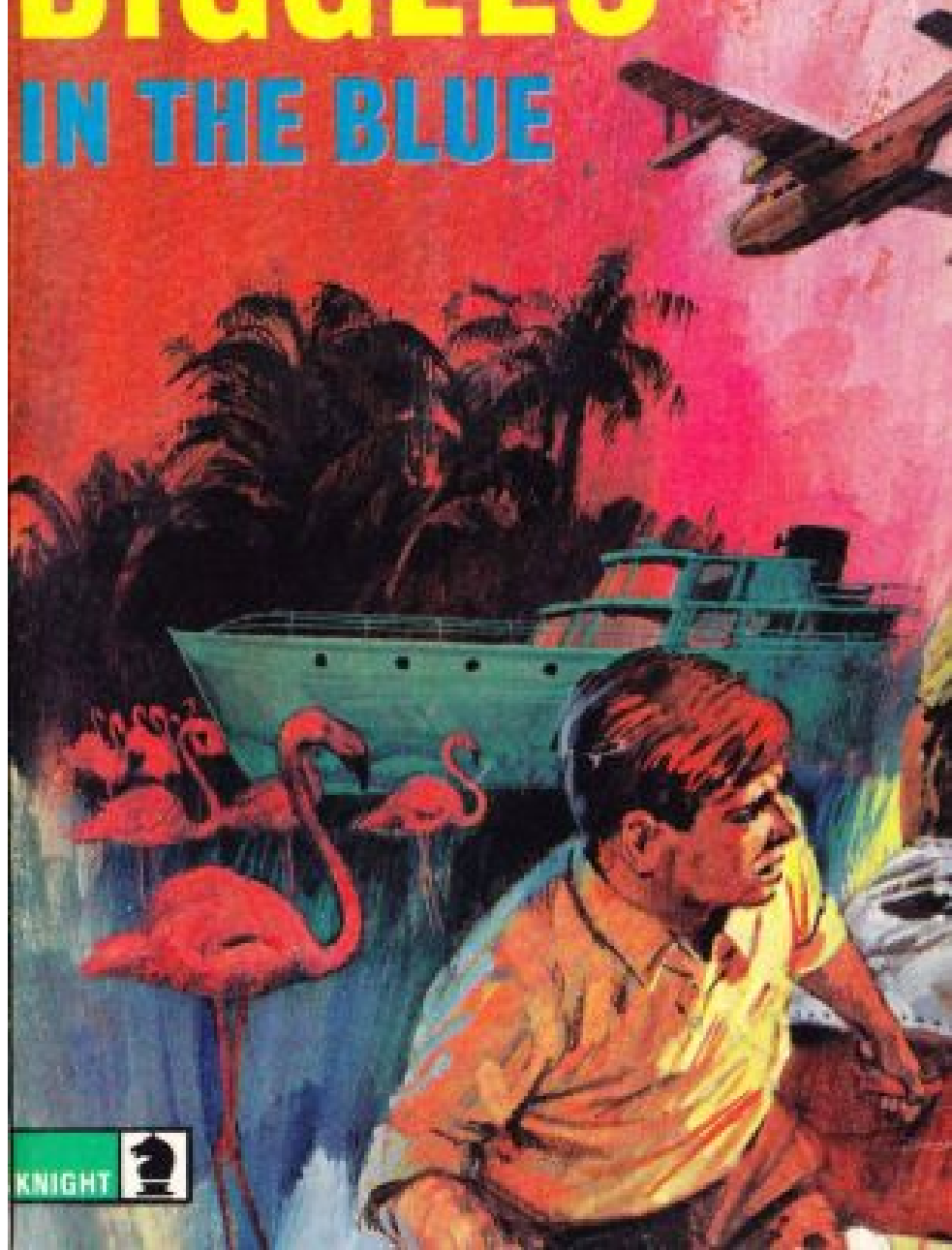


Captain W. E. Johns

BIGGLES

IN THE BLUE



KNIGHT



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CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

**BIGGLES
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BIGGLES IS SURPRISED

‘DID you want to see me, Sir?’

Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Air Section of Scotland Yard, looked up from his desk as his chief operational pilot entered the room and asked the question. A peculiar smile softened his austere features and something like a twinkle appeared in his eyes as he answered: ‘Yes, make yourself comfortable. I have an item of news that I feel sure will interest you.’

Biggles pulled up a chair and reached for a cigarette. ‘Tell me the worst,’ he requested. ‘Nothing would surprise me.’

‘Your old arch-enemy, Erich von Stalhein, is in Jamaica.’

Biggles’s eyebrows lifted a trifle. ‘I was wrong,’ he admitted. ‘That does surprise me. Somehow I have never associated our frigid Prussian friend with palm beaches and blue lagoons.’

‘His purpose in going there has nothing to do with either,’ stated the Air Commodore dryly.

‘I can believe that,’ returned Biggles. ‘How did you know he was there?’

‘Major Charles, of M.I.5, passed me the word.’

‘D’you know what he’s doing in Jamaica?’

‘We’ve a pretty good idea.’

‘That’s comforting, anyway. Tell me about it.’

The Air Commodore settled back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. ‘It’s a queer story, mostly fact, but padded with a certain amount of surmise dropped in to fill the gaps. However, it all ties up pretty well. Do you recall a friend of von Stalhein’s named Werner Wolff?’

Biggles knitted his forehead. ‘Vaguely—a long time ago.’

‘He rarely came into your line of country. He was closely associated with von Stalhein in his early days at the Wilhelmstrasse. Between the wars Wolff left the Intelligence Service for politics, which pay off rather better. During the Hitler régime, he became a sort of liaison officer with the big industrial concerns, mostly naval armaments, and like some of the others he got into the big money by farming out contracts for war material. Unlike the others, though, he didn’t keep all his eggs in a German basket. Nor did he get caught at the finish. He made several trips to the United States before America came into the war and may have feathered a nest there. At least, that’s what we supposed. Maybe he wasn’t so sure that Hitler was going to win the war,

for when it ended he just faded away and was never seen or heard of again; which means that he must have made his plans for escape and retirement with more care than the rest of them. It now seems that through the years since the war, while he was in hiding, he kept in touch with his old friend, von Stalhein.'

'I take it that you've now discovered where this wily fox went to ground?'

The Air Commodore smiled ruefully. 'Yes. For the past eight years he has resided on the outskirts of Kingston, Jamaica, as a respectable Norwegian gentleman named Christen Hagen.'

Biggles grinned. 'Pretty good. How did he manage that?'

'Through foresight, presumably, and being in a position to provide himself with everything he would need to get away with such a performance. Posing as a lone navigator, he turned up at Kingston in a small yacht named the *Vega*, having sailed single-handed across the Atlantic. He had an auxiliary engine to help him. That's what he said on arrival.'

'It could have been true. It has been done, often—and without an engine.'

'His papers and the ship's papers were in order, so he was allowed to land; and having landed, he stayed. Apparently nobody bothered about him afterwards. He was quiet and self-supporting so there was no reason why he shouldn't stay if he wanted to. Anyway, he bought an old place in a secluded quarter with the enchanting name of Rumkeg Haven, in a bay called Tew's Anchorage. Tew, I believe, was a notorious pirate in his day.'

'How was it that nobody recognized Wolff?'

'He had grown a beard during his long trip, and being sunburnt, and in rough sea clothes, he bore little resemblance to the spruce officer of Hitler's staff. He kept his beard, of course, and like many people in the tropics wore dark glasses against sun-glare.'

'The Port Authorities would search his craft. If he had his loot on board, why wasn't it found?'

The Air Commodore shrugged. 'Obviously, he hadn't got it with him. He may have put it ashore somewhere before making his official landing. We've no proof that he came straight to Jamaica.'

'How did all this come to light?' inquired Biggles curiously.

'Werner Wolff, alias Christen Hagen, has just died in Jamaica—from natural causes.'

'How did that reveal his identity?'

'There was found, in his safe, a personal letter of commendation from Hitler, with a signed photograph, which he must have valued so highly that he couldn't bring himself to destroy it. That was his one slip, or weakness; a natural one, perhaps. He had disposed of, or hidden, everything else concerning his past.'

'When did this happen?'

'Just over a fortnight ago.'

‘And what brought von Stalhein into the picture so smartly?’

‘We’re a bit vague about that. He may have seen Hagen’s death reported in the newspapers. He knew who Hagen was, of course. He may have been tipped off by someone else in the know; or he might have gone out on the off-chance of seeing his old colleague. He had a good reason, as I shall presently explain. Be that as it may, Hagen was dead and buried when he arrived. But let us leave that for the moment. Von Stalhein is there. That’s what really concerns us.’

‘But surely, if von Stalhein was aware of Hagen’s death, there would be no point in him going to Jamaica?’

‘On the contrary, his reasons for going would be even more pressing. Hagen dead might be worth more than Hagen alive. To start with, von Stalhein must have known that Hagen had some money tucked away somewhere, probably in American dollars, or something equally easy to negotiate. I mention dollars because a fair-sized wad of them was found in Hagen’s desk, apparently for current use. Incidentally, these notes were in brand new condition although the serial numbers showed them to be ten years old; which could only mean that they had never been in circulation.’

‘They’d been tucked away somewhere?’

‘Exactly. But if money was the only lure, we wouldn’t worry about it. There was something else, something far more important. When Wolff bolted he took with him certain documents we should very much like to see. And so would a lot of other people. Or put it this way. Even if we didn’t want them ourselves, it would be a serious thing for us if other people got hold of them. They were the experimental data and blueprints of secret weapons, up as far as V. 18, which were in hand when the war ended. We knew they existed. As you can imagine, we hunted high and low for them. So did France and America. And so, I need hardly say, did Russia. They were never found. Subsequently, an engineer who had been on Wolff’s staff, under interrogation, told us that the last he saw of them was Wolff packing them in a valise. That was at Kiel, just before Wolff pulled out. At that time, no doubt, he was concerned primarily with preventing them from falling into our hands. We had hoped that by this time they would have been destroyed, or lost beyond recovery; but it now seems that they are still extant.’

‘They weren’t in the safe?’

‘Had they been there, we should have found them. They’re not in Hagen’s house, for it has been searched from floor to roof.’

‘What about the yacht?’

‘They’re not there, either. No. It’s pretty safe to assume that the papers are tucked away with Hagen’s private hoard.’

Biggles grimaced. ‘Not so good.’

‘It’s alarming. Imagine what Russia would give, at this moment, for those drawings!’

‘And if von Stalhein gets them, we know where they’ll go.’

‘He hates us so much for winning the war that he’d rather give them away to an enemy of ours than sell them to us for all the money in the Mint,’ asserted the Air Commodore bitterly.

Biggles nodded. ‘That’s really his trouble,’ he said pensively. ‘He’s made losing the war a personal matter and it warps his better judgment. He goes on playing the lone wolf, hoping to see our turn to take the rap.’

‘Don’t be too generous. You’ve always been the sand in his gear box. He’d kill you if he had the chance.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘I always try to see the other fellow’s point of view. Maybe that’s *my* weakness. But let’s get back to work. Has he any hope of getting his hands on these documents?’

‘That’s what we’d like to know. No doubt he hopes, but he may have no definite information. I’ll tell you why we think that. By one of those queer twists of fate, Hagen was in the act of writing to von Stalhein when he died.’

‘Who got the letter?’

‘We did—fortunately. But let me tell you what happened. It’s the crux of the whole business. Wolff, or Hagen as he was known, lived in a villa on the outskirts of Kingston with one servant, an elderly Negress named Josephine, who was maid-of-all-work. She knows nothing, and hardly comes into the affair. She says that her master had been ill, on and off, for some time before he died. Finding himself getting worse, he called in a doctor named Douglas. Douglas—we’ve spoken to him—says that he had to tell Hagen the truth, which was that he was suffering from thrombosis and might pop off at any time. There was nothing he could do for him. He gave him this disturbing information to give him a chance to put his affairs in order. Hagen must have accepted the advice. He went home, and sitting at his desk, started to write a letter to von Stalhein. It is pretty clear that he intended to tell him where his private papers were hidden, but he didn’t get as far as that. Old Man Death took a hand. The maid found her master sprawled across his desk, dead. She called the doctor. He knew there was no question of suicide or murder, but seeing that there was some good furniture in the house he brought in the police with a view to informing the next-of-kin. The police, not having this information, made a search hoping to find it. The letter from Hitler to Wolff was found, whereupon the authorities acted wisely and promptly. Everything was sealed, a guard put on the house, and M.I.5 informed. Major Charles had one of his best men flown out and he soon got to the bottom of things. The death couldn’t be kept out of the newspapers, but nothing else was released for publication. Hagen was buried in the name by which he had been known. That’s how things stand at the moment.’

‘And then von Stalhein arrived on the scene, eh?’

‘Yes. We weren’t surprised. In fact, we were watching for him. As I told you, Hagen was in the act of writing a letter when he died. It was in German. I have a translation of it here. It tells us something, but not enough. Actually, there were three objects of interest to us on the desk. There was the letter. There was an envelope already addressed, and there was a sketch, probably unfinished, since it means nothing as it is. The envelope was addressed to Herr Ernst Stalling, Hotel Prinz Karl, Zindenplatze, Berlin.’

‘Who was smart enough to associate that address with von Stalhein?’

‘First, there was the resemblance of the name. We knew from you that von Stalhein used the Hotel Prinz Karl^[A]; and if more were needed, Hagen began his letter “Dear Erich”. Confirmation was provided when von Stalhein arrived on the island in the name of Stalling.’

[A] See *Biggles follows on*.

Biggles nodded. ‘Good enough.’

‘I’ll read you the letter,’ went on the Air Commodore. ‘You will spot the points on which our assumptions have been based.’ He picked up a sheet of notepaper. ‘“Dear Erich: It is some time since I wrote to you, but I have not forgotten the promise I once made that should difficulties arise here I would pass to you certain information, knowing that you would use it to the best advantage. You will understand to what I am referring. The time, it seems, has come. My doctor has just informed me that my days are numbered, and death, when it comes, will be sudden. In these melancholy circumstances, I am writing to you what may be my last letter. The papers, etc., are safe, and in . . .”’

The Air Commodore looked up. ‘That’s the lot,’ he said simply. ‘Death chose that moment to strike.’

Biggles drew heavily on his cigarette. ‘A good way to go out,’ he observed. ‘Pity he didn’t finish the letter. And that’s all you know?’

‘Almost. Von Stalhein may know more—or less. It’s plain from the letter that there had been correspondence between the two men, in which case Hagen may have dropped a hint.’

‘There’s also a possibility that towards the end of the war Hagen may have told von Stalhein what he intended to do. Anyway, it wouldn’t be safe to conclude that von Stalhein knows no more than we do. Anything else?’

‘Just now I mentioned a sketch which Hagen may have intended to include in his letter, or incorporate into the text of it. It is, as you will see, a mere outline, with a square dot near it.’

Biggles took the paper and studied it critically. The drawing consisted of an oval, elongated at one end so that it might have represented a pear. There was a dent on one side, and a small square mark occurred just off the pointed end. ‘I don’t think we shall learn much from this,’ was his opinion.

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ answered the Air Commodore.

‘One would have supposed the stuff to be hidden on an island somewhere.’

‘Yes, but not necessarily. Hagen had a yacht, don’t forget. He sometimes used it. Yachting was—or appeared to be—his pastime. We understand that he often made trips, sometimes long ones, always alone. We thought the sketch might represent one of

the small islets or cays with which the Caribbean abounds. If it is, we haven't been able to locate it. That isn't surprising. The archipelago through which Hagen would pass on his way to Jamaica is the Bahamas. It may surprise you to know that in that particular group there are twenty-nine large islands, six hundred and sixty smaller ones and two thousand four hundred islets and cays. Some of them change shape and size according to the tides. Think that over!

'On second thoughts, I'd question the sketch representing an island.'

'Why?'

The last word of Hagen's letter is against it. The word is "in". One doesn't talk of a thing being *in* an island. One says *on* an island.'

'He might have been going to write "in a box", or something, *on* an island.'

'True enough,' conceded Biggles. He looked again at the sketch. 'Is this the original?'

'Yes.'

'That's interesting.'

'In what way?'

'Well, it's made on flimsy stuff—tissue paper in fact.'

'What about it?'

'There must have been a reason for that. One doesn't normally keep tissue paper on a writing-desk. Hagen must have had plenty of ordinary paper handy. Why fetch tissue?'

'Does it matter?'

'It might.'

'Go on.'

'One reason that occurs to me is, Hagen wanted to make a tracing of something, possibly from a map. Ordinary paper, being opaque, would be useless. This stuff is at least semi-transparent. It would serve the purpose I have suggested.'

'Yes,' asserted the Air Commodore. 'You may have something there.'

'If I'm right, the tracing would be made from something in the house. That's all. It was just an idea.' Biggles stubbed his cigarette. 'It boils down to this. Von Stalhein, unaware of the existence of this letter, is already on the job.'

'He is, we may hope, also unaware of the existence of the letter to his friend from Hitler, so he may be under the impression that Hagen's real identity died with him. That would be to our advantage.'

Biggles pondered the matter. 'My guess is, von Stalhein didn't know of Hagen's death until he arrived. He went out hoping to persuade Hagen to hand over the documents, to be used in a war against Britain. Where's he staying, by the way?'

'In an unpretentious boarding-house called the Maison Respiro.'

'Papers in order?'

'Perfect.'

Biggles smiled. 'They would be. He would make no mistake about that. What is he supposed to be doing in Jamaica?'

'Acting as a salesman for Rhine wines. He has samples.'

'Could he obtain permission to enter Hagen's house?'

'No.'

'He'll try to get in.'

'Of course he will. That's why a caretaker is still on duty—officially pending the disposal of the furniture. We shall, I expect, take it over. Apart from the fact that there is no known next-of-kin, Wolff was on our list of wanted war criminals.'

'What about the black servant?'

'She's no longer in the house. She wouldn't stay after what happened.' The Air Commodore smiled. 'She's afraid there might be a bogeyman on the prowl.'

'And, by thunder, she might be right at that,' contended Biggles. 'Von Stalhein comes near to being one, anyway. But tell me: apart from the native servant, was no one ever in the house? I mean, in all the time he was there, didn't Hagen make any friends, acquaintances who might be able to throw light on his movements?'

'According to old Josephine, no. The only man with whom he seems to have got on a reasonably friendly footing was his nearest neighbour, a retired British naval commander named Evans. The houses are about five minutes' walk from each other. There's only a hedge between the two estates, so it was natural that the two men should get on speaking terms. Evans knows nothing. He says he might have been in Hagen's house half a dozen times all told. Hagen was in his place perhaps two or three times. The conversation seems seldom to have got beyond natural history, that being Evans's chief interest in life. Apparently he is writing a book on the birds of the West Indies.'

'He never accompanied Hagen on one of his yachting trips, I take it?'

'No. He says he sometimes wondered why, he being a sailor, Hagen never asked him to go with him; but he didn't.'

'And he still doesn't know Hagen's real name?'

'No.'

Biggles eyed the Commodore thoughtfully. 'Wolff had a nerve, planting himself on a British island.'

'That was really rather clever of him. No doubt he worked it out that we shouldn't search our own territory. But, then, he had plenty of time to make his plans, and facilities for providing himself with false papers.'

Biggles took another cigarette and tapped it pensively on his thumbnail. 'Von Stalhein, obviously looking for the same thing as we are, is likely to be a nuisance. Have you considered picking him up on a technical offence and putting him where he can't get into mischief?'

The Air Commodore shrugged. 'I suppose we could do that. Major Charles was of opinion that it was better to let him run loose until we're certain that he knows nothing definite. If he does find a clue he may lead us to the documents.'

‘He’s more likely to disappear under your noses.’

‘He couldn’t leave the island without us knowing.’

‘I wouldn’t bet on that,’ averred Biggles grimly. ‘He’s a crafty bird. He was trained in the right school. Besides, we don’t know what plans he made before he started. He may have taken his friends in Eastern Europe into his confidence in order to get assistance, financial or otherwise.’

‘We can watch him.’

Biggles smiled sceptically. ‘He’d know he was being watched in five minutes. He’s had years of experience and knows every trick in the game.’

‘He may be unaware that we have established Hagen’s identity, and that may make him careless.’

‘If he sees me, it won’t take him long to put two and two together and get the right answer. By the way, I’m assuming that the object of this little chat is an invitation to me to go and look for Hagen’s box of tricks?’

‘Quite right. But get the thing clear. We want these plans, not so much for our own use as to prevent them from falling into the hands of a potential enemy. If they were at the bottom of the sea, it wouldn’t matter. It’s the fact that they exist that’s worrying us. Burn them, do anything you like with them, rather than have anyone else get hold of them. While they’re floating about loose, we’re sitting on the brink of a volcano.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I understand. The sooner I get mobile the better. May I have these documents for further study?’

‘You may. From the air you should be able to check the sketch with the islands in the vicinity.’

Biggles folded the papers and put them in his wallet. ‘There’s a lot of ground—or rather, water—to cover.’ He got up. ‘I’ll take my crew out and see what we can make of it. I seem to spend my life looking for needles in haystacks.’

‘That’s because you so often find the needle,’ rejoined the Air Commodore soberly. ‘I’ll get the necessary authority prepared for you and warn Jamaica that you’re on your way. I take it you’d like everything handed over to you?’

‘Please, including the keys to the house and the safe. I’d like to have a look at things inside before I start scanning the horizon for pear-shaped islands.’

‘I’ll see to it.’

‘Then I’ll get along.’

Leaving the room, Biggles made his way back to his own office, to face the expectant gaze of Air Constables Algy Lacey, Bertie Lissie and “Ginger” Hepplethwaite.

‘Well, and where do we go from here?’ asked Ginger.

‘To the West Indies,’ answered Biggles, briefly.

Bertie flicked up his eyeglass and caught it in his eye. ‘Goody-goody,’ he murmured approvingly. ‘Where the jolly old bananas come from. That’s me, every time.’

‘Don’t flatter your appetite,’ Biggles told him seriously. ‘This is no fruity frolic. Erich von Stalhein is already off the mark. If he gets what he’s after, there’s liable to be a considerable explosion in which Western Europe will go up in a cloud of smoke and come down in a shower of dust.’

Bertie looked startled. ‘Here, I say, old boy, there’s no future in that.’

‘I hoped you’d see it that way,’ returned Biggles. ‘Now let’s get down to work.’ He took the sketch from his wallet and laid it on the table. ‘This is what we’ve got to find. The only man who knew what it represented is dead. Look hard and get the shape fixed on your minds, so that you’ll recognize it again if you see it.’

RUMKEG HAVEN

A WEEK after the conversation in the Air Commodore's office, Ginger, standing beside Biggles, was regarding with mild astonishment the flamboyant uniforms of the band of the Royal West India Regiment as it made music against a background of palms, lawns and deck-chairs, near the swimming-pool at Kingston, Jamaica. Although the hot season was well advanced, there were quite a few people about, holiday-makers and tourists, to give the place an air of gaiety, some swimming, some sun-bathing, others at small tables having mid-morning coffee or a cocktail.

Algy and Bertie were not there. They had remained in charge of the aircraft selected for the operation, a twin-engined Otter amphibian that had found a mooring in Columbus Bay, where an unobtrusive hotel was available for accommodation. The main airport at Palisadoes, where every Central American Air Line seems to cross, was too busy and altogether too public for their purpose, Biggles had decided. Taking Ginger with him in a hired car he had gone to the Capital to present his credentials to the Chief of Police, who was expecting him, and at the same time inquire if there had been any developments in the case on hand.

