replied Don. "Shall I take on?"

Colin shook his head.

"I'm quite fresh, thanks. Do you mind getting breakfast? I'd rather see her through this bit of country."

The Khiri Rush Mountains were just sighted at a distance of nearly a hundred miles, or three-quarters of an hour's run, the altimeter indicating a height of 6000 feet. Throughout the night the plane had been flying with her gyro stabilizer in action, but before very long she would have to be manoeuvred without that device if the course between the ranges was as tortuous as was expected.

Presently Standish replaced the binoculars in their case. He had found what he had been looking for—the valley giving access to Hakaab from the west.

The pilot's heart beat high. He felt tremendously elated. Here was something out of the ordinary—making an aerial voyage of

discovery which was far different from humdrum flights over well-charted routes.

Forty minutes later the *Condor* passed almost immediately over the spot where, before the day was done, Angelo Malagrotto was to set his snare. Viewed from a height the ring of sand-polished rocks looked like some gigantic prehistoric circle. Don, who had just brought his chum a cup of tea, called his attention to it.

"Looks to me like an ancient city overwhelmed by the sand," he remarked. "I'd like to have a chance of exploring the place."

"It's only natural rock," declared Standish. "Strange that it outcrops like that though, when there's nothing but sand for miles. Now, then, here comes a bit of tricky work!"

He switched off the gyro and stood by the hand-operated controls. In a valley, subject to sudden wind-eddies, one had to be on the alert.

On gaining the entrance to the defile Standish found that it presented no great difficulty. Although it wound considerably, at no part was it less than four hundred yards in width, although the rocks rose precipitously to several thousand feet above the questing *Condor*.

Suddenly there was a sharp metallic knock, followed by an exclamation of pain.

"Hello! What's happened to Jack?" asked Standish. "See what's wrong, old man!"

Don hurried into the motor-room and found Metcalfe holding his left forearm with his right hand. Blood was oozing between the tightly gripping fingers. The Yorkshireman was staring at a small hole in the roof of the cabin.

"Copped a bullet this time," he declared.

"Bullet?"

"A'm right sure, A did that!" persisted Metcalfe. "A was tending the dynamo. Thought A'd got a 'short' until A saw the blood and that hole in t'roof."

"Let's look at the wound," was Grey's practical suggestion.

"It's nowt much," asserted the Yorkshireman. "Happen more bullets'll be coming where this one came from."

"Not likely. We're out of range by now," said Don, as he opened the First Aid box on the bulkhead.

Examination showed that the wound was a superficial one. It had grazed the skin, drawing blood and raising an angry-looking weal.

Washing the wound with iodine Grey tied a bandage round the engineer's arm.

"That'll do gradely," declared Metcalfe. "Nowt to worry over, but A'd like to have five minutes with the chap who did it!"

Further examination showed that the bullet—which was considerably larger than a Lee-Enfield and had been probably fired from an old Martini rifle—had hit the underside of the fuselage between the engine beds, and after grazing Metcalfe's arm had glanced off one of the cylinders and made its exit through the roof. The rush of air through the jagged hole overhead sounded like the drone of a swarm of bees.

"Sniper fired at us," reported Grey.

"Good shot, or more likely a fluke," rejoined Standish. "Metcalfe hurt?"

"Just a graze," replied Don. "He's carrying on."

"We're nearly through.... Hello! More of them. Our arrival in Bakhistan has evidently upset some of the tribesmen."

Standish spoke calmly though he realized that a second hit might have far more serious results than the first.

From rifts in the side of the pass well-concealed Bakhistanis were keeping up a hot fire upon the swiftly-moving biplane. The reports of the rifles were inaudible to the crew, but wisps of smoke—the tribesmen were using black powder—and the angry whine of nearby bullets indicated the nature of the airmen's reception.

"All wides!" declared Standish reassuringly. "The blighters aim straight at us, and don't know how to allow for our speed. The one hit was a fluke."

Thirty seconds later the *Condor* emerged from the valley. Bullets no longer zipped astern of her. The hillmen, baulked in their efforts to bring the airmen down, emerged from their hiding-place and gazed at the strange sight of the rapidly vanishing "bird".

"There's Hakaab!" exclaimed Colin, pointing to a group of mean hovels topped by three or four minarets and crowning the almost flat top of a rugged plateau. "I suppose that square stone building is Amir Abdullah's palace. We'll cruise round and look for a suitable landing-place. Wonder if the inhabitants will greet us with a fusillade of rifle bullets?"

At a height of one thousand feet above the "city", for such was its designation, the airmen had ample opportunity to examine the Amir's capital. It was unfortified with the exception of the palace, the outer walls of which were loop-holed. Yet, by its position, Hakaab would be able to withstand any invaders not equipped with artillery and other modern arms of offence; and it was on that account that in the past Bakhistan had retained its independence against Persian and Afghan invaders.

The streets were narrow and irregular and were often completely bridged by brightly coloured awnings. The small open spaces in front of the mosques and the larger ones in which the market was held were crowded by white-clad people gazing upwards at the unusual spectacle of an aircraft. Some of them had seen aeroplanes before, as the younger Bakhistanis had been to the bazaars at Kabul and the Punjab, and hitherto their stories of these mechanized



birds had been discounted by the older tribesmen. And because British aircraft had successfully evacuated foreigners from the beleaguered legations at Kabul without having to resort to aggressive measures the report had got about that aeroplanes were incapable of fighting. It was on account of this rumour that the tribesmen in the valley of the Khiri Kush had ventured to snipe the *Condor* upon her arrival over the frontier.

"Not a breath of wind," reported Don. "Those flags are absolutely motionless, so 'head to wind' is out of the question. See any level ground?"

"None except the squares and they're packed with people," replied Colin. "And I don't want to land outside the city and far away from the palace if it can be avoided. Since the Amir's been brought up in England he must know that a clear landing-place is wanted. Or perhaps he doesn't want us to land, and that will give him an excuse to freeze on to the ruby.... My error! It seems as if friend Abdullah is making an effort on our behalf."

From the gate of the palace a body of horsemen emerged. Deploying into line they set their steeds in motion and began to clear the square of the dense throngs. Apparently they had some difficulty in their task, for here and there the Amir's guard came to blows with knots of his recalcitrant subjects.

Finally a space was cleared, the horsemen holding all approaches, although the flat roofs of the houses were black with upturned faces.

"Not much room, but we'll have to risk it," decided Colin. "Now for it!"

The *Condor*, swooping at a steep angle, cleared one of the roofs by less than ten feet, the whirr of her propellers causing the onlookers to prostrate themselves in fear and trembling.

Then, bumping lightly, she traversed almost the entire length of the square before coming to a standstill within five yards of the

horsemen stationed in front of the palace gate. It spoke volumes for the steadfastness of these guards and of the command they had of their steeds that neither a man nor horse moved even in the face of what looked like imminent danger.

Standish alighted with the intention of scotching the landing-wheels. As he did so the double gates of the palace were thrown open, and a tall slim man of about twenty-five, dressed in rich Eastern garments and wearing a green turban, appeared. He was followed by a number of courtiers and servants whose respect for the gorgeous potentate was shared with their undisguised interest in the newly-arrived aeroplane.

Guessing rightly that the principal personage was the Amir Abdullah, Standish saluted.

"Good day, old sport!" was the Amir's greeting in English, with the usual *chi-chi* accent of the East. "So you have arrived! Have you had a decent journey?"

"Quite, your Highness," replied Standish. "Many thanks for the arrangements you have made for our landing."

"Friends of Sir Rugglestone are friends of mine," declared Abdullah. "Come along in and have a spot! Although as a follower of Mohammed I am not allowed to join you in a friendly glass, there is no reason why I should not have a wine cellar for the entertainment of my English guests. I do have Englishmen here occasionally," he added almost plaintively, "and I hope to entertain more in the near future."

"Thanks awfully," replied Colin, rather taken aback by the Amir's command of idiomatic English until he remembered that Abdullah had been brought up in an English public school and had "finished up" at one of the Varsities. "But if you don't mind I'd like to see my old bus safely housed."

"No one will harm it," asserted the Amir.

"I am quite content to accept your Highness's assurance," rejoined Standish. "Your people won't meddle with it, but there are natural conditions to be taken into account—strong winds and such like."

"Those I cannot control," said Abdullah, with a smile. "But I can arrange for the safe custody of your plane."

He gave a fairly lengthy order to one of his attendants. The man passed it on to a number of subordinates. Half a dozen mounted guards then cleared one of the side streets leading out of the square. The *Condor*, man-handled by a score of Bakhistanis, was dragged into the empty thoroughfare which was just wide enough at its nearest end to take the wing tips, and armed men were posted to keep off curious spectators. It seemed a fairly high-handed action against the inhabitants of that street, but evidently the Amir's word was law!

"Bring your pals in," invited the Amir. "What is this? You've been hurt?" he added, addressing Metcalfe. "How was that?"

"Nowt much," replied the Yorkshireman with typical bluffness. "Some gentleman took a pot-shot coming along."

"Where? When?" Abdullah turned to Standish for details.

"It didn't very much matter," said the latter apologetically. "One of the hillmen evidently got a bit excited at the sight of the bus and couldn't resist letting off his rifle as a form of welcome. I don't suppose he tried to hit us."

"I'll jolly well see into this later," declared the Amir angrily. "Some of the outlying tribes are a bit difficult to keep in hand; but I'll take care they're punished."

"They probably didn't know what they were doing," suggested Standish. "I suppose they couldn't resist firing when they saw what they imagined to be a gigantic bird. We'll probably fly back by another route."

"There isn't one unless you climb thousands of feet," asserted Abdullah. "But don't mark time here. Lunch is what you need."

The crew of the *Condor* were taken into the palace and shown into a room where slaves presented brass bowls of water and by signs offered to wash the feet of the Amir's guests.

They were then shown into a richly decorated hall where the Amir and a number of his officers entertained the Englishmen to luncheon.

"When do you propose to start on your homeward journey?" asked their host.

"To-morrow, all being well," replied Standish, realizing that he could not say very well that it depended upon when the Atar-il-Kilk ruby was given into his charge.

"It is a short visit," remarked Abdullah. "Very well, then, this evening I will hand you my father's gift to Sir Rugglestone. It is a sacred duty, though honestly I don't like parting with the jolly old thing! As it is, I must do so on the strict Q.T., because my subjects might cut up rough."

## CHAPTER XII

### The Gem is Handed Over

Abdullah made an almost imperceptible sign to the Bakhistanis at the festive board. Whether any of them had understood the conversation in English, Standish knew not. Their placid features rather created the impression that they had not.

But the signal was understood. Making deep obeisance first to their ruler and then to the three Englishmen the Bakhistanis filed out.

The slaves or servants, having handed round cigarettes and provided their lord with a hookah, also vanished.

The Amir Abdullah and his guests were alone.

Then a curious thing happened. Their host, excusing himself for a few moments, went into a room opening out of the banqueting hall. In a few minutes he returned wearing white flannels and a blazer bearing the arms of his college.

"Now we can take things easily," he declared, with a laugh that contrasted strangely with his former demeanour. In the presence of his compatriots his features wore that sort of immobile serenity that characterizes the Eastern races. His demeanour was now more like that of a "fresher" entertaining a party of "undergrads" in his rooms.

The hookah he pushed aside and from the pocket of his blazer he produced a well-seasoned briar. This he filled and lighted with obvious satisfaction.

"It wants but the Proctor's bulldogs to appear on the scene to complete the illusion," he observed. "By Jove! It's topping to be with 'sports' again!"

"That's right champion of you to say it," declared Metcalfe, mellowing under the influence of Oriental dishes followed by a magnum of whisky. "You've done us right proud, Amir!"

Colin and Don exchanged glances. They were rather dubious concerning the Yorkshireman's candour.

But Abdullah appreciated it. He laughed and began a discussion with Metcalfe upon the merits of Yorkshire cricketers compared with those of Middlesex.

"And you breed fine dogs in Yorkshire," he remarked.

"Ay, that we do, by gum!" agreed Metcalfe. "If A'd known as you were such a sport A'd have brought along a pup—a champion!"

The Amir shook his head regretfully.

"That pleasure is denied me, even though I am ruler of Bakhistan," he remarked with a touch of sadness. "In Moslem countries a dog is a creature of no account. Not that I think so. If I brought a dog into the palace I should be debased in the eyes of my countrymen. Already I have tried to introduce certain Western customs that would benefit Bakhistan; but Bakhistan is not ripe for the civilization of the West. Fortunately I saw it and desisted before there was a proper bust up."

Once again the Amir excused himself and left his guests. Although they did not know it he resumed his Eastern garb and rejoined his household to respond to the cry of the Imaum calling the Faithful to prayer at the setting of the sun.

Then, again changing into flannels, he came back to his English guests.

The conversation flowed briskly for another three hours, but, somewhat to Standish's concern, no further mention had been made of the ruby.

Presently Abdullah arose, knocked out his pipe, and replaced it in his blazer pocket.

"It's about time I executed my father's instructions," he announced. "If you will come along—all three of you—I will give you the ruby into your keeping. But before so doing," he added courteously,

"there is one slight formality. Sir Rugglestone Gorton has, I take it, furnished you with credentials?"

In reply Standish pulled out his pocket-book and produced the silver "card" given him by the baronet.

The Amir scanned it.

"Quite O.K.!" he declared. "I stick to it. Now, this way, please."

Unlocking a metal-studded door he escorted his guests into a sort of annexe opening out of the hall and projecting over the edge of the two hundred feet precipice which bounded the palace on its eastern side. The moon had now risen, and by its strong light, Standish, looking through a latticed window, could form some idea of the precarious position of the Amir's private "den". How it was supported over the abyss Standish knew not, but from its position it was absolutely unapproachable except by means of the narrow, heavily studded door.

At one end of the room and next to the entrance was a small platform gained by three steps. The Amir ascended the platform and, producing a bunch of Yale keys, proceeded to unlock what was obviously a very modern safe. Not only had it three intricate locks manipulated by keys, but there was also a combination. Directly the latter was set in correct position a bell began to ring shrilly until the Amir, touching a concealed push, silenced the warning note.

"Your Highness has taken elaborate precautions," observed Colin.

"I jolly well think I have!" agreed Abdullah.

The door of the safe swung open. Standish and his companions, standing on the floor-level, could not see what was in the safe. Presently the Amir produced a curiously inlaid metal box, about ten inches square, and carefully placed it on a small table on the left of the platform.

Then he unlocked it with almost reverent care.

"Behold the gem!" he announced.

There, resting upon a cushion of velvet and surrounded by layers of swan's-down was the object of Colin Standish's mission. If the three Englishmen expected to see a flashing, scintillating gem that almost blinded the eyes by its brilliance they were disappointed. It was simply an octagonal mass of dark blood-red stone, transparent only when the Amir held it up to the light.

"Worth an emperor's ransom, and held at the cost of untold lives through the centuries that are gone, the Atar-il-Kilk now passes into the keeping of one of a different race!" continued the Amir solemnly. He paused.

"Now I will relock the jolly old gem and hand it over—— Dash it! There goes the key."

Slipping off the edge of the table the key, rebounding from the platform, fell upon the lower floor. Simultaneously the three Englishmen made a grab for it. It was an undignified performance, and the Amir smiled broadly when Don Grey restored the key to him; while Colin and the Yorkshireman, whose heads had come in contact during the search, feelingly rubbed their foreheads.

"Perhaps you would like me to replace the gem in the safe until tomorrow?" asked Abdullah. "Or on the other hand you may not care to let it out of your possession now I have your receipt?"

"There is no possibility of it being stolen, your Highness?" asked Standish.

"None whatever," was the decided reply. "You can take it to your sleeping-quarters. Armed guards will be stationed outside both window and door. In fact the gem will be strictly guarded until it is placed in your aeroplane. Then, once you are in flight, my responsibility is at an end. Mind you, there is great opposition to its departure. I have issued a declaration stating that your visit has nothing to do with the Atar-il-Kilk leaving Bakhistan. Public sentiment has to be taken into consideration even though it is



necessary to deceive my subjects, but paramount is the duty I owe to my honoured parent, the late Amir Mir Ghani."

"In the circumstances perhaps it will be well if I do take charge of the ruby, your Highness," said Standish. "If we are to make an early start——"

"Then freeze on to the jolly old thing!" interposed Abdullah, handing him the casket. "If you are starting your flight at daybreak—I wish to goodness you could hang on here a few days—I will be on the spot to wish you luck. The hour is late. If you are to start early it is desirable to rest."

The Amir relocked the safe and led the way to the audience hall, Standish following with the casket, with Don and Metcalfe at his heels.

Declining the Amir's offer of a "night-cap", the three Englishmen were shown to their sleeping-quarters by a servant whom Abdullah had summoned in the Oriental manner by clapping his hands.

The man conducted them along a wide corridor at the end of which was a room overlooking the courtyard in the quadrangle of the palace. It was lighted by means of oil lamps suspended from the roof. There were two windows, both opening on a sort of balcony twenty feet above the ground. The windows were glazeless but screened by means of a *chik* or curtain composed of strung bamboos. There were three beds consisting of low wicker couches, the legs of which were standing in brass bowls. The coverings were of thin mats, while for protection against mosquitoes curtains were provided.

