

COMBINED OPERATIONS



PERCY F.
WESTERMAN

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Title: Combined Operations

Date of first publication: 1944

Author: Percy F. Westerman (1876-1959)

Date first posted: June 8, 2020

Date last updated: Nov. 2, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200611

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

COMBINED OPERATIONS

**PERCY F.
WESTERMAN**



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OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE!

Page 130

Frontispiece

Combined Operations

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

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BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW



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ECONOMY STANDARDS

Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd., Glasgow

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COMBINED OPERATIONS

CHAPTER I

Relaxation

“Anything on the notice-board?” inquired Flight-lieutenant Derek Dundas languidly from the depths of a cushioned canvas chair.

Seeing him reclining there, with knees drawn up and arms sprawling with his hands almost touching the ground, no one not acquainted with him would have guessed with any degree of accuracy how tall Derek Dundas stood in his socks.

The most sanguine estimate might be five feet nine inches. On one occasion a newcomer to the squadron was asked what he thought was the height of his new flight-lieutenant. He put it down at “five seven and a half”. He was out—hopelessly; for Derek stood six feet two and a half inches and topped the scale at eleven stone two pounds.

Yet to see him at P.T.I, one would get a totally different and not so misleading an impression. He looked, and was, a trained athlete, the finished product of Royal Air Force traditional efficiency. There he was one of a crowd. In the pilot’s seat of his Halifax bomber he was just one of a crew—a crew that could rightly be described as a highly trained efficient one.

It was a revelation to watch Derek slither into the pilot’s seat. Halifaxes, enormous machines as they are, are not designed to accommodate oversize men, yet Lofty Dundas, as he was known to his fellow airmen, did it with hardly an appreciable effort. Once seated, he would crouch over the controls and concentrate on his job. Nothing else mattered from the time the bomber took off till she “touched down”.

“Nothing that concerns us,” was Pilot-officer David Price’s reply in answer to Derek’s question.

“Glory be!” ejaculated Lofty. “See Holt sculling around by any chance? He promised to lend me a book after lunch, and I’ll bet the blighter’s forgotten all about it.”

David Price was, as might be imagined, a Welshman, a native of Cardiff. He might be described as being the antithesis of Derek Dundas, although the pair were good pals. In height he was five feet eight, sturdily built and mercurial in temperament. What a job the other fellows had to break him of the frequent use of “Look you!” They did it at last, or thought they did. David kept a taut hold on himself in that respect; although in moments of intense excitement, such as when he saw his bombs hitting the target good and proper, he simply just couldn’t refrain from uttering that typically Welsh ejaculation.

Derek, as captain of the aircraft, had had his doubts concerning David’s capabilities as a bomb-aimer. Target practice was one thing, dropping heavy H.E. bombs just when and where they are wanted, and in the face of a superabundance of flak, might be an entirely different proposition. One “op. flight” was sufficient to convince Derek that he had been wrong in his opinion. Since then they had taken part in more than twenty bombing raids over enemy territory, and David’s coolness and precision had become proverbial.

“Here’s Holt!” declared David. “He’s someone with him. I don’t know the merchant; he’s not one of our crush.”

Flying-officer Nigel Holt, otherwise the navigator, came striding along the tarmac, keeping step with the stranger, who wore the uniform of a squadron-leader. It was rather difficult for Holt to keep in step, because the other fellow had a pronounced limp.

Derek, shading his eyes, looked in their direction, wondering whether Holt had remembered to bring along that book. Then suddenly he heaved himself out of his camp chair and strode towards the approaching pair.

“Hazeltynne!” he exclaimed joyously. “This is topping! Don’t say you’re joining our mob!”

Squadron-leader Basil Hazeltynne, D.F.C., shook his head.

“No such luck,” he replied. “I’m grounded. Temporarily, I hope. Had to look in on duty, and heard you were here, and Holt said he knew exactly where you were to be found and brought me along.”

Although Basil Hazeltynne had been in the Royal Air Force for only five years, his promotion had been rapid and his career varied.

He’d started off in a bomber squadron, and during the fairly desultory operations in France in ’39—now slightly referred to as the “phoney war” with concert parties giving shows close up to the so-called front-line—

he'd been shot down over enemy territory but had succeeded in bringing his crew safely back. Then, during the Battle of Britain, when fighters were desperately needed to shoot the Luftwaffe out of the sky—an almost superhuman task most effectively accomplished—Hazeltyne changed over to a fighter.

Shot down four times—on two occasions into the “drink”, otherwise the sea—he had “celebrated” the last occasion by getting his left leg neatly drilled by a machine-gun bullet. It had played up with his calf muscles, with the result that, after being boarded, he was placed on light duties on the “administrative side”. With luck he hoped to be in the air again within three months.

“Let me see,” said Derek, after the customary introductions had been made, “I haven’t set eyes on you since I was turfed out of Stockboro’ Hospital in October ’40.”

“Yes, and they didn’t chuck me out till the following Christmas,” added Hazeltyne. “It wasn’t a bad show as hospitals go. . . . And I had to thank a rotten Eyetie for that.”

“Oh yes,” continued Derek. “That was when the Italians tried to drop stuff on London, and we scuppered the lot. You were in that do.”

“Tell us about it, sir,” prompted David Price. “I’ve heard about it, of course, but never first-hand information.”

“There’s precious little to tell,” rejoined Hazeltyne. “It was when the Huns were bombing London fairly heavily, and, according to their propaganda, it was practically in ruins and had been almost evacuated. That gave Musso an idea: to deliver another stab in the back when there didn’t seem to him any chance of resistance. But you must have heard this before?”

“Not that part, sir,” replied David, adding almost apologetically: “I was a kid at school then.”

“So Musso respectfully asked his boss, Hitler, to allow the Regia Aeronautica Italiano to have the great honour of accompanying the Luftwaffe on a raid against London,” continued the squadron-leader. “One can almost imagine the crafty Hitler thinking: ‘My Air Force has had a mauling, let his airmen have a cut at it and then they’ll know what we’re up against. The Italian Air Force isn’t much good anyway.’ Evidently the Wop airmen thought they were on a soft job—like Guernica and Abyssinia, where they gloated at bombing and machine-gunning the helpless civilian population—so they dispatched about twenty biplanes—biplanes, mark you!

—but without German escort. They got it hot from coastal batteries on both sides of the Thames Estuary, so they bunched up and steered a middle course. It wasn't even money for jam. They were just cold meat. None reached London, and I don't think any got back. It was the softest job I was ever on in that line, even though I did cop a packet. I rather fancy a panicky Eyetie fired one burst by accident!"

"Stopping the night?" asked Derek.

"Unfortunately—no," replied Hazeltyne.

He could have added that he was on important and specialized duty in connexion with impending offensive operations, but he kept silent on that matter. Not to his closest friend would he breathe the slightest inkling of what was being planned to take place in the very near future. A few careless words, a hint, and the whole operation would be rendered not only futile but even disastrous. Many young and valuable lives would be sacrificed in vain.

"It is unfortunate," agreed Derek. "Since I haven't run across you for nearly two years, and we're having a slack time so far as O.P.s are concerned, it would have been——"

The shrill notes of a gong interrupted the flight-lieutenant's sentence.

It was an insistent warning, not of an impending air attack upon the aerodrome, but to the effect that all air-crews were to proceed at once to the operations room.

This was unusual. Generally the conference took place just before a night operation was to be put into effect. It seemed much too early for that!

Derek's languid demeanour dropped from him like a shed garment. He was out of his deck chair as if something had stung him.

"See you later!" he exclaimed hurriedly to his visitor.

"Perhaps," rejoined Hazeltyne. "At any rate, I must breeze off too!"

By this time there was a crowd of officers, N.C.O.s and men comprising the bomber crews, not merely hurrying but running towards the operations room. Some might be going there for the last time. . . .

They crowded round the long table, some sitting, others leaning over the shoulders of their comrades, all keenly alert to hear what was about to be demanded of them.

Derek glanced round to reassure himself that all his crew were present. They were: Sergeant "Mick" O'Hara, the wireless operator, a native of

Southern Ireland, who had been a radio officer, albeit a junior one, in one of the leading steamship companies before joining up in the R.A.F. He had been offered a commission, but for some reason best known to himself, he had refused to take it.

Sitting next to him was Sergeant Bob Holroyd, a Yorkshireman, who had been an apprentice and was just out of his time when the lure of the air got him in its toils. He was the engineer responsible for the smooth and efficient running of the four Merlin engines that developed a total of four thousand seven hundred horse-power, which is more than double that required to drive a 530-ton sloop at twenty knots.

Standing behind these two were Tom Tredgold, a New Zealander; Jim Macey, usually known as “Pug”—probably with reference to a former famous prize-fighter with a similar name but without the “y”—and Phil Evershot, otherwise the “Warm-’Un”. These three were respectively front, rear and midship gunners, whose primary duty it was to ward off attacks by Nazi fighters.

Derek’s crew were all there. In fact there were only two absentees amongst all the bomber crews, and they, being on short leave, had been recalled by telegram and were already on their way to the aerodrome.

There was nothing ornamental or imposing about the operations room. It was a plain building with matt-painted walls and artificially lighted. At one end was a large map of Western Europe. Between the blacked-out windows were diagrams and silhouettes of both Allied and Axis aircraft, while at the end opposite to the map was a blank space upon which “movie” films and lantern slides could be projected.

On the table were more maps, aerial photographs, documents and paper on which to make notes. At the head stood the briefing officer, a tall, youthful-looking man in the early thirties.

He was wearing glasses. On the breast of his tunic were ribbons that might well be the envy and admiration of most if not all of his audience. He had to wear glasses after an aerial encounter in which he had been shot down after accounting for three of the five Nazi planes that attacked him. The resulting defect of vision finished his career as a bomber pilot, and from that time he had been on the administrative staff, where his valuable practical experience especially qualified him for his present duties.

If there was one part of his present job that he didn’t like, it was sending men on operational flights in which he himself could not take an active part.

By the squadron he was generally and affectionately referred to as the Old War Horse. There was nothing of the martinet about him. He knew how to lead better than to drive, and although willing to demand risks he never asked the crews to attempt impossibilities.

Glancing at his wrist-watch the Old War Horse tapped the table with the end of his pencil. It wasn't a particularly loud noise—rather the reverse—but almost in an instant the babel of voices ceased.

“Gentlemen!” he began. “I haven't brought you here to announce the target for to-night. There isn't one, so far as this squadron is concerned, but to-morrow in daylight your objective will be”—here he paused for two or three seconds, and then rapped out the name—“Berlin!”

CHAPTER II

The Eve of the Raid

“Probably most of you are aware,” proceeded the Old War Horse, “there is a grand meeting of the Nazi Party Leaders and their followers billed to take place in Berlin at eleven o’clock to-morrow morning. It is to be held under the presidency of Fatty Goering in the unavoidable absence of Adolf Hitler, supposed by the German nation to be at the Russian Front. From information received from reliable sources, the Fuehrer is at Berchtesgaden, probably trying in vain to concoct explanations to his deluded people why the Russian army, thrice annihilated by him, has most unkindly given him a terrific kick in the pants. And, failing to find an excuse, he’ll be gnawing yet another carpet. That, of course, may be one of the many war myths, but we like to think that he does indulge in that sort of amusement!

“Now it’s up to this and other squadrons, although we are not sending a large force, to upset Goering’s little lunch-party. On this occasion we are not counting so much about the military effect of the attack, but rather on the psychological. Having promised so emphatically that the air over Germany will never be polluted by British aircraft, Goering will be in a quandary, when he is about to commence his speech, when our two- and four-thousand-pound bombs begin to fall. Now we’ll see what Berlin looks like from a height of two thousand feet.”

He paused while the electric lights were switched off and a photograph was projected on the screen.

“Here’s the building where the Party rally is planned to be held,” he resumed. “It isn’t conspicuous, because of the camouflaged canopy, but you can take your bearings on that spire to the north and the chimneys of the power-station. Probably a great many civilians will get hurt, but that cannot be helped from our point of view.

“They are all potential war-workers for Nazi Germany, even as our civilian population are for the most part engaged in helping on the Allies’ war effort. It’s not a case of revenge for what the Huns have done to our

cities and towns, but rather of retribution. And by hitting the old Hun hard and where it hurts him most we are definitely shortening the war. Now for details!”

Firstly the rendezvous, or linking-up area for the raiding squadrons to get in touch with one another, was given; the times, altitude and route were made known. The last was decidedly complicated. Since the attack was to be carried out in broad daylight, there was likely to be considerable A.A. and fighter opposition on the direct route, so detours had to be planned in order to “fox” the Nazi airmen.

“And you’ll probably find heavy opposition in and around Berlin,” he continued. “I don’t doubt but what our air-gunners will give a good account of themselves. Now, as to weather conditions: our meteorological experts report that there’s likely to be considerable cloud, not lower than five thousand feet, over most of the distance, but over the target there’ll be clear sky. I hope the experts are right: they generally are. Now, any questions?”

“Are we to expect fighter cover, sir?” asked one of the pilots.

“Yes and no,” was the reply. “There’ll be diversionary sweeps over Northern France and on the U-boat bases; so you are not likely to meet with fighter opposition in the first hundred miles or so of your flight. On your return journey arrangements have been made for squadrons of our two-seater bombers to escort you for the last two hundred miles; otherwise you’ll have to rely upon your defensive armament and your ability to take evasive action in cloud formation. Meanwhile, a cautiously worded hint that the target is Northern Italy won’t do you any harm. It might do you some good. . . . Any more questions? . . . No. . . . Then that’s all, I think. The very best of luck! Most of us who are left behind will be tuning-in to Deutschlandsender at 1100 to-morrow!”

A long evening followed. There wasn’t much hilarity in the mess, in fact there was hardly any. Those detailed for the attack knew that they were up against what promised to be a very tough proposition. Groups of twos and threes discussed the subject, but for the most part those about to participate in the operations were strangely quiet. Quite a few had certain preparations to make—to commit various thoughts and messages to paper—just in case they didn’t come back.

Derek turned in early. It was to be his twenty-first operational flight over Germany, but even he found it difficult to compose himself to sleep. Usually he did, since he was not given to worrying over such matters. After the first half a dozen flights over enemy territory, he took these operations more or

less as a matter of course. It was his job and one that he was paid to do. More than that, it was his duty, and thus he threw his whole mind into it.

But, somehow, the daylight raid upon the capital of the Reich affected him differently. How or why he couldn't think. He'd been over Brest, Lorient and Wilhelmshaven in daylight, and he knew only too well what their A.A. defences were like. His luck had been in to a certain extent. On several occasions he'd been attacked by hostile fighter-planes. Always his crew had beaten them off but—and here was the disappointing factor—never had they as yet succeeded in definitely “downing” a Boche aircraft. When such successes were achieved and duly confirmed, the victors painted a small swastika on the tail member of their machine. Some fighters showed more than a score; bombers, with fewer opportunities, since they had to beat off rather than to make an aerial attack against hostile fighters, rarely displayed more than half a dozen miniature “Crooked Crosses”.

“S for Sylvia”—the name given to his Halifax, and all the bombers of the squadron bore feminine names—hadn't a single swastika as a record of her prowess. Yes, so far, in that direction, his luck was dead out.

Derek was still thinking on these things when he fell asleep. It was a sound, dreamless slumber, but it seemed to him that he had only just dosed off when his batman entered with the customary shaving water and cup of tea.

“What's it like, Dawson?” he asked.

“Pretty nippy, sir; no rain and the stars are out. Forecast is good, so it looks as if you'll have a fine trip, sir.”

The flight-lieutenant thanked the man for the information, and heaved himself rather reluctantly from his bed. The clock showed that it was five minutes to five.

Noises along the corridor—the banging of doors, sounds of voices and of someone making a half-hearted attempt to whistle—were borne to Derek's ears as he began to prepare for the day's work. Ugh! How he loathed these early morning starts. There was one thing at least in favour of night operations: if you were lucky you were home, you'd been briefed, you'd fed and were snug in bed long before this hour.

He dressed without undue haste, then emptied his pockets of money and other articles. It was considered unlucky to go on an op. flight carrying currency, while it was against regulations to have anything in one's possession likely to give information to the enemy in the unfortunate event

of having to bale out and become a prisoner of war. Identity discs—sometimes facetiously referred to as “Tail Wagger Club Medallions”—didn’t come into this category.

There was plenty of time before breakfast, so Derek strolled out into the darkness and on to the taking-off ground. Dim lights were flickering here and there as the ground staff went about their varied though highly important tasks, upon the efficiency of which depended the lives of the men who flew.

Half a dozen huge Halifaxes were already lined up, their outlines just visible against the loom of the starlit sky. Others, drawn by small but powerful tractors, driven for the most part by W.A.A.F.s, were emerging from their hangars. More tractors, towing squat trailers, were bringing bomb-loads to the waiting aircraft—bombs of the latest type, weighing four thousand pounds and resembling a naval torpedo more than those of the smaller sort.

Derek had little difficulty in finding “S for Sylvia”. The bomber, held by chocks, was the third in the line. Mechanics were busy, by the aid of electric lamps with wandering leads, overhauling and testing the hydraulic and electrical gear and giving final adjustments to the four engines.

Underneath, a tractor had been drawn up and the bombs were being loaded into the bomb-racks. In the still air the reek of Castrol and aviation spirit was decidedly noticeable.

“Everything O.K., Smith?” he inquired of the leading hand of the ground staff.

“All O.K., sir!” was the confident reply. “She won’t let you down. Let’s hope you’ll have a swastika or two to shove up after this ‘do’.”

“Thanks, I hope so,” rejoined Derek heartily. “But why swastika?”

By the gleam of the lamp he noticed a grin on the man’s face.

“ ’Cause it’s Berlin, not Turin, this trip, sir!” he replied.

“I wonder how he came to know that?” thought Derek. “Well, another two and a half hours and we’ll be up.”

A few yards away a couple of dim shapes, whom he identified as Price and Holt, came up.

“Mornin’, you fellows,” Derek greeted them. “Another brace of birds with uneasy consciences?”

“Sort of,” admitted the bomb aimer guardedly. “But we’ll all be merry and bright when the show starts going. But if that starboard bomb-door jams, as it did on the Frankfort stunt, there’ll be——”

“No, it won’t,” declared Derek confidently. “It’s just been tested and everything’s O.K. Isn’t it, Smith?”

“I’ll bet my life it is, sir,” replied the N.C.O. emphatically—and he meant it!

The three officers remained talking on various matters until from the portico of the mess-room a gong gave out its sharp though welcome announcement that breakfast was ready.

It was a generous, hot repast. Knowing that air-crews must be well and amply fed before proceeding on offensive operations, those in charge of the messing arrangements saw to it that there was wholesome food in abundance. As the crews fed the M.O. unobtrusively watched them, and anyone with a bad appetite or who refused his meal was as likely as not to be “stood down”, since it was taken for granted that there was something wrong with his nerves.

This morning there were no such “suspects”. The fellows tackled their breakfasts with avidity. There was very little conversation; no one seemed inclined for that, and even the licensed wit of the mess was silent.

Then half an hour’s stand-easy gave the crews time to shift into flying kit. Then there was a babel of more or less inconsequent conversation—the topic of the forthcoming raid was studiously avoided—and pipes and cigarettes were lit.

At length came the order for the air-crews to man their respective aircraft, and across the tarmac surged what would appear to an outsider to be a disorderly mob.

Looking, in the dim light of dawn, like a cross between the principal character in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and an Arctic explorer, for each man was in flying kit and encumbered by his “Mae West” and his packed parachute, they doubled to their respective bombers, now drawn up ready for the take-off.

“S for Sylvia”—a veteran of three months’ service though bearing no signs of the scars she had received in previous operations—was typical of the squadron of Halifaxes now almost ready to become airborne.

Derek Dundas, the “skipper” and pilot, wormed his way into his seat and crouched over the multitudinous array of “gadgets” on his instrument panel. Brains, hands and feet would all have to be brought into play in co-ordinated activity. He was apt to declare that after the war he’d be able to qualify for the post of cinema organist, since working stops, manuals and pedals would be child’s play after piloting an aircraft. From his perch he had an uninterrupted view through three hundred degrees horizontally, and also a wide expanse of the sky above. Only from underneath—the bomber’s vulnerable spot—was his range of vision drastically obstructed.

The three air-gunners climbed into their tight quarters of the mechanically operated turrets. They had to be there from the time of taking off until the bomber touched down on her return. It was not at all an uncommon occurrence for the gun to be in action within ten minutes of the take-off, especially if Nazi fighters were up over the North Sea and English Channel.

Pilot-officer David Price had not to go to his post until they were actually approaching the target; so instead of taking up a recumbent position and lying on his stomach in his “padded cell”, otherwise a low compartment right in the nose of the bomber and immediately under the front twin gun-turret, he seated himself on the lowermost step leading to the navigator’s cabin.

Here Flying-officer Nigel Holt was sitting at the chart table. He, too, was one of those who serve while they only stand and wait, although in his case he wasn’t on his feet. Unless “S for Sylvia” became separated from the other Halifaxes there wouldn’t be much for him to do, since “J for Jane”, the squadron-leader’s bus, would take the lead. But if circumstances led him to find himself alone, it would be Holt’s task to set a course either for the objective or else for home, as the case might be.

Another temporarily inactive member of the crew was the wireless operator, Sergeant O’Hara. Until the bomber became airborne his post was almost a sinecure, except for preliminary adjustments to the “set”. But once the fight was fairly under way, he’d be kept busy with radio contact with base, intercommunication between the raiding aircraft and passing on the reports to those members of the crew who were concerned.

Yet another man whose activities lasted from start to finish was Holroyd, the engineer. From his post, immediately behind but on a higher level than the pilot, he had a dual duty to perform; he had to control the four powerful engines, increasing or diminishing their “revs” as the occasion demanded,

and also to keep a look-out through the astral-dome for enemy fighters approaching on a bearing “blind” to the pilot. Also, as a side line, he was expected to carry out minor repairs and adjustments to the engines, should through any cause they give trouble. And sometimes these “minor” repairs were actually major ones, and then the Yorkshireman would have to worm his way along the inside of one of the wings to coax a stalled mass of machinery into action again. Quite possibly, if he failed to accomplish this job, the crew would either have to bale out or run the risk of a crash landing.

Engines roared into activity. Ground men, pulling chocks clear, stood back as the ungainly monsters—ungainly only when not airborne—waddled over the tarmac.

“S for Sylvia” was the fourth to take off. Derek received the signal to start taxi-ing. Now he was all alert and very different from the slow, easy-going youth of the previous night.

More throttle! The bomber increased speed but showed no signs of parting company with Mother Earth. “P for Peggy”, the one immediately ahead, lifts herself from the runway. Dick gives his aircraft still more throttle; a slight pull on the joy-stick and “S for Sylvia” is airborne.

CHAPTER III

Over Berlin

Twice the leading bombers circled over the aerodrome until the remaining ones had taken off and were gaining the prescribed altitude.

In the half light of dawn the aerodrome was almost invisible even from two thousand feet. So well camouflaged were the hangars and administrative and repair buildings that they seemed to merge into the flat countryside. Had the sun been above the hangar the effect would have been different, for in spite of the camouflager's art, it is the shadows that give the show away to lone German reconnaissance machines. Underground hangars and workshops and the building of decoy aerodromes help to solve the problem of how to gain comparative security from hostile air attack—methods that have been tried out both by the Axis and the United Nations.

"From Squadron-commander, sir!" announced O'Hara. "'Set course for target, alt. 25,000.'"

"Right," replied Derek. "Acknowledge!"

In perfect formation the heavily laden bombers began their long and fairly gradual climb. At sixteen thousand feet they passed over the English coast. Away to the left other formations could just be discerned. More had preceded them; others, to give the necessary time interval, were yet to take off from their respective aerodromes.

Already "Sylvia's" three air-gunners were feeling the effect of the cold in spite of the wind-proof transparent covers for the gun-positions and of the fact that they were wearing electrically heated suits. Ice was forming on the leading edges of the wings and tending to cloud the protection to the gun-turrets. Yet the while all three men were keenly on the alert, though perhaps they wouldn't have the chance to let off even half a dozen rounds, unless they were attacked by fighters or the captain gave the order to them to shoot up likely targets on the ground.

Over the English Channel patches of low clouds, looking snow-white as seen from above, obscured the French coast until the bombers were almost over it. Anti-aircraft batteries were in action, not against the Halifaxes, but against medium bombers flying at low altitudes and delivering a diversionary raid on the advanced aerodrome in the Normandy area.

By this time the crew had put on their oxygen masks. The temperature inside the fuselage, in spite of the heating apparatus worked by the exhausts, had dropped to minus five degrees Fahrenheit.

So far there was no fighter opposition. Possibly this was employed elsewhere, or it might be that the German radiolocation stations had been the objective of the diversionary raids, so that they failed to give warning of the Halifaxes flying above the clouds and at such a height that they were both invisible and inaudible from the ground.

An hour passed. It seemed longer than that. Price, making an effort to heave himself out of his far from comfortable seat, thought to himself that this looked like being a very tame business. Hedge-hopping was what appealed to him; then one did get a thrill or two. He was wondering also why Jerry hadn't put up strong fighter opposition. Surely, with Hermann Goering due to spout in another ninety minutes' time, he would have concentrated every available aircraft that the Luftwaffe could release from other duties so that the British bombers could be intercepted long before they arrived over the German capital.

Actually the enemy air defence had been neatly tricked. Instead of making for Berlin by the shortest route, the detour they were taking was bringing them well clear of the German fighters. Perhaps it would be a different tale on the return flight.

He tried to read a book to while away the time. It wasn't a success. He couldn't keep his mind on it. Perhaps this was one of the effects of oxygen. Again and again he glanced at one of the synchronized clocks, frequently to imagine that the hands had become stationary as the result of the intense cold.

A voice boomed into the earpiece of his headphones; it was the skipper speaking.

" 'Bout time you went to your padded cell, old son! We're gliding down in five minutes."

The oxygen apparatuses had already been discarded. The bomber had lost height and was gliding towards the target, now only some twenty miles

off.

Wriggling into his cramped quarters, the bomb-aimer settled himself into as comfortable a position as conditions allowed. He looked out. The clouds had been left behind. Berlin and the surrounding district lay bathed in bright sunshine.

So far as David Price could make out there was as yet no anti-aircraft gunfire. The sky was amazingly clear of those balls of white and black smoke that almost invariably greet the day-bombers. On the other hand—for the distance between “Sylvia” and the objective was rapidly diminishing—mushroom-shaped clouds of black smoke cutting across the centre of Berlin indicated that the first wave of British aircraft was already making it most difficult for Field-Marshal Hermann Goering, both in a physical and a moral sense, to deliver his address to the German nation.

“Bomb doors open!”

“J for Jane” and “T for Trixie” were dropping their lethal cargoes. “S for Sylvia” had not as yet brought her immediate target into her bomb-sight.

Cool as the proverbial cucumber, David waited until the right moment. Provided the instrument had been set correctly the first four-thousand-pound bomb would fall exactly where it was meant to drop—not on a children’s school but on an important and imposing building on the Unter der Linden. There could be no mistaking the place. Even the most elaborate camouflage of which the resourceful Huns were capable couldn’t render it safe. The chain of lakes linked up by the River Spree served as a bearing and a landmark that no pilot could miss.

Suddenly the Halifax shuddered. She dipped slightly and recovered herself. The A.A. guns had opened up, and one shell exploding close under the bomber had ripped about four feet off the leading edge of the starboard wing. Then two sharp raps, something like those of a postman’s knock, sounded on the side of the fuselage.

“The blighters are opening up at us!” thought the bomb-aimer rather indignantly.

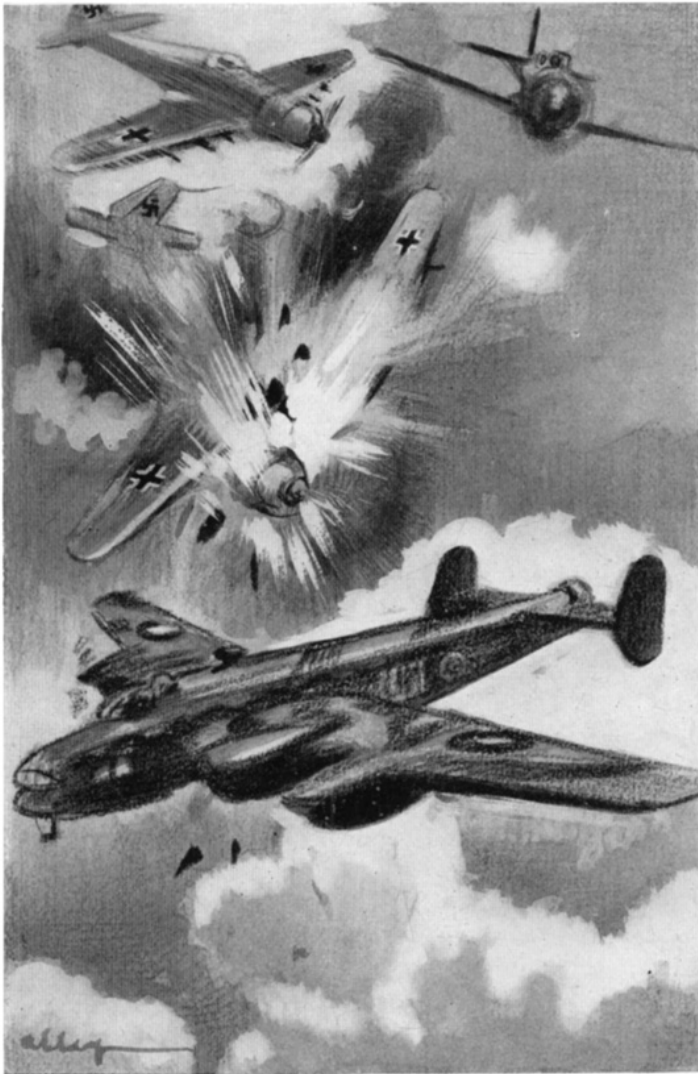
That was all the attention he gave to it. His whole being was held by the work on hand—his own particular job. What he didn’t know was that there were two jagged holes through the side, one of them just above the wireless operator’s seat, and that O’Hara, wounded in his left shoulder and right wrist, was savagely glaring at his now useless transmitter.

“S for Sylvia” lurched under the shock of a couple of shells. Momentarily she swerved off her course, but even that didn’t upset Price’s calculations. He held on to the bomb-release gear.

“Next run over the target I’ll get it, I hope!” he reported to Derek, who had been waiting for that decidedly perceptible movement of the aircraft that happens when a heavy bomb is released.

There was no help for it. Huge bombs of the type carried by the Halifax weren’t to be dumped indiscriminately. It was a question of planting them where they would do the greatest possible damage.

Derek held on. Far below him he could see that fires started by the earlier attackers had gained a firm hold and that big areas of the city had been practically flattened out. Viewed from the air it wasn’t a spectacular scene, as in the case of night bombing, when lurid flames, dazzling beams of searchlight and the firework display of tracers gave one the impression of a Brock’s display in peace-time and without the spice of danger. All the same, the good work of carrying aerial warfare into the heart of the Third Reich was proceeding with excellent results.



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WITH A TERRIFIC FLASH THE HUN EXPLODED IN MID-AIR

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Another thing that struck him as he made the run over the target was the relatively weak defence put up by the A.A. guns. Even allowing for the fact that it was broad daylight and that puffs of white and black smoke were not so impressive as the flash of exploding shells at night, the old Boche wasn't up to his usual form. This was additionally remarkable in view of Goering's advertised address. Derek wondered what the fat Field-Marshal was doing at that very moment. Probably he was sheltering in an exceptionally deep

dugout and listening, with mixed feelings, to the terrific, nerve-racking detonations of the eight- and four-thousand-pound “beautiful” bombs as handed out by the R.A.F.

Now the Halifax was at the end of her run. Her consorts, their allotted tasks completed, had turned for home. Their respective wireless operators had called up the operations room at their bases reporting “Op. successfully completed”.

“S for Sylvia” had to go into the fray again. It was a point of honour for a bomber not to return with her bomb-racks laden. She had no means of getting into touch with her base. The first intimation of her safety would be when she touched down on British soil—unless she had met with a mishap and would never return.

Describing a “close” turn the Halifax began to retrace her course. Derek could now see the general pattern of the bombers’ attack. There were lines of fires running north and south and from west to east, with others of less magnitude running diagonally. All seemed to meet at a central point, where the principal objective was now hidden by bellowing clouds of smoke. The R.A.F. had described the pattern of a Union Jack over Berlin!

Again, and still cool and collected, Price stood by the bomb-aimer’s sights. The Halifax was flying low in order to dodge the anti-aircraft shells which, though relatively few, were concentrated upon her. Probably there was machine-gun and rifle fire from the ground; if so, they gave no trouble and were also unseen and unheard by the aircraft’s crew.

It was now or never!

Straight for the enormous cloud that overhung the centre of the target “S for Sylvia” tore. She wasn’t doing her maximum speed owing to damage already received. The wind shrieked and howled through gashes in her wings and sides, yet in spite of a tendency to swing to the right, caused by damage to the leading edge of the wing, the pilot contrived to keep her on a fairly steady course.

Now she was entering the fringe of the smoke cloud. Pilot-officer Price actuated the release gear.

“Bombs all gone, sir!” he reported.

It was a hardly necessary announcement. The characteristic tremor of the aircraft, different from that caused by a shell hit, told Derek that.

For some seconds the crew were enveloped in darkness, so thick and opaque was the pall of smoke over the centre of the city.

Then, with a quick succession of heavy reports, followed by waves of displaced air that tossed the Halifax like a celluloid ball in a shooting-gallery, the bombs exploded, their flashes rending the smoke with dull red streaks.

Lightened by the release of her heavy load the bomber banked and began to gain altitude. Derek's object was to trick the anti-aircraft defences by altering course and climbing while still hidden by the smoke.

"S for Sylvia" had carried out the part assigned to her, although she had no means of announcing that to the control office at her base. It now remained for her to make for home and get there—if she could!

CHAPTER IV

Intercepted

His principal duty performed, David backed slowly out of his “padded cell”. He had no idea till then how cramped and cold he was. He had experienced no thrill of exultation when he had released the heavy lethal cargo; and now that that had been done, all he worried about was how long it would take to get home. That was, in his opinion, the boring part of the operation—having little or nothing to do but watch his comrades, who as a rule were fully occupied.

As he stood up in the alleyway, holding on with one hand, for the bomber seemed to be making a bumpy passage, he was conscious of a back-draught of very cold air.

“Had a puncture?” he inquired of the navigator.

Nigel Holt, bending over the map clipped to the table in front of him, looked up.

“Yes, and no repair outfit, my lad!” he replied. “Better look round and see what’s the damage. I’m busy.”

The navigator switched back his attention to his task—that of setting course for home.

David, now more aware of the unusual vibration, ascended the three broad steps. As he glanced into the wireless compartment on his right, he was astonished to find Sergeant O’Hara sitting sideways and looking ghostly white. The headphones he had been wearing had slipped off and were dangling by their flexible cords over the edge of a table. The transmitting set looked as if its face had been punched out—which indeed was the case.

“Copped it!” exclaimed the wounded sergeant laconically.

“Where?”

“Arm and shoulder. Sure I feel the one but not the other.”

“Let’s see,” said the Welshman briskly. “I’ll have to rip your coat off.”

“That’ll be up agin the Government,” rejoined O’Hara, with an effort towards humour. “Seven pound ten they cost. No, let it stop. It’ll be mighty cold. I think the bleeding’s stopped.”

Then he began to lean forward. Had not Price caught him he would have toppled on to the floor.

Lowering the now unconscious man into a recumbent position, David went to seek assistance. There were, so far as he knew, only two of the crew who might be available: the navigator and the engineer.

He encountered the latter as the Yorkshireman was backing through the oval aperture between the fuselage and the interior of the starboard wing.

“Nay, ba gum!” replied Holroyd. “Wi’ oil-pressure gauge down to nowt? Happen engine’ll seize up any moment now, if Ah can’t fix things up like.”

Clearly there was no help to be obtained from him. It was a case of the lives of all the crew against one; for although the Halifax *might* limp home on even only two engines, one out of action would be a terrific handicap if she were attacked by enemy fighters.

Nigel Holt, on hearing of O’Hara’s condition, set aside his navigating instruments and accompanied David to the unconscious man.

They removed his harness and cut away his fleece-lined leather jacket. The fleece of both arms was soaked in blood. The wound in the shoulder had already staunched itself, but the one in the arm was pumping blood, indicating that an artery had been cut.

Skilfully Holt applied a tourniquet and then first-aid bandages. The tourniquet had to be watched lest the pressure proved too much and applied for too long a time. Then they lifted the wounded man on to a bunk provided for casualties and covered him with electrically heated blankets.

While this was in progress O’Hara opened his eyes.

“Begorra, it’s giving me gip!” he exclaimed. “Sure, it’s worse I am than before!”

“You’ll feel easier very soon,” declared David encouragingly. “Another two hours and you’ll be nice and comfortable in hospital!”

He spoke optimistically. In his own mind he knew that, owing to the reduced speed, it would be considerably more than a couple of hours before the bomber touched down.

Leaving the navigator with the patient, David made his way to the captain and reported what had happened.

“I guessed the radio had packed up,” replied Derek. “Couldn’t even get anyone on the intercom. How is he?”

“In considerable pain. Do you think he ought to have a shot of morphia?”

“Good heavens, man, no!” declared Derek emphatically. “Supposing we had to bale out? We could launch him overboard, and even though he’s wounded he’d be able to pull the rip-cord. But if he’s under morphia he wouldn’t stand a dog’s chance. No; no morphia under any circumstances! I’m frightfully sorry for O’Hara, but there it is!”

David was turning away when the skipper called him back.

“Be as quick as you can,” he said. “I’ll want you as messenger now that I can’t call up any of the gunners. We’ll probably find Me’s or F.W.s waiting for us, and there’s precious little cloud cover.”

“Have you sighted any yet?”

“No; and don’t want to! All I’ve seen are our Lancasters, the last wave over Berlin, and they were well away to the nor’ard.”

David began to make his way back to his patient. On the way he noticed that there was no one in the “adastral”. The engineer was still busy trying to coax the sluggish engine to pick up after he had succeeded in getting the oil-pressure feed approaching normal.

“Might as well have a look-see!” he decided, intending to take a brief survey. After all, so far as he was concerned, he had been flying blind from the moment he left the bomb-aimer’s compartment.

Almost at the first glance he caught sight of three dark objects just clear of the full glare of the sun. A couple of seconds later they became invisible because they had taken up a position against which R.A.F. flying personnel are repeatedly warned: “Beware of the Hun in the sun!”

