

THE FIFTH MAN



MANNING
COLES

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NOVELS BY
MANNING COLES

**DRINK TO YESTERDAY
A TOAST TO TOMORROW
THEY TELL NO TALES
WITHOUT LAWFUL AUTHORITY
GREEN HAZARD**

THE FIFTH MAN

MANNING COLES



TORONTO
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1946

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**To entertain some idle moment
for
G.O.M.**

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I

WHO COMES?

HE came wavering down the lane in the gathering darkness; to the watchers in the shadow of the holly hedge he seemed to be not without his troubles, for his front light was flickering off and on and every time it failed him he wobbled violently.

“Not very expert, apparently,” said one of the watchers in a quiet voice. “Better stop him, Widgers.”

Constable Widgers stepped into the road and flashed his torch as a signal, adding, “Stop, please, sir.” This sudden intervention was too much for the cyclist who practically fell off, only remaining on his feet by an effort. “You startled me,” he said in an amused voice, “I nearly came a frightful crash and lost the most valuable part of my shopping. Who are you?”

“P.C. Widgers of Chiddon,” said the constable. “May I see your identity card, please?”

The constable’s torch illuminated a grossly fat man dressed in shabby flannel trousers with elastic bands round the ankles in place of unobtainable trouser-clips, a high-necked sweater with a cardigan over it and an old tweed jacket over that. He wore no hat; his bald head, surrounded by a coronet of greyish curls, looked not so much as though the hair was missing as that the accretion of tissue had pushed its way through its thatch. He had a fat good-tempered face, creased in the lines of frequent laughter, and a soft fruity voice with a chuckle in it. He propped his bicycle carefully against one substantial thigh and produced his identity card from his coat pocket.

“There you are, constable,” he said, and handed it over. The front wheel of his cycle swung round, he caught at the handlebars, and his lamp promptly went out.

“Confound the thing,” he said. “It’s been doing that ever since I had to light up, but I don’t think it need perform in front of the police. Uncalled-for. It goes on again if you hit it,” he added, giving the lamp a slap which had the effect desired. “The trouble is that I am by no means an expert rider, as you may have noticed, and every time I lean over the handlebars to give it a clout it makes me wobble.” He broke into a jolly bubbling laugh so infectious that his hearers smiled with him, and the Inspector came forward from the shadows to join his constable.

“Bad contact somewhere, sir,” he said. “They ought to have fixed it up for you, whoever put your battery in.”

“Not guilty,” said the fat man. “This is my wife’s cycle really. She spins about everywhere like a bird on the wing, I don’t. I remind myself more of a penguin,” and again he bubbled with laughter.

The Inspector turned a torch upon his wrist-watch and appeared to be satisfied with what he saw, for he offered to try to adjust the lamp. “I suppose you’re not very used to it yet, sir,” he said, pulling off the top.

“I am not,” said the cyclist emphatically, “and to tell you the truth I don’t want to be, either, but I’m afraid I shall have to, Heaven reward Hitler with gumboils. When we laid

up the car for the duration, my wife said we'd better buy a lady's cycle as then we could both ride it—alternately, not both at once," he chuckled. "All in order, constable?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. Not been in these parts long, have you?"

"Only a few weeks. We had a furnished house in London—ours was smashed up in '41—and the owner wanted it back. So, as my wife was a bit overdone with war-work and housekeeping, and I can work anywhere, I took that cottage at Coveham, next to the smithy, I expect you know it."

"Yes, sir."

"Like a fool I missed the Bridport bus this afternoon and had to ride in, and I've a horrid feeling I've got off the road. This road will take me to Coveham, won't it, if I can find a left-hand turn somewhere?"

The Inspector laughed. "You're well off your road, sir. This one doesn't go anywhere except down to the sea. You'd best go back to the cross-roads you passed, and turn right. That'll take you home."

"What, about two miles back? I turned right there, I ought to have gone straight on."

"That's right, sir. Do you mind if I just look in your basket?" There was a cycle-basket on the rear carrier.

The fat man laughed again. "By all means, I have no guilty secrets—at least, not in there." There was a shopping-list, and the contents of the basket tallied with a few omissions. "No suet obtainable," explained the cyclist. "No matches, no mouse-traps, no bath-salts. I did get half a bottle of whisky, though, shan't tell you where, and if you drop it I shall complain to the Home Secretary."

"I wouldn't do anything so wicked," said the Inspector. "Well, I don't think we need detain you any longer, sir. Your lamp's all right now, look. You know your way, don't you?"

The cyclist thanked him gratefully, wished them a cheerful good night, and turned the cycle round. "I've never ridden in the dark before," he added. "Pray for me, won't you?" He hopped violently upon one foot some dozen times in the road before he managed to mount and ride unsteadily away, avoiding a brick with a yelp of comic alarm and another peal of laughter.

"Merry old cuss, isn't 'e?" said the constable.

"Seems so," agreed the Inspector. "Well, it's getting dark now, nearly five o'clock. Hope this fellow won't be too long, standing in one spot in January isn't my idea of a piece of cake. Better not smoke, either. Pity, but it can't be helped."

The police retired to the shadow of the hollies again and time passed in silence till at last the constable moved suddenly and said, "Listen!" in a low voice. He was right, there were footsteps coming up the lane from the sea, uneven footsteps, which sometimes hurried and sometimes ceased. The Inspector waited till the newcomer was almost upon them and then he stepped out smartly, switching on his torch and saying, "Stop, please," in a peremptory voice. The beam showed a young man in a raincoat, as thin and eager as the cyclist had been fat and genial.

"Who are you," babbled the young man, who was evidently in a state of some agitation, "are you——"

“Police,” said the Inspector.

“Thank God,” said the newcomer, and clutched at them. “Let’s go—let’s get away from here. Take me to British Intelligence, I’ve got something frightfully important to tell them—what’s that noise?”

“What noise?”

“Behind the hedge,” said the young man, with the whites of his eyes showing in the torchlight.

“Only a rat in the ditch, these ditches are full of ’em. You come along with us, you’ll be all right.”

* * * * *

Thomas Elphinstone Hambledon looked across his desk at the man seated uneasily on the edge of a chair. He was a thin young man with untidy dark hair and an anxious expression, his eyes were fixed on Hambledon and he had the air of one who is overcharged with urgent explanations. He waited, with parted lips, to be allowed to begin, and twisted his handkerchief about with his fingers. “Nerves or conscience?” said Hambledon to himself, and opened the interrogation with crisp authority.

“Your name?”

“Abbott. Harold William Abbott.”

“Home address?”

The man gave a number in a street in Nottingham.

“And before the war you were a schoolmaster, I think?”

“Yes, sir. I was modern languages master at St. Raphael’s School, Wigby, near Leicester.”

“So you speak German?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Were you ever in Germany before the war?”

“Er—no, sir.”

“Why did you hesitate?”

“Because I had an invitation to go to Bergisch Gladbach, near Cologne, in the summer holidays of 1939.”

“And you didn’t go.”

“No, sir. It was so obvious that war was imminent, I didn’t want to go and be caught there and interned. Besides, I was in the Territorials and——”

“Who invited you?”

“A German boy who came here two years running with one of those Youth Movement visits to this country which used to be organized before the war. Parties of boys from Germany used to come here in exchange, as it were, for parties of English boys visiting Germany.”

“I remember,” said Hambledon. “How did you come to meet him?”

“I used to help to entertain the German boys. They were sometimes accommodated in

schools—St. Raphael’s had them twice—and sometimes we camped out. It was a great help, my speaking German, and I was used to managing boys.”

“This boy’s name?”

“Anton Petsch. He was the son of a chemist in Bergisch Gladbach. He was rather a nice boy and more friendly than some of them.”

“Did you see him again while you were in Germany?”

“No, sir. No doubt he was in the army. He——”

“Or any of the other boys you had met here?”

“No, sir.”

“Or make any attempt to get into touch with him or his family?”

“No, sir. None.”

“Oh. When the war broke out you were called up, of course.”

“Yes, sir. Actually, I was——”

“Regiment?”

“First Bucks, sir.”

“In due course you went to France, and were subsequently taken prisoner—when and where?”

“At Hazebrouck in May, 1940.”

“And you remained in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany till——”

“October the 17th, 1943. Three years and five months.”

“Now tell me exactly,” said Hambledon, his voice hardening, “how you came to be landed near Coveham on the coast of Dorset in a rubber boat from a German submarine last Saturday.”

Abbott sat a little further back on his chair, rubbed his hands together, and began.

“It’s pretty awful, sir, being a prisoner. It’s the monotony. Especially to a man like me, always used to a lot of mental stimulus. You take up some hobby or study some subject with books from the Red Cross, but nothing seems worth while, if you know what I mean. It seems as though life has always been like that and always will be like that for ever and ever. Every day the same duties, the same hours, the same food, the same faces, the same rules and restrictions, the same things to look at, never anything different unless they bring in some more prisoners—it’s killing. Especially, as I said just now, to a man like me——”

“Get on with the story,” said Hambledon irritably.

“It was on October the eighth last year that I was called into the prison governor’s office and interviewed by a man I’d never seen before——”

“Name?” snapped Hambledon.

“I don’t know, sir. They didn’t say and I didn’t ask. He started by asking me if I were the same Harold Abbott who was formerly a master at St. Raphael’s and had had to do with the visits to England of the *Jugendbund*—that means the German Youth Movement——”

“I know a little German myself,” said Hambledon coldly. “Continue.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Abbott. “I could not know that. When I said I was the same, this man became very friendly in manner. He said that that proved that I was not so

dominated by an ignorant and foolish prejudice against Germany as most Englishmen were—I am quoting his words. I said that that was because I didn't know so much about Germany in those days," said Abbott proudly, and looked at Hambledon for approval.

"Go on."

"He talked a lot about how Germany was certainly winning the war and about how they had no intention of destroying English life and culture. They only wanted the war over without unnecessary destruction and loss of life, and the sooner England gave up the easier the terms would be. England, he said, would still have a great part to play in the future history of the world under the guidance and direction of a victorious Germany. Whereas, if we persisted, they would be compelled to destroy utterly all our cities and crush this senseless defiance with an iron and irrevocable will-to-victory," said Abbott with a sneer. "He said I had seen for myself the excellence of their methods of training youth. He talked a lot more in the same strain and all the time I wondered what was coming. Eventually he said that I must, as an intelligent man, see that whoever assisted in the smallest degree in bringing about an early termination to a disastrous conflict would not only deserve well of Germany but would be serving England in the truest and highest sense."

"You have a singularly good memory," said Hambledon, without enthusiasm.

"I always had," said Abbott frankly. "When I was a boy——"

"Get on with the story."

"Eventually he came to the point. Would I go to England and do some simple and interesting work for German Intelligence. Just the compilation of a few facts such as I, an Englishman, would find it easy to——"

"What did you say?"

"I refused, of course."

"And then?"

"He would not take my refusal as final," said Abbott. "He said I was to think it over and he would see me again in two days' time. In the meantime, I had better not tell my fellow-prisoners the subject of our conversation. He suggested that I should tell them that I had been cross-examined about the city of Nottingham—industries, sources of power and so on——"

"All of which they could have got from a sixpenny guidebook before the war," commented Hambledon. "Was that the end of the interview?"

"Yes. Except that he hinted that if I didn't agree, I might find life a lot less pleasant than it had been hitherto. I laughed at that," said Abbott. "Life in a prison camp pleasant! He said I should not find it a laughing matter, and I was shown out."

"Were you the only prisoner in that camp to be interviewed at that time?"

"So far as I know, yes, but there might have been others interviewed without my knowing it."

"But surely an extraordinary interview like this would be the subject of discussion all over the camp, among the prisoners, I mean."

"If they talked about it," said Abbott unwillingly.

"Do I gather that you didn't?"

“No, I—you see, an idea struck me——”

“Did you tell the others that you’d been sitting there for—how long? an hour and a half—discussing the public services of Nottingham?”

“Yes, I hadn’t time to think up——”

“Think up a better lie. I see. Did your fellow-prisoners believe you, d’you think?”

Abbott wriggled uneasily. “They—I thought they were not quite so friendly——”

“I see. Now, about this bright idea of yours.”

“I thought that if I agreed it was a chance of getting home to England. That was all I cared about. Needless to say I never intended to do a stroke of work for Germany. I proved that when I gave myself up as soon as I landed.”

“You gave yourself up, certainly,” agreed Hambleton. “What happened next? In the prison camp, I mean.”

“The same man came back two days later as he said he would——”

“Give me a detailed description of him.”

Abbott paused for thought. “He was a biggish man, about five foot ten, I suppose. Grey hair, going bald on the top. Broad shoulders, but thin in the body. Blue eyes, sunburnt face. Something the matter with one of his ears—yes, I remember now. The top of his right ear was missing, a war wound I suppose. He wore gold-rimmed glasses. Long thin nose, artificial teeth, clean-shaven——”

“That’ll do. Now go on with the story.”

“He asked me if I’d made up my mind. I said, yes. He asked which way, and I said I’d been thinking over his arguments and come to the conclusion that he was right. Let’s stop this rotten war, I said, and we can sort things out afterwards. He said I had made a wise decision. He told me to wait there, and left the room. Ten minutes later he came back and told me to follow him, we went out to a car and drove away then and there.”

“Any other prisoners see you go?”

“No, sir. We went out of the Governor’s front door, as it were. We drove off and he talked. He was quite nice most of the time, told me I was going to a sort of school near Berlin for training, that I wasn’t to be afraid because everybody would help me. I would be sent to England before long and met there by some more people who would show me what to do and all that. It would be all quite easy. Only, just at the end of the run, he told me what would happen to me if I let them down.” Abbott’s face turned grey, and he shivered. “It was simply beastly, it made me feel sick. And now I have let them down. You don’t think there’s any chance of their getting at me, do you? Can’t I change my name and go back in a different Regiment, or into the Navy instead——”

“You’re going into an internment camp for the present till I make up my mind about you. You’ll be quite safe there. Go on.”

“Internment camp—why, I——”

“I said, go on.”

“The car stopped at a railway station and I was told to get out. Two men came forward and took me away, he stayed in the car, I didn’t see him again. These two men and I got in a train and went to Berlin, and from there in another train to a place about half an hour’s journey. I couldn’t see its name, it was dark when we got there. Then we drove in a car for

another quarter of an hour or so and came to a big country house. It was a nice place, had statues on the terraces. It was called Liesensee.” Abbott laughed self-consciously. “I said it was a good name for a place where people were taught to tell lies.”

“Continue to disclose the undecorated truth,” urged Hambleton.

II

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

ABBOTT gave a detailed description of his life in one of Germany's spy schools. "Being an Englishman, there were a lot of things I knew already that the Germans had to learn, but there was a lot to mug up all the same. Radio transmission, secret writing, how to set about collecting information, what to look for, the sort of things they wanted to know and all that. Just like being at school again. It wasn't too bad really, there was plenty to occupy your mind, and physical drill in the mornings. No games, though, and you were barked at from morning to night. Very strict timetable, musn't be a minute late, ever. But after the prisoner-of-war camp it was wonderful."

"Any other British subjects there?"

"Four others, sir."

"Their names?"

"Nicholls, Little, Tanner and Brampton."

"Tell me all you know about them."

"I don't know much, really, we weren't allowed to be together and if they saw us talking they came and separated us. I did gather that we'd all had the same idea, it was just a scheme to get home again. Nicholls was some sort of an engineer and Little was something to do with a newspaper, editor, he said. I never heard what Tanner was. Brampton wouldn't talk about himself much, but he was a Major so he must have been in the Army before the war. He didn't try to chum up with us at all."

"Was Major Brampton the only officer?"

"No. Tanner and Little were Lieutenants. I was a Sergeant and Nicholls a Private."

"How long were you at this school?"

"Three months, sir, twelve weeks, to be exact. October the seventeenth till January the first. At the end of the course we had exams which we all passed, and started on our travels next day, Sunday January the second—last Sunday week, that was. Seems longer ago than that."

"All five together?"

"We started all together, but Major Brampton disappeared in Berlin."

"What d'you mean? That he was taken away by himself?"

"I don't think so, sir. I think he gave the guards the slip and went off on his own. They didn't tell you anything, but I heard them talking about it. They were in rather a flap, they said they'd get into trouble but no doubt he'd soon be caught. So, no doubt, he was, sir; what could one man do all alone in Berlin?"

"The rest of you went on, I suppose?"

"Yes, by train. That's when we got our first chance to talk, though even then the guards didn't like it much."

"Where did they take you?"

“To Brussels, first. I mean, that was the first place where we got out of the train. We were there for four days, I suppose they were arranging for us to be taken across. We stayed in quite a decent hotel, we had fresh guards there. I imagine the first lot went back to Berlin. We were given instructions about what to do when we landed. I was just to paddle ashore, deflate the dinghy, bury it in the sand, and wait. Someone would say, ‘How far have you come?’ and I was to answer, ‘Forty-seven miles as the crow flies.’ Then he would say, ‘But it’s sixty-three miles by road,’ and then we should each know we’d met the right man.”

“Were the other three given the same password?”

“Yes, sir, except that there were only two others by then. Tanner was killed the night before they gave us our instructions.”

“Do you know anything about Tanner’s death?”

“Oh yes, I was there at the time. It was like this. We’d been kept pretty close in the hotel, just taken out for potty little walks and to see round one or two museums. I enjoyed the museums, the others didn’t. Then one evening the guards came and said as it was our last night on the soil of the Continent for the present anyway, they’d give us a treat and take us out to dinner at a restaurant. It was quite an exciting idea, at least I found it so, I hadn’t had a meal in a restaurant for over three years. So we went to quite a nice place, not very big, and sat at a table in a corner, all six of us. The guards were quite friendly and the food was good, we were enjoying ourselves when suddenly all the lights went out and somebody fired an automatic at us—at least, it sounded like an automatic. I went down flat and so did Little, the guards shouted and one or two people screamed. Next minute the lights went on again and there was Tanner dead in his chair, shot through the head, and one of the guards was wounded. Nicholls hadn’t moved but they’d missed him; Little and I and the other guards weren’t hurt either though they’d fired seven shots at us and smashed the mirror behind us.”

“It is a little difficult to aim accurately in the dark,” said Hambleton.

“They’d have done better with a tommy-gun,” said Abbott.

“So simple,” said Hambleton sarcastically, “taking a tommy-gun into a restaurant without anyone noticing it. Go on.”

“There was an awful row,” said Abbott. “Germans rushed about arresting people and swearing, and our wounded guard was bleeding like a pig all over everything till a first-aid chap came up and looked after him. We were hustled into a car, driven back to our hotel and locked in our rooms. The guards said the men who shot at us were pigs of Belgians in the pay of the Allies and they—the Germans—would make them regret it. Nicholls said, ‘Suppose you don’t catch them?’ and the guard said it didn’t matter, they could always shoot some hostages. Pretty beastly. I hope the men weren’t caught, though it was hard luck on Tanner, wasn’t it, when all he wanted was to get home? He’d got a wife and children in Liverpool, he told me.”

Abbott described how the three survivors—himself, Nicholls, and Little—were taken to Ostend and put on board a submarine, which took them down Channel to the Dorset coast. The submarine surfaced after dark and he was taken up the conning-tower, pushed into a rubber dinghy and told to paddle straight ahead, he could see the shore dimly about a mile away and the sea was flat calm. Then the submarine started her engines again and

moved off, taking Nicholls and Little with her. He understood they were going to be put ashore somewhere else.

“So I paddled as fast as I could, jumped ashore leaving the dinghy floating, and ran for it. I wanted to get away before the man came whom I was supposed to wait for. I got off the beach without seeing anybody and ran like blazes, I was happy. Back to England, home and beauty, as they say, it seemed too good to be true. I ran into a tree in the dark and you may think I’m a fool, but I put my arms around it and kissed it; it was an English tree, you see. I expect I was a bit hysterical, I’ve always been rather highly strung. Then the police stopped me, and was I glad to see them, or was I?” Abbott laughed and rubbed his hands together. “I expect you know the rest, don’t you?”

Hambledon asked a few more questions and then touched a bell on his desk; a police officer entered the room.

“I’ve done with this man for the present,” said Hambledon. “You can take him away. I shall probably want to talk to him again in a few days’ time.”

“Where am I going?” asked Abbott.

“Back to Brixton.”

“Brixton jail? But why? I haven’t done anything.”

“Cheer up,” said Hambledon. “Remember, it’s an English jail.”

Hambledon added a few comments to the notes he had taken during his interview with Abbott, and then sent for Nicholls. This man was a good deal older than the schoolmaster, he gave his age as thirty-five. He was a short stocky man with a faint reminiscence of a Scot’s accent, and he gave an address in London. He answered Hambledon’s questions readily but briefly, without any trace of Abbott’s tendency to explain too much.

His name was Edward Nicholls and he had been trained as an engineer, he gave the name of the company. This firm had done a certain amount of business with a German engineering company which made dynamo components. Nicholls said that as he could see that this business was likely to increase, he thought it worth his while to learn German. He went to a night-school for the purpose.

“So you can speak German,” said Hambledon.

“Not too well. I can read it and write it without difficulty, but I never had much practice in speaking it.”

“Not even when you became a prisoner?”

“No. I could understand what the guards said, but I didn’t want to talk to them.”

Nicholls said he thought there might be a chance of being sent to Germany to represent his firm, that was why he took up German. It was about 1928 when he started to learn, and early in 1930 he told the firm that he knew enough German to get along in it, “particularly engineering technical terms.”

“I see,” said Hambledon. “Did they give you a chance to show what you could do?”

“More or less. I had a test, but the junior partner who talked to me said my accent was bad. Still, they put me in that branch of the office and I did some of the correspondence. Then one of the bosses went to Germany on business and took me with him. I was told to listen to how people talked and try to improve myself.”

“Where did you go?”

“Stuttgart. We had a week there.”

“Did you go anywhere else in Germany?”

“No. We went home at the end of the week.”

“Not very long to practise pronunciation.”

“No.”

“Did you like the Germans?”

“Oh, they were all right. They were hot engineers, I’ll say that. Some of their machinery was wonderful.”

“Did you make any friends?”

“No, not to say friends. Some of the German engineers were quite nice fellows, they took me out one or two evenings. I found it a bit of a strain understanding what they said, or I expect I’d have liked it better. They all seemed to talk so fast.”

Hambledon received a fairly clear picture of the stolid engineer being conducted round beer-halls and listening to variety turns with a faintly puzzled frown whenever anybody made a joke and everyone else laughed.

“Did you keep up with any of these men after you went back?”

“One of them wrote once or twice and I answered, but it dropped.”

“What happened after you got back? In the firm, I mean.”

“Oh, I went on in the office for some time—nearly a year. Then the old chap retired, the one who took me to Germany. That’s when I thought I might get the job.”

“And didn’t you?”

“No. They gave it to a young fellow who hadn’t been with the firm long. The nephew of one of the directors. He’d been to school in Germany.”

“So you were frozen out.”

“You could put it like that, but I wasn’t much surprised. These things happen.”

“Didn’t you resent it rather?”

“No. What’s the good?”

“None at all,” said Hambledon. “I agree. I only thought you might have been annoyed.”

Nicholls shook his head. “Disappointed a bit, that’s all.”

“What happened then?”

“Nothing. I went on with the firm for another couple of years. Till March thirty-four.”

Hambledon sighed. He was beginning to feel like a corkscrew getting tired of extracting numerous small corks one after another.

“What happened in March thirty-four?”

“One of the Germans came over and saw me in the office. I mean, he came to see the firm on business, he just happened to see me there.”

“One of those you’d met in Germany?”

“I had met him of course, or he wouldn’t have recognized me. He wasn’t an engineer, he was one of the bosses.”

“Go on,” said Hambledon wearily.

“He told me they wanted a representative in London and would I like the job. The pay was better than what I was getting, so I said yes. Besides, it was a step up.”

“Oh, quite.”

“And if I was working in London it wouldn’t matter if my German accent wasn’t too good.”

“So you took the job.”

“Yes.”

Hambledon sighed again, and learned by degrees that Nicholls had run the German firm’s London office for four years, from 1934 till 1939, apparently to their mutual satisfaction. It seemed to be a perfectly straightforward affair conducted on strictly business lines.

“Did they ever ask you to obtain any information outside the normal current of your business?”

“They did once, some question about aero-engines. I told them I didn’t know and didn’t propose to ask.”

“And that settled that?”

“Yes. They didn’t ask anything like that again. That was in August ’38, we all knew what was coming by then. I didn’t care if I was sacked, the job wouldn’t last much longer anyway.”

Nicholls’ office closed down on the outbreak of war and he promptly enlisted.

“I should have thought you’d have been more useful in a munition factory,” said Hambledon.

“Maybe,” said Nicholls bluntly, “but I wanted a change.”

He was taken prisoner at Dunkirk and remained in a prisoner-of-war camp till October 1943, when he was taken to the Governor’s office for an interview. Nicholls’ account here followed Abbott’s closely except that it was much shorter. “Big feller, with a clip off his right ear. Gassed a lot. Asked me if I’d go to England to work for German Intelligence.”

“What did you say!”

“I said, yes.”

Hambledon looked at Nicholls. “Did he believe you?”

“I suppose so, since I’m here. He talked a lot more about what they’d do to me if I let them down.”

“What did you say to that?”

“Nothing much. ‘I understand,’ or something like that. I was thinking they’d have to catch me first.”

Hambledon was thinking that the German Intelligence must be extremely short of agents if they tried to enlist this lump of granite. Though that was, of course, always a Nazi mistake; the psychological error of thinking that any man could be bent to their will if they only pushed him hard enough. Nicholls described the German spy school in a few brief sentences, he did not seem to have been particularly impressed. He said it was “too much like the story-books. Secret inks, and all that.”

Asked about his fellow-prisoners, Abbott, Little, Tanner and Brampton, he said that

they had not been allowed to talk together and he had not bothered to try. "It wasn't as though we were trying to escape together. All we had to do was to sit tight and do as we were bid." Abbott, he said, was a "gasbag. Always bursting with lots to say and nothing in it when it was said. A bit hysterical." Tanner was "a very quiet gentleman, an officer. I was a bit surprised he'd gone in for it. I suppose he wanted to get home, like the rest of us." Little was also an officer, something to do with newspapers before the war. Nicholls had not much to say about Little, "he talked about things I wasn't interested in. He and Abbott were pretty friendly. Lieutenant Tanner and I kept out of it."

"And the fifth man?" said Hambledon. "Major Brampton?"

Nicholls shook his head. "Hardly knew him. He only travelled as far as Berlin with us."

"What happened to him, do you know?"

"No idea, he just disappeared. Abbott said he'd escaped, but I doubt it. He couldn't speak any German."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Quite. He was always getting cursed at the spy school for not understanding what they said to him. So was Little, but Abbott used to prompt him. Major Brampton was different."

"How, different?"

"Oh, one of the huntin', shootin' and fishin' crowd. You know, you can always tell. Good officer, I daresay, but a silly ass over things he thought weren't important. He behaved as though the spy school was a silly game, but he came out top of the exams all the same."

"Oh, did he?"

Nicholls actually laughed. "He used to rile the Germans no end. 'My good man,' he used to say." Nicholls mimicked a rather haw-haw voice. "'My good man, don't do that.' Always looked as though he wasn't listening, and then came out on top."

"I thought you said you hardly knew him," said Hambledon, with a laugh.

"Never spoke to me at all, only 'good morning, Nicholls.' And I'd say, 'good morning, sir.' He used to speak to Mr. Tanner sometimes, don't know what about."

When Nicholls was pushed off from the submarine in his rubber boat, he made no attempt to row ashore at once, but lay off until it was daylight. He then waited till he saw some soldiers on the beach, rowed in and gave himself up. "I thought if there was a reception committee waiting for me, they could just wait."

"Quite," said Hambledon. "Very sensible." Nicholls was ultimately dismissed under escort, he made no fuss about returning to Brixton Jail.

Little was then brought in. Hambledon put him through the same sieve as the other two, but gained very little more information than he had already gleaned from Abbott and Nicholls. Little was rather of the Abbott type, but more intelligent and practical. He admitted frankly that he had been favourably impressed by the early achievements of the Nazi party, but pointed out that he was not the only one; quite a lot of English people thought as he did.

Little was editor of a small provincial newspaper, and after attending a couple of

meetings arranged by German sympathizers and addressed by plausible and fluent Germans, he wrote a series of articles on The Re-birth of Germany and published them in his paper. This was in 1935. Not long after this he was approached by an organization for the encouragement of Anglo-German friendly relations, thanked for what he had written, and invited to pay a visit to Germany to see the wonders of the Re-birth for himself. He went.

“Enjoy yourself?” asked Hambledon.

Little had enjoyed himself, in a way. He was handicapped by knowing no German; “I still don’t,” he added. “I’m a complete dud at languages, always was.” He was taken about, beamed upon, and shown what it was thought advisable for him to see. It was very well done.

“What did you mean when you said just now that you enjoyed yourself ‘in a way’?”

“When I came to see for myself, it was all a bit too military for my taste. I was rather a pacifist in those days,” said Little, with disarming frankness. “I changed my mind later. But I thought then there was a lot too much drill and not enough Swedish exercises, if you see what I mean. Physical training, yes, but even then you could see what was aimed at.”

“Did you ever visit Germany again?”

“No,” said Little. “For a long time I used to be bombarded with literature from Nazi sources, big envelopes full of leaflets on all sorts of subjects gradually working round to the iniquities of the Versailles Treaty and how badly Germany had been treated and all that stuff. I expect you saw it, there was a lot of it about at one time.”

“What did you do about it?”

“Joined the Territorials,” said Little cheerfully.

After Little had been removed, Hambledon talked the matter over with Chief-Inspector Bagshott of Scotland Yard, who was at the time on special duty with the Security Police. He was an old friend of Hambledon’s and accustomed to his methods, which he sometimes deprecated and sometimes envied.

“I think their stories are probably true,” said Tommy.

“I thought the Germans were an intelligent race,” said Bagshott.

“Only in spots,” said Hambledon. “Large red spots with purple frills round them.”

“Surely,” pursued Bagshott, “they could not really have believed that any of these men would be of the slightest use to them. It must have been obvious that these prisoners only agreed in order to get home.”

“You don’t appreciate the Nazi mentality,” said Tommy. “Imagine the case the other way round. Suppose we’d freed German prisoners with the same tale and they had gone home and reported to the police, which would mean the Gestapo. Do you suppose they would have been believed? Not on your life. ‘But why,’ the Gestapo would say, ‘did the accursed English pick on you? There must have been something about you which led them to suppose you would fall in with this scheme. No true Nazi would countenance it for a moment. He would spit in the face of the tempter. You are politically suspect.’ When the German protested that he had reported himself at once to the police, they would reply ‘Of course. What else could you do? It is the first obvious step towards establishing confidence, under cover of which to serve the enemies of the Reich. You are from-the-

bottom-of-your-liver unreliable. You are probably Jewish.’ It’s wonderful,” added Hambledon in passing, “what a lot of Germans do have a Jewish skeleton in their family vaults. The end of the interview would open the door of a concentration camp, or more likely—“Hambledon levelled an imaginary rifle—“bang, bang! Bury me this carrion. Is that a quotation from Shakespeare?”

“I don’t know,” said Bagshott. “But——”

“I can’t account for it,” said Hambledon, “but I often say things that sound to me like Shakespeare. You know——”

“What you mean,” interrupted the Chief-Inspector, “is that these Nazis are so untrustworthy themselves that they can’t trust anybody else.”

“Precisely. Untrust begets untrust, and liars, lies. There I go again, it even scans.”

“So the Germans think the English wouldn’t dare to come to us for fear of being put into a concentration camp,” pursued Bagshott.

“That’s it.”

“But that’s exactly what we shall do with ’em, isn’t it? Detained under 18B?”

“Till we’re satisfied with their bona-fides, yes,” said Hambledon. “But our concentration camps and the Germans’ have nothing in common but the name. I ought to know, I used to——”

The door opened and a man came in saying, “Excuse me, sir,” to Hambledon. “Brixton prison on the telephone. Did you direct the first prisoner, Abbott, to be taken anywhere else instead of back there? Or possibly on the way there?”

“What? No, I certainly didn’t. I sent him straight back in charge of the man who brought him. Why?”

“Because they should have arrived two hours ago and they haven’t done so.”

Hambledon glanced at Bagshott who rose to his feet and reached for the telephone. “May I—thanks. Put Brixton through to me here, please.”

The man left the room and Hambledon said, “That’s odd. There may have been an accident.”

“Brixton ought to have been informed,” began Bagshott, but the telephone started to squeak and he broke off to listen. He asked a few questions and ended by saying, “I will see into it at once. Good-bye.” He put the receiver down and went on, “The escort was a Special Branch man named Warren. He was instructed to bring the prisoner in an ordinary taxi and take him back in the same way. The three prisoners were brought separately, of course, with separate escorts at different times, but all by taxi. I am going to look for Abbott and Warren now, I’ll ring you up as soon as I hear anything.”

“If it’s really interesting, come and tell me,” said Hambledon. “Or bring the men here if they have anything exciting to say. In an hour’s time will do, I’m going to have dinner now.”

“I wish I could,” said Bagshott, and departed in haste.

III

CONFERENCE IN WHITEHALL

THREE days later the body of Abbott was found in an empty warehouse in the maze of small streets between Kennington Road and the Albert Embankment. He had been shot through the head. Of Warren there was no trace, nor of the taxi-cab in which the two men had driven away from the Foreign Office on the way to Brixton Jail. Bagshott in person brought the news to Hambledon, whose face settled into grim lines.

“And I promised that poor fish that he would be safe,” said Tommy. “Not that the world is much the poorer for his loss, but I dislike having my promises broken for me, especially by Germans. There’s one minor consolation, they only shot him through the head. I suppose they hadn’t the time to play with him as they said.”

“Why,” said Bagshott, “what did they say?”

Hambledon told him, and the Chief-Inspector looked a little sick.

“I wish I knew what has happened to Warren,” he said anxiously. “I went along and examined the place myself, but there was nothing there to tell us anything.”

“There’s a pretty efficient organization behind all this,” said Hambledon. “I wonder whether your Special Branch Inspector who collected Abbott at Coveham noticed anything or saw anybody.”

“He’s at the Yard,” said Bagshott, “I’ll ring up and tell him to come round, shall I?”

“Please.”

While they were waiting for the Inspector, Bagshott said, “I should like to know why they made a dead set at Abbott. The other two men, Nicholls and Little, are just as dangerous to them as he was.”

“I think perhaps Abbott was the only one they managed to keep tabs on, he rowed ashore at once from the submarine as he was told. Nicholls hung about off-shore till daylight and only came in when he saw some soldiers. Little rowed parallel with the shore—I say, rowed, though I understand you can only paddle those rubber dinghies. He must have put in some pretty strenuous exercise. He landed about three miles further along the coast, I expect the tide helped him; and then gave himself up to a coast watcher. I daresay the reception committee lost track of those two. That’s why I wanted a word with your Inspector.”

Bagshott nodded. “What about the man who sent you the information in the first place?”

“Goodness knows who or where he is, even the R.A.F. officer who brought the letter didn’t see him. He—the flying man—was forced down in Belgium, baled out, and was hidden by patriots belonging to the organization who smuggle these fellows across. He was handed the letter at the last moment before leaving Belgium and asked to deliver it, and that’s all he knows. He was told a friend wanted him to take it.”

The door opened and Bagshott introduced the man who entered. “Detective-Inspector Ennis, of the Special Branch.”

“I want you to tell me, Detective-Inspector,” said Hambledon, “every single detail of your arrest of the man Abbott at Coveham in Dorset on the night of Sunday last. What arrangements you made, who assisted you, and all about it.”

“Where shall I start, sir? When I reached Bridport?” Hambledon nodded. “I took with me Detective-Sergeant Fowler of the Special Branch and applied to the Bridport police for the loan of two constables of the Dorset County Police. They lent me P.C.’s Widders and Morgan. The place where the man was expected to come ashore is a narrow break in the cliffs which run along that coast; it was there or nowhere for some distance either side. There’s a lane runs down to the sea there, and a little half-moon beach, with cliffs either side. I posted Fowler and Morgan out of sight down on the beach, and waited with Widders about a hundred yards up the lane where there was a clump of hollies providing cover. I didn’t want to be too conspicuous.”

“Quite right,” said Hambledon.

“Fowler and Morgan on the beach had instructions not to interfere if the man came straight up the lane, only if he tried to dodge away. We got into position before dark and waited about two hours. I couldn’t see the beach from where I was. Fowler reported that just before six he thought he heard the sound of engines out to sea, and about twenty minutes later he picked out a small boat coming inshore. It’s never perfectly dark down by the sea, somehow. The boat grounded and a man sprang out and ran up the beach, by luck he found the lane practically at once. They could tell by the sound of his footsteps, sir.” Hambledon nodded, and Ennis went on. “He came up the lane, alternately running and standing still, till when he was abreast of me I stepped out and stopped him.”

“What, exactly, did you say and what did he answer?”

“I said, ‘Stop, please.’ He asked who we were and I said ‘Police.’ He said, ‘Thank God,’ and grabbed hold of my arm. He said, ‘Take me to British Intelligence, I’ve got something to tell them. Be quick, don’t let’s wait about,’ words to that effect.”

“You’re sure he mentioned British Intelligence?”

“Certain, sir. He was in a nervous excited state, one could see that, he was looking all ways at once——”

“See it, you said. You turned a torch on him?”

“Yes, sir,” said Ennis in a tone of surprise. “I had no instructions not to show a light.”

“No, no,” said Hambledon. “It’s all right, I only wanted to know. Go on.”

“He was very frightened, thought he heard a noise behind the bushes. I told him it was only a rat.”

“Did you go behind the bushes and look?”

“No, sir. I didn’t hear anything, and my instructions were to get him away as quickly as possible. So I took him up the lane to where I had the car waiting, me on one side of him, Widders on the other, and Fowler and Morgan following on behind. We put him in the back seat between Fowler and Widders and drove to Bridport where we left the two constables and the car; and Fowler and I brought him up to town by train.”

“Did Fowler or Morgan see or hear anybody on the beach?”

“No, sir, I asked them both. Not a sound or a sign.”

“Oh. And you didn’t see anyone, either?”

“Only one man, a local resident who’d taken the wrong road. That would be nearly half an hour before Abbott came ashore.”

“A local resident taking the wrong road?” repeated Hambledon. “Surely not.”

“He hadn’t lived there more than a few weeks, I understood him to say. Moved down from London.”

“Did the local constable—Widgers—know him?”

“No, sir. He didn’t come from Widgers’ village, and not having been there long——”

“Did you check his identity card?” asked Bagshott.

“Widgers did. I supposed it was all in order as Widgers didn’t query it.”

“What sort of man was your wanderer?” asked Hambledon, and Ennis described the very fat man uncertainly riding a lady’s cycle, with a basket full of shopping.

“Doesn’t sound very suspicious, certainly,” said Bagshott, but Hambledon said, “I think I’d like a chat with Widgers, something might emerge.”

“I’ll put a call through to Bridport,” said Bagshott, and talked about over-riding priorities to the telephone exchange to such purpose that Bridport answered within five minutes and Hambledon took over.

“Hambledon Foreign Office, speaking. Could I have a word with Police Constable Widgers if he is available, please? Thank you . . . Not in the station, that’s unfortunate. No, I’m afraid nobody else will do, Superintendent, I’m sorry to be so exacting, but it’s a matter of an eye-witness account . . . Yes, please.” There was a short pause during which Hambledon lit a cigarette and practised patience. “Yes? Oh, thank you very much, please do. I am most grateful, Superintendent.” Hambledon put down the receiver and said, “Widgers is out on duty remonstrating with somebody who has set their chimney alight contrary to the black-out regulations. They are fetching him back and will ring us again in a quarter of an hour. ‘Oh, Mary, go and call the cattle home, and call the cattle home, across the sands of’—Bridport.”

Ennis looked respectfully amused and Bagshott remarked in a tone of relief that at least it wasn’t Shakespeare. Hambledon said that in point of fact the quotation was not very well chosen because, if he remembered correctly, Mary came to grief and the cattle never arrived after all. Ennis diffidently suggested, as an amendment, “I hear you calling me,” and the telephone rang again.

“If this is Widgers,” said Hambledon, reaching for the receiver, “he’s put the fire out very quickly. Hullo! Yes, speaking. Good. What I wanted to ask you, Constable Widgers, was for the fullest possible particulars about a fat man on a lady’s cycle who turned up while you were waiting for somebody to come ashore last Sunday night, you remember?”

Widgers said he remembered perfectly, and gave a more detailed description of the man than Ennis had, including the clothes the man wore and the make of cycle he was using. Hambledon took notes.

“You examined his identity card, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir. It seemed all in order. He said he came from London, and there was a London address on it; and an address in Coveham written below when he re-registered, sir.”

“You haven’t seen him since, by any chance?”

“No, sir. I haven’t looked for him,” said Widgers. “The Coveham constable is here, sir, I could call him to the ’phone if you wish.”

“Ask him yourself, for a start, if he knows your fat friend,” said Hambledon. “I don’t want to waste time on the matter if it’s all in order. I’ll hold on.”

“Very good, sir,” said Widgers. There followed a pause of five long minutes before he returned to the telephone with some excitement in his voice. “Sir? There is something wrong. There’s no such man living in Coveham at all, and the address he gave is occupied by two old ladies who’ve lived there all their lives. They have a brother from London staying with them now, an old gentleman over eighty and infirm. There’s nobody else there, the constable called there to-day about something. It’s only a small house.”

“Oh, really,” said Hambledon. “How very interesting. I suppose you can’t, by chance, remember the London address? There’s no reason why you should, but——”

“I’ve got it written down,” said Widgers unexpectedly. “And the identity card number. Just a moment—I’ve got it. The address is 101 Tavistock Square, W.C., and the reference number is EEPO/9/6.”

“Well done, constable,” said Hambledon heartily. “This information is of the utmost value. I am very much obliged to you. I wish every member of the Force had his wits about him to that extent.” Widgers, at the other end, was reduced to incoherent bumbles, and Hambledon went on, “Tell me, why did you make these notes? Did you suspect him, and if so, why?”

“Not exactly, sir. I did think it a bit odd that I hadn’t seen him before if he’d been about the district for weeks. He’s rather remarkable-looking, but it’s a big district, I mightn’t have chanced to meet him. No, I make a practice, sir, of noting down odds and ends just in case they might be wanted any time, the numbers of cars left standing in lanes, things like that. It’s never been any use before,” added Widgers frankly.

“Well, it is this time. Thank you again,” said Hambledon. “Good-bye.”

When the reference number was looked up, it proved to be a Hampshire number belonging to an elderly but ferocious barber at Portsmouth. He had never been in Dorset, didn’t want to go to Dorset and had no intention of going there. Why should he? He’d got quite enough to do by being so short-handed as he was with all his assistants called up, and all his A.R.P. work as well, without gallivanting off to Dorset——

“All right, all right,” said the police officer who interviewed him. “This is only a routine enquiry it was my duty to make——”

But the barber took a dim view of routine enquiries when he was busy. As for number 101 Tavistock Square, it simply didn’t exist. There never was such a number.

* * * * *

Bagshott turned the whole resources of the Police Force, Special Branch and C.I.D., on to the task of finding Warren, but nearly three weeks passed without a trace of him. In the evening of Friday, January the twenty-eighth, Hambledon’s telephone rang and Bagshott announced himself in a triumphant voice.

“I’ve got them,” he said. “Warren, my Special Branch man, and the man who found him.”

“Alive?” said Hambledon anxiously.

“Certainly. Alive and well. Warren’s a bit the worse for having been locked up all this time, but otherwise he’s all right. He’s been in a house at Teddington.”

“Teddington, eh? I should like to see them both at once, if Warren is well enough to tell his story.”

“I’ll bring them along at once.”

Five minutes later Bagshott walked in to Hambledon’s room. “Most extraordinary affair,” he said. “I thought Warren was at the bottom of the river weeks ago. Which would you like to see first?”

“Warren, please.”

Warren came in, pallid in face but bearing no other marks of ill-usage.

“Sit down, do,” said Hambledon. “I am very glad to see you alive—I didn’t think you were. I’m afraid you’ve had a rotten time of it.”

“Thank you, sir. Yes, it wasn’t too good. I shall sympathize with yard dogs more than ever, in future.”

“Have a cigarette,” said Hambledon, “and tell me all about it from the moment you left this office.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Warren again. “I left this room with the prisoner, Abbott, who was lamenting about having to go back to Brixton. We went out of the building, I expected some trouble in finding a taxi, especially in the dark—it was quite dark by the time we left, if you remember, sir. However, at the corner of Charles Street and Whitehall I found a taxi standing, the driver was having an argument with a man who, I gathered, was his previous fare. I said, ‘Excuse me, is this cab engaged?’ and the man on the pavement said it was not, paid the driver and walked away. I put the prisoner in, told the driver to go to Brixton Jail, and got in myself. We started off, the taxi turned round in Whitehall and went over Westminster Bridge all right, down Westminster Bridge Road and turned right into Kennington Road, all as it should have done. The prisoner started arguing again about how an Englishman couldn’t be kept in prison without a trial, I remember he was talking about the Habeas Corpus Act as we crossed Lambeth Road. I started to tell him about Section 18B when suddenly the taxi, instead of keeping straight on, turned right. I tapped on the glass and shouted at the driver, but he said there was a traffic diversion further on and it was better going that way. I am not very familiar with that part of London, sir, and traffic diversions are so common now-a-days—I am sorry, sir,”—to Bagshott—“I ought to have known, no doubt——”

“Carry on,” said Bagshott.

“We turned left and right and all ways, it was pitch dark and I couldn’t see a single street-name even if I should have known it if I had. Little narrow streets they were, too, and a lot of bomb damage here and there, I could see that much.”

“Did the driver hesitate at all?” asked Hambledon.

“No, sir. I was beginning to get uneasy, but he seemed so confident I was sure he knew the way—I was right there, anyway,” said Warren with a rueful laugh. “All this didn’t last long, you know, five minutes or a bit over, and the prisoner talking nineteen to the dozen all the time——”

“He did indeed,” said Tommy sympathetically.

“When all of a sudden the taxi swerved so violently to the left that I was thrown on top of the prisoner, and then round again to the right into a building of some kind. There were men there I could just see, and I heard sliding doors being run along behind us. At the same moment the taxi stopped so violently that I was thrown forward just as the door opened and somebody hit me a crack on the head—it all happened at once. I didn’t go right out, I could dimly hear the prisoner yelling, ‘no, no, no,’ and somebody laughed.”

“Just laughed,” said Hambleton. “You didn’t hear anybody speak?”

“No, sir. Only the prisoner shouting, and this laugh. I wasn’t quite conscious, but I remember trying to hang on to him—the prisoner, that is. Then somebody hauled me out of the cab and hit me again. At least, I suppose that’s what happened, I went right out that time and there were two bumps on my head when I woke up.”

“Where was this—where did you wake up?”

“In the room where I’ve been all this time. It had strong wooden panels over the windows like a permanent black-out, they were screwed on, the screws countersunk and the heads puttied over. I could just see they were screws in one or two places. I hadn’t any tools, they took my knife away. I imagined that the room was at the top of a house because there were ventilators in the ceiling, but I couldn’t see out. The door was very solid and had no handle on the inside, I knew there were two bolts outside because I used to hear them being run along whenever the door was opened. It was a fair sized room and had a small wash-place off it with hot and cold water laid on, that window was blocked too. Electric light on all the time, I couldn’t turn it off. That worried me, and I used to take the bulb out sometimes for a rest, or tie it up in a blue handkerchief I happened to have with me. I don’t know how much of all this you want, sir?”

“Go on, please,” said Hambleton. “I want everything.”

“The room was fairly comfortable, carpet on the floor, a bed and an easy chair. A man used to come in three times a day and bring me food and drink—at least, I suppose it was in the day, I couldn’t tell. For all I know they might have left me alone all day and fed me during the night. I tried to make him talk, but he wouldn’t. He used to shave me, too, they wouldn’t trust me with a safety razor.”

“They didn’t actually ill-use you?” asked Hambleton.

“No, sir. I asked for books to read and the man brought some. And a book containing fairly stiff crossword puzzles, and that was a great help. I used to do physical jerks and exercises, not to get too flabby. Room was fairly warm, there was a water radiator with a grating behind it, air came in that way. No, it wasn’t too bad, only the boredom and being shut in.” Warren shivered. “I started talking to myself.”

“Take it easy,” said Hambleton. “You’ll soon get out of the habit. You said just now you didn’t know whether it was night or day. You had your watch?”

“Yes, sir, they left that, but I got muddled, having been unconscious. I tried to keep a sort of calendar but it was a bit difficult.”

“I should think so. Nothing happened all the time till to-night? Nobody else came but the one man?”

“Nobody, sir. I thought somebody might come and ask me questions about Security stuff, but no one came near. I can’t think what they kept me for.”

Bagshott stirred in his chair and said, "A hostage, possibly," and Hambledon nodded.

"Yes, I did think of that," said Warren. "It's a German habit."

"What happened to-night?" asked Hambledon.

