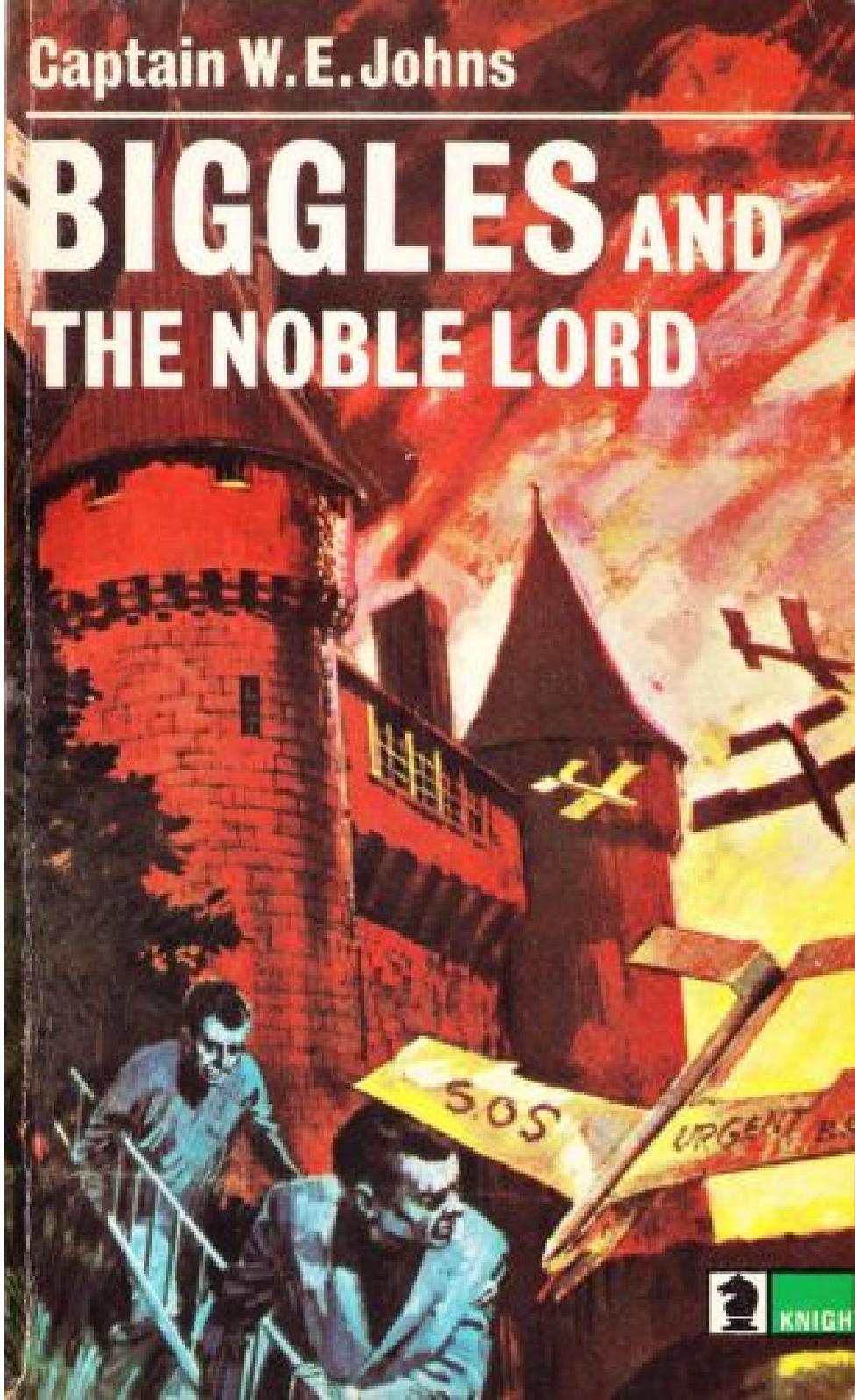


Captain W. E. Johns

BIGGLES AND THE NOBLE LORD



KNIGHT

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'The man I want is the top man,' asserts Biggles, 'the crafty type we believe to be organizing these raids.'

In the hope of getting a lead, Biggles sends Ginger – impersonating an Indian princess – up the Great North Road to Scotland in a Rolls-Royce driven by Bertie, but this brush with the crooks convinces Biggles that he is underestimating the enemy.

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BIGGLES AND THE NOBLE LORD

LONDON—SUSSEX—NORMANDY

All these areas play a major part in tracking down the master-mind behind the large-scale robberies which have bedevilled Britain for the past year.

Where does this super-crook hide his stolen property, and what useful purpose does a newly built brick building serve behind the high walls of Brindon Hall Park?

When the chase takes Biggles across the Channel, he is more than grateful to Marcel Brissac for turning up in the nick of time.

