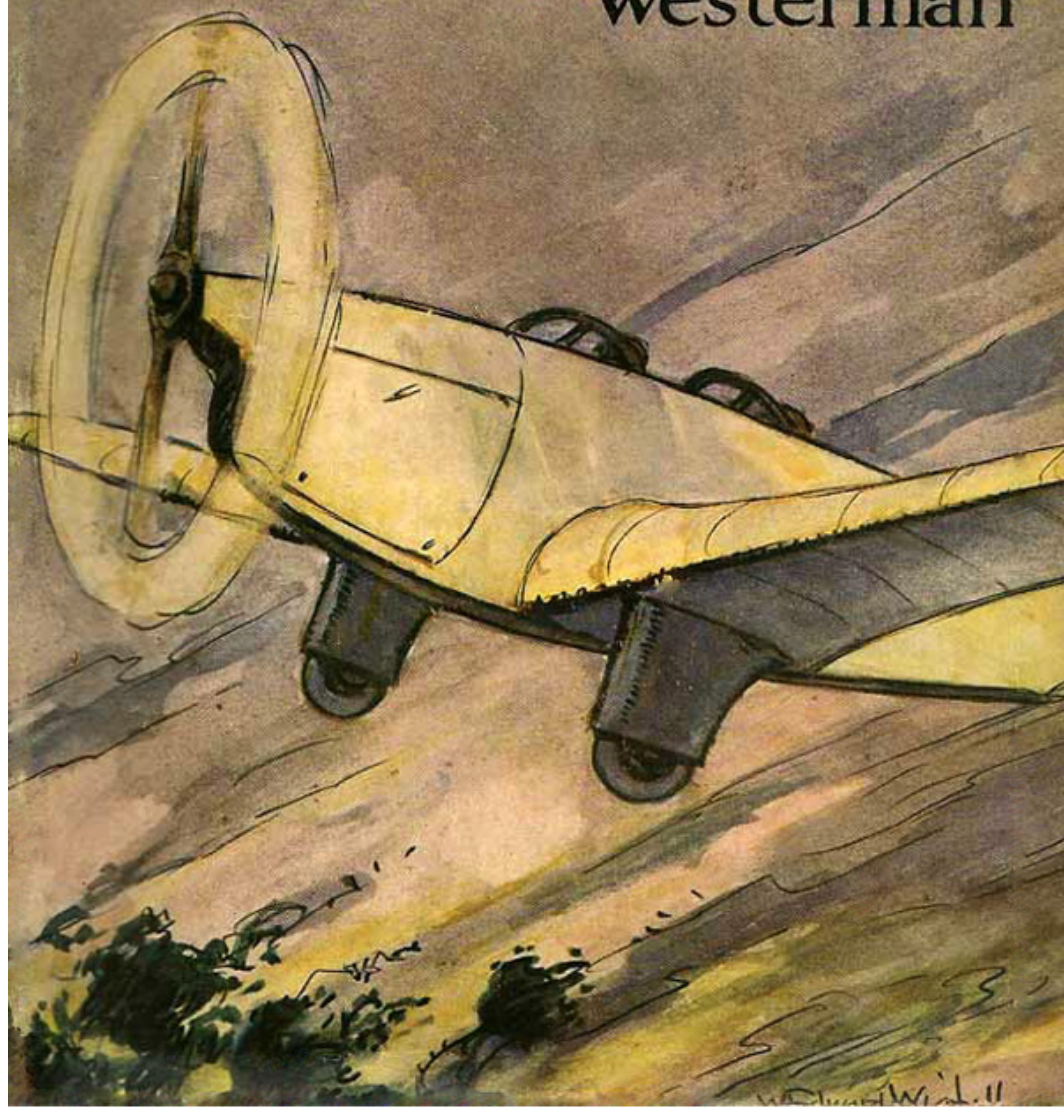


# RINGED BY FIRE

Percy F.  
Westerman



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E 873

A SLENDER CHANCE

Page 134

Frontispiece

# RINGED BY FIRE

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "The Black Hawk" &c.

*Illustrated by W. Edward Wigfull*

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED  
LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Percy F. Westerman

Captain Flick.

Tireless Wings.

His First Ship.

The Red Pirate.

The Call of the Sea.

Standish of the Air Police.

Sleuths of the Air.

The Black Hawk.

Andy All-Alone.

The Westow Talisman.

The White Arab.

The Buccaneers of Boya.

Rounding up the Raider.

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In Defiance of the Ban.

The Senior Cadet.

The Amir's Ruby.

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The Wireless Officer.

A Lad of Grit.

The Submarine Hunters.

Sea Scouts All.

The Thick of the Fray at Zeebrugge.

A Sub and a Submarine.

Under the White Ensign.

With Beatty off Jutland.

The Dispatch Riders.

A Cadet of the Mercantile Marine.



# Contents

CHAP.	Page
I. A SOFT JOB OR——?	<a href="#">9</a>
II. FORCED DOWN-	<a href="#">19</a>
III. THREATENED	<a href="#">30</a>
IV. THE MAUDLIN MANAGER	<a href="#">39</a>
V. THE WRECKED MONOPLANE	<a href="#">48</a>
VI. AN AWKWARD MISTAKE	<a href="#">59</a>
VII. THE CONSPIRATORS-	<a href="#">75</a>
VIII. WHAT THE BOY REVEALED	<a href="#">81</a>
IX. THE END OF THE VIGIL-	<a href="#">91</a>
X. CAUGHT	<a href="#">101</a>
XI. IN CAPTIVITY	<a href="#">111</a>
XII. A CHECK	<a href="#">120</a>
XIII. RINGED IN BY FIRE-	<a href="#">129</a>
XIV. INSPIRATION	<a href="#">140</a>
XV. THE INNER CAVE	<a href="#">149</a>
XVI. THE INTERCEPTED LORRY	<a href="#">160</a>
XVII. AN UNLUCKY JOY-RIDE-	<a href="#">169</a>
XVIII. DOPED!	<a href="#">181</a>
XIX. THROUGH THE RACE	<a href="#">191</a>
XX. A SCRAP AND A RESCUE	<a href="#">199</a>
XXI. ROUNDED UP	<a href="#">210</a>
XXII. DUTY CALLS	<a href="#">218</a>



# Illustrations

	Facing Page
A SLENDER CHANCE - - - - -	<a href="#"><i>Frontispiece</i></a>
STANDISH HEAVED AND HAULED-	<a href="#">48</a>
WILD WORK AT TILLY WHIM - - - - -	<a href="#">96</a>
ALMOST LOST! - - - - -	<a href="#">192</a>

# RINGED BY FIRE

# CHAPTER I

## A Soft Job or——?

“I’m having you transferred at once, Standish,” announced Colonel Robartes, Superintendent of the North-Eastern Division of the Royal Air Constabulary.

Colin Standish tried not to show his disappointment. He had been very happy at Hawkscar. It was not pleasant to think of parting from his brother officers, staunch comrades all in peril and stout adventures, especially his chum—Don Grey.

“I shall be sorry to leave Hawkscar, sir.”

“No doubt,” rejoined Colonel Robartes drily. He, too, knew that comradeship, especially comradeship of the air, is a bond not easily broken. “No doubt; but duty before everything, Standish!”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Glad to hear you say that, Standish,” continued the superintendent briskly. “However, you won’t be sent very far away, and if you have your usual luck you’ll be back here within a month or so. You know Dorset pretty well?”

Of course Standish did. He had spent most of his boyhood days in that county. He had commenced his air career at the Far Eastern Airways’ principal aerodrome at Bere Regis. From there he had flown on his two adventurous missions—that of the Amir’s Ruby and the affair of the Westow Talisman.

“Yes, sir.”

“Of course. You were at Bere Regis Aerodrome. Shows I haven’t refreshed my memory by studying your *dossier*. You start your next job with the great advantage of knowing the district in which your work lies. It may not sound very exciting; but, as often happens, there may be a lot behind it. You’ve heard about all these heath fires in Dorset?”

“Seventeen last week, I understand, sir.”

“Seventeen if not more. Now, even taking into consideration the prolonged dry spell, that number of fires—serious all of them—cannot owe their origin to natural conditions. The heat of the sun and spontaneous combustion of peaty ground can be safely ruled out. Sparks from a railway engine might account for three of the conflagrations, but in other cases the scene of the outbreak is remote from railways and roads. Hikers have been blamed; but people of that sort appreciate the countryside too much to destroy its beauties, even through carelessness.”

“Is anyone suspected, sir?”

“I should certainly think so, but so far the county police have nothing to go on. They’ve applied for Royal Air Constabulary co-operation. That’s why I’m sending you.”

If the truth be told, Standish did not feel particularly keen about the job. It seemed a dull sort of business flying aimlessly over miles of desolate heathland looking for—in all probability—a half-witted youth or a man of unsound mind whose amusement it was to set fire to patches of gorse and heather. Yet it would be pleasant to be down in Dorset again—his boyhood’s home county. A sort of mild relaxation after his wild adventures with gangs of desperate international crooks.

“Do you wish me to take one of the H machines, sir?”

“One of the H machines, and advertise the fact that you’re a member of the Force to anyone who chances to lift up his eyes and gaze into the sky? That would be a deterrent to the incendiary, but he’d just lie low until the air patrol was withdrawn and then start his merry game all over again. What I want you to do, and what you must do, is to surprise the fellow in the act, keep him under observation while you wireless the nearest police station, and see that they get him. That’s simple enough, isn’t it?”

“No, sir.”

“Eh?” The superintendent raised his bushy eyebrows and glanced sharply at his subordinate. He wasn’t used to having his judgment criticized. “What do you mean, eh?”

“You imply that I am to fly solo, sir, in a bus that is indistinguishable from private light aeroplanes.”

Colonel Robartes waggled his forefinger accusingly.

“Now, I know what you’re angling for, young man!” he exclaimed. “You want me to send your chum Grey with you?”

Colin Standish was too honest to deny this implication. At the same time, any other member of the flying police would serve his purpose.

“I’d like to take Grey, sir,” he replied. “We sort of understand each other. And for observation purposes, sending out wireless reports, and——”

“And what?” inquired the superintendent, noticing the other’s hesitation. “Carry on, I’m listening.”

“Well, sir, supposing the fires are being started by a gang operating in a car——”

He paused again. It seemed rather absurd to suggest that a gang would have nothing better to do than to roam a certain district and set fire to heathland. There seemed to be no object in it, and yet—he remembered that there was a vast naval cordite factory at Holton Heath, surrounded by acres of highly inflammable gorse.

“That probability cannot be overlooked, Standish.”

“What then, sir? With an H machine we could bring the magneto-cutout apparatus into action and hold the car up while some of our crew could land to effect an arrest.”

“Too obvious, employing a service machine, as I said before,” objected Colonel Robartes. “I’ll spare Grey to go with you. I had meant him to investigate that fish-poaching case off Whitby, but I’ll detail Willis for that. You’ll take a two-seater observation bus—I’ll leave you to make your own arrangements with the Air Ministry concerning the identification markings—but you’d better take the spraying apparatus. You may find that handy. By the by, I shall not require any reports from you until the business is settled one way or other.”

“Very good, sir.”

“And another thing. When you get south it would be as well to pay a call at the customs office at Poole. They’re a bit worried about something that may or may not be connected with the fire-raising business. That’s all, I think. I’ll see that Murchison gets your papers through by midday and then you can start off immediately. Good luck!”

Crossing the parade-ground on his way to the officers’ mess, Colin caught sight of his chum Don, who, in civilian garb, was carrying a small suitcase.

“Hallo!” exclaimed Standish. “What’s up?”

“Off for the week-end,” replied the other. “Had to apply for special leave. I meant to look you up and tell you before I went.”

“Very urgent?”

“Very.”

There was a pause—a sort of uncomfortable silence.

Grey, usually so communicative, had made no effort to give explanations.

“Well, I’m sorry,” observed Standish.

“You needn’t be.”

“But I am.”

Curiosity got the better of Don’s reticence.

“Why?”

“Because I’m off on special duty. Just had instructions from Colonel Robartes. I wangled it that you should breeze along too.”

“Right-o. I’m on it!” declared Grey.

“But your urgent leave?”

“Can wait,” replied Don crisply. “Come along. I’ll tell the taxi fellow I shan’t want him. Now, what’s the latest stunt?”

Standish explained.

“Doesn’t look as if we’re going to add to the ‘hurt aggregate’,” observed Don. “Pretty tame business, I think.”

In referring to the “hurt aggregate” he implied that he did not consider the undertaking a risky one. In the orderly-room a record is kept of the number of days lost in that branch of the Royal Air Constabulary owing to officers and men incapacitated through “hurts” and sickness. This record showed how hazardous was their work in combating crime and how healthy the life was in other respects. During the first year of its existence, Hawkscar showed nearly two thousand days “hurts” and ninety-four days on the sick list.

“Well, if it is, then it will be a sort of rest-cure,” said Colin. “We can both do with that after the Down ’em Gang set-to. If it isn’t—and Robartes hinted at something behind it—then all I hope is that we have our usual luck.”

By two o'clock in the afternoon the chums were ready to take off. Their machine, a two-seater single-engined monoplane, had been given a distinguishing letter and number, as in the case of privately owned buses. It was otherwise indistinguishable from thousands of its type; but there was a difference.

In the floor of the after-cockpit was a small box-like arrangement on a swivelled mounting and with a nozzle projecting downwards through a slot. This was what Colonel Robartes had referred to as the "spraying apparatus". Actually it was a modified form of a quick-firing gun—the propellant being compressed air. But instead of discharging metal shells it fired circular missiles made of celluloid. These contained strong aniline dye which, spreading upon impact, covered their object with an indelible stain.

Underneath the deck and close to the observer's seat was a small but efficient wireless set capable of sending out and receiving messages over a radius of two hundred miles by day. Ready to hand were a pair of earphones, while in the coaming in front of the bucket seat was a small lamp that showed a red light whenever a message intended for the occupants was sent out on this particular wave-length.

Stowing their personal belongings under the deck, the two chums, both of whom were now in plain clothes, made a brief but comprehensive test of the engine and controls, boarded their bus and, giving their confrères a cheery farewell, took off into the blue.

Or, rather, into the clouds, for the sky was obscured by a flat layer of fleecy vapour in suspension, which was just what Standish wanted.

Outside the unclimbable iron fence enclosing the aerodrome there were at least fifty people watching the proceedings. Quite possibly most of them were there out of pure curiosity. On the other hand, there might be some with other intentions. They might take more than ordinary interest in the monoplane that differed from the huge H-type aircraft that formed part of the standard equipment of the Royal Air Constabulary.

So, climbing steeply, Standish headed his bus northwards until she was well above the bank of clouds. Then, secure from earthly observation, he swung her round and headed southwards.

Half an hour later, in a now cloudless sky, the two chums noticed that they were over a large river. They knew exactly where they were. The river was the Trent; they had flown over it several times.



“We’re out of the North-eastern Area now,” said Don, speaking through the voice-tube. “Not doing so badly.”

There were at least a dozen aircraft within sight—a liner bound from Croydon to Edinburgh and Aberdeen, a Post Office plane conveying letters and parcels from South Wales to Lincoln and Hull, and the rest seemed to be private machines.

Suddenly—for neither of the two sub-inspectors had glanced astern—a huge triple-engined biplane overtook them at at least one hundred and eighty miles an hour.

Colin recognized it as one of the Royal Air Constabulary machines belonging to the Midland Area, and which differed considerably in design from the H’s of his division.

He waved. There was no response. Swiftly and majestically the other machine drew ahead, swerved slightly, and took up a position less than fifty yards ahead.

From the tail of the fuselage a green light, clearly visible in the strong sunshine, suddenly flashed. It was a signal known to every airman.

It meant: “Stop, land immediately!”

## CHAPTER II

# Forced Down

“Got a bee in his bonnet, that speed cop!” exclaimed Grey. “What are you going to do about it, old son?”

Under other conditions Standish might have felt inclined to “lead the Midland Air Constabulary a dance”; but it was imperative that he should be in Dorset well before sunset.

He touched a button on the dashboard. Above the centre of the wing-span a small oval disc appeared displaying the Royal Coat of Arms and the letters R.A.C. This was the identification disc used only between Royal Air Constabulary machines.

The green light ahead was switched off, only to reappear five seconds later. It was an acknowledgment that the disc had been observed; but it also meant that the biplane’s crew were not satisfied, for some reason.

Standish held on. He felt peeved. The action of the Royal Air Constabulary’s crew seemed inexplicable. Had they wanted to communicate any information they could have done so by wireless, without ordering him to volplane to earth as if he had been a suspect.

His blood boiled when a few seconds later his engine konked out. The other machine had released a ray that had polarized the magneto of his engine. Until that numbing influence was removed the monoplane was not even as efficient as a mere sailplane.

The only thing to be done was to dive steeply, alight, and get the exasperating business over. He tried to think of the blistering remark he would make to that unknown sub-inspector when they met.

Swooping swiftly earthwards, Standish kept his eyes skinned for a suitable landing-ground. Fortunately he was over the rich grazing district of the Trent valley, where it was easy to descend. In the distance he could see the factory chimneys of Leicester and the surrounding industrial hamlets. The way the smoke was blowing enabled him to land head to wind.

He swung his bus eastwards. So did the pilot of the monoplane. Below was a large, gently sloping field, surrounded by hedges and with a row of

tall trees and a wide ditch dead to wind'ard.

"I'll make 'em sit up!" he muttered. "The bone-heads!"

He reckoned that if he could prolong the volplane and time his descent to enable his bus to stop within a few feet of those trees the biplane would have to zoom, clear the tree tops, and come to earth at least two hundred yards away. He pictured the wrathful indignation of the sub-inspector and his men at having to wade through what was probably a muddy ditch and force their way through a thick-set hedge before they could get to him.

Apparently the pilot of the biplane divined his purpose. Banking steeply, he swung round until he was almost on Standish's tail. The paralysing rays held Colin's bus in their inexorable grip.

The monoplane bumped gently, taxied for about fifty yards, and came to a standstill with her nose almost touching the hedge. For taking off Standish could hardly have chosen a worse place.

Indignantly Standish and Grey alighted. In the event of an argument a person sitting down is at a disadvantage. They saw the biplane descend and a uniformed sub-inspector and five constables alight.

"What does this mean?" demanded the sub-inspector, a big, beefy-faced individual who struck Standish as being a blusterer. "You saw the stop signal. Why didn't you obey at once?"

"You saw our identity disc," rejoined Colin. "If you had anything to communicate, why didn't you do so by wireless?"

"None of your lip, my fine fellow," exclaimed the other. "You claim to be Royal Air Constabulary officers. Where are your warrant cards? I'm too old a bird to be caught by chaff!"

"You certainly look an old bird," retorted Standish coolly. "Here you are; now are you satisfied?"

The sub-inspector looked at both Standish's and Grey's warrant cards, the constables peering over his shoulder as he did so.

"H'm: Inspector Colin Standish and Sub-Inspector Donald Grey—perhaps," he remarked with a sneer. "I'm placing both of you under arrest. Get the bracelets on 'em, men!"

This was wholly illegal. It was not even the usual police procedure of making an arrest, since the charge was not stated.

“One moment!” exclaimed Colin authoritatively. “Where’s your warrant card?”

“Here!” snapped the fellow, pointing to a pair of handcuffs held by one of his subordinates. “Come on, now; no nonsense!”

If either Standish or Grey had had their doubts they were now convinced. Their would-be arresters were not members of the Royal Air Constabulary. For some reason—and the thought flashed through Colin’s mind that there were several—they were attempting to kidnap two genuine officers.

“They’ve streaked after us all the way from Hawkscar,” he thought. Then aloud:

“Stand back! Put your hands up!”

He whipped his automatic from the side pocket of his flying-coat. Don did the same.

The five men drew back but made no attempt to obey the second of Colin’s orders.

They knew perfectly well that an air constable is not entitled to use firearms except in self-defence, and then only if he has reasonable ground for suspecting that his life is in danger.

Probably the would-be kidnappers were armed too. Either they were afraid to shoot or else afraid to draw, covered as they were by the pistols of two now cool and determined men.

“You’ll hear more about this!” snapped the bogus sub-inspector. “Come along, you men!”

He swung on his heel and walked back to the waiting biplane, his companions following his example. There was no chance of their being shot in the back.

Colin was thinking hard.

Since this country differs very considerably from the “wild and woolly west”, it is not within the right of the civil law to round up criminals at the point of the pistol. Physically he and Don were strong, but not capable of tackling eight desperate men; since those who had remained in the biplane would almost certainly come to their friends’ assistance.

Yet for the honour of the Royal Air Constabulary something must be done.

“Come on, Don!” he exclaimed in a low voice. “We’ve got to cripple that bus.”

The would-be kidnappers retired in good order and climbed into the biplane. Their trouble in taking off, if they succeeded in so doing, would be similar to Standish’s. They must turn, taxi down-wind to the other side of the field, turn again and gather sufficient ground speed for the take-off.

The question was, how to stop them? Damaging the rudder and tail fins might do; on the other hand, a triple-engined bus can steer by throttle control. Several instances occurred during the War of pilots bringing their machines down in safety even with the tail of the bus shot away.

The vulnerable part of the biplane was her petrol tanks. These, in order to economize space, were built into the metal wings of the upper plane—of strong, though light, rustless steel. Was the metal stout enough to stop a .230 nickle-coated bullet?

Keeping “well from under”, Colin fired. A stream of petrol gushed through the bullet hole. Then he ought to have left well alone and directed his attention to the other wing tank. Possibly it was excitement, probably the determination to do the business thoroughly. At all events he fired a second shot.

The result exceeded his expectations. A spurt of reddish flame issued from both bullet holes, rapidly increasing in intensity until the petrol-fed tongues of fire soared twenty feet or more into the air.

“Get your fire-extinguishers to work!” shouted Standish to the crew.

He had disabled the bus right enough. There was no need to turn it into a huge bonfire. Technically, he had committed the crime of arson.

His exhortation fell upon deaf ears; or, if the crew did hear, they were too astounded to take action. Their whole desire seemed to be to get clear away.

They jumped and took to their heels across the field, with Standish and Don in hot pursuit.

Now, at last, was the chance to make an arrest or two by pouncing on the stragglers at the tail-end of the fugitives.

Standish in the course of his duty had been one of several constables in pursuit of a gang. Invariably the fugitives had scattered. In this case there was no attempt to disperse. The rascals could run. They outstripped their pursuers even though the two chums had hastily thrown off their flying-

coats; and they kept together in a pretty solid group so that there were no laggards who could be overtaken and captured.

Through the first hedge the fugitives forced their way with only a slight loss of lead. They had more than regained it by the time they were across the next field.

Their pursuers stuck it grimly. It looked like a losing game for them, but something might happen to enable them to overtake their quarry.

This went on for over a mile.

Colin and his chum were getting their “second wind” when, to their dismay, they saw that the eight men had gained a high road. Actually it was in the Fosse Way running between the outskirts of Leicester to Newark in an almost straight line and with hardly a village on it for nearly the whole of that distance.

Usually there was a large amount of motor traffic on it. Now it was almost deserted except for a lorry proceeding towards Newark.

From a distance of about two hundred yards Standish and Grey saw the end of the pursuit, as far as they were directly concerned.

The gang stopped the lorry, jumped in and compelled the scared driver to make it travel far in excess of the legal speed limit. By the time the two sub-inspectors had gained the tarmac the lorry and their quarry were out of sight.

About a minute later a saloon car came along in the same direction. Standish signalled it to stop. The driver accelerated. How was he to know that these two civilians were Royal Air Constabulary officers?

The next car was a sports model driven by a bare-headed youth of about eighteen. He pulled up and grinned cheerfully at the two perspiring, panting chums.

“Too warm for a marathon, eh?” he remarked. “What’s the bright idea? Want a lift?”

Briefly Colin explained the situation.

The youth’s eyes gleamed.

“Hop in,” he exclaimed. “Hang on tight—she’ll do seventy easily.”

It was a tight squeeze—three in that little sports model, but it was a job after the youthful owner’s heart.

How that car moved! Even Standish, accustomed to speed up to two hundred miles an hour, hung on tightly and shut his eyes as the road appeared to move past them at breakneck speed. At the crown of a low bridge she leapt with all four wheels clear of the ground. A gentle curve she took with the off-side wheels a foot in the air. Other cars she simply left standing.

Thought Standish: "Now, if a tyre bursts——"

Although they didn't overtake the lorry or even get a glimpse of her, Standish and Grey found themselves in the police station at Newark, having accomplished the twenty-three mile run in nineteen and a half minutes. They had to harden their hearts and firmly refuse to let their young amateur chauffeur accompany them into the station. There were things to be said that were not for his ears, even though he had played no mean part in the interests of Law and Order.

The telephone and wireless telegraphy got to work. Police cordons were thrown out; mobile police patrols searched a wide area.

All to no purpose.

The lorry in which the gang had made their escape was soon discovered. The pale and agitated driver told how he had been compelled to turn off the main road into a lane leading to Farndon Ferry. There they had left him with a blood-curdling threat as to what would happen to him if he dared to move or raise an alarm within the next twenty minutes. Actually he waited five; then he made his way towards Newark, only to be challenged by a mobile police officer.

Police were immediately dispatched to scour both banks of the River Trent, but, meanwhile, after a brief consultation with the Chief Constable, Colin and Don returned by car to the spot where they had left the fields.

They were feeling rather down in the mouth over the whole business. Not only had they been greatly delayed—it was now close on six o'clock—but an unpleasant fact was evident; some gang, probably in touch with other similar organizations who use aircraft for the maturing of their nefarious schemes, had made a determined attempt to kidnap them. The attempt had failed; the miscreants had got clear—and they were in possession of the fact that Inspector Standish and Sub-Inspector Grey, in civilian clothes and flying a disguised machine, were on their way southwards.

The audacity of the rogues had been astonishing. They had gained possession of a machine that could not readily be distinguished from a Royal



Air Constabulary patrol plane; they had contrived to acquire or else construct a magneto neutralizer—a contrivance hitherto sacred to the fighting and police air forces of the Realm.

Apparently they had gone to all this length merely in an attempt to capture Standish and Grey. For what reason? Revenge, or did they regard these two as a positive menace to their activities?

It looked as if from now onwards Colin and Don were marked men.

## CHAPTER III

# Threatened

Not that Standish and his chum worried very much about that. They had been threatened over and over again. Like most of their brother officers, they had received several anonymous letters which, on the principle that “threatened men live longest”, they had treated with indifference. Their successful efforts in laying the Down ’Em and the Moss gangs by the heels had resulted in several attempts against their lives.