This formality had produced little of interest. Von Stalhein, it appeared, was still there, spending most of his time, it was said, bathing or sitting about in the gardens near the bandstand. It seemed to Ginger that the authorities had not quite grasped the seriousness of the man's presence, although he made allowance for the fact that they were not fully informed about his character or his purpose there. Nor did he overlook the possibility that von Stalhein's behaviour was calculated deliberately to produce a lack of interest in his movements.

For the rest, they learned that a daily caretaker, a coloured man, was still on duty at Hagen's house, Rumkeg Haven. He had the keys. Nothing had been moved. The yacht *Vega* was still lying in the harbour.

Biggles said they would take over. He collected the keys of Hagen's safe and that was that. The authorities were content, Ginger thought, to have the responsibility taken off their hands.

The case had by this time been discussed by Biggles and his assistants from every angle; but at the finish, with so little on which to work, the immediate plan was simple. First, Biggles decided, they would make a thorough search of Hagen's property for something more definite, something more in the nature of a clue; for he was convinced that their most important asset, the sketch, was a tracing that had been made from a map, a chart, a photograph, or an original drawing that should be somewhere in the house. If this search produced no result, they would have to fall back on the long and

tedious task of making a reconnaissance of the surrounding seas for something that conformed to the shape of the sketch.

However, for the moment they were making a tour of the area in which von Stalhein was normally to be found at that hour, to confirm that he was there, before going on to Hagen's house to collect the keys from the caretaker and make a preliminary survey of the place.

As a matter of detail, Biggles had remarked that he thought it odd that von Stalhein should fritter away his time round the swimming-pool when he had work to do. He was not that sort of man. What was his object? What was he waiting for? What could he hope to gain from this? There was, Biggles opined, something queer about it.

Ginger had thought on the same lines, and said he could only assume that von Stalhein, supposing Hagen's real identity had not been discovered, was in no hurry. He might be waiting for the caretaker to be withdrawn from the house. He might even be contemplating buying, or hiring, the establishment, and living there. He would then be able to search the whole property from end to end unmolested.

Biggles agreed that these were possibilities, but not convincing ones. They were not in accord with von Stalhein's usual methods. 'But for the fact that he usually works alone, I'd be inclined to think he was waiting for someone to join him,' he concluded.

'Well, there he is, anyway,' announced Ginger. 'Over there by the pool, in the long chair, wearing a bath-robe. That long cigarette-holder, and the monocle, would give him away in a crowd.'

Biggles's eyes found the subject of their conversation. 'Been bathing, apparently,' he observed. 'From the way he's wrapped himself up, he's no intention of getting sunburnt. He doesn't look like moving yet. Okay. That's all I wanted to know. There's no point in hanging around here any longer, so we'll press on and give Hagen's place the once over.'

They returned to their car, and a drive of some ten minutes or so took them to their next objective.

'My word! Hagen was no fool when he chose this spot for a hide-out,' remarked Biggles admiringly, as he cruised quietly to a standstill and surveyed the dazzling scene that a turn of the road had brought into view.

'Tew, the pirate, wasn't a bad judge either, if this was in fact where he dropped his anchor,' contributed Ginger, his eyes absorbing the picture. 'Talk about gorgeous technicalour!'

The anchorage, although small, was, he thought, the last word in tropic extravagance. Under a sky incredibly blue, turquoise undulations of water surged in to caress a crescent of glistening sands. At one point there was a rampart of coral on which tiny waves exploded in showers of diamonds before falling back in hissing sweeps of foamy lace. Behind the beach crowded coconut palms and sea-grape trees with leaves the size of plates. Behind, again, the land rose sharply under a cloak of colourful vegetation that included giant ferns, bougainvillea, jasmine and hibiscus. Over all hung the drowsy hum of insects.

‘Almost too good to be true, isn’t it?’ murmured Biggles whimsically, as he got out and walked towards a gate that promised a house beyond.

It turned out to be the wrong one—for there were only two—presumably the home of the retired naval officer, Evans; but a hundred yards beyond, the words Rumkeg Haven, in faded paint on a sagging gate, told them that they had arrived at their destination.

A mossy drive, bounded by an overgrown garden in which mangoes, bananas and yams fought a losing battle with a jungle of weeds, gave access to a house of fair size, and from the style of its architecture, of some age. In most of the windows the blinds were down. All was silent.

Ginger looked expectantly for the caretaker, but he was not in sight, although the front door stood ajar. They went on to it. Biggles pushed it open. They stepped inside, and stopped.

The coloured caretaker was in the hall. He did not rise to greet them or demand their business, the simple reason being that he was sprawled in an armchair, and from his stertorous breathing, fast asleep. From a cigarette that had fallen from his drooping fingers to the carpet, a spiral of blue smoke still coiled upwards.

Biggles glanced at Ginger, smiling sadly at this flagrant dereliction of duty, and touched the man gently on the shoulder.

He did not move.

Biggles shook him.

Still the man made no response.

Biggles’s expression of easy tolerance changed abruptly. Frowning, he put a finger to the black eyelid and raised it, to reveal the iris half rolled back. The muscles of Biggles’s face stiffened. Stooping swiftly, he picked up the half-smoked cigarette and raised it to his nose. He flicked it out of the open door and laid a finger on his lips for silence, while his eyes explored the doors that led off the hall—as did Ginger, who did not need to be told what Biggles suspected.

There were three doors, one on either side, and another, of lesser importance, at the far end, obviously leading to the rear of the house. All were shut. But as they stood there in listening attitudes there came a slight sound from the room on their right, which happened to be the one nearest to them. Biggles tiptoed to it, and dropping on one knee put an eye to the keyhole. A shake of the head told Ginger that this attempt to see into the room had failed, presumably because the key was in the lock on the other side. The caretaker was still snoring.

Biggles’s hand closed over the old-fashioned china door-knob. With infinite care he turned it. The door yielded to his pressure. Slowly, and, as it seemed, without making a sound, it swung open. But there must have been a slight noise, or perhaps a draught, for a man who had been bending over a desk at the far end of the room spun round, so that they all stood face to face.

For perhaps five brittle seconds nobody moved or spoke. Shock froze lips and muscles, and it must have been the same at both ends of the room.

Indeed, Ginger could hardly believe his eyes, for the man was he, who, twenty minutes earlier, he would have sworn was wrapped in a bath-robe at the bathing-pool. They had travelled fast in a car and it had not stopped on the way. How the apparent miracle had been achieved he could not imagine, but there was no possibility of a mistake. The man in front of them, tight-lipped, staring with half-closed, calculating eyes, was Erich von Stalhein, one time Nazi secret agent, now a free-lance operative with headquarters behind the Iron Curtain.

Slowly, but perceptibly, as the initial shock subsided, the tension relaxed.

Biggles was the first to speak. 'I'm sorry to see you've sunk as low as house-breaking, von Stalhein,' he said evenly.

'You jump to conclusions,' answered von Stalhein suavely. 'I am here on legitimate business.'

'That must be a novel experience for you,' returned Biggles coldly. 'It would be interesting to know the sort of business you would regard as legitimate.'

'There is no secret about that,' averred von Stalhein. 'I am at the moment concerned with the marketing of an excellent Rhine wine. I have some samples with me.' He indicated an attaché case that stood just inside the door. 'Would you care to try a half-bottle? I can recommend it.'

'Not at the moment, thanks,' replied Biggles. 'Do you usually start by doping the servants of your prospective customers?'

Von Stalhein shrugged. 'I came here inquiring for Mr Hagen. I was given to understand that he lived here. It is true that in the course of conversation I gave the man in the hall a cigarette. But how was I to know that he suffered from a weak head? He should not have accepted it.'

'It would need a strong head to stand up to your brand of smoking material, I'll warrant,' said Biggles grimly.

'A matter of opinion,' came back from Stalhein, casually. 'Since Mr Hagen seems to be away, and our views on the quality of nicotine differ, and you are not interested in wine, there would appear to be no point in pursuing this conversation. I must confess that I was surprised to see you walk in,' he admitted, picking up his case of samples.

To Ginger's surprise, Biggles made no attempt to stop him. He did no more than follow him to the front door. On the top step von Stalhein turned, and for a moment a cynical smile softened his austere features. 'Our meeting here today was a happy coincidence,' he murmured. 'Otherwise I might not have known that you were on the island. That, you will agree, would have been a pity. If you change your mind about the wine, let me know.'

'Are you thinking of staying here for some time, then?' inquired Biggles.

'It's hard to say,' replied von Stalhein thoughtfully. 'It depends on how well my business goes . . . the wine business, I mean.'

'Of course.'

'What about you, Bigglesworth? Are you thinking of staying on?'

‘As a matter of fact,’ answered Biggles slowly, his eyes on von Stalhein’s face, ‘I’m thinking of taking up residence here.’

‘In this house?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know, I was thinking of doing that myself,’ returned von Stalhein. ‘It’s a delightful spot.’

‘The name, certainly, would have been appropriate for a wine-merchant,’ agreed Biggles.

Von Stalhein shook his head. ‘I never touch rum. Beastly stuff. By the way, be careful if you decide to live here. They say there are snakes in the garden.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Snakes don’t worry me. I can deal with them. After all, I’ve had a lot of experience—as you know.’

‘I believe it is a fact that even the best snake-charmers usually die of snake bite at the finish,’ said von Stalhein softly. ‘I merely mentioned the danger in passing. But I must be getting along. Good-day, gentlemen.’ He turned about and strode away.

Biggles watched him out of sight with a curious expression on his face.

‘Are you letting him get away with this?’ inquired Ginger indignantly.

‘What can I do? We knew he was on the island, so from that angle the position hasn’t changed. I’m sorry he’s seen us. It puts a different complexion on the thing. Remember, he had no reason to suppose that Hagen’s true identity had even been suspected. No doubt he expected to be allowed to do his job in his own time without any hurry. Seeing us here has altered all that. It can only mean one thing—that British Intelligence knows the truth. It must have shaken him to the roots when we walked in, for up to that moment it couldn’t have occurred to him that we were on the job. Now he knows, and he’ll act accordingly. I’m sorry about it, because in effect it means that he’s scored the first point, as you might say. Now he must be wondering, and wondering hard, how much we know.’

‘That cuts two ways, too,’ muttered Ginger. ‘Bearing in mind that correspondence passed between him and Hagen, we can do a bit of wondering about how much *he* knows.’

‘We shall learn that in due course, no doubt.’

‘Why not scotch his antics right away? You could charge him with doping and house-breaking. He might have got what we know he came here for.’

‘I don’t think so,’ answered Biggles. ‘He couldn’t have had time. Had he found anything he wouldn’t be hanging about. I’d say he was only in the room for a minute or two. That doped cigarette was only half-smoked.’

‘And so you’re going to let him go?’

‘Even if we went for him, we might find it difficult to prove a charge. He would say that he called to sell wine. He found the caretaker asleep, so he waited. That’s what he would say and it would sound reasonable. He didn’t hurt the caretaker. As far as we know he hasn’t taken anything. No. Von Stalhein saw how I was fixed as well as I could see it myself. He as good as said so. No doubt he’s a bit worried now he knows

we're here, and annoyed that we disturbed him just as he was getting busy. But we have this consolation. I'm pretty certain he hasn't got what he came to Jamaica to find, or he'd be away by now. It's doubtful if he has a clue. It was in the hope of finding one that he came to this house.'

'But how on earth did he get here so quickly? No car passed us on the road and he couldn't have got here any other way.'

'That's what took the wind out of my bellows when I saw him standing there,' admitted Biggles. 'There's only one answer to that conundrum. The man we saw at the pool wasn't von Stalhein.'

'If it wasn't, I'll eat my hat.'

'You'd better get ready for a long chew.'

'But two men so much alike! That would be a fantastic coincidence.'

'I don't think coincidence comes into it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that the man at the pool was a stooge planted there by von Stalhein. The trick succeeded. It took us in—and the police, who von Stalhein must have suspected were watching him. Erich wanted to get on with his job. He couldn't very well do that while he was under surveillance. So he planted a decoy. Quite simple.'

'It's a bit hard to believe that he could find here a man sufficiently like him to impersonate him.'

'It's very hard to believe. That's why I don't believe it. It's my guess that he brought the man with him. After all, the resemblance need not have been very close. The man at the pool was well wrapped up, as we remarked, in a bath-robe. It was the eyeglass and long cigarette-holder that fooled us.'

'If he brought one confederate with him he might have brought two or three,' muttered Ginger.

'True enough. With strangers in the game we shall have to watch how we go—particularly after that backchat about snakes in the garden.'

'Was that a threat?'

'Undoubtedly.'

'Was he speaking literally?'

'I wouldn't know, but I should hardly think so.'

'Are there poisonous snakes in Jamaica?'

'I'm not sure about that, although there is certainly a deadly serpent on some of the West Indian islands called the fer-de-lance.'

'I'd like to be more sure about it,' said Ginger. 'If there's one thing that scares me, it's snakes.'

'Forget about them for the moment. Let's go and have a closer look at this stooge at the pool before von Stalhein can make contact with him, so that we'll know him next

time. At least, we should be able to confirm if he is what I suspect him to be. This place can wait. Von Stalhein isn't likely to come back today. Let's go.'

There was a brief delay, however, for at this juncture the caretaker yawned, stretched, and looking somewhat dazed, got unsteadily to his feet. He started as his eyes fell on Biggles and Ginger standing there looking at him. 'What you men want here?' he demanded thickly.

Biggles wasted no time in argument. 'We're police officers,' he said curtly. 'We want the keys. Then you can go home. What do you mean by going to sleep?'

'Me? Sleep suh!' The black looked shocked. 'No *suh*.'

'Never mind. Give me the keys and run along.'

'If dat's what you say, suh.' The man handed over the keys, and still half asleep stumbled away.

Biggles locked the house and pocketed the keys, after which they walked quickly to the car and returned to the bathing-pool. Ginger kept a look-out for von Stalhein on the way, but seeing nothing of him decided that he must have taken the path that skirted the seashore. The car parked, they walked on to where they had seen von Stalhein's double. He was still in the same chair, still in a bath-wrap, reading a newspaper.

'That in itself is suspicious,' said Biggles, as they strolled towards him. 'It's getting on for lunch-time, and as you see, most people have got their clothes on.'

As they drew near, Ginger perceived that the resemblance to von Stalhein was not so pronounced as he had thought, and it was clear that the monocle and long cigarette-holder, such as von Stalhein habitually used, had been largely responsible for the deception. But still, apart from that there was just a sufficient likeness, both of face and figure, to support Biggles's contention that the imitation was deliberate, not accidental. The man in the chair was a trifle more heavily built, and somewhat flatter in the face.

As they passed close to him, as if aware of Ginger's scrutiny, he looked up, and their eyes met; and there was a quality, a sort of cold-blooded absence of expression, in those of the man, that sent a chill down Ginger's spine. As he presently described it to Biggles, it was like looking at the eyes of an octopus. 'I'd hate to fall foul of him on a dark night,' he stated.

'Or at any other time,' said Biggles quietly.

He did not stop. He went on a little way to where a white waiter was wiping a table that had just been abandoned. He indicated the man in the bath-wrap. 'D'you happen to know the name of that gentleman?' he inquired.

The waiter looked and shook his head. 'Sorry sir, no,' he answered, in a voice that had a frank cockney ring. 'He only turned up here lately. I've served him with a drink once or twice, but I don't know him from Adam. Foreigner, by the way he talks. He's got some queer pals, I know that much. There's one of them coming now.'

Queer was understatement, thought Ginger, as he regarded the new arrival, who had said something in passing to the man they were watching and was answered by a curt nod. He was coloured; not quite the ebony black of a full-blooded negro, but the deep chocolate brown of a mixed breed, mostly negro. There was nothing remarkable about

that. It was his get-up that fascinated Ginger—beautifully-pressed lilac trousers tapered almost to a point at the ankles, and a square-shouldered, wasp-waisted jacket with long lapels that ended in a single large button. A broad-rimmed hat, snapped down in front, covered his head. A flaunting red tie decorated with dice, and a large gold pin, completed an outfit that would have been ridiculous had not the man, who was tall and slim, walked with the smooth grace of a panther.

‘Who’s that astonishing piece of work?’ Biggles asked the waiter.

‘Napoleon Morgan—at least that’s what he says,’ answered the waiter cynically.

‘By thunder! He certainly chose a name while he was at it,’ said Biggles.

‘Nappy Morgan, they call him; but I reckon you’d be smart to catch *him* napping,’ went on the waiter, grinning at his own joke. ‘He’s well known here. Too well known. One of the high-lights of the Communist Party. Always stirring up trouble. That’s easier than working. Can’t think why they don’t push him back to Trinidad, where, so they say, he was a big noise in the Saga Boys.’

‘What are the Saga Boys?’ inquired Ginger curiously.

‘Spivs, smart guys and razor-slashers, mostly,’ replied the waiter. ‘This particular specimen lives in the Dunghill.’

‘That’s a pretty address,’ murmured Biggles, smiling.

‘It’s the slums down by the railway yard, and a good place for a white man to keep away from,’ concluded the waiter, moving off to serve a customer.

Biggles found a shady seat under some palms. ‘We’ll sit here for a bit and see what else happens,’ he decided. ‘Von Stalhein seems to be flying with some strange birds. That fellow over there,’ he indicated the original object of their visit, ‘is a Slav from Eastern Europe, judging from his flat face and high cheekbones.’

What happened next was not unexpected. About a quarter of an hour later von Stalhein arrived on the scene. He went straight to the man in the bath gown, said something to him and strode on. The unknown man at once got up and disappeared in the direction of the dressing-cabins.

‘That, I think, answers our questions,’ said Biggles drily. ‘Friend Erich is not alone here. Which of these two is the boss remains to be seen.’

‘Is there likely to be any doubt about that?’ asked Ginger, with a trace of surprise in his voice.

‘Plenty of doubt,’ replied Biggles. ‘People who draw their pay packet from behind the Iron Curtain can’t do as they like. They do as they are told—and there are people to see that they do just that. But come on. It’s lunch-time. Let’s go somewhere and tear a chop. Then we’ll go back to Rumkeg Haven and see what there is to see there.’

AN EGG MAKES A MYSTERY

TWO hours later, having satisfied their appetites and discussed the events of the morning, Biggles and Ginger were again at Rumkeg Haven. The atmosphere of any large, unoccupied house is usually one of brooding melancholy, and this one, Ginger found, was no exception. Moreover, in view of what had happened there, and in the absence of any other sound, the silent rooms seemed to convey an air of secrecy, so that any sort of noise was magnified and became an intrusion. Wherefore they moved about quietly. Conversation was carried on in low tones.

Having gone over the house to make themselves familiar with the general lay-out of the place, they returned to the room in which von Stalhein had been disturbed. This was an automatic choice, for, furnished both as a sitting-room and as a study, it was obviously the place where the ex-Nazi had spent most of his time.

Ginger had no delusions about the magnitude of the task they had set themselves. If Hagen's secret, or the clue to its whereabouts, was hidden somewhere in the structure of the house, as it might be, then short of taking the house to pieces it was likely to remain undiscovered. Their one hope, as Biggles had remarked earlier, was that Hagen's death, coming suddenly as it did, had in some way left exposed something which in the ordinary way he would have kept concealed. This, of course, had actually happened in the case of the unfinished letter. But this alone was not enough. Something more definite was needed to put them on the track. And in a way that no amount of imagination could have foreseen, this was provided. Hagen had left something, although even he could hardly have imagined the curious link it was to form in his affairs.

A tour of the house, a long, low, rambling, two-storied building, largely of wooden construction, yielded nothing sensational. It was clearly a bachelor establishment. From the fact that only a few of the rooms were furnished it was plain that Hagen did not expect, or intend to encourage, visitors. In the matter of bedrooms, the one that had obviously been his own was comfortable enough. One other was furnished, simply, as if for a servant. On the ground floor some trouble and expense had been taken to make the two large reception rooms really attractive. One was the dining-room; the other was just such a mixture of sitting-room, study and library, as might have been expected. The furniture everywhere was massive, old-fashioned mahogany. Outstanding in the living-room, facing tall french windows that gave access to the garden, was a ponderous Georgian writing-table, also of mahogany, with many drawers. It must have been in the equally heavy chair that served it that Hagen had died, reflected Ginger morbidly. A small modern steel safe stood near it. The walls supported a few pictures, depicting

local scenery, and two large maps: one of the world and the other of the Caribbean, including the West Indian islands. For the rest, a miscellaneous collection of ornaments, instruments, and sundry utility objects, stood wherever room could be found for them. On the mantelpiece, flanking a brass-faced clock, was an assortment of sea shells, and, somewhat oddly Ginger thought, a large white egg. Two powerful sea-fishing rods, with their out-size reels, stood in a corner. So much was revealed at first glance.

‘Well, let’s make a start,’ said Biggles, walking over to the safe.

‘If we knew what we were looking for it would be something,’ remarked Ginger lugubriously.

To narrate in detail the investigations of the next hour would be pointless, for only one item of the slightest interest came to light. Biggles went through the safe, but it contained only a signed photograph of Hitler, some account books and loose money. He went through the drawers of the writing-table one by one, examining each item before replacing it as he had found it. Actually, there was very little in them other than stationery and miscellaneous trifles such as a petrol lighter, a fountain pen, paper fasteners and the like. However, in one he found a folded sheet of tissue paper from which a piece had been cut. The piece on which the sketch had been made, which Biggles took from his pocket, fitted exactly.

‘Unfortunately that tells us nothing,’ he said. ‘It merely confirms what we had already supposed.’

The many books were a problem. They covered a number of subjects, and to go through every one would obviously be a long and wearying process. There was an atlas, and on it Biggles spent some time, scrutinizing it for marks such as a navigator might make. The same with the maps on the walls. Biggles even took them down and held them up to the light in the hope of finding pin-holes made by compasses or dividers. This again was without result. The smallness of the scale ruled out any possibility of the tracing having been made from the features shown on them.

Ginger wandered about, picking things up and putting them down again, either for something to do or perhaps seeking inspiration. Several times his eyes went to the egg on the mantelpiece. At last he picked it up. ‘What’s this, and what’s it doing here, anyway?’ he inquired.

Biggles came over. ‘It looks to me uncommonly like an egg,’ he observed with mild sarcasm.

‘I’d already worked that out,’ replied Ginger. ‘What did he want it for, I wonder?’

‘The usual object of bringing an egg into a house is to eat it,’ stated Biggles.

‘In which case you take it to the kitchen. I didn’t notice any chickens in the garden.’

‘It’s too big for a chicken’s egg.’

‘I’ve heard of double-yolked ones.’

‘Not as big as that, I think.’

Ginger held the egg in the palm of his hand. It was about three times the size of a hen’s egg and of a peculiar chalky white. ‘This doesn’t belong here,’ he declared. ‘Yet Hagen must have had some purpose in bringing it here. What was it?’

‘Maybe he was going to start collecting eggs.’

‘In which case he would have blown out the contents.’ Ginger weighed the egg in his hand, then shook it. ‘This hasn’t been here long,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it isn’t addled.’ He replaced it on the mantelpiece. ‘When I was a kid I used to collect eggs myself,’ he confessed. ‘But I never saw one like that.’

‘There are probably a lot of eggs you haven’t seen,’ Biggles told him casually, going back to the table and examining it critically.

‘What are you doing now?’ asked Ginger.

‘I’m wondering if there’s a secret drawer in this thing. Desks of this period often had a secret compartment.’

‘If it could be found as easily as that there wouldn’t be much of a secret about it.’

‘True enough,’ conceded Biggles. ‘Assuming there is one, Hagen obviously didn’t put much faith in it or he wouldn’t have bought a safe—although, of course, a safe is protection in case of fire. It’s reasonable to suppose that anything Hagen valued particularly, such as the letter from Hitler, he would put in the safe.’ He looked around, somewhat helplessly. ‘I’m afraid we’ve taken on something. Where do we go next?’