Without direct means of communication with the pilot, David hurried to give Derek the information.

“Right!” exclaimed the pilot tersely. “I’ve spotted the blighters!”

The for’ard air-gunner seemed to have sensed the danger, so David hurried back to warn the midship and rear gunners.

They had already spotted the approaching aircraft and had identified them as F.W. 190's. They had fanned out and, possessing the advantage of a hundred miles per hour speed over the Halifax, were about to attack from three widely separated directions.

Deciding that he'd like to see something of the scrap—it was a rotten business being cooped up and unable to know what was happening—he returned to the observation dome above and in the rear of the pilot's "office". If things took a turn for the worse it would be only a matter of seconds for him to nip back to O'Hara and dump him overboard, should the order be given to abandon aircraft. David didn't think it would be. He had complete confidence in the Halifax and those who handled and fought her; but, all the same, if luck should happen to be on the side of the old Hun, then it would be better to be prepared for emergencies.

He thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't given the wounded sergeant any morphia and that he had refixed his parachute harness.

The German approaching on the starboard side opened fire. He was below the Halifax, but still five hundred yards off—a favourable position so far as the Boche was concerned for delivering an attack.

The midship gunner was ready for him. Waiting until he was well within range, Evershot opened up. He knew that he'd have less than ten seconds before the enemy plane dived underneath, and then the British air-gunner would be unable to depress his weapons sufficiently. That meant that the huge bomber would be easy meat.

"Why doesn't he fire?" was the thought that ran through Price's mind as he divided his attention between the midship gun position and the rapidly approaching Hun. He seemed oblivious of the fact that Jerry was blazing away and that he was standing with his head and shoulders above the roof of the fuselage and only some splinter-proof, but not bullet-proof, glass between him and the attacking aircraft.

Machine-gun bullets were mushrooming harmlessly against the armoured parts of the Halifax's fuselage; some were penetrating where there was no such protection. There were cannon-shells, too, giving out that peculiar sharp crack as the explosive charges went off.

Then—seemingly at long last, although it was a matter of seconds—the "Warm-'Un" opened fire, but it was none the less effective for that!

With a terrific flash that momentarily seemed to outvie the glare of the January sun the Hun exploded in mid-air. The disintegration was practically

instantaneous. At one moment the Nazi aircraft was in full flight towards her would-be victim, with all her forward guns blazing away. At the next there was nothing but the shattered wings and a still fiercely burning petrol-tank falling earthwards. What happened to the engines the observers didn't know.

"We've got her, look you!" shouted David.

No one heard him. It wouldn't have mattered if one had; in that case he wouldn't be "ticked off" by his companions for lapsing into the Welsh vernacular!

The midship gunner, without an instant's delay, so swift was the tempo of the aerial combat, trained his power-operated turret round so that the guns could be brought to bear upon Hun number two.

Even so, he was just too late, for the rear gunner, getting the F.W. 190 dead in his sights, let him have a long burst.

The enemy aircraft didn't blow up. It banked steeply with smoke and flames pouring from both engines. Then, unaccountably, unless the pilot had been killed or seriously wounded, it attempted to climb. It failed.

Then commenced the sickening dive to earth. Three men jumped for it. The parachute harness of one became entangled in the tail member. The flames mercifully hid him from David Price's sight.

The others, dropping clear, pulled their respective rip-cords. The envelopes distended and bore the airmen comparatively slowly to the ground.

"They'll live to fly and fight again," thought the Welshman. "If they'd been us and we were baling out, it's ten to one the blighters would have followed us down and machine-gunned us."

By this time the third Hun, warned by the fate of the others, had turned and was legging it for his base, followed by an ineffectual burst from Pug Macey's guns to speed him on his way.

"Did you see the second Hun hit the deck?" inquired Derek when David, having left his perch of observation, reported to his captain.

"No, sir!"

"Pity!" continued Derek. "Taking fire doesn't necessarily mean that the Boche plane is done in. . . . And we're in for a spot of bother too!"

"How?"

“Two engines packed up. Aileron wires shot away and—but that’s enough to get on with.”

“Where are we now?” asked David.

“Just across the frontier of Hunland proper,” replied the skipper. “That doesn’t mean we’re out of danger. But we’re getting back somehow,” he concluded with slow and deliberate emphasis.

“We’ve downed two, any old way!”

“Two?” echoed Derek. “Hanged if I saw the second. It crashed all right?”

“Couldn’t say,” admitted David. “She was smoking badly when she passed out of my line of vision. But why F.W. 190’s?”

“Goodness knows,” replied the captain. “Short of fighters, I expect, so they have to bring these up. They didn’t do their job badly,” he added. “We’re in a bit of a mess.”

At that moment Sergeant Holroyd appeared, smothered in oil and with streaks of blood on his face and hands.

“Copped it, Sergeant?” asked Derek.

“Nowt to make song about, sir,” was the reply. “What does matter is there’s a great hole in port petrol-tank, as big as ma fist. Wi’ luck we may get across; without luck Ah reckon we’re fair flummoxed. How far have we to do, sir?”

“Three hundred and fifty miles.”

“Three fifty, ba gum! Happen we’ll finish in t’ drink then!”

CHAPTER V

Limping Home

Pilot-officer David Price, feeling none too happy over the state of affairs—it looked as if the destruction of the one F.W. 190 and the probable crash of the second would never be reported—made his way back to the semi-conscious O'Hara.

He was rather surprised to find that the Yorkshireman had followed him.

Holroyd looked in a filthy mess. If he had sat in a tub of dirty lubricating oil he couldn't have presented a more disreputable appearance. He was shedding oil as he stood—but what mattered? The interior of the fuselage would be in a worse state before “S for Sylvia” landed, if she should succeed in touching down without smashing herself up.

“Just a breather, sir!” he observed. “Then Ah reckon Ah’ll be right busy rest o’ trip. Ah’m fair mucked oop wi’ oil.”

“I can see that,” concurred David.

“Reminds me o’ bit o’ fun when Ah were garage-hand,” Holroyd continued in a well-meaning effort to relieve the mental strain. “We’d get hold of young lad—a beginner—and stuff the spout of a six-inch filler into his trousers band. Then we’d tell him to bend his head and place a copper on his forehead.”

“What was the bright idea, anyway?”

“We would tell him to move his head forward again so a penny’ll slide off. If it drops into the oil-funnel t’ lad gets t’ penny. Happen he missed first time. Second go, he almost does it. ‘Bide your time, lad,’ prompts one of the hands as he has a shot at it for the third time.”

“Third time lucky, perhaps?” remarked David.

Holroyd grinned.

“The third time, whiles lad wur slanting with head back, someone poured half a gallon o’ paraffin down funnel. Sor’ of initiation, same as Oddfellows and the like.”

“Strange sort of initiation,” observed David. “How do the novices take it?”

“Fair an’ middling,” replied Holroyd. “Those lads who tak’ it gamely most often turn out the most likely.”

“And how did you react when you went through it—I suppose you did?”

Another smile flitted over the sergeant’s face.

“Ah’m not answering that question, sir!” he replied enigmatically. “Reckon Ah’ll be getting along!”

“That helped pass the time,” thought David, as he directed his attention upon the wounded O’Hara.

The sergeant was sitting up with his back propped up by his parachute kit.

“Feel better like this, sir,” he declared. “Get more air—breathing better. Well it is that Holroyd didn’t patch me up. He’d just be for trying that trick on me!”

That was a hopeful sign. If men could talk in this strain when lying helpless in a badly mauled bomber it spoke well for morale.

Meanwhile, Derek Dundas was having a busy time at the controls, or, rather, what was left of them. The speed had dropped considerably, while the aircraft’s climbing power was almost negligible. By careful nursing he could gain altitude, but that was almost invariably countered by loss of height when attempting to fly level.

All the while a sharp look-out was kept for more intercepting aircraft. “S for Sylvia” might not be so fortunate next time. She was no longer in a position to ward off attack, especially if she encountered a group of fighters.

Dodging from cloud to cloud and taking advantage of the cover they afforded, the Halifax struggled homewards. She was now within range of British fighters that were to act as air-cover for the returning raiders; but of these there was no sign.

The inference, as Derek saw it, was that all the other bombers had returned. “S for Sylvia” was already considerably overdue. “Operations

room” had doubtless called her up more than once, but getting no reply had come to the conclusion that “one of our aircraft had failed to return”.

At length the sea, looking like a leaden strip between the British and French coasts, came in sight. The Halifax was now flying at six thousand feet, which brought her well within the range of the numerous enemy A.A. batteries along the coastline.

She could climb no higher, not with two engines out of action and the other two firing intermittently. There was, in the captain’s opinion, only one thing to be done. That was to dive down and “hedge-hop” over the last ten or twenty miles of enemy-occupied France and skim the waves across the Channel. If the Halifax failed to make it on the last lap, there was always the chance of her crew being picked up by R.A.F. rescue launches.

He glanced at the gauges of the remaining intact petrol-tanks. They showed just about enough to get the aircraft across to the other side, but not a sufficient quantity to enable her to make base.

Derek’s throat was parched and dry. Not until he’d taken a malted milk lozenge could he shout to the navigator.

Holt had virtually finished his specialized job. He’d set the course that had brought the Halifax within sight of the chalk cliffs of Kent and Sussex. He heard the skipper shouting, calling him by name.

“Tell the gunners I’m diving on the ack-ack batteries,” said Derek. “We’ll have to shoot our way through. We may rattle the blighters quite a lot, but there’ll be some dirt flying about, I reckon!”

The Halifax was incapable of making a “close” turn, owing to the damage to the ailerons. It was much like steering a rudderless ship by “working” her twin screws. But she could dive, and when Derek put her nose well down she tore through the air almost as rapidly as if all four engines had been running all out.

There were plenty of ground defences: groups of anti-aircraft guns with their muzzles fairly discernible in spite of camouflage. All around there were craters large and small, showing that the R.A.F. had recently been busy.

So far not an enemy gun opened up. Sergeant Tredgold, peering through his sights in the forward gun-position, waited.

He hadn’t to wait long. From a large hut close to one of the batteries poured a stream of grey-uniformed figures. Most of them were looking

upwards as they ran to man their anti-aircraft guns. Their faces, though probably bronzed by the weather, showed white against the dun-coloured ground.

Spurts of flame leapt from the New Zealander's twin guns. Some of the Huns fell, others stopped in their tracks, more of them turned and ran for cover. A few continued to race to their gun-sites, but thought better of it when more of their numbers bit the dust.

Tredgold might have bagged the lot, since the Germans were bunched in his sights, for quite thirty seconds, while the Halifax was making her dive. He desisted, not because he was reluctant to inflict casualties, but he had achieved his object by preventing the battery from opening fire. There was also the expenditure of ammunition to be taken into account. A lot had been fired during the encounter with the three Focke Wulf 190's, and more might be badly wanted before "S for Sylvia" was out of the present jam.

It was a great temptation to blaze away, but the New Zealander, cool and collected, wisely refrained. He was one of those level-headed fighting men who can see two or more moves ahead. If anyone were to ask him how and why he had acquired the faculty, he would have replied—if he replied at all—that it was because he was supposed to be a fairly good chess-player.

An ack-ack battery opened up on the right, and although shells whizzed dangerously close, the Halifax had almost reached the limit of her dive.

Flattening out with only thirty feet to spare between the belly of the fuselage and the tops of a clump of trees, the bomber began her hedge-hopping tactics. The impetus of her descent carried her on at a tremendous speed that gradually dropped until the dial on the instrument panel registered a bare two hundred miles per hour.

Even at this relatively low speed the moral effect of the huge aircraft skimming low over the ground was enough to put the breeze up the German troops, most of whom consisted of raw levies and elderly men whose nerve had been badly frayed by repeated visits by the R.A.F. and the American Air Force. By day and by night, with bombers and fighter-bombers, the Huns had been plastered. They hardly dare move either by rail or on the road without running the risk of being surprised and shot up from the air.

The Germans were trying similar tactics over English coastal towns, but with this difference: they made tip-and-run raids, barely lasting more than five minutes; while the R.A.F., selecting its targets with due regard for the

French civil population, did their job thoroughly and deliberately before returning to base.

The Halifax was now flying so low that the sea was no longer visible. “Hedge-hopping” in this instance was a misnomer, since there weren’t any. Sometimes flying down a shallow valley, at others skimming the tops of the trees growing on either side of a long straight road, the bomber tore on, Derek doing all he knew to keep her clear of various obstructions.

There were convoys along the highway. At the first sound of the British aircraft’s approach the drivers and troops, not even waiting to ascertain whether it was one of their own, leapt from the hastily stalled vehicles and dived for shelter in the nearest ditches.

Well before they got there the Halifax was over them and almost out of sight.

Occasionally bursts of machine-gun and rifle fire greeted the bomber. Most of it went wide. Indeed, the crew were ignorant of the fact until, quite by chance, half a dozen clean bullet holes appeared in the side of the fuselage just below the rear-gunner’s perch.

Now she was over the coast. Skirting the barbed wire festooned on the end of the cliff the Halifax headed northwards, barely eighty feet above the sea. By luck she had chosen a stretch of coastline where there were no batteries; or if there were they didn’t open fire.

Thirty seconds or so later, however, some heavier guns, probably dual-purpose ones, let rip from a position a mile or so farther along the coast.

Derek, who was preparing to relax somewhat now that the aircraft was clear of enemy territory, received a sudden shock when the first shell, cutting diagonally across the bomber’s nose, hit the water some thousand yards away and exploded. By the flash and the volume of smoke emitted by the missile it was evident to him that it was something of considerably greater calibre than that of an ack-ack gun. It also meant that the Halifax was not only within range but would continue to be so for thirty seconds or more.

Now the heavy stuff was coming thick and fast. Ahead and on both sides the surface of the sea was churned into columns of white foam by the ricocheting missiles.

Derek took evading action as best he might, pushing the rudder-bar to and fro. Slowly the partly crippled aircraft responded. It seemed a futile operation, since the Halifax, answering sluggishly to the action of her

rudder, might well flounder into the path of one of the shells. If she did, then the resulting explosion would smash her to atoms.

Pieces of shells rattled against the sides of the fuselage. More holes, this time ugly, jagged ones, appeared on the wings and in the hull. Acrid smelling fumes filled the interior, eddying violently under the effect of the air currents pouring in through a dozen gaps.

Then, almost unexpectedly, the shell-fire ceased. Probably the German gunners, deceived by the water-spouts caused by their projectiles, had come to the conclusion that the low-flying aircraft had fallen a victim to the accuracy of the fire. And when they discovered their mistake the Halifax was out of range.

There was no time for the pilot to relax. He'd been keyed up to such a pitch of excitement—a contrast to his usual coolness and alertness in a tight corner—that he found himself shaking with the reaction. In spite of his furlined flying helmet a cold perspiration oozed from his forehead.

“What’s up with me?” he asked himself. “Am I passing out?”

A hand touched him on the shoulder and a voice that he dimly recognized as Price’s announced:

“The ‘Warm-’Un’s’ copped it, Skipper!”

That brought Derek up with a round turn. So Phil Evershot, the midship gunner, was a casualty.

“Dead?” he inquired laconically.

“As good as, worse luck,” replied the Welshman. “Shell splinter in the forehead. We’ve got him out of the turret, but goodness knows what we can do. How far now?”

“Another five minutes,” declared Derek. “Stand by for ‘flaps down’. Lower the under-carriage. We may just do it yet.”

Then more trouble followed.

The hydraulic system, operating the lowering of the landing wheels from their cowlings, failed. Those of the crew who were available set to work on the hand-operated gear. They weren’t certain that that was working.

Meanwhile Derek was making for the coast in the neighbourhood of Worthing. Here the land was lower than to the eastward, where high chalk cliffs might have proved an unclimbable barrier to the returning Halifax.

He knew—in fact he could see—that a few miles inland was that ridge of hills known as the South Downs. If the bomber couldn't gain sufficient altitude to clear the cliffs it seemed obvious that she could not surmount the Downs, that rise to a height of some eight hundred feet.

Between them and the sea were one or two landing grounds, while there were gaps in the hills, particularly between Worthing and Pulborough, where the bomber might scrape through. It didn't look particularly hopeful, but where there's life there's hope.

Now they were over the English coast. For miles there seemed to be nothing but buildings, for this part of the south coast is one of the densest and most extensive "built-up areas", other than the congested manufacturing towns and cities.

Then, unaccountably and as if they knew they were over British soil, the two engines that had been running erratically, suddenly picked up.

Quick to take advantage of this astonishing piece of good luck, Derek put her nose up. The altimeter, if it could be relied upon, indicated a clear gain of seven hundred and fifty feet.

Ahead lay the aerodrome for which the pilot was making. Then came another shock. The landing ground was dotted with dispersed aircraft. It would be hopeless to attempt to touch down, equally so to circle round until the grounded machines could be moved sufficiently to enable the Halifax to come down. Her fuel would be exhausted long before that could be done.

"Wheels down, sir!" reported Holroyd.

"I'm carrying on, Sergeant," declared Derek. "We can't touch down here."

"Ah doubt there's enough juice for another five minutes, sir."

"Then we can only hope for the best—a crash-landing. Warn the crew to stand by."

Holroyd had a shrewd guess why the engines had picked up. Petrol engines when they are using the last of the juice frequently do "rev up", only to give up the ghost in a series of coughs and splutters.

Now the Halifax was over the crest of the Downs. Beyond lay a wide expanse of agricultural land, interspersed with numerous woods and dotted with hamlets and isolated houses. Over the landscape were patches of low-lying clouds.

Then, within a few seconds of each other, both engines stopped. There was an uncanny silence, except for the humming of the wind against the jagged leading edges of the wings.

It was too late to bale out, since the Halifax was now too close to the ground. In any case, with two wounded men on board, the captain would not have given the order to abandon aircraft.

He searched the ground below her in the hope of finding a possible clear space on which to touch down.

There was one—apparently the ground of a manor house. Close by was a narrow lane crossing a small river, while roughly parallel to the latter ran what appeared to be a sunken lane. Actually it was the dried-up bed of the long-disused canal between the Wey and the Arun. A century ago it was the only inland waterway affording communication between London and Portsmouth. Now there is none, and what would have been an important alternative to rail and road transport in the present war was now derelict.

Putting the nose of the Halifax down, Derek prepared to land. Then quickly he changed his mind; for across her proposed emergency landing-field were five circular patches regularly spaced out in a line. He knew what they were. Jerry at one time had dropped a stick of bombs. The craters had only been partly filled in. To attempt to touch down there would simply be begging for trouble.

A short distance away across the stream was a farm-house with outbuildings. Beyond was a small field, bounded on three sides by a wood. Even at a comparatively low altitude it looked little bigger than a pocket-handkerchief.

It had to be touch and go. The bomber, nursed into a steady glide, couldn't possibly clear the tree-tops.

Again Derek put her nose down.

The ground seemed to be leaping up to meet him. Then there was a bump—not so severe as he had expected—and another. The Halifax, making a good though by no means perfect three-point landing, had touched down.

Carried onward by her momentum she tore towards the fringe of the wood.

Derek applied the brakes, but the huge tyres skidded on the sodden grass.

“Now there’ll be a proper mess-up,” was the thought that flashed across his mind.

He braced himself for the impact. He’d be lucky if he got off with a pair of broken legs. He’d seen men removed from a Lancaster that had, in similar circumstances, crashed against but not through, a stone-built barn. It hadn’t been a pleasant sight! He wondered whether the other members of the crew had taken up crash-landing positions—how O’Hara and Evershot, helpless as they were, would fare.

Then, with hardly a jolt, the Halifax came to a standstill.

Her motionless propellers were within arm’s length of a row of fully grown trees, each trunk as massive as a stone buttress.

For several moments no one spoke.

Then: “We’re down, look you!” exclaimed David in a high-pitched voice, stating what was an obvious fact.

Derek eyed him severely.

“For that barred expression, my lad, you’ll stand drinks all round in the mess to-night!” he declared.

There was a general laugh. The tension was broken. Short of being sent up again—a recognized antidote to air shock—to raise a laugh is the next best thing.

CHAPTER VI

Back to Base

Derek was the first to leave the aircraft. He had two clean-cut objects immediately in his mind: to obtain medical assistance for the two wounded members of the crew, and to find out where he was in order to telephone to base and report on the more or less successful landing.

Two men were already hurrying towards the stationary Halifax. One, whom Derek rightly guessed to be the farmer, was tall, somewhat rugged-faced, and spoke in a soft though educated voice. Used to the bucolic inhabitants of the county popularly known as “Silly Sussex”, who, in his experience, rarely gave a straight answer to a straight question, Derek was agreeably surprised at the conciseness and directness of his replies.

“Where are we, please?”

“At Drungewick, six miles from Billingshurst and eight from Horsham.”

“Then Flintfold is the nearest R.A.F. station. Have you a telephone?”

“Yes, use it by all means.”

“We’ve two wounded men on board. I want to telephone for an ambulance. There isn’t a stretcher anywhere near here?”

“What’s wrong with a couple of stout hurdles?” asked the farmer practically.

These were quickly forthcoming, but not before David had given Mick O’Hara an opium pill, now that there was no longer any question of having to bale out.

They had very little difficulty in getting the two casualties out of the fuselage. Both were placed carefully on the hurdles and covered with blankets. With the aid of the farmer and his men they were carried into the house.

O'Hara's wounds had already been dressed, but when Derek saw the state the New Zealander was in he had a nasty shock. The shell splinter had cut a gash about six inches in length horizontally across his forehead, laying bare the frontal bone.

It looked pretty ghastly. His comrades almost took it for granted that the wound would prove fatal.

The first-aid chest, removed from the aircraft, was again brought into service; but it seemed that little could be done for the man until the arrival of the ambulance with a medical officer.

While they were waiting, Derek rang up base, demanding an urgent priority call. It took nine minutes before he got through.

"That you, Cattisbourne Station?"

"Orderly officer speaking!"

"Splendid: it's Brighouse, I recognized your voice. 'S for Sylvia' has touched down at Drungewick. . . . No, not Brunswick—Drungewick in Sussex. Can't give you the map reference, but it's eight miles west of Horsham. Can you send a tender to collect the crew?"

"Crash-landing, old son?"

"No jolly fear," replied the pilot indignantly. "A good and proper three-point landing in a field little larger than a football ground, if you want to know. That's where she's jammed, but we caught it coming back. We are reported overdue and missing, I take it?"

"Were," amended the orderly officer. "The Royal Observer Corps reported you coming in and flying low, twenty minutes or half an hour ago. So if you thought you were catching us on the hop it's a flop! Righto, I'll arrange for transport to fetch you. It should arrive at 1800. Meanwhile, be good!"

"How did the other fellows get on?"

"Every aircraft except yours returned, and the crews have mopped up most of the whisky. We managed to save a bottle for your crowd, when they roll up. Well, cheerio, see you later!"

Pilot-officer Brighouse, the orderly officer of the day, rang off. He was having a pretty busy time.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Derek. "The blighter wouldn't wait to be informed of our casualties, and he didn't give me a chance to tell him we'd downed a

“Not one but two,” added David.

“I thought you didn’t see it crash. Did it?” asked Derek hopefully.

“Yes, Tredgold and Macey both saw it hit the ground and explode.”

The uninjured members of the bomber’s crew were now attacking their rations. They hadn’t eaten either on the way out or on the homeward run. For one thing, they were too keyed up to bother about such mundane things as food; for another, experience had taught them to conserve their rations until they were over the English coast, the reason being that if they had to abandon aircraft over the Channel and take to their rubber dinghy, they wouldn’t be without food for at least forty-eight hours. By that time they would either be picked up or they would never be found.

Then the R.A.F. ambulance from Flintfold arrived. With it was a doctor in the uniform of a squadron-leader, and three orderlies. A tender followed with another surgeon and more hospital attendants.

“You’ve made quite a sound job of this man,” declared the senior M.O. after giving O’Hara an examination. “He’d better be placed in the ambulance straight away.”

Evershot’s wound required more attention. Derek and his companions didn’t see what was being done to him—perhaps it was just as well!—but in about ten minutes both doctors stood up, straightened their backs, and asked for hot water to wash their hands.

“Do you think he’ll pull through?” asked Derek anxiously.

“Why not?” rejoined the senior doctor. “Nelson did!”

“What’s Nelson got to do with it?” thought Derek. “In any case, he didn’t survive the Battle of Trafalgar.”

Catching sight of the puzzled expression on Dundas’s face, the M.O. proceeded to enlighten him on that point.

“I was referring to the Battle of the Nile. During the action Nelson received a wound very similar to this man’s. A strip of skin fell over both eyes. It looked pretty serious to those of the crew who saw it. The report got round that the admiral was mortally wounded, and for a while he was also under that impression. When the French flagship—*l’Orient*—blew up, Nelson left the cockpit and, to the surprise and relief of his crew, appeared again on the quarter-deck and gave instructions for boats to be lowered to

save survivors from the French ship. Nelson recovered from that wound in a little over a month. I expect this man will be up and about in less than that time.”

“That’s good!” declared Derek.

“Unless there are complications that I cannot at present detect,” continued the M.O. “To explain in terms that a layman can understand: the brain, though protected by the frontal bone, isn’t damaged, but there is a possibility that the bone itself might be affected by the shock. However, time will tell.”

Derek wondered, and so did the remaining members of the bomber’s crew, whether they would ever set eyes on Sergeant Mick O’Hara again, still more whether he would be able to take part with them in subsequent offensive operations against the enemy.

They had been a team—a well-trained, efficient crowd who understood each other and knew the true sense of comradeship. In all probability they would have Evershot back before very long, but “S for Sylvia” would be made fit for service before then. That meant there would have to be another wireless operator and another air-gunner. They might be, and probably would be, keen and efficient but, as Nigel Holt observed, it wouldn’t be the old gang!

With the departure of the ambulance Derek and his crew felt rather at a loose end, while they were waiting for transport to take them back to Cattisbourne Aerodrome.

They offered to give the farmer a hand, but either he didn’t care to trust his tractors in the hands of men used to Merlin engines or he thought they should be resting and sleeping after their exertions. For him it was a fairly slack time of year; too early for ploughing and sowing, since most of the ground was stiff and sticky owing to abnormal rains.

To fill in the time Derek and his crew paid a visit to their grounded aircraft, for grounded she most certainly was. Until she was partly dismantled and towed back to her base for repairs, renewals and overhaul, “S for Sylvia” was as completely earth-bound as the proverbial pig; although, to confound yet another old-time proverb, pigs *have* flown in aircraft.

They counted sixty-four holes, large and small, mostly clean-cut ones caused by machine-gun bullets. Looking at the damage, the crew marvelled that there hadn’t been heavier casualties and that the aircraft had got back.

“As a matter of fact, you fellows, we had flak most of the way,” said Derek. “Most of the stuff burst well below us; so I didn’t trouble to tell you at the time. Our tightest corner was when the shore batteries opened up.”

“I thought they were bound to get us, sir,” declared Macey. “In the rear cockpit it seemed as if they were concentrating on me! Think we can borrow a paint-brush and a pot of paint, sir?”

“What on earth for?”

“Just to put a pair of swastikas on the old bus, sir.”

“But our ‘kills’ haven’t been confirmed.”

“They will be, sir,” rejoined the air-gunner confidently. “Mr. Price says he didn’t see the second F.W. come down, but Tredgold and I saw her hit the ground. All I can say is I shouldn’t like to have been aboard, because she blew up good and proper.”

“We’d better leave the swastika stuff,” decided Derek. “It means only waiting till the briefing officer has seen us. . . . Ha! This sounds like the tender!”

Bidding farewell to their temporary host, the remaining crew boarded the vehicle, Derek and Nigel sitting with the driver.

“Find the place all right?” asked Derek.

“Yes, sir. Got a bit flummoxed when I asked the natives. Don’t know what you think about these signposts being removed, sir; but it strikes me it’s doing Jerry a good turn instead of a bad one.”

“Wasting our petrol by taking vehicles miles out of their way and stopping with engines running to ask for directions. Yes, I suppose there must be thousands of gallons of juice and hundreds of working hours wasted over that. Any news on the wireless?”

“Not ‘arf there ain’t, sir,” replied the driver, keeping a sharp look-out ahead all the time he spoke. “Ginger Peake—you’ll know him, sir, he’s in No. 3 Flight—well, Ginger tunes-in to a Hun station. He speaks the language like a native, him having been on Cook’s staff in Berlin for ten years. So he translated: sort of running commentary like. They started off, just before one one o o, with a hymn tune, which was rather strange, I think, sir.”

“Quite,” agreed Derek, tactfully refraining from mentioning that “*Deutschland über Alles*” and “Praise the Lord, ye heavens adore Him” are

set to the same tune.

“Then they gave out that Field-Marshal Goering would commence his speech in a few minutes. He just didn’t. We could hear the ‘cookies’ going off, so we knew the lads were busy. And we didn’t lose one aircraft, seeing as you fetched back. What’s more, we’ve sent another lot of bombers to Berlin this afternoon.”

“Good heavens!” ejaculated Derek. “And how did they get on?”

“Don’t know yet, sir,” was the reply. “None of them went from Cattisbourne. But two trips to Berlin in one day and by daylight; that’ll give the old Boche something more than a headache! . . . Ah, now we’re on a clear road. I know where we are now, so I’ll step on it!”

Although the vehicle was supposed to be “governed” so that the maximum speed should not exceed forty miles per hour, the R.A.F. driver certainly got another fifteen or twenty out of her.

By this time Derek was feeling dog-tired. It had been a long, arduous day with excitement and the sense of responsibility to keep him keyed up.

He fell asleep, only to awake with a start to find that he was leaning against the driver’s shoulder and that Holt, breathing heavily, was slumbering with his head resting on his—Derek’s—shoulder.

“It’s all right, sir,” declared the man cheerfully. “You just carry on an’ have a kip. I won’t put the whole caboosh into the ditch!”

People on the road, if they had time to glance at the swiftly moving vehicle, would have registered surprise at the sight of two men in flying kit lolling sideways as if they were drunk and incapable.

They weren’t drunk although, fast asleep, they might well be incapable. So sound did Derek slumber that it seemed to him that he hadn’t closed his eyes for more than a minute when the driver nudged him with his shoulder.

“Here we are, sir!” he announced. “Eighty miles in one hour and forty minutes. Not so dusty, sir!”

Derek pulled himself together and managed to collect his wits in time to return the salute of the sentry on the gate.

He had been twelve hours away from “base”, and what a lot had happened in that time!

CHAPTER VII

“Missing the Bus”

“So you have showed up, after all,” was the Old War Horse’s greeting when the returned members of the last-one-home Halifax were assembled in order to be cross-examined by the briefing officer. “Couldn’t send my final report to the Air Ministry until I received yours. A bit of a blustering trip for you, I understand. Well, Dundas?”

As briefly as possible, without leaving out any essential facts, Derek told his story. The greater part of it was similar to dozens the Old War Horse had heard that day. All the bombers had unloaded their stuff in the target area, all the pilots reported that there was a comparatively feeble amount of flak, an indication that the defence had been taken off its guard.

There had been heavy fighter opposition on the run home for most of the British aircraft, but so far only two victims had been claimed by the aircraft on their return.

“You say you downed a couple of F.W. 190’s?” inquired their interrogator in even tones, although by the expression on his face it was evident that the news interested him greatly. It would be a feather in the cap of the squadron operating from Cattisbourne. “You actually saw them crash?”

“No, sir, I did not,” replied Derek. “My attention was fully occupied keeping the aircraft on a fairly level keel. We’d received damage.”

“H’m; then who saw them?”

“I did, sir,” replied Sergeant Macey. “I got one with a short burst and Sergeant Tredgold got the other.”

“We both had a crack at the second blighter,” added the New Zealander. “I didn’t see the first one go, because I was concentrating on the other.”

“The first one blew up in the air,” declared Macey. “The second did a terminal velocity powerdive with his engines well on fire. He blew up when

he hit the ground.”

“Where did this encounter take place?” asked the Old War Horse, addressing the question to the pilot.

“Roughly midway between Cologne and Coblenz, sir; over mountainous, heavily wooded country. We hadn’t actually recrossed the Rhine.”

“It was over the Westerwald,” supplemented Holt, the navigator. “We deviated to the northward of our outward route, according to instructions.”

“And the time?”

“Approximately between 1235 and 1240, sir,” replied Nigel Holt.

“Both claims allowed!” announced the examining officer. “It may interest you fellows to learn that one of our Stirlings taking part in a diversionary sweep over the Rhineland reported seeing an explosion in mid-air and a considerable volume of black smoke rising from the ground. The time and place reported by the captain of the Stirling coincide with those you’ve just given me. We, as a squadron, haven’t done so badly. We certainly made a mess-pot of Goering’s speech—and his lunch!”

That evening the squadron held a smoking concert to celebrate the successful day-raid on the German capital. It was a climax to a strenuous time in the air, and although most, if not all, of the crews were dog-tired, they “let themselves go” in the knowledge that they would not be called upon for the next operational flight for at least another three days.

They could afford to be hilarious. So far as they, as a squadron, were concerned, they had not suffered any fatal casualties, although eleven men couldn’t be present on account of wounds received in action.

When, as sometimes happened, there were vacant chairs in the mess that would never again be filled by the gallant youths who had laid down their lives for their country, there would be an inevitable atmosphere of depression. Now there was no such vacancies, hence the evening of festivity and mirth.

There were songs—solos and choruses—anecdotes and speeches. Almost every fellow who “got up on his hind legs” guyed somebody else. Juniors had sly digs at their superiors; no one minded, and everything was taken in good part. Even the C.O. grinned delightedly when a squadron-leader “pulled his leg”.

Then the C.O. was called upon to speak. He was a man still in the early forties, with dark-brown hair greying at the temples. Across his left breast he wore a double row of ribbons, and they hadn't been acquired by serving on the staff in a safe back area.

His remarks were a clever blending of seriousness and humour. He led off with a tribute to the ground staff, without whose zeal and devotion to what is sometimes hard routine work it would have been impossible for the air-crews to have performed what they did so efficiently.

"It is a significant fact," he went on, "that from reports I have seen from every captain of aircraft from the station who took part in to-day's minor operation, there is not one instance of defects developing due to mechanical or structural causes. When those who fly know they can rely implicitly upon those who put them into the air, the confidence they derive from that knowledge is a decided contribution to subsequent success.

"I have just referred to your little day excursion to Berlin as a minor operation. Probably some of you who have borne the heat and burden of the day might feel inclined to disagree. But in the light of immediate further operations over Germany and Italy—although you have greatly inconvenienced a certain Boche Field-Marshal mainly famous for his excess of adipose tissue—this double daylight raid over the hub of Hunland is like a zephyr preceding the hurricane."

The concert wasn't the end of the day's excitement, for at the close the adjutant called Derek aside.

"I don't suppose that repairs to your aircraft will be completed inside a week," he began. "Since you've had a particularly sticky time getting home there's no reason why you and your crew shouldn't fade out of the picture for seven days. In other words, go on leave and enjoy yourselves."

"Thanks awfully, sir," rejoined Derek, feeling like a schoolboy unexpectedly given an extra day's holiday.

"Get hold of your crew bright and early to-morrow morning, then. Send in details for making out the travelling warrants to the orderly room, and I'll see they're made out at once. There'll be transport leaving here to catch both the up and down trains at Marlborough at eleven. That's all, I think!"

Derek didn't leave it till the morning. Before he turned in that night he'd obtained all the necessary particulars as to the crew's respective destinations.

Fortunately all of them had either relations or friends living within eight hours' rail journey, Bob Holroyd having the longest journey to make. Even Tom Tredgold, hailing from Christchurch, New Zealand, got "fixed up" when Macey gave him an invitation to spend his leave at his home—the town, somewhat strangely, bore the same name and was no farther away than Hampshire.

Had Sergeant O'Hara not been a casualty in hospital, his case would have been difficult, since to reach his home in Ireland would have taken about thirty hours.

"I'm having my warrant made out for Smoke," announced Nigel Holt, using the nickname by which London is popularly referred to by the Services. "May as well be rooked there as anywhere else; you get more for your money."

"You're telling me," rejoined Derek. "But isn't your home in Lincoln?"

"Yes, after a fashion," replied the flying officer. "Only my governor just happens to be doing a spot of work in North Africa, and the mater's on some sort of roving commission with the A.T.S. All my pals are in the Forces, so I'd be having a pretty thin time."

"Then why not come along with me?" suggested Derek. "My people won't mind. No, that won't do; that's a rotten way of putting it. They'll be delighted to see you."

"H'm! Must think it over, Lofty."

"There'll be plenty to do to amuse yourself," continued Derek, unrebuffed by the apparently churlish reluctance on Holt's part to accept the invitation. "There's a good trout stream. You can do a bit of rabbiting, there are plenty of decent walks, and there's always the chance to run into Bournemouth for the evening."

"That sounds quite all right," said Nigel. "I'd like to come along, of course; but it's frightful cheek packing myself on your people for the best part of seven days. Your people's place isn't far from Poole, is it?"

"About ten miles."

"Wonder if there's any chance of doing a spot of sailing in the harbour?" asked the flying officer, mindful of a glorious and never-to-be-forgotten holiday in a motor cruiser in those far-off days before the world went mad.

"Might be," replied Derek dubiously. "We might get a fishing-permit to use a boat in the harbour. Only this is winter, let me remind you. But I tell

you what: there's a pal of mine in command of a minesweeper based on Poole. He mentioned when last I saw him that he could get the S.N.O.'s permission to take me for a trip. It should be possible to include you, but we'll have to wear uniform."

"That sounds all right," declared Holt. "Well, it's your suggestion, old man, and if your people don't cotton on to it, don't blame me. No doubt they'll be delighted to welcome their young hopeful home at any old hour of the day or night, but when it comes to my breezing in on top of them, without a word of warning——"

"I'll wire first thing in the morning," interposed his chum. "So that'll be all right!"

At ten o'clock next morning the hale-and-hearty members of the crew of "S for Sylvia", which incidentally had been dismantled and was on its way by lorry for reconditioning, left Cattisbourne Aerodrome by motor transport for Marlborough railway station.

Derek and Nigel were not the only ones of the party bound south, and they had not long to wait for the train that was to take them on the first of several sections of the journey.

Although the distance as the crow flies was a mere fifty miles, their route practically doubled the distance and involved five changes. Had they been able to "wangle" a flight in a trainer aircraft they could have made it in approximately a quarter of an hour.

As it was, it was four o'clock in the afternoon of a full Sunday, with the daylight already fading, when they found themselves at Poole, faced with an hour and a half's wait before the next train would take them for the last ten miles to their destination, the little market-town of Tardiham.