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

**BIGGLES AND
THE NOBLE LORD**

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CHAPTER 1

THE BIG QUESTION

‘TAKE a seat, Bigglesworth,’ greeted Air Commodore Raymond, as his chief operational pilot walked into his office and closed the door behind him. ‘It’s time we had a little chat. Help yourself to cigarettes. We may be some time.’

Biggles took the usual chair in front of his Chief’s desk, lit a cigarette and waited.

The Air Commodore, head of the Special Air Police Section at New Scotland Yard, went on. ‘The other day you told me that in your opinion the large-scale criminal activities of the past year were carried out by the same organization; I won’t call it a gang because the way these jobs have been done suggests a more efficient, and a more ambitious, set-up.’

‘That is correct, sir. I haven’t changed my mind,’ Biggles said.

‘Have you thought any more about it?’

‘Not a lot, sir, since so far there has been no indication that these crimes come into our particular line of country.’

‘You still believe there’s a master-mind in the background who does the planning?’

‘I do. What else can we think? I know there was a time when master-criminals existed only in popular fiction. But times have changed, and it rather looks as if one has popped up. So far there hasn’t been a hitch; not a slip; not a blunder in these raids, which all points to careful planning and perfect timing. An ordinary common-or-garden gang falls short of such a standard. When we get to the kernel of this particular nut, if ever we do, we shall find an educated man, one with a brain and who knows how to use it. It could be a man with a military background; one accustomed to precision. A general, for instance. In that case it’s unlikely he’d go out on the jobs himself, so it follows that he must have a staff of highly trained operatives who carry out orders without questioning them. These men are probably experts in their own particular field.’

‘Why?’

‘You have only to look at the ground that has been covered. Bank raids, jewel robberies, gold bullion—it’s all the same to this wizard. Everything

organized like a plan of campaign. Nothing left to chance. But there's still one aspect that puzzles me.'

'What's that?'

'What does he do with the loot?'

'How do you mean?'

'Tot up the stuff he's got away with. Of course, jewellery in small quantities can be disposed of through fences who are prepared to handle this sort of hot merchandise; but what do you do with gold in bulk or bank-notes in millions. It might eventually be unloaded; but that would take time. Gold, for instance, is heavy stuff; and bulky. Not easy to move by the ton without someone spotting it. I'm thinking particularly of the ingots. An idea has crept into my mind that some joker may be doing this for fun.'

The Air Commodore looked astonished. 'For *fun*! What fun can he get out of it?'

'It may tickle him to take the mickey out of the police.'

'What on earth gives you such a fantastic notion?'

'For what other reason could he be doing it?'

'The obvious one. For easy money.'

'That's what one would naturally suppose. But if I'm right in supposing that this epidemic of crime, clever crime, springs from the imagination of one man—and that's what the overall pattern suggests—he must already have more money than he can spend. Why does he go on? Why not pack it in while the going's good, without taking any more risks? However smart he may think he is, there must always be a risk of something coming unstuck.'

'There doesn't seem to have been much in the way of risk so far,' the Air Commodore pointed out, dryly.

'He must employ men to carry out the raids he dreams up. That's always a risk. If ever there's an argument one might give him away.'

'I suppose that could happen,' conceded the Air Commodore.

Take one of his activities; the hijacking of commercial vehicles,' went on Biggles, presumably to support his theory. 'The last was a load of whisky on the way south from Scotland. Ten thousand gallons of the stuff due for export. What's he going to do with it? Where's he going to put it? He couldn't drink it. Why nick it, anyway, when he must have enough ready cash to buy more than he could ever need for his personal use? That's the trouble. Unlike the normal criminal he jumps from one racket to another.'

The Air Commodore thought for a moment. ‘There may be something in what you say, but it doesn’t answer our problem. How are we going to catch him?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘No use asking me, sir. We can only hope that one of these days he’ll go too far. Given enough rope he may hang himself.’

‘He’s had enough rope already to do that; but it hasn’t happened yet.’

‘It may. Success could go to his head. That’s when he’ll slip.’

‘In the meantime the public are beginning to think we must be a bunch of nitwits.’

‘We can hardly blame them for that. You’ve asked my opinion, sir. I’ve told you. That’s as much as I can do about it.’

‘Is it?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? You’re not suggesting that I set myself the task of clipping the wings of this fly bird?’

‘You might give the matter some thought.’

‘I’ve already done that, sir,’ protested Biggles.

‘Well, go on thinking.’

Biggles smiled as he got up. ‘Okay, sir, I suppose I could do that without suffering too much discomfort or burning a lot of petrol. Meanwhile you can tell the Commissioner what I think, and if he feels in the mind he can turn the regular Force on to it.’

‘What exactly am I to tell him?’

‘You can say I believe this super criminal is some sort of crank. He has a cache somewhere—a dump if you like—where all this loot can be stored until the time comes to release it: little by little, of course, otherwise he’d flood the market. Small fry, like round-the-corner pawnbrokers, might buy gold by the ounce, or even a pound or two; but the only people who can handle gold in big quantities are governments, or bankers, and they don’t get up to tricks.’