Up to within recent years the habitual criminal in this country was unique in this respect: he rarely, if ever, harboured resentment or revenge against the policeman who had effected his arrest. He regarded it all as part of a game—desperate, it is true. It was a contest between the cunning of the law-breaker on the one hand and the protector of Law and Order on the other. Should the former lose he “took his medicine” more or less cheerfully, and in many instances the ’tects who had been responsible for his arrest also made themselves responsible for looking after his family while he did his “stretch”.

Latterly criminals have changed both their character and their methods. They enlist the latest scientific discoveries in their aid. They are no longer an almost wholly British type. Criminals from the States, from the Continent and from the farthestmost regions of the earth have flocked into the country—men who do not hesitate to resort to violence both in the commission of their crimes and in their efforts, successful or otherwise, to effect their escape.

The motor-car was found to be a valuable ally, and latterly that means of locomotion has been largely superseded by the aeroplane, especially in the execution of schemes planned on the Continent by international crooks.

“I have an idea,” observed Don, as they tramped across the fields towards the place where they had left their monoplane. “Those fellows weren’t really after us.”

“Weren’t they?” queried his chum. “Then who in the name of goodness were they after?”

“It seems to me as if they were after someone else,” continued Colin. “I’ll have to make inquiries from Divisional Headquarters. As likely as not they disguised themselves as R.A.C. men in order to stop and rob someone in a bus resembling ours. They’d hardly go to all that trouble merely to kidnap us.”

“They’ve found out who we are, though.”

“Yes, worse luck. . . . Hallo! What a gallery!”

The biplane that Standish had set on fire (grimly he recollected that his task was to attempt to stamp out arson and he himself had committed that offence) was by this time nothing but a mass of twisted metal and a pile of white embers from which smoke was still rising. Two or three Leicestershire County Constabulary policemen were examining the wreckage, their actions being watched with deep interest by a crowd. It seemed strange where all that number of people could have come from considering that the district was a sparsely populated rural one.

Fortunately the flames had been confined to the would-be kidnapper machine and a small circle of grass. The chums’ monoplane was untouched by fire; but it was certainly being touched by a crowd of yokels. Three or four urchins were dancing about in the cockpit and fiddling with the controls, to the evident satisfaction both of themselves and their parents.

Fortunately the crowd appeared honest, for no one had “pinched” the chums’ leather flying-coats, which they had thrown off at the commencement of the pursuit.

Seeing the two airmen approach, the urchins hurriedly abandoned their new plaything. One of the constables strolled up, produced a notebook and assumed an inquisitorial air.

“Which of you two is in charge of this machine?” he demanded.

“Neither,” replied Standish. “I always understood that the police take charge of abandoned property. You’ve neglected your duty by allowing those children to jump all over this machine instead of——”

“Do you think you’re going to teach me my duty?” interrupted the policeman angrily.

“I really think I am,” rejoined Colin coolly. “Just cast your eye on this.”

For the third time that day he produced his warrant card.

The policeman wilted.

“Very sorry indeed, sir.”

“That’s all right,” said Standish. “We all make mistakes sometimes. Ask the other constables to come here.”

He questioned the trio and discovered that they knew nothing about the affair except that they had been informed by a neighbouring farmer that an aeroplane was on fire.

Standish told them of what had occurred, suggested that they should get into communication with their Chief Constable, and that they’d better get an aeronautical expert to examine the wreckage.

He and Grey then overhauled their monoplane. Hardly any damage had been done, although the youthful intruders had been monkeying with the wireless apparatus. Fortunately the spraying gadget had been overlooked, while the controls, although they had been tampered with, were intact.

With the help of some of the onlookers they swung the bus round, started up and taxied across the field. Then, after a short run, the monoplane resumed its interrupted journey.

Without further incident the monoplane hurried southwards, crossed the Thames just below Oxford and, skirting Salisbury, entered upon the last phase of its flight.

The prolonged spell of hot, dry weather looked like breaking up. In fact, a few miles from the Dorset boundary they encountered a heavy hailstorm.

Standish regretted the change, for two reasons. He hated rain like a cat, even though he had known what thirst means in more than one arid desert. He revelled in the exceptionally fine weather with which Great Britain had been favoured. The second reason was that a heavy downpour would effectually put a stop to the heath fires. That, of course, would relieve a great many people from anxiety, but it would also deprive Standish of any possible chance of arresting the suspected incendiary.

He had previously telephoned to Far Eastern Airways Aerodrome at Bere Regis asking the manager to reserve a private hangar for him for at least a fortnight.

Just before sunset—and an angry looking sun was visible through a rift in the dark wind-torn clouds—the monoplane skimmed the summit of Woodbury and came to earth on the well-known stretch of tarmac from which Colin and Don had taken off on their memorable flight to Bakhistan and to the Egypto-Sudanese frontier.

“Back again, then, Mr. Standish!” exclaimed Symes, the veteran ground foreman. “Don’t say you’ve chucked the Royal Air Constabulary and are coming here to sign on again?”

“Hardly,” replied Colin. “We’re having a sort of spot of leave. I suppose there are some of the old pilots still here. Where’s Mr. Truscott?”

Symes informed him that the managing director was in town and would probably return by car that evening. The curious fact about Mr. Truscott was that he’d never go anywhere by air, preferring the older method of locomotion.

“All right,” continued Standish; “you’ve reserved the hangar? Good; we’ll trundle the bus in. I don’t think we’ll want her to-morrow, do you, Don?”

Grey, glancing up at the rain-teeming clouds, opined that it didn’t look like it.

The monoplane was housed, the chums removed their suitcases, the door of the hangar was locked with a Yale. Standish was given one key, the other Symes retained, and in no circumstances, except in a case of danger from fire, would he open those doors without Standish’s permission—not even at the request of the resident managing director.

“Who’s in the mess?” asked Standish.

“Only Mr. Evans and Mr. Brown,” replied Symes. “You’ll not be knowing them. They joined after you left.”

“Then we’ll push straight on to the Bear,” decided Standish. “You might get a taxi.”

In choosing to stop at an hotel at Wareham—a distance of eight miles from the aerodrome, Colin knew that he and Grey would not be recognized as former pilots in the Far Eastern Airways or as officers of the Royal Air Constabulary. The little town was in the centre of the heath on which a series of mysterious fires had occurred. They stood a good chance of picking up information without their informants knowing that they were on official duties. For the present they would be two tourists exploring the district.

It was a weird drive through the darkness and the rain across the heath. For miles the undulating country had been devastated. The air was thick with the reek of burnt gorse. Here and there the peaty soil was emitting dense smoke in spite of the downpour.

Next morning the rain had cleared away and the sun shone from an unclouded sky.

“Ground’s too damp yet for a heath fire,” remarked Don.

“So we can take a holiday,” rejoined Colin. “We’ll run up to Bere Regis and have a yarn with Truscott; then we may as well go on to Poole and see the customs people there. Colonel Robartes wouldn’t have suggested our doing so unless there’s something in the wind.”

Arriving at the aerodrome they learnt that Mr. Truscott had not returned. He had telephoned from London stating that he had been detained and would probably arrive just before noon.

“May as well hang on,” decided Colin. “There’s no violent hurry. Look here, Don! While we’re waiting I think I’ll have a go at the throttle control. It seemed a bit on the coarse side. Perhaps those kids stretched it.”

They went to the lock-up hangars, threw open both doors to admit plenty of light and ventilation.

Standish swung himself on board.

His chum heard him give a little gasp of astonishment.

“What’s up?” asked Don.

“Look here,” said Colin, pointing to the instrument-board.

Pinned to it was a piece of paper on which was written in red ink and in block capitals:

“WE KNOW WHAT YOU ARE AFTER, INSPECTOR  
STANDISH. UNLESS YOU WANT A BROKEN NECK YOU  
HAD BETTER TRANSFER YOUR ACTIVITIES  
ELSEWHERE. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!”

## CHAPTER IV

# The Maudlin Manager

It was not the threat that had given Standish a nasty jolt. He was used to receiving anonymous letters couched in lurid terms.

What did astonish him was the fact that the missive had been affixed to the instrument-board of the monoplane after the machine had been placed behind locked doors. There were, he felt sure, only two keys to the Yale lock. He held one; Symes the other. Symes was a veritable Cerberus, vigilant, impeccable and above suspicion.

Carefully withdrawing the pin and handling the rectangular piece of paper by its edges, Colin examined the writing. The block letters had been deliberately made—no hurried scrawl. The fact that they were in red ink pointed to the suggestion that the person who had penned the threatening notice had done so at his leisure, and in some place where he had not been liable to interruption. A pencilled scrawl could have been made on the spot. An intruder would not carry red ink about with him. The writing had not been blotted—another fact that showed that the writer had been deliberate.

Probably a microscopic examination might reveal finger-prints. On the other hand, the writer might have worn gloves in order to prevent such incriminating evidence.

Without creasing the paper, Colin placed it carefully in his pocket-book.

“What do you make of it, old son?” he asked.

“Do you remember when we took a stowaway from this very aerodrome?” rejoined Grey. “Some other blighter might have concealed himself when we left the bus yesterday. You didn’t notice her dipping by the stern, did you?”

“No; she was in perfect trim. Your theory won’t hold, though. If there were someone stowed away we must have locked him in here. The lock’s intact.”

“Well, someone’s been in and out; that’s certain,” declared Grey. “Pretty cool customer, too. There doesn’t seem any place where he could have broken in or out.”



They made a careful examination of the hangar. The floor was of concrete, the walls of breeze brick with three small louvre ventilators fifteen feet from the ground, and a few air bricks an inch or so above the floor. The roof was of curved galvanized iron on steel trusses. The whole building was fireproof and without means of egress or ingress except by the door, unless a hole had been made in either the walls or the roof. There was no hole, nor any signs of one having been made.

Surrounding the aerodrome was a so-called unclimbable fence—a metal spiked barrier sufficient to deter most people who had any regard for their skins or their clothes; but one that would present little difficulty to the average cat-burglar. All the same, unless the intruder had entered the main gate under some pretext and had concealed himself until after midnight, he would have not only to scale the fence but to find his way into the hangar by some means that at present was an unsolved mystery. In so doing the chances were that he would have creased the paper. There were no creases. The paper was as fresh as if it had just been taken from a packet.

Throwing off his coat, Standish tackled the job he had in mind—the adjustment of the throttle control.

Then they relocked the hangar doors and made their way to the mess-room.

There were now half a dozen pilots, four of whom Colin and Don knew. They greeted the newcomers boisterously, chaffing them at being so bored stiff with a flying policeman's job that they were only too glad to re-engage with Far Eastern Airways and see life.

"You haven't met these two birds," said Dixon. "Bright lads both of them—this is Evans, this is Brown. Standish and Grey were pilots here when you were being licked into shape at school."

"Of course we know of you," said Evans smilingly. "I'm glad to make your acquaintance."

Conversation became general. Presently, without any leading question by either Standish or Grey, the subject of the recent heath fire was brought up.

"No joke making for the 'drome a few days ago," declared Dixon. "I was bringing a crowd from the south of France. You couldn't see Bere Regis a mile away. Smoke from acres of burning heath rising a thousand feet up. You mayn't believe it, but there were bits of burning wood thrown up into the air well above the smoke cloud."

“Windy?” asked Standish laconically.

“Rather. Burning embers drifting into the cockpit make you wonder what might happen if there’s any leaking petrol pipe union. A few weeks ago I had the job of flying over the crater of Vesuvius. London press photographer’s stunt. By Jove! It was child’s play compared to dashing through that smoke cloud.”

“Worse than a sandstorm, then,” remarked Colin. “Any chance of another fire?”

“We’ve had quite enough around here, thank you,” replied Dixon. “’Sides, the ground’s pretty sodden with last night’s rain. All the same, if there should be one I’d advise you to keep clear, even if you have a gas-mask, which I bet you haven’t. But when there was a big blaze at Sandford the other day—there were three quite distinct heath fires that afternoon—there were half a dozen buses buzzing around.”

“What for?” asked Grey.

“Aerial photographs for the press, of course,” replied Dixon. “What do you think they were—a fire brigade?”

“What do you think is the cause of all these outbreaks?” asked Standish.

“Dunno: seems too big a thing to be accidental every time.”

“I know for a fact that someone’s been starting them,” declared Evans.

“What do you mean?”

“Last Monday week I was coming back from Wool in my car. I was alone,” explained the young pilot. “On the bend near the top of Gallow’s Hill I surprised a fellow deliberately firing the gorse. He’d got down from a car to do it.”

“And what then?”

“He hopped back into his car and drove off like mad.”

“And you chased him. Didn’t you get the number of the car?” asked someone.

“I did neither,” explained Evans. “I thought it was the best thing to stamp the fire out. Wouldn’t you?”

“You informed the police, I suppose?” asked Standish.

Evans grinned.

“I don’t mind admitting that you’re the first policeman I’ve mentioned it to,” he answered. “You see, I’d forgotten my driving licence. I should have been asked for it, and as I didn’t feel like being touched for ten bob by the local beaks, I gave the police a wide berth. . . . Hallo! Here’s the boss! Looks as if he’s had a night of it.”

Through one of the windows Standish caught sight of his former employer. Mr. Truscott had just returned from town in his saloon car. His face was flushed. He walked somewhat unsteadily. Somehow he looked different from the pompous, self-confident resident managing director of the days when Colin and Don were under his orders.

“He’s taken to bending his elbow a lot recently,” explained Dixon. “Bad example to pilots, only none of us has imitated him so far.”

“I suppose we’d better see him,” said Standish, picking up his cap. “Come along, Don; cheerio, you fellows. We must try to arrange an evening in Bournemouth before my leave’s up.”

On their way across the tarmac to Truscott’s private office Standish remarked:

“Dixon was right. Our old boss has been imbibing a bit too freely. It’s a pity; he used to be very abstemious in the old days.”

“He certainly surprised me,” admitted Grey.

“I meant to take him into our confidence and to tell him why we’re here,” continued Colin. “It wouldn’t be safe to do that now. ‘When wine’s in wit’s out’, you know. We’ll have to pitch the same yarn as we told the others.”

There was a strange messenger-boy in the lobby. The chums gave their names.

“Appointment? ’Cause Mr. Truscott won’t see anyone except by appointment.”

“Loyal lad,” thought Standish. “Trying to boom off visitors while the boss is like that.”

“Yes, appointment,” he replied.

The resident general manager was sitting in a low armchair. He made an effort to rise, but gave it up.

“My word, you two!” he exclaimed. “Until I got your telephone message yesterday I didn’t expect to see you here again. ’Scuse my not rising; touch

of lumbago or something. Take a chair, each of you. Spot?"

The chums sat down, but declined the offer of a drink. There was an awkward silence.

"Well; sorry you left the company and became Air cops?" inquired Truscott. "Not thinking of asking for re-engagements, eh?"

"No; sort of holiday," replied Colin.

"Sort of holiday? Does that mean you've what they call a case on down this way?"

It was a point-blank question. Standish hesitated and wondered whether the manager in his present slightly bibulous state would notice it.

"If there had been anything of that sort you would have heard of it," he rejoined. "I suppose you are of the opinion that the local heath fires are the work of an incendiary?"

"I'm not," replied Truscott, raising his voice. "And supposing they were, you'd better transfer your activities elsewhere. We don't want the aerodrome set on fire as a protest because we're harbouring two Royal Air Constabulary officers."

He broke off and then uttered a cackling laugh.

"He, he! Can't help pulling your leg, Standish. As if such a thing would happen. The cause is simple enough. Ground dry as tinder for weeks. A broken bottle acting as a sort of burning-glass would easily account for a fire. But proceed with your duty, only I hope you won't spray me with aniline dye by mistake."

Aniline dye! How did Truscott get to hear of the spraying apparatus? Of course it was standard equipment of certain types of R.A.C. machines; but Truscott was in London when their monoplane arrived. He had only just returned. He had had no time to have the hangar unlocked even if Symes had made a special concession—which was most unlikely.

"How did you know about the spraying apparatus?" asked Colin pointedly.

Truscott grinned fatuously and waggled his fat forefinger.

"Little bird told me," he replied, and hurriedly changed the topic of conversation.

This unsatisfactory interview lasted about ten minutes, and the chums left the aerodrome in order to have lunch at one of the village inns.

“Silly old josser,” remarked Grey. “Trying to be funny. Of course that was a chance shot of his, mentioning the dye.”

“Of course,” rejoined Standish.

And that was all that was said about it for the present; but Colin Standish was doing some very hard thinking.

## CHAPTER V

# The Wrecked Monoplane

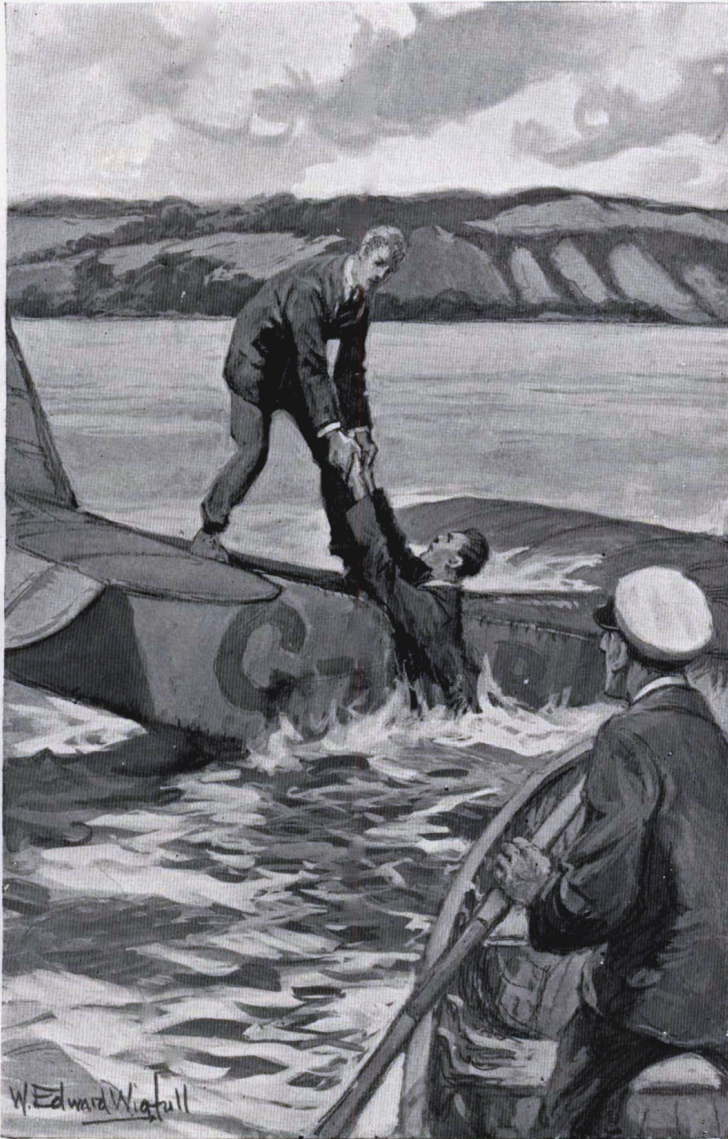
“We’ll carry out our programme and run into Poole this afternoon,” said Colin, after lunch. “The waiter told me that there’s a bus at one-fifty.”

“What’s the idea?” asked Grey.

“Dunno, beyond Colonel Robartes’ suggestion. If there is anything we’ll soon hear.”

Their bus route lay to the north of the fire-devastated area. Although the flames had not succeeded in crossing the highway they had destroyed the hedges in several places, particularly towards a cluster of artificial mounds which, although some distance away, the chums knew to be the Royal Naval Cordite Factory at Holton.

Arriving at Poole, they made their way down the High Street to the quay, close to which was an eighteenth-century brick building with two semicircular flights of stone steps each leading to a doorway on the first storey.



E 873

STANDISH HEAVED AND HAULED

Page 55

This was Poole's custom-house, the scene of many a stirring episode in the old days when smuggling was conducted with crude cunning and brute force.



“Good afternoon, Mr. Standish; good afternoon, Mr. Grey!” was the greeting given them by a big, red-faced, blue-eyed, clean-shaven individual in the inner office. “So you’ve arrived.”

Seeing that the chums had not given their names, it was somewhat surprising to be thus addressed. If secrecy were to be one of the factors of success their errand looked like being foredoomed to failure.

They tried to look impassive, but the effort was not a success.

The customs officer smiled broadly.

“Not so much of a mystery,” he explained. “We’ve had a communication from—let me see. Ah, yes—Colonel Robartes, stating that you would pay us a visit. He enclosed your photographs; that’s how I recognized you.”

“But the superintendent of our area did not give us definite instructions to report here,” said Standish.

“I know nothing about that. All I know is that we applied to the North-Eastern Area for the services of two R.A.C. officers.”

“Then what’s the trouble?”

“Smugglers,” replied the other laconically.

“Strange are the workings of the official mind,” thought Colin. “We were sent down here to investigate supposed cases of arson; now it seems we’re switched on to a contraband problem.”

“Smugglers?” he echoed.

“Yes. We’ve every reason to believe that a considerable amount of smuggling occurs on this part of the coast between Swanage and Weymouth. The stuff may be landed from motor-boats at such isolated places as Arishmell Gap, Warborough or Chapman’s Pool; or it may be brought over in aeroplanes and dumped somewhere on the heath until it’s picked up by a car.”

“If it’s brought by air surely it’s a job for the Southern Area Air Constabulary?” observed Don.

“They’ve had a good try,” replied the customs officer. “But they’re too well known about here. That’s why it was suggested that assistance should be obtained from a different area. Fresh blood, so to speak, and you’ve made a very successful capture up north, so I understand.”

“All these yachts,” remarked Standish, indicating a line of trim motor-cruisers lying alongside the quay. “What’s to prevent them nipping across Channel and bringing stuff back with them?”

The customs officer smiled tolerantly.

“We know them all and where they come from,” he explained. “Besides, yacht owners don’t do that sort of thing. We had one instance some years ago, though. A yacht landed several cases of spirits at the mouth of the harbour during the night, and then came up alongside the quay and reported she’d come foreign and had nothing to declare. We took the owner’s word for it, as we generally do.”

“Then how——?”

“Ah; you may well ask how. It was quite a fluke. Months afterwards some of the owner’s friends talked about it in a London restaurant. There was a customs man sitting at the next table.”

A chart of Poole Harbour and another of the coast from Portland Bill to Christchurch Head were produced, and the customs officer pointed out the districts over which he would like the two air officers to fly.

“We can’t do much at night,” expostulated Grey.

“I know. It’s about dawn when there’s a good chance of swooping down over a suspicious craft.”

“It looks as if we’re going to be deprived of our beauty-sleep, old son,” remarked Colin to his chum. “All in a good cause. It isn’t the first time that we’ve been called upon to do night duty.”

They discussed matters for some time and then the chums suggested that they’d better be going.

“Where shall we be able to get in touch with you?” asked the customs officer. “You’re based upon Bere Regis aerodrome, you say. How are you getting back? By bus? Well, look here; I’m sending two of my men to Wareham by motor-boat. Would you like a trip up the harbour with them? You can easily get back to Bere Regis from there.”

It was an inviting prospect. The afternoon was warm, the sea was as smooth as glass. It wanted about an hour to second high-water—Poole is remarkable in having four tides a day.

Standish quite expected the customs boat to be a smart motor-launch capable of doing at least twenty-five knots. He was somewhat disappointed

to find that she was a lubberly old tub of about twenty feet in length propelled by an ancient outboard motor.

“She’s good for about six knots,” explained one of the boatmen. “With the tide we’ll be at Wareham quay in about an hour. . . . Start her up, George.”

After three attempts George succeeded in getting the engine to fire. The boat gathered way, glided past the line of moored yachts and small coasters alongside the quays, and gained the expansive land-locked harbour.

Presently Standish found himself peering into the dazzling rays of the late afternoon sun and wondering how the helmsman could see his way.

“It is a bit tricky, sir,” explained the man. “It’s a mile from shore to shore; but if we went twenty yards on either side of our present course we’d be hard on the mud.”

“Seems an ideal spot to run a cargo ashore in a small boat,” remarked Colin. “And how do you know you’re on your correct course?”

The customs man pointed to a small black pole that had just become visible in that patch of dazzling sunlit water.

“That’s one of the booms, sir. Easy enough to pick up when you know somewhere where they are. Hello, what’s that?”

Above the tinny noise of the outboard motor could be heard the noise of an aero engine. An aeroplane over Poole Harbour was quite a common sight; but both Colin and Don, with their trained ears, had heard something that had escaped their companions in the boat.

About five hundred feet up was a small monoplane suffering from engine trouble. The engine was missing badly. Although the pilot could have glided down on the sandy shore, for some reason he preferred to nurse his failing engine and circle above the boat.

“What’s the idea?” asked Don. “She’s not a seaplane.”

“If she were she’d come a nasty cropper on the mudflats,” declared the boatman at the helm.

Just then the monoplane’s motor sounded as if it had picked up. The pilot banked steeply, sidestepped, and came down with a resounding smack and a terrific cloud of spray.

He had stalled his machine in about six inches of water over liquid mud that was probably thirty feet deep. The propeller blades had broken off short,

but the prop boss was still revolving at high speed, the jagged fragments of the built-up blades churning up mud and water. The machine, with crumpled wings, was rapidly sinking into the ooze.

There was no sign of the pilot. Probably the impact had hurled him against the instrument-board and had rendered him senseless even if he had not broken his spinal column.

“There may be enough water to float us, sir,” declared one of the boat’s crew. “Do you mind coming for’ard? She won’t squat so much.”

The outboard engine boat dashed to the rescue. About twenty feet from the wrecked plane she smelt the mud. The steersman tilted the engine and allowed the boat to come to a standstill within six feet of the now silent monoplane. The boat’s forefoot was actually resting on one of the partly submerged wings.

“No chance of her blowing up, is there, sir?” asked one of the customs boatmen apprehensively.

“I think not. Her engine’s stopped,” replied Colin. “Stand by, we’ll jump for it.”

He leapt and landed on the deck of the fuselage. Don followed. As he did so the boat, relieved of the combined weight, slithered on the mud. In consequence Grey leapt short and landed up to his waist in black slime.

Under different circumstances his sudden misadventure might well have been greeted with roars of laughter from his companions; but this was no occasion for mirth.

Gripping his chum by the wrists, Standish heaved and hauled. Gradually he extricated Don from the tenacious embrace of the mud. There was a gurgling sound and both men subsided across the deck of the monoplane. Before the suction had been overcome Don had left both shoes irretrievably lost in the clinging mud.

Picking themselves up, the chums devoted their attention to the unfortunate pilot. He was unconscious and breathed stertorously. There was a severe gash across his forehead which was bleeding profusely. His left arm had been fractured at the wrist and there were indications that his left leg had been broken below the knee.

Within the limited space at their disposal the chums quickly set to work to render first-aid. It was a fairly straightforward task to cut strips from the wreckage to make into splints and to apply iodine and bandages to the nasty

wound in the pilot's forehead; but the difficult part of the business came when they had to transfer him from the wrecked monoplane to the waiting boat.