"By Jove! I've just had a brain-wave!" exclaimed Derek. "There's a bus from the 'George' to Tardiham. Unless the time-table's been altered since I was home last, it leaves in ten minutes. We'll catch it hands down."

"Lead on, McDuff!" agreed his companion. "It's your show. I'm entirely in your hands."

It was but a few minutes' walk from the railway-station to the starting-point of the bus to Tardiham.

While they were waiting Nigel surprised his chum by chuckling audibly.

"Why this hilarity?" he inquired.

Holt pointed across the busy street to the window of a vacant shop. In it was a notice in well-executed stencilled letters about four inches high:

BUSINESS TRANSFERED TO PREMESIS
OPPOSITE. ACCOMADATION 100.

“That’s not a striking testimonial for the local education authority,” he remarked. “I’ll copy it in my pocket-book. It’ll be something to amuse the lads when we get back. Four mistakes!”

“I can only see three,” observed Derek.

“Four,” insisted his companion. “There are two in that rendering of ‘accommodation’.”

“But, hang it! that’s only one word. If it’s right, it’s right; if it’s wrong, it’s wrong, and there’s no getting away with it.”

They continued to argue while the squadron-leader jotted down the words on the back of an envelope.

They waited and waited. There was no sign of the Tardiham bus.

“Bit late, isn’t it?”

“Are you sure it’s running?”

“I’ll ask that policeman.”

The constable smiled.

“Yes, sir; it starts at 4.10. It’s now 4.16 and it’s just gone!”

“But I thought it went from here?” asked Derek.

“It used to, sir; for the last couple of months it leaves from the other side of the road. You ain’t the only ones to be let down like that.”

“So it’s the train after all,” declared Derek. “Now we know what ‘missing the bus’ means in its truest sense. If you hadn’t called my attention to that confounded——”

“Hello, Dundas!” exclaimed a hearty voice, accompanied by a slap on the shoulder. “What are you doing in this part of the world?”

The speaker was a tall slim man in the early twenties. He was wearing naval uniform with two wavy lines of gold lace on each sleeve, denoting that he was a lieutenant R.N.V.R. His equivalent rank, therefore, was junior to Derek and superior to Nigel Holt.

“What, Callender? Awfully glad to see you!” rejoined Derek. “This is Holt; Holt, old man, this is Callender. We were talking about you only last evening.”

“Nothing too much to my discredit, I hope?” asked the naval officer, with a pleasant smile.

“On the contrary,” replied Derek. “We’re on seven days’ leave, and this merchant here is spending it with me. He happened to mention he’d like to have a day afloat and I remembered your invitation for a run out in your minesweeper. Does the invitation still hold?”

“Of course!”

“Well, then, what day?”

“You’ll have to make it to-morrow,” explained Callender. “We’ve been attached to the Poole Naval Base for fourteen days, and we’re going back to Pompey on Friday. What about to-morrow?”

“What time do you weigh and proceed—if that’s the right term?”

“O seven four five, prompt.”

“’Fraid it’s no go,” said Derek, to Nigel’s obvious disappointment. “The first train in doesn’t arrive till eight.”

“Then why not come aboard now?” continued the lieutenant. “We can fix you up with a couple of spare bunks. I’ll look in the office and get the S.N.O.’s permission—there won’t be any difficulty in getting that—and we’ll go on board straight away. Nothing like hammering the jolly old iron while it’s hot!”

It was Holt who raised objections to their sudden and unexpected change of plans.

“How about your people?” he asked Derek. “They’ll be expecting us.”

“They won’t,” was the surprising answer. “Matter of fact, I clean forgot to send them a wire; so in their case ignorance is bliss. We’ll have three clear days at my place, anyhow. I say, Nigel; see what we get for missing the bus!”

CHAPTER VIII

On Board the Minesweeper

The three were not unfamiliar with Poole. Callender and Holt had cruised in its large land-locked harbour, Dundas had lived in the district for a considerable part of his life.

For the second time in a little over a quarter of a century, Poole, discarding its peace-time industries, or adapting them as circumstances required, had switched over whole-heartedly to the task of helping to win the war.

As they made their way along the High Street, that, beginning spaciouly, gradually deteriorated into a narrow road with mean buildings, there was little to indicate that Poole, like other towns large and small, had been the target for Nazi aircraft. But whereas the street was formerly crowded with civilians connected with yachting and fishing—even a Royal Naval uniform was an unfamiliar sight—its pavements were packed with men and women wearing dark blue, Air Force blue or khaki. There were also Canadian troops, a fair sprinkling of Americans, men of the Free French navy wearing pom-pommed caps, and even Madrasi bluejackets of the Royal Indian Navy.

In the narrowest part of the High Street army wagons and other heavy Service vehicles clattered incessantly, leaving onlookers to wonder what manner of men their drivers were that their ponderous charges could pass one another without actually colliding.

“You’d better come in with me,” said Callender, as they arrived at a building set back from the main thoroughfare. “The S.N.O. might want to see you.”

The naval sentry at the entrance brought his rifle to the slope, giving the butt a sharp slap. Then the two R.A.F. officers had to present their identity cards, for even the naval officer’s guarantee as to their bona fides was not sufficient.

In less than four minutes they were out of the building, the S.N.O. having raised no objection to Callender's request to "ship two supernumeraries on board H.M. Minesweeper No. 445 B".

"Plenty of time before tea," observed Callender. "And there's just about enough daylight left for us to see our way about, so we'll make a detour along the quay. There's a spot of bomb damage that may interest you."

The two airmen silently acquiesced and fell into step with the naval man, except when they had to drop into single file where the crowds were thickest. They weren't particularly interested in bomb damage. They'd seen quite enough of it in Britain and had helped considerably in making a far worse mess of German cities and towns.

The policy of bombing Hunland by day and by night was showing unmistakable signs of bearing fruit. The Boche was whining, and when he starts doing that there is every indication that he realizes that he's being given far heavier punishment than he ever inflicted upon us in air warfare.

Only that afternoon on the train Derek had read a report in a British newspaper giving some remarkable revelations of a Dr. Willi Bauer, a Nazi official spokesman on the German wireless:

"Little does our enemy think of the cruelty and sorrow he inflicts on our women and children. He has no pity. Yet it can now be said that, in secret, we often thought of the victims of German raids on British towns. We pitied the sufferings of those English people who lost their homes."

And yet, when a handful of Nazi airmen contrived to drop their bombs on Greater London and one H.E. killed a score or more of children in a school building, one of the Huns who took part in the attack boasted over the German radio that the raiders had dropped their bombs exactly where they had been meant to fall!

There were very little signs of destruction. A large yacht, converted to a patrol vessel, had been hit by a bomb that had passed completely through her foredeck without exploding. Only one man of her crew was wounded, but the vessel sank in a few minutes. Several hours later the bomb—a delayed action one—went off, blowing the submerged bows to bits. One freak of the explosion left an officer's monkey-jacket spread-eagled over the funnel. Already the greater part of the wreckage had been removed by a salvage firm.

"It's a remarkable thing," remarked Callender, "but Jerry planes seemed to take a delight in trailing me—or, rather, I should say my ship—from port

to port and drop their stuff *after* she's sailed."

"There's some slight consolation for us, then," observed Holt. "I suppose you're confident that Jerry won't unload a few bombs while we're on board?"

"I guarantee nothing," replied the naval officer. "What I do know is that that craft was sunk within eighteen hours after we'd left Poole for Portsmouth."

It was almost dark when Callender led his guests up the gangplank connecting H.M.S. Minesweeper 445 B with the quay.

The White Ensign—actually it was decidedly grubby and showing sign of fraying—had been lowered at sunset, but that fact didn't prevent the new arrivals paying the proper compliments to the diminutive warship's quarter-deck.

Then they went below to the ward-room, which was ingeniously constructed by bulkheading off a part of the original fish-hold.

A young R.N.V.R. sub-lieutenant heaved himself out of an armchair when his skipper, barely two years a senior both in age and rank, entered.

"My sub," was Callender's introduction to the new arrivals. "Richard Tugwell, but he'll answer readily to Tuggy, or even Tug. Tuggy, old horse, this is Dundas, an old friend of mine; and this is—— Oh, dash it all! I've a frightful memory for people's names."

"Don't worry, sir," broke in the sub-lieutenant. "I've met Holt before!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the flying officer. "When your name was mentioned I didn't twig it. . . . We were at Christ's Hospital together," he explained for the benefit of the other two. "Let me see: how long ago was it?"

"Five years," replied Tugwell. "And a lot's happened since then. You haven't altered very much. Flying seems to suit you down to the ground."

"Here, don't say that!" protested Holt, touching the bulkhead with his forefinger. "Down to the ground can be very awkward and unpleasant. But you've filled out, Tug. Actually putting on fat!"

"Shows I don't overwork him," commented Callender. "Well, I'll leave you fellows to chew the fat. I've a spot of work to do—seeing what signals have come in—but it won't take me long. Tea will be here in a few minutes."

For the next quarter of an hour or so the two old Bluecoats almost monopolized the conversation. Derek, finding little of interest in the exchange of reminiscences, turned his attention to his immediate surroundings.

The ward-room had been made quite cosy, at the expense of the officers, who had to pay for decorations out of their own pockets. The bulkhead was painted in white enamel with a dado of dark blue about three feet from the deck. The deckhead, otherwise the ceiling, being of metal as a possible protection against machine-gun bullets and fragments of shell, was covered with a cork cement composition with the object of counteracting "sweating". Yet in spite of these precautions there were yellowy streaks indicating pretty obviously that the deckhead, although reasonably rain and spray proof, was not wholly so.

On the bulkhead were neatly framed prints, mostly of marine subjects, a brass eight-day clock and a barometer to match. At one end was a polished brass stove, at the other, where a door led for'ard to the crew's quarters, a bookcase. There were three armchairs, that in a heavy seaway could be clamped to the deck, and a couple of settees. In one corner was a swing-table, with small holes bored in the board at intervals of about a foot close to the edges.

Derek wondered what they were for. He'd know when the minesweeper put to sea!

There were no scuttles but a skylight, carefully blacked-out lest a stray beam from the well-lighted ward-room should act as a magnet for night-raiding aircraft's bombs.

The characteristic reek of ships was definitely noticeable. Derek rather liked it. Nowhere ashore could any building acquire the odours of a ship; yet, although she had been a trawler, 445 B's former fish-hold did not seem to retain the smell of decayed fish and seaweed.

In a lull in the conversation Derek remarked on this to the sub.

"It *did*," explained Tugwell feelingly. "It was enough to turn a fellow inside out even before we put to sea. But we cured it finally, although I admit if the old hooker's trying to stand on her head in a good old seaway it does reek a bit below!"

There was a tap on the door and a bluejacket entered and prepared to lay the table.

“Are you for a bloater for your tae?” he asked in a Northumbrian burr. “They’re guid bloaters, I’m tellin’ you; juist the thing to tek’ edge of a man’s hunger off, since it’s a couple o’ hours or more to next meal!”

“It’s ages since I tasted bloaters,” declared Nigel after the man, part of whose duties was that of officers’ steward, had left the cabin. “They seem to have disappeared from the menu at Cattisbourne. I missed them—plebeian taste, but there you are!”

“Wait till you’ve sampled our bangers, sir,” suggested the sub.

“Bangers! What are they?” rejoined Derek. “And you can cut out the ‘sir’ if you don’t mind.”

“Bangers are real pork sausages,” explained Tugwell. “They don’t do us so badly in the grub line afloat. And spirits and tobacco we get out of bond.”

“Sorry I had to leave you,” said Callender, on returning to the ward-room. “One or two signals were urgent. . . . Tea ready? Good. I say, you fellows, anything you want ashore this evening? There are a couple of cinemas.”

“We’d rather be comfortable on board, thanks all the same,” replied Derek. “Unless you’re particularly keen?”

“No; there’s not much fun being ashore on a dark winter’s night. I don’t know many at the base. We generally settle down to a book unless anyone blows in; don’t we, Sub?”

“Tell us something about your job,” prompted Derek after tea had been satisfactorily disposed of, and pipes and cigarettes were lighted.

“Shouldn’t think that there is much that you don’t already know,” replied the captain. “You’ve laid mines in enemy waters?”

“That we have not,” declared Derek. “Bombing’s our forte. We leave mine-laying to the Coastal Command fellows, and a pretty sticky job it is, with little chance of being in the limelight, although they do get in the searchlights more than is good for them sometimes.”

“And the Hun lays mines in our waters too,” continued Callender. “Not to the extent he once did, but in sufficient numbers to keep a few hundred of our minesweepers busy round the coast.

“Broadly speaking, mines are of three distinct types. The most dangerous to shipping is, in my opinion, the old contact one, with leaden horns. It hasn’t altered a great deal since the last war, so I’ve been told. They

are laid by U-boats—I'm referring to the German mines—usually at depths varying from ten to twenty feet beneath the surface. They can be fished up by paravanes, but when we're working in pairs, connected by a sweep, our speed is too slow for them to be efficient. If we're lucky, we bring mines to the surface and then touch them off with rifle fire."

"And if you're not?" asked Nigel.

"It usually means the loss of a couple of hundred fathoms of good wire if one of the horns of the mine is bent and the thing goes up. If the explosion is close to the sweeper, the chances are she'll have her stern blow off, or worse."

"Or worse," echoed Derek. "It seems to me you haven't a particularly healthy job, and we're taking part in it to-morrow!"

"One gets used to it," declared Callender imperturbably. "First going off I used to have disturbed nights thinking about them; but it soon wears off. Personally, I don't envy you your job lugging tons of H.E. over enemy territory and liable to have the whole caboodle touched off at any moment."

"You forget all about that when you've made a good offensive sweep or two," rejoined Derek. "It reminds me of the yarn about the man who was a caretaker at a dynamite works. . . . But carry on; how about the other types of mines? How do you deal with them?"

"The magnetic mine was a nasty proposition until our naval experts discovered its secret; but, of course, you know about that and the principle on which it operates. The trouble is that these brutes lie on the sea-bed. They're difficult to sweep, so we generally detonate them by a certain gadget. I can't go into details. It's a strict secret; but if we detect one I'll show you how it is dealt with.

"Finally, unless the Hun, who's pretty clever in that line, doesn't turn out an entirely new sort of mine, there only remains the acoustic brute. Like the magnetic mine, it rests on the bed of the sea when laid. We've got that type weighed up and deal with it accordingly.

"Contact mines are usually laid by mine-laying U-boats, the others by night-flying aircraft. Contrary to popular belief, they aren't dropped in a straight line in the same direction of the sea traffic lane or swept channel along which our coastal convoys proceed. They are either dropped across the channel, at right angles to its direction, or else diagonally, and you can see that that method greatly increases the area to be searched."

"Do you ever see Boche aircraft laying them?" asked Holt.

“No,” was the reply. “We carry out our sweeping operations during daylight and endeavour to return to harbour by sunset. You can’t work the sweeps at all satisfactorily in the dark. In any case, unless the Boche aircraft could be seen actually dropping their eggs, it would be extremely difficult to distinguish them from some of our night raiders flying low as they came in over the coast. As I just mentioned, the enemy planes drop their mines across the swept channel and that’s in the same direction as our homing aircraft. Also, if the swept channel is fairly close to the land the Huns sometimes fly over it before they turn for home. Then the sirens go but nothing happens, because they aren’t carrying bombs. Bombs and magnetic mines are bad mixers in an aircraft’s offensive load!”

“Have you often been attacked?” asked Derek.

“Not directly, except on one occasion,” replied Callender. “Somehow the Hun concentrates on our ‘opposite number’, and then we open fire without being actually in action.”

“But on that one occasion?”

“Then two Me’s did have a cut at us. The first dropped a couple of beauties that missed. We gave him a burst as he came in, and that rattled him. We may have hit him; that I don’t know. The second Me thought better of it, and he turned away. As he was swinging to starboard we certainly did get him. He legged it, losing height and smoking heavily. Our opposite number let off a few rounds in support of us, although the Hun wasn’t anywhere near over her, but, bless me! if she didn’t put in a claim that she and not we had disabled the Hun so that it was unlikely he’d ever get back to base!

“But the funny part came later. Jerry’s bombs hadn’t done us any damage, but they’d brought hundreds of fish to the surface, either killed or stunned. So we made a sixteen-point turn and steamed through the area dead slow so that our bow wave wouldn’t throw all the fish clear. Then the cook was lowered over the side in a bosun’s chair—the sea was calm and the temperature of the water fairly high, since it was August—and using a hoop net he scooped up about a hundredweight of prime fish in under twenty minutes.

“For the next few days we seemed to be having nothing to eat except fish—boiled, stewed and fried. This threatened to go on indefinitely, since the cook had salted a lot down. Then, one night, just for a spree, someone—I won’t mention names—hung up a dogfish, that’s something like a shark, just inside the door of the Pay’s office. The Pay wasn’t exactly popular, so we

were hoping he'd go to his cabin in the dark, feel for the electric-light switch and put his hand in the dogfish's mouth.

"It was after eleven at night when the Pay returned from a hectic evening. This was somewhere on the East Coast, by the by, and our depot 'ship' was a shore establishment. About a dozen of us were hanging around waiting to see how the Pay would take it. Suddenly he lets off a terrific yell _____"

Callender's yarn was interrupted by a tap on the door and a signalman appeared.

"Captain wishes to see you at once in his office, sir!" he reported.

"Sorry, you fellows!" exclaimed the lieutenant, reaching for his cap and greatcoat, and off he went "at the double" to accede to the S.N.O.'s "wishes", which, from a naval point of view, meant "Hurry for all you're worth!"

He was back on board in about half an hour and addressed himself to his sub-lieutenant.

"The Observer Corps at Swanage reports that an enemy aircraft is suspected of having dropped magnetic mines, believed to be six, just before sunset this evening at a position three to three and a half miles on a bearing 170 degrees from Anvil Point. We are to clear up the mess the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Very good, sir!" replied Tugwell, without emotion. It was just ordinary routine so far as both these officers were concerned.

"Now what do *you* think about it?" continued Callender, turning to his guests. "We may not return to base till pretty late," he went on tactfully, "so if you have anything else on, you can easily go ashore before we cast off to-morrow."

"Nothing doing, old horse!" declared Derek. "We're coming along to see the fun, eh, Holt?"

"Rather!" agreed the flying officer. "Won't it be nice for a change to see other fellows doing a spot of work?"

CHAPTER IX

A Brush with the Enemy

“Dirty weather ahead of us,” was Lieutenant Callender’s greeting when his guests, freshly shaven, came out of the cabins that had been temporarily allotted to them. “Glass has fallen three-tenths in the night. We may be able to get the job done before it pipes up.”

It was seven-thirty in the morning and still pitch-dark on deck. Preparations were already going on for the minesweeper’s departure. Men, hardly visible in their black oilskins, moved here and there with an uncanny sense of confidence and precision. In the circumstances Derek and Nigel thought it just as well to remain below until dawn. Attempting to move anywhere on the deck, encumbered as it was with wires, bollards and similar “gadgets”, might easily result in a broken ankle. In the fuselage of a bomber they were quite at home; here on board they, were acutely aware that although they were qualified airmen they were also land-lubbers. Even Holt’s previous experience in yachts and motor-cruisers didn’t seem to help him very much.

Steam had already been raised. Minesweeper 445 B, when she started her career as a trawler, had coal-fed furnaces. Since the Admiralty had taken her over fuel oil had taken the place of coal, thus considerably lightening the work of the stokers.

The two chums were wearing R.A.F. uniform; in addition, obligingly lent them by the skipper and his second in command, they had oilskins over greatcoats, rubber knee boots, mufflers and sou’westers.

“You’ll do,” observed their host. “You may want a couple of sweaters apiece before long!”

“Gosh! We look like those advertisements for Michelin tyres,” declared Nigel. “What temperature are you expecting: thirty below?”

It was somewhat remarkable the interest the two guests took in the barometer. That was an instrument that, so far as operational flights were

concerned, they hardly troubled about. They left weather forecasts to the “Met. officer”, who was responsible for reports on the weather, direction and force of wind they were likely to encounter over enemy territory. They were used to flying in gales that in the last war would have kept the R.A.F. on the ground. But, somehow, on board the minesweeper the “glass” with all its prognosticated was a very real thing!

“May as well go on the bridge,” suggested Callender. “It’s getting fairly light, and we’ll be casting off in a few minutes. Mind the treads of the ladders. You’re apt to slip in rubber boots if you aren’t careful. ‘One hand for the ship and one for yourself’ is an old navy saying; but you’d better by far keep two hands for yourself and let others take care of this old hooker!”

Wondering what the skipper meant by “fairly light”, the two airmen followed him, almost blindly, to the foot of the bridge ladder, the “bridge” being an addition since No. 445 B had been incorporated into the Royal Navy.

Gradually their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. They could make out the old buildings across the quay, their roofs looming against the rain-laden sky.

Astern and ahead were more minesweepers, with steam escaping from their funnels as an indication that they, too, would shortly be putting to sea.

“All ready?” sung out the skipper.

“All ready, sir!” replied a voice.

The engine-room telegraph bell clanged the warning “Stand by”.

“Let go for’ard; ease your after-springs!”

“All gone for’ard, sir!”

Again the telegraph bell rang as Callender thrust the lever over to Quarter Speed Ahead.

“Let go aft!”

Almost imperceptibly the buildings on the quay appeared to be moving. Then gathering speed Minesweeper 445 B headed for the harbour entrance.

The White Ensign was hoisted, a fact that caused Nigel to inquire why, since he always thought that during the winter months colours weren’t hoisted until nine o’clock.

“Quite correct when a warship’s in harbour,” explained Callender. “When she’s under way she flies them day or night—just to help prevent awkward mistakes.”

Soon the minesweeper was abreast of the bomb-damaged hotel at Sandbanks, where the spacious waters of Poole Harbour contract to about a cable’s length and through which both flood and ebb tides make with considerable strength.

It was now dawn. Ahead, but slightly on the starboard bow, could be discerned the detached chalk mass of Handifast Point, off which Old Harry—a famous pinnacle—is fast crumbling to share the fate of his “wife”.

The wind was sou’west, but, sheltered by the Studland coast, the sea on the Bar was not particularly heavy. Even so, as the vessel passed the Bar Buoy, a sea breaking over her bows warned the two “supernumeraries” of what was in store.

Presently Peveril Point and Durlston Head were opened out, and as the minesweeper drew clear of the rock-bound cliffs she met the full force of the rising gale.

She was not alone. Three other sweepers had followed her out of Poole. Others from Portland would be taking part in the operations farther to the west’ard.

Callender and the sub were now busy taking angles with their sextants to ensure they were somewhere close to the area where the magnetic mines were reported to have been dropped. With luck they might locate the spot in half an hour; or it might take hours before the delicate instruments dealt with Hitler’s now discredited “secret weapon”, with which he hoped to blockade the British Isles so effectually that no vessel, Allied or neutral, could approach our shores without the almost certain fate of being blown up.

Leaving Tugwell in charge of the bridge, Callender invited his guests to go with him to the chart-house. Inside was a bluejacket.

“Anything doing, Watson?” asked the skipper.

“No, sir,” he replied.

“It may interest you to know,” Callender announced to his guests in quite a casual tone, “that but for the de-Gaussing apparatus, we’d very probably all be bound for a very long journey from which there is no return.”

In spite of this assurance Derek felt a peculiar sensation in the region of his waist. He wasn’t used to mines any more than he had been to flak and to

enemy night fighters during his initial operations over Western Europe.

“What was that fairly heavy detonation a few seconds ago?” asked Derek.

“Oh, that; it was a mine touched off about five miles away,” replied the skipper in a tone that implied that it didn’t concern him.

“It sounded much closer,” continued Derek, still curious to know what actually had happened and to learn all he could.

“Because sound travels quicker through water than through air,” explained Callender. “You’re used to air conditions; we fellows afloat have two elements to study—air and water—with a third—fire—occupying a minor place, so to speak. Well, we’re to look out for six of the brutes, if the Royal Observer Corps’ report is correct.”

The search continued for the best part of an hour, but without any positive result. Then a mine was touched off by one of the Poole-based flotilla.

This was followed by an interval of three quarters of an hour, during which No. 445 B steamed slowly, rolling and pitching disconcertingly in the now fairly heavy seas.

It was more than either Derek or Nigel had bargained for, although the crew seemed to take things as a matter of course.

“We don’t often sweep in this weather,” remarked Callender. “But the business is urgent. There’s a big up-Channel convoy expected about midnight. Well, there doesn’t seem much doing just now; what about a spot of lunch? There’s cold pork, rather fat, and——”

“Are you trying to be funny?” asked Derek, with a touch of asperity.

He wasn’t feeling any too good. Nor was Holt for that matter. They had found the interior of the chart-room too warm to be bearable, so they had gone out to the rain- and spray-swept bridge only to find that there was no relief from a growing feeling of nausea. And on the top of it Callender was cold-bloodedly suggesting a meal that included cold fat pork!

Callender, Derek decided, must have the digestion of an ostrich and a cast-iron tummy. He recalled when they were kids at school and Callender certainly wasn’t a robust youngster. He rather fought shy of outdoor sports, and yet here he was handling quite a respectably sized craft in a heavy seaway as if he’d been used to the sea for donkey’s years!

“No. 406 flying signal, sir!” reported one of the look-out men.

It was a warning for any of her consorts chancing to be too close for safety to steam clear.

Magnetic mine No. 2, followed by 3 and 4, were dealt with in fairly quick succession. All three had been laid in a comparatively small area.

These incidents not only diverted Derek’s mixed thoughts about lunch, but also made him forget the threat of *mal de mer*.

Then came 445 B’s turn; Derek had completely recovered his sea-legs in the excitement of the tense moments from the discovery of the mine’s proximity till, with a huge column of smoke and water, it was blown up.

Finally the sixth hidden menace was effectively disposed of by another of the minesweepers. Yet, although having carried out orders they could now return to port, they still carried on. There might be more mines in the fairway, so they were going to make a clean sweep while they were about it, hoping that the old Hun wouldn’t be over on a similar game after they’d got back to base, otherwise the same old task would have to be undertaken on the morrow. What was even more serious, the convoy would have to be held up until it could be reported that the “swept channel” was indeed clear.

It was not until 1400 hours that the operations were deemed to be successfully accomplished and the minesweeping flotilla headed for home. All being well, they would be moored alongside Poole Quay in an hour.

They had the tide with them and the wind almost dead astern. They were steaming in single line ahead, pitching and corkscrewing as the heavy seas swept under their squat sterns. No. 445 B was the rearmost ship of the line.

“Aircraft coming up astern of us, sir!” shouted one of the crew.

Callender didn’t waste time looking to see what they were, whether friend or foe. This part of the Dorset coast was one of the “focal points” for raiders, both ours and the enemy’s. Squadrons of R.A.F. and American bombers escorted by fighters were crossing the Channel over this locality daily and often twice or thrice a day. On the other hand, very small formations of Nazi bombers, hardly ever accompanied by fighters and frequently coming singly, were in the habit of making tip-and-run raids. Taking advantage of cloud cover they would fly in low, since at roof-top height they cannot readily be detected by radiolocation, drop a few bombs on Swanage and follow these up with a few bursts of machine-gun fire and then leg it for home. They rarely flew far inland, for if they did the chances were that they would be intercepted by our fighter planes. It was a common

sight to see a Hun tearing southward with a Hurricane or an “improved” Spitfire following at a sensible distance until the doomed German was clear of British soil.

There is no object in shooting down a Boche over towns and villages, where in his crash he would involve people and property in a common destruction. So, considerately, our fighter pilots follow him out to sea, then increasing speed, overtake and shoot down the luckless raider.

Callender’s theory was that when on minesweeping operations it was just as well to treat all aircraft as hostile until they were identified as friendly. In other words, order the crew to action stations, ready to open fire immediately the rapidly approaching aircraft proves to be a Hun. Frequently the Boche was the one to open the ball.

Hurriedly donning their steel helmets the guns’ crews dashed to their respective action stations.

Derek and Holt hadn’t “tin hats”. Time was—and it is to be hoped that it will not return—when seamen, soldiers and airmen were ordered to carry steel helmets and respirators whether on duty or on leave.

Somehow, both of them felt a sensation of defencelessness without head protection, although they knew that the “inverted metal pudding basin” would not stop a bullet, although it would deflect one that struck it a glancing blow.

“Me’s; two of the blighters!” shouted Derek for Callender’s information, since the lieutenant still seemed uncertain on that point.

“Thanks!” he replied. “Now get below out of it. Officially you aren’t here.”

It was sound advice. Although the minesweeper’s deck would not stop even a medium-sized bomb and a cannon shell would easily rip a hole in it, it was proof against machine-gun fire. Callender was quite right about their presence on board. They weren’t on duty. If they became fatal casualties, in all probability they wouldn’t appear in the casualty list as “killed in action” because they weren’t entered in the ship’s books as members of the crew.



DEREK TAKES HIS CHANCE

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Neither of them made a move in the direction of the companion-way. Had they been off duty at Cattisbourne Aerodrome and Jerry was about to bomb the place, they wouldn't have hesitated to dive into the nearest dugout. On board conditions seemed and probably were different. With the crew at action stations it seemed decidedly *infra dig.* to scurry below like a pair of startled rabbits.

Yet, while waiting for the attack, the thought flashed across Derek's mind that Holt and he were "grasping the sticky end of the stick". They had opened fire with machine-guns many a time over enemy territory; now they were about to experience what it was like to be the targets for hostile fire.

Callender, catching a glimpse of them out of the corner of his eye, signed to them to shelter under the side of the chart-room. Then, rather than let his obstinate guests be at a disadvantage, he removed his steel helmet, replacing it with his cap, which he rammed upon his head with an exaggerated tilt over his left eye.

A moment later the first Me roared overhead. She had already dropped a couple of bombs that came screeching down, although their rate of falling was not too rapid for them to be visible as they fell.

Instinctively Derek and his companion ducked their heads. They had no illusions as to what would happen if even one of those destructive missiles scored a direct hit.

Already a pair of Lewis guns on a single mounting had opened fire, although Derek was unaware of it. The noise of the bomber's engines completely drowned the staccato bark of the weapon.

Whether any of the bullets took effect upon the Messerschmitt it was impossible to say. Probably they didn't, as the bomber had flattened out from her dive before the minesweeper's guns came into action. But it seemed to have the effect of "rattling" the bomb-aimer and the pilot as well, for the aircraft swerved violently.

Both bombs struck the water almost simultaneously and within forty or fifty yards of each other. One fell thirty feet astern; the other was a miss on the minesweeper's starboard quarter.

She shuddered under the shock of the violent upheaval of water. Something, afterwards found to be the aerial with its insulators, clattered upon the deck. Then came the rush of air to fill the partial vacuum set up by the violent disruption.

Someone shouted, "Jolly old miss!" and the men at the nearest gun laughed.

By now the first Me was out of hearing if not of sight. She was swinging to her left with the obvious intention of attacking the leading minesweeper.

Derek paid no further attention to her, for the second bomber, reappearing out of a cloud, was diving down upon 445 B.

This time she was met by a concentrated fire from the minesweeper as she began to flatten out of her dive. Pieces flew from wings and fuselages. A propeller almost ceased to revolve. Derek could see the blades distinctly as they slowed down.

Then, out of control, the Nazi aircraft tried to swing away. She side-stepped and, unable to recover, fell into the sea with a terrific splash.

Once only a part of the fuselage and one wing-tip reappeared above the surface. Then, in a smother of foam and smoke, the bomber disappeared for the last time.

The minesweeper's crew cheered. So did those of the next ahead. Probably the others did as well, but being down wind and too far off they couldn't be heard.

It would have been futile to stop and lower a boat to search for survivors. No human being could possibly have remained alive after that terrific crash.

The Lewis guns' crews set to work to replace the empty trays of ammunition.

Suddenly a hail of bullets churned the sea into miniature water-spouts as they struck the surface about fifty yards astern.

A third enemy aircraft, coming down in the dazzling ray of sunshine through a gap in the clouds, had opened fire at extreme range.

Derek knew that double trick of old: attacking "in the sun", so that the enemy is baffled by the glare, and firing at a range that no British airman would attempt. In combats between Allied and Axis aircraft the latter carry a far greater quantity of ammunition. They can afford to be reckless with its expenditure, while the British airman withholds his fire until he has his adversary well in his sights, and the range is reduced so that hits can almost certainly be scored.

The minesweeper had an abundance of ammunition on board, but naval anti-aircraft gunners are also trained to avoid hasty action.

In this case, however, the Hun had the advantage of surprise. He could see where the hail of bullets was striking. All he had to do was to lift the nose of the aircraft slightly and the target should be raked from stern to stem.

The Me in her dive was doing a good three hundred miles an hour. She was over and beyond the minesweeper in about ten seconds, but in that brief

interval the Hun had left a trail of death and destruction.

Funnel, ventilators, wheel-house and boats were riddled. The already frayed and smoke-blackened White Ensign was ripped half a dozen times.

Two of the gun's crew serving the for'ard quick-firer were wounded, while a bluejacket with a Lewis—he hadn't the chance to fire a round—had been shot through the head, a bullet having passed through the sighting-slot in the gun-shield, which was about a thousand to one chance.

Derek, surprised to find that he was unhurt, went to the bluejacket's assistance, although he guessed that the poor fellow had been killed instantaneously.

Nigel followed him, but before they reached the spot where the man lay, Tugwell shouted: "Stand by, everybody, here comes the swine again!"

Emboldened by his initial success and by the fact that he had met with no opposition, the Nazi pilot was coming in to have another crack at the minesweeper.

Now was Derek's chance. Stepping over the dead bluejacket he swung the automatic weapon in the direction of the returning Hun.

He'd handled a Lewis, but that was many months ago. Then the gun was fired from a low bipod mounting with the gunner in a prone position.

This one was on a high-angle mounting, with a gun-shield somewhat resembling half a pea-pod so that it gave almost but not quite complete protection to the firer.

One glance reassured him that the tray was in position. He wasn't sure whether it was full, only partly so or empty! There wasn't time for him to find out.

He pulled back the cocking-piece twice and waited, finger on trigger and eye in line with the sights.

In air combats British fighter pilots regard the once-vaunted Messerschmitt as "easy meat".

Derek was now as cool as the proverbial cucumber. He was armed; capable of offence and defence. Yet he felt conditions were different from those appertaining to the air-fighting. In an aircraft one possessed the quality of quick manœuvrability unless unfortunate enough to have an essential part of the controls shot away or the engines damaged.

Here, on the deck of the minesweeper, he lost that sense of rapidity of action. The vessel was moving much too slowly, and in any case he had no control of the steering.

All the same, he held his fire until the Me was about four hundred yards off and decreasing that distance to zero in six seconds.

He pressed the trigger. Thanks be! He could feel the recoil and see the empty cases flying clear.

On came the Nazi aircraft. There was something strange about her behaviour. Her guns weren't firing. Then trails of smoke were coming from her fuselage—or was it the exhaust!

No, by Jupiter, it wasn't! She was on fire good and proper!

She tried to bank. It was no use. She was planing down. Both engines had stopped. It looked as if she would crash on the minesweeper's deck.

At about four or five hundred feet the rear gunner jumped for it. He hadn't a dog's chance. Frantically and too soon he pulled the rip-cord. The envelope of the parachute got caught up in the tail member. Flames were already pouring from the rear gun-turret and licking the bomber's rudder.

Meanwhile, aware of the danger, Callender had ordered "Hard over to port", with the intention of avoiding the aircraft now hopelessly out of control.

It was like a whale endeavouring to dodge a thrasher-shark.

The crash seemed inevitable when the Me's glide suddenly changed into a nose-dive.

She hit the water at less than fifty yards from the ship, throwing up a cloud of spray, smoke and steam. Except for a few bits of debris nothing of her came to the surface again.

Callender leant over the bridge-guard rails, the canvas dodgers of which were well riddled. He was bleeding from a slight graze on his forehead—had he not discarded his steel helmet he wouldn't have got that!—and his left wrist had been hastily bandaged with his handkerchief.

"Jolly good show, Lofty!" he exclaimed. "You bagged that blighter all right."

"Why me?" protested Derek. "There were other guns in action."

“Were there? If there were, I didn’t see them,” declared the skipper. “Caught us napping the second time.”

The Hun had got in a burst before he crashed. Several of the machine-gun bullets had splayed themselves on the shield of the Lewis behind which Derek and Holt had been standing.

No. 445 B had paid a fairly stiff price for her double success. One man had been killed outright, another seriously wounded, and four others, including the commanding officer, had received minor injuries.

Tugwell had had a narrow escape. The sub made a dash to take the wheel when the helmsman had his right arm smashed by a bullet. In his haste his rubber-boots slithered on the wet deck and he pitched on his knees. Before he could recover himself two of the spokes of the steering-wheel were shattered by machine-gun fire. Had he regained his feet a few seconds earlier the bullets would have passed through his body.

Another narrow escape was that of one of the stokers. He’d been in the boiler-room during the first attack. In the ensuing lull, thinking that the “fun” was over, he came to the top of the engine-room ladder to have what he termed in naval parlance “three spits and a draw”. In other words, he meant to have a few puffs with his pipe.

He’d rammed tobacco into the bowl and had gripped the pipe stem between his teeth.

Just as he was on the point of striking a match, a bullet hit the pipe, knocking the bowl to smithereens and leaving the stem still between his teeth.

The impact, so far as he was concerned, was hardly noticeable. He thought that the rest of the pipe had dropped from the stem; and it was not until someone cursed him for exposing his head as a target that he realized the ship was again under fire.

As quickly as possible urgent minor repairs were made good. The damaged wheel was patched up, the steam steering-gear fortunately not having been damaged. The wounded were taken below and their injuries treated.

Meanwhile the other minesweepers were sending signals of congratulation to the victor, some of them couched in humorous and even sarcastic strain.

“Jealous, that’s what they are,” declared Tugwell. “Won’t they be surprised when they hear that our R.A.F. supernumeraries bagged the second Hun?”

“You’d better keep that part dark, my lad!” objected Derek. “It’s the ship that gets the credit, not the individual, in this case.”

Callender, overhearing the conversation, gave one of his wry smiles.

“We’ll see about that,” he interposed darkly. “Well, you fellows, sorry you came?”

Both Derek and Holt declared that they weren’t. What’s more, they meant it!

CHAPTER X

A Nuisance Raid

Without further incident the minesweepers returned to harbour and tied up alongside Poole Quay.

“There’s just time for you to catch the bus,” declared their host. “Sorry, but I’ve got to make my report to the S.N.O. . . . I don’t suppose I’ll be seeing you again in a hurry. We’re to rejoin the Portsmouth flotilla the day after to-morrow.”