Ginger shrugged. ‘Don’t ask me.’

‘If you’d get a bright idea occasionally, instead of fiddling about with birds’ eggs, you’d be some use to me,’ said Biggles.

‘What about calling on the bloke next door—the naval type, Evans? He might be able to tell us something.’

‘He’s already been interviewed. He knows nothing of Hagen’s private affairs.’

Ginger raised a shoulder. ‘Okay. It was just an idea. But I can see this. It’s all very well to sit at home and talk about searching a house this size; but when you get on the spot it’s a different cup of tea. At the rate we’re going we’re likely to be here for weeks. Hadn’t I better let Algy and Bertie know that they can settle down for a nice long rest—either that or let them go exploring on their own account.’

Biggles lit a cigarette. ‘You’re quite right,’ he said shortly. ‘This searching business isn’t in our line. It’s too slow. But it seemed the obvious thing to do. Let’s go and have a word with Commander Evans. There’s just a chance that he may let something drop.’ He locked the safe.

A few minutes later a black manservant was showing them into the sitting-room of the retired naval officer, an elderly but virile, jovial-looking man who greeted them cordially.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked.

Ginger looked about in some astonishment until he remembered the man’s hobby, for the place was more like a natural history museum than a room in a private house. From every wall stuffed birds of many sizes and colours gazed at the visitors with glassy eyes.

‘We’re special investigators from London inquiring into the estate of the late Mr Hagen, who lived next door,’ explained Biggles. ‘There’s a question of the inheritance to the property.’

‘So I understand.’ Evans smiled, at the same time looking a trifle puzzled. ‘How many of you are there on this job?’ he asked.

Biggles looked slightly taken aback. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘I’ve already had a man here making the same inquiries. Frankly, he did not impress me very favourably.’

‘Would you mind describing him?’

‘Not at all.’

Ginger was not very surprised when Evans gave a fair description of von Stalhein.

‘I can only tell you what I told him,’ went on the naval officer. ‘Although we had several conversations, some of them long ones, I never really got to know Hagen. He was friendly enough in a way, but you couldn’t get inside him, so to speak. Retiring sort of fellow. Not that I was anxious to strike up too close a friendship, which might have interfered with my own particular study, which, as you can see, is ornithology.’ Evans indicated the walls of the room. ‘Hagen never told me anything about himself,’ he went on. ‘If he had any relations he never mentioned them to me. Naturally, I wouldn’t raise the subject. No reason to. Indeed, my interest in him may have been inspired by selfish motives, for he was sometimes able to help me with my hobby.’

‘In what way?’ asked Biggles.

Evans, like most enthusiastic collectors, was only too willing to talk about the subject nearest his heart. ‘He brought me information about birds, their haunts, movements and migrations. In fact, he collected one or two specimens for me when he was off cruising. He had a small yacht.’

‘So I believe.’

‘Actually, he didn’t use it a lot, when he did decide to go for a trip he must have gone a fair distance, for he was away some time.’

Biggles nodded.

‘His death was in the nature of a personal tragedy for me,’ continued Evans sadly.

‘Really? How was that?’ prompted Biggles quietly.

Evans threw them a sort of sheepish smile. ‘I shouldn’t really tell you this because it’s almost a confession of law-breaking. Nothing very serious. I console my conscience by pleading justification. You see, there once existed all over the West Indies that most wonderful and spectacular of birds *Phoenicopteriba ruber*.’ He laughed at the expression on Ginger’s face. ‘It is more commonly known as the scarlet flamingo,’ he explained. ‘Now, by ruthless hunting for its plumage, and the eggs, which the natives eat, its numbers have so diminished that there are only two colonies left—possibly three. There are certainly two, both in the Bahamas. One is on the island of Inagua, and the other on Andros, which is far away to the north. The birds are now protected by law. Indeed, under pressure from bird-watching societies in England and America the government has appointed a guardian to keep an eye on the nests. That was some time ago.’ Evans made a gesture. ‘Whether the man is still on Inagua, I don’t know. Nobody seems to know. Of course, it is seldom that anyone goes there. As an ardent collector I was naturally very anxious to have an egg for my museum. Hagen kindly offered to get

me one, and also some snapshots of the birds, on their nest, at the same time. The nests are very curious. They are really turrets of mud raised above the shallow water of the lagoons. An egg is laid on the top of each turret.'

Biggles raised his eyebrows. 'Was Hagen going to get you this egg from Inagua?'

'No. He said he knew of another, smaller colony, on an uninhabited island. Now, of course, I shall never get an egg, or any photographs.'

'What is the egg like?' asked Biggles.

'It's about three times the size of a hen's egg, with a chalky white shell.'

'Very interesting,' answered Biggles smoothly. 'Do you by any chance know the name of the island on which this secondary colony is located?'

'No. Hagen never told me. I had a feeling that for some reason of his own he wanted it kept a secret. But I fancy it must be near Inagua, the birds obviously being an offshoot from the main body.'

'What sort of ground do these birds choose for their nesting-place?'

'They build on the mud flats far out in the lagoons, no doubt as a precautionary measure against their enemies. Actually, this is very foolish of them, because after heavy rains, when the water rises, the nests are often inundated and the eggs lost. True, the birds seem to know the risk, for as I told you, they make piles of mud and lay their eggs on top. But that doesn't always save them.'

'I see,' said Biggles slowly, catching Ginger's eye. 'Have you been into Hagen's house lately?' he asked Evans.

'No. Not for some time.'

'Then you must be unaware that Hagen got the egg for you.'

'I hadn't seen him for some time when I was shocked to learn of his death. In some ways he was a strange man.' Evans started as if he suddenly realized what Biggles had said. 'Did you say he'd *got* the egg?' he almost shouted.

'I imagine so,' replied Biggles smiling. 'At least, there's an egg, just as you've described, on the mantelpiece.'

'Wonderful! Wonderful!' cried Evans. 'May I have it?'

'Certainly, as far as I'm concerned,' Biggles told him. 'It has no intrinsic value, I suppose; and if, as you say, the eggs are hard to come by, this specimen might as well go into a good collection. There's no point in wasting it.'

'When can I have it?' asked Evans, as excited as a schoolboy.

'Well, as a matter of fact, I've just locked the house, and didn't intend going back today. But I'll tell you what. May I leave the keys with you? That would suit me very well because it would save me carrying them about and they would always be available should I want them. You could then fetch the egg at any time. It's in the study, on the mantelpiece.'

'Certainly, I'll take care of the keys for you,' promised Evans readily. 'Keep an eye on the place, too, if you like.'

‘Capital,’ acknowledged Biggles, handing over the keys. ‘We’ve some way to go so we’ll be getting along.’

‘When will you be back?’ asked Evans, as he walked with them towards the door.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Biggles. ‘I haven’t made up my mind about that. Thank you for your co-operation. Oh, and by the way; if that other fellow should come back asking more questions—the foreigner you mentioned—send him packing. He’s an imposter, trying to pull off something on his own account.’ Biggles hesitated as if a thought had struck him. ‘Did you by any chance say anything to him about the flamingos?’

Evans puckered his forehead in an effort to remember. ‘I don’t think so. Yes, the birds were mentioned. The fellow asked me if I knew where Hagen went in his yacht. I said I didn’t know, but I have a vague recollection of saying that I wished I did know, on account of the flamingos that were there. Something of that sort.’

‘Ah!’ breathed Biggles.

On the threshold he stopped. ‘One last question, to satisfy my young friend here. Do you happen to have any snakes about here?’

‘Snakes!’ Evans looked surprised, and slightly amused. ‘Good lord, no. At any rate I’ve never seen one. There’s an exceptionally nasty reptile on some of the islands, though, the fer-de-lance. It’s particularly bad on Trinidad, and I know it occurs on Martinique, St. Lucia and Tobago, where the workers in the sugar plantations go in terror of it—and no wonder.’

‘Queer name, fer-de-lance,’ put in Ginger.

‘It gets its name from its triangular or lance-shaped head. Also, I believe, it comes at you like a lance. The brutes are about six feet long, greyish-brown in colour, with dark cross-bands edged with yellowish-green. But why did you ask about it?’

‘I just wondered,’ murmured Biggles vaguely.

Evans laughed. ‘I don’t think you need worry about them. Good-bye for the present. Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.’

Commander Evans was evidently unaware that, although in 1940 there was a colony of about 10,000 flamingos on Andros, by 1952 it had vanished, the loss being due chiefly to local people taking the eggs and young. A Society for the Preservation of the Flamingo in the Bahamas has recently been formed, and Wardens appointed. According to the Fauna Preservation Society there are now (1953) about 7,500 flamingos on Inagua.

EVANS WAS WRONG

THE heat was fast going out of the sun and the shades of evening were dimming the brilliance of the scene as Biggles and Ginger slowly made their way back to the car.

‘I think it was a sound idea, leaving the keys with Evans,’ opined Biggles. ‘Any of us may want them at any time and they’ll be on the spot.’

‘What about von Stalhein having the nerve to call upon him?’

‘Yes. I wasn’t prepared for that, although it might have been expected. I’m not very happy about it, either. I mean, Evans mentioning those birds, which seem to be an obsession with him. Hagen said he would get an egg and some photos. We know he got the egg. If he got the one, he would almost certainly get the other, because to get the egg he would have to go to the breeding ground, anyway. Yet where are the photos? I didn’t see them. I didn’t see a camera if it comes to that. Hagen must have had one or he wouldn’t have offered to take a photograph.’

‘You think von Stalhein might have got the photos—and the camera?’

‘It rather looks like that. If he has got them he knows what we know. He may know more. Photos of nests would show a background beyond, a part of the landscape, and that might easily reveal the identity of the island. But there’s nothing we can do about that now.’

‘We could ask Evans if he knows where Hagen usually took his photographs to be developed, and then ask the photographer if he has developed any flamingo pictures.’

‘That’s a possibility. We’ll bear it in mind,’ replied Biggles.

They reached the car and took their seats; but Biggles did not drive off at once. Deep in thought he wound the window down and lit a cigarette. ‘We haven’t done too badly,’ he observed. ‘At least we now have something to work on.’

‘And my egg came into the picture after all,’ reminded Ginger.

‘It did,’ conceded Biggles. ‘Amazing how things work out, isn’t it? Little did Hagen imagine that having an ornithologist for a neighbour was likely to lead to the exposure of what he had been at such pains to conceal. He’d turn in his grave if he knew that he had been given away by a bird’s egg—of all things. For unless I’m unduly optimistic, that egg is going to narrow our search, and maybe in the end lead us to what we’re here to find. I see it like this; Hagen wouldn’t go out of his way to collect that egg. He wouldn’t have known where to find it had he not seen the flamingo colony, which means that he must have landed on the island where the birds have settled. Why did he land there? One guess should be enough. It wasn’t merely to stretch his legs, you may be sure. You notice that he didn’t give the name of the island to Evans. Why not? I

think I know. He didn't want anyone to know he'd been there. Nor did he want bird watchers prowling about the place. Anyway, before I do anything else I'm going to find this flamingo island and check up for a feature that conforms to the shape of the sketch. When we find that we shan't be far from the things we're looking for.'

'Evans spoke of two main islands.'

'Inagua and Andros. We can forget them. Andros is hundreds of miles away. There are a lot of people on it, so it would hardly suit Hagen's purpose. I don't know about Inagua. It's this secondary colony that we've got to find. According to Evans, and he should know, the new breeding ground can't be far from the old one on Inagua. That shrinks our search to a comparatively small area. We'll get back to Columbus Bay and cast an eye over our maps. Then maybe, we'll do a spot of flying for a close look. We'll press on, I think, before it gets dark.'

'You think it safe to leave the house with no one in it?'

'I think so. Von Stalhein may suppose that we've taken up residence there, as I hinted. Anyway, we shall have to risk it. To ask the police to put a guard on the place again might start people asking questions. We can't be in two places at once and I'm anxious to follow up this flamingo clue. If that fails we shall have to come back to the house and try something else.'

Biggles was reaching for the starter when from somewhere near at hand the solemn hush of evening was shattered by a scream so full of terror that Ginger's muscles went taut. Biggles gave him one startled look and was out of the door in a flash. 'Come on!' he snapped, and dashed up Evans's drive.

'It wasn't there! It was over here!' shouted Ginger, pointing at Rumkeg Haven. He'd been sitting on that side of the car.

Biggles retraced his steps and together they raced up the road to Hagen's house. Nearing it, Biggles pulled up short. 'Hark!'

From close at hand came groans.

'I didn't leave that window open,' rapped out Biggles, pointing at the french window that opened into the garden.

With Ginger at his heels he made a rush for it. He took the three stone steps leading up at a bound, crossed the threshold, and then, with a brittle 'Look out!' twisted sideways so abruptly that he crashed into a chair and sent it flying. Only collision with the wall prevented him from going down himself. Recovering, he snatched one of the short fishing rods and lashed at something on the ground.

By this time Ginger was in the room and he saw at once what Biggles had seen. Skidding to a stop, he, too, jumped sideways.

The next few minutes were a pandemonium in the nature of a nightmare that he is not likely to forget easily.

Evans lay huddled on the floor, one knee drawn up, one arm over his face. Coiled beside him, a swaying, triangular-shaped head turned menacingly towards the newcomers, was a snake, brown with dark markings edged with greenish-yellow.

To get near the man on the floor without being bitten by the snake was obviously impossible, and it was to deal with the situation that Biggles had grabbed the first weapon within reach—the fishing-rod. And it was not a bad instrument for the purpose to which he now put it. He aimed a smashing blow at the reptile, and he did, in fact, hit it, but not hard enough to put it out of action, due to the top of the rod snapping off short. What was left in his hand was shorter and therefore handier, and he raised it to strike again. However, before the blow could fall, the snake showed its resentment of such treatment by lunging at Ginger at a speed that shocked him, and sent him vaulting on the writing-table. The snake, hissing like escaping steam, shot under a big armchair, a position in which it could not of course be struck.

‘You’d better stay where you are,’ Biggles told Ginger grimly, and then tried to poke the snake from its retreat. In this he succeeded only too well. The snake shot out straight towards him, and in an instant was too close for him to get in an effective blow. Whereupon he, too, had to seek safety in flight. The snake struck at him, but he sprang sideways and then jumped on a chair; and from that elevated position he tried without success to get in a telling stroke. The difficulty was to hit the snake without hitting Evans. In his desperate efforts Biggles finally overturned the chair. He flung it at the writhing reptile and then jumped on another.

So far Ginger had done nothing but stare at this alarming contest. Now, seeing that the affair was going badly, he decided to take a hand. A second fishing-rod stood in a corner. He made a long jump for it, seized it, and whirling round made a stroke at the snake which, had it succeeded, would have broken its back. Unfortunately the point of the rod caught in a hanging lamp. There was a resounding crash and glass flew in all directions. The blow, its force gone, struck the reptile harmlessly across the tail, and merely seemed to drive it into a fury in which it tore about giving neither him nor Biggles a chance to end the matter. Finally the creature shot under the sofa and remained there. The result of this was a pause in which the only sounds were the heavy breathing of Biggles and Ginger as they stared at the place where the snake had disappeared.

‘I can see its head,’ panted Ginger.

‘Then heave something at it and let’s make an end of this madhouse,’ rasped Biggles. ‘Evans is likely to die while we’re fooling about like this.’

Ginger picked up a brass candlestick and threw it. It missed. But it was a close miss and achieved its object. Out came the snake. Biggles bashed at it in passing but failed to hit it. Ginger made a swipe from a bad angle that did no more than sweep the reptile across the floor to the open window, through which it promptly squirmed to disappear in the jungle of weeds.

‘All right, let it go,’ muttered Biggles irritably.

‘I’m not likely to go after it,’ returned Ginger warmly. ‘Mind there isn’t another.’

‘We’ll risk that,’ answered Biggles, dropping on his knees beside Evans, who appeared to be unconscious.

Ginger joined him. ‘It looks as if he’s had it,’ he observed.

‘Knife. Give me your knife, quick!’ snapped Biggles, examining the prostrate man with feverish speed. He pulled up the legs of his trousers. ‘Here we are.’ He took the penknife which Ginger handed to him, blade open, and swiftly made two incisions, one across the other. ‘Try to find some brandy or whisky,’ he ordered, and then began sucking the wound he had made, spitting out the venom thus extracted.

Ginger found a decanter in the dining-room.

‘Try to get a little through his lips,’ said Biggles, carrying on with what he was doing.

‘What about a doctor?’ asked Ginger, as he stooped to comply.

‘No use. There’s no phone here. By the time a doctor got here it would be too late. We can do better ourselves for the moment. If we can get him moving he’s got a chance.’

Not without difficulty Ginger got some of the spirit through the pallid lips, spilling plenty in the process. Biggles enlarged the wound so that the poisoned blood ran freely. The leg was beginning to swell. Then he dragged Evans into a sitting position and shook him. ‘Evans!’ he cried. ‘Wake up. Do you hear me? Wake up.’

Evans gasped and rolled his eyes. Biggles struck him a smart blow. ‘Get up! Our only chance is to keep him moving,’ he told Ginger in a swift aside.

Evans made an effort to rise.

‘That’s better,’ said Biggles, trying to get the stricken man on to his feet. Then, to Ginger: ‘Okay. Dash into the town and get a doctor and an ambulance. I’ll keep him going.’

Ginger went off at the double, tore into the town, and by great good fortune spotted a military ambulance. He told the corporal driver what had happened. The N.C.O. said he would see to it, whereupon Ginger dashed back to Rumkeg Haven to find the position unchanged. Ten minutes later an ambulance pulled up outside and a service medical officer hurried in. They watched him inject a shot of serum.

‘We’ll get him to hospital,’ said the doctor. ‘Lucky you were about. You did well. He’s got a chance.’

The sick man was put on a stretcher and carried out. The ambulance departed, and Biggles and Ginger were left alone in the fast-falling twilight.

‘What you might call a hectic finish to what promised to be a dull day,’ observed Biggles, mopping his face.

‘That snake was no accident,’ declared Ginger in a hard voice. ‘It was a fer-de-lance. I recognized it from Evans’s description. I understood him to say that the snake wasn’t a native of Jamaica, which means that it must have been planted here.’

‘I don’t think there’s much doubt about that,’ assented Biggles.

‘By von Stalhein.’

‘He may have known about it, but I can’t think that he did the actual job. Snakes are not his line of country, and it’s hard to see how he could have got hold of one so quickly, even if he had wanted one. Yet I admit it’s queer that he should have warned us

of snakes. The implication is that he knew someone who had the snake, someone who wouldn't be above slipping it our way.'

'Then it looks as if we might have been watched.'

'Whoever put that snake here must have gambled that we'd come back some time. He didn't reckon on anyone else going in.'

'How did he get the thing in the house?'

Biggles pointed to one of the lower panes in the glass door that opened on the garden. It was broken. 'That, I fancy, is how it was done. That glass wasn't broken when we first came here—or if it was I didn't notice it. By thunder! They didn't waste any time. Well, we know what to expect.' He pointed to where the egg lay smashed on the floor, its yolk a horrible sickly red. 'That did us a good turn although it may have cost Evans his life. If he lives we'll get him another.'

'He came here to fetch it, I suppose.'

'Of course. He could hardly wait to see it, poor chap.' Biggles indicated the keys still hanging from the garden door. 'He came into the house that way. It was nearer than going round to the front door. The brute was here and it went for him.'

'And now it's somewhere in the garden.'

'Which means that I, for one, shall give the garden a wide berth,' asserted Biggles, closing the french window, locking it on the outside and putting the keys in his pocket. 'That seems to be all,' he concluded. 'Let's push along. The others will be wondering what's happened to us. Keep your eyes skinned for that creeping horror.'

Keeping to the middle of the drive, with a watchful eye for the snake, they went back to the car.

Shortly after they had started, as they cruised down the road, a figure came in sight walking with a swinging stride in the same direction. It was a tall negro with peg-top trousers and a slim-waisted jacket.

Ginger recognized him at once. 'By gosh!' he breathed. 'Look who's here. Napoleon, the Communist from the Dunghill, the pal of von Stalhein's pal.'

Biggles's lips came together in a hard line. 'The Saga Boy from Trinidad—Trinidad, where snakes are common.'

'So *he's* the skunk who did it,' grated Ginger.

'It might be coincidence, of course, but I don't trust coincidences.'

As they passed the man he turned his head in their direction and gave them a flashing smile, at the same time sweeping off his hat in a salute so exaggerated that it was obviously intended to be insolent.

Biggles drove on. 'I hope one day to put a different expression on that rascal's face,' he said quietly.

STUMPED!

THE morning following the drama at Rumkeg Haven saw the Otter in the air, heading on a course north-west under a blue sky, over a sea even more blue, for the nearest known haunt of the scarlet flamingos: Inagua, the second largest island of the great Bahama archipelago, and, incidentally, the one nearest to Jamaica. Even so, by taking the famous Windward Passage between the foreign islands of Cuba and Haiti it still meant a run of about three hundred miles.

Maps and Admiralty charts had yielded a certain amount of information, but nothing particularly exciting. There were, it was ascertained, two Inaguas: Great Inagua and Little Inagua, the last named being a small piece of land lying off the most northerly point of the larger island. Being in the Bahamas both were British. Andros, the other known habitat of the flamingos, lay many hundreds of miles away to the north, and could, Biggles decided, be ruled out, since it was considered unlikely that Hagen would deviate so far from his course on his escape route from Europe to Jamaica. Nor would he subsequently be likely to choose a cache so far from his home.

Great Inagua, it turned out, was an island of some size, embracing nearly eight hundred square miles, much of which, however, comprised an immense land-locked central lagoon around which the island had been fashioned, so to speak. This lagoon was the home of the fiery flamingos. It was learned that the island once held a fairly large black population, but over the years this had shrunk to a mere handful of old people who for the most part dwelt in a ramshackle settlement known as Mathew Town. There was nothing on the island for the men to do, so new generations went away. Ships seldom called. In a word, the island was practically abandoned, and was now much in the same state as it was when the first explorers arrived from Europe.

Spread out on the Atlantic side of the island for hundreds of miles was the multitude of islands, islets, cays and reefs, that formed the archipelago known as the Bahamas. Through these, Wolff, the escaping Nazi, must have passed on his way to Jamaica; and somewhere he must have stopped to hide those things which would have betrayed him had they been discovered by the Port Authorities when he arrived at Jamaica. Assuming that he would enter the Caribbean Sea through the Windward Passage, over which the Otter was now flying, he would pass close to Inagua. There was no dearth of hiding-places. As the Air Commodore had said, the sea was bestrewn with islands of all shapes and sizes; and it was evident that without something definite on which to work the task of finding Hagen's cache would be hopeless from the outset. By the merest chance they now held a clue, a slender one admittedly, but it was infinitely better than nothing at all.

There were a few craft dotted about, but mostly small and seldom far from land. Far to the north a liner was steaming at speed for the Windward Passage, leaving a long white wake behind her. Southward, a rakish craft was almost stationary; but it must have been moving faster than was apparent, for the next time Ginger looked it was no longer there.

Before starting Biggles had rung up the hospital to get the latest news of Evans. They were all relieved to hear that he had passed a comfortable night, and while he might expect to be a sick man for some time, he was now thought to be out of danger.

Biggles did not, of course, hope to achieve anything conclusive on his first trip to Inagua. It was more in the nature of a reconnaissance, to make a broad survey of the area, to establish, if possible, the particular island on which the flamingos had started a second colony. He did not rule out the possibility of there being two or three such colonies, unknown to Hagen, which would complicate matters. Apart from the birds, therefore, close watch was to be kept for any physical feature, islet or lagoon, that bore a resemblance to the outline depicted on the sketch. The difficulty was, there was no scale shown, so the drawing might represent something with an over-all area of anything from yards to miles.