"Well—I ought to explain that sometimes they used to leave me an extra supply of food at breakfast time and not come in again till late at night. That happened—er—four times. It happened to-day, the man said they'd be back for supper. That was about nine o'clock generally."

"Just a moment," said Hambledon. "Bagshott, it is now half-past seven. This house—you know the address?" Bagshott nodded. "This house will be surrounded at once and anyone attempting to enter, arrested. The house will, of course, be entered and searched and any papers brought to me. Letters may arrive."

"May I use your 'phone?" said Bagshott, and put a call through to the Superintendent of Police at Teddington.

"Now, go on," said Hambledon to Warren.

"Soon after five o'clock I heard somebody coming up the stairs, I knew it wasn't the same man, the step was different. He opened the door and came in. I asked him who he was and he wouldn't tell me. He asked me my name and I gave it, telling him I was a prisoner and he was to get me out. He agreed and we left at once, bolting the door behind us. I gather he got in by a window at the back as he went to shut it before we left the house. We went out at the front door, shut it after us, and walked away. In the course of conversation I asked if he was the police and he said he was not. The question seemed to amuse him. I said I was going to the police station to get a car to London and he asked me if I could put him in touch with Intelligence. I was anxious to get him to the station as I considered his actions not above suspicion, so I agreed to try and he came with me. I brought him to the Chief-Inspector here who interviewed him."

"What exactly did you consider suspicious, Detective-Inspector?"

"Well, he wasn't either Police or Intelligence. What was he doing in that house? Was he just breaking-and-entering and happened to find me, or did he know I was there? He said he was just having a look round. How did he know the house was suspicious or was it just coincidence, and why was he so keen on interviewing Intelligence?"

"Quite a string of questions," said Hambledon. "Did he answer any of 'em to you, Bagshott? And who is the feller anyway?"

"Don't know," said Bagshott. "He wouldn't talk to me, not even to give his name. He only repeated his demand to see someone in Intelligence, so I rang you up."

"Quite the little mystery man, isn't he? I'll unravel him," said Hambledon. "About that taxi, did you get its number?" Warren shook his head. "Never mind, it was probably faked anyway. Anything recognizable about it? Or the driver?"

"No, sir. Perfectly ordinary taxi so far as one could see in the dark. I turned my torch on when we got in, nothing special about it. The driver was so muffled up in scarves and coats one could hardly see his face, but it was a cold night and taxi-drivers do wrap up. I didn't make a note of his number, either."

"We are making enquiries about a taxi which set down an argumentative fare at the corner of Charles Street at that time, and picked up another," said Bagshott. "Somebody

may have noticed him.”

“I wish you luck,” said Hambledon, “I think you’ll need it. Well, now for the other fellow. I hope he’ll think I’m good enough to talk to.”

IV

A DUTCHMAN FROM FLUSHING

WARREN and Bagshott left the room and a few minutes later the Chief-Inspector returned bringing another man with him; a brown-haired man of about thirty-five, clean-shaven, of medium height, with a square jaw and a faintly amused expression.

"This is Warren's rescuer," said Bagshott. "I'm sorry I can't introduce him more formally, but he appears to wish to remain anonymous." He turned to the man and added, "This is Mr. Hambleton of British Intelligence, you can talk to him without misgivings. Well, unless you want me, Hambleton, I've got a few things to see to."

"Carry on, Bagshott. I expect this gentleman and I will be able to entertain each other for a little while." Bagshott went out, and Hambleton said, "Do sit down. I understand that you had some tale you wished to unfold. Who are you for a start?"

"Really," said the man coolly, "I've been so many different people lately that I must stop and think. What's more, I doubt if any of my various aliases would convey much to you. In the first place, I'm the man who sent you a note by an escaping R.A.F. officer about four men who were being landed from a German submarine on England's shores with a view to their acting for German Intelligence. I hope the note reached you."

"I had a feeling," said Hambleton, "that this interview was going to be interesting, now I'm sure of it. Please go on."

"I particularly wanted them to be rescued from Nazi clutches as soon as they arrived. You know, they had no intention of acting for Germany, it was merely a scheme for getting home; but if the German agents did get their claws on them, I'd be sorry for them. Not one of the four would have the least idea how to look after themselves; nice fellows and all that, but scarcely one complete brain between all of them. Not the chess-player's mind, what? No finesse."

"No?" said Hambleton. "I'll remember what you say, I'm sure it's valuable. About yourself, now——"

"Tanner is at once the best of the bunch and the most helpless. Even deceiving the Nazis gave him a pain in his conscience, believe it or not. But his wife is dying of T.B. and he wanted rather badly to get home. He——"

"You will be sorry to hear," interrupted Hambleton, "that Lieutenant Tanner was shot dead by patriots in Brussels on his way through. Unfortunately nobody warned them that he was not a genuine renegade."

The man scowled for a moment. "Pity. Well, accidents will happen."

"I'm surprised you didn't know it," said Hambleton.

"I wonder I didn't hear it. I suppose they didn't get the tip in time in Brussels. I was having——"

"Are you sure you didn't know it?"

"Quite sure," said the man, and looked Hambleton squarely in the face.

"Now tell me who you are," said Tommy.

“I am a member of German Intelligence,” said the man with an impish grin. “It occurred to me that since I’ve got away with that, I might be useful to you.”

“You propose to act as a British agent on the staff of German Intelligence,” said Hambleton.

“Exactly. It should be exciting, I think. I’ve been bored stiff for three years and I’m tired of it. I don’t think I’d be bored on that job.”

Hambleton leaned back in his chair and regarded his visitor with a face in which there was no amusement at all.

“Let’s get this straight,” he said. “You are Major Aylwin Brampton, nephew of Sir Oliver Brampton, Member of Parliament for the Rook’s Nest Division of Yorkshire. You were born in 1911 in London, but both your parents died when you were a child and your uncle brought you up at his place, Rock Hall, Rook’s Nest, Yorkshire. You were educated at Rugby and Cambridge; after that you acted as a secretary to your uncle, who was a man of many affairs. Am I right?”

“Please go on,” said his visitor. “Excuse me—May I smoke?”

“Have one of mine,” said Hambleton. “Your uncle was a great admirer of the Nazi party, he was one of many who thought a little more discipline would be good for English youth. He had not only joined the British Union of Fascists, he was a prominent supporter of the Link, that ingenuous organization for encouraging a rapprochement between England and Germany. Many people who thought in the early days as he did, saw their mistake some time before the war actually broke out; not so your uncle. He continued to believe in the innocence of Germany’s intentions——”

“Persistent old cock, wasn’t he?”

“With the result,” continued Hambleton, “that soon after the outbreak of war he was gathered in and interned under Section 18B of the Defence of the Realm Act. He is still interned. Let us revert to you. You joined the Territorials before the war, and in view of your uncle’s well-known views on the subject of Germany, I may say that your army career was watched with interest. However, apart from acting as your uncle’s secretary you did nothing reprehensible as far as we know. On the outbreak of war you were called up, went abroad with your regiment, and were eventually reported missing after Dunkirk, and subsequently as a prisoner-of-war in Germany. Nothing more was heard of you until now, when you pop up bright and smiling with this kindly offer to serve in British Intelligence on the strength of having rescued three British soldiers from the wicked Nazis. Am I right?”

“It certainly sounds pretty dubious.”

“Tell me how you knew when and where those men were going to be landed if the Germans didn’t tell you? Tell me how you knew where to look for Detective-Sergeant Warren?”

“With pleasure. It’s a long story——”

“It would be, and I don’t know that I shall bother to listen to it,” said Hambleton. “Can you suggest any reason why I shouldn’t simply have you shot as a traitor?”

“There’s one quite good reason,” said Hambleton’s visitor with a disarming smile.

“Trot it out and I’ll look at it.”

"I'm not Major Brampton."

"Oh, come," said Hambleton. "Can't you think of a better one than that? Listen. You arrived from your prison camp at the German spy school at Liesensee on October 17th, 1943. In spite of the fact that you can't speak or understand a word of German—you, Oliver Brampton's secretary—you came out on top in their end-of-term examinations. Do you still maintain you can't speak German?"

"Not to you," said the man in that language. "I just thought it would be useful if the Germans didn't know it."

"You are losing your grip," said Hambleton contemptuously. "The Germans did know it, you have been corresponding with them for years. It was only to your fellow-prisoners that you pretended you couldn't speak German, and the Nazis for some reason fell in with the idea. You started off with the other prisoners from Liesensee on January the second this year, but you disappeared in Berlin. You turned up two days later in Flushing, where you got into touch with the underground movement and forwarded your note to me by the R.A.F. pilot who was being sent over. You were next seen entering the house of one Willem Geerds, a Dutchman known to be collaborating with the German authorities. It may or may not be news to you that Geerds has been carefully destroyed."

"Good job too," said the man shortly.

"Why?"

"He murdered a friend of mine."

"Really," said Hambleton, "your friends do seem to be unlucky, don't they? There was Tanner, too, wasn't there, and it's difficult to imagine how the other three escaped on that occasion. Abbott, of course, didn't last long, he was shot through the head in London the day after he reached England——"

"Look here," said the visitor energetically. "I am a fairly patient man I think, but you are going a bit over the mark——"

" 'My patience is exhausted', " said Hambleton in German, mimicking the Fuehrer.

"I've already told you I'm not Brampton; send for your dossier about him, read the description and look at the photograph. I'm not in the least like him, and Brampton is dead anyway."

Hambleton looked at him for a moment, and then rang the bell and sent for the papers. Till they arrived the two men sat in silence; the visitor lighting another cigarette from the end of the last, and Hambleton busying himself with some letters on his desk. The dossier was brought in, a stout paper cover containing copies of letters, many pages of typescript with notes scribbled in the margin, and a photograph. Two photographs, to be exact, one full-face and one in profile. There were also finger-prints.

Hambleton looked from the photographs to the man in front of him, and back again.

"There is not the slightest doubt about it," he said. "You are not this man."

"There are also the finger-prints," said the man calmly, "but I'd rather you didn't go into that if you don't mind. I am a little sensitive on the subject of finger-prints."

"Who the devil are you?"

"My name is Anthony Colemore, son of the late Roger Colemore, the etymologist."

"Colemore," said Hambleton slowly. "The name conveys something—I heard it

mentioned only the other day——”

“I was the man who came such a purler over that whisky smuggling case. That’s one reason why I wasn’t anxious to hob-nob with Chief-Inspector Bagshott and Co. You see, I didn’t finish my sentence.”

“You broke jail, didn’t you, if I remember correctly?”

“Yes. I was bored, I hate being shut up. Being locked in at night—ugh!”

“I can, of course, check your identity by your finger-prints,” said Hambleton.

“If you do, I go back to jail,” Colemore pointed out.

“Not necessarily,” said Hambleton. “If I ask for the identification of finger-prints they don’t automatically assume that I’ve got the body.”

“Stupid of me,” murmured Colemore. “‘Conscience makes cowards,’ you know. I suppose it’s conscience since I don’t suffer from indigestion.”

“Nor do I necessarily have to hand people over to the police because they happen to want ’em. Let your mind be at rest on that point and tell me how you come to be posing as Brampton?”

“I came across him during the retreat from the Albert Canal. He was pretty badly wounded and I stayed by him just too long, by the time he died I couldn’t get away. It occurred to me that I’d have a better time as a prisoner if the Boche thought I was a British officer, so I changed clothes with him, took his papers and odds and ends, and gave myself up.”

“Did you know him before?”

“No,” said Colemore. “What’s more I knew practically nothing about him till you gave me his life’s history just now. I gathered from the Nazi General or what-not who interviewed me that I had an interestingly peculiar sort of uncle, that was all. As regards being able to talk German, I started off by refusing to understand it mainly in order to annoy them, I’m afraid. Then when this Intelligence fellow implied that I’d been fluent in it for years, I went all mysterious and suggested that it would be to everybody’s advantage if that was kept a secret. He looked puzzled and said, ‘How wise of you.’ What I’d have said if he’d simply asked ‘why?’ I really don’t know.”

Hambleton laughed. “He thought there was some inner meaning he was supposed to see but didn’t, and he wouldn’t admit it. The gentle Nazi to the life. That’s what happens when men are given jobs, not because they’re fitted for them, but because they are deserving party members.”

“It might have some funny results even here if only good Conservatives were admitted to British Intelligence.”

“Heaven forbid. Well, you do seem to have landed yourself into rather a sticky mess, Colemore, what with the police and the Nazis. Suppose you tell me all about it and we’ll see what it all boils down to? Start at the beginning and go right on to the end.”

“What, my boyhood days and all?” Hambleton nodded. “Well, you’ve brought it on yourself.” Colemore settled himself more comfortably in his chair and began.

“My father was rather a weird old bird, but he was a real expert on languages. I don’t mean merely a good linguist, he was interested in the origins of words and how they changed as they were absorbed into the speech of different peoples. He used to hunt words

through various cognate dialects with the enthusiasm of a deer-stalker after a fourteen-pointer, only his chases would lead right across Europe. Then he'd come home and read papers to learned societies. I can't think why he ever married anything more human than a dictionary, but he did. My mother died when I was five, and after that he used to trail me round with him everywhere. We'd go to some place for a week and stay there six months; after a bit he'd look at me as though he'd just remembered I was there and say, 'School. You ought to be at school,' and into school I went wherever we happened to be. I remember one year when I had one term in Servia, another in Albania and the third in Greece."

"What a dreadful idea," said the horrified Hambledon, once a schoolmaster himself.

"Oh, I don't know. You learn to stand on your own feet, and how other people think and all that. I learned a lot of languages besides German too, you do when you're a small boy."

Etymology is not, it appears, a very highly-paid career, and most of the eminent Roger Colemore's money came from investments. He thought he was good at foreseeing which industries were going to increase in importance and he changed his investments accordingly.

"Oh, dear," said Hambledon. "I've met people who thought that. One of them cleans my boots every morning."

"Father wasn't as bad as that," said Anthony Colemore. "After the last war, when there was a lot of rebuilding in progress, he said cement was the goods. So he invested our all in cement. We were almost rich for a time and my schools became quite luxurious and exclusive. I was practically hovering on the brink of Harrow when Clarence Hatry fell down. So did our fortunes."

"After your previous experiences," said Hambledon sympathetically, "you might have found Harrow a trifle difficult. How old were you then?"

"Sixteen," said Colemore. "I daresay you're right—about Harrow, I mean. Well, at that point Father died and the fun really began. We were in England then, as it happened. Kind friends of my father's rallied round and gave me good advice. You can imagine it. 'Work, my boy. Honest work never hurt any man.' All I knew was how to live comfortably anywhere and talk about eight languages. So they found me a job in a City wine-merchant's office. One of the old-established ones preserved in cobwebs."

"Talking about wine-merchants," said Hambledon, "I think a little weak whisky and water won't hurt us. I keep some here. Don't let me interrupt you."

"I should love you to," said Colemore, "with that. How on earth do you manage it these days?"

"Oh, a spot of blackmail," said Hambledon airily. "Here's yours. Please carry on."

Young Colemore endured the wine-merchant's office for as long as he could, which was fifteen months, and then left for another post which promised more and performed much less. He went from one job to another, each a little less satisfactory than the last. "Some of 'em didn't pay too badly, but I just couldn't stand 'em. I remember once I met a man in a train, rather the Jew-boy type but not a bad fellow. He had a couple of big suitcases with him. He put me up to his line of business, which was buying cheap lines in the East End and peddling them from door to door in places like Surbiton or Esher.

‘Superior novelties, my boy,’ he said. ‘Small profits and quick returns.’ So I got a pedlar’s certificate and tried it; you’d be surprised what a paying game it is. But what a life! I stuck it out for eight months, by which time I’d got suitcase-carrier’s shoulder, bell-pusher’s thumb, hawker’s brass-face and a chronic ingratiating manner. So I left that alone for ever.”

“I thought I’d done a few odd jobs in the course of my mis-spent life,” said the amused Hambledon, “but you beat me. Carry on, please.”

“Sure this isn’t boring you? Well, there’s no accounting for tastes, and, d’you know, it’s rather fun telling it all. I’ve never done so before,” said Colemore.

He travelled to Southampton in 1930 to try for a job on the harbour works and went into a public-house in the dock area for a glass of beer and a couple of sandwiches; funds not permitting of a more spacious meal. At the bar he fell into conversation with a tall thin man in a blue-and-white-striped cotton monkey-jacket which young Colemore recognized as the undress uniform of a ship’s steward. The thin man said that he was a dining-saloon steward on the R.M.S.P. liner *Orbita*, at present on the Western Ocean run. New York to Hamburg, calling at Southampton en route.

“Got long in Southampton?” asked Colemore.

“Only four hours. We have five days at New York and a fortnight at Hamburg, they’re the real ends of the run, you see, though this is our port of registration. Besides, repairs and overhaul come cheaper in Hamburg.”

“Doesn’t seem long to spend in your home-land,” suggested Colemore.

“Hamburg’s more like home to most of us stewards. We don’t go ashore in New York much,” said the steward.

“Why not?”

“Too expensive.”

Colemore gathered by degrees that it was a dog’s life with compensations. The hours were long and trying and the pay was not extravagant, but the tips made up for many shortcomings, especially if you were a B.R.

“What’s that?”

“Bedroom Steward.” This voyage was going to be worse than most because they were short-handed. “We shall be one at a table ’stead of two if we don’t look out. Some of our chaps went on the ran-tan in Hamburg and got left on the beach.”

“Come again?”

“Missed the ship.”

“I say,” said Anthony Colemore, “do you think there’s a chance of my getting a job on the *Orbita*?”

“Ever been a waiter?”

“No. But I can speak a lot of different languages.”

“Can you really? But surely you don’t want a job like that, then.”

“Don’t I?” said Colemore. “I was going along to the new harbour works to ask for a navvying job.”

“Oh lor’. Well, we’re better than that. You might manage it if you don’t mind doing a

dock-head jump. Come along,” said the steward, glancing at his watch and sliding hurriedly off his high stool, “what you want is the Providore’s Department. Come on, I’ll take you.”

So they interviewed a man in an office who looked at young Colemore without any particular enthusiasm but eventually said he could have a try at it and they’d see how he shaped. “Do you want an advance?”

The steward nudged him and whispered, “Say yes,” so Colemore said, “Yes, please,” and received two pounds in advance.

“Now,” said the steward, leading the way out at a rapid pace, “we’ll take a cab and dash up to Baker’s to get your slops.”

“Wouldn’t it be quicker if we took a taxi?”

“No. We always take a cab. By the way, they call me The Colonel.”

“Why?”

“Oh, I expect it was because I was a temporary gentleman in the last war.”

Colemore stayed for five years with the Royal Mail Line and saved quite a fair sum of money. He made one friend in Hamburg, a young man in the Company’s office who happened to be a Dutchman. In fact, they became friendly in the first place because Colemore could speak fluent Dutch and Van Drom liked to use his native tongue in his hours of ease. He regarded German as a debased dialect and the Germans as mediæval barbarians incapable of the higher civilization, which is to live peaceably with one’s neighbours.

“Sometimes I didn’t see him for a year or more, when I was on the South American run,” said Colemore. “But we stewards always like to get on the Western Ocean run in the winter, and whenever I went to Hamburg I used to look him up.”

In the early spring of 1935 Van Drom said that when he was at home—which was Flushing—for Christmas, some men he knew made a suggestion to him. It was a scheme by which Scotch whisky, sent overseas in bond, should be acquired from the warehouses in Holland and smuggled back into England. “There was a lot of money in it,” said Colemore, “and Van Drom always had expensive tastes, especially for a Dutchman. You see, whisky in itself is cheap enough, it’s only the excise duty which makes it so dear in England. So if we could buy it abroad without the duty having to be paid on it, we could afford to sell it in England a lot cheaper than anyone could buy it anywhere else, and still make a big profit. Besides, whisky made for export is ten or twenty per cent. overproof, that’s a lot stronger than ordinary stuff, so any publican who bought it for resale could water it down and no harm done. In fact, he’d have to, or somebody would spot it for export whisky and ask awkward questions about its origin.”

Van Drom and his friends formed a sort of syndicate. “I never knew how they managed the Dutch end,” said Colemore. “Getting hold of the whisky, I mean. I thought it more tactful not to enquire. No business of mine.” What they wanted was an English partner who would run it across for them and arrange for its disposal in England. Somebody with a fast cabin cruiser who could look like an enthusiastic and not too intelligent amateur yachtsman, with more money than sense. “Always blowing ashore at places like Harwich and Sandwich and Rye and Littlehampton and Lyminster, all togged up to the nines to give the girls a treat.” The real business would be done in smaller nooks

and inlets of the coast, where elderly boatmen would row out to where the cabin cruiser had dropped her mud-hook, and return ashore with cases tactfully draped with tarpaulin. “You’d be surprised how easy it was,” said Colemore. “Do you know, I’ve actually landed cases on the beach at Hayling Island in broad daylight and dumped them in a bathing-box to be collected by lorry after dark? It’s a fact.”

Colemore explained that the business was, of course, only run in the summer, but it was so profitable that he could live comfortably on the proceeds throughout the winter months “and even put a bit by for my problematical old age.” When the fashion came in for small but highly efficient cameras and an import duty was put upon foreign-made ones, he took to smuggling Leica cameras too. “They were quite safe unless you wanted to take one abroad with you, when you had to declare its number. Then, if the officials looked it up and found it wasn’t one of the numbers listed as having passed through customs, there was trouble. Otherwise it was all sigarney, as Dad used to say. One of his sample words, though I don’t know what it was a sample of.”

All things, however, draw to evensong sooner or later and so did Colemore’s profitable trade. “It all started with a publican in a Hampshire market town who didn’t bother to break down the whisky to the right strength. He got quite a reputation for his wonderful whisky, I believe, and other publicans bought their supplies from him. All went well till the excise man turned up with his little hydrometer and tested the whisky. Our friend had been in trouble once before for watering his stuff and the excise man was naturally hopeful that it would happen again. This time the mistake was on the other foot, as it were, the hydrometer nearly jumped out of the glass because the whisky was too strong instead of too weak.”

Colemore at that time was running a big consignment across in two lots and was delayed in Holland with engine trouble. He had the boat’s engines overhauled in Rotterdam and came into Bosham harbour one fine summer’s morning a fortnight after his first delivery instead of only two or three days. The police had spent the intervening fortnight making enquiries, and whisky had been popping up all over the place. “Cases under beds, cases in out-houses hidden under sacks, cases sunk in ponds—even left on roads when the owners didn’t dare to keep ’em. I must say I think somebody might have warned me, but they didn’t. I slid into Bosham with the engine just ticking over and my heart singing. I’d just dropped anchor when small boats with large men in them came upon me from every side. My heart left off singing and started sinking instead, I hadn’t a chance to make a bolt for it. I argued, but it was no good. The bottles even had the export labels on ’em, you know, stamped perforations.”

Colemore came up for trial but the result was a foregone conclusion and he was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment and a fine of three times the value of the goods.

SHORT LIFE OF JEAN LEGRIN

COLEMORE never disclosed the means by which he escaped from Maidstone Jail, he said he could not do so without incriminating friends of his. Van Drom in person picked him off an unfrequented beach in Kent at two a.m. of a moonless night, and landed him in Holland. This was in July, 1939, he having served only six months of his two years' sentence, and already it was more than obvious that the Germans were stoking up the fires in Europe and that very soon the pot would boil over.

"I ought to be in the Army," he said to Van Drom. "I am more than willing to join the Army. But if I go back to England for the purpose all that will happen will be a return to Maidstone Jail, and a fat lot of help that'll be to the country. They'll even have to board and lodge me, which they're spared at the present. Fancy me a *bouche inutile* sewing mail-bags for the duration. I'll bet the war would be over before I'd served my time."

"Cheer up," said Van Drom. "At least your country will fight when the time comes. Mine is cowering trustfully in the shadow of Nazi promises and will be instantly gobbled up when it suits them."

"I'd join your Army if only they'd promise to fight," said Colemore thoughtfully.

"Even that inducement," said Van Drom, laughing, "won't persuade them to abandon neutrality, I fear."

"Ass!"

"Oh, quite. But the French will fight. They'll have to. If you must join an army, why not join the French?"

"If I had some suitable papers," said Colemore slowly.

"That can be arranged. Since my country will not fight," said Van Drom, "there are those of us who are making a few preliminary arrangements against the time when the Boche comes. The production of passable identity papers is of primary importance."

Colemore nodded. "There's another point. Being an Englishman, I've never done my year with the colours as boys do in countries which have conscription. I can shoot, but arms drill——"

Van Drom laughed. "You are—how old? Thirty-one. You would have done your year at eighteen. How many men, d'you suppose, remember their arms drill after thirteen years? Besides, there are several Frenchmen about still in Sluys, we will get one of them to give you a little coaching. The thing is simple."

It was. Calling-up and identity papers were produced, and Colemore found himself Jean Legrin of the 105th Chasseurs, now mechanized. He joined his regiment at Amiens in the middle of August 1939 and found himself the subject of highly intensive training. A fortnight later war broke out, but Hitler kindly allowed him another six months to familiarize himself with his weapons before hostilities really began in earnest. Van Drom had underrated his countrymen, for they fought like fiends against hopeless odds, treachery and sabotage when the Low Countries were invaded, and the 105th Chasseurs

went into Belgium to try to stop the flood. At the end of May they were swirling round on the northern edge of the famous gap between Arras and Cambrai with the Germans pouring towards Boulogne between them and the main French forces. The retreat to Dunkirk began.

By the twenty-eighth of May, Colemore—Jean Legrin, that is—no longer mechanized since his armoured car had been attended to by the Luftwaffe, was trudging wearily in the general direction of England. He had lost touch with his unit, nobody gave him any orders since there seemed no one there to do so, and he had a sinking conviction that he was being left further and further behind. There was always the Luftwaffe, and soon he saw other Germans as well. Lines of tanks and lorried infantry all going his way on all the roads. Jean Legrin took to the fields.

Two days later he was in a wood near Hazebrouck, dodging from tree to tree and miserably chewing a turnip, when he came upon a wounded British officer lying hidden under a clump of bushes. He was obviously badly hurt and, equally obviously, would not be there much longer in any sense that really mattered. Colemore gave him a drink of water and the officer, who happened to be a major, revived slightly and addressed him in French; not very good French at that.

“Don’t bother,” said Colemore gently. “I’m as English as you are. Have some more water. I wish I’d got some brandy. I’ll go and see if I can scrounge something, even *vin ordinaire* would be better for you than this.”

“Not worth while,” gasped the major. “Don’t leave me.”

“All right, I won’t.”

There was a short pause, and the major said, “No. You’d better go on. No sense—stopping here to be captured.”

“I might just as well stay here as go on,” said Colemore. “I think we’re both well left behind.”

The major closed his eyes and Colemore waited, there was a certain relief in having a good excuse to sit still. Those weary miles——

He was almost asleep when the major spoke again. “If you’re English, why are you in that uniform?”

“Because I’m in the French army.”

“Dashed good reason,” said the major feebly. “Tell me—some other time——”

He shut his eyes again and relapsed into unconsciousness, and this time Colemore really did fall asleep. When he awoke it was almost dark and the hand he still held in his was quite cold.

He sat up quickly and thought things over. It was plain that his chances of escape were practically non-existent, and the lot of a French *poilu* prisoner was not likely to be a very happy one. He would be better off in Maidstone Jail. He would probably be slightly better off if he’d been a British Tommy, at least he’d be herded with his own kind. The idea came to him slowly that he would be better off still as a British officer—a major, for example.

There followed a period of activity upon which Colemore never allowed his mind to rest; in one way the gathering darkness made the distasteful job more difficult, in another

it made it easier to carry through. At last it was done; an unwounded but exhausted officer of the British Army staggered away between the trees and a dead French *poilu* lay still under the rhododendron bushes. Colemore went on till he could go no further and then dropped to the ground and slept the sleep of total exhaustion.

When he awoke it was broad daylight. He sat up and rubbed his face with a handkerchief he found in one of his pockets, the result was scratchy discomfort since he had not shaved for five days, but he felt better.

“Well, that’s that,” he said aloud. “Jean Legrin is dead, God rest his soul. Now, who am I?”

He examined the gold identity disc upon his wrist which had made him feel such a grave-robber, though it could not be left behind. It announced that he was Aylwin Fortescue Henry Brampton, Major; and his religion was that of the Church of England. He turned out his pockets which contained all the usual things except letters. Apparently Major Brampton did not receive, or did not cherish, letters.

“Pity,” murmured Colemore. “It might have been a help to know something about myself. Am I a bachelor or a married man with six children? Married men with children usually carry photographs to war, it will be simpler if I am a bachelor. I am pretty well off, judging by a gold cigarette-case, ivory pocket-knife, and so forth. Haven’t I even got a girl-friend?”

His military identity card added nothing to the information on the disc, also it bore a photograph which did not resemble Colemore in the least, so he buried it. He soon wearied of an unprofitable search, there was a more immediate need pressing upon his consciousness; breakfast. Coffee, hot rolls, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade. Even another turnip would be better than nothing. It seemed that the best plan would be to give himself up, presumably even the Germans fed their prisoners occasionally.

He got to his feet, feeling curiously weak in the legs and a little light-headed from lack of food, and trudged wearily on till he came to a road. At the moment it was empty, but a few minutes later two despatchriders came storming along on motor-cycles. Colemore stepped into the road and held up his hand with a commanding gesture; the motor-cyclists stopped.

“British officer,” said Colemore briefly. “Want to surrender.” He spoke in English merely because it did not occur to him to speak German, his mind was not working very capably.

“Another prisoner,” said one rider to the other in German in a bored voice. “I don’t suppose this fool can speak our language either. All the trouble they give!”

This annoyed Colemore. Very well, if it was giving trouble he’d keep it up.

“*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*” asked the other rider, and Colemore merely stared at him.

“Told you so,” grumbled the first. Turning to Colemore he added, “*Wir*—we not can take.”

“Must,” said Colemore peremptorily. “I am your prisoner.” He staggered and clutched at the handlebars to save himself from falling; the despatch rider promptly knocked his hands away and the other covered him with a revolver.

“Stand up!” barked the first, and the second said, “You can take him on your carrier. Mine’s full.”

“Damned if I will. This is wasting time. You—” to Colemore—“sit down there and give yourself up to somebody else. I don’t want you.”

“No use talking like that, he doesn’t understand you,” said the other. “Listen. Something coming.”

A noise, which Colemore had thought was merely inside his own head, grew rapidly louder and a column of light tanks came fast down the road. The despatch riders signalled them to stop.

“Prisoner just given himself up,” they said. “Can you take him on? We can’t.”

The tank commander stuck his head out and called upon his Maker to witness that he was sick to death of prisoners. “Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. Millions of them,” he said lyrically. “All over the place. This is a fighting unit, not a—” something —“peripatetic prison camp. I’ve got to report to Hazebrouck, not play about giving free rides to the accursed English.”

“Shoot him, then,” said the despatch rider.

“Can’t do that, it’s against orders. Much as I’d like to. Damned nuisance.”

“Take him to Hazebrouck, then. You can dump him there. Here! Stand up, you——”

But Colemore had collapsed in a heap in the road. When he came to himself he was uncomfortably sprawled on the top of the tank with a rope through his belt to keep him from sliding off. He saw above him the corner of a large house with a smashed gable-end, and the tank came to a stop. Somebody untied the rope and he fell off.

He was hauled to his feet, cuffed, marched across the road and pushed into a room where there was a bench, so he sat on it. Unmeasured time passed, and somebody brought him a bowl of soup and some bread, never had any meal he had ever eaten tasted so good. He was feeling almost cheerful when a German officer, with escort, came to interrogate him. They started, naturally by searching him, and the gold cigarette-case, ivory pocket-knife and other small treasures were laid out on a table. In reply to questions he gave Major Brampton’s name, rank, and regiment, but when asked about the whereabouts and destination of his unit he replied with perfect truth, “I don’t know.”

The German scowled. “I suppose you will tell me next that you’ve no idea where you saw them last.”

“Yes,” said Colemore ambiguously.

“Where are they now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you run away from them, or did they run away from you?”

“Neither,” said Colemore. “What is more, you know perfectly well you have no business to ask me such questions and I decline to answer. You have my name, rank, and regiment and that is all you are entitled to ask.”

“You are impertinent,” said the German, “and if it were not that your whole army is so totally defeated that details no longer matter, I would make you regret it. Learn this, we Germans do not obey laws, we make them for subject races to obey. Take him away.”

The escort closed in, but Colemore said, “My things, please,” indicating the little heap on the table.

“You may have your handkerchief, give it to him, Schultz. The other things are much

too good for a prisoner.”

So Colemore was marched away and the last he saw of Major Brampton’s cigarette-case was in the hands of the German officer. Colemore remarked to himself that it didn’t matter, it wasn’t his anyway.

There followed a long journey on foot, in lorries and by rail, during which he wondered whether there would be any other officers of Brampton’s regiment in the prison camp to which he was being sent, and what would happen when they realized he was an impostor. It would not help matters if he told the truth and said he was Anthony Colemore; the whisky case was sufficiently recent and notorious for them to recognize that name at once. An escaped jail-bird masquerading as a brother officer—no. Some other story must be presented.

By the time he reached the camp he had five different explanations, all convincing, ready for use according to the circumstances in which he found himself, but none of them were wanted. Brampton had been acting as liaison officer far from his own unit, and no other officer from his regiment was captured at that time or sent to that camp. One or two of the elder men there looked at him rather askance when he mentioned the name of Aylwin Brampton; Colemore wondered why, scenting some scandal. He had the sense to keep quiet and unobtrusive, and gradually came to be accepted as just another fellow-prisoner.

Major Brampton’s arrival at his particular Oflag was reported in due course by the German authorities to the British, a procedure which made Colemore nervous; he had not thought of that happening when he changed identities with the late Major. He looked forward with considerable anxiety to letters from home, possibly legal papers to be signed, even a power-of-attorney to enable someone or other to carry on his affairs in his absence. In due course a letter came. It was headed “Rock Hall, Rook’s Nest, Yorkshire;” he looked at the signature which was merely “Lena.”

“My dear Aylwin,

“I am sure you will believe me when I say how immensely relieved I was to hear that you are safe and sound although a prisoner-of-war, and not even, apparently, wounded. Tom Moggett came home with a story of your having been so severely wounded that you were not likely to live, and after five months had passed without a word from you I assumed that this story was true, and a memorial service was held for you at Rook’s Nest on October the 11th which I considered a suitable and appropriate date. (‘I wonder why appropriate?’ thought Colemore. ‘My birthday, perhaps?’) It was very well attended, considering all things. (‘Considering what things, for heaven’s sake?’) After which, I thought it best to consult my solicitors with a view to getting things settled up, as a state of uncertainty is always so inconvenient, but they strongly advised me to wait for more definite proof one way or the other, pointing out that the power-of-attorney you gave me would cover most contingencies for an indefinite period. (‘Cold-blooded female!’ snorted Colemore. ‘Who the devil is she? My sister’). As the only contingency not covered is very unlikely to arise, I assented, and it is as well I did.

“The last thing I should ever wish to do, Aylwin, is to reproach an unhappy

man in your miserable condition, but I do feel I owe it to myself to protest against your inconsiderate silence. The unfortunate estrangement between us does not relieve you from the obligations of common courtesy towards your wife. However, I do not wish to labour this point, and will only add renewed assurances of my relief that you have been spared. I shall be very glad to hear from you as soon as possible; I know many people whose relations were taken prisoner during the retreat and they have all had letters, or postcards, or both, from them long ago. It puts me in an invidious position to have to admit that I have not heard from you. I am sure you will understand this.

“If there is anything you want which it is possible for me to send you, please let me know and I will do my utmost to fulfil any wish you may express.

“With my best wishes for a speedy end to this dreadful war and hoping that you are well and as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, believe me.

“Yours affectionately,

“Lena.”

“Well, well,” said Colemore, digesting the letter gradually. “Poor old Brampton, and what a cat! Wasn’t she in a rage too! I suppose it did make her look rather an ass, having a memorial service—not so wasted as she thinks, by the way. Contingency not likely to arise? I have it, she means her marrying again. What a—well, I don’t wonder they were ‘estranged,’ I wonder he didn’t brain her with a chair-leg. What a letter to write to a poor prisoner and captive, I don’t think Brampton would answer it. I’m sure I shan’t anyway. Raspberries to Lena.”

So Colemore made no attempt to reply. Nine months later came another letter, much shorter, a striking mixture of plaintiveness and exasperation. He did not answer this one, either; the years passed on and he heard no more, though he still wondered sometimes what the “all things considered” were which would keep people from attending that memorial service. Presumably the same as had caused some of his fellow-prisoners to look coldly upon him when he first arrived.

Indeed, it was not until three-and-a-half years later, when he was persuasively interviewed by the same German who had called upon Tanner, Nicholls, Little and Abbott, that light began to dawn. The grey-haired officer with the chip off his right ear had been very polite, even apologetic. It was most unfortunate that his identity had not been discovered sooner. It was deplorable that the nephew of Sir Oliver Brampton, that enlightened Englishman, that true friend of the German Reich, now being victimized by the British for his opinions—that his nephew should have been allowed to languish in a prisoner-of-war camp for over three years. It was in-the-highest-degree-lamentable.

“These things will happen,” murmured Colemore, and on pretence of hitching up his trousers pinched himself to make sure this was not a dream. So this was why Colonel Vaughan-Mordaunt had looked as though he smelt something nasty when——

“Shall we now speak German?” asked his interviewer.

“I don’t speak German,” said Colemore, and looked him straight in the face.

“But—in private—between ourselves——”

“Not at any time. I never could,” said Colemore firmly.

“No doubt you have your reasons,” said the German. “Wise reasons. Your fellow-prisoners——”

Colemore sighed impatiently and the German tried another tack.

“Since you insist, that shall remain secret,” he said. “Reverting for a moment to your unfortunate and infinitely-to-be-regretted imprisonment, the Reich is anxious to make every reparation in its power——”

“Not even the Reich,” said Colemore sadly, “can give me back the wasted years.” He was beginning to enjoy himself.

“Alas, no. Nevertheless, what can be done shall be done. Listen, I have a proposition to make.”

The German unfolded at considerable length the part which the distinguished Major Aylwin Brampton had it in his power to play in the unfolding drama of the Reich’s inevitable triumph. “We are—I speak frankly to a man of your standing and discrimination—desperately short of reliable and intelligent agents in England. The rank and file, the letter-boxes, the messenger-boys if I may so express myself, we have these. It is the heads of departments, the managerial staff, the directors, who are so deplorably lacking.”

“Nasty blow,” said Colemore sympathetically, “when they swept up the British Union of Fascists.”

“Very awkward. Yet their usefulness was dubious because their sympathies were known.”

“What about mine?” said Colemore, in a spirit of genuine enquiry which the German took for sarcasm. After all, if one has to play a part it’s always as well to run through the script if the producer will let you.

“You had the superior intelligence not to appear publicly attached to any of your uncle’s enthusiasms. None but a few of us, in the inner council of German Intelligence, knew of your real convictions.”

“Yet you kept me in jail for nearly four years,” said Colemore bitterly. The German began to apologize again, but the prisoner cut him short.

“How do you propose to start operations?”

“You will, if you follow my advice, take a short course at one of our training centres for intelligence work. Believe me, you will find it helpful. Then,” said the German triumphantly, “you will escape and make your way to England. We will help you, of course. Every facility—you shall be landed on the English coast from a submarine——”

“Oh no, I won’t,” said Colemore. “The English aren’t asleep, you know, especially along the coasts.”

“There are places,” said the German. “That surprises you, but believe me, it is frequently done. You will be met on arrival and looked after.”

“My escape will be much more convincing if I find my own way across.”

“No,” said the German obstinately. “These are the orders and even the highest of us in Germany have learned to obey. That is why our Germany is so great.”

Colemore dropped the argument and the interview came to an end. Two days later he

was transferred from his prison camp to Liesensee, where he made the acquaintance of the other four Englishmen, Little, Abbott, Nicholls and Tanner. They told him frankly that they were all in this with the one aim, to get home again, and that they were going to give themselves up immediately upon landing. Colemore himself had other views. If the Germans themselves introduced him into their spy-ring, well, so much the worse for them.

The five who were going to England had, of course, to look perfectly ordinary in the matter of dress when they arrived. No foreign cut or alien cloth for them. Their measurements were accurately taken by a fellow-student who had been a tailor in the days of his innocence, and these were sent to an English tailor in Berlin. The English tailor himself had naturally been consigned to an internment camp long before, but well-trained assistants remained to clothe the Nazi bosses in mufti of the best London cut. Even the Nazis admit that London can cut a suit. In due course the garments came, were fitted, altered where necessary, and finally delivered.

“These are beautiful suits,” said the Nazi officials enviously. “Even our leaders have none better than these.”

“It’s an excellent fit,” said Abbott, regarding himself with pleasure. “I’ve never had a better, even in England.”

“They’ll pass in a crowd,” said Colemore, looking critically at his overcoat lapels. Tanner shook himself comfortably into his; he said nothing but the strain in his expression relaxed a little as though already he felt himself halfway home.

“To look at you,” said the Germans, “one would say that you were a manufacturer of munitions at least, if not a Secretary at one of the more important Ministries. No ordinary man can obtain clothes like these.”

“They are quite every-day suits for England,” said Nicholls bluntly.

Colemore strolled thoughtfully away. His plan seemed to have become not easier, but a trifle less impossible.

He had the luck one day to find a party badge lying on the path where someone had dropped it. He let his handkerchief fall over it and picked up both together. One never knew, it might prove to be of use.

Finally, they were issued with temporary identity cards to last them until they left the Continent. The cards bore their photographs and a full description of them; on the outside was printed “On Special Service for the Reich.”

Colemore counted his blessings. Not much money, but an imposing suit with creases down its trousers, a Nazi party badge, and a Special Service card. The card would be better if it had not the name of Aylwin Brampton inside, but it was written in an odd shade of purple ink and he could see no way of altering it.

A few days before the end of the course he had another interview with the grey-haired German.

“We regard you as the leader of this party,” he said. “These others, though they will be extremely useful, are not of your intellectual calibre, Major Brampton. You will reassure them if they appear nervous. You will remind them, if they waver, of the fate in store for those who betray the Reich. And I may as well add, that what will be done to them will be as a gently rocking to sleep compared to what will happen to you if you fail us,” he added, and his lip lifted like a wolf’s.

Colemore thought it wiser to ignore this, and the German unrolled a large-scale map of the south-western coast of England.

“You will all be landed about here,” he said, pointing at Bridport. “Not all in the same place, but singly; all within a few miles of each other. There are five suitable spots, here —” his pencil pointed them out. “Singly, you can be landed easily, the whole party together would increase the risk. The landings will be made on the night of January the eighth. The tides and the moon will then be suitable. You will be met on landing by a man who will say, ‘How far have you come?’ You will reply, ‘Forty-seven miles as the crow flies.’ Then he will say, ‘But it’s sixty-three miles by road.’”

“Forty-seven, sixty-three,” repeated Colemore.

“Good. You will all be taken separately to a house near London where you will meet again, and it is then that I look to you to establish your mental supremacy over the other four and encourage them to maintain their purpose.”

“Our purpose, you mean.”

“Our purpose, it is well said. I can see, Major Brampton, that your services will be invaluable to the Reich and you will find Germany not ungrateful.”

Colemore wished the German would not talk so exactly like a leading article in *Das Reich*. He made one attempt to obtain the address of the house near London. “Suppose anything goes wrong and I am not met on landing,” he said. “Where do I make for?”

“Nothing will go wrong.”

“But the man might have a heart-attack, or get run over on his way to the beach.”

“Then another will take his place.”

“It certainly seems as though you have plenty of your people about,” said Colemore, with a laugh.

“Messenger-boys, as I said before, messenger-boys. You will meet no one of importance until you reach the house of which I spoke. Then you will receive detailed instructions.”

“It is well,” said Colemore solemnly.

Three days later they were all five conducted to Berlin by train, a crowded local train. They had two guards with them but they were quite friendly, and the party was a cheerful one.

“Quite an end-of-term feeling about it, isn’t there?” said Abbott.

VI

DISAPPEARANCE IN BERLIN

IT was impossible for Colemore to make any definite plans in advance since he had no idea how their journey was to be arranged. He merely filled his mind with readiness to seize any opportunity which offered itself, and waited.

As the train drew in through the suburbs of Berlin, their guards rose to their feet and collected their belongings, telling the five Englishmen to do the same.

"We have not long between trains," they said. "This one is so crowded that if we wait our turn to alight we may miss the connection."

"We're going on by train, then, are we?" asked Abbott. "Where to?"

"Brussels."

Colemore managed to place himself next the door into the corridor, he had only a small attaché case in his hand. The guard turned to him and told him to try to work his way along the corridor to the exit door at the end of the coach. Continental trains do not have doors at intervals along the railway coaches as British carriages do. "Try and make a way for us," added the guard. "*Herrgott*, what a press of people."

Colemore nodded and slid, with apologies, round the person of a fat lady with many parcels. In passing, he kicked over one of her baskets and the contents fell out. She expressed loud exasperation and stooped to pick up the things, no cork in the neck of any bottle ever fitted better than did her portly form the narrow corridor. Colemore, apparently unaware of what he had done, went on. By the time the train was slowing down at the platform he was only the third from the door. Two young men in front of him dropped out while yet the train was moving and Colemore followed them.

The guards had the tickets, he must bluff his way past the barrier without one. He strode, a masterful and confident figure, towards the gate, slipping the Nazi Party badge into his button-hole as he went. The ticket-collector held out his hand.

"My servant has the tickets," said Colemore imperiously. "He is coming behind with my baggage."

The man hesitated, noticed the well-cut clothes and the Party badge, met the hard stare in Colemore's eyes, and yielded. The Englishman passed him, walked straight across the entrance-hall into the street and kept going. The hunt for him would be up in ten minutes' time, the first necessity was to get out of Berlin. A tram going west for a start.

He paused at a street-corner to get his bearings and saw a man in S.S. uniform apparently staring at him. Without hesitation Colemore turned into the first shop which offered itself, it happened to be an optician's.

He spent some minutes choosing a monocle. It should have one of those almost invisible clips which attach themselves to the eyebrow and thus increase stability. It should also have a broad black ribbon. By the time the distinguished Herr was suited the Nazi outside had strolled away. Colemore adjusted the monocle, tilted his grey Homburg hat slightly to the left, and walked out.

He swung himself on to a tram which appeared to be going in the right direction; when the conductor asked where he wanted to go he said, "All the way," in a bored voice and offered a five-mark note. The conductor grumbled at having to give so much change but eventually produced it, and the tram rumbled on. Streets became more suburban, an occasional field appeared, the tram emptied and the conductor went forward and wound round the destination indicator ready for the return trip. This was evidently the terminus; when the tram stopped Colemore immediately alighted.

Just beyond this point another tram-line continued; upon it, ready to start, stood one of those country trams which serve Germany's rural districts so well if so unpicturesquely. It had a powered car in front and a string of two or three towed coaches behind; its route-board gave the names of several places Colemore had never heard of, ending with Bechen. He decided that Bechen would do.

Bechen, when he reached it two hours later, proved to be a pleasant small place with a large and comely inn. It was upon a wide main road; just against the inn at the village cross-roads stood a sign-post of which one arm said, menacingly, Berlin; while the opposite one offered a friendly choice of Stendal, Obisfelde, Lehrte and Hanover. Colemore looked at it with approval and went into the inn for lunch.

The innkeeper said that certainly the distinguished Herr could lunch on such poor food as the war permitted. There was soup and game, for a sweet his wife would make an omelette. Let him help the gracious Herr to remove his overcoat, there was a table by the fire where he would be warm and clear of draughts. This chair, now, could be recommended. A small glass of something to settle the stomach after a cold journey, there was still a very little cherry brandy left. One small minor formality with which he must trouble the Herr—his identity card? It was necessary, as everyone knew, to make an entry in the hotel register of all visitors.

Colemore did not know it and it was an awkward moment. The process of circularizing the police to locate and detain the body of Aylwin Brampton was doubtless already in motion; before long the local constable in every village within a hundred miles of Berlin would be examining hotel registers. A man, they would say accurately, must eat, especially in winter. He hesitated for a moment, turned a confidential gaze upon the innkeeper, and said in a lowered voice, "I will show you this."

He drew out his identity card and displayed its cover with the swastika large and black upon it, below which came the useful words: "On Special Service for the Reich."

The innkeeper saw it and bowed. "One saw at once, naturally, that the Herr was no ordinary man. It is not for me to suggest, but it would perhaps be more discreet if no entry were made in the register?"

"You are a man of no common discernment," said Colemore. "I may, presently, call upon you to help me in another small matter. In the meantime I am, as you say, cold. I think a glass of cherry brandy would go down very pleasantly."

He lunched before the fire, not without qualms whenever heavy footsteps approached the door, and reflected upon the truth of the saying that clothes make the man.

He was well aware, as who was not, of the notorious congestion of Germany's railway system. Enormous quantities of supplies, especially those of an urgent or perishable nature, he knew were sent by road; and this was the main artery to the West from Berlin.