Meanwhile, since the tide was still on the flood, the two boatmen had succeeded in getting her close alongside. By taking up the bottom-boards and using them as a rough-and-ready stretcher, the four men succeeded, not without a good deal of effort, in getting the patient into the boat without further risk of injury to the fractured limbs.

"The sooner we get him to hospital the better," declared Grey.

"Well, there's not one in Wareham," rejoined one of the boatmen. "We'd better make for Poole as fast as we jolly well can. The tide'll turn soon and that will help us."

Then, with the proverbial cussedness of outboard engines, the motor obstinately refused to fire. Her crew, hampered by the presence of the injured and unconscious pilot, were faced with the possibility of having to row the cumbersome craft for six miles—unless they were lucky enough to get the offer of a tow.

Just as they pushed off the mud into navigable water they noticed a speed-boat approaching at high speed.

She slowed down as she drew near.

One of the customs boatmen signalled to the crew to bring her alongside.

"A crash, I see," remarked one of the speed-boat's crew of three. "Anyone hurt? Can we do anything to help?"

"If you'll tow us to Poole, sir," suggested the boatman.

"We're unmanageable at low speed," explained the other, shaking his head. "The load on the engine would soon make her stop. I tell you what: we'll take the injured man. We'll be at Poole quay in less than fifteen minutes."

It seemed a sound proposition.

"Thank you, sir," agreed the boatman. "George! You'd better go with them. These gentlemen here will come in to Wareham with me and you'd better come up by the first train and help take our boat back."

"That will hardly do," objected the owner of the speed-boat. "We've a full complement already. We can only just manage to accommodate the injured man."

“It’ll have to do, sir,” exclaimed the boatman firmly—and unreasonably, Standish thought. “My mate here must be in charge of the patient until he’s in the doctor’s hands.”

To Colin’s astonishment the owner of the speed-boat raised no further objections.

Yet again the unconscious pilot was transferred. George, the customs boatman, boarded the speed-boat and, for lack of other seating accommodation, perched himself on the after-deck with his feet in the narrow well.

The speed-boat’s engines were restarted. She leapt ahead and rapidly gained pace. One of her crew, seated in the after-cockpit, touched George on the shoulder and pointed in the direction of the wrecked monoplane.

George, naturally, looked; as he did so the other deftly gripped him by the ankles and toppled him neatly over the transom into the creamy wake of the swiftly moving speed-boat.

## CHAPTER VI

# An Awkward Mistake

Standish showed no signs of surprise at George's unexpected bath. He was getting used to sudden developments. His mission, which had promised to be a humdrum affair, was rapidly showing signs of becoming "something big".

Seizing one of the heavy ash oars, he helped the customs man urge the boat towards the latter's jettisoned *confrère*, while Grey assisted by tilting the now useless motor in order that the propeller should not act as a drag.

Fortunately swimming is compulsory with the sea-service branch of H.M. Customs and Excise, so George, although encumbered by his heavy boots, was in no immediate danger.

Nevertheless, by the time they hauled him over the gunwale, he was considerably puffed and not a little indignant.

"I'll bet a pound note that yon speed-boat won't be seen in Poole again," he declared, as he proceeded to wring the water out of his clothes. "It's a put-up job. I don't mean to say he mistook us for that blinking speed-boat and didn't find out his mistake until it was too late."

"What do you think he meant to do?" asked Standish.

"You'll find the answer in that wreck, sir," replied George, pointing to the monoplane that was slowly yet surely being swallowed up by the mud.

"I guess you're right there, George," agreed his mate. "Supposing we have a look-see before it's too late."

Again they made their way towards the wreck, Colin and the other boatman rowing, while Don scraped the thick deposits of mud from his nether garments and George removed his uniform and wrung the sodden articles out.

It was on the top of high water when the boat made fast alongside the monoplane.

Assisted by Standish, the two customs men made a systematic search of what remained of the interior of the fuselage above water. Aft the cockpit

they found two leather suitcases and a large package wrapped up in oiled silk.

“Enough to pay for your ducking, George,” declared his companion with a chuckle of satisfaction. “We’d better be getting along before the tide leaves us, unless we want to make a night of it sitting in an open boat in the mud and with nothing to eat and drink.”

“Do you think she’ll quite disappear?” asked Grey.

“May not for a tide or two. I’ll ’phone the harbour-master and see if he can send a salvage craft along. Keep her on the move, sir, and I’ll try my luck with the engine again.”

Standish and Grey were contemplating the possibility of having to row the heavy craft for the rest of the way to Wareham when, either by good luck or good management, the boatman contrived to get the outboard running.

Presently they entered the River Frome, following its meandering course between reed-fringed banks until, skirting a tall yellow sandstone cliff, they came in sight of a number of moored motor-yachts, most of which displayed an orange and yellow burgee.

“Now, supposing that speed-boat came from here?” asked Standish.

“Not she,” replied George. “We know all these boats. They belong here. There’s no harm in asking.”

He hailed one of the cruisers.

“Seen a speed-boat passing here this afternoon, sir?”

“No,” was the reply. “There’s been nothing up here to-day.”

“Then that speed-boat must have been lying doggo either in Murmer’s Cove or behind Gigger’s Island,” suggested George’s mate.

“Or else up North River.”

“May be. Well, here we are, gentlemen. It hasn’t been a dull trip, has it?”

The boat ran alongside a landing stage almost under the shadow of a church tower. The customs men tied her up and went off—one to borrow some dry clothes and the other to pursue the business that had brought them to Wareham. What it was Standish hadn’t discovered; they hadn’t volunteered the information and he had not inquired.

It was not until the chums were in their room at the Bear that Colin drew a small metal case from his pocket.



“This does not contain contraband goods, old son,” he remarked. “Otherwise I would have handed it over to our worthy George and his fellow officer. But it does concern what we’re after, and therefore I’ve taken possession of it without pangs of conscience.”

He snapped open the lid and disclosed several sealed glass tubes divided by a thin disc. On each side of the disc each tube was filled with powder of different kinds.

“Snow?” asked Don.

Standish shook his head.

“Nothing of that nature,” he replied. “If it were, it would have been a job for the customs. As it isn’t, I’ll take the liberty of experimenting with its contents.”

He extracted the cork and poured half the contents upon a metal ash tray. Then, with the aid of the blade of his penknife, he punctured the celluloid disc and released the remainder of the powder. This he poured upon the heap already on the tray.

Almost immediately the combined chemicals burst into a vivid white flame.

“Pretty dangerous stuff to carry in a plane,” remarked Grey.

“Harmless enough provided it doesn’t mix,” explained his chum. “Unless I’m much mistaken, these chemicals are phosphorus and potassium chloride. The two, kept separate, are harmless. Mix them and, as you saw, there’s a big flame. That fellow who crashed this afternoon had a supply of these. If he dropped one from a height and the glass splintered there would be an immediate flash.”

“But how would that account for a heath fire supposing the tube dropped into a patch of heather and wasn’t broken?” asked Grey.

“It wouldn’t ignite until, in the rays of the sun, the disc separating the chemicals became melted,” explained his chum. “It may take hours, days, or even weeks.”

“What’s your opinion about this business, old son?” asked Grey. “Hanged if I can see why a drug smuggler should want to weigh in with arson.”

Standish gave it.

“But I’m dashed if I’m going to be the early bird to get a worm in order to please the Poole customs,” he added. “This afternoon’s crash will have dislocated the air-smugglers’ plans.”

However, just before noon, the chums left their hotel and motored to Bere Regis aerodrome.

When the doors of the hangar were unlocked they hastened to see if there were another mysteriously placed warning pinned to the instrument-board.

There was none. A piece of silk thread that Standish had stretched across the forward cockpit had not been disturbed.

They manhandled their plane into the open, saw that there was petrol enough and that the controls were in order. As far as they could ascertain, no attempt at sabotage had been made.

“May as well take her up,” decided Colin.

Symes, the ground foreman, came up holding his well-known log-book.

“Going to log us, Symes?” inquired Standish. “We aren’t Far Eastern pilots now, you know.”

“Routine, sir,” replied Symes imperturbably. “I’ll have to know your destination and probable time of return.”

“Oh, just pottering round,” explained Colin. “We may be an hour or we mayn’t return before dusk.”

A group of pilots and groundsmen watched them take off. Assistance was not necessary as in the case of the huge Condor biplanes used in the company’s service for long-distance flights. *They* did not have to depend upon petrol, and, remembering that some intruder had been alone with their monoplane, Standish found himself wishing that his bus was not dependent upon highly inflammable spirit.

Grey took charge of the controls, while Standish, armed with a pair of low-powered binoculars, which, giving a wide field, were preferable to the high-powered prism glasses for his task, occupied the bucket seat in the after-cockpit.

Quickly the monoplane climbed to an altitude of two thousand feet. The air was inclined to be misty, so that the Isle of Wight, which, when visible from this part of Dorset, was a sure indication of stormy weather, was hidden in the heat haze.

Following the coastline of the extensive harbour of Poole, Standish scanned the numerous indentations where a hundred small craft could lie hidden from ground observation in the esparto grass. It was now nearly high tide and the whole extent of the harbour resembled a large lake. There were hundreds of craft, large and small, towards the eastern side; but to the westward of the island and in the Wareham Channel the number of vessels under way could be counted on the fingers of one hand. One of the latter craft was a lighter with a crane from which hung a crumpled shape that Standish knew to be the wrecked monoplane. The harbour-master had not lost much time in getting the suspicious machine away from the tenacious grip of the mud.

Except for that, there was little to attract attention.

“Swing her out to sea, Don.”

“Aye, aye, skipper!”

They crossed the coast in the neighbourhood of the famous Old Harry Rock; then, turning westwards, passed over Swanage, St. Alban’s Head, Kimmeridge and Warbarrow. Several flying-boats proceeding from Portland to Portsmouth and a Far Eastern Airway biplane heading south were the only aircraft sighted.

High over Lulworth Cove the monoplane turned and headed inland towards Wareham. Soon they were over a part of the great heath that had suffered considerably from a recent fire. Gaunt barrows, previously hidden in masses of gorse, were now revealed—blackened rounded mounds that were in existence long before England had a written history, and, perhaps even now, held the gold and silver funeral trappings of more than one long-forgotten chieftain.

Presently, not far from an expanse of trees that he recognized on his map as Holme Woods, Standish caught sight of a stationary saloon car. He focused his glasses on it, not out of mere idle curiosity but because he fancied——

He was not mistaken. A man had alighted and was setting fire to something by the side of the road.

A thin wisp of bluish smoke, visible even to the naked eye, rose into the still air. The man, satisfied that a fire had been well and truly started, jumped into his car and made off.

“There’s one of the blighters, Don!” shouted Colin through the voice-tube. “Shut off your engine and plane down. We’ll mark him, right enough.”

Grey, his eyes fixed upon the comparatively slowly moving car—actually it had already attained a speed of about forty miles an hour—followed his chum's instructions while Colin, releasing the safety-catch of the spraying gun, awaited the chance of "marking" his man in more senses than one.

Smart as he had been in swooping earthwards, Grey was not in time. The car, swinging round a corner, disappeared under the trees from his sight. The pilot had to zoom to avoid a crash into the tree tops.

"Sorry, old son!" exclaimed Don.

"Couldn't be helped," replied Colin. "We've got the fellow cold all the same. He's got to come out by one of these three roads. Circle over the wood and keep a sharp look-out while I wireless the police."

The monoplane regained altitude; Standish unwound the aerial and proceeded to call up the Wareham police.

The signals were quickly answered. Then Colin sent out the following message:

"From Air Constabulary patrol. Car driver seen setting fire to heath half-mile south of East Holme. Is hiding in Holme Woods."

"Right! Sending motor-police to close each exit, and police to scour woods," came the reply.

Standish had only just switched off, when Don exclaimed:

"There he is!"

Glancing downward, Standish saw the car proceeding at a much slower speed towards the village of Stoborough by the eastern exit from the woods; but instead of proceeding in that direction the driver swung the car to the right along an unfrequented road in the direction of Creech Barrow. That meant that the mobile police would not be able to intercept him. It would mean a stern chase and only after Standish had informed them by wireless of the suspect's unforeseen ruse.

The only thing to be done for the present was to swoop down and spray the car with aniline dye.

Again Standish prepared the spraying-gun. He realized that the car was speeding against a fairly stiff breeze and consequently the celluloid shells would be considerably deflected. He'd have to aim several yards ahead of the moving target in order to score a direct hit.

The occupant of the car was obviously ignorant of the fact that the monoplane with engine shut off was swooping down and rapidly overtaking him. The saloon roof prevented him looking upwards and, unless he thrust his head out of the window, he would be unable to see the aeroplane even if he knew he was being pursued.

The car descended a dip in the road and ran under a railway bridge. Beyond that point the road was unimpeded for a mile or so.

Watching his opportunity, Colin fired three "shells" in quick succession, while Don, having overshot their quarry, promptly restarted the engine, zoomed, and then banked in order to see the effect of his chum's marksmanship.

The celluloid cylinders had done their work well. One had hit the roof fairly and squarely, another had shattered itself on the bonnet, liberally spraying both wings and the wind-screen. The third had struck the ground in front of the car and had left a big splash of violet fluid upon the road.

Then, to both chums' surprise the car wobbled and came to a standstill with the near side wings on the verge of the road. The off-side door was flung open and the driver emerged, wiping his face with a handkerchief that had been white but was now of a violet hue.

The aniline dye, blowing back through the partly opened wind-screen, had done its work only too well. It had very efficiently marked not only the car but its occupant.

He looked up and shook his fist defiantly at the monoplane. No doubt he shouted angrily as well, but if he did his voice was drowned by the roar of the machine.

"Bring her down, Don!" exclaimed Standish. "I didn't expect to make an arrest, but we may as well make a thorough job of it."

They landed on a rough grassy track about a hundred yards from the car. Both alighted and made their way towards the suspect, who, however, made no attempt to escape.

"Poor specimen of a criminal, that," thought Standish contemptuously, for an easy capture never appealed to him. "Unless, of course, the dye has blinded him. Then the fat will be in the fire with a vengeance!"

"What do you mean, sir, by this unwarrantable outrage?" demanded the motorist. "I say, what do you mean by it?"

Colin, however, had heard that sort of greeting before. Suspects often try to bluff their captors by such words.

“It’s my duty to arrest you!” exclaimed Standish.

“What, what, what!” spluttered the other furiously. “Arrest me? What the deuce d’ye mean? Look what you’ve done! It’s an atrocious act. You don’t even attempt to apologize for a mistake, which it isn’t. Arrest me? Who are you? I’d like to have your name and address!”

“We are police officers,” replied Standish. “If you insist on seeing our warrant cards. . . . You’re under arrest. Any statement you may make may be used in evidence against you.”

“Arrest be hanged!” stormed the other, dabbing his face, and transferring more dye from his handkerchief to his nose and cheek. “Call yourselves police officers and you don’t know who I am? I’m a Justice of the Peace, sir, and—Ha! That’s better. Here’s someone with grey matter under his cap instead of batter pudding.”

A constable riding a motor-bicycle arrived upon the scene, glanced at Standish and, before the latter could say a word, at his prisoner.

Then, to the chagrin of the two chums, the policeman, successfully suppressing a grin, saluted the owner of the car.

“Quite evidently a mistake, Sir Gregory,” he exclaimed.

“Mistake? Of course it’s a mistake or worse,” rejoined the other heatedly. “Ruined my car, made me look a perfect guy, and then the fellow talks of arresting me. He says he’s a policeman, too. I doubt it.”

Was the man still bluffing? Since the constable had unhesitatingly recognized and saluted him, he was evidently someone of standing. But even persons in the higher walks of life had been known, through some inexplicable mental kink, to commit utterly senseless crimes.

Producing his warrant card, Colin showed it to the constable.

“We sighted this person in the act of deliberately firing the heath,” said Standish. “In the circumstances we are justified in arresting him.”

“Setting fire to the heath?” echoed the motorist, either with well-feigned indignation or genuine surprise. “Where, might I ask, did you see me doing that?”

“On the Lulworth Road about half a mile south of East Holme, about twenty minutes ago.”

“Haven’t been within a mile of the place,” declared the suspect. “To satisfy you, I’ll give an account of my movements. Half an hour ago I was talking to your superintendent outside the town hall at Wareham. I left there, paid a call at the house of a friend and found no one at home, and then drove along this road.”

“Apparently it’s a case of mistaken identity, sir,” observed the constable, addressing Colin. “I saw Sir Gregory Wyatt talking to our super at the time he mentioned. That was four minutes before we got your radio message.”

“In that case, Sir Gregory, I must most deeply apologize,” said Standish. “But the fact remains that we did spot a car similar to yours from which a man alighted to set fire to the gorse. He drove under cover into Holme Lane woods.”

“Then go and find him,” rejoined the J.P. “Don’t waste time here. Look here! Hop into my car and I’ll drive you there. The constable had better ride off as hard as he can and warn the others.”

Sir Gregory, in spite of his violet-hued face, was as keen as anyone to effect the incendiary’s capture. And for a very good reason: only a week ago a mysteriously started fire on the adjoining heath had swept through his plantation, destroying hundreds of young trees and—worst of all, to his mind—driving pheasants and partridges to seek shelter on his neighbours’ shoots.

Colin declined the offer, pointing out that he was responsible for the safety of the monoplane, which could not be left unattended.

“Besides,” he added, “it looks as if the fire is gaining a firm hold. The wind is in this direction and there’s a good chance of our bus being burnt if we don’t take off. Of course, as regards the damage done to your car——”

Sir Gregory waved his hand with a negative gesture.

“All in a good cause, inspector. You’ll hear no more about that from me; but I’m looking to you to see this fire-raising business properly scotched within the next few days.”

## CHAPTER VII

# The Conspirators

About the time when Colin was tendering his apologies to Sir Gregory, a man was standing by a grey saloon car that had drawn up close to a water-splash in Holme Lane.

“That inquisitive plane seems to have pushed off out of it,” he said to himself. “I think it’s safe to retrace my way.”

There was no one in sight in that tree-enshrouded lane. Restarting the engine he backed the car into a clearing and then went ahead, recrossing the water-splash and making in the direction from which he had come.

He reached the fork road exactly sixty seconds before the mobile police arrived to throw a cordon round the woods—and a minute, when a car is travelling at nearly fifty miles an hour, is a useful lead. Not that the police had seen him round the bend.

As he drove past the place where he had started the fire he noticed with intense satisfaction that the flames had taken a good hold. Fanned by the now strong nor’westerly breeze, they were sweeping onwards and expanding fanwise at an alarming pace. And, curiously, they were eating their way to windward—probably owing to the strong induced upward draught of hot air.

Beyond the leaping flames men were striving to beat out the fire by means of branches of trees. They were too intent upon their task and too far away to notice the rapidly moving car.

A few miles farther on towards East Lulworth he almost overtook one of several cars strung out at irregular intervals. He slowed down. There was no sense in letting their occupants see the number of his car even though it was a fictitious one. They might be holiday-makers bound for the famous Cove; on the other hand, some of them might not.

Two policemen riding push-bikes passed him. They took no notice of the car. They’d been summoned by telephone to the fire.

He smiled sardonically. There would be no police in Lulworth for a while; so much the better.



Then a khaki-painted lorry, packed with khaki-clad men with black bonnets and with gas masks slung round their necks, tore past—a party of Tanks Corps men going to assist in the task of subduing the conflagration.

The on-coming traffic increased as he drew nearer East Lulworth. The now thick clouds of smoke had acted as a magnet not only to the fire-fighters but to curious sightseers. Cars, motor-cycles, pedal cycles, men on horseback and on foot, were rapidly emptying the twin villages on the road to the Cove.

Down the steep hill into West Lulworth the fire-raising motorist drove. Here the major line of traffic was in his direction—more holiday-makers on their way to the Cove by way of Wool.

Presently the road ended abruptly at a pebbled beach fringing a circular expanse of water. Right ahead, the cliffs on either side terminated sharply, leaving a gap between the Cove and the open sea.

A few yards short of the beach the man swung his car to the right and drove on to a gently sloping grassy field in which cars were parked by scores. There were at least two hundred and their numbers were being momentarily increased.

Under the direction of an attendant he backed his car into line, switched off the engine and got out.

In a seemingly casual manner he strolled between the orderly lines of packed vehicles until he found what he was looking for—a powerful grey saloon car.

It was empty, as he expected it to be.

He resumed his leisurely walk, making in the direction of Stair Hole, where the ceaseless onslaughts of the sea have honeycombed the outlying cliff and formed a long narrow pool. The noise of the surf and the rattle of large rounded pebbles in the undertow mingled with the loud cries of wheeling seagulls. Except for a few people picnicking on the grass the place was almost deserted.

A tall, heavily-built man with a camera-case slung over his shoulder strolled to meet him.

“So you’re here, Jimmy. How goes it?”

James Prodgers, incendiary and what not, nodded.

“So it seems, Tom. And you haven’t made a move yet?”

“I was waiting for you, wasn’t I?”

“And a jolly good thing you did. I’ve drawn the cops away right enough. You’ve got the stuff landed all right?”

“Yes,” replied the man addressed as Tom, moodily, “I have. That’s all there’s to be said about it. Nutting’s made a mess of it at his end.”

“How?”

“Crashed somewhere in Poole Harbour.”

“And the cargo?”

“Gone. The ‘rats’ (customs officers) snaffled that.”

“And Nutting?”

“The Pirate picked him up. Had to do the rough touch with one of the rats before he got away. If we don’t get a clear run with this lot we’re in the cart properly—we’ll be stony, even if we’re not nabbed. Labordière won’t risk another consignment on credit, and if we can’t raise the rhino we may as well pack up and quit. And there’s another piece of bad news on top of this.”

“What’s that?”

“The air cops are about.”

“Pooh!” exclaimed James Prodggers contemptuously. “They don’t count much. At least, so far.”

“Didn’t Standish put ‘paid’ to the Moss Gang’s account?”

“M’yes, but that was up north somewhere.”

“Let me tell you this,” said Tom, lowering his voice still more. “Inspector Standish is at Bere Regis.”

“In an Air Constabulary bus?”

“No.”

James Prodggers’ features turned a greenish hue.

“I hope to goodness he wasn’t the fellow who was buzzing around while I was at Holme Wood,” he observed.

“Why, what happened?” asked his companion, with surprise.

Jimmy told him.

“Then dashed if I’m going to risk getting that stuff inland,” declared Tom. “You’ve made a messpot of it with your fire-raising stunt. There’s a few thousand pounds of stuff in my car at the present moment. It won’t be safe to be on the road. What’s to be done with it?”

“Where’s the *Spitfire*?”

“At anchor in the cove. No one suspects her, as far as I know.”

“And you can get the stuff on board again?”

“Sure; there’s no watch on luggage going off to a yacht. That’s one blessing.”

“Then get it on board at once. We’ll garage both cars for a day or so, and to-night we’ll take *Spitfire* eastwards.”

“And run right into the arms of the rats either at Poole or in the Solent, I suppose?”

“Sort of thing we’d do, wouldn’t we? No. High water to-night is at 1·20. We can get through St. Alban’s Race at slack water and keep close in under the cliffs. I’ll phone Gordon from the hotel here and tell him to stand by, and before dawn the stuff will be snugly hidden in the cave. All the same, a thousand curses on Inspector Standish! . . . I suppose it is right that Standish is down here?”

“Unfortunately, yes. His bus is kept at Bere Regis, but he’s stopping at the Bear at Wareham.”

“Couldn’t we——?” began Jimmy Prodggers tentatively.

“No, we couldn’t,” snapped his companion. “If there were the ghost of a chance I’d take it, but you won’t catch Standish napping.”

## CHAPTER VIII

# What the Boy Revealed

“It’s been worse than a blank day, Don,” remarked Colin, as they alighted from a bus and made their way to their quarters at the Bear. They had flown back to Bere Regis, where they had put their monoplane in the hangar and had gone back to Wareham by a public conveyance.

“Can’t agree with you there, old son,” rejoined his chum.

“What haven’t we done?” continued Standish. “Mistaken a J.P. for a bandit and smothered him with dye.”

“Not much to worry about there; he was awfully sporty over the business.”

“And the actual incendiary got away. The mobile police don’t seem to be very happy about it all. I fancy they’ve the idea that we called them out merely to cover our blunder in marking Sir Gregory.”

“They must know that our wireless came through at least ten minutes before. There’s one thing certain, we spotted the blighter in the act of firing the heath. I bet it gave him a nasty jar and he’ll think twice about trying it on again.”

At the hotel entrance the waiter stopped them.

“Excuse me, sir; there’s a boy waiting to see you.”

“A boy?” inquired Standish.

“Yes, sir.”

“To see me?”

“He asked to see Inspector Standish, sir.”

“What’s his name? Did he state his business?”

“I didn’t ask, sir. He’s waiting in the lounge.”

Standish felt decidedly annoyed. At the end of a tiring and fruitless day he didn’t want to be pestered by a boy who, probably, wanted his autograph.

What was worse, the little blighter had somehow discovered that Inspector Standish was in the district. Several people knew that, of course, but——

“All right. I’ll see him. Come along, Don.”

Seated on the edge of a chair and nervously fingering his cap was a youth of about fourteen.

He stood up when the two chums entered the lounge but made no attempt to speak. His face was red and flushed, Colin noticed.

“Well, young man, you want to see me? What about?”

“Are you Inspector Standish of the Royal Air Constabulary, sir?” asked the boy, bringing out the name in an awed tone.

“Yes; and this is Sub-Inspector Grey. You may have heard of him too.”

The boy nodded, tongue-tied. He’d heard of their flight to bring home the Amir’s Ruby and of their adventures with the Westow Talisman; but until that day he had never expected to see these heroes in the flesh.

“What’s your name, my boy?”

“Day—Denis Day, sir.”

“And where do you live?”

“At Swanage.”

“Grammar School?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now we *are* getting on, Day,” continued Colin. “Suppose you tell me why you came to see me?”

“You’ve been threatened, sir.”

“Not the first time, and probably not the last,” rejoined Standish.

“What is this bright lad doing?” he thought. “Trying to make my blood creep, like the famous Fat Boy, or has he got an idea for the pictures?” Then —“Fire away and tell us all about it.”

“This afternoon being a half-holiday, I cycled to Lulworth Cove, sir. I was a bit tired, so I lay down on the grass near Stair Hole. While I was there two men came up and stood talking close to where I was.”

“What sort of men?”

“One was big and red-faced. Looked like a farmer. The other was slim. Both were dressed in plus-fours.”

“Did they see you?”

“No, sir; the ground slopes steeply and is very ridgy. They couldn’t see me. I was in front of them and lower down towards the beach.”

“Then how came it that you could see them and they couldn’t see you?” asked Colin rather sharply.