By ten o'clock the rugged hills of Cuba and Haiti, with their white shore-lines of surf, had dropped away astern, and the flat mass of Great Inagua, shaped like a horn with a large hole punched through it—the lagoon—lay ahead. As they drew near, and Biggles dropped off some altitude, Ginger, who was sitting next to him in the cockpit, regarded it first with curiosity and then with disappointment; for it was far from being the picturesque tropic isle of popular imagination. Still, it was a rarely-visited island in a tropic sea, and all islands, coral islands, desert islands or treasure islands, sandy, palm-clad or rocky, hold a fascination of their own. Ginger would have agreed with the man who once described an island as 'a body of land surrounded by mystery and romance'. Certain it is that a report of wealth on a continent never excites the same interest as the same thing found on a remote island. Inagua, or one of its neighbours, might hold a treasure of even greater importance to civilization than gold, pondered Ginger as they drew near. That was what they were there to investigate.

The first view damped his enthusiasm. There was no riot of luxuriant vegetation, no mysterious mountains or secret rivers. The whole place looked as flat as a slate, and the colour of one, except where patches of white showed the salt pans that provided some of the inhabitants with a livelihood. Naturally, there was nothing wanting in the matter of beaches, or reefs, on which the ocean rollers dashed themselves to pieces. For mile after mile the beaches stretched, the pure white sand fringing the pale turquoise water of the shallows.

The line of demarcation where the water inside the reef met the open sea was remarkable. There was no gradual merging of colour. The shallows along the shore varied slightly between the palest turquoise and green, but outside the reefs there was an abrupt change to an intense ultramarine blue which could only mean great depth. Looking at the Admiralty chart on his knees Ginger noted with awe that the depths were marked in thousands of feet; so he knew that far under the blue was a world of everlasting night. Yet from this lonely floor rose up, erect like a colossal mushroom, the

slab of land that the scarlet flamingos had chosen for their home. The world was a strange place, he pondered, impressed by this solemn thought.

Behind the beach, filling a great part of the island was the immense lagoon, limpid, lifeless and desolate, with two or three smaller ones clustering round one end like offspring round a parent. The vegetation on the land was sparse, and appeared to be mostly colourless scrub and palmettos. There were some wind-torn, weary-looking palms, but these mostly occurred near the coast, obviously having germinated from nuts cast up by the waves. At one point on the coast there was a compact jungle of mangroves, also, no doubt, introduced by the sea. Apart from these there were only a few trees, mostly isolated. Some sombre blots later turned out to be that remarkable growth, the banyan, which, by dropping aerial roots from its branches, turned itself into a close-knit forest that covered an acre or more of ground.

From the angle from which they approached there was no sign of human habitation. Mathew Town, as Ginger saw from his chart, lay at the extreme western end of the island. As Biggles had made his landfall about the middle it could not be seen. According to Admiralty Sailing Directions there was, or used to be, another settlement at a place called Man-o'-War Bay. But he could not pick out the grey background. The general picture of desolation was not improved by the wreck of a schooner that lay half-buried in the sand just beyond the reach of the waves which at some time in the past had cast it there.

Ginger's eyes, exploring the far rim of the lagoon, stopped suddenly at a curious pink fringe.

'Flamingos,' said Biggles, who had evidently spotted the colony.

Flamingos they were, and in numbers beyond Ginger's expectation. Apparently they did not like the aircraft, for as it roared towards them they rose in a mass to provide one of the most unforgettable natural spectacles that he had ever seen. There must have been hundreds of birds in the pack. At first they kept together, surging up like a scarlet flood into the blue sky; then they broke off into long skeins, so that suddenly the air was full of weaving streaks of fire, and Biggles had to move fast to keep clear. For a little while there was some risk of collision. In a voice shrill with admiration Ginger called to Bertie and Algy, who were in the cabin, to make sure that they had not missed this incredible sight.

Apparently they were looking, for Algy answered: 'It's out of this world.'

'And I must be out of my mind to scatter the whole colony like that,' muttered Biggles. 'I wasn't expecting them to be so wild. Obviously, not many aircraft come this way.'

The Otter continued to climb in circles while some of the birds returned to their nesting ground and others faded into the blue. Little Inagua came into view just off the tip of the parent island. Beyond it, and to left and right, a bewildering array of surf-washed islets of all shapes and sizes made a pattern like a broken jigsaw puzzle thrown carelessly on the blue sea. With the chart on his knees Ginger tried to pick them out by name—Providencialis, Ambergris Cay, Turk's Island, Castle Island, and so on indefinitely.

On several islands birds were standing in the shallows, but Biggles said he thought they did not nest there. They were members of the main colony which through his carelessness he had disturbed. This was soon seen to be true, for before long the birds were taking off and drifting back to Inagua.

Ginger said little, but for the first time the full magnitude of the task they had set themselves was brought home to him. To search all those scraps of land was out of the question. None of them, as far as he could see, bore the slightest resemblance to the sketch which he had memorized. Nor was there a lake, a lagoon, a wood, or anything else of the right shape. Not normally pessimistic, he became convinced that short of further evidence they were doomed to failure.

For another hour Biggles flew round, and in that time a wide expanse of ocean was covered. 'Do you see anything?' he once asked Ginger.

'Nothing,' answered Ginger, in a hopeless sort of voice.

'If there's a colony in this region, apart from the one on Inagua, I don't know where it is,' stated Biggles. 'None of these odd birds we see about could be called a colony, by which I mean a nesting ground. There was no doubt about the one on Inagua, and you saw how the birds behaved. We've seen nothing like that since, even in a small way.'

'If the worst comes to the worst we shall have to land at some of these islands and see if there are any nests,' suggested Ginger without enthusiasm. 'If we could see some nests from ground level we could judge what they would look like from the air.'

'You're not expecting me to fly low through that mob on Inagua, I hope?' returned Biggles.

'Nothing so daft,' answered Ginger. 'I was only thinking that at the place where Hagen landed there must have been nests, or he couldn't have got the egg.'

'Well, we've had a look, and that gives us an idea of what we're up against,' went on Biggles. 'It won't help matters if we strike a head wind and run out of petrol, so we'll get back.' He brought the machine round on a course for its base.

The Otter touched down in time for a late lunch at the little hotel where they had found accommodation.

'Has anybody any ideas?' asked Biggles, over coffee. 'This morning has made it pretty plain that flapping about the sky haphazard isn't going to get us anywhere.'

'How about some of us going to Kingston to see if we can locate the photographer who developed Hagen's photos?' suggested Ginger. 'I saw nothing in the house to show that he did his own developing and printing. Few people do, nowadays. Hagen obviously had a camera. If he took some photos someone must have developed them, and that person, having seen the prints, might be able to describe the scenery.'

'It might save time if we saw Evans first,' answered Biggles thoughtfully. 'He's probably expecting us to call. There's a chance that he may be able to tell us right away who developed Hagen's films. You might try it, Ginger. I shall have to take the machine to the airport and get the tanks topped up.'

'Fair enough,' agreed Ginger. 'Anyone coming with me?' he asked, looking round.

‘I shall want Algy with me,’ said Biggles. ‘Apart from refuelling I have an idea of looking over Hagen’s yacht. It’s in the harbour not far from the airport. Algy can give me a hand.’

‘I’ll come with you, old boy,’ Bertie told Ginger.

‘Okay. Then let’s get mobile,’ said Ginger, getting up.

In a few minutes they were on their way in the car that had been used on the previous day.

They found Evans sitting up in bed, but still looking pale and shaken, as he had good reason to be. However, he assured them that, although his leg was much swollen, complete recovery was now only a matter of time. Had it not been for Biggles’s prompt action in sucking out most of the venom, as he learned from the doctor, he would certainly have passed out on the floor of Rumkeg Haven. He went on, as Ginger feared he might, to comment on the coincidence of the affair. He had told Biggles he had never seen a snake in the vicinity, yet within an hour he had been bitten by one. He couldn’t imagine how it had got there. It obviously did not occur to him that this was anything but a remarkable coincidence; and Ginger did not enlighten him, for the explanation would have involved questions he preferred not to answer. Ginger himself would have liked to know how the snake had been produced at such short notice, and Evans, knowing the island well, might have been able to make a suggestion; but in the circumstances he felt it was wiser to leave the question unasked.

They then came to the matter of the flamingos. Ginger mentioned that the egg had been smashed; but Evans said he knew this, for he had just picked it up when the snake struck him. He remembered dropping it. Ginger said they would try to get him another, and then passed on to the vital question. Assuming that Hagen had taken some photographs of the flamingos, where were they? They were not to be found in the house. However, opined Ginger, Hagen might not have fetched them from the agency to which he had taken them for development. Did he, Evans, know the name of the man who usually did Hagen’s photographic work?

Evans answered the question without hesitation. Yes, he knew. The man was Johnston, a chemist in Aclim Street. He employed the same man himself. Indeed, he had recommended him to Hagen when his neighbour had asked who was the best man for such work.

This was all Ginger wanted to know, and as soon as he could do so without appearing discourteous, he took his leave, and with Bertie set off for their next step in their line of investigation.

They found Mr Johnston in his shop, and Ginger came straight to the point. He said he thought Mr Johnston knew the late Mr Hagen, and Johnston agreed that he did.

‘Did Mr Hagen bring you any spools for development just before he died?’ asked Ginger.

Johnston shook his head. ‘No, not for some time.’

Ginger’s heart sank. ‘You do the photographic work yourself?’

‘Of course.’

‘In which case you would see the prints? Did you ever develop for him any films showing flamingos on their nests?’

Again Johnston shook his head. ‘No—never.’

Ginger drew a deep breath. ‘That’s all I wanted to know. Sorry I troubled you. Thanks for answering my questions.’

Disappointed, he was turning away when Johnston called him back. ‘If it’s photos of nesting flamingos you want, I can tell you who has some.’

‘Who?’ asked Ginger, trying not to show his excitement.

‘I’ve just remembered. Within the last day or two a gentleman came in with a spool for developing and printing. Very good they were too.’

‘Have you copies?’

‘No, I don’t keep copies. I handed over the prints with the films.’

Ginger steadied himself to speak naturally. ‘Would you mind telling me who brought the spools to you?’

‘Just a minute.’ With irritating deliberation Johnston produced his order book and ran a finger down the list of names. ‘Here we are. It was a Mr Stalling, a visitor staying at the Maison Respiro. How he managed to get the photographs I don’t know . . .’

But Ginger was no longer listening. He had learned all he wanted to know, and hardly trusting himself to speak, made his way into the street.

‘Imagine it,’ he said bitterly to Bertie, ‘after all that von Stalhein has the photos. Here we are, tearing about, while he calmly . . .’ He nearly choked.

‘Yes, I must say it’s a bit steep,’ agreed Bertie.

‘What a confounded pest the fellow is with his infernal tricks.’

‘Well, the sooner we let Biggles know about this the better,’ declared Ginger, recovering somewhat. ‘We know where von Stalhein hangs out. We may still be in time to put a wasp in his little pot of jam.’

‘Biggles won’t be back yet, if he has to spend time messing about with Hagen’s boat,’ reminded Bertie.

‘Then we shall have to wait for him. If we go to the harbour or the airport we may miss him and waste time. Let’s get back.’

Bertie’s fears proved unfounded, for when they got home Biggles and Algy were already there. Biggles, Ginger noticed, looked worried. He would, he thought, look still more worried when he heard the news about the photographs.

‘You’re soon back,’ greeted Ginger. ‘You couldn’t have spent much time on the yacht.’

‘We didn’t spend any time on it,’ corrected Biggles, with a touch of asperity.

‘Why not?’

‘Because it wasn’t there.’

Ginger stared.

‘Nobody had even missed it,’ went on Biggles cuttingly. ‘We went to police headquarters to ask them to lend us someone who knew where the *Vega* was moored. A fellow came with us. When we got to the place there was no yacht. All the Port Authorities could tell us was a fisherman found someone had used his dinghy in the night and then turned it adrift. No doubt it had been used to get out to the yacht and then abandoned. What’s your news?’

‘Worse than yours, if anything,’ Ginger answered apologetically. ‘Von Stalhein got hold of the flamingo photos. He took the films to Hagen’s photographer to be developed and collected them later—the films and the prints. I’m afraid he’s got away with them. There are no spare copies.’

Biggles took out a cigarette and lit it. ‘That hooks up,’ he said slowly. ‘After learning from Evans about the birds, von Stalhein must have fetched the camera from Rumkeg Haven, and finding a film in it had it developed. Now he has the clue he wanted.’

‘What about grabbing him and taking it off him?’ suggested Ginger belligerently.

Biggles smiled wanly. ‘Don’t be silly. Who do you suppose pinched the yacht?’

‘You think von Stalhein took it?’

‘Who else? When we found the yacht had gone I got the police to make discreet enquiries at the Maison Respiro. Two guests checked out last night. They were Mr Ernest Stalling and a man who registered as Boris Zorotov, alleged to be a displaced person from Eastern Europe here to study social conditions. Mr Zorotov I suspect, was the cold-eyed stooge we saw near the bandstand. They didn’t depart by passenger steamer. There wasn’t one. And they didn’t go by air because the plane had left. If I’m any good at guessing they went in a small yacht named the *Vega*.’

‘Well! Blow me down,’ murmured Bertie, polishing his eyeglass. ‘Stumped, by Jove!’

Ginger dropped into a chair. ‘Give me a cup of tea, someone,’ he pleaded.

CLOSER RECONNAISSANCE

THE situation that had developed was discussed until bedtime and resumed early the following morning. The result, in a word, was a decision to try to locate the missing yacht. From the air, it was thought, this should be possible, if not easy. Von Stalhein, assuming that he had taken it, would not overlook the probability of a pursuit, and would be unlikely to stay on the open sea; at any rate, during the hours of daylight. Apart from that, it was possible that with a forty hour start he had reached his destination, wherever that might be. Finally, it could be supposed that he was not alone in the *Vega*.

But the big question that exercised Biggles's mind was, how much did von Stalhein know? Obviously he knew something or he wouldn't have left Jamaica. Was he relying on the flamingo photographs to take him to the right island? That the photographs were in some way responsible for his hasty departure Biggles did not doubt, for, as he argued, there had been nothing to prevent von Stalhein leaving Jamaica earlier had he so wished. 'If we look at it like that,' he said, 'we must presume that von Stalhein has now got the information he was looking for.'

'Even if he managed to find the right island, what good would that do him?' enquired Algy. 'He couldn't dig up the whole place.'

'He wouldn't be likely to try,' replied Biggles. 'We must reckon, therefore, that he has something definite, something more specific, on which to work. We realized from the start that he might be in possession of details about which we know nothing. Indeed, it seems likely, when we remember that von Stalhein and Hagen were old friends, and were in touch with each other right up to the time of Hagen's death. Clearly, von Stalhein didn't know exactly where the plans and things were hidden, or he would have grabbed them, regardless of his association with Hagen. Maybe Hagen knew that. He may have told von Stalhein so much, but withheld the final key, so to speak. The letter he was writing when he died almost proves that.'

'Why should Hagen hold out on von Stalhein?' asked Ginger. 'I mean, why didn't he turn up the documents earlier? Why hang on to them?'

Biggles shrugged. 'That doesn't matter now. The fact remains he didn't, and one can think of several reasons why. Maybe he didn't altogether trust him. Maybe he didn't like von Stalhein's new politics. Maybe he wanted to have the handling of the stuff himself, rather than have someone else hand it over to a foreign power of which he disapproved. But as I say, that doesn't matter now. We're concerned with the present, not with the past, and I feel that the first thing to do is to find out where von

Stalhein has gone, for where the *Vega* drops anchor will not be far from Hagen's cache. That, clearly, is what von Stalhein thinks, so let us find the *Vega* for a start.'

'Why did he pinch the *Vega*?' asked Algy. 'He knew we were here. He knew we'd be told that the *Vega* had disappeared. He must have realized that we'd put two and two together. Why expose his hand?'

'What else could he do? He wanted to go somewhere, and to go anywhere from an island you need a craft of some sort. To hire a vessel would not only have been costly; the owner or his crew would have been on board; they might have asked questions—or seen too much. Don't forget that these islands once bristled with pirates, and rumours of treasure are common. Almost everyone is on the look-out for anything smelling of a secret hoard. Von Stalhein didn't want any tittle-tattle of that sort about his movements. The *Vega* was an obvious choice and he's got away with it. Now we've got to find him.'

'The sound of aero-engines will warn him that we're about,' put in Ginger doubtfully.

'It might, but not necessarily. Ours isn't the only machine in the sky. He may wonder, but as he can't know what type of aircraft we are using he couldn't be sure. Anyway, we shall have to take a chance on that. Let's go.'

And so the search began. It lasted all day, in two sorties which extended to the safety limit of fuel.

There were now two things to look for: the yacht *Vega*, and the secondary colony of flamingos. Neither was found. They were out again early the following morning, taking turns to fly the aircraft, and when they returned to base every scrap of land within a hundred and fifty miles of Inagua had been surveyed without result. Biggles was frankly worried. To add to his difficulties, the weather had shown signs of deteriorating. There had been heavy rain in the night, and even while they were out they had several times been forced to turn from their course to avoid ugly thunderstorms which, spilling their liquid contents, came sweeping up from the south.

'Well, I don't know what else we can do,' said Biggles wearily, as they rested after lunch. 'Has anyone any suggestions?'

'I'll tell you something that occurred to me this morning,' answered Ginger. 'It may mean nothing, but thinking about it coming home it struck me that it might give us a new angle. As we came back near Inagua I noticed that the big lagoon had changed its shape.'

Biggles nodded. 'Yes, I thought that, too.'

'And some new stretches of water had formed near it—the result of all this rain, I imagine.'

Biggles looked up hopefully. 'Did any one of them strike you as being like the sketch?'

'No. I wouldn't go so far as that. But there was one, fairly near the sea, that bore a slight resemblance. It occurred to me that if the lagoons can change their shape as easily as that, one of them might eventually take the shape of the outline drawn by

Hagen—according to the time of the year and the amount of rainfall. At all events, none of these lagoons is constant.’

‘So we come back again to Inagua,’ murmured Bertie.

‘There was always a chance of it,’ resumed Biggles. ‘What Hagen told Evans about a *second* flamingo colony might have been a deliberate attempt to put him off the track, should he try to find out where he had been.’

‘Just a minute,’ said Ginger, in a curious voice. ‘Have you got Hagen’s letter handy—the one he wrote to von Stalhein?’

‘I’ve got a translation.’

‘That’s no use. I mean the original.’

‘I’ve a photo of it.’

‘That’ll do. Let me have a dekko at it.’

Biggles opened his valise. ‘What’s the idea?’

‘Either I’m kidding myself or I’ve just had a brainwave,’ answered Ginger. ‘If I remember rightly the last word of the letter was “in”.’

‘Correct.’

‘That might have been the first syllable of Inagua.’

A strange expression crossed Biggles’s face. He put the photograph of the letter on the table and stared at it. ‘By jingo! I believe you’re right! From the way Hagen wrote the letter “i” it might well be a capital. And it would make sense. He says: “The papers, etc., are safe, and in . . .” He might have been going to say “and Inagua is the island in question . . . or the place I told you about . . .” or something like that. And here we’ve been talking about Inagua, and flying round the place, and that never struck me. My brain must be getting addled. Ginger, I believe you’ve got something. Full marks. We may be wrong, but the possibility that we’re right is worth exploring. It’s a bit late to do anything today but we’ll get all set for tomorrow and give the place a really close examination.’

‘If von Stalhein is there, he’ll see us,’ Algy pointed out.

‘For a start I shall go over very high and check the shape of the lagoon. That’s obviously the first thing to do. I hadn’t realized that rain could cause it to alter so quickly. Which can only mean that it’s shallow. Hagen may not have realized it, either. He may have made his sketch at high water. If the yacht is there it can only mean that von Stalhein believes Inagua to be the place. We ought to be able to see a yacht. Even a small craft like the *Vega* isn’t easily hidden on an open coast, and that goes for most of Inagua.’

‘Suppose one of the lagoons is the right shape, and the *Vega* is there, what are you going to do about it?’ asked Ginger.

‘Obviously, we could do nothing from the air. It would mean landing and foot-slogging.’ Biggles thought for a moment. ‘The first thing would be to check up on the square dot shown on the sketch, close to the outline. We don’t know what it represents, but it must have some special significance or Hagen wouldn’t have put it there. Anyhow, it’s all we have to go on. If it fails—well, that’s that. To search the entire

island without even knowing what sort of receptacle we're looking for would be futile. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. One thing at a time, and the first is to check up on this new lagoon idea. It's too late to do anything today, so let's get organized for tomorrow. We'll take food and water in case we decide to land. Study the chart everyone, and get the island fixed in your minds in case we get separated. Better take pocket compasses, too. I know the ground looks reasonably open, but there's a lot of it, and, as far as I can make out, there's not a road of any sort—not that there's anywhere for a road to lead to.' Biggles opened the map on the table and looked at it.

'If you decide to land, where do you reckon would be the best place?' asked Algy.

'Well, if we're going to have a look at this mark at the end of the lagoon, it would be as near to that as possible. But we can't fix anything definite until we know if the *Vega* is there, and if so, where it's moored. We can hardly land alongside without getting involved in a rumpus. After all, we don't know how many men von Stalhein has with him. He isn't a sailor. He'd need a pilot, or a navigator, or someone who knows something about the handling of boats.' Biggles continued his study of the map. 'There seem to be several possibilities. There's this place here, for instance—Man-o'-War Bay. That might mean anything, though. We'd better wait until we get there and use our own judgment from what we can actually see. It may be years since the original survey was checked, and things change.'

'Why not land on the lagoon?' suggested Ginger. 'That would at least be calm water, and plenty of it.'

'I'd rather not risk that until we know the depth. I feel sure it must be shallow or the level wouldn't rise and fall as it does. We should look silly if we ripped our keel off trying to get down on a few inches of water over a rocky bottom. Moreover, the lagoon is a bit too open. If von Stalhein is there I'd rather he didn't know we were about. Apart from the island being a nice wild spot for a murder, by watching him we may learn something. That cuts two ways. If he spots us, he may learn something. But all this is supposing that he's there. We may be barking up the wrong tree. Let's wait and see. Meanwhile, let's fix ourselves up in marching order.'

The rest of the afternoon was so employed.

The first streak of daylight the following morning saw the Otter again outward bound for the Bahamas, and soon after eight o'clock their objective, Inagua, crept up over the horizon. As the island is some fifty miles long there was no chance of missing it.

In eager anticipation Ginger watched for the lagoons to appear, for upon the shape of one of them depended the confirmation of his theory. Not until they were directly overhead could the outlines be checked accurately.

A glance was enough to reveal that the big lagoon bore not the slightest resemblance to what they sought. It merely appeared to be larger. But as Ginger's eyes wandered on over the smaller newly-formed sheets of water a cry of triumph left his lips. 'There it is!' he exclaimed 'Look! The very end one of all; the one nearest the sea.'

For a moment Biggles did not answer. Watching steadfastly he altered course a trifle. 'I think you're right,' he agreed. 'At least, if it isn't it, it's mighty like it.' He flew on. 'I'm not going too close in case we're being watched,' he continued. 'Besides, I don't want to get in another scramble with the flamingos and maybe do some damage. You'll notice that the colony extends nearly to the piece of water we're looking at, which means that if Hagen went there he wouldn't have far to go to get an egg.'