"Where are you going to put the ruby, old man?" inquired Don.

"I'll hang on to it with both hands," declared Standish grimly. "May as well look round outside. Don't like the idea of those open windows."

He raised the *chik*. As he did so a soldier holding a naked *tulwar*, or curved sword, stepped into the circle of light of the overhanging

lamp. Seeing that it was one of the *feringhis*, the man saluted in Bakhistani fashion by touching his forehead with the flat of his blade.

"Sorry, old son!" exclaimed Standish, "didn't mean to disturb you!"

The man lowered his *tulwar* and stood aside. Colin did not carry out his intention of having a look round outside.

"We're well guarded anyway," he remarked.

"Or the ruby is," added Metcalfe. "Don't go much on it, sir! A've picked up prettier stones on Whitby beach!"

They undressed and turned in. The lamps remained lighted since they were too high to reach and there appeared to be no other means of extinguishing them.

Tired with the events of the day the trio were soon fast asleep. Not even the voices of the sentries, as at regular intervals they announced their watchfulness to the officer of the guard, disturbed their slumbers.

Suddenly Standish woke up. He was conscious of someone beside his couch. There was an unmistakable smell of *ghi* or native butter. Then he felt the casket being stealthily withdrawn from his grasp.

With a shout he sprang up and made a grab at the intruder. His fingers closed upon the wrist of the would-be thief. A knife flashed in the lamplight.

## CHAPTER XIII

### Through Peril to the Plane

Down flashed the glittering blade. Colin wriggled sideways, still grasping his assailant's wrist. The point of the knife, missing his ribs by inches, struck the casket, the force of the blow jerking the weapon from the man's hand.

"Got you, you blighter!" exclaimed Standish triumphantly.

But his success was short-lived. The native, a small wiry, man, was stark naked, and had covered himself with a layer of grease.

With an eel-like movement he wriggled out of his captor's grip, slipped under Metcalfe's arms as the Yorkshireman vainly attempted to hold him, and dashed for the nearest open window.

Against the setting moon his outline was distinctly silhouetted as he leapt upon the parapet of the balcony.

There was a dull *swish*. His body fell with a dull thud upon the pavement of the quadrangle, while his head rolled slowly across the balcony.

The horrified Englishman saw one of the Amir's guard calmly wiping his *tulwar* as unconcernedly as a man would clean and strop his razor!

Another life had been sacrificed for the sake of the Atar-il-Kilk ruby.

Other guards appeared upon the scene; inquired in dumb show whether the *feringhis* had suffered harm. Their chief concern, however, seemed to be that the commotion had awakened their lord the Amir. Servants, too, arrived, moving noiselessly as they removed all traces of the tragedy and sprinkled aromatic herbs over the floor.

"Shan't be sorry to be clear of this show," declared Grey.

"Nor I," asserted Standish with absolute sincerity.

There was no more sleep for them that night. They dressed and sat up, Standish nursing the casket on his knees. As he examined the dent made by the would-be assassin's knife in the metalwork he gradually realized how narrowly he had missed contributing his life to the toll already paid to the Atar-il-Kilk.

At dawn, food was brought them. They ate sparingly. They were feeling fagged, low-spirited; their eyes were heavy for lack of sleep.

The Amir Abdullah, arrayed in his gorgeous Eastern attire, awaited them in the presence chamber, surrounded by his chiefs and retainers.

Standish, carrying his suitcase in which he had placed the casket, approached to take formal farewell of his host.

"I'm dashed sorry you were disturbed," declared Abdullah. "Still more regretful that my guards did not collar the interrupter of your repose. I would have made an example of him."

The words sounded ominous. Never since the three airmen had arrived at the palace had the Amir expressed himself in these or similar terms. Here was the Oriental showing itself through Western veneer.

Standish did not inquire how.

"He paid with his life, your Highness. But how did he know about the ruby?"

Abdullah closed his eyes and shook his head in dreary fashion.

"It was an insult to me through my guests," he rejoined. "But Allah the All-merciful willed otherwise. S'long, old boy! Glad to have met you."

Still carrying his suitcase—he had declined the offer of a slave to take it to the *Condor*, thereby jeopardizing his prestige in the eyes

of the Bakhistanis—Standish with his companions left the palace and its somewhat remarkable ruler.

Preceded by armed horsemen, who roughly forced the pack of onlookers out of the way, the three airmen set out across the square towards the wide street in which the *Condor* had been housed.

The inhabitants of Hakaab did not appear to show resentment at their cavalier treatment by the guards. They seemed to have discarded their usual placid demeanour and shouted and waved their arms in token of farewell to the three *feringhis*.

"It seems as if our friend Abdullah has told them a fairy tale and put them off the scent regarding the ruby," remarked Don.

"They are quite well-disposed," rejoined Standish. "If the tribesmen of the Khiri Kush are similarly disposed we can take the valley route without——"

The sentence remained unfinished.

There was a flash and a loud report.

Standish ducked. It was a spontaneous and unnecessary movement, for the bullet had already passed him by. Missing his head by inches, the bullet struck one of the onlookers in the chest.

A scene of intense excitement followed. Friends of the stricken Bakhistani raised him and bore him away wailing and uttering maledictions upon his slayer. Hands were pointed upwards towards the flat roof of a building abutting on the square where a patriarchal-looking native, long-bearded and dressed in flowing white robes was in the act of reloading an ancient breech-loading Snyder rifle.

Hemmed in between the horsemen in front and the crowd behind and on either side, Standish and his companions felt anything but happy. Unable to speak a word of Bakhistani, they could not understand what the spectators were shouting—whether it was a hostile or a friendly demonstration.

But they quite realized that the bearded old gentleman on the house-top was preparing to take another pot-shot at one of them.

The only ones not unduly perturbed by the attempted assassination of the three *feringhis* were the mounted guards. They had reined in their steeds, and sat motionless as statues.

As a compliment to the Amir—for it would have been considered bad form to carry them—they had left their automatics locked up in the plane. They were absolutely unarmed, cooped up in the midst of a crowd whose intentions now seemed hostile, and waiting to be shot at by the rifleman on the house-top!

The assassin closed the breech of his rifle and raised the weapon to his shoulder. At that short distance Standish could see the muzzle of the heavy bore Snyder pointed straight at his head.

Before the bearded rifleman could fire a second shot someone in the crowd let fly with a long-barrelled pistol. It was either a good shot or a lucky fluke.

The bullet struck the assassin in the left arm. His finger clutched spasmodically at the trigger, but the bullet flew harmlessly over the heads of the crowd. He dropped his rifle and clapped his right hand to the injured limb, the while yelling imprecations not at his intended victim but at the individual who had balked him.

An instant later and four infuriated Bakhistanis, who had forced their way through the crowd and had broken into the house, appeared upon the roof, each brandishing a long knife.

The white-robed assassin disappeared beneath the knot of assailants as they hacked again and again at his prostrate form.

The armed horsemen set their steeds in motion. The procession to the *Condor* was resumed.

Standish and his chums never heard the facts of the case and to what circumstances one, if not all of them, owed their escape.

The old rifleman was the father of the would-be thief who had been killed while attempting to rob Standish of the casket containing the gem. It was quite likely that the robber had no knowledge of the contents of the casket, although in some mysterious way he might have found out. The father of the slain thief had attempted to avenge his son by shooting at the *feringhi*, who, although the act was beyond his control, was accounted responsible for the death of the intruder.

Unfortunately for him the assassin had missed the object of his vengeance and had slain a harmless onlooker. Friends of the murdered man had taken swift vengeance upon his slayer, and two more lives had gone to the account of the Atar-il-Kilk.

Feeling considerably jolted, the three airmen reached the place that had been used as a temporary hangar. Guards were still holding both ends of the street. The biplane was exactly as Standish had left it. Nothing had been disturbed.

Unlocking the door, Standish went to the control cabin, and placing his suitcase containing the casket by his side, directed operations; while Grey and Metcalfe, assisted by some of the Amir's bodyguard, swung the machine round and wheeled her into the open square.

Grey and the Yorkshireman climbed on board. The engineer set the twin engines in motion and reported all ready.

A wide path had been cleared by the guards through the crowd. The *Condor* began to move over the ground, gathering speed under increased throttle. Then, taking off in splendid form, she leapt skywards, dipped in salute over the Amir's palace, and making a semi-circular sweep, settled down on her homeward flight.

For the first time that day Standish's set features relaxed into a smile.

"Thank heavens we're away!" he ejaculated—and meant it.

"The rest will be child's play after what we've gone through," declared Don.

Colin raised his shoulders in protest. Something seemed to tell him that they weren't "out of the wood" yet—not by long chinks.

"Lug that suitcase of mine to my cabin, will you?" he asked. "Then come here and stand by—just in case the snipers get busy in the valley."

The forbidding gorge was as silent as the tomb. No hostile bullet tore through the light metal structure of the plane as she flew all out between the beetling crags.

Bearing in mind the Amir Abdullah's remarks concerning the hillmen, this inaction on their part seemed more than remarkable. There was something uncanny about the business, since the airmen now knew that the hillmen were constantly on the alert to open fire upon strangers, and when opportunity served, to plunder their victims.

"Through with it!" exclaimed Grey as the *Condor* emerged from the defile, "and we're ahead of time too!"

"We are," agreed Colin. "And I think we can stop the night at Basra. Don't know about you, but I could do with a——"

"Look!" interrupted Don. "Look! There's a plane down there. And she's crashed, by Jove!"



## CHAPTER XIV

### Almost Wiped Out

"When will not the English aeroplane appear?" inquired Ahmed grumblingly.

"How can I say?" rejoined Angelo Malagrotto, with asperity. "Maledictions on it! Here we wait and grill in the sun and yet no sign."

"I tell you they are behind us yet," declared Ivan Ulvitch. "We have won the race and are likely to pay for our over-haste."

"Not so," objected the Italian. "They must have preceded us. So here we wait, even if we have to wait for a week; but they will drop like over-ripe oranges into the waiting basket."

"That is all very well for you, Angelo," remarked the Russian, as he rolled a cigarette. "You are like a lizard, used to basking in the sun. Has anyone brought a pack of cards?"

Three of the crew of the *soi-disant* F987 were sheltering under one of the wings. It was a few degrees cooler than being cooped up in the body of the plane. Not a breath of wind stirred the sultry air. Even their supply of drinking-water was more than luke-warm, although at the earlier stages of their vigil the desperadoes did not mind that. They possessed a fair quantity of wine and spirits.

Crouching under a rough shelter furnished by a black blanket propped up by a couple of poles set against a rock was Georgeos the Greek, the fourth member of the party. He was doing his turn as sentry, occasionally scanning the cloudless sky for signs of the expected English machine. When he was not thus engaged he was scheming in his mind how, when the time came, he could conveniently rid himself of his companions and make off with the precious ruby.

It was not surprising that Angelo Malagrotto, Ivan Ulvitch, and Ahmed the Turk were entertaining similar ideas. Amongst the

thieves who frequent the Levant there is no honour. The English proverb does not hold good in their case!

Night drew on, and still there was no sign of the expected *Condor*. The Greek had done his spell of duty and was almost due to go on sentry again.

"Is it necessary after sunset?" he asked. "In the still air of the desert night surely the plane, if it ever arrives, will be heard long before it is seen? What objection can there be to a game of *écarté*?"

Although three of them had been playing cards for the greater part of the day the inborn gambling instincts both of the Italian and the Russian were irresistible. Ahmed alone demurred, but gave way to the others.

They commenced play at sunset. Midnight found them still gambling, the game being interrupted by frequent quarrels between Ivan and the Italian. Once Malagrotto drew his knife only to find himself covered by the Russian's automatic.

"Keep calm, my friend!" counselled Ulvitch. "If you want satisfaction after the work we have come all this way to do is done, then I am at your service."

"You have taken my last *piastre*!" almost howled the Italian.

"Tch!" ejaculated the Russian. "What of it? See, I lend you a hundred. Perchance your luck will change."

They continued playing, ignorant of the fact that eighty armed Bakhistani hillmen, who throughout the day had been keeping the apparently disabled aeroplane under observation from their mountain fastnesses, were stealthily drawing closer and closer towards the circle of rocks in which the gamblers were engrossed in their play.

It was a bright moonlit night. Even the white-clad forms of the Bakhistanis could not have escaped detection had the gang maintained a watch. In the hollow where their plane rested their range of ground vision was limited to the irregular rings of rocks.

At length the Russian threw his cards down upon the strip of green cloth placed upon the sand.

"Enough!" he declared. "You've had your revenge, Angelo! It must be near dawn. One more bottle of wine, and then we start another day, keeping watch for what?"

He stood erect, stretched his arms and commenced to walk towards the plane.

Suddenly he stopped and looked over the ridge. Out there, in the rays of the setting moon something was moving. At first sight it looked like a long line of sheep. Then realization dawned in his muddled brain.

"To arms, comrades!" he shouted. "We are attacked!"

The remaining gamblers sprang to their feet. It was no false alarm. The Bakhistanis had nearly completed their enveloping movement and were about to rush the *feringhi* camp.

"We are betrayed!" yelled Malagrotto. "Make for the machine! It is our only chance! Quick, Ahmed! Start the motors!"

Panic seized them. The Greek and the Italian struggled with each other, each trying to board the plane simultaneously and through the same door. They were still snarling and elbowing each other when Ivan Ulvitch hurled both aside and leapt on board. Malagrotto followed, and the Greek, who had been thrown a good five yards, made a dive through the narrow doorway, capsizing the Italian by the impetus. Although almost as frantic as his comrades Ahmed made a desperate effort to swing the propeller.

As he did so the hillmen opened a rapid though ragged fire. The Turk reeled with three of the fingers of his left hand shattered. Nevertheless he persisted in his effort but without avail.

The aeroplane was struck again and again. One bullet severed the fuel pipe and smashed the float-chamber of the carburettor. Petrol began to flow freely.

"Engine's out of action!" shouted Ulvitch, who was by far the calmest of the three in the machine. "We cannot rise. If we stay here we'll be shot down like dogs. To the rocks! Then we can sell our lives dearly!"

He snatched up the only rifle on board. Malagrotto and Georgios had their automatics. They leapt to the ground, the Greek being hit in the left shoulder in the operation.

"Run for it, Ahmed!" exclaimed the Russian.

"When I have found my revolver," replied the Turk, who had recovered his customary coolness. He was a firm believer in Kismet. What has to be, must be; but he was not going to die without sending some of his enemies before him if he could.

Notwithstanding the pain of his wound, Ahmed scrambled into the covered body of the plane, found a pistol and an unopened box of ammunition.

He was hit again, this time in the ribs, but leaping from the machine he followed his panic-stricken companions, who by this time had gained a temporary refuge in a hollow of the rocks.

Had the ring of sand-polished granite been smaller or the number of the defenders been larger, the place would have been capable of being held indefinitely—or at least while water, provisions, and ammunition lasted. For miles on all sides the place was almost dead level without the faintest sign of cover. A couple of machine-guns stationed at opposite points of the ring would have wiped out the three score or so Bakhistanis in a few minutes.

But Angelo Malagrotto and his three companions had no machine-gun and their numbers were utterly insufficient to hold the whole of the natural defences. All they could do was to man the largest of the detached rocks, the summit of which was barely fifteen feet above the ground, and take what cover they could in the slight depression there.

Long before, the Bakhistani hillmen had accurately gauged the number of their intended victims, and with that knowledge they had little hesitation in occupying the rocks on the remote side of the irregular ring. Then, used to hill-fighting all their lives, they worked their way round, taking full advantage of the cover afforded, until they considered it was time to rush the white men's defences.

The now disabled aeroplane was another thing to be taken into consideration. In it was much booty dear to the heart of half-savage tribesmen, but since it afforded no defence against high-velocity bullets, would-be looters would be exposed to rifle and revolver fire. What was worse from the survivors' standpoint was that the *feringhis*, seeing their plane being plundered, would open fire and thus destroy the machine and all that was in it. Booty being the chief consideration the hillmen left the crippled plane severely alone until they should have effectively dealt with the trapped airmen.

For trapped they were. They knew it; but, sheltered in the hollow and with weapons of precision in their hands, their sense of fear passed. They were desperate men, used to desperate situations, and knowing that they were cornered they meant to fight to the last.

The hostile fire had ceased when the aeroplane was abandoned. The hillmen were still cautiously working from rock to rock, taking up positions to enable them to make a combined rush.

Ivan Ulvitch, with a full clip of ammunition in the magazine and a round in the breech, lay with his rifle to his shoulder, eagerly watching for any movement in the moonlight. His companions, knowing the impracticability of straight shooting with an automatic, contented themselves by lying close until the expected assault began. In the interval the Greek bound Ahmed's wounds, which, although not serious, had been bleeding freely.

Suddenly the Russian pressed the trigger. He had caught sight of a round skullcap just showing above a depression in the rocks.

The wearer of the cap leapt a good three feet in the air and disappeared from sight.

"One!" exclaimed Ulvitch as he ejected the still smoking cartridge case.

The shot had a salutary effect upon the hillmen. Not a man showed himself. They were waiting until the sun rose. Then, in a few hours, the white men, sprawling upon the bare, heated rock under the pitiless rays of the sun would have to come out into the open—to surrender or fight.