‘All right,’ said the Air Commodore. ‘Let’s agree there must be a dump somewhere. Where are we going to look for it?’

Biggles face creased in a smile. ‘Excuse me, sir, while I laugh. I haven’t the foggiest notion. But if I know anything it won’t be where we think it might be. This villain has brains, don’t forget. He’s already got more money than he can spend, which leads me to think he’s now collecting wealth merely for the sake of it; or for kicks. To some people money can become a drug. They become addicts. The more they have the more they want. This is

the bug that makes misers. That leads us to another point that's worth remembering. A miser likes his money easily accessible, where he can get to it, count it, and gloat over it in secret.'

'Never mind the philosophy,' cut in the Air Commodore. 'Let's be practical. What are we going to do about it? The Force is being made to look like a bunch of amateurs.'

'I'm afraid that's how they'll continue to look until it can produce a man with a brain equal in size to the one they've been looking for.'

'Do you feel like having a go at it?'

Biggles looked pained. 'Have a heart, sir. I don't remember saying anything which might suggest I have a brain of the size the case demands. Nor have I ever indicated that aviation may come into the picture.'

'It might.'

'I agree, it might, although too much gold on the floor of an aircraft is a good way of knocking the bottom out of it. Actually, that has happened, between Paris and London. Give me a lead and I'll follow it.'

'If there was any sort of lead the regular police could follow it. I'm afraid you'll have to find your own.'

'You realize this load of loot might be anywhere.'

'Well, you have a means of getting around.'

'Thank you, sir.' With a bleak smile Biggles departed.

Back in his own office he found his three police-pilot assistants engaged in an acrobatic contest with mini-planes made of folded notepaper, with a paper clip as a power unit to provide the necessary momentum and stability.

'Okay, that's enough,' he interrupted. 'Sit down and pay attention. I've got a question for you. When you've heard it you can answer it in turn.' He waited for them to get settled and went on. 'This is the question. If you had a million pounds in gold, notes and jewels, and wanted to hide it, where would you put it?' He went over to his desk, sat in the chair and lit a cigarette.

Ginger was the first to speak. He looked puzzled. 'Is this some sort of game?'

'No.'

'A riddle?'

'No. It's a serious question. Somewhere there's an answer—if it can be found. Take your time, but we haven't got all day.' He waited.

There was silence for a minute or two. Then Algy was the first to come through with his answer. 'I'd buy a house in the country with a lily pond in the garden. I'd pack the stuff in plastic bags and sink it in the pond. Then I'd buy a few ducks to paddle on the pond to keep the water muddy, so the bottom couldn't be seen. How's that?'

'I wouldn't call that an original idea,' was Biggles' opinion. 'It's been done too often. It was a common trick during the war, in the occupied countries when the enemy marched in. In France people are still fishing for some of the things they submerged, even their best wine, before the Nazis could get their hands on it. Think again. I want something simple but original.'

Ginger came next. 'I'd take a house with a cellar, put the stuff in the cellar and pile a ton of coal on top of it.'

'I don't think that's very bright, either,' Biggles said. 'You'd have to carry the ton of coal yourself or the coalman would see the stuff and wonder what you were up to. I want something really clever.'

'Well, let's say a house with a cave in the garden.'

'Where are you going to find a house with a cave in the garden?'

'There must be some.'

'And what would you do with the treasure while you were hunting up and down the country for one? You couldn't leave it lying around or hump it about with you. You can think of something better than that.'

Bertie took his turn. It began with a question. 'Do I have time to prepare a hiding-place before I get the money, and what have you, or do I have to find the hiding-place *after* I've got it? It makes a difference.'

'A reasonable question,' acknowledged Biggles. 'You can say you knew you were going to get the stuff in time to make the necessary preparations for hiding it.'

'Then it would be easy, old boy,' declared Bertie, breathing on his monocle and polishing it with his handkerchief. 'I'd buy a farm well away from anywhere. In one of the sheds I'd put an old horse cart. I'd put the stuff in the cart and cover it with a load of cow dung, or something equally beastly, to discourage any nosey parker from getting inquisitive.'

'Suppose you yourself wanted to get to the money? You'd have a dirty business on your hands. Perhaps I should have said that the stuff would have to be easily accessible.'

‘Hm. I didn’t think of that,’ confessed Bertie. ‘Well, instead of the dung I’d cover it with straw, or turnips, or something of that sort.’

‘First you’d have to grow a field of corn to get the straw, or a few acres of turnips, and that would take time. What would you do with the stuff while you were waiting for the harvest?’

‘Yes, I see your point,’ Bertie said sadly.

Ginger came back. ‘Would I be right in thinking there was some purpose in this quiz programme?’

‘You would.’

‘Then as you can only sit there and find fault with anything we suggest, why don’t you have a go at it yourself?’ Ginger said tartly.