If he could get a lift on a convoy bound for Holland, make his way to Flushing and get into touch with Van Drom, the worst part of his journey would be over. Van Drom would arrange for his transfer to England or put him in touch with somebody who would. At the last moment, when it was too late to stop him, he would send a message to German Intelligence that he was on the point of crossing to England as an escaped prisoner who really had escaped. Once there, he would be ready to take up his duties. If this performance didn't impress them with his outstanding capabilities, nothing would. To escape them and then deliberately to get into contact with them again would prove his good faith.

Having thus established himself upon an unassailable pedestal, he would get into touch with British Intelligence. He should be a pretty useful sort of recruit, and perhaps some day the authorities could be persuaded to forget about that unfinished visit to Maidstone Jail.

He finished his lunch, lit one of the perfectly horrible cigarettes which had been sparingly issued at Liesensee, and summoned the innkeeper.

"I have an urgent and highly confidential journey to make," said Colemore. "It was inadvisable to take my own car, it might be recognized, you understand." The innkeeper nodded wisely, and Colemore continued, "The trains are much too slow for my purpose. If I could happen upon a fast-moving convoy going through to the West, that would serve my purpose admirably."

The innkeeper understood. Oh, absolutely. There were, in fact, many such convoys passing through Bechen, especially towards evening since they liked to travel principally by night. The accursed British Air Force—exactly. He knew some of the regular drivers quite well, they often dropped in for a last nip to keep out the cold on the long night's run. There would certainly be some along presently, let the gracious Herr be at rest, matters would certainly arrange for themselves.

"As soon as possible," urged the gracious Herr, who was feeling anything but restful and becoming more fidgety with every passing moment. How long before the search reached Bechen? "I said, the matter is not only secret but extremely urgent."

"At the earliest possible opportunity," agreed the man. "I will go now and look out." He left the room and Colemore wrapped himself in enforced patience. "'Sister Anne,'" he murmured, "'Sister Anne, is anyone coming?'" He could not sit still, he rose from the comfortable chair and wandered restlessly about the room. "I wish I were a hen, I could hop up and down without appearing eccentric. From the chair to the sofa and back—Calm yourself, Anthony. You'll give the show away."

When the innkeeper eventually returned the gracious Herr was sunk in the depths of the chair before the fire, looking half asleep. If the perspiration was shining on his forehead, doubtless the heat from the blazing logs was responsible.

"I was almost dozing," he said. "Your good fire—have you arranged something?"

"There is a man here who is driving a staff car to Brussels for the use of the High Command there. It is a large limousine—the Herr will be more comfortable than in a lorry."

Anthony Colemore felt that he would be perfectly comfortable on a red-hot gridiron if only it were leaving the Berlin district at a sufficiently high speed. Brussels was not in

Holland, but at least it was in the right direction. "It sounds very suitable," he said carelessly. "I will speak to the man."

"I will bring him in," said the innkeeper.

The driver proved to be a sandy-haired young man with a red face and large hands with chapped knuckles. He gave the Nazi salute and introduced himself as Erich Feinberg, transport driver.

Colemore did not give himself a name at all. The omission would add to the desirable mystery surrounding him and also save him the trouble of inventing one. Besides, what are transport drivers that they should be told names?

"Well, Feinberg," said Colemore pleasantly, "our friend here tells me that you are taking an empty car through to Brussels. You will be serving the Reich well if you will take me with you."

Feinberg looked attentively at him and evidently decided that here was one to be treated with respect.

"It is as the Herr wishes," he said. "It will be an honour to drive the Herr. When will your Excellency be ready to start?"

"At once, if possible."

"I will go and start the car," said the driver. He saluted smartly and went out; Colemore rewarded the innkeeper for his good works and followed in time to see Feinberg affixing to the small flagstaff on the bonnet of the car a blue pennon with a red bar across it. Colemore asked no question and walked to the door of the seat beside the driver.

Feinberg hurried back. "Excuse me, the Herr will be more comfortable in the back seat." He fussed round making Colemore comfortable, a performance which nearly sent him mad, and at last got into his own seat and drove off. Colemore leaned back, quite limp with relief, and found himself unexpectedly remembering quite a lot of the *Te Deum*.

He became gradually aware that as the night came on the traffic on the road steadily increased. Dim lights advanced and passed continually; Feinberg pulled out frequently to overtake half-seen vehicles rumbling along in columns. Sometimes lights were waved at them and the car slowed down, the beam fell on the little blue-and-red pennon and then switched to the impassive figure with the black-ribboned monocle and the grey Homburg hat in the back seat. After which they were hastily waved on, even convoys paused to let them pass. Again Feinberg explained.

"It is very convenient to be able to mount the pennon," he said. "Had I not had a distinguished passenger it would not have been permitted. Though doubtless I babble to the Herr of that which he has known all his life."

"I seem to have heard somewhere that there is such a custom," admitted Colemore humorously, and the driver chuckled.

Anthony began to wonder what he should do next. Berlin had been happily left behind, but he had no wish to go to Brussels. For one thing, it was in Belgium whereas he wanted to go to Holland; and in anything but a staff car with a pennon on the bonnet, there would be an examination of papers at the frontier.

On the other hand, the sooner he was out of Germany the better; even an Occupied Country would be better than that, yes, even the wrong Occupied Country. He had heard

from recently arrived prisoners at his camp, stories of the very healthy resistance movements in the various countries; the White Brigade of Belgium, for example. But since their very existence depended upon their being difficult to find, it was not easy to see how he was to get into touch with them. Did one just knock at a door and say, "I am an escaped British prisoner-of-war, please help me?" Definitely a gamble.

Anthony Colemore sighed deeply, sat up and lit the last of his revolting cigarettes. Cabbage leaves and dried lavender, to judge by the taste. Feinberg saw the flare of the match reflected in the windscreen, and half-turned his head. "I trust the Herr is not too tired with the journey," he said. "It is cramping, to sit for too long."

"I am accustomed to long journeys," said Colemore loftily. "Besides, I have been asleep," he added in a more friendly tone.

"I am glad," said Feinberg. "Where does your Excellency wish to be put down?"

Colemore hesitated momentarily and decided to continue playing the hand which a kindly Providence had dealt him. "Actually," he said, "my business is in Holland, not in Brussels at all. I must go on from there."

"It is simple," said Feinberg. "Your Excellency has but to declare himself at the car pool in Brussels and a car, complete with driver, will be instantly available."

The imp in Colemore acclaimed this idea, suggesting that it was magnificent and so outrageous that it would certainly succeed. Wiser counsels, however, prevailed.

"But that is exactly what I do not wish to do—to declare myself," he said, with exact truth. "Had it been as simple as that I should have travelled in my own car all the way. But it might have been recognized, and it is above all things necessary that I arrive unexpectedly. That is why I am in this car, my good Feinberg."

"I spoke as a fool," said the abashed driver. "The innkeeper at Bechen did indeed tell me that your Excellency wished to travel incognito, but I had not thought it out—I beg the Herr to excuse——"

"It was not to be expected that you should," said Colemore with kindly condescension. "If I could, therefore, pick up another convoy going north from Brussels, and in the meantime find some place where I could remain in seclusion—and indeed, I should be glad to rest——"

"It is simple," said Feinberg again. "We shall arrive in Brussels in the afternoon, having had breakfast and two hours' rest—if the urgency of the Herr's business permits that I rest——"

"Certainly, Feinberg, certainly. I have no wish to slaughter the willing horse."

"Also, we shall lunch on the road. We arrive at Brussels at about seventeen hours and I will take the Herr to my billet. It is a small hotel, not such as he is accustomed to, but clean, and they will provide a room at my request. There your Excellency can rest until two hours after midnight when my friend Steiger comes through with a convoy going north to Rotterdam. He will call at my billet—with the Herr's permission, we have been friends since boyhood, we come from the same village and I have a parcel for him from home, it is all arranged. Steiger will go fast, for he is travelling unladen. If the Herr would care to travel with Steiger——"

VII

PORTRAIT OF A COLLABORATOR

COLEMORE continued to receive, with incredulous delight, the favours of Fortune. Steiger's convoy duly arrived and the Englishman was stowed away on a heap of Army blankets in one of the lorries. Colemore was quite sure he would be unable to close his eyes at all until they were safely over the frontier, but the convoy rumbled on at a steady twenty miles an hour, it was warm among the blankets, and he was sound asleep long before they reached Antwerp. He woke up and peered out between the curtains at the tail of the lorry to find that it was just getting light, bitterly cold, and pouring with rain which looked like turning to snow at any moment. He had no watch and could only guess the time to be about eight o'clock, they must have passed the frontier long ago. A flat straight road streaming with rain; away to his right—since he was looking backwards—flat lands extended to limitless water apparently on the same level. On the left, more flat land without water except that which was falling upon it. Behind, the other vehicles of the convoy dripped and splashed their monotonous way. Anthony Colemore returned to his blankets.

The convoy stopped at Bergen-op-Zoom for breakfast; Colemore left it at that point and took the train for Flushing. It was as easy as that.

He walked out of Flushing station, turned up his coat-collar, having removed his Party badge, and made for Van Drom's house. This town was almost home, he knew it well. Here was the statue of De Ruyter, gazing sternly into space, there was the flower-shop where he once bought white roses for that girl's fête day—what was her name—Van Drom's sister. She married an American and went to the States. Fortunate for her. Failing Van Drom—if he was away, for example—there were several people he could go to, that is if they were still there. There was Brouncker at the Mariner's Welcome down by the docks, he was probably still in the same place. He used to store the whisky from the time it mysteriously arrived from the warehouse until it was put on board the cabin cruiser; she used to lie in that little basin just behind the weighing house, and the Mariner's Welcome was in the street behind.

Not far now to Van Drom's house. Here was the Palais de Dance where those Swedish sailors threw the commissionaire through the staircase window on Boxing Night, 1937. He fell in a snowdrift but it broke his leg all the same. Now round this corner. The house is occupied, anyway, smoke coming from one of the chimneys, curtains at the windows. Colemore walked up the three steps to the front door and rang the bell. There was no immediate answer, he stood at the door waiting; when he bent his head the rain cascaded off the brim of his hat.

At last the door was unlocked; he looked up eagerly but the man who opened it was a stranger.

"Mynheer Van Drom," said Colemore, "is he at home?"

"Not at the moment," said the man in a friendly voice. "Will you not come in out of the wet?"

“Thank you, it is a dreadful morning,” Colemore walked in and stood in the hall, dripping water upon the tiled floor. At least he could wait in the dry until Van Drom returned.

“Let me help you off with that wet coat,” said the man, “then we will go to the kitchen, it is at least warm in there. I must introduce myself, my name is Willem Geerds, a friend of Van Drom’s. I am living here for the present.”

Colemore followed him to the kitchen, which was empty. “The housekeeper,” said Geerds carelessly, “is out shopping, poor thing. Fancy standing in queues in this weather.”

“The old lady,” said Anthony, “Van Drom’s mother, is she still alive?”

“No. She died, in 1940 I think. Before I came here, I never knew her.”

Colemore nodded, and moved over to the tiled stove, rubbing his frozen fingers to restore the circulation. “If only it would stop raining and freeze instead,” he said, “one would not feel it so much. It is this awful wetness that seems to get into one’s bones.”

“Will you not sit down?” said Geerds. “Yes, there will be much sickness if this weather continues.” He opened the stove door and threw in some small billets of wood. There followed a pause, as if neither man was willing to be responsible for opening the conversation.

“When do you expect Van Drom back?” asked Colemore.

“Not to-day, I fear. He has gone away on business and left me to look after things in his absence. I am in his confidence in all his affairs,” added Geerds pointedly.

“I am disappointed to find him away. I was hoping that he would be able to help me in a small matter,” said Colemore cautiously.

“I thought perhaps you might need a little help, if I am not being indiscreet. It is unusual to see unmistakably English clothes in Holland these days,” added Geerds with a laugh.

“I am beginning to find them something of an embarrassment,” admitted Colemore. “No well-dressed man should look so conspicuous.”

“The sight of them is refreshing, they bring back memories of other and—I am taking a risk with a stranger—undoubtedly happier days.”

“They may refresh some people, but they might annoy others,” said Colemore.

“That is so. Those whom it is dangerous to annoy. If—forgive me—if it was a change of clothing which you hoped to obtain from Van Drom, I expect I could help you just as well.”

“Thank you. That was certainly one thing, and I should be very grateful indeed. When do you expect him back?”

“It is childish,” said Geerds frankly, “for us to go on fencing with each other like this when we are obviously on the same side. We must be, or you would not have come, dressed like that, to Van Drom for help. I will be plain with you and tell you that I have not the least idea when Van Drom will be back. He has gone to England.”

“Has he, indeed! Well, I don’t know why I’m surprised, I might have expected it.”

“He was engaged here on work of some importance,” said Geerds. “I daresay you know what it was. Then one or two little things began to look suspicious and we thought it

would be safer if he left. I am doing my poor best to fill the gap. Now you know, and if you're a member of the Gestapo my number's up—but I don't think you are somehow."

Colemore laughed. "Frankness for frankness," he said. "I am an escaped British prisoner-of-war, that's what I am, and I was hoping Van Drom would help me to get across."

"So you're English, are you? Well, I'm—but why on earth such very English clothes?"

"That's a long story and I'll tell you sometime. I've bluffed my way across Germany with their help and this," said Colemore, producing the Nazi party badge. "I had the luck to pick it up and it's served me well. I think its usefulness is now finished, it would be safer in the stove. By the way, I appreciate your tact in not asking my name. I'll tell you if you like, but perhaps you'd rather not know. It might be safer—our temporary masters are not too gentle when they want to know something."

"As you like," said Geerdts, "though the name would be safe with me. One more thing I haven't got to tell won't make much odds among so many."

Colemore would have told him but for the fact that he was not sure whether he had better say Colemore or Brampton, or even Jean Legrin. Life does tend to become complicated with so many aliases. "Oh, call me Tony," he said. "That's what Van Drom always called me, and it will sound all right in this house. Does the grandfather clock still lose in the winter and gain in the summer?"

"Yes, I can't cure it. Well, what about some lunch, and I think then you'd better retire upstairs before the housekeeper comes back. It might be as well if she didn't see you—she doesn't live in, you can come down again when she's gone. She's new to me and I'm not quite sure, you understand?"

Colemore remained in a bedroom over the kitchen until the housekeeper had returned from her shopping expedition, prepared the evening meal and gone again. He amused himself very comfortably by changing into warm dry clothes of less remarkable appearance kindly provided by Geerdts, having a wash and a shave, and sitting in an armchair thinking how lucky he was until he fell asleep. Good chap, Geerdts. . . .

At the supper-table the small portions reminded him of something he had forgotten; or, being a prisoner, had not fully realized. "I say," he said in horrified tones, "I can't live on your rations. I'm not going to starve you, it's not to be thought of."

"Doesn't matter a bit," said Geerdts cheerfully. "It's only for a few days. I hope to be able to arrange for your passage by Monday next at latest."

"Splendid, but—to-day's Tuesday isn't it?—that's six days ahead. I'm certainly not going to live on you for six days. I know a man who'll certainly be able to help me. There's a flourishing Black Market in Holland, isn't there? Yes, and if there wasn't he'd certainly start one. I'll go and see him to-morrow."

"If I might advise," said Geerdts carefully, "I think it would be very much wiser if you didn't go out until you leave here for good."

"What? Stay in doors for five days on end? Not if I know it."

"It would be safer," urged Geerdts. "You might be seen to come out of the house."

"Then I'll go over the garden wall," said Colemore. "It wouldn't be the first time."

“If you were seen doing that,” said Geerdts, laughing, “that would indeed settle it.”

“Why should I be seen at all?” asked Colemore, turning obstinate. “I won’t go out in the daylight since you advise against it, but I shall be all right after dark. I’ll go to-night, not to-morrow; the sky’s cleared and it isn’t even raining.”

“I must really,” said Geerdts, persisting, “ask you, as a personal favour, to stay here. To wander about a German-occupied town is most unsafe—most.”

“That’s all right,” said Anthony, with a laugh. He got up and slipped into the shabby but warm overcoat which Geerdts silently offered him. “I’ll go and try to rustle up some provisions, shan’t be long.”

“Where does your Black Marketeer live—is it far?” asked Geerdts anxiously.

“Oh, no, quite close,” said Anthony untruthfully. As a matter of fact it was some distance, but he wasn’t giving away Brouncker and the Mariner’s Welcome to anybody, however well-intended. Rather tactless of Geerdts to ask. “This the latchkey?” went on Colemore. “Thanks awfully, very trusting of you. Cheerio, see you later.”

He pursued his unobtrusive way towards the dock area, making sure at intervals that he was not being followed, and approached the Mariner’s Welcome with caution. The place looked much as it did in the old days; not quite so full and a lot shabbier, but basically the same. A low beamed ceiling, a sanded floor, round iron tables here and there with bentwood chairs grouped round them; not so many lights as there used to be, a bar right across the far end with two copper pots on either side in which the square green shoots of hyacinth bulbs just showed above the mould. Colemore even recognized the pots. The room was about half full of men who all stopped talking and stared at him as he entered; Brouncker himself was behind the bar, not so healthily florid as he used to be and his hair much greyer, but still a square reassuring figure. He looked at Anthony without recognition as he crossed the room, after all it was five years since they had met.

Colemore leaned on the bar and asked if there was any Schnapps in the house.

“Not to call Schnapps,” said Brouncker surlily. “There’s spirits, of a sort.”

When he returned with the glass Anthony leaned yet further across the bar and said in a low tone, “None of that whisky left that we used to run across?”

Brouncker stared at him and the Englishman added, “Don’t you remember me? Colemore.”

The Dutchman nodded, opened the flap of the bar and said, “You’d better come inside.”

Colemore passed through the bar and between the tattered red curtains, once so smart, into the back room. There was a lanky lad in there whom Brouncker sent out to mind the bar, he then carefully shut the door behind him.

“Mynheer Colemore, this is a very great surprise. How the devil you get here, eh? I am delighted to see you.”

“From a prisoner-of-war camp,” said Colemore, shaking hands with him warmly. “I got tired of being shut up, so I left.”

Brouncker’s broad face creased with laughter. “I seem to remember,” he said, “you got tired of being shut up once before, eh? Or is it tactless to mention it?”

“Not at all. I wish *Miss Impertinence* was still tied up in the basin behind here, she’d

be useful now.”

“Your little boat, yes. What became of her?”

“Confiscated by the British Customs authorities, I don’t know where she is now.”

“Perhaps she was running something better than whisky at Dunkirk, eh?”

Colemore’s face lit up. “Oh, probably she was. If only I’d got there I might have got a lift home in her. Would have been strange, wouldn’t it?”

“You want to get across now, eh?”

“Yes. I think that’ll be all right. Geerdts is fixing it up for me.”

“Who?” said Brouncker sharply.

“Geerdts. Willem Geerdts. He lives in Van Drom’s house. I went straight there when I arrived this morning, but apparently Van Drom’s gone to England. Don’t you know Geerdts?”

“Van Drom has not gone to England,” said Brouncker.

“Where is he then?”

“In heaven, no doubt. He was a good man.”

“What! When did this happen?”

Brouncker thought for a moment. “Twenty months ago.”

“But—doesn’t Geerdts know?”

“He should. He sent him there.”

Colemore turned white. “Look here. Are you certain of this?”

“Not certain, no. I have no proof. Only what you call morally certain, eh? Geerdts has been very helpful in getting your airmen out, and at first we thought Van Drom had just been unlucky. Then there were others in the Underground Movement with whom Geerdts came in contact who also were unlucky. Too many of them. So we watch him very closely and upon the first definite proof—for we are just men, we do not condemn without proof like the damned Nazis—upon the first proof, we act.”

Colemore emptied his glass and Brouncker took it away from him. “Now we have some real Schnapps, eh? Not that muck. I am sorry I did not know you when you came in, you looked a stranger and here we distrust strangers these days.”

Anthony laughed a little. “I seem to remember that you always did. Customs officials or Nazi officials, what’s the odds?”

Brouncker chuckled. “You are right. It seems the war has not changed either of us so much, eh? We still dislike the same things we disliked before. But, Mynheer Colemore, that you have been with Geerdts, that is serious. You told him who you were, eh?”

“Not my name. Only that I was an escaped British prisoner, and a friend of Van Drom’s.”

“You must not go back to Geerdts,” said Brouncker decisively.

“No? I’m not so sure. Listen, Brouncker.” Colemore told him the whole story; how he had enlisted into German Intelligence, how he had given them the slip to prove his abilities and would get into contact with them again to prove his good faith. How he intended, on reaching England, to approach British Intelligence and work for them with the Germans.

“You play a dangerous game, Mynheer. I would not give twopence for your life,” said Brouncker frankly.

“Never mind, it’ll be fun. And perhaps, when it’s all over, the British authorities will forget about Maidstone Jail. About Geerds, though. He does not know that I suspect him; if I go back to-night he will be sure I don’t. You want proof, perhaps I can obtain it.”

“You will not know from one moment to another when the Gestapo are coming to arrest you,” objected Brouncker. “He may have denounced you already.”

“If they arrive I will floor them with this,” said Colemore, producing his special pass. “Geerds hasn’t seen that yet. I don’t know why I didn’t show it to him, I just like keeping something in reserve on principle.”

“But,” said Brouncker, “if they see that they will say ‘Ha. This is that escaped prisoner who is to be arrested.’ ”

“I am hoping that the order for my arrest has not yet reached so far. If it has I must either bluff it out or dive through the nearest window,” said Colemore cheerfully.

“You are quite mad, but such madness sometimes succeeds when caution fails. Tell me, is there anything I can do for you, eh?”

“I want a letter sent to England at once, to warn them about the arrival of the other four men who were with me. I want to get across myself when I’ve attended to Geerds. To-night, I want some foodstuffs to take back to the house, that was what I came out for, or so I said.”

“Write your letter here,” said Brouncker. “There is a British airman being taken across to-night, if I am quick I can give it to him before he starts, he can carry it. Will you not go with him, eh? It would be much better.”

“No,” said Colemore. “There is Geerds to see to first—Van Drom was a friend of mine.”

“Very well. Here is pen and paper, write your letter while I find you some food. Bread, bacon, an egg or two and a very little butter. Also a small piece of soap, if you wish.”

Colemore sat down and wrote the letter which told British Intelligence exactly where and when to meet Abbott, Little, Nicholls and Tanner on the coast of Dorset on the night of January the eighth.

VIII

THE "JAN HOUYS" PUTS TO SEA

ANTHONY COLEMORE let himself into Van Drom's house and passed through the hall wondering what he would find awaiting him when he opened the kitchen door. However, there was no one there but the Dutchman, sitting in a rockingchair by the fire reading a book. He looked up pleasantly when Colemore entered.

"I am glad to see you back," said Geerds. "I was beginning to be anxious."

"I was out longer than I intended. Like a fool I lost my way and walked about taking wrong turnings. There was no black-out when I was last in Flushing, I'd forgotten that. Any of this stuff any good?"

Geerds made appreciative remarks about the food Colemore laid on the table. "I shall try to persuade you to introduce me to your Black Marketeer, he's better than mine. I kept the coffee hot, would you like some?"

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough and Colemore retired to bed wondering how on earth he was going to find the proof which Brouncker wanted. Geerds would not keep incriminating papers, he was not that sort of fool. If he were a traitor, Colemore himself was more likely to provide the proof than find it, and the prospect of being avenged by Brouncker and supporting company was no real consolation.

Anthony awoke in the morning with a mind still undecided; there was nothing to do but wait upon circumstance. He could not afford to wait too long; as soon as it occurred to the Gestapo to enquire whether anyone had given a lift to a distinguished-looking gentleman wearing clothes of an English cut and a grey Homburg hat, Feinberg, the transport driver, would talk. So would his boyhood's friend Steiger, who had put Colemore down at Bergen-op-Zoom.

Geerds knocked at the door and entered with a tray containing coffee, rolls and Brouncker's butter, and a rasher of bacon.

"Here is a real English breakfast," he said, "a foretaste of what you will be enjoying at home in a few days' time. I brought it up before the housekeeper comes. Lock your door after me, we don't want her charging in here. I'll get rid of her as early as possible and then you shall come down to lunch. By the way, my young nephew arrives to-day, he starts school to-morrow. He lives with me during the term and goes home for the holidays, he's studying marine engineering."

Colemore thought an escaped prisoner would naturally display a little nervousness.

"How old is your nephew?" he asked. "Can he be trusted not to talk if he sees me?"

"Piet is sixteen. Oh, you can trust him. One sees you have not lived in an occupied country, my dear Tony. Here the children learn in their cradles to keep secrets."

Piet was present at lunch, a tall skinny boy with shy manners, Colemore rather liked him. The day passed slowly by; Anthony remained indoors, but towards the late afternoon Geerds went out for an hour or two. When he returned, Colemore thought there was a slight change in the Dutchman's manner. He was still outwardly friendly but appeared a

little absent-minded as though he were thinking of some other matter. After supper, Colemore and the boy Piet settled down to play draughts and Geerds sat reading, but the pages did not turn very regularly, occasionally he glanced at the clock.

“He’s expecting somebody,” said Anthony to himself, and his nerves tightened.

“Piet, my lad,” said Geerds at the end of a game, “put the draughts away. That’s enough for to-night.”

“But, uncle,” protested Piet, “it’s quite early. Why, I——”

Geerds shot him a look which dried him up as with blotting paper; the boy sighed resignedly and began to put the game away. “Thanks for the game,” said Colemore. “I enjoyed it.”

“Oh, good,” said Piet, his face lighting up, “we’ll play again to-morrow night, shall we?”

“Of course,” agreed Colemore. “I think I’ll go and get a mouthful of fresh air—and possibly of something a bit stronger—before we turn in. Shan’t be long, Geerds.”

“Not to-night,” said Geerds peremptorily. “Piet, go and sit in the other room, and when you hear a knock at the front door, open it.”

“Now don’t start that all over again,” said Anthony as the boy left the room. “We had it all out last night.”

“I want to talk to you.”

Colemore raised his eyebrows at the tone, and sat on the edge of the table as one who merely pauses in the act of going. “Well, what is it?”

“At the risk of being indiscreet, I must ask you a few more questions about yourself. At which camp were you imprisoned?”

“I’d rather not tell you. Why d’you want to know?”

“When did you leave it?”

“On October the eleventh, last year,” said Colemore, reckoning that the truth would be more confusing than any lie.

“October the eleventh. And your name, rank and regiment?”

“I told you before that you would be safer not knowing that.”

“All the same, I must know it, please.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Geerds, turning on him with a snarl, “no prisoner answering your description has escaped from any camp.”

“How do you know that?” flashed Colemore.

“That’s my business. In my opinion, Tony—my dear Tony—you are not an escaped prisoner at all. You are a blasted British spy.”

Anthony stood up defiantly and Geerds immediately produced an unpleasant-looking revolver and levelled it at him.

“You fool,” said Colemore contemptuously. “Look at this.”

Disregarding the revolver, he slipped his hand into his breast-pocket and produced his pass, and held it up so that Geerds could see the cover. “On Special Service for the Reich. You know what that means, don’t you?”

The Dutchman turned white and the gun wavered in his hand.

“You were quite right,” went on Colemore, pursuing his advantage, “I am not an escaped British prisoner. I am a member of the inner council of the Gestapo, and if I told you my real name you would probably faint. There has been too much double-dealing in Holland, Geerdts; I have come here to clean it up and I think, Geerdts, I’ll start with you.”

“I—I,” began Geerdts, “I have served the Reich faithfully——”

“Faithfully!” snorted Colemore. “Shall I give you a list of the British airmen you have assisted to escape?”

Geerdts made a visible effort to pull himself together. “*Mein Herr*,” he began with some dignity, “I was told to enrol myself in the underground movement in order to be able to give accurate information of their doings. In order to inspire confidence it was necessary to take part in——”

“A plausible explanation,” said Anthony coldly. “You can keep it for Himmler, he likes plausible explanations, doesn’t he?”

“I have proofs,” said Geerdts obstinately.

“Tell them to the Gestapo,” urged Colemore, and at that moment there came a heavy knock on the front door and the hurrying footsteps of Piet crossing the hall to open it.

“I will,” said Geerdts, “For here they are.”

“I know,” said Colemore, with what he hoped was a fiendish grin. “We were most amused when we found that you had sent for us yourself.”

Geerdts’ jaw dropped. The door opened and two men in the uniform of the Gestapo appeared, one of them held a revolver in his hand and the terrified face of Piet looked for an instant over their shoulders.

“You shall not——” yelled Geerdts, and fired straight into the face of the man holding the gun. The face disintegrated and the man dropped as Anthony dived under the table for safety. The second Gestapo man pulled out his revolver and shot Geerdts in the body, his knees sagged and the gun fell from his hand within a few inches of Anthony’s head. He promptly snatched it up and fired several shots from beneath the table at the surviving Gestapo agent who immediately ceased to survive, and there followed a horrid silence.

It was broken by the clatter of nailed boots in the hall as Piet rushed away to the front door and out into the street, screaming in a cracked voice for help, police, there was murder—murder——

Colemore scrambled to his feet, dashed out of the other kitchen door, through the tiny scullery, down the garden and over the wall in one rush. He was in too much of a hurry to notice anything but poor Piet’s yells destroying the bedtime peace of Flushing, or he would have heard the tramp of feet.

They belonged to a patrol of German military police marching in single file, well spaced out, with an officer at their head, seven men in all. The night was not quite dark because there had been a slight fall of snow, and the soldiers were staring about this way and that to account for the yells, and some of them were nervous. There was always some devilry afoot in these angry Dutch towns.

“It is not in this street at all, Herr Leutnant,” said the corporal. “It is in the next street on the——”

At that moment Colemore arrived among them, cannoned violently into the fourth man, knocking him over, and ran like a hare. The man exclaimed loudly and his comrade next behind him, whose nerves had never been the same since El Alamein, threw up his rifle and fired off most of the contents of his magazine. The officer and two other men ahead of this excitement with immediate presence of mind threw themselves flat; Colemore swerved across the road and disappeared up an alley. The officer rose to his feet, shouting an order; the patrol collected itself and came to attention.

“Who fired those shots?” he asked angrily.

“I did, sir,” said the North African veteran.

“Who the blazes gave you the order to fire? It’s a wonder you didn’t kill somebody. What the blazes were you firing at anyway?” He had not seen Colemore at all, not having been in a position to do so.

“A man came over the wall,” began the soldier. . . .

In the meantime, Colemore had put several streets between himself and the patrol, he dropped to a walk and then came to a stop in a dark corner, gasping. A prisoner is not usually in very good physical condition, and he had had a trying evening.

“At least,” he panted, “I can’t complain of being bored. What on earth do I do now?”

His first idea was naturally to make for Brouncker and the Mariner’s Welcome, and he made for the dock area. But the disturbance appeared to have spread by contagion all over Flushing. There were police all over the town, ordinary police, special police, military police. Colemore spent so much time dodging into alleys and waiting round corners while heavy footsteps went by that it was past midnight before he came upon cobblestoned quays and vast dark warehouses in a part he did not know. Here also were watchful men about, harbour police this time. It wouldn’t do at all to go to Brouncker now, if he were to be seen entering the Mariner’s Welcome it would be ruin for all concerned.

“Another town I’ve made too hot to hold me,” he reflected. “First Berlin and now Flushing. Not bad going.”

He passed silently along the quays, slipping from shadow to shadow, till his attention was caught by a faint hissing noise arising from a sea-going tug tied up just ahead of him. Somebody with steam up and going out shortly. This was, in fact, what he was looking for, something in which to stow away. He reconnoitered carefully, there seemed to be no one about; no lights, as of course the tug’s portholes were carefully shuttered. He climbed down a short iron ladder, stepped carefully on board and tiptoed across the deck. Down the engine-room ladder a chink of light showed beneath a door and somebody was whistling. He turned aft and was at the head of the companion-ladder when he heard voices and footsteps along the quay above his head.

He went down the ladder like a swift shadow, and waited at the foot, holding his breath, but the voices and footsteps passed by without stopping. He breathed more easily and set himself to listen. Very quiet down here. No lights, no sound. Evidently the crew were still ashore except for the whistler in the engine-room.

He was standing in the well-deck in the stern of the tug; it was of course open to the sky, and the bulwarks curved round him breast-high. There was no cover there. Behind him was an open door, he went in and found himself in a narrow passage. Still no sound, he could not now hear the man in the engine-room. He switched on a small electric torch

which Geerds had given him; there was a door on either side of the passage, cabins presumably, ahead was the saloon, dark and empty. He looked in, it was very small and cramped, just enough room to pass between the central table and the seats on either side and not enough cover to hide a cat. There was a door leading forward, but that would take him too near the engine-room. He must try the cabins, if there was no cover there he must hope that no one would come in before the tug sailed. He entered the port cabin quietly, shut the door behind him and switched on the light.

There was a man lying on the bunk, fully dressed, and his uniform was that of an officer in the German Navy. He had evidently been asleep; as Colemore switched on the light he awoke, blinked at the glare, and said, "We are off now, are—who the devil are you?"

He sat up hastily, as he did so Colemore hit him under the jaw with an uppercut which perked his chin up as though his neck were hinged, and his head went back with a thud against the brass rim of the porthole. He slipped sideways and lay across the bunk perfectly limp.

"Sorry, old chap," murmured Colemore. "Well, I suppose I'd better scam before you _____"

The murmur died away. The German's face had turned such an odd colour that Anthony paused to investigate. No breathing, no pulse, and a nasty soft place at the back of his skull with a cut that did not bleed.

"Good Lord," said Colemore softly, "I've killed him."

He paused to think things over. Brouncker had told him, when they were discussing escapes, that too many Dutch coastwise vessels had taken the wrong turning and fetched up in English ports. "So now they send 'em out with German naval officers on board to check the course. Old dug-outs, most of 'em, but they do know which way we're steering."

Probably the dead German on the bunk was one of the Navy's watch dogs and perhaps the crew didn't know him. Or if they did it wouldn't matter, he might have been replaced by somebody else at the last moment. The Dutch crew wouldn't dare to argue. Or care to, either, it wouldn't matter to them.

That being so, the German Naval Officer might just as well be himself.

"I simply hate," said Colemore between his teeth, "changing clothes with dead men. This is the second time. However, I needn't dress this one up in my clothes, thank goodness."

The German's uniform fitted where it touched, being at once too short and too wide, but the overcoat did well enough. The hat was too large, but a little packing inside would amend that.

Colemore went outside the cabin and listened; there was still no sound, the night was darker than before and it was snowing again. The German, once hoisted on to the bulwarks, was lowered quietly into the water and disappeared, together with Colemore's civilian clothes. The Englishman returned to the cabin, washed his hands, did a little necessary tidying up, and sat down to read the German's papers. The guess had been a good one. Lieutenant Ernst Vegelt was to proceed in charge of the tug *Jan Houys* of Rotterdam, from Flushing to Ostend, towing two barges respectively loaded with cement

and explosives. Due regard should be paid to the weather conditions, the responsibility of deciding whether or not to proceed was entirely his, and so on.

"It's a good thing it's a fairly quiet night," said Colemore, "for the *Jan Houys* would proceed to-night if it was blowing half-bricks and sea-serpents. I wonder when we're supposed to sail?"

He wandered out to the well-deck to look at the weather, and heard footsteps coming along the quay. This time he stood his ground. The man clattered down the iron ladder on to the deck and was immediately hailed from the engine-room, whose occupant was on apparently the look-out.

"That you, Dirk?"

"That's me," said Dirk cheerfully.

"You're late," said the first voice. "You're all late. Where's the others?"

"Just coming."

"Skipper ain't aboard yet," said the first speaker, who appeared to be worried about something. "Thought we was goin' to sail at one, an' it's past two."

"Don't worry," said Dirk, "they're all right. They'll be along in a minute." He dropped his voice for another remark Colemore could not catch, but he heard the first speaker answer, "Yes, hours ago. I heard him come aboard about eleven."

The voices died away and the men went below, but Colemore stood where he was, waiting.

Ten minutes later more footsteps approached, several sets of them, and voices. Men descended the iron ladder to the deck and one of them came aft and down the companion-ladder beside which Colemore was standing.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he began, in a furious tone. "I understood we were to sail at one o'clock, are you aware that it is nearly half-past two?"

"I beg the Herr Leutenant's pardon," said the Dutch skipper, and peered at him through the darkness. "I was delayed, I could not help it."

"Get on with it now you have come," said Colemore irritably.

"We can make up for lost time on the run," said the Dutchman quietly. He turned in to the cabin opposite and came out again at once, pulling on a tarpaulin coat and winding an extra muffler round his neck. "We shall now start," he said, in passing, and went up on deck; Colemore remained where he was and leaned over the bulwarks, watching. A heavy hawser was brought aboard and passed above his head to the short samson-post on deck, orders were shouted and men hurried about. The tug's engines began to turn and the propeller to thresh the water below him, hawsers were thrown off from the quayside and hauled in aboard. The tug moved forward a few yards and stopped again, lights flashed astern and signals were made.

Colemore remained on deck until the tug, towing two barges had passed out of the dock and was heading down the Scheldt towards the sea, and then retired to his cabin. It was bitterly cold, and his duties could not be expected to begin for a couple of hours, since not even the most obstinate Dutch skipper could go far astray in the Scheldt. Anthony rolled himself in blankets and lay down on the bunk to get warm; almost immediately he fell fast asleep.

IX

SMELL ONIONS, SMELL DEATH

COLEMORE awoke with a start and a consciousness of having slept too long; the late Lieutenant Vegelt's watch told him the time was nearly half-past seven and he rolled hastily off the bunk. Five hours, much too long. Not that the Dutchmen would mind in the least, but precious time had been wasted when he might have been talking to them. He realized suddenly that he had awakened with a new idea full-grown in his mind; to persuade them to cut loose the barges and proceed direct to England. Now, in an hour it would be daylight.

He went up on deck. It was still almost dark but the darkness was becoming less opaque. The tug was labouring steadily along, the wire hawser from the samson-post still stretched tautly aft into obscurity. The sky seemed so low as almost to touch the head of the stumpy mast, and a few large flakes of snow whirled past and began to settle. He shivered, walked along the deck and climbed the ladder to the bridge, a tiny space already overcrowded with the three men in it; the captain, another man, and a seaman at the wheel, his creased intent face showing up in the light from the binnacle.

"Good morning, captain," said Colemore. "Nasty morning."

"Good morning," said the Dutchman gruffly, and stared at him. Colemore wondering how to begin a delicate negotiation, moved across to look over the steerman's shoulder at the compass; what he saw surprised him. The course was north of east, not south of it as it should have been; they were not making for Ostend at all, but for—he thought for a moment—probably Harwich. No persuasion appeared to be needed. He looked up and met the Skipper's eyes, and the expression in them was not friendly.

"One would almost think," said Colemore, "that you were making for England."

"So," said the captain heavily, and the third man moved closer to Colemore. The atmosphere was full of menace and the steersman edged a few inches away.

"I am glad," said Colemore bluntly. "I also wish to go to England." A little lacking in finesse, he felt, but it seemed to be a moment for plain speaking.

"I am not taking you to England," said the skipper, and added thoughtfully, "*Verdomte Boche.*"

"*Verdomte Boche,*" said the third man like an echo.

"I am not," said Colemore. "I will convince the English that I am not."

"That is precisely what I am afraid of," said the captain. "The British are trustful and kindhearted. They do not know the Boche as we do, who have lived with him for nearly three years."

"I have friends in England," said Colemore.

"No doubt. No doubt at all. I repeat, the British lack education in these matters."

"I am an escaped British prisoner-of-war and the Gestapo are after me," began Colemore, but was interrupted by a bellow of laughter from the skipper.

"That is you Germans all over," he spluttered. "You think everyone but yourselves so

stupid that any childish story will do. Escaping from the Gestapo!” He roared with laughter again.

Colemore put his hand in his pocket but the German officer’s revolver had gone, the third man had neatly removed it.

“All clear, sir,” he said to the skipper.

“Good. Now——”

The Skipper stopped suddenly and the mate said, “Listen!” Away to the south a cloud was suddenly illuminated, and the sound came to their ears of a series of heavy thuds.

“Gunfire,” began Colemore.

“Cast off that hawser,” yelled the skipper, and the third man made one jump off the bridge ladder and ran aft. “You——” added the Dutchman to Colemore, “get off my bridge.”

Colemore obeyed instantly and ran down the ladder. The argument about his destination could be resumed later, the middle of a naval battle was no place for it. As he reached the narrow deck it seemed to fill with men as the crew came up, it seemed that the *Jan Houys* of Rotterdam carried quite a company of passengers for England. The gunfire came rapidly nearer, gun-flashes and star-shells lit up the lowering sky. He heard the whistle in the engine-room of the voice-tube from the bridge, and the skipper’s voice above him howling to somebody to “Whack her up.” The tug seemed to leap suddenly forward, and Colemore guessed that the mate had cast off the towing hawser and left the barges behind. There was a deep roar from the southward and a dull red glow which flickered and increased.

“Something hit,” said Anthony, his teeth chattering with excitement, “please God, it isn’t one of ours——”

The mate appeared beside him and shouted up to the bridge. “Hawser cast off, sir.” The engine revolutions increased rapidly, Colemore glanced up to see a shower of sparks coming from the funnel.

“Good,” said the skipper’s voice just above his head, he must have been standing at the top of the ladder. “Now throw that”——something——“German overboard.”

Colemore ducked, somebody caught him by the collar of his overcoat which fortunately was not buttoned, and he slipped out of it. But there was no room to dodge, the darkness seemed full of strong arms clutching at him. He clung to a hand-rail on the side of the deck-house and yelled, “Stop it, you fools. I’m British, I tell you——”

He was plucked from his hold as though he were a child, flung against the bulwarks and pitched overboard by the ankles. His keenest terror as the cold sea closed over him was for the screw——must keep clear of the screw——

He rose, choking and spluttering, in the wake of the tug, and an eddy spun him round to show him the *Jan Houys* as a black lump against the sky with a red glow at the funnel, going like a bat out of Hades. The next moment it was gone.

“The important thing,” said Colemore aloud, “is to keep one’s head. Now, where are those infernal barges?”

He trod water for a few moments, turning to decide the most hopeful direction, and then settled down to swim. The water was intensely cold, already he could feel his muscles beginning to stiffen. If he could not reach those barges in ten minutes, or fifteen

at most, he was done for. He rose on the crest of a wave and tried to pick them out, but the star-shells had ceased, and the long low barges would be difficult to see in this grey murk. Probably he was going the wrong way, and his body seemed to be getting heavier. Another ten minutes, and then, "Of his bones were coral made, they are pearls which were his eyes"—ugh!

He felt a throbbing sensation which at first he took to be a sort of shivering in his limbs, then he realized that it was vibration from a ship's propellers. There was a ship near at hand, going fast.

There followed a blinding flash which illuminated for a second every detail of a large destroyer which appeared to be leaping like a salmon from the water and parting into pieces. Clearly visible also, nearer at hand, was the cement barge, swung broadside on to the explosion and rolling over, then the sea rose violently with him and the blast and roar of the explosion stunned and overwhelmed him. In point of fact the German destroyer, escaping at extreme speed from the British naval forces with which she had been engaged, had run straight upon the barge loaded with explosives and the whole consignment had blown up.

Colemore recovered a measure of consciousness to find himself lying half in and half out of water on a raft, a contrivance like a large plate with a fat sausage-like rim and wooden battens filling the circle. There were other men there, talking German. One of them asked who he was, and another replied that he must be the new lieutenant who joined the ship yesterday, just before she sailed. The speaker could not remember the name, but a third voice supplied it, Beisegel. "I saw it on the list," he said, in a tired sing-song voice. "I suppose the other officers are all gone."

"Beisegel," repeated Colemore to himself. "Beisegel. Beisegel. Mustn't forget that. My name's Beisegel." He slipped into unconsciousness again.

He was aroused by being heaved about and dragged uncomfortably upwards in the bight of a rope. It was broad daylight, and he was being hoisted up the side of a grey ship, upon which were men in uniform of the Royal Navy. He was hauled over the rail and stood on the deck, and immediately his legs collapsed under him.

"Here's an officer," said somebody, and made a hasty examination of him. "Doesn't seem to be wounded. Take him down to the wardroom and hop some whisky into him. I'll interview him presently. You there," continued the voice in painstaking German, "what ship are you from?"

"Destroyer," said one of the German survivors. "The *Dhunn*. Ran on a mine and blew up."

"When?"

But Colemore heard no more. He was conducted below, supported into the wardroom and dropped into a padded armchair. The place was warm and the chair comfortable, he lay still and watched pools of water forming round his feet. What a beastly mess and what a lot of sea-water clothes can retain. He was given a tumbler and assisted to drink the contents, his mind began to work again.

"You stay put," said the Sub-Lieutenant who was ministering to him. "*Restez ici. Requiescat in pace*. Sorry I don't know any German. Can you speak English?"

Colemore thought it safest to stare blankly, and the boy made signs that he was to stay

where he was. Anthony, who felt he never wished to move again, nodded, and the Sub-Lieutenant went out of the room, leaving him alone.

“Beisegel,” said Colemore, suddenly remembering. “That’s my name, but I haven’t got any papers. Vegelt’s were in the overcoat. By gosh, but I have, though, there’s that special pass. They mustn’t find that.”

He pulled it out of an inner pocket, still inside the oilskin tobacco pouch he had put it in for safety when he was on the tug—the late Vegelt’s tobacco pouch. “Thought it might get wet,” he murmured, and giggled weakly. “Bit damp round the edges, that’s all. Where the hell can I put it?”

He looked anxiously about but the sound of approaching footsteps left him no time. He pushed the packet firmly down inside the chair between the padding of the arm and the seat just as the Surgeon-Lieutenant entered and took him firmly by the arm. “You look a bit less corpse-like,” he remarked cheerfully. “Come along and let’s get these wet slops off you.”

The destroyer Commander’s interview with his prisoner proved to be completely unsatisfactory. The Herr Leutnant Beisegel of the German Navy gave his own name and the name of his ship, but refused any other information whatever. The port from which his ship had sailed, her date of sailing, the name of her Captain, the number of her company—even Leutnant Beisegel’s own home address—all these were met with a stubborn shake of the head and the reiterated reply, “I do not speak.”

“It’s not really important,” said the Commander, losing his patience. “We have most of the information we want from your crew.”

“Then why bother me?” asked the prisoner wearily, and was removed in custody.

“Obstinate devil,” said the Commander. “Well, if he doesn’t want his people notified of his fate, it won’t keep me awake o’ nights. It’s their vorry, ain’t it? They to have brought him up better should.”

Actually Colemore realized for the first time what a tangle he was in. He could not say he was Major Brampton because the first relative who turned up to greet him would blow the gaff on that. To say that he was Anthony Colemore would merely reopen the gates of Maidstone Jail. Exhausted and depressed, he thought that if he asked to see a British Intelligence agent he would simply be removed in a plain van to the nearest mental home. This scheme, which had seemed such a jape when it started, now appeared the height of idiocy, so he squared his jaw and repeated, “I do not speak,” like a good Nazi-trained parrot. After all, there was nothing much he could say.

He was landed in England, transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp, and interviewed all over again. By this time he was feeling a good deal better, he would yet make something of this job, by heck he would.

“I’ve been lucky so far,” he told himself. “I’ve been garlanded with horse-shoes. I wasn’t caught in Germany, shot in Holland, or drowned in the North Sea. If I don’t choose to talk they won’t make me—not in England. I’ll just have a short rest-cure in camp and then get going again.”

So, although this interviewer was more experienced and a great deal more subtle than the destroyer Commander, he got no more out of Leutnant Beisegel than the Navy man had done.

“Close as a blinking oyster,” said the interviewer. “I wish I were quite sure he’s as stupid as he chooses to look. Well, he’s behind barbed-wire now, so that’s that.”

The prisoner-of-war camp could not be described as the height of luxury. It was situated on a vast expanse of moorland, colourless and bleak in those January days. Wooden huts in orderly rows contained German officers of all services and ranks who each reacted to confinement according to his temperament, and formed themselves into separate cliques according to seniority, degree of devotion to the Nazi party, social standing, family connections and so forth. The Bavarians patronized the Saxons and glared at the Prussians who sneered at both. In fact the Prussians formed the closest and most dissociated clique of all, being at once the haughtiest and the least devoted to the Party. They were the Ancient Military Regime, they were, and their authority far pre-dated the rise of the upstart Nazis. Furthermore, they all appeared to be each others’ cousins and had known all about each other from their nursery days. They had no use for a mere naval lieutenant, a vonless Beisegel, and Colemore avoided them.

He cultivated the Nazis fanatics who heil-Hitlered each other all day long and exuded racial superiority from every pore. Anthony found them intensely boring but such contacts might be useful; besides, he did not mean to remain for long in their company. Two or three weeks in which to rest and make a few plans, and then he would leave. After all, he’d got out of Maidstone Jail, and out of Germany also.

The camp was very full and almost daily fresh consignments arrived from North Africa, sunburnt men from Rommel’s forces who shivered in the north-east wind. More huts were erected within the barbed-wire perimeter, and still more outside it later to be included in a still larger ring-fence.