He thought he had bowled the lad out, but young Day, with increasing confidence, proceeded smoothly:

“I followed them after what I’d heard. One man said he’d set fire to the heath and that an aeroplane had spotted him. The other said he was certain it was you, sir.”

Standish was now all attention.

“Did they give any reason why the fire was started?”

“To attract attention so that one of them could drive away with a load of something.”

“Ah!”

Colin and Don exchanged glances. That went to confirm one of their theories concerning the outbreak of fire-raising.

“A load of something; did he say what?” asked Grey, speaking for the first time.

“No, sir; but I knew he meant smuggled goods.”

“Did they say they were going to take the goods away by car?” asked Standish.

“The goods were in one car. Both men had cars; but when your name was mentioned they decided to put the stuff back in a boat or a yacht and land it along the coast in a cave.”

“What cave?”

“They didn’t say; but it was somewhere on the Swanage side of St Alban’s.”

“What caves are there, do you know?”

“I only know of two, sir. One is at Tilly Whim—it’s only a mile from my home—and the other is Parson’s Barn close to Old Harry Rock.”

“Then what happened?”

“They went off. As soon as I thought it was safe I got up and followed them. There was plenty of people about, nearer the cove. At the parking ground they stopped and talked, but I daren’t go any nearer. Then each got into the car. The tall man took out two suitcases and went down to the beach. I waited, because the short man was waiting too. When the other came back they drove the cars to the Cove Hotel Garage. That’s the last I saw of them, because I thought you’d like to know about it. So I rode here as fast as I could.”

“Why here? How did you know we were at the Bear?”

“Because one of them said so, sir.”

“And you’ve said nothing to anyone else?”

“No, sir.”

“I suppose you didn’t think to take the number of the cars?” asked Grey.

Denis smiled broadly and produced a well-used diary from the pocket of his blazer.

“Didn’t I just? ICU 445 and NOG 022.”

“Probably faked number plates,” commented Standish. “All the same, Day, you’ve done remarkably well. Thanks awfully for warning us. You’ll make a smart detective some day.”

“I wish I were old enough for the Royal Air Constabulary,” observed the boy wistfully.

“Time for that in another three years,” rejoined Standish briskly. “Now, let us have your address, and in all probability you’ll hear from us very soon. That’s good; cheerio!”

“You boomed the kid off pretty quickly,” remarked Don after their youthful visitor had gone.

“Had to; he’d want to hang on yarning indefinitely,” explained his chum. “Really couldn’t spare any more time. We’ve a full programme in front of us for the rest of the day and probably most of the night. One moment, while I fetch a map of East Dorset. While you’re about it, Don, you might nip across to the police station and ask the superintendent to let you phone to the Lulworth Constabulary. Get them to ascertain if two cars bearing the numbers Day gave us are still in the Cove Hotel garage.”

Grey set off. The police station was almost opposite the hotel. He got the message through and was told to expect a reply within a quarter of an hour.

Meanwhile, Standish studied the map. If the youth had reported correctly it seemed probable that the smugglers would attempt to land their stuff in Tilly Whim caves. The other was too close to Poole Harbour and consequently more likely to be observed by the customs water patrol.

“I take it that half a dozen men ought to be sufficient to round them up,” he observed when Don returned. “We’d better make arrangements with the Coast Watchers and the Swanage police; but before that I think we’ll run over to Swanage and see what Tilly Whim caves are like. We’ll have tea first; the evenings are long, fortunately.”

After having fed they left the hotel and caught a train to Swanage. They had the carriage to themselves and, departing from their usual procedure, took the opportunity to disguise themselves by putting on false moustaches. Wearing flannels and blue blazers, they looked very much like two of the thousands of holiday visitors to the select watering-place.

There was no need to inquire the way to the caves. Standish knew the route by a previous study of the map.

They climbed the steep hill out of the town, followed the cliff path, which was crowded with holiday-makers, past the Great Globe and thence to one of the entrances to the caves.

It was barred by a rusty iron gate on which was a painted notice to the effect that the caves are private property and visitors exploring them do so at their own risk, since there was a danger of falling rocks.

Dozens of sightseers, paying scant attention to the warning, were scaling the low wall by the side of the gate. The chums followed their example and descended a steep slippery declivity that eventually led through a tunnel. A few yards from the mouth the tunnel took an abrupt turn to the left and opened on to a wide terrace thickly strewn with enormous boulders.

On the seaward side the terrace ended abruptly in a sheer cliff about fifty feet in height, while on the landward side it was encompassed by beetling crags rising a hundred feet and honeycombed with artificially made caves.

Everywhere trippers swarmed. A more unlikely place for a smugglers’ lair would be difficult to imagine.

Don remarked upon it.



“There’ll be a difference between seven on a summer’s evening and three o’clock in the morning,” said Colin. “At any rate, we’ll see what it looks like after midnight.”

“It’s in full view of Anvil Point Lighthouse,” objected Grey.

“And therefore more likely to be overlooked by the Coast Watchers,” rejoined Standish. “There’s another way out, I see. On a calm night a boat could run in under the shadow of the cliffs and no one would be any the wiser.”

“What’s your plan, then?”

“To collect half a dozen officers to watch each exit,” explained Colin. “I mean to wait down here from midnight till dawn if necessary. If I see any suspicious movement, I’ll give a blast on a whistle and both parties of our men will rush the caves simultaneously. You’ll be with one of the parties.”

“Hang it all, man!” expostulated Grey. “You ought to be director of operations. Why can’t I remain here? There isn’t much risk, because when the fellows find they’re trapped I don’t suppose they’ll fight. They’re not the stamp of the old-time smugglers.”

Standish considered. After all, he ought to let his chum and subordinate be in the limelight sometimes. It would give Grey a chance of gaining promotion. They ought to have given him his inspectorship after the Moss Gang affair; only, for some reason, they hadn’t.

“Right-o, then!” agreed Standish. “Mind you, it may be a night’s work for nothing, although something tells me this is the spot. Come along; we’ll go back to the town and make arrangements with the police.”

They left the caves by the western exit and, climbing a steep grassy down enclosed by walls of ashlar masonry, gained a rutty road two hundred and fifty feet above sea-level.

“Good old crowd here,” remarked Grey. “The lighthouse seems quite a popular show-place. I dare say the place will be deserted to-night.”

“I hope it won’t,” rejoined Standish oracularly.

## CHAPTER IX

# The End of the Vigil

There was one important point that Denis Day had omitted to mention during his interview with Inspector Standish—the name of the yacht, motor-cruiser or motor-boat in which the contraband was to be reshipped at Lulworth and taken to some other part of the coast.

It was one of those important omissions that so often wreck the most carefully laid plans.

Denis suddenly remembered it while he was having a belated tea.

He decided to ride to Wareham again and report the matter. At seven o'clock he arrived at the Bear, only to be informed that both Mr. Standish and Mr. Grey were out and were not expected back until very late.

Meanwhile Standish had completed his preparations, although he had some difficulty in convincing the Swanage police on a matter in which he didn't feel convinced himself. They ridiculed the idea that a party of smugglers would make use of Tilly Whim caves as a *cache*.

However, he won his point, and soon after eleven o'clock one party, consisting of a sergeant, three constables and three customs watchmen, took up their position at a stone shelter immediately above the caves, whence they could rush down the steep declivity and block the westernmost exit.

Colin was with the other party, which included three of the local constabulary and four customs men who had been hurried along from Poole. A fast launch, also manned by the Preventive Service, was to cruise between Old Harry and St. Alban's Head, keeping well in the offing, with orders not to close the land unless a white and a blue rocket were fired by one of the shore parties.

It was a warm night, but a sea mist had spread inland during the last hour or so.

It was by no means thick where Colin stood. In the pale starlight he could see objects a hundred yards away, looking to his right and left; but the platform in front of the cavern, or as much of it as could usually be seen from above, lay hidden under a white blanket of mist. Seaward, nothing

could be discerned. Vessels bound up and down Channel were sounding their sirens, while at ten-minute intervals Anvil Point Lighthouse lived up to its name by giving a shattering *bang* with its explosive fog-signalling apparatus.

A curious fact was that the watchers on the hill above the caves could see the lantern and gallery of the lighthouse, but the rest of the tower was hidden by the mist.

Somewhere far below him Standish knew that his chum Don Grey was keeping his solitary vigil. Neither by sight nor sound would the latter communicate with Colin and his companions until the crucial moment when the smugglers, midway between the boat and the caves, were caught red-handed.

With his folded arms resting on the rough stone wall, Colin waited and waited. Except for the distant wailing of the sirens, the gentle murmur of the swell against the rocks and the periodical crash of the lighthouse fog-signal, no sound disturbed the stillness of the night.

A glance at the luminous dial of his wristlet watch told him that it was just past midnight. Unless the smugglers had hurried on with their work—and supposing Tilly Whim caves was their objective—they would hardly be here before one o'clock. Certainly not later than three-thirty.

He stole back to his party, treading softly lest his foot should dislodge a stone and send it crashing upon the rocks below.

The men were silently smoking, sheltering in the landward recess of the shelter.

“Anything doing, sir?” asked one of the customs men.

“All quiet, so far,” replied Standish. “No news from the sergeant?”

“One of his men was here ten minutes ago, sir. There was nothing to report.”

“Very well; carry on.”

“Want one of us to take a spell, sir?”

“No, thanks.”

Colin returned to his observation post.

At a quarter to one he fancied he heard the throb of a petrol engine. He listened intently, then turned out his party.

They, too, strained their ears.

“Seems you’ve made a mistake, sir,” remarked one of the customs boatmen in a husky whisper. “Fog plays strange pranks. Perhaps it’s our launch a couple of miles or more out to sea. If there was a motor-craft close inside we’d hear her right enough.”

Two o’clock . . . three o’clock.

Would the smugglers ever arrive? Had they chosen another landing-place? There were plenty between Lulworth and Swanage Bay, but as far as Standish was aware—and he had made careful inquiries—there were no caves. And what if young Denis Day had mistaken “cove” for “cave”?

A policeman approached.

“We’ve stopped a man coming from the caves, sir,” he reported. “He’s up at the shelter. Would you like to interrogate him?”

“What sort of man?”

“A fisherman.”

“H’m; none of you recognized him?”

“Yes, sir. I do for one. He lives over again Langton. Nothing known against him—so far.”

“Right! I’ll come along.”

In the carefully shielded light of a police lantern—it could not possibly be seen from seaward—stood a short, stocky man with a weather-beaten face partly hidden by a white beard. He was wearing a blue jersey, brown canvas trousers and seaboots reaching to his thighs. His expression was that of nervousness combined with righteous indignation at being stopped by the police at that hour in the morning.

“Doant’ee zee I be gwine whoäme after lifting my pots, look zee?” he declared.

“Where’s your boat?” asked one of the policemen.

“Down along. If you be wishen to zee un——”

“You came past the caves, George?”

“Sure I did.”

“Did you meet or see anyone?”

“No, zur.”

“Any crabs or lobsters?”

“Dree undersized uns. I chucked they back.”

“Better let him go, sir,” suggested one of the policeman in an aside. “We know who he is. He may do a bit of smuggling on his own account, but he won’t be mixed up with a crack gang.”

“I’ll have the law on you!” declared the old fisherman.

“Don’t, George; get yourself a pint of your favourite at my expense when the pub’s open,” said Standish cheerfully, as he handed the man a silver coin. “Good night.”

The old chap shuffled off.

“I wanted to find out if his hands smelt of lobster pots,” explained Standish. “Do fishermen work single-handed in this part of the coast? Strange I didn’t hear the splash of oars.”

“He’ll have been lifting his pots off Dancing Ledge, sir,” explained one of the boatmen. “Keeping close in to Anvil Point the cliffs would muffle the sound of oars.”

“I suppose that’s that, then,” remarked Colin. “Three-thirty; we’d better call the men off.”

“Now we’re here I’d propose hanging on till dawn, sir,” suggested the customs man. “If their boat’s merely got held up by the fog they’ll risk landing the stuff even if they’re a bit late, if they’ve found their bearings.”

They waited; saw the false dawn, followed by a brief period of intense darkness.

Then came the dawn—grey streaks rising above the low-lying bank of fog.

Standish gave a blast on his whistle—the signal of recall. He was feeling horribly tired and greatly disappointed. His intuition had let him down. Time and money wasted. He remembered how the Swanage police had been frankly sceptical over the whole business.



E 873

WILD WORK AT TILLY WHIM

Page 103

The sergeant and the other party appeared, puffing and blowing after their ascent of the hill.

“We’ve drawn a blank this time, sir,” observed the former in a tone that could not disguise the “I told you so!”

“We’ll move off as soon as Sub-Inspector Grey rejoins us,” decided Standish.

They waited five minutes.

“Perhaps he didn’t hear the whistle, sir,” suggested one of the constables. “Shall I go down and tell him?”

“Please do.”

By this time Standish was beginning to feel more than a little anxious for his chum. Grey had a remarkably keen sense of hearing. It seemed absurd to accept the constable’s opinion that he hadn’t heard the whistle.

Making his way to the stone wall overlooking the platform, Colin waited. Presently, eighty feet beneath him, he saw the head and shoulders of a policeman as he emerged from the entrance tunnel and picked his way between the enormous boulders in front of the caves. He noticed that the sand between the rocks was pitted by innumerable footprints. Of course, they had been there since yesterday. Hundreds of trippers had passed that way. . . .

The constable disappeared from Standish’s sight behind a projecting ledge. A few minutes later he heard a blast of the policeman’s whistle. It was repeated.

Presently the man reappeared.

Colin hailed him.

“Any sign of Mr. Grey?”

The policeman looked upwards.

“No, sir.”

“Then stand by!”

Standish then summoned the others.

“Mr. Grey’s missing,” he announced. “We’d better go down and search the caves.”

They hurried through the tunnel and made an extensive search, but with no result.

The men were now genuinely anxious.

“Perhaps he’s slipped over the ledge, sir,” said the sergeant, gingerly peering over the unprotected brink at the jagged rocks washed by the waves

fifty feet below.

“If he had we’d see his body,” rejoined Colin sharply. “Nip up to the lighthouse, two of you, and borrow a rope.”

The rope was soon forthcoming. One of the off-duty lighthouse-keepers joined the party.

“Tide started to ebb at three o’clock, sir,” he observed. “A corpse might be carried out to sea; on the other hand, I’ve known ’em remain jammed on the rocks.”

A corpse—his chum Grey a corpse.

Colin shuddered at the thought. Again and again they had risked death together, and yet the idea, obvious now, had never occurred to him that Don might have met his death in such a simple way—slipping over a cliff.

The boatmen bent a “bowline on the bight”.

“Better not, sir,” objected one, as Standish prepared to go down. “You aren’t used to this sort of job. We are.”

Colin gave way. In the circumstances it was as well. Although used to heights from an airman’s outlook, he was not accustomed to being lowered down a rugged cliff to a ledge of slippery, weed-covered rocks. He was too agitated to feel sure of himself.

The boatman removed his coat, folded it, lining outwards, and placed it on the brink in order to take the chafe of the rope. Then, getting into the double loop, he allowed his companions to lower him over the edge.

Four times the operation was repeated at different points—each time with the same result.

Reluctantly Standish had to admit that Don’s name would have to be added to the already long list of those members of the Royal Air Constabulary who had given their lives in the execution of their duty. He would have to send a report to his chief, which was a most unpleasant thing to have to do, when he had to admit failure and the loss of his subordinate who was also his chum. Worse still, he must write a sympathetic letter to Grey’s parents.

“If only I hadn’t let Don take my place last night,” he thought bitterly.



## CHAPTER X

# Caught

On the rocky platform in front of the caves, Don Grey had prepared for his solitary spell of voluntary duty.

He visualized the probable situation. The contraband was to be landed from a small craft—possibly a motor-cruiser—unless, which seemed unlikely, the smuggling vessel was a large craft. In that case the stuff would be sent ashore in a dinghy.

If it were to be taken to its hiding-place in the caves by the shortest possible route it would mean hauling up the package, or whatever it was, by a rope.

Don walked to the edge of the platform and peered down. In spite of the sea-mist the starlight made it possible to see the waves lapping the rocks fifty feet or so below. To an experienced climber the task of scaling the cliff at this point was practicable though by no means easy. The question then arose in Grey's mind as to whether the smugglers would have aeroplanes waiting to haul the stuff up.

If they had, then he'd have to be doubly careful. If he remained near the brink it would be an easy matter for anyone coming behind him unawares to push him over the cliff. It would look like an accident, and without witnesses how could it be proved to be otherwise?

If the smugglers were about to receive assistance from the land their helpers could gain the caves by two ways only—one by the tunnel, the other by skirting the cliff on the western side. According to arrangements made with Standish, it had been decided to let any suspicious person pass the unseen patrols, so that the whole gang—principals and accomplices—could be netted simultaneously.

Another question was: which of the caves would be chosen as a *cache*? The largest of them was nearest the probable landing-place. Its entrance was about twenty yards in width, the almost horizontal roof being supported by several rough stone pillars. Across this wide mouth a wall about four feet in height had been built, nominally to prevent visitors from penetrating into the dangerous recesses of the cave. Actually it was easy to scale and thousands

of people did so in the course of a year, but the risk of so doing was apparent by the number of rocks, large and small, that had fallen from the low roof and lay about in disorder upon the floor of the main cave. Farther away from the entrance the cave diminished in height and was obstructed in many places by mounds of rubble, leaving narrow passages that appeared to lead nowhere.

It was close to the ashlar wall across the mouth of the cave that Don took his stand. The fog had increased somewhat; but he could still see a fair distance to right and left—enough to give him sufficient warning of the approach of the suspects.

Above him, the cliff face jutted out menacingly in the half-light. The drifting vapour of the sea-fog gave the impression that that overhanging rock was moving.

Soon after midnight Grey grew tired of standing, so, spreading a newspaper on the top of the wall, he sat down with his feet about eighteen inches from the ground. His right hand was in his coat pocket, in which reposed his electric torch. His automatic, loaded with two blank cartridges and three live ones, was in the other pocket.

He was beginning to feel drowsy. He had had a long and heavy day. The salt air helped to make him long for bed.

“It doesn’t seem as if anything’s going to happen to-night,” he thought.

His awakening was a rude one.

Without an instant’s warning a heavy cloth was thrown over his head. Simultaneously two powerful arms encircled his body, pinning his elbows to his sides. Insecurely perched upon the wall, he was easily jerked backwards upon the dust and sand that lay inches deep upon the floor of the cave.

He shouted, but his voice was muffled by the substance that enveloped his head. The feeble sound he made could not possibly be heard beyond the limits of the cave.

The cloth was twisted tighter. This, coupled with the fact that his captor was kneeling on his chest, made him gasp frantically for breath. He struggled, but his efforts were of no avail against the sheer brute strength of his assailant, or assailants.

“Lash his ankles!” said a rough voice. “Stop kicking, will yer? or I’ll slit your throat like a pig’s.”

“Dash it! You’re suffocating him,” expostulated another.

“Serve him right, then.”

“Hist! Not so loud. Go easy. He’s more good to us alive than a corpse. That’s lashed his ankles right enough. Turn him over and we’ll truss him up properly.”

Grey was helpless, unable to move hand or foot. Then, removing the cloth from his head, his captors deftly inserted a gag, tying it behind the back of the head. He could now breathe through his nostrils and he did so with avidity, drawing in deep draughts of the fog-laden air.

Another man joined the party.

“Inspector Standish has been too clever this time,” he observed tauntingly.

In spite of his hazardous predicament Don felt slightly amused. He wondered what this ruffian would think when they discovered that the prisoner was not whom they thought.

“Look alive!” ordered the first speaker peremptorily. “Get him down below out of it. The boss ought to be here within the next ten minutes or so.”

They lifted Grey by the shoulders and feet and carried him about ten yards from the place where he had been overturned.

In the floor of the cave was a circular opening. During their explorations earlier in the evening, Standish and Grey had walked over the spot and there were no signs of a shaft then.

Against the side of the aperture rested the top of a ladder. Close to it was a coil of stout rope and a dark lantern.

One of the men descended. The others, looping one end of the rope round Don’s body, lowered him into the pit.

The fellow steadied him as his feet touched the ground.

“All O.K.!” he whispered. “Dick had better wait up topsides to let the gov’nor know.”

Another man followed down the ladder. The wooden cover was replaced over the shaft.

His captors then carried Grey clear of the foot of the ladder and made him sit down upon an upturned keg.

“Sight to make your eyes glad, eh, Inspector?” said one of the men. “Look around. We don’t charge anything for the view. Sorry we have to

man-handle you rough, but if you will sit on our doorstep all night something's got to be done, see?"

Don looked around.

He knew more or less where he was. Underneath the main cave was another almost as large, the existence of which was certainly not known except to this gang of smugglers. The contraband goods hidden therein must have been the work of several months, perhaps years. There were at least twenty barrels and kegs that brazenly proclaimed their contents to be cognac and hollands. Bales and oak boxes occupied another part of the cave, while on rough shelves and fixed to the wall were a number of small glass bottles containing white powder—probably cocaine or, in the language of the underworld, "snow".

But what struck Grey particularly was the fact that although most of the barrels were small enough to be lowered through the shaft there were four puncheons that could not possibly have found their way into the cave by that way. Obviously there was another opening.

"We don't want to be hard on you," continued the fellow in a conciliatory tone. "You're doing your duty though naturally we're sore because you tried to discover our secret. Well, we've let you into it and you wouldn't have found it out if we hadn't, Inspector."

Don nodded. Since he could not speak by reason of the gag, it was the only thing he could do to pretend acquiescence. He wanted to keep up the delusion on his captor's part that he was Standish.

"It'll mean keeping you for a week, perhaps more," continued the fellow. "Until we clear that stuff out and pack up. Of course, we might let you go before then, but I don't suppose you'll take your solemn oath not to blab about what you've seen?"

Grey shook his head resolutely.

"Guessed as much," resumed the other. "It seems as if you are to be our guest for a considerable time, Inspector Standish. It would never do to let your friends know of your new quarters—at least, until we have cleared out our goods and have abandoned this cave once and for all.

"You cannot escape, so there is no harm in describing the history of the place. Believe me, it is rather interesting. You are now in a part of this system of caverns that has been in existence for at least five hundred years. Its secret has been preserved and handed down from one group of families to another for the greater part of that time, with only one break. That was

when Old Rowley was on the throne. A youngster named Wentworth had been captured under circumstances similar to your own. He escaped and, naturally, told the authorities of the existence of the secret cave. It was raided and the entrance destroyed by gunpowder. More than a hundred and fifty years later the cave had been long forgotten when by chance a couple of quarrymen, who were also smugglers, were sinking a well and accidentally discovered it.

“But don’t think to escape. Additional precautions have been taken since Wentworth contrived to find his way out. You will probably be given restricted liberty of action, but beyond that you will be carefully watched. The exit is beset with pitfalls and strongly guarded. So——”

“Here’s the boss, zur!” interrupted the second man.

The cover over the mouth of the shaft had again been removed. Three leather suitcases were lowered in quick succession, followed by two men wearing oilskins and sou’westers that glistened with moisture. The slab was then replaced.

“All clear,” announced one of the newcomers, a burly man who was known to his accomplices as James Prodgers, international crook, drug smuggler and owner of the motor-cruiser *Spitfire*. “Ran the stuff under the very noses of the rats, and the yacht’s standing out to sea by this time. Hallo, who’ve you got here?”

“Inspector Standish, of the Royal Air Constabulary,” announced Don’s captor with intense satisfaction. “We shadowed him for nearly a couple of hours before we had our chance.”

Prodgers held a lantern so that the rays fell upon the prisoner’s face.

“No such luck!” he exclaimed. “You’ve got the wrong man. Remove that gag. If he shouts, his friends won’t hear. By now there’s sand piled a foot deep over the slab.”

The gag was removed. Grey was assisted to a sitting position.

“Who are you?” demanded Prodgers.

“It’s more to the point to know who you are,” rejoined Don, speaking as calmly as he could.

“No lip, young man! Has he been searched? No? Then go through his pockets.”

His automatic pistol and electric torch were removed from Grey's side-pockets. His purse they examined and returned to him. A further search revealed a number of documents, including his warrant card.

"Donald Grey, Sub-Inspector, Royal Air Constabulary, North-Eastern Division, eh?" remarked the leader of the gang. "So that's fixed you, my man. We'll take good care of you for a while. Nice little automatic, isn't it? Cost the Home Office a tenner, I reckon. Kind of them to make us a present of it. Now I know that Standish is in this district. I suppose he's directing those rats who are cooling their heels on the cliff top, isn't he? How many men has he with him?"

"I decline to give you any information," replied Don.

An ugly look appeared upon the other's face.

Opening the front of the lantern, he held a piece of thin iron rod into the flame until the metal glowed. He took his time with the evident intention of impressing his captive by the grim preparations.

"I see that a little gentle persuasion is needed to make you speak," he hissed. "Bare his chest, Tom."

# CHAPTER XI

## In Captivity

Don Grey clenched his jaws and waited for the dreaded ordeal. So far he had entertained no fears for his bodily safety. He had regarded the smugglers as men of intelligence who were pitting their brains against those of authority, but who would be most reluctant to resort to personal violence except in cases where their liberty was at stake.

But now, it seemed, they were actuated by other motives. In order to obtain information concerning the steps taken to attempt their capture, they were about to torture their bound and helpless prisoner in an effort to compel him to speak.

“They won’t if I can help it,” thought Don. “I hope I’ll have strength to stick it.”

Removing the iron from the flame, Prodgers held it an inch or so from the back of his hand. There was a singeing smell as the hairs swealed under the heat.

“Now will you answer?” he demanded.

Grey shook his head. His dry lips could not even frame the monosyllable “No”.

“Chuck it, Boss!” protested the man who had been responsible for Don’s capture. “Tom and I aren’t going to stand by and see an Englishman tickled with a hot iron. Keep those tricks for the other side—not here.”

For a few moments Prodgers hesitated. Then he tossed the iron rod across the floor of the cave.

“Only a piece of bluff on my part,” he explained lamely. “After all, it doesn’t much matter who’s outside. We’re snug enough here until the excitement’s died down. Plenty of grub and drink, I hope?”

“Enough to last a month, if need be. Look here, Boss; we can’t keep him trussed up like a fowl. He won’t be able to get clear. Hadn’t we better cast loose his lashings?”

“I suppose so,” replied Prodgers, probably with the idea of trying to impress upon his captive that his recent threat was not to be taken seriously. “Look here, Grey; if we unloose you will you promise not to give trouble? You cannot possibly escape. If you attempt to do so, you’ll only be giving yourself and us unnecessary trouble.”