'I can see something else,' asserted Ginger, excitement raising his voice a tone. 'At the extreme end, just where the mark appears on the sketch, there's a sort of lump. I can't see what it is from this height, though.'

'Nor I,' answered Biggles, after a pause, 'but there's certainly something there.' He smiled. 'I really believe we're getting warm at last. I can't see anyone moving. Obviously there's nobody near the birds or they'd be on the wing.'

'I can't see anything of the *Vega*,' said Ginger, his eyes following the coast.

'We'll check on that,' replied Biggles, making a slow turn in order to follow the shore.

An hour was spent circumnavigating the island, but not a vessel of any sort, large or small, was sighted.

'The only place where a craft could be hidden is in those mangroves,' observed Biggles thoughtfully, indicating the sombre mass formed by a long group of the water-loving trees. They occurred at one point only. 'The only way to see inside that timber would be from ground level,' he added.

'So what's the drill now?' inquired Ginger.

'There's nothing more we can do from up here, so we shall have to go down,' replied Biggles. 'I'm not infatuated with the prospect but it's the only way. Let's try to find a place not too far from the lagoon, yet within walking distance of the mangroves.'

In this quest they succeeded reasonably well, for roughly midway between the mangroves and the small lagoon there appeared a sheltered bay which judging from its dark colour, held a good depth of water with no shoals or reefs. Nor was there any surf such as pounded the more exposed parts of the island.

'That's Man-o'-War Bay,' said Ginger, looking at the map.

As a matter of detail the proposed anchorage was about four miles from both the lagoon and the mangroves, which lay in opposite directions. It might have been possible to land nearer to the mangroves, but the objections, supposing the *Vega* to be there, were obvious. It would not have been possible to land much nearer to the lagoon, although it was less than half a mile from the sea, because that part of the coast beyond which it lay was protected by reefs. To land inside them would have been a hazardous undertaking, while on the seaward side, the water, while not rough, was by no means calm.

Biggles made a cautious approach to the little bay, and after a close examination of the surface put the Otter down without difficulty. It finished its run well inside and lay rocking on a gentle swell. There was no wind to speak of, with the result that the full force of the sun was appreciated for the first time.

Biggles called everyone together. 'Now then, this is the plan,' he informed them. 'It now looks very much as if Inagua is, after all, Hagen's island. We can't do any more from up topside, so we shall have to use our feet. We have two objectives to reconnoitre. One is the belt of mangroves. The *Vega*, if she is here, will be there, for I can see nowhere else where she could find cover. If it turns out that she isn't here, so much the better. I don't want the yacht. Nor do I want to see von Stalhein. Our primary object, short of finding Hagen's cache, is to prevent him from getting at it. In other words, if we can find what we came here to collect I shan't interfere with him. All right. Now for the second objective. The outline on Hagen's sketch conforms to the shape of one of the lagoons. We are bound to suppose that the cache is near it. At the end of what we now believe to be Hagen's lagoon he made a mark. Just what it represents we don't know. We're going to find out. Now then; I see no reason why everyone should go to both objectives, which would waste time unnecessarily. Someone will have to stay with the machine, of course. We should look silly if we came back and found her cast on the beach by a squall, or burnt out by von Stalhein if he happened to see us arrive. I shall stay here to see that neither of those things happen. It boils down to this. There will be two parties, one going to the lagoon, the other to the mangroves. Two of you had better go to the mangroves in case von Stalhein is there and starts throwing his weight about. The other one can go to the lagoon. Neither job should take very long; just how long will depend of course upon the state of the going. Judging from what we've seen from the air it doesn't look too bad, so three hours ought to see both parties back. Any questions?'

'I'd like to see the flamingos at close range,' said Ginger.

'As two will be going to the mangroves, that will mean going alone.'

'That's okay with me. There's nothing to it as far as I can see.'

'All right,' assented Biggles. 'Ginger will go to the lagoon. Algy and Bertie will go to the mangroves. You'll find it pretty warm so I'd advise you to take some water, as well as a biscuit or two, in case of accidents. With the ground so flat I suspect the lagoons will be brackish, if not actually salt. Whatever happens this will be the rendezvous for everyone. If anyone is away for more than five hours I shall assume that something has gone wrong and take whatever steps seem indicated. Anything else?'

No one answered.

'All right,' concluded Biggles. 'That settles that. Get off as soon as you can. I'll take the machine to the beach to give you a dry start. Take your guns. I don't think you're likely to need them but you never know. I'll take care of things here.'

GINGER GOES ALONE

GINGER, accoutred, for his walk, turned his back to the sea and set off for that point of the lagoon where the mysterious 'bump' occurred, which was, as near as makes no difference, due east from Man-o'-War Bay. He hoped that it was not merely by chance that this was no great distance from where the flamingos nested. He had not the remotest idea of what the bump was, and he did not waste time guessing. He would soon know, he assured himself, with an optimism which, in the light of events, was not justified.

There had been some debate as to whether he should take a direct route to the lagoon, or follow the coast until he was opposite the nearest point and then turn inland. The latter method of approach would be a good deal farther, although possibly the walking would be easier. Remembering that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, he took the direct overland route.

It was not long, however, before a suspicion began to dawn on him that his decision was an error in judgment; that the other way would have been less strenuous, if longer. At any rate, it became evident that the undertaking was not going to be the easy jaunt which he—and Biggles, too, for that matter—had supposed. For this no one was really to blame, for the terrain, seen from the air, appeared quite flat and presented no obstacles. Flat it certainly was, but the obstacles were numerous and outside his experience.

One thing was certain. The time schedule would go by the board. In his own mind he had reckoned that three hours was more than ample for the two-way journey, but he soon perceived that if he made the trip in double that time he would be doing well. This, however, did not worry him unduly, for as things were, an hour or two one way or the other seemed of no great importance. He had with him both food and water. He was glad he had the water, and was presently to be even more glad, for the intensity of the heat, without the slight breeze, was more exhausting than he had foreseen.

Almost at once he had witnessed a spectacle that did not cheer him. It would have been depressing anywhere. He came upon an ill-defined track that promised to take him through a tangle of thorn bushes, so he followed it. It petered out in a little depression in which huddled the ruins of a deserted village. He had not realized that there was, or had been, a settlement at Man-o'-War Bay. But there it stood, a line of primitive coral and thatch cottages, pathetic in their lonely isolation. The place seemed to smell of poverty and death.

A few of the houses had clung to their roofs, but most had crumbled to decay. Shafts of sunlight made strange patterns in darkened rooms from which broken

windows stared like blind eyes. Doors and shutters hung with an ever-weakening grip to rusty hinges. There was even a little church, with the remains of a crude pulpit. Nearby, mounds of earth with mouldering crosses, overgrown with weeds, told the age-old story of life and death. When or why the place had been abandoned Ginger did not know; but as he passed on, his footsteps echoing emptily between the houses, he was aware of that poignant feeling of sadness that such a picture must inevitably produce.

Prompted by curiosity to know more about this lost and forgotten outpost, he walked to the door of the end house, but backed away from the curtain of cobwebs that would have made entrance an uncomfortable adventure. Always the spiders win in the end, he pondered morosely, as he turned his back on the ruin and walked on. They were the final tenants of every house.

The sun struck down with bars of white heat and there was little or no shade. He had expected it to be hot, but not as hot as this, and as he trudged on he used his handkerchief repeatedly to mop the perspiration that poured down his face.

Passing on to what he had supposed to be a grassy plain he was almost dismayed by what he saw. Here was no luxuriant vegetation, but sheer desolation. For a mile or more it stretched, shimmering in the heat, just tufts of coarse grey grass growing between the caked mud of what had obviously been puddles of stagnant water. There were one or two straggling, miserable-looking trees, but they were as colourless as the rest. The sparse leaves glinted like metal as they hung listlessly from the branches. In some strange way everything seemed to sparkle, and the dry water-holes told him why. The bottoms were not mud, but salt. Salt was encrusted on everything, the result, he could only suppose, of sea spray borne on the winds during the periodic gales. He began to feel that this was a desert island in the literal sense of the word. In the distance there were a few scattered coconut palms, but they were poor and tattered things with obviously no love for their surroundings. On the far side of the plain the only growth that appeared to thrive were tall thorn bushes of one sort or another, or monstrous cacti, the brilliant flowers of which were the only bright spots in an otherwise colourless world. Often it was necessary to make long detours to avoid compact colonies of them.

Yet, curiously enough, there was plenty of wild life in this harsh land. Pelicans, herons and grebes stood about in the slime of drying water-holes. There were several species of lizards and innumerable land crabs, large yellow creatures with eyes set on stalks and mouths that opened sideways to give their faces a demoniac expression. There was great activity among them, many casting aside the soil and debris with which they had blocked the entrances to their holes. In the excavation of these they had thrown up heaps of dirt like molehills. Very soon he was to remember this activity and understand the reason for it. A few raised their claws menacingly when he passed close to them. The ground was strewn with millions of shells of those that had died. What they were doing so far from the sea was beyond his comprehension. Admittedly, he knew little about the habits of crabs. Anyway, it seemed all wrong. But then, he mused, the whole place was crazy.

He plodded on through heat that was fast becoming unbearable. He did his best to avoid the thorns which every plant had put out in its defence, but he was not always successful, and more than once had to stop to remove one from his person. Nor could

he always find a way round areas of bog where his shoes picked up slabs of white, glutinous mud. In such places mosquitoes rose in swarms with a hum like a distant aero-engine. They got into his eyes, his ears and his nose, and nearly drove him to distraction. He tried tying his handkerchief over his face, but it did little good.

With one tribulation and another he was far from happy as he struggled on, sometimes checking his course with his compass. The deep shade of an ancient banyan tree, covering at least an acre of ground, gave him a brief respite. He dared not stay long, for he was aware that already he was far behind schedule; so he drank a little water and went forward.

The going became worse. There were more, and thicker, thorn bushes. The alternative was to take to the mud holes, where he slipped about and sometimes stumbled over half-buried sticks. Once he found himself on an area of loose grey limestone which flung back in his face the blistering heat of the sun. On the far side of it he found himself confronted by a low cliff so full of holes that it had the appearance of a petrified sponge. All along the base lay the shells of countless sea creatures, bleached by the sun. The holes, he realized, could only have been caused by the action of water, so it seemed that this part of the island must at some time in the past have been submerged. The sea would not have to rise very far to submerge it again, he brooded. The sooner the better. He did not attempt to climb the cliff. The rock was as hard as flint, and a fall would have meant serious laceration, if not broken bones. He turned back to the thorns.

They were soon worse than ever, a maze of prickly branches that he feared would bar any further progress until he found what appeared to be a vague, narrow track, winding through them. He had noticed similar tracks before, and wondered what had made them; but as they had never led in the right direction they were of no use to him. However, on this occasion the path was more or less right, so he took it thankfully. Apart from the discomfort, he was getting worried about the state of his shoes. Much more of this, he thought, and they would fall to pieces, with a result not pleasant to contemplate.

He munched a biscuit as he walked, not daring to waste time by stopping. He reckoned he had been out for three hours, in which time he had covered perhaps three miles, so he still had some distance to go.

Soon after this he learned what had made the tracks. Rounding a bush he came face to face with a scrawny old sow, obviously gone wild, with a litter of piglets. The young ones dashed about squealing with fright but finished up behind mother for protection. She dropped her head and showed her teeth, which caused Ginger, who thought she was going to charge, to whip out his automatic. For a moment or two the affair hung in the balance; then the sow, grunting defiance, moved away into the bushes taking her brood with her—much to Ginger's relief. With a deep breath he mopped his brow and went on. He did not return the pistol to his pocket. He was still not sure of the sow, and thought there was still a chance that the father of the family might be about to resent his intrusion with more belligerent tactics.

Actually, this did not happen, but the incident, trivial in itself, was to have a sequel of vital importance.

He went on, and emerging from a belt of thorns found before him an area of barren rock, the shallow depressions of which were filled with a silt which, on examination as it crunched under his feet, proved to be composed entirely of the skeletons of tiny fish. Clearly, these holes had once been filled with water. This had been evaporated by the sun, leaving the fish to die.

Across this dismal expanse he made the best time possible, hoping at any moment to see the lagoon ahead. This might have been possible had it not been for the intervention of another belt of thorn and palmetto shrubs, through which, fortunately, a pig-track meandered, offering an easy passage.

He was almost through when, rounding a sharp bend, he came face to face with a man going in the opposite direction. Although he was no longer in his town finery there was no mistaking him. It was the Negro, Napoleon Morgan. They saw each other simultaneously, as they were bound to, and both stopped abruptly, eyeing each other. The shock of surprise must have been the same for both, for some seconds passed in utter silence during which neither of them moved a muscle.

If Ginger remained rooted to the ground, to use the common expression, it is not to say that his brain was spellbound. He was still carrying his automatic, but at first sight of the negro he had instinctively slipped it behind him rather than have it look as though he were inviting a fight. And there he stood, rigid, waiting for the other to show his reactions to the encounter. He had nothing definite against the man although of course he suspected him of complicity in the snake affair; but how far he was directly associated with von Stalhein he did not know.

Actually, the questions that flashed into Ginger's mind were, how much did the negro know? Did he know who he, Ginger, was, and his purpose there? True, he must have seen him with Biggles in the car near Rumkeg Haven, but that might not mean anything. Morgan, a professed Communist, might have made the same cynical salute to any two white men in a car.

All these doubts were soon to be dispelled. The first shock of surprise had caused the negro's eyes to open wide; but as it passed, the lids half dropped in an expression of calculated hostility which prepared Ginger for what was coming. From that moment he knew that violence was intended. Nor could it be avoided, for the man was in his path, so that to pass out of reach was not possible.

Then the negro smiled, and the smile was even more significant than the glare. Without haste the man took a razor from his pocket and began to strop the blade meditatively on the palm of his left hand.

'What do you think you're going to do with that?' inquired Ginger coldly—and unnecessarily, as he well knew. The question was really an attempt to ease the tension.

Morgan did not answer. He merely showed his teeth as his smile broadened.

Ginger was not deceived by this nor by the feline deliberation of Morgan's movements. He could see the muscles becoming taut where the black skin was exposed by an open-necked shirt, and was well aware that action, when it came, would be swift. He made one attempt to avoid conflict, even though he knew it to be futile. Looking the man in the face he said quietly:

‘Put that thing away.’

The smile faded.

‘I said put it away,’ repeated Ginger sternly.

At that the negro sprang, arm swinging; and although Ginger was ready, had he not been on his toes, such was the speed of the movement that he must have been caught. His pistol hand jerked forward, the gun spitting as he leapt sideways.

Morgan sprawled past him, stumbled, and crashed headlong. Ginger was round in a flash, gun ready, to see the negro on his knees, both hands resting on the ground. The open razor lay a yard away. A black hand crept towards it.

‘Another inch and I’ll plug you properly,’ grated Ginger, pugnaciously; and he would have done so, for he was boiling with rage at the unprovoked attempt to murder him. Where he had hit the man he did not know, but blood on the black hand suggested the arm or shoulder. Anyway, he suspected that the man was not seriously hurt.

He kept his distance. ‘Leave that razor where it is and get going before I drill a hole in a better place, you murdering swine,’ he rasped. He no longer had any doubt as to what his fate would be should the negro get him in his power.

Very slowly Morgan got to his feet, facing the way Ginger had come; and there for a few seconds he stood, breathing heavily.

‘This gun is still pointing at your back,’ warned Ginger, who was behind him. ‘One step towards that razor and you’ll get what, if I had any sense, I ought to give you anyway.’

The man walked slowly down the track. After going a little way he looked over his shoulder, and the expression on his face made Ginger feel cold inside, in spite of the heat.

Morgan walked on.

Ginger saw him out of sight, but still he stood for some minutes, watching and listening. He picked up the razor, closed it, and threw it in the bushes. Then, still watching the track, pistol in hand, he sat down, feeling suddenly weak. His hands, he discovered, were trembling, either from anger, or shock, or both. He was not surprised. It had been a nasty business. Actually, he soliloquized, the negro was lucky still to be alive, for prompted solely by the instinct of self-preservation he had blazed at his assailant without even attempting to take aim. There had been no time for that.

Still somewhat dazed by the speed of it all, he took a drink of water and splashed a little on his face, after which he felt better and able to think more clearly.

The first thought that struck him was, so von Stalhein and his associates were on the island after all. Morgan would hardly be there alone. His presence at that particular spot could not be accidental. Where was von Stalhein? In front of him or behind? This led to another thought, one that disturbed him not a little. If Morgan was making his way to Man-o’-War Bay, or the mangroves beyond—supposing the *Vega* to be there—then he would almost certainly see the Otter . . . perhaps collide with Algy and Bertie. What would happen then?

At first he felt that he ought to go back, to shadow the negro until he was able to warn the others that the man was on the island. But to do that would be to risk running into an ambush himself, although this risk would arise in any case when he turned for home. Apart from that, it seemed a pity to abandon his project, after all his labour, at the last moment. In the end he decided, as he was now so close to the lagoon, little was to be gained by turning for home immediately. He would press on as quickly as possible, so that whatever happened he would not have to report the failure of his mission. Looking at his watch he saw with consternation that he had been on the go for four hours. Already Biggles would be watching for his return, and he had not yet reached his objective. He prayed fervently that Biggles would give him an hour or two's grace before sending someone to look for him, as he had practically said that he would; for Morgan on the prowl was a more deadly menace than any wild beast.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

PICKING himself up Ginger set off again as fast as was compatible with caution, for he did not lose sight of the possibility of von Stalhein being somewhere in front of him. This was another uncomfortable thought, and one that finally banished the last shreds of his early optimism. A feeling was growing on him that their calculations were at fault; that a hard-headed Nazi like Hagen would never have chosen such an unpleasant place as this for his cache. Of course, he took into account that if he had, he would not follow the route which he, Ginger, had taken. He would come in straight from the sea, only a short distance. Yet, if Hagen had not come to the island, what was Morgan doing there? For it seemed to follow that if Morgan was there, his associate, Boris Zorotov, who had acted as stooge for von Stalhein, would not be far away—to say nothing of von Stalhein himself. It was all very puzzling.

Another twenty minutes of miserable travelling and the lagoon that was his destination came into view—a broad sheet of water, pale green in colour, lying still and silent in the blazing sunshine. Around the perimeter the ground was greyish-white with saline deposits. Some small flat banks of sand suggested that the water, always shallow, was now receding by the process of evaporation. This, when he reached it, he was able to confirm. Nowhere that he could see was it more than a couple of feet deep. Often it was only a matter of inches, with a rocky bottom, and he perceived how wise Biggles had been not to risk landing the aircraft on it.

Beyond the small lagoon, and separated from it only by a narrow isthmus, was its immense parent, stretching away to distant horizons. Some distance to the left was the scarlet crescent that he had seen from the air—the flamingo colony. It comprised many hundreds of birds, a wonderful sight. A few, as if they might have been sentinels, stood still or moved slowly up and down on the outskirts of the main body. Some had seen him, and were watching him suspiciously.

From the fiery multitude came an incessant clamour, like the gabbling of a distant flock of geese. There were other birds too, all around; pelicans, gulls, terns, herons and sandpipers. Nothing else moved. There were only the birds. Away beyond the flamingo colony, through a dip in the sand dunes, he could see the sparkling blue of the open sea, broken inshore by misty spray where waves waged eternal war on the reefs.

At first Ginger could see no sign of the object, the bump, that had brought him to the lagoon; but after walking some distance he came upon it, a hundred yards or so from the water's edge and half hidden by a mass of salt-encrusted cacti. At least, in the absence of anything else, he could only assume that this was the object marked on Hagen's drawing.

Walking nearer he made it out to be a small coral and thatch hut, a tiny edition of the houses he had seen at Man-o'-War Bay. It was in the last stages of dilapidation. He approached warily until he was satisfied that there was no one in it.

Going right up he regarded it with mixed feelings. It seemed so little after his labour, merely four walls, a door, a window and a wind-torn roof of palm fronds. The floor was bare earth. In a corner, looking as if it might have been a bed, lay a flat heap of palmetto leaves. The only occupant was a huge black and yellow spider that retired to its hole on his approach. He leaned against the doorpost while his eyes made a thoughtful reconnaissance of the place.

Who had built it, and for what purpose, he could not imagine. But someone, at some time, had evidently gone to the trouble of carrying the building materials from a distance, for they were not available near at hand. Certainly it was not Hagen. It must have been there long before his time. Indeed, it was hard to understand how Hagen had found the hut; yet it seemed that he must have known of its existence or he would not have marked it on his sketch. True, it was no great distance from the sea and Hagen might have been searching for a hiding-place; yet so improbable did it seem that he could have been there that the feeling grew again on Ginger that they were off the track altogether. The resemblance of the lagoon to the outline on the sketch, and the hut, were just a coincidence. Yet against that there was the presence of Morgan to explain. He had been there—or somewhere close.

Ginger went outside and surveyed the desolate landscape, looking in a vague sort of way for anything that would help him to find an explanation. In an area of soft sand he found footprints, large flat marks obviously made by human feet; but beyond the fact that they were there they told him nothing. He returned to the hut, and in making a close scrutiny he was more successful. Blown into a corner, as if it might have been by the wind, was a tiny screwed up wisp of paper in such new condition that it could not have been there for very long. Unfolding it with care, he read some printed words that put a different complexion on everything. The slip was the wrapping of a photographic film, giving instructions for use. So someone had loaded a camera there. Who else could it have been but Hagen, who was known to have taken photos of the flamingos? Ginger drew a deep breath. This, he told himself, was something. Now he was getting somewhere.

He explored the hut with reawakened interest. Not that there was much room for exploration. Really, he could see all there was to see at a single glance. He looked at the supposed bed of withered fronds on the floor. Walking over to it, and lifting it in a mass to see if there was anything underneath, his pulses quickened when he observed that the earth was rough and soft, as if it had been turned over, whereas the rest of the floor was hard-packed. In a moment he was on his knees, delving with his fingers, and while this confirmed his belief that the ground had been disturbed he was unable to make much progress, for the earth was well mixed with shells and pieces of flinty coral that threatened to cut his hands if he persisted. Quickly he looked around for something to use as a tool, but there was nothing. The blade of his penknife was too small to make any impression. He tried the spine of a palm-frond, but it was brittle with age and crumbled at the slightest pressure. Cacti, the only plants that grew anywhere near were useless. It was maddening to be so hot on the trail, as he was now sure he was, yet not

be able to follow it up. Controlling his irritation, and contemplating the soil, he realized that anything buried there might be some way down, in which case, even with a tool, the task of unearthing it would take some time.

Hagen, if this was in fact his cache, must have had a tool. Where was it? He spent some time searching, but to no purpose. Hot and somewhat bothered he looked at his watch, and saw to his alarm and chagrin that he had been away more than five hours. Biggles would soon be taking action to find out what had become of him, if, indeed, he had not already done so. Obviously, it was time he started for home. There was little more he could do at the hut, anyway.

He was getting to his feet when a roar of sound, unlike anything he had ever heard, sent him striding to the door. He saw at once what had caused it. The entire flock of flamingos was in the air, every bird screaming, a thousand wings beating. For a few seconds, as the almost solid band of colour wheeled across the sky, he could only stare at it, thinking that it was a spectacle that would have to be seen to be believed. But then came other thoughts. What had caused the birds to behave in such a manner? Clearly, something or somebody had disturbed them, sent them from their nesting ground in screaming protest.

At first, seeing nothing, he thought it might be the weather for while he had been in the hut there had certainly been a change; one that filled him with misgivings but not actual alarm. A film of mist now half-obscured the sun, and the surface of the lagoon, instead of being tranquil, was now astir with little waves kept in motion by gusts of wind which were at least refreshing after the torrid heat.