In either case the result would be the same. These wild hillmen never took prisoners.

The sun rose above the lofty Khiri Rush. Still an uncanny silence prevailed amongst the attackers. Although they were unheard and unseen they made their presence felt.

Unable to stand the suspense, the Greek began to whimper.

"Shut up, you fool!" hissed the Russian. "When you have something to complain about then you can squeal. Attend! You can stand the heat better than I; give me your cap!"

He snatched the Greek's headgear and set it upon the top of the ridge.

The bait was irresistible. Three or four hillmen opened fire. The cap was holed in three places almost simultaneously; but before the marksmen could regain cover Ulvitch shot one through the head.

"Two!" he announced, with a grim laugh. "Has anyone else a cap to spare?"

"Take mine, Ivan," volunteered Ahmed. "Before long I shall not need it."

But the second decoy failed to draw. The Bakhistanis were now content to wait.

Hotter and hotter grew the sun.

Georgeos, unable to remain quiet, began to shift his position. For a brief instant his head showed above the ledge. He dropped back with a gurgling cry with a bullet wound through his neck.

"He's done for," remarked Malagrotto, as he possessed himself of the Greek's automatic and ammunition. "He is not much loss. He never had any spirit; but he might have settled with some of the pigs before he allowed himself to be shot."

"This heat will beat us," declared the Russian. "Now, if I had those Bakhistanis confronting me in Russia in January! Let us throw ourselves against the enemy. Better to die fighting than be grilled to death."

"Better to hold on," objected Angelo. "They will make a rush and then we will slay many before the end."

For another ten minutes the three survivors kept silent. Then Ulvitch slid his rifle across to where the Italian lay.

"Make good use of it," he said grimly. "Hand me the Greek's pistol. With two I will give these devils something to remember me by."

Without a word of protest Malagrotto did as the Russian had asked.

Waiting only to reassure himself that both his own and the Greek's automatics were loaded, Ivan sprang to his feet, and leaping over the rock, raced madly towards the nearest lurking place of the Bakhistanis.

Before he had covered a dozen yards a ragged volley rang out on his right. If he were hit he gave no sign. He gained the summit of the nearest rock, stood erect while he emptied both automatics into the pack of hillmen lying behind it. It was a challenge dear to the heart of the fanatical warrior.

Up they swarmed, knife in hand. The Russian disappeared as, beaten down, he fought fiercely tooth and nail until the end.

But Malagrotto had not been a passive spectator of his comrade's gallant fate. He emptied the magazine of the rifle into the surging

mass of white-clad hillmen, dropping several. Then, before the natives on either side could reply—for their attention had been centred upon the Russian's desperate onslaught—the wily Italian had regained cover.

"Only two of us left now, Ahmed," he exclaimed as he thrust another clip into the magazine. "Why did you not use your pistol?"

There was no reply.

The Turk was either insensible or dead. He had rolled over on his back. By his side lay a Verey pistol that they had intended to use to give a decoy signal should the *Condor* appear at night.

The sight of the pistol gave Malagrotto an inspiration. The Bakhistanis might, and probably would, have the satisfaction of wiping him out, but he could baulk them of their principal booty—the aeroplane and its contents.

There was but one cartridge available for that particular pistol. It was already in the breech.

Cautiously Malagrotto aimed the pistol at the nose of the plane. He knew that the body and the ground around was well saturated with petrol escaping from the severed fuel pipe.

He pressed the trigger. The missile—a green flare rocket—hit the machine and burst with a dazzling glare. In an instant the fire ignited the petrol.

Flames shot fifty feet into the air.

"And that has baulked the pigs!" muttered the Italian, as he reached for his rifle.

Then, to his surprise, the surviving hillmen, abandoning their shelters, began to run in a disorderly mob. The burning plane would not account for that.

Suspecting a ruse, Malagrotto remained in his shelter until an unmistakable sound in the sky made him look up.



Rapidly approaching was the biplane which but a few hours ago Malagrotto had hoped to lure to destruction.

"*Basta!*" he ejaculated. Then, making sure that Ahmed was a corpse, he stood erect and began waving his arms.

"Who knows but that I may gain possession of the Atar-il-Kilk ruby yet?" he thought. "It is the luck of Angelo Malagrotto. Always when things look their blackest, good fortune comes to his aid. Remember I am a Frenchman. All I have to do is to play my cards cautiously and Signor Standish will rue the day he came to my aid a second time!"

And with this cheerful resolve the Italian, after replacing his automatic in his hip-pocket, awaited the descending airplane.

## CHAPTER XV

### The "Condor" to the Rescue

"There's a scrap on down there!" declared Don Grey, who was keeping the stranded plane under observation through his binoculars. "Looks as if the natives are looting as well. What are you going to do about it, old son?"

Colin Standish had already made up his mind. Even with the precious Atar-il-Kilk on board he could not do otherwise than go to the aid of the crew of the crashed machine—that was, supposing any survived.

"See any signs of the crew?" he asked.

"I think so.... One, if not two. Hello! They've either fired the bus or else the other johnnies have done so. Now, what's to be done?"

"We'll try putting the wind up the Bakhistanis—I suppose they are Bakhistanis—and then land and pick up the airmen. Did you notice the markings on the plane before she took fire?"

"She was a French machine," replied Don. "I couldn't make out her number."

"Perhaps we'll never know," rejoined Standish. "Well, here goes. We'll have to risk being fired at. Tell Metcalfe to open the cut-outs."

With her exhausts roaring like a battery of machine-guns the *Condor* swooped down towards the ring of rocks that had attracted her crew's attention.

But no hostile bullets came her way. The Bakhistanis fled in all directions. They would have had no hesitation in attacking a plane that had been compelled to alight; but one in flight was a very different proposition. Rumours from the bazaars of Kabul, vague reports from the market-places of Baghdad had been borne to their ears of the means the Kafirs who ruled these parts employed to

deal with certain tribesmen who showed hostility towards them. No longer did the white men come against them laboriously and on foot, to fight often under great disadvantages in difficult country. That they did in the past. Now the infidels employed huge birds that, flying high over the tribesmen's villages, rained down fire upon them in the form of eggs, that, bursting, spread death and destruction far and wide.

Quite probably this bird—was it not the one that had passed unscathed through the valley only a day before?—was one that carried these destructive eggs and had come to avenge the one that now lay burning.

So the hillmen fled. Contrary to their usual custom they did not tarry to remove their dead and wounded. Their chief thought was to remove themselves as quickly as possible from the ill-omened spot where one-third of their original number lay dead or dying in an enterprise that had so dismally failed.

"That's chivvied them off!" declared Don.

"Hope so," replied Standish cautiously. "But we'll have to be jolly careful. See any signs of life amongst those fellows lying around?"

"There's a white man—he's waving to us," replied Don. "Swing her round a bit, old man. Yes, there are about a dozen natives, some of them wounded. They're all close together inside the ring of rocks."

Standish's uncle had been an infantry major in the Sudan Campaign that had terminated with the Battle of Omdurman. He remembered the veteran's description of those operations and one phrase that stuck vividly in his memory. That was: "We could never trust a dead fuzzy-wuzzy". The Arabs, he explained, had a habit of pretending to be dead, and then either shooting at or stabbing British soldiers after they had stepped over the supposed corpses. And what an Arab has done the wily hillman might well copy.

"We'll come down well away from the rocks," he decided. "If the survivors of the crew can come to us, well and good; if not, I'll go and fetch them."

"No, that's my job," objected Grey. "I'm Second Pilot—the First Pilot always remains on board."

"Toss up for it when we land," declared Standish. "So that's that!"

Judging by the clouds of dust set up by the fleeing Bakhistanis there was little or no wind, so the direction of landing was immaterial.

The ground was soft. The *Condor* dragged heavily directly her landing-wheels made contact and soon came to a standstill.

"The fellow's coming this way," declared Colin, who, now the plane was stationary, was able to make use of his binoculars. "So we won't have to fetch him. But by Jove! he looks pretty groggy."

"In that case I'll go and meet him," rejoined Don, and putting on his topee and placing an automatic in his pocket, he lowered himself to the ground and hurried towards the approaching man.

"Now, since he's a Frenchman," thought Grey, "I'll have to try my hand at the lingo. Not much good at it. Standish is the one for that."

The stranger was trudging wearily. At intervals he stopped and looked back as if suspecting danger.

"*Soyez le bienvenu, monsieur!*" Don greeted him when within speaking distance. "*Je—je suis....* Hang it! I've forgotten!"

"I speak English, monsieur," rejoined the rescued man, speaking with difficulty because his throat and tongue were parched by the heat. "A t'ousand t'anks for your opportune assistance."

"Are you alone?"

"*Hélas, monsieur!* It is so to be feared. My three camarades they are *morts*—slain by those assassins *là-bas*. Permit me to myself

introduce. My name it is Jean Deschamps, Professeur de Science, of Paris. *Excusez-moi*, monsieur, I feel——"

Grey caught him as he fell.

Luckily the Frenchman was not heavy and Don had little difficulty in hoisting him on his back and carrying him to the *Condor*. On the way the man partly recovered consciousness. He muttered in a language that was not French, although his benefactor failed to notice that slight peculiarity.

"Up with him, Jack!" shouted Don to the Yorkshireman. "He's pretty well done in!"

"Ay, A'll bear a hand!" declared Metcalfe, as he swung himself down to the ground.

He threw his arms round Malagrotto's thighs to lift him in through the narrow door where Standish was waiting to assist in the operation. As he did so his wrist came in contact with the automatic in the Italian's hip-pocket.

"Happen A'll take charge of it in case it hitches up agen the entry-port," he said to himself, as he extracted the weapon and put it into a pocket in his over-all.

"Hop on board as sharp as you can!" shouted Standish, to make himself heard above the roar of the exhausts; for although both motors were running dead slow, Metcalfe had kept both cut-outs in action.

The rescued man being safe on board, Grey swarmed up the short ladder.

"Any more of them?" inquired Colin.

"He said there weren't," replied his chum breathlessly. "S'pose I'd better go and make sure?"

Standish levelled his binoculars before deciding. The Bakhistani hillmen were now about half a mile away. Seeing that the second airship had come down to earth they had plucked up courage

somewhat and were debating amongst themselves whether they should return to the attack.

"Yes, better make sure," he decided. "We'll taxi a bit nearer."

At a hundred yards from the circle of rocks, Don again alighted.

He went forward cautiously, giving the few white-robed corpses on that side of the ring as wide a berth as possible.

On the rock so stubbornly defended by the four desperadoes he found the bodies of Ahmed and Georgeos. A hasty examination showed that these two men were dead. That accounted for three. Where was the fourth?

Grey naturally expected to have found the three men close together. His curiosity was excited; so shedding some of his former caution he descended the rock and looked about him.

There were cartridge cases everywhere, showing that the hillmen had wasted a good deal of ammunition before they had all but achieved their object.

He went up to the burnt-out aeroplane. Only the engine, a few metal parts of the chassis, and the landing-wheels remained. Strangely enough one tyre, except for being scorched, was almost intact.

A few yards farther on he caught sight of a white topee lying at the base of a large rock. On the other side he found what was left of Ivan Ulvitch. The Russian had been almost hacked to pieces by his ferocious assailants. On the ground all around him were knives, cartridge cases and more grisly relics. Outside was another circle of dead who had fallen before Ulvitch himself had gone down before sheer weight of numbers. The wounded hillmen had either crawled away or had been carried off by their fellow-countrymen.

"That man sold his life dearly," thought Don admiringly. "We can't bury the three, that's pretty certain. For one thing we've no implements and the sand hereabouts is pretty hard. I suppose they'll send a plane from Jask for that."

Having been warned to lose no time over his search, Don was about to retrace his steps when a wounded Bakhistani, who had been lying with his head pillowed in his hands and appeared to be dead, suddenly sprang to his feet and levelled a rifle at the young Englishman.

There was no escape. The nearest rock which might offer shelter was five yards away. Long before Don could gain that the hillman would press the trigger.

Without a moment's hesitation Grey brought his automatic up. Fortunately he had already released the safety catch.

Two flashes and two reports, the latter sounding as one.

Don staggered. The hillman's bullet had ploughed through his hair and had sent his topee flying.

Recovering himself he fired again—three shots in rapid succession. But this expenditure of ammunition was unnecessary.

His first shot had struck the Bakhistani evenly between the eyes. The already wounded man fell forward on his face, his legs beating a tattoo. Then he stiffened, quivered and lay still.

"I'll have his rifle as a souvenir," decided Don. "I've won it in fair fight; I haven't bought it in a native bazaar."

He held the weapon by its sling, and keeping a most wary look-out, began to retrace his steps to the *Condor*.

"Buck up, man!" yelled Standish.

Bullets were beginning to drop all around the still stationary biplane. The hillmen were returning to the attack.

## CHAPTER XVI

### The Seed of Suspicion

Fortunately most of the missiles either fell short or were "overs". The former, thanks to the yielding nature of the sand, simply knocked up a cloud of dust. There were no ricochets; had there been, things would have gone badly with the *Condor* and her crew. As soon as Don was on board, the *Condor* took off. As she did so the hillmen's fire almost ceased. Contrary to their expectations the huge bird was by no means incapable of flight.

A bullet ripped the walls of the control cabin, missing the instrument-board by a hand's-breadth.

"Confound you!" exclaimed Standish. "Now I will jolly well put the wind up you!"

He swung the plane round and headed for the distant knot of hillmen. They instantly took to flight, their white garments hidden by clouds of dust thrown up by their skeltering feet.

Looking back as they ran the now terrified Bakhistanis realized that they stood no more chance of outpacing the dreaded "bird" than a quail attempting to outpace a hawk. The airplane was almost upon them, for Standish in the execution of his threat was flying at about thirty feet above the ground.

With her exhausts roaring and a great cloud of dust thrown up by the wake of the swiftly revolving propellers, the biplane swooped over the almost paralysed hillmen. Finding that flight would not avail, they had thrown themselves headlong in the dust, burying their heads ostrich-like in the sand and clapping their hands over their ears in a futile effort to shut out the nerve-racking din.

Past the cowering mob the *Condor* tore; then, making a half-circle turn, she rushed back again towards the Bakhistanis, who, before they could realize that they had survived destruction, were threatened by another devastating charge of the terror of the skies.



Even Don held his breath with apprehension as his comrade at the controls descended until it seemed as if the landing-wheels must strike the ground. Had Standish been so carried away with his resolve to scare the murderous hillmen that he had forgotten the primary object of the flight?

Possibly the same thought occurred to the pilot; or perhaps he was satisfied with having achieved his immediate object.

A touch upon the elevator-control and the *Condor* leapt steeply upwards until the altimeter registered nine thousand feet.

Looking backwards, even at that altitude, Don could see the hillmen still pinned to earth, like so many chickens mesmerized by a chalk-line.

"And that's that," commented Standish, as he set a compass course and brought the gyro stabilizers into action. "Take her, Don; I'll go and have a look at the Frenchman."

He found Angelo Malagrotto recovering from his attack of unconsciousness. He was lying on a settee in one of the cabins and trying to form some plan of action. He wondered whether he had been recognized by his rescuers, but came to the conclusion that so far they had not connected the French airman with the tatterdemalion they had pulled out of the waters of the Mediterranean. Quite possibly they would accept his story of a scientific expedition to the Far East. Why should they not? Presumably, since they were flying in a westerly direction, they had the priceless Atar-il-Kilk ruby on board. If so, then he, Angelo Malagrotto, would yet find a way to gain possession of it. Even if it came to shooting down the crew of the *Condor* while she was in flight. Why not? There was no risk, provided he took them completely unawares; and with the gyro stabilizers in action, the plane would take care of herself until he was able to gain control. If, as he had previously overheard Grey remark, the *Condor* was capable of flying from England to Bakhistan without refuelling, she could easily cover the few hundred miles between her and his

Egyptian base at Kafshirbin. No; on further thoughts, that would not do. He had left other members of the gang there. They would want to share the proceeds of the booty. Better by far to work single-handed. And there was yet ample time. He must rest, feed, and drink to recover his strength before commencing the shooting business. He was glad that Ulvitch, Ahmed, and Georgeos, that spineless Greek, were all dead. One of them might have told a contradictory story, and then those trusting fools of Englishmen might be suspicious. Yes, the shooting could wait. Meanwhile it was reassuring to know that he had taken the precaution of putting a loaded automatic into his hip-pocket.

He patted that hip-pocket.

"*Basta!*" he muttered under his breath.

For the pistol was not there.

The loss jolted him considerably. Unarmed he felt helpless. The knowledge that the automatic had vanished revived his suspicions that his rescuers had recognized him. Finding that he had given them the slip at Alexandria, just as the Egyptian police were putting off to the *Condor*, they would be certain to make inquiries concerning his identity, and already he was aware that a description of him had been broadcast by the Italian police.

He went through his other pockets. Nothing, apparently, had been disturbed. There was his foreign passport, representing him to be Monsieur Jean Deschamps, Professeur of the University of Paris and elsewhere; his pocket-book containing a big sheaf of paper money; his purse with most of the money with which his companions had been gambling when the hillmen surprised them. Rather gleefully he recollected that, in spite of his apprehensions, he had taken possession of the coins which his fellow gamblers had left lying on the square of green baize.