Don considered the proposition. Once he had given his word his sense of honour would not permit him to break his pledge. By being given a very limited amount of liberty he might be able to gather information for subsequent use. From what he already knew concerning the cavern there was no possible chance of escape. Rescue, if forthcoming, would have to come from outside—but how was a rescuing party to know of his plight, when the very existence of the cave was a secret known only to a few—each of whom was deeply involved in this grave law-breaking business?

His chief hope of release lay in the fact that he already knew. The vessel that had landed the small but valuable contraband had made off to seaward. There was a chance that she might be stopped by the customs patrol launch and taken into Poole as a suspect. Then, if any of the crew was willing to turn King’s Evidence, the secret of the smugglers’ lair might be revealed.

But perhaps the crew of the *Spitfire* were in ignorance of the actual *cache*.

“Right; I’ll give no trouble,” replied Don.

“Now and after?” asked Prodgers.

“While I’m here,” answered Grey.

“That’ll serve, Boss,” declared Tom. “By the time we turn him adrift we’ll have got all the stuff safely away.”

James Prodgers had other views on the matter, but for the present he preferred to keep them to himself.

“O.K.,” he agreed. “Cut him loose. How about a meal? I’m ready and I guess the rest of you are too.”

Within a few minutes following his release from his bonds, Don was one of the belated supper party. He had eaten nothing since tea-time and it was now close upon four in the morning.

He wondered what Colin would think if he could have been an unseen witness of the scene.



There were now half a dozen of the gang present. Since no one had descended the ladder after the cover had been replaced, it again showed that there was another entrance. The seven, Don included, either reclined on bundles upon the floor or sat upon upturned kegs. More light had been provided. A loaf was handed round, each man cutting off what he required. When it came to Grey's turn the man Tom lent him his knife. Then slices of ham were served out and a metal cup, filled with spirits that had not enriched the coffers of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was served out to each one.

Don drank with the rest. This was an occasion when he could, without prejudice, break the laws of the country by consuming "free" spirit on unlicensed premises!

As the repast went on the smugglers began to talk with little restraint. Since the raid upon them had utterly failed, they harboured no resentment. The fact that they held a police officer captive somewhat complicated matters, since there would certainly be a protracted search made of the district. But, on the other hand, they had successfully landed the last of their contraband goods. Provided they could get the stuff inland and dispose of it profitably, there was enough for each man to "retire" from the illicit business. Don gathered that most of them were making their way across to Havre and thence to the United States. Prodders, alone, gave no inkling of his future movements. He was still pondering over the idea of making good use of his captive.

When the meal was over—and it was a protracted affair—Tom took Grey in hand.

"I'll show you round," he explained, "and then you can turn-in. Here's where you wash—water laid on, you see, though it doesn't come through pipes. You can dress here. I'll find you a couple of blankets and you'll have to make do with a donkey's breakfast."

The latter, Don discovered, was a coarse canvas mattress stuffed with straw and placed upon a few planks raised some inches above the bone-dry floor of the cave.

"Sleep well," enjoined his guide. "There's no need to worry about your money. We're all honest men here!"

Don had been more than twenty hours without sleep. He had been drowsy enough before he had been captured; now, aided by the effects of the strong, well over "proof" spirit, he was hardly able to keep his eyes open.

Throwing off his clothes, he sluiced his head and shoulders in the cold running water, towelled vigorously with a piece of canvas supplied by his captors, wrapped himself in the blankets and was soon lost to the world, in more senses than one.

Already, although he was unaware of it, the local representative of the London press had telephoned that Sub-Inspector Donald Grey, R.A. Constabulary, was missing. Although foul play had not been suspected, the cause of his disappearance was unknown. It was presumed that he had fallen over a cliff while in the execution of his duty.

When Don awoke, almost his first act was to glance at his watch. It was ten minutes past seven. He was still feeling desperately tired. The other occupants of the cave were up and about. Some of them had lighted a rusty paraffin stove and were engaged in frying eggs and bacon.

"You'd better turn out if you want something hot," observed Tom, seeing Grey bestir himself.

"You're evidently a believer in early rising," rejoined Don, stifling a yawn. "I've only had about two hours' sleep."

"Two hours! Why, you haven't stirred for close on fifteen hours," was the astonishing declaration. "Some of us'll soon be thinking of turning in, I'll allow."

So that accounted for his ravenous hunger! Although he still felt stiff and tired, he was famishing. He had eaten his last meal sixteen hours previously.

He dressed hurriedly. His captors had kept their word, for his pocket-book, containing about fifteen pounds in notes, and his purse, with about fourteen shillings in silver and copper, were intact.

The others, even Prodgers, greeted him in a friendly manner as he took his seat upon the same upturned keg that he had previously had.

They gave him two slices of Dorset bacon, two eggs and a generous slice of wholemeal bread. After that, honey, marmalade and fruit were left to his choice. There was a large iron pot simmering over a primus stove. It contained coffee already sweetened and mixed with milk. Each man dipped a small jug into the liquid and poured out as much as he wanted into his pannikin or cup as the case might be. Some of them laced their coffee with spirits, but Prodgers was one of the crew who refrained. Don remembered that the fellow had been equally abstemious during the preceding meal.

As he ate, Grey looked about him with a well-assumed air of carelessness. He noticed, amongst other things, that two of the puncheons and several of the smaller casks had disappeared, together with the suitcases that Prodgers had landed earlier in the day—during the small hours of the morning.

Certain it was that the smugglers, undeterred by the knowledge that two strong parties of police and customs men had been guarding the approaches to the caves, had succeeded in removing a considerable portion of their contraband goods. And, since the puncheons were too big to be hauled up through the vertical shaft, these two facts pointed to the existence of a tunnel that opened out at a considerable distance away—far enough to relieve the gang from all fear of their would-be captors.

“I don’t want to cause your friends undue anxiety,” said Prodgers at the conclusion of the meal. “You’d better write to Standish telling him you’re alive and kicking. I’ll have to play the role of censor, of course, so you’ll not waste your time in giving information that won’t be passed. You’ll find pencil and paper over there.”

“No limit to the length of the correspondence?”

“None. Make a full-length book of it if you like, provided you give nothing away.”

“Right!”

Grey busied himself, writing at a fair speed, and without hesitation:

DEAR INSPECTOR STANDISH,

I’m alive and kicking, so my captors say. Under the circumstances I’ve nothing much to complain about. The surroundings are plain but fairly comfortable. Cannot give definite information. At present I’m feeling tired. Very shortly I’ll be turning in. Every precaution is being taken to prevent my escape. Except for a chance to see a newspaper I’m well treated. No anxiety need be felt for my safety. Transference to a distant hiding-place is hinted at. Rather ambiguous that, eh? Anyhow, I don’t know where that place is. Not worrying. Can you let my people know I’m all right. Ever since yesterday——

At length Don finished his effort and handed it to Prodgers.

“Bit disjointed, isn’t it?” asked the self-appointed censor.

“’Spose it is,” admitted Grey frankly. “So would your letter be if you were in my place. Can’t help feeling a bit rattled, you know. Cut out anything you like: I don’t mind.”

And because Grey had suggested it, Prodgers, with typical pig-headedness, didn’t alter or cut out a single sentence.

In that screed Don had given his chum a definite clue to the smugglers’ hiding-place.

## CHAPTER XII

### A Check

Standish was standing in the superintendent's office at Wareham police station. One foot was planted on a chair. In his right hand he held a telephone earpiece. His face was drawn and pale under the strain of the last three or four days. He was engaged in a long-distance conversation with his chief, Colonel Robartes.

"No, sir, nothing further to report. They've drafted extra police in, but so far without result. . . . You'll send Amble. . . . Oh, yes, I suppose I'd better have someone. . . . Quite, sir. . . . Oh, yes, there had been two heath fires in the district. The source of one was traced. The other probably was not accidental. Two bungalows were involved. . . . No, sir, the fishermen are confident that if the body (he couldn't say Don's body) is found it won't be earlier than the ninth day . . . anywhere between Portland and the Isle of Wight. . . . Very good, sir, good night!"

Standish rung off, conferred for a few minutes with the superintendent, and then went back to his hotel to spend the rest of the evening in solitary brooding.

It looked as if he would have to accept defeat—defeat with loss of prestige, and in the knowledge that he had lost his best friend.

He glanced at the letter-rack. The last post that day was in by five o'clock. It was now nearly seven and he had collected his mail an hour ago.

To his surprise there was an envelope addressed to him. It had not been there when he went across the road to the police station.

It was addressed to him at Far Eastern Airways Aerodrome, Bere Regis, and bore a French stamp and the Havre postmark. Since it had not been readdressed it must have been brought in from Bere Regis by hand. It had not come through the local post office.

The address on the envelope was unfamiliar; by the spidery writing and elaborate flourishes Colin thought that it had been the work of a foreigner.

He slit open the flap and extracted the contents—four small sheets of thin paper written on in pencil.

The daylight that found its way into the entrance hall was not enough to enable him to read it. He slipped the letter into his pocket and went up to his room. He did not bother to read it at first, but devoted his attention to a copy of one of the Dorset papers to see if there were any fresh developments of the mystery of Grey's disappearance. The London papers had sent down special representatives; but for authentic details Colin preferred the work of the local reporters. They, at any rate, were not handicapped by a lack of local knowledge. They trusted less to their imagination, and confined themselves chiefly to the bald narrative of actual facts.

There was nothing fresh. Colin put the paper aside and reopened the pencilled sheets.

He gave a gasp of astonishment—he who so rarely betrayed his emotions.

The writing was that of his chum Grey.

He read it through. It conveyed precious little beyond the all-important fact that Don was alive and well, but in some place of detention—where?

It contained, of course, a code, and one that the two chums had often made use of at odd moments, in case the necessity to employ it in grim earnest should arise.

Standish picked out the first word of each sentence—"I'm under the cannot."

Not much sense there. The first three words sounded hopeful. He continued, taking the initial letters of the succeeding sentences:

"I'm under the cave. Entrance is perhaps a mile north."

That solved part of the mystery. Don had not fallen over the cliff. He had been kidnapped, taken into one of the caves and thence by an unknown passage into a deeper cavern. Otherwise he wouldn't have stated "I'm under the cave". Equally obviously, there must be a bolt-hole—a tunnel emerging into the open air at some point about a mile to the north and inland.

The fact that the letter had been posted abroad was meant to set would-be rescuers on a false trail. On the supposition that Don had been kidnapped and taken across Channel, the British police authorities would have to approach their French colleagues by roundabout methods before the machinery of the law could be set into operation—and then it would be working on barren ground.

It was quite an easy matter to post Grey's letter to a French agent of the smugglers and get him to send it to Standish's address. The whole business would not take more than forty-eight hours—less, if the missive had been sent by air mail.

Unfolding his inch-to-the-mile ordnance map, Colin measured off the distance. If north were anything approximate—then the exit was somewhere in a maze of quarries to the south of Swanage's main approach. He had seen them from the air—a perfect labyrinth that underground was probably as complex as the catacombs of ancient Rome. It was quite reasonable to infer that the companies and private individuals owning the quarries might be absolutely ignorant of the fact that a tunnel from Tilly Whim caves led to one of the scores of excavations with which the district is honeycombed.

Colin's thoughts dwelt upon the events of the night of his fruitless vigil. He recalled the fact that the police sergeant had brought an old fisherman up in order to explain his presence there; George, one of the constables had called him. And he, Standish, had given the old fellow the price of a drink. Now, was it possible that George knew of the existence of the cavern under the caves? He was not a stranger to the locality, since one of the constables had recognized him.

It would not be at all a bad move to get in touch with George and ask a few pertinent questions—even, perhaps, try a little bluffing!

Again Standish went across to the police station. Just outside the overhanging porch of the Bear he caught sight of the local reporter and beckoned him.

"You've been very helpful in this business," Colin said. "I'm going to make some return by giving you some exclusive information: Sub-Inspector Grey is alive and, I trust, well."

"Where is he?"

"That I cannot say, because I don't know for certain," replied Standish. "But I can tell you this: I've just had a letter from him. It was posted at Havre. Now there's something to get busy with. Good night."

"May I mention your name as my authority?" asked the pressman.

"Certainly."

Standish knew that this was a safe move. Not only would it reassure Don's relations and friends—for the astonishing news would be telephoned to London and would appear in all the big "dailies"—but it would lead

Grey's captors to believe that their ruse concerning his whereabouts had been successful.

Now to release Don and make a clean-up of the smuggling gang at one and the same time!

At the police station Standish explained matters to the superintendent and asked permission to telephone to Swanage.

He got his number.

"Swanage Constabulary? Is Sergeant Hicks there? Inspector Standish speaking."

"Sergeant Hicks speaking now, sir."

"Good! One of your men, you'll remember, said he recognized George—the old fisherman we questioned on the night of Mr. Grey's disappearance."

"Yes, sir."

"Find out from him where this George lives and induce him to come over to the station. You can't compel him, I know; but he'll probably agree. I'll be over by eight o'clock. Right; ring off!"

Hurrying back to the hotel to change into uniform, Standish left word that he would not be back that night.

"Lumme!" ejaculated the waiter. "He's some lad, that inspector. Taken a room for a fortnight and hasn't slept in his bed more than three times since he's been here."

A police car was waiting at the hotel entrance. Seven minutes later it was roaring up the steep and narrow incline into Corfe Castle. Another ten minutes and it came to a standstill outside the police station at Swanage.

He was met by Sergeant Hicks.

"Bolsom, the constable you referred to, hasn't returned yet, sir," he announced, with a salute. "I've sent him off with a motor-cycle and side-car. I don't think our man, George Briddlebrack, will mind being driven in a side-car. In fact he'll feel rather pleased with himself, I should imagine."

"H'm, I hope he will. By the by, Mr. Grey has written to me."

"Then he's not——?"



“No,” interrupted Standish. “He’s not dead, but held a prisoner somewhere by the gang. He says he’s somewhere under Tilly Whim Caves. I suppose you don’t know of any possible hiding-place under the caves, sergeant?”

“I don’t, sir,” admitted Hicks frankly. “Many a time when I was a boy—I was brought up here—I’ve played in the caves. Explored every inch, I might say.”

“What would you say if anyone suggested that there is a secret tunnel from the caves to the quarries?”

“There isn’t one,” declared Sergeant Hicks emphatically. “Whoever said there is is a perverter of the truth!”

“I hope I’ll be able to call you that, sergeant,” rejoined Standish cheerfully. “We’ll see what Mr. George Bridlebrack has to say about it.”

“Here’s Constable Bolsom, sir!”

The policeman, wearing black overalls over his uniform, entered the charge-room and catching sight of Standish saluted smartly.

“I’ve been, sir!”

“And Bridlebrack refused to come back?”

“Well, sir, he couldn’t,” replied the constable stolidly. “He’s dead!”

“Dead?” echoed the sergeant sharply. “How? foul play?”

“No, sir, his wife says he’s been out of sorts for some time past. A doctor’s been attending him.”

“Another check!” thought Standish. “That old man might have supplied very important information.”

“What now, sir?” asked Sergeant Hicks.

“We must have both the caves and the quarries watched night and day,” decided Colin.

“Two plain-clothes officers by day and four uniformed ones at night.”

“It will be a heavy strain on the local constabulary, sir,” observed Hicks. “What with these fires——”

“Possibly,” rejoined Standish. “All the same, I must make arrangements with your Chief for this to be done. If necessary we must draft in men from

other districts. Talking about these fires, I noticed a blaze over towards Studland as I drove here.”

“Yes, sir; that’s all right,” explained Hicks. “Estate men clearing the ground. They’ll keep the blaze well under control.”

Just then the telephone bell rang.

The sergeant went over to the instrument.

“Well? . . . Yes, Hicks speaking; who is it? . . . Where? . . . At Worth, you say. . . . And you’ve called up the Fire Brigade. . . . All right; I’ll send as many of our men as can be spared.”

He replaced the receiver and turned to Standish.

“Another fire has just been reported, sir; up by the quarries you were talking about! That’s the third since Tuesday.”

## CHAPTER XIII

# Ringed in by Fire

That night Standish slept at an hotel in Swanage. Having been assured that police would be detailed to watch the places he had indicated he then returned to Bere Regis Aerodrome.

The essential part of his duty, from an official point of view, was to maintain an air patrol. Recently his investigations had kept him mostly on *terra firma*, and so far, as he had to admit, without much progress towards his ultimate goal.

There was also another reason. Sub-Inspector Amble was due to report for duty there that evening, and was coming south from Hawkscar by train. He had known Amble for some time and rather liked him.

It was nearly noon when Colin arrived at the Far Eastern Airways Aerodrome. In reply to his question he was informed that Mr. Truscott had left for London that morning, in order to attend a board meeting.

Unlocking the doors of the hanger, Colin saw that his “booby-trap”, a thin thread of black silk stretched across the forward cockpit—was untouched. Apparently no intruder had found his way in during his absence.

“Taking off, sir?” inquired the ground foreman.

“Yes, Symes; single-handed this time. You might get hold of a couple of men.”

“Very good, sir. Wasn’t that good news of Mr. Grey?”

“You’ve heard, then?”

“Only what’s in the morning papers. They say he’s been kidnapped and taken across to France.”

“And what do you think about it?”

“Me, sir?” rejoined Symes. “If the papers say he’s in France it’s not for me to doubt what they say. It isn’t my job, Mr. Standish.”

“Hinting that it’s mine, eh? I must admit, Symes, this business has baffled me. The one bright spot is the knowledge that Grey is alive.”

The foreman whistled. In reply to the summons two of the ground staff hurried up. The monoplane was manhandled out of the shed to the fuel supply pump.

“Fifty gallons,” ordered Standish. “Yes, and oil.”

During the filling operations he tested the controls with his usual thoroughness. Everything was in order. He signed the ground foreman’s log, told Symes that he would probably be away no longer than four hours, and climbing on board again, called to the men to “give her a swing”.

This time he was single-handed, but that did not prevent him from being his own observer.

He flew south, high over the lofty mound crowned by the gaunt ruins of Corfe Castle, then over Kingston Hill, and above the extensive “slate” quarries—actually the famous Purbeck Stone is hewn there—and thence to the coast.

Occasionally he shut off his engine and as he glided he could hear, amongst other noises, the dull reports of the blasting charges and the rumble of displaced stone that rewarded the marblers’ efforts. He had lived long enough in this district to give the quarrymen the local designation, although the term “marbler” seemed somewhat obscure in origin.

Huge lorries laden with enormous slabs of hewn stone could be seen lumbering along the road. Men, looking no larger than ants, swarmed over the quarries. Probably twice as many were hidden from sight in those intricate workings. The whole district was such a hive of industry that Colin wondered whether the employment of plain-clothes constables during the day was really necessary.

At length, none the wiser for his morning’s flight, Standish swung the bus homewards, intending to make a detour over Arne and the upper reaches of Poole Harbour. He was still curious to know where that speed-boat had been lying unobserved until she suddenly appeared to rescue the smuggler airman from his crashed machine.

Even as he turned northwards he caught sight of an enormous cloud of dense smoke. A quarter of an hour ago he had flown over that district and there had been no sign of a heath fire.

A glance at his map enabled him to name the district. It was a vast expanse of heathland between the River Frome and Poole Harbour on the one side and the Purbeck Hills on the other, and rejoiced in the name of Slepe Common or, in the vernacular, Slip Heath. A very inferior road

crossed it, together with several tracks almost obliterated by the dense growth of gorse and heather. Except for a few hours' downpour no rain had fallen for nearly two months and the ground was parched and the coarse vegetation was like dry tinder.

There were one or two farms and about half a dozen isolated cottages on the heath, but from his position they were hidden by the dense smoke screen.

The strong breeze was sou'westerly, so that flying down-wind Standish was at first to wind'ard of the fire. He kept a sharp look-out for any suspicious character. If an incendiary had been at work he would now be decamping, either afoot or on a bicycle, since no car could approach the spot where the outbreak had commenced. There were, however, about a dozen men engaged upon the hopeless task of attempting to beat out the flames by means of up-rooted gorse bushes. Considering the magnitude of the conflagration their efforts could be likened to those of Mrs. Partington with her broom!

Climbing steeply, Standish gained an altitude that brought him above the rolling masses of black smoke. Well to lee'ard of the fire he dived to observe the conditions in the path of the flames.

To his horror he found that the line of fire was of crescent formation. The extremities, like the horns of a Zulu *impi*, were far in advance of the centre and had already nearly encircled a cottage. He could discern the occupiers—a man and a woman, valiantly digging a “stop” in a vain effort to prevent the fire advancing, apparently oblivious of the fact that already their retreat was nearly cut off. They were in the centre of an oval patch of unconsumed heath measuring roughly half a mile by two hundred to three hundred yards.

Already the building was hidden again and again by smoke that, driven by the strong wind, flew in irregular bursts over the unfortunate cottagers' threatened sanctuary.

Quickly Standish weighed up the situation. It would be useless for him to go for assistance. The monoplane would not take long to reach a town or village, but by the time would-be rescuers arrived the cottage would be in flames, and the two people either suffocated or burnt.

He must carry out the task if it were humanly possible. It would be a matter of moments. Could he land on that apparently rough ground, take the

cottagers on board and find sufficient space for the machine to gather speed before taking off?

In cold blood Standish might have hesitated. As it was, although he knew the terrific risk, he acted promptly.

Swooping down, he made a good landing on what was probably the only stretch of turf for a mile around. True, the old bus rocked alarmingly, but tyres and undercarriage stood the strain.

He brought up within ten yards of the man and woman who, absorbed in their hopeless task, had neither seen nor heard the plane until it was close upon them.

“Hop in as sharp as you can!” exclaimed Colin. “The fire’s all round you!”

“So ’en be, missus! Look-zee, us never knawed that. Cottage it’ll have to go! Come on, old girl, ’tes your first ride in aireyplane an’ mine too.”

“And your last if we aren’t lucky,” thought Colin grimly.

“Fowls ’ull have to take their chance,” said the woman. “But there be our Nell.”

“Who’s Nell?” asked Standish sharply. He had not bargained for three passengers. Even with two the bus would be on the heavy side.

“Our sheep dog, zur,” explained the woman. “I’ll not be a minute loosen’ her, look-zee!”

Through the thin smoke that was preceding the flames scores of wild rabbits, rats, mice, a few weasels and several snakes were seeking to escape the devouring elements. Many of the rabbits had their fur singed completely off.

“Get the dog as fast as you can,” ordered Standish, anxiously looking to windward and mentally measuring the steadily diminishing length of his only possible take-off.

The woman returned with a grey-and-white bobtailed dog. Fortunately, the animal, though obviously apprehensive, was docile.

As quickly as possible Standish helped the woman into the after-cockpit and snapped the quick-release belt round her waist.

“Sit here,” he explained to the man. “Put your legs straight out under here and hang on to this like grim death—understand? Are you sure that the

dog will be quiet?”

“Quiet as a lamb, zur.”

The animal was pushed under the deck. If, as might easily happen, the monoplane flew upside down, the woman and the dog would not be likely to fall out. As for her husband, it all depended upon whether he kept his legs as Colin had directed, and was able to retain his grip on the coaming!

With a loud roar the motor woke into activity. No need to be gentle with the throttle. Standish let her rip. Intense acceleration was necessary if the machine was to take off successfully. Head to wind, of course, but dead towards the rapidly advancing wall of fire.

He could see nothing of the ground ahead. If it were encumbered by gorse bushes a take-off would be out of the question. The prop would be shattered into fragments, the machine would capsize and the petrol—more than thirty gallons of it—would gush from the tank. . . . It would be a fairly quick death—certainly quicker than being slowly roasted by the heat of the heath fire.

Not a moment too soon or too late did the heavily-laden plane part company with Mother Earth.

She was up, but dashing madly through the midst of those swirling tongues of blood-red flame.

Colin had a momentary glimpse of the flames, wind-torn by the whirling of the propeller and streaming on both sides of him, yet strangely enough, missing both him and his passengers. The heat scorched his face cruelly, but there was no actual contact with the fire.

Glancing at his altimeter he found that the machine was rapidly gaining height. Then the glare gave place to darkness.

They had risen above the flames and were climbing obliquely through the smoke. Or, rather, Colin hoped so!

It was too dark to see the instrument-board, even with the dash-lamp switched on. All that was visible of that was the glow-worm-like radiance of the filament. Whether the bus was on an even keel or not he was unable to say. She was plunging blindly through the suffocating smoke. The choking sensation that gripped Colin by the throat was far worse than the terrible heat of the flames through which the monoplane had just passed.

Standish wondered how his unexpected passengers were faring. Even in those moments of peril his thoughts were not for himself but for others. For

the present he was no longer a Royal Air Constabulary officer but a pilot to whose care the lives of others had been entrusted.

He had now lost all sense of time and direction. He wondered how much longer he could possibly hold out, taking in those reluctant breaths of noxious, smoke-laden air, before the fumes should overcome him. And yet, in the midst of peril, he concentrated his failing faculties upon the task of keeping the machine under control.

Since the instrument-board was invisible he had to fly by guess. The smoke-cloud might be a couple of miles in extent and rising a thousand feet or more above the burning heath. The higher he climbed, provided the monoplane maintained speed, the sooner he would be clear of the suffocating fumes. But what if he attempted to climb too steeply and the old bus stalled? She would be in a tail spin before he could check her, and crash to earth like a fiery comet. The end would be sharp and sudden, but before then there would be long-drawn-out seconds of intense mental agony.

No, he simply daren't run that risk.

He groped for the controls and brought the monoplane's nose down slightly. As he did so the intense darkness gave place to a dark brownish layer of smoke—or at least he thought so.

"We're nearly above it!" he thought. "Stick it, old girl! We'll win through yet."

His eyes were smarting painfully in spite of his goggles. His nostrils and mouth felt as if they had been stuffed with hot sawdust—only the stuff did not smell and taste like sawdust but something most unpleasant. Worse than everything was that relentless grip upon his throat and the frightful strain upon his smoke-filled lungs.

A moment later the monoplane emerged into brilliant sunshine. She was only about fifteen feet above the blackened ground from which wisps of smoke were still rising. She was heading straight for a clump of scorched pine trees and at a speed of over one hundred and fifty miles an hour.

Would Standish, with his vision blurred and his lungs strained to bursting point, be able to sight the obstruction in time, or was his desperate act to save others a useless sacrifice?



## CHAPTER XIV

# Inspiration

Somehow Colin realized that instead of being thousands of feet up he was skimming the ground. He had utterly miscalculated the climbing angle and instead of gaining altitude while in the smoke he had brought the machine nose down, so that she was flying horizontally.

What with the grit in his eyes and the fact that the monoplane was almost pointing towards the sun, Standish saw nothing of the menacing barrier right ahead—that clump of trees whose gaunt branches almost met like giant arms out-stretched to hold the machine and its occupants in a deadly grip.