‘I have,’ stated Biggles.

‘Then what’s the answer?’

Biggles grinned. ‘I don’t know it. That’s why I’m asking you.’

‘But someone knows?’

‘I’m pretty sure of it.’

Algy came in again. ‘I take it there’s some reason for this footling exercise?’

‘There certainly is.’

‘Then don’t you think it’s about time you quit flying on half throttle and put us on course!’

‘Fair enough,’ Biggles agreed. ‘I’ve just had a session with the Chief. He’s having a spot of bother. You know about this super-crook who’s helping himself to other people’s property as and when he feels like it, so we needn’t go into that. The Air Commodore has been handed the problem on a plate, without a knife and fork, and, naturally, he’s passed it on to us. In a word, I’m afraid I opened my big mouth too wide, with the result that I’ve been invited to find the place where this modern Dick Turpin is hiding his ill-gotten nicker. As I haven’t a clue I thought one of you might come up with a bright idea of where we might start. That’s all there is to it. Don’t tell me that’s plenty to go on with. I’m perfectly well aware of that. Let’s talk about it.’

CHAPTER 2

ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

‘JUST a minute before we start,’ requested Ginger. ‘Is there any reason to suppose this has anything to do with aviation?’

‘None at all, as far as I’m aware, although of course flying may come, into the picture,’ returned Biggles.

‘Then what’s it got to do with us?’

‘Nothing, really. I imagine it’s a case of getting all hands to the pumps. We’ve nothing on at the moment. Presumably someone thought we might as well make ourselves useful by operating independently of the regular Force.’

‘Why are you so sure this villain has got a secret dump?’

‘I’m not sure. That’s merely a theory. What else can he do with all the stuff he’s pinched except hoard it? That’s what I mean by making a dump. You can’t sell gold bricks just anywhere; and you can’t take a hundred thousand pounds in notes to a bank without the manager raising his eyebrows and wanted to know where the boodle came from. He knows better than anyone that honest men don’t carry that sort of money around in suitcases.’

‘Okay. So let’s say there’s a dump,’ conceded Ginger. ‘Is there any reason to think it’s in this country?’

‘No, apart from the fact that a crook would find it difficult to get the stuff abroad. There’s too much of it. Gold is heavy stuff to lug about. One bar would be about as much as you or I could carry.’

‘Here, hold hard chaps,’ protested Bertie. ‘Do you mind if I push a word in edgeways? I may have a clue. Any old how, I can tell you something about this wise guy.’

‘Good. Let’s have it,’ requested Biggles.

‘He’s a collector.’

‘We already know that,’ Biggles pointed out sarcastically.

‘I’m not thinking of the stuff you have in mind. I mean a genuine collector. A chap who goes in for antiques and objects of art for no other

reason than because he likes the look of 'em—if you follow me.'

'What gives you that idea?'

'You remember when Lady Loxton's jewels were nicked from her place in Sussex, we were asked to keep an eye open in case the bloke who snatched them had ideas of flying them abroad in a private aircraft.'

'What about it?'

'You said at the time you thought this was the work of the same big-time crook.'

'I remember. So what?'

'When I was going through the list of missing goods with Inspector Gaskin in his office there was one item that struck me as a bit odd . . . out of step with the rest, if you see what I mean. It wasn't a piece of jewellery. It was a vase—well, a sort of vase.'

'A vase?'

'Actually a hand-painted French porcelain cake stand, described as a party of cupids holding up a plate. Why did the crook bother about a thing like that unless he took a fancy to it? It caught his eye and he couldn't resist it.'

'I suppose it was valuable.'

'It was, but not all that valuable compared with the jewels. Anyway, that's why I think he's a collector. I'd make a little bet that if you could see inside his house, this item wouldn't be the only piece of porcelain on the shelves.'

'We first have the little problem of finding the house before we can see what's in it,' Biggles said dryly. 'Still, full marks, Bertie. It's worth remembering. We might get a line on him by checking the London sale rooms to watch who buys this sort of stuff.'

'Matter of fact, old boy. Gaskin told me he did watch the auction rooms for a time to see if this particular piece of pottery did appear; but the last time I spoke to him it hadn't shown up. So it looks as if the thief must have kept it. That's what makes me think he may be a collector.'

'I take your point,' Biggles said. 'Anyone else any ideas?'

Algy spoke. 'I'd say most of these robberies were inside jobs, or how would the crook know where the stuff was, and in the case of the gold and notes when it was going to be moved and where it was being delivered? He must have known the time and the route the delivery van was taking, or how could he have been there exactly at the right moment to intercept it? How

would he know that a large sum of money was about to be delivered, and where, unless someone on the inside, a crooked employee, gave him the wink? Don't ask me to believe that he's clever enough to do this by guesswork.'