“This place is becoming uncomfortably overcrowded,” said Colemore, and the elderly naval officer, to whom he was talking agreed.

“It won’t last, though,” he said.

“The flow of prisoners?” said Colemore. “Of course not.”

The navy man shrugged his shoulders and echoed, “of course not,” in a faintly sarcastic tone. “What I really meant,” he added, “was that this is only a transit camp. They dump us here to wait for passage to Canada, that’s all. One of the guards told me so the other day when I asked how many more they were going to bring in. I gather it won’t be long now.”

“Canada,” said Colemore, and hoped he did not look as horrified as he felt. “What, all of us?”

“Why not? They can get quite a lot on a big passenger liner if they really try, you know. I expect they’re a bit short of shipping at the moment on account of the North African campaign. But there’s certain to be some ‘returned empties’ available soon.”

This meant that Colemore’s rest-cure must be brought to a close at the earliest possible moment, and he went for a thoughtful walk round the camp to gather, if possible, some germ of a fruitful idea. He was joined almost at once by Leutnant Leonhard von Rohde.

Von Rohde was a chinless youth with a fair skin and colourless flaxen hair brushed flat on a narrow head. He had been gathered in from the coast of France during one of the numerous unadvertised Commando raids which took place with such distressing frequency. Von Rohde told Colemore that he had arrived at his post on the West Wall

direct from his Officer Cadet College at Bensberg, a very new chum, nervous, conscientious, and inexperienced. There came a wet moonless night, windy and full of noises, trees rustling and creaking, shutters rattling and doors clapping in every draught. They were all assembled at headquarters, nine officers together and he the youngest, talking by the fire and expecting only the mess-sergeant announcing dinner, when the door opened quietly and terrible men, armed to the teeth, rushed in. They wore brown woollen caps on their heads, their faces were blackened and their eyeballs and teeth glittered horribly. They yelled, they fired, they attacked “with knives, fists and teeth, and dear Beisegel, believe me.”

“Not really?” murmured Colemore, inwardly rejoicing, for this was the first he had heard of the Commandos. “Not teeth, surely. Don’t tell me they rushed in and bit you, my dear Von Rohde.”

“Well, not me, actually, but the Mess-Sergeant was howling that somebody had bitten his ear. I took cover behind a chair and was just drawing my automatic when one of these appalling savages picked me up bodily, squeezed the breath out of me, threw me over his shoulder like a sack, and rushed out into the night. My head hit the doorpost going out and I lost consciousness for a time. When I recovered I was in a boat, my Captain was also there. We were on the sea and it was terribly rough, the boat was pitching and rolling most violently. My Captain and I were completely overcome, but those terrible men only laughed. One of them sat quite close to me eating onions. Onions. Whenever I think of death I seem to smell onions.”

For some reason Von Rohde attached himself to Colemore and followed him about everywhere, talking all the time about “my father the General,” his mother, who was some relation of Baldur von Schirach’s, and his seven sisters, all older than himself. “When I was a kid,” was the opening phrase of most of his stories, and Colemore received a clear picture of the darling pampered only son considered rather delicate, surrounded by petticoats and sheltered from the harsh world until he was pitchforked into Bensberg College and expected to stand on his own feet for the first time in his life. He had not been happy at Bensberg, and if he had not been equally unhappy in the army it was only because he had not been in it long enough to find out what it was really like. More clematis than cactus, in short.

Von Rohde emerged round a corner and joined Colemore as soon as he had parted from the naval officer who had talked to him about Canada.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, just for a walk round,” said Colemore. “Coming?”

“Yes, please. Is there any news?”

“Nothing definite.”

“Oh,” said Von Rohde. “I thought you looked as though your officer had told you something interesting. Forgive me if I appear curious, it may of course have had reference to your private affairs. But there is so little that is of any interest in this place. My father the General always says that wherever men are gathered together there must be always something of interest to hear or see. But he was never in a prisoner-of-war camp.”

“He was lucky,” said Colemore with feeling. “That fellow I was talking to said that he understood we should shortly be sent over to Canada.”

“Canada!” exclaimed von Rohde in tones of horror, and stopped short in mid-stride. “How terrible.”

“Why terrible? No worse than here. In fact, probably better, because this camp is only for temporary detention en route, that’s why it’s so uncomfortable. I’ve no doubt the quarters in Canada will be much better.”

“I daresay,” said von Rohde disconsolately, “but it’s so far from home.” His face grew red and he turned his head away to conceal his emotion.

“It is rather,” agreed Colemore. “In fact, I think it’s too far.”

“Couldn’t we escape?” said von Rohde in a whisper, glancing round him to make sure they were not overheard.

Colemore was almost startled, one did not expect daring suggestions from such as Leonhard von Rohde.

“But we are on an island,” he began.

“We make our way to the coast and steal a boat,” said von Rohde. “You are a naval officer and I’ve done a lot of small-boat sailing. If we had a boat and a compass and some food and water it could be done.”

“I thought you didn’t like the sea. You told me that when you were brought across _____”

“But there’s a lot of difference between a sailing boat and a high-powered motor launch smashing along at full speed,” objected von Rohde. “You know that, yourself. I’m all right in sailing boats—at least, I always have been,” he added humbly.

“I’ll think it over,” said Colemore, and spent several hours in doing so. It seemed at first sight completely foolish to saddle himself with this amiable goof. On the other hand, one of his problems, hitherto insoluble, was how to attain contact with German Intelligence circles in England. If by any miracle von Rohde did get across, he could take a message to the right quarter and see that it was received; after all, one isn’t a nephew-by-marriage of Baldur von Schirach’s for nothing, however rabbit-like in temperament one may be. There were doubtless plenty of other men in the camp who would do the job equally as well or better, but Colemore did not feel inclined to trust any of them. Besides, the more capable the man, the less desirable it was to release him; but nobody could imagine much damage recoiling upon the British Empire by the return of Leonhard von Rohde to the Wehrmacht. Definitely one of nature’s white mice. Very well, if he could get out von Rohde should come too.

TWO PAINTERS PASS OUT

WORKMEN were coming into the camp daily, working upon the erection of the extra huts. The huts themselves also came in, in sections, on lorries, and were sorted out and bolted together upon concrete foundations which had been made ready for them. The work was urgent, to be finished at the earliest possible moment, and men swarmed upon the sites drilling holes, pushing bolts through and running up nuts upon them, hanging doors, fitting windows and adding roofs as though their lives depended on it. This exhibition of industry at least provided something for the prisoners to look at, and Colemore watched the proceedings with a degree of interest all his own.

He observed that the workmen were counted by the guard on the gate when they came in and also when they left, but he doubted whether the tally was always impeccable because the workmen streamed out of the gates in a clotted throng when the whistle went at the end of the day. They did not go out at lunch-time but they stopped work at noon on Saturdays. They all had passes, evidently, but the guards only looked at a very few, stopped at random. Also there were the foremen, men dressed in overalls like the others but wearing bowler hats which are, for some unknown reason, the insignia of a foreman's rank in England. They went in and out of the gate whenever they wished, Colemore reckoned that this practice must make the tally even more difficult. He stood with von Rohde at his elbow as usual and watched the evening exodus.

"Must be confusing for the guards," said Anthony. "If sixty-four men come in and four of them go out twice and come back twice and three of them go out three times and come back twice and two of them go out twice and come back three times, how many men are there to go out in the end?"

"Please?" said von Rohde.

"Especially when they go out all bunched together like that, look at 'em. D'you mean to tell me that if the guards—there are two of 'em counting—if one makes the answer sixty and the other sixty-one, they rush to the Commandant and report it?"

"They ought to," said von Rohde severely. "The conscientious sentry reports immediately to his superior officer anything that is in the very smallest degree suspicious."

"No doubt," said Colemore, "but——"

"Besides, if one of us prisoners had managed to slip out with the crowd, his absence would immediately be noted at the roll-call, which always takes place as soon as the gates are shut for the night."

"Yes, but the workmen leave at noon on Saturdays."

"That is so, I have noticed it myself."

"And still the roll isn't called until eighteen-thirty hours."

Von Rohde looked at Colemore with the hopeful look of a dog whose master appears about to produce a biscuit.

“So that if we went out on Saturday morning our absence would not, with ordinary luck, be noted for six hours and a half.”

“Our clothes—” began von Rohde.

“Overalls. And bowler hats.”

“Why bowler hats?”

“Because no workman would say to a foreman, ‘Hi, who are you? I don’t seem to know your face.’”

“But would not another foreman——”

“Not necessarily. Some are fitters and some plumbers, some painters and so on. They probably don’t all know each other. Besides, we can avoid other bowler hats.”

“That is so,” agreed von Rohde. “It is wonderful to me how you foresee all these contingencies,” he added handsomely. “But how to obtain them?”

“Leave that to me,” said Colemore. “To-day’s Tuesday, we have until Saturday. I know where there are some bowler hats, anyway.”

“Where?”

“In the stage property wardrobe. You know, among all the funny clothes they are getting together for that theatrical show.”

For some of the prisoners were beguiling their unoccupied hours in amateur theatricals with the concurrence of the British authorities, since men who are happily employed are less likely to make trouble.

“Ah, yes,” said von Rohde. “I am looking forward to seeing it, but I have no part in it. I think I should find it very difficult to appear other than I am, besides, there are all the words to learn.”

“Yes,” said Colemore. “Very tiring, I should think. Never mind, perhaps you’ll be seeing a show in Berlin that night, if we’re very, very lucky.”

Von Rohde’s face lit up. “You shall be there too,” he said. “We will celebrate together and I will introduce you to my father the General, my mother and all my sisters.”

“I shall be honoured,” said Colemore gravely.

Every evening when the workmen left the camp Anthony watched the proceedings from an inconspicuous view-point. Most of the men went out in their overalls, blue or brown denim suits for the fitters and plumbers, white coats for the painters. Those who took their overalls off before they went home just removed them at the last moment, rolled them up and threw them into a small hut, the door of which was locked when the last man had gone. Colemore took an opportunity to examine the hut. It was the sort of temporary erection so often seen on building sites, roughly erected out of odd pieces of wood left over from floor-boards and rafters, and tucked away between two buildings. The door was strong and had a good padlock but the back was more promising; uneven lengths of plank nailed on the framing and, as it were, patched here and there where the pieces did not fit. Colemore picked up a piece of broken iron bracket out of the mud and carefully levered loose one of the short lengths near the floor, he then pushed it back into place by hand. Then he had only to wait until Saturday. He must contrive to get behind the hut without being noticed; if anyone saw him there at the last moment he would be lost. Or if anyone looked in at the door at the moment when he pulled out a suit from the back. Or if all the

workmen took their overalls home at the week-end. . . .

Saturday morning came at last. Colemore had managed to abstract and hide two bowler hats the night before, after a rehearsal, when he kindly offered to help the stage staff to clear up. The weather was damp, cold and foggy that Saturday; shortly before twelve Colemore slipped down the alley between the two half-finished buildings and crouched down at the back of the hut. He was incredibly lucky, somebody had stacked some sheets of corrugated iron in the entrance to the alley and these masked him from casual glances. He loosened his board ready for action and waited, smiling at the thought of von Rohde sitting in strict seclusion nursing two bowler hats and stuffing paper into the crown of one of them because otherwise it would have rested on his ears. The noise of hammering and sawing gradually ceased, the workmen were packing up their tools ready to leave when the whistle was blown. He and von Rohde must be very quick, it would not do to be last out of the gate in case the guards counted accurately. The escaping prisoners must drift out casually in the thickest of the throng. Surely it must be time——

Footsteps approached the front of the hut, and voices. Somebody said that the kick-off was at two-thirty and if they didn't catch the one-fifteen they'd miss a quarter of an hour. The hut door opened and there was a soft thump as someone threw his overalls in, remarking that if his old woman hadn't got dinner on time to-day there'd be trouble and her in the middle of it. Other bundles were thrown in, one hit Colemore's loose board and would have knocked it out but for his hand behind it, and there was a pause.

"Whistle's late," said one voice.

"Your watch is fast," said another. "Give us a light, Tom. Ta."

"Let's get down towards the gate," urged the first, and the footsteps moved away. Colemore pulled back the board, snatched out the first two bundles which offered themselves—as it happened they were both white coats splashed with Solignum—pushed the board into place and ran for it. He peeped round the corrugated iron and could see no one, so he strolled aimlessly away with the bundles under his coat. As he went, the whistle blew.

Two foremen in splashed white coats passed the gates among a throng of workmen jostling and hurrying. One of them paused just outside to ask a plumber's mate for a light, for there was a forgotten packet of cigarettes in one of those painter's overalls. The other foreman walked on with his shoulders hunched, looking as though he did not feel very well that morning.

When his friend caught up with him they walked on rapidly till they were out of earshot, and von Rohde said, "Why did you do that?" in a pained voice. "I thought you had been stopped—I was so alarmed I could hardly breathe."

"I thought the guard rather stared at me," said Colemore. "I did it in order that he should think the workman knew me."

"I wish I had your presence of mind," said von Rohde plaintively. "To me it is like a sort of magic."

"Come on," said Anthony. "We've got a long way to go and we haven't got any money for fares."

"They will miss us when the roll is called to-night," said von Rohde, lengthening his stride.

“Yes, but they won’t know how we’re dressed until Monday morning, by which time we shall be dressed differently and, I hope, a very long way off. Turn right here.”

“Do you, then, know this country so well?”

“Never been here before, but that other road goes straight towards the town and I don’t think we’d better. This one goes off into the country by the look of it.”

Presently the road curved and they saw ahead of them a village in the process of becoming a suburb of the large town they had avoided. There was a huddle of stone cottages with ugly slate roofs dimly to be discerned, for the fog was thickening and turning to drizzle; a muddy lane led off to the right and Colemore turned down it.

“Better not go straight through,” he said. “Somebody might notice us. I wish we’d got blue overalls instead of these white coats, they’re too conspicuous to please me.”

They dodged behind a barn in order not to be seen by a boy driving some cows and a young woman laden with parcels and a baby, with a small child trotting composedly behind.

“Not many people about,” said von Rohde.

“Dinner-time,” said Colemore briefly. “Come on.”

On the further side of the village there was a new housing estate, small detached houses spaced apart among trees, for the site had been a wood and the development company had been careful not to cut down more than was necessary. Furze-bushes there were, and the grey stiffness of winter heather, dripping wet, and dead stalks of bracken fallen at all angles. Split-chestnut fencing divided the little properties, and even that was sagging in loose curves here and there where the supporting posts had failed.

“It all looks very shabby and neglected,” said von Rohde, “and the houses want painting.”

“Shortage of labour,” explained Colemore. “I should think it’s rather nice here in the summer.”

“I suppose all the gardeners and house repairers have been rounded up and sent to be bombed in their factories,” said the German cheerfully. “I expect most of them——”

“Hush—sh,” said Colemore suddenly, and pushed him down behind a clump of gorse which was not only wet but prickly. From the nearest house there came the sound of a door opening, and voices. A man came out of the front door carrying two suitcases, put them down on the step and returned inside.

“Quick, round the other side here,” whispered Colemore. “Keep low, don’t let ’em see you.” Von Rohde disappeared like a rabbit and Colemore followed him, still keeping one eye on the door. The man came out again, pulling on a mackintosh; he was followed by a tall young woman who hurried out, locked the door behind her, gave the man the key and put up a vivid scarlet umbrella.

“If we don’t hurry,” she said in a loud and rather angry voice, “we shall miss the bus.” She walked quickly down the path and the man picked up the suitcases and followed her.

“Yes,” he said. “Did you lock the back door before you came out?”

“Of course I did. Do come on. Oh gosh, how foul it is not to be able to use the car on a day like this.”

“Never mind,” said the man consolingly. “It’s not far to the bus.”

They passed through the gate, turned down the lane and were soon out of sight, the bobbing red umbrella disappearing among the trees.

“Now,” said Colemore, “We’ll wait twenty minutes and then we’ll go and have a look at that house.”

“Why wait?”

“In case they come back for something they’ve forgotten, or miss the bus. Heaven be praised for the British week-end habit.”

“You really know a great deal about British ways, Beisegel,” said von Rohde. “It is an immense help to persons in our position.”

“I used to visit England frequently before the war,” answered Colemore, “and I always enjoyed it. They are, in some respects, a simple and predictable people.”

“I feel it would have been an advantage to me to have travelled more widely,” said von Rohde humbly. “But my father the General was averse to foreign ways—the old school, you know—and we did not go abroad much. Only to Switzerland, for the winter sports, you know.”

“But we have excellent winter sports in Germany,” said Colemore. “Your father the General could have indulged his taste for ski-ing at home if he had wished to.”

“It was my mother who had to be indulged. Seven daughters to marry, it is not so simple unless one goes about into society. Heaven be praised, they all made good marriages except Annabella, and one can’t expect miracles.”

“Is your sister Annabella then not so charming and accomplished as the others?” asked the amused Colemore.

“She is a very dear, nice girl,” said her loyal brother, “and very useful in the house. We are all very fond of Annabella.” He stopped, and Colemore could not think of an inoffensive formula for asking what was the matter with the dear, nice girl. He looked at his watch.

“Another five minutes, and we can go in.”

“I shall be glad. It is damp here, and moreover there is something dead not far away. Possibly a rabbit.”

“Come on, then,” said Colemore, and led the way through the gate and round to the back door. “No use trying the front they’ve locked it.”

“The woman said she had also locked the back door,” said von Rohde, “did she not?”

“Yes, but there might be a window. Besides, she might have forgotten.”

But the door was locked and all the ground-floor windows were securely fastened.

“Careful people, these,” said Colemore, and stood back to inspect the house more generally. There was a single-storey room tacked on near the back door, a scullery or coal-cellar probably. There was a window above this.

“Now, if nobody is watching us,” said Anthony, and examined the surrounding scenery with intense care. Only the chimney-stack of the next house was visible and there was no one to be seen anywhere. The drizzle thickened, drifting between the trees like smoke, and a leaking gutter near by began to drip upon an upturned bucket with an intrusive sound like a fingernail tapping upon a door.

“Nobody about,” said Colemore. “That window’s open an inch at the top. Give me a

leg up, I'm going on this roof."

"Do I also enter this way?" asked von Rohde, obediently bracing himself against the wall.

"No, wait here. I'll come down and let you in." Colemore ascended by means of the German, a stack-pipe, and the scullery roof; the window opened easily and he passed inside. A few minutes later the back door opened and von Rohde also found shelter.

"Something to eat first," said Colemore, and led the way to the kitchen. There was a new loaf wrapped in a napkin on the dresser, von Rohde took it and looked round for a knife.

"Not that loaf of bread," said Colemore, "they'll miss that at once. Put it back as it was. I see you're not used to burglary," he added kindly, as the German's face fell.

"Indeed I have never—but surely that is the garbage pail?" Colemore was looking inside a receptacle under the sink and taking from it almost a half-loaf.

"It is, but it's quite dry. This was only resting on some nice clean potato peelings and you can cut off the outside slice if you're dainty. Now then, a tin of something——"

He sought in the kitchen cupboard and produced a tin of Spam, rearranging the shelf so that no gap met the eye. "I hope she'll forget she hasn't used this," he said, and set von Rohde to mixing dried milk with water in a basin while the kettle boiled. "Coffee will do us a lot of good, hot strong coffee."

"It may serve to avert a chill to the stomach," said the German. "This stuff sticks together and does not wish to mix."

"Take a fork to it, it says so on the tin. By the way can't you speak English?"

"Not a word."

"Very awkward, I shall have to think up something to cover that." Colemore rummaged in the dresser drawers for a tin-opener and came upon a small box which rattled, he opened it.

"Three pounds," he announced, "in notes, five shillings and ninepence. For the grocer's bill, possibly? How blest to us is the servant shortage, if there'd been a maid in the house the lady would have kept the money locked up." He put it in his pocket.

They made a pleasant and sustaining meal before the electric fire, but Colemore would permit no lingering over it.

"It is past fifteen hours," he said, "we are still less than three miles from the camp, we have a lot to do here and in three hours' time they will know we have escaped. Can you wash up?"

When the kitchen was perfectly tidy they went upstairs; the man of the house kept his clothes in a small dressing-room and Colemore went straight to the back of his wardrobe.

"Mustn't take a suit from the front, he'd miss it at once. Grey flannel bags and a sports coat, that'll do for you. I'll have this blue suit, it's inoffensive, though I detest double-fronted waistcoats. Hurry up and change. What a mercy we're all more or less stock size."

"He is larger than I am centrally," complained von Rohde, displaying room to spare at the top of the trousers. Colemore passed him a belt, finished dressing himself, and looked inside a cupboard.

"What's this rolled up? An old dressing-gown. Nice and warm, it'll do for you in the

boat.”

“Why not a proper coat?”

“He is short of overcoats, he would miss it at once. I keep on telling you we mustn’t take what will be immediately missed. Now then, food and something to pack it in. I hope those two suitcases weren’t all they had in the world. Wonder where they keep their luggage, in the loft possibly?”

There was a trap-door in the landing ceiling and a stepladder near by; Colemore used it to reach and push up the trap, and disappeared through the hole. “Not much up here—what’s this? An old cane suitcase, not natty but it’ll do. Coming down.” Von Rohde received the suitcase while Anthony went further exploring. “A pile of something covered with a cloth. Tinned stuff, believe it or not. Von Rohde, you must be my mascot—touch wood. The wretched woman with the red umbrella is an unpatriotic food-hoarder, we will spoil the Egyptian.” He selected a few tins calculated to contain enough to support von Rohde during a passage across the North Sea, and rearranged the others so that his pilfering was not obvious. “Take these from me, will you? I think it would be a good idea to hide our prison clothes up here, and, of course, the overalls and bowler hats. There’s a sort of false wall at the back here, I can drop them behind that. Just hand them all up to me, would you?”

“Would it not,” said von Rohde, handing up their discarded raiment piece by piece, “be a good idea to retain the hats? It is very unwise to walk about in such heavy rain as this with the head bare.”

“My dear, good chap,” said Colemore, laughing, “if you were to walk about dressed in flannel bags, sports jacket and bowler hat you’d be arrested at sight on suspicion of being an escaped lunatic. I could wear mine with this suit, but I won’t, it doesn’t fit. That’s the lot, isn’t it? Good. I will now descend,” and he did, shutting the trap and putting the steps back where he found them. “I think that’s enough to keep you alive for a couple of days or so.”

“We were very lucky in finding this house,” said the German, standing meekly with his hands full of tins for Colemore to pack in the suitcase.

“We were lucky to find an unoccupied house so quickly,” said Colemore, “but any ordinary house with a man in it would have supplied our simple needs. Now I want a sheet, wonder where she keeps ’em. In this cupboard? Yes, indeed.”

“What for?”

“And some ink, or quick-drying paint, or floor-stain, and a brush. Come on, downstairs again, we’ve done up here.”

“What for?” repeated von Rohde, trailing after him. “What do we want the sheet and the paint for?”

“I visualize you,” said Colemore, with his head in the cupboard under the stairs, “sailing across the North Sea in a boat small enough to manage single-handed. Liquid blacklead, the very stuff. And a brush to put it on with. Having evaded the British coastal patrols, heaven helping you, you are approaching the coast of Holland or Belgium when an aeroplane roars overhead. Spread the sheet out on the floor here, it’s tiled and if I make marks I can wipe them up. You look up and observe with delight that the aircraft bears German markings.” Colemore knelt down and began to apply the blacklead to the sheet.

“Hold it off the floor if you can, will you? That’s the way. You then drape this sheet over the deck of the boat and when the aircraft comes down to investigate he’ll see—this.” A large swastika began to take shape before von Rohde’s astonished blue eyes. “Then he’ll report your position and doubtless light surface craft will be sent out to bring you in. It will save time—several hours perhaps.”

“You know,” said von Rohde, blushing with enthusiasm, “I do think you are quite the most brilliant chap I’ve ever met. I mean, the way you think of things—” His voice trailed off.

“Oh, no,” said Colemore modestly, and corrected a few of the wilder wobbles in the Crooked Cross.

“But, look here, why do you keep on talking as though all these arrangements are for me alone? You’re coming too. Aren’t you?”

“No. I’m staying behind.”

“My dear Beisegel——”

“I’ve got a little job to do for Germany here in England, von Rohde.”

Colemore heard a gasp of surprise behind him.

“The devil you have!” said von Rohde.

XI

THE OLD SOW

COLEMORE completed his representation of the Swastika and draped the sheets over the banisters.

“We’ll give that a few minutes to dry,” he said, “we haven’t quite finished even yet. There is a telephone in that corner, I notice. Wonder if they’ve got a Classified Directory?”

They had, but it was several years old. Colemore did not know that the issue of these had been discontinued when the paper shortage became acute.

“Why do people keep out-of-date directories?” he grumbled. “It’s positively dangerous in cases of emergency. If you want a doctor or a dentist, for example.”

“Typical British inefficiency,” sneered von Rohde. “It is as well we do not want a doctor. Or a dentist.”

“But we do.”

“Why?”

“For your sore throat, swollen jaw and distended glands. They are what prevent you from talking of course. I must go upstairs again and find you a muffler. Piketon, that’s where we’re making for.”

“But,” objected von Rohde, “if we go to a doctor, he will discover——”

“My good ass,” said Colemore patiently, “of course we aren’t going to a doctor. I only want the name of one to make my line of talk sound genuine.”

“My admiration for your obviously inexhaustible resource——”

“Wilson, he’ll do. Dr. Wilson, 49 Hill Brow, Piketon. And the dentist—here we are—Barrowby and Thistlethwaite——”

“*Herrgott!*” said von Rohde weakly, “what names——”

“I’ll just check up in the other directory to see if they’re still there. Barrowby & Thistlethwaite, yes. Dr. Wilson, also, yes. Good. We are going to Piketon to interview Dr. Wilson about your poor jaw. Well, that’s that. Now——”

“What is Piketon?”

“A small seaport town on the estuary of the Faraday River. It has boat-building yards on a small scale—or had, when I knew it. Also amateur yachtsmen and a yacht club. I went there once years ago. I hope to find you a boat there. Now then, von Rohde, listen carefully.”

“I should always give my whole attention, my dear Beisegel, to anything you are pleased to tell me.”

“Good, thank you. Now, as soon as ever you reach Holland or Belgium or wherever you fetch up, go straight to Berlin as quickly as possible. Fly, if you can. Get in touch with Intelligence and give them this message. ‘Major Aylwin Brampton has reached England, and desires contact. He will be at Platform Six, Waterloo Station, at six p.m.’—that’s

eighteen hours—‘on’—er—“Wednesday, February the 9th and will wait one hour.’ Please repeat that.”

“It would be safer if I wrote it down——”

“*Himmelherrgottsakramentdalektsmi!* No. Quite the contrary. Most unsafe. Listen.”

Colemore patiently repeated the message, making von Rohde say it after him time and again until the German had it perfect.

“That’s better. You won’t forget it, will you? February the 9th is ten days ahead, I should think that’s enough time. You can tell ’em all about our escape, too, you’ll find they will be interested.”

“I am sure they will be. But—I am sorry to be so ignorant—whom do I ask for in German Intelligence?”

“I cannot give you any names, it is not permitted. You’re a relation of von Schirach’s, aren’t you? Well, go to him and say you have a very important message to deliver to Intelligence—and to nobody else, von Rohde, nobody else, not even to von Schirach himself. He’ll put you in touch with the right people. Now repeat the message again.”

Von Rohde got it right first time. “I never do forget things when once I have thoroughly learned them,” he said earnestly.

“Splendid. Well, that’s all now. You pack the sheet into the suitcase while I find you a muffler, and we’ll go.”

“One moment—the men who are to meet Major Aylwin Brampton—do they know him? Or do I add that he will be wearing a certain flower in his button-hole or something _____”

“Flower my foot. No, they don’t know him but they have his photograph and a description. Also there is a certain password to be used.”

“I beg your pardon, I might have known the matter would have been arranged.” Von Rohde paused, and a look of childlike cunning spread visibly across his face. “I am not, I know, at all in your class for intelligence and ready wit, but even I can guess, can I not that, Major Aylwin Brampton is my good friend Beisegel?”

“He might be, and equally well he might not, von Rohde,” said Colemore abruptly. “There’s an English proverb which says that those who don’t ask questions are not told lies. I am not the only German agent in England, you know.”

Embarrassment turned von Rohde scarlet and apparently rendered him speechless as well. He struggled for words with which to apologize, and Colemore relented.

“It’s all right, old chap. I’m sorry I snapped at you, one couldn’t expect you to know. It’s not in your line at all. Come on, let’s get going.”

When they came out of the house the rain was pouring steadily from a sullen sky and the daylight was beginning to fail. “We’ll go the way our host and hostess went,” said Colemore, carrying the suitcase. “They said it wasn’t far to the bus.”

“How far is it to Piketon?”

“About twenty miles. We’ll take a bus to Beverley and the train from there. I don’t like it because we haven’t got any identity cards if we should be asked for them, but we must chance that. Now mind, you’re not to talk where anyone can hear you. In fact, you’d better not talk any more for the present, here’s the main road.”

Von Rohde wound the red-and-black knitted muffler twice round his neck, tucked the ends into his coat and sighed resignedly. There was a bus stop a few yards from the corner, another man was waiting beside it, and they joined him. Presently a bus came down the road, disregarded their signal and splashed past, full up.

“Oh lor’,” said the other man in a resigned voice.

“How often do these buses run?” asked Colemore.

“Every twenty minutes.”

“Oh, lor’.”

“That’s what I said,” agreed the man, and they went on waiting while the rain came down harder.

“I’m fed up with this,” said the man suddenly, and left them. He walked on down the road until a car came along, overtaking him, when he stepped out into the road with a gesture, his thumb jerking upwards.

“This is new to me,” murmured the interested Colemore. “What’s that for?”

The car driver made some gesture they could not distinguish, and passed on without stopping, so did the next. The third, however, stopped; the man got in and was driven away.

“I’ve got it,” said Colemore. “This is how one gets a lift these days. I’d heard of people giving lifts but I’d never seen it done before. Come on, George. Your name’s going to be George,” he added, and walked on. Von Rohde followed without answering.

Several cars passed before at last one responded to their signal. The driver opened the door and shouted above the drumming of the rain on the roof, “Where d’you want to go?”

“Well,” said Colemore, “Piketon actually, but anywhere on the road would be a help _____”

“You’re in luck,” said the driver, “that’s where I live. And I am going straight home, or am I? Gosh, what a night! There’s rather a lot of stuff in the back, if your friend could squeeze in——”

“My brother,” said Colemore. “Thanks most awfully, it is good of you. I’m afraid we’re rather wet, anything here to hurt? Oh, good. Get in, George,” with a gesture which von Rohde obeyed. Colemore sat beside the driver, still babbling gratitude, and the car moved off. The driver proved to be a commercial traveller with the easy friendliness of his class, he introduced himself as Robert Anstruther, “Bob to my pals, everyone calls me Bob.” He travelled in cakes and biscuits, and told them he had not lived in Piketon long, only about three months. “I was at Lancaster before, only the poor chap here died and the firm sent me to replace him.” He talked on and on, telling them funny stories and histories about his customers, while the night fell and the rain beat upon the windscreen and the dimmed lights struggled against the dark. Presently he began to display a quite kindly interest in his passengers.

“Live in Piketon, do you?”

“Not now. We used to live nearby before the war, but just before that we moved and we’re both working in an aircraft factory.”

“Ah,” said Anstruther. “I should ha’ been in the Army but my heart’s a bit groggy. Besides, I’m over forty.”

“Oh, bad show,” said Colemore sympathetically. “My brother’s a bit under the weather, too,” he added, with a jerk of his head towards von Rohde mute in the back seat. “That’s why we’re going to Piketon this evening, to see Dr. Wilson. Know Dr. Wilson?”

“No, but I’ve heard of him. Nice old chap, by all accounts.”

“One of the best. He used to attend us when we lived here, looked after my mother, and that. George here was always a bit delicate as a kid so I thought I’d take him back to the man who’d known him before. It’s a great thing when doctors know their patients well.”

“Ah, you’re telling me,” said Anstruther, and there followed a long story about his wife’s mother. “Hope there’s not much wrong with your brother.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. We’re on a week’s holiday, really, and George started off by sitting in a draught and getting toothache. So he went to a dentist who took out two back teeth for him, they’d given him trouble before. That was two days ago, and his jaw started swelling up and getting stiff. Well, we had rooms booked in that village back there and I didn’t like not to go, we wanted a change pretty badly——”

“I’ll say you chaps work in those aircraft factories.”

“Work!” said Colemore, and laughed aloud. “I did not know one could work like that and not fall down dead. However, one doesn’t die, somehow, but it’s told on George. Today I got really worried, he can’t open his mouth at all—it seems as though the jaw is set—this evening he can’t even speak. I don’t think he’s really ill, mind, he feels all right, he says, and I don’t think he’s got a temperature. But——”

“Inflammation from the teeth settled in the glands,” said Anstruther authoritatively. “I’ve heard of cases. Pulling out the teeth has set it off, like. You’re quite right to take him to the doctor. We shan’t be long now, only a couple of miles to go. I can drop you within a few yards of the doctor’s, I know where he lives. Thank goodness the rain’s easing off a bit.”

“Do you know anywhere where we could put up for the night?” asked Colemore. “If Dr. Wilson wants to see George again as I expect he will——”

“Lord, now you’ve asked me something, the place is packed out. Your doctor’s more likely to know than me.”

“You’re right, of course——”

“But look here. The Spread Eagle do take people in though they may be full. If you’re stuck, go there and mention my name—Bob Anstruther—they’ll do what they can for any friend of mine. In fact, if you go there later on you’ll probably find me, I generally drop in for a pint and a game of darts on a Saturday night. Spread Eagle, in Market Street, anybody’ll show you.”

“Thanks most awfully——”

“Or, look here,” Anstruther flowed on in the full tide of kindness, “why not come to my place for the night? The wife’s away and I’m pigging it, but we’ll manage to be comfortable. It’s a house called Gleneagles—heaven knows why—in Cliff Road; you go up Market Street—look here, it’s not too easy to find. If you want me, I’ll be at the Spread Eagle about nine, come there and find me.”

“You’re a good chap and no mistake,” said Colemore warmly. “Two total strangers,

you don't even know our name, which by the way is Thistlethwaite——”

“Good old Yorkshire name, anyway,” laughed Anstruther, “hard to say and worse to spell. Well, here we are. The doctor's house is the second round this corner, I won't drive up if you don't mind as it means turning the car and I hate backing in the dark. Let me know how your brother gets on, won't you? Gleneagles, Cliff Road, or else the Spread Eagle. Cheerio, best of luck.”

He drove away and left them standing on the pavement with the suitcase between them, and the night seemed suddenly silent and very cold.

“What a gasbag,” said von Rohde indistinctly, through the muffler. “*Herrgott*, how these English bourgeois talk!”

Colemore could have kicked him. The ungrateful chinless arrogant little squirt of a Prussian, sneering at the stranger who was willing to shelter him——

“Come on,” said Anthony curtly. “And don't talk yourself.”

He paused for a moment to get his bearings, and led the way in the direction of the river. The weather was clearing considerably, there was a young moon not far off setting and it was still fairly light. At first they passed through streets as thronged with people as was to be expected between six and seven on a Saturday evening, but when Colemore turned into narrow muddy lanes between warehouses and sheds, the crowds were left behind and they met only a stray passer-by occasionally and once a scatter of cats in pursuit of their desires.

“Here we are,” said Anthony, passing round the end of a fence, and the river lay before them. Tall open-ended sheds lined the banks, inside the sheds were dimly visible the sheeted forms of motor boats, cabin cruisers and small yachts laid up on chocks until such time as the seas should be safe again for decent unarmed people. Out in the river, already broadening to its estuary, two or three small sailing boats lay at moorings and the bows of all of them pointed upstream.

“Tide high but going out,” said Colemore. “One of those will do you nicely. Now to find a dinghy somewhere, wait till the moon goes down, and there you are. Think you can manage one of those?”

“I suppose so,” said von Rohde in a rather sullen voice. Colemore glanced at him, wondering whether he had misgivings about his voyage now that it came to the point—and indeed one could not blame him—or whether he was sulking from being snubbed.

“Quite plain sailing down here,” said Anthony, in case it was nervousness which was afflicting the German. “Keep well out in mid-stream and you'll be all right. There are mud banks but they won't worry you at this state of the tide. If you set the jib only—I'll help you——”

“Don't bother,” said von Rohde. “Better to drift down with the current till I'm clear of the town if possible. Sails can't be got up in dead silence and they are more visible than one would think in the dark. If they pass in front of a light, for instance. Masts don't show nearly so much.”

Colemore was agreeably surprised, the man had spoken with unexpected decision, and what was more, he was right. Perhaps he was one of those people who is only really at home on the water—a throw-back to some seafaring ancestor. Ashore, he didn't seem to have enough sense to come in out of the rain.

"I absolutely agree with you," said Anthony. "If you can manage to do that it will be much better."

They stumbled along the waterfront, slipping on the mud, climbing over obstructions and trying not to make a noise. "If we can't find a dinghy soon—" began Colemore, but von Rohde interrupted him. "If not, I must swim for it, that's all."

"You know," said Anthony, "I wonder you didn't go in the Navy instead of the Army. Your tastes seem to lie more that way."

"Family tradition," said von Rohde, in a voice gone suddenly dull. "We von Rohde's always serve in the Army. I would have preferred the Navy but my father, the General, would not hear of it."

"Poor down-trodden little worm," said Colemore to himself, and added aloud, "Here, what's that ahead?" It was quite a smart dinghy, smart by war-time standards, and it was lying on the mud just above high-water mark.

"It has no oars," said von Rohde in a dispirited voice.

"Of course not, they'll keep them locked up. We'll paddle with the floor-boards."

"Oh. Look here, there is no necessity for me to trespass further upon your good nature, if you will help me to get her afloat I can manage alone."

"Nonsense," said Colemore heartily, "shouldn't think of it. Besides, it isn't as though you've got oars, it's damned awkward paddling with a piece of plank, and the current here runs faster than you'd think. No, I'll come with you and bring the dinghy back, in half an hour it will be dark enough for us not to be seen."

Colemore was right about the current, it took both men all they could spare of energy to paddle against it with the unhandy floor-boards; they made for the nearest boat and hung on to the rail, gasping.

"You were right," said von Rohde, "I'd never have done it without you. You'll find it easier going back. This boat must frequently be used, everything is here and ready," he added, climbing on board for a quick look round. "I shall start at once, the sooner the better."

"I hope you'll manage," said Colemore, a little remorseful at sending him off alone. "The weather's in your favour, I hope it holds. Listen, I forgot to get you any water, but there's a big tin of grapefruit, that'll help you. Sure you'll be all right?"

"Perfectly, thanks, unless the British coastal patrols catch me. I've done a lot of single-handed sailing in the Baltic," said von Rohde. "Good-bye, and thank you a thousand times for all you've done for me—I cannot adequately express what is your due. We shall meet again in our dear Germany, and my father, the General, shall tell you what is in our hearts. My mother also——"

"Good-bye," said Colemore, hastily returning to the dinghy. "Take care of yourself—best of luck—don't forget the message, for heaven's sake. Heil Hitler!"

"Your message is written on my heart," said von Rohde, casting off the painter. "Heil Hitler!"

The current snatched at Colemore's dinghy and swept him away, he had his hands full to come ashore anywhere near the spot whence they had started. He paused in the act of hauling the dinghy up the mud, and stared at the river; in a street opposite a car faced him

as he gazed it seemed that something upright passed across the dimmed lights. Von Rohde had not wasted any time.

“Queer bloke,” said Colemore, trying to clean the mud off his shoes. “Odd mixture, very.”

He made his way to the Spread Eagle, wiped his feet carefully on the mat, and walked into the Saloon bar. Anstruther was there with a glass in his hand in the middle of a ring of cheerful friends; when he saw Colemore enter and pause near the door, he put his glass down and came forward.

“Well,” said the commercial traveller in a low tone, “what about your brother?”

“In hospital. Dr. Wilson wants to keep him under observation for a few days, so there he is. I waited with him at the doctor’s while arrangements were made and then Wilson drove us up himself. We had to wait there a bit too, after which they removed George with brisk efficiency and I came on down here.” Colemore sighed, and Anstruther patted him on the shoulder.

“Pretty foul for you. Still, he’s in the best hands. Cheer up and come and have a drink.”

“I could do with one,” said Anthony. “By the way, Mr. Anstruther——”

“Bob to you, please, Mr. Thistleth—hang it, I can’t say it——”

“Don’t try, my name’s Bill.”

“Come on, Bill. Boys! Meet a friend of mine, Bill—Twistlethwaite? I never get it right. This one is on me. Bill’s just had to dump his brother into hospital so he’s feeling a bit cast down. What’s yours, Bill?”

The bar was warm and bright and welcoming; after a little while Colemore thought it quite reasonable to cheer up a little. Songs with choruses were sung and, since there were no ladies present, somebody obliged with “The Derby Ram.”

“That’s a good old song.”

“It is, it is. If a bit—you know——”

“Well, it’s very old. Other times, other manners, as the saying is.”

“D’you know ‘The Old Sow’?” asked Colemore.

One or two said “No,” but more said “Yes,” and there were cries of “Sing it, Bill! Sing it.”

“If you’ll all help with the piggy noises,” said Colemore. He began in a pleasant tenor voice:—

“There was an old Farmer who had an old Sow—”

Snort—snort—squeal from all over the room.

“There was an old Farmer who had an old Sow—”

The door opened and an Inspector of Police entered followed by a constable, and waited, grinning broadly for the song to finish.

“Haven’t heard that song since I was a boy,” said the Inspector, coming forward. “My father used to sing it.”

“What are you doing on licensed premises in uniform, Inspector?” asked Anstruther. “Police rules slacked off in war-time? Going to have one?”

“No such luck,” said the Inspector genially. “No, this is on business, though I don’t think I need trouble you gentlemen. They’ve mislaid two German prisoners from that camp beyond Beverley and we’ve got to go round looking for them. Identity cards, please—sorry to be such a nuisance, gentlemen.”

Most of them produced their identity cards, all but two, in fact, and one of them was Colemore. He felt in his inside pocket quite naturally as all the others did, and his cheerful face fell suddenly.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Left it in my other coat. What a fool!”

Anstruther looked sympathetic and said, “Never mind, I’ll vouch for you.” The other cardless man was known to the Inspector personally and was merely reminded that it was an offence not to carry it and the omission would probably cost him five bob. The police made a note and worked round the room till they came to Colemore.

“Sorry,” said Anthony. “Left it behind in my digs. My brother was ill and I was rather worried and clean forgot it.”

“Very unfortunate,” said the Inspector in a friendly voice. “Perhaps somebody here could vouch for you?”

“I can,” said Anstruther.

“That’s good,” said the Inspector, and asked Colemore for his name, home address, and identity card number. He gave the name of William Thistlethwaite and an address in Leeds, hoping the Inspector didn’t know Leeds as it would be awkward if he said, “Mayfield Road? Don’t remember that, where is it?” However, 147 Mayfield Road, Leeds, went down in the notebook just as readily as if there really were such a street. The identity number was another matter. Colemore had never seen a civilian identity card and had no idea what the numbers were like. He said he was sorry, he’d never attempted to memorize it and had never looked at the card since it was handed to him.

“Lots of people don’t,” said Anstruther, coming to the rescue. “This gentleman’s all right, he’s a friend of mine and staying the night with me, aren’t you, Bill? His brother George has been taken ill and had to be rushed off to the Memorial Hospital. Bill’s all right.”

“You wouldn’t expect to find a German prisoner singing a song in a saloon bar,” said another man. “Especially ‘The Old Sow.’ ”

“Well, no, that’s quite true,” said the Inspector. “Proper old song, that is.” He told Colemore to produce his identity card at the police station in the village where Anthony had said he was spending his holiday. After which he finished his round of the room and went out; Colemore sighed with relief and decided to leave Piketon that night.

* * * * *

The Inspector crossed the road to an adjacent call box and rang up the Memorial Hospital. Had a patient named George Thistlethwaite been brought in that evening? No, not an accident case; illness, he understood. Yes, certainly he would hold on . . . No one of that name? Quite sure? Thank you very much. . . .

XII

ALIAS HENRY BILSTON

CLOSING time came to the Spread Eagle and the patrons dispersed with a merry noise. Anstruther, warm with wine, song, and kindness, took Colemore by the elbow and steered him across the street.

“Up this way,” he said. “Dark, isn’t it, when you first come out? But it isn’t far, thank goodness. Quite a cheery evening, wasn’t it; feeling better, are you?”

“Much better, thanks,” said Colemore. “It was only——”

“I know, I know. Never mind, things’ll be all right, you’ll see. I say, that was a good song you sang, new one on me. How did it go?”

“It’s not new at all, it’s very old,” said Colemore, “I heard it when I was a boy.”

“‘There was an old Farmer,’ ” began Anstruther. “That’s not quite right.”

“‘There was an old Farmer,’ ” sang Colemore, and just at that moment dimmed lights slid up level with them and stopped.

“Going home, gentlemen?” said the Inspector’s voice from inside the car. “Can I give you a lift? I’m going your way.”

“Good idea,” said Anstruther, immediately stumbling into the back seat. Colemore fervently disliked the idea of any further contact with the police but there was no help for it, so he followed Anstruther into the car which drove off at once. Curious the way the police seemed to pop up every time he started that song. He leaned back and yawned uncontrollably, it had been a long exciting day and he was tired. He’d rather nothing more happened that night except bed—an armchair would do. He yawned again, the police car turned suddenly off the road up a short drive and stopped.

“Why, we’re right home,” said Anstruther, rousing himself. “Nice of you to bring us right up to the door, Inspector. Come in and have a glass of beer, come on.”

“I think perhaps it would go down quite well,” said the Inspector.

“And your driver?”

“He’s a teetotaler,” said the Inspector hastily. “Shan’t be long, Gregson.”

Anstruther unlocked the door and went in, the Inspector politely stood back for Colemore to precede him and followed into the house.

“Let’s see if there’s anything in the larder,” said Anstruther. “Besides beer, I mean. I could do with a bite of something and I don’t suppose Bill’s had any supper either, have you, Bill?”

“No,” said Colemore, “now you mention it, I haven’t.”

“You won’t sleep if you’re hungry,” said Anstruther wisely, and picked up a tray which he loaded with plates and cutlery. A crusty loaf, butter, cheese, and some sliced ham. After prolonged search in several wrong places, a jar of pickles. Beer in crown-capped bottles led to another hunt for the opener. Colemore yawned till the tears came to his eyes and wished his new friend were less hospitable.

Finally, tankards for the beer. Anstruther was justly proud of his pewter tankards, "always use them. Beer don't taste the same out of a glass." He picked up the tray, Colemore carried the bottles, and the Inspector followed behind with the tankards.

"This way," said the host, going out of the kitchen. "We'll sit in the front room and turn on the gas fire. Hullo, the front door's open, didn't you fellows shut it?"

"I thought I did," said the Inspector. "I will this time, anyway," and did so. "Sorry," he added.

"Doesn't matter," said Anstruther. "I don't suppose we'll be burgled with a police car on the doorstep."

The front room was small, but pleasantly furnished. Long velvet curtains covered the window to the floor, and matched the brown carpet, deep armchairs held copper-coloured cushions which repeated the glow of copper bowls on the tables and candlesticks on the mantelpiece. The three men sat round the fire dealing with ham and beer and talking amicably about this and that.

"D'you suppose you'll catch your German prisoners?" asked Anstruther, "or are they miles away by this time?"

"They're not so far off," said the Inspector, his eyes on the fire. "They stole the Phillips brothers' boat which was lying at moorings as usual; trying to get out to sea, I suppose. But she ran aground on a mudbank by Folly Point, so they left her. I say, 'they,' actually there was only one man in her."

"Have you got him?" asked Anstruther.

"Not yet. But we shall."

Colemore's heart sank. Von Rohde ashore by himself——

"How do you know there was only one?" he asked.

"By the tracks in the mud."

"Oh, of course."

"I suppose you will catch him," said Anstruther.

"We ought to," said the Inspector with a short laugh, "considering the number of people that's out looking for him."

"I wonder where the other one went," pursued Anstruther. "You'd think they'd keep together, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," said the Inspector, and then asked Anstruther point blank how long he had known Colemore.

"Why, actually I only met him this afternoon. I gave him a lift, you know. But he's a native of these parts; I've only lived here three months."

"Is that right, Mr. Thistlethwaite?"

"That's right," said Colemore steadily.

"Ah," said the Inspector, and leaned back comfortably in his chair. "Then I expect you remember the old Corn Exchange being burnt down, somebody was telling me about it only to-day. That was a bad fire, I gather. Let's see, how long ago would that be? Ten—twelve years ago, quite."

"Oh, quite that," agreed Colemore. "I wouldn't like to say exactly, I've nothing to date

it by.”

The Inspector finished his beer and rose to his feet in order to put the tankard on the mantelpiece. He was a big man, he seemed to Colemore to tower over him like the tall Agrippa of the nursery rhyme.

“Curious,” he said quietly. “Very curious.”

“What is?” asked Anstruther sleepily.