Ginger's eyes dropped from the band of fire still weaving about the sky to the tongue of land from whence it had sprung, and then he saw what had caused the tumult. A figure was moving quickly along the sand towards the nesting ground, marked by the irregular outline of the turrets on which the eggs were laid. He stared hard, but could do no more than make it out to be a human being, a stout person it seemed to be, wearing an enormous hat. The increasing mistiness in the atmosphere blurred the figure. Indeed, it distorted the whole landscape so that it was impossible to see anything clearly.

This new and unexpected development threw him into a quandary. He wanted to stay and watch, yet he was anxious to get back as quickly as possible to set Biggles's mind at rest and tell him of his discoveries. Deciding that a minute or two would not make much difference now that he was already so far behind time, he stood still, watching closely, from the cover of the doorway. Even at this distance salt spray from the lagoon was soon being blown into his face, and for the first time the weather gave him a pang of apprehension. Something was happening to it. A wide, dark cloud was racing up from the south. He did not like the look of it at all. He told himself it was time to make a move, particularly in view of the sort of country he had to cross; but still he tarried, his eyes on the distant figure. What was it doing? It seemed to be bending, straightening, bending and straightening, and from time to time doing something with the big hat.

Suddenly he got it, and he could have kicked himself for not guessing the answer to the riddle at once, so obvious was it. Someone was stealing the flamingo eggs. Who it could be he did not attempt to guess, but someone was definitely breaking the bird

protection laws. Not that that aspect worried him overmuch. He had more important matters on his mind.

The figure was now moving even more quickly. It no longer stooped. On it went until, reaching a belt of cacti it disappeared from view. But not for long. It reappeared from the side of the cacti nearer to him, hurrying and now leading a donkey. He made it out to be a woman; a fat woman, either in a short skirt or a skirt drawn up to her knees. What he had taken for a hat now turned out to be a basket. A short walk in the direction of the sea took her from his sight, this time for good.

Puzzled, but not for a moment supposing that the female had any bearing on his own affairs, he turned away, determined now to move off. It was, he observed with a frown, high time, for the wind was now blowing with some violence, and as he hastened on his way a storm of rain burst upon him.

At first he took little notice of this. He had been wet often enough before. It was not until the downpour blotted out everything beyond a few yards that he became seriously concerned. To make matters worse, the pall of indigo cloud that was unloading its contents on him was almost overhead. The sun had of course been obliterated, with the result that an uncanny twilight dimmed the scene. The only sounds were the howling of the wind and the hiss of rain. At least, so for a little while he thought. Then, with a shock, he saw that the ground all about him was on the move with the shadowy forms of the land crabs, hundreds of them, thousands of them, all taking advantage of the deluge to make their way to the sea. As they moved their shells kept up an incessant rattle. They took not the slightest notice of him but proceeded with their migration regardless of obstacles. So many were there that it was difficult to walk without treading on them.

Ginger stopped, wavering, assailed by fresh doubts and misgivings. The wind screamed. The rain hissed. The crabs rattled. He knew that to go on would be asking for trouble. Should he lose his way, as plainly he might, anything could happen. If it had taken him more than four hours to reach the lagoon in clear weather, how much longer would it take him to get back to base in such conditions as these? He was desperately anxious to get home, but it now seemed the height of folly to attempt it. He remembered the thorns and the hostile cacti. They would tear him to pieces. He remembered the cliff of petrified coral. If he stumbled over that it would be serious, to say the least of it. And there was the plain, with the mud holes which would now be full of water. He might blunder about in them until he dropped from sheer exhaustion. And, to cap all, there was only one place over the whole distance where any sort of protection from the weather was available—the banyan tree. It would be pitch dark by the time he could reach that area, so he would probably fail to find it anyway.

Close behind him was the hut. It would at least offer shelter until the storm had passed. Reluctantly he turned back towards it. It seemed the common-sense thing to do. Bitterly he regretted that he had not started earlier, but regrets, seldom any use, were of no avail now. The weather had turned against him. That was all there was to it. He tried to console himself with the thought that he was not the first man to be benighted.

THE MANGROVES

ALGY and Bertie, bound for the mangrove swamp, in the matter of travail and discomfort fared no better than Ginger in the opposite direction. The first part of their journey lay through similar depressing scenery. The same unpleasant obstacles were encountered, and progress was slow and often painful. But after a while they struck some sandhills that fringed the coast and things were better, although it was still heavy going through hot, soft sand.

Ahead now, stark against the blue of sea and sky, was the sombre, almost black, area of mangroves. As they closed the distance, progress was again necessarily slow, for they were now faced with the possibility of having watchful enemies to contend with.

However, taking advantage of every scrap of cover that offered they reached the edge of the mangroves without incident, and there they paused for a minute to rest in the shade of the massive trees. Algy, looking at his watch, suffered the same anxieties as Ginger in the matter of the time schedule. He conveyed to Bertie the disturbing information that they had been on the move for three hours. It was obvious that they were going to be late getting back. This did not really matter, for there was no particular reason for haste except that Biggles, not knowing the difficulties of travel, would wonder what had held them up. They realized, of course, that Ginger was also likely to be late back for the same reason as themselves.

As they were about to move on, Bertie had a mild fright when a miniature lance, about a foot long, buried itself in the mud at his feet. His pistol was out in a moment, and he moved quickly to the nearest tree trunk, from the cover of which he sought his supposed attacker. 'Some blighter is shooting at us,' he asserted indignantly.

Algy grinned and told him to put his gun away. As they went on he explained.^[B]

[B] The mangrove usually lives in a tidal mud subject to inundations. In the ordinary way, therefore, its seed would be washed away to destruction. To prevent this the seed puts out a shoot like a dart. This, falling, sticks in the mud, and so holds the seed fixed until it has had time to put down roots which become a permanent anchor.

A mangrove swamp is never a pleasant place at any time. The one with which Algy and Bertie were concerned turned out to be a good deal bigger than aerial

reconnaissance had indicated, and so for some time they slushed about in the mud, or scrambled about on octopus-like roots, without seeing anything more exciting than enormous purple crabs, lizards, and other dwellers of the slime. In such conditions it was difficult to maintain direction, and they were both getting thoroughly sick of the place when they came upon some harder ground through which ran a track of sorts. It was wet and slippery, and revealed, among other things, the imprints of shoe-shod feet.

Following this comparatively easy route, it soon brought them to what was clearly the purpose of it—a long arm of black, open water, running back into the timber. And there, moored to a tangle of roots on the far side, was the *Vega*. The branches of the trees spread well over it, making it plain why they had not spotted the vessel from the air. Between one of the branches and the mast a wireless aerial had been suspended. Algy paid little attention to this at the time. He did no more than notice it. But he was to remember it later on.

Sitting together on deck, smoking and talking, were three white men. One was von Stalhein. The others they did not know, never having seen them before, although from a description that Ginger had given them, Algy took one of them to be von Stalhein's stooge, Zorotov. The other, evidently a sailor, wore a suit of white ducks with a peaked cap. A negro, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts, leaned over the stern doing nothing in particular. Just below him, a dinghy floated on the inky water.

Algy touched Bertie on the arm and they retired to a safe distance. 'Biggles's hunch was right,' he whispered, when they were out of sight and hearing. 'There she is.'

'Jolly good,' answered Bertie. 'I vote we skid along home and tell him. I don't mind telling you that I'm bound rigid with this beastly mud. The stuff stinks. Positively stinks. Filthy. Disgusting.'

Algy hesitated. 'I doubt if Ginger will be back yet. How about trying to get close enough to the *Vega* to hear what they're talking about? Even a word or two might give us a line on what they know, or what they intend to do.'

'We could have a shot at it, old boy,' Bertie agreed. 'But go steady. This nauseating bog is no place for a fracas—if you see what I mean.'

'I think it's worth trying, while we're actually on the spot,' insisted Algy. 'They obviously suspect nothing so there isn't much risk.'

'Lead on, laddie,' invited Bertie.

Algy proceeded, taking the only possible route. As a bird would fly, the distance across the creek was not more than fifty yards; but to get to the *Vega* on foot meant going up one side of the open water and down the other, a matter of nearly half a mile. Over ordinary ground a half mile is no great distance, but in a mangrove swamp it can be a long and tiring stretch, as Algy discovered, and admitted, before the finish. There was one redeeming feature. At the inner extremity of the creek the mud gave way slowly to firmer ground, and this promised a quicker passage home than the way they had come. There was, in fact, a vestige of a path leading in the general direction of Man-o'-War Bay.

As a matter of detail this track might well have brought about their downfall, for hardly had they got into a satisfactory position near the *Vega* when down it a man came

striding. He was black, or nearly black. Stripped to the waist, carrying a dirty shirt, he had a blood-stained rag wrapped round the upper part of his left arm. It was evident that he had met with an accident, although at that juncture neither Algy nor Bertie would have guessed the cause.

They crouched in the mud under a tangle of roots as he went past within a dozen yards. By the nature of the ground he had to pick his way carefully so he did not so much as glance in their direction. Reaching the water he called out, whereupon the negro in the stern of the *Vega* dropped into the dinghy, cast off, and paddled the yard or two necessary to pick him up.

'I'd say that's Morgan,' breathed Algy in Bertie's ear, under cover of the noise made by the boat. They had, of course, learned about the man from Biggles and Ginger.

With the interest the occasion warranted they watched the negro helped aboard, to be greeted by a volley of questions about his arm, from which he now removed the rag. In a high-pitched, sing-song voice he narrated in a passion his own version of what had happened, the conversation being carried on in English, which was, presumably, the only common language among them.

His story bore little resemblance to the facts, although the watchers on the shore were not to know this. He described how, returning from his investigation of the bird sanctuary, he had been attacked without provocation by a white man who had drawn a pistol and shot him in the arm.

'Ginger,' breathed Algy in Bertie's ear.

'What do you do to this man?' asked one of those on board, in broken English.

Morgan leered in a way that sent a chill down Algy's spine. For all he knew the man might be telling the truth. 'Don't ask me dat,' replied Morgan, with a significance that implied the answer.

One of the white men, in a casual sort of way, was now dressing the wound. Morgan continued to complain of the way his assailant had tried to murder him. However, he had fixed him.

Von Stalhein stood watching and listening to all this without speaking. Indeed, he appeared not to take much notice. He fitted a cigarette into its holder and smoked patiently until the dressing of the wound was complete, when the negro finished his recital. Then he asked: 'Did you find the birds?'

'Sure I find dem,' declared Morgan.

'And you checked the photographs?'

'Dat's what I am sent for, ain't it?' returned Morgan insolently.

'Where are the photographs?'

Morgan produced an envelope which, judging from the conversation, held the flamingo snapshots taken by Hagen. The negro selected one, and tapping it with a black finger, handed it to von Stalhein. 'Dat's der place,' he asserted. There was no doubt about it, he averred. He had stood on the spot from which the picture must have been taken.

‘Excellent,’ acknowledged von Stalhein. He turned to his companions. ‘That’s all we wanted to find out. Now we can proceed.’

‘It’s too late to do anything today,’ said the man whom Algy thought was Zorotov. ‘The barometer is falling in a way I do not like, so I think we must stay here to see what happens. I do not like little ships in a rough sea. I admit it. Let us go below and talk of this, away from these cursed mosquitoes.’

All except the two coloured men disappeared down the companion-way.

‘This is our cue to pull out,’ Algy told Bertie. ‘We’re not likely to learn any more here and the sooner Biggles knows what we know the better. I don’t like the sound of Morgan’s story. It could only have been Ginger he met. If there was a scrap Ginger might have been hurt—if nothing worse.’

‘That fellow Morgan’s a liar, if ever I saw one,’ stated Bertie with unusual emphasis.

‘So he may be, but he’s a dangerous one,’ replied Algy. ‘By gosh! That chap told the truth about the mosquitoes. They’re getting bad. Let’s get out of this. I don’t like the look of the weather either. You heard what was said about the barometer falling. Let’s get mobile.’

With the caution the circumstances demanded, they made their way to the hard ground and then set off at the fastest pace possible for the rendezvous.

‘Ginger must have shot that blighter,’ said Bertie as they strode along.

‘It looks that way,’ admitted Algy. ‘Who else could it be? And who else would be carrying a gun? It couldn’t have been Biggles. He wouldn’t leave the lagoon.’

‘Pity Ginger didn’t make a better job of it,’ muttered Bertie. ‘Nasty piece of work that fellow Morgan. Better out of the way.’

‘We can be sure of this,’ went on Algy. ‘Ginger went to the flamingo ground. So did Morgan. They must have bumped into each other. There was a fight, and Ginger had to pull his gun—he wouldn’t have used it otherwise. Morgan stopped one with his arm. What happened to Ginger is anyone’s guess. I hope he’s all right.’

‘We shall soon know, old boy,’ said Bertie. ‘If he’s all right he’ll be back by the time we get home.’

Crossing some open ground they were met by a stiffish breeze, and Algy threw an appraising glance at an ugly cloud that was racing low across the sky. ‘The barometer was right, by the look of it,’ he remarked soberly. ‘That storm’s going to hit us.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Biggles will be in a flap about it, and about us being late. If it really starts to blow, he won’t dare to keep the machine where it is.’

‘In which case we shall be on a spot. Von Stalhein must know from Morgan’s story that we’re around.’

‘I’m afraid so.’

They strode on into the diffused glare of a sun that was now nearly on the horizon.

They found Biggles pacing the beach. ‘What the deuce have you been up to all this time?’ he greeted them trenchantly.

Algy answered with another question. 'Is Ginger back?'

'No.'

Algy frowned. 'That's bad.'

'Why?'

'He ran into that crook Morgan.'

Biggles stopped dead. 'How do you know that?'

'We've seen Morgan. Somebody—I reckon it could only have been Ginger—plugged him through the arm.' He went on to narrate what he and Bertie had learned from their reconnaissance.

Biggles heard him out, his face expressing his solicitude. 'That sounds grim to me,' was his verdict in a hard voice. 'The number of times I've said it's a mistake to break up the party, yet here I go on doing it. But there, it seemed the best way. Now the weather packs up on us. That's just dandy. You realize that if this wind gets any stronger I daren't stay here—not that getting off would be fun, if seas started rolling into the bay, as they're likely to. If Ginger was here I'd get out now. What the dickens can he be doing?'

'He might be hurt,' Algy pointed out.

'I haven't overlooked that possibility,' answered Biggles. 'What are we going to do? It won't help anybody if the machine is wrecked. If we get stranded here it might be months before we were picked up. That would be a nice prospect if we have Ginger, seriously hurt on our hands.'

Nobody answered. What Biggles had said was so obviously true that further comment seemed unnecessary.

Ten minutes passed. Biggles paced up and down, stopping sometimes to look at a line of white surf that was creeping ever farther into the bay.

'You can bet it's something outside his control that's keeping him, or he'd be here,' said Algy gloomily.

'It's no use kidding ourselves any longer,' returned Biggles. 'He must have got hurt in this affair with Morgan.'

'That's what Morgan said but I didn't believe it,' muttered Algy. 'After all, Ginger had a gun, and he used it,' he argued, not very convincingly.

Another ten minutes passed. There was still no sign of Ginger. The wind had nearly reached gale force, and with an overcast sky the light was beginning to fail. White breakers were rolling into the bay, causing the Otter to jerk uneasily at her anchor as the swell reached the shallow water where she was moored.

'Okay,' decided Biggles suddenly. 'I can't wait any longer. We daren't risk losing the machine. I shall stay here. Bertie can stay with me. Algy, you'll have to take the machine back to Jamaica. Come for us when the weather fairs up. If it stays bad you can fly over and have a look at us if you like, but don't try to get down on the water unless you're sure it's safe. I'll give you the okay if I'm about. Watch for signals. Keep clear of the mangroves. We'll throw some grub ashore and then the sooner you're off the better.'

Some tins of meat, biscuit and jam were carried ashore from the reserve supply of food and Algy took his place in the cockpit. Not without concern the others watched him taxi into position and race in a smother of foam towards the open sea.

‘The first wave will kick her into the air. Then she’ll either stay there or dive straight in,’ said Biggles in a flat voice.

The machine began to bounce a little as it raced into the area made turbulent by the ocean breakers; then, as Biggles had predicted, the surging foam of a broken roller tossed it into the air. For a moment it seemed to hang on the point of stalling; then it picked up and climbed steadily.

Biggles took a deep breath. ‘Good,’ he said, as the Otter faded into the murk. ‘He’s made it. By thunder, though, he was only just in time,’ he added, as a squall of rain tore across the bay and hid everything from view.

They picked up the rations and carried them up the beach to the only shelter available. It was meagre enough, simply a shallow recess among some stranded coral boulders. Still, it was better than nothing, and as Biggles pointed out, they dared not go any farther afield in a search for something better in case Ginger returned.

‘We shan’t see him tonight, now, old boy,’ asserted Bertie positively. ‘You don’t know what the going is like. It’s frightful; an absolute shocker; all thorns, holes, rocks and what have you. It’s bad enough in daylight, but after dark I’d say it’s no bally use at all.’

‘We shall have to go and look for him,’ said Biggles. ‘We’ll give him a few minutes more before we start.’

Squatting under the coral they watched the weather develop into a screaming gale accompanied by lashing rain that reduced visibility to zero.

‘I’m afraid you’re right,’ Biggles told Bertie, in a resigned voice. ‘He couldn’t travel in this. Nor could we. If we tried, we might pass within a dozen yards of each other without knowing it. It’s no use. We shall have to wait.’

STALEMATE

BIGGLES and Bertie spent a miserable night. They got little sleep. Added to the discomfort of the storm was the anxiety on Ginger's account, and they spent most of the night talking about the one thing or the other. However, towards morning the storm abated, and the dawn broke clear and bright. The open sea still tossed and foamed but inside the bay the breakers died and ended on the beach as angry wavelets. While the stars were still paling in the sky, Biggles and Bertie were on the move, wringing out their saturated clothes, glad that the period of inaction was past and looking forward to the sun to restore life to their chilled limbs.

After a quick bite of food, taken standing, they set off to find Ginger. They could not of course be sure that they were following precisely in his footsteps; all they could do was take a compass bearing on the lagoon as they knew he had, satisfied that this would keep them on the general line, certainly within hailing distance.

Stopping occasionally to look around, particularly in the direction of the mangroves—for they realized there was danger of collision with their enemies—they came upon the deserted village. Thinking that Ginger might have taken refuge from the weather in one of the houses, they hailed, and when this produced no reply they pushed on again, taking a route somewhat nearer to the shore than Ginger had, although they were not to know this. As a result they found something he had missed. Not that there was anything particularly remarkable about it. It was merely another cottage, in better repair than most, the reason being that it was occupied. Or it may have been because the house was in a habitable condition that it was occupied. At least, so it could be presumed, for standing near the door, an axe in her hand as if she had been chopping wood, was a massively-built negress of past middle-life. Tethered to a post nearby was a donkey.

Biggles was a little surprised, for he had supposed from what he had seen from the air that this end of the island was uninhabited. The only place where he had seen the smoke of cooking fires was at Mathew Town, where, as he knew, there was a coloured settlement; but that was on the extreme south-west tip of the island, forty miles or more away.

Apart from surprise, his only other emotion was satisfaction, for it seemed possible, indeed probable, that the woman would be able to give him information about Ginger, who, if he had not actually spoken to the woman, must have passed close by the place. With the object of asking the question he advanced towards the dwelling; but the moment the negress saw him coming she abandoned what she was doing and retired quickly indoors. The way she did this made it evident that she had no desire for conversation. To settle any doubt the door was slammed.

Biggles called. He tried cajolery, but it was no use. The woman did not answer and obviously had no intention of answering. That she was watching them, they knew, for every now and then a black face could be seen peeping round an ancient muslin curtain.

Biggles looked at Bertie and smiled bleakly. 'Apparently she doesn't like the look of us,' he said sadly. 'Maybe, she's shy. I imagine she rarely has visitors. No matter. Let's push on.'

'It looks to me mighty like a guilty conscience about something, old boy,' opined Bertie shrewdly.

They continued on their way, encountering the same difficulties and uncomfortable conditions as had Ginger on the previous day. They observed that these alone would have made it impossible for him to be back on time.

'He must have had a brutal walk in this stuff,' declared Biggles, looking for a way through a barricade of thorns. 'He'd never get through places like this in the dark. He must have known it so he probably didn't try.'

Neither of them had forgotten the possibility of Ginger having been killed or wounded by Morgan, for that there had been an encounter was certain. They did not refer to it, but as they walked along they examined the ground as well as the landscape. From time to time Biggles cupped his hands round his mouth and hailed. No answer came. In the empty distances the sound seemed flat and ineffectual.

When they reached the open area beyond the bushes where Ginger had met Morgan, to their great relief they saw him coming towards them. Ginger waved recognition, and in a few minutes they were together.

'Sorry I sent you on such a dirty jaunt as this, but I didn't realize the going was so abominable,' greeted Biggles. 'Are you all right?'

'Right as rain. Why?'

'You met Morgan, didn't you?'

'Too true I did. He came for me with a razor, but unfortunately for him I had my gun handy. I had to use it.'

'Quite right.'

'How did you know about Morgan?'

'The *Vega* is in the mangroves. Algy and Bertie were watching it and saw Morgan come back wounded.'

'I guessed the *Vega* was around,' said Ginger.

Biggles related briefly what had happened at Man-o'-War Bay. 'I'm sorry Algy had to go, but I daren't risk the machine being wrecked,' he concluded. 'What happened to you after the Morgan business? Where did you pass the night?'

'That mark we were so puzzled about near the end of the lagoon is a hut,' revealed Ginger. 'I started for home, but when the weather got really dirty, I realized I would never make it so I went back to the hut and spent the night there.'

'A hut, eh?' Biggles looked interested. 'Anything in it?'

'Not much.'

Ginger told all there was to tell, except that he did not mention the negress, regarding the incident as something outside their own affairs. 'It's fairly certain that Hagen used the hut,' he said in conclusion, showing Biggles the photographic film label.

'Someone else may have been there taking photos of the birds, but I must admit it doesn't seem very likely,' said Biggles pensively, looking at the slip of paper. 'How deep did you dig under this bedding stuff?'

'Not far. Six inches, maybe. I'd nothing to dig with. It was slow work grovelling like a rabbit or I'd have gone on with it, because I'm pretty sure that something is, or was, buried there. But as things were I thought I'd better get back and tell you about it.'

'Naturally,' acknowledged Biggles. 'Now we're so near, we'll have another shot at it right away. I'd like to have a look round anyway. As I don't normally carry a pick and shovel with me we shall have to do the best we can with sharpened sticks. Let's cut some.'

The only wood available was the stems of the thorn bushes, and these, while being far from ideal for the job, had to suffice. The thorns had first to be removed, so it was the best part of half an hour before they were equipped for the task on hand.

The hut was reached without incident. Ginger was posted at the door for possible visitors while Biggles and Bertie went to work on the floor. It was not easy, and hands, which had to be used to scrape away the loosened soil, were soon showing signs of the harsh treatment. But progress, if slow, was made.

After a while Biggles exclaimed and held up a button. Examining it, he declared that it was a cuff button from a jacket. There was no maker's name on it, so it told them nothing beyond the obvious fact that the ground had been disturbed; but the discovery set them working with greater zeal.

'You know, old boy, I've always wanted to dig up a jolly old treasure,' asserted Bertie, pausing to mop a streaming face.

'Well you're having your wish,' Biggles told him cheerfully.

'And I don't care if I never have to dig up another,' returned Bertie. 'Beastly business.'

There was another exclamation as Biggles struck something solid. 'Here we are,' he predicted, scratching away at the earth vigorously.

A piece of flat wood was exposed.