“And then, I suppose, there’ll be an air raid here?” added Derek, remembering Callender’s statement that the Jerry bomber always seemed to put in an appearance within a few hours of 445 B’s departure from the port she happened to have put into.

“I hope not,” rejoined Callender. “You want a quiet leave, not one dodging bombs! But if there is a raid it’ll give you the chance of studying your problems from a different angle.”

An hour later, Derek and his companion, each lugging a suitcase stained with salt water, arrived at their original destination.

Neither of Derek’s parents expressed any surprise at their son’s unexpected arrival; nor for that matter did they in Nigel’s case.

Knowing their son’s casualness, they were more or less prepared for these sudden and unheralded visits.

“But I did intend to phone you, Mater,” he declared. “Only other things cropped up and——”

“You hadn’t time to let us know.”

“Oh, yes, I had,” admitted Derek frankly, “only I forgot. Well, how’s everybody?”

“Everybody’s all right so far,” replied Mr. Dundas. “At least those who are still here. Young Godfrey is a prisoner of war, and both the Jefferson

boys have been killed in action in North Africa.”

“I’ll see to your rooms,” declared Derek’s mother. “And you must be ready for a meal.”

“We are that!” admitted her son. “You see, we’ve been on a sea voyage.”

“I gathered that much,” was Mr. Dundas’s astonishing rejoinder.

“Why, Sherlock?” inquired his graceless offspring.

“By the way you rolled up the garden path. It was a decidedly nautical gait; one that you wouldn’t expect from an airman. Were you shot down by any chance and had to spend hours in a rubber dinghy?”

“No, thank goodness, and I hope I never shall,” replied Derek, placing his hand on the table-top. “It was a pukka cruise in a minesweeper. Fairly big seas, and when I came ashore the ground heaved and pitched as if there was an earthquake on. Didn’t you notice it, old top?”

“I did,” agreed Holt. “In fact I do still, only I didn’t like to mention it to you in case you thought I’d had a glass of genuine Navy rum on the Q.T.!”

“We did barge into one another on the way to the bus stop,” declared Derek. “I noticed a military policeman watching us rather curiously. . . . Yes, I’m hungry; you’re hungry. We could do ample justice to Callender’s fat pork!”

After the meal Mr. Dundas excused himself. A lieutenant in the Home Guard, he was most keen over his job. Efficiency was his watchword, and when any lack of it came to his notice, no matter from what quarter, he did not hesitate to express himself freely and even violently.

“I’ve had another batch of *Army Council Instructions* and *Home Guard Information Circulars*, including six closely printed pages of addenda,” he observed. “We get snowed under with them, and they are mostly about nothing of importance.”

“We get much the same sort of thing in the R.A.F., Pater,” said Derek reassuringly.

“I doubt it,” continued Mr. Dundas. “In any case, yours is a full-time occupation; mine—well, it’s anything! That’s been the greatest source of discontent in the Battalion—and the introduction of conscription. Once I knew every man in my platoon; now I don’t even know the names of many of them. Then there’s this forty-eight hours a month duty. That was laid down as the maximum, but, somehow, it appears to be regarded as a

minimum, and the consequence is that there are utterly useless so-called drills, parades and instructions merely to make up the required number of hours.”

“You’re not keen on conscription for the Home Guard, then?” asked Holt.

“Emphatically, no!” was the reply. “As an example of how the men take it, the *Home Guard Instruction* was issued recently suggesting, not ordering, that before every parade the platoon commander was to ask: ‘Home Guard, why are we here?’ To which the men were to respond: ‘We are here to defend our native land.’ With that the platoon commander continues: ‘And can we do this?’ To which the men reply: ‘We can and we will, with God’s help!’ It would be interesting to know, only I suppose we never will, how often this ritual is carried out.

“But that is not the whole point. One evening, just before the men fell in, one would-be wit of a conscript called out: ‘Home Guard, why are we here?’ To which about a dozen men replied in chorus: ‘Because we jolly well have to!’ ‘And if we don’t?’ Without an instant’s hesitation came the concerted reply: ‘Two quid or three months’ quod, or both!’ ”

“Doesn’t sound particularly good to me, Pater!” remarked Derek.

“A squadron-leader mentioned to me that Tardiham is the most conspicuous anti-tank island in the south of England,” volunteered Holt.

“I’m afraid he’s dead right there,” concurred Mr. Dundas. “I could never understand why they festooned the skyline round the place with barbed wire, nor built pill-boxes with the firing slits the wrong way round. They would collect bullets as a magnet does iron filings. And there’s no provision made against bombing.”

“That’s practically the only danger one has to guard against,” rejoined Derek. “Hitler lost his chance of invasion after Dunkirk. He might try a diversion by dropping airborne troops. If he does, he’ll have to have temporary mastery of the air over a limited locality, so that, before the Huns are dropped, their bombers will blast every fortified position to dust.”

“They’d have an easy job with Tardiham, then,” declared Mr. Dundas. “Although there are anti-aircraft batteries some miles off, they are useless against low-flying aircraft. We had a Bofors gun on the hilltop, manned day and night by the Regulars, but yesterday, after it had been there for six weeks, it was carted away.”

“Isn’t there some talk of turning Home Guards into anti-aircraft personnel?” asked Nigel. “That seems a sound scheme, anyway.”

“Yes,” agreed Mr. Dundas tentatively. “Only I don’t see how it would work in this district. Most of the men are on urgent agricultural work; they couldn’t man the batteries, by day and it’s hardly to be expected of them to go on duty at night after a strenuous ten hours on the land. They’re the right stuff these lads! Give them a rifle or a Sten gun, teach them to throw live 36 grenades, and they’d give a good account of themselves; but it’s farcical getting them on parade twice a week being taught to strip a machine-gun. They simply lose interest.”

The next day Derek and Nigel just slacked. It was a complete change after a long period of strenuous activity. The gale had died down. There was a light northerly breeze and quite a considerable lot of sunshine.

As usual the district had three alerts during the day, but no one seemed to take the slightest notice. It was generally considered that Tardiham was too far inland for raiders, since these had for weeks past only ventured on tip-and-run attacks upon seaside towns.

“Good weather for Callender to take his packet round to Portsmouth,” remarked Derek. “My word, didn’t she pitch and roll?”

“Well, there was a nasty lump of a sea,” said Holt. “I don’t envy those fellows their job. . . . Hello! Our fellows off to the other side again! No, they’re Yanks.”

“With our fighter escort,” added Derek, gazing skywards, and shading his eyes against the glare. “I can just make them out.”

The Allied aircraft swept southwards—about thirty American double-fuselage bombers flying at ten thousand feet, and their escort at more than double that height.

“How far away are we from your people’s house?” asked Holt.

“Three and a half miles—why?”

“Because those fellows will be over the Cherbourg peninsula, drop their stuff and be back at their respective bases before we get home,” explained Holt. “Strange, when you come to think of it. You know,” he continued after a pause, “it’s going to be the deuce of a problem after the war. We’re having the time of our lives, but, if we aren’t downed, what’s in store for us? We can’t all be civil pilots, and I don’t think I’d care for civil aviation.”

“I try not to think of what’s going to happen after the war,” admitted Derek. “It may be a most unholy scramble for the jobs that are going and thundering bad luck for the hindermost. Everyone will be clamouring for reduced taxation and a decided drop in the cost of living, yet there’ll be a most unholy row if there’s an attempt made to cut down the present scale of wages. . . . Good heavens! It doesn’t bear thinking about.”

“But it must,” added Nigel quietly. “And thinking isn’t enough.”

They made their way homewards, cutting across the heath and over Knap Hill that overlooked the hamlet where the Dundases lived.

“Plenty of time,” observed Derek. “Let’s sit and have a smoke. It’s nearly one o’clock and lunch isn’t till two, because the governor has to go to Poole this morning.”

Hardly had they got their pipes going when the wailing of a distant siren was borne to their ears. A few seconds later a second and nearer one started, quickly followed by the raucous warbling notes of the Tardiham siren.

“I wonder what place is getting it?” remarked Derek. “Hear anything?”

“Only those tanks rumbling,” replied Nigel, indicating a column of heavily armoured vehicles crossing Tardiham bridge on their way southwards.

A moment later the first of four deep reports was heard.

“Our antis in action,” declared Holt.

“Bombs!” amended Derek laconically. “Sounds as if they fell in the Poole area. What price Callender’s statement?”

“What statement?”

“That the Huns almost invariably followed him round. If it weren’t so hazy we could see part of Poole from here. Ah! There go our guns. And there’s a flying boat. The rain hasn’t stopped her from taking off!”

As they watched the aircraft rise, seemingly slowly and majestically, they caught sight of a black-painted bomber flying towards Tardiham from an easterly direction. It was so low that it only just skimmed the tree-tops of a wood to the east of the town.

A moment later came the staccato reports of machine-gun fire, followed by four muffled explosions in quick succession.

From the northern part of Tardiham a cloud of black smoke shot up into the almost windless air, looking like a gigantic toadstool.

For the second time the town had been directly attacked. Two years previously a couple of hundred of incendiaries had rained down, without causing casualties and doing only slight damage. At intervals the immediate vicinity had received attention from Nazi bombers, but so far no H.E. bombs had fallen on the town.

Now, it appeared, its comparatively long period of immunity had been broken.

“Look out!” exclaimed Holt. “Here comes the swine!”

The twin-engined bomber, flying so low that it seemed less than the height of the church tower, was heading in their direction.

In a detached sort of way Derek wondered whether the figures of his companion and himself, standing on the gaunt hilltop, would attract the attention of the raider’s machine-gunner. Yet it did not occur to either of them that they should take cover. They just stood there watching and waiting, although the abandoned gun-pit where the Bofors A.A. gun had been until a couple of days ago was only ten yards away.

When the German aircraft was almost overhead it banked steeply and made off at right angles to its former course. Virtually it was a sitting target for perhaps fifteen seconds before, climbing steeply, it made for the cover of a low-lying bank of clouds.

“Confound the swine!” ejaculated Derek savagely. “If that Bofors had been here they would have downed it. Couldn’t have missed. And he’s got away with it!”

“Not if our fighters are waiting to shoot it down over the sea. But what about your governor? He’s on his way from the railway station.”

“Yes, unless the raid on Poole has delayed the train,” replied Derek. “Let’s push off into the town, anyway.”

They lost no time in descending the hill and gaining the road. As they entered the town by the Newport Bridge, there was little to suggest that anything of the nature of enemy action had taken place. The pall of smoke over the bombed area had dispersed. If there had been any resulting fires these had been effectually dealt with.

But when the two chums passed the Town Hall evidences began to accumulate. There were crowds in the street; ambulances (ominous sign!)

and fire engine; soldiers, police and Civil Defence workers.

Three hundred yards from the scene of the explosion the limit of material damage had occurred, shop windows blown out by the suction following the blast. Here and there a window had escaped by one of those curious freaks accompanying explosions.

Then roofs began to show that Derek and his chum were getting nearer to the source of the trouble—tiles displaced, then every tile removed and rafters left gaunt against the sky.

At the end of the main street, hard by where it leaves the town by a gap in the prehistoric earthworks, the scene of destruction lay revealed.

Four medium bombs had been dropped. Three of them had fallen outside the town and on the farther side of North River. Owing to the marshy nature of the ground, these had done little damage. One of them, already flooded from the river, would doubtless be appreciated as a bathing-pool in the ensuing summer!

But it was the fourth bomb that had done the most mischief. Bursting in a garden between the Drill Hall and the ancient church of St. Adhelm's-on-the-Wall—for a thousand years this Saxon building had withstood the ravages of time and vandalism—it had shattered most of the windows of the church and had unroofed the tower.

The Drill Hall had its outer wall blown outwards, the roof stripped, and the metal girders that had supported it were bent and twisted as if they had been made of copper wire.

Between these two buildings was a row of four houses. From the road there looked little the matter with them, except for broken doors and windows, but the whole of the back, getting most of the force of the explosion, had been ripped away, leaving bedsteads in the upper storeys standing precariously on the only partly supported floors.

There was no sign of the train arriving, for, although the railway station was about a quarter of a mile outside the town, it would be visible from where Derek and Holt stood.

They didn't ask questions of any of the helpers concerning the damage and casualties, since the rescue parties were still hard at it. One of the axioms of the Fighting Services is: "If you're not on duty and you can't help in any way, keep your mouth shut and stand clear!"

Since there was nothing they could do they went on in the direction of the station.

The train arrived just as they got there.

“You’re a smart Home Guard officer, Pater!” was Derek’s greeting. “Tardiham’s been bombed and you weren’t there.”

“Can’t be in two places at once,” observed Mr. Dundas. “I heard people talking on the train that Tardiham had been hit. So has Poole for that matter.”

“Badly?”

“I don’t know. Much damage here?”

“Your precious Drill Hall’s practically done in.”

“If that’s all there’s not much harm done. Anyone in the place?”

“We don’t know,” reiterated his son. “Except that they weren’t searching the debris.”

“That’s a good thing. Still more that only last week they shifted the live ammunition out of it. If that lot had been touched off it would have been good-bye to Tardiham! Did they fire on the Boche?”

“Not to our knowledge,” replied Derek.

“I guessed as much. There are probably half a dozen Lewis guns buried under the debris. That’ll give our men something to do for the next three or four musters to clean them up—if they can be made serviceable again.”

Later in the day the casualty figures were made known. More than a hundred and fifty buildings were damaged, varying from demolition to windows broken and tiles blown off. This was the result of one bomb only; yet, providentially, no one was killed and only fifteen were injured, mainly by blast and flying glass. Of these only two were hospital cases.

This was all the more remarkable since Tardiham, covering only a quarter of a square mile, is a congested area. In it was the normal population of some two thousand in addition to some hundred evacuees, mostly women and children, and two companies of Regular troops.

It was a striking tribute to British morale that the townsfolk took the after-effects with the utmost composure. There was actually a rivalry as to who could boast of the narrowest escape, while most of those whose houses had been damaged were actually smiling as they related their experiences.

A week later those responsible for the defence of Tardiham ordered slit trenches to be dug; siting them on the crest of the ancient earthworks and in the middle of a maze of barbed wire!

CHAPTER XI

Turin

Before then Derek and Nigel were back at Cattisbourne. Their not uneventful seven days' leave remained only a memory. Ahead of them lay more work—grim duty to perform.

“S for Sylvia” had been thoroughly overhauled. Two new engines had been installed, repairs to bomb-doors, cowlings and aileron controls had been effected. In her fresh coat of paint the Halifax hardly showed the scars of aerial combat. Her two “kills” had been allowed and, as one result, she now bore two small swastikas in addition to the fifteen stencils representing bombs that indicated she had taken part in offensive operational flights that number of times.

Sergeant Michael O'Hara was still in hospital, his place in the crew being taken by a Cornishman, Antony Polkerris, who, like the man he had temporarily superseded, had been a wireless operator in the Union Castle Line.

On making inquiries after Phil Evershot, Derek learned with regret that his wounds had proved to be more serious than were at first supposed and that it was most unlikely that he would be fit for operational duties again, at least for a long time.

So the “Warm-'Un” had perforce to be left out of the original team, and one Witherson, who in civil life was supposed to be a thatcher but was a professional poacher, “reigned in his stead”. No doubt his nocturnal activities were now all to his advantage, for besides possessing “cat's eyes” he had earned a sound reputation as a machine-gunner.

On the second day following his return to duty, Derek, with the rest of the squadron, was briefed for a heavy raid on Turin.

He wasn't greatly pleased with this information. He couldn't work up the enthusiasm he had over the raids on Berlin, Essen, Cologne and other German cities.

Derek had spent a considerable part of his youth in Italy. Mr. Dundas had held a consular post in Genoa until his retirement about the time when the effete League of Nations attempted most ineffectually to impose sanctions on that country. Admittedly Italy, or rather Fascist Italy under the bombastic dictatorship of Benito Mussolini, was in the wrong over the temporary conquest of Abyssinia. Italy herself had not only subscribed to the Articles of the Covenant of the League, but had sponsored Abyssinia when that admittedly uncivilized nation had been admitted into the League; yet she took advantage of the fact that, of the principal Powers yet remaining more or less faithful to Geneva, none was in a position to take effective action against a delinquent state.

So when sanctions were nominally imposed the Italians, probably more united than they had ever been in the course of their existence, openly defied the League and resigned from its membership. The U.S.A. had never joined the League, and now that Germany and Japan were also out of it, France lukewarm and Great Britain disarmed to the bare bone, it was no longer in a position to deal satisfactorily with Mussolini.

Abyssinia was overrun and the Italians, previously Great Britain's ally, became bitterly anti-English. Taking advantage of this state of affairs, Mussolini and Hitler came to an agreement that became the basis for the Axis partnership.

Derek retained good impressions of the Italian people, especially those in the sea-coast villages on the shores of the Gulf of Genoa. He had spent happy holidays at Alassio, Cervo, Finalborgo and other small fishing places where, under the tutelage of Ligurian fisherfolk, he had gained some knowledge of handling a boat under oars or sail. He could speak Italian fluently, not merely that as spoken by the educated classes but also the *patois* of the humbler folk, especially those who wrested a scanty livelihood from the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Like most Britons, Derek had no quarrel with the Italian people. It was just the lust for power on the part of *il Duce* that had raised Italy to the top of an apparently secure pedestal, and already the Italians were aware of the disconcerting fact that it was tottering. They'd lost their African Empire, they had impoverished themselves without any corresponding benefit, and now, instead of Italy being an equal partner in the Axis, she had become a German-controlled vassal state, forced to send her armies to face death and defeat in the rigours of a Russian winter.

No, Derek had nothing against the Italian people. On the other hand, he recalled how Mussolini had craved Hitler's permission for units of the Italian Air Force to participate in the raids on London. They had achieved nothing in that abortive effort, but they had given the R.A.F. every right to strike at the industrial cities of Italy.

The naval ports of Genoa, Spezzia, Naples and Taranto had already felt the weight of Britain's air and sea power. Milan and Turin, the chief manufacturing centres of Lombardy, had been badly battered, and that unpleasant process was being maintained until Fascism was finally overthrown and the Italians in the depths of despair uttered cries of *peccavi*!

Derek would have gone a dozen times to Berlin rather than over Turin, a place he knew so well. It seemed rather like taking advantage of a former acquaintance, but it meant helping to bring the war to a speedier and successful conclusion.

As usual the Old War Horse put the bombers' crews through a thorough preparation, warning them of what "bad patches" to avoid and the best route across the Alps.

"Some of you have been over Northern Italy before," he continued. "Your experience will be most helpful to those who as yet haven't made the trip. I must warn you, however, that in all probability you'll find heavier—though I will not, say more accurate—flak than you have previously encountered. We have learnt that Musso has requested that more A.A. guns be sent from Germany. These might have been dispatched; but if they were, it's quite on the cards that Hitler has demanded their return, following your appointment over Berlin some days ago! Even if there are more defensive measures it is most unlikely that any of the A.A. guns will be manned by Germans; so if you thoroughly swamp the ring of gun and searchlight positions the Italian anti-aircraft crews will dive below for cover!

"That's all, I think. . . . Any questions? . . . No; well, good luck and happy landings!"

There was only a short interval between the end of the conference and the time fixed for the departure of the squadron.

All the aircraft at Cattisbourne told off to take part in the operation were already on the flying-off ground. Their engines were being warmed up, while the ground staff proceeded with their final adjustments. The aircraft had been "bombed-up". Some were laden with 4000-pound "cookies", others with bombs of half that weight, while several carried cargoes of

incendiaries charged with a secret composition so highly inflammable that they would defy all efforts on the part of the Italian fire-fighters to deal effectually with them.

“S for Sylvia” was the sixth to take off. It felt glorious to be in the air once more and to know that the veteran Halifax—veteran in point of the number of flights undertaken, though not in terms of years—was flying as well as ever she did.

It was dusk as they took off. Before they were across the Channel the moon, now approaching its full, had risen above a bank of clouds. There was the usual display of searchlights, for fears of invasion kept the Germans on the other side of the Channel on their toes.

Otherwise unchallenged the bombers flew inland, not even a solitary Hun fighter putting in an appearance in an attempt at interception.

The Italians had due warning. Sirens were wailing in Lausanne, Geneva and other towns of neutral Switzerland before the British aircraft reached the foothills of the Alps.

Derek regarded this part of the flight with exceptional interest. Almost but not quite he put the thought from his mind that he was taking part in a raid. The view of the not so far distant Alps, their snow-covered crests and peaks outlined in the purest white imaginable against the slanting moonbeams, reminded him of happier times when the world, though in turmoil, was not engaged in war *à l'outrance*. He had been through the Alps by train on several occasions. Twice, as a passenger, he had motored over Alpine passes—now he was seeing these stupendous ranges from a different angle. He was flying above them. Man, he mused, had conquered all the heights of the globe by the aid of mechanical flight. Even Everest, upon the summit of which no human foot had trod, had been crossed by aircraft. In these present times flights of this nature get hardly more than half a dozen lines, if that, in the attenuated pages of the Press; but with what enthusiasm would Napoleon have hailed the troop-carrying plane as a swift and secure means of transporting his army into Italy instead of having to make the tedious and costly passage of the Simplon Pass!

It wasn't a long flight to Turin: less in distance than that of a straight line from Land's End to John o' Groats. Already the bombers were practically in sight of their target.

At fifteen thousand feet it was bitterly cold inside the Halifax, notwithstanding the heating system fed by the exhausts. It felt much colder

than on the last Berlin trip; in fact Derek found himself wondering whether in the overhaul a previous defect, due to shell splinters, had not been overlooked.

Now they were over the highest ridge of the Alps that lay on their route. Derek knew that he had cleared it, but on the actual crossing his limited downward range of vision prevented him seeing “S for Sylvia” skim the snow-clad height with a margin of only some fifty feet.

Presently David Price, just before wriggling into the bomb-aimer’s station, came up and reported that the pilot had cut things so fine that he had chipped off the top of one of the Alpine peaks!

“No fear I didn’t,” replied Derek. “If I had, you wouldn’t be here now, my bright lad!”

“But you did,” persisted the Welshman. “As we tore over I saw a good and proper avalanche!”

Other bombers’ crews later reported much the same story. In actual fact the snow had been dislodged not by direct contact but by disturbance of the air set up by the slip-stream and also by the reverberation set up by the engine in the rarefied atmosphere.

A few minutes later they were losing altitude. The dividing range of the Alps had been crossed. Ahead and still far below lay the plain of Lombardy, its towns and other salient features clearly discernible in the moonlight.

Other raiders had preceded them. For some reason, since the moonlight was in itself sufficient to identify the target, those first over Turin had dropped flares. These were being fired at by the ground defences, while searchlights, rendered practically ineffective as they pierced the moonlit sky, sought, mostly in vain, to concentrate upon the constant stream of bombers.

It was to be an attack of fairly brief duration, but one that carried plenty of punch. The idea was to unload the greatest possible weight of bombs in the shortest possible time.

The Cattisbourne squadron was still fifteen miles from its objective when preceding aircraft dropped their loads of heavy bombs and incendiaries over the city.

In less than half a minute the aspect, as seen from “S for Sylvia”, underwent a complete and terrible change. Vivid flashes lighted up the sky, flashes so brilliant that they figuratively put the moonlight completely into the shade. Whole blocks of buildings collapsed, searchlights and anti-

aircraft flashes practically ceased owing to the heavy saturation of the defences. The fires, thousands of them, from enormous conflagrations to comparatively small glows, appeared over the greater part of the hapless city as the incendiaries showered down. Above the roar of the bombers' engines came the thunderous crash of the heaviest bombs that rocked Turin even to the depth of its deepest dugouts.

There was no need for Derek to make a preliminary run over the target. The whole area was a mass of fire now being rapidly obscured by a dense pall of red and orange-tinted smoke.

Again came the order: "Bomb doors open!" followed in the course of a few seconds by Pilot-officer Price reporting: "Bombs gone, sir!"

So that was that. To all intents and purposes operations were completed so far as "S for Sylvia" was concerned. All she had to do was to hold on until she was clear of the target area and then, keeping clear of more waves of attackers, make for base as quickly as possible.

But it wasn't so easy as all that!

Away to the south-east of the outskirts of Turin flak was coming up, though not in sufficient quantities to make it appear formidable. In any case "S for Sylvia's" altitude should have been sufficient to enable her to fly above the highest burst. Judging by the tracers it wasn't heavy stuff the Italians were putting up. Compared with the flak the Huns were in the habit of sending up over the Ruhr, it looked a pretty poor show!

Derek had put the rudder-bar over and the Halifax was commencing a close turn to port when the aircraft was hit. It was something fairly big by the way she shuddered and lurched.

Glancing sideways he had a bit of a shock. The starboard wing was well alight. The outer engine had stopped and flames from it were already trailing aft over the rear gunner's cockpit. In the wing close to the flames was one of the fuel tanks. At a modest estimate it contained at least two hundred gallons of aviation spirit. If that lot caught the resulting explosion would leave only bits and pieces of the aircraft and practically no trace of her crew.

With characteristic presence of mind Sergeant Holroyd brought the chemical fire extinguisher to bear upon the flames. It was a good effort but already the fire had taken too great a hold. Fanned by the rush of wind, that also had the effect of dispersing the fire-fighting chemical, the greater part of the wing was already glowing a dull red.

Derek did all he could to keep the Halifax on an even keel. She was side-slipping badly. She would continue to do so more and more until, deprived of the lift of the starboard wing, she would dive out of control to the ground—if she didn't blow up first!

The bomb-aimer backed out of his cramped quarters. David looked rather white about the gills, even in the reflected glare of the flames. He said nothing but just waited. There was nothing he could do.

Sergeant Holroyd lurched over the inclined deck to the pilot's office.

"Fire out of control, sir!" he reported, without the suspicion of a tremor in his voice.

Derek knew what that meant. He'd been expecting it. The Halifax had received a mortal hurt; now it only remained for her crew to save themselves, if it wasn't already too late.

He gave the order—the captain's last resort—to "abandon aircraft".

Even then there was no undue scramble. Quickly yet deliberately, with the N.C.O. going first, the men leapt into space until only Derek was left on board.

Satisfied on that point he tugged at the sliding roof above his head. Then, to his horror, he found that it had jammed. How or why he could not imagine. It moved easily enough when he tested it before the aircraft took off for what was going to be her last flight. . . . Now, in spite of his desperate efforts, the hood refused to budge even an inch.

Abandoning the attempt, Derek tried to reach the door in the side of the fuselage through which at least three of the crew had made their getaway.

He was too late. Flames were licking the floor. Very-light cartridges were exploding, piercing the dense smoke with red and green glares. At first Derek thought that it was one of the petrol tanks that was on the point of exploding.

At that moment the Halifax turned completely on its back.

Trapped, Derek heaved himself back into the pilot's office. When the end came, he reflected grimly, he would die at his post.

His feet slipped on the inside of the now inverted hood. Then to his surprise he found that by so doing he had forced the sliding roof open. The Halifax, though upside down, was apparently flying more or less

horizontally, although at any instant she might get into a spin and dive at a terrific speed to earth.

Somehow it wasn't the crash that Derek dreaded. It was that instantaneous disintegration accompanying the explosion of an aircraft's fuel. Scientifically matter is said to be indestructible; from what he'd seen in the course of his career in the Royal Air Force he had long come to the conclusion that theory and practice do not always go hand in hand.

Even as a drowning man sees all the salient features of his life pass across his mind in the space of perhaps less than a minute, so did a succession of thoughts occur to Derek as he wriggled through the aperture that was once the sliding roof. But they weren't retrospective. Far from it; they concerned immediate doubts and fears.

Would his packed parachute get hung up as he dropped through the narrow gap? Would his harness get mixed up with the aircraft's tail-member? He'd seen one wretched German caught up in that manner and it wasn't a pleasant sight. And would the envelope unfold when he pulled the rip-cord? And how many seconds had to elapse before he tugged at the thing? Six, ten, or twenty? Ten, most likely; but if what his science master at school said were correct and that the acceleration due to gravity was thirty-two feet per second, then at the end of ten seconds he'd be dropping through space at three hundred and twenty feet per second. Something wrong there; or wasn't there something about a vacuum? In any case it would mean a terrific jerk on the parachute harness. What if . . . ? Oh, dash it all! He'd seen paratroops decanted by the hundred like bees coming out of a hive. Only a few hundred feet up when they jumped and every parachute opened. Why shouldn't his? And he had between ten and fifteen thousand feet of altitude to play with—if the aircraft didn't blow up first!

And if, instead of exploding, the burning aircraft followed him down and collided with him in mid-air . . . ?

These and other harrowing problems confronted him in that very brief interval while he was making his escape through the not fully opened aperture. They were real fears—fears that might be realized although it was fifty-fifty that none of them would. But of a real and impending peril that was awaiting him some ten thousand feet below, he had as yet not the slightest inkling.

He released his grip from the edges of the hood.

He was falling!

He counted—far too quickly—up to ten and then pulled the rip-cord. Even so in that brief space of time he was dropping head downwards.

It seemed like a minute before anything happened. Then came a sharp jerk of the harness as the pilot's parachute distended. He was no longer plunging head first. There were more jerks as the strain of the gear tugged at his thighs and shoulders.

“It's opened!” he thought delightedly. “I'd like to meet the Waaf who packed that 'chute!”

Even in this state of mind he fully realized, now that there seemed a good chance of being able to qualify for membership of the famous Caterpillar Club, that he'd be a prisoner of war, probably for the duration. There would be no more operational flights for him, nor, indeed, any more flying until the cessation of hostilities—and that might not be for several years.

Then his thoughts were directed to his crew. He reproached himself for being so self-centred. He'd hardly given them a thought once he was assured that they had jumped for safety. He wondered how they were faring; whether they had landed by this time. Wherever they came down it would be a considerable distance, possibly between five and ten miles, away; since, during the few minutes he had taken to find a way out, the Halifax had been going at high speed and more or less in a straight line.

Comfortably suspended by his harness, Derek looked groundwards.

Then he had a terrific shock!

Right below him was the centre of a large area of Turin that was a mass of leaping flames. Although there was plenty of smoke, clouds of it rising to quite ten thousand feet, this part of the heavily bombed city was fairly clear of it. Instead there was a gigantic furnace waiting for him—a furnace that he had helped to create.

This looked like being Nemesis with a vengeance!

CHAPTER XII

A Narrow Escape

Most decidedly it looked like a case of “out of the frying-pan into the fire”. There seemed no way of escape. During her brief flight with no one at the controls “S for Sylvia” had been recrossing the target area when Derek baled out.

There was no wind—at least he could detect no appreciable drift—to take him and his parachute clear of the raging inferno. Even by working the trimming cords it would be out of the question to divert the downward path of the envelope sufficiently to avoid the fiery fate that awaited him.

After the first few seconds of mental panic, Derek took a calmer view of the situation. He wondered which would happen first: death by suffocation, since the air for thousands of feet would be heavily charged with noxious gases, or whether he’d be scorched to death before he came in actual contact with the flames. Would the silken envelope of the parachute—supposed to be fireproof—be shrivelled up, so that the last lap of the descent would be as swift as the flight of an arrow?

He rather hoped it would be. Far better for the end to be swift and sudden than to endure the agony of being slowly grilled before being thrown into that enormous furnace.

Then a bomber, quite out of control and with flames trailing from all four engines, came hurtling down from the moonlit sky. It was kicking up a terrific screech, something like the sound of calico being ripped only a thousandfold louder.

Once it looked as if the aircraft was making directly for him, until, giving a half roll, it partly flattened out and disappeared into a huge cloud of smoke.

Derek watched its departure with a strange sense of complete detachment. It had been a narrow escape for him, but he’d had so many in

the last few minutes that this one didn't seem to matter. What did was the blazing area of the city still some five thousand feet below.

Even at that altitude the air was perceptibly warm and smelt smoky. Not that it affected his breathing to any noticeable extent, but it certainly wasn't pure air.

By this time the last of the raiders had left for home. The desultory anti-aircraft fire had ceased soon after the last bomb had fallen. From the city itself there were plenty of discordant noises, all plainly audible to him as he dangled under his silken envelope. The roaring and crackling of the flames, the rumble of brickwork and masonry as buildings crumbled under the intense heat, the almost hysterical shouts and cries of the Italian fire-fighters, the terrified bellowing of cattle penned in the city abattoirs—these were but some of the hideous sounds from sorely stricken Turin.

The glare was so intense that the underside of his parachute envelope showed red against the moonlit sky, while the air was so heavily charged with particles of dust that the moon itself appeared like a deep orange disc.

By now Derek was fully conscious of the fact that he could feel the heat rising from the huge conflagration below.

Then something else struck him. Although he could feel the air streaming past him as the parachute continued its descent, the fiercely burning buildings did not seem appreciably nearer than they had done at least five minutes ago. What was more, there was now a decided drift in a southerly direction. Instead of being over the centre of the burning area, he was now more towards the edge of it.

Again hope revived. The flames that had threatened him with total extinction had, in his case, proved to be a blessing in disguise.

The hot air rising almost vertically from the burning buildings was not merely retarding the descent of the parachute but was even causing it, temporarily and imperceptibly, to increase its altitude. The parachute, with Derek suspended under it, was behaving much as does a celluloid ball in a vertically directed jet of water. As long as it keeps in or near the middle of the jet its position remains fairly constant; the moment it is forced to the side of the rising column of water it begins to fall to the ground.

Then, because the parachute was now beyond the limit of this burning district—one of many—its earthward drop was resumed.

Through a dense cloud of smoke Derek plunged, to emerge to find himself almost level with two rows of gaunt rafters. Thirty feet below was a

broad street, littered with abandoned and badly damaged vehicles and blocked at two points by huge mounds of rubble.

Then his feet touched solid ground with a jolt that shook him considerably. Down over his head and shoulders flopped the parachute envelope, temporarily limiting his range of vision to that of a few inches.

Releasing his harness Derek tackled the still billowing envelope, getting it under control and compressing it into a small bundle. Then he wondered what he should do about it, and how long it would be before he was pounced on by excitable and none too disciplined Fascist militiamen.

There wasn't a living person in sight. On one pavement were the huddled forms of two ill-starred civilians who had been caught by blast as they were making a belated rush to a shelter. Near by three horses were stretched stiff in the road, one of them still in the shafts of a wrecked cabriolet.

The houses, mainly of three or four storeys, had been for the most part badly damaged. Doors and windows had been blown out and roofs lifted into the air. Here and there fires were burning with apparently no attempt on the part of the authorities to grapple with them.

Then Derek discovered where he was. He already knew he had come down somewhere in Turin, but now he recognized the street in spite of its battered state.

It was the Strada Vittoriosa, and within fifty yards was the house his father had occupied during his twelve years in the British Consular Service.

"Might as well get rid of this," decided Derek, referring to his trusty parachute. "I don't see me giving it away to the first Wop who shows up."

He disposed of it most effectually by hurling the bundle on top of a heap of burning debris, and then, still without seeing anybody, he made his way to the house where he had spent many happy days of childhood.

It wasn't so badly damaged as those in its immediate vicinity. The portico had collapsed and the ornamental chestnut-wood door was supported by only one hinge. Most of the windows were out, but, as he subsequently discovered, the roof was almost intact.

He climbed over the rubble that half filled the porch and forced his way in through the partly opened door. The rooms opening out of the hall were deserted. They were in darkness. Dust filled the air and was already settling deeply upon the furniture.

What little moonlight filtered in through the glazeless windows—the black-out curtains having been swept away by the blast—was hardly sufficient to enable Derek to grope his way about. Even so, with different furniture, much of which had been flung across the rooms, the place seemed to have lost its once familiar atmosphere.

He went upstairs. The wide staircase with its ornate carved balusters seemed sound and solid, though covered deeply with fallen plaster and dust. On the wall was an electric-light switch. It was out of order. No doubt Turin's electricity supply had been utterly dislocated by the R.A.F., and probably the water supply as well.

In the largest bedroom a large four-poster bed stood with its canopy awry and the bedclothes in disorder. Articles of apparel were strewn on the floor. Water dripped through the ceiling from the room above.

Derek went through the open french windows on to the balcony. He trod carefully, in case it would not bear his weight. He looked down at the deserted street. There was now more moonlight. Much of the pall of smoke had dispersed.

In the vicinity everything was strangely quiet. It seemed like the city of the dead. Perhaps it was. Certain it was that few if any people had emerged from their shelters, nor were there any troops or fire-fighters in evidence. Farther away, however, there were sounds of motor traffic, of people shouting and of the cries of hysterical women.

It was a striking contrast to conditions prevailing in British towns after a raid, as Derek knew from personal experience and on more than one occasion.

Over the Royal Arsenal flames were still leaping skywards. At frequent intervals muffled explosions, mistaken by the civil population for more bombs, shook the house. The lads of the R.A.F., thought Derek, had certainly made a good job of Italy's most important establishment for the production of munitions of war.

Derek was feeling very hungry. He knew where the pantry was, if the present tenant hadn't shifted it elsewhere. He'd forage round for a good meal and then turn in. If he were to be a prisoner of war, there was no reason why he should go without food and sleep before he was arrested. Also it might give the populace time to cool down a bit. British airmen forced to bale out were sometimes roughly handled by their exasperated and

overstrung captors, but otherwise they were well treated—better by the Italians than by the Nazis.

The pantry was almost bare, showing that food conditions in Italy were far from satisfactory. In pre-war days there was enough and to spare, provided the customers had plenty of money to spend; but on “scrounging round”, Derek discovered a maize loaf, a small quantity of olive oil, a couple of sausages of the polony kind though of uncertain ancestry, and a bottle of coarse native wine known as *grappa*. If he had expected to find tea, coffee or chocolate he was mistaken. In any case he had no means of cooking food or of heating water, and when he turned on a tap only a trickle of rusty liquid came through, showing that the water mains had been broken.

He made a sorry meal, thinking regretfully of the thermos, the tin of sandwiches and the slab of chocolate he had left behind when he abandoned the disabled Halifax.

Then, quite expecting to be rudely disturbed before morning, he turned in all standing on the four-poster bed.

He was surprised when he awoke to find the sunshine streaming in through the shuttered windows. People were moving in the street, yet no one had entered the house.

He went to the window, this time avoiding the balcony. There was a commotion in the street, and the cause and effect were not difficult to solve.

Troops had caught a couple of looters red-handed—looting in its most despicable form, that of pilfering from bombed houses. In Great Britain the penalty varies from two years’ hard labour to penal servitude. In Turin the authorities took more drastic measures.

The two men were interrogated on the spot by a *Sotto tenento*, an officer whose rank corresponds with that of a “second loot” in the British army.

The whole proceedings lasted hardly more than a couple of minutes. The convicted men were stood up against the wall of the house they had attempted to loot and were shot out of hand!

Derek decided he’d better wait a little longer before giving himself up!