“That the Corn Exchange here dates from Queen Anne and is as good to-day as when it was built.”

Colemore’s heart seemed to contract, and Anstruther looked up with a puzzled expression.

“The Corn Exchange?” he said. “That’s the tall red building in Market Street with the pillars in front, isn’t it? Headquarters of the local Home Guard Battalion.”

“That’s it,” said the Inspector, still looking down on the top of Colemore’s head. “Mr. Thistlethwaite,” he added, “I am taking you into custody on suspicion of being an escaped German prisoner. You will accompany me to the police station now, and to-morrow morning you will be taken to the camp to see whether they can identify——”

The window curtains parted and a hand came out, holding an automatic, in the shadow a beaky nose could dimly be seen and nothing more.

“Put your hands up at once,” said an authoritative voice. Anstruther and Colemore obeyed at once; but the Inspector, who was still holding his empty pint pot, turned like a flash and hurled it at the automatic. He missed, there were two cracks and two spurts of flame, and the Inspector dropped like a log with blood running from the side of his head. Anstruther said, “Oh dear, Oh dear,” in an oddly breathless voice, dropped his arms and seemed to collapse by degrees. His knees gave way and he sank slowly to the floor. Colemore was staring at him, frozen with horror, when there was a click and the lights went out.

* * * * *

At this point in his story, Colemore turned to Hambledon and said, “You see now why I go all bashful when I meet the police. As though breaking jail wasn’t enough, I am certainly wanted on a murder charge. They will assume that I shot the Inspector, and poor old Anstruther too. Who’ll believe this wild story about a hand with an automatic——”

“I do,” said Hambledon. “Cheer up, no murder charge lies against you. Unless, that is, there are more violent deaths in the rest of your story.”

“There aren’t,” said Colemore. “But——”

“The Inspector wasn’t killed, though he had the narrowest escape possible. The bullet merely stunned him, slid along the outside of his skull cutting a furrow—hence the blood—and wound up in a copy of ‘Bulldog Drummond’ in the bookcase. So appropriate. He recovered without difficulty and told a story which coincides with yours.”

“Anstruther——”

“I’m sorry to say Anstruther is dead, but he died of heart, not from a bullet. The excitement, you know. His heart was weak, he told you that himself.”

“He died on my account, for all that,” said Colemore. “If I hadn’t gone back to him

after seeing von Rohde off—but it was such a foul night and I was so tired——”

Hambledon nodded sympathetically. “You might like to hear the rest of that scene—I take it you don’t know much about it since you thought the Inspector was dead——”

“I don’t. I left at once—I’ll tell you in a minute.”

“The police driver, Gregson, who had been left outside in the car, was heard by some passers-by to be howling for help. This was about an hour later. He was lying under a bush in the garden firmly tied up, he had been stunned. When they went into the house they found the Inspector still unconscious but quite comfortable. A first-aid dressing had been applied to his head which was resting cosily upon a cushion. Poor Anstruther had been properly laid out, his eyes closed and his hands crossed upon his breast. I don’t know why.”

“Heaven knows I don’t,” said Colemore. “By the way, while you are clearing up my loose ends; tell me, did they catch Von Rohde?”

“No.”

“No? Good heart alive, why not?”

“They just didn’t,” said Hambledon, “that’s all. Please go on with your story, it is more than enthralling. The lights went out——”

The room was not dark even then on account of the glow from the fire, but Colemore was momentarily blinded and in that moment he was caught by the wrist and hustled out of the room. “Quick, come on,” said the same voice which had spoken from behind the curtain. Colemore was pulled through the hall and down the drive to a small van which was standing just inside the gate, pushed into the seat beside the driver and told to go where he was taken, he was being looked after and everything would be all right. Then the van drove away.

“One moment,” said Hambledon. “You didn’t see the face of the man behind the curtain at all? Not even by the firelight?”

“No,” said Colemore. “I suppose I ought to have done, but it all happened so quickly. I felt stupid, too, as though events were getting quite beyond me. Shock, I suppose, it was all so beastly, especially about poor Anstruther.”

“You can’t describe the man at all, then?”

“Except for a general idea that he was about my height, no. His voice puzzled me, though, I’m sure I’ve heard it before somewhere but I still can’t remember where. It worries me.”

“Any accent of any kind?”

“Absolutely none. Just ordinary standard English.”

Hambledon nodded. “Sorry to interrupt. Please go on.”

The van had hardly started on its journey when the driver half-turned towards Colemore and placed a wallet in his hands.

“You’d better look at that,” he said, “we may be stopped by the police at any moment. You’ll find a torch in the cubby-hole in front of you. Don’t let it shine on the windscreen,

or you'll blind me with the reflection."

"What is all this?"

"Identity card and personal papers. Take a good look at the identity card and memorize the number. You know how these numbers are arranged, don't you? Oh. Well, the letters in front are the district and the first number indicates the house in which you were on the night the cards were all issued. The last number is your own. It is seven. There were nine people in that house that night—are you listening? You must remember all this in case the police ask you."

"I'm listening," said Colemore.

"There were nine people in the house because it's one of those bed-and-breakfast places where men lodge who are out at work all day. There was the proprietor and his wife—they were numbers one and two, of course—a maidservant and odd-job man, three and four; and five lodgers, all men. The proprietor's name was Spink. Repeat, please."

Colemore did so.

"You happened to be number seven. The address, as you can see for yourself, is 51, Willowmore Road. It is a turning off the top end of Gray's Inn road, near King's Cross. The house is one in a row of ugly stucco houses each with a small balcony over the front door."

"Is it really?"

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean, is there really a house such as you describe at that address?"

"Of course. It's a real house in a real street and is still run for bed-and-breakfasts by Spink and his wife and the odd-job man. Only the maid has gone, into a factory. And, of course, the lodgers vary as time goes on."

"I see. I wasn't sure how these things were worked."

The driver's face, dimly seen by the lights of a passing car, expressed contempt, but he went on without comment.

"As you can see, your name is Henry Gwynne Bilston, commonly called Bill. Have you got all that?"

"I'll teach it to myself as we go on," said Colemore. "What else is there in here? Letters?"

"Only bills, some paid and some not. There's some money in there, too. And a few odd London bus tickets, don't throw them away. They prove you were in London last week; or, at least, they suggest it."

The driver relapsed into silence while Colemore repeated his new story to himself. Presently lights were waved before them and the van obediently stopped. Men in Home Guard uniform, great-coated and armed, came to the windows and asked to see the identity cards. Colemore and the driver handed them out; they were examined by the light of torches and handed back without comment.

"Drive on," said one of the picket in a tired voice; and the van went on again.

"Those two escaped prisoners," said the driver with a laugh like a snort, "have fairly roused the country, believe me. Home Guards called out, police, special constables, wardens, coast watchers, fire-watchers, Farmer Giles with a double-barrelled gun, old

Uncle Tom Cobby and the Wurzel-under-Slug Town Band. All that fuss over two poor little stray Germans. They'll be badly off if they haven't got any friends, won't they?"

Colemore did not know what he was expected to say, so he merely grunted and went on studying his identity card. After a run of nearly three hours, during which they were stopped twice more, the van came into the streets of a town; and Anthony, who had been dozing, sat up.

"Is this Leeds?"

"It is. We're a bit late, being stopped so often, but I expect you'll catch your train. There's a man waiting for you with the ticket."

There was. The van pulled up at a corner just short of the station and a man stepped out of the shadows to meet it. Colemore got out, saying, "Good night, and thanks very much," to the van-driver, who did not answer, but merely drove away. The man on the pavement grabbed Colemore by the arm and said, "Come on, run. You're late. Here, take your ticket, don't lose it."

Together they pelted along the pavement, turned into the station entrance and ran towards the barrier. Before they reached it, the man released Colemore's arm, slowed up, and immediately disappeared in the darkness. There was a considerable group of people pressing towards the barrier; Colemore joined it, hoping he did not look as conspicuous as he felt. Inside the barrier there were—horrid sight—police, looking at intending passengers as they passed through. Just before it was his turn, a whistle blew on the platform, the long, wavering, hurry-up whistle of the guard anxious to start the train. Somebody was shouting, "London train! London train! Hurry along there, please," and the passengers began to run, Anthony with them. The police did not snatch him, he hurled himself into the train only to find that there were, of course, no seats to be had. He stood in the corridor all the way to London.

King's Cross at seven-thirty on a wet miserable winter morning is not the most cheerful place on earth. Colemore, aching with fatigue, hurried down the platform and was stopped by the police. They examined his identity card; asked him where he had come from, to which he replied, "Peterborough," and where he was going, to which he answered, "Home to bed. Gosh, that train!" They smiled indulgently and let him pass. He went straight to the restaurant and swallowed two cups of railway coffee one after the other as rapidly as possible without scalding himself. Roll and butter and Spam restored him to life, and he sat in a corner to think things over.

The question was, where to go. If only British Intelligence had a definite office like the Admiralty or the Air Ministry it would be easy. But Colemore, like most Englishmen, had no idea where Intelligence lived and worked; only an imaginative picture of a corridor going off where no one would expect a corridor to exist, leading to rooms containing people who had discarded their names and were only known by numbers.

He must get under cover soon; if he wandered about in the light of day it wouldn't be long before he was arrested either as the missing prisoner Beisegel or the missing prisoner Colemore.

Of course, there was that lodging-house in Willowmore Road, and that was conveniently near. But if it was inhabited exclusively by persons like that revoltingly capable man behind Anstruther's curtain, he didn't think he wanted to cultivate them, at

least, not till he'd had a good night's sleep. Who were they, anyway? German Intelligence, presumably, since no one else would shoot an Inspector of Police to rescue an escaping German prisoner. But how did the man know he was an escaping German prisoner?

His eyelids began to close and he shook himself awake. The plain fact was that there was nowhere else to go at the moment. He knew people in London—one man in particular—who would help him, but it might take all day to find him if he had moved in the last four years. Or been bombed out. He might even have been killed.

Colemore rose wearily to his feet and walked out without being conscious of having come to a decision. He crossed the Euston Road, turned down Gray's Inn Road like a sleepwalker, and found himself at a corner staring at a street-name on the corner of a shop. Willowmore Road. Ugly stucco houses with a little balcony over the front door, and the high blank wall of a warehouse closing in the far end of the road.

He came to number fifty-one, walked up two steps, knocked at the door and waited. "Now I've done it," he thought, and at that full consciousness and energy returned like a flood. This couldn't be any worse than Van Drom's house in Flushing, and he had got out of that all right.

The door opened and a man stood there looking at him, a shabby, rather grubby old man in a striped jacket. The odd-job man, presumably. Colemore realized with a sinking feeling that he did not know whom to ask for; he had forgotten the landlord's name and the only one that occurred to him was his own by adoption—the one on his identity card.

"Er—Mr. Bilston at home?" he asked.

XIII

BREAKING AND ENTERING

INSIDE the front door a short passage led straight into a room set with small tables laid for breakfast; at one of these was sitting a grossly fat man with a bald head surrounded by a coronet of greyish curls. He looked round when the odd-job man opened the door to Colemore's knock; when Anthony asked for "Mr. Bilston," the fat man burst into peals of laughter. He had a jolly bubbling laugh so infectious that Colemore smiled and even the odd-job man lost his careworn look for a moment.

"Why, Bill!" said the fat man, between chuckles, "what a night you've 'ad! Fancy askin' for 'imself, can you beat it! Come on in and 'ave some breakfast, that'll pick you up. Just in time for the kippers, Mrs. Spink 'avin' struck lucky, an' a nice strong cup o' tea for our pore friend's 'ead, Joe, please. Come an' sit down at my table, quite like ole times, this is."

The odd-job man, with the air of one whom nothing could any longer astonish, admitted Colemore and disappeared towards the kitchen. Anthony walked into the dining-room and sat down at his new friend's table; there were three or four other men in the room breakfasting hastily with newspapers propped up in front of them, they glanced at Colemore with momentary interest and one said, "Good morning," after which they took no further notice of him.

"Proper cow of a mornin'," said the fat man, "by the look of it. Is it rainin' or only pretendin' to?"

"It's pretending hard enough to soak you," said Colemore, wearily rubbing his eyes.

"You look as though you 'adn't slep' for a week," said the fat man with another bubble of laughter. "What you wants is a good breakfast an' a nice lay-down. Nice to be one of them as can lay down in the mornin's if 'e wants to."

"You've said it," said Colemore, feeling that this conversation would be made much easier if someone would kindly tell him who Mr. Bilston was supposed to be and what he was alleged to do for a living. Joe, the odd-job man, came in with a tin tray loaded with food and tea things which he banged down in front of Colemore.

"I don't think I want any breakfast," said Anthony, having just had some. "A cup of tea——"

But Joe took no notice and went away again, and the fat man sat and laughed.

"You and your cups o' tea," he said. "Get on wiv it. Can't waste good food in war-time. S'wicked. Look at me. Never wasted good food in all me life, an' look at me now. Always 'appy, even when I've got to go out on a blarsted wet cow of a mornin' drivin' folks to places they probably don' want to go to, an' muckin' up me cab"—he called it "keb"—"so's I've got two hours' work cleanin' of it off. Am I dahn-'earted? 'Course not." He paused for a long drink of tea, and continued. "An' there's you, got nothin' to do but sit indoors like a lord watchin' the rain-drops runnin' down the windows till you drops off to sleep."

So this man was a taxi-driver.

“You always said trade was better in bad weather,” ventured Colemore.

“So I did. So it is, what you can do on two gallons a day. Two gallons! What I says to the Pool Board las’ time they cut me ration, ‘What d’you suppose I’m tryin’ to do with the old cab?’ I says, ‘Wean ’er?’ ” He laughed again at his own joke.

Colemore became aware that he was taking a violent dislike to this genial soul. He had one of the jolliest laughs ever heard, one which would have made his fortune on the music-hall stage; his fat face was creased in lines of good temper, but his little brown eyes were as cold and hard as agates. It occurred to Anthony that there was something rather terrifying about this taxi-driver.

The other men in the room finished their breakfasts and went out; Colemore ate the kipper since eating was easier than talking, and the cheerful taxi-driver sat and bubbled with laughter and conversation. He talked about bombs and taxi-fares and the price of whisky; it was obvious that he was one of the gang since he had been so ready to rescue Colemore from his embarrassment on the doorstep, yet not once did he say “You did right—or wrong—to come here,” or “Did you have any trouble on the way?” He took everything for granted; it was very disconcerting.

Presently the front door opened with no announcing knock, and a man came quickly into the room. He was a slim hatchet-faced man dressed in extremely well-cut clothes, and carrying a small suitcase; he looked noticeably out of place in the third-rate boarding-house. The taxi-driver rose to go as soon as this man entered, and it was plain that he had been awaiting his arrival.

“Newman,” said the newcomer, addressing the fat man, “get your cab out and be round here as quickly as you can.”

“Very good,” said Newman, “In ten minutes time? I’ve got to get ’er started.” He went down the hall and out of the house.

“Listen, Bilston,” said the newcomer, in a pleasant, cultured voice, “I’m going to take you to a decent hotel, you can’t stay in a place like this. I expect you could do with a few hours’ sleep. By the way, my name’s Symes.”

“I’m beginning to feel I’ve done nearly enough for the moment,” admitted Colemore. “For one thing, I’ve never had such an uncomfortable journey.”

“Had to stand, did you? Yes, the trains are frightfully overcrowded these days, it’s hopeless to get a seat unless you start from the terminus. Have a cigarette?”

“Thanks, I’d like one. But look here, I can’t go to an hotel without any luggage.”

“I’ve thought of that,” said Symes. “This is your luggage,” indicating the suitcase. “I hope the things will fit reasonably well.”

Colemore felt almost awe-struck. This organization, whatever it might be, was horribly efficient; he nearly said so but thought better of it. He took refuge in politeness instead.

“I am really extremely obliged to you,” he said earnestly, “for all the trouble you have taken.”

“A pleasure,” said Symes carelessly, and the conversation flagged till Newman opened the front door and revealed a taxi standing outside with the engine running. Symes got up,

Colemore followed suit, saying diffidently, "Er—shouldn't I pay somebody for that good kipper?"

"Oh, leave half-a-crown on the table," said Symes. "Somebody'll find it."

They drove to a small hotel in Princes Square, Bayswater, where Symes surprised Colemore by asking for a double-bedded room and actually getting it. A less pleasant moment came when the proprietor left them alone in the room and Symes locked the door. "You don't want to be disturbed," he said, meeting Colemore's distrustful look with the competent firmness of a trained nurse putting a new patient in his place. "It's not nine o'clock yet, quite early. If I were you I'd get into pyjamas, climb into bed and go to sleep. I'll wake you in time for lunch."

"You ought to be running a nursing home," growled Colemore, nevertheless doing what he was bid.

"I'd hate to," said the unruffled Symes.

"Do you mean to say you're going to sit and brood over me while I sleep?"

"I've got nothing to do this morning and there's a book I want to read. It seems a good opportunity. Do you mind if I smoke?"

Colemore repressed the classic reply, "I don't care if you burn," and merely said, "Not at all. Please do," in what he hoped was a suitably casual tone. He got into bed and pulled the bedclothes over his head.

He was awakened by Symes who was shaking his shoulder and saying that it was past one o'clock and time for lunch. Colemore rolled over, groaned, and said he could sleep for a week.

"You can have another instalment after lunch, if you like," said Symes, laughing. "No purchase tax on sleep. Did you hear those bombers going over?"

"No—yes, at least I dreamed about a Heinkel. Were they Heinkels?"

"No. Lancasters."

"Oh," said Colemore. "Gosh, I want a shave."

"Have one, then," said Symes cheerfully, and produced the necessary kit from the suitcase.

Washed, shaven, and changed into clean dry clothes, Colemore was conducted downstairs to a fairly adequate lunch and treated to a Benedictine and coffee in the lounge. "Drink that slowly," said Symes. "It's probably the last Benedictine in London."

Colemore regarded his glass with the veneration it deserved. "Is that why we came to this place?" he asked.

"Largely," said Symes.

Ten minutes later the porter came in haste to say that Mr. Symes was wanted on the telephone—in the hall, just to the left of the door——

"You'd better come too, if you don't mind," said Symes politely, and Colemore went willingly. One might pick up some scrap of information.

Symes picked up the receiver and said, "Symes speaking. Who is that, please? . . . Oh, yes . . . Yes, quite all right, thanks. No, none at all . . . Glad to hear it . . . Very well, I will . . . Good. I'll do that . . . Yes, certainly . . . Right, thank you. Good-bye."

“Fat lot I learned from that,” said Colemore to himself as Symes put down the receiver and turned towards him, smiling broadly.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve got to leave you now. Think you can manage all right?”

“Oh, quite,” said Colemore, “thanks very much. But what d’you mean?” He glanced round but there was no one within earshot. “I’m not a prisoner any more, eh?”

“No, no,” said Symes. “You’re all right. I’m sorry, but one had to make sure. It wasn’t too unpleasant, was it?”

“Not at all, quite the contrary. But—can I go anywhere I like, or stay here if I like?”

“If I were you,” said Symes, “I’d stay here, if only because it’s nearly impossible to get a room these days, and this is quite a decent place. If you do move, be sure to let me know, won’t you? Alan Symes, and number 8, Meon Road, Teddington will always find me.”

“Teddington,” repeated Colemore. “Quite a nice place.”

“Yes, isn’t it? By the way, you’ll want some money, here you are.” Symes gave him a comfortably fat envelope, and went on, “I shall be seeing you again soon, I hope. I might very possibly ring you up one evening. You don’t normally go to bed before eleven or so, I suppose? No, well, that is a convenient time. Good-bye, glad to have met you. Where’s my book—oh, here. Good-bye.”

They shook hands like old friends, Symes picked up his hat, settled it at a comfortable angle, smiled at him and walked out. Colemore, in a kind of daze, stood in the hall and incredulously watched his departure.

“Well,” he said to the hat-stand, “what d’you know about that?”

Anthony went up to his room, bathed his face in cold water as a help to clear thinking and sat down on one of the beds to tidy up his confused mind.

In the first place, it was plain that the enigmatic Symes had been prepared to stay all day and that night with him, and possibly for longer, until Colemore’s good faith had been established; hence the demand for a double room.

Even more obviously, the watch and ward had been called off in the telephone message Symes had received after lunch. Somebody had been able to vouch for him. Evidently he had been accepted as genuine by German Intelligence, as he had designed, and had arrived in London under his own steam, again as designed. True, he had had a helping hand here and there, but the first half of the scheme had come off. The second half was to get in touch with British Intelligence; he puzzled over this for some time and eventually gave it up for the moment.

He passed several intensely boring days doing nothing in particular, and nothing happened. Fortunately the weather continued to be so bad that it was natural to go out with a hat pulled down over his eyes, a scarf round his neck and a collar turned up. He resisted a natural desire to look up some old friends, he was really afraid that he would be followed and that evil consequences to the friends would ensue. It seemed to him that London had never been so dull and that everyone was busy except Anthony Colemore. He tried museums and picture-galleries, but they were mostly closed and their best exhibits removed to safer places. Almost the only place which remained unchanged was the Tower of London, and a man can’t happily spend his days at the Tower, especially when he is an escaped prisoner. There were not many theatres open and in any case he was not in the

mood for theatres. He went to the cinema every day, it was somewhere warm and dry to sit in; and he went for long walks. But the bomb damage depressed him beyond tears and at the end of a week he felt that if he saw just one more cinematograph show he would be sick.

“I could write to British Intelligence, that’s an idea. Address it ‘British Intelligence, London,’ and just post it. Ask them for an appointment. But I can’t have an answer sent here, it wouldn’t be safe. I shouldn’t give this address, I should just ask them to put an advertisement in the agony column of the *Times*. ‘War Office, Thursday two-thirty,’ something like that.”

He was almost happy for a whole morning thinking over this idea, but by degrees doubts began to creep in.

“I’ve got no proofs,” he said confidentially to one of Landseer’s lions in Trafalgar Square. “If I say I’m Beisegel I go back to the prisoner-of-war camp. It’s no use saying I’m Brampton, they’ll soon bring along somebody who knew him; besides, I’ve a nasty feeling that there was something a bit fishy about Brampton, the Germans liked him far too much. And if I say I’m Colemore, I’m sunk at once. If I could do something useful before I write to them——”

The lion stared benignly over his head and there seemed the beginning of a smile on its face. “You look as though you knew all the answers,” said Colemore irritably, and then a thought struck him. “Of course. I can go and have a look at that house at Teddington.”

It was still early in the afternoon so he went at once, arranging in his mind during the journey what he would say when he reached the house. He would knock at the door and probably it would be opened by a man. Not necessarily at all, Alan Symes was the sort of man who was just as likely to have a smart parlour-maid. On second thoughts, not in wartime; all the smart parlour-maids were in the Services, but he might have a wife and even a couple of children. Presumably the place was Symes’ private residence. Anyway, he—Colemore—would knock at the door and ask if Mr. Symes was at home, and after that be guided by events. If Symes, or whoever interviewed him, said, “Why did you come here?” he would say he was anxious at not having heard from them, something untoward might have happened. After all, Symes himself gave him that address.

The train stopped at Teddington; Colemore got out, walked out of the station and asked a postman to direct him to Meon Road. It was some little way, a quarter of an hour’s walk, quite. Colemore memorized the direction and set out.

Meon Road proved to be a lane leading into the country; fields on one side and detached houses on the other, each standing in its own garden with a drive to the front door. Thoroughly desirable residences if a trifle large in these days of domestic shortage. Number eight was a gabled house with two stories and attics, creepers grew upon the walls and the garden contained a pergola and a number of ornamental trees such as laburnum and flowering cherry, all leafless of course. Colemore did not feel particularly drawn to it.

“I think I’m being a fool,” he said thoughtfully. “However, it’s no goodfunking it now.”

He opened the gate, walked up the drive to the front door, rang the bell and waited. Nothing happened. He stood in the porch and observed the garden, which did not interest

him. At the end of a couple of minutes he rang the bell again with the same result.

“Nobody at home?” he said, and stood back from the porch to look at the house. It was obviously furnished, he could see that since the curtains were not drawn. Nothing remarkable about that. No smoke arose from any chimney.

“This is rather an anti-climax,” said Anthony to himself. “I suppose I can just go back to London again.”

He walked round the house. By this time the evening was drawing in and the garden filling with shadows. There was a path to the back door, and outside this there stood a pint bottle of milk.

“They are all out,” said Colemore, and curiosity seized upon him like a fever. Alan Symes’ house, with nobody in it——

“If they come back and catch me inside, I can say I came here for safety because I thought I was being followed in London. I broke in because I was afraid to hang about. I might have been noticed, mightn’t I?”

He found a scullery window and pushed the catch back with a piece of broken slate; he climbed inside and stood listening. There was not a sound in the house and moreover it had that empty feeling characteristic of unoccupied rooms. He went exploring. Kitchen, painfully tidy and rather cold, they cooked by electricity. A hall with a staircase leading upwards and three doors standing open; dining-room, small sitting-room, large sitting-room. Undistinguished furniture, bought in suites in Tottenham Court Road by the look of it. Dining-room in mahogany, small room oak, drawing-room maple with stuffing. Upright piano by Broadwood. The drawing-room sounded rather less dead because there was a clock ticking on the mantelpiece. In the smaller room there was a large desk which Anthony regarded with some interest but dared not touch. Getting into the house might be explained away but breaking into the desk would look a little suspicious.

He stood in the hall looking upwards and straining his ears, from somewhere behind him there came a very faint tick. He turned round and listened intently, it came again from a small cupboard on the wall. Colemore opened it, it contained nothing more exciting than the electric meters and as he looked at it the hand on one of the dials moved.

He was just about to shut the cupboard again when a sudden thought struck him and he watched the dial. The hand moved again.

“Somewhere in this house,” said Colemore to himself, “there’s a light on. Then why didn’t I see it from the outside since there are no blinds drawn? Except in the attics, perhaps. Very odd. Who would sit in the attics in preference to an imitation Heppelwhite drawing-room? Maybe there’s a cupboard somewhere with a light in it and somebody’s left it burning. It would be both kind and patriotic to switch it off, wouldn’t it?”

He went upstairs very quietly and looked round four unexciting bedrooms and a bathroom. No lights anywhere there. A narrow staircase led up to the attics, and he paused at the foot looking up. There was no sound to be heard, but somehow the top storey did not feel so uninhabited as the rest of the house.

“I cannot resist,” said Colemore, and ascended the stairs, which creaked. At the top was a tiny landing with a window in it and two doors, one ajar and the other shut. From underneath the closed door there showed a thin line of light; by the twilight creeping in at the window it could be seen that this door had two strong bolts on the outside.

XIV

THE NEW RECRUIT

COLEMORE shot back the bolts, opened the door and went in; the first thing he saw was a man lying fully dressed on a bed smoking a cigarette and working out a crossword puzzle. The man looked up sharply and said, "Hullo, haven't seen you before. Who are you?"

"That depends," said Colemore cautiously. "Who are you?"

"Detective-Inspector Warren."

Colemore's eyes widened with surprise and instinctively he turned to shut the door behind him.

"Don't do that!" said Warren. "If you do, we shan't get out again."

Anthony looked at the door, it had no handle on the inside.

"Dear me," he said mildly. "And what are you doing here? Waiting for somebody?"

"Don't be silly," said Warren. "I'm a prisoner here and you're going to get me out."

"You've said it brother. I don't think this is a very healthy house, somehow, come on, let's be going. Can you walk? I mean, not damaged in any way—no, I see you're not. Down those stairs, can you see? I'll shut this door again and bolt it. That's right. No, round to the left, don't you remember coming up here?"

"No," said Warren briefly. "I wasn't conscious. Which way now?"

Colemore threw a careful pencil of light from his torch on the front door. It had a Yale lock but was not bolted.

"This way," he said. "It'll lock itself after us and thus betray no sign of burglarious entry. Just a moment."

He ran back through the kitchen, closed and latched the scullery window by which he had entered, and returned to the front door to find Warren leaning against the wall.

"What's the matter? For goodness' sake don't be taken ill now. Come on out."

"I'm all right," said Warren, walking out of the open door. "Excitement, probably."

The door shut behind them, Colemore took his arm and led him rapidly down the drive.

"If a car comes down the road we make a dive into one of these front gardens," he said. "When are your hosts expected back, do you know?"

"Some time to-night," said Warren, "since it is night. I didn't know. They left me food and drink for the whole day and said they'd be back at supper-time. That's about nine p.m. usually. What is this place?"

"Teddington."

"Really? Where's the police station?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Colemore.

"Aren't you in the Force, then?"

"Good heavens, no," said Colemore, laughing. "Whatever put that idea into your

head?”

“I don’t know, unless it was your manner when you walked into the room. Did you know I was there?”

“No, I didn’t. I was just having a look round and came across you.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Warren, and added after a moment’s thought, “I’m in the Special Branch myself.”

Colemore considered this. He had never heard of the Special Branch, but it sounded hopeful. He decided upon frankness.

“Does that mean you are working for—or with—the Intelligence people?”

“Why do you ask?” said Warren.

“Because I want to be put in touch with them at once and as unobtrusively as possible. Not one of the clerks for somebody’s secretary, either, but someone at the top who knows his onions.”

Warren began to think that his rescuer was rather a queer bird who might be genuine and, again, might not. Walking into that house as though he’d bought the place and then saying he didn’t know Warren was there. How did he come to enter that place at all if he were neither Intelligence nor the police?

“I daresay that might be arranged,” said Warren casually. “I’m going to the police station to ask for a car to London, it might be better than going by train. You’d better come with me.”

“Are you sure it can be managed?” said Colemore urgently. “Because, if not, the sooner we part the better. If I’m seen with you my number’s up.”

“I can’t take you myself to such a man as you want,” said Warren frankly. “I’m only a humble Detective-Inspector. But I can take you to Chief-Inspector Bagshott at Scotland Yard, he deals with all that sort of thing.”

“No, no. I don’t want the police. It’s British Intelligence I want and nobody else will do.”

“Chief-Inspector Bagshott will take you along, that’s what I meant. He deals with the Intelligence people.”

“Oh, very well,” said Colemore unwillingly. All these police, no doubt armed with Beisegel’s description——

“There’s a constable,” said Warren suddenly. “He’ll direct us.”

When they reached the police station Warren dived inside like a rabbit into his home burrow, and Colemore reluctantly followed. He could hardly wait about outside in case Symes, or some other member of that party, came past; besides, if only he had known it, Warren would never have permitted it. Colemore was much too interesting a man to let go. He was left to sit unhappily in the outer room and be regarded with curiosity by the desk sergeant while Warren went into the Superintendent’s room and shut the door behind him.

“I am Detective-Inspector Warren of the Special Branch,” he began, “here’s my card _____”

“What!” said the Superintendent. “Not the man who disappeared three weeks ago? Good Lord, man, where have you been?”

“Locked up,” said Warren grimly. “I’m afraid I can’t say any more without permission, I must report first.”

“Locked up. Not in my Division, surely?”

Warren smiled and did not answer the question. “I really wanted to ask you, Superintendent, whether you could possibly let me have a police car up to Scotland Yard. I’ve got a man outside there I don’t want to lose sight of.”

“Is he a prisoner?”

“Not yet.”

“Oh. I wondered whether he was one of the people who locked you up.”

“So do I, that’s why I don’t want to lose him.”

“Oh, ah. Yes, in that case you shall certainly have a car.” The Superintendent touched a bell and gave orders to the constable who answered it.

“I am very much obliged to you, Superintendent,” said Warren.

“Don’t mention it. I am delighted to see you alive, Detective-Inspector. I—we—began to think you weren’t.”

“I began to wonder, myself,” admitted Warren.

“But—in my Division—” began the Superintendent, but the constable appeared again in the doorway and said that the car was ready.

* * * * *

“I expect you know the rest,” said Colemore to Hambledon. “Warren made one or two gentle attempts to pump me on the way to town and tactfully gave it up when he realized I wasn’t going to talk, Chief-Inspector Bagshott was a little more pressing, but he also gave it up when all I did was to bleat for Intelligence like a lost lamb for its mother. So we came along here and here we are.”

“Yes,” said Hambledon. He leaned back in his chair and studied the man opposite to him. Colemore was a lean man of medium height, brown-haired and grey-eyed, with nothing particularly noticeable about him except an air of self-reliance which was to be expected in one who had led such a life as his. There was alertness in his eyes and more than a trace of recklessness in his expression; altogether he looked a man who might have done all the things he described and was prepared to do that and more again if suitably encouraged.

“So you want to work for M. I. 5,” said Hambledon. “You certainly seem to be in a position where you might be quite useful.”

Colemore nodded. “So long as my friends don’t put the raid on the Teddington house to my account.”

“Oh dear, no. Unless you were seen, and I hope for your sake you weren’t. A brief account will appear in the papers to the effect that a light was shining from an attic window so the police investigated. Your friends will think that Warren managed to shift the black-out. It was of course, the police who found and liberated Warren.”

“So simple,” said Colemore, “when you put it like that. To get down to brass tacks, what d’you want me to do, exactly?”

“Keep in with them and keep me informed.”

“But how am I to get in touch with you? If I’m seen——”

“You won’t be. All you have to do will be to ring up the Saturn Motor Hire Company—see the rings going round—here’s one of their cards.”

“Oh, I’ve seen them,” said Colemore. “They have white patches on the spokes of the wheels so that when they’re running they look like circles.”

“That’s them,” said Hambleton ungrammatically. “They’re a perfectly genuine firm and lots of people use them. It was one of my brighter ideas, if I may say so. The drivers keep careful logs of whom they’ve driven and where to; most useful sometimes. Most of the cars are quite ordinary but they have one or two special ones, and you’ll get those. Sit on the right side at the back, put your right hand down and feel under the edge of the seat near the end. Your fingers will encounter a bell-push, but it doesn’t ring a bell. It flashes a little blue light where only the driver can see it. So you can order the car to your hotel, say ‘The Ritz’ in a lordly voice, and drive away. Then press the button and the driver will bring you here without more said. Very convenient, especially if at any time you happen to have a passenger you’d like to show me.”

“But suppose we’re followed by another car,” began Colemore.

“You won’t be—not successfully. You wait and see.”

“I’d better be getting back to my hotel,” said Anthony, looking at the clock. “I’m supposed to be in by eleven or so in case they want to telephone.” He gave Hambleton the address. “It’s past midnight, but I am out on the rampage for once.” He got up and stretched himself. “Gosh, what a seance we’ve had.”

“Have you any idea,” said Hambleton, “what they want you to do?”

“None. But they believe I’m Brampton, remember, they may think I have family or social contacts which may be useful. I don’t know. I only hope they don’t produce one of the gang who used to know Brampton, that’s all. Have you any tips you can give me?”

“We know,” said Hambleton, rising stiffly, “we know of course that there is a German espionage organization at work—there always has been and I suspect there always will be. This edition seems to be more efficient than usual. We even know who some of the small fry are, but we’re leaving them alone because we want the heads.”

“According to that fellow with the clipped ear who interviewed me in the prison camp, I’m to be one of the heads myself,” said Colemore cheerfully. “If I look like making an ass of myself, you can come and arrest me.”

“Without hesitation,” said Tommy.

“By the way—one minor point—will the police continue to search for the missing German prisoner, Beisegel? To say nothing of the missing British prisoner, Colemore?”

“I think I can call them off the hunt for Beisegel,” said Hambleton. “Your life will probably be sufficiently complex without having to dodge the police on that score. I’m afraid the Maidstone Jail business is rather outside my sphere of influence, but it’s a long time ago and I should imagine they’ve left off looking for you by now. Especially as you escaped to the Continent such a short time before the War, the obvious solution is that you just got lost, like so many others. Of course, if you fell foul of the police in any way and they took your finger-prints, the game would be up.”

Colemore nodded. "I will be tactful. Er—thanks awfully for listening to all that."

"For believing all that, is what you really mean. Strange to say, I do. Well, good-bye and good hunting. There's a car at the door which will drop you at a quiet spot near the hotel—the commissionaire will show you into the right car. We have been extra careful since they got poor Abbott that way. Good luck."

Next morning Symes strolled into the hotel and Colemore, greeting him with something near enthusiasm, looked for signs of distress over the Teddington affair but saw none. Symes looked as unruffled as before.

"Sorry to have left you high and dry so long," he said. "Meant to have looked you up before this, but one thing and another prevented me."

"I'm awfully glad you've come," said Colemore. "I was beginning to wonder whether you'd forgotten me. I hardly liked to bother you with a letter when there was really nothing to say."

Symes nodded. "Doing anything in particular this morning? Let's go out for a stroll, shall we? It's a nice day for once."

They turned into Kensington Gardens, and Symes said, "By the way, don't write to that Teddington address now. You didn't, did you?"

"No," said Colemore in a surprised voice. "No, I didn't."

"That's all right. There's been a spot of bother down there. Some ass showed a light and the police kicked up about it."

"But surely—a small fine——"

"When you want me in future," said Symes, disregarding this, "ring up this number." He took from his pocket-book a card with 'Alan G. Symes' engraved upon it, and wrote a number on the back. "If I'm not there, somebody will tell you when to ring again."

"Thanks very much. Shall I memorize this and destroy it?"

"No, why? It's quite an innocent number."

Colemore nodded and said nothing.

"What I really wanted to see you about," said Symes, "was a little affair that's being arranged near Petersfield, in Hampshire. Know Petersfield?"

"No," said Colemore, "don't you pass it going to Portsmouth by train? I've never got out there."

"Yes. The Portsmouth road passes through, too."

Colemore held his peace. Major Brampton was a Yorkshire man and did not necessarily know the Portsmouth road.

"There's a sabotage job," went on Symes. "Our man is perfectly reliable about explosives and he knows the spot, but he wants somebody with him to lend a hand. I thought it would interest you, and perhaps, give you experience. Know anything about sabotage work?"

"Only in theory," said Anthony. "I haven't had much practical experience."

"I thought you probably hadn't. There's a place where a road-bridge crosses the railway—the main road and the main line. He'll show you."

"Won't it be guarded?" said Colemore.

“I don’t think so,” said Symes carelessly.

“But—” began Colemore.

“Don’t worry,” said Symes. “Will you meet our fellow by the War Memorial at Waterloo Station at ten minutes to six to-night? He is a tall man, lined face, hair turning grey, dressed in dark trousers, fawn raincoat, grey felt hat, black-and-white checked scarf—one of those shepherd’s plaid things. He will be carrying a rather large suitcase with a blue stripe painted across the ends and narrow aluminium stripes edging the blue ones.”

“I think I ought to be able to pick him out. What’s his name?”

“You can call him Eddie.”

Colemore parted from Symes, went for a brief run round the Underground Railway to make sure he wasn’t being followed, and telephoned the Saturn Hire Company to pick him up. The car duly arrived and Colemore slid across the back seat to the right side and felt under the edge. There was a bell-push there, and he pressed it. The driver did not appear to take the faintest notice, but instead of stopping at the Criterion Restaurant as originally requested he drove straight to Hambledon’s office.

“Splendid,” said Colemore. “Thanks very much.”

“Would you wish me to wait, sir?”

“Please. I don’t suppose I shall be long.”

Colemore unfolded his story and Hambledon listened with cheerful interest.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “That’s fine. Arrangements shall be made. I suppose the decorative suitcase will be full of gelignite and what-not, I hope he won’t drop it down the steps at Waterloo. Useful place, Waterloo, if not picturesque. We should miss it.”

“What do I do?” asked Colemore.

“Whatever Eddie tells you. Just behave perfectly normally and try to look as though you’re merely going to Hampshire to find a house to let.”

“An expression of hopeful incredulity?”

“That’ll do. Anything else?”

“I’ve got Symes’ telephone number,” said Colemore, and gave it. “He told me not to write to the Teddington house. He said there’d been some trouble about lights showing.”

“We didn’t catch anybody there,” said Hambledon. “Nobody came there after you and Warren left, I mean. Perhaps somebody walked along Meon Road and felt a sudden psychic aversion to entering number eight, so he simply went on past the gate. The police do affect some people like that, I understand. They know they’re there without seeing them. Very useful. I’ll have this telephone number looked up.”

“I don’t think there’s anything else at the moment.”

“No? Well, I expect there soon will be. Good-bye, and have a jolly evening.”

When Colemore had gone, Hambledon rang up Bagshott and made certain arrangements.

“You’ll have to be careful,” he said. “Heaven knows what that blighter Eddie has got in his suitcase. Don’t let him throw it at you, will you? No Rugby scrimmage from any of your young toughs.”

“It’s the last thing they’d do,” began Bagshott indignantly.

“It would be,” said Hambleton. “Good afternoon.”

XV

SAD CASE OF PLUGS MULLIGAN

PLUGS MULLIGAN had been a burglar when he was young and active, but advancing years slowed him and a tendency to deafness rendered him vulnerable. Finally he was caught, and served a short sentence as a first offender, aged 47.

"It is deplorable," he was told when they released him, "to find a man of your age taking to crime. More than that, it's stupid. How can you expect to get away with it? Give it up, like a sensible man, and keep out of trouble in future.

"Mister," said Plugs earnestly, "I've done me last burglary—me first and last," he added hastily. "I was a fool, that's all. Oo'veer'eard of a deaf burglar?"

He retired to his native Aldgate and remembered an idea which had been described to him by an old friend. A suitcase, a large but ordinary-looking suitcase. It was not so ordinary as it looked; if it were put down upon another and smaller suitcase its bottom side collapsed inwards and swallowed up the smaller case. An inconspicuous knob under the handle could then be slid along, causing grabs inside to grip its prey. Then all one had to do was to pick up the case again and carry them both away. A soft job for one's declining years.

"I'll get one of them," he said. "Expensive, but worth it. You can't expect to set up in business without putting a spot of capital into it."

He got his case, though the cost made a hole in his savings. It was worth it, and he did very well indeed out of his investment.

He was wandering round Waterloo Station, looking for another dividend, on the evening when Colemore met Eddie by the War Memorial. Colemore arrived first and had waited several minutes when a taxi pulled up and the man with the shepherd's plaid scarf got out. He turned back and lifted a brown suitcase, with a blue-and-silver stripe on it, carefully out of the taxi and placed it gently upon the pavement. When he had paid off the taxi-driver, Colemore strolled up to him and said, "Hullo, Eddie! How's things?"

"Hullo, Bill! Sorry to be late, we had bad luck with the traffic lights. Doesn't matter, there's plenty of time. Let's go up, shall we?"

They walked up the long flight of steps, and Colemore noticed that Eddie held up the suitcase in front of him with both hands instead of carrying it normally. It looked awkward and was obviously heavy.

"Can I lend you a hand with that?" asked Colemore.

"No, thanks. I can manage all right. I don't want to bump it against the steps, that's all. This gelnignite's a bit elderly and it gets unreliable with age, as I daresay you know."

"Dear me," said Colemore. "I hope we don't have a railway accident."

Eddie grinned. "Don't worry," he said. "If we did, you'd be standing at St. Peter's gate before you knew what had happened. Oh, it's not too bad, but it's time it was used up, if you know what I mean."

Plugs Mulligan, standing at the top of the steps, watched them come up and noticed,

with interest, the care that was being taken.

“Now, what’s in that case?” he wondered. “Somethin’ vallyble. Eggs? or watches? If they was comin’ to town I’d say it was eggs, but leavin’ town—I’ll wait and see if they are catchin’ a train.”

They reached the top of the steps; as they were passing Mulligan Eddie asked Colemore if he would go and get the tickets. “Two first returns to Petersfield. I’ll wait for you in front of the departure board.”

Colemore nodded and they parted, Mulligan drifting after Eddie. The point that was worrying Plugs Mulligan was that Eddie’s suitcase was as big as his own, it would never go inside.

“Better let it go,” he said to himself. “And yet—what the heck’s inside that case?”

There was a sudden rush of last minute passengers for Surbiton, they threatened to engulf Eddie and he hugged his case closely to him and sidestepped behind a seat to avoid them.

“Very precious,” said Plugs, “I must ’ave it.” Eddie waited for Colemore; Mulligan, six feet away, evolved a scheme. He would put down his own case beside theirs, pick up the other, take it to the left-luggage office, and book it in. Then he would come back and pick up his own. There was little risk of losing it, people are very honest about luggage as Plugs knew very well. Eddie went on and stood in front of the departure board looking up the trains for Petersfield, and Colemore came to join him.

“No train till six twenty-seven,” said Eddie disgustedly. “We’ve got half an hour to wait.” He put his case down close to his feet.

“We don’t want to stand here for half an hour, do we?” said Colemore. “What about going along and having a drink? Or even a sandwich or so. It seems to take the best part of two hours to get to Petersfield.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Eddie. “Where is the refreshment place in this station?”

“Along there somewhere,” said Colemore, pointing.

“It’s so dark you can’t see,” said Eddie, turning to peer into the dimness. Mulligan, edging nearer, seized his opportunity. He put down his case, picked up Eddie’s and slid off.

“We can go across and look for it,” said Anthony.

“That’s so,” agreed Eddie, turned to pick up his case and let out a startled yelp.

“My case! It’s gone.”

“There’s somebody else’s left instead,” said Colemore, repressing an inclination to laugh. If this were some of Hambleton’s staff work——

“The point is, was my case stolen, or is this a genuine mistake?” said Eddie, and stooped to pick up Plugs’. “Gosh no. This one’s empty.”

He stood, dangling it from one finger and looking distractedly about him. What he saw disturbed him even more. Large men in plain clothes were converging upon him from several directions at once, and they were all staring fixedly at him. He lost his head, threw down Spike’s case, dodged the nearest man and ran for it. At the entrance he collided with a tall man who immediately gathered him in and presented him to his pursuers. Colemore did not wait to see the outcome, but left the station at once without looking back.

Mulligan, in the meantime, did not reach the left-luggage office. He found his arm taken and firmly held while he was conducted to a waiting taxi. He protested loudly.

“What’s all this about?”

“You will be taken to the police station and charged with stealing luggage. That suitcase, in fact.”

Mulligan’s face was a picture of bewilderment.

“I know I’m deaf,” he said. “Must ’a got worse sudden.”

“You heard me,” said the Detective-Inspector.

“I thought I ’eard you say as I’d stolen this ’ere case. That’s what I thought I ’eard.”

“Too right, you did.”

“I never! It’s me own. Lemme go.”

“Now then, no trouble, please.”

“It’s me own what I bought wiv me own money in the Mile End Road.”

“You can tell them all about it at the police station. Get in the car.”

Plugs put one foot on the running-board and took it off as an idea struck him.

“I say, mister! You don’t mean to tell me as I’ve ’ad the misfortune to ’ave been sold stolen goods?”

“You can keep all that for the Super at the station. Get in!”

At the police station Mulligan stuck to his story. He’d bought the case off a man he didn’t know in the Mile End Road. True, it was a bit cheaper than you’d expect, no doubt the man had stolen it himself and planted it on a poor unsuspecting old man who’d never had the advantage of much education. Trusting, that’s what he was, been told so time and again.

“Listen,” said the Superintendent. “You were seen to take that case. We were watching you.”

“Eh?” said Mulligan, one hand behind his ear. “I can’t make out what you’re sayin’.”

“Have you opened the case, Wilson?” asked the Superintendent of one of his constables. He spoke in a low tone and Mulligan really did not hear.

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s in it?”

“Explosives, sir. Sticks of gelignite and fuses, mainly.”

The Superintendent whistled. “Bring it here. Be careful.”

When it was brought and placed gingerly upon his desk, he opened it and turned to Mulligan.

“You say this is your case?”

“That’s right,” said Mulligan, trying to see past the lid.

“What’s this, then?” The Superintendent held up a stick of gelignite.

“That? That—oh, that’s only modellin’ wax I was takin’ down to me sister’s kiddies. I dearly love kids, always did. Got none of me own.”

“Oh. Where does your sister live?”

Mulligan nearly said Aldershot, but changed his mind and said “Portsmouth.”

“And you were thinking of going there?”

“That’s right. I ’adn’t seen ’em, not for——”

“You ought to know you couldn’t go there, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Protected area. No visitors allowed.”

“Oh, b-bother this war,” said Mulligan. “Can’t a man——”

But the Superintendent got tired of it.

“You’ve got his statement down, Gibbs? Get it typed out, and then”—to Mulligan—“you can read it through and sign it, if that’s the story you’re going to stick to. Take him away, Wilson.”

* * * * *

Eddie was taken into custody on a charge of “loitering with intent,” and he also protested. Confronted with the trick suitcase he had dropped when he fled, words rather tended to fail him. He was searched, and a wallet was found in his coat pocket, a leather wallet with C.D. stamped on the corner. Inside it was twenty-five pounds in notes and some letters addressed to Charles Denton at an address at Blackheath.

“What’s all this?”

Eddie cast a horrified glance upon it and said indignantly that he’d never seen it before and that the police had planted it.

“That’ll do!” said the Superintendent sharply. At that moment his telephone rang and he lifted the receiver. The voice at the other end introduced itself as Charles Denton—with an address at Blackheath. He said that he had been robbed of a wallet, brown seal leather with C.D. in the corner, containing twenty-five pounds and some letters addressed to him. He apologized for troubling the police in a matter in which it was unreasonable to expect them to work miracles, but he understood that it was correct procedure to inform the police about such matters——

“Well, sir,” said the Superintendent genially, “they say miracles do happen. If you could make it convenient to call at this Station . . . Thank you, sir. . . . Yes, certainly. In ten minutes’ time. Thank you, sir.”