'What ho! Now for the jolly old doubloons, just like you read about—what,' cried Bertie excitedly.

More digging was necessary before the board could be moved, and by that time a square, in the nature of a lid, was exposed. Biggles got his fingers under the edge and tore it up. Below was a cavity. It was empty.

For several seconds nobody spoke. All eyes stared blankly into the vacant hole.

'Gone,' said Biggles in a dazed voice.

'Blow me down!' growled Bertie. 'After all that sweat.'

‘It must have been there,’ said Ginger awkwardly.

‘Of course it was there,’ muttered Biggles. ‘Everything fits. The lagoon. The mark. The birds—everything. This was Hagen’s cache. What else could it be?’ He looked up. ‘I’m afraid we’ve had it,’ he said heavily.

‘You think von Stalhein’s beaten us to it?’ queried Ginger.

Biggles didn’t answer for a moment. ‘It looks that way. Morgan may have dug it up, and having put it somewhere else, was on his way back when he ran into you.’

There was a short silence. Biggles stared at the hole, considering the matter. ‘No, there’s something wrong with that,’ he decided. ‘It doesn’t hook up with what happened yesterday afternoon at the *Vega*. Morgan’s behaviour, as Algy described it to me, merely suggested that he had located the lagoon, or the hut, from the photographs. Certainly nobody from the *Vega* has been here today or Ginger must have seen them: and if von Stalhein already had the box he wouldn’t have been hanging about in the mangroves. He’d have gone.’

Bertie put in a word. ‘But look here, old boy, Morgan might have got the box, or whatever it was, and decided to keep it himself. Come back for it later on—if you see what I mean. Being a crook, that’s the sort of thing he’d do. He could tell von Stalhein any old yarn.’

‘I see what you mean, all right, but it won’t do,’ answered Biggles slowly. ‘To start with, it’s some time since this dirt was turned over. It wasn’t dug up yesterday, or the day before. And if Morgan had got the box he wouldn’t have bothered to fill in the hole. Why should he? He could have told von Stalhein that this was not the place they were looking for.’

Bertie sighed. ‘Too true—too true. Somebody always knocks the polish off my bright ideas.’

‘Well, if von Stalhein hasn’t got the stuff, who has?’ questioned Ginger.

‘If I knew that I shouldn’t be sitting here like a dog that’s lost its dinner,’ growled Biggles. ‘I am still wondering if von Stalhein could somehow have got hold of the stuff.’

‘Well, here he comes, so you can ask him,’ rapped out Ginger from the door.

Biggles sprang to his feet. ‘Who else?’

‘Zorotov and Morgan.’

‘Where?’

‘They’re coming from the direction of the sea. They must have walked along the beach.’

‘That’s grand news,’ declared Biggles. ‘If von Stalhein is coming here, obviously he hasn’t got the stuff. That’s all I care about.’

‘But here, I say, old boy, what are you going to do about the bunch of scallywags?’ inquired Bertie anxiously.

‘Nothing!’

‘Nothing?’

‘Not a thing. What is there to do? The stuff isn’t here. Von Stalhein can dig dirt until he’s blue in the face as far as I’m concerned.’

Ginger was peeping round the doorpost. ‘They’re coming here,’ he stated.

‘Okay. Let ’em come,’ replied Biggles. ‘We’ll wait for them. Their faces, when they see us, should be better than a puppet-show. We couldn’t get away without them seeing us, anyhow, and I’m certainly not going to be seen running from any Iron Curtain riff-raff. If they want a fuss they can have it. Keep quiet.’ Biggles lit a cigarette.

Voices could now be heard approaching. English was the language used, apparently for Morgan’s benefit. Presently footsteps crunched on the shingle and brittle shells that fringed the lagoon. They stopped.

Von Stalhein spoke. ‘Yes, without doubt, this is the place,’ he said confidently. ‘He told me of the hut. Yes, it fits with the photos. There is the ridge with the flamingos’ nests.’

Zorotov answered, and it was clear at once from the way he spoke that it was he, not von Stalhein, who was in command of the party. He sounded irritable—put out, perhaps, by the long walk in the sun. ‘I hope for your sake you’re right,’ he said harshly, speaking with a pronounced foreign accent. ‘The same with you, Morgan. It is time you did something to earn the money we have paid you for so long. What are you standing there for? Go on. Get it, and let us leave this pestilential island.’

Footsteps advanced.

Biggles walked to the door of the hut and looked out. ‘Good morning, von Stalhein,’ he said evenly.

There was dead silence as the advancing party froze in its tracks.

‘I am afraid you’ve come a long way for nothing,’ said Biggles.

Of the others, von Stalhein was the first to recover. ‘What do you mean?’ he inquired frostily, his eyes on Biggles’s face.

‘The stuff isn’t here.’

‘What stuff?’

‘Oh, quit dissembling,’ replied Biggles, with a touch of impatience. ‘Let us call it Wolff’s scrapbook.’

‘He lies!’ cried Zorotov.

‘The trouble with liars is, they suppose everyone else to be a liar,’ answered Biggles smoothly.

Zorotov jerked a hand at Morgan. ‘Do something!’ he ordered.

The negro moved his feet nervously.

‘You’d be very foolish indeed to put your hand near your pocket,’ Biggles told him. ‘Try something silly and I’ll make a hole in your hide where it’ll hurt more than the one you collected yesterday. And that isn’t a lie, either.’

Von Stalhein walked forward to the door of the hut and looked inside. With set face he nodded curtly to Bertie and glanced at the empty hole. His eyes went round the bare walls. Then he looked at Biggles with raised eyebrows.

‘No, we haven’t got it,’ said Biggles softly.

‘Do you know—who has?’

‘Come—come,’ protested Biggles. ‘Would I be likely to tell you if I knew?’

Zorotov, pale and tight-lipped with chagrin, turned on von Stalhein in a fury and let out a spate of words. He spoke in a foreign language but was obviously being very rude.

Von Stalhein merely shrugged his shoulders.

Biggles shook his head sadly. ‘You know, von Stalhein, mysteries often come my way; but the one that always gets me beaten is why you, once an officer and still sometimes a gentleman, associate with people who behave as if they were brought up in a sewer. Stick a cactus in his mouth.’

Zorotov went off again, this time at Biggles; but Biggles cut in with a brittle ‘Shut up! You start that line of guff with me and I’ll show you what we do with people like you where I come from. Your miserable tools may stand for it, but I won’t.’

For the first time ever, Ginger thought he detected a shadow of shame on von Stalhein’s face. It was gone in a moment. His lips came together in a hard line and he turned away without a word.

Biggles drew gently on his cigarette, but he was round in a flash when Morgan’s hand moved, accidentally perhaps, towards his pocket. ‘As for you,’ he said grimly, ‘if ever I hear of you in Jamaica, or any other British island, I’ll have you put, for attempted murder, where your dirty pay packet won’t be much use to you. Get out of my sight, you sneaking traitor, before I get really angry and give myself the pleasure of shooting you here and now.’

‘That’s a threat!’ cried Zorotov, throwing out a hand and looking from one to the other. ‘I call on everyone to witness that this man makes a threat of murder.’

Biggles’s eyes glinted. ‘A threat? That wasn’t a threat. It was a promise. And it goes for you, too, you reptile.’

Ginger hadn’t seen Biggles so angry for a long time.

‘Quite right, old boy, quite right—absolutely,’ murmured Bertie, adjusting his eyeglass. ‘I’m with you, every time.’

‘I refuse to be drawn into fighting,’ declared Zorotov, with a great show of indignation.

‘Ha! Fighting!’ sneered Biggles. ‘I know your sort. Your idea of fighting is to beg house-room in a friendly country and then drop poison around so that you can grab the property.’ He turned again to von Stalhein. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ he inquired curiously. ‘There was a time, when I flew war-kites, when a German could be relied on to give as good as he got; and no one knows better than me how lucky I am still to be on top of the ground. Have these Reds got you mesmerized or something?’

Von Stalhein bit his lip. Still he did not speak. Presently he dropped his cigarette and heeled it viciously into the ground.

‘Okay,’ said Biggles quietly. ‘Have it your own way. But you go on flying with carrion crows and you’ll become one.’

Zorotov pointed a finger at Biggles. 'We shall meet again,' he said thickly.

'If we do, the pleasure will be all yours,' Biggles told him.

Zorotov turned abruptly and strode away, followed by his colleagues. After they had gone about a hundred yards they stopped, and, from Zorotov's violent gesticulating, what appeared to be an argument ensued.

'Throw him in the drink!' shouted Biggles.

The invitation was ignored. The three men walked on and were soon lost to sight among the sand dunes.

'You'll be asking von Stalhein to come and dine with us next,' said Ginger cynically.

'There's a difference between a bad man and a good man gone wrong,' answered Biggles coldly, as he turned back into the hut. 'All that's wrong with von Stalhein is he's allowed a bug to get into his brain.'

'So have a lot of other people, and they're not much use to anybody,' returned Ginger bluntly. 'It's up to them to winkle it out, not us.'

'Okay. Forget it,' muttered Biggles.

'What's more to the point is, where do we go from here?' put in Bertie. 'I mean, have we time for a dip in the lagoon to freshen us up a bit, so to speak, after the recent slummy backchat?'

'No, we haven't,' Biggles told him shortly. 'What we have to do now is to find the person who rifled the cache. The chances are that whoever did it is still on the island. People don't come and go very often. Whoever's got the stuff may not realize the value of it. Who on earth would come to a place like this I can't imagine, but that's the nut we've got to crack.'

'I know one person who comes this way,' said Ginger, suddenly remembering.

Biggles started. 'You do?'

'Yes. An old woman. A negress who I suspect comes here to pinch flamingo eggs. She was here yesterday. I saw her.'

Biggles looked interested. 'Is that so? If she's in the habit of coming here, she may be able to tell us something. Which way did she go?'

Ginger pointed. 'Over there. She's got a donkey.'

'Has she though? In that case I think I know where she lives,' replied Biggles. 'We passed her cottage on the way out. Let's go and have a word with her. I must admit that when we passed her place she wasn't exactly what you might call affable, but a little blarney and a few dollars ought to put that right. Wait a minute, though.' He looked at the others as if another thought had occurred to him. 'Maybe she *does* know something,' he went on softly. 'Maybe that's why she gave us the cold and stony. Bertie said at the time that it looked like a guilty conscience, and he may have been right. That would account for her wanting to keep clear of us. Come on! It's time we were getting back anyway, in case Algy comes over. Now the storm is past he probably will. It would be too bad if he bumped into Zorotov after what I gave him. I think the coast is the nearest way.'

They set off. The new route took them along the edge of the lagoon. Biggles surveyed it. In fact he waded out for some distance. 'There seems to be plenty of water at this end,' he announced. 'Pity we didn't know about it earlier. We could have put the machine down here instead of using Man-o'-War Bay, which from now on will be a bit too close to the *Vega* to be healthy. If Algy comes, I shall feel inclined to bring the machine up here, out of the way of trouble.'

The journey was resumed.

MORGAN TRIES AGAIN

It took Biggles, with Bertie and Ginger, the best part of an hour to get back to the cottage occupied by the negress, even though the coastal route they followed was nothing like as bad as the cross-country compass course they had taken on the outward journey. A certain amount of caution was necessary, for, as Biggles said, their enemies were quite good enough to shoot at them from cover if an opportunity offered. It was assumed that they had gone back to the *Vega*, but this was only surmise; they might equally well be lying in wait for them. However, they saw nothing of them.

Biggles's main anxiety was concerned with the negress, whom he feared might have gone off somewhere; for this would mean either looking for her, a formidable task, or waiting for her to come home, which might mean a long delay. Again, if she saw them, judging from her behaviour on the previous occasion, she might give them the slip altogether. In the event, these fears did not materialize. The woman was there, and they were made aware of it while some distance away in a manner that provided ample scope for speculation.

From the direction of the cottage, as they approached, came a sound of shattering blows as of metal. It was, as Ginger remarked, as if someone was throwing rocks at a dustbin. The volume of noise was certainly just as great, if not greater.

As they drew still nearer, another sound, one that did nothing to elucidate the mystery, became audible. Between blows, the striker appeared to be treating another person to some calculated abuse. It became possible to hear the words.

'So you won't, eh?' *Bang*. 'Yo don behave stubborn, eh?' *Crash*. 'I show youse.' *Whang*. 'Come back here, yo.' *Zonk*. 'How yus like dat one, huh?' *Bang—crash*.

'Sounds as if the old crow is walloping her moke,' guessed Bertie.

'If it's the donkey that's getting it, it must be wearing a tin suit,' said Ginger.

Emerging from the bushes, the mystery was at once solved, and so curious was the spectacle provided that they all stopped to watch, for so far the buxom negress responsible for the din had not seen them. Swinging an axe, she was battering an object already so mutilated that it was impossible to say what it was. Whatever its original shape may have been, it no longer conformed to any common geometrical pattern. The maximum dimension was about three feet. That the object was of metal was made apparent by the noise it made when the axe struck it and sent it bowling over the rocky ground. Metal gleamed white where the axe had hit, although the original colour had been black or dark brown.

A short distance away, watching the exhibition with the placid indifference of its kind, was the donkey, loaded with two basket panniers.

Biggles advanced until he was between the woman and the house, when, suddenly seeing him, her exertions ended abruptly with the axe half-raised. Rolling eyes, showing the whites, betraying her surprise.

‘Having a little trouble, ma’am?’ questioned Biggles quietly.

Slowly the woman lowered the axe. For a moment it looked as if she intended bolting, but Biggles held out a cigarette case, smiling, and that at once eased the situation. She accepted the offer. ‘My respects to you, master,’ she said, taking a light from Biggles and exhaling smoke with obvious relish.

‘What are you trying to do?’ inquired Biggles casually.

‘Dis old box, he won’t open no-how,’ declared the negress.

Ginger, drawing near, saw that the object was indeed a box, or had been one before being battered out of recognition. He thought he perceived a slight resemblance to a pressed-steel uniform case, such as travellers often use in the tropics where white ants are liable to attack any softer material. The colour, such as remained, was right, too. He also saw the cause of the trouble. The negress was telling the truth. The receptacle carried two heavy brass locks, and they were still intact, as were two handles, one at either side. Clearly, the woman, not having a key, was trying to open the box or get to the contents with an instrument which, while powerful, was quite unsuitable for the purpose. Anyone who has tried to open a tin of sardines without a key, as had Ginger on more than one occasion, will appreciate the difficulty of the undertaking.

‘Where are the keys?’ enquired Biggles blandly.

The negress threw him a sidelong glance. ‘I dun lost dem,’ she explained.

‘That was careless of you,’ chided Biggles. ‘Why not tell the truth and say you never had them?’

The woman sighed. ‘Yus too smart for me, suh.’

‘Where did you get the box?’ persisted Biggles.

‘Found it, suh, washed up on the beach.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Susannah Shaw.’

‘Very well, Susannah,’ went on Biggles. ‘Now suppose you go on telling the truth about the box.’

The woman hung her head. She was a simple soul, and her embarrassment was pathetic.

‘Come on,’ pressed Biggles.

‘I found it, suh.’

‘Of course you found it,’ agreed Biggles. ‘But where? Come on now. You don’t want me to report you to the government for stealing flamingo eggs, do you?’

‘No, *suh*.’

‘You know what’ll happen to you if I do?’

‘Yes, master.’ The woman was now looking frightened.

‘Very well. Suppose I tell *you* where you found the box? You dug it up in the hut over by the flamingos, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, suh.’ The voice was hardly audible.

‘It’s all right, Susannah,’ went on Biggles kindly. ‘We’re not going to report you, or anything like that. But we happened to be looking for a box like the one you’re trying to open. It doesn’t belong to you. It belongs to the government and you’ll have to give it up.’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘You’ll get a reward, of course.’

She brightened at that.

‘How long have you had it?’

‘ ’Bout a week, suh.’

‘And you haven’t managed to get it open yet?’

‘No, suh.’

Biggles smiled. ‘You’ve had a good try, I see. What did you think was in it?’

‘Treasure, suh. Folks is allus finding treasure round the islands, hid away in dem bad old pirate days.’

Biggles picked up the box, not without difficulty, for it was heavy, as being of metal it would be, apart from the contents. He rocked it to and fro. ‘Doesn’t sound like treasure to me,’ he said. ‘Feels more like paper inside.’ He tried to squint through one of the gashes made by the axe, but not succeeding, allowed the box to fall back on the ground. ‘How did you know the box was in the hut, Susannah?’ he asked. ‘Come along now, we might as well have the whole truth. You’ve nothing to be afraid of.’

Nervously, and sometimes near to tears, the negress told her story in a way that left no doubt about its veracity. It sounded reasonable enough, too. Her husband, she said in effect, had been appointed by the government, at a small salary, to watch over the flamingos and see that no one robbed the nests. He had built the hut for shelter while he was so employed. That was a long time ago. She couldn’t say exactly how long. Anyway, he had died. The money had stopped coming, and she, as a widow, had found herself destitute. The remedy was at hand and she had succumbed to temptation. She had taken some eggs—only a few at first—to Mathew Town, where she had sold them. They were, she claimed, good to eat. She also claimed, ingenuously, and perhaps truthfully, that in doing this she was helping the government, because otherwise ‘the black trash’ of Mathew Town would have raided the nesting ground and wiped out the whole colony. As it was, they were afraid of her, and kept clear. After all, she said, as her husband had been in charge, and no one else had been appointed, the flamingos were her responsibility.

Ginger could not repress a smile at this. Clearly, the truth was, without the flamingos, she would be in danger of starvation. So she protected them. In protecting them she helped the government—and herself at the same time.

She went on. One day, a long time ago, when she was collecting a few eggs, she saw a man, a stranger, come up from the sea carrying a box. Afraid that he might be a government inspector she hid herself and watched. The man went to the hut. When he went away he no longer carried the box. She knew the box must be in the hut, but she didn't even look for it, although she had a good idea where it was. She was not a thief. Time passed. At intervals the man appeared. Always he went to the hut. Then came a long time when she did not see him and she decided that he was never coming back; so, her curiosity getting the better of her, she went to the hut and without much difficulty found the box. She dug it up and carried it home, only to find that she couldn't open it. The only tool she possessed was the axe. She dared not take the box to Mathew Town for fear of questions being asked. Even if she had borrowed a better tool she would have been followed to see for what purpose it was required; for there were many stories of treasure on the island and everyone was always on the look-out. This, she affirmed, was the truth. Seeing white men on the island, she was afraid they had come for the box, and not daring to confess, had tried to keep out of sight. But provisions being low she had been compelled to risk a raid on the eggs. That was all. She was 'berry, berry sorry' if she had done wrong, and hoped she wouldn't be taken away from her home.

'Of course not,' Biggles hastened to assure her. 'But I shall have to take the box because it is government property.' He took out his notebook, counted out some notes and handed them over. 'There you are, Susannah. That should keep you going for some time. But mind, no more egg-stealing. When I get home I shall suggest to the government that you are made the guardian of the flamingos, and paid the same as your husband before he died.'

'Thank you, master. You berry kind, suh,' acknowledged the old woman with tears in her eyes.

'Meanwhile I wouldn't say anything about this to anybody.'

'No, suh.'

'All right. Good-bye, Susannah.'

'Good-bye, suh. God's blessing on you.'

'Bring the box,' Biggles told the others. 'It's a bit on the heavy side, so carry it between you. We haven't far to go.'

'We've got it!' cried Ginger triumphantly, as they set off in the direction of Man-o'-War Bay.

'I think it must be the stuff we came for,' assented Biggles cautiously.

'Let's open it and make sure,' suggested Ginger. 'It would be a sell-out if we were wrong.'

'Open it?' queried Biggles. 'With what? We can no more open the confounded thing than could Susannah. Good thing she couldn't open it, or having no use for the plans, she would probably have used them to light the fire. Then we should never have known what had become of them and the Ministry of Defence would have had sleepless nights for years to come. Hark!'

The drone of an aircraft was wafted on the gentle breeze.

‘Algy!’ said Ginger, with satisfaction. ‘Just at the right time.’

‘Right on the dot,’ agreed Bertie. ‘Everything is all opening and shutting. Jolly good.’

The machine was evidently flying low, for they couldn’t see it. The engines died. They could hear it gliding into the bay with the obvious intention of landing.

They hurried on.

They still had nearly half a mile to go when from the bay came a sudden burst of gunshots.

‘That can only mean that von Stalhein is there,’ rapped out Biggles, and broke into a run. Bertie and Ginger struggled along behind him with the box. ‘Leave that!’ said Biggles tersely. ‘If they shoot up the machine, we’ve had it. Ginger, you stay and take care of the box. We’ll be back. Come on, Bertie.’

He raced away, Bertie at his heels, leaving Ginger standing by the box, slightly bewildered by the sudden change of outlook. He stared at the box. Lying in the open it looked dangerously conspicuous. Should von Stalhein come that way, as was possible, he could hardly fail to see it. He would guess what it was. The thing would be better out of sight, Ginger decided quickly. Where could he put it?

There was not much in the way of a hiding-place. All he could do at short notice was drag the thing into a small hollow near a tangle of prickly-pear. Over it he threw anything that came to hand—grass, sticks, dead leaves and other rubbish. This did not entirely cover it, but it was at least well camouflaged and unlikely to be seen except by anyone who knew it was there.

While thus engaged he kept an ear in the direction of the bay, from which came sounds that fanned his anxiety to acute alarm. There were more shots. These were followed by the roar of engines and the unmistakable signs of an aircraft taking off. He stood still, listening. The drone receded. Then it increased in volume as if the machine were returning. The sound ended abruptly as the engines were cut. Still he could not see the machine; but he could hear it flying. What on earth could Algy be doing? He stood rigid, trying to follow the machine with his ears. The sound faded. Silence fell.

After a while, as everything remained quiet, he sat down on the box to wait. There was no indication of what was going on at the bay. It was all very worrying. Anything could have happened. Apart from events elsewhere, the responsibility of being left alone in charge of the box weighed heavily upon him. On its safe custody, he reflected, might rest the fate of nations. He couldn’t even get at the papers to burn them in an emergency. What else could he do with the box, he wondered, looking around in desperation? Nothing, it seemed. Perhaps Biggles would soon be back. He hoped so, fervently.

This hope was not fulfilled. An hour passed. The uneasy silence dragged on. What was happening? Something serious, obviously, or Biggles would be back by now. He fell back on the old solace of no news being good news. But he found it unconvincing. In a case like this he felt that no news could only mean bad news. How right he was in this, fortunately he did not know.

Many possibilities occurred to him, but without any means of checking them they merely added weight to the burden of his apprehensions. Not far away there was a low ridge that promised a view of the sea. He was tempted to go to it, but he daren't risk leaving the box. Mere curiosity would not justify it. Biggles had told him to stay where he was, so he stayed. At least he had the comfort of knowing that they were aware of his position.

For something to do, to occupy his mind and curb his impatience, he tried, as Biggles had done, to see inside the box through the largest of the gashes made by the axe. Using his knife as a lever, he managed to widen it a fraction, enough to reveal, just inside, the corner of a sheet of paper. After several failures he succeeded in impaling this with one of the long, stiff cactus thorns, and drew it up until he could get hold of it with finger and thumb. He was now able to pull the paper through the slit to the extent of about three inches. Farther than that it would not come, for the paper, being stiff, jammed against the ends of the slit and started to tear against the sharp edges of the metal when he applied force. However, he could see enough for his purpose. The paper was white on one side and blue on the other. On the blue side were the white lines of a drawing of some mechanical device. The lettering was in German, and the dimensions marked in metres. That was really all he wanted to know. These were Hagen's plans without a doubt. There could hardly be two sets of German blueprints on the island. With a feeling of satisfaction that he had employed his time usefully, he tucked the paper back into the box and resumed his vigil.