But the mere knowledge that he was only just skimming the ground was sufficient to make Standish zoom almost automatically. He realized that in his present condition altitude meant everything towards safety. Higher up the air would be pure, keen and bracing. There he would remain until his senses regained their normal state, and he would be able to make a successful landing.

As he zoomed, the monoplane almost grazed the tree-tops. Then and only then did he realize how narrowly he had escaped.

Up and up he climbed, refilling his lungs with nectar-tasting air.

He looked back over his shoulder at his passengers. The man was still gripping the coaming. His bloodshot eyes looked white in comparison with his blackened face. He was gasping like a stranded fish although buffeted by the one-hundred-and-fifty-mile gale. He was alive; that was one thing to be thankful for.

His wife was leaning forward as far as the safety-belt would permit. Colin could not see her face, but the movement of her shoulders showed that she had survived the ordeal.

Of the sheep-dog there was no sign.

In about ten minutes, during which the monoplane had flown well out to sea and back, Standish decided that it was time to land and get medical attention for his human passengers.

He switched off the ignition, put the stabilizer gear into operation and leant across the decking behind the pilot's cockpit.

"How are you feeling now?" he inquired.

"Middlin', zur," replied the man.

"Splendid! And your wife?"

The countryman turned and said something to his wife. She replied, but Colin was unable to hear the conversation.

"She's feeling a bit rough, zur."

Standish knew what that meant. He had lived long enough in Dorset to know that Dorset people never make use of the word "ill"; "rough" is the invariable substitute.

"Right-o!" he rejoined. "We'll land. Where do you want to land?"

"Anywhere nigh to Wareham, sur. My missus' daughter lives there. She'll tak' us in till our place is builded again. We'm havin' to start all over again, look-zee!"

Colin could not help admiring the simple bravery of the man. One would have thought he would be afraid to live again on that desolate heath; yet he was calmly stating his intention of chancing similar risks as soon as his homestead was rebuilt.

Switching on the motor, Standish headed northward again. Passing over Corfe he could see the vast blackened area devastated by the fire. In fact, the conflagration still raged in three different places, having been split up by various arms of Poole Harbour. Where his passengers' cottage had been nothing remained but four blackened mud walls.

Presently, looking down for a suitable landing-ground, Colin noticed a level track on the right bank of the River Frome, and fairly close to the glaring white concrete bridge at the southern exit from the town. The field was intersected by a few dykes, but there was otherwise plenty of space both for landing and taking-off.

Again Colin stopped his engine.

"Will this do?" he asked.

"I'm not particular, zur. 'Tain't fur from Wareham."

Down swooped the monoplane. The landing wheels bumped. She was almost at a standstill when she put her nose down. The propeller flew into a

hundred pieces. One of the wheels collapsed. The machine tilted until her starboard wing-tip touched the ground.

Too late Colin discovered that he had landed on a marsh.

He got out and assisted his passengers to alight. The sheep-dog leapt lithely from the cockpit and capered around, barking delightedly at finding herself on the ground again.

Full of concern for his bus, Colin turned to the old countryman.

“Why didn’t you tell me this was a marsh?” he demanded.

“You never axed I, zur!” was the bland response.

Already a number of people were hurrying along the river bank, attracted by the mishap.

The damaged monoplane bore signs of the ordeal through which she had passed. The flames had scorched wings and fuselage. Her identification marks were obliterated beyond recognition. Her previously glistening grey paint was now almost black. Ashes lay an inch deep on the floors of the cockpits. In addition, her unfortunate landing had resulted in the destruction of her propeller and slight damage to her undercarriage.

Colin found himself an object of particular attention on the part of the crowd. And no wonder. His leather coat was singed and burnt in a dozen places. The lambskin of his gloves was blackened. His face resembled that of a ship’s fireman. In addition there was a painful blister on his left cheek and a gash on his chin from which blood was still dripping.

His passengers went off in the care of their friends. He was left to satisfy the curiosity of the crowd and to answer a string of questions fired at him by a newspaper man, until the police arrived to take charge of the situation.

Assuring them that he was not in need of medical attention and still less of a stretcher which had been brought to the scene, Standish made his way to the Bear whence, having had a hot bath and a change, he telephoned to Bere Regis for a breakdown equipment to remove the damaged machine. Then he obtained a trunk call to Hawkscar and reported the damage.

“You’re not hurt, Standish, I hope?” asked Colonel Robartes, who answered the call in person.

“No, sir.”

“That’s the thing that matters. How long before the machine is repaired?”

“They have spare props in stock, sir. The undercarriage should be repaired in a few hours.”

“Good! Then carry on!”

Colin breathed freely. He had expected that his little mishap would mean his recall. Everything seemed to be going wrong; his blunder in squirting aniline dye over a highly-respected Justice of the Peace; then Don’s disappearance, and finally the damage to Royal Air Constabulary *matériel* not directly attributable to the exigencies of the Service. And yet his genial Chief had sufficient faith in him to tell him to carry on!

After tea Colin went to the railway station to meet Amble on his arrival.

“I brought you down south on a wild-goose chase, I fancy, Amble,” he observed after the usual exchange of greetings. “I crashed the old bus this afternoon.”

“Sounds exciting, sir,” remarked the youthful Sub-inspector.

“It was,” agreed Colin grimly. “But that’s beside the point. We’re badly handicapped without the plane.”

He explained the situation to date.

“I’m convinced that Grey is held prisoner in some secret cave,” he added. “I shouldn’t be at all surprised to hear that that’s the work of a foreign crook. Ours don’t go to such extreme lengths. We’ve made several intensive searches; we’ve men on watch day and night, and yet, beyond that one letter from Grey, there’s not the faintest clue.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if his captors adopt American methods and demand a ransom for his release, sir,” suggested Amble.

“In that case they’ll waste their time,” rejoined Colin. “Hallo! Here’s the breakdown gang with the old bus. We may as well run up to Bere Regis with them and see what the repairs foreman has to say.”

The lorry with the dismantled monoplane had stopped at the closed gates of a level crossing. Amble threw his suitcase into the cab and the two Air Constabulary officers managed to squeeze in beside the driver.

On arriving at the aerodrome Standish inquired if Mr. Truscott was in.

“Yes,” was the reply. “He heard you’d crashed and left a message that he’d like to see you when you arrived.”

Taking Amble with him, Colin went across to the resident managing director's office.

Truscott, who was looking much better than when Colin had last seen him, greeted him jocularly.

"I warned you, young man!" he exclaimed. "You were like a moth flying round a lighted candle. You scorched your wings and down you came. A good job you're not in the employ of Far Eastern Airways or I'd have to tick you off severely."

"Then I'm glad I'm not," rejoined Colin.

"And still no news of Grey?"

"We live in hope."

"Well, I hope you won't die in despair, Standish," remarked Truscott. "How about a spot?"

Both Colin and Amble declined the invitation and after a brief inconsequential conversation they left the office.

"I wonder why he wanted to see me?" thought Standish. "There wasn't anything particular he wanted."

The interview with the ground foreman was of a more satisfactory nature. Symes had got the repairs foreman to examine the damaged plane, with the result that the work was already in hand.

Standish was promised that the machine would be repaired, tested and given its certificate by ten o'clock on Thursday.

They caught a motor-bus back to Wareham, had dinner and devoted the rest of the evening to writing and reading, since Standish had to send in an official report of the mishap. At ten o'clock he telephoned to Swanage and was informed that there were no fresh developments.

At eleven Colin went to bed but not to sleep. He lay awake reconstructing the events of the day. Throughout his ordeal by fire he had kept metaphorically cool and collected. Intent upon the work of rescue, he had hardly given more than a passing thought to the risks he had undergone. Now, safely in bed, the whole scene was re-acted in all its grimness. He actually found himself shivering with apprehension of what might have happened.

At length, long after midnight, he fell into an uneasy slumber. Strange dreams troubled his excited brain. Most of them he could not remember

when he awoke; but one remained vividly impressed on his mind.

He was standing on the edge of an abandoned shaft in the quarry. Everything was vivid and real, even the waving of the parched grass in the breeze that came in from the sea and the wheeling seagulls overhead.

Then a boy came up to him.

“Do you know there’s a long tunnel out of this hole?” he asked. “I thought you might be looking for it. There is one!”

The speaker in his dream was Denis Day.

“By Jove!” decided Colin, staring at the early morning sunshine pouring through the window. “I’ll look that bright youth up. Dashed if I don’t!”

## CHAPTER XV

# The Inner Cave

Standish tubbed, dressed, and went down to breakfast. Amble had not yet put in an appearance.

Whilst waiting for the meal to be served Colin could not put his dream out of his mind. It was one of many that alone had not faded into oblivion with the dawn of day. Its persistence struck him as being very remarkable. He always prided himself upon what he called materialism. He was superstitious up to a certain point, a peculiarity shared by most airmen; but if anyone had taxed him with being influenced by supernatural agencies he would have hotly and truthfully denied it.

“I’ll put it this way,” he reasoned. “That youngster certainly put me on to something when he came and told me about those two fellows at Lulworth Cove. Why shouldn’t he be able to do me another good turn?”

Then Amble arrived, said good morning, and asked how Colin had slept.

“Rottenly,” admitted the latter frankly.

“Thought so, sir,” continued the young sub-inspector. “I could hear you talking in your sleep. I was on the point of coming in to see if you were all right when you called out quite loudly ‘That’s the day’ or something like it. Then you went off quietly.”

“What I think I said was ‘That’s it, Day!’” explained Standish. “I mentioned yesterday how a Swanage Grammar School boy did quite a smart bit of detective work and came here to me with important information. I’m going to look that youngster up and ask him for some more!”

“What made you decide to do that?” asked Amble.

“Call it intuition and you may not be far wrong,” replied Colin, helping himself to bacon and eggs. “You get an idea firmly fixed in your mind. You work on those lines and generally it passes out all right. At least I’ve found it so.”

“But if it doesn’t?”

“Then,” replied Colin with a smile, “you’ll have to admit you’re on the wrong tack and then start all over again. In this case we’ll see if my theory holds.”

After breakfast Standish had to confer with the superintendent of police for nearly an hour. Then he was held up by a London pressman and a press photographer, who had been sent down to interview him concerning his rescue of the cottagers.

“It was most courageous of you, sir, if I may be permitted to say so,” observed the reporter at the conclusion of the interview.

“You’d better put in your report that my cold feet helped to keep my head cool!” rejoined Colin. “If ever a fellow was in a blue funk, I was!”

Shortly after noon Standish and Amble called at Denis Day’s home, just in case the youth was in for the midday recess. Their luck was in. It was a half-term holiday and Denis was planning to go boating in the bay.

“You know the quarries pretty well?” asked Colin.

“Rather, sir!” replied the lad. “Several of our fellows have permission to search for geological specimens.”

“You don’t happen to know if there’s a tunnel from one of them leading towards the sea?”

“There is a tunnel, but it doesn’t run very far,” replied Denis. “I’ll show you where it is, if you like.”

“But how about your boating trip?”

“That doesn’t matter, sir; I’d like to take part in another bit of detective work.”

“How do you know there’s going to be any?” asked Standish.

“There must be if you’re thinking of exploring the quarries, sir.”

“Quite right there,” admitted Colin.

Both he and Amble were in plain clothes. In fact, Standish’s uniform had been completely spoilt during his flight through the flames, and he hadn’t another except the one left at Hawkscar.

The two Royal Air Constabulary officers and Denis made their way up to the quarries. Work had been suspended for the dinner hour and the “marblers” had gone home until one-thirty; but as Standish and his



companions entered the scarred ground a tall, broad-shouldered man walked towards them.

“That’s Dumbell,” declared Denis. “One of the local police.”

“Not much use his being in plain clothes, since everyone seems to know him,” commented Amble.

The policeman, recognizing Standish, saluted.

“Nothing to report, I suppose?” asked the latter.

“No, sir, everything very quiet.”

“You’re relieved at two o’clock, I believe?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When your relief arrives you’d better remain a little longer. I may want you.”

Colin spoke with conviction. He was standing close to a partly broken down stone wall that guarded a neglected working. The place seemed strangely familiar although he had never seen it before except from the air—at least with his eyes. It was the place of his dream.

He was not surprised when Denis pointed to the quarry.

“This is the one, sir,” he announced. “We won’t want a ladder, but you’ll have to be careful how you climb down. I’ll show you.”

With confident agility the boy commenced the descent. He knew exactly where to place his feet without looking down.

The quarry was about thirty feet deep. It had not been worked for several years. Stunted bushes covered the rubble that formed two mounds in the centre of the oval-shaped floor. Rank foliage hid several parts of the beetling sides.

Arriving at the bottom, Denis gave directions to Amble and Standish, and without mishap, though with a certain amount of trepidation, both men completed the descent. The two men looked around for recent footprints. There were several both going and coming towards the place of their descent; but owing to the hardness of the ground elsewhere it was impossible to trace them farther. Nor was there at first any sign of a tunnel, until Denis, full of enthusiasm, led the way behind a natural screen of tendrils and showed them an irregular opening in the solid rock.

“It doesn’t go far,” Day warned them. “Not more than the length of a cricket pitch. You haven’t brought candles?”

“We’ve torches, though,” explained Standish. “Now you’d better remain here.”

Denis looked positively pained and disappointed.

“I’ve been there before several times.”

“Quite; but this is an extraordinary occasion,” rejoined Standish. “I promise you we’ll let you see all there is to be seen if it turns out as I hope it will.”

He stepped into the gloomy passage and switched on his torch, keeping the light towards the floor; while Amble, walking behind him, played the rays of his torch upon the roof.

Standish’s heart beat a trifle quicker. He suspected that he was on the brink of an important discovery. The floor was deep in dry dust. The dust was pitted by innumerable footprints. If the tunnel were but a matter of from twenty to twenty-five yards in length why should it be quite a busy thoroughfare?

As he progressed Colin counted his steps. At the thirtieth he stopped.

Denis was right in a way. The tunnel had ended at that spot, as far as he was concerned. Now it continued—a seemingly endless passage stretching far beyond the limit of the rays of their torches.

The solution to this was soon evident. Almost flush with the wall on their right was an enormous slab of stone cunningly set in a vertical socket. It did not require very much effort to set the slab in motion. Acting as a door, it completely blocked the tunnel and fitted so closely that it resembled the stop-end of the passage. Unless the rock were carefully examined in a strong light no one was likely to discover the fact that it was merely a door.

“Awkward for us, Amble,” remarked Standish.

“How, sir?”

“It would seem that our birds have flown, and perhaps taken Grey with them. We’ll go back and bring the two plain-clothes constables along.”

Emerging into the open, they dispatched Denis with a message to the two policemen, for by this time Dumbell’s relief had arrived. He turned out to be P.C. Bolsom, the man who had gone on his unsuccessful errand to bring Briddlebrack to the station.

Both men came to the brink of the quarry and then hesitated. Heavily-built and by no means young constables, they did not like the idea of climbing down that somewhat precipitous wall of hewn rock.

“Do you mind if we fetch a ladder, sir?” asked Bolsom.

“Bring a dozen if you like,” rejoined Standish. “Only be sharp about it.”

“Hold on, Dick!” exclaimed Dumbell, as his companion was hurrying off. “Here’s a rope ladder.”

“What’s that?” sung out Standish from below.

“A rope ladder, sir. Quite sound, too.”

“Rolled up?”

“No, sir; just pushed in anyhow under the bushes.”

That was another bad sign. It went to show that the smugglers had left the cave hurriedly and with no immediate intention of returning—if they returned at all.

Otherwise they would have rolled the rope-ladder into a small compass and hidden it carefully. Yes, everything pointed that way. Although Standish felt certain he had discovered the smugglers’ lair he realized that his plan to rescue his chum would be shattered, unless——

The policemen dropped one end of the ladder over the edge of the quarry. The other end was already strongly secured to a couple of iron spikes driven deeply into the hard ground.

Both descended. Bolsom saluted.

“We’ve found another way into Tilly Whim Caves,” declared Standish. “I want you two to follow me. There may be a rough house, but we’ll have to chance that.”

“Are you armed, sir?” asked Dumbell.

“No; except for an Englishman’s weapons. You can use your fists, I hope?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the man with a grin. “Won the Dorset Constabulary heavy-weight championship at Dorchester a twelvemonth back.”

“Good man!” exclaimed Colin approvingly. “When this business is over I’d like to have half a dozen rounds with you before I go back! However, we’d better get a move on.”

Standish again led the way, followed by Dumbell and Bolsom, with Amble bringing up the rear. Denis was again enjoined to remain outside; but before a minute had elapsed he stole cautiously after them into the pitch-black darkness of the tunnel. Even his hero-worship of Inspector Colin Standish was not strong enough to make him withstand the temptation to see what was about to take place!

The explorers proceeded cautiously, Colin keeping a careful watch to see if Grey had found an opportunity of leaving any clues to his next destination. He knew that if Don had the faintest opportunity of so doing he would not hesitate. But, except for the confusion of footprints, which pointed to the fact that a number of people were leaving the cave, there was nothing until progress was barred by a closed door.

This differed from the others in that it was of very old oak, criss-crossed with flat rusty iron bars and studded with nails.

They halted to discuss the situation. With his grim experience of the fiendish booby-traps in the caves near Assuan, when he was on his mission with the Westow Talisman, Colin had good cause for caution. Not that he expected that the smugglers would spring deadly traps or even use contrivances that would be a menace to life or limb; but it was quite likely that they had made preparations to give intruders an unpleasant reception.

“Stand back!” he ordered.

His companions withdrew a few paces.

Gingerly Standish turned a large iron ring that lifted a heavy latch. He pushed against the door. It gave, revealing a large cavern.

Nothing of an aggressive character happened.

The four men entered, Amble and Standish flashing their torches.

As Colin had expected, the birds had flown. They had done so hurriedly, for there were the remains of a meal on a rough wooden table. A large barrel and two small kegs had been left, together with a few utensils and discarded oilskins. Hanging from a hook in the wall was a lantern. Standish examined it and found that the oil reservoir was dry.

There were about half a dozen recesses opening out of the main cave, but none of them was of any great extent and they were evidently used as sleeping-places by the gang.

At the far end of the cave was a ladder leading up to a shaft in the rocky ceiling.

“Perhaps they’re up there, sir,” suggested Bolsom. “A sort of funk-hole. If they heard us coming they may have made a bunk for it.”

“We’ll soon see,” rejoined Colin. “Hold my torch and light me up.”

“Better be careful, sir.”

“No need to tell me that,” said Standish cheerfully. “Stand from under in case the rungs are rotten.”

Without more ado he commenced to ascend the ladder. Contrary to his expectations, it was of exceptionally sound construction and rigidly clamped to the side of the shaft.

His bulk occupied most of the available space, consequently much of the light from the torch was intercepted.

He had bumped against something solid. It was the underside of a stone that completely covered the obvious exit.

Gripping the ladder tightly with one hand, Standish pushed upwards with the other. The stone gave a little but otherwise resisted his efforts.

He rested a few moments, then with a tremendous heave set the stone in motion.

It turned backwards. A shower of dust and dirt descended upon Colin’s head and shoulders; but through it he could see dim daylight.

He ascended another couple of rungs. His head was clear and just above the upper floor.

Then, suddenly, a huge pair of hands gripped him by the side of his head and a gruff voice exclaimed menacingly:

“Got you at last, you blighter!”

## CHAPTER XVI

# The Intercepted Lorry

Colin was in a position of great disadvantage. Not only was he in danger of his feet slipping on the rungs of the ladder, but he was exposed to an attack from the rear without being able to offer effective resistance. In addition, his eyes were badly bunged up by the shower of sand and dust that had fallen upon him. Until he was clear of the ladder he could expect no physical assistance from his companions, although their presence below, when made known to his assailant, might carry some moral weight.

His boxing prowess stood Colin in good stead. Ducking, he partly freed himself from the other's grip, then bringing his left fist up sharply he had the great satisfaction of feeling his knuckles hit bone. It was not a heavy blow, it just missed the point of his unseen foe's jaw. It jolted the man considerably.

"Ouch! Do you want me to give you a tap on the head with this? . . . Oh, sorry, sir! I thought you were one of 'em!"

The man released his grip and stepped aside. Colin, emerging from the shaft and wiping the dust from his eyes, recognized his assailant as one of the Swanage policemen.

"All right, Murch!" he rejoined. "We all make mistakes sometimes. But, let me inform you, your mode of address to a suspect is hardly according to constabulary rules and regulations. It's not considered the thing for a constable to call his prisoner a blighter!"

"I couldn't help feeling a bit flummoxed, sir, when the ground sort of opened almost at my feet and someone, which happened to be you, suddenly shot up like a jack-in-the-box!"

By this time Amble, Bolsom and Dumbell had ascended the shaft and were blinking in the sunlight that streamed in through the mouth of the upper cave.

Colin was now in no doubt as to where he was. He was in the largest of the Tilly Whim caves. During the present summer hundreds, perhaps thousands, of trippers had explored the place, many of them actually treading over the sand-covered stone—less than an inch and a half in

thickness—that alone prevented some of them from dropping thirty feet or more to the floor of the lower and secret cavern. Recently, however, since police had been on duty in the caves, the public had been denied access and had to be content with looking in from the seaward side of the stone barrier.

At the present moment there were at least fifty people peering into the sombre cave and wondering what all the fuss was about.

“The birds have flown, Murch,” announced Standish. “It won’t be necessary for a further police guard. You’d better pack up now, Dumbell. You’ve exceeded your spell of duty. You’d better inform the Chief, and tell him from me that if he can come here there’ll be something to interest him.”

“Very good, sir!” replied the policeman. “If you’ve no objection, I won’t return by the tunnel.”

“The tunnel: by Jove, Amble, I’ve forgotten that boy,” declared Colin. “I promised to let him have a look round.”

“I’ve had a jolly good look round, sir!” rejoined a boyish voice, apparently coming out of the ground.

Standing on the ladder with his eyes just level with the brink of the shaft was Denis.

It was no use ticking the boy off. His pardonable curiosity had made him disobey instructions; but, after all, there was no harm done.

“Then come up before you fall and break your neck!” said Colin. “Well, there you are; the first Grammar School boy to tread the floor of the smugglers’ cavern. Now you can crow over your chums!”

“I wish you’d found Mr. Grey, sir!”

“So do I, Denis. But we haven’t done so badly, thanks to you.”

“Can you take me up for a joy flip, sir?” asked the boy eagerly.

Colin shook his head, very regretfully. He would have given a lot to satisfy young Day’s healthy ambition.

“Sorry, old son!” he replied. “For one thing, I’ve damaged the old bus: for another, it’s against regulations. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Get your people’s consent and I’ll arrange a flight for you from Bere Regis Aerodrome.”

“Will you, sir,” asked Denis eagerly.

“Yes—dash it all—yes!” agreed Standish. “When this business is finished I’ll take you up—only it won’t be an R.A.C. machine!”

“Good enough, sir; thanks awfully.”

They shook hands on it—the famous Inspector Colin Standish and the youthful schoolboy. Denis flushed to the roots of his hair. He would be able to brag that he was going for a flight with the great Standish! Wouldn’t the other fellows be green with envy! If at school next day the boys should have to write an essay on “How I spent my half-term holiday,” he’d have the others whacked hollow!

“You’d better stand by to see that no unauthorized person goes near that hole, Murch,” ordered Standish. “We don’t want people crowding all over the place until it has been carefully inspected. Come on, Amble, it’s time we had something to eat.”

The rest of the day was fully occupied in conferring with the various police and customs authorities and sending a report to headquarters.

Detectives arrived to take measurements and to look for possible clues. Police photographers took flashlight photographs; pressmen turned up, keen as mustard to obtain all the information they possibly could and to weave romantic stories round the secret cavern. Custom-house officers from Poole put in an appearance to take charge of what contraband remained—about forty gallons of brandy and ten of rum and Hollands. They found no drugs—which pointed to the fact that either the gang were not “dope merchants” or else they had been successful in disposing of their highly dangerous goods.

And they had spirited Grey away!

“They must have drugged him in order to do that, sir,” observed Sub-Inspector Amble. “Grey wouldn’t go otherwise without kicking up a row! And there were police on duty at the quarries.”

“Yes,” agreed Colin. “That’s what baffles me. They couldn’t very well haul a senseless man up the quarry and carry him to a waiting car without one man spotting something. I wonder, now: have there been any fires about here during the last few nights?”

This conversation took place in the Bear, after their return to Wareham.

Standish went to the telephone and rang up the Swanage police.

In answer to his inquiries he was informed that there had been an outbreak about a mile from the quarries on the night of Tuesday last. One of the constables on duty had left the quarries in order to warn the inhabitants



of a cottage that was in danger. The other remained at his post, but admitted that he had gone to the limit of his beat in order to watch the conflagration.

“Then I’ll bet the gang took full advantage of that fact and got away with Don,” mused Standish. “That fire was started deliberately in order to cover their departure.”

He studied his map of the district. The only practicable road for a car was the old highway from Corfe to Swanage—that had to a great extent been neglected in favour of the valley road. The alternative to a car was for the smugglers to proceed on foot to one of the several coves between Swanage and Lulworth and to re-embark their contraband goods. Having once landed there, would they do so? Possibly in the case of drugs, but hardly as far as barrels of wine and spirits were concerned.

Next morning after breakfast Standish was standing outside the hotel waiting for Amble. They were about to return to Bere Regis to take over the repaired monoplane.

But Colin had a definite reason for waiting on the pavement.

He had not been there very long before a heavy lorry bearing the name of a well-known firm of quarry owners came lumbering over the South Bridge. It had done so twice before at almost the same time since Standish had taken up his quarters at The Bear.

The lorry was laden with eight or nine large blocks of stone—quite a common sight in Wareham, through which passes a considerable amount of similar road traffic. The driver was proceeding at less than twelve miles an hour.

A hundred yards or so from the hotel were the cross roads that intersect the Roman planned town. There were a number of vehicles about, since the main roads from Swanage and Weymouth converge at this point. A policeman was controlling the traffic. Close at hand, standing on the pavement by the Corn Exchange, were a sergeant and another constable.

Standish watched the lorry pass. Then he blew a sharp blast on his whistle.

Instantly the policeman on point duty stopped the north-going stream of traffic, amongst them the lorry. The sergeant and the second constable thereupon went across to the suspected vehicle and interviewed the driver. Standish joined them.

The man's driving licence was produced. It showed the name of Berry. A closer examination showed that it was originally Perry and that the number also had been altered.

Under the sergeant's direction the driver turned his vehicle and drove it back to the police station. There the man was charged with having an altered licence and also with driving a vehicle bearing false number plates.

He bluffed, but unavailingly. He was removed to the charge-room, while the police climbed upon the slabs of stone and continued their investigations.

The result was not altogether unexpected.

The stones were so arranged that between them was a fairly large space. Packed in straw between the slabs were three kegs of French brandy!