But there was still the mystery of the missing automatic. He was absolutely certain that he had put it in his hip-pocket. That was no hallucination. It might have slipped out as he rolled down the side

of the rock or when he reeled and fainted in the English airman's arms.

He was still considering theories on the point when Standish entered the cabin.

Colin had prepared a carefully-worded greeting in French to congratulate the rescued man on his escape and to offer his condolences at the untimely fate of his companions; but, like a good many of his fellow-countrymen, when it came to the point he was almost tongue-tied.

"*Au bon matin, monsieur,*" he began. "*Je—je—*"

"I spik ze English, monsieur," rejoined Angelo Malagrotto. "In my youth I 'ave ze English governess. She——"

But Standish did not want to hear the history of the Frenchman's early days. It was the present and immediate future that mattered.

"I'm glad we were able to be there in the nick of time," he remarked. "We were, unfortunately, too late to rescue your companions. They are dead."

"Zat I know. I tell your friend."

"Yes, but thinking some of them might show signs of life, he went to make sure."

"And he found——?" questioned Malagrotto eagerly.

"That you were only too right. They were dead. But all of you put up a stiff resistance, monsieur. It is a distressful subject. Tell me; where do you wish us to land you? We shall probably be passing over Le Bourget in the course of three or four days——"

Malagrotto shook his head.

"*Non, non, mon ami,*" he protested. "You are too good! I will not upon your generosity tread without permission!"

"You mean 'trespass'," thought Standish. Then aloud: "It will not put us out."

The Italian, harbouring thoughts of "putting them out" in a different sense, shrugged his shoulders.

"By vot route you return?" he inquired.

"Basra, Aleppo, and then perhaps Constantinople," replied Standish.

"Ah, goot! If at Aleppo you put me *pied à terre*, all vill be well. Many of my French friends dey live at Aleppo."

"In the meantime we'll land at Basra and get the air officials there to telegraph to Jask to send a party out and give your dead comrades decent burial."

Malagrotto thought swiftly; decided that there was no harm in that. They had called at Jask for fuel on the outward run and the officials there had not raised any questions. They had hardly troubled to examine the forged passports. But he did not want to go to Aleppo. Syria under French control was too hot for him; but there was plenty of time between Basra and Aleppo to put his hastily conceived plan into execution.

"Monsieur, in the name of my comrades and of France, I thank you!" he said, with a profound bow.

"I'll get you some food," continued Standish. "Meanwhile there's the wash-basin, and I see that Metcalfe has provided clean towels—thoughtful fellow! Excuse me a minute and I'll bring the grub along. And, before I forget it, I'll lend you a safety-razor and a brush and comb."

An hour later Malagrotto, having washed and shaved and fed well, felt considerably revived. His torn, blood-stained clothes were replaced by some lent him by the sympathetic Metcalfe. Colin would have helped but for the fact that his were "out-size", and Malagrotto was spare and below average height.

"You'd better turn in—sleep, you know," suggested Standish. "We'll let you know when we're nearing Basra."

And the Italian criminal, being badly in need of sleep and rest, was glad to take advantage of the suggestion.

"Evidently these fools of Englishmen do not doubt me," he thought, as he closed his eyes. "Nevertheless where has my pistol made its disappearance?"

Returning to the control cabin Standish relieved his chum in the relatively light task of occasionally checking the biplane's drift. Although the gyro stabilizers kept the *Condor* on a straight course through still air it was necessary to watch for and to correct the effect of any air-currents or eddies that were likely to drive her out of her charted direction.

"How is he?" inquired Don, referring to the rescued man.

"Sleeping by now, I expect," replied Standish.

"What was he doing on the Bakhistan frontier, I should like to know," remarked Grey. "Did you ask him, by any chance?"

"Come to think of it, I didn't," confessed Colin.

Just before sunset the *Condor* landed at Basra and was placed in a hangar belonging to the Royal Air Force.

Standish immediately made his report concerning the rescue of Professeur Jean Deschamps.

"Jolly lucky for the blighter that you showed up in the nick of time," remarked Preston, the Wing Commander in charge of the aerodrome. "Right-o! I'll ring up Jask and ask them to send out to the spot. Where is the Professor?"

"In the ante-room with my assistant pilot and the engineer."

"Bring them along to dinner, then," continued the Air Force Officer. "Don't worry about not having mess-kit. There'll be four or five of our crush and Danvers, he's the local Chief of Iraki police and a jolly decent sort. Very good, then, at seven-thirty."

When told of the invitation Malagrotto begged to be excused on the score of fatigue and lack of suitable clothes, but Standish would take no refusal, pointing out that in any case they were sleeping in Government quarters that night, and it would not be "the thing" to decline hospitality.

"Ver' good, I vill come," agreed the *soi-disant Professeur*, who had already accepted two whiskies and sodas offered him by the junior members of the mess.

It was an injudicious move on the part of Angelo Malagrotto to accept that invitation. Had it not been for the benign influence of the two drinks he might have exercised caution and firmly declined to be present.

His table manners were atrocious. Standish felt himself going hot and cold with shame, although he was not responsible for Monsieur le Professeur's lack of polish. Even the young R.A.F. officers "sat up" and "took notice".

Half-way through the meal one of the mess servants handed the Wing Commander a chit.

"Excuse me a moment," said Preston apologetically, as he rose from the table. "There's a telephone call to which I must attend."

He was away many moments.

Then an orderly appeared.

"A through call for you, Mr. Standish," he announced loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. "It's a message from someone in London, sir!"

Excusing himself, Colin left the mess.

In the ante-room he encountered Preston.

"Sorry to have to spoof you, Standish," explained the Wing Commander, "but there is no telephonic message for you. But I've been on the phone with the Jask crowd. They are considerably peeved. It appears this fellow who calls himself Professor

Deschamps landed there for fuel on his outward flight. The number of his bus was F987. Well, 'there ain't no such number!' They want me to detain him pending inquiries. I fancy they suspect he's been trying his hand at gun-running. I'll have to see what Dacres thinks about it, but honestly I don't like the risk of pulling the blighter up on mere suspicion. Supposing he is O.K. after all? Look here; can you arrange to delay your start until, say, noon to-morrow? That will give us time to make further inquiries."

Standish thought he could. He was, in fact, well ahead of his scheduled time.

"Thanks awfully," said Preston. "Well, we'd better get back. Not a hint to Deschamps! But I'm not binding you to secrecy as far as your companions are concerned."

After a very convivial evening, Malagrotto was shown to his sleeping-quarters—a small room opening out into a courtyard, the building although spacious being only one-storeyed.

Before he turned-in, he had a good look round. Professional caution was returning. He wanted to make sure of being able to get away if it seemed necessary. Also he was debating whether it would be safe to pay a nocturnal visit to Standish's room and gain possession of the metal box containing the Atar-il-Kilk while its custodian slept. He had plenty of money. He could make for the native quarter and bribe an Arab to hide him. Yes, there were sentries—natives—posted outside the building; but Malagrotto never worried about sentries.

Very slowly he commenced whetting his knife upon the sole of his shoe.

## CHAPTER XVII

### Under Arrest

"Wing Commander Preston wishes to see you, gentlemen," announced a batman.

Standish and his two companions were on the point of turning-in when the message was brought to them.

They found Preston in his office. With him was Inspector Dacres. A native sergeant and a couple of Iraki policemen were under the veranda.

"Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep, Standish," began Preston, "but I know you'll be interested. You've been in bad company, my lad. At least it looks like it. We asked Baghdad to make inquiries. They seem a bit rattled too. It appears that a plane belonging to an Egyptian tourist agency is missing. It was chartered by Professor Deschamps. Darned silly of him to stick to that name now. Don't you think so, Dacres?"

The Inspector smiled.

"The most cunning criminal frequently gives himself away by a silly mistake," he observed.

"Well, it appears that the plane passed over the Sinai Peninsula," continued the Wing Commander. "Evidently there was a row of some sort and the passengers slung the Gippy pilot overboard. What was left of him landed close to an Arab encampment. That shows how an amateur airman can be deceived. The fellows who chucked the Gippy out never spotted the black tents, or if they did they mistook them for boulders. At any rate the Arabs found the remains and recognized the uniform as one of the Cairo pilots. So they made for Akaba as hard as they could and reported the facts, adding that the plane disappeared flying high in an easterly direction. The Akaba people wired to Cairo; Cairo replied that four Frenchmen had hired the bus for a joy-ride. Then everyone seems



to have got busy on the wires, and so it looks as if you have brought the sole survivor back to justice."

"Then A reckon A can say who he is," announced Metcalfe unexpectedly.

"Who?" asked Standish.

"The fellow we picked up on our way to Alexandria."

"Angelo Malagrotto?" rejoined Colin. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You never asked me," replied the Yorkshireman. "Happen A had an idea when Mr. Grey lugged him into t'bus."

"If it is Malagrotto then his capture will be a feather in our caps," said Dacres.

"Are you going to arrest him then?" asked the Wing Commander.

"Evidence not sufficient," objected the Inspector. "I'd be in the jolly old *consommé* with a vengeance if I did make a mistake."

The Wing Commander nodded. He, too, had expressed himself in similar strain earlier in the evening. The Powers-that-Be at home have no mercy for an overseas subordinate who makes a mistake in wrongfully arresting a foreign subject!

"Can you see any resemblance between Professor Deschamps and Angelo Malagrotto, Mr. Standish?" asked Preston.

"Honestly I cannot," replied Colin. "The fellow we lugged out of the sea had a ragged beard; the one we rescued out in the desert has an Imperial. Why not ask him whether he is Malagrotto?"

"Hang it! I'll risk it!" decided the Inspector. "Come along with me, Dacres. And if you three care to wait in the corridor you'll hear everything that's being said. Room No. 9, isn't it?"

The Inspector gave an order in Iraki to the sergeant. The two policemen fixed bayonets with a most cheerful air and followed the Inspector and their N.C.O. along the corridor.

Outside the room occupied by Malagrotto, Dacres tapped peremptorily upon the door.

"*Qui est là?*" inquired the occupant.

"You are wanted, Professor," replied the Inspector.

There was a pause. Then Malagrotto unbolted the door. Not a muscle of his face twitched. He was making a rapid calculation. One hand closed gently upon his dagger-like knife. The two officers, he noticed, were unarmed; but in the lighted corridor he caught sight of glistening bayonets.

"You are, I believe, Angelo Malagrotto."

The self-styled professor smiled, shrugged his shoulders and threw out his hands—palms uppermost.

"You make mistake, monsieur. I know not ze man!"

"If I have I'll apologize handsomely later," rejoined the Inspector.

"I'll trouble you to show me your passport."

"*Mais oui, monsieur,*" agreed the still smiling Italian.

He handed Preston the required document. The Inspector held it closer to the light and studied it closely.

"I'll take charge of this for the present," he said. "Meanwhile, monsieur, you must consider yourself under arrest. Will you please dress and go with me to the station?"

Standish and his companions did a silent "fade out". They had no wish to encounter the notorious criminal.

Preston followed them.

"Have a drink before you turn in," he suggested, "We may as well hear what Dacres has to say. He'll be along soon."

Actually it was nearly an hour before the Inspector returned. He threw his helmet upon the ante-room table and helped himself to a stiff peg.

"Friend Malagrotto's under lock and key," he announced. "Of course he won't admit that he's anyone but Deschamps, but now I'm absolutely dead sure of the man."

"Why?" asked the Wing Commander.

"Because the passport is forged. The wording is a careful copy, but I'm dashed if the seal is. Imagine a Frenchman using a seal with 'Republica Francais' on it!"

"But that doesn't prove that he is Malagrotto," remarked Standish. "No, but it proves that he isn't what he claims to be," rejoined Dacres triumphantly. "And that's good enough for me. I searched him. He had a considerable amount of Egyptian money in his possession and this knife. Now I can understand a man, going for a flight across the desert, carrying a revolver, but this dagger—no."

"He had an automatic," declared Metcalfe. "A took it from him while he was unconscious!"

"Why?"

"Happen A didn't like look of his face," replied the Yorkshireman. "It's in my case."

"Perhaps it is a fortunate thing for all of you that your engineer took possession of the weapon, Mr. Standish," observed Dacres. "He bluffed you from the start. Those four men were no more on a scientific flight than I am! You can take it from me that they were after the Amir's ruby, and if I hadn't nabbed him he would have collared it before you got home—if you ever did get there!"

"That, I suppose, is the result of publicity," said Standish.

"Exactly. It's a mug's game bringing that gem home in the way you're doing," agreed the Inspector with cheerful candour. "Why didn't you fix the ruby on the tail of your machine like a jolly old mascot? But, joking apart, Standish, if I were you I'd send the thing on by the regular Far Eastern Airways service. It's safer."

Colin shook his head.

"I have my orders," he declared, "and I must carry them out. In any case the worst part of the run is over, and I'm following the authorized route. Can't come to much harm."

"Let's hope you won't," rejoined Dacres, as he drained his glass. "Well, sleep soundly. Friend Malagrotto is behind iron bars and with a couple of men keeping guard outside his cell. He, for one, won't disturb you."

When Standish returned to his sleeping-quarters he felt decidedly uneasy. He unlocked his case to make sure that the metal box with its precious contents was still there. Then he examined the window. It opened out upon the parade grounds. It was heavily barred as a precaution against predatory Arabs, who had the reputation of being the most daring and cunning thieves east of Suez. The bars were set in a hinged frame padlocked on the inside, while on the opposite wall the key of the padlock was kept in a glass-fronted case bearing the notice: "In case of fire only".

He bolted the door and wedged a chair under the handle.

All these precautions he took, notwithstanding he was in a Royal Air Force station with British sentries patrolling outside!

"The ruby's getting on my nerves," he said to himself. "And I thought I hadn't any!"

He passed a restless, almost sleepless night, and he had landed at Basra expressly for the purpose of enjoying a sound, dreamless slumber. He would have done better in the *Condor* while in flight, he thought, except—well, what might have happened if he had carried on with Angelo Malagrotto as a passenger, unsuspected yet capable of going to any extreme in order to gain his ends. That danger was over. He was thankful that now he need not delay his start until midday. He would stick to his original plan and start soon after daybreak.

At length he fell asleep to be wakened by reveille being sounded.

"Your hot water, sir!"

Standish leapt out of bed and somewhat shame-facedly removed his barricade and unlocked the door.

The orderly still lingered.

"'Eard the noos, sir?"

"No; what?"

"That there bloke they shoved into the clink las' night broke but, did the two nigger cops in, an' got clean away. Lumme! It beats the bloomin' picturs 'oller!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### Smoked Out!

Standish asked the man no further question. He began to lather his face before shaving. Even the news of Angelo Malagrotto's escape did not stop him from performing that matutinal rite.

"I expect they'll recapture him before long," he soliloquized. "Let's hope we're clear of Basra before they get him. Cunning devil! I wonder if he was after the ruby?"

On going out of his sleeping-quarters, Standish found that the whole place was almost deserted. Every available pilot officer and flying officer had "gone up". Their machines were circling low overhead and making wide-flung flights into the desert in order to make sure that the escaped Italian had not fled in that direction. The ground staff had joined forces with the Iraki police and were prosecuting a vigorous search in the native quarter. Even the shipping was not neglected, every craft from 8000-ton tramps down to the local fishing and trading craft being systematically examined.

Only Wing Commander Preston, two orderly room clerks, and the men detailed for guard duty remained in the building.

"Unfortunate business, this, Standish," was Preston's greeting when Colin wished him good morning. "And when we thought we'd laid him properly by the heels! But we'll get him sure enough. Dacres is drafting out placards both in English and Iraki offering a big reward for information leading to Malagrotto's apprehension. No native can resist that inducement. Sorry about breakfast; the cooks and messmen have joined in the search. Disturbing business all round!"

"Don't worry about a meal for us," rejoined Standish. "We can grub when we're in flight. As a matter of fact I was about to tell you that we have decided to make an early start after all. You see, when

Malagrotto was arrested, there really was no need for us to hang on till the afternoon."

"Right-o," agreed the Wing Commander. "I'll order some of the guard to give you a hand with your bus. By the by, before you start would you mind letting me have the Italian's automatic which your engineer wisely collared? It will be used in evidence—when we catch him."

The *Condor* was brought from her temporary hangar. The crew went on board. Metcalfe handed Malagrotto's pistol to one of the aircraftsmen to give to his commanding officer.

"All clear!"

The propellers commenced to revolve, sending up a terrific cloud of dust as the biplane gathered speed across the take-off ground.

Then, keeping a watchful eye for the R.A.F. aeroplanes already in the air, Standish took off. In a few minutes the minarets of Basra and the sparkling wavelets of the Persian Gulf—for altitude lent enchantment to the muddy expanse of water—were hidden in the hot mist.

The course to Baghdad was an easy one, the River Tigris on the right forming a definite guide.

An hour found the *Condor* over Kut-el-Amara, a collection of mud hovels that was held so gallantly yet unavailingly by British and Indian troops against the Turks in the Great War. Then the ruined arch of Ctesiphon could be seen standing out clearly against the expanse of sand, and beyond it more buildings capped by numerous minarets. It was the city of Baghdad.