Waiting, he changed his mind. Other fellows, brought down over enemy territory, had succeeded in getting away and finally reaching their own country. He had one great advantage over the majority of these men—he knew Italy fairly well and could speak the language fluently.

Having come to this decision he knew he must act quickly. His R.A.F. uniform would give him away to the first person he encountered. He would have to conceal or destroy that, even though it meant that should he be captured while wearing civilian clothes he would be liable to be shot as a spy.

Returning to the bedroom he searched in wardrobes and hanging cupboards for a suitable disguise. He was lucky almost straight away. There were several suits that practically fitted him, dark cloth coats and trousers, somewhat shabby but obviously belonging to a professional man. The shoes, down at heel, he eyed with distaste; they were buttoned ones! He could imagine himself turning up at some R.A.F. station wearing buttoned shoes and the bursts of hilarity that would greet his “sissy” appearance!

In the breast pocket of one of the jackets he found a pocket-book. In it were six one-hundred *lire* notes, a ration card and an identity card.

The latter bore the usual photograph of its owner, a typically northern Italian type of man, twenty-eight years of age and born in Florence. He had been exempted from military service on account of cardiac trouble. His occupation was that of estate agent, added to which he held some sort of Government post as a billeting officer.

This was the general description, as set down on his identity papers, of Antonio Beppo Durando.

Obviously Derek would have to impersonate the absent Durando if he were to get very far away from Turin. There was one snag: the photograph of Durando on the identity card did not resemble Derek in the slightest degree.

Derek surmounted that difficulty by removing the Italian’s photograph and substituting one of his own from his Service identity card, which he then destroyed. That was cutting the Gordian knot with a vengeance, since in the event of his capture, Derek would be unable to produce proof that he was an officer of the Royal Air Force; so, even if he were not executed as a spy, he would not be accorded the privileges extended to officer prisoners of war.

His uniform he hid in the attic, but he kept his underclothing, even though these bore an English laundry mark. He simply *had* to draw the line at wearing another man’s vest and pants—Italian at that!

“It’s quite time I got a move on!” he said aloud; then he pulled himself up with a round turn. Why he had expressed himself aloud he didn’t know, except that, because he was in a solitary state, he let the words slip out. It

made him resolve that while he remained a free man on Italian soil he must literally do in Rome as the Romans do and speak only Italian.

Giving a final glance at his image in a mirror, Derek went to the front entrance. All he was carrying was a black bag in which he had put a blanket, a pair of shoes, a bottle of *Chianti* and half a loaf of maize bread.

He'd have to go on short commons, that was a foregone conclusion. The ration book, though it might be most useful later on, would be of no immediate assistance to him as Durando had already drawn the current week's issue.

Antonio Durando had evidently left his dwelling in a violent hurry. If he had escaped death or injury, there was the likelihood that he would return home to see how his worldly possessions had fared. It would be decidedly awkward, thought Derek, if he—the Italian's impersonator—ran into the real Durando on his own doorstep!

By now the Strada Vittoriosa was crowded. Ambulances were still busy, troops and Fascist militia and Blackshirts were patrolling the street. The pavements were thronged mostly with civilians. Many were only partly clad. Most of them carried bundles over their shoulders or were pushing perambulators piled up with their scanty belongings.

Every time a motor vehicle changed gear, people in the vicinity stopped and gazed apprehensively into the sky. When, as Derek left the house, a biplane, conspicuous with a red, white and green marking, flew overhead, there was a general stampede for the shelters. Without the shadow of a doubt, the civil population of Turin had its nerves thoroughly on edge; and in this respect their apprehension of a speedy renewal of the R.A.F.'s attentions had also communicated itself to the troops stationed in and around the sorely blitzed city.

Unchallenged and hardly noticed, Derek mingled with the crowd. From scraps of animated conversation he overheard he gathered that the municipal authorities, acting upon an order from *il Duce*, had given instructions for the mass evacuation of all civilians, not only from Turin but from Milan, except for those engaged upon the production of arms and munitions.

Farther along the street two Blackshirts were putting up another proclamation. Crowds seethed in front of it. There were cries of indignation and muttered imprecations against Benito Mussolini.

The announcement stated that the city's electricity, gas and water supplies were disrupted and that no guarantee would be given when they

would be restored. There would also be a shortage of food until the Government could take steps to distribute limited supplies on a strictly rationed basis.

It was the third section of the proclamation that angered the people most. Since the railway station had been heavily damaged, all refugees were to make their way as best they might into the country. Farmers and others living well outside the city had been ordered to give shelter to these refugees and to provide food to the extent their stocks afforded.

That meant that a large proportion of the inhabitants of Turin had to make their way on foot, or on cycles if they were fortunate enough to possess them, for a distance of several miles, and that in the knowledge that there would be totally inadequate accommodation for them.

Fear of a renewal of the air raid urged the scared and almost demented people to put as great a distance as possible between them and their ravaged homes before nightfall.

Derek felt sorry for the women and children, and he expressed his sorrow in a practical way by helping to carry children, although hampered by his “borrowed” bag and its contents.

He had thought of making for one of the numerous fishing hamlets on the shores of the Gulf of Genoa. Until the German occupation of what was known as Vichy France, it would have been a comparatively easy way of escape to bribe an Italian fisherman to set him ashore on the French side of the Franco-Italian frontier. Thence it would be only a matter of time before he could make his way across the Pyrenees to Lisbon and thence back to England.

But that line of escape was now barred to him. There remained what appeared to be the only possible way: to make for the south of Italy and thence to Sicily. From there it is but a sixty-mile journey by sea to Malta, and if he couldn't steal some sort of a craft and sail her that small distance then he didn't deserve to regain his liberty!

About six miles from the outskirts of Turin the road to Chieri and Asti crosses a stream by means of a narrow, humpbacked bridge.

Here, for some reason soon to be apparent, the police had erected a barrier. Few of the now thinning procession of refugees were stopped, but those who were were men of military age. Not all of these were told to halt; only one or two here and there.

Derek approached none too confidently, although he put a brave face on the situation. It was difficult to feel composed when wearing someone else's clothes!

He was leading a little girl of about four years of age, and in addition to his own luggage was carrying a bulging fibre basket. The mother of the child, with two others clinging to her skirts, was close at his heels.

He was about to pass the barrier unchallenged when a sergeant of police shouted to two of his underlings:

“Stop that man! He looks like the one we are searching for!”

CHAPTER XIII

Refugees

Derek stopped. It would have been futile to attempt to escape. He was quite under the impression that someone had seen him leave the house in Strada Vittoriosa—perhaps Antonio Beppo Durando himself—and the police at the barricade had been warned that a suspect might attempt to get through.

“Your papers, signor!”

“With pleasure!” rejoined Derek, although there seemed very little pleasure to be derived from the encounter so far as he was concerned.

The woman snatched her bundle from his keeping, grabbed the child by the wrist and hurried on.

Both policemen studied the identity paper, asked the suspect to remove his hat and compared his features with that of the photograph. Derek had previously cut off the lower portion of the print so that the collar of his uniform did not appear on it.

“You are not a war-worker?” questioned one of the policemen.

“Assuredly,” he replied. “I am detailed to act as billeting officer. You see, it is so set down on my papers.”

“It seems that this signor is on his lawful occupation, Sergeant,” declared the policeman in a disappointed tone. The capture of the wanted man would have meant a reward of one hundred *lire*.

“Is that your wife?” inquired the sergeant, indicating the woman with the three children. From a safe distance she had been watching the proceedings and wondering why the stranger who had helped her on the way had been stopped by the police.

“No,” replied Derek indifferently; “I don’t even know the woman. But who is it you’re after?”

“Only an English airman,” replied the policeman. “Seven of them baled out, but one has so far got away.”

Derek did some quick thinking.

“How many English aircraft were shot down?” he asked.

“Only one over Turin. It is reported that others never recrossed the Alps.”

So evidently the crew of “S for Sylvia” were prisoners of war; all except two, himself and one other. The Italian policeman had told him there were seven. Actually the crew totalled eight. So another was at large. Who was it? he wondered.

“Where will the prisoners be sent to?” he asked, somewhat incautiously, but as the guardians of the barricade hadn’t jibbed at his previous inquiries he thought he could well risk it.

“You a Turin man and do not know that?” asked the Italian in surprise. “Then I am not going to enlighten you. Now proceed; you are hindering us.”

Derek proceeded. He hadn’t any definite and immediate destination. The scanty information concerning his bomber’s crew put a fresh idea into his head. If he could but discover the name and locality of the prisoners-of-war camp to which they had been sent, he might be of much assistance to them.

If, perhaps, he had tipped the policemen they might have told him more; but he didn’t like to run the risk of retracing his steps for that purpose.

The woman whose child he had been helping along had gone on. It was likely that she might be able to give the information he required, but she had been suspicious of him owing to the fact that he had been stopped and questioned by the police. In Fascist Italy it was not healthy to be seen in company with strangers in which the police took an interest!

Considering the matter he realized how indiscreet he’d been. According to his papers he was supposed to be suffering from a diseased heart, yet he had approached the barrier carrying a weighty bag, a heavier bundle, and leading a child! Fortunately for him the police hadn’t noticed it. He decided to act up to the part in the future.

The crowd of refugees continued to diminish as footsore women and exhausted children dropped behind, until about five kilometres farther on Derek was one of a mere trickle.

About five kilometres farther on Derek sat by the roadside to rest. Trudging along in borrowed boots that pinched and encumbered by his also borrowed luggage, he was acutely aware that even though he might be considered an efficient airman he certainly did not cut a fine figure as a pedestrian and a refugee at that! He had to ration himself as far as food was concerned. Twice he had stopped at farm-houses and asked if they sold bread, only to be met with sullen looks and uncivil refusals. Quite probably the farmers had kept back produce enough and more than enough for their needs, but there was no telling how the food situation would affect them before Italy was out of the war.

He was munching a piece of maize bread when an elderly man who was hobbling along looked at him, and without as much, as *Scuse!* sat down beside him.

He was about fifty years of age, with deeply wrinkled features and gnarled hands. He was shabbily dressed, and in default of better protection his feet were swathed in strips of cloth. Over his shoulder he carried a knapsack of the Italian pattern as issued to the infantry in the last war.

“Bombed out?” he inquired.

“Yes,” replied Derek, with equal brevity.

“Aha! then we are comrades in adversity. I, too, have had to leave Turin, but not on account of——” He broke off abruptly and producing a crumpled packet of home-produced cigarettes, lighted one by means of flint and steel applied to a piece of tinder. The smell of the cigarette convinced Derek that it wasn’t made from tobacco!

“Why comrades?” asked Derek.

He wasn’t at all anxious for the fellow’s society, yet he might be able to obtain some useful information from him.

The man made no reply to the question. Instead he asked another.

“What is your name?”

“Antonio Durando,” replied the temporary bearer of that cognomen. In the circumstances, since the man might be a Fascist spy, it was better to do so in case later on he would again have to produce his papers.

“Durando?” echoed the other. “I know many Durandos in Turin—or did. Not a few of them, living in my district, must have been killed by the British airmen. Are you related to Giuseppe Durando, the old man living in Strada Vittoriosa *nono?*”

Derek had to think quickly.

“Yes; he is a distant relation.”

“*Basta!* I might have guessed it,” rejoined the other. “Are you of the same political opinions?”

But for Derek’s previous acquaintance with Italian life, he might have been suspicious of the question. He remembered that even amongst the fishermen on the Ligurian coast political discussions were amongst the chief topics of the day. They were mostly anti-Fascist in spite of the fact that the Blackshirts were everywhere.

“I am,” he replied. “And you?”

“Assuredly. Now I tell you; it is not that I have to leave Turin on account of the English airmen. There I had a business—a very good business until we Italians were made to join the Axis to fight against our allies in the last war. I was a manufacturer of silk. I employed fifty hands. Then came orders that seventy-five per cent of my output must be sent to Germany. For why? To clothe the fat wives of Nazi pig-dogs!”

“Or to make bags for holding powder for the German heavy guns,” suggested Derek.

“One way or other the result for me was the same. The Nazis pay for my silk at their own price, which does not suit me at all. I make complaints. What happens? A certain fat man in Rome orders my business to be closed, and my workpeople, including myself, are to be sent to Germany to toil in Nazi armaments factories. So I and many of my friends and employees quit Turin. It is better to be a beggar in my own country than a slave in Germany.”

“I quite agree,” said Derek cordially.

“Benito he is finished,” went on the Italian. “I do not care who hears me say it. When he was a socialist during the last war he came to address a meeting. Then he had big holes in his boots and his clothes were ragged—almost as bad as mine are now. Your relation Giuseppe and I were on the reception committee, and we, out of charity, got together a subscription of forty *lire* to send him back by train to Turin.”

“You could do with your share of the forty *lire* now,” commented Derek.

“I could; and after the march on Rome I wrote to Mussolini reminding him of it. Perhaps, I thought, he will place me, as a good patriot, in a good Government office. But no! Instead I have a visit from the Blackshirts. They

threaten me if I write again to *il Duce* on the subject I will be well beaten. After that I say privately to my friends: ‘Down with Mussolini, the upstart who has dragged Italy to ruin.’ ”

Derek wasn’t favourably impressed. Obviously this man, like thousands of others, had a genuine grievance against the head of the Fascist Government. But would he have had if Mussolini had rewarded him with a minor post under the Fascist regime?

“And this war is a terrible mistake,” went on the garrulous Turino. “We are on the wrong side. As for me I like the English. I have seen many English tourists before Mussolini quarrelled with England. They expended plenty of money—not like the German tourists, who were nothing more than spies.”

“There’s a lot in what you say,” rejoined Derek, thinking that now was the opportunity of angling for the information he wanted. “I, too, have no great reason for disliking them, even though, through the necessities of war, they bomb and blast our cities. Isn’t there a prisoners-of-war camp near Asti?”

“You mean the one at Nizza. It is but thirty kilometres from here. But why are you interested?”

“For a very good reason,” replied the *soi-disant* Durando. “I have another relative who is a contractor for supplying provisions to the English prisoners. I think I can arrange to obtain employment under him. That would solve my food difficulties, I think.”

“Assuredly!” concurred the Italian. “If one wishes to be well fed, one has either to be a relative or a friend to a member of the Fascist Grand Council or be engaged on the work of feeding English prisoners. I envy you, Signor Durando! Do me the honour of smoking a cigarette with you?”

He extended the crumpled and greasy cardboard packet. Derek took one of the cigarettes. He hadn’t any of his own and he was pining for a smoke, even though the cigarette wasn’t anything like the ones he was accustomed to.

The Italian lighted it for him and then, before Derek had taken half a dozen draws, he went off, declaring that one of the party of fugitives that had just gone past was an old friend.

When ten minutes later Derek rose and flexed his tired limbs he made the disconcerting discovery that his “borrowed” pocket-book with its contents, including five one-hundred *lire* notes, had disappeared. All he had

left in money was one note of that denomination and a few ten and fifteen *lire* ones. Fortunately, when the police at the barricade had returned his papers he had placed them, including his identity card, in another pocket!

In spite of the gnarled hands his chance acquaintance must have been a clever pickpocket. While lighting the cigarette he had given Derek, he had deftly extricated his pocket-book from the inside pocket of his jacket, and now he had gone on his way rejoicing—the richer by five hundred *lire*!

It was useless to pursue the man. Ten minutes' start was a useful one and quite possibly, directly he was out of sight, he had turned off the road and was taking a short-cut through some olive groves.

Derek wondered whether, in addition to being a thief, the fellow was a consummate liar and whether what he had said about the prisoners-of-war camp at Nizza was a fairy tale. If that were so, it was just a *quid pro quo*, since Derek had not been guiltless in giving a fictitious account of himself.

By now the flood of refugees had once more increased. There were more Fascist officials, halting small groups and giving them confusing and contradictory orders. There were protests, hysterical outcries, and in a few instances shouts of violent abuse.

Someone announced that trains were ready to depart from the station of a nearby town, and that free travel for refugees would be provided by the Government; to which a woman replied that she had just come from that particular town and that the railway officials had declared that they were not likely to do so for some days.

There were similar uncertainties over the distribution of food. The Blackshirts announced that rations of bread and macaroni were ready at a depot a few kilometres farther on, but when a crowd of famished and weary women and children reached there, both shelter and food were a myth.

It was now late in the afternoon. Derek didn't see much chance of arriving at Nizza before dark. It wouldn't be healthy for him to be near the prisoners' compound after sunset. Italian guards had an awkward habit, due no doubt to their nervousness, of shooting first and challenging afterwards.

As for finding shelter in any of the inns he was doomed to disappointment. Almost every dwelling from ten to thirty miles outside Turin had its full quota of refugees, many of whom had forced their presence upon the unsympathetic and in many cases hostile peasantry.

Breaking away from the main road Derek plodded on till he came to a small village. At the inn, a miserable sort of place, he inquired if there were

any accommodation to be had. As he half expected, he was told that there was not; but he did succeed in buying a bowl of lentil soup and a glass of home-produced wine.

He had barely finished this meagre refreshment when a car stopped outside the inn. From it alighted two *carabinieri*—wiry, fierce-looking men, wearing greenish-grey uniforms and black hats. One of them—the driver—had a revolver in his belt, the other, with a sword girded at his side, carried a rifle slung across his back.

Giving Derek a casual glance the two men entered the inn. Presently, judging by the tone of their voices, although he could not overhear what was being said, he gathered that a heated argument was in progress.

Derek looked more than once at the unattended car. What would be simpler than to jump in and, after covering the greater part of the distance between him and Nizza, to abandon the vehicle?

Then he weighed up the pros and cons. The *carabinieri* were armed. If they heard the car being started up, they would hurriedly emerge from the inn and fire at the thief who had stolen a Government car. Also, there was the risk of more armed guards farther on, and it would take a great deal of explaining on Derek's part to give a satisfactory reason why he, a civilian, was alone and at the wheel of a *carabinieri* vehicle.

When the two men reappeared Derek gave them a civil "Good afternoon" and asked if they were going to Nizza. If so, would they give him a lift. He would pay five *lire* for the privilege.

"We pass within five kilometres of Nizza," replied the driver. "Of course, it is forbidden to give lifts to civilians, but——"

He winked, and the deal was as good as sealed.

"Where are you from, signor?" asked the second man politely, for even the trifling sum of five *lire* made a tremendous difference.

"Turin."

"So? Well, what happened there last night? We have been on patrol and have heard many stories. No two people seem to agree on anything concerning the damage."

"It is very serious," declared Derek guardedly.

"The sooner this war is over the better, whichever wins," went on the *carabiniere*, who wore a strip of ribbon on his tunic. "Then I get back to my

wife and family—or what is left of my family. I have three sons somewhere in Tripolitania. I pray to the Virgin that they are now prisoners to the English; then they will be well out of it.”

“Why? Do the English treat their prisoners as well as that?” asked Derek artlessly.

“So one hears. Then I know I fought alongside of an English regiment on the Piave in the last war. A Tommy—that is what we called the English soldiers—saved my life when a cursed Austrian was about to bayonet me as I lay wounded on the ground. No, I do not hate the English, Guyda notwithstanding!”

By this time the car was well under way. It was pretty obvious that the driver was the worse for drink, while his garrulous comrade was only a stage or so removed from that state.

Often as they rounded corners the car was on two wheels. Once it glanced off the hind-quarters of a cow, and in the course of five seconds while the ancient in charge of the animal was within earshot the driver had told him all he wanted to know, and much in addition, concerning himself, his ancestors and his descendants!

After that the second man resumed his confidential conversation. He insisted upon it. They had set out on a strictly private enterprise, namely to blackmail the landlord of the inn. He, it appeared, had had the car commandeered by the Fascist authorities, and before surrendering it he had removed the serviceable tyres and had substituted some worn-out ones. A neighbour had “given him away”. The two *carabinieri* had gone to him, suggesting that for a bribe of fifty *lire* they would ease the situation considerably. The innkeeper had refused to be blackmailed, hence the row!

“He is a fool this Pietro Gallo,” continued Derek’s unabashed confidant. “Because our captain will himself pay him a visit to-morrow. Then it will cost Pietro very much more than fifty *lire* to square the matter!”

This information did not surprise Derek in the least. He knew well that from the highest officials down to the lowest of the low the Italians are not above accepting bribes and even extorting blackmail from their fellow-countrymen.

Then Derek put out a “feeler” about the prisoners-of-war camp.

The fellow couldn’t or wouldn’t give any information about it beyond the important news that it wasn’t at Nizza but about six kilometres from the place. The car would pass within sight of it.

The sun had not set when Derek alighted from the car. The driver in drunken solemnity insisted on shaking hands with him three times, while the veteran of the last war, standing on tiptoe, attempted but in vain to embrace and kiss his much taller chance acquaintance!

Unless he were mistaken there was his immediate goal—a collection of about twenty long, low wooden huts surrounded by a double fence of barbed wire, part of which glinted in the rays of the setting sun. He could see men standing in two ranks—the prisoners either lined up for their evening meal or fallen-in for the last roll-call of the day. Outside the fence a few Italian soldiers were patrolling. More than likely there were others posted in those elevated perches placed at about a hundred yards' interval outside the barbed wire.

Nizza Camp was one of many scattered throughout Italy. It had accommodation for two thousand officer-prisoners, but there were only about eighty, mostly R.N. and R.A.F. personnel, there. It had been built with others during the period when the Italians, optimistically but erroneously, anticipated a crushing and decisive victory in Egypt by Marshal Grazziani's army. As things turned out it was Wavell's men who had to do the corralling to accommodate the vast numbers of Italian troops who, after incredibly faint resistance, had "thrown in their hands".

Keeping to his previous resolution, Derek decided to find somewhere to sleep and to reconnoitre the camp in the morning.

It was cold. Until a day or two ago the *mistral* had been blowing, and on the uplands, some two thousand feet above sea-level, the temperature after sunset wasn't many degrees above freezing.

Derek looked about to see if there were any ricks. There weren't. It was much too early for the first hay crop and last year's had been taken over by the Government, much of it being sent to Germany as part payment for limited consignments of coal.

Except for the camp hutments there wasn't a house within sight. It was a cheerless outlook. Derek felt like a wayfarer arriving in a strange town where all the hotels were full up. He'd experienced that situation when touring at home, just before the war. This was far worse.

In the distance was a small wood. There he might find rough shelter from the wind. Perhaps there would be a dry ditch.

Although frightfully stiff and hungry, he summoned up his remaining energies and set off towards it, until his path was barred by a small stream.

He could have waded through it, but it would be better if he could find a way across dry-shod.

Even as he stood looking right and left a voice suddenly boomed:

“Lofty, by all that’s wonderful! What are you doing in that get-up, old son?”

CHAPTER XIV

An Unexpected Meeting

Derek recognized the voice. It was Nigel Holt's, but he could see no sign of its owner.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"In my dog-box," was the flippant reply. "There's room for you. Can't show myself yet; but make for that bush on your right. The stream isn't more than nine inches deep!"

Thus directed Derek sat down and unbuttoned and removed his borrowed boots. Then, having waded across, he proceeded a short distance upstream to the bush, or rather clump of bushes, that Holt had indicated.

"Anyone in sight?" asked Nigel from somewhere in the scanty foliage.

Derek glanced round in all directions.

"No one!"

"Good! See my head? This way, then. Mind you don't get your eyes scratched out by these brambles."

On hands and knees Derek crawled under the bushes, Holt preceding him and edging backwards.

Presently Derek could see nothing except the dim whiteness of Nigel's face; but he knew that he was entering a cave of some sort.

"Good enough!" declared Holt. "Sit down anywhere. It's bone dry. Sorry the electric light's not in working order. What do you think of my hide-out?"

"Like a fox-hole."

"It *is* a fox-hole. If it hadn't been for a fox showing me the way I'd never have discovered it. I showed my gratitude by giving Reynard an eviction order, though!"

"And what have you been doing since last we parted?" asked Derek.

“Your yarn first,” demurred Nigel. “To tell the honest truth, none of the boys ever expected to see you again this side of Jordan. We’d written you off as a total constructive loss! I was the last except you to bale out, and when I looked at the old kite she seemed in ribbons with flames pouring from her. Then you seemed to have got her more or less on an even keel. I thought to myself, ‘Lofty is flying the old bus back on his own so that he can pick up a D.F.C.’ ”

“You’re dead wrong,” declared Derek, and went on to relate in detail how he’d found himself trapped in the burning aircraft and how, by sheer good luck, he’d baled out and come down in a blitzed and deserted street. “Are you hungry?”

“Hungry? My dear old soul, I’m simply ravenous. I could emulate Adolf and gnaw a carpet if it had been boiled in fat!”

“Well, fair does,” rejoined Derek, opening his bag and groping for the meagre contents. “There’s a chunk of maize bread, and I’ve a whole bottle of Chianti.”

For a while they ate and drank without any attempt at conversation.

“Now your story,” prompted Derek, after he had brought the account of his adventure up to date.

“There’s precious little to tell,” said Nigel, almost apologetically. “After the rest of us had baled out we found we’d all landed within a quarter of a mile of one another. Witherson—you know, the Poacher—had a couple of bullets through his calf and that rather slowed down the proceedings; but we patched him up somehow—he stuck it jolly well!—and there we waited. We knew we couldn’t get away and that the Wops might just as well come to us as we to seek them out. Also we gathered that they would be pretty excited over the basting we had given them, so we came to the conclusion it would be advisable to sit pretty until the overheated Latin blood had cooled somewhat.

“And would you believe it? All that time we were within twenty-five yards of a well-camouflaged A.A. gun position. None of our bombs had dropped anywhere near it—at least we didn’t see a single crater—yet the Wops there had gone to earth.

“After things had quieted down somewhat—our bombers had made for home although the A.A.s were still blazing away to the west of Turin—an Italian shoved his head out of the funk-hole and had a look round. He caught sight of us and—bad luck to him!—must have mistaken us for Huns. The

Germans had been sending officers to Italy to ginger things up, and he, poor twerp! thought that that was what we were after.

“He shouted to his pals in the dugout and an Italian officer appeared. He gave us a most elaborate Fascist salute and said something we couldn’t understand. That’s where we missed you most, Lofty!

“But when he discovered his mistake, instead of being a cringing jackal he transformed himself into a sort of laughing jackass! You would have thought that he’d been directly responsible for shooting us down.

“There was a lot of telephoning and after a while a big motor van arrived. The Italians had already searched us pretty thoroughly and hadn’t been backward in annexing souvenirs. It was no use protesting, because we didn’t speak the lingo, and once they had disarmed us they didn’t forget to do their pantomimic stuff, threatening us with all sorts of trouble if we gave them any.

“On the way here the van stopped for something. The armed guard at the back got down and went to speak to the driver or somebody. And then—goodness knows why, except to give the blighters a bit of a run for their money—I slipped out and made a dash for it.

“In a way it was a daft thing to do; it would make things worse for the other fellows.”

“Quite likely,” agreed Derek. “But, on the other hand, every attempt at escape hampers the enemy’s war effort. Supposing they turned out a couple of hundred troops to engage in the search—and that is quite a modest estimate—then those two hundred are wasting time that might otherwise be profitably employed on war production. Did the guards fire?”

“They did. Rotten shots, though! Couldn’t hit me at three hundred yards and there wasn’t a bit of cover until I reached a small wood. Then I more or less doubled back to follow the direction the van was taking, only on a parallel course. I figured they’d not follow in that direction, leaving me pretty much to my own devices. That’s a sound scheme, isn’t it?”

“Up to a certain point,” assented Derek. “But if the search-party makes two moves ahead of you and sees through your little plan, where are you?”

“They haven’t so far. But before I’d gone very far I came in sight of a sort of concentration camp——”

“That’s Nizza.”

“Thanks for the information, old son, but it doesn’t convey much.”

“That was where you were being conveyed to, in any case. No doubt the other fellows are there now, with a decent roof over their heads.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” asked Holt. “It’s dry.”

“Unless it rains hard, and then the water will soak through and the stream will overflow its banks and wash us out.”

“It hasn’t so far. Let’s get a bit of shut-eye. I’m dog-tired and I suppose you are.”

There was a thick deposit of dust and dried twigs on the floor of the little cave. The two men, back to back for mutual warmth and sharing the “borrowed” blanket, were soon sound asleep.

At daybreak they awoke, feeling the better for their slumbers, but stiff, cold and hungry. They finished the rest of their meagre food and refilling the half-empty bottle of *Chianti* with water from the stream, not only quenched their thirst but sent the blood glowing through their veins.

Derek went to the side of a hillock to reconnoitre. The camp was roughly half a mile away but he could see the prisoners parading for the first meal of the day. It was too far off for him to recognize anybody, but he couldn’t help thinking about the others of the bomber’s crew, starting their first complete day of captivity—a captivity that would entail many days and nights of utter boredom until their prison door would be opened and they were free men once more.

“What are your plans?” asked Holt, when Derek returned to their hide-out.

“We’ll stick together,” declared Derek. “In this get-up I can go into Nizza and buy food for both of us, and if I can get hold of a suitable disguise for you we can make tracks to the south of Italy.”

Nigel shook his head.

“Nothin’ doin’,” he demurred. “Very decent of you, Lofty, I’m sure, but it just can’t be done. It would be all right for you to go into the town, if you were passing through it on your way somewhere. But to buy grub—even if you can do it—and then return the way you came would arouse suspicion. And in that rig-out, which is miles too small for you, you must attract notice. And another thing: when you pinched Durando’s clothes you forgot to get hold of a razor. You’ll have quite a beard in a week.”

“That won’t matter,” rejoined Derek. “There were hundreds of men refugees on the roads from Turin. The great majority of them hadn’t shaved

that morning!”

“There’s something else,” continued Holt. “I can’t speak the lingo, and *Si, si!* won’t get me very far. I couldn’t pretend to be deaf and dumb and let you do the pow-wow-ing. If I were, that would be set down on my papers, which I don’t possess. No, Lofty, it just can’t be did! You and I part company, old son. You stand a good chance of getting clear; I don’t! So when I’m properly browned off, I’ll give myself up. It will be something to let our fellows know you’re alive and kicking!”

CHAPTER XV

A Trek towards Freedom

Unwillingly Derek recognized the force and weight of his companion's decision.

The time had come for them to sever their brief reunion, for in this case the old proverb, "There's safety in numbers", couldn't apply.

"I'll give you about an hour's start," declared Nigel, as they shook hands on parting. Why they did so they didn't know. Being British and therefore credited with being undemonstrative, they hadn't clasped hands when they met, and there seemed no reason why they should do so now.

But they did!

Soon Derek was rubbing shoulders with the crowd in the narrow streets of Nizza. The resources of the little town had been severely strained by the influx of refugees, whose tales of death and destruction did not tend to improve the morale of their temporary and far from willing hosts.

Blackshirts were putting up placards at many street corners. Crowds stood in front of these notices, criticizing for the most part unfavourably the orders and regulations issued by the Fascist Party. The civilian population had been "rattled" to such an extent by the attentions of the R.A.F. that they ignored the risk of being denounced to the authorities. It was more than likely that the local Blackshirts deliberately turned deaf ears to the subversive conversation, lest, in the day of reckoning, they might be in for a very rough handling by the people over whom they had lorded it since the year of the eventful March on Rome.

Derek made a point of reading several of the proclamations. Two or three gave him useful information.

Mayors of towns and villages were instructed that shopkeepers and traders were to "honour" ration tickets issued in Turin, Milan and other bombed cities. Hitherto this transfer had been illegal. Now it was not; but there was a proviso that supplies of food could not be guaranteed and would

be only available provided there were sufficient stocks above the quota fixed for the resident population—which in practical terms meant there would be very little surplus available for the swarms of refugees.

Another was to the effect that masons and other artisans in the building trades who by age or through any other cause were exempt from military service were required for urgent work at and near Reggio. Men would be enrolled locally and given free railroad tickets to their destination.

“That shows that the Government has as yet no intention of rebuilding or restoring our homes!” declared a woman to a sympathetic audience. “Why should Lombardy be deprived of workmen just for the benefit of Calabria?”

This appeared to be what estate agents term “an attractive proposition”. Antonio Beppo Durando was an estate agent; could he, or rather, his impersonator, be reckoned as belonging to the building trade? If so, here seemed a long stride towards freedom.

Reggio, he knew, was on the “toe” of Italy. Across the Straits of Messina, on the shores of which Reggio stands, is Sicily, and the south of Sicily is only sixty miles from Malta and liberty! More than that, it meant rejoining his squadron and helping with the good work of smashing the ex-house painter!

In circumstances such as these Derek generally was a cheerful optimist; but, optimism being of little use without action, he was one of those who believed in getting a move on. At the same time he knew the value of caution and the need of patience when patience was necessary.

Having been given directions where to find the mayor’s office, Derek presented himself for enrolment. There were few volunteers for this Reggio work and, in spite of the Government decree, it was soon obvious to Derek, as well as to other applicants, that the mayor was less than lukewarm in the matter. Apparently it didn’t concern him in the least that Antonio Beppo Durando was an estate agent or a bricklayer’s labourer.

“Don’t hurry to arrive at Reggio,” he said with a crafty smile. “Don’t work at all hard either. These defences are being built for the benefit of those pigs of Germans, not for good Italians. If they are built before the British land, the longer it will take them to liberate us from the Nazi yoke.”

To which Derek replied with a cautious, “*Si, si, Eccellenza!*”

It gave him additional food for thought. The hatred of the German by the vast majority of Italians, including those outwardly Fascists, was widespread and was still growing. Nowhere had he heard of anger being expressed

against the R.A.F. except in a few instances where refugees from bombed Turin had lost their homes in the holocaust. The tendency was to blame Mussolini for having needlessly plunged Italy into war and to curse the German policy of “friendly” infiltration into their country.

Taking a leaf from the mayor’s book, Derek decided that he needn’t hurry.

“But do not tarry here too long,” continued the mayor. “If you do not volunteer for Calabria you stand the chance of being *ordered* to proceed to Germany to work hard and with little pay for the Nazis. Here is your ticket,” he added, handing it to Derek together with his identity card. “And have you read the life of our great patriot?”

“*Il Duce?*”

The mayor looked as if he was about to spit contemptuously, thought better of it and shrugged his shoulders.

“*Corpo di Bacco!*” he ejaculated. “It is to Garibaldi I refer. What did he write? I will tell you: ‘England is the friend of Italy. Cursed be the Italian who raises his hand in strife against the English!’ It seems that the curse is bearing fruit.”

Again Derek wondered at this outspoken Italian, who must have owed his municipal appointment to the Fascists, for they had weeded out all officials known to be opposed to Mussolini and his Blackshirts. The hatred of Nazi Germany might be genuine, but it was possible that he was a secret agent trying to trap his fellow-countrymen. There might be Gestapo spies listening behind the door, or there might be dictaphones in the room to record any declaration of disloyalty to the Fascist cause.

Derek, playing for caution, replied in a monosyllable, bowed—he refrained from giving the Fascist salute!—and left the building.

Apart from the mayor’s declaration, he had already gathered abundant evidence of the hatred felt by the average Italian against the Germans virtually in occupation of the country. If the Italians did have the opportunity to rise *en masse* against the Boche, there would be a repetition, although on a far greater scale, of the Sicilian Vespers!

It has been said that one of Mussolini’s outstanding successes as Dictator of Italy was that, for the first time since their introduction into that country, trains ran on time. *Il Duce*’s success in that direction had since had a decided slip back; for on arriving at the station, which was crowded with refugees who had taken advantage of, or had been compelled to obey, the

Government's arrangements for free travel, there was no sign of the expected train.

It was not until three hours later that the already crowded train steamed into the station. Hardly any passengers alighted, and when the barrier was lifted, there were scenes of almost unbelievable confusion as the waiting crowds stormed the carriages. Men fought each other and savagely pushed aside women and children, many of whom were thrown down and trampled upon. A few Blackshirts looked on, unwilling or unable to deal with what was fast becoming an uncontrollable mob.

Derek, still outside the barrier and on the fringe of the more or less passive part of the crowd, could do nothing to help rescue the women and children from the press.

He contrasted the scene with those at the London termini when, at the height of the blitz on the Metropolis, mass evacuations of women and children took place. Many of these went unwillingly, loath to part from their husbands and fathers; but there were no scenes of frenzied disorder such as this.

The guard sounded several violent blasts on his horn and waved frantically to the driver. Desperate refugees clambered on to the roofs of the carriages and hung on like clusters of bees to the doors.

The train didn't move. Inferior coal, and a partial lack of it, had reduced the pressure in the boiler to well below efficiency point. The scene might have been a comedy but for its stark reality.

Derek waited no longer. He saw that it would be worse than useless to remain on the remote chance of boarding the next train or the one after that.

In the town he managed to buy some sorry food, and just before sunset succeeded in getting a bed in a sort of hostel. The place wasn't heated but it stank of unwashed humanity. He pictured the R.A.F. mess at Cattisbourne. The fellows there would be sitting down to dinner. There would be real soup—not the watery, flavourless stuff he had been having since his forced descent on Italian territory—roast beef, baked potatoes and cauliflower. Plenty of good English beer too! Not the harsh Italian wine that, though it warmed a fellow up, seemed to burn his inside in the process! The first dinner in mess after a raid was apt to be a subdued sort of affair when there were vacant seats that had been occupied by men who would never return. On the second night the atmosphere would be cheerful. One cannot always bear in mind the comrades who had been unlucky. . . . He wondered whether

any news had reached the squadron concerning the fate of “S for Sylvia” and her crew!

Presently he fell asleep, but not for long. The place was stiff with vermin! Well before dawn he got up, left the hostel—which would have compared unfavourably with a common lodging-house in a British dockside town—and went out into the clear, cold air.

The streets were almost deserted. He decided to make for the railway station once more, on the off-chance that there might be a belated train. There was not; but farther along the line a long goods train, with steam up, was stationary.

In the grey dawn he made his way towards it. At the end was the Italian counterpart of a guard’s van, but apparently untenanted. He could hear voices coming from the front part of the train—probably the driver and fireman—which was out of his range of vision because of a curve of the line.

The train was composed mostly of long trucks—considerably longer than the ordinary type of British railway wagons—some being roofed in, others covered by camouflaged tarpaulins.

He went from truck to truck, reading the destination cards affixed to their sides: Rimini, Ancona, Roma, Napoli, as well as places he had never heard of. From this he gathered that the direct line to Rome via Genoa and Pisa and down the west coast of Italy wasn’t used by goods traffic. Perhaps passenger trains no longer took that route either. It was too exposed to attack from the sea, and in consequence the longer route following the shores of the Adriatic for a considerable part of the distance was safer—if there was such a thing as safety on the Italian State Railways in 1943!