This form of smuggling had been going on for some time. The lorry did not belong to the firm whose name it bore. Its number plates were faked. The driver, who would give no account of himself, protested that he had only taken on the job two days previously as a substitute to the regular driver.

"There's something for you to get on with, Superintendent," remarked Standish. "I'll leave it in your hands. You'll probably get the fellow to make some interesting admissions. If so, you might let me know!"

Meanwhile, Amble, who had seen the arrest from the balcony of the hotel, had rejoined Standish.

They left the police station on their way to the aerodrome.

"What aroused your suspicions, sir?" asked the sub-inspector.

"Just the result of observation," explained Colin. "I noticed on two occasions that that lorry was carrying the same blocks of stone. Unfortunately for the gang they were careless enough to load up with slabs that were not exactly commonplace. On the third occasion I felt certain; so I arranged for the lorry to be stopped next time. That's all!"

"And a jolly good 'all', too, sir," rejoined Amble. "No joke intended!"

"Carelessness on their part; neglect of apparently trivial points on the one hand and a keen sense of observation on the other," continued Standish. "In our job it's the little things that count and often they occur when least expected."

"I hope that fellow will let out some information concerning Grey."

“He’ll probably ‘blow the gaff’ to save his own skin,” said Standish. “If I’m any judge of character he’ll collapse like a punctured balloon when the superintendent gets busy with him!”

## CHAPTER XVII

# An Unlucky Joy-ride

On the last occasion when Standish had visited the Far Eastern Airways Aerodrome, the resident managing director had asked to see him. Now, upon his arrival, Colin returned the compliment by going over to the general office and asking to see Mr. Truscott.

“I’m sorry, sir,” announced one of the clerks, “but Mr. Truscott is away.”

“Another board meeting in town?”

“No, sir,” replied the clerk, with the suspicion of a smile. “He’s been called away on urgent business.”

“It seems as if Truscott’s more of a non-resident managing director than a resident one,” thought Colin, as he left the building. “Probably the silly ass has been bending his elbow again and isn’t in a fit state to appear. It’s a strange thing how a fellow can fall to pieces. In my time he was mightily efficient!”

He rejoined Amble, and the two went across to the repair shops.

“Sorry we haven’t been able to complete your job, sir,” explained the repairs foreman. “There’s been unexpected difficulties.”

He plunged into a welter of technical explanations which proved that not only did he know his business, but that it would be hopeless to expect the monoplane passed for duty before the morrow.

Standish went to the telephone and learnt that there were no fresh developments at Swanage.

“We’ll have to hang on to the slack until to-morrow, Amble,” he observed. “Although I could do with a jolly good rest, I don’t like wasting time.”

“Why not take that youngster—Day’s his name, isn’t it?—for a flip this evening, sir?” suggested his subordinate. “You’ll have that off your mind, at all events.”

“H’m, perhaps,” rejoined Colin. “But what if anything important transpires?”

“You won’t be away more than a couple of hours, sir. I’ll stand by here, of course, until you return.”

Standish considered the idea. He had a sort of roving commission. At Hawkscar his daily duty was limited to eight hours unless unforeseen circumstances necessitated an extension. Here his hours of duty were elastic. Several times he had been “on” for twenty hours out of the twenty-four. Yes, by Jove! It was a good scheme of Amble’s. It would give him a chance to forget everything for a few hours and to give Denis Day that pleasure to which he so eagerly looked forward.

It was necessary to interview the ground foreman.

Mr. Symes agreed to let out on hire one of his two-seater “hack buses”, subject to certain conditions.

“She’s a reliable little bus, sir,” he observed. “But does your official policy cover flights in non-Service machines?”

“No,” admitted Colin. “But I’ve a third party policy. I kept it up after I left Far Eastern Airways, so you needn’t be afraid of running risks by letting me have the bus.”

“I’d like to have a look at that policy, sir,” rejoined the cautious, level-headed Symes.

Colin produced the document. It was in order and satisfied the ground foreman’s doubts.

“Very good, sir. When do you want her ready?”

“At five. But hang on a bit. I’d better see if my passenger will be able to come.”

He went to the telephone room, rang up Day’s house and found Denis was at home.

“Look here, Denis, I’ll take you for a flip this evening. Did you mention it to your people? . . . Good. . . . At half-past five. . . . I’ll pick you up on Nine Barrow Down, just above Knitson Farm. . . . For goodness’ sake don’t say anything to the other fellows. I don’t want to be mobbed by the whole school. . . . What’s that? . . . all right, then . . . half-past five sharp!”

At five o’clock, having tested the controls, Standish took off. The type of machine was no stranger to him. Often in his Far Eastern Airways pilot days he had taken similar craft up for private passenger flights generally limited to the British Islands. Occasionally this sort of work had taken him across

Channel. The monoplanes were reliable, convenient and easy to manage, but were not fast, since they were single-engined and of comparatively low horse-power.

Twenty minutes later at an easy cruising speed he arrived at the rendezvous. On the summit of Nine Barrow Down the flat surface covered with closely cropped turf made an admirable landing-ground with ample room when it came to taking-off.

And the gallery! It looked as if the whole school had turned out. Denis had taken full advantage of Colin's acquiescence, just to show to his envious chums that he hadn't been swanking when he announced that Inspector Standish was taking him for a joy-ride.

Colin was one to enjoy popularity when he deserved it. There was no sham modesty in his composition. He waved his hand to the crowd and regretted that he had not gone the whole hog and chartered one of the big Condors to take twenty of the boys up instead of one!

Alighting, Standish handed Denis a flying-kit, including helmet and goggles. At least a dozen cameras clicked.

Denis climbed on board; was strapped in. The propeller commenced to revolve, increased revolutions. The monoplane waddled like an ungainly duck over the turf, gathered momentum and soared into the blue.

Standish steered eastward across Bournemouth Bay, skirted Hengistbury Head and shaped a course for the Needles. Once or twice he glanced back to see how his passenger fared. He would not have been surprised to find that Denis was violently air-sick; but the lad greeted him with a delighted grin on each and every occasion.

Over Tennyson Down Standish swung the bus round. He would run west and give his passenger an unusual view of his native town and the magnificent coastline past St. Alban's Head and Lulworth Cove.

Then, just as the monoplane was approaching Old Harry Rocks, the engine faltered, picked up and then konked out.

Standish thought hard for a few seconds. Had he enough altitude to glide to the top of the cliffs? He might try it. Had he been solo he could have done it. With his boy passenger on board he simply could not take risks that might involve loss of life. Better to come down in the sea and stand a reasonable chance of being picked up by one of the numerous craft generally to be found off Poole Bar.

But, unfortunately, there was not a vessel, large or small, within reasonable distance of the position the monoplane would occupy after her descent.

Since the roar of the engine had ceased Colin could speak to his passenger other than by means of the voice-tube.

“See that handle, Denis? Work it. Try to get the pressure up. Let me know if the needle points to fifteen.”

The boy was a brick! There was not the faintest doubt that Denis was aware of the gravity of the situation; yet unfalteringly he set to work in an attempt to raise the air pressure in the petrol tank.

Standish swung his attention back to the task of nursing the machine—which was now virtually a glider—in an effort to regain altitude. He knew from experience on the Yorkshire coast that in the case of an off-shore wind blowing over a cliff there is a downward air-current over the edge—much the same as the movement of water over a fall. He would have to retain sufficient height to counteract that vertical air-current if a successful landing beyond the cliff were to be accomplished.

“Can’t get any pressure, sir!”

“That’s torn it, then,” thought Colin, aloud—“We’ve got to come down somewhere, Denis. Keep a cool head and we’ll come out on top yet!”

The monoplane was now about a quarter of a mile from Ballard Down. There were people on the grassy slope beyond, strolling or sitting at their ease on the turf and hardly giving a thought or a glance towards the gliding aeroplane. Would any of them, Colin wondered, have the initiative to hurry to the main road, stop the first motorist who came along, and ask him to report to the Swanage lifeboat station that a machine had crashed off Old Harry Rocks?

But she had not crashed yet. There was still a fighting chance of landing above the cliff.

Nursing the controls, Standish held on, mentally measuring the intervening distance and keeping a wary eye upon the needle of the altimeter. Again and again, taking advantage of upward currents, he gained a few feet, only to lose again.

He saw that his chance in that direction was gone. He must make seaward and alight upon the surface. Denis and he would be dashed against

the rocks, over which white water was foaming, unless the monoplane fell well beyond the influence of those breakers.

He swung the bus round. She dropped a good fifty feet in the process.

“That’s the confounded ‘dead’ air in the wake of the cliff,” thought Colin. “I cut it a jolly sight too closely.”

More jockeying resulted in a gain of about half a mile from shore. Provided the machine did not turn turtle before they were clear they stood a fair chance of keeping themselves afloat until they were picked up. Denis, he knew, was a good swimmer and the water was fairly warm, so that there was less risk of being assailed by that dreaded foe—cramp.

“Be ready to open the quick release of your safety-belt, Denis!”

“Right-o, sir!”

Again Standish turned the monoplane’s nose landward and head to wind. The breeze, coming off the land in treacherous puffs, was at this distance fairly constant. The land prevented much of a sea getting up, but farther to lee’ard the waves were high and foam capped. He had chosen his landing-ground with considerable skill. Now to make the decisive plunge!

The landing-wheels threw up feathers of spray as they ploughed with little resistance through the water. Then came a tremendous *whump*! as the underside of the fuselage struck the waves with a resounding smack, lifted and bumped again.

The monoplane speedily lost way and came more or less to a standstill, lifting sluggishly to the rollers. But she was not a seaplane. Once the water made its way into the fuselage there would be nothing to keep her afloat unless air was trapped under the deck.

Already, owing to the weight of the engine, she was, in sea parlance, settling down by the head. Clouds of steam announced that cold water was coming into contact with the hot cylinders.

“Kick off your shoes and inflate your lifebelt, Denis!” ordered Standish. “You’re going to get a wet shirt in a minute or so.”

“Won’t be the first time, sir!”

To Colin’s surprise, the boy was grinning! Either he possessed superb pluck or he was ignorant of the peril of the situation. Probably the former.

The monoplane’s nose continued to dip. Her stern and rudder rose correspondingly higher. She was also taking a list, her starboard wing-tip



being already submerged.

The occupants had finished inflating their india-rubber lifebelts, and had removed their shoes and leather flying-kit. Colin scanned the surface of the sea in all directions. There was no sign of a boat.

It was of no use waiting for the machine to sink. There was too great a risk of their becoming entangled in some of the wires should the monoplane turn completely over as she slipped beneath the surface.

“Jump for it, Denis!”

Without hesitation the boy dived overboard, reappearing almost immediately. He had forgotten that he was wearing a fully-inflated lifebelt.

A few strokes took him clear. Reassured on this score, Standish slipped feet foremost into the sea.

“No use fagging ourselves out,” said Colin.

They waited for the final disappearance of the machine. Relieved of their weight, she lifted slightly, took an additional list and then slowly submerged, nose first. For about a minute the tail remained in view like an obelisk surmounted by an exaggerated weather-vane.

Then, with the hiss of escaping air, that, too, disappeared in the centre of an iridescent and steadily increasing patch of oil.

Standish made no effort to swim. Kept afloat by his lifebelt, he took a bearing ashore—Old Harry Rocks just open to a conspicuous building on the shore of Studland Bay. Slowly but surely the latter drew clear. It was a sign that there was a steady east-going current. If the swimmers could keep within the influence of the indraught, the flood-tide would carry them in towards Poole Harbour. Then there would be plenty of craft to pick them up.

“Strike out slowly, Denis!” exclaimed Colin. “We’ve the tide with us.”

Hampered by their lifebelts, progress was indeed slow, despite the assistance of the young flood. Colin had no doubts about his ability to reach shore. He was a powerful swimmer and could do four or five miles provided the temperature of the water was not low; but was his young companion’s physique strong enough to stand the strain?

They were progressing at the rate of about two knots; a few minutes ago their speed had been nearly one hundred and twenty miles an hour!

“You all right?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Good!”

Presently, Standish heard a distant noise. He listened intently. It was not the hum of an aerial propeller, but the characteristic sound of a motor-craft of some sort.

Denis heard it, too; but no vessel appeared to be in sight.

Then they saw, dead in the eye of the setting sun and almost invisible in the patch of dazzling water, a fairly large white motor-cruiser which had just rounded Durlstone Head and was now almost midway between the swimmers and Old Harry Rocks.

“They haven’t seen us,” thought Standish. “Not much of a look-out kept on board her!”

Denis was of the same opinion.

“She’s going on without spotting us, sir!”

“Shout like bill-ho. . . . Together! . . . Ahoy!”

It was doubtful whether the sound of their united voices would carry that distance, since the vessel was almost dead to wind’ard.

They hailed again and again. They waved their saturated handkerchiefs.

Already the motor-cruiser was starboarding helm in order to shape a course for the Bar Buoy of Poole Harbour. She was soon almost stern-on to the swimmers.

Then:

“She’s turning again, sir!” commented Denis. “She’s spotted us!”

“And about time, too!” added Standish thankfully.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### Doped!

Don Grey awoke with a splitting headache. His mouth was dry, his tongue felt like a piece of leather and as if it had swollen to twice its normal size.

The floor of the cave was rocking and pitching. Was it possible that the Isle of Purbeck was in the throes of an earthquake? The light, too, seemed different from the yellowish glimmers to which he had been accustomed for nearly a week in that gloomy, artificially illuminated cavern that served as his prison.

For some moments he lay more or less quietly on his hard bunk—he was beginning to be aware that his recumbent body was moving from side to side with his backbone as a sort of pivot.

Above the loud buzzing in his ears he detected another unusual sound—unusual since he had not heard it from the moment of his capture by Prodgers' gang. It was the splash of the waves. But why? The booming of the heaviest breakers against that rockbound coast would be inaudible to anyone in the depths of that subterranean cavern.

Presently the dancing lights before his eyes seemed to diminish. He was no longer in the cave but in a vessel of some sort—probably a small one, judging by its lively motion and the narrowness of the cabin.

It was a cabin—not the typical fo'c'sle of a tramp steamer. There were two bunks. One he was occupying, the other was untenanted.

On either side were three small scuttles, tightly fastened, since there was a fairly high sea running. Above the centre line was a skylight, partly open, but covered with a canvas awning. Underneath the deck a propeller shaft was rumbling—revolving rapidly as the vessel's stern lifted almost clear of the waves and slowly as it dipped to give the propeller more than its normal grip.

Don sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bunk and was promptly pitched into the opposite one by the erratic motion.

His next effort was a cautious one in view of his last experience. Gripping the bunk board, he managed to regain his feet. He felt horribly sick.

“Shanghaied!” he muttered. “Prodgers must have doctored the coffee I had last night!”

Against one of the bulkheads was a folding washbasin. In the rack above it a water-jug and a couple of tumblers. He half-filled one of the glasses and drank its contents.

It put new life into him. He was able to think coherently and to move without much difficulty in spite of the “corkscrewing” of the motor-cruiser.

For motor-cruiser she undoubtedly was. The rapid pulsations, the reek of petrol fumes and the muffled pop-pop-pop of the exhaust bore that out.

Going to one of the scuttles, Don peered out. There was little to be seen except sea and sky, the waves being high but not menacing; but on the top of the up-and-down motion of the craft he caught glimpses of land to starboard.

Grey recognized the coastline at once. Many and many a time when he was a pilot in Far Eastern Airways, he had seen that grim promontory on his flights across Channel. He saw it now from a different angle, but, all the same, it was unmistakable.

Portland Bill!

It bore about four miles north, so the motor-cruiser was outside the dreaded Race. She was heading approximately sou’west, a course that would take her well clear of The Start. Where was she bound?

Don went to the door in the for’ard bulkhead and tried it cautiously. As he expected, it was locked.

He was still a prisoner; but for some reason he had not been tied up.

He peeped through the keyhole, from which the key had been removed. The “arc of visibility” was naturally small. All he could see was the broad shoulders and back of a man wearing a navy-blue mackintosh. Probably it was Prodgers, but Don could not be sure. Presently the man moved aside and Grey was able to see part of an enclosed wheel-house.

Turning his attention to other matters, Don found that there was another exit from the cabin right aft, a combination of sliding hatch and two small double doors. That, too, was locked, while one of the doors was additionally secured by a bolt on the inside.

It was the work of a few seconds to slip the bolt. He tried the doors. They gave slightly under the pressure of his hand.

The double doors, which were above a flight of three metal-treaded steps, were too small for him to butt with his shoulder. Unshipping the ladder he used it as a sort of battering ram, wrapping one of the blankets round it to deaden the sound.

The lock burst from its fastenings. The doors flew open.

As he expected, the doors gave on to a short deck barely four feet in length, that terminated at the stanchioned taffrail. Unless someone was standing there and the sliding hatch remained in position it would be impossible for any of the crew to see that the doors were no longer closed.

So far so good.

Wriggling on his stomach, Grey wormed his way out of the cabin and crouched on the narrow deck, shielded from observation by the rise of the deck-house. For erratic motion he could not have chosen a worse place on board. The cruiser was flinging her stern about so violently that Don felt as if he were on a "crazy switchback".

He was in the open, drinking in deep draughts of the salt-laden air and every moment feeling better for it.

After a while he peered cautiously ahead. He could see the upper part of the sunk wheel-house. The helmsman he now knew to be Prodgers, who at the present moment was doing two things at once.

Not only was he handling the wheel but he was taking in a wireless message, since he had a pair of earphones clapped to his head.

That fact looked promising. The motor-cruiser was not carrying a large crew—possibly not more than three all told—the skipper, a mechanic and a deck-hand. Prodgers was his own skipper. Of the others on board there were no signs. Quite likely the mechanic was in the motor-room and the deck-hand down below for'ard, probably acting as cook and steward in addition to his proper duty.

The roof of the after deck-house was about fifteen feet in length. On either side were waterways sufficiently wide for a person to walk with ease in ordinary weather. Even in the sea now running it would not be difficult to go for'ard, since there was a hand-rail on either side of the roof.

Grey's problem was to get within arm's length of the obnoxious Prodgers before the latter was aware of his proximity. If he succeeded, he

stood an excellent chance of capturing the craft; if he did not, he would probably be knocked on the head and tossed overboard. After all, he thought, he couldn't blame Prodgers if he did get rid of his attacker in that way. The fellow was out for liberty—alternatively a long “stretch” of penal servitude—and since there would be no awkward witnesses he could get rid of Grey's corpse with little fear of detection.

Rapidly Don thought out his plan of action. It was unorthodox and contrary to the regulations of the Royal Air Constabulary. There would be no smart tap on the shoulder, the brief formula of arrest and the snapping on of handcuffs. It was to be the brutal law of “Get your man before he gets you!”

Steadying himself by the hand-rail, Don stole along the waterways until he gained the edge of the central cockpit, over part of which was the wheel-house.

Prodgers was still intent upon his dual tasks.

Stealthily Grey stepped over the coaming on to the teak grating between the gear levers. The grating gave a firm foothold.

He sprang!

His fingers clutched at his victim's burly neck. With a quick sideways jerk he flung Prodgers against the side of the wheel-house. The unfortunate smuggler's head struck the thick plate glass with a sickening thud. It sounded as if the jar had broken the man's neck.

Without a groan Prodgers dropped inertly upon the deck, blood oozing from his nose, ears, and a gash on the side of his head.

Whatever feelings of remorse he had for his victim, Grey stifled. His task was by no means completed.

Stooping, he felt the pockets of his victim. From the hip-pocket he extracted a hard flat object—his own automatic taken from him on the night of his capture.

“So it won't be a loss to Air Constabulary funds after all,” thought Don, as he opened the magazine and examined its contents.

The blank cartridges had been extracted. There remained three live ones—more than sufficient if more serious work had to be done.

Meanwhile, since the wheel was unattended, the motor-cruiser had made a wide circle to starboard and was now heading almost in the opposite

direction. Don let her swing; plenty of time to get her under control when he had indisputably gained possession of the vessel. And, of course, first aid must be given to the unlucky Prodgers.

Grey tapped at the open hatch of the motor-room.

“Below there!” he shouted. “On deck with you!”

The head and shoulders of a grimy-faced man appeared. Don hadn’t seen him before. He had not been one of the gang who had sheltered in the cavern.

“I’m a police officer!” announced Grey, displaying his automatic. “You’re under arrest on charges of kidnapping and defrauding the revenue.”

“I don’t know anything about that, sir,” protested the mechanic. “I’m only carrying out the Boss’s orders!”

“Then carry out mine,” rejoined Don. “Give no trouble and you may get off lightly. How many more are there on board?”

“One, sir.”

“Where?”

“Turned in for’ard, sir!”

“Any means of securing the hatch?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then go for’ard and do so,” ordered Grey. “Make a sound job of it. No hanky-panky or you’ll be sorry for it.”

“Very good, sir!”

Stepping aside in order to guard against a treacherous attack, Grey allowed the mechanic to come on deck and make his way for’ard. Evidently the fellow was thoroughly cowed, for without disturbing the slumbering deck-hand he pulled over the sliding hatch and secured it by its hasp.

“Now back to your engine-room,” continued Don. “Before you go; where was Mr. Prodgers bound for?”

“To meet a steamer off Start Point.”

“What steamer?”

“I don’t know, sir. All I do know is that she’s a Finn from Taku for Pernambuco.”

“And I suppose I was to be put on board her and shipped off to South America?”

“I can’t say, sir,” replied the man stolidly.

“Or you won’t say,” rejoined his captor. “Very well; I’ll get that information from your boss, later on. Now, below with you; and listen; don’t attempt to stop your motor without orders from me. No tricks; you understand?”

The mechanic went down to his engine-room. Don placed one of the gratings over the hatchway and a bucket on top of the grating. Should the man attempt to come on deck, he would have to unship the grating and capsize the bucket. The noise would give Grey ample warning.

He next devoted his attention to the senseless Prodgers, placing him on the deck of the cockpit with his head on a cushion. Then, having washed the man’s wound and bound it with a handkerchief soaked in salt water, Don took the precaution of lashing his ankles and placing a broom handle up each of the prisoner’s legs. When these were secured Prodgers would be unable to rise, even if his injuries did not prevent him making the attempt when he recovered consciousness.

Don had only a slight knowledge of how to handle a vessel. Had the *Spitfire*—for that was the name he saw painted on her lifebuoys—been dependent upon sails her position would have been hazardous. He would have had to enlist the aid of his two prisoners. But since she was motor-driven, Grey had only to keep her on her course and sooner or later—barring accidents—she would fetch port.

Where?

Portland with its spacious harbour and Weymouth with its cramped one suggested themselves. He knew the general position of the Race from aerial observation. All he had to do was to keep to the eastward of the Shambles Lightship and stand in. An easy task it seemed; but Don found himself tempted; why not do the thing properly and carry his prize and the captured smugglers into Poole?

“I’ll have a jolly good shot at it, anyway!” he decided, somewhat vaingloriously.



## CHAPTER XIX

# Through the Race

Fortunately for him, Don did not have to worry over a compass course. The air was remarkably clear on this part of the coast, which is notorious for the sudden formation of sea-fogs. The bold promontory of St. Alban's Head showed up distinctly against the blue sky.

"I'll steer for that," he decided. "If I clear it by about a mile, I'll be all right. It's the entrance to Poole Harbour that will be the difficult part of the business. I suppose there are charts on board."

At first, owing to his lack of experience, the *Spitfire* yawed considerably, first swinging to port and then to starboard as he struggled with the wheel. It seemed so different from keeping an aeroplane on her course.

Presently he found that only a slight alteration of helm and the knack of "meeting her" did the trick. Although she rolled and pitched in the following seas, the *Spitfire* was making good weather of it and reeling off about twelve knots. He who was used to velocities in the air up to two hundred miles an hour was rather startled by her apparent terrific speed. Again and again he glanced apprehensively astern—a failing common to landsmen—and wondered whether the menacing following seas would break over her stern.

Confidence returning, he found he could control the wheel with one hand. That left the other free to remove a bundle of charts from a tin case which he found in a rack by the side of the chart-table.

"Poole Harbour—good! Now we'll know where we are!" he thought. "By Jove, I am hungry and thirsty. If only I could let go and forage round for some grub."

Visions of a glorious repast at a Weymouth Hotel almost made him decide to abandon his decision to make for Poole.

"No, I'll carry on. The sooner I hand over the prisoners and get back to Standish the better!"

He neared the headland, which was about a mile on his port beam. He could see the spray dashing furiously against the formidable looking cliffs. Right ahead, the seas appeared confused and foam-flecked.

Unknowingly he was making for the centre of St. Alban's Race, which for violence ranks second to Portland amongst the dangerous tide-rips of the English Channel.

The tide was ebbing strongly to the west'ard and against the strong sou'westerly breeze. Consequently the Race was heavier than it would have been had *Spitfire* been carrying her tide.



E 873

ALMOST LOST!

Page 196

Soon she was in the thick of it.

Grey had to hang on to the wheel with both hands to prevent himself being flung across the wheel-house. The body of the unconscious Prodgers rolled to and fro as the vessel heeled, first to port and then to starboard, putting her rail under as she did so. Don could do nothing to help his victim.

Had he relinquished his grip he might easily have been flung overboard as he stooped to assist the unconscious man.

Green water broke inboard over the bows and surged heavily against the wheel-house. The plate-glass windows were obscured as clouds of spray flew right over the truck of the mast.

The propeller was alternately racing and slowing down. More than once Don thought the engine had stopped, and the idea filled him with apprehension.

Between the thudding of the waves he heard a furious hammering on the fore-hatch. The terrific pounding had awakened the hand in the fo’c’sle. Finding himself locked in, the man was clamouring, with mingled fear and resentment, to be released. He, of course, knew nothing of the change of fortune; but the fact that he was locked in and that the vessel was in danger of breaking her back in the angry seas was enough to scare anyone in these circumstances.

The bucket had rolled off the grating and was slithering across the deck of the cockpit. Presently the grating was pushed aside and the mechanic, white-faced in spite of his oil-smeared features, looked upwards.

“What’s wrong, sir?” he shouted, in order to make himself heard above the turmoil.

“You stick to your post and keep that motor going,” rejoined Don. “We’re all right.”

The man disappeared, more or less reassured. Grey felt far from being “all right”. It was only the gravity of the situation and realization that the responsibility of keeping her on her course was his that prevented him from being violently seasick.

But, having reassured the mechanic, he had yet to deal with the problem of the fo’c’sle hand. The terrified man, finding that no one had come to release him, was trying to smash the heavy teak hatch. By the sounds it looked as if he had found a hatchet and was cutting his way out.

The new phase in the situation caused Don great misgivings. He dared not leave the wheel, nor could he make his way for’ard, with water pouring completely over the craft, to order the fellow to desist. He would be washed overboard in the attempt, for not only was the *Spitfire* “taking it green”, but she was rolling gunwales under. A seaman might and possibly would have worked his way for’ard, holding on like grim death and getting more than

his fair share of “Saltash Luck”—otherwise a ducking. But Grey was no seaman. He never pretended to be.