The minutes of another half-hour crawled round the face of his watch. The breeze died. The sun blazed. A blue and yellow striped lizard emerged from its hole and flicked a long tongue at an incautious fly. A red and green humming-bird, humming like an overgrown bee, hung poised in mid-air while its beak explored a scented cactus blossom within a yard of his head. But Ginger was not interested in natural history at that moment.

The snapping of a twig not far away brought him to his feet with a sigh of relief. Biggles at last, he thought. From the direction of the bay a man came into sight. It was not Biggles. It was a coloured man. Presently he saw that it was Morgan. From the manner of his progress he was on a definite errand. Where the man was going Ginger neither knew nor cared. The fact that he was there was enough.

Slowly, Ginger began to sink down, hoping that he would not be seen. The last thing he wanted, with a box in his charge, was trouble of any sort, with anybody, least of all with the murderous negro.

For a brief interval it looked as if all would be well. Morgan strode on. But at the last moment something made him turn his head, and looking across the patch of open ground he saw Ginger crouching there. In a flash he had swerved aside into some bushes. A second later a revolver crashed, and Ginger, who was thinking in terms of razors rather than firearms, felt the wind of the bullet on his cheek. His reaction was to duck behind the box, a position from which he returned the shot. He knew that shooting at an unseen target was usually hopeless, but he thought he would let the negro know that he was armed. Anyway, the shot missed. Apparently Morgan having fired, had shifted his position, for the next shot, which followed quickly, came from a different

place. Ginger crouched even lower as the bullet splashed pieces of fleshy cactus leaf over him.

For a little while there was silence, a sultry, attentive silence.

Then, watching closely, Ginger saw a bush shake slightly. Knowing that he was fighting for his life, he didn't hesitate. He raised his pistol, took careful aim, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled again harder. Still nothing happened, and his mouth went dry with mortification as he realized that the inherent weakness of almost all automatics had chosen this moment to operate. His gun had jammed.

In a fever of haste and exasperation he worked on it, trying to clear the cartridge; but it refused to budge. He saw what had caused the calamity. Sand. Only recently he had cleaned the weapon. There must have been a smear of oil left on it. Sand or dirt in his pocket had stuck to the oil.

Had it not been for the box he would have abandoned valour for discretion and made a bolt for it. In fact he considered doing so. But the box! If he left it, he might never see it again. He decided that he would rather be shot than have to tell Biggles that he had lost the box—which, incidentally, was his only cover.

Another shot, from a fresh place, came unpleasantly close. His inability to return it would, he feared, tell Morgan the truth; that his gun was out of action. Or he might think that he was out of ammunition. At any rate, from his failure to shoot back, the negro would soon realize that he was unable to do so, and that would be the end. His only hope, he thought, was that Biggles or Bertie would hear the shooting and come to see what it was about. Even that was cold comfort, for their first indication of what was afoot might be a bullet.

Another shot struck the box with a metallic *whang*, and in ricocheting grazed his arm. Worse and worse. Morgan would naturally wonder what the bullet had struck, and in due course investigate. Up to then Ginger had a vague hope that even if he were killed Morgan would fail to discover the box. Now even that consolation was denied him.

He could see from the occasional shake of a bush that the negro was getting near, apparently seeking an angle from which his target would be fully exposed.

With the end so near, Ginger tried a bluff. 'One more step, Morgan, and I'll shoot,' he shouted. But somehow, even to himself, his voice lacked conviction.

Apparently Morgan thought so too, for with a yell, gun raised, he burst from the bushes and charged.

Ginger sprang to his feet and hurled his useless gun into the distorted face. Then, in taking a pace to the rear, his heel caught in a projecting root and he went over backwards. His head struck a rock. Sparks danced before his eyes. Dazed, he tried to claw his way to his feet. As in a nightmare he saw a tall black body towering over him. A gun roared.

A great weight descended on him, pressing him into the ground.

HEAVY ODDS

GINGER had been right in his supposition that something serious had happened to delay Biggles's return. Not only had things happened, they were continuing to happen.

Biggles and Bertie, racing towards the bay regardless of thorns or anything else, were just in time to see Zorotov, with von Stalhein and the negro, running towards the far side, which was the direction of the mangroves and, of course, the yacht. Zorotov, looking round before disappearing into cover, saw them, and fired a shot or two; but at such a long range they did no damage.

Biggles did not trouble to reply. He was more concerned with the Otter, which was in the air, heading out to sea, having taken off again after landing. In a way he was relieved to know that the machine was still airworthy, but he was upset at having lost touch with it. But, as he told Bertie, it was just one of those things. They couldn't be everywhere at once. Had they stayed in the bay they wouldn't have got the box. They couldn't have it all ways. So, frustrated, all they could do was stand and watch. After the reception he had received there seemed little likelihood of Algy coming back—at any rate to the bay.

For what had happened was plain enough to see. Zorotov and his confederates had taken the coastal route home, and by an unfortunate chance must have been walking round the beach of Man-o'-War Bay when the aircraft appeared. Von Stalhein, guessing its ownership and purpose, would not be slow to seize an opportunity so fortuitously thrown in his way. He and the others had waited for the machine to land and then opened fire on it with all the weapons they had in the hope of putting it out of action and so marooning Biggles and his party on the island. But to put an aircraft out of action with single shots is not an easy matter, and having failed in their objective they had proceeded on their way, deriving some satisfaction, no doubt, from having forced the machine to abandon its mooring.

But had they failed in their intention? Biggles, staring at the receding Otter, was not sure; for once or twice the aircraft had sideslipped a little in a manner which, with an experienced pilot at the controls, could not be attributed to carelessness or lack of ability. Such slipshod flying could hardly be accidental; that is, if all was well. There seemed to be no reason for Algy to lose height deliberately. Wherefore Biggles watched the machine with a frown of anxiety furrowing his forehead. When, presently, the Otter started to make a slow turn back towards the land, all he could say was: 'He's coming in. I hope he's all right.'

'He's looking for some other place to get down,' surmised Bertie confidently. 'He wouldn't just push off and leave us.'

‘I agree he wouldn’t be likely to try to land here again after what happened,’ said Biggles. ‘Look at him!’ he went on quickly, as the Otter appeared to waver, as if on the point of stalling. ‘There’s something wrong there. Either Algy or the machine, has been hit. Let’s get on higher ground where we can keep him in sight.’

Leaving the beach inside the bay they scrambled up the rough ground behind it, and then went on a little way to the highest point, a position which commanded a view not only of the sky, but of the coast-line stretching away into the far distance, in the direction of the lagoons.

‘He’s coming down,’ said Biggles tersely, his eyes on the machine.

The drone had faded; the nose of the aircraft had tilted down, and after making a slow, wide turn, it began to lose height towards a part of the island some two miles or so from where they stood. ‘He’s going to try to get down on the beach,’ guessed Bertie.

‘Or the lagoon,’ replied Biggles. ‘Come on, we’d better see what’s the matter. He may be all right, but there’s something I don’t like about the way he’s handling the machine.’

Hurrying forward they saw the Otter lowering its wheels and making a somewhat bumpy landing on what, from a distance, looked like a broad strip of sand fringing the sea at that point. The actual spot, Biggles judged, was not far from the lagoon.

‘He could have got down on the near side of the lagoon where we saw the deep water, had he known about it,’ muttered Biggles. ‘Pity. I suppose he wouldn’t risk it.’

‘I can’t see Algy,’ panted Bertie, as they ran on.

‘Nor I. I am afraid that looks bad. Having got down, he wouldn’t just sit there if he was all right.’

Although they made the best speed possible it took them nearly an hour to reach the aircraft, for the going was usually bad, and sometimes awful, soft sand alternating with dead, jagged coral, or areas of a squat, impenetrable cactus, armed with three-inch thorns.

Running roughly parallel with the beach, and only a short distance from it, was the reef which, in rough weather, broke the force of the waves which otherwise might have swept far into the low flat hinterland. But now the sea had fallen to a dead calm, and the water, clear and blue, did no more than caress its ancient enemy. On the other hand, to the right, between gaps in the dunes that backed the beach, it was possible to see the tranquil surface of the lagoon, emerald green in the bright sunlight.

They found Algy in the cockpit. One glance at his pale face was enough to tell them that he was hurt; but he greeted them with a wan smile.

‘Sorry about this,’ he apologized.

‘Where are you hit?’ asked Biggles crisply.

‘I got one in the thigh. I don’t think it’s too bad. What worried me more, they either holed a tank or cut the petrol lead. My pressure dropped. I could smell petrol, anyway, so knowing I was losing juice, I turned back and put her down at the first available space. I was scared of passing out before I could get her on the carpet. I felt a bit sick at first but I’m okay now.’

Biggles was already opening the first-aid outfit. 'Good show, laddie. I'll do what I can here and then get you to a doctor. I should be able to fix the petrol leak. We shall have to move fast. Bertie, I'll tell you what. You leave this to me. Hoof it back to Ginger as fast as you can go. Bring him along, and the box. By the time you've done that we should be ready to move off.'

Algy's eyes opened wide. 'Have you got the stuff?'

'We think so.'

'Great work.'

Bertie spoke. 'If I see the skunks who did this, do you mind if I shoot them?' He put the question to Biggles.

'As long as you don't waste time or get yourself shot in the effort.'

'It was that infernal negro who got me,' said Algy. 'He was nearly in the machine before I saw him.'

'That's just what I wanted to know, old boy,' said Bertie.

Dropping back on to the sand he started off at a steady trot, which was as fast as it was possible to travel over the rough ground, in the heat, without risk of injury or complete exhaustion. He knew the way, so he was not at a loss on that account.

Although he was fit, he was making heavy weather of it by the time he was within striking distance of his destination. Breathing heavily, his face streaming perspiration and followed by a cloud of flies, he was on what he told himself was the last lap when he was startled by a gunshot not far ahead. Realizing that it could only mean one thing, that Ginger was in trouble, he called on every muscle for a final effort.

More shots at intervals acted as a spur, and when finally he tore through the bushes that tried to hold him back he was not altogether surprised by what he saw.

From a distance of ten yards he was just in time to see Ginger, with Morgan almost on top of him, hurl his pistol and go over backwards.

Bertie did not hesitate. There was no time for reflection, or even a challenge. Jerking out his gun he snapped a shot at the negro.

At such a range it was hardly possible to miss.

Morgan sprang erect, turned an astonished face to Bertie, crumpled, and fell across Ginger who was twisting desperately in his efforts to rise.

Bertie ran forward and pulled him clear.

White and shaken Ginger scrambled to his feet. 'Thanks,' he gasped, even then aware that the word, in the circumstances, sounded foolish. 'By gosh! You were only just in time,' he stammered.

Bertie was looking at Morgan, and seeing where his bullet had struck, shook his head. 'He's had it,' he observed. 'No time to do anything but shoot, old boy; no time at all. Another tick and you'd have had the chop.'

'As far as Morgan is concerned I couldn't care less,' said Ginger weakly, squatting on the ground to recover his strength and composure. 'If ever a man got what was coming to him, he has. Another jiffy and he'd have got me.'

‘He shot Algy, the hound.’

‘You don’t mean—’

‘Plugged him in the thigh when he landed. Biggles is taking care of him. But what about you, laddie? Are you all right?’

‘A bit rattled, that’s all.’

‘Why did you let the rascal get so close?’

‘Gun jammed.’

Bertie looked shocked. ‘I say! How frightful.’

‘Are you telling me! You were a long way away. What happened to you?’

As briefly as possible Bertie told him. ‘On your feet, old top, and let’s get mobile,’ he concluded briskly. ‘Algy may be worse than he pretends and Biggles is in a flap about getting him to hospital. Where’s this beastly box?’

‘Here.’ Ginger kicked it. ‘What are you going to do about this?’ He pointed at Morgan.

‘Leave him where he is. What else can we do? I mean to say we’ve no time to dig holes. Nothing to dig with either. His pals can do that. They’ll find him.’

‘We’d better get out before they find us,’ said Ginger. ‘I’ve had enough trouble for one day. Let’s get to Biggles and leave him to decide what to do about it. Maybe he’ll drop a message to von Stalhein.’

‘That’s the ticket,’ agreed Bertie. ‘Let’s get along. This running about doesn’t suit me. I’m positively sticky. Disgusting.’

‘We might have a quick dip in the sea as we go along,’ suggested Ginger. ‘I’m not exactly as clean as a new pin myself. Come on! Let’s get it over.’

A CLOSE FINISH

GINGER and Bertie picked up the box between them and started off, striking diagonally towards the sea, which Bertie now knew from experience was the best way, although it could not be called easy.

But when they came into sight of the open water they halted with one accord, and the box dropped from their hands with a clatter as they stared in astonishment at a vessel that was nosing its way in, along the coast. It was a submarine. There were several men on deck staring towards the shore.

‘Well, blow me down!’ ejaculated Bertie. ‘Is it one of ours?’ asked Ginger, in a curious voice.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ answered Bertie. ‘It’s up to something, though. No skipper would risk his ship as close in as that without a jolly good reason.’

‘I’ve seen that submarine before, now I come to think of it,’ declared Ginger. ‘Our first day out. It submerged when we got close to it. At least I saw a vessel and it disappeared mysteriously. It must have been hanging about here for some time.’

‘Don’t tell me they are pals of von Stalhein,’ said Bertie, in a startled voice.

‘They’re more likely to be pals of Zorotov.’

‘D’you know, old boy, I believe you’re right,’ returned Bertie slowly. ‘It’s a big prize they’re after, don’t forget. Yes, by Jove! Look!’ With outstretched finger he pointed to a small yacht that came churning round the headland of the bay.

‘The *Vega*!’

‘Absolutely. You’re right, laddie. No doubt about it. The *Vega* had radio. We saw the aerial. That stinker Zorotov has called up the submarine for help.’

‘That sub has seen the machine and is making for it,’ asserted Ginger, in a voice charged with apprehension as the full purport of what he was saying struck him.

‘They daren’t come right in.’

‘No, but they’ve got guns.’

‘Here, I say, that’s a nasty thought, old boy.’

‘It’ll be nastier if they use them,’ muttered Ginger. ‘Come on. Let’s run for it.’

Picking up the box they started off again.

‘They’ve spotted us,’ panted Ginger, before they had gone far. ‘They’re launching a dinghy. If it lands between us and the Otter we’ve had it.’

They tore on at a speed which in normal circumstances they would have held to be impossible. The box impeded them. Its shape made it awkward to carry single-handed, yet between them it meant that in places they had to go in single file. They dropped it several times. Scratched by thorns, and knocking themselves against projecting coral, they ran on.

Yet in spite of their efforts it was soon clear that they would lose the race. Not only was the *Vega* turning in towards them, but the dinghy from the submarine, under the power of six oars, was fairly skimming over the calm water, making for a gap in the reef roughly halfway between them and the aircraft.

Several shots were fired, either from the *Vega*, the submarine, or the dinghy. Ginger didn't know which, and he didn't risk a broken leg looking to see. But they settled any doubt about the intention of the submarine. The shots went wide, anyway, as was to be expected, since they were in any case being fired from a moving vessel. But smacking into the coral or kicking up the sand they did nothing to ease the situation.

It soon became apparent to Ginger that they were attempting the impossible. The Otter was still nearly a mile away. The dinghy was only two hundred yards from the beach. Inevitably they would be cut off. There appeared to be nothing they could do, and nothing that Biggles could do either. Ginger was just saying so to Bertie when the Otter's engines came to life.

'He's seen what's going on, anyway,' panted Ginger.

'He's coming for us.'

'Not a hope. He couldn't land on this stretch without cracking up. He knows that.'

Boom. A gun on the submarine flashed. A second or two later the sand behind the Otter fountained into the sky.

'That's the finish,' gasped Ginger.

Again the gun flashed. But the Otter was now racing tail up over the sand, going away from them. It was only just in time, for the shell burst on the spot where it had been standing.

Ginger stopped and dropped the box. 'No use,' he muttered. 'He's away.'

'He couldn't very well stay where he was,' Bertie pointed out.

'No. And he won't be likely to just push off and leave us here,' asserted Ginger confidently.

Crouching behind some coral in order not to offer themselves as stationary targets, they watched the machine take off, by which time the anti-aircraft guns on the submarine were spurting streams of tracer shells across its track. But no sooner was the Otter airborne than it spun round, almost on a wing tip, and came racing back so low that the shells were well above it.

'Look at him!' exclaimed Ginger admiringly, as the Otter started taking evasive action. 'That's flying for you!'

He ducked instinctively as the Otter roared low over them. A message streamer came hurtling down.

Ginger dashed out, picked it up, ran back, and snatching out the message, read aloud: *'Sink box in deep water off reef, then make for deep end of lagoon.'*

'They won't be able to get their sights on the lagoon,' said Bertie.

'But he says sink the box,' stammered Ginger.

'Then let's sink it,' returned Bertie calmly. 'He's not risking these stinkers getting hold of it. Quite right. Lay hold. Here we go.'

Picking up the box by the handles they ran down the beach to the shallow water inside the nearest point of the reef. Through it, splashing and stumbling in their haste, they floundered in a cloud of spray. Reaching the reef they scrambled up on it, the box banging and bumping as they dragged it to the far side.

'Here we are—this'll do,' gasped Ginger.

They forced the box into the water and held it half under. And even at that desperate moment it struck Ginger as fantastic that had it not been for the negress gashing holes in the box with her axe in her efforts to open it, they would have been unable to dispose of it. But he realized that Biggles must have taken that into account.

All too slowly the box filled, bubbles pouring up as the water poured in. It lost its buoyancy, became sluggish and began to settle.

Ginger, staring down into nothingness, as it seemed, suffered a twinge of vertigo. So clear was the water that it was like looking over the edge of the world into a remote blue void inhabited by ghostly shapes that became dim and vague as they merged into the darkness of the distant depths.

'Right!' called Bertie. 'Let go!'

Ginger released his hold.

Down—down—down, quite slowly, went the box, into a liquid world as remote as the moon, an unknown world from which there could be no return.

'Come on, laddie, run for it,' said Bertie.

As they got up Ginger saw that the dinghy was landing some three hundred yards from them. The crew were pulling it up the sand.

Following Bertie he splashed his way back to dry ground and up the beach to the cover of the nearest dunes. Shots followed them. From a hollow Bertie sent some shots back, 'to discourage them from being in too much of a hurry', as he said. Then, on they went through the dunes, and there, on the limpid green water of the lagoon, was the Otter, her engines ticking over. Reeling drunkenly as loose sand clogged their weary feet they blundered towards it.

Biggles appeared in the cockpit, beckoning furiously. But they could go no faster. In a world that was becoming unreal Ginger saw Biggles pull his gun and empty it at an unseen target. Flamingos, scarlet blotches against the blue, were screaming protests against the unusual visitation. There were nests, too, tall piles of mud and weed with a little hollow on top. Ginger fell over one and went headlong. Recovering, he snatched an egg from one of the nests. 'Evans!' he grunted. 'We said we'd get him one.'

The rest of the journey was mostly a blur of spray, for it was now the water that clogged their legs. At one place they had to swim a little way, and the coolness, after

the heat, was at least refreshing.

Biggles appeared at the cabin door and dragged them in.

Ginger fell flat. 'Mind my egg!' he cried foolishly. He did not attempt to get up, but lay there, with water pouring off him to make puddles on the floor. Bertie flopped down beside him. Coughing up salt water that he had swallowed in the last mad rush, Ginger heard the engines roar, and an instant later vibration told him they were moving.

It was some minutes before either he or Bertie spoke. Then Bertie, adjusting his eyeglass, looked up and said: 'I say, old boy, did you ever know such a ridiculous flap?'

'No matter. We made it,' answered Ginger, with weary satisfaction. He dragged himself to his feet and looked through the window. Skeins of flamingos were streaming in all directions. 'We have only to hit one of those confounded birds and that will be our last flap ever,' he observed morosely, wrapping his egg in some loose paper and putting it carefully in a locker.

'Pity we had to dump the box,' lamented Bertie.

'We should have never got to the machine had we tried to bring it with us,' replied Ginger emphatically. 'I don't mind telling you I was about all in. And I'll tell you something else. That box, with all the devil's paraphernalia that was inside it, is in the best place. War is bad enough without any more horrors. And if you asked me, I'd say that's what Biggles thought, too.'

'Where are we heading for?' wondered Bertie.

'I'll find out,' answered Ginger, going forward.

Two minutes later his head reappeared. 'Jamaica, and then home,' he reported.

'Suits me, laddie,' said Bertie.

'And me,' agreed Ginger.

THE CASE IS CLOSED

THERE were no repercussions from the case which Biggles entered in his records as *Wolff alias Hagen, deceased, v. the Crown*.

The situation that led to the loss of Wolff's papers was explained in Biggles's report, and while, naturally, there was disappointment in certain technical departments, Biggles's action in disposing of them rather than risk their falling into the hands of a potential enemy was held to be justified.

Unofficially, the Air Commodore agreed with those who thought that the documents were better out of the way altogether. How much money remained in the box, if any, was a matter for surmise. Hagen had spent a lot during his residence in the West Indies so there may not have been a great deal. Among other things he had bought Rumkeg Haven, which was subsequently confiscated by the Crown. But money was of small importance compared with the scientific data.

The first result of Biggles's report was the despatch of an Admiralty frigate to the area in which the foreign submarine was operating; but nothing more was seen of it. This surprised nobody.

The frigate found the *Vega*, a total wreck, cast away on Inagua, where apparently it had been abandoned. It was assumed to have been lost through faulty navigation, but in his own mind Biggles thought it was far more likely that those who had taken the yacht from its mooring in Jamaica had been picked up by the submarine when it was realized that it could serve no further purpose by remaining in West Indian waters.

Biggles also voiced an opinion that, as those for whom von Stalhein was working did not easily forgive failure, he was likely to get a rap on the knuckles when he returned to his masters empty-handed. Certainly neither he nor Zorotov were on Inagua. At all events, a shore party from the frigate could find no sign of them. Nor could the body of the trouble-making negro be found, although a search was made for it. Biggles had reported the man's death, as he was bound to. Nobody bothered much about this. As someone observed, it was time this swaggering Napoleon met his Waterloo.

Ginger did not forget Evans who, when the Otter left Jamaica, was well on his way to recovery. The presentation of the specimen egg would, he said, complete the cure.

Nor did Biggles overlook his promise to Susannah Shaw, the lonely female who, although she never knew it, had played such a vital part in their affairs. In due course, a request was sent to the Governor of the Bahamas to see that the flamingo colony was

properly protected, and at Biggles's suggestion, Susannah, as wife of the previous guardian, was appointed to the post.

Algy, much to his disgust, had to spend a fortnight in hospital. He was never in serious danger from his wound, but for the rest of his days he will carry a souvenir, in the form of a scar, to remind him of his visit to the Isles of Reef and Palm.

These are other Knight Books

Captain W. E. Johns has, during the past thirty years, written over eighty books about Biggles, the intrepid airman whose adventures take him and his comrades all over the world.

Many of these books are still available, published by Brockhampton Press. Here is a list of the titles available in Knight Books:

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Leif Hamre

OTTER THREE TWO CALLING

'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! Otter three two calling. Engine playing us up—reason unknown. We are flying at nine thousand feet, above thick cloud, and losing height. Preparing to jump.'

This is the message Peter Hovden sends, while on his first operational flight with the Royal Norwegian Air Force, in which he has just qualified as a sergeant pilot. At that point, and at other times during this tense story, it looks as though it might prove to be his last flight.

This story won the Norwegian State Prize for the best children's book of its year.

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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 *Biggles in the Blue* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]