There were four trucks destined for Naples. Two of them had iron roofs and their doors were securely locked. They weren’t of any use to him. He went on to the next. That seemed more hopeful. It bore the legend *Napoli*, but stencilled on the side was the name of a German firm and the address “Dusseldorf”.

Swinging himself up by means of one of the buffers, Derek unlaced a part of the tarpaulin cover. Here was a pleasing discovery, at least as well as he could make out in the semi-darkness. Part of the floor was unoccupied, though covered ankle-deep with straw. The rest of the truck was taken up by dozens of glazed stone drain-pipes, with straw between and on top of them.

Stretching himself on the straw, Derek waited. He waited a long time. It didn't look as if the goods carried by the train were wanted in a hurry.

Presently a man came along the line of carriages, peremptorily tapping the wheels with a hammer. Judging by the dull sounds given out by some of them, Derek came to the conclusion that the rolling-stock of the Italian State Railways was badly in need of an overhaul.

At length, with a loud clanking of couplings, the train moved on. It went on all through the day, with numerous stoppages not only at stations but at places where there were not.

No one looked under the awning. He wouldn't mind much if his hiding-place were discovered. He'd flourish his railway ticket and claim privilege as a Government employee.

About five in the afternoon—it was pure guesswork on his part—he lifted part of the tarpaulin and looked out. Quite a short distance away and on the left was the sea—the Adriatic. So the train was taking the much longer, roundabout route, either because the direct line was reserved for troops and passenger trains or else the Allied bombers had been busy knocking about bridges, culverts and rail tracks.

Soon after daybreak next morning, Derek awoke feeling unwashed, stiff, hungry and thirsty. The water in the *Chianti* bottle was nearly finished and not till then had he entertained doubts concerning the purity of the source of supply.

Again the train was stationary. Shunting operations were about to commence. He raised his head to peer over the side of the track and found himself looking straight at the guard.

The guard showed no signs of surprise; he wished the stowaway “Good morning,” adding as an afterthought, “Have you been smoking, signor?”

“I wish I had something to smoke,” rejoined Derek.

“It is well for you and for others on the train that you did not. You know it carries ammunition?”

The guard put the question without heat or rancour. He was an elderly man whose brick-red complexion and white hair were in startling contrast. His demeanour was obviously conciliatory.

“I did not,” answered Derek; then he turned back the tarpaulin a bit more and looked at his travelling companions. The “drain-pipes”, as he had taken

them to be, were shells of about four-inch calibre, each wrapped round with what appeared to be glazed paper.

“You see,” he continued, “I hold a free travel ticket. I am in Government employ, and as the trains were overcrowded, I chose this wagon, which isn’t a *wagon-lit*!”

The guard chuckled at the feeble witticism.

“For the matter of a few *lire*, you could have travelled comfortably in my coach,” he observed. “Even now, it is not too late to do so. We shall not arrive at Rome before eighteen hours—if then.”

Gladly Derek availed himself of the offer. Being in charge of the guard, so to speak, might save him from awkward complications. It would certainly be more congenial than being cooped up with a truck-load of high-explosive shells. Not that the dangerous nature of the consignment worried him in the slightest degree; the risk of that lot “going up” was slight compared with being in a bomber over enemy territory and with a few tons of sensitive explosives in the bomb-racks!

After a few notes of small denomination had changed hands—Derek playing his part of an Italian and bargaining over the deal—the guard offered him some cheese and a piece of dry roll. Then, obtaining boiling water from the driver, the old fellow concocted some sort of drink which he declared was coffee. By the time Derek had finished his meal in his new quarters the train, having reassembled most of the trucks, resumed its meanderings.

Guilo—for that was the guard’s name—seemed glad to have someone to talk with. Derek questioned him about war conditions in Central and Southern Italy; but on that subject he was reticent. Perhaps he had an idea that his passenger might be a Fascist spy. But he waxed eloquent on how the war affected him personally.

“I wish it would go on for as long as I live,” he declared. “You see, one year before it started I was dismissed and a young man took my place. I was then fifty-six. I had saved a little money but that soon went. There was nothing I could do but to sit in the sun and brush the flies from my face when they kept me awake. I thought I was finished—too old to find work and nothing to look forward to.

“Then, soon after Italy entered the war, I was sent for and told to take charge of a goods train between Bologna and Naples. It made me ten, twenty years younger! They pay me fifty *lire* a month more than I had.”

“And I suppose you were worse off than before, owing to the rise in the cost of living?” asked Derek, as a “feeler” towards obtaining inside information concerning the internal state of the country.

“How so?” asked the guard.

“If you have a hundred *lire* now and find that it will buy you less than fifty did before the war—in my experience I find that a *lire* will buy only a third of what it used to do—then are you better off? You are not, my friend!”

Guilo shook his head. It was beyond his powers of reasoning to understand the meaning of “depreciation”. All he knew was that whereas he once earned so much, now that amount had been doubled. For that reason he would be sorry when the war came to an end.

“Because, signor,” he continued, “whether Italy wins or loses we Italians will be the worse off. Even Fascists with whom I have spoken in Rome know that. We are fighting now, not to recover our African colonies, not to annex Nice, Corsica and Tunis, but to save the Germans from defeat. Look what our heroic Italian troops did in Russia; they held back the Russians during the whole of the winter.”

Derek did not attempt to disillusion him on that point. Most Italians knew by this time that the troops Mussolini had grudgingly “lent” to Hitler had been practically annihilated in the snow-covered steppes and outside Stalingrad.

But he did “rub it in” about the way Rommel had treated, or rather ill-treated, the Italian troops in Libya and Tripolitania, making off with their transport during the long retreat from El Alamein and sacrificing thousands of them in rearguard delaying actions to enable the Afrika Corps to find refuge in Southern Tunisia.

“There is something in what you say,” admitted Guilo. “We Italians do not love the Germans, but it seems to me that now we have gone thus far we must hang together till the end. You say you are going to Calabria? Now, I have seen thousands of our people brought out of Sicily and sent to Lombardy and even to Germany, while almost the same number are being sent from the north to build defences in Calabria and Sicily. Why this exchange of population? Yet *il Duce* has ordered it, therefore it must be right and wise.”

It was eight o’clock in the evening when the munitions train arrived at Rome. So confident were the military authorities there that the Eternal City

would never feel the weight of the R.A.F. that the goods train with its dangerous load was permitted to enter the heart of the city.

The civil population held other views; for although no bombs had been dropped, British and American aircraft had flown high over the city. Whether this portended future aerial activity or not, the average Roman gazed apprehensively at the sky. The heavy raids on Turin, Genoa and Naples had badly shaken his never steadfast morale.

During the evening the trucks labelled “Roma” were detached in order to be sent to the naval base at Civita Vecchia. The rest of the wagons were to proceed to Naples by the direct coast line.

As this was a Government munitions train and not supposed to be carrying passengers, there was no visit by Fascist officials in order to check identity papers. Derek did not leave the guard’s compartment during the stay at Rome, since by so doing he avoided the risk of awkward complications. And he didn’t want to lose this train; it was far more comfortable than having to stand for hours in the corridor of a crowded passenger train.

From Guilo he learned that the engine would be taken off and that for the rest of the southward run the train would be drawn by an electrically driven one. Unless there were unexpected delays Naples should be reached in three and a half hours, or about half-past one in the morning.

The now considerably lighter train steamed out of Rome on the last stage of its journey—its last in a double sense.

Derek had just turned in on a canvas, straw-stuffed mattress, when he heard the screeching sounds of the brakes being violently applied. The train came to a standstill so quickly that the jolt sent Derek flying against the partition.

The guard put his head out of the window, gave one look, shouted “Bombers!” and took a flying leap into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

The Train Buster

Derek followed Guilo's example, although deliberately and with more caution. In fact Guilo hadn't shown any! For a man of his age he had displayed remarkable agility. It was a wonder that he hadn't broken his neck.

As Derek gained the permanent way, nearly tripping over the wires and remembering just in time that the centre rail was "live", he heard the drone of a none-too-distant aircraft and the rattle of cannon fire.

By this time the driver of the train had jumped from his engine. Derek couldn't see him, but he heard him as he ran blindly through the darkness uttering curses and imploring the Saints with equal energy.

It was the noise of the aircraft that sounded like music in Derek's ears.

The fighter-bomber had already shot up one engine travelling northwards and now, not satisfied with that success, was seeking a second victim.

That victim was the ammunition-laden train from which Derek had just alighted.

More or less aware of the highly inflammable nature of the contents of the wagons, he vied with the two Italian railwaymen in their efforts to put as great a distance as possible between them and the abandoned train before the aircraft did another bit of spectacular and accurate shooting.

Derek had sprinted about a hundred yards when he stumbled into a dry ditch. It was fairly deep, quite four feet, and with steep sides. At any rate it would make a grandstand seat for the impending performance.

It was, of course, too close to be pleasant or even safe. If the ammunition went up the ditch would shelter him from blast, but it would afford no protection from debris that, flung high into the air, might drop, almost perpendicularly, on top of him.

Somehow Derek paid scant attention to his own peril. His main attention was directed towards the British aircraft—he assumed with the greatest assurance that it was British—that was coming in for the attack.

He was one of those “who were but are not”. Only a couple of days or so ago he was on operational duties; now he was just a mere spectator, watching what the other fellow was doing and wondering whether he’d make a good job of it.

He was much in the same position as the veteran soldier, who having completed his time had to be discharged, taking a profound but perhaps critical interest in his old battalion. Or the pensioner bluejacket, whose main retrospective interest was in the last ship on which he had served; for all the many vessels he’d “commissioned”, the last one was almost invariably the one to which he was most attached. He, too, had to stay “on the beach” while others—younger men and therefore in his eye less experienced—manned and fought her.

“Come on, you jolly blighters!” almost shouted Derek, forgetting that an incautious word in English might betray him. “Come on and get busy. . . . Gosh! He’s overshot the target.”

The pilot might have done so or he might be making a preliminary run over the target to make sure of it. Unlike the Boche airman, who does not discriminate between hospital trains and munitions trains, the R.A.F. pilot doesn’t attack trains plainly marked with the Red Cross; nor does he machine-gun passenger trains in enemy-occupied territory unless he is certain that the “passengers” are German troops.

The pilot had already “busted” a train just outside Sezze, about forty-five miles from Rome and only four miles from the position of the train from which Derek and the crew had alighted in a most undignified manner. Now the pilot was following the line, shooting up signal-boxes and cutting the electric cables with cannon fire, the while keeping a sharp look-out for more victims in the form of goods trains.

He’d spotted this one. Although, being electrically driven, the engine did not betray her presence by clouds of escaping steam, it did so until it came to a standstill by the succession of sparks from the “live” rail.

The noise of the fighter-bomber’s engines grew less.

“He’s given it a miss!” thought Derek. He didn’t feel thankful. Guilo and the driver probably did! They were still legging it, intent only upon putting a

very safe distance between them and the tempting target, standing motionless on the line.

After a seemingly long interval—actually it was about half a minute—the aircraft gave audible warning that it was returning.

The reverberations of the engine increased to a roar. The pilot was flying at about fifty feet above the ground.

“If he let’s fly he’ll blow himself sky-high,” thought Derek.

The pilot didn’t. He wasn’t a tyro on the job. Those covered-in wagons looked suspiciously like those carrying explosives—which they were.

In a matter of seconds he had again flown over the target, this time from the rear. Again nothing, happened—or had it?

Derek could hear the rending of wood and the metallic clank of objects striking the steel roofs. Then, when the aircraft was well clear, things *did* begin to happen.

The aircraft had dropped a stick of incendiary bombs, each with a few seconds’ delayed action fuse and a small charge of H.E. in the tail.

A line of fiercely flaming lights sprang up, not only on and over the train but a hundred yards or so ahead and behind it.

Tarpaulins were quickly ablaze. The fires then got a firm hold on the wooden trucks. There was no one to tackle the conflagration. It would have been suicidal to attempt it, and certainly no Italian would have made an effort to fight the flames if any had been present.

With his head just above the rim of the ditch and ready to duck at a second’s warning, Derek watched the fires getting fiercer and fiercer. So far there had been no explosions. In the light of the flames he could see that the engine appeared to be undamaged, although white flames were pouring from burning incendiaries on the roof of the cab.

In any case, there must be a terrific detonation sooner or later when the fires got to the loaded shells and other explosives.

Then with a loud report the first explosive charge in the incendiaries went off. This was about fifty yards from the guard’s van. Then another closer still, and the van disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Derek suddenly remembered that his borrowed bag was in the van. For the rest of his grand tour of Italy it looked as if he would be travelling light!

Then, with a truly stupendous roar that rocked the ground where Derek was crouching, one of the ammunition trucks blew up.

Very promptly Derek threw himself, huddled up, on the bottom of the ditch. He could feel the blast sweeping only a little way above his head.

Then as other explosives shattered the night, debris large and small began to patter down.

One piece, weighing at least a hundredweight, pitched on the edge of the ditch directly above the spot where Derek crouched. Luckily for him it stopped there.

Others fell behind, in front and on both sides. It was like being caught in a heavy barrage, but what caused Derek the most apprehension were the little fires that seemed as numerous as daisies in a meadow; fragments hurled from the exploding bombs.

For several minutes the series of explosions continued to the accompaniment of a hail of debris.

Then the detonations died down and with them ceased the rain of flaming bits and pieces of what had been a train.

Again came the noise of the British aircraft. It circled over the scene in order that the crew could faithfully assess the damage they had done.

Then it flew off in a south-easterly direction.

Not until then did Derek stand up and look round.

Of the train only a few girders and bogie wheels remained. The engine had toppled over a culvert, a total wreck. Strangely enough, where the trucks had been standing there was no fire, but for a radius of quite three hundred yards shattered woodwork was burning in innumerable places, in many instances setting fire to the grass and thus uniting several small detached fires into ones of considerable size.

There was no sense in going back to the railway track. Although the Italians have a well-deserved reputation for engineering, the damage done by one solitary British “engine-buster” would take several days to be made good.

So Derek decided to strike inland until he came to a road leading southward. He might then be able to gather information concerning the probable time that would have to elapse before trains were again running between Rome and Naples.

Taking his bearings by that tried and trusty friend of those who travel by night—the Pole Star—he set off across open country, making several detours to avoid fires that were still burning.

He hadn't covered more than two hundred yards when he heard groans. He couldn't distinguish whether they came from a human being or from an animal.

“Where are you?” he shouted in Italian.

There was no reply. The groaning continued in an agonized monotone.

Man or beast, Derek knew that he must do what he could. In the case of an animal there was little he could do. Without a knife he couldn't put the poor brute out of its misery should such a course be necessary.

Guided by the sounds, Derek scrambled over a wire fence—luckily it wasn't of the barbed variety—and into a field of maize. Part of the field was burning and throwing up a dense cloud of smoke. On account of the ground being marshy and the stalks of the grain heavy with moisture the flames hadn't taken such a firm hold as on the pasture land.

He hadn't forced his way through the standing maize for more than ten yards before he reached his immediate objective.

It wasn't a cow, as he had more than half expected, but a man lying face downwards. He was hatless, but the reflected glare of the flames glinted on his white hair.

It was Guilo, the railway guard. Derek was under the impression that in his flight Guilo had stumbled and hurt his ankle.

“What has happened?” he asked.

The Italian stopped groaning.

“Is it you, Antonio?” he asked, addressing Derek by his assumed Christian name, which he had done during the latter part of their brief acquaintance. “That accursed Luigi! He ran; he would not return to my aid when I implored him.”

Apparently Luigi was the name of the engine-driver. Derek hadn't seen much of him, but he remembered him as a big, sturdy Calabrian of more than average strength. He could have carried Guilo, who weighed about eight stone, without any great effort. So Luigi had legged it, leaving his fellow-railwayman very much in the lurch.

Derek hadn't come there to discuss Luigi and his delinquencies.

“Where are you injured?” he asked.

“My leg; I have lost it,” declared Guilo with another groan. “A bomb burst close to me and——”

He left the sentence unfinished. Derek thought he had fainted. He stooped to examine the guard’s injury. If his foot had been blown off some sort of tourniquet would have to be applied without loss of time, or he would bleed to death.

It hadn’t been severed. There was no sign of injury to the ankle, but there was a nasty lacerated wound in the man’s calf. In addition there were burns. Guilo hadn’t stopped a bomb, as he had imagined, but had been brought down by a piece of flaming debris.

“I will have to carry you to the nearest house,” announced Derek. “Do you know if there is one; you should know this part of the country well.”

“I know it no farther than I can see from the train,” declared Guilo. “Perhaps there is a farm near by; perhaps there is not.” Then as an afterthought he continued: “I know there is a motor road between Cisterna and Sezze, and it is not far. Often I have seen cars proceeding along it.”

A cloud of smoke sweeping towards them warned Derek that the sooner they got out of the path of the advancing flames the better. The nearest edge of the fire was now only about the length of a cricket pitch away.

“Put your arms round my neck,” he instructed the injured man. “It may hurt you a lot when I lift you, but that cannot be helped.”

Getting Guilo on his back was a complicated business. He was only five feet two inches in height while Derek exceeded the Italian’s stature by a foot. However, by bending and standing astride the injured man, Derek managed to hoist him on his back. Even then it required considerable effort on his part for Derek to regain his standing position.

Nor was the going an easy matter. Guilo clung so tightly that his clasped hands retarded his rescuer’s breathing. Soon Derek, in spite of his physical fitness, though that had been adversely affected by the events of the last few days, found that every step he took required more effort.

The Italian was like a millstone round his neck. He felt like a dead weight; but for his frequent groans Derek would have thought that he had passed out.

After covering a tedious three hundred yards or so during which he was compelled to stop several times—he dare not risk setting down his burden—

Derek caught sight of a house of some sort, its whitewashed walls and pink-coloured roof visible in the glare of the fires against a background of blackness.

How he managed to stagger the remaining distance he hardly knew.

The door of the cottage was open. He didn't stop to knock. He just stumbled over the threshold into a room that was dimly lighted by a smoky oil lamp.

The place was meanly furnished. A few inches off the ground was a bed of sorts covered with rugs. There were distinct evidences that it had been occupied only some minutes earlier.

As gently as he could, Derek lowered the injured man on to the rough couch. Then, making use of his previous knowledge of the domestic arrangements of Italian peasants' dwellings, he looked on a shelf above the door for a peculiarly shaped bottle in which olive oil is kept.

There was one, but with precious little oil in it. That, once a plentiful commodity, had almost vanished except in the houses of the rich, who in spite of heavy taxation had, by exploiting black markets, managed to have ill-gotten money to spend.

Uncorking the bottle Derek poured most of its contents over Guilo's burns, since no better treatment was possible at the moment. This gave speedy relief, although it could be but a temporary measure. The services of a doctor would be required; but where in this remote country district and on a night when British aircraft were active could a doctor be found?

Derek was still attending to the injured man when a woman cautiously put her head round the doorpost. He didn't see her until she spoke.

"The Saints be praised!" she exclaimed. "Where are the British? Have you seen any of the enemy?"

"What British?" asked Derek. "One bomber flew along the railway and this man, the guard of the train, was injured."

"Wounded in defence of the train of which I was in charge!" declared Guilo quite unexpectedly. "Only when my foot was almost severed and I was useless to fight the flames any longer did I crawl away. Then Antonio here carried me to this house."

Derek had his work cut out to prevent himself from laughing outright at the little Italian's preposterous declaration.

“What British?” he reiterated.

“Have you not heard?” she rejoined. “They have landed all along the shore between Porto d’Anzo and Ostia. Sezze and Custerna have fallen, and everywhere the British are slaughtering everyone in their way. It is said that their parachutist army has forced its way into Rome itself!”

This, from Derek’s point of view, seemed too good to be true. There were fires at various points along the line where the solitary raider had been active. The bomb explosions, both near and afar, might well be mistaken by the highly strung Italians for heavy gunfire. He could well imagine how rumours, totally false, could and did spread with astonishing rapidity, each “report” gaining in frightfulness in the process. For many reasons, large sections of the Italian people would welcome a British invasion in order to rid their country of the hated Germans; but they didn’t want the actual landing to be made in the locality in which they lived.

“Who told you the British were here?” he asked.

“Pietro the policeman. He ran, so did my husband. I, too, followed but presently I returned. I do not think the British will cut the throat of an old woman such as I.”

“Then you are alone here?”

The woman gave him a suspicious glance. Then, catching sight of the nearly empty bottle of olive oil, she shrieked:

“Thief! You plunder my precious oil! You will pay, will you not, or I will fetch Pietro!”

“I’ll pay,” declared Derek in order to calm the hysterically angry woman. “Don’t you see this man is dangerously wounded—in the service of Italy!” he added, with veiled sarcasm and amusement. “Now get some boiling water. We must dress his wounds. When daylight comes I will go for assistance.”

Watching by the side of the boastful Guilo, who, now that his hurts had been attended to, had ceased to moan, Derek fell asleep.

When he awoke the sun was well up and its rays were streaming through the now unshuttered window.

There was a new arrival—a thick-set, heavy-jowled man of about fifty, evidently the peasant-proprietor of the little farm and husband of the tight-fisted woman who so reluctantly had helped to dress Guilo’s wounds.

Derek stood up. He didn't quite like the way in which the fellow was looking at him. He was still more surprised when the Italian addressed him in broken English:

“Eet is verra great pleasure to meeta you once more, Mistaire Dereka Dunda, ze Englishman from Turino!”

CHAPTER XVII

“See Naples——”

Although Derek was taken aback by this dramatic denunciation, he contrived to keep both his features and his feelings under control.

He must play for time and do some hard, quick thinking!

Fortunately, so far as he was concerned, the Italian couldn't content himself with one sentence and allow that to sink in. He went on: “You no remember me, Mario ze 'ead vaiter at ze Hotel Colonna Grossa at Nucetto? Den you big boy, but Mario 'e nevaire forget ze face, Mistaire Englishman!”

In a flash Derek remembered. The Hotel Colonna at Nucetto on the Riviera di Ponente was where the Dundas family used to go for their holidays during Mr. Dundas's term as vice-consul at Turin.

Yes, he remembered Mario, the sleek and obsequious head-waiter, but in the course of a few years, during which Derek had grown from boyhood to manhood, Mario's appearance had made a decided change for the worse. Also he had a faint recollection of the suave head-waiter suddenly ceasing to function at the Hotel Volonna. He'd been arrested on a charge of blackmailing a wealthy American and had been sentenced to one year's or two years' imprisonment, Derek didn't remember which. Also at the time there was a lot of talk about the comparative lightness of the sentence because Mario knew far too much concerning certain Fascist officials in the district.

Obviously Mario wasn't to be trusted. There would be no sense in bribing him, although he would have accepted the bribe with all outward expressions of gratitude, fidelity and secrecy. Then he would hurry off to the nearest prefect or chief of police and denounce the Englishman as a spy.

Throwing out his hands in a typically Italian gesture, Derek countered the accusation, which in fact was absolutely true, with:

“If you will speak a language that I do not understand it is a waste of breath. Speak Italian, please.”

“You are an Englishman,” reiterated Mario, speaking in Italian. “You visited the Hotel Colonna with your father, who was an English official in Turin. That was five years ago. Even then you were very tall. I do not forget faces; that is part of a head-waiter’s training. Perhaps we can come to some amicable arrangement in this matter?”

Since he’d decided that bribery was out of the question there remained two courses open, so far as Derek was concerned.

He could give the greasy ex-head-waiter a straight left to the point and put him down for more than the full count and then clear out. But Guilo, now awake and undoubtedly interested, would be an awkward witness in the event of Derek being followed and arrested.



HE DIDN'T STOP TO KNOCK

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The other was to take a high-handed attitude towards the blackmailer.

He pretended to fall into a violent temper. Italians rarely argue with an opponent without “letting themselves go”. It is a typical example of the Latin temperament and, especially amongst the peasantry of Southern Italy, often leads to drawing knives.

“You pig and son of a pig!” he stormed. “Are all tall men English? What of the late Duke d’Abruzzi? You would denounce me as a spy because I am two metres tall? Very well, then; we’ll prove that I am Antonio Durando, in the Government service. We go together to the prefecture. I will see to it you do not give me the slip! Then *I* will accuse *you* of subversive activity against the Fascist regime, because you have questioned my loyalty! You know what that means? Ten years in the sulphur mines in Sicily! Come on, I say, we start for the prefecture at once!”

He towered over the now cowering Mario, grasped him by the shoulders and jerked him towards the door.

By this time the ex-head-waiter did think he had made a mistake. This tall, grimy man with a sprouting beard must be a Fascist official or he would never have been so domineering and threatening.

Mario fell on his knees and begged Signor Durando’s pardon. Everyone makes mistakes, he went on; only the noble-hearted know how to forgive. There would be no need for the signor to take him ten kilometres to the prefect’s office. Again he implored the signor’s pardon.

“I will overlook your offence,” declared Derek, with well-assumed magnanimity. “See that it does not occur again. Now I’m off, but not to lodge a complaint against you. I leave Guilo in your charge until he can be removed to the railwaymen’s hospital. On my way back from Naples I may call and see how he fares and, doubtless, see that you are recompensed for your trouble.”

With a display of dignity that he did not feel, the *soi-disant* Durando, having bidden Guilo farewell and a speedy recovery, stalked out into the brilliant sunshine on yet another stage of the journey to home and freedom.

It was a narrow shave, and only by keeping a cool head and employing consummate bluff had Derek extricated himself from a difficult and hazardous situation.

Alternately tramping and getting lifts from farmers in their slow-moving ox-drawn carts, Derek found that darkness was setting in while he was yet eight kilometres from Naples. It wasn’t his fault that the journey had taken the greater part of twelve hours. No trains were running, all motor traffic on the parallel road was confined to military transport, not a few of the vehicles being not only German in make but packed with Boche troops and equipment. It would have been useless for Derek to have even attempted to beg a lift in one of these.

The farmers and peasantry were almost invariably both talkative and inquisitive. In spite of posters displayed in every village, the Italians simply could not refrain from indulging in careless talk.

They were still “jumpy” over the visit by the lone R.A.F. airman; and although reports of the landing of British troops had already been officially denied, at least half a dozen people with whom Derek spoke asked him for news of the “invasion”.

One old man who spoke the Italian of the upper classes—he had been a professor at Bologna until he fell foul of the Blackshirts over some political question—asked Derek why he was going to Naples, apologizing for having to put the question.

“I am on my way to Reggio,” replied the self-styled Durando. “I am taking up a post there.”

“*Ahe*, then why go to Naples? In times past we Italians used to say: ‘*Vedi Napoli e poi mori*’. That is a figure of speech; but now I would not dwell there if I were offered a house and fifty thousand *lire* a year!”

“Because of air raids?”

“Assuredly! My friend, go to Naples if you must. If it is not necessary for you to do so, avoid it like the plague. You know that Naples was the largest city in Italy, its population well exceeding that of Rome. But to-day Naples is a skeleton, its inhabitants having fled save those who were ordered to remain. Rome, on the other hand, has increased because the English refrain from bombing it. So what with refugees flocking there and Germans swarming into the city, Rome has now perhaps thrice the population of unhappy Naples. War is a crime against humanity. No one is any better off after it is over. ‘Woe to the vanquished’—yes, but also ‘Woe to the victors’! Signor, I am a poor man, but will you do me the honour of drinking a glass of *Chianti* with me?”

The professor even asked him if he would care to sleep in his humble abode, pointing out that it would be safer to enter Naples by day and leave for the south as soon as possible.

“Although the English send their aircraft from Malta by day as well as by night,” he added, “the visitations by day are neither so frequent nor so numerous as those under cover of darkness. It is but eight kilometres from the outskirts of the city. One can see it and the bay from the upper windows of this house.”

Derek thanked him and gratefully accepted the old man's hospitality. Obviously on the borderline of poverty, the professor did his best to act up to the part of a perfect host.

His guest was given a bath. Although the bath consisted of a large earthenware pan filled with cold water and there was no soap—that commodity being very scarce and rarely to be seen except in rich people's homes and then in very limited quantities—Derek was glad to be able to remove most of the grime he had picked up on his travels.

About nine in the evening the professor tactfully suggested that his guest must be fatigued after his journey and with the effect of the raid. Derek was—naturally; but thought that it was the need for economy in artificial lighting that had prompted his host to suggest retiring to rest.

He showed Derek to one of the upper rooms. The window was wide open, the outlook revealing little more than a galaxy of stars. The whole countryside was blacked-out. In this respect one visit by the R.A.F. had been far more efficacious in enforcing the anti-lighting regulations than had been decrees under *il Duce's* own hand.

Away to the south-east a small expanse of sky glowed red. It reminded Derek of the Cleveland ironworks at night, only instead of numerous ruddy flares from the blast furnaces this looked a solitary glare.

"Vesuvius," explained his host. "Recently the volcano has been more active. The superstitious countryfolk regard it as a bad portent. I trust that they are mistaken. Naples lies over there to your right. To-morrow you will see it in daylight. At night there is nothing to be seen of it unless——"

He left the sentence unfinished; then, drawing the shutters and lighting a small oil-lamp, the professor wished him good night.

It was a sultry night and a distinct contrast to weather conditions prevailing in Northern and Central Italy during his journey. There had been a slight fall of snow in Rome and people had gone about shivering. Here it was so warm and close that, before turning in, Derek extinguished the lamp, opened the window and threw the shutters wide open.

Close by nightingales were singing. Farther afield could be heard the noises of trains being shunted and in the distance the wailing of ships' sirens. From the port of Naples, where activity continued day and night, a considerable volume of war material was being shipped to the German and Italian troops holding out in Tunisia.

Derek was a sound sleeper, but he had the knack of being instantly awake if anything untoward occurred to disturb his slumbers.

It wasn't a sound that made him open his eyes but a brilliant light. It was not a flash but a constant glare, so vivid that the room was a contrast between vivid light and sombre shadows.

Springing out of bed Derek went to the window. High in the sky and above the unhappy city of Naples flares hung seemingly motionless in the sky.

The R.A.F. was paying yet another visit.

Derek hadn't been at the window for more than five seconds when an anti-aircraft battery, of whose existence he had no previous knowledge, and too close up to the house to be pleasant, opened up, firing at the flares with the object of putting them out. The room shook under the sharp concussions of the gun. More anti-aircraft guns opened up, but not with the celerity that is a marked feature of the anti-aircraft barrages put up round London and other British cities and towns.

One of the flares was hit and dissipated in smouldering sparks. The Italian gunners in the nearby gun-site cheered at their initial success; but their exhilaration was short-lived.

The faint hum of an aircraft flying at a great height rapidly increased to a roar. Then through the darkness between two groups of wavering searchlights came the red and orange streaks of tracer bullets streaming downwards.

The jubilation in the gun-pits ceased very abruptly. The weapon ceased firing. One group of searchlights was switched off—if it hadn't been knocked out by the hail of machine-gun bullets and cannon shells.

Derek could hear the whine of these vicious little projectiles and the snapping of twigs and branches in the still nearer olive groves. It was too near to be safe, so far as he was concerned, but, foolishly no doubt, he remained at the window, determined not to miss the show.

Now anti-aircraft firing was in full blast. Searchlights in groups and singly were being increased in numbers. Belated sirens were warning the temperamental Neapolitans to dive for their shelters. Between the loud reports of the "antis" Derek could hear a distant murmuring—the panic-stricken cries of the inhabitants of the already badly strafed city.

So far not a bomb had hurtled out of the sky. The British aircraft seemed in no hurry to get on with the job. They had flown high over the target and were now turning in a southerly direction for the “kill”.

They were diving to the attack. Determined to make sure of their objectives, the first wave came down to less than a thousand feet.

Derek could see some of them distinctly, as, temporarily caught in the none too resolute searchlight beams, they looked like dainty silver-winged mayflies—only they were far from that!

Then, with a quick succession of earth-shaking crashes, the bombs exploded. Heavy, light and incendiary missiles poured out of the sky. Almost in the twinkling of an eye a vast area of the city was well alight, while terrific upward flashes, accompanied by enormous mushroom-shaped clouds of black smoke, indicated that the work of destruction was in full swing.

To Derek, viewing it from a different angle, the scene appeared far more terrible than had the bombing of Berlin. There he had had his work cut out to fly his aircraft over the target and he had had only momentary glimpses, a bird’s-eye view, of the scene. Here it was much like watching a cinematographic display. He was a mere spectator, watching from a relatively safe view-point the scene of destruction wrought by Britain’s air might.

One thing struck him: the relatively feeble reply of the Italian defences. As the bombs began to fall there was a noticeable decrease in the volume of anti-aircraft fire. It wasn’t the fault of the guns, for up till then the rapidity with which these weapons were worked compared favourably with that of the Boche gunners; but the men just couldn’t stick it! It was much the same with the searchlights, and by the time the last wave of aircraft was on its homeward way the defences of Naples had practically ceased to operate.

Soon afterwards Derek returned to his bed. There was no object in remaining at the window to watch the devouring flames. In a way he felt sorry for the Italians whose homes had been destroyed under conditions brought about by modern warfare—of which the Germans were the originators. Yet he remembered how practically all Italy went mad with delight when Mussolini’s air force not only bombed and gassed unarmed Abyssinians but gloated over their deeds. And much the same sort of thing had happened at Guernica, when that town and most of its inhabitants had been blasted to atoms by mercenary German and Italian bombers. Italy, like the Nazis, had sown the wind and was now reaping the whirlwind.

Next morning the professor, who looked paler and frailer than before, asked Derek how he had slept.

“Naturally I was awake while the English bombers were over,” he replied. “And you?”

“I think I slept through most of it,” replied his host. “There was nothing I could do if I arose from my bed. If Fate decrees that I am to be killed by a bomb, then who can go against Fate? I would rather die in my bed than in an underground shelter.”

After another frugal meal Derek prepared to resume his way.

“You will not stay a day or so longer?” asked his host pathetically. “Rarely do I meet with anyone with whom I can talk. The peasants, my only neighbours, have little intelligence. Their conversations are limited to the weather and their woes. You, I perceive, are a man of understanding. Will you not remain longer?”

For some things Derek would have liked to accept the offer, but he had to continue on his way. Each day’s delay might mean another gone before he regained complete freedom.

“I am sorry,” continued the professor. “If at any time you should be passing this way do call at this house. If I am still alive, it will be a pleasure to talk with you again.”

“After the war perhaps?”

The old man shook his head.

“After the war,” he repeated. “What then? What of our unhappy country? Yet, I think, that if the world will learn its lesson, all the carnage and destruction will not have been in vain.”

CHAPTER XVIII

In Calabria

Contrary to his expectations Derek experienced no big difficulties in entering Naples. Apart from the crowded state of the road—for, as in previous raids, the morning had seen a fresh exodus of utterly demoralized citizens—no one even attempted to bar his way or to demand his papers.

Fires were still raging. Small parties of soldiers and sailors were helping in the work of rescuing people still trapped beneath the ruined buildings. As they worked, talking loudly and excitedly, they kept their eyes frequently directed skywards in dread of a daylight visit by American airmen. There were police about but, significantly, very few Blackshirts, but not once was Derek stopped and asked to produce his papers. The life of the city seemed to be numbed by the terrific ordeal of death and destruction. Naples had had its share of earthquakes in the past; but now the forces of man-made destruction had not only rivalled but had excelled those of Nature.

The Plaza Reale and the Plaza San Fernando were just heaps of rubble. The Stazione Maritime was partly wrecked, while the landing-stages—known to thousands of pleasure cruisers before the war—were smouldering, shattered ruins. There was a constant stream of ambulances and stretcher-bearers, with considerable confusion. Organization was far from perfect. The bearers would put down their burdens and argue heatedly as to where the injured victims were to be taken.

Every now and again, through the haze of smoke and dust, came explosions and the dull rumble of falling buildings. Demolition was in progress to localize the still fiercely burning fires; and at each detonation there were scenes of panic amongst those of the population that remained. Like a spectre, unseen but heard, the R.A.F. still remained in their feverish imagination.

It was in and around the naval harbour that the destruction was heaviest. Several moles, alongside of which destroyers and other light craft had been moored, were pitted with enormous craters. In some cases the jetties were

cut off from the mainland by these gaping holes. Alongside the moles destroyers had been sunk, leaving only the jagged stumps of masts and funnels showing above water. A light cruiser in dry-dock was still ablaze, although the dock had been flooded in an attempt to get the fire under control. Sailors and firemen were making feeble efforts in that direction. A rumour had got about that the warship's magazine was in danger of going up, and that was sufficient to quell, not the flames, but the ardour of the fire-fighters.

Workshops, slipways, docks, warehouses and administrative buildings had been razed. There was no doubt that the R.A.F., as in the case of Turin and Genoa, had done their job thoroughly. It was but one of the heavy penalties the wretched Italian nation had to pay for the blind leadership of the Sawdust Cæsar in linking up his country's fate with that of the barbarous Hun.

Derek was not in any immediate hurry to leave the stricken city. It was not idle or morbid curiosity that possessed him, but the knowledge that the information thus gained of the results of the raid would be most helpful if and when he could pass it on to the British Air Ministry.

Quite possibly R.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft had already been over Naples that morning, taking aerial photographs of the scenes of destruction. Developed and enlarged, these photographs would give a good idea of what objects had been hit and of those that still remained as targets for subsequent offensive operations against the enemy.

But the enlarged prints did not and could not reveal everything, although they did give a true picture of devastated areas. In some cases, however, lateral blast from the R.A.F.'s latest and most powerful bombs had wrought devastation that was hidden from the air.

In a naval port anywhere in Great Britain or in Germany a stranger would not stand the slightest chance of entering without being challenged and having his identity card scrutinized, even if there had been a *blitz* only a few hours previously. Here, as in Genoa, there was such a state of confusion, bordering upon panic, that there appeared to be no official check on anyone—not even looters!

That gave Derek his chance to observe on the spot the result of this new heavy bomb with its terrific lateral blast.

Close to the head of what was once a dry-dock was a stone-built workshop of about seven hundred feet in length by fifty in breadth. The

bomb had fallen at the tail-end of the dock and had demolished the caisson. The blast, instead of spreading fanwise and expending much of its force in the air, had flattened every object by the side of the dock until it had “come up against” the workshop.

The huge double doors in the seaward end of the building had been blown inwards. Most of the machines on the floor had been wrenched from their beds. Every partition and party wall had been demolished, leaving the interior looking like what it was—a charnel house.

Yet, in spite of this damage, involving considerable loss of life, the roof of the workshop was virtually intact, although every window in the building had been blown out.

None of this destruction could be observed from the air. That was where direct evidence from the ground would prove to be most valuable, although generally difficult to obtain. In cases of British raids on German cities and towns information of a sort does reach the Air Ministry through devious channels vaguely termed “reports from neutrals who have recently left Berlin”—or other places. More than likely these reports are grossly exaggerated or unintentionally inaccurate. It is only by means of the British Secret Service and from British prisoners who have succeeded in effecting their escape that a fairly reliable account of the state of affairs can be obtained.