"How's she going, Jack?" inquired Standish.

"Right champion, sir!" replied Metcalfe. "She'll want no attention for the next two hours. Happen A'll get breakfast?"

"Yes, do," agreed Colin heartily, for the Yorkshireman was not only a good mechanic but an excellent cook—and Standish cherished no delusions concerning his own culinary abilities.

Meanwhile Don Grey had connected up the gyro stabilizers and had set a course that, following the Euphrates valley, would eventually bring the *Condor* over French Mandated Territory in the neighbourhood of Aleppo.

"Metcalf seems to have acted smartly over that affair of Malagrotto's automatic," remarked Standish as he rejoined his chum in the control cabin. "He may be a bit slow in the uptake."

"Yes, he didn't say a word about his suspicions concerning Angelo's identity because he said he hadn't been asked to do so. That reminds me: did we return those revolvers we took from those Gippy policemen at Alexandria?"

"Goodness, no!" replied Standish. "I quite meant to do so. Technically we've committed a theft from the Egyptian Government, but I don't suppose that bumptious lieutenant of police will have reported it. He would be ashamed to own up to it.

"All the same I'll send them back when we get home," continued Colin. "Hello, Metcalfe! You surely haven't got brekker already?"

The Yorkshireman grinned and shook his head.

"Nay; A have not," he replied. "You'll not be having breakfast yet awhile."

"Oh, why not?" inquired Colin.

"Ants," replied Metcalfe. "Millions of them, swarming all ower t'larder and store-rooms."

"Must have shipped them at Basra, confound it!" said Standish. "They'll eat through every bit of woodwork—not that there's much of it—before very long if we don't get rid of them. How about paraffin, Jack?"

The engineer again shook his head.



"Muck up everything," he objected tersely.

Standish agreed. Food even with the slightest taint of paraffin is far from being pleasant, especially in hot countries when the effect is even more pronounced than in colder climes.

"Well, what can you suggest?" he asked.

"Smoke them out wi' a bit o' burning sulphur," replied the Yorkshireman.

"Wouldn't that taint the provisions? And it's too risky to use here."

"Smell'll soon go off," continued Metcalfe. "And A'll tak right good care it doesn't set aught afire. Happen we'll be keeping on an even keel?"

"Then try it," decided Standish, knowing that the engineer was too cautious to run the risk of fire.

He went aft with Metcalfe in order to watch the operation.

The store-rooms were immediately abaft the sleeping-cabins and extended almost to the tail of the fuselage. When employed as an air-liner these store-rooms were cut off from the passenger accommodation by means of a sliding door, which during the present trip had been left open.

Procuring a shallow earthenware dish Metcalfe set a small lump of rock sulphur on the bottom of the bowl. Then he placed the bowl in a larger one that contained water to a depth of about an inch.

He then set the sulphur alight. Pungent fumes began to arise.

"Best get out, sir!" suggested the Yorkshireman, as the fumes caused tears to well from their eyes. "So far no ants have got for'ard. Look at them! That's tickling them up champion!"

The two men beat a retreat, closing the sliding door after them.

"We'll gi' t'stuff an hour," decided Metcalfe. "And now A'll be makin' the tea."

Standish went back to the control room.

He had not been there more than five minutes before the Yorkshireman appeared.

"A reckon we've a stowaway aboard!" was his startling announcement. "Someone's coughing and spluttering right aft!"

Colin sprang to his feet.

"Is there?" he rejoined. "We'll soon see."

He had already made up his mind as to who the stowaway might be. The *Condor* had been in a hangar within the limits of the Royal Air Force station at Basra. Sentries had been posted outside the sheds day and night, according to regulations. It was quite certain that the stowaway was a deserter—a youth "fed up" with service in Mesopotamia and determined to smuggle himself back to England in a machine that happened to be a civilian one.

Standish pushed aside the sliding door. A dense cloud of sulphurous smoke eddied out. He recoiled. His hand involuntarily flew to his throat as he gasped for breath.

He was in that attitude when through the bluish fumes dashed a half-naked man whose features were concealed by a scarf wrapped round his head and over his mouth.

Partly blinded by the smoke, the stowaway butted the almost equally stupefied Standish in the pit of his stomach. Both men fell upon the deck, the intruder uppermost.

For an instant Metcalfe hesitated. Then, seizing a fire extinguisher, he vaulted over the two struggling figures and began to play the oxygen-destroying liquid upon the floor of the store-room.

And for a very good reason. The stowaway, in making his dash from the sulphur-laden store-room, had capsized the bowl containing the burning brimstone. Already bluish flames were attacking the wooden zinc-lined cases containing the provisions.

Then he, too, recoiled, as the suffocating gas from the sulphur was being overwhelmed by the more powerful chemical that composed the released contents of the fire extinguisher.

Metcalfé slammed the sliding door. The danger of fire was, he knew, now no longer to be reckoned with; he was free to go to Colin's aid.

Strong and active though he was, Standish had all his work cut out to deal with the frenzied attack of the unknown assailant. At first he contented himself with obtaining a grip upon the other man's wrists, thinking that the stowaway, maddened by the fumes, had no idea of what he was doing.

But when the latter, who had contrived to free himself from the handkerchief across his mouth, ferociously tried to bite Standish in the throat, the Englishman thought that it was about time to check the little display of attempted cannibalism.

Relaxing his grip upon the other's right wrist, Standish gave him a short jab with his left. It missed the fellow's chin, otherwise the struggle would have been decided then and there, and caught him a glancing blow under the nose.

In a trice Colin's assailant shifted his free right hand to the Englishman's hair. Obtaining a claw-like hold the stowaway proceeded in approved Apache style to do his best to gouge out his opponent's eyes.

Luckily Standish had had his hair cut very short just before leaving home, and thus the other man was unable to take full advantage of his unfair tactics. With a twist of his head Colin broke away from the other's torturing grip, only to receive a succession of butts in the region of his solar plexus from the stowaway's knee.

By this time the exertion had partly cleared the suffocating fumes from Standish's throat. He was now able to use his wits as well as his enormous strength.

With a terrific left to the other's chest he lifted his assailant a good three feet clear of the ground, hurling him in a heap against the metal bulkhead.

Standish, panting heavily, regained his feet. Almost at the same time his antagonist, far from being knocked out by the blow, rose and faced him. Even as the stowaway crouched in order to return to the attack Colin recognized him.

It was the escaped desperado, Angelo Malagrotto!

## CHAPTER XIX

### Tooth and Nail!

"By gum! It's the Eyetalian!" ejaculated Metcalfe. "Look out in case he has a knife. Let me tackle him!"

Standish, standing between Malagrotto and the Yorkshireman, signed to the latter to remain where he was. The idea that Metcalfe should put the finish to the business did not appeal to his sense of fair play. He never liked the thought of "two to one" when it came to a scrap.

By this time Colin felt certain that the Italian did not possess a knife. Had he a weapon he would have made use of it at the onset instead of employing tactics of the eye-gouging order.

Even as he crouched like a wild animal at bay, Malagrotto knew that he stood very little chance of success against the well-knit, athletic Englishman—unless he could employ some underhand work to more than equalize the disparity between them.

The idea of surrendering was not in his scheme of things. After what had happened at Basra and his tooth-and-nail methods when he first tried to overcome his one-time rescuer and former host, it was unlikely that Standish would listen to any proposition. The whole question boiled down to this: either he had to fight and overcome three people and then be able to secure the Atar-il-Kilk or he himself would be killed and then all chance of stealing the ruby would be lost. Many a time had Angelo Malagrotto rubbed shoulders with Death. The probability of parting with his life worried him far less than losing the Atar-il-Kilk.

Like a panther Malagrotto sprang with the intention of gripping Standish round the waist and delivering a succession of cowardly blows below the belt.

Swiftly Standish let drive with a straight left. It landed on the top of the Italian's skull. It would have fractured the cranium of most

European or Asiatic born individuals; but Malagrotto's must have been as tough as a negro's.

The Italian recoiled in mid-air and flopped on his face upon the deck. The next instant he was up again with his arms wound tightly round Standish's legs just below the knees. He made more than one ineffectual effort to bite the Englishman.

"You miserable rat!" exclaimed Standish.

He gripped the Italian with his left hand, wrenched him clear, held him at arm's length, and then with a powerful heave flung him heavily against the bulkhead once more.

This time Malagrotto did not move.

"You've broken the miserable blighter's neck, sir!" exclaimed Metcalfe.

"He'll be downright lucky if I have," growled the victor, as he surveyed his clothes that bore signs of the Italian's biting efforts. "Bear a hand and lash him up. We cannot take any more risks."

Malagrotto was alive but unconscious. They dashed water on his face, then stretching him at full length on the deck, lashed his legs together, one on each side of a metal stanchion.

"Secure his hands behind his back when he recovers a bit," ordered Standish. "I'm off to refit and execute repairs. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"An' to think A'd lent him those clothes!" remarked the Yorkshireman ruefully, as he proceeded to tie the desperado's ankles in such a way as to give him no chance to free himself.

Before going to his cabin Standish looked into the control room.

"Hello!" exclaimed Don, catching sight of his dishevelled chum. "What have you been doing—ratting?"

"Sort of," admitted Colin. "We smoked the fellow out and collared him, but he gave us a run for our money."

"Who is he?"

"Malagrotto!"

"Get away!" exclaimed Grey, imitating one of Metcalfe's provincialisms.

"Well, he nearly did," declared Colin. "If he had had a pistol or even a knife it might have gone badly with the lot of us. One can't help admiring the audacity of the rogue. Fancy getting out of his cell and doing in the two Iraki policemen. Then, instead of doing what everybody thought he would do—make either for the desert or the native quarter—he returned to the hangars, dodged the sentries and smuggled himself away in the tail compartment of our bus."

"I don't think it was audacity that prompted him," remarked Grey. "It was the ruby he had at the back of his mind the whole time. What do you propose doing with him?"

"I'll think out that proposition while I'm changing," replied Standish. "No I won't, though! I'll do that now. Alter course fifteen degrees to port, old son!"

Don obeyed the order promptly. Then, after having done so, he naturally asked why.

"Killing two birds with one stone, so to speak," explained Colin. "I'm making for Alexandria—we've enough time on hand for that—to return those pistols we borrowed and forgot about, and also to hand Malagrotto over to the Egyptian police."

"Your tea, sir!" announced Metcalfe imperturbably. "And there's a couple o' rashers apiece wi' no blooming ants in the gravy!"

"How's the prisoner?"

"Sort of half and half, sir. He's not quite come to hissen yet."

"You might have hung on with breakfast until I had 'changed'," grumbled Standish. "Ugh! the bacon reeks of sulphur!"

"Good for the blood, sir," countered the Yorkshireman. "There's worse things happen at sea—and in the air, too. Thank your lucky stars it's you and not the Eyetalian who's having a nice plate of rashers set in front of him!"

Two hours later Metcalfe again entered the control room with the news that Malagrotto was now fully conscious and wanted to speak to his victor.

"S'pose I'd better go and see what he wants," remarked Standish. "Don't like the job though. It looks like crowing over the blighter."

He was not at all surprised to find the prisoner in a very chastened mood.

"I must apologize, Mr. Standish," he began, speaking in similar English to that he had used in his assumed character of a French professor. "I did not vish to 'urt you. But consider! I vas falsely accused. Dey would not take my word I vas ze Professeur Deschamps. Dey put me in ze prison. I revolt! I made escape, taking refuge wi' you, my former benefactor. You maltreat me. You turn on ze poison gas. I know not vat for. I suffocate! Den when you let me out I become—vot you call it?—ah, temporarily insane. I fight. I lose. Now I am ver' sorry for vot I done, for vot you did also!"

"I am afraid that I cannot accept your statement, Malagrotto," said Colin.

"Malagrotto! Ten thousand devils fly away wit' ze *coquin*, ze assassin! I know not ze man Malagrotto."

Standish did not press the point.

"They were within their rights to arrest you at Basra," he remarked. "Your passport was a forged one."

"It is a ver' big lie!" exclaimed the desperado excitedly. "If dey say it was forged den I tell you dey steal my passport and show one dat is not in order!"



"British officers wouldn't stoop to a trick like that," said Colin indignantly. "It's simply not done. However, it is my intention to proceed to Alexandria and hand you over to the Egyptian police."

To his surprise Malagrotto received that information quite quietly.

"*Bon!*" he rejoined. "At Alexandria I have friends on *ze Consulat Francais*. Justice will be done!"

He shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes as an intimation that the interview was now ended.

Standish left him.

The plan suited Malagrotto admirably, taking all circumstances into consideration. He had a profound contempt for the Egyptian police. They could be bribed by promises even though he had not a piastre in his possession. And they had no pluck. On one occasion he had been surrounded by eight of them and had fought his way out with no other weapon than an empty revolver. Once he could get in touch with his friends at Kafshirbin—that sink of iniquity populated entirely by Levantine criminals—he entertained no doubts concerning his speedy release. But even that took time. Even he had to admit that the *Atar-il-Kilk*—which at that moment was within twenty feet of him—looked like being taken beyond his reach; and that thought made him gnash his teeth.

Suddenly he sat up and sniffed. He was not mistaken. There was the peculiar smell of smouldering wool. Somewhere aft a fire had broken out—and the *Condor*, with her crew in blissful ignorance of the latest peril that beset them, was speeding through the air at 150 miles an hour at a height of six thousand feet above the Syrian Desert.

## CHAPTER XX

Down!

Metcalf, disturbed in the middle of a short nap, raised his head and listened.

"There's that blinkin' Eyetalian yelling again!" he murmured drowsily. "Let him holler! What's he shouting: something about fire? Happen he's trying some of his tricks again."

Malagrotto's shouts were redoubled. Even with his indifference to violent death by steel or bullet he had a horror of being burnt alive in mid-air.

"Perhaps a few of those ants have survived and are giving him what-ho!" thought the Yorkshireman. "A'll go see!"

He got up from the cork bed which he had placed on the engine-room floor between the two motors, glanced at the oil gauges through sheer force of habit, and then made his way aft.

"It is fire after all!" he muttered. "It can't be that sulphur, although A didn't reckon on that Eye-talian kicking over the dish!"

He snatched an extinguisher from the bulkhead, stepped over the bound prisoner and threw open the sliding hatch of the store-room.

By this time the fire was well alight. It glowed a dull red. Already the metal plating aft had been holed and flames fanned by the wind were streaming astern.

The extinguisher was unable to cope with the outbreak owing to the powerful induced draught caused by the *Condor's* speed.

Metcalf hurried for'ard.

"We're alight astern, sir!" he reported. "Extinguisher's no good at this speed. Best bring the bus down!"

"Right!" replied Standish. "Stand by!"

He did not question the engineer's suggestion. It was the only thing to be done. Once the biplane was stationary on the ground the fire might be got under.

Mentally consigning the ants, the sulphur, and Malagrotto to perdition, Standish made the machine dive steeply. Fortunately the desert beneath was fairly level and there was no indication of any wind.

"Look here, Don!" he exclaimed hurriedly. "Directly we land cut Malagrotto's leg lashings adrift and get him out. He can't get very far. Then freeze on to the ruby. Metcalfe and I will tackle the fire. Don't forget to take an automatic."

The *Condor* bumped, rose, and bumped again; then waddling awkwardly for about fifty yards, came to a standstill with her landing-wheels almost axle-deep in soft sand.

Grey, dragging Malagrotto by the shoulders, emerged followed by Standish. The engineer remained on board, emptying a second extinguisher into the blazing mass, while Colin shovelled up sand as fast as he could and threw it over the almost glowing metal sheeting.

Their combined efforts, aided by the fact that the fire was no longer fanned by a terrific draught, were eventually successful.

Metcalfe, black as a coal miner and running with perspiration, began throwing the badly charred remains of blankets and bedding out on the ground.

"It wasn't that sulphur after all, sir!" he reported gleefully. "Spontaneous combustion; that's what it was. A always said cotton and wool never agreed when packed tight in an enclosed space!"

"Yes, but look at our tail plane," pointed out Standish. "It's a wonder it held. Pretty pickle to find ourselves in, anyway."

"Worse things happen at sea," rejoined the Yorkshireman. "We're here, the ruby's here, and a reckons yon tail's not beyond repair."

Keep an eye on th' Eytalian, sir, and Mr. Grey and mysen'll soon sort things right."

Standish could not help feeling annoyed. Apart from the risk of losing the Atar-il-Kilk ruby he would have to "log" the fact that the plane had caught fire. There would be an inquiry when he returned to Bere Regis Aerodrome, but it was fortunate that the *Condor* was not then actually a passenger-carrying air-liner. Accidents of this description are apt to have a very detrimental effect—to create a sense of uneasiness amongst subsequent passengers.

But in Metcalfe Standish had a tower of strength. The Yorkshireman was an engineer to his fingertips. There was not the slightest doubt that he would be able to make the *Condor* airworthy again as soon as anybody.

Assisted by Grey the engineer got to work, riveting spare metal plates to the weakened tail planes and replacing doubtful control rods with others that were beyond suspicion.

This task was nearing completion when a distant rumble attracted Standish's attention. On the horizon a great cloud of dust was rising in the sultry air.

"A sandstorm, confound it!" thought Colin. "That puts the lid on things!"