Biggles answered. 'You may be sure the police haven't overlooked that; but what can they do about it? How are you going to find the man who supplies the necessary information? It's not much use questioning the staff. No one is likely to admit he is the culprit. We know this sort of thing does go on. The bribe has only got to be big enough to turn some men crooked. The only thing the police can do is watch a suspect to see if he's suddenly spending more money than he earns. Even if that happens it only half answers the question. You can't prove anything. The suspect can say he won the money gambling. No, we shan't find the answer that way. To stop the rot we've got to catch the big man at the top, not the small fish who work for him.'

Ginger came in. 'How about setting a trap?'

'What sort of trap?'

'Send out a dummy car with an imaginary load of money on board, on the lines of the "Q ships" they used in the war to trap enemy submarines. You remember they were harmless-looking merchant ships, but they bristled with concealed guns. When a U-boat popped up off went the guns and down went the sub.'

'How do you think that could be made to work in our case?' inquired Biggles.

'I was thinking of the way Lady Charlington's jewels were lifted from her chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce on the way to Scotland. The car stopped only once on the way, at an hotel. Her Ladyship went in to have some lunch, leaving her jewel case under the seat. The chauffeur took the opportunity to slip into the gent's toilet. He was away less than two minutes, yet when he came back the jewels had disappeared.'

'The chauffeur must have been in on that job,' declared Algy.

'You can't say that,' disputed Biggles. 'He had been driving his boss, at home and abroad, for thirty years, during which time he would have had scores of opportunities to pinch the jewels. He's still in Her Ladyship's employment and has never shown a sign of making any profit out of the theft. He blamed himself for what had happened and has never been the same man since. I'll admit the crooks must have known the day Her Ladyship was going to travel, and where she was going, so they were able to

follow in another car to wait for their chance. They knew she would have to stop somewhere for lunch on such a long run. They could have got the information from the gossip column of a society newspaper or magazine. Of course, the chauffeurs of wealthy people are always being approached by crooks to play in with them. That's a well-known fact. But most of them have more sense than to fall for that racket, although it must be a big temptation. They know only too well that if anything is missing they'll be suspect. I once had a talk with one of these chaps. He told me the crooks were always at him. Never left him alone. He'd been offered as much as a thousand pounds to disappear for a couple of minutes.'

'In the case we're talking about the crooks must have known where the car was going to stop,' urged Ginger.

'That to some extent was Lady Charlington's own fault, as she was prepared to admit. She always stopped for lunch at the same hotel whenever she was on her way to Scotland to join her husband. Anyway, it would only have been necessary for the crooks to know the day she was going to travel for them to follow in another car.'

'How would they know she was taking her jewels with her?'

'There was going to be a big house party, so naturally she'd want her jewels with her.'

'Let's get back to the point,' Ginger said. 'Why shouldn't we organize something of the sort? All we need is a Rolls. I could play the part of some foreign princess over here for a holiday. Bertie could be my chauffeur. You could let it be known to the Press that I was going somewhere on a certain day taking my famous jewels with me. All you have to do then is follow us in another car. The car stops somewhere *en route* for lunch. The princess goes in. That's me. Bertie goes to have a drink at the bar. The crook makes his snatch. You grab him. It's as easy as that.'

Biggles smiled broadly. 'I see you've got it all worked out. Pretty good. But there's one thing wrong. If it worked I should find myself with some small-time crook. The man I want is the top man, the crafty type we believe to be organizing these raids.'

Ginger had the answer ready. 'Very well. Don't grab him. Let him get away with it. You follow him to see where he goes. He should lead you to the man you want.'

Biggles gave the proposal some thought. 'As a plan it strikes me as a pretty big pond to angle in for one particular fish,' he remarked. 'Still for want of anything more substantial we could try it. There's just a chance that

we might get a bite. If we hooked nothing we'd be no worse off than we are now. It's no use waiting for the fish we're after to give itself up. It would be an expensive operation to put on the expense account, but the Air Commodore said I could try anything. He'll probably think I'm out of my mind—and he could be right.'

'What am I supposed to be doing while the rest of you gallivant about in Rolls-Royces and lush hotels?' inquired Algy.

'I don't see why we shouldn't try both schemes,' Biggles answered. 'You could check up for someone with money who collects antique French porcelain. The people who deal in that sort of stuff should know. Try the leading auctioneers, watch the sale rooms, and so on. You might strike a lead worth following. If we all fail there will be no harm done. Let's see about getting organized.'

CHAPTER 3

ACCORDING TO PLAN

A WEEK later the plan was put into action. What had been arranged had been done. A notice to the effect that Princess Lazu of India, now staying at the Savoy Hotel in London, intended to leave on Saturday for a visit to friends in Scotland, had appeared, with a photograph, in the appropriate newspapers and magazines. The photograph, showing Ginger made up as a young woman, getting into her Rolls-Royce. Bertie, in chauffeur's uniform was holding the door open for her. Algy had gone his own way to check up on well-known collectors of early porcelain.