When Charles Denton lounged into the Police Station he at once identified the wallet as his. What was more, he identified the prisoner too, as a man who had tried to jostle him in the Bakerloo Tube shortly before.

“That’s a lie,” said the prisoner. “I wasn’t in the Bakerloo Tube.”

“Oh, weren’t you?” said the Superintendent. “How did you reach the station?”

“In a taxi.”

“And where did you pick up the taxi?”

The prisoner opened his mouth, thought better of it and shut it again. He did not want to say where he’d come from.

“Of course,” said Charles Denton in his slow, gentle voice, “I might have been mistaken about that. The lights, you know. But there’s the wallet, what?”

“Oh, quite,” said the Superintendent.

Denton had been one of Hambledon's assistants for years, and he was not at Waterloo by any coincidence.

"The fact was, I had a brainwave," said Denton, telling Hambledon about it later. "Feller came barging towards me so I just cannoned into him and dropped my wallet into his pocket."

"Whenever I've had to run away from police," said Hambledon thoughtfully, "it never occurred to me to stop and pick a pocket. However, I daresay it'll all help. We only want this Eddie put away in cold storage till the war's over."

Eddie, to his rage and disgust, received a sentence of five years' imprisonment. Both Judge and Jury took a dim view of men who went about with trick suitcases and snatched wallets in passing.

As for Colemore, he had made his escape without anyone appearing to notice him and walked rapidly away into the darkness. He thought it safe to lean over the parapet of Westminster Bridge and finish his laugh in comfort. Eddie's face, when he turned round and found his suitcase gone, repaid many hours of anxious boredom. Colemore decided that his obvious role was that of righteous indignation. How dared they partner him with such a bungler as Eddie? He entered the first telephone kiosk he saw and rang up the number Symes had given him. A gruff voice answered him.

"Mr. Symes there, please?" said Colemore.

"'Oo's that speaking?"

"Mr. Bilston."

"'Old on, please."

There was a short pause, after which the gruff voice said that Mr. Symes was out at the moment but was expected back in ten minutes' time. Say a quarter of an hour.

"All right. I'll ring up again later," said Colemore, and went for a walk along the Embankment to admire Boadicea and the dolphins upon the unlighted street lamps. There were searchlights up towards the east and their beams lit up the broad road as he strolled along, thinking. Probably Symes did not live at the place where the telephone was situated, but somewhere near from whence he could readily be fetched.

When the allotted time had passed, Colemore telephoned again, and this time Symes answered in person.

"Where are you speaking from?" he asked.

"I'm on the Embankment," said Colemore, in an angry voice, "and it's just pure luck I'm not in custody. What sort of a gibbering nitwit is that fool I met to-night?"

"D'you mean Eddie?"

"Of course I mean Eddie, who'd you suppose I mean? Look here, if I'm going to be landed with blasted idiots like that, the game's not worth the candle. It's not safe, and I shan't go on with it. You can find some other mug——"

"Look here," said Symes. "What's happened?"

"Happened!" snorted Colemore. "Know what the fool did? He let his suitcase—yes, that one—be stolen from him by a sneak-thief. As though that wasn't enough, he lost his

head when a policeman looked at him, and ran away. So naturally the copper ran too, to see what Eddie was running for, and they caught him. They pulled him in I suppose, I didn't wait to see. I don't care, either, and I hope he gets fifteen years on Dartmoor. Fellow's a complete menace. If you can't——"

"Look here," said Symes again, but Colemore interrupted him.

"Don't keep on saying 'look here.' This is a telephone, not a television set!"

"All right, all right. I'm sorry. Loo—nearly said it again. I must cure myself of that. I'm frightfully sorry all this has happened. Come up West and have dinner with me, will you? There's a little restaurant in Soho where even now one can get a meal. Will you meet me in half an hour's time—that's at seven o'clock, say, at Piccadilly Circus? Corner of Shaftesbury Avenue. We'll have a spot of something and then some food, what?"

"All right," said Colemore sulkily. "I'll come."

He went, and presented such a picture of simmering indignation that Symes laid himself out to be charming. Anthony allowed himself to be gradually soothed; Symes apologized for Eddie, "a brilliant man on his job, but of course he had his limitations. My fault for not putting you in charge. We shall know better in future." They sat at a corner table from which they could not be overheard, and Symes unburdened himself of some of the sorrows which ham-handed subordinates inflict upon organizers. "These mutts," he moaned. "They think everyone stupid but themselves and that's where they slip up. Then they are caught, of course, and if it wasn't for the difficulty of replacing them I should be glad. Can't abide a fool."

"Dangerous, too," sympathized Colemore.

Symes nodded. "That house at Teddington. That's another worry just now."

"What's the matter?"

"The fact is," said Symes, lowering his voice, "we had a prisoner there, a policeman. He had to be left alone in the house sometimes, and eventually he managed in some way to remove the black-out and show a light. So the police broke in and found him, and now of course they're all sitting round the house waiting for one of us to go back there. And there are some things in there I want."

Colemore frowned thoughtfully. "That was the same house which you gave me as an address to write to, was it?"

"The same."

"And when did this happen?"

"Last night. That's one reason why I came round to you early this morning; to tell you not to write there."

Colemore nodded and allowed his frown to relax. "What have you got there?" he asked.

"Money and memoranda. Nearly five hundred pounds in notes and a file of papers."

Colemore whistled under his breath. "I expect the police have got them by now," he said. "If they're looking for anything in a house they usually find it, you know."

"Not where I put them, I think," said Symes.

"They will pull the house to pieces if necessary," said Anthony coldly. "Floors up, skirting-boards off, panelling pulled down, fireplaces out, plumbing dismantled, even the

doorknobs taken off and inspected. Quite apart from what they'll do to the furniture. Where a thing can be put, it can be found."

Symes looked a little disconcerted. "I suppose it's possible to find them," he admitted. "I still think it's extremely unlikely." Colemore shrugged his shoulders and Symes continued; "In any case, if they haven't got them, neither have we."

The waiter came with the coffee, Colemore lit a cigarette and stared absently across the room until the man had tidied up the table and gone.

"What you really mean, I suppose," said Anthony at last, "is that you want me to go and get the stuff for you." He spoke in a slightly contemptuous tone; ever since Symes had had to apologize for Eddie's shortcomings the initiative seemed to have passed to Colemore, and he meant to keep it.

"I didn't mean anything of the sort," protested Symes. "I think it's far too dangerous."

"That's for me to decide. Where is the stuff?"

"But—" began Symes. Colemore looked at him, he stopped and began again. "I couldn't possibly allow you to take such a——"

"Where is the stuff?"

Symes gave in. "In the dining-room. Left of the front door as you enter. There's a fireplace in the room with an oak mantelpiece, you know, shelf above and flat panels either side of the fire. Behind the left-hand panel."

"I should think they've found it. In case they haven't, how does it open?"

"It's screwed to the wall. The heads of the screws are covered with plastic wood and don't show, but there are six of them. Two at the top, just under—"

"Heavens, man, I shouldn't have time to play about scraping wood off screw-heads. If I do it—if—I should take a two-foot tire-lever with me. I expect your friend the taxi-driver's got one. The thin end, that's the end you insert under the tire, wants grinding to a sharp chisle-edge. Can you get that done for me?"

"Certainly," said Symes, with a slight gasp. "Newman—that's the taxi-driver, you remember—has got a workbench in his garage. He'll do it."

Colemore nodded carelessly. "Very well, let him do it. I'll go down one night—not to-night—and look the place over. Then I can tell you whether I think it's possible. How do I find the house?"

Symes described the route from the station and Anthony listened, no one would have imagined that he knew the place at all.

"House on the left, you say. What's opposite? Only fields? I see. Yes, that's quite clear."

He rose from the chair and put his overcoat on. "Thanks for a pleasant evening," he continued. "I'll ring you up as soon as I've got any news for you. Good night and thanks again."

Symes looked as though there was a good deal more that he wanted to say, but Colemore nodded cheerfully and strolled out of the restaurant leaving him behind. Anthony walked to Piccadilly Circus and took a bus to Marble Arch.

"Moral ascendancy," he said to himself. "That's the idea. If only I can keep it up."

XVI

TREASURE HUNT

A FEW days later, Colemore telephoned to Symes to ask for the keys of number eight Meon Road, Teddington. "Send them here by messenger, will you? Yes, to this hotel. I may use them to-night if nothing unforeseen happens. Thanks for the tire-lever."

"I'll send both front and back door keys if you like," said Symes, "though I expect the back door's bolted. By the way, you remember, don't you, that there's a moon to-night?"

"Yes, both keys, please. And I like moonlight. If there are any policemen about I would so very much rather see them than collide with them."

"I'll come with you, shall I?"

"Heavens, no," said Colemore firmly. "I'm obliged for the offer, but I'd much rather be alone. Don't think of it, please. I'll telephone to-night when I get back." He rang off before Symes could reply, and smiled to himself. "That'll fetch him," he murmured. "As Hambledon said it's no use putting on an act unless you have an audience."

Colemore arrived at Teddington shortly after nine. He did not follow Symes' directions for reaching the house, he had spent some time in Hambledon's office studying a large-scale map, showing footpaths, right-of-way and other short cuts in the Meon Road district. He came to the house by way of a timber-merchant's yard, a path round a Methodist chapel and two private gardens; the last of these backed on to the garden of Symes' house. He walked between the tidy rows of Brussels sprouts and winter kale to the back door, which was not even locked, though the scullery he entered was in total darkness. He opened the kitchen door, Hambledon heard him and came across the hall to meet him.

"Well done, Colemore," he said. "Come in where it's warm. We're nearly ready for you."

"Did you find much stuff there?" asked Colemore.

"Most useful," said Hambledon. "Most illuminating—at least, I've no doubt it will be when it's all decoded. We've been here for the past two hours taking photostat copies of all their memoranda, and photographs of finger-prints too. Also the numbers of the notes, all pound and ten-shilling ones, by the way. There were one or two letters which arrived by post after Warren's release from the top attic, but I think it can be assumed that the police have seized them, you wouldn't expect to find them still here."

"No, of course not. Were they of any interest?"

"Not much. The milk bill, and a letter from a poor gentleman asking for a remittance. He gives no address and signs the letter with a number, but we hope those notes will tell us who he is. Sit down by the fire and have a cigarette. How long do you think you ought to stay?"

"A quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, not more. I don't think Symes knew exactly when I arrived," said Colemore, "but he might possibly have heard something. It's as well to be careful. Your man at Waterloo told me that my friend had left by an earlier train."

“Symes arrived more than an hour ago,” said Hambledon, “and has been lurking in the gardens waiting for you to pass along the road. He must be getting a little chilly by now, it is not a pleasant evening. Yes, what is it?” Hambledon went to the door in response to a call from another room and entered into low-voiced conversation with somebody in the hall. Colemore leaned back in his chair, waiting; the house seemed full of people. There were two men sitting at the dining-table near him, checking over the numbers of treasury notes; they wore rubber gloves, as did another man at the far end of the table who was arranging papers carefully in order with reference to a list at his elbow. A fourth man came into the room and handed him a dozen more sheets, saying, “That’s the lot,” in a casual voice.

“Sure? I thought there was one on blue ruled paper—here it is. Quite right, thank you.” He went on sorting.

Colemore looked at the ruined fireplace; the splintered oak panel lying in the hearth and the rough brickwork exposed which it had formerly covered. A shallow recess had been chipped out to leave a space behind the panel, the wooden plugs holding the screws of which Symes had spoken were showing with the screws still in them. The panel had been ripped off by force as arranged, just in case Symes, or some of his people, ever managed to examine it. Hambledon was always thorough.

Hambledon himself returned and said cheerfully, “Shan’t be long now. They’ve only got to pack up the parcel again exactly as it was even to the knots in the string and then you can have it. Do you mind if I have your raincoat and trousers, please?”

Colemore stared. “What on earth for?”

“You are going to show evidences of having had a rough trip getting away from here, and I thought it would be nicer for you if you weren’t inside the clothes while the evidence was collected. You needn’t be shy, there are no ladies present. I don’t think I need have your waistcoat, but I’ll have the jacket of your suit, please. Thanks very much. I won’t keep you long.”

Hambledon went away with the clothes over his arm and Colemore sat down again feeling very self-conscious in woollen underwear and waistcoat, but the busy men at the table took no notice at all. It would be all one to them thought Anthony, if he were as naked as when he was born or dressed in gauze and spangles as a fairy queen. . . . He was just becoming aware of a draught from the open door when Hambledon returned with a messy-looking bundle.

“Escaping from this house,” said Tommy, “you unluckily attract the attention of the constable who has just entered the front garden. You immediately flee to the right, past the pergola, you know; and tear your trousers on the fence between this garden and the next. Here is the tear.” Hambledon displayed a large three-cornered tear in the left knee. “The constable blows his whistle and switches on a torch which illuminates shrubs and bushes in a spectacular and pleasing manner. The whistle is answered by other constables stationed round the house, they also switch on torches and run hither and thither. You still keep going across gardens in a course roughly parallel to the road, in the garden next but one to this you trip over something and nearly take a header into the lily pond. Or perhaps it contains gold-fish, I haven’t really examined it. That was where you get the right side of your coat—here—and your sleeves so wet. Passing from there, you lie doggo under some bushes while the hunt sweeps past you; it is at this point that you collect all this mud. You

allow the police to pass by and then get up and walk quietly into the road. There is an unattended car standing by a gateway a hundred yards up the road; contrary to regulations the owner has not immobilized it. You will visibly realize what a state you are in, enter the car and drive away. After which the owner will emerge from the nearest house, bewailing his loss to the police who will tell him it serves him right and take his name and address. I hope Symes will be interested and amused. He is at the moment in a clump of beeches just inside the field opposite, about halfway to the car, I expect you remember it.” Colemore nodded. “Well, is that all clear?”

“Perfectly, thanks. What do I really do—just pass quietly across a couple of gardens and emerge in the road?”

“Yes. The police will gambol round you, but you needn’t take any notice. They get very little opportunity for innocent enjoyment, you know, I expect they’ll make the most of it.”

“My face and hands ought to be muddy, oughtn’t they?” said Anthony, dressing himself. “Gosh, these things are in a mess.”

“Yes, aren’t they? I attended to them myself. There’s a pail of nice wet mud in the kitchen, you can dabble in it before you go. Leave the car wherever it happens to suit you to do so, the police will find it. I’ll keep the tire-lever, it may come in handy.”

* * * * *

Alan Symes left London much too early and arrived at Teddington much too soon for Colemore, but not nearly soon enough to see Hambledon and his party arrive at the house in Meon Road. Symes did not wait at Teddington station for fear Colemore should see him and tell him to go away and stay there. He went to the neighbourhood of Meon Road and found a place in somebody’s garden from which he ought to see Colemore pass by. He waited for some time, several people went past but not Colemore. Symes began to shiver, it was a cold night. Better to walk on a little, perhaps. A door opened in the house behind him and an Aberdeen terrier rushed out, capering in the moonlight. Symes moved unwisely and the dog saw him. It was, indeed, better to walk on a little.

He went on until the Aberdeen’s barking died away, and found himself in Meon Road itself; he walked boldly past the house and pretended to post a letter in a pillar-box outside number ten. Number eight was dark and silent, but as he came by the gate again something moved under the may trees and he saw the outline of a policeman’s helmet.

After that he moved uneasily from place to place, getting really anxious because Colemore did not come. Of course, he might have changed his mind. Symes took refuge at last in a clump of beeches about fifty yards up the road in the fields opposite the houses. He peered at his watch by the light of the moon, it was nearly half-past nine. “I’ll wait till ten,” said Symes to himself, “and then clear off home if nothing happens. This is a waste of time.” He shivered in the night air.

At ten minutes to ten he started violently, flattened himself against one of the trees and stared anxiously across the road. Something was happening, very much so. There was a bright light in the garden of number eight, and a whistle blew, piercing, insistent. Another answered, more lights sprang up, more whistles, and shouting. The torches flitted among tree-trunks and behind bushes, and there were crashing noises as bodies forced their way

through undergrowth. Symes ran crouching in the shadow to the roadside hedge and threw himself flat behind it.

A voice cried. "I see him! To your left, Bill! Stop you there!" Windows went up in numbers nine and seven, eager heads leaned out and anxious voices asked, "What is it? Parachutists? Where's the Home Guard?"

"Coming, Madam! You're quite safe, don't worry. Behind that shed there!"

Symes lay flat in the wet grass, shaking with excitement. That queer fellow had certainly done it this time, he could hardly hope to escape all this. The place must have been surrounded by police.

Lights, whistles, shouts and trampling swept past Symes' view-point and persevered across the gardens, leaving an uneasy quiet behind. Symes raised himself on his elbows just in time to see a man in civilian clothes come out of one of the gates opposite and stroll—stroll!—across the road towards him. The man was plainly recognizable in the moonlight, it was unmistakably Colemore.

Symes waited till Colemore came abreast of him and then whistled softly, thinking to stop him and get possession of those precious papers. But the whistle had entirely the wrong effect. Colemore leapt as if he had been stung and went off up the road like a startled rabbit. He reached the car, hesitated and hurled himself into it. The next moment the engine started, the car moved forward, accelerated, and flashed out of sight.

Symes stood up, cursing under his breath. It was dangerous to stay there, the police would probably search the fields on their way back. He pushed through the hedge and walked on towards the station.

A policeman came suddenly forward from a gateway and said abruptly, "Excuse me. Have you seen a man in a raincoat and soft grey hat come out of these gardens just now?"

"No," said Symes. "No, I'm sorry. I've only just come along the road." They were then at about the spot where the car had stood, and a gentleman came from the house opposite in haste; stopped, stared, and said, "Where's my car?"

"Did you leave it here, sir?"

"Precisely here. What the devil——"

"Did you immobilize it, sir?"

"No—well, no, I didn't. I only went inside for a moment, just to leave a book——"

"Well, you know the regulations, sir, don't you? If you'd complied with regulations the car'd be still there."

"But constable——"

"I must trouble you for your name and address——"

Symes unostentatiously removed himself. The last thing he wished was to be questioned further, and he thought himself lucky to be allowed to go. He went quietly and quickly away; the constable and the bereft car-owner grinned at each other.

"So that's one of them, is it?"

"That's right. Well, we shall know him again."

Symes went home and waited anxiously for Colemore to telephone as promised; he waited all night but no call came. By early morning he was nearly frantic with anxiety, he abandoned his flat to brood over the telephone in Spink's stuffy office downstairs. Not

that he liked Colemore personally, quite the contrary; especially since Eddie's misadventure at Waterloo Station had given Colemore an opportunity for censure. But Symes was not his own master, and he did not like to think what would happen if the promising new recruit came to a bad end through his agency. Besides, there was all that money and the papers. All that money. Perhaps Colemore had kept the money himself and—what might he not do with the memoranda?

But soon after eight in the morning the telephone rang and Symes leapt to answer it. Colemore's voice at the other end, cool, unexcited, faintly supercilious. "That you, Symes? Bilston here. Can you meet me at that boarding-house near King's Cross where we first met? Willowmore Road, that's it. Take a room, please, I want to change. You can get me another suit, can't you? Thanks very much. This one's in rather a mess, I don't like to walk into my hotel looking like this. Mrs. What's-her-name the manageress would, I'm sure, draw the worst conclusions. About nine, then? I'll be there."

"Have you—" began Symes, but there was a click and the telephone went dead.

Anthony Colemore strolled into the house without knocking and greeted Symes kindly.

"Sorry I couldn't ring up last night," he said. "I was rather moving about from place to place, and then I didn't like to ask to use the 'phone where I slept. It wasn't very private. I thought you'd just conclude I'd put off the trip."

"I was rather anxious," admitted Symes.

"You shouldn't have worried, I was all right. Did you manage to find a suit for me? Oh, well done. Come up and tell me all the news while I change."

They retired to a bedroom upstairs; when Symes had shut the door Colemore took out a flat parcel from an inside pocket in his raincoat and handed it over.

"Is that the one you wanted? It may be a bit damp, I fell into a lily pond at one stage of the proceedings."

Symes snatched at the parcel, examined it, felt it, and sighed with relief.

"That's it," he said. "Well done, indeed. So you got away all right after all. I gather there was a certain amount of trouble."

"Trouble? Oh, I wouldn't call it that. I had to run for it, that's all."

"Seen the papers this morning?"

"No," said Colemore, genuinely surprised. "Why?"

"Look," said Symes, and gave him one. "I only saw it myself ten minutes ago."

Colemore interrupted his dressing to sit on the edge of the bed with the paper. Hambledon had got busy. Second only in importance to the War news were head-lines; "Burglary at Teddington. Murder of a Policeman."

"Gosh," said Colemore blankly. "I'm sure I didn't kill him."

"'Constable Evett of the Teddington police,'" Colemore read aloud, "'saw a suspicious movement at the door of a house in Meon Road, Teddington. The house was unoccupied and the police had been asked to watch it.'"

Colemore grinned at Symes and said, "I'd like to know who asked 'em, wouldn't you? To continue. 'He went up the drive and challenged the man who was in the act of coming out of the house. The man made as if to run away and constable Evett blew his whistle to

summon assistance. At that the intruder turned upon him and hit him on the head with a tire-lever, inflicting injuries which proved almost immediately fatal. The weapon was found within a few yards of the spot, and a photograph of it appears in Column 6 on this page. It is an ordinary two-foot tire-lever, such as is used in garages for removing motor-car tires, but the thin end has been sharpened to a chisel edge. Any person having any knowledge of a tire-lever having been altered in this way, or who can give any information whatever about it, is asked to communicate immediately with the police at the nearest police station.’” Colemore left off reading and frowned thoughtfully. “That’s very awkward, you know. There’s always the devil of a fuss in this country if a policeman comes to a bad end. Look at the Gutteridge case.”

“Did any of them get a good look at you?” asked Symes.

“Only this fellow,” said Colemore. “He was right in front of me and there wasn’t room to dodge. I didn’t hit very hard, he must be one of those thin-skulled people. I wouldn’t have hit him at all only I had those papers of yours on me and I didn’t like to risk capture. I gathered that they were rather important.”

“Rather important!” said Symes, and tore open the parcel. “I should say they were important. They’re more precious than the lives of a dozen policemen if you only knew it. Look at that,” he said, and gave Colemore a moment’s glance, no more, at what appeared to be a long list of numbers. “They’re in code, of course, but British Intelligence would have worried them out in the end, even without the key. We should be sunk indeed if they solved that one.”

“You haven’t got the key there too, surely,” said Colemore.

“Heavens, no. That’s in a safer place even than these were.”

“I should hope so.”

“I can’t tell you,” said Symes, with unusual animation, “what a good job of work you’ve done getting these. It’s quite remarkable. It’s amazing. Those whom we serve will be very pleased with you indeed, please allow me to be the first to congratulate you.”

“Thank you,” said Colemore. “I should be rather pleased with myself if it wasn’t for this,”—he tapped the paper. “Anywhere except in Britain it wouldn’t matter, but here _____”

“Oh, the policeman,” said Symes carelessly.

“I had to drop the tire-lever,” said Colemore. “There was some running to be done. By the way, there was somebody behind a hedge who whistled softly as I passed by. He might have seen my face. I didn’t stop to investigate. He might inform the police,” added Colemore, wondering whether Symes would admit having been there himself.

Symes hesitated, and then did admit it. “I just hung about on the chance I might be able to help you.”

“No harm done as it happened,” said Colemore, rather sternly, “but suppose the police had drawn both sides of the road at once. Where would you have been then? In the jug, that’s where. Acting suspiciously, aiding and abetting.”

“They wouldn’t have caught me,” said Symes confidently.

“It is a mistake to underrate the English police. You got away with it that time, but I’d much rather you didn’t run these risks in future, at least, not with me.”

“Sorry,” said Symes. “You see, it was your first job, and we were a little nervous. We shan’t be in future, believe me,” he added more genially.

“Let’s forget it. Well, now I’m respectably dressed again, is there anything to loiter here for?”

Colemore went to see Hambledon as soon as was consistent with his personal safety, surrounding the journey to the Foreign Office with all the precautions he could devise.

“Well?” said Tommy. “How are you and all your little friends to-day?”

“Fine, thank you. Quite pleased with me, too.”

“Long may it last. I always say that confidence tricksters are good intelligence agents gone wrong. I should have made a passable con. man myself, but the career has its drawbacks.”

“I suppose so,” said Colemore. “I haven’t tried it myself—not yet. By the way, if I may ask, what is all this about a policeman being murdered? I never murdered any policeman.”

“Of course you didn’t. I put that in for your sake, as a safeguard.”

“I don’t follow that. Safeguard against whom?”

“Your new friends. Listen. They think you’ve killed a policeman.”

“Yes.”

“And people who murder policemen are disliked in this country. Remember the Gutteridge case?”

“Odd you should refer to that,” said Colemore. “I mentioned it to Symes less than an hour ago.”

“What did he say?”

“I got the impression that he’d never heard of it. Also, he seemed to think policemen were not important. I told him they were, very.”

“I expect some of Symes’ superiors are better informed than he is,” said Hambledon. “The point of the imaginary Constable Evett’s apocryphal murder is this. There will come a time when disasters and set-backs begin to afflict Symes and his crew, and when that time comes they—or some of them—may come to suspect you. Then somebody a trifle more intelligent than the rest will say ‘No. It is impossible that this man can be double-crossing us. He has killed a policeman and is consequently in our power, because an anonymous letter will put the police on his track at any time. He must faithful be, he dare not otherwise do. Heil Hitler!’ That’s what they’d say,” concluded Hambledon.

Colemore nodded. “They may use it as a threat to make me do what I’m told.”

“I shouldn’t wonder at all. Then you can turn a delicate shade of green, allow your knees to knock lightly together—and come and tell me all about it. Those papers we photographed are all in code and our experts have gone intensively broody over them.”

Colemore repeated what Symes had told him about the key to the cipher.

“It would be courteous and helpful,” said Tommy, “if he’d tell you where he keeps it. Then we can go and photograph that too. There is also a list of telephone numbers which is not so simple as it looks. They are London numbers, or appear to be, Flaxman, Frobisher, Drake and so on, and we said ‘Ha! The Lord hath laid the enemy upon the lee bow.’ Drake did say that, didn’t he? Well, somebody did. But when we came to look at

'em closely, they dried up. Some of them are genuine, one's a monumental mason in Kensington, perfectly respectable people above even my suspicions; another is, believe it or not, the Office of Works; and so on. But others are not real telephone numbers at all, they——"

"You haven't a copy here, I suppose?"

"I have, yes. Here it is," said Hambledon, and held out a large photograph.

Colemore turned it round so that the typing was upside-down to him, and glanced at it sideways. "That's it. He let me have just a glimpse of that and said it was worth the lives of a dozen policemen and if you could solve that they'd be sunk."

"Fancy that, now," said Tommy slowly. "Well, well. You are a great help, Colemore, you are indeed. Now the code people can get in a fresh supply of wet towels and try again. I'll send it across to them at once and if it wasn't for the points rationing system I'd send 'em a few tins of sardines with it. Anything else you want to report?"

"I don't think so. Symes did make reference to 'those whom we serve,' but I didn't gather whether he meant our immediate bosses or the German High Command."

"You don't think Symes is chief organizer?"

"No, I don't. The chief organizer wouldn't spend a couple of hours in a cold field watching me play 'touchlast' with the Teddington police. Symes might be the London manager, perhaps. I don't know yet."

"As a matter of fact," said Hambledon, "we have acquired from various sources a few gleams of light about the chief organizer. I won't tell you what they are because they are very dim and may only be misleading. I may be going away to the country for a few days to look at one or two things, but if you want to tell us about anything, come here just as usual and ask for Charles Denton. You may remember that your friend Eddie was accused of picking a gentleman's pocket of a wallet with twenty pounds in it? That was Charles Denton's wallet."

"What an extraordinary coincidence," said Colemore.

Hambledon leaned back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. It is a fact that he was once a schoolmaster.

"If you happen to put a drawing-pin on the seat of a chair," he said, "and the next moment someone comes unexpectedly into the room and sits on it, that's coincidence. But if you intentionally plant the said pin where you think somebody is likely to sit——"

"I think it will be a pleasure to make the acquaintance of Mr. Denton," said Anthony.

"Men of pure heart and unblemished intentions find him pleasant company. Talking about pure hearts reminds me of Symes, though I can't think why. I wonder who and what he was when he started his career. What's his nationality do you think?"

"I don't know at all. He doesn't bear a stamp of any kind—public school or Army or anything else I recognize. He's not interested in sport, or art, or music. He never mentions family connections or a home—you know, 'I had an old aunt who kept white mice,' or anything like that. I'd better cultivate Symes a little more, perhaps."

Hambledon nodded. "'Splendidly null,' in fact. By the way, that telephone number he gave you is at 51 Willowmore Road. That's the cheap boarding-house you went to, isn't it?"

“Oh, really?” said Colemore. “Yes, I met him there this morning. But Symes wouldn’t live in a place like that, you know.”

“You haven’t seen all over the house, have you?” said Tommy. “Or perhaps he lives next door. We shall find out in due course, no doubt.”

“When I first met him I was definitely a subordinate, but after Eddie came that crash I became haughtily censorious at once. Moral superiority is my motto.”

“Continue to be morally superior,” said Hambleton. “It’s always a good line with that crowd, they are themselves psychologically leprous. Any information will be gratefully received, but his past isn’t really important. His future it is which is receiving my sleepless attention.”

Colemore got up to go. “By the way, you’ve no idea what the chief organizer looks like, I suppose?”

“Anything between Donald Duck and Hermann Goering. No, I haven’t, nobody’s seen him. Whatever it looks like, it’s got a brain, Colemore.”

XVII

JONES

“THERE’S something interesting happening along the South Coast,” said Symes.

“What sort of something?” asked Colemore.

“Constructional work on a large scale. Landing barges possibly, for an invasion of the Continent.”

“Let’s go down and bore holes in them,” said Anthony lazily.

“I was speaking seriously. This is an important matter.”

Colemore grinned at him and Symes relaxed. “One sees that you are indeed English, Bilston—or should I say Major Brampton?”

“Bilston will do. Where is all this going on, and how much do you know about it?”

“I said, the South Coast, but as a matter of fact I believe the things are being built all round the coast at different places. The most detailed particulars we have received come from an agent of ours at Portsmouth. He says there is a place along the coast road where one can see the operations from a distance. I suggest we go and have a look.”

“Good idea. It will give us a day’s outing, anyway; I am getting very tired of London. Fill our lungs with sea air, and all that. Where is the spot and how do we get there?”

“The spot is just west of Portsmouth and we shall drive there in a fish cart. Our agent is a fishmonger, he has a permit to use a boat for fishing within certain limits, and sells some of the fish from a barrow in Portsmouth. He sells the rest to housewives in the neighbourhood, using a horse and cart for the purpose. He is very well known and his journeys arouse no interest.”

“I see. He has a fish round. A good cover, if not aristocratic. I think that suit I messed up at Teddington will do; I had the trousers mended,” said Colemore. “And cleaned. They will probably want cleaning again after this. When do we start?”

“In a few days,” answered Symes. “I must let this man know in good time. Also, I must arrange some good excuse for visiting Portsmouth in case the police stop us at the station. I don’t think we need stay the night there, but if we must, no doubt we shall find an hotel somewhere.”

“I expect so. Since it’s only for one night it won’t matter much what it’s like—if it’s not so comfortable as this, for example,” said Colemore, looking appreciatively round the room. He had cultivated Symes with enough success to be invited to his flat, which had proved to be the top floor of 51, Willowmore Road. Hambledon’s guess was a good one, the top floor was very different from the rest of the rather frowsty lodging-house. Symes had a large airy sitting-room, a bedroom and a bathroom all shut away by a door at the head of the stairs, and the contrast was pleasant. Downstairs, noise and bustle, worn linoleum and a smell of cabbage; upstairs behind Symes’ door there was quiet and comfort; bright clean rooms, soft carpets and admirable furniture. Colemore was lounging in a large padded armchair before the electric fire, there was a bookcase opposite the windows and over the mantelpiece a Massenet etching of a duel.

“You like my little establishment,” said Symes. “I believe in comfort when it does not conflict with duty.”

Colemore thought that whatever nation had given Symes to the world it certainly wasn't his own. No Englishman would talk like that.

“I think comfort in private is an assistance to duty,” said Anthony. “A man does all the better for being able to relax in pleasant surroundings.”

“I do not always relax. Quite a lot of good work is done here. A typewriter is an ugly thing so I keep it out of sight, but I have one.”

“Hideous, aren't they?” said Colemore, who was wondering whether Symes kept a safe out of sight too, and if so, where. “What about the telephone, is that hidden away too?”

“No, that's downstairs in Spink's office. I did not want the telephone company's men snooping about up here, they might report upon it. It is inconvenient having to go down two flights to telephone, but 'safety first,' as your national proverb says.”

“I think you are wise,” said Colemore, ignoring the sneer. “Reverting to this Portsmouth trip for a moment, have you got a map?” He turned in his chair and looked at the bookcase, which was filled with a nondescript collection of biographies, travel books and French novels. “I don't see any there.”

“You don't see them,” said Symes, “but they are there all the same. I will find you one of the district.” He went to the bookcase, slid his hand down the side of it, and the whole thing moved out on hinges, revealing the door of a safe behind it. “I am showing you a secret, my dear Bilston. I am rather proud of this. Spink, another man, and I fitted it up and decorated this flat ourselves, and this was our most ingenious effort.”

“Jolly good,” said Colemore. “You had to knock a hole in the wall for that, didn't you? What a job.”

“Spink worked for a builder at one time. The safe goes right through the wall and into my bedroom the other side; we had to build a cupboard over it to mask it.” Symes was fumbling with his own person for the key, the process involved a certain amount of unbuttoning. “It is a special safe, brought from America, the lock has no duplicate.”

“Bit awkward if you lose the key,” suggested Colemore. “What would you do? Hire an expert burglar to open it and then bump him off?”

“There is a duplicate key, but it is not readily available. However, I shall not lose this one, it never leaves me night or day. Hence all this undressing,” added Symes with a laugh. “I wear it next my skin. Inconvenient, but safe.” He produced the key and bent to open the safe, not allowing Colemore to see the process which apparently included turning sundry knobs and pressing levers.

“It sounds complicated,” said Colemore, listening to a series of clicks.

“It is.” The safe door swung open, showing the usual arrangement of grey-painted steel pigeon-holes containing a normal-looking assortment of papers tied together and one or two small boxes. One division was full of maps, Symes brought out one and spread it upon the table.

“Actually, I don't know myself exactly where the place is, but it must be somewhere here,” he said, pointing out a spot between Cosham and Fareham. “Do you know this

coast at all?"

"No," said Colemore untruthfully. "Yorkshire was my county, you know. I did go across to the Isle of Wight once to spend a week-end with some people, but that's all. It rained, I remember."

Symes laughed. "This map is on rather a small scale for our purpose, but it looks as though there's a railway line there which might be the one Jones mentioned."

"Jones being the fishmonger, I suppose," said Colemore leaning over the map. "Yes, we want more detail than this, and anyway the spot wouldn't be marked. A personal visit is the only way to study the problem, when we've seen it we can talk about it. Pity one can't buy six-inch ordnance maps these days, they put in practically every tree." He abandoned the map to look idly out of the window while Symes locked up again and restored the key to its own place. "Fine selection of chimney-pots you see from here."

"I have a message for you," said Symes. "Our Leader in England is very pleased with you over the Teddington affair on the whole, but I am to tell you that more care must be taken in future to avoid trouble with the English police. He is very seriously concerned about the death of the constable Evett. On no account must such a thing ever occur again."

"I told you it was a serious matter, didn't I?" said Colemore anxiously.

"You did, yes. I explained to him that you were distressed about it——"

"It was almost an accident, tell him that," urged Anthony. "The man ought not to have died from a tap like that."

"I told him that also, but our Leader in England does not permit accidents of that nature." Colemore's face fell, and Symes went on with a little laugh. "The fact is, our Leader in England has what you might call a bee in his bonnet about the police, if I may say so with deep respect. That is partly why that detective-inspector was being kept a prisoner at Teddington; I should have dropped him down a disused well at once. However, the decision is not for me to question and the man did not see much and can have little to tell, so his release is not really important."

"I am always careful with the police," said Colemore, "and in future I shall be ten times more so. No more blue-clad corpses for me."

Hambledon was very interested in all this and particularly in the description of Symes' safe. While Colemore was telling his story, the door of Hambledon's room opened and a tall man put his head in, apologized when he saw there was a visitor present, and began to withdraw. Tommy called him in.

"Charles! Come in, I want you. Colemore, this is Charles Denton, I mentioned his name to you the other day. If I am not here at any time, he will attend to your sorrows."

Denton came in and shook hands. "Hambledon told me about you," he said. "You're the fellow who gets out of places, aren't you? Including the North Sea."

"Aren't you the man who had his pocket picked at Waterloo Station one night not long ago?" said Colemore. "By a man named Eddie."

Denton nodded. "Edwin Cuttlefish, or some such name. We shall not meet him again for some time, I think."

"Cuttlefish?"

"Czentchifitchkowski, or words to that effect. Probably assumed."

Colemore began to laugh, and Hambledon said, "I was just hearing about a nice flat at the top of a boarding-house, Denton. It sounds interesting." He gave Denton a brief summary of Colemore's story as far as it had gone and Anthony finished it.

"Tiresome of him to wear the key next to his skin like that," said Tommy. "Next door to impossible to pick the pocket without tickling him. Of course we could open the safe by brute force, but one feels it would be so much nicer all round if he didn't know it had been opened. Think how it would worry him if he knew somebody's been through it. No, seriously, if we're going to force his safe we just might as well arrest him at once, and I don't want to do that yet. I can get Symes any time, it's Our Leader in England I want. We must have that key for a few hours, Colemore."

Hambledon relapsed into thought, and Colemore was careful not to interrupt him.

"What time does the last train leave Portsmouth these days, Colemore, d'you know?"

"No, but I can find out."

"So can I," said Tommy, and rang up Waterloo Station. "Five minutes past nine? Thank you very much. That's absolutely the last train to London? It seems very early. . . . Yes, I see. Thank you." He put down the receiver. "You heard that, Colemore. You will somehow contrive to lose the last train, don't cut it too fine, it may not start too punctually. You will then be left all in the dark in a half-ruined city you don't know well; at least, I hope Symes doesn't; and you want an hotel for the night. What do you do?"

"Ask a policeman?"

"No, no. You take a taxi and bid him drive you round until you find one with room for you."

"I should think," said Colemore, "that it would be easier to find an hotel in Portsmouth than a taxi after the last train's gone. Hotels at least don't buzz past when you want them."

"All depends on what sort of an evening you've had," suggested Denton.

"There will be a taxi," said Hambledon. "You will emerge from the station entrance, blundering in the dark, and there to your right near the railway bridge, you will dimly discern the form of a taxi standing by the pavement. You and Symes will naturally make a dash for it and ask the driver if he is disengaged. He will unwillingly admit it and drive you to two hotels which are full up and a third which takes you both in. If you're lucky you'll get something to eat; but in any case, Colemore, you'll have a nightcap before you go to bed. It might even be whisky, think of that. But whatever it is, you'll both have one. Particularly Symes. Then you can retire to bed and sleep as you deserve. That's all."

"All I have to do," said Colemore, "is to make sure we lose the last train and both have a drink before we go to bed?"

"Correct."

"I'll do my best," said Anthony modestly.

* * * * *

Jones, the fishmonger, lived in a small house in the Portsea district; Symes and Colemore walked there from the Town Station and Colemore noticed that Symes was more than once in doubt about the direction they should take.

"I used to know this place fairly well," said Symes in a tone of apology. "It is rather

different now and I find it confusing.”

“There certainly seem to have been some drastic alterations,” said Anthony, surveying the area of desolation near the Unicorn Gate. “In the name of goodness, what happened here?”

“I don’t know,” said Symes indifferently. “It’s all been cleared away and levelled, one can’t tell whether it was a fire or explosion. I never enquired.”

Mr. Jones’ house also was not so good as it had been before the raids began. It was a two-storied house with a small yard at the side; the roof had been patched, the brick walls were blackened with smoke and chipped in places, the window frames had been repaired and when the two men entered Colemore noticed that the ceiling had been replaced with plaster board. Even so, Mr. Jones could consider himself lucky; the house opposite was represented by a heap of brickbats with weeds growing over them. Mr. Jones was a short man in a blue jersey with two coats over it and a muffler round his neck, between that and his checked cap his black hair stuck out in a stiff fringe; it was some time since he had had it cut. He needed a shave too, and also gave the impression that the rationing of soap was no grief to him. Altogether, thought Colemore, not an attractive fishmonger. The housewives of Portsmouth and district must be hard up for fish to buy from such as he. Colemore was right, they were.

“Come in,” said Jones, and shut the door after them. “Sit down, will you? Have a drop of something? There’s only beer in the house.”

His visitors refused and Symes said, “We’ve no time to waste. What have you seen and where is it?”

“Large concrete sections bein’ built and bolted together. Reinforced concrete. ’Uge things.”

“Concrete, eh? Not landing barges?”

“Landing barges,” said Jones, and snorted contemptuously. “Better look at ’em yourself ’stead of askin’ me to describe ’em. I don’t know what they are.”

“And where can we see them?”

“On the Fareham road, about three miles along, or may be a bit more. Look, you’d best take a bus along to Portsbridge an’ get off at the police box, they do stop about there. Then take the first to the left, that is the main road, an’ walk on towards Fareham. I’ll come along and pick you up. You don’t want to ride all through the streets in a fish-cart; people might think it was funny an’ I don’ want people thinkin’ me funny. Not that way. Besides, it’s slow.”

“How long will it take you to reach the Fareham road?”

“Well, I got one or two things to do.” Symes looked at him coldly and seemed about to speak, but Jones took no notice. “Look, what’s time? ’Alf past twelve, nearly. Look, you go and get yourselves a nice bit of dinner somewhere, an’ I’ll ’ave mine an’ start off. See you somewheres along the Fareham road soon after two. You start walking from Portsbridge about two o’clock an’ I’ll overtake you, see?” He rose from his chair.

“Very well,” said Symes. “Don’t be late. We want to get back to-night.”

“I’ll not be late. I know just ’ow long it takes me to get there.”

Symes and Colemore left the house and went in search of a restaurant.

“Rather an independent gentleman,” said Anthony.

“Too damned independent. Always was a surly brute and he’s getting worse. Thinks he’s indispensable.”

“And the tiresome part is that he’s right, I suppose?”

Symes laughed rather ruefully. “I’m afraid so, for the present. We shall replace him as soon as possible, but it’s not easy, especially in Portsmouth.”

Soon after two o’clock they dropped off a bus at the Portsbridge, walked past the police box embattled with sandbags, and proceeded along the Fareham road. Here in many places the sea comes right up to the road and the tide was out, displaying the oily mud-flats of Portsmouth Harbour, brown and glistening and furrowed with little water-channels. Colemore hung back and looked at it.

“What’s the matter?” asked Symes.

“I was only wondering what lies hidden in all that mud. This is a very ancient harbour, you know, Symes. There’ll be the remains of Roman galleys there, Danish long-boats and Norman ships. Armour and weapons, gold cups and silver goblets, old anchors and queer bits of gear——”

“Dead men and crabs,” said Symes bluntly. “Come on!”

Colemore laughed and obeyed. They walked on and on, but there was no sign of Jones and his cart.

“We are lucky,” said Symes, “to have such a clear day. It is very common here to have a mist blowing in from the sea.”

“It may come yet when the tide turns,” said Anthony. “I wish our smelly friend would turn up.”

“He is half an hour late already, it is like his insolence. Your countrymen, my dear Bilston, are as stubborn as mules.”

“We call it ‘sturdy independence’ when it suits us and pigheadedness when it doesn’t,” said Colemore lightly. They had walked over two miles before Jones overtook them in a shabby open cart drawn by a depressed and drooping horse.

“Where have you been all this time?” asked Symes angrily. “You’re late. It’s nearly a quarter to three.”

“Been delayed,” said Jones. “One gentleman sit nex’ me an’ the other in the cart? I put some sacks in to sit on. Clean sacks.”

They did not look particularly clean, but Anthony settled down on them and the cart rumbled on again. Symes and the driver, sitting together in front, seemed to have nothing to say; the road, between the Portsdown Hills and the sea, was not particularly interesting; green slopes on one hand, marshy mud on the other. If Anthony had been a little more comfortable he would have gone to sleep.

“There,” said Jones at last, and Colemore turned round to look ahead. Between the road and the waters of the harbour there was at this point a wide stretch of marshy land. An embankment ran across it carrying a single line of railway down to a rough stone quay at the water’s edge half a mile away. Near the quay were sheds and workshops obviously recently erected, and a large number of square sections, made of what looked like concrete, being moved about by cranes and bolted together. It was evidently an urgent

matter, for gangs of men were clustered about them, moving alertly as could be seen even at that distance.

“Workin’ like beavers, aren’t they?” said Jones, allowing the horse to walk. “There’s some of the things floatin’, look.”

Colemore was very interested, this was something quite new.

“They do look rather like huge barges,” he said.

Jones made a scornful noise and asked who had ever heard of concrete barges. “Tell you what I think they are,” he said. “I think they’re floatin’ gun platforms, that’s what. Tow ’em over the other side and drop them on the bottom in shallow water just off-shore. Big guns to cover the landing, that’s what.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if you’re right,” said Symes.

The whole place was surrounded by barbed-wire apron fencing practically impossible to climb; there was one entrance gate guarded by sentries. The railway which was carried upon the embankment crossed the road by a bridge, this also was guarded. Nearer the quay the embankment became a viaduct of some half-dozen low arches, for there was an inlet of water-logged marsh filled by the sea at high-tide. Electric cables on short pylons crossed the strip of land to supply the workshops with light and power.

“Not an easy place to enter,” said Symes.

“There is only one way in,” said Colemore.

“What’s that?”

“From the sea. By boat.”

“You’re right, mister,” said Jones. “On a nice thick dark night it could be done.”

“One might blow up the bridge across this road,” suggested Symes. “No need to enter, then.”

“Sentries doubled at night,” said Jones, and added grimly, “They’ve thought of that one.”

There was a pause in the conversation while the horse walked drearily past the gate. One of the sentries grinned at Jones who lifted his hand in reply.

“I sells ’em fish,” he explained.

“They live there, do they?” asked Colemore.

“There’s about ten of ’em does, with a sergeant.”

“Sabotage at cement works,” said Symes, who was evidently impressed with the defences of the place.

“Man alive, there are thousands of cement works in England,” said Colemore impatiently, “and I expect there are stocks in hand, too. No. We must either tackle the place itself or leave it alone.”

Symes looked rather crestfallen but did not argue, and Jones asked how much further they wanted to go. “We can’t very well just turn round an’ drive back. They might think it was a bit funny.”

“You’re very anxious not to look funny, aren’t you?” snarled Symes.

“Yes, mister,” said Jones simply, “an’ I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

Colemore asked if there were not a turning somewhere at hand; if so they could go

down it a little way, wait awhile and then return. "They will think you have been on some errand."

Jones said there was, and shortly turned into a farm track where they pulled up out of sight of the road and let some time go by. Colemore did his best to make the time as long as possible; it was barely four o'clock and how he was to detain Symes in Portsmouth for another five hours, until the last train should have gone, was by no means clear.

"One might blow up one of the pylons carrying their electricity supply," he said thoughtfully.

"I don't know anything about explosives," said Symes, "but I should have thought that pylons weren't very easy to blow up. Too much open-work."

"Oh, no," said Anthony. "Quite simple. You attach a slab of gun cotton to each leg, ignite the fuses and run like blazes. At least that's what the handbooks say. Even a pylon will fall down when its legs are removed, and the cable will go too."

"They'd soon put a pole up again," said Jones.

"There is that," admitted Anthony. "It wouldn't hold 'em up for long. It would be better to damage the workshops."

"There's the soldiers," said Jones.

"No other bridge on this line, I suppose?" said Symes.

"No," said the fishmonger. "An' if there was it would be guarded."

Colemore sighed and lit a cigarette. If only the cart would break down, or a lorry run into it, or the horse fall down dead——

"We may as well get back," said Symes.

"May as well," agreed Jones, "as sit 'ere admirin' the scenery. Pubs don't open till six." He got down and led the horse to turn the cart as the lane was narrow. "You'll trot 'ome, you old bag o' nails, won't you?" he added, addressing the horse, who sniffed disgustedly and began to move. Jones had to scramble hastily into his seat.

They returned along the coast road a good deal faster than they had come; to Colemore's annoyance it was not yet five o'clock when they turned over Portsbridge again.

"Goin' to get down an' catch a bus?" asked Jones, preparing to stop.

"No, let's drive on," said Colemore. "I don't feel clean enough for a bus, I smell of fish. There's plenty of time."