There was nothing to which the biplane could be tethered. All that could be done was to swing her nose-on to the approaching storm, tilt the elevators, and trust to luck.

Metcalfe, perched upon the tail of the fuselage, shaded his eyes and looked in the direction of the column of dust.

"That's no sandstorm, sir!" he reported. "It's a great motor-car coming this way."

Up to a certain point the engineer was right. Actually it was a French tank, specially built for travelling at high speed over sandy wastes. It was approaching at quite thirty miles an hour to the

accompaniment of a terrific roar of the exhausts and a ponderous clang as the broad driving bands rolled over the uneven ground.

In its wake and almost hidden in the dust was another tank of identical pattern.

Both came to a standstill within twenty yards of the *Condor*. From them emerged four officers and about twenty men dressed in French Colonial uniforms. The *poilus* carried stretchers, First Aid outfits, and fire extinguishers.

Standish stepped forward to meet them. The senior officer—a major wearing the ribbon of the Legion of Honour in addition to a double row of war decoration ribbons—smartly returned the Englishman's salute.

"We saw you from El Kish descending in flames, monsieur," he began, speaking in fluent English, "so we came to render assistance. Fortunately, it seems, our aid is not required."

"Thanks, no," replied Colin. "But it was awfully good of you to turn out, all the same."

"It is our duty," continued the Major. "Also I would tell you that you might even now be in danger. These Syrian Arabs—*que le diable les emporte!*—would be swarming around like flies to a honey-pot. So permit us to remain until you make the restart. It would seem that, since your wheels are deep in the sand, we may still be of more assistance. When you are ready we will manoeuvre and flatten out the sand with those broad tractor wheels!"

"Again many thanks, Major," said Colin heartily, for the question of how to taxi over the yielding ground was a difficult one and hard to solve. "We may be some time. Will you and your officers have a whisky and soda?"

The Frenchman shook his head.

"Non, non, monsieur!" he replied. "Once during the war I was given whisky at an English mess behind the lines. I quote the lines of your excellent poet Poe: 'Quoth the raven nevermore'. My name,

monsieur, is Corbeau, which, as you may know, in English means 'raven'. However, I have my duty to perform. That is to request to see your passports and papers."

"Certainly," agreed Standish. "I will fetch them. Now the jolly old fat's in the fire with a vengeance. What about Malagrotto?" he thought. "If he claims to be a Frenchman what will happen then?"

So far the Italian—who, although the lashings round his ankles had been unfastened, was still secured with his arms bound behind his back—had escaped observation. Don had left him sitting in the shade of the starboard wings and on the far side from where the French officers and men were standing.

Standish presented the required documents. Major Corbeau scanned them, and after making a few notes in his pocket-book returned them with a bow.

"So far you have been fortunate in bringing back the Atar-il-Kilk," he remarked.

"How did you know that?" asked the astonished pilot.

The Frenchman smiled.

"It is well known that you are on that mission," he said. "Only English" ("*et imbeciles*" he thought but courteously refrained from saying so) "would undertake such a task in such a casual manner. If we had to transport by air one of the most valuable gems in the world a squadron of fighting aeroplanes would not be considered too many as an escort.... Yes, I think this sand will have to be crushed hard."

He bent down in order to look under the nose of the plane. As he did so he caught sight of Malagrotto's figure sitting close to the starboard side of the fuselage.

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed Major Corbeau. "And who is this? A man bound? What does it mean, monsieur?"

"Oh—that?" Standish found himself floundering under the stern, suspicious gaze of the French officer. "Er—a passenger."

"Ah! a passenger bound? *Ma foi!* There is somet'ing ver'"—in his excitement Major Corbeau's command of the English language failed somewhat. He searched his mind to find some slang word to express himself—"ver' fishy, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"It is," agreed Colin cheerfully. "You see, the fellow has a bad record. He was arrested at Basra——"

"And sent to England in your aeroplane—without guards," added the Major sarcastically.

"Oh, no," said Standish. "He wasn't sent; he escaped and——"

"You aided his escape then?"

"No, he smuggled—hid himself—on board. We had a bit of a difficulty to bring him to reason," explained Colin. "You see, what with the ruby on board——"

"Exactly!" exclaimed Major Corbeau. "Evidently you have associated yourself with a criminal."

"In a sense, yes," agreed Standish. "And you will be doing us a great service if you take him off our hands!"

The ruse worked. Had Standish said that he wanted to take Malagrotto on with him, the Major would have objected through sheer perverseness and would probably have detained the *Condor* and her crew in addition. The mere suggestion that the prisoner should be left with the French military authorities was enough.

"No, we do not entangle ourselves with affairs of this sort. Nevertheless I will speak to the *coquin*."

He signed to two of his subordinate officers to accompany him.

Malagrotto, seeing them approach, stood up.

"Who are you? What is your nationality?" demanded Major Corbeau.

Breathlessly Standish awaited the prisoner's reply. If Malagrotto persisted in his story that he was Professeur Deschamps and a French subject there would be little chance of the *Condor* being permitted to resume her flight for perhaps several days.

But the Italian had thought all this out before. French prisons were difficult places to break out of—more so than Italian ones, and certainly both were far more so than an Egyptian one!

He looked Major Corbeau straight in the face.

"I am an Italian, Monsieur le Majeur!"



## CHAPTER XXI

### Good-bye to Malagrotto

When two rival nations almost equally matched are ready to fly at each other's throats a very slight incident might easily set fire to their highly inflammable *amour-propre*. Consequently each country is chary of acting discourteously towards individuals of the other nation who might be living within their gates.

It was thus in the case of France and Italy. For a long time past no Frenchman had been arrested on Italian soil except at the request of the French police, and no Italian had been detained inside the French frontier except for offences coming under the civil criminal code.

Hence Major Corbeau decided that it would be better to waive the lack of passport incident—but he must do so without loss of dignity.

"Remove him on board your aeroplane, monsieur!" he ordered. "Where he now is he is virtually upon French soil. Inside he is technically upon the territory of Great Britain."

"That's certainly a way out of the difficulty," thought Standish. "But we'll have to lash the fellow's legs to the stanchion. Can't do otherwise with the ruby on board."

For Grey had taken the Atar-il-Kilk back to Colin's cabin soon after the French tanks had been sighted.

Malagrotto offered no resistance. He was going quietly when one of the French officers whispered into Major's Corbeau's ear.

"*Halte là!*" order the Major. Then turning to Standish: "Is that rogue known by the name of Angelo Malagrotto, by any chance?"

"Yes," replied Colin.

"Then perhaps it is well you are not returning by way of Aleppo and Constantinople," was the astonishing information. "We had

wireless reports concerning this dog of an Italian! Also from Cairo we had warning that two of his confederates left Alexandria for Angora. There they seized by stratagem a Turkish warplane fitted with the latest devices for bringing down aircraft. It occurs to me, *mon ami*, that the Atar-il-Kilk has something to do with their plans. You are indeed fortunate in choosing another route! And now it would seem that your mechanic had effected the necessary repairs. We will assist you to take off!"

Standish went to the control cabin.

"All ready, Metcalfe?"

"All ready, sir!"

The motors woke into activity. Colin tested the ailerons and tail plane and rudder controls and found that everything was now in order.

One of the tanks moved slowly forward until it took up a position about ten yards in front of the biplane's nose. Then it lumbered forward, flattening the soft sand into a hardness almost as firm as that of concrete until a "take off" nearly a quarter of a mile in length was formed.

While this work was in progress the second tank was manoeuvred into position and a stout towing-rope was attached from it to the *Condor's* undercarriage. The *poilus* then dug the sand away from the biplane's wheels and placed several short planks up the incline thus formed.

Soon the *Condor* was resting on firm ground ready to take off.

Standish did not waste any time in taking to the air. He was on tenterhooks lest the excitable French major should change his mind; while the sight of a wireless pole projecting through the roof of one of the tanks did not tend to allay his fear.

He did not feel safe until the *Condor* had reached a height of six thousand feet.

"You might see if everything's all right in my cabin, Don," he said.

Grey did so, and returning, reported that the metal box containing the gem was where he had left it in Colin's suitcase.

"Did you think those French tommies might have sneaked it, old son?" he added banteringly.

"One never knows," replied Standish. "The sooner I've finished with it the better I'll be pleased. No wonder they say wealth is a curse!"

"I'd risk the curse if I had the rhino," declared Don. "Now, then: shall I take over?"

It wanted but an hour to sunset when the *Condor* alighted in Alexandria Harbour and almost in the same spot where she had berthed only a few momentous days previously.

The biplane had hardly made fast to a buoy and had stopped her engines when an Egyptian police motor-launch came pelting towards her. There were two officers and ten men aboard; so evidently they were not taking any more chances. One of the officers Standish recognized as the over-bearing lieutenant whom he had taken for a forced joy-ride.

"There's the fellow I want to see, Don!" he exclaimed. "We'll see if his manners have improved since last time we were here."

"Cheerio, *bimbashi!*" sung out Standish as the launch ran alongside. "Come aboard. I've gone out of my way to pay you a visit!"

The lieutenant hardly knew what to make of this exuberant greeting. He rather fancied that the Englishman was trying to pull his leg.

"Good evening, Captain Standish!" he replied somewhat stiffly. "Are you remaining here long? You know the port regulations."

"I do that," agreed Colin. "As a matter of fact I want to be getting on as soon as possible and it's about fifty minutes to sunset. I've a lot to tell you, so come aboard."

The Egyptian forced a laugh.

"Thanks," he replied. "Do you mind if I bring this merchant with me," and he indicated the second police official.

"Not in the least," replied Standish. "Does he understand English, by the way?"

"No, French."

"Right! This way. You aren't entirely a stranger on board."

"That's a fact," agreed the lieutenant, still mystified for the reason of the Englishman's cordial invitation.

Standish led the way to his cabin and switched on the electric light. Don remained at the gangway and Metcalfe was tinkering about with his beloved engines; but, even without them, the cabin was more than comfortably crowded by the two decidedly fat Egyptians.

Their host handed cigarettes and offered a whisky and soda. They declined the drink on the ground that they were Moslems, although on the previous occasion the lieutenant had not hesitated to drink spirits when he was alone with his abductor.

"One of my reasons for looking you up is that I've three revolvers belonging to the Egyptian Police Service," explained Standish. "I'm sorry I borrowed them and forgot to return them at the last moment. I quite intended to do so."

The bimbashi raised one hand and shook his head.

"That incident is closed," he replied. "To have to give an explanation to my chief would be impossible. They are reported as being stolen by Arabs! That being so, perhaps, Captain Standish, you will keep them as souvenirs. But you did not come all this way to tell me that?"

"No, my chief reason concerns the fellow I was going to hand over to you but who made his escape before I could do so—Angelo Malagrotto."

"He fled," announced the lieutenant. "Only yesterday we raided the island of Kafshirbin and found the whole lot of criminals had cleared out. We heard they had made for Constantinople."

"But surely you've heard of the case of Professor Deschamps?"

The Egyptian nodded indifferently.

"The fellow who chartered a plane at Cairo, threw the pilot overboard and cleared off. Yes, but that did not concern us. It is the affair of the Cairo police. I heard that he was captured somewhere in Persia."

"In Bakhistan to be exact," continued Standish, glancing at the clock on the bulkhead. "As a matter of fact we rescued him from some natives who had wiped out his companions and brought him on to Basra. There he escaped. But what will interest you is the fact that Professor Deschamps and Angelo Malagrotto are one and the same individual!"

"If only you had brought him to Alexandria!" exclaimed the Egyptian. "There is now a reward offered for his arrest both by the Egyptian and the Italian Governments!"

"That is exactly what I have done!" said Standish. "He's on board here now, waiting to be handed over."

The lieutenant almost embraced Colin in his excitement. Then he explained matters to his companion. The two Egyptians talked rapidly for nearly two minutes before the *bimbashi* turned to his host.

"It is a hundred thousand piastres: how much of that do you want as your share?" asked the police officer, hardly able to conceal the avaricious, anxious look on his face.

"None of it!" declared Standish resolutely. "I'm not keen on blood-money. All I want is to get rid of the fellow. It's up to you to prove that he is a murderer. I've nothing much against him except——"

"Except what?" inquired the lieutenant.

"No, you won't get me detained as a witness," thought Colin. Then aloud: "Nothing much. Hadn't you better order some of your men to take him away? You'll have to be careful; he's a slippery customer."

"You swear that you will not claim part of the reward?" asked the lieutenant.

"Confound you!" replied Colin furiously. "Didn't I say I wouldn't? Isn't my word good enough. Get a move on! I want to be off before sunset."

The two Egyptians went to the entry-port. They gave half a dozen orders. Six men, armed with revolvers and short swords, came on board.

Malagrotto offered no resistance. The lashings round his ankles were cast off. His captors lifted him on to his feet. Three policemen preceded him, the rest following in single file, for the alleyway was barely wide enough for two oversized men to walk abreast.

As he was passing through the engine-room between the two motors, the Italian's feet slipped on the oily metal deck. He lurched against a work-bench and recovered himself before the nearest policeman could assist him.

Then, catching sight of Metcalfe, he exclaimed:

"Farewell, engineer! I am sorry I cannot return the clothes you lent me. Perhaps after my execution you'll receive them by post!"

And with this grim remark he stepped into the waiting motor-boat.

The *Condor* was only just in time; for five minutes after she had taken off the sunset gun boomed from Fort Mex. A quarter of an

hour later Alexandria—a blaze of light in the dark sky—vanished astern of the swiftly-moving machine.

"And that's that!" commented Standish. "Last lap. Another eleven hours and we'll sight Old England again!"

## CHAPTER XXII

### The Cell

The Egyptian police launch, with Angelo Malagrotto manacled in the forepeak, *chugged* slowly shoreward.

The two police officers in the sternsheets waited until the *Condor* had shown her heels in Alexandria Harbour; then the senior gave orders for the engine to be stopped.

"That fool of an Englishman assured me that he would not claim any of the reward, Azziz," remarked the senior police officer.

"That is what he told you, Osman," replied the other. "As if he wouldn't!"

"I think he means what he says," persisted Osman. "It was my misfortune to have lived my youth in England, and it is a fact that these infidels do say what they mean. There's a hundred thousand piastres! A quarter of that sum and either of us would be rich."

"Rich indeed," agreed Azziz. "But would the Government pay that sum to us? Knowing how hard it is to get our pay since the British officials handed over control of the Treasury—even I, a true believer, will admit that they paid us promptly—it would seem that the reward would be absorbed before it reached us. They would say that we did not capture the man but merely received him into custody. Even if fifty piastres came this way the Rallaz Pasha would not let it through his hands."

"That's just the point," agreed Osman. "We must capture Malagrotto after a desperate struggle!"

"I know not what you mean."

"Have you no imagination? Listen."

He unfolded his plan.



"But Malagrotto himself," objected Azziz. "Before the judges he would deny everything."

"Leave that to me," continued Osman. "Five hundred piastres will satisfy our men, and I will bribe Malagrotto to keep silent. It will not be long before he's dead, in any case!"

By this time darkness had fallen, and the launch, with only her riding-lamp showing, floated motionless on the calm waters of the lake.

Going for'ard the lieutenant called together his men and explained exactly what they were to do and that in due course five hundred piastres would be theirs. That was equivalent to a little more than five pounds of English money to be divided amongst ten men; but to a Gippy policeman ten piastres spells luxury.

One and all swore by the Prophet that they would keep faith with their two officers.

Then Osman went into the forepeak.

"You, Malagrotto, are as good as dead," he began. "It is in my power to make some of your remaining days easier. To-morrow you will be sent to Cairo. I can arrange for you to be well supplied with cigarettes and wine provided you agree to one condition."

"Name it, *effendi!*"

The Egyptian did so.

"*Sapristi!*" exclaimed Malagrotto. "Is that all? I agree."

"And if you go back on your word no one will believe you," threatened Osman.

"That I know," replied the Italian. "You can rest assured that I will keep silent."

The lieutenant went aft, ordered the steaming-lights to be switched on and the engines restarted. The motor-launch, gathering way,

headed for a muddy creek on the outskirts of the lowest quarters of the city.

Through the dark squalid alleys Malagrotto was taken and placed in the cellar of a deserted half-ruined hovel. There he was left with fetters on wrists and ankles—but only for a few moments.

Then a terrific fusillade of revolver shots rang out as the ten policemen emptied their pistols either into the air or at the crumbling stonework.

A few startled fellaheen, roused from their slumbers, saw a kafir being led away surrounded by policemen.

Twenty minutes later Malagrotto was placed by himself in a cell in the Marabout prison and Bimbashi Osman was excitedly telephoning to his chief:

"*Effendi!* I have to report that, assisted by *Bimbashi Azziz*, I have just arrested the notorious malefactor, Angelo Malagrotto, after he had made a desperate resistance. He is now here in a cell.... Many thanks for your congratulations, *effendi*. Allah be praised that the infidel murderer is in our hands. Will you please accept my written application for the reward of a hundred thousand piastres."

Meanwhile Angelo Malagrotto was taking things very calmly in his cell. Although the moon—now three days old—had not yet risen, the brilliant starlight enabled him to form a general idea of his surroundings.