In four days the newspaper idea had produced what Bertie described as a 'nibble', to give them encouragement and show that it had not passed unnoticed. It could only be hoped that the nibble came from the organization they were trying to trap. There was no proof of this. It came about in this way.

The Princess's Rolls, hired for the purpose, was in the hotel garage. One morning Bertie, in the chauffeur's uniform he now habitually wore, was putting a duster over it when he noticed another chauffeur taking more than a passing interest in him. He was smart, good-looking, and might have been in the early fifties. Bertie took no notice. At the time it did not occur to him that there was anything sinister in this. There was nothing unusual about it.

Presently the man strolled over and looking at the car remarked admiringly: 'Nice job.' He spoke in an educated voice.

Casually, Bertie agreed, and continued his work.

'That's Princess Lazu's car, isn't it?' said the man.

'It is,' Bertie answered, somewhat curtly, taking care not to be too ready to talk.

'Taking her up to Scotland, I hear.'

'Who told you that?'

'I read it in the paper. Isn't it true?'

'Yes. Something like that,' admitted Bertie, going on with his polishing.

'How about a drink?' was the next suggestion.

‘No thanks. Not now. I’m busy,’ replied Bertie, wondering what this was leading up to.

There was a brief silence. Then the man said: ‘Should be a nice trip if the weather stays fine.’

‘Could be.’

‘Bit of a responsibility, though.’

‘How?’

‘Well, I suppose she’ll be taking her jewels with her, in which case you’ll be expected to keep an eye on ’em. From all accounts they’re really something. Starting Saturday, aren’t you?’

Bertie did not answer.

‘Where do you reckon to stop for lunch?’

‘Mind your own business,’ snapped Bertie.

‘What time are you starting?’

Bertie stopped what he was doing and looked round. ‘What are you getting at?’ he demanded to know.

The man smiled. ‘I’ll give you one guess.’

‘Listen, friend,’ Bertie said coldly. ‘If you’ve something to say, say it, and let me get on with my work.’

‘Meet me at the pub on the corner tonight, at say, eight o’clock and I’ll tell you. The Princess will be at dinner, so you won’t be on duty.’

‘I don’t drink with people I don’t know,’ Bertie stated.

‘I could put a little proposition to you that you might find interesting.’

‘Nothing doing,’ snapped Bertie.

The man raised his eyebrows. ‘What’s the matter with you? Have I said something?’

‘You’ve said enough.’

‘I would have thought you could use a thousand nicker as easy as anyone else.’

‘And what exactly have I to do for that?’

‘Nothing. Well, practically nothing. When you stop for lunch simply make an excuse to leave your car for one minute. It’s as easy as that.’

‘So that’s it,’ sneered Bertie. ‘I’ve heard it all before.’

The man smiled curiously. ‘I’ll bet you have.’

‘Nothing doing.’

‘Are you saying you prefer to spend the best years of your life trundling some daft bird around the country?’

‘Push off,’ requested Bertie icily.

‘Think it over. Maybe you’ll change your mind. If you do I’ll see you get the money.’

Bertie did not answer.

The man waited for a minute. Then, with a casual, ‘So long—be seeing you,’ he departed.

Out of the corners of his eyes Bertie watched him make his way through the parked cars to a green Jaguar. He noted the number. So he hadn’t been long getting a bite, he thought with satisfaction as he returned to his Rolls. He realized of course that what had just happened might have nothing to do with the man they were really after, for as Biggles had said, this attempting to bribe the chauffeur of a wealthy owner was a common occurrence.

As soon as convenient he telephoned Biggles and told him about the incident. Biggles said: ‘Good. That’s fine. You know what to do. Carry on. When you leave on Saturday I’ll be on your tail.’

At the first opportunity he also told Ginger, his princess, about it. ‘With any luck we should soon have a bird in the cage,’ Bertie concluded. ‘It may not be the one we’re looking for, but any old bird in the hand is worth a dozen in the bushes.’

On Saturday morning, at the time arranged, Bertie brought the Rolls round to the main entrance of the well-known hotel. Three pieces of luggage were put in the boot. The ‘Princess’ came out carrying what was obviously her jewel case. It was in fact a jewel case, a second-hand one bought for the operation; a small, brown, pigskin, drum-shaped receptacle with a handle on the lid. The inside was divided into compartments, on this occasion holding nothing more valuable than a few small pebbles to represent the precious stones for which it was intended. Bertie, cap in hand, held the door of the rear seat open for her to get in. She handed him the case while she took her place. When she was settled he passed back the case. She put it on the seat beside her. Bertie closed the door and took his place at the wheel. The hall-porter touched his cap and closed the door. The Rolls moved slowly into the Strand to begin its journey.