Yet he realized the extreme gravity of the situation. Should the man succeed in breaking open the hatch the forepeak would soon be flooded and that would result in the vessel going to the bottom.

Don was beginning to rue his vainglorious decision to make for Poole, when, as rapidly as she had entered it, the vessel drew clear of the dreaded Race and was soon in relatively calm water.

Replacing the grating over the engine-room hatchway and restoring the bucket to act as an alarm signal, Don left the *Spitfire* to take care of herself while he went cautiously for’ard.

The deck-hand was still raining blows with the hatchet, but with less impetuosity. Probably he realized by the different motion of the craft that she was in calmer water, and therefore in no danger of foundering. But that was no reason why he should be cooped up below under lock and key; therefore he meant to release himself.

“Below there!” shouted Grey.

“’Ere, let me out,” responded a muffled and aggrieved voice.

“I’ll do nothing of the kind,” rejoined Don. “You’re under arrest. If you persist in your attempt I’ll have no option but to disable you with a bullet. Remain where you are, quietly, or it will be the worse for you!”

The other, hearing himself addressed by a strange and authoritative voice, and possessing a guilty and very uneasy conscience, realized that in this instance—as in many others—discretion was the better part of valour.

“Orl right, sir!” he replied submissively.

Reassured on that point, for the man could not renew his attempts on the hatch without his knowledge, Grey crawled back to the wheel-house, his toes and knees slithering over the painted canvas of the cabin-top as he did so.

It was an awkward job, too, making his way round the side of the wheel-house. There was only a short hand-rail to which to cling, and the screws holding the sockets and the teak frame did not look any too strong. Just then the *Spitfire* rolled heavily to starboard—just the thing she would do!—and his feet slipped from the four-inch-wide waterway.

For several seconds he hung overboard, water up to his waist and his whole weight dragging at that flimsy hand-rail.

It held.

Then, as the motor-cruiser rolled the other way he clambered back and flung himself into the cockpit, narrowly missing Captain James Prodgers' face with the toe of his shoe.

The *Spitfire*, her wheel unattended, had swung eight points from her course and was pointing straight for the line of surf-beaten cliffs.

He got her back again, shaping a course to clear the well-known Anvill Point which, during the passage through St. Alban's Race, had opened out into full view.

The sight of the lighthouse and the yawning mouths of the Tilly Whim Caves a little beyond it brought Grey's thoughts back to the events of the last few days. How many days? He had not the faintest idea. During his tedious captivity in the cavern night and day were much the same—alternate periods of deep sleep and waking hours, deadly monotony varied only by scraps of conversation with the kindlier disposed of his captors.

He wondered what Standish had been doing all the time. His chum would be working unceasingly to unravel the tangled skeins; unless—horrible thought! he also had been caught in the smugglers' toils and spirited away.

And how long had elapsed between his last waking hours in the cavern and the time when he came out of his stupor, to find himself on board the *Spitfire*?

He wondered whether one of the lighthouse keepers had his telescope focused on the plunging craft. If so, would he recognize the helmsman as the missing Sub-Inspector Grey? Possibly, since Don had spoken to the lighthouse men on more than one occasion; if so, would they telephone to Standish and give him the startling news?

Suddenly Grey's reveries were interrupted by the violent crash of broken glass. A heavy metal object, narrowly missing his left ear, had shattered one of the panes of the wheel-house within eighteen inches of his face.

## CHAPTER XX

# A Scrap and a Rescue

Instinctively Grey ducked, relinquished the wheel, and, guarding his face with his disengaged left arm, spun round to face his assailant.

His first impression had been that the mechanic, faithless to his promise, had broken out of the engine-room. In that he was mistaken. The bucket still remained upon the grating guarding the hatchway.

Upon the deck of the cockpit Prodgers was sitting with his back propped against the after end of the coaming. He had recovered consciousness without Grey being aware of it. He had recognized his former prisoner and had guessed rightly that by some freak of fortune the tables had been turned.

His legs were bound. A couple of mop handles lashed to them made it impossible to regain his feet. Yet, unaccountably to him, his arms had not been secured.

Had Prodgers exercised his usual forethought he would have set to work to cast loose his lashings. Either the blow he had received had still left him a little dazed or else the impulse to get even with Grey made him incautious.

Within hand's reach was a heavy belaying-pin set in a bee-block on the inner side of the coaming.

With a trembling hand Prodgers withdrew the dangerous missile. At close quarters and used as a club it would be a formidable weapon, but he could not get to his feet. What satisfaction it would give him to bring the belaying-pin down with all his strength upon Grey's unprotected skull! But it couldn't be done! Sitting down, he couldn't deliver a direct blow at the head of a person standing six feet away. Used as a missile at that range it could not possibly miss.

So Prodgers thought.

Mustering his energies, he hurled the belaying-pin.

Even as he did so a roll of the ship caused Don to move sideways. The iron bar, missing his head by inches, crashed through the window, clattered upon the plunging deck and rebounded into the sea.

Conscious of failure and fearing the consequences, Prodgers simply wilted.

Grey stood over him.

“Jolly silly thing to do, Prodgers,” he exclaimed. “I’m sorry, but I’ll have to trice you up properly!”

He looked about for a length of rope.

On the after cabin-top, and prevented from being thrown overboard by means of a becket made fast to one of the handrails, was a coil of signal halliard.

Don stretched across to get it.

As he did so, Prodgers gripped his ankles in a vice-like grip. Aided by a roll of the vessel Grey lost his balance. He fell across the coaming, partly winding himself in the process, and hung face downwards over the vessel’s side.

Even as he hung there he was vividly conscious of the water swirling past as the *Spitfire* ploughed her erratic course at a good twelve knots.

He brought his arms back and gripped the coaming.

He could hear Prodgers shouting to the mechanic to come to his assistance and the fellow’s loud “Coming, sir!”

Another quick movement of the vessel threw Grey back clear of the coaming. He sat down heavily upon his antagonist’s legs. Prodgers, probably on account of the sudden and excruciating pain, relinquished his grip on Don’s ankles and struck him full in the face with his left fist.

A thousand stars danced before Grey’s eyes. He reeled, recovered himself and, with a short jab, delivered a neat upper-cut to the unguarded point of his assailant’s jaw.

For the second time that day Captain James Prodgers “went to sleep”.

Feeling pretty muzzy, Don regained his feet. With his undamaged eye—for his left had been bunged up—he saw the mechanic’s head and shoulders above the motor-room hatchway.

The man hesitated, then quietly disappeared, replacing the grating over the opening as he did so.

“If you’d been ten seconds quicker——” thought Grey.



He staggered to the wheel, put the craft back on her course, and then returned to complete the trussing up of his late assailant.

Prodders looked in a nasty condition. The wound on the side of his head had opened afresh; he had bitten his tongue when Don's fist had dealt the deciding upper-cut, his wide-open eyes gazed vacantly at the clouds.

"You've an advantage over me in one respect, my festive!" thought Grey, as he bound the man's arms behind his back. "You can't feel as I do!"

For Don was in a pretty bad state. He was feeling shaky. One eye had closed and was already surrounded by a halo of delicate greens and blues. He had barked both shins, his left knuckle was raw, while blood trickled from a superficial cut on his cheek. In addition, his coat and trousers were rent in a dozen places.

"Now, if the lighthouse keeper has been keeping us under observation," he mused, "he'll have something to write home about. I shan't be sorry when I get this packet over Poole Bar! And, by Jove! it isn't far off sunset. I'll be lucky to be in before dark."

The *Spitfire* had cleared Peverill Ledge and had opened out the whole expanse of Swanage Bay. Occasionally Grey left the wheel, to lean over the side and moisten his handkerchief in salt water. The application of the damp linen helped to ease the pain of his damaged eye.

Presently he noticed a monoplane heading towards Ballard Down. She was too far off for him to pick up her identity marks, but he recognized her as one of Far Eastern Airways' hack machines. Since she wasn't the bus that Standish and he had flown down from Hawkscar he paid no further attention but went to the side to dip his handkerchief again.

When he got back to the wheel the monoplane was no longer to be seen.

"'Cheer up for Chatham; Sheerness is in sight'," he quoted, as the solitary chalk pinnacle of Old Harry drew broad on the port beam. "I'll be able to pick up the bar buoy in a minute or so."

He put the helm over slowly. As he did so he chanced to glance astern.

Something attracted his attention. It looked like a couple of small barrels bobbing about at a distance of about two hundred yards. Even as he looked, from one of them shot up something that looked like the moving arm of a semaphore.

He wiped his uninjured eye with his damp handkerchief. It had been weeping in sympathy with the other. He looked again.

“By Jove!” he ejaculated. “There are two men out there, swimming, and they’re calling for assistance!”

He put the helm hard over and jerked the lever of the motor-room telegraph to half speed. Promptly the mechanic, anxious to make amends for his lapse, slowed the engine down.

Round swung the *Spitfire*, heeling outwards as she did so. Grey brought her bows on to the swimmers, then, judging his distance, ordered “Stop!”

He had miscalculated the amount of way the boat carried. She swept past the swimmers at a good five knots. He daren’t order the motors to be reversed in case either of the two men might be caught by the swiftly-revolving blades.

He glanced over the side and saw that they were clear. As he did so he uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

One of the men was Colin Standish. The other was a boy. Somehow his face seemed familiar, but he couldn’t quite place him.

“Next shot, Standish, old son!” he yelled.

Colin, instantly recognizing the voice, but not the battered and blood-smearred face of his chum, waved in reply.

The *Spitfire*, with engine half-speed ahead again, held on, then turned and headed back to the work of rescue.

Grey was thinking hard. His task was not an easy one single-handed. The motor-cruiser had a fairly high freeboard. It would be impossible for anyone in the water to gain her deck unassisted. Ought he to release the deck-hand and get him to help? The mechanic, busy with the reverse gear and throttle—for there was no deck-control in the wheel-house—could not be spared. But what if the deck-hand, in dread of arrest and imprisonment, took advantage of the state of affairs and felled him?

Don decided against calling upon him for aid of any kind.

He remembered that on the port side just abaft of amidships was an accommodation-ladder triced up and secured to the rail. When in use it was lowered by means of a single cat-davit.

Again Grey rang down for “Stop”. Before *Spitfire* lost way he had lowered the accommodation ladder. Its lower platform was normally within a foot of the water; now, owing to the vessel’s roll it was alternately about twelve inches below and a couple of feet above the surface.

He went back to the wheel-house. *Spitfire* was now almost without movement through the water, although she was rolling somewhat heavily in the long off-shore swell. He could see Standish and the lad about twenty yards away on the port bow.

"If I get her going she'll overrun them," he thought. "Better yell to them to swim to her."

He did so. The swimmers struck out.

Soon, however, it became evident that the high freeboard of the motor-cruiser was causing her to drift to lee'ard quicker than they, hampered by their lifebelts, could swim.

For the first time Grey realized how unhandy a motor-craft can be when not carrying way. His attempts to fetch the swimmers would have been highly diverting if the situation had not been deadly serious.

At the fourth attempt he managed to bring the craft sufficiently close for Standish and his companion to grasp the accommodation ladder. Then, abandoning the wheel, Don hastened to give first the boy and then Colin a "leg up" into safety.

With the water streaming from their garments, Standish and Denis gained the cockpit. Both stared at the still unconscious and bound figure.

"What's up?" asked Standish.

"All sorts of funny things, old son," replied Grey, who was almost too delighted to speak. "I've been shanghaied; I've been a mutineer; the skipper of this craft. After that I had to quell a mutiny and rescue you. Quite enough for one day, what?"

"Hardly! We've a lot to square up before the day's done," replied Standish. "Is there any whisky on board?"

"Try the captain's cabin," suggested his chum. "From what I know of him, there should be more than you'll want."

"Come along, Denis, and shift your things," said Standish. "You've met Day before, Don! But who's this?"

It was Denis who answered.

In spite of Captain James Prodgers' battered appearance he recognized him as one of the two plotters he had shadowed at Lulworth Cove.

“He’s a bird worth catching then,” commented Standish. “Come along, Denis.”

They shed their clothes in the state-room, wrapped themselves toga-wise in borrowed blankets, and took a modest amount of ardent spirit to warm their chilled bodies.

“Do you think you’re going to land at Poole Quay rigged up like that?” asked Grey, when they rejoined him in the wheel-house.

“Well, we look a jolly sight more presentable than you do,” rejoined Colin cheerfully. “You look like a superannuated rat-catcher!”

“And I feel like it,” admitted Don. “Shift that grating and pass your clothes down to the engineer. He’ll dry them for you and you won’t have to offer him a tip.”

The Bar Buoy glided past and as the *Spitfire* made her way up the long, buoyed channel, the chums briefly related their respective experiences while Denis listened with rapt attention.

It was nearly dark when the *Spitfire* approached Poole Quay.

Standish and Denis had resumed their clothes and were preparing to assist in making fast.

“Think you’ll manage it?” asked Standish anxiously, for, although he had unbounded faith in Don’s skill as an airman, he was very dubious concerning his ability to manoeuvre a “sixty-foot” vessel alongside the quay.

“I’ll have a good shot at it, anyway,” replied Grey cheerfully. “Why do you ask?”

“ ’Cause I’ve had one forced landing to-day and I don’t want another,” replied Colin.

They had not thought about switching on the navigation lamps, and this fact probably aroused the suspicion of the customs watches as the darkened craft bumped heavily alongside the granite-faced quay.

“What craft is that?” hailed a grim voice.

“*Spitfire!*” replied Don.

“What’s your last port?”

“Hanged if I know!” responded Grey, grinning cheerfully.

“What’s that?” continued their inquisitor. “Here, don’t you try to pull my leg!”

“The last thing we’d think of doing,” rejoined Standish. “If you’ll fetch at least three policemen and a stretcher we’ll be extremely obliged!”

## CHAPTER XXI

### Rounded Up

The customs officer came to the edge of the quay and flashed a lamp into the cockpit.

“Why, it’s Inspector Standish!” he exclaimed. “You’ve got a rum cargo here, sir!”

“Meaning the disreputable state of my colleague, Mr. Grey?”

“Not exactly. But this——”

He pointed to the bound, apparently lifeless figure of James Prodgers.

“That’s what the stretcher is wanted for,” rejoined Standish. “We’ve nabbed three of the gang—or at least Mr. Grey has. Two of them are under hatches. You’re in no hurry, I expect. Would you mind hanging on while I telephone. The customs office is open, I hope?”

“The watch-house, sir; office closes at four.”

Just then a policeman went by. Standish called to him and asked him to remain with the customs officer.

“And I’ll phone to the station for more constables,” he continued. “Come along, you fellows.”

Accompanied by Don and Denis, Standish jumped ashore. On their way along the quay the latter turned to his chum.

“You’d better nip along to The Antelope and book a couple of rooms for to-night, and order a thundering good dinner for three,” he suggested. “I’ll have to be busy on the phone. I’ll be along as soon as I possibly can.”

His first call was to Swanage, where he telephoned to Day’s parents. Fortunately no news had reached them of their son’s misadventure, so he merely mentioned that they were at Poole and that Denis was having dinner with him. He would be sent home by train.

Then he rang up Bere Regis Aerodrome. Mr. Truscott, he learnt, was still away and Sub-Inspector Amble had gone back to his hotel in Wareham.

Having reported the loss of the hired monoplane his next act was to telephone to Amble.

“Great news, sir!” reported the latter directly he heard Colin’s voice. “The lorry fellow you nabbed has admitted that Mr. Grey was removed from the cave to a motor-boat belonging to Prodgers two days ago.”

“As it happens, Mr. Grey is with me at Poole,” replied Standish. “Keep that information to yourself for the present. I’ll be along to-morrow afternoon after the court rises. We’ve got most of the gang. Now you’d better go across to the superintendent and get him to issue a warrant for the arrest of—well, I needn’t mention the name on the phone, but you know perfectly well whom I mean. That’s all, I think. Good night!”

Then he went back to the *Spitfire*, now securely moored alongside the quay with three customs officers in charge of her, and a couple of policemen ashore keeping back the crowd of curious sightseers who, notwithstanding the time of day, were gaping at the craft they had possibly passed unnoticed on many occasions.

One of the constables, recognizing Standish, saluted.

“Cleared the birds out?” inquired Colin.

“Yes, sir. The man Prodgers started shouting as our men carried him off. They’ve taken him to hospital. The other two went quietly. They’ll be brought before the magistrates at the Town Hall at eleven to-morrow.”

“Right! I’ll be there!”

Standish stepped on board and went to the saloon where two of the customs men were busily engaged in “rummaging”. Already they had searched the lockers and were now ripping up the floor-boards to see if there were any contraband goods in the bilges. They looked hot and tired, but pleased with themselves.

“Getting on, then?”

“Yes, sir; enough dope in these two suitcases to make every man, woman and child in Poole make whoopee. And there’s a tidy amount of silk. But there’s not much spirit; some rum, but only half a bottle of whisky.”

“I know that,” rejoined Standish. “I helped myself. I wanted it.”

“Suppose you didn’t remove anything else, sir?” asked the customs officer suspiciously, for it appeared that there was a certain amount of rivalry between the two civil forces of the Crown. Colin, as a member of the

Royal Air Constabulary, was classed with the “common or garden” policeman in the customs man’s estimation.

“I have,” he admitted.

“What is it; anything dutiable?”

“An envelope and its contents—important, but not contraband. For certain reasons connected with this case I am not prepared to make its contents known at present. You’ll be at the Town Hall to-morrow, of course? Then, good night.”

Standish went ashore, made his way through the crowd, firmly but courteously declined to be interviewed by a hustling reporter, and went along to the Antelope Hotel.

There he had a hot bath—Don and Denis had already had one—dressed himself in his rapidly shrinking flannels and went down to the dining-room where, in spite of the lateness of the hour, a sumptuous meal was provided.

The trio were ravenously hungry. Not until coffee had been served and the waiter had retired (very reluctantly, since he was hoping to overhear interesting details from the lips of the two famous Royal Air Constabulary officers) did conversation flow.

Denis Day, who had won his right to be taken into their counsels, sat enthralled. It appeared that Grey, finding that there was not a later train to Swanage—for the 9.5 p.m. had gone—had telephoned to Denis’s people saying that their son was remaining at Poole for the night.

“We’ll send you back to-morrow morning in time for school, Denis,” said Standish. “No; you won’t be called as a witness, if we can help it. Don’t look so glum! You’ve done splendidly; but you mustn’t stop away from school.”

“You’ve phoned Amble?” asked Don.

“Yes; told him to apply at Wareham for—a warrant for the arrest of John Truscott,” announced Standish gravely.

“Truscott? Surely——”

“Unfortunately, yes,” explained Colin. “A rotten job to have to do, but, fortunately for me, I’ll be spared the actual task of making the arrest. I had my suspicions of him the day after we came south.”

Grey was completely taken aback by the news.



He knew only too well that his former chief at Far Eastern Airways had figuratively gone to pieces within the last six months; but he never suspected for a moment that the resident managing director of Bere Regis Aerodrome had been involved in law-breaking transactions that meant his arrest.

“What happened then?” he asked.

“You remember that anonymous warning we found in the locked hangar?”

“Yes.”

“The actual wording?”

“I think so: ‘We know what you are after, Inspector Standish; unless you want a broken neck you had better transfer your activities elsewhere. You have——’ ”

Colin held up his hand.

“ ‘You had better transfer your activities elsewhere’; that’s the important part,” he declared. “Next day we both had a sort of interview with Truscott; *and he used that identical phrase.*”

“So he did, by Jove!” exclaimed Grey. “But, surely that wasn’t sufficient, even if it did arouse your suspicions, to warrant his arrest?”

“No,” admitted his chum. “But it started me on the right track. Until yesterday, I wasn’t sure. You remember I either called personally or by phone and he was away—or supposed to be away, on duty. But when I was having that drink in the *Spitfire’s* cabin, I took the liberty of inspecting friend Prodgers’ private correspondence. There were letters, addressed, sealed and stamped lying in a rack. He’d put to sea so hurriedly that he hadn’t time to get them posted. One was addressed to Truscott. I opened it. Here it is:

“DEAR T.,

“Those pups have upset our apple-cart. As you know, I’ve got hold of one of them but S. is still at large and raising Cain. It’s not safe to leave the cargo where it is. I’m taking the dry stuff on board again, together with G. The juice I’m trying to get away before we pack up for good.

“You’d better take care of yourself for it’s certain I can’t.

“Yours,  
“J. P.”

“That’s cooked Truscott’s goose,” commented Don. “Fancy that blighter Prodgers calling us ‘pups’! Hard names break no bones, though! But how did old Truscott become involved?”

“Weakness due to booze,” declared Standish emphatically. “He didn’t use to be like that. I fancy he allowed himself to become compromised and then, when he’d got him properly entangled, Prodgers put the screw on; blackmail, of course. I feel very much bucked over the successful ending of the case, but I do regret having to take action against Truscott.”

“Yes; he was very decent to us once,” agreed Don. “He warned us. I wonder how he got into the hangar without Symes knowing?”

“Must have been a third key. Symes isn’t always on duty. And he didn’t play any dirty tricks with the machine, remember.”

“Did anyone do anything to the monoplane we crashed in, sir?” asked Denis.

“No, I don’t think so,” replied Colin. “Merely a defect in the pressure system. That reminds me: I’ll have to notify my insurance company to-morrow.”

He stifled a yawn.

“Heavy day to-morrow,” he continued, “I’m dog-tired and I guess you two are. So who’s for bed?”

## CHAPTER XXII

### Duty Calls

The proceedings at the crowded eighteenth-century courthouse next morning were, contrary to expectations, brief. Only formal evidence was offered and the three accused were committed for trial at the ensuing assizes at Dorchester.

Simultaneously five prisoners were brought up before the Wareham magistrates on charges of attempting to defraud his Majesty's Government by illegally bringing contraband goods into the country, and also of arson and attempted manslaughter.

They, too, were sent up to the assizes.

But there was no news of the arrest of Timothy Truscott, resident managing director of Bere Regis Aerodrome. He had disappeared without a trace, and although the British seaports and airports were carefully watched, days and weeks went by without any news of the missing man.

Meanwhile, repairs to the R.A.C. monoplane having been effected and his mission accomplished until he was required to appear as a witness at the assizes, Standish had reported to headquarters at Hawkscar and requested permission to return to his Division.

Back came Colonel Robartes' reply written in his characteristic scrawl:

"Well done, both of you. Take a prolonged holiday on full pay until after the trial. You deserve it!"

In due course the big trial came off.

Standish during cross-examination was asked whether any suspicion was attached to any member of the staff of Far Eastern Airways other than Timothy Truscott.

Unhesitatingly he replied, "Not the slightest," and felt proud that he was able to pay the tribute to his former colleagues.

All the prisoners were found guilty.

In pronouncing sentence the judge, who was an amateur yachtsman, observed:

“Your case, James Proddgers, calls for strong denunciation. As a yacht-owner you, in common with those who take their pleasures upon the sea in their own craft, have been given special consideration by His Majesty’s customs officers. Hitherto British yachts entering British ports have been exempt from search if not arriving from a foreign port. The word of the owners has been accepted. That statement has been given as a word of honour and rarely has that trust been abused. You by your illegal act have jeopardized that confidence. . . . Furthermore, you have been found guilty by the jury after a fair and impartial trial on charges of fire-raising. I need hardly say that if the crime had resulted in loss of life—which happily has been averted—you would have been charged with the capital offence. The sentence I shall pass is that you go into penal servitude for a term of fourteen years.”

The rest of the prisoners were sentenced to terms ranging from twelve months’ hard labour to seven years’ penal servitude.

Before the Judge retired he called Inspector Standish and Sub-Inspector Grey and warmly complimented them upon the successful termination of their hazardous investigations.

“I feel certain,” he concluded, “that with such capable officers as you within its ranks the Royal Air Constabulary, in spite of adverse criticisms in certain quarters, has already justified its existence. I wish you every success in the future.”

Next day they received instructions to report at Hawkscar on the following Monday. That gave them four clear days before returning to duty.

By the same post came a request from the head office of Far Eastern Airways in London asking if it would be convenient for Inspector Standish to call there.

“Don’t like it, old son,” confessed Colin to his chum. “They’re probably trying to pump me concerning poor old Truscott. I think I’ll decline.”

“Better go,” suggested Grey. “It can do no harm. You needn’t say anything to his disadvantage.”

So Standish went before the Board of Directors.

“We have sent for you to place a proposition before you, Mr. Standish,” said the Chairman. “As you are probably aware, a vacancy exists at our aerodrome at Bere Regis. In view of your previous experience, although you are still a young man in the company’s service, we are prepared to offer you the managership with a seat on the Board at the end of two years’ service.

That will then, of course, carry with it your director's fee. Meanwhile we offer you a salary of fifteen hundred pounds per annum. We trust that you will be able to give us a favourable reply. No doubt you will wish for time to come to your decision."

The announcement took Standish completely by surprise.

For a few minutes he thought hard. He was accustomed to making rapid and, for the most part, sound decisions.

In these few minutes he reviewed all the possibilities of the offer. It was a tempting one. It looked like playing for safety. Far Eastern Airways were paying well in spite of the setback caused by Truscott's lapse. It meant freedom from financial worries, coupled with a sense of full responsibility. Virtually he would be his own master.

On the other hand there would be little or no flying for him. No more long-distance air journeys with his chum Don. To him in the fulness of youth flying was the zest of life.

And what of his comrades of the Royal Air Constabulary? True, he could resign his commission. But he would have to cut asunder the bonds of comradeship; to abandon a life of adventure amongst the clouds for a drab though secure existence on *terra firma*.

No, it couldn't be done.

The Board of Directors received his decision with regret.

Standish breathed freely when he gained the open air. He had been tempted but he had not fallen.

.....

At 3 p.m. on Monday a monoplane with freshly painted wings and fuselage alighted faultlessly upon the tarmac at Hawkscar aerodrome.

From it alighted Inspector Standish and Sub-Inspector Grey. Amble, unlucky wight! had been recalled to duty immediately after the capture of the gang.

"Back again, then!" was Colonel Robartes' greeting, when they reported at his office. "Good! And you've had a long holiday? Splendid. Now take these papers along with you. You'll find them most interesting, I feel sure. It's a rather remarkable case and I feel certain that I can entrust it to your hands. Let me have your report by 9 a.m. to-morrow!"

Overjoyed, the chums went away to see what fate, in the form of these documents, had in store for them.

After all, they were young, and to youth work—especially adventurous work—is the zest of life.

No wonder they felt glad!

## 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.

Inconsistent hyphenation has been left as printed in the original book.

[The end of *Ringed by Fire* by Percy F. Westerman]