True to his promise the lieutenant of police had left a small bottle of wine and a bundle of cigarettes with the prisoner.

Malagrotto drank sparingly and then smoked two cigarettes. He was in no great hurry.

Then, sitting on the low bench that served as a bed, he removed the shoes which Metcalfe had lent him. Inside one was a small file; in the other the blade of a pocket-knife.

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(Almost at the same time Jack Metcalfe, then more than two hundred miles away, was frantically searching for both the knife and the file.

"A'm certain A left my knife there!" he declared. "A was stripping the insulation from a new lead."

"For goodness' sake don't grouse about it," protested Grey. "It's bound to be about somewhere; in the engine sump more than likely. Dash it all! I'll give you mine!"

"Eh, but that's not the same," objected the searcher. "Yon was a champion knife. A wouldna have lost it for anything.")

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It had been a simple matter for Malagrotto, prison-breaker, sneak-thief, and murderer, to gain possession of the file and the knife. When, on passing through the *Condor's* engine-room, he had pretended to slip, he had dexterously removed the articles from the bench notwithstanding the fact that his arms were bound at the wrists. On board the police launch he was left alone in the forepeak. Then he transferred the file to one of his borrowed shoes; and after breaking the blade from the handle, slipped the former into his other shoe. It made him walk rather painfully from the boat to the cell; and although his captors made a perfunctory search, they failed to discover the implements whereby the desperado hoped to regain his liberty.

Soon after midnight Malagrotto "got busy". It took an hour's hard and unremitting work to file through most of the iron bars on the window of the cell.

Then he had to desist when a sleepy gaoler opened the grille in the door and flashed the beam of a torch into the cell. Malagrotto was apparently sound asleep.

As soon as the gaoler's footsteps died away along the corridor the prisoner resumed his task. He judged that it would be at least two hours before another inspection was made.

In another twenty minutes he put aside the file, wrenched at the remaining bars and bent them inwards.

Wrapping a fragment of a scarf round part of the blade, Malagrotto placed it in his side pocket; then, with the agility of a monkey he drew himself up and wriggled through the now open window.

There was about a fifteen-foot drop to the ground—a sort of square with the prison on one side and the artillery barracks on the other. On the left were more buildings, probably stores; on the right there was an avenue leading down to the harbour.

Just as Malagrotto was about to let go and drop he heard the regular sound of footsteps. He hung back, peering through the darkness with eyes that were as keen as those of a cat.

A soldier, wearing dull yellow uniform and scarlet tarboosh, was patrolling his beat. Instead of doing so in a soldier-like manner with his rifle and fixed bayonet at the slope, he was carrying the weapon under his arm.

Immediately under the window the man stopped. For a moment the prisoner imagined that the sentry had seen something to arouse his suspicion.

Then came a gleam of yellow light followed by the pungent smell of a match, similar to those sold in France. The sentry was lighting a cigarette.

The Italian thought rapidly. Obviously the man would eventually move on, and it was fairly certain that his beat was restricted to that side of the building. Better, then, to act now than to risk being spotted from a distance by the armed soldier.

Malagrotto dropped.

He landed fairly upon the shoulders of the unsuspecting Egyptian. The man collapsed with a muffled thud, the metallic clang of his rifle being deadened by his body.

The Italian, unhurt, regained his feet, raised the sentry's face to the starlit sky. There was no need for further investigation or action in that direction. The man would never speak again.

Dexterously Malagrotto explored his victim's pockets; then as softly as a leopard he stole away into the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### The Last Lap

"Wake up, old man! Coast of England in sight!" announced Don.

Although in a sound sleep Standish was almost instantly awake and in possession of his senses. Thanks to his training and experience he had the happy knack of awakening at the slightest untoward sound without being in the least bewildered.

"Good!" he exclaimed, as he commenced to throw on his clothes. "I'll be with you in a tick! What's the landfall?"

"The Wight on our starboard bow," replied Grey. "Purbeck dead ahead. How's that for navigation?"

In a minute or so Standish was in the control room. What he saw was good. It was now broad daylight and the verdure of the Purbeck Downs compared with the parched deserts of the East was a welcome sight to the returning airmen.

Nor were they lacking for company. More than twenty planes engaged upon cross-Channel flights were in sight, while at a much greater elevation four enormous twelve-engined air-liners to and from America, via the recently stationed floating air depot in mid-Atlantic, were to be seen. Seaplanes bearing the distinctive red, white, and blue concentric circles of the Royal Air Force were making their regular patrol between the Cattewater and Calshot.

In such company as these there was now not the slightest fear that any air-pirate would dare attack the *Condor* bearing home the Atar-il-Kilk ruby. No wonder that Standish rejoiced at the sight, confident that his difficult task was all but completed. A load had been lifted from his mind.

Disconnecting the gyro stabilizers Standish gave three blasts on the siren—the signal when other aircraft were within sight that the *Condor* was about to alight.

From the Bere Regis Aerodrome a smoke-rocket soared skywards—the intimation that the landing-ground was clear.

"You can count on old Symes to keep a sharp look-out," remarked Standish. "And we're three days inside scheduled time. It looks as if I can enter for the Middleweight Championship after all!"

"You've certainly been in training—after a fashion," rejoined Don. "If you knock out your man same as you did Malagrotto, well—I feel sorry for the fellow who puts on the gloves against you, old son!"

Standish did not reply. His attention was now centred upon alighting. The wind was sou'-west. That meant he had to fly over the aerodrome, make a semi-circular turn and come down head to wind.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Don. "Look at the crush! Wonder how they knew when to expect us? Talk about a secret mission!"

The *Condor* made a splendid landing. Crowds of curious spectators and a fair sprinkling of pressmen raced after her before she came to a standstill. It took all the efforts of the ground staff, under the direction of the taciturn Symes, to hold the onlookers back from mobbing the returning airmen.

"Why didn't they lock the gates, Symes?" were Standish's first words.

"We did, sir," replied the ground foreman. "Only look at 'em! And at least a couple of hundred people swarmed over the wall!"

The big gates of the aerodrome had been torn away from their hinges by the thoroughly excited crowd who were now cheering and shouting in a deafening roar. "Speech! Speech!" they yelled.

Truscott, the Resident Managing Director, elbowed his way close to the biplane.

"Say something to them, for goodness' sake, Standish!" he exclaimed. "Anything to keep 'em quiet."

Standish stood framed in the starboard entry-port. Consequently a large section of the crowd who were unable to see him surged round to swell the numbers of those who were within the young pilot's range of vision.

Colin held up his hand. A great hush settled upon the crowd.

"Gentlemen—I mean, ladies and gentlemen—I can't speak for rotten apples really. Even if I did there wouldn't be very much to tell you. We've brought the ruby back but I'm sorry I can't show it. So that's that, and thank you very much!"

He disappeared within the machine, Truscott followed, while the staff had another strenuous time in keeping the crowd at a safe distance.

"So you've almost carried out the contract, Standish!" exclaimed the Managing Director.

"Almost, sir; nearly pipped on the post, though. Why I was ordered to call here puzzles me. We could have avoided all this fuss by making for Croydon."

"And probably the disappointed crowd would have wrecked the place," added Truscott. "I'll get the Customs people to make the usual examination and then we'll run the machine into her hangar."

"But I have to hand over the gem to Sir Rugglestone at Haxthorpe Hall."

"I know that," agreed the Manager. "But I've received a telegram from him—how he knew you were arriving to-day puzzles me—saying that he expects you at Haxthorpe Hall not earlier than 8 p.m."

"Is that genuine?" asked Colin. "Don't you think we'd better ask for a confirmatory telegram?"

"P'raps we'd better. All right, we'll have the bus run into her hangar, and I think with a police escort it will be safe to bring the ruby up



to the office. What do you propose to do: to take a single-seater up north or complete your flight in the *Condor*?

"The *Condor*, sir," replied Standish. "It's a bit of a responsibility with a solo flight, and the fellows I've had with me oughtn't to be left out of the picture at the last lap. We'll be back soon after eleven to-morrow, and then, if you've no objections, sir, I'd like to start my fifteen days' leave."

"By all means! Still keen on that boxing tournament at Bournemouth? Well, jolly good luck!"

"That's the second time I've been wished that to-day," thought Colin. "Another one and that means luck!"

After considerable difficulty the *Condor* was taken out into her hangar. Surrounded by policemen and ground officials, Standish, Grey, and Metcalfe were escorted to Truscott's private office, and the case containing the gem was immediately placed in the massive fire-proof safe.

"Did A hear we are off to Yorkshire, sir?" inquired Metcalfe. "A was wondering whether A could get time off as soon as we get to Haxthorpe. My owd folk live in York and it's only an hour by t'bus. A could be back by eight in morning."

"Don't see why you shouldn't, Jack," replied Standish.

The crew had lunch, then Colin had to be interviewed by reporters. He said very little but quite sufficient for the papers to come out with a double column concerning the *Condor's* flight. What was lacking in detail was made up in sheer imagination.

At 1.30 p.m. a telegram was received from Sir Ruggleston Gorton:

"Confirm previous instructions. Arrange for *Condor* to arrive not earlier than 8 p.m. Congratulations upon successful flight—Gorton."

"That seems genuine enough," remarked Truscott. "Our wire asking for confirmation was bound to be delivered at Haxthorpe Hall, and there is a space of four hours between the two Sir Rugglestone sent. But I can't quite understand why he wants you to arrive after 8 p.m. It's dark by then. You'll be just in time for dinner, Standish!" he added jokingly.

"Perhaps Sir Rugglestone doesn't want his grounds overrun by sightseers as we have been here," observed Standish. "If you don't mind, sir, I'll push over to my quarters and get a bath."

"And don't forget to put in a dress shirt and your dinner jacket," said Truscott.

The Resident Managing Director was in very good humour. His exasperation at the mobbing of the aerodrome was over. Whatever damage the crowd had done would be offset by the tremendous advertisement the flight to Bakhistan had given to Far Eastern Airways, Limited.

At 5 p.m. the *Condor* took off on the last lap of her adventurous voyage. Standish steered an almost straight course, passing within a few miles of Oxford, Leicester, and Nottingham, and joining the recognized air route at York. He had purposely kept a few minutes in hand. Some sort of premonition warned him against proceeding direct to Haxthorpe Hall, so he held on until a few miles north-east of Malton before turning and making for his objective.

By this time darkness had fallen and with it the wind had died entirely away. A reddish sky just before sunset had promised a continuance of calm settled weather.

The bell in the clock tower of the Hall was striking eight, when, punctual to a minute, Standish brought the biplane to earth. The private landing-ground had been illuminated by means of flood-lights.

Sir Rugglestone, in evening dress, was standing under the portico. His agent, accompanied by the Haxthorpe air pilot, Alfred Burt, came up to the now stationary biplane.

"Sir Rugglestone is ready to receive you, gentlemen," announced the agent. "Mr. Burt, here, will see to your machine."

"She's over-wide to go in any of the sheds, sir," said Mr. Burt. "Being a calm night she'll rest steady between the sheds and those trees. If you'll run her there, sir, I'll see to things."

The *Condor* was secured for the night. Standish, with his suitcase in which was stowed the ruby, turned to his mechanic.

"Almost forgot about you, Jack," he remarked. "You'd better clear off at once."

"Happen t'bus is still running to York, mister?" inquired Metcalfe, addressing Sir Rugglestone's pilot.

"One passes the gate at 8.20," was the reply. "It you hop it you'll just catch it."

So Metcalfe departed gleefully to go to his parents' home at York.

Sir Rugglestone greeted Colin and Don warmly.

"Dinner will be served in a few minutes," he observed. "Informal, as last time you were here, Mr. Standish. I'll have you shown to your rooms."

Colin could not help noticing that Sir Rugglestone was looking somewhat pale in spite of his tanned complexion.

"The ruby, sir?"

"Ah, of course! I'll put it in the safe until after dinner."

The dinner went smoothly. Sir Rugglestone, his agent, Colin and Don, comprised the party, no one else being present except the butler and a couple of servants. The two young airmen were frequently questioned with reference to their adventures, and

although Sir Rugglestone was undoubtedly interested, Standish noticed that he kept on glancing at the clock, and then at his watch.

At nine-thirty the meal ended.

"You needn't wait, Harold," observed Sir Rugglestone, addressing the agent. "Your wife will wonder what is detaining you. I'll see you at eleven to-morrow about that business of the pheasants."

"Good night, sir," said the agent, and bowing to the two guests he went out of the room.

"Come along to my study," suggested the airmen's host. "It's cosy there and we can then examine the ruby.... I shall not require you again to-night, William."

Sir Rugglestone, taking the box and the precious case from the safe, led the way to his study where a fire burned brightly on the wide, sixteenth-century hearth. At one end of the room was a polished oak table. On all sides, with the exception of the windows and door, were tall bookcases. A few easy chairs, a grandfather clock—without which few Yorkshire houses would be considered complete—and a large terrestrial globe, were other articles of furniture.

Overhead opal electric lamps flush with the carved ceiling threw a soft light upon the polished oak floor; while on the table a couple of electric lamps set in stands fashioned to resemble tall candlesticks completed the lighting scheme.

"Dashed if I feel at home here, old son," said Don, in an undertone, while their host was rearranging the heavy curtains. "I'd rather be in a jolly old pub any day!"

Although Colin did not share the latter part of his chum's sentiments, he felt quite in accord with the beginning. In spite of its luxury, there seemed something vague about the place!

## CHAPTER XXIV

### Hands Up!

"And what are your impressions of the Amir Abdullah?" inquired Sir Rugglestone.

Standish could not help being suspicious at the question. His host had asked a precisely similar one during dinner and he had answered it at length. Either the baronet was apt to be slightly forgetful or else he was playing for time. Something seemed to be worrying him about that. Again and again he glanced at the clock.

But before Standish had finished replying to the question, Sir Rugglestone fired in another:

"Did you have any trouble with a crowd calling themselves the Down 'Em Gang?"

"The crooks you warned us about, sir?"

"Yes."

"Not as far as I know," declared Standish. "Our little spot of trouble was Angelo Malagrotto."

But evidently Sir Rugglestone was not interested in Angelo Malagrotto.

"You are quite sure that the Down 'Em Gang haven't been on your track?"

"Well, sir, I cannot say that they weren't on our track. In fact I had an anonymous letter from Plymouth just before we started for Bakhistan warning us of the gang. But, as far as I know, nothing came of it."

"And so you've brought the ruby to Haxthorpe Hall," observed Sir Rugglestone in a low tone. "It is wonderful considering the danger you had to run and of which I gave you full warning. Well," he

continued briskly, "suppose we have a look at the gem. You've seen it before, I take it?"

"Yes, sir; the Amir gave us a glimpse of it."

"And what did you think of it?"

Had Colin been bluntly outspoken he would have replied "Not much!" but he replied tactfully: "I'm afraid I haven't had much experience of precious stones."

"Then you can examine this one and I will explain its many merits."

Sir Rugglestone lifted the metal case from the mantelpiece, on which he had placed it after removing it from the safe.

"So that's the dint made by the oil-covered native in the Amir's palace," he remarked. "Interesting—very. I remember when I was in the Punjab, many years ago——"

And he launched out into a protracted story of a Pathan who succeeded in stealing a dozen rifles from the regimental armoury before he was caught.

"He doesn't seem in a hurry to look at the ruby," thought Standish, as the baronet glanced at the clock for the twentieth time. "I'll give you the key, sir," he suggested.

Apparently Sir Rugglestone did not hear.

He started another yarn, at the same time handing round his cigarette case.

"Dash it! There is something wrong with the man!" mused Colin.

"He wasn't like this before. He's like a cat on hot bricks!"

Outside an owl hooted.

Sir Rugglestone broke off in the midst of his narrative.

"Now," he exclaimed, "I think we'll open the casket. I believe you have the key, Mr. Standish."

Colin stood up to get the key from his pocket. As he did so the electric lights went out, leaving the study dimly illuminated by the ruddy glare of the burning logs on the hearth.

"Dear me, how unfortunate!" murmured Sir Rugglestone. "Just at this very moment too. Fuse blown out, I expect."

Then the door was opened very softly.

"I did not ring!" exclaimed the baronet sternly. "I do not wish to be disturbed!"

"Sorry we can't erblige yer, sir!" exclaimed a husky voice. "Put 'em up, sir, an' keep 'em up. And you two coves too: up with 'em an' no hanky panky!"

The two chums swung round and found themselves covered.

Five men, each wearing a hideous snout-like mask and holding an automatic, had ranged themselves against the wall on either side of the door.

"Put 'em up, confound you!" rasped out the spokesman. "'Ow many more times!"

Sir Rugglestone had already raised his arms to the fullest extent. He nodded significantly to the two young airmen.

There was nothing for it.

Trapped, and covered by the sinister-looking weapons, Standish and his chum complied.

## CHAPTER XXV

### The Box is Opened

For some moments there was an uncanny silence, broken only by the now exaggerated ticking of the grandfather clock and by the spluttering of the burning logs.

Then the leader of the gang, without lowering his automatic, spoke to one of his men.

"Switch on the light, Bud!" he ordered. "We've got 'em scared stiff."

The American went out and presently the study was flooded with light. When Standish's eyes grew accustomed to the sudden blaze he saw that the intruders were wearing not the orthodox crape mask commonly associated with ordinary housebreakers, but the latest type of gas-masks.