During this operation Bertie had found it hard to keep a straight face, with such dignity did Ginger play his part as the Princess he was supposed to be. Indeed, he made a smart, good-looking young woman. A bath, with a

little colouring matter in the water, had toned his skin to the right shade of *café au lait* to suggest the Orient. Two-inch heels had given him that much extra height, and a touch of lipstick completed a transformation that would have deceived Bertie had he not known the truth. Neither of them was likely to come into close physical contact with the man, or men, who might be expected to make a raid on the jewel case; but knowing they were likely to be under observation from the moment of leaving the hotel, they took pains to play their respective parts correctly. That of employer and employee. So their behaviour was stiff and formal.

Bertie had seen no more of the man who had tried to bribe him in the garage; but he felt confident that he would not be far away. His eyes roved round for the green Jaguar, but he could not see it. This did not surprise him. It did not follow that the Jaguar would be used for the raid on the jewels. Nor could he see Biggles' Ford—his own car—although in the press of traffic he had little time to look for it. However, he knew it would not be far away.

With the Princess relaxed and settled in her seat, Bertie, poker-faced, took the shortest route to the North Circular Road, and from it turned up the A.1, the main road to the north. It was a pleasant spring day, and as the traffic thinned out, still keeping a close watch behind and in front of him for any vehicle acting suspiciously, he derived some pleasure from the situation. There was not much in the way of conversation in the Rolls. Bertie concentrating on what he was doing. Once as they headed up the open road, Ginger said: 'Well, how did I make out?' (To save possible confusion we had better call him Ginger.)

'Jolly good,' Bertie answered, without turning his head. 'You would have fooled anyone. You jolly nearly took me in.'

Ginger allowed himself to smile. 'Just remember I'm your boss,' he bantered.

Clear on the A.1 the Rolls began to eat up the miles. The first stop, it had been decided, would be at Stamford, at the George, the popular three-star hotel on the main road, for lunch. This, it was thought, would be where the raid, if there was to be one, would be attempted. It was by no means certain. Bertie had refused to be bribed, but the man's last words had been: 'Think it over.' If, therefore, Bertie left the car it would be assumed that on second thoughts he had agreed to co-operate. Time would show.

The Rolls covered the 90 miles to Stamford, in Lincolnshire, without any trouble and glided in to halt at the front entrance. From then on things

happened with a rapidity that nearly left Bertie ‘standing on one foot’, as he afterwards put it. This was the order of events.

Bertie jumped out and, as was right and proper, opened the door for his lady passenger, his employer. Ginger got out, leaving the jewel case on the seat, and walked into the hotel. Bertie put the jewel case on the floor, where it could not easily be seen by anyone passing, closed the door, locked it, and surveyed the scene. As was to be expected there were several cars parked near, most of them without their drivers who had gone into the hotel for one reason or another. He was looking for the green Jaguar. It was not there. The driver of a car that had followed him in, a dark blue Mercedes, got out and paused to light a cigarette. He was not the man who had spoken to Bertie in the garage in London; he had never seen him before, so without giving him another thought he went into the hotel to have a drink which, after the fairly long run, he felt he needed. He decided that the man who had tried to bribe him had taken him at his word and had not turned up. Just inside the hotel entrance he turned for a final look round, still thinking of the green Jaguar. There was still no sign of it, and he was turning again to go on to the bar when he saw the driver of the Mercedes step quickly to the Rolls, unlock the door, presumably with a duplicate key, pick up the jewel case and walk away with it. Bertie was amazed at the speed and facility at which this was done.

Unthinkingly, his natural reaction was to dash after the thief and confront him; but he remembered in time that this was all according to plan. The trap had worked. He saw the thief return to his Mercedes, the engine of which must have been left running from the speed at which it accelerated and made off. At this precise moment a light Bedford van pulled up alongside the Rolls effectively preventing it from being moved. Any driver would have objected to this, and Bertie strode out to ask the driver of the van to give him room to get out.

The man was not in the least abashed. He said: ‘Okay—okay. There’s no need to blow your top. I shan’t be a tick. I only came in to give you this.’ Without getting out of his seat he offered a small packet, actually a folded envelope. As Bertie took it the man added: ‘The gent in the Merc. asked me to give it to you.’ With that he drove off, leaving Bertie standing with the package in his hand trying to keep pace with events.

There was no point now in trying to follow the Mercedes even had he wished to do so. It was already out of sight. The van had gone, too, and he realized with a mild shock that this was no accidental encounter. This was

all part of the getaway plan after the jewel case had been snatched. It was well thought out and neatly executed.

Bertie looked at the envelope in his hand. He went into the hotel and tore it open to reveal a thick wad of ten-pound notes. Without bothering to count them he stuffed them into his pocket. Why had he been given this money? The reason was not hard to find. The thief assumed he had changed his mind and had agreed to co-operate. This would be a natural supposition when he had left the Rolls to go into the hotel. The money was the promised reward.

Still slightly dazed Bertie went into the dining-room and saw Ginger sitting alone at a small table already having his lunch. Going up to him he said quietly: 'It worked. They've got it.'

'Good. What did you do?' Ginger said, without looking up.