This was Derek’s opportunity. Whether his reports would be of value depended upon how long it took for him to reach Allied-controlled territory.

Soon after midday Derek left Naples. There didn’t seem the slightest chance of getting either food, drink or shelter. Nor could he travel by rail; for not only were the city’s railway stations badly damaged, but for miles along the shores of the Bay of Naples there were stretches of twisted rails where bombs had fallen.

So far his railway pass had been so much waste paper. He wondered what had happened to the two thousand men sent from Lombardy for forced labour in Calabria whom he’d last seen trying in vain to board the already overcrowded train at Nizza.

He left Naples on foot, making in the direction of Pompeii. There were but few refugees leaving the city by that route. The coastal districts were considered to be decidedly unhealthy on account of the activities of the R.A.F. and of British submarines. The latter had a nasty habit of surfacing and shelling rail bridges. It was inland that the main stream of Neapolitan

civilians made their weary way. For miles the countryside was dotted with tents and other makeshift shelters where the fugitives existed on the borderline of starvation and privation.

Italy's railways are her most vulnerable line of communication. South of Florence they practically hug the coastline—with a few exceptions—along the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the “toe” and “heel” of the peninsula, and thence north-westwards, keeping close to the Adriatic coast. There are connecting lines between the two coastal rail arteries, but every troop train and every munition train between the Brenner Pass and Southern Italy has to run the gauntlet over hundreds of miles of a maritime route exposed not only to air attack but from the sea.

Derek was lucky. At Sarno he found a stationary troop train. The front half was fairly full with men in German uniforms—troops bound for Sicily, whence they were being embarked to reinforce Von Arnim's army in Tunisia. The rear portion was crowded with Italian troops to reinforce the garrisons of Sicily against the rising peril of an Allied landing.

A piece of successful bluff obtained for him a seat—or rather standing-room—in one of the rear coaches. His papers and railway warrant, together with a plausible story that he was a Government official posted to defence works at Reggio, and that he had lost his luggage during the air attack on Naples, were sufficient to convince the *capitano* that Antonio Beppo Durando should be allowed to proceed by troop train.

It took three days to reach Reggio. He'd only a vague idea of the meanderings of the train. At night it stopped in some remote siding. During daylight it passed through stations that gave him some idea of the route: Bari, then inland to Taranto (where he missed another air attack by a couple of hours), and again hugging the coast, finally to his immediate destination, Reggio.

The journey had been little short of a nightmare. The Italian troops were badly fed and none offered any to the civilian passengers. By bribing a quartermaster with some of his few remaining *lire* notes, Derek succeeded in getting just enough to take the edge off his gnawing hunger.

He couldn't blame the Italian soldiers for their selfishness. The men hadn't enough to satisfy their own needs; yet the Germans in the front half of the train received double the ration they did, and these were of better quality.

The Huns and the Eyeties certainly did not fraternize during halts at various stations where the troops were allowed to alight and stretch their legs. Twice there was nearly a free fight. The Italians, it appeared, had belonged to a battalion that had been roughly mauled in Russia. The Germans were new recruits who, imbued with unadulterated Nazi principles, were convinced that they would stop the rot in Tunisia. There were insulting remarks hurled at one another, including references to Stalingrad.

Derek wasn't sorry when he arrived at Reggio. It marked the end of one stage of his attempted escape. He would even have endured the German troops could he have wangled a trip to Sicily. From southern Sicily it was a mere hop to Malta and freedom.

There was no chance in that direction. The Boche troops were marched off without delay to embark on a vessel for Messina, while the Italians were sent to barracks just outside Reggio.

Conditions in Calabria were stricter than they had been elsewhere in Italy. A large proportion of the civil population of Sicily was being evacuated and most of them landed at Reggio. Here the able-bodied men were sent north, most of them for forced labour in Germany, although they were promised high wages that never materialized. For some reason the Sicilians were distrusted in Southern Italy, and their places in the work of fortifying the coast were then taken by Piedmontese and Lombards.

Derek lost no time in reporting to the office of the engineers. The more enthusiastic he appeared to be the more chance he had of getting transferred to a defended zone in Sicily.

Again his role as Durando the estate agent of Turin stood him in good stead. He was asked if he had had any experience in concrete work, to which he replied, quite truthfully, that he had. He omitted, however, to explain that this experience was limited to a job he had once done in his school holidays—to construct a lily-pond in the lawn!

“Where are the men we were promised?” continued the interrogating officer. “Two thousand from Turin and a thousand from Milan. We were advised they left a week ago. So far you are the only one to arrive. How is that?”

Derek realized that he had made a blunder. He should have waited with the rest of the so-called volunteers at Nizza, instead of going on by himself.

He was about to give a rather dubious explanation when the telephone bell rang.

The officer unhooked the receiver and listened. Then he replaced the instrument and fumbled with some papers.

“You’ll report to No. 15 post,” he ordered, addressing Derek, and forgetting all about the explanation he had demanded. “You will be in charge of the civilian workmen, but under the orders of *Teniente* Salva.”

That same afternoon Derek Dundas started work as an overseer in charge of a section of the Calabrian chain of defence works. In effect, although he was working against his country he was also working for her.

He was given a plan of No. 15 post, work on which had only recently been started. When he saw it he chuckled to himself.

The site was about three miles south of Reggio. One hundred metres from the shore was a chain of gun emplacements nearing completion. These, although partly concealed and camouflaged, were dummy fortifications, calculated to draw the invaders’ fire and also to serve as decoy targets for bombing aircraft. In them were to be mounted make-believe guns, but so far these were not in evidence.

Two hundred metres farther inland were the real fortifications—a chain of massive concrete gun positions. Not one of these had a direct frontal fire. Each one was covered by flanking fire of the two adjacent to it, while minefields and concealed trenches stiff with barbed wire were calculated to hold up both tanks and infantry, making them exposed to a murderous enfilading fire from artillery and machine-guns.

Soon Derek discovered that the Italian-imported labourers hadn’t their hearts in their work—a trait common to workers in other countries employing similar forms of forced labour. He did nothing to hurry the workmen and they, taking their cue from him, did as little as they could and that badly!

In the mixing-machines the “aggregate” was wrong: the proportion of cement to sand and gravel was much lower than it should have been, so that the “concrete” was anything but what it was supposed to be.

Derek’s gang were not the only culprits. On the next emplacement were about twenty dock labourers from Genoa. They had been sent south on account of suspected sabotage following the first heavy R.A.F. raid on that port. It wasn’t because they were pro-Ally or anti-Fascist, but because the dockers had been refused extra payments for working in a dangerous zone. All they got in reply to their request was a forcible round-up and deportation to Calabria.

Their overseer, Pietro Milano, was a tall, gaunt, swarthy man of twenty-five. He was only an inch or so shorter than Derek.

He tried to be friendly with the new overseer, but at first Antonio Beppo Durando was slightly stand-offish and reticent, which is unusual so far as Italians are concerned.

It wasn't British insularity that was responsible for Derek's aloofness. He had to be careful when Gestapo agents were everywhere. Then a curious incident happened that altered Derek's opinion.

A group of German officers came round on a tour of inspection. One of them prodded the walls of a gun emplacement with a stick. It sunk nearly six inches into the "concrete" with hardly an effort on the German's part.

"When was this mixed?" he demanded in guttural and broken Italian.

Actually the stuff had been poured into the "moulds" a week ago. The boards had been removed, leaving the concrete just stiff enough to hold together. Men were actually at work burying the seaward face of the emplacement under sand, in which case the rotten workmanship would never be detected unless a shell or a bomb landed close to the gun-pit.

Before Derek could think of a suitable reply—it would have to be suitable or he would find himself haled before a mixed tribunal of Italian and German officers on a serious charge—Pietro Milano butted in.

"I am in charge of this section, Herr Hauptman," he declared mendaciously in a German as crude as the Hun's efforts at Italian. "The cement was poured in only yesterday, but the moulds were wanted elsewhere in a hurry, so I took the risk. It would have set hard by Thursday."

The officer grunted in reply and accepted Milano's explanation. As the inspecting German turned the corner he spat significantly over his left shoulder.

"Why did you run that risk for me?" asked Derek.

"I saw you were not ready with a suitable reply," explained Pietro. "If the Hun had found out that stuff was rotten he would have discovered the same state of affairs in my section, and both of us would run the risk of being put up against a wall and shot!"

Soon the two men became friendly. In their off-time, which amounted to a couple of hours after dark, and in the mess-room where they ate their frugal food, each told the other about himself. Derek's was a "fairy tale" almost from start to finish, but Pietro accepted it all in good faith.

Pietro Milano, according to his narrative, had been a bit of a rolling-stone. Born in Italy, he had been taken by his parents to New York when he was about nine years of age. Ten years later the Milanos returned to Italy, where Pietro's father set up as an hotel-keeper at Rapallo. Pietro, of course, had to serve three years in the army. Part of the time he served in Libya—that was before the war—and according to him it was almost as bad as Dante's *Inferno* in spite of Mussolini's efforts to colonize it. Of his subsequent career Pietro was reticent, but from various hints that he dropped Derek gathered that he got mixed up in some anti-Fascist activities and in consequence had spent twelve months in prison.

After the war he hoped he'd be able to return to New York and become an American citizen.

"Italy's done for, whether she wins the war or loses it," he declared indiscreetly. "No one will be able to make money in this country. Not like New York. . . . You speak English, Antonio?"

"A little," replied Derek cautiously. "We were taught that language at school."

"Let me hear you speak it!"

Derek obliged by quoting a sentence in English as spoken by Italians.

Pietro threw back his head and laughed.

"You call that English?" he asked. "Listen!"

Derek would have laughed but for offending the fellow, for Pietro's was an example of English as spoken by a Bowery tough or an Italo-American gangster from Chicago.

"Not bad," he conceded, "but we'd better stop talking that language. It wouldn't do if the Gestapo overheard us."

During the next few days Derek obtained quite a lot of useful information concerning the defences of Reggio. He was becoming quite an efficient Secret Service Agent.

It was the Germans who were to attempt to hold Calabria in the event of an Allied invasion. Their system of fortifications differed considerably from previous ones, except that in principle it was still defence in depth.

The gun emplacements were but part of the scheme. Inland and at regular intervals were strong-points called by the Germans "starfish", instead of the now discredited "hedgehogs".

From each principal strong-point underground passages, four or five in number, ran fanwise for distances up to four hundred yards. Each terminated at a subsidiary machine-gun post with no arc of frontal fire and practically invisible to the assault troops. In addition each main strong-point was linked up with the others by means of subterranean galleries. Bolt holes were made to enable the defenders to get away if they were in danger of being overrun, and then the extremities of the “starfish”, having previously been mined, would be blown up as the attacking troops advanced over them. Ordinary land-mines, trenches and anti-tank ditches filled with barbed-wire entanglements added to the strength of the defences.

It was typically German in design, but Derek was glad he wasn't one of the troops manning the defences. Having had close-up views of craters caused by the 8000-pounder bombs dropped by the R.A.F., he didn't hold a high opinion of the defence system of Reggio. It would be a hard nut for infantry to crack even if supported by artillery; but after eight or ten hours' intensive strafing from the air these concrete defence-works would be nothing more than death-traps to the men who attempted to hold them.

Derek had been in the Reggio area for about a fortnight, without the faintest chance of being able to cross to Sicily, when, unexpectedly, the much-desired opportunity occurred.

CHAPTER XIX

Rescued

The tempo of aerial activity over Sicily and Southern Italy was steadily increasing. At night Derek could see flashes from bomb explosions and huge fires glowing over Messina. Malta, “the unsinkable aircraft-carrier” as the Germans begrudgingly and ruefully termed it, was hitting back with interest. Relieved by British convoys after months of savage bombing by the Luftwaffe, battered but unconquered, the little island was proving more than a thorn in the side of the Axis partners. And now Messina, Palermo, Syracuse and many smaller Sicilian seaports were reeling under hammer-blows delivered by the R.A.F. squadrons based on the George Cross Island.

Soon after the workmen had started operations one morning, there was something of a commotion when a group of agitated Italian officers arrived. There was a hurried, almost frenzied, consultation with the officials directing the construction of the fortifications, and when this broke up it was announced that three hundred civilian workmen were to be sent across to Messina. The raid during the night had done considerable damage; those of the inhabitants yet remaining in the city that once had a population of nearly two hundred thousand were in a state of panic. The fire-fighting and rescue services had broken down, there were hundreds of people still trapped beneath the ruins, and until help was forthcoming little could be done to aid them.

Here was Derek’s chance to get to Sicily; but as soon as he arrived at Messina he didn’t mean to slip off and make for the south coast of the island. He’d do his bit in rescuing the trapped civilians. After all, the Allied nations weren’t waging war against Sicilian women and children. . . . Then, when the rescue operations were finished and the imported workmen were about to be sent back to Reggio, his long-anticipated chance would come.

Already in his imagination he saw himself making off with a fishing-boat from Porto Palo, making the sixty-mile run under cover of darkness and being hailed by a British patrol-boat off the entrance to Valetta Harbour!

Some delay occurred before the men could be collected. Mostly from Northern Italy, they had few sympathies for their fellow-countrymen of the south. Messina meant little or nothing to them, except that it was one of the most frequently bombed cities in Sicily. Why should they risk their precious lives by going there when at any hour of the day or night British bombers might be raining death and destruction upon the congested area of bricks and mortar?

At length the required number was forthcoming. Under military escort they were taken to the small port of San Giovanni, only a short distance from Reggio. Here a ferry service was supposed to ply between the mainland and Messina, only it wasn't running. Dangers far greater than Scylla and Charybdis had made the passage of the narrow Strait of Messina a perilous one.

Instead of boarding the ferry steamer the men were embarked on board an antiquated tramp steamer bearing the name *Marco Polo*. But for the war she would have been turned over to the ship-breakers. Now, since anything that could float was pressed into service, she had been dazzle-painted and given an armament of two light quick-firers.

"It is well that we can swim," observed Pietro, as the two lukewarm overseers found themselves on the well-deck of the *Marco Polo*.

They had frequently bathed off the beach at No. 15 post in spite of barbed-wire entanglements and regulations forbidding workmen and others to enter the water. It had been a simple matter to bribe the Italian sentries. If there were German troops about that completely altered the situation.

"Yes," agreed Derek. "How many of these men on board can swim? I wonder."

"Precious few, seeing that they came from Piedmont and Lombardy. And they haven't been issued with life-belts. And the boats look as if they haven't been lowered for years!"

Derek wondered why Milano spoke so knowledgeably about things pertaining to the sea, since he, too, came from Piedmont. Then he recalled that his companion had twice crossed the Atlantic.

At length the *Marco Polo* cast off and started on her brief though hazardous voyage, a distance of about half that between Dover and Calais.

From the grey-bearded captain downwards practically all the officers, passengers and crew were "jumpy". Their state of mind wasn't made any

easier by the rumours that included in her cargo were several tons of high-explosives!

The passengers were confined to the well-deck, leaving fo'c'sle and poop clear for the guns' crews. On the bridge most of the officers and several of the men began keeping a look-out by means of telescopes and binoculars for hostile aircraft and submarines.

It wasn't clear which they dreaded most: the sudden powerdive out of the blue sky or the sinister trail of a torpedo from an unseen and unheard submerged submarine. Judging by their gesticulations and their high-pitched, excited voices, they weren't any too happy on board the decrepit *Marco Polo*.

This state of affairs continued until the ship was within three miles of the Sicilian coast. Then things began to happen.

The first intimation of trouble, so far as Derek was concerned, was a commotion on the fo'c'sle. The gun's crew suddenly abandoned their weapon and, tumbling over one another in their haste, poured down the fo'c'sle ladder to mingle with the passengers on the well-deck.

At first Derek thought that it was an approaching bomber that had caused the precipitate flight; but the sky seemed clear of aircraft.

Crossing to the starboard side, he saw to his delight and surprise that a large submarine had surfaced within two hundred yards of the ship.

The effect was like a rabbit being mesmerized into complete inactivity by a cobra. Even before the submarine's crew could come on deck and man their quick-firer, there had been ample time for the Italian gunners to let off a dozen rounds at point-blank range.

Instead they had abandoned their guns. Their action might have been determined by the knowledge that there were tons of explosives under their feet and it would require but one well-placed shell from the British submarine to blow the *Marco Polo* sky-high.

Derek wasn't feeling any too happy over that either! It had temporarily damped his feelings of elation when first he spotted the submarine.

On the British craft a two-flag signal was hoisted so promptly that it looked as if the flags had been previously toggled to the halliards. Derek couldn't read it, nor would he have known what it meant. It is the International Code of Signals "OL". To almost every seaman, whatever his

nationality, the meaning would be perfectly clear: “Heave-to or I will open fire on you!”

Frantically the *capitano* rang down for the *Marco Polo*’s engines to go half speed astern and then stop, so eager he was to comply with the submarine’s imperious request. Simultaneously a seaman raced to the poop and struck the red, white and green tri-colour of Italy.

The submarine edged on to within easy hailing distance. From the platform in the wake of the conning-tower an officer hailed the ship in tolerable Italian by means of a megaphone.

“Have you troops on board? Are you carrying munitions?”

To which the Italian skipper replied in the negative. Although the *Marco Polo* was not carrying troops she was carrying munitions, but he had lied in the vain hope of saving his ship.

“I give you ten minutes to abandon ship,” continued the voice of doom.

There was no necessity for the Italian captain to give the order. There was a mad rush for the boats on the port side. The terrified passengers and crew somehow didn’t like the idea of tumbling into the boat on the starboard side. Possibly they were under the erroneous belief that the submarine would slap a torpedo into the ship before the boats could get away, and it would give them more chance if the hull of the *Marco Polo* was between them and the “tinfish”!

Suddenly Pietro, who was standing close to Derek, mounted the rail and commenced semaphoring to the submarine. Again Derek was momentarily dumbfounded. Although good at Morse he was a duffer at semaphore.

The officer on the deck of the submarine had spotted the sender. He spoke to a yeoman of signals who gave the “acknowledgment”.

Then, turning his head and looking down at Derek, Pietro shouted in perfect English:

“Now’s your chance, my lad! Jump for it. We’ll be picked up all right!”

Derek didn’t stop to ask questions. His training as a pilot had taught him to make swift decisions. He heaved himself up and on the rail and, following his companion’s example, took a clear header into the sea.

Whether any of the *Marco Polo*’s crew saw their dive overboard didn’t matter. The chances were that they didn’t. If they had there would be several discussions concerning the two deserters when the crew reached land.

Using powerful side-strokes, the two swimmers quickly increased their distance from the doomed ship. During their swim not a word was exchanged, although Derek was almost bursting with curiosity to know exactly what had happened and why Pietro—if that were his right name—was about to be received as a *persona grata* on board one of His Majesty's submarines!

And why, after weeks during which neither had spoken anything but Italian, had he suddenly addressed Derek in colloquial English! How did he know he was English anyway?

A couple of bluejackets (only they weren't bluejackets in a literal sense since they were wearing white sweaters) were ready to give the swimmers a "leg up".

Holding on to stanchions with one hand, each sailor extended the other for the two swimmers to grasp.

Then Derek found himself where he'd never expected to be: on the deck of a British submarine.

Both he and his companion looked like scarecrows in their dripping, ill-fitting clothes. Derek had lost his disreputable hat, but "Pietro" was still wearing the peaked cap that might originally have been issued to one of Rommel's Afrika Corps, and smartly saluted the submarine's quarter-deck, while Derek, being hatless, hardly knew what to do in the circumstances.

Standing there, at sea in a double sense, Derek found himself thinking—of all things!—about the custom of saluting. For some reason, as yet unexplained to him, the seaman had given the naval salute to the bedraggled "Italian" and he had acknowledged it in the correct manner. Why? That raised the question in Derek's mind: is it the officer or the uniform that calls for the salute? Apparently the officer wearing the King's uniform; yet, on the other hand, it is laid down in Regulations that "an officer is to be saluted whether he is in uniform or not. It is to be understood that there is no excuse for not seeing an officer or for not recognizing one's superior officer in plain clothes." If, also, it is the King's uniform that demands the salute, should it be given to one displayed in a Military Outfitter's window?

Then, again, are Home Guard officers strictly entitled to a salute? He'd had a friendly discussion with his father on that point, for a Home Guard officer does not hold the King's Commission, nor can he exercise the cherished but rarely used right of appealing to His Majesty if he thinks he is labouring under a grievance by a superior. That privilege is confined to

commissioned officers of the regular Army, the Navy and the Royal Air Force.

“This way!” exclaimed his mysterious companion, indicating the platform on which the lieutenant-commander stood.

“Hello, George!” he addressed the “Owner” in a jovial tone. “Jolly decent of you hauling us out of the drink. This is—Antonio. I haven’t got his proper tally.”

“That can wait, Tom,” replied the bearded lieutenant-commander. “Better get below, the pair of you. Might have to do a crash-dive. Eyetic planes about.”

“Right! By the by, George, before I go; just one word of advice. I’d open the range if I were you before sending that old tub to the bottom. She’s carrying a cargo of H.E.s.”

“Thanks for the tip, old bird!” replied Lieutenant-commander George Maynebrace, R.N., D.S.O. with bar. “And you’ll find changes of raiment and a couple of stiff pegs waiting for you.”

“So it’s not what the Old Obadiah said to the Young Obadiah,” observed Lieutenant-commander Thomas Chalmers, known to Derek as Pietro Milano. “Good enough; come on, Antonio!”

“Antonio for the last time, I hope,” rejoined Derek, as he followed Chalmers below to a very restricted ward-room.

Before they were allowed to enter they shed their disreputable civilian garments and were handed clothing from the submarine’s “slop-chest”, including white drill shorts and vests.

While they were changing these came two reports in quick succession; then after an interval of about thirty seconds a truly terrific whump that sounded to Derek like a shell-burst close to the fuselage of an aircraft.

“That’s George knocking out *Marco Polo’s* front teeth,” observed Maynebrace. “Sounds much nearer than it actually is.”

“Is there any chance of borrowing a safety razor?” asked Derek, once more embarrassingly conscious of a heavy crop of “face moss”.

“I reckon the Owner might lend you his, sir,” replied the petty officer who had been attending to their immediate needs. “But don’t go too much on it, sir. He’s mighty particular to shave his beard before we make port: Same with most all the ship’s company. We grow beards when we’re on a

long cruise, and a lot of us don't bother to shave when we do fetch up alongside the depot ship."

So Derek compromised by trimming his "Dago beard" with a pair of scissors. He could imagine his reception if he turned up at an R.A.F. station looking like a lanky Captain Kettle.

Meanwhile the submarine—she bore no name but the number 445—had submerged, but was still running under the power of her electric motors instead of resting on the sea-bed.

A sub-lieutenant peeped into the ward-room.

"The hunt's up," he observed in a casual tone. "A couple of destroyers; but the Owner'll fox them all right! Fancy getting peeved over an old tub like the *Marco Polo*!"

Before Chalmers or Derek could say a word to him the second-in-command hurried off to his "submerged action station".

The first of many distinctly disconcerting thuds made the submarine shudder. So did Derek. It was his first experience of being hunted with depth charges. He was used to flak. He could see the shell-bursts in most cases and take evasive action. Piloting the aircraft required all his skill and attention; he didn't let his mind be distracted by such incidents as anti-aircraft fire.

But here, cooped up in a steel box that was driving blindly through the water at twenty fathoms below the surface, he wasn't at all happy. Nor was his peace of mind set at rest at the sight of his seemingly unperturbed companion.

Whump! . . . whump!

Two explosions much nearer than the first showed that the hunters were hot on the trail.

The electric lights in the ward-room jumped, but fortunately did not go out.

Then, sounding immediately above him, Derek could hear the thrash of one of the Italian destroyer's propellers.

"If she drops depth charges now she'll get us," he thought, and glanced apprehensively at the concave side of the confined space.

Two more detonations followed a few seconds later, but these felt, and were, farther away.

“George has trailed a red herring,” remarked Chalmers, speaking for the first time since the attack started. “A good thing the destroyers hadn’t aircraft spotting for them.”

“How do you know they haven’t?” asked Derek, since everyone on board was “blind”.

“They would have got us, I expect,” replied Tom Chalmers. “That’s the worst of the Mediterranean: water’s too clear. We in The Trade prefer the Atlantic.”

This remark gave Derek an additional clue to his companion’s identity. Tom Chalmers was not only a naval officer but he had been in submarines, a part of the Service known as “The Trade”.

Before Derek could make a suitable rejoinder there was a dull grinding sound. The submarine, with her motors switched off and additional water ballast admitted into her buoyancy tanks, had come to rest on the floor of the Messina Strait.

“I’ll bet Old George is in his favourite hide-out,” declared Chalmers. “He’s shaken off the blighters. Some men are born lucky. I don’t think I was!”

“Why?” asked Derek.

Before his companion could reply Maynebrace entered the ward-room.

“Now you can do the *pukka* introduction, Tom!” he began.

“Can I?” rejoined Chalmers with a broad grin. “Not in these trousers, m’lad. All I know about that bright lad is that he’s R.A.F.”

“How does he know that?” thought Derek. “I never told him. I never for one moment thought he was anything but an Italian.”

“In that case,” continued the Owner, “you’d better do your own introduction.”

Derek gave his name and rank.

“But you must take me on trust,” he added. “I’ve nothing to prove my identity.”

“Except a card stating that you are Antonio Beppo Durando,” said Chalmers.

“I believe I still have it, though it must be properly soaked. I’ll dry it and have it framed as a souvenir when I get home.”

“We must take you on your face valuation, then,” continued Maynebrace banteringly. “No one gets very far in the Service if he ships under a false tally.”

“I know a fellow in the R.A.F.—Hazeltyn’s his name—who often spoke of a Lieutenant-commander Maynebrace,” said Derek. “Does that happen to be you?”

“No, my cousin,” replied the Owner. “There are several Maynebraces—spelt with a Y on the Navy List. Others of that name have served in the Navy as far back as Queen Anne’s reign; and, of course, there have been ‘mainbraces’ ever since the first square-rigger was built! We’ve one on this hooker, but we keep that for splicing on suitable occasions!”

The others smiled at this mild joke.

“When you put the *Marco Polo* down, for instance?” asked Chalmers.

“One of the small fry, but they all count,” continued Maynebrace. “I fancy the Old Man was punished for telling a lie. He swore she wasn’t carrying munitions, but our second shell—— The men in the boats would have been safe if she hadn’t been carrying quite a lot of H.E. As it was, they got it properly in the neck when that lot was touched off. Incidentally, but for your timely warning, George, we might have struck a bad patch if we’d shelled her at two hundred yards instead of eight hundred! But what happened to you, Tom? Your craft was reported overdue and presumed lost. We never heard you were P.O.W., and until you semaphored me from the *Marco Polo* I thought you’d paid a visit to Davy Jones.”

Briefly, Lieutenant-commander Chalmers related the circumstances under which the submarine in which he was in command penetrated the outer harbours of Taranto and slapped a couple of “mouldies” into an Italian light cruiser. In attempting to get away the submarine ran into a wreck of a warship that had previously been sunk there.

The Eyeties knew she was trapped. They made no attempt to depth charge her but waited, hoping to effect her capture.

At night, after being submerged for nine hours and with propellers damaged and the boat filled with chlorine fumes, since she was leaking badly, Chalmers blew all ballast tanks. She wrenched herself clear of the entanglement and broke surface.

The crew jumped overboard and swam for the shore, leaving the Italian guard boat to take possession of the British submarine.

They were in possession only about a minute, then up she went in a cloud of smoke. The time-fuses the crew had placed in position had done their work!

Infuriated at being balked of their prey, the Italians declared that the submarine had been destroyed by her crew after they had surrendered. As a matter of fact they hadn't, but the excuse served for reprisals upon Chalmers and his crew.

They were taken to a prisoners-of-war camp in a remote district in the Apennines. Their capture was not reported to the British Government and they were not allowed to communicate with their relations. The Red Cross had no knowledge of the existence of this "disciplinary" camp and consequently no parcels reached them. They were on the verge of starvation.

Then Chalmers, who spoke Italian fluently, succeeded in effecting his escape from the camp, but not out of Italy. His subsequent adventures were much the same as those that Derek had undergone, and after four months on the Calabrian fortifications, he had seized his chance when the *Marco Polo* was intercepted.

"I'm mighty curious to know how you spotted I was British," said Derek at the conclusion of the narrative. "Still more so how you knew I was—or am, rather—in the R.A.F."

Tom Chalmers smiled.

"If you want to know, my lad," he replied, "you happen to have the habit of lying on your back when you're asleep. The natural result in the case of most people is to snore. You don't, but instead you're apt to talk in your sleep. On several occasions I turned out of my bunk to pinch your nose! That proved effective, although you 'babbled o' green fields' and other things—in English!"

CHAPTER XX

“Submarining”

Lunch in the now crowded ward-room was quite a lively affair. Not the least contributory factor was that it was the first decent square meal Derek and Chalmers had had since their feet had first trod the soil of an Italy at war.

“Do you always have meals like this?” asked Derek, after having praised the food and the cook who prepared it with only a small electric stove in a confined space at his disposal.

“As often as we can,” replied Maynebrace. “This is a special occasion. I’m afraid we shan’t be able to run to it until the end of the cruise.”

“How long will that be, George?” asked his brother-officer.

“Another ten days.”

That gave Derek food for thought. The normal complement of the submarine was sixty officers and men. Now there were two supernumeraries to be fed. Three meals a day for two persons for ten days meant a fairly heavy inroad upon the catering arrangements.

“Had good hunting, George?” inquired Chalmers.

“Fairish,” replied Maynebrace. “Mostly small fry, although we did score a couple of hits on an Italian destroyer. Couldn’t claim her as a certainty because half a dozen Capronis made things a bit lively—Hear that?”

Derek had for some time; a rasping, rattling noise as if an army of giant crabs was crawling over the submarine’s hull. He hoped that the enemy were not “sweeping” with explosive grapnels.

“Yes; what is it?”

“Shingle being swept by the tide-rip past our sides,” explained the lieutenant-commander. “This is my private bolt-hole—at least I claim that it is. We’re now lying doggo at twenty fathoms and three cables’ lengths, from

the so-called whirlpool known to the ancients as Charybdis. The scour of the current makes the water as thick as pea soup, so there's no chance of our being spotted from the air, and the Wops' destroyers seem to take it for granted that we'd make to the south'ard for more sea room and deeper soundings. Instead, when we submerge we make for here."

"And so the whirlpool that put the wind up old Ulysses is doing you a good turn," observed Chalmers.

"Yes; on this occasion until midnight. Then we're making our way westward along the north coast of Sicily. I'm hoping to fall in with a convoy out of Palermo. . . . Sorry I can't offer you a smoke, Dundas. That's one of the drawbacks of The Trade. Can't waste oxygen. You'll have the chance when we surface and recharge batteries."

The meal over, the ward-room settled itself for a prolonged *siesta*. It was one way of passing the time and was less wasteful of oxygen than continuing to yarn. They settled themselves to sleep as best they might, Derek and Chalmers stretching themselves on cushions on the deck. Then all but one of the electric lights were switched off and soon comparative silence reigned.

In the ratings' quarters very similar conditions prevailed. Unnecessary movement was discouraged, as that also tended to vitiate the air in the hermetically sealed hull of the submarine.

Derek awoke with a headache. He was experiencing what happens when extremes meet. He knew what it meant when oxygen has to be inhaled when flying at high altitudes, where atmospheric pressure is far less than at ground level. Now he was feeling the effects of a deficiency of oxygen in an airtight steel box withstanding a pressure of between fifteen and twenty atmospheres!

At long last—or so it seemed to him—Maynebrace and his second-in-command bestirred themselves and went to the control station. Gongs rang in various parts of the ship. The electric motors were switched on and powerful pumps set to work to "blow" the auxiliary water-ballast tanks.

Derek was conscious of a gentle see-sawing motion. The submarine had left her resting-place on the sea-bed and was rising cautiously to the surface.

He went into the narrow alleyway where he could see the electrically lighted control station.

Maynebrace was standing in front of a number of dials, one of which indicated the depth at which the vessel was still submerged. The needle was

moving slowly. Just now it was registering a depth of fifty feet.

“Up periscope!” ordered the lieutenant-commander.

“Up periscope, sir!” replied a petty officer as he manipulated a geared hand-wheel.

The light was temporarily switched off. Then in the object-bowl of the periscope appeared a vista of star-powdered sky and nothing else. No sinister outline of an enemy patrol-boat or of any other craft appeared.

A few seconds later and the submarine was awash. The hatches were opened to admit volumes of pure night air.

Some of the officers and crew remained on deck, the look-outs keeping their eyes skinned in case any enemy craft should appear through the darkness. Most of the ratings, however, remained below, where they could smoke without the glowing pipe-bowls and cigarettes giving the submarine's position away.

All the while the dynamos were purring softly as precious “juice” was being charged into the batteries.

With the first streaks of dawn No. 445 again submerged. She had fixed her position and a compass course of 35° would take her through the Messina Strait. At the end of two hours, by which time Cape di Faro would bear on the port quarter, the course would be changed to 290° unless anything unforeseen happened!

By this time Derek was becoming more accustomed to being cooped up beneath the surface. In principle it was rather like “blind flying”, which formed part of the training of an R.A.F. pilot. Yet he wasn't completely at his ease and said so to Maynebrace.

“I'll wager you aren't so dithery as I was when I was flown from Gib. to Plymouth in a Catalina,” opined the lieutenant-commander. “‘The shoemaker to his last’, I suppose. I'll never make an airman, although I'm supposed to be a fairly good submariner!”

At varying intervals the submarine poked the tip of her periscope above the surface, generally without anything being seen but an expanse of sea and sky.

Once Maynebrace, satisfied that there were no targets in the form of enemy surface craft about, invited Derek to “have a look-see”.

Away on the starboard bow were three or four rocky islands, while farther away and a couple of points forward of the beam was another, from the highest peak of which a thin column of smoke was rising.

Although Derek hadn't previously seen it, he knew that it was Stromboli. Since he'd been brought down over Turin he had seen Italy's three volcanoes—Vesuvius at a close distance, Etna, its glare visible by night from Calabria, and now Stromboli. His impression was that, compared with the fires started by the R.A.F., the volcanoes were mere side-shows, although he hadn't seen any of them in active eruption. Then perhaps he'd change his opinion!

About an hour later Maynebrace again brought the submarine to the surface. A preliminary survey through the periscope had revealed nothing, but from the navigation platform his keen eyes detected smoke on the horizon—not an isolated trail from a solitary steamship but several—bearing roughly 320 degrees.

"Either the Italian Fleet is out or there's a large convoy hull-down," he declared. "The Italian Navy's great in making too much smoke. That's because their supplies of Welsh steam coal are cut off and the stuff the Huns supply them with is very inferior."

"Germany all over," added Chalmers. "She makes trade agreements with her Allies and neutral countries and palms them off with dud stuff. . . . That crowd looks like a convoy from Naples, heading for Palermo before making for Tunis."

"We'll see before long," replied 445's skipper confidently.

There was hardly any need to alter course. The British submarine and the as yet unidentified ships were converging.

Maynebrace kept her awash for the best part of half an hour, so as to make use of the submarine's surface speed of 17½ knots. The while he was running the risk of being spotted from the air, for the white foaming bow wave could not fail to attract the attentions of any aerial observer worth his salt.

Just before No. 445 submerged it had been possible to form some idea of what the Italian vessels consisted. There were five merchantmen of about 8000 tons, all deeply laden. Astern of them was a large tanker, while four destroyers of the *Centauro* class were acting as escorts.

Quickly Maynebrace decided on his plan of action. The merchantmen, probably carrying troops and tanks to reinforce the Germans in Tunisia,

were tempting targets, but the oil-tanker was the “pick of the bunch”, since petrol is the life-blood of a modern army. Rommel might get a hundred tanks and the same quantity of aircraft across the Mediterranean, but without petrol they would be little more than junk.

The crew were already at action stations. The plan of attack was to dive under the destroyer screen and let fly at the tanker with a couple of torpedoes at a range of two miles. That meant that the British submarine had to travel a distance of four miles before getting within effective range.

The two “supernumeraries” had gone to the ward-room. There was nothing they could do and elsewhere they would only be in the way.

Chalmers glanced at the clock on the bulkhead.

“In another fifteen minutes those ‘mouldies’ will be running straight and true for the target, Dundas,” he declared. “Like to have a little flutter on it?”

“That they’ll hit?”

“You can take that for granted,” replied Chalmers. “I mean on the time, to the nearest fifteen seconds, when the torpedoes hit. We’ll hear the racket all right.”

“I think I’ve a couple of twenty *lire* notes, if they aren’t pulped,” said Derek “If we——”

“What’s up now?” interrupted his companion as the submarine gave a shudder. “George has let fly with his torpedoes already.”

They waited, perplexed at the unexpected turn of events. It seemed as if the torpedoes, instead of being discharged at a distance of a couple of miles, had been fired at five miles’ range, in which case several minutes would elapse before the shattering roar announced that one torpedo, if not both, had got home.

To render the situation even more bewildering to Derek and his companion the submarine dived deeply. They could hear the seaman at the depth-gauge calling out the depth in a monotone: “Twenty, thirty—thirty it is, sir!”

No. 445 was one hundred and eighty feet beneath the surface and was moving slowly to enable her to keep at the required depth with a minimum speed.

Then, from a considerable distance, came the sounds of heavy explosions. The experienced Chalmers declared that they were bombs and

not depth-charges. Derek did not gainsay him. He knew what a bomb sounded like when he was in the air or on the ground. Below the surface of the sea the reports sounded differently. He was quite content to take his companion's word for it, and to be deeply thankful that the missiles were exploding several miles off!

Presently Maynebrace, having "handed over" to his second-in-command, entered the ward-room. He was looking remarkably cheerful.

"What's doing, George?" asked his brother-officer.

"Those R.A.F. lads have queered my pitch!" he declared. "I didn't stop to observe results of their attack—once I was bombed by one of our aircraft by mistake, and I don't want another experience of that sort; so we're sculling around waiting for things to quiet down."

"But you let off a couple of 'mouldies'," prompted Chalmers.

"Yes; it was rather amusing! I raised the periscope to see how we were closing the range—it was still about five miles—when at less than a couple of cables off and broadside on was a Wop submarine. There were about fifteen or twenty of the crew on deck and they seemed to be watching their own convoy. None, so far as I could see, was looking our way. It was a priceless opportunity. The Italians must have had the surprise of their lives when we got her. Then we submerged good and proper, in case the destroyers came for us."