"Portsmouth buses aren't all that fussy," said Jones with a chuckle, but Colemore said, "No, I am."

"Drive on, then," agreed Symes. "I must get back to-night, but even so there's plenty of time."

They reached the neighbourhood of the station in what seemed to the anxious Colemore to be record time. He looked at the clock, it was barely a quarter to six when they parted from Jones by the railway bridge.

"Look here," said Colemore, "what about getting something to eat before we start? It'll be pretty late by the time we reach town." The excuse sounded horribly thin to him but Symes was surprisingly amenable.

“Not a bad idea,” he said. “It’ll do quite well if we catch the eight o’clock train. We mustn’t miss it, that’s all.”

“Oh, we shan’t,” said Colemore confidently, and indeed it did not seem possible to do so. They had a sort of high tea, with eggs and bacon, and walked up to the station with twenty minutes to spare. Colemore was desperately considering if he ought to push Symes under a bus when he caught sight of a tall figure he recognized entering the station just ahead of them. The man turned round and looked straight through Colemore as though he were a perfect stranger.

The tall man was Charles Denton. Reinforcements had arrived.

XVIII

UNLUCKY DAY

“PLENTY of time,” said Symes. “Let’s go and see if there’s anything fit to read on the bookstall.”

There was something of a crowd round the bookstall, Charles Denton was also there. He bought a copy of *Bomber Command Continues*, and in turning away from the counter collided awkwardly with Symes. Both men apologized and Denton drifted away. Colemore opened his raincoat to fish for loose change in his trouser pocket and was momentarily entangled in a group of men who were discussing football results. He freed himself and bought a paper, Symes joined him and they walked towards the barrier. Symes was feeling in an inside pocket for his wallet, and stopped dead in his tracks.

“What’s the matter?” asked Colemore.

“My wallet—I must have put it in the wrong pocket.” He went on searching while a lovely light dawned upon the mind of Colemore. That fellow Denton——

“I haven’t got it,” said Symes in an agitated voice. “Lend me some money, Bilston, I must buy another ticket. Somebody’s picked my pockets,” he went on while Colemore hunted through his own.

“Mine too,” he announced at last, and one of the most difficult things he ever did was to keep the jubilation out of his voice.

“Haven’t you got any other money? I’ve only got sevenpence.”

Colemore brought out some assorted coins. “Two and fourpence half-penny,” he said.

Symes turned a greenish white. “I must get back to Town to-night. It’s urgent—it’s necessary.”

“I suppose the pawn-shops are shut?”

“Of course they are,” snapped Symes. “Ages ago.” He stood irresolute while Colemore helpfully suggested complaining to the police.

“That’s no use. There’s only one thing for it, Jones must lend us some money. I’ll go down there at once—there is a later train—are you coming or will you wait here?”

“Oh, I’ll come,” said Colemore, and they set off at a good four miles an hour. But the Portsmouth black-out was a real one, and if Symes had been uncertain in the daylight he was lost in the dark. They took innumerable wrong turnings and asked the way from several people who had never heard of Jones’ street. Colemore said that judging by the stars they should steer a bit more south, and Symes bit his head off.

Eventually they did find the house, but it was deserted. Mr. Jones was out.

The woman next door said that she expected he had gone out for a half-pint, he generally did so in the evenings. Asked what house of refreshment he usually patronized, she didn’t know, sometimes one and sometimes another. They could try the “Still and West,” but of course he mightn’t be there. Colemore felt that if there was much more of this he would begin to giggle; but Symes’ face, seen in a gleam of light from the woman’s door, was wet with perspiration.

“I must get back to-night,” he said. “I must. It is desperately urgent.”

“Let’s go to the ‘Still and West’,” said Colemore. “I daresay we’ll find Jones there. Or at least my two and fourpence half-penny will stand us a drink each. You seem to me to need consolation.”

“Consolation,” said Symes bitterly. “You English are all alike, you turn everything into a jest. This is serious. Did that miserable woman say the third turning on the left?”

“Yes, and this is it. Cheer up, and you shall meet your girl-friend.”

“I tell you this is serious!” hissed Symes. “It is no girl-friend, you fool. It is Our Leader in England who comes to me to-night.”

“Well, you can explain why you weren’t there, can’t you?” said Colemore reasonably. “Accidents will happen. Ring him up.”

“You don’t understand,” said Symes. “He is not the sort of man one rings up to say one is not going to keep an appointment.” There was a queer little noise in the darkness and Colemore allowed himself the relaxation of a grin. The imperturbable Symes was actually grinding his teeth.

The “Still and West” failed to produce Mr. Jones, so did two other places recommended as likely by some of the patrons. The hunters returned to Jones’ house and encountered him on the doorstep.

“Lend me two pounds, quickly,” said Symes.

“Whatever for?”

“Because I’ve had my pocket picked. Quick! I’ve got a train to catch.”

“Well, you might say ‘please’,” said Jones, who seemed to have had more than one half-pint. “Manners, manners.”

“You——” began Symes, and choked.

“All right, all right,” said Jones, unlocking the door. “Come in, then.”

“I’ll wait outside,” said Colemore hastily. It was a pity to miss any of this entertainment, but he dared not smile, let alone laugh. Besides, he wanted to think. Our Leader in England “comes to me to-night,” presumably to Symes’ flat; Hambledon must be told somehow as soon as possible. Telephone. Presumably somebody would take a message if Hambledon had gone home, though his office hours seemed to be extensive and unusual. Unless one could find Denton again. Trunk calls took so long, though probably that number had priority over any common call.

Symes burst out of the house and started to run. “Come on, come on! It’s ten minutes to nine now, and the train goes at five past.”

Colemore did his best to take the wrong turning again but was not lucky this time. They emerged almost at once into Commercial Road and ran across the Guildhall Square. Symes snatched two tickets at the office as the clock said three minutes past nine, and the two men made a rush for the steps and the barrier. Here they had to stop, for there was something of a crowd. In addition to the man who was clipping the tickets, there were two policemen examining identity cards.

“Oh——” said Symes, and his teeth chattered.

“Tell ’em what’s happened,” urged Colemore. “Perhaps they’ll let us through.”

However, he was wrong—he had an idea he might be. The policemen were kind and

courteous, but firm. If the gentlemen would just step across to the police station—only just across the Guildhall Square, no distance at all—they could see the sergeant in charge and no doubt he would fix them up. They could lay a complaint at the same time. Keep right of the Guildhall and past it. They would find the police station in the Municipal College, first left and first right. Two minutes' walk, or three at the outside.

“But,” wailed Symes, “this is the last train to town, isn't it? And I must get there to-night.”

“Most unfortunate,” said the policeman, “but——”

Symes grabbed at a passing porter and said, “Is this really the last train out of this blasted place to-night?”

“Where did you want to go to?” said the porter in a tired voice, as one would say, “Really, these passengers——”

“London.”

“There's the ten o'clock to Woking. Not beyond,” said the porter, and went away.

“There,” said the policeman. “If you was to catch the ten o'clock to Woking you could be in town nice and early in the morning, couldn't you from there?”

“In the meantime,” said Colemore, “what about trying to get our wallets back? We may just as well go across to the police station as hang about here.” Since Hambledon had reassured him, Anthony was no longer so allergic to police stations as he had been. He took Symes, who appeared to be speechless, by the elbow, and led him firmly outside and across the road. Anthony would have been quite happy if only he could have seen Denton. This evening out was acquiring that dream-like quality only associated, as a rule, with the consumption of much fine alcohol, and all they'd had was half a pint of beer at the “Still and West” for the good of the house.

The desk sergeant at the police station was very sympathetic. Most unfortunate, so inconvenient. These pickpockets—— He wrote down full particulars in longhand, and it took some time. Then he said that if he made a few enquiries it might be possible to regain the stolen goods at once; the few pickpockets who blotted the fair copy-book of Portsmouth were known to the police and if any one of them had been seen on the station that evening he could be picked up and brought in.

“But the ten o'clock train,” moaned Symes, who had decided to get as far as Woking at least, “Some transport might be found there.”

“Yes, sir, yes,” said the sergeant, glancing at the clock. “It's only just after the half-hour now. Well, twenty to.”

He picked up the telephone and engaged in conversation while Symes bounced gently up and down on his chair. Oh, so Scrubby was there round eight, was he? Yes, well, he'd better be brought in, the gentlemen might be able to recognize him. Probably it was Scrubby, he usually went for wallets. Yes, best take the car round to the Fleece and if he wasn't there go on to the—yes, that's right. Thank you.

The sergeant replaced the receiver, beamed upon Symes, and said, “Now I hope we shan't be long. Best if we could get the wallets back, wouldn't it? Apart from what money you've got in them, it's always a bother having to renew identity cards. Quite so.”

Symes looked imploringly at the clock which continued to proceed, and Colemore had

an idea. He made an excuse to leave the room, found a piece of paper and wrote on it with the stump of pencil he always carried, asking the sergeant to telephone Hambledon's number and give the following message:—"Leader going to flat to-night." He then found a constable straying about and asked him to give the note to the sergeant the moment he and Symes had gone. Not before, on any account.

The constable looked surprised but agreed, and Colemore returned to the office to find Symes emitting a faint hissing sound and the clock pointing to nine-forty-seven.

Five minutes later a small man was brought in, volubly protesting his innocence. He was at the railway station round about eight, certainly; but not to pickpockets, certainly not. He went to meet his daughter come down from London for a holiday.

The sergeant asked Colemore and Symes if either of them recognized the small man. Symes at once said, "No," but Colemore, anxious to keep the ball rolling, said he wasn't really sure; there was something in Scrubby's appearance which seemed recently familiar, and probably it was at the Town Station that they had met.

"Search him," said the Sergeant, in a bored voice.

Scrubby protested yet more violently, but was removed. In a few minutes the constable returned with a wallet, but it had never belonged to either Colemore or to Symes. It contained seven pounds ten in notes and some letters addressed to a business gentleman who lived at Farlington. The Sergeant smiled.

"Well, it's an ill wind blows no man good. This loss hasn't even been reported yet—he will be pleased."

It was three minutes to ten when a constable entered the office bearing two wallets which, he said, had been handed to the police at Town Station by the clerk at the left-luggage office. He had found them on the floor just behind the counter. Presumably somebody had slipped them over when he wasn't looking, just at the end, and they'd fallen behind a couple of suitcases and lain there in the shadow, like——

"Let me see," said Symes, and snatched at them.

"Steady, steady," said the sergeant, and began to check the wallets and contents by the particulars Symes and Colemore had given him.

"You seem to be lucky, gentlemen. Even the money is still here, and your railway tickets. Now, if you'd just sign receipts for them——"

Symes' signature was an illegible scrawl and Colemore's "H. G. Bilston" was not much better. As they dashed out of the police station towards the railway they heard a whistle blow and thereafter the sound of a train in motion.

"She's gone," said Colemore, and dropped to a walk.

"Come on!" said Symes. "Might not have been that one. They're late, sometimes."

But when they dashed panting into the station, the last train had indeed gone.

"Oh, well," said Colemore accepting the inevitable. "We couldn't have done more."

"We could," said Symes grimly. "We could have taken more care of the wallets."

"We were darned lucky to get them back. Money and all, too. Can't imagine what the fellow was thinking of, to throw them away like that."

"Thought he had been seen," explained Symes. "Getting rid of the evidence."

"I expect you're right. Well, now what next?"

“Find somewhere to stay for the night I suppose, and go up in the morning. No use trying to cadge a lift, I should be too late anyway.”

“Do you know any hotels?” asked Colemore.

“I used to, but I expect most of them are destroyed. If we could find a taxi——” said Symes, turning towards the street again.

“Not very likely,” said Colemore, following him, “at this time of night.”

But when they came out of the station gates it all happened as Hambledon had foretold, there was a taxi under the railway bridge. Actually, Symes saw it first and rushed at it with Colemore close behind. The driver made difficulties connected with his inadequate petrol ration, but Symes overbore him, and eventually he agreed to take them round and try one or two places.

The first two were full up, but the third took them in and gave them supper of a simple kind. Symes asked the landlord if he could put through a telephone call to London, and the landlord said that of course he could, though it might take some time to get through. Why not ask for it now and the exchange could call him up when the connection had been made? Symes agreed and the call came through just as they were finishing with cheese and biscuits. Colemore could not overhear what was said, but he thought Symes looked a trifle dispirited when he returned. After which they had a couple of whiskies in the lounge, and Colemore said he was tired with all this galloping about and would go to bed.

“I expect it’s tired me too,” said Symes. “I’m generally fairly wide awake at night, but I am getting sleepy now.” He yawned.

Colemore took him upstairs and saw him safely to his room before retiring himself, and both slept extremely well. Symes said so when they met at a late breakfast in the morning.

“Sea air,” said Colemore. “Always makes you sleepy. Now when I lived in Yorkshire _____”

* * * * *

Whether it was the sea air or something in Symes’ last whisky, he went to sleep the moment his head was on the pillow. This was about eleven o’clock, and at a quarter past his deep and regular breathing was quite audible to a listener at the keyhole of his bedroom door. The listener straightened himself and turned to the landlord, who was keeping watch in the passage in case anyone should come along.

“Quite all right,” said the listener. “He’s gone beautifully bye-byes.”

“With what he had,” said the landlord, “he did ought to, too.”

The listener, who was Charles Denton, opened the bedroom door. It was not fastened because the key was missing and there was no bolt on the inside. He entered with a torch, turned down Symes’ bedclothes, unbuttoned his pyjama jacket and disclosed a webbing belt with a small pocket on it containing a key. The key was removed, the bedclothes gently replaced, and Symes slept peacefully on.

“Now I must rush,” said Denton. “See you again about six o’clock or soon after.”

“Come in by the side door,” said the landlord. “You’ll find me in the office.”

“Stout fellow,” said Denton, and departed at a run up the street to a point where a

Bentley sports model awaited him. The driver saw him coming and started the engine, Denton jumped in and they drove away. Portsmouth goes to bed early in war-time, and they roared through the silent streets and up the main road to London. Masked headlamps are not the best illumination for a fast run on a dark night, but Denton had chosen his driver carefully. He was a friend from the R.A.F. on leave from a squadron of night-fighters; to most people the drive would have been extremely trying, to put it mildly. Denton said so, but the driver replied cheerfully that it was a piece of cake. You'd only got to look straight ahead, not all round and up and down as well. He accelerated, and the Bentley stormed through Cowplain and the tree-lined roads beyond.

In the meantime, things were happening in Willowmore Road. Six doors away from number fifty-one there was a house which had been abandoned by its tenants after a bomb had fallen in the garden behind and removed much of the rear wall. Ceilings fell down when this happened, windows blew out bodily and floors sagged, but the stairs remained practically undamaged, as so often happened. The back had been roughly boarded up, but on this night enough of the boards had been removed to admit two agile men who ascended the stairs to the top and went through the trap-door on to the flat roof. Low walls separated the roofs of the different houses, the men stepped silently over five of them and arrived upon the sixth roof.

Symes' skylight had been blacked-out by being painted over inside; the men listened intently before starting operations. No sound came up, so one of them took hold of the edge of the skylight and pulled. It did not move.

"Fastened down," he said. "Quite right, too, with so many burglars about."

He took from his pocket a rubber sucker of the type which is used to affix ashtrays to the windscreens of cars, moistened it and stuck it firmly on one of the glass panes. He produced a sharp thin knife and began to loosen the putty round the glass, it was hard with age and came off in short lengths which he put carefully aside.

"Just a touch of seccotine," he said, "when we've finished, and nobody will notice the glass has been tampered with at all. That is, of course, provided I don't drop it."

More careful scraping round the edges and the pane rose unwillingly from its bed, pulled up by the rubber sucker. Inside the flat all was quiet and completely dark, and the bolt which held down the skylight was within reach.

"There now," said the operator. "Nobody at home, just as expected. How very nice. Sometimes people don't act just as expected, and it can be tiresome."

His companion chuckled. "I should think so. I think I'm glad I'm only a photographer."

"Oh, no. Burgling is quite good fun, especially when you know you won't be arrested for it. Now, if Denton will kindly arrive with the key, we can get on with the job. Will you stay here while I go down and meet him?"

There was less time to wait than they had expected, Denton's R.A.F. driver had covered the seventy-five miles in under three hours in spite of difficulties.

"Five past two," said Denton, handing over the key. "You won't linger, needless to say. We've got to put this key back before that blighter even begins to wake up. I'll go back to the car and wait, you know where to find it, don't you?"

The skylight opened without difficulty, inside it an iron ladder had been fixed to the

wall in case of incendiary bombs on the roof. The Department's official burglar and photographer went down it into the flat, bolted the outer door and saw that the black-out was in place. Then they switched on the lights and found the safe behind the bookcase as Colemore had described it.

"Looks a bit of a teaser," said the photographer.

"It would be if we hadn't got the key. This is quite a good make. With the key—just a moment——"

The safe door swung open; the men put on clean rubber gloves since roofs are dirty places. They did not dare to use Symes' bathroom for fear someone downstairs should hear water running. Section by section the safe was cleared, every paper photographed and replaced in the same order. The men were deft and experienced, they worked in silence and at top speed, but even so it was over an hour before they closed the safe door again, swung the bookcase into place and looked round to make sure they had left no traces.

"We'll just unbolt the door and go," said the burglar. "That's right, up the ladder. For mercy's sake mind that pane of glass! Denton must be ramping. You go on ahead and give him the key, will you? I'll stick this putty back and follow you down."

"Twenty past three," said Denton, winding down the car window to receive the key. "We shall have to move, shan't we?"

"Simple," said the driver. "The roads will be clear now unless we run into convoys. With any ordinary luck we'll be there by six. Or thereabouts."

It was ten minutes past six when Denton left the Bentley just out of sight of the Portsmouth hotel and entered by the side door to find the landlord yawning and stretching before the fire in his little office.

"I've just crep' up once or twice," he said. "The gentleman was snoring beautiful just now."

Denton entered Symes' bedroom with considerably more precaution than before, lifted the bedclothes an inch at a time and returned the key to its pocket in the webbing belt. Before he had time to button the pocket, Symes rolled over, still asleep, and threw his arm across it. Denton softly replaced the bedclothes and left the room at once.

He shut the door inaudibly and Symes slept on until past nine o'clock. He found the button of his pocket undone when he awoke and thought nothing of it since the key was safely inside.

"Must have undone it in my sleep," he said.

XIX

“HOME JAMES——”

“ABOUT Our Leader in England,” said Colemore. “Did you manage anything?”

“Unfortunately not,” said Hambledon. “I wasn’t at the office when your message came—I have a home—and though they rang me up at once and I rushed off to Willowmore Road in person I couldn’t see anyone. I mean that literally as, of course, it was dark. There were men who came and went from number fifty-one but I couldn’t get a fair look at any of them. To make matters worse, the air-raid siren went just as I arrived so one couldn’t even use a torch.”

“There wasn’t much time, actually,” said Colemore. “I don’t know how soon the police sent off my message, and Symes rang up Our Leader well before eleven to say he wasn’t coming. So I expect he cleared off at once.”

“I probably passed him in the street. Never mind ‘probably we shall meet at Phillippi’ and I hope he’ll enjoy it as much as I shall. Now tell me, how did you get on at Portsmouth?”

Colemore told in detail the story of their drive in the fish-cart along the Fareham road and of the mysterious reinforced concrete structures which they had seen. “They float,” said Colemore. “Jones suggested that they were platforms for heavy guns, to be towed across and sunk off-shore during the Invasion.”

Hambledon smiled. “They are known as Mulberry Harbours, but that’s highly confidential at the moment.”

“Oh, I’m not asking,” said Anthony hastily. He went on to describe the lay-out of the factory. “The only reasonable way to reach the spot is to get Jones to land me on the foreshore from a dinghy. I should then persuade him to come with me and help to carry the explosives. At a convenient spot I should hit him under the ear and hand him over to the soldiers or whoever you appoint. That’s simple, but as regards the sabotage I don’t know what to suggest unless we can arrange a nice bright explosion and follow it up with some dramatic rumours of damage done and lives lost.”

“I think we’ll ask for expert advice,” said Hambledon. He drew his telephone towards him, gave a number and almost immediately engaged in conversation with someone whom he called Henry. Hambledon asked him to come round and have a word with him then and there if possible, and Henry appeared to be offering him a choice of words over the telephone. Eventually Hambledon prevailed and replaced the receiver.

“He will come,” said Hambledon, “in about ten minutes. In the meantime, perhaps you’d like to hear what happened at Symes’ flat. Actually, nothing much happened. I sent a couple of men there, they opened the safe, photographed all the contents, locked it up again and came away. Most of the papers are not very interesting and there were, as you said, a large number of maps. The thing we were after, the key to that telephone number code, is there. The telephone numbers are a list of names and addresses just as you’d expect, we are looking into them and we expect they will prove illuminating.”

“I hope so,” said Colemore. “By the way,” he added, with a rather embarrassed laugh,

“I can’t tell you how relieved I was to see Denton at Portsmouth Town Station last night. I couldn’t think of any way of preventing Symes from catching that train unless I clouted him or threw him down the stairs.”

“We thought you might have trouble when we saw how early it was when you left town. You did very well to put things off until eight. It’s funny you should have suggested throwing him down the stairs; if you’d arrived at the station much earlier something like that would have happened to Symes. I suppose you’ve never practised picking pockets, have you? No, I thought you hadn’t. It’s considered rather a low-grade activity, I don’t know why as it’s really highly skilled. It would have been such fun if you’d pinched Symes’ wallet yourself, wouldn’t it?”

The door opened and there entered a Commander, R.N., whom Hambledon did not introduce by name. He merely greeted him warmly and said that “our young friend opposite” wanted to blow up the new factory opposite Portchester Castle, if nobody minded, and how could it best be done?

“Explain,” said the Commander, and Hambledon did so. “He’s simply got to keep in with these people,” added Tommy. “It’s vital. I’d rather he really blew the place up than fell down on this job. I expect you’ve got plenty more factories, haven’t you?”

“You do make the most cold-blooded suggestions of anyone I’ve ever met,” complained the Commander. “You ought to have been a pirate. Why pitch on one of our shows? Why can’t he go and blow up the War Office or something that doesn’t matter?”

“I could do that some other time, perhaps,” murmured Colemore, but the Commander had suddenly become serious and was unrolling a large-scale map.

“I looked into this matter since you mentioned it to me the other day. This is the place, isn’t it?”

“That’s it,” said Anthony.

“That viaduct,” said the Commander, pointing it out, “where the railway crosses that patch of marsh, has got to come down. They used to light dummy fires on that stretch during the raids on Portsmouth, to persuade the Hun to drop his bombs on the mud. He scored several near misses, and the viaduct was considerably shaken. It is beginning to give in places, and the heavy loads it is now asked to carry are too much for it. We can’t waste time pulling it down. It will be destroyed by demolition charges and Bailey bridges run across instead. If your young friend could arrange his—his charades for that day he might cash in on it.”

“Not by day——” began Colemore, and Hambledon backed him up.

“It’s got to be by night,” he said firmly. “And the demolition charges should be fairly spectacular. We shall have an audience, you know. Also, it would help if the men on duty there exhibited suitable reactions. I mean, it’s no good the sentries just saying ‘There she goes,’ and continuing to discuss football, it wouldn’t carry conviction. Conviction,” added Hambledon with considerable energy, “is precisely what this is going to carry, one of these days. Well?”

The Commander sighed. “Apart from your suggestion that sentries do nothing but loll round and discuss football, I see your point. The sentries will give an impersonation of Casabianca and stand unwillingly firm, while the others rush about and register distress and alarm, eh?”

“Search will be immediately instituted,” said Hambledon. “The wandering lights of torches will be seen traversing the marsh——”

“Accompanied by loud splashes and suitable curses when they fall into pools of water——”

“Shots might be fired——”

“Must they?” said Colemore plaintively.

“Of course,” said the Commander. “If we’ve got to stage a sort of Wild West fireworks show we may as well do it properly. You can always throw yourself flat, the ground is nice and soft I assure you.”

“The night chosen should be moonless,” said Hambledon.

“Perhaps you’d like me to arrange for a nice wet fog too,” said the sardonic Commander.

Four nights later Colemore rang Symes up on the telephone and said he wanted to see him at once. “Will you come here or shall we meet somewhere?”

Symes said he would come to Colemore; when he arrived they retired to a quiet corner of the lounge and talked in low tones.

“I went to Portsmouth again and had another look at that place,” said Colemore. “The only vulnerable spot is that viaduct across that patch of swamp. If that were broken it should worry them a bit. Then I went on and saw Jones. Next Tuesday is the best night for the attempt, no moon and a rising tide at about two a.m. It won’t be high till after four, so the water won’t be deep under the viaduct, but there’s no fear of having the boat stranded as it might be on a falling tide. I shall go to Jones’s house soon after ten, taking the necessary explosives with me, you can supply them, no doubt?”

“But——” began Symes.

“All I wanted to discuss with you was the get-away afterwards. I think I’d better go down by train—and I’ll carry the suitcase myself this time, Symes. No more Eddies for me. But I don’t want to walk through the streets of Portsmouth even in the dark with my trousers plastered to the knees with harbour mud, as they will be; not after that explosion. The police wouldn’t have to switch a torch on to notice it, they’d smell it yards away. I think you’d better——”

“I will inform those in authority——” said Symes, raising his voice in order to interrupt.

“Quiet, don’t talk so loud,” said Colemore peremptorily. “You’ve got a car available, I suppose?”

Symes nodded sulkily.

“You will wait for me with the car on the Portsmouth-Fareham road from two o’clock onwards. You can park the car in that lane where we waited the other day, do you remember? With the car headed towards the main road, of course, ready to start at once. In case you’re not sure where the lane is, here’s an ordnance map.” Colemore handed him a roll. “I’ve marked the spot in pencil, make sure you know it and then destroy the map. Got that?”

“How do you propose to get there?”

“I will get Jones to put me ashore past the boundary wire of that establishment and

then I'll walk up to the road. It may take me an hour or more, you'd better wait till four o'clock at least. I can change in the car, I'll send you some clothes to take with you. All clear?"

"I will consult Our Leader," said Symes, dropping his voice to the edge of inaudibility, "and, if he approves, the scheme shall be carried out. I shall recommend it," he added, "it seems to me the only possible——"

"It is," said Colemore.

"But I must tell you that you should have obtained approval before proceeding to the actual arrangements with Jones. It is subversive of discipline for subordinates to initiate action, however brilliantly conceived, without consultation and approval. It——"

"I was in a hurry," said Colemore. "One can't keep on visiting Portsmouth, it's not a healthy spot in some respects. Our Leader will understand, as you'll find out when you tell him. I think we'd better not meet again before Tuesday night—Wednesday morning, rather—at about three a.m. at the point I've marked. Don't forget to destroy the map. Well, I think that's all. I've promised to have a game of bridge with some of the residents to-night. Stay and have a drink?"

Symes declined with thanks and went away. He did not look particularly pleased with life, and Colemore smiled to himself.

"Moral superiority," he murmured, and went to join the card-players. "I hope it'll work with contract bridge."

Tuesday night proved overcast and damp, more ideal for the purpose than the Commander's fog since Colemore and Jones had to find their way across dark waters to an exact spot invisible against the hill behind it. Jones, however, had not occupied his business on that water for years to lose himself now. He checked his position by sea-marks, buoys and other indications which meant nothing to Colemore sitting low in the stern of a smelly dinghy and hoping they wouldn't meet anything. Presently Jones stopped pulling and quietly unshipped his oars.

"Go for'ard now," he said softly, "an' get in the bows with the boat-'ook. We're not far off now."

Colemore obeyed, Jones took his place and propelled the dinghy with an oar over the stern. Presently there came from the darkness ahead a puffing sound, the noise of iron wheels on rails, and a faint glow from a locomotive. The factory was getting in the last supply before the viaduct was broken. The train came to a standstill and there came the sound of voices and a few dimmed lights. The dinghy slowed suddenly, ran on a yard or two, and came to rest against a tussock of marsh grass. Jones drew his oar in and came forward to join Colemore.

"Better wait a bit till they've settled down," whispered Colemore, and Jones agreed.

"The train crew will go back on the loco," he said. "They don't stay there nights."

"They won't unload the trucks to-night, I suppose?"

"No. Just leave 'em. There they go."

The small locomotive puffed into life again and went back up the line and out of sight. Doors slammed and peace settled upon the factory, broken only by the occasional sound of heavy boots on concrete.

“The sentries,” explained Jones. “They won’t see us. What about now?”

Colemore assented, and Jones went ashore with a line and a stake which he pushed into the soft ground to secure the boat. Colemore lifted out the suitcase and followed. He had an excuse ready to induce the fisherman to come with him; but no excuse was necessary, for the going was so difficult as to be nearly impossible. Slippery lumps of soil were separated by slimy channels, Colemore tripped and floundered in the dark, staggering with the heavy suitcase. Jones appeared to be able to see in the dark like a cat. He sniggered.

“Not like pavements, is it?” he whispered. “’Ere, best give me that.”

He took the suitcase and strolled away, it was all Colemore could do to keep up with him until the going improved on firmer soil. They were approaching the viaduct at a tangent; under the second arch there was a small party waiting for them, though Jones did not know it. He paused about twenty yards away and put down the case.

“There you are,” he whispered. “You get on with it now. I don’t know aught ’bout explosives and don’t want to. I’ll get back to the boat and wait for you.”

“Right,” said Colemore. “Just a moment—she lies there, doesn’t she?” He pointed.

“More to the left,” said Jones. “See that pylon against the sky? If you stoop a bit, like this——”

Colemore hit him behind the ear and the fishmonger grunted and fell on his face. Anthony whistled softly and men came out from under the arch.

“This him?” they said. “Poor boob.” They picked him out of the mud and removed him, while one of them gave Colemore a message.

“The officer says, sir, as you’d better come inside and wait, it’s more comfortable in there. We aren’t quite ready, them arches won’t go up for another ’alf-hour. This way, sir, let me guide you. Mustn’t show a light, that’s the orders.”

Symes backed the car into the lane according to Colemore’s instructions. They had been duly confirmed by Our Leader, whose opinion of Colemore appeared to be rising steadily in a manner which made Symes grind his teeth whenever he thought of it. He had hinted tactfully that it might perhaps be advisable to test out this new recruit more thoroughly before putting too much trust in him. The hint had been met by a cold stare and an icier silence, Symes’ voice died away in mid-sentence. He left The Presence disliking Colemore more heartily than ever. Something would have to be done about it, surely there was some means. . . .

Symes turned out the lights, locked up the car and left it well out of sight from the casual passer-by. There was, in fact, a good deal of traffic, mainly military, along the main road from Portsmouth to Fareham even at two o’clock in the morning. He walked back along the main road till he reached a point he had noted before. One could look across from here at the embankment and its viaduct, though he could see nothing in the darkness, not yet. He climbed a gate and sat down inside the hedge to wait for what should come.

He heard the train wagons go down to the factory and the locomotive return, but nothing happened for some time. The sentries on the gate and the road-bridge were near enough for him to hear their footsteps when there was nothing passing on the road, one man had a tiresome cough.

Presently in the darkness he fancied he saw a tiny spark. It might have been merely

fancy—he found himself counting seconds. If that fellow Bilston—no, Brampton—brought this off the Leader would be pleased. Perhaps it would really be better if he failed, and better still if he blew himself up——

There came a blinding flash in the darkness, a yellow flame leaping and carrying with it loose pieces of all shapes. Lumps of stuff, probably brickwork, a shower of earth, thin strips which might be railway lines. The flash died instantly but the picture was left before his dazzled eyes so that he could go on looking at it after the reality had vanished. Immediately upon the flash there followed the deep sound of the explosion, and directly after that an appalling scream in a man's voice, high and shaking, that slid down the scale and died away.

“Good lord alive,” said Colemore, starting from his chair, “what was that?”

“It's all right,” said the officer, laughing. “Only my mountebanks enjoying themselves. They were told to demonstrate. You've spilt your whisky, let me give you some more.”

Symes also sprang to his feet, he had not expected this. Away to his left the sentries shouted to each other excitedly, one started to run and his fellow called him back. Down by the jetty, doors opened and lights appeared, the lights of torches in the hands of running men. More shouting, “Over there, look!” and shots fired. Somebody called “Ted! Ted, where are you?” and one of the sentries by the gate called up to one on the bridge, “Did you hear that yell? Somebody's got his.” The bridge guard answered, “Reckon it was poor old Ted?”

Authoritative voices shouted orders and the lights began to scatter over the marshland. Symes hastily climbed the gate and went back to the car. He was half a mile or more from the explosion and, of course, well outside the boundary fence, but it would not do to be seen watching. It wouldn't do to be seen at all. He ran the last few hundred yards and threw himself at the car, fumbling with the locked door. That fellow Brampton had certainly done it this time—was it he who screamed? If he had not got far enough away—if he'd slipped and twisted his ankle, or just stuck in that filthy mud till something got him, a length of rail perhaps, like a javelin——

Symes got into the car, lit a cigarette and glanced at his watch by its glow. A quarter to three, he was to wait until four. He might be waiting in vain, or of course it might not have been Brampton who screamed.

At ten minutes to four he got out of the car and listened. Five minutes to four. Two minutes.

“He's not coming,” said Symes aloud, and started violently as someone took him by the elbow.

“‘Home, James, and don't spare the horses,’ ” quoted Colemore. “Did I startle you?”

“I didn't hear you,” said Symes breathlessly. “Are you all right?”

“Quite, thanks. Get in the car and let's be going. I'll get in the back, I want to change. Gosh, that mud!”

“Who was that who screamed?” asked Symes. “Any idea? It was a yell, wasn't it?”

“Yes, I know,” said Colemore grimly. “I'm sorry, although we didn't like him much. Poor old Jones. He lost his head and ran the wrong way. I found him—nearly got caught myself doing so—he was quite dead.”

Symes started the engine and drove carefully away while Colemore wrestled with buttons and braces in the back seat. Jones didn't really matter except for the trouble of replacing him, on the whole Our Leader would be so pleased. That fellow Brampton had done it again.

XX

TEST CASE

FOR obvious reasons, Colemore and Hambledon did not meet more often than was absolutely necessary. However many precautions they might take, there was always a chance that somebody might see something and report it. Hambledon said that he was no believer in tempting Providence with the long arm of Coincidence. It was, therefore, some weeks after the affair in Portsmouth Harbour that Hambledon sent for Colemore.

“I thought it was time we re-coordinated our efforts,” said Tommy. “I don’t know whether you’ve got any news for me?”

“Precious little, except that I have done so well that I am shortly to have the honour of being presented to Our Leader in England himself. Symes told me so last night.”

“That will be nice for you, won’t it?”

“Yes, won’t it? Quite a thrill. I was delighted, and said so. Symes was not. He doesn’t like me.”

“No?” said Hambledon. “Look here, Colemore, are you absolutely certain Symes isn’t Our Leader himself?”

Colemore stared. “As certain as one can be without actually having seen both men. Symes often has to do things he doesn’t want to, under orders. Also, that time we stayed the night in Portsmouth, he genuinely had the wind up because he couldn’t get back to Town. No, he’s pretty high up, but he’s not the Tallest Poppy.”

Hambledon nodded. “Again, are you sure the Leader isn’t somebody you’ve met already without knowing he was the Leader?”

“It’s possible,” said Anthony slowly. “I couldn’t be sure about that. It never occurred to me.”

“Is there anyone you know whom it might be, then?”

“I haven’t met many people, you know. Eddie and Jones are both crossed off and anyway they were subordinates. There’s one man I sometimes wonder about, and that’s the laughing taxi-driver. The fat man, you know. I think he’s a lot more important than you’d expect.”

“More than Symes?”

“Equal, anyway.”

Hambledon nodded. “It was he who picked up the unlucky Abbott and Detective-Inspector Warren from the end of this street the night they were kidnapped. We recently arranged that he should be induced to laugh where Warren could overhear him, and it was the same laugh. Encouraged by this, I had the same experiment tried with Detective-Inspector Ennis. You haven’t met him. It was he who went to Dorset to meet Abbott when he came ashore, thanks to the little note you sent over from Holland. Ennis also recognized him.”

“I haven’t seen much of Newman,” said Colemore. “He came up to Symes’ flat one evening when I was there, he only stayed a few minutes and then he and Symes had a few

private words I couldn't overhear outside the door. Symes' armchair creaks. But his manner was definitely not subordinate. I suppose he might be Our Leader," he added rather doubtfully.

"The point," said Hambledon, "is this. We have unravelled all the data from Meon Road, Teddington, and also from Symes' safe, and followed up all the people mentioned. The one person not mentioned, Colemore is Our Leader. Thoroughly well organized, this business. The Teddington office, so to speak, dealt with the sabotage branch; Symes' office with espionage, gaining information. The givers and receivers, as it were. Symes was the link between them. Some names appear on both lists, but not many. Let's have a drink, all this talking dries me—dehydrates me, to use the modern slang."

When this suggestion had been carried out, Hambledon continued.

"There are other pairs of offices similarly organized in other parts of the country; Plymouth for the West, Newcastle for the North, Glasgow for Scotland, and another in Belfast, but I needn't bother you with all those. I only mention it to show that we're all ready to pounce if only we knew who Our Leader is. But we must have him, Colemore."

"He must do quite a lot of travelling about," said Colemore. "I suppose he'd just returned from one of his journeys that night we stayed at Portsmouth. Arrived late in town, presumably, since Symes didn't mind what time he got back as long as he did."

"I daresay," said Tommy. "Well, we're having these people watched. The people on those lists, I mean. And all of them, Colemore, visit Willowmore Road and there is no other place which they all visit. We are occupying the house opposite fifty-one. Number fifty, to be exact. I don't mean I am, but some of us are. I like peace in the home, myself."

"But," said Colemore, and did not go on.

"Number fifty-one is rather a queer boarding-house, its always full up. Even after people carrying suitcases have just left, there is never a vacant room for an innocent enquirer." Colemore smiled and Hambledon added, "Innocent of what they're doing, anyway."

"I've been there quite a lot lately," said Anthony, "and, as I said just now, I never meet anyone in Symes' flat. Newman once, no one else. One passes people on the stairs, but that's all."

"Yet it looks as though Our Leader is there when he's in London. What staff do they keep?"

"There's Spink, the landlord, who is always about and usually answers the door. He can't be your man because he is always there—he doesn't go travelling. Mrs. Spink, a colourless woman who sits in the office all day doing accounts and making out bills and orders. The office is a poky little room inside the front door, I've seen people paying her. There's Joe, the waiter and general odd-job man. He always reminds me of a scrawny fowl, he scuttles about all day with his head out in front; Spink bawls at him every time he sees him. There's a charwoman in the mornings. I don't know what the kitchen staff consists of. Mrs. Spink does the housework in Symes' flat."

"You've been all over the house, have you?" asked Tommy.

"Except in the kitchen," answered Colemore.

"I can't imagine Our Leader in England living in the kitchen premises of a scruffy boarding-house. It wouldn't be good enough for one thing. For another, there wouldn't be

room. With his organization, he'd want something like a suite of offices besides living accommodation for himself. Yet he doesn't live in Symes' flat even when Symes isn't there, or my tame burglars would have found him when they broke in that night."

Colemore shook his head. "Unless he lives next door?"

"No. The house on one side is wrecked by bombing at the back although it looks all right in front. The people on the other side are definitely trustworthy. Never mind, we'll find out one of these days. When you're introduced to him perhaps."

"It should help," said Anthony.

* * * * *

Symes spent a large part of his leisure time trying to think of a scheme for discrediting Colemore which would not recoil on himself if it failed. It was not easy. With every task which Colemore successfully performed, his reputation grew higher with one whom Symes feared far more than the Day of Judgment.

Eventually luck favoured him. He lunched at a restaurant and amused himself by looking at a copy of *The Tatler* which someone had carelessly left behind. A group of notables arranged round a long white bundle at a society christening. "Reading from left to right . . ." Horses and their riders in the Park on sunny mornings. Fashionable weddings. Symes sneered faintly and turned another page.

There was a photograph of a handsome, if rather hard faced woman emerging from a doorway. The caption said:—"Personal Service to the Red Cross. Mrs. Aylwin Brampton, whose husband is a P.O.W., assists in the collection of jewels and *objets d'art* for the next Red Cross sale. She is a well-known connoisseur of Oriental china."

"So that's his wife," said Symes to himself with genuine surprise. "I'd forgotten he'd got one. In fact, I had an idea he hadn't." He tried to recall an unguarded remark which Colemore had once made on the subject of marriage, having also forgotten that Major Aylwin Brampton had a wife. The exact recollection eluded Symes, but the impression remained strong enough to induce him to take *The Tatler* home in his pocket.

He tore a strip, which included the caption, from the bottom of the page. He did the same with two or three other pages so as to make it appear that he had been using the margins as lighter spills, and threw the paper down on the table. He was expecting Colemore to come in that evening.

Colemore came as arranged to discuss means of reporting to Germany upon the increasing activity along the South Coast, and was offered a cigarette. He accepted, and felt in his pocket.

"Don't waste a match," said Symes carelessly. "Tear a spill off that paper. It'll light at the electric fire if you touch the bar with it."

"*Tatler*, eh?" said Colemore. "Haven't seen one for years. Why, this is a new one, it's a shame to tear it up." He leaned upon the table and looked at the paper.

"Take it home if you like," said Symes generously. "I don't want it."

Colemore was looking straight at Mrs. Brampton's photograph without a sign of recognition and turned the page without comment.

"I think I'm glad I'm not famous enough to be snapshotted," he said. "Especially on a

windy day. Look at these bridesmaids wrestling with the bride's veil."

"Symbol of modesty, isn't it?" sneered Symes.

"Part of the traditional fancy-dress," said Colemore, and the subject dropped. This was the night before Colemore saw Hambleton and told him that nothing important had been said, except that he was to see the Leader.

Symes waited till his visitor had gone and then asked Newman, the taxi-driver, to come up to the flat. The stout man arrived, puffing and blowing.

"When the war is over," he said, "I will have the National Gallery for my bungalow. No, not the National Gallery, there are steps outside. Somewhere completely level." He laughed, but Symes was not amused.

"What would you say if a man failed to recognize his wife's photograph?"

"That it was either a damn bad photograph," chuckled Newman, "or a damn bad wife."

"Would you call this a bad photograph?" asked Symes, and pointed out Mrs. Brampton.

"Not too bad. Why?"

Symes told him.

"It's odd, certainly, but there might be some other explanation. He might have purposely ignored the lady, to keep her out of all this. He might not have actually looked at it. Or, more likely still, the caption might have been attached to the wrong photo; it does happen even in the best papers now and again."

Symes' face fell noticeably.

"I tell you what, Symes, you are letting your dislike of this fellow out-run reason. The Leader has passed him and that should be enough."

"But," said Symes, "I should fail in my duty if I observed suspicious circumstances and did not report them."

"Oh, quite. But what suspicious circumstances have you observed?"

"There's this."

"That's one, not several. Any more?"

"He—there's something about him—I know there's something not right."

Newman hesitated, he knew it to be true that men in their position did develop a sixth sense which warned them of danger.

"I propose," went on Symes, "to confront him with the lady and see what happens."

"I don't like it," said Newman.

"Besides, I'm sure he said he wasn't married."

"Isn't, or never has been? Perhaps they're divorced. What exactly did he say?"

Symes had to admit he could not remember.

"There you are. You can't remember. Probably the words could bear either meaning, or he may have been warning you to let his private life alone. And that photo may not be the right lady. And your intuitions may be indigestion, or jealousy. You can't go to Our Leader with a thin tale like that. You know what would happen, don't you?"

"I don't propose to. I want to prove it."

“I know you do,” laughed Newman. “You hate him like rat-poison. I think you’re a fool.”

Symes shook his head.

“Besides, you forget,” continued Newman. “He wouldn’t dare to double-cross us. Ever since he shot that policeman we’ve had him there—” gesturing with a downturned thumb.

“A little note to the police would be enough. People who kill policemen in this country hang by the neck until they are dead, Symes.”

“I daresay, but that wouldn’t help us if he talked first. As, of course, he would if he thought it would save his neck. That, I suppose, is why Our Leader is so strict about casualties among the police; they always get their man in the end, I believe, and then _____”

“They haven’t got Brampton,” said Newman.

“Not yet. But that doesn’t affect my point. Is this man Brampton or a substitute?”

“Get someone who knew him to look at him,” suggested the fat man.

“I can’t, they’re all in jail or out of the country. Except his wife.”

“Oh, well,” said Newman. “I don’t like it and I think you’re a fool, as I said before. But if you insist I suppose something must be done if only to convince you you’re wrong. It’ll be your funeral if you are, won’t it?” He went off into one of his peals of laughter.

“I have it,” said Symes. “I’ll go to one of those press photographic agencies and get a photo of Brampton. They’re sure to have one—political man, local big-wig and all that. I’ll say I want it for a local paper to head an account of his wife’s work for the Red Cross.”

Newman approved. “When you’ve got it, let me know. That ought to settle your doubts.”

Symes got his photograph. It showed a man lounging comfortably on a sandy beach in brilliant sunshine. He wore a swimming-suit, and a beach robe hung from his shoulders; he also wore dark sun-glasses and a moustache—Colemore was clean-shaven. He was accompanied by a slim vision with blonde hair, the irreducible minimum in bathing-suits, and a parasol. The caption said:—

“Major Aylwin Brampton and friend on the beach at Cannes. 1937.”

“Is this the only one you’ve got of him?”

The agency regretted that it was. Apparently Major Brampton was not one of those who liked being caught by press photographers. “Some don’t, you know. Funny, isn’t it?”

Symes agreed. He bought the photograph—not that he really wanted it. When he showed it to Newman, the fat man rolled with laughter till the tears came. Symes was not amused.

“It’s not very like Bilston,” he said. “Take away the moustache——”

“That’s just what he’s done,” gurgled Newman. “Dark glasses over his eyes, moustache over his mouth—what d’you want? A strawberry-mark on the left arm?”

“It hasn’t settled my doubts, anyway,” said Symes stubbornly.

Newman left off laughing and sat up. “I suppose you’ll keep on at this till you get your

own way. Well, I hope you like the result, that's all. You want them to meet in order to see if they know each other?"

Symes nodded.

"Then you're dead from the neck upwards. If she sees him, and he is Brampton, she'll tell the world."

"I knew that, of course," said Symes. "He must see her, that's all. I'll——"

"You'll leave it to me," said the taxi-driver. "Either I arrange it or the matter's dropped. Got that?"

"Very well," said Symes, "if you wish. I don't mind so long as it's done. But if he doesn't recognize her——"

He tore the photograph into small pieces and burnt the remains in an ash-tray.

"If he doesn't," said Newman, "I'll take back all I've said." He struggled out of the armchair and waddled towards the door. "But I still don't like it," he added, and went out of the room.

It did not take their organization many days to find out all the taxi-driver wanted to know about Mrs. Brampton. Normally, she lived in Yorkshire, but some months earlier she had come to London and taken a small flat on Campden Hill, where she lived with an elderly maid. Not far away, in Palace Gardens Terrace, lived her married sister with a Colonel husband who daily attended the War Office. Their son and daughter were in the Services; Mrs. Brampton was childless. Reports from Yorkshire suggested that the Brampton marriage had not been entirely successful, Newman wondered idly whether the dazzling blonde at Cannes had been responsible. He withdrew this slander upon the Brampton reputation when he learned that the Major was "never much of a one for the ladies" and had early become disillusioned about matrimony. It was hinted that Mrs. Brampton had cleverly allied herself with an estate in Yorkshire, a title in prospect, and quite a lot of money; rather than with a sensitive retiring man whom everyone seemed to like. Mrs. Brampton did not appear to be popular with her servants. Newman chuckled quite genuinely when he thought he saw the reason why Colemore ignored the photograph in *The Tatler*. Probably averted his eyes with a shudder. However, Symes had insisted upon this investigation, and he should have it. Newman did not like Symes at all, although Fate had ordained that they should work together. For one thing, Symes had no sense of humour whereas Newman's was well developed, if cruel. They were very much like a much more notorious pair, Goering and Goebbels.

Mrs. Brampton was always talking about "my poor husband," and when "poor Aylwin comes home." It appeared that he was going to have his life thoroughly reorganized for him, and one of the Yorkshire grooms gave it as his opinion that the Major was a lot more happy in that there prisoner-of-war camp where wives were not admitted. She was a masterful lady.

Newman absorbed all this and laid his plans accordingly.

One afternoon at about five o'clock, a taxi drove up to the entrance of the Campden Hill flats and a man got out. He was dressed in the uniform of a British officer, but not of Brampton's regiment, and he had one arm in a sling. He told the taxi to wait, went up to Mrs. Brampton's flat, and asked if she were at home.

"What name, please, sir?"

“Captain Vincent.”

The maid showed him in to the drawing-room, and Mrs. Brampton came in at once.

“Captain Vincent? I don’t think I——”

“You do not know me, Mrs. Brampton. I—er, that is, I have come to bring you some news.”

“Oh—please sit down. What is it?”

“I ought to explain that I was, until recently, a prisoner-of-war in Germany. I have just been repatriated owing to this——” he indicated his arm. “My fighting days are over, I fear.”