Then through his mind ran a recollection of a conversation with Don Grey just before the *Condor* charged the far-flung fog-bank. It was the Down 'Em Gang who had effected a daring jewel robbery at a place called Allerby Grange and had made their "get away" by means of some powerful gas that rendered the household unconscious for some hours.

He was up against the Down 'Em Gang this time with a vengeance. But what riled him most was the fact that the ruby, for which he had risked so much, was at the mercy of these rogues at the eleventh hour!

"Get over there!" ordered the leader. "Sit down! We don't want to 'urt yer! Put yer 'ands flat on the table an' keep em' there!"

Sir Rugglestone and the two young airmen obeyed. They were in consequence sitting at the side of the table facing the door, Don being on the extreme left, Colin in the centre, and the baronet on the latter's right. Within hand's reach of Sir Rugglestone was the



terrestrial globe. The box containing the gem was practically in the middle of the table and in front of Standish.

"Get on wi' the job, Creeper!" prompted one of the gang.

"It's like this," began the chief spokesman, who had been addressed by a nickname that suggested a loathsome insect. "We've made up our minds to 'ave that there ruby an' now we've got it. The first time it didn't come off, but now there's no bloomin' error. You can take it from me, Sir Rugglestone, that that's that! Naturally we don't want to do you gents no 'arm, but afore we clears off with the gee-gaw, we'll 'ave to give you a whiff of somethink which ain't exactly pleasant or not exactly 'armful. See my meanin'?"

"I wish you'd kindly not drop your aitches, Burt!" exclaimed Sir Rugglestone. "Hitherto since you've been in my service, you have refrained from so doing. Please remember to continue to do so while you remain in my presence. And another thing! That automatic may or may not be loaded. In all probability it is not, but I will not be curious enough to put the question. But I really must say that I do not consider you have the pluck to shoot—or any of you, if it comes to that. To be hanged by the neck is a deucedly protracted and unpleasant experience, you know, so point your pistols in some direction other than at the heads of my guests and myself."

There was a quiet yet determined ring in Sir Rugglestone's voice that surprised Standish. His host seemed to be enjoying himself! And the words surprised the treacherous *employee* still more. He replaced the automatic in his hip-pocket. His companions lowered their weapons irresolutely.

"That may be as you say, sir," rejoined Burt. "But that won't prevent us getting away with the Atar-il-Kilk."

"Ah—I wonder?" murmured the baronet.

"It won't," reiterated Burt alias Slimmer. "We've arranged everything. The servants are in the cellars under lock and key, the

telephone's cut. I'm sorry about the whiff of gas; but it won't do you no harm!"

"Double negatives, Burt, double negatives! How often have I tried to cure you of that deplorable lapse from King's English? But concerning your threat to use gas——"

With a quick movement Sir Rugglestone capsized the terrestrial globe. It rolled upon a mat, breaking away from its stand as it did so. There was a faint, steady hiss of escaping vapour.

"You can remove those masks of yours," continued Sir Rugglestone. "Except for purposes of disguise they are useless. And, I may inform you, whatever gas you intend to employ will be completely—completely, mind—nullified by the action of the chemical I have this moment released from that receptacle. Forewarned is forearmed, you see. I think I can claim the second trick!"

"He's bluffin'," exclaimed the fellow who was holding a small cylinder. "We'll soon settle his hash!"

He opened a valve. A greyish liquid gushed out.

It was a chemical similar to that employed in the famous Allerby Grange case, but to the surprise of the gang it had not the slightest effect upon their intended victims.

"Trumped again, Burt!" said Sir Rugglestone tauntingly.

"I've got the winning ace yet!" declared Burt, with a vicious snarl. "You've asked for it! Boys! we'll gag 'em and truss them up. They'll be safe enough till to-morrow morning!"

"They'll find that's not an easy job," thought Standish. "If it comes to a scrap.... Three against five and Sir Rugglestone seems pretty wiry in spite of his age."

It seemed as if the baronet had divined his next-door neighbour's thoughts.

"I think we'd better let these gentlemen have their way for the time being, Mr. Standish," he observed.

"That's talking sense, boss!" interrupted Bud. "I guess you folk will swaller yer medicine right now!"

"One moment, please!" objected the baronet. "I take it that it was your intention to take possession of the gem almost at once?"

"We've already got it," retorted Bud.

"I will not deny that statement," resumed Sir Rugglestone. "But, considering the fact that the box has only just been handed over to me, I think you might stretch a point and let me see the famous stone before it passes out of Haxthorpe Hall!"

"Waste o' time!" objected Bud.

"Who's boss here?" demanded Burt sharply.

"Very well, sir. We don't mind your taking a farewell look at the thing."

"Where is the key, Mr. Standish?" asked the baronet.

Colin drew back his hand to find the required article.

"Stop!" shouted Bud. "None of your games! Keep 'em on the table. Jim! go to his pocket."

The rascal thus addressed went round the table. He was so deft that Standish was unaware that his slim hand had even touched him until he displayed the key.

"Is this the one, sir?" he asked politely.

"It is."

Bud leant over and drew the metal box towards him, took the key and inserted it in the lock.

The lid refused to open. Possibly the blow given it by the would-be robber in the Amir's palace had injured the spring.

"Sure it's the right key?" demanded Bud.

"Positive," replied Standish, speaking for the first time since the arrival of the gang.

"Let me have a go at it?" said Burt.

The three rascals were intent upon the box. The remaining two also let their attention wander.

"Now—" thought Standish.

But Sir Rugglestone, again guessing what was in the young pilot's mind, nudged his arm.

"Don't worry," he whispered.

So some of the gang, if not all, were spared the chance of getting what is known in the vernacular as "a thick ear"—or something worse. Thinking things over, Standish decided that the baronet was right. The element of surprise would be eliminated by the fact that there was the table between the opposing parties, and in the excitement firearms might be brought into use.

"No good!" exclaimed Burt, throwing the key on the table. "But I'll soon get it open."

He brought a piece of thin wire from his pocket, bent the end into a sharp elbow and inserted it into the lock. In thirty seconds or less, the lock which—the work of an Eastern craftsman—was supposed to be thief-proof, was turned back.

Burt threw open the lid.

He gave a howl of dismay. So did his companions; for there, wrapped in common wool, was a worthless pebble!

## CHAPTER XXVI

### The Winning Card

"Game and rubber, I think!"

There was a ring of calm triumph in Sir Rugglestone's voice that compelled silence. The five desperadoes gazed through their hideous goggles at the open box. After all their elaborate preparations they had come here to find themselves fooled.

Standish, too, felt bewildered. He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. Nor could he understand why Sir Rugglestone had taken the disappointment so casually. The fact that the Atar-il-Kilk was not in the box, but only a worthless substitute, seemed to trouble him not one jot. The outwitting of the gang gave him far more satisfaction than the loss of the priceless jewel.

Thought after thought flashed across Colin's mind in the space of a few seconds. Obviously it was a case of clever substitution, but when had the exchange taken place? Surely not in the Amir's palace when the would-be robber paid for his temerity with his life? Nor at Basra, unless Malagrotto had found quick opportunity to effect his purpose? On the Syrian Desert when Major Corbeau and his men were rendering assistance to the temporarily disabled plane? Or at Alexandria when the Italian criminal was being removed to the police launch? Finally, had a clever cracksman succeeded in gaining possession of the gem while the *Condor* was at Bere Regis Aerodrome?

On the face of it Standish had failed in his duty.

"You've double-crossed us, you stinking guy!" exclaimed Bud furiously.

He raised his pistol. Two of his companions, fearing the consequences—for if they were chary of using firearms in order to

gain possession of the Atar-il-Kilk, they were still more so when nothing of material value was at stake—gripped him by the wrists.

Sir Rugglestone spoke again:

"I'm afraid I do not quite understand the meaning of the word 'double-cross'," he remarked suavely. "That word is new to my vocabulary. Also I strongly object to my study being turned into a sort of pot-house. That sort of thing has to stop—now!"

The next instant half a dozen burly, red-faced men in plain clothes appeared from behind the tall bookcases. They struck Standish as being more like a crowd of jovial innkeepers than members of the most efficient detective force in the world. Not one of them displayed a weapon of any sort; but their sudden appearance gave the astounded desperadoes no doubt as to their intentions.

Then a whistle blew shrilly. The heavy curtains were dashed aside and a number of uniformed police entered by the windows. Others were not long in arriving by orthodox methods—through the doorway. To Standish's confused mind the whole place seemed to be teeming with representatives of the law.

"Take off those masks!" ordered one of the detectives sternly. "You won't want them again. Now, wrists together!"

After that hardly a word was spoken.

Mutely the five prisoners submitted to the handcuffs; a policeman collected the gas-masks; another somewhat gingerly took possession of the empty gas-cylinder.

An inspector tapped Alfred Burt on the shoulder and pointed to the door. In single file and escorted by the uniformed police, the five departed on the first stage of their journey through the police court, then the Assizes, to the gloomy portals of Dartmouth Prison.

Sir Rugglestone turned to the Chief Detective.

"Congratulations, Middleham! A very neat coup indeed!"

"If I may be permitted to say so, Sir Rugglestone, the chief credit belongs to you."

The baronet shook his head.

"Hardly; success is mainly due to my late pilot, Alfred Burt. Like many another expert criminal, he gave himself away through a very simple slip. Also I notice that although he took particular pains to acquaint himself with the domestic arrangements of this establishment he failed to do so with regard to the architectural arrangements of Haxthorpe Hall. Really, I suppose, it is about time that the indoor members of my staff were released from the discomforts of the cellars!"

"And I'll wish you good night, Sir Rugglestone," said Middleham. "You will, of course, be at Malton Police Court to-morrow at eleven!"

The Scotland Yard men, declining offers of refreshment, went out leaving Sir Rugglestone alone with the two young airmen.

"Well, and how's that?" he said, standing with his back to the glowing hearth.

"It looks like a proper lash-up as far as I am concerned, sir," replied Standish, pointing to the open box at the edge of the table. "Honestly, I don't know how the ruby was stolen——"

"Stolen!" echoed Sir Rugglestone. "It wasn't stolen. You brought back that stone—it looks like a chunk of the Khiri Kush—from Bakhistan."

"But it wasn't in the box when the Amir showed it us," protested Don.

"I won't dispute that, Mr. Grey. What I said was that this pebble was in the box when you left the palace at Hakaab. Abdullah certainly showed you an imitation of the Atar-il-Kilk. He had that made in order to satisfy his subjects that the gem is still in the country. A bit of deception, I'll admit, but it had to be done. When

Abdullah was at school he was quite a skilful conjurer, I remember. And you didn't see him make the 'pass'?"

"Unless it was when he dropped the key—don't you remember, Don?" asked Standish.

"That must have been the time. After that he handed the box over to us," said Grey.

"I feel I owe you an apology, gentlemen—" began Sir Rugglestone. "As——"

A knock at the door interrupted the sentence. The butler, still looking a bit ruffled after his incarceration in the cellar, appeared.

"A gentleman giving the name of Mr. Metcalfe wishes to see Mr. Standish, sir!"

Sir Rugglestone raised his eyebrows inquiringly in Colin's direction.

"The mechanic of the *Condor* sir," explained Standish. "I gave him leave to go to York until to-morrow. Excuse me; I'll see what he wants."

"Better bring him in here, Williams!"

"Very good, sir!"

A confused murmur of voices came from without. Evidently Metcalfe was protesting in broad Yorkshire against being brought into Sir Rugglestone's presence, while the butler was equally determined to carry out his master's orders.

Then the door opened.

"Mr. John Metcalfe!" announced the butler pompously.

"Good evening, Mr. Metcalfe!" exclaimed Sir Rugglestone cordially.



"A'm right glad to mak your acquaintance, sir!" replied the engineer, extending a huge hand. "A hope you're feeling champion! Which is more'n A feel."

"What is wrong then?" asked Sir Rugglestone.

It did not take the stolid Yorkshireman long to get into his stride. His grievance was that as he was hurrying through the lodge gates in order to catch the York bus he was stopped by three policemen. That was at about twenty past eight. In answer to questions he told them that he was the engineer of the *Condor* that had just arrived from Bere Regis. He was caustically requested to "tell that to the marines", and without further ado was detained in the lodge-keeper's cottage until the raid was accomplished and Mr. Burt and his associates removed in motor-vans. Then, having been questioned by Chief Detective Middleham, he was allowed to go.

"And so, guessing that all wasn't all correct and finding A'd missed t'last bus, A coomed here to see Mr. Standish," he concluded.

"All's correct now, Mr. Metcalfe," said Sir Rugglestone. "We'll give you a shake-down, and to-morrow if Mr. Standish has no objection I'll have you run out to York by car. You will be fetched some time in the afternoon."

"But we are returning to Bere Regis early to-morrow, sir," observed Standish.

Sir Rugglestone shook his head.

"Impossible!" he replied. "You will have to appear at Malton Police Court at eleven. Although the proceedings are merely formal—sufficient to commit the accused to the Assizes—they will take some time. Then lunch and you will be able to fly back to Bere Regis some time in the afternoon. Now, Mr. Metcalfe, we are discussing the voyage in which you played no inconspicuous part. I may mention that you didn't bring home the Atar-il-Kilk after all, but only a worthless bit of stone!"

"By gum!" ejaculated the engineer.

"So to proceed with my apology," continued Sir Rugglestone. "I deceived you, Mr. Standish. But had I told you at the outset that you were merely returning with a spurious gem you would not have guarded it so faithfully in face of the danger that beset you. I know you are going to protest, but experience has told me that is a fact. In my frontier days we often sent out men with bogus messages—written, of course—with the idea that they should fall into the hands of the enemy. If a messenger knew he was entrusted with a deceptive message he generally let himself be captured without giving his captors much trouble. That made them suspicious. On the other hand the messenger, thinking his orders were of great importance, did his best to evade capture. Sometimes he succeeded; but if he were caught, the enemy, judging by his resistance, accepted the captured dispatch as genuine.

"So you got through safely, in spite of the dangers I warned you about. And you brought me this!"

"And having accomplished that job satisfactorily I suppose you are entrusting Far Eastern Airways to bring home the genuine ruby, sir?" asked Standish.

Sir Rugglestone shook his head and laughed.

"Oh no, Mr. Standish!" he replied. "The Atar-il-Kilk is already in this country. At the present moment it is in a Safe Deposit vault in Chancery Lane!"

"Then why?" asked Standish in amazement.

"Ah—why?" echoed Sir Rugglestone. "I'll explain. The Atar-il-Kilk came to this country without any fuss; camel post to Jask, thence by boat to Bombay and thence to London by P. and O. Liner. It wasn't even insured, and no one who had the handling of it had the slightest idea of what it was until the Safe Deposit officials cleared it through the Customs. And even they did not know it was the famous Atar-il-Kilk!"

"It seems a terrific waste of money to send us out to Bakhistan, sir," remarked Don. "All the same, we were jolly glad to make the trip."

"It cost a good deal certainly—but it was not a terrific waste, Mr. Grey," replied Sir Rugglestone. "Knowing that the Down 'Em Gang were on its track—it was I who had that unsigned letter sent to you from Plymouth, Mr. Standish—and that other rogues might also be after it (as they were), it was necessary to lay a false trail. That is why I enjoined the utmost secrecy and afterwards sent off a report to the press announcing your impending departure for Bakhistan!"

"Eh, thou'rt a right cunning fox, sir!" exclaimed Metcalfe, with the spontaneous outspokenness of a Yorkshireman.

Colin and Don fairly gasped. To them the engineer's remark sounded offensive; but the baronet merely laughed.

"That is what the Afridis called me," he remarked. "I'm rather proud of the compliment. But having given my explanation, gentlemen, I hope you will accept my apology. Thank you! And in recognition of your zeal and enterprise, I hope that you will accept this. I am glad that Mr. Metcalfe is here to take this in person."

He drew three envelopes from his pocket and handed them to the *Condor's* crew.

Unblushingly Metcalfe opened his and drew out a cheque. The amount astounded him.

"By gum!" was all he could say.

"It's nearly midnight," continued Sir Rugglestone. "You'll be wanting to turn in, I expect. Must you really be returning to-morrow? The shooting here isn't at all bad."

"As a matter of fact I've entered for the finals of the Middleweight Championship at Bournemouth on Thursday, sir," said Standish.

"H'm, the 30th, not much time! Well, I wish I could be there! Jolly good luck! Hope you'll pull it off!"

The clock struck twelve.

"That's the third time I've been wished that in twenty-four hours," thought Colin. "If there's anything in that I ought to put up a show!"

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And he did!

By eight-thirty on the 30th of September Colin Standish, to the discomfiture of his tough opponent, to the satisfaction of the referee, and to the applause of the crowd at the ring-side, won the Middleweight Championship.

He had the satisfaction of winning the coveted belt even if he did not bring home the famous Atar-il-Kilk.

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**Transcriber's Note: The printed edition on which this ebook is based included four illustrations by W. Edward Wigfull. The copyright status of these illustrations is uncertain, and they have consequently been omitted from this digital edition.**

(The end of *The Amir's Ruby* by Percy F. Westerman)