"They dropped depth-charges," said Chalmers.

"No, Tom, they didn't!" corrected Maynebrace. "Our fighter-bombers butted in. That's the real reason why we dived. They've done us out of the chance of bagging the tanker. Well, I must away! We're coming up to have another look-see."

As soon as No. 445 broke surface and a sharp all-round look-out revealed no hostile craft in the immediate vicinity, Derek and his companion came on deck.

Away to the sou'west two heavy columns of smoke told their own story. The black, greasy-looking cloud undoubtedly came from the tanker; the other probably was rising from one of the merchant ships. The rest of the convoy, including the destroyers, had legged it for all they were worth, harried by cannon fire from the British aircraft.

No. 445 was moving in almost the opposite course to the one she had been shaping while her attack on the convoy was developing.

Soon, so far as Derek was concerned, the result became apparent. About a mile away, their position only being located by the fact that they were splashing vigorously in order to attract attention, were several survivors of the torpedoed Italian submarine.

They were watching the now distinctly visible patch of bobbing heads when Maynebrace's servant came up and saluted.

"Your plain clothes are dry, sirs!" he announced. "Will you be putting them on soon?"

Derek was at pains to keep a straight face. He thought he'd finished with the motley garments he had "borrowed" from Signor Antonio Beppo Durando at the same time as he had temporarily assumed his name. He couldn't imagine himself going ashore at Valetta and reporting for duty rigged out in obviously Dago-cut civilian clothes!

"I thought you had more gumption, my man!" was Lieutenant-commander Thomas Chalmers's response. "We don't want those rig-outs. Dump them overboard!"

A sense of discipline urged the bluejacket to carry out what was virtually an order; but he hesitated.

"Well, what is it?" asked Chalmers less peremptorily. After all, the rating had gone to the trouble of getting the clothing dried. He also remembered that he wasn't the arbiter of the destinies of Derek Dundas's sloughed raiment.

"It's like this, sir," responded the A.B. "If you've no use for the clothes, I know a Jew in Valetta who'll give me a couple of dollars for them."

"Very well," agreed Chalmers. "Carry on. You have no objection, Dundas?"

"No jolly fear," replied Derek heartily.

The bluejacket, still holding the neatly folded garments under his arm, saluted and went below.

"In any case, did he expect us to put the things on here—on deck?" asked Derek.

By this time No. 445 was easing down in order to lose way and pick up the survivors of her victim.

There were thirteen. Most of them were able to clamber aboard without assistance, but three who were suffering from shock were gently assisted up

the side by the British bluejackets. Apart from that the victors regarded the vanquished quite tolerantly. Somehow, as has been proved by events during the present war, the British tar looks upon the Italian sailor as a poor sort of fish, rather to be pitied since he's forced to put to sea on the order of *il Duce*, only to scuttle back to harbour when warships flying the White Ensign make their frequent appearance in Musso's *mare nostrum*.

The commander of the submarine was amongst those rescued. Questioned by Chalmers on behalf of Maynebrace, whose knowledge of Italian was decidedly elementary, he admitted that a good look-out had not been kept and that the shattering report of the double explosion was the first and last intimation of the attack.

The submarine, the *Tazzella*, was one of Italy's latest design. She was on her maiden voyage, which ended abruptly and dramatically within twenty-four hours of leaving port. She was on her way to her base at Pantalleria, where she had orders to operate with others against British shipping between Malta and the Algerian ports.

According to a petty officer's statement, she had come to the surface in order to give the crew the opportunity to smoke!

Without delay the prisoners were "struck below", in other words sent down and placed in confinement in a double sense. Even at the best of times the accommodation on board No. 445 was limited. Now, in addition to the two supernumeraries, the living-space had to accommodate thirteen prisoners.

In the circumstances and taking into consideration the fact that the submarine had used all her torpedoes except two, Maynebrace decided to curtail his cruise and return to Malta.

It meant short rations for everyone, yet the crew accepted the situation with their customary good-humour and cheerfulness.

"They don't give us 'hard-lying money', but I reckon we've earned it," declared an able seaman who had voluntarily given up his bunk to one of the injured Italians and in consequence had to sleep as best he might on the deck. "But we'll have a tidy drop of blood-money when we get back to Pompey."

From which remark Derek gathered that "blood-money" was a monetary reward reckoned on the number of the crew of an enemy vessel destroyed or captured in action.

At length, when a few miles from Malta, No. 445 sent a signal asking permission to enter the harbour. Until this was granted she would be liable to be fired upon by the coastal batteries, and after nearly three years of war—dating from Mussolini’s suicidal step of throwing Italy into the struggle—the Malta artillery, a regiment composed almost entirely of natives of the island, were so smart at getting on a target that it wouldn’t be healthy for any vessel to which permission to enter the Grand Harbour had not been signalled.

To Derek it seemed as if all Malta had turned out to welcome the returning submarine. Already by radio news of her successful cruise, one of many, had been received and had spread like wildfire amongst the civil population.

He had expected to find a devastated Valetta with only a fraction of the population left, and these spending most of their time in the vast subterranean shelters cut out of the solid rock.

Devastation there had been, for in their frustrated efforts to smash this “unsinkable aircraft-carrier”, the Luftwaffe and to a lesser extent the Italian Air Force had done their hardest to batter the island into ruins.

There were big gaps in the wall overlooking the harbour—walls from which the Knights of St. John had successfully defied the Turks. Whole streets had been reduced to rubble, the cathedral and several churches had been blasted, but Malta still carried on.

What struck Derek most was the crowd of children on the water-front cheering the returning submarine with tremendous vigour. Hundreds of raids had not broken their spirits. They were proud of the fact that they belonged to the island upon which the George Cross had been so worthily bestowed.

Almost as soon as No. 445 was tied up, an armed guard removed the prisoners. One of them looked a grotesque figure, as he was wearing a pair of trousers several inches too long for him and a “civvy” coat that to Derek seemed familiar. He hadn’t wanted to see it again—these garments once the property of Antonio Beppo Durando of Turin!

“Couldn’t let the poor blighter go ashore anyhow, sir!” explained the bluejacket, who had hoped to raise a “couple of dollars” for the cast-off suit from a Jew old-clothes man. “He won’t half look a sketch when they let in a yellow patch on the back of that coat!”

“Yellow patch?” queried Derek.

“Yes, sir; just to show they are prisoners of war. And they can’t unpick the stitches neither! ’Cause if they tried to remove the patch there’d be a hole in the coat as big as your head!”

Now came the time for Derek to say farewell to his host and rescuer.

“That’s nothing,” declared Maynebrace. “We happened to be sculling around when Tom and you decided to swim for it. By the by, you might return those clothes you’re wearing when you get the chance. They’re in my charge and I can’t mark them off the ledger as ‘lost owing to the exigencies of the Service’. There’s a little gang at the Admiralty known as the Exchequer and Audit Department, and some of the questions those merchants ask are enough to turn one’s hair grey. Well, we’ll probably run across one another before you get clear of Malta. What do you propose doing?”

“Getting back to my squadron as quickly as I jolly well can,” replied Flight-lieutenant Derek Dundas.

CHAPTER XXI

Secret Service

It wasn't so easy as that!

Although Derek lost no time in reporting to R.A.F. Command, little prospect was held out for his return home. R.A.F. personnel was pouring into Malta but very few were being sent back to England.

"If you were a casualty—wounded or sick—we'd put you on board a hospital ship," observed the group captain. "As you aren't, we can't—not being Huns! So just toddle around and take it easily. You deserve a bit of a rest after your wanderings."

No doubt it was good advice, but it wasn't what Derek wanted—standing by and watching other men take off on operational flights. All the aircraft at the station to which he was temporarily attached were fighters—and he was a bomber pilot.

Until fairly recently the aerodromes at Malta had been having a decidedly sticky time. Most of the ground staff had been literally driven underground by repeated and heavy strafing. The runways showed plenty of traces of bomb craters; yet within a few hours after they had been put out of action the aerodromes were in full working order.

It was strange, too, to see aircraft taking off from sun-dried ground—a contrast to the runways of British airfields. There wasn't a blade of grass to be seen, nothing but soft rock, pulverized and rolled into a surface that would be a veritable nightmare to the pilot inexperienced in the ways of the "unsinkable aircraft-carrier".

Malta had gone over from the defensive to the offensive. Daily fighters and fighter-bombers roared off to shower destruction and chaos over the enemy's air and sea bases in Sicily. Others attacked convoys proceeding to and from Bizerta and other Tunisian ports still in German hands; while on the few occasions that the Luftwaffe attempted to raid Malta, the R.A.F.

fighters almost invariably intercepted them. Sometimes dog-fights would develop, but generally the Hun turned and legged it for all he was worth.

All this while events in North Africa were moving at a great pace, and these also affected the Royal Air Force based on Malta.

Tripoli had fallen, the Mareth Line had been turned, Sfax had been occupied by Montgomery's Eighth Army, while American troops were making good progress in Central Tunisia.

Rommel was again in flight, and his defeat was largely owing to the splendid work of R.A.F. fighters operating from Malta on his precarious sea lines of communication. Added to this, Flying Fortresses from Algerian bases were hammering at Italian bases, Naples being attacked on many occasions.

Derek was glad he wasn't at Naples. He'd seen a good deal of destruction there but, according to all accounts, the city was receiving terrifically hard punishment.

The R.A.F. at Malta were doing a fine piece of work. How different from the earlier days on the island when the fighter strength consisted of three aircraft, ironically called Faith, Hope and Charity! As in the case of the Battle of Britain, it was few against many and the few achieved miracles!

Here was Flight-lieutenant Derek Dundas at the hub of these operational flights against the enemy, yet he was little better than a mere onlooker. How he chafed to be in the air again, especially as his old squadron was participating in heavy raids over Germany—raids with results on German morale that were sure to be counter-acted by Goebbel's reassurances.

At length Derek received a welcome surprise when a flying officer detailed for orderly-room duties informed him that he was being sent home "forthwith".

"This isn't official," cautioned Derek's informant, "but it's a tip straight out of the horse's mouth."

"And this isn't the 1st of April," said Derek sceptically.

"No, the 12th, but that doesn't affect the point, laddie. All I know—and you'll know, too, when the daily orders are published—that we're soon to be quit of your presence."

"For some things, I'm sorry I'm packing up," declared Derek, with genuine regret, for now that the time was at hand for him to leave Malta he

realized that, apart from not being in the air, he had had quite a good time with the squadron to which he was temporarily attached.

By this time he had been supplied with uniform and flying equipment, partly from R.A.F. stores and partly through a well-known firm who still carried on in spite of the fact that their Valetta premises had been *blitzed*. He had also discharged part of his obligations to Lieutenant-commander Maynebrace. Some he could never repay in kind, but the material ones he did, sending back the borrowed kit. Maynebrace, away on another successful cruise, received the things on the day Derek was due to leave.

In peace-time it takes between seven and eight days to reach England from Malta by sea, half that time by combined sea and rail, and as many hours by air; but Derek was informed that the journey might take weeks.

It did, even though the Air Ministry wanted him in an hurry, although he didn't know that at the time!

For the first stage—from Malta to Gib.—he was given a passage in a destroyer engaged in escorting a convoy from Alexandria. That, on account of the relatively low speed of the merchantmen, was a tedious business; but in spite of feverish activity on the part of the German and Italian aircraft operating across the Sicilian Narrows, the convoy got through without a single casualty. Thanks to the Allied aircraft operating from North Africa on Rommel's lines of communication, the enemy were too preoccupied in trying to evade our fighters and fighter-bombers to devote any serious attention to British convoys.

At Gibraltar Derek was ordered to report to an R.A.F. officer of high rank.

"Now, Flight-lieutenant Dundas, I wish to impress upon you the urgency of speed and secrecy for the remainder of your journey home," he said, after Derek had produced his necessary credentials. "We're sending you overland to Lisbon."

"Very good, sir," replied Derek, thinking that the haste for his return home was in connection with intensive operational flights over Germany in which experienced pilots would be needed. "Would it be indiscreet on my part to ask——?"

"Not only indiscreet but positively dangerous to life and limb!" interrupted his superior sharply. Then in even tones he continued his instructions.

“At Lisbon you will get into touch with the person named in this document. You are to make a mental note of both his name and address, but on no account are you to have those particulars in writing on you. Your passage for the last stage will be by Imperial Airways. When you land take the first available train to Waterloo and report to the Air Ministry without delay. You should be there on or before the 22nd of this month—not later than noon of that day, if humanly possible. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Perfectly, sir!”

It was so far as the route was concerned, but it still left Derek figuratively in the air concerning the reason. It seemed remarkable that, after he’d been allowed to stagnate at Malta for more than a month, the Air Ministry should want him to report in London as quickly as circumstances permitted; all the more so because the reason was deeply shrouded in mystery.

Then, having handed Derek a bundle of Spanish notes for his railway expenses and a passport for his journey, his superior officer gave him a small washleather bag.

“The contents will be something of a novelty to you,” he said with a smile. “You are far too young to remember when they were in general circulation. They are half-sovereigns. They’re not a gift but a loan—at least, the residue, if any, you’ll hand back. Briefly, they are to grease the palm of any over-officious Spaniard who might make mischief. A gold coin, especially a British or American one, is more than current coinage anywhere—even in Hunland! Well, good luck both for your journey and its sequel—although I don’t mind telling you I don’t know myself what that will be!”

An hour later Derek, wearing civilian clothes that fitted and looked far better than did the “glad rags” of Antonio Beppo Durando, took the steamer plying across the Bay of Gibraltar to Algeçiras, whence the railway meanders nearly a hundred miles farther away from Lisbon before making an acute bend to that city.

Declining the offers of half a dozen vociferous porters, Derek carried his two suitcases to the railway station. One case was heavy; the other contained his uniform. The first was strongly padlocked. . . . He’d heard accounts of travellers having their suitcases rifled or stolen on continental railways.

The Customs officials examined his credentials and courteously passed his luggage through without attempting to open the cases. Somewhat

amusedly, Derek wondered what would have been their reactions had they opened the larger and heavier one.

For the first section of the rail journey he travelled on the Madrid express. The train was by no means overcrowded—a favourable contrast to travel conditions in Britain in war-time—and the compartment he entered was occupied by a solitary Spaniard.

Placing his large suitcase on the rack and the other on the seat beside him, Derek prepared to make the best of a long journey. His travelling companion spoke no English and Derek was ignorant of Spanish, so there seemed no prospect of conversation between the two.

Just as the train was about to start a third man jumped into the compartment. He looked a German. The thought went through Derek's mind that the fellow was shadowing him. It was a vague thought at first, but it soon became insistent; the fellow was there for no good purpose.

He paid no attention to his fellow-travellers, but became engrossed in a Spanish newspaper. About half an hour after the train had started he reached up to the rack and produced from a wicker basket a sausage that looked like those of pre-war Germany, some garlic and a loaf.

The Spaniard also brought some food from a suitcase placed under the seat. The case, Derek noticed, was somewhat similar to one of his. Not that this caused him any suspicion. Had it belonged to the Teuton there might have been ground for vigilance; it would be an easy matter to exchange the suitcases while Derek slept.

The express certainly didn't live up to its name. The average speed was about forty miles an hour, and although it passed through a number of stations without stopping, it halted at quite a number. No more passengers invaded Derek's compartment.

He wasn't due to change till 3.30 a.m. At nine he, too, had a snack meal, then slipping one hand under the strap of the suitcase that held his personal belongings and putting his feet on the opposite seat (he didn't know that on certain continental railway systems that is an offence punishable by the summary infliction of a fine), he dozed.

The carriage was well lighted, so he pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes to screen them from the glare. Several times he awoke. His travelling companions hadn't moved.

Then the train stopped at a station—Aguila. The next stop would be at Cordoba, where he would have to change.

The Spaniard got up, retrieved his suitcase from under the seat, gave the Teuton a husky “*Buena noches, señor,*” and departed.

The other man was apparently asleep.

Again Derek dozed, to awake with a start to find the train pulled up at the brilliantly lighted station of Cordoba.

The Teuton alighted first and hurried towards the barrier. Derek, collecting his suitcases, managed to find a sleepy official who could speak English. From him he learned that a train would leave in an hour and ten minutes (always provided it wasn’t late!) for Badajoz, on the Spanish side of the frontier. Also there was a buffet in the station that was open day and night.

To this refreshment place Derek made his way. In spite of the unearthly hour he was supplied with cold chicken, roll and butter, a glass of excellent sherry and a cup of black coffee for the moderate sum of three *pesetas*. And Spain, still feeling the grim effects of the Civil War, was supposed to be faced with an acute food shortage, so much so that the U.S.A. were sending supplies of wheat for the hungry population.

Having refreshed, although he was still feeling sleepy, Derek went out into the open air. As he placed the two suitcases on the seat, he noticed in the glare of an electric lamp that the larger one of the pair wasn’t the one with which he had been entrusted before leaving Gib.!

This one was similar and the initials were the same; but on closer examination he discovered that his had had the lettering painted on the fabric. The substitute had adhesive stencils stuck on.

Derek didn’t feel the least perturbed over the theft. On the contrary, he was amused at what the thief would do with his booty. Also he was puzzled as to which of his two fellow-travellers had been the culprit and for what reason—common theft or espionage?

For, as he was aware, the suitcase contained two large bundles of obsolete Admiralty charts of parts of the French and Italian seaboard, upon which were marked British minefields that didn’t exist and suggested landing-beaches where no British troops would attempt invasion. It was just part of a scheme to plant misleading information for the Axis, and would prove a very useful weapon when the so-called Second Front materialized.

The suitcase also contained documents purporting to be British Air Ministry schedules for bomber operations over both Italy and Western Germany. Hamburg, Kiel, Lubeck and Bremen were to have heavy raids on

and about the 20th of the month, while Turin, Milan, Venice and Genoa were due for terrific air-bombardments between the 25th and 30th.

This also Derek knew to be a ruse to divert enemy night-fighters and mobile A.A. guns to districts where an Allied air attack had been presumably planned to take place. The bombers would strike but on very different targets, where there would be considerably less flak and fighter opposition than if the Huns had not been tricked into thinking the attack would develop elsewhere.

But what Derek didn't know was the reason for his being sent home.

Then he tried to decide which of the two men had lifted the "planted" suitcase: the Spaniard who had alighted at Aguila or the Germanic-looking individual who had left the train at Cordoba.

He had just made up his mind that the Hun was the culprit and that he was now on his way to the nearest German consulate with the stolen British Admiralty and Air Force plans, when the man reappeared and sat down on a seat about twenty yards away.

More passengers were arriving, mostly of the peasant and artisan classes who would crowd into the fourth-class compartments.

Thirty-five minutes late the Badajos train snorted and grunted to a standstill. Derek didn't hurry to find a seat. He waited until the German had entered one compartment before he went to another.

This time he was alone. He felt that he must have more sleep, but before that he'd examine the substituted suitcase. It was unlocked. Inside it was filled with oranges! Evidently the secret agent wanted to make some sort of compensation for the exchange. If anything Derek was the better off by the deal, particularly if he were able to get the fruit to England! At the same time he felt a mild resentment towards the R.A.F. officer who, without informing him of the fact, had employed him as a decoy.

Soon he was sleeping soundly, not awakening until the train arrived at Badajos. Here he changed to another train, on which Customs officials travelled to the frontier, where both Spanish and Portuguese Customs officials examined passports and baggage.

Again Derek's *visa* saved him from having to turn out the contents of his suitcase. There was wording in the document which he couldn't read that served as a talisman against Iberian officialdom!

Just as the train was about to start the door of his carriage was flung open and his former fellow-traveller, the silent Hun, jumped in. He must have left his luggage in the other compartment.

Directly the train was in motion the man's demeanour underwent a complete change. He smiled and in perfect English addressed Derek by his name and rank!

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me," declared Derek with typically British hauteur. He didn't want to have to engage in conversation with the fellow, although he couldn't help wondering how he came to speak to him by name. He might, of course, have bribed the Customs officer into giving him that information.

There was one circumstance for which he was thankful. He was now on Portuguese territory, and although that country was not as yet an ally—as she had been in the last war—her relations with Great Britain were far more cordial than those of Spain—at least until Allied successes in North Africa had put a check upon Nazi intrigues in the republic governed by General Franco.

"I quite agree," replied the man. "I have; but that advantage can be neutralized. Do you mind casting your eyes on this?"

He handed Derek a stiff card on which was printed "C.I.D., New Scotland Yard". It bore the name of Inspector John Burdett.

Even so Derek was not impressed. The warrant card might be a forgery, and he certainly wasn't one capable of distinguishing between the spurious and the genuine article.

He returned it without comment.

"You're still suspicious, Dundas," continued the man. Again there was a change about his looks. His eyes seemed as hard as agates. "I'll give you some interesting facts. Firstly, you've lost a suitcase and have had a similar one palmed off on you. Is that so?"

"Yes," replied Derek tersely. There wasn't much news about that, but if the inspector hadn't taken the luggage himself he must have seen the Spaniard commit the theft. That being so, why hadn't he arrested the fellow on the spot?

But when the inspector proceeded to give a detailed account of the contents of the case Derek was impressed. Unless he were in league with the Spanish secret agent—and he might well be—how could the New Scotland

Yard man know what was there except by being told by the authorities at Gibraltar?

“The thief won’t get much for his pains,” observed Derek. “He’ll be properly fooled!”

“And in a different way you’ve been—sort of stool-pigeon, only, though you didn’t know it, you are doing valuable service to the Allies. I’ll explain. At Gib. my colleagues and I have been trying to trace a Nazi Secret Service agency by which news from inside the fortress eventually gets to Berlin. As you must be aware, there are hundreds of dagoes employed as workmen on the Rock. They come in across the neutral ground in the morning and return to Spanish territory at night. Some of them are undoubtedly spies, although they aren’t able to pick up secret information since they aren’t allowed in the new galleries; but we decided upon the rather cute idea of getting these fellows to pass on most misleading information to their Nazi paymasters.

“There is one blighter, however, whom we hope to nab, and that is the fellow—he isn’t a Spaniard and probably is a Hun—who lifted your suitcase. He did the trick just before the train stopped at Aguila.”

“You saw him do it?”

“I did!”

“Then why didn’t you arrest him?” asked Derek. “You had sufficient evidence to get your man.”

“I had; but we *wanted* the fellow to lay hold of the contents of that case. Now I know who he is to a dead certainty. After I’ve seen you safely through to Lisbon, I’m returning to Gib. He may be there before me, but he’ll turn up there again sooner or later and before he’s been told by his Nazi employers that he’s been spoofed. And they’ll accept those dates for raids on Germany and Italy as genuine until the end of April.”

“But how did the fellow know that I was supposed to be carrying important confidential documents?”

“We—the C.I.D. temporarily at Gib.—told him,” explained Inspector Burdett. “One of our agents—a genuine Spanish workman—was given the tip to spread the report amongst his mates that a very tall Englishman was leaving for Algeçiras at such and such a day and time, and that he was carrying secret plans for a co-ordinated attack by sea and air on the enemy’s Western Front as a preliminary to an Allied invasion of the Continent. So the Nazi agent shadowed you and I shadowed him until he got away with the dud documents. That was phase one of my present activities. The second is

to see you safely in Lisbon, although I don't anticipate any bother on that side of the frontier. The third and last will be when I clap the darbies on him."

Following this information Derek's stiffness thawed. Yet he didn't take Burdett entirely at his face value. For all he knew his story might be a tissue of falsehoods from start to finish. On the other hand, it might not! So, remembering official warnings about reticence and reserve, he steered the conversation into the channel of non-committal topics.

At length the train arrived at Lisbon five hours late. Accompanied by Inspector Burdett, whose instructions, it seemed, were to see him safely at the address to which he had been directed, Derek reported at a large house in the Calle Minandho.

Here, after his credentials had been examined and, incidentally, his suspicions concerning the C.I.D. officer had been laid at rest, Derek was taken by taxi to the river-front.

Out on the Tagus rode a huge Imperial Airways flying boat, painted white.

While the passengers, ten in number, were waiting to be transferred to her by means of a motor launch, one of them, an American, asked if they were armed against Nazi air attack.

"I guess not," replied a Canadian diplomat who had already made the double crossing of the Atlantic a round dozen times. "And there's no armed escort."

"That's darned queer," rejoined the New Yorker.

"They say, although I can't vouch for the authenticity of the report, that there's a sort of understanding between the R.A.F. and the Luftwaffe," the man from Ottawa went on. "The Huns won't attack civil aircraft and the R.A.F. in return will refrain from blowing Berchtesgaden sky-high and Hitler with it!"

Derek couldn't feel amused at the bizarre explanation. From the R.A.F. angle it was manifestly absurd. If the Führer's aerie were a place of military importance, they would have attended to it most efficaciously long ago. No good purpose would be likely to be achieved by deliberately bombing Hitler. By his death through those means he would remain in memory the idol of the German people. It would be better by far to give him enough tether until his disillusioned followers "liquidated" the ex-Austrian house-painter who had led Germany to ruin.

As for the alleged immunity of civil aviation aircraft from enemy action, Derek knew of no authentic reason. The fact remained that to the best of his knowledge they hadn't been interfered with.

Be that as it may, Derek didn't enjoy the last lap. Perhaps it was because it was being made in a "civil" aircraft and that, a pilot himself, Derek didn't like being in an aircraft with another man—a non-R.A.F. one—at the controls.

Nothing of an exciting nature happened, and strict on time the huge flying boat touched down.

Four hours later, Flying-officer Derek Dundas reported at the Air Ministry.

CHAPTER XXII

Combined Operations

“You have spent some time around Nizza, I believe?” was one of the first questions fired at Derek by the president of a board of Air Ministry officials.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, “about twenty hours.”

“Twenty hours of close contact with a place in enemy territory in war-time is worth twenty days of pre-war information—subject to certain limitations. What we particularly want is information concerning the P.O.W. camp there. You’ve seen that?”

“Yes, sir; but from the outside. There’s a triple fence, said to contain a highly charged wire. The sentries seemed to be well posted to observe what is going on. In those circumstances I did not venture too close.”

“Perhaps it was just as well that you did not,” rejoined the president drily. “Now this is the present situation; but before we go into that, and you are aware of the need for the strictest secrecy, did you see any indications of an aerodrome being in course of construction at Nizza?”

“None whatever,” replied Derek.

“There are now,” continued his questioner. “The *Regia Aeronautica* is usually correct in its adherence to conventions; but, undoubtedly owing to Nazi pressure, the Italians have just developed the Hunnish habit of building airfields alongside prisoners-of-war camps. They’ve done this at Nizza, and we can’t allow that!”

Derek was of the same opinion, although he couldn’t see how, short of precision bombing, the landing-ground could be properly strafed. It was a personal matter so far as he was concerned, for in the adjacent P.O.W. camp were, amongst others, the rest of the crew of “S for Sylvia”—Price, Holt, Holroyd, Tredgold the New Zealander, Macey and those two lads who’d flown with him for the first time, Polkerris and Poacher Witherson. It was bad enough to know that any prisoners-of-war camp was dangerously close

to a target area, but when it came to exposing his old comrades to the blast of bombs dropped by their own squadron—that looked like exceeding the limit!

All he could say in reply was, “I suppose not, sir!”

“Suppose!” echoed the president. “There is to be no ‘suppose’ about it. We can’t allow that. Obviously if we can’t shift the enemy aerodrome then we must remove the prisoners—our men—from the camp. Now have a good look at this print and see if you can recognize the lay of the land.”

He handed Derek an enlargement, measuring three feet by two, of an aerial photograph.

It was so distinct, thanks to the clearness of the Italian sky, that Derek thought he recognized the features of some of the men inside the barbed wire as they stood looking up at the British aerial reconnaissance aircraft.

There was that stream through which he had waded at Nigel Holt’s invitation to share his hiding-place. The bushes hiding the entrance were still there, but the nearby farm buildings had disappeared to give place to one of the hangars on the new landing-ground.

For the best part of half an hour the officials present discussed the photograph and other matters concerning the Nizza airfield and the camp.

Then Derek was told why he had been sent for.

On the 23rd of the month—incidentally it would be St. George’s Day and the anniversary of Zeebrugge—or on the first suitable day following if atmospheric conditions made it necessary for operations to be postponed—there were to be heavy raids simultaneously on Turin, Milan, Genoa and Spezzia. While these were in progress, fifteen troop-carrying aircraft, each carrying ten men in addition to its normal crew, were to drop their human cargoes on or near the Nizza airfield.

These airborne troops had a twofold mission—to release the British prisoners and to capture the aerodrome, clear the landing-ground of enemy aircraft, and then to signal to their own aircraft to alight.

The released prisoners, estimated not to exceed fifty in all, could be easily distributed amongst the troop-carrying planes; then, after the raiders had played havoc with enemy aircraft and buildings, they, too, would climb on board for their return flight.

The whole operation, from the time the first aircraft arrived over Nizza until the last one had left for home, was to be compressed into the space of

forty minutes.

“That’s the general scheme,” the president continued. “You, Dundas, will be responsible for getting the leading aircraft over the place, for bringing her down when the airfield has been seized, and cleared, and for taking off again. That is a heavy responsibility, but with your record and experience you will, I feel sure, bear it out. You will report to Cattisbourne to-morrow and will be given further instructions. The paratroops are already attached to that station for operational training, so liaison should be perfect by the time the show starts. Now, are there any points upon which you require information?”

Derek thought not; at least there were none he dared raise. He would like to know whether the British prisoners had received a warning through secret channels of the impending attempt to effect their release.

Once clear of the Air Ministry buildings, he lost no time in getting lunch at his club and then catching the next train to Marlborough. On the way he reflected grimly upon tricks that the war played on one. After all his adventures and escape from Italy he was entitled to leave on his return to England; yet between landing and London he had been within twelve miles of his home without the faintest chance of seeing it earlier than the end of the month. Perhaps he never would!

Nor was he particularly impressed by his reception at Cattisbourne. Except for certain of the so-called “permanent staff”, there were few who greeted him by name. In the space of four months there had been many changes. Most of the pilots he knew had gone. Some had been posted to other stations, at home or abroad; others had gone on operational flights and had not returned. Of these many never would; others were prisoners of war. They had been replaced by fresh drafts from training establishments, so it was not to be wondered at that few recognized him. When he asked after several he had been friendly with, no one seemed to know what had happened to them, or if they did it was usually “missing on op. flight”, until Derek couldn’t bring himself to continue with his inquiries. There had been many flights over Germany in which the squadron had taken part, and although their losses nightly were light in the aggregate, they made quite a formidable list.

But Derek had other things to occupy his mind and to tax his physical ability. He’d seen airborne troops hurling themselves from their carriers, but he had never had the handling of one of these craft.

In practice he discovered that the aircraft did not differ in speed and manoeuvrability from the bombers to which he was accustomed. In place of the bomb-load was the human cargo, although the defensive armament was retained. Since the distance to Northern Italy demanded speed in order to get the job done within a certain time-limit, there could be no possibility of using gliders towed by power aircraft, so each of the fifteen carriers was a self-contained unit.

At length the evening before the day fixed for the raid arrived. The glass was high with a slight tendency to fall. What wind there was came from the south-east, while the moon, now on the wane, had yet sufficient brilliance to render unnecessary the use of flares over the target area.

Well on time the fifteen troop-carriers took off, the leader waiting till the last was airborne. Then they joined in the stupendous armada of aircraft, drawn from fifty aerodromes mostly in the west Midlands, and all streaming out across the English Channel, bound for Northern Italy.

By the time Derek had brought his aircraft over the Alps, which meant gaining an altitude of sixteen thousand feet, icing conditions had been experienced, while in addition several of the troops were feeling the effects of a deficit of oxygen. But the fires already started in Turin and Genoa livened the men up considerably. Flak was coming up from the former place but not in any strength, nor were the searchlights particularly active.

Compared with the opposition Derek had encountered when he had had to bale out over the city, the Italian anti-aircraft measures were decidedly weaker. It looked as if the severe hammering these cities had previously received had “knocked the stuffing out of them”.

Not that Derek worried about that. Turin no longer claimed his attention. His particular task was to locate the airfield and prisoners-of-war camp at Nizza.

It should be easy to locate, situated as it is practically midway between Turin and Genoa and on the river Belbo.

But it wasn't! In fact Derek overshot the target before he realized that it actually was the town of Nizza. The camp had not been camouflaged, but the aerodrome buildings adjoining had been skilfully concealed from aerial observation. There were at least twenty aircraft dispersed on the ground, the Italians having made no attempt to take-off to intercept the strong force of bombers that had already passed overhead on their way to Genoa.

The troop-carriers turned in obedience to the leader's order. Since there was no wind it was immaterial in what direction the aircraft touched down. Before they did that they would have to disgorge their armed passengers.

Down to five hundred feet! Not a sign from the ground to show that the defenders of the aerodrome were on their toes.

Now the aircraft Derek was piloting was in the favourable position for the men to jump. All of them had jumped several times before, but for most it was the first occasion on which they were to alight on enemy territory.

The signal was given. The hatch in the floor of the fuselage was opened and in quick succession the ten paratroops dropped into space.

By the time Derek had swung his aircraft round his "little lot", each man swinging under the fabric of his parachute, was safely on his way earthwards. Although his rate of descent was considerably in excess of that of a pilot compelled to "bale out", each man had been trained how to touch down without injury to his legs.

Now the other aircraft were discharging their quotas. On the rough ground to the west of the prisoners' camp, where Derek had once so cautiously made his way, the paratroops, disengaging themselves from their parachute harness, were emptying the arms-containers that had been dropped from the aircraft.

Then one party rushed to seize the aerodrome while another and smaller one made straight for the entrance gates to the prisoners' camp.

Cruising round until he received the signal that the runways were clear, Derek could see little to indicate how things were going on the ground. There was a little machine-gunning and spasmodic rifle firing; but, as he subsequently learned, the troops supposed to be guarding the flying field put up a decidedly poor show.

Actually the British paratroops had things almost entirely their own way. Their morale badly shaken by reports that were coming in of abnormally heavy air attacks upon Turin, Genoa and other cities of Northern Italy, the Fascist militia who were supposed to be guarding Nizza aerodrome bolted before the concerted rush of their attackers.

The paratroops, their faces blackened, overran the staff buildings. Only a few shots were exchanged before those of the Italians who were not fleeing for dear life held up their hands in token of surrender.

Led by a young second-lieutenant who could speak Italian fairly well, half a dozen men burst open the doors of the control tower. Inside they found a Nazi *Hauptman* who would have offered resistance but for the fact that two Italian officers had covered him with their revolvers, threatening to shoot if he offered resistance to the invaders!

The German was promptly made prisoner, while one of the Italians begged that his own life and that of his fellow-countryman would be spared. Terrified by the appearance of the savage-looking British, he was under the mistaken apprehension that these paratroops gave no quarter!

“I am married man and have four children!” he whined.

The “second loot”, recalling a story that had gone the rounds in the last war, applied it to the present case.

“Your wife will be a widow with four orphans!” he amended in Italian. “That is unless you show me the switch for lighting the flare-path!”

“*Si, si, Capitano!*” agreed the Italian, giving his captor brevet rank. “The switch, I show you. I operate it for you!”

“Not so fast!” exclaimed the British officer peremptorily; then ordering two of his men to remove the German, he waited for the expected information that the landing-ground was ready to receive the still hovering troop-carrier aircraft.

As the Boche was being taken away he gave the British officer a formal salute and the Italian a glance that showed all too clearly what he thought of his Axis partners.

With a snarl the Fascist, who had surrendered his automatic pistol, drew a dagger that his captors had so far overlooked. Had it not been for the prompt intervention on the part of a British sergeant he would have plunged the weapon into the back of the German.

Leaving two more of his men to guard the treacherous Italian, the British subaltern waited at one of the observation windows while the main body of paratroops proceeded with their prearranged task.

This they did most effectively and with dispatch.

The aircraft on the runways were manhandled out of the way and then destroyed by means of demolition charges. The dispersed machines were set on fire; while other British troops made as much of a mess of hangars and workshops as if they had been hit by four-thousand-pounder “cookies”.

In just under half an hour from the time the first carrier discharged its quota of paratroops, Derek saw double lines of blue lights gleam on the flare-path. Apart from the signal that the runways were clear they were hardly necessary, for the huge fires from burning buildings and destroyed aircraft were quite sufficient to light the way.

It was like coming down between an irregular-shaped horseshoe of flame topped by clouds of smoke. Since there was no wind the smoke rose almost vertically, giving the impression that the aircraft were swooping down between the walls of a canyon.

Making a faultless three-point landing, Derek taxied his aircraft to the end of the flare-path. Here men were waiting, each party allocated to the plane in which they had made the outward journey, to manhandle the aircraft round, so that when it came to taking-off Derek's would be the last to do so.

Meanwhile, with the regularity of clockwork, the other carriers came bowling along the flare-path to be dealt with in a similar manner.

Then Derek saw a sight that, above everything else connected with present operations, he had been waiting for.

Coming through the smoke and guided by khaki-clad figures looking more like demons from the lower regions than British Tommies was a batch of men mostly bareheaded and wearing nondescript garments. Some carried small bundles, others nothing but what they stood up in.

Eagerly Derek scanned the faces of the rescued prisoners. Most of them had been shown to their allotted places in the waiting aircraft. So far he had recognized no one.

He was beginning to think that the captured crew of "S for Sylvia" had been transferred to another camp, when right at the tail-end of the procession came the men for whom he was seeking.

"Hello, Taffy! Hello, Holt!" he shouted. "Come on, you fellows. In you hop!"

There was a momentary pause, then:

"Why, dashed if it isn't Old Lofty!" almost shouted Flying-officer Nigel Holt, who was hardly able to accept the evidence of his own eyes.

"Quite correct!" agreed Derek. "Hurry up; we're two minutes behind time already."

The rescued men scrambled on board.

“I never expected you’d roll up to pull us out of this hole,” declared Holt.

“Neither did I,” replied Derek with a delighted grin. “At least until a couple of days ago. Make yourselves scarce, you fellows. We’ve a long way to go yet!”

One by one the troop-carrier aircraft, the weight of their additional passengers compensated by that of the petrol burned on the outward flight, rose steadily through the smoke-laden air.

The paratroops had accomplished the task they had set out to do. At the cost of four men slightly wounded they had effected the rescue of forty-nine British prisoners of war in Italian hands, and had left such a trail of destruction behind them that Nizza as an airfield would be out of commission for an indefinite period.

Not until the returning aircraft were within sight of the English coast did Derek send out a radio message—one that gave him perhaps the most gratifying moment of his career.

It was: “Combined operations successfully accomplished as ordered!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Combined Operations* by Percy F. Westerman]