“I am so sorry. You have, perhaps, seen my husband?”

He bowed his head. “I have, indeed. Quite recently.”

“Recently? You mean he was at the same camp?”

“I do not wish to startle you, Mrs. Brampton.” Captain Vincent had a deep and pleasant voice, at this point it expressed sympathy and encouragement in the highest possible degree. “You are a brave and self-controlled woman, I am sure.”

“Aylwin is dead!”

“No, no. Stupid of me! Far from it. He is in London.”

“In London? Impossible! I should have been informed by the Red Cross if——”

“There was a bit of a muddle,” said Vincent. “Your husband was not, originally, one of those on the list for exchange. Then one of the other fellows died at the last moment, and sooner than upset all the arrangements and make the numbers come wrong—you know these Germans, so methodical and exact——”

“They substituted my husband.”

“Precisely.”

Mrs. Brampton sprang to her feet and walked excitedly about the room, Captain Vincent stood watching her with deferential kindness.

She stopped suddenly. “I—but the next batch of returned prisoners is not due for a fortnight. How can——”

“There were three of us poor crocks from our camp,” said Vincent, and looked away out of the window as one who beheld some far-off scene withheld from other eyes. “We were to go South, to join up with other parties en route for Lisbon, you know. Then the R.A.F. came.” He laughed, softly but triumphantly. “We looked up, and there were the famous rings. I can’t tell you—however, you don’t want to hear that now. The upshot was that the railway lines were cut and the train we were in was sent north. To get it out of the way, anywhere, the chaos on the German railways——. Well, we arrived at Rostock, what’s left of it. The German Commandant there obviously didn’t know what to do with us so, to cut a long story short, he put us on a ’plane for Sweden and we flew home from there.”

She thought this over. “If she’ll swallow that,” thought Vincent, “she’ll swallow anything.” He went on quickly.

“Your husband is very ill, Mrs. Brampton.”

She wheeled upon him. “What is it—where is he?”

“‘It’ is a sort of nervous paralysis which sometimes attacks him. You knew he had a spinal injury? I have never seen him so bad as to-day. The excitement, no doubt.”

“Where is he?”

“At a small hotel, the Dunara Hotel, close to Victoria Station. He is practically a stretcher case—I did not know what to do for the best. I took a room for him and left him there while I came to fetch you. You might have been out of town——”

“You did quite right.” She was almost convinced. “The third man you spoke of, is he with my husband?”

“He has gone straight home to his mother,” Captain Vincent permitted himself a fleeting, tender smile. “I don’t want to hurry you, Mrs. Brampton, but I should rather like to go home to mine.”

That settled it. She apologized, asked him to wait one moment, just one, while she put on a coat, and rushed out of the room. He heard her call excitedly to the maid as she went along the passage.

There was a short pause, and then voices again. “She has been quick,” he said, and then frowned. Not voices, but a voice. She was telephoning to somebody; she was of those who address the telephone as though it were deaf. She said, “Dunara Hotel. Near Victoria. Dunara—no, I don’t know how they spell it. I’m going at once. Of course.”

Mrs. Brampton re-entered the room. “Now, if you will. I’ve just rung up my sister, she is so excited. She would hardly believe it.”

“I expect she was surprised,” said Captain Vincent. “I kept the taxi waiting,” he added. “I thought it would save time.”

XXI

MRS. BRAMPTON

MRS. BRAMPTON'S sister put down the telephone as her husband let himself into the flat in Palace Gardens Terrace.

"Bertie! Bertie, I've just had the most amazing news from Lena! Aylwin is in London!"

"God bless my soul! In London? How the devil did he get here?"

"He's been repatriated. He's——"

"Is he at her flat?"

"No. A man came to see her—she was so excited she couldn't explain properly—a brother officer, apparently. Poor Aylwin was taken ill on the journey so this man put him in an hotel to rest, while he came to see if Lena was in town. So she's rushed off to the hotel to see him——"

"Just a minute, just a minute. How long has Brampton been in England?"

"They've just arrived. Or so I gathered."

"But there haven't been any prisoners-of-war repatriated lately. There's another ship due to leave Lisbon in a fortnight's time."

"They didn't come via Lisbon, she told me that. They flew from Sweden."

"Now listen, Cecily. Repatriated prisoners don't just drop in by air from Sweden at any odd time. You must know that. This is a ridiculous story."

"But, Bertie——"

"Did she know this fellow—the brother officer wallah?"

"I—I don't know. I rather think not. She said he was 'a Captain Vincent,' and one doesn't say 'a Mr. So-and-so' when it's someone one knows. Oh, Bertie!"

"Lena's a fool," said the Colonel. "Headstrong idiot. You know what all this is about, don't you?"

"No," faltered his wife. "I haven't the least idea."

"Flat robbery, that's what. She's been decoyed away leaving that poor silly Eliza on her own. Then the bell will ring, Eliza will open the door, get knocked on the head, and bang go the Brampton rubies. Dam' fool," said the Colonel, diving at the telephone. "I'll ring her up." He dialled Mrs. Brampton's number and waited. Eliza always hated answering the telephone.

"There you are," said the Colonel, screwing his head round with the receiver still at his ear, "no reply. They are already there, no doubt. Eliza is tied up and they are opening the safe. I'd have done better to ring up the—Hallo! That you, Eliza? Colonel Dadgworthy here. Don't open the door to anyone on any account, unless you recognize their voice through the door. And not then, unless you're absolutely sure. Make 'em stoop down so's you can see their faces through the letter-box. Understand? Your mistress has been decoyed away and an attempt will probably be made to rob the flat."

“Oh, Bertie,” said his wife, “you’ll terrify the poor woman.”

“I can’t help that,” said the Colonel, and paused to listen to squeaks from the telephone. “No, I shouldn’t ring up the police yet, Eliza. Leave it to me, I’ll see to it. You just keep quiet and put the chain up on the door. Right.”

He put down the receiver. “Did Lena have the sense to tell you what hotel it was?”

“The Dun——. Just a moment. Dunara, that’s it. Near Victoria.”

“Dunara? Never heard of it. Don’t suppose there is such a place.”

“Look it up in the Directory.”

The Colonel did so, muttering.

“Donaldson’s. Duncansby. Dunara, here it is.”

“Perhaps it’s all right, then, Bertie.”

“Perhaps it’s all wrong. Put your hat on while I call a taxi. What it is,” said the Colonel bitterly, “to have a fool for a sister-in-law. Tiresome woman, Lena. Always was. Always will be. Poor Brampton——”

The Dunara Hotel consisted of a couple of floors over shops in a side street behind the station, the hotel entrance was a narrow doorway with a stair running straight up inside it and a notice saying, “Please walk up.” The Colonel snorted and walked up, with Mrs. Dadgworthy following timidly behind. At the top there was a landing (oilcloth with palms) and a large firm manageress.

“Major Brampton here?”

“Not staying here, no. We have no one of that name, I’m sorry. Unless you mean someone who has come to call on one of the guests.”

“No, I meant—what did she say, Cecily?”

“Did an officer come here to-day,” said Mrs. Dadgworthy, “bringing another wounded officer who had been taken ill in the train? He was to stay here and rest until his wife came.”

The manageress shook her head.

“I’m sorry, madam. Nothing like that has happened here to-day. I haven’t had a wounded officer here for more than eight months, the last was Sub-Lieutenant——”

“This was an Army officer, a Major.”

“No, madam. I’m sorry. There must have been some mistake. There are many hotels in this district, no doubt it was one of the others.”

“Thank you,” said the Colonel. “Much obliged. Come on, Cecily.”

“What shall we do now?” said his wife, when they were outside on the pavement again. “Poor Lena——”

“Get into the taxi. To the nearest police station! Poor Lena, my foot.”

Almost before the taxi stopped at the police station, the Colonel leapt out and rushed inside. By the time his wife was able to join him he was already explaining matters to the desk sergeant.

“If you will send a squad of men at once to six Campden Hill Brow, you will prevent a jewel robbery and probably murder.”

The desk sergeant raised his eyebrows and reached for his note-pad.

“Number six, Campden Hill Brow. You have reason to believe a jewel robbery is about to be attempted?”

“Of course, I said so. The——”

“But, Bertie,” said Mrs. Dadgworthy.

“May I have your name and address, please?”

The Colonel gave them. “The lady who lives there has been decoyed away, leaving only a fool of a maid in the house. There are rubies there, well-known rubies.”

“How do you know the lady has been decoyed away?”

“She rang up my wife—she’s her sister—and told a cock-and-bull story about a man coming to say that her husband had just arrived in London and was ill at an hotel. So she rushed off to meet him. I, of course, realized that the story was ridiculous, and my wife and I went to the hotel. Of course they were not there.”

“You are quite sure you went to the right hotel?”

The Colonel spluttered, and his wife said, “Quite sure, officer.”

“What made you think the story ridiculous?”

“Prisoners-of-war don’t arrive unannounced at odd times in twos and threes by air from Sweden.”

“No, sir.”

“And that’s what she said. If only I’d been in when she telephoned I would have handled the matter. About the jewel robbery——”

“What,” said the desk sergeant patiently, “makes you so sure that a jewel robbery was planned?”

“Bertie,” said Mrs. Dadgworthy, “you don’t know they are after the rubies. You only assumed that.”

“Why,” said the Colonel, “what else could it be?”

The desk sergeant sighed and tried again.

“As regards the actual facts in your possession,” he said, “all we have to go on so far is that the lady telephoned to say that her husband, who was a prisoner-of-war, had unexpectedly arrived in London and was ill at an hotel. Some man brought the message——”

“A brother officer,” said Mrs. Dadgworthy. “A Captain Vincent.”

“Do you know him? No? Did she?”

“I don’t think so, by the way she spoke. I’ve never heard the name before.”

“I see. Then having reason to think the lady had been hoaxed, you went to the hotel she mentioned.”

“And they were not there,” said the Colonel. “Never had been there. Dunara Hotel. Saw the manageress.”

“I see. You don’t think that when the lady found her husband was not there she just went home again?”

“Ring up and see,” said the Colonel, and gave the number. The sergeant dialled the number and Eliza answered promptly at once. No, her mistress had not returned and nobody had come to the flat. The sergeant replaced the receiver.

“What time was it when the lady telephoned you, madam?”

“About half-past five.”

“Oh. And it’s now twenty past six. Not much time wasted. She might have gone somewhere else on the way home.”

The Colonel could not deny the possibility. “But I don’t believe it,” he added.

“But why,” wailed Mrs. Dadgworthy, “should anyone wish to abduct poor Lena?”

The desk sergeant, not knowing the lady, had no suggestions to offer. “If you will give me full particulars,” he said, “we will make enquiries, and in the meantime please keep me informed if you hear any news of her. Her name, please?”

“Brampton.”

The sergeant looked up suddenly. “Brampton?”

The Colonel spelt it. “Mrs. Lena Brampton.”

“And her husband’s name?”

“Major Aylwin Brampton.”

“Excuse me a moment,” said the sergeant, and left the room to consult with his Superintendent.

“That Major Aylwin Brampton the Special Branch asked us to look out for, sir,” he said.

Bagshott had issued a general instruction that anyone giving either the name of Aylwin Brampton or Henry Gwynne Bilston should at all times be given any aid or comfort of which he appeared to stand in need.

“Well?” said the Superintendent.

“There’s a report just come in that his wife’s been decoyed away from her flat.” The desk sergeant repeated the story.

“Curious,” said the Superintendent. “Very curious. I think I’d better pass that on to the Special Branch. I don’t know whether they’re interested in his wife as well as in him; that’s for them to say. Get a full description of her, Wilkes, and all particulars, while I ring up.”

The Superintendent rang up Bagshott and told him the tale. Bagshott instructed him to take the matter seriously, with all the action that implied, and then telephoned to Tommy Hambleton.

“An odd thing has just happened,” said Bagshott, “It’s been reported that Mrs. Brampton has been decoyed away from her flat.”

“Mrs. Brampton?” said Tommy. “What for?”

“Heaven knows.” Bagshott told him all the details, and added, “I’ve told the police to take the matter seriously, though of course it may all be a mare’s nest. Or perhaps there really is somebody after those rubies, if there are any.”

“Serve her right for keeping them in a London flat,” said Hambleton callously. “That is, if it is the rubies they’re after.”

“If it isn’t,” said Bagshott, “what is it?”

“I wish I knew,” said Tommy, rather anxiously. “I don’t understand it, and I don’t like things I don’t understand. Let me know what transpires, won’t you?”

He rang off and thought things over. It was impossible to hear the name Brampton without thinking of Colemore, but the connection was not very obvious. There was no reason to suppose that the gang with whom Colemore was working had anything to do with it. Very unlikely, in fact. The last thing they would want would be for anyone to recognize their Major Brampton. Coincidence, probably. Nevertheless, Tommy picked up the telephone again and rang Colemore's hotel, asking to speak to him. A voice at the other end regretted that Mr. Bilston had gone out a quarter of an hour earlier. Could any message be taken?

"No, thanks," said Hambledon. "It's not really important. I'll ring again later."

* * * * *

Earlier during this same day, Symes rang up Colemore and asked him to remain indoors within reach of the telephone.

"What, all day?"

"I am sorry," said Symes smoothly. "There is someone whom I want you to meet, but I am not sure yet of the time. That's all."

Anthony immediately jumped to the conclusion that the someone was Our Leader, as Symes meant him to do. A certain degree of enthusiasm seemed to be indicated.

"Oh, ah! Yes, of course I'll wait in. I was going out, but it doesn't matter a bit. Thanks, old chap."

"A pleasure," said Symes, and rang off.

Just before six in the evening, the hotel telephone rang again and the porter called to Colemore, who was sitting in the lounge reading "Lorna Doone."

"Wanted on the 'phone, sir, please."

This time the voice at the other end was Newman's.

"That you, Bilston?"

"Speaking."

"Newman here. I want you to lend me a hand, please. Do you know Moscow Road?"

"Quite near here?" said Colemore. "Yes, of course I do."

"Come to the end nearest you, I am waiting there with the cab."

"I'll come at once. Oh, by the way. I was waiting in for a call from Symes, will that _____"

"That's all right," said Newman with a laugh, and rang off.

When Colemore turned the corner of Moscow Road he saw Newman standing by the taxi. He was smiling as Colemore hurried up, and came a few paces to meet him.

"There's a lady in the cab," he said, and turned back towards it. "She's been taken a bit faint." He opened the door and Colemore looked in. There was indeed, a lady leaning back in the corner.

"Who is she, d'you know?" said Colemore innocently.

There was only the most momentary pause before Newman said, "Why do you ask that?"

“I beg your pardon,” said Anthony hastily. “I thought she was just an ordinary fare, you know, and you wanted me to help you take her home. And it would have been a help to know where she lived, wouldn’t it?”

“So I do,” said the taxi-driver cheerfully. “Hop in with her, will you?”

Colemore obeyed, and the taxi drove off. The glass partition was open between the passengers and the driver; Newman spoke over his shoulder.

“Open the windows, will you? Fresh air’s good for faints.”

Anthony did so at once, though he did not believe the lady had fainted. She wasn’t pale enough, for one thing, and she was breathing much too deeply. The air blowing upon her from the open windows had a good effect almost at once. She began to move, opened her eyes with an effort, shut them again and murmured something.

“She’s coming round,” said Anthony.

“Good,” said Newman. “Don’t hurry her. Tell her to keep quiet and not try to talk, and she’ll be all right.”

He drove through Pembridge Square, turned down Pembridge Gardens, and was waiting to cross Notting Hill when the invalid roused herself again. She opened her eyes wide this time and stared at him.

“You’re all right,” said Colemore. “You fainted, but you’re feeling better now. Just sit still and don’t try to talk. Everything’s all right.”

She looked at him distrustfully, but her eyes closed once more.

The taxi shot across Notting Hill, turned right, and then left down Campden Hill. Left again, into one of the narrow old turnings leading to Silver Street, and stopped outside a public-house. Newman jumped out—he could jump when he liked—opened the door and spoke in Colemore’s ear.

“Take her in there,” he said sharply. “Saloon bar. Sit her in a chair in a corner, buy her a brandy. Tell the barmaid the lady’s been took faint and you’ll just pay off the taxi and come back. Then come out again. Now then, lady! You gets out ’ere,” he went on in a louder voice. “Let the gentleman ’elp you.”

She got out of the taxi and across the pavement much more easily than Colemore had expected; she leaned heavily on his arm but she walked steadily enough. He led her in through the swing-door and found a quiet corner without difficulty; the place had just opened and there were only two or three customers there. They looked round with mild interest.

Anthony went to the bar, said his piece and obtained the brandy; the barmaid was sympathetic.

“Should I fetch the manageress?”

“No, no. She’ll be all right in a minute. I’ll just pay off the taxi and be back.”

He carried the glass across to his patient and said, “Drink this.” She sipped it, made a grimace, and then looked up at him.

“You’re not Captain Vincent.”

“Never mind, you’re all right now. Just a moment,” said Colemore, and made his escape.

Newman was still waiting with the car door ajar. He signed to Colemore to get in and

drove hastily away.

When they had gone some distance Colemore leaned forward and said, "She'll be all right. The barmaid will see to her."

"Did she say anything more?"

"Only said I wasn't Captain Vincent."

Newman began to laugh. "No, you're not Captain Vincent, are you? No." He seemed thoroughly to be enjoying some private joke, and Colemore leaned back in his seat. There always was, he thought, something faintly sinister about this taxi-driver's laughter, jolly as it seemed; on this occasion it sounded more unpleasant than usual.

* * * * *

Bagshott's telephone rang, and Notting Hill Police Station reported that Mrs. Brampton had been found in a public-house near her home. In a turning off Silver Street, to be exact. She had been taken there by a man who bought her some brandy, dashed out again to pay off a taxi—so he said—and did not return. Mrs. Brampton seemed very unwell, so the manageress of the place had called the police. Mrs. Brampton had told them her name, besides, she was wearing an identity disc. The police had summoned a doctor, who had taken her home.

"What's the matter with her?"

Doped, the doctor said. Nothing serious, and she would be perfectly well again after a night's rest.

Bagshott asked the name of the public-house and then rang up Tommy Hambledon.

"Did you get a description of the man who dumped her there?" asked Hambledon.

"No. I didn't wait, besides, I thought you might like to interview the barmaid yourself and get it at first hand."

"I am all for interviewing barmaids," said Tommy. "Let's go now—are you coming?"

"I'll pick you up," said Bagshott, "in three minutes from now."

The police car swept through the streets and Hambledon got his interview. The barmaid was an intelligent and observant woman; when asked to describe the man who had brought in the lady she gave an unmistakable word-picture of Anthony Colemore.

Hambledon and Bagshott looked at each other as the light of understanding dawned upon both at once. They hurriedly thanked the barmaid and returned to their car in haste.

"You've got it, haven't you?" said Hambledon. "She was drugged——"

"So that she wouldn't recognize him if he were Brampton," said Bagshott. "Whereas he——"

"Didn't recognize her, how should he? So now they know he's not Brampton——"

"And the balloon is about to ascend," finished Bagshott, and snapped an order at the police driver which took them back to Whitehall even faster than they had come.

"The next step," said Hambledon, "is to find out what they've done with Colemore. If they haven't murdered him already they'll take him to Willowmore Road, I expect. If so, we raid that house to-night. If they've taken him somewhere else we will discover where, and raid that instead."

“And if they’ve already bumped him off?”

“Then they’ll all be hanged at Pentonville instead of being shot at the Tower,” said Tommy. “Except, of course on Colemore’s account, I don’t really mind which.”

THE MAN WITH THE CLIPPED EAR

NEWMAN kept his taxi in a lock-up garage at the closed end of Willowmore Road. He drove straight there, after Colemore had deposited the lady, and put the cab away, chatting amiably all the time. After which, he and Anthony strolled along the road to number fifty-one together, and a watcher behind the grubby lace curtains of number fifty opposite took up his telephone and reported their arrival to Bagshott's office. When the Chief-Inspector accompanied by Hambleton, returned from Notting Hill, he found a note of the message lying on his desk. He read it and passed it over to Tommy.

"Thank you," said Hambleton, returning it. "The canary is now among the cats."

"'Cry Havock,' " said Bagshott, anticipating him, "'and let loose the dogs of war?'"

"I should like to make sure that Our Leader is there first. Though how are we to make sure of that, without having the remotest idea of what he looks like, is not too clear."

"Unless he's the taxi-driver."

"Yes. But we don't know."

"What do you think the right course to take?" asked Bagshott.

"You've got all your plans cut and dried for raiding the place. Will you tell the men to stand by for immediate action, but not to begin until we give the word?"

Bagshott nodded and rang his bell. A man came in to whom the Chief-Inspector gave certain orders, while Tommy strolled restlessly about the room. When the man had gone out again, Hambleton said, "I don't know quite what I'm waiting for. At least, I do, I want to give 'em time to summon their Leader. But, as we remarked just now, we shan't know when he arrives unless they lose their heads and give the game away somehow. They won't do that. So, unless anything unexpected occurs in the meantime, I think operations might start at ten-thirty, if you agree. It will be dark by then."

"That'll do nicely. It is now just after seven and it will take about an hour to get everything ready. After that, five minutes' notice. But, you know, they'll have plenty of time to annihilate Colemore before that."

"I'm sorry," said Hambleton grimly, "but Our Leader is more important than several Colemores. Besides, if they're going to destroy him out of hand, they've probably done it by now. I'm counting on their waiting or the Leader to approve, or conduct some sort of trial. Or even try to make Colemore talk. They don't know how short their time is."

"Nor does Colemore," said Bagshott, with distaste.

"No. That can't be helped. I should think they will have the Leader there by ten-thirty, unless he's in Glasgow or Plymouth. I've given them four hours."

* * * * *

"I brought you straight along," said Newman, "although it's a bit early. But you can wait in Symes' flat."

“Early?” said Colemore. “What for?”

“Someone wants to see you this evening,” answered Newman, as they turned in at the door of number fifty-one. “We’ll go straight up, I think.” He led the way upstairs, and Colemore followed. At the door, Newman paused to let him enter first, and Symes stood up as they came in.

“Well?” said Symes.

“You were right,” said Newman. “I take back all I said. I also apologize.”

“Ah,” said Symes; it was a sigh of relief as though he had been waiting anxiously for news. Colemore stood between them and looked from one to the other; they both looked at him. For once, it was Symes who laughed; the taxi-driver was not amused, it seemed. A sort of prickle ran up Colemore’s spine and his collar felt tight. This was it, evidently.

“Anything the matter?” he asked easily.

“Yes. At least, you’ll find there is,” said Newman.

“Carry on,” said Anthony, and felt for his cigarettes. At once two automatics appeared and Symes told him to put his hands up.

“Why? I’m not armed. I only want a smoke.”

“Search him, Symes.”

Symes did so, and said, “It’s quite true,” in a surprised voice.

“Now, perhaps, I may get my cigarettes,” said Colemore, in a tone of irritated patience. “After which, perhaps you’ll leave off waving these things at me and explain what you think you’re talking about.” He sat down in Symes’ most comfortable chair, lit a cigarette, and looked at them contemptuously.

Newman sat on a corner of the table, which groaned, and said, “You didn’t recognize the lady.”

“No. Why should I?”

“She was your wife, that’s why.” He laughed.

“Oh, no, she isn’t,” said Colemore. “I’m not married. Never have been.”

“That was Mrs. Brampton,” said Newman.

“Really?” said Colemore in a bored voice, and flicked cigarette-ash on Symes’ carpet, a thing which always annoyed him, for Symes was finically tidy. He left off gloating and snarled instead.

“You’ve been posing as Brampton——” he began.

“Oh, no,” interrupted Colemore, and blew a smoke-ring. “If you will cast your memory back, you’ll find that I never said I was Brampton. More, whenever you attempted to call me that, I corrected you.”

Symes stepped back and levelled his automatic, but Newman intervened and said, “Better not, Symes,” in an undecided voice.

“Much better not,” said Colemore confidently.

“He should die,” said Symes hoarsely.

“That can wait,” said Newman. “In any case, it would have had to wait. He has to be interviewed first, you remember.”

“Who are you?” asked Symes angrily.

“Don’t you know?” asked Colemore sarcastically. “Then what the hell d’you mean by trying to shoot me? You’ll regret that, you mud-brained rabbit.”

“Better lock him up,” said Newman. “Our Leader will decide.”

“Furthermore,” said Colemore, “he may decide what is to be done with two men who made no attempt—till your amateurish effort to-day—to find out who I really am. I’ll give you one piece of advice. If I were you, I’d be civil.”

“When Our Leader comes,” began Symes, but Colemore cut him short.

“We shall have a good deal to say to each other. At least,” he added with emphasis, “I shall have a lot to say to him.” He looked them over with the air of a housewife inspecting dubious fish and deciding against it. “What time do you expect him?”

“About nine o’clock,” said Newman.

“Some time to wait,” said Colemore, and made a long arm for the evening paper lying on the table. “You might tell those people of yours to send me up something to eat. Cold beef and beer will do. Or tongue.” He became immersed in the day’s news, and silence followed.

Eventually Newman broke it. “You’ve probably got plenty to do, Symes, getting ready for to-night. I’ll stay here and—er—keep our guest company.”

Symes hesitated, and moved towards the door. Colemore glanced up to say, “Don’t forget the beer,” and went on reading, though it might have been noticed that he laid the paper on his knee instead of holding it up. If he had done that, it would have shaken like palm-leaves in the south-west Trades, for reaction was upon him. Symes left the room without replying; Newman came round the table and lowered himself with a grunt into the other armchair.

At the end of ten minutes, by which time Anthony had read the same article three times over without taking in a word of it, Newman spoke.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said frankly, “so I’m playing safe. Whether you’re my prisoner or I’m yours, we’re quite comfortable here, aren’t we?”

“Quite,” said Anthony coldly. “I take it that pantomime this afternoon was Symes’ idea?”

“The general scheme was his, I arranged the details I may say, with perfect truth, that I didn’t like the idea. I was completely taken aback when you didn’t recognize——”

“You don’t like Symes, either, do you?”

“No,” said Newman simply, and began to laugh. “His face, when you sat down in that chair, was a picture I’ve been wanting to see for a long time.”

“You’re a nice united set of conspirators, aren’t you?” said Colemore. Newman left off laughing, Anthony found himself a book to read, being careful to turn pages at suitable intervals, and silence fell again until the man Spink came up with a supper tray. It had been laid for two, and Colemore drew up a chair to the table.

“You may as well have yours at the same time,” he remarked, before Newman had time to move.

“Thank you,” said the taxi-driver unwillingly.

Colemore poured himself out a glass of beer and drank a silent toast.

“Here’s to Moral Superiority, and may she last the course!”

It was a little before nine when the door opened and Symes came in with a perfectly expressionless face. He looked at the two men and said, "You are to come down, please."

Colemore got up, stretched himself leisurely and lounged out of the room, Symes leading the way and Newman waddling behind. They went down the two flights of stairs, across the hall and into the kitchen; on the further side of this a door stood open, within it a flight of stairs led downwards.

"Ah," said Colemore. "The castle dungeons."

Symes went on and opened a door at the foot. Inside, there was a small room containing a table with a wireless transmitting set upon it, one chair and a steel filing cabinet. There was a further door on the other side; Symes opened it and said, "Newman and the prisoner, sir."

Within the room beyond, a man sat at a table with his back to them, a slim man with yellow hair and a fair skin reddened by the sun. It occurred to Colemore that this appearance was familiar at almost the same moment that he caught sight of the man's face in a mirror opposite.

It was the callow lieutenant whom he had himself released from the prison camp in Yorkshire. It was von Rohde.

Colemore was so profoundly astonished that he gasped and was horrified to realize that he had done so audibly. He stopped short, snatched out his handkerchief, gasped again more loudly, and produced a quite convincing sneeze. He then blew his nose and was ready to advance upon von Rohde when the German at last rose from his chair and turned round.

Von Rohde looked a good deal older and not at all callow. His large beaky nose was menacing instead of comic, his mouth no longer hung open, and his jaw appeared to have come forward.

Colemore strode into the room and said, "Heil Hitler!" with the authorized gesture; von Rohde replied, and added, "What is your name? Not Brampton, I understand."

"Of course it isn't Brampton," snapped Colemore, "and I should like to hear your excuse for taking four months to find that out."

"Who are you to dare——" began the German, but Colemore did not let him continue.

"I will tell you," he said, in a hectoring tone, "not who I am, because that does not concern you. I will tell you what I am. I am an emissary of the Berlin Office sent to find out what is the matter with your organization here, and I have to start by fishing you—you!—out of a prisoner-of-war camp. I thought I told you to go back to Berlin and report?"

"I don't believe it," said von Rohde stubbornly. "If you had been what you say, you would have had credentials to produce."

"In order that those who search prisoners should find them, I suppose?"

"I have had no confirmatory orders from Berlin."

"No. When you did not return it was decided to let you go on for a time and show what depths of inanity you could attain. For a time, von Rohde, and that time is now up."

"But——"

"I gave you a perfect example of how a total stranger could enter your organization

without effective challenge from any of you. Symes appears to be the only one who had any doubts, though I think his action was dictated rather by jealousy than intelligence.” Colemore lit a cigarette and sat down in von Rohde’s chair. “When I look into matters what do I find? Your so-called explosives expert a neurotic fool who runs round in circles because a policeman looks at him, and gets himself arrested. In an important Naval base like Portsmouth, your principal agent is a semi-illiterate fisherman with insolent manners. Is this the best you can do?”

“If it had not been for me,” said von Rohde with some dignity, “you would have been captured by that country policeman at Picketon. It was, perhaps, as well that I did not leave for Germany that night after all?”

“My good von Rohde! Did you seriously suppose that I was without resource?”

Von Rohde took a turn across the room and back. Colemore flushed by success, overstepped the mark.

“Your orders now,” he said, “are to hand over to me and proceed at once to Germany for an enquiry.” The moment he had said it he could have kicked himself; von Rohde’s jaw came forward and he threw his head back.

“No. I will not do that. I may have done wrong, that is not for me to say. But, as you have yourself pointed out, I know nothing about you and I cannot act without confirmation. As perhaps you know, Herr von Vielenfeldt is in London, and he is, of course, your chief as well as mine. I will ask him to come here and decide the matter. Symes, this gentleman will return to your flat for the present. Newman, you will get out your cab and take a note I shall write to an address I will give you, wait there and bring the Herr to this house.”

So once more Colemore sat in Symes’ best armchair and thought, while Symes sat upright on guard. There was no attempt, like Newman’s, to propitiate him on the part of Symes. Things did not look too good. Whoever this von Vielenfeldt might be, if he were “your Chief and mine” he would not be easily hoaxed. Von Rohde was Our Leader in England, and von Vielenfeldt a sort of visiting inspector, evidently. If only the news could be conveyed to Hambleton——

When von Vielenfeldt arrived in Newman’s cab, he was at once conducted downstairs by Symes, who may be pardoned for thinking that this day had been made on purpose to exalt him and confound his enemies. That fellow Bilston, who wasn’t Brampton, was exposed as a fraud; Newman, who hadn’t believed it, was proved wrong; even the autocratic von Rohde had slipped up in admitting Bilston to their counsels. Von Rohde, after all, had produced the fellow in the first place. Only he, Symes, had felt that there was something wrong and acted upon his instinct. Von Vielenfeldt would see all that and could be trusted to give credit where it was due. Failing von Rohde, and with a black mark against Newman, Symes was the obvious choice to be Leader in England. He knew how things were done, he knew all the ropes—or nearly all—he had worked hard and was due for a reward. What a happy chance that von Vielenfeldt should be in England at such a moment. Symes showed the visitor through the transmitting room into von Rohde’s presence, shut the door after him, and waited happily outside. When Newman came down the cellar stairs a few minutes later, Symes merely looked at him superciliously and did not speak.

An indistinct murmur of voices came from the inner room; no words could be heard but the tone of one voice was peremptory and of the other apologetic. That was as it should be, justice would shortly be done.

Some time later the inner door opened and von Vielenfeldt said, "Bring down the prisoner!" Symes and Newman sprang to attention and obeyed. Colemore was in Symes' flat with Spink on guard. They brought him downstairs, leaving Spink in the hall; this was fortunate, for he was just in time to answer the door to three sailors.

"The prisoner, sir," said Symes, and pushed Colemore into the inner room.

"I want you also," said von Vielenfeldt. "Both of you. Now then, prisoner! Who am I?"

Colemore looked at him and recognized him almost at once. He was a tall man with grey hair, going bald on the top; he had a long thin nose and wore gold-rimmed spectacles. He had an unfamiliar look for a moment because Colemore had never seen him in civilian clothes before, but he had one peculiarity which was finally recognizable. The top of his right ear was missing.

"I don't know your name," said Anthony calmly, "but you're the fellow who interviewed me at the prisoner-of-war camp."

"Correct. I told you then what would happen to you if you played us false, did I not?"

"What makes you think I have?"

"You are not Brampton, although that was the name under which you passed at the camp."

"I am a little tired of this," said Colemore. "I said I was Brampton for my own purposes, you never asked me if it were true. What does it matter what my name is so long as I serve the Reich?"

At this point three sailors knocked at the front door and Spink went to answer it, though no sound of the altercation penetrated to the sound-proof rooms below.

"It does matter. What is your name?"

"Send these fellows out of the room," said Colemore, indicating Symes and Newman, "and I'll tell you."

"You do not give orders here," snapped the German. "Once more, what is your wretched name? Isaacstein, since you are so ashamed of it?"

"No," said Colemore. "I was in prison in England for smuggling just before the war and I broke jail and got away to the Continent. If the English police hear my name, I go back to prison—if they catch me. That is why I keep it secret. That is why I took Brampton's name instead." This was not strictly true, but never mind. If he kept on talking, perhaps some miracle would occur. "Brampton is dead, he was killed near Hazebrouck during the retreat to Dunkirk."

"And when I interviewed you at the camp you said nothing of this. Why?"

"Because I wanted to get out of the camp, of course. You picked on me because you thought I was Brampton. Well, it suited me."

"In Berlin, after leaving the training course at Liesensee, you ran away. Why?"

"Just to show you what I could do," said Colemore. "It was as well I did, wasn't it? The three men you landed in Dorset were all caught at once, I wasn't. If it hadn't been for

me, von Rohde would have been in Canada long ago.”

“Are you trying to make me believe that you knew von Rohde was at that particular prisoner-of-war camp and that you got yourself sent there on purpose to rescue him?”

This was an awkward question; Colemore wished he had never mentioned von Rohde. However, von Vielenfeldt went on without waiting for an answer.

“What is more, the fact is that von Rohde picked on you at that camp, not you upon him. You are a liar, Mister-No-name. You will find it a mistake to lie to us.”

Upstairs, three sailors sat upon the doorstep while Spink telephoned for the fire brigade.

Colemore felt the sweat upon his forehead. One of these days Hambleton would come and clear out this nest, but long before that Anthony Colemore would be unpleasantly dead.

“I didn’t tell you that I went there on purpose to rescue von Rohde,” he said, with the accent on the pronoun. “I was trying to find out if there was any limit to what von Rohde would believe. There doesn’t seem to be. He is a singularly credulous person. I even told him,” said Colemore, with a laugh which sounded to himself like the croak of an asthmatic raven, “that I’d been sent from headquarters in Berlin to find out what was the matter with his rotten organization, and he swallowed that one, too.”

“You may leave von Rohde to me,” said von Vielenfeldt grimly, “with the utmost confidence. You are a very bold young man. It is really a pity you have got to die.”

Spink on the floor of the hall upstairs, was finding how impossible it is to get up when one’s feet are firmly held in the air.

“I still don’t see why you should think it necessary,” said Colemore, judicially. “I think you owe me a lot. Without wishing to blow my own trumpet, I’ve done one or two quite useful things for you, you know. Besides getting von Rohde out by accident or otherwise. Ask Symes.”

“I don’t think I’ll waste time asking Symes,” said the German. “It is a pity you are not reliable, for you are certainly clever. Your verdicts, gentlemen?”

“Death,” said von Rohde; Symes and Newman echoed him.

“Very melodramatic,” said Colemore.

“I agree with the verdict,” said von Vielenfeldt. “Take him away and shoot him. We have wasted enough time over this play-actor.”

Symes and Newman closed in on Colemore and led him back into the transmitting room; the door closed behind them.

“Now, von Rohde. I shall be glad to hear any reasonable excuse for your numerous blunders——”

There came the sound of a shot from the room next door.

“Commendably prompt,” said the man with the clipped ear.

XXIII

OUR LEADER-IN-ENGLAND

HAMBLEDON, with Bagshott, was sitting behind grimy curtains on the first floor of number fifty, opposite. There was little to see, for it was dark at nine-fifteen; not very dark, for the night was filled with stars, but between the high walls of the narrow street little light penetrated. They sat in silence, a remarkable thing where Thomas Elphinstone Hambledon was concerned; Bagshott was just about to say so when the front door of fifty-one opened suddenly and closed again at once. Someone had come out in a hurry, running footsteps were heard; looking out they could see a figure going quickly towards the closed end of the street. It vanished; a moment later another form detached itself from the shadows opposite and came across to report.

“That was Newman, sir, the taxi-driver. He’s in a hurry. Gone to the garage where he keeps his cab.”

“Ah,” said Hambledon comfortably. “That’s better. Now perhaps things will begin to move.”

“Here comes the cab,” said Bagshott, his nose against the window-pane. Dimmed lights and the sound of an engine passed the house, going towards Gray’s Inn Road.

“Not taking anybody away,” said Tommy. “Gone to fetch someone. Very interesting, indeed. I wonder how long he will be away?”

“Order ‘instant readiness’,” said Bagshott, and the man who had just reported saluted and left the room.

“Twenty past nine,” said Hambledon, looking at the luminous dial of his watch.

At five minutes to ten the lights of a taxi turned in from Gray’s Inn Road, came towards the watchers and stopped at the house opposite. A car door shut. A house door shut. Someone had arrived and gone inside. The taxi drove back to its garage; two minutes later Newman came back and also went inside.

Hambledon looked at Bagshott, saying “Right. Let her go,” Bagshott leaned forward and pressed a bell. Then both men left the room.

Willowmore Road was a very quiet street normally, as *culs-de-sac* so frequently are, especially at a time when most of the children had been sent away to the country. It was a dull street, looking at it from the busy thoroughfare at the end; few people came into it unless they had business there. Perhaps that is why Symes and his friends liked it so much. It was, therefore, with a sense of outrage that the inhabitants heard the sound of song approaching, and any who looked out saw three sailors, arm in arm. They tacked down the middle of the road.

*“My Lady of the Lamp-lights,
My own Lily Marlene.”*

Shortly before they reached fifty-one, one of them detached himself, inspected one of the houses by the light of a torch, and said, “No. Only a S.P. card. Thought it was Rooms

to Let.”

“No use looking for a card,” said a tall thin one. “People don’t put out cards. No cardboard.” He walked across to number fifty and hammered the knocker, but got no reply.

“They won’t open,” he said in a pained voice, and his friends told him to come away and not disturb the dead, a remark which made Hambledon giggle. He was ten yards away behind a wall.

The sailors drifted across the road and banged at the door of fifty-one, which opened promptly because its inmates had their own reasons for not wanting disturbances on their doorstep, especially just then.

“We want a bed. Three beds.”

“Sorry,” said Spink. “We’re full right up. Try——”

“Now, listen. We’ve tried lots and lots and lots of places an’ they’re all full up.”

“I tell you, I’m sorry, but——”

“Now look, mister. We won’t be no trouble. We can sleep anywheres. Can’t we, Nobby?”

“That’s right,” answered the tall thin one. “Little ol’ armchair. Kitchen table. Sleep on the rug ’long of pussy.”

“Nice pussy,” said one of the others, and tried to push past Spink, who pushed back and the man sat down on the pavement.

“Look,” said Spink with unusual forbearance, “I’m sorry, I am really, but we’re full right up. You try four doors down, I daresay you’ll get in there.”

“He don’t want us, that’s what,” said Nobby sadly, and dragged up his friend from the pavement. “Come on let’s go.”

They went, and Spink thankfully shut the door. Five minutes later they were back again, and once more Spink answered the door.

“We can’t go there,” they said. “There’s nothing inside the door.”

“Not that bombed ’ouse,” said Spink impatiently. “You went too far. The one on this side. You go and try again.”

But the sailors sat down on the doorstep and began to sing again, and Spink almost tore his hair.

“Please go away,” he said. “We’ve got illness in the ’ouse.”

The tall one called Nobby got up at once and staggered into the road, but the other two remained sitting, and argued.

“What is it? Measles?”

“Look, mister, we aren’t afraid of measles. We’ve had ’em. ’Sides, if we gets measles we’ll get a spell in——”

“Try number fourteen,” said Spink desperately. “I know there’s room there. People left to-day.”

“Can’t see numbers. Too dark.”

There came an angry whisper from behind Spink. “What are you talking to those men for? Send them away.”

Spink sighed with exasperation and began, "Number fourteen, jus' beyond that lamp-post," when he was interrupted by the return of Nobby, walking backwards and tripping occasionally.

"Fire," he said, conversationally.

"No, no," said Spink. "Go——"

"Yes," insisted Nobby. "Nice fire. Quite 'citing." He pointed at the house opposite. "Look upstairs."

Spink looked up and saw to his horror that clouds of smoke were rolling out of the bedroom window inside which a red glare flickered, sank, and flared up again. Bagshott's firework specialist was beginning to enjoy himself. Spink made a leap at the telephone in the office, dialled Exchange, and could be heard shouting, "Fire! Fire station, quick! Fire in Willowmore Road, number fifty——"

The sailors moved back from the steps and sat upon the door-sill itself, thus preventing the door from shutting; they sat three in a row, completely blocking the entrance. When Spink returned from telephoning he asked them quite politely to go away and sit somewhere else because he wanted to shut the door, but they refused. They said they were quite comfortable there and would have a good view of the fire. Also, the steps were cold.

"Goin' to be a real one, ain't it, Nobby? Coo, look at them flames."

"Serve 'em right," said Nobby sourly, "not letting us in."

"You'll 'ave to move," said Spink. "You'll be in the way of the engines."

One of the sailors gave him good advice. "You go all over the 'ouse and take the curtains down, see? Else, the 'eat will break the windows and the sparks'll catch the curtains, an' then this 'ouse'll go too. I know. I seen it in Pompey. That's 'ow the ol' Central went up——"

His voice was drowned by those of his friends who once more burst into song.

*"My brother Jim's a fireman bold
He puts out fires.
He went to a fire last week, I'm told——"*

Spink was nearly frantic. He did not know exactly what was happening in his house that night but he knew it was something important that must be kept quiet, and now all this was happening. In the distance he heard the sound of a loud bell rapidly approaching, the fire-engines already? Surely they were suspiciously prompt? He lost his temper completely.

"Damn you, get off my step!" he yelled, and aimed a furious kick at the sailor in the middle. It did not take effect because the sailor moved at the wrong moment, and a large hand shot back and closed round Spink's ankle. He staggered, lost his balance, and fell with a crash; his other ankle was then similarly captured and held up in the air. The fire-engines arrived and the street appeared to fill with N.F.S. men. A tower on wheels came also, it was wound up till it was higher than the roofs, and a searchlight on top was switched on. Willowmore Road became as light as day. Spink struggled and cursed, and one of the sailors, after a moment's thought, said, "Avast heaving," in a firm voice. A short spare man in a raincoat slipped along the wall to the door, followed by a Chief-

Inspector of police in uniform.

Hambledon nodded to the tall sailor, who let go of Spink's ankles. Spink scrambled to his feet and ran, followed by the sailor, with Hambledon and Bagshott just behind. Spink ran down the cellar steps and half-opened the door; but the sailor, who had suddenly become completely sober, seized upon him and pulled him back. Hambledon went on through the open door, but Spink found himself impelled up the stairs again, through the hall and into the street. Here he attempted to bolt but the sailors closed round him.

"Here," began Spink, but Nobby interrupted him.

"I am Detective-Sergeant Gascoigne of the Special Branch and I am taking you into custody. Now then! Take him away, Warner." One of the other alleged sailors removed him.

More police entered the house; if several of them were in the uniform of the National Fire Service the agitated inhabitants scarcely noticed it, or were disinclined to argue. Joe, the odd-job man, did not answer when spoken to and scuttled obediently into the police van which was waiting outside the door. Mrs. Spink asked where her husband was; when she was told he had been taken into custody, she remarked that she'd always told him it would end up like this and now it had. The police agreed with her and removed her also. The other inmates were scared and furtive men; one evaded his captors and jumped through the kitchen window to land in the area behind with a broken ankle. He left in an ambulance. Another had his bedroom door locked; when the police demanded admittance they heard a sharp crack inside the room before they could burst in the door. When they did so they found that he was beyond the reach of justice. The rest went tamely enough.

Outside, the fire appeared to have come under control with remarkable promptitude, and the firemen did not unroll their hoses. Only the searchlight on the tower continued to illuminate the street and the interested faces at doors and windows. At the Gray's Inn Road end there was a cordon of police keeping back the crowd and telling them to move on, the fire was out and there was nothing to see.

"Then what about the black-out, constable?"

"Black-out?"

"That searchlight. They ought to put it out. It's not safe."

"That'll go out in a minute. Pass along, there, please."

So the house was cleared from the ground-floor to the roof including Symes' flat which had no one in it. The police relaxed and stood about, waiting, the inmates of the "Black Maria" whispered and fidgeted, and the ambulance drove away. But still the searchlight shone down on the street and still the police waited for what was next to come.

In the meantime, von Vielenfeldt was dealing with von Rohde.

"You did not do so badly," he said, "during your early years in England, when you were under surveillance and communications with the Fatherland were easy. When the war came and you were left in control here, what happened? Blunder after blunder. Repeated necessity for consultation and correction, involving dangerous transits to and from the Continent. It is thus, in a sense, your own fault you were captured near Ambleteuse by the Commandos. Your final idiocy—final, von Rohde—was your dealings with the man who called himself Brampton. Now tell me how it was that you did not investigate this man's credentials before you trusted him?"

“With deep respect,” said von Rohde, “it was your Excellency who authorized his employment. At the prison camp I thought him interesting—for one thing, none of us knew him—so I cultivated his acquaintance. We escaped and I arranged for him to be kept in custody until I had communicated with you in Berlin. I received orders to try him out. He proved to be, as your Excellency has just said, exceptionally ready-witted and resourceful. I must point out, I was never instructed to investigate his identity.”

“Is it really necessary,” said von Vielenfeldt, “to teach you the elements of caution? Of course, the instruction to try him out included an enquiry into his bona-fides.”

Von Rohde coloured, for he was justly indignant. The instruction hadn’t included anything of the sort; the fact was that von Vielenfeldt had been just as easily deceived as the rest of them, but would he admit it? No.

“I was certainly not given to understand——” he began.

“I agree with our late friend in at least one point. You are not given to understanding very much, von Rohde. It is a pity for you that the penalty for stupidity is so severe. *Herrgott!* Did you suppose this business was some kind of game——”

“I have the honour,” said von Rohde stiffly, “to resign my commission. I should be glad of your Excellency’s permission to return to Germany and serve as a private in the Wehrmacht, preferably on the Eastern front. Even one so despicably stupid as myself might conceivably——”

“Request refused. You will return to Germany to stand your trial for gross dereliction of duty. I am not sure that it would not be simpler to report your presence here to the British authorities. You will be shot just the same and it will save a lot of trouble.”

A third voice broke in. “I couldn’t possibly agree with you more,” it said, and both men sprang round to see Tommy Hambledon standing in the doorway with Bagshott at his elbow and others behind. “I shouldn’t give any trouble, if I were you,” he went on. “As you so justly remark, you’ll be shot all the same. Only sooner. Von Vielenfeldt, it is a great pleasure to me to find you here. I knew that it was you who had originally interviewed our men, from the description of you which they all gave me. Your ear, particularly, if you don’t mind my mentioning it. I hoped—oh, how I hoped!—that you would come over some time, since you seemed so interested in us. But to stroll in here and find you so soon——”

“At least,” said von Vielenfeldt, “we disposed of your spy before you——”

“The shot you heard?” said Tommy blandly. “Oh no, it was me shooting Symes. You see, I was behind the door when they marched out, all white-faced and resolute. Your taxi-driver was more amenable, I never saw a fat man put his hands up so quickly. Well, well, I mustn’t keep you chatting here, and in such an uncomfortable position too. Bagshott, if these gentlemen were searched for arms, they could then put their hands down and walk upstairs. I think I’ll stay here for a while, it looks as though I might find something to interest me. Don’t wait, Bagshott, I’ll lock up and put the cat out. Send Colemore in to me, will you? Good night, gentlemen.”

Colemore came in, Hambledon looked at him and laughed.

“You’d better sit down a minute, I think,” he said. “You’ve had a trying evening, haven’t you? But what a beautiful ending. Fancy finding von Vielenfeldt here. I feel as though I’d set a mousetrap and caught the Dragon from Drachenfels instead. I tell you

what, Colemore. If I tell this tale properly I don't think you'll hear any more about that little affair at Maidstone Jail."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Fifth Man* by Manning Coles]