'Nothing. I couldn't have done anything had I wanted to. They saw to that. I was hemmed in by a van.'

'Okay,' Ginger said calmly. 'Not to worry. We can leave the rest to Biggles.'

'I hope you're right,' returned Bertie gloomily. 'I didn't see him.'

'He'd be on the job,' declared Ginger confidently. 'There's nothing more we can do. As we're here we might as well have something to eat. You can't very well sit here with me, so I suggest you go to the bar for a drink and a sandwich. I'll see you outside in half an hour.'

'Then what?'

'We'll go back to London. There's no point in going any farther after what's happened.'

'Don't you think you should inform the police that you've been robbed? It would be the natural thing to do. The crooks will expect that.'

'They'll understand why I've done nothing about it when they discover they've only got away with a few pebbles. No, we'll leave the police out of this. It would only raise complications. The crooks will realize you've double-crossed them. They won't be pleased about that.'

'At least I've got some of their money,' Bertie said, cheerfully.

'Probably stolen notes,' reminded Ginger. 'They must have plenty of that sort of money. Glad to get rid of it.'

Bertie nodded. 'Fair enough, old boy. I'll see you outside presently,' he said, and went through to the bar.

An hour later the Rolls was cruising back down the road to London, Ginger looking forward to getting out of his disguise, which he found

uncomfortable, and into his own clothes.

CHAPTER 4

NOT ACCORDING TO PLAN

BEFORE the start of the return trip to London there had been a brief discussion as to whether, now the operation could be regarded as concluded, Ginger should travel as before, in the back seat, or in front with Bertie. They agreed it was not really important, but at the finish Ginger thought it better that he should continue to use the rear seat just in case they were still being watched. This would not prevent them from talking. Upon such slender threads can life depend, for had Ginger travelled in front he might not have been alive to see the end of the journey.

As there was no need for haste Bertie settled down at a quiet forty miles an hour to make conversation easier. Naturally, they still wanted to talk over what had happened.

Ginger said he was not entirely happy about the outcome of the affair, although, to be sure, it had worked out exactly as planned. But there were two details that worried him. The jewel case had been snatched so quickly that he was afraid Biggles might not have seen it happen. Like Bertie he would have been looking for a green Jaguar. Then again, if he had seen the theft, would he be able to keep pace with a fast car like the Mercedes, which for obvious reasons would get as far from the scene of the crime as quickly as possible? The car Biggles was using was his own. A Ford, some years old. He had refrained from using a police car with a 'hotted-up' engine for fear it would be recognized as such.

Bertie did not share these anxieties. He said Biggles knew what he was doing and he was content to leave it at that. As far as he was concerned the plan had worked. If he had any doubts at all, it was over the question of what the thief would do when he discovered that all he had got for his trouble was a few pebbles; and how long it would be before he realized how he had been tricked.

The answer to these questions were soon to be forthcoming. In fact, they were to be provided, and in no uncertain manner, much earlier than could have been expected.

The time was nearly four o'clock when it happened. The Rolls was still travelling at a leisurely 40 miles an hour, making for Scotland Yard, to

where it was assumed Biggles would return when he had completed his part of the programme. If he was not there they would wait for him; or Ginger, if he wished, could go on home to get into his ordinary clothes, in which, he declared, he would feel more comfortable. There was no urgency about it either way.

The Rolls was on the straight stretch of country road after leaving Hatfield when Bertie in his reflector saw a small open sports car coming up behind him at racing speed. There were two men in it, crouching low for the protection of the windscreen. This was so normal that he paid no further attention to it beyond drawing in a little closer to the grass verge to give the oncoming car ample room to overtake. This swerve, slight though it was, may have saved his life.

As he straightened out the sports car flashed up alongside, much closer than was necessary. This caused him to glance at it disapprovingly. What happened next occurred in less time than it takes to tell. He saw the goggled face of the passenger on the near side glaring at him. There seemed to be something strange about it. There appeared to be an object in front of it. Then he saw what it was. A hand holding a gun. The man was pointing a gun at him. Before he could move he saw the flash of the gun as it was fired. The bullet smashed through the glass of his window. He ducked. This inevitably caused him to swerve sharply, one wheel running on the grass. As he stood on the footbrake there was the report of another shot. The bullet hit the car somewhere; he didn't know where. At all events it didn't touch him. When he raised his head the sports car was some distance ahead doing well over a 100 miles an hour. He brought the Rolls back on to the road, and stopping dead looked back at Ginger. 'You all right?' he shouted.

'Yes. What about you?'

'Didn't touch me.'

'Must have been close.' Ginger was looking at the hole in the window.

'Close enough.' Bertie smiled, bleakly. 'Still a miss is as good as a mile, as they say. The dirty dogs. I wasn't prepared for anything like that. When I ducked the blighter may have thought he'd got me. Anyway, now we know what to expect. Lucky you weren't sitting next to me. If you had been I reckon you'd have copped it.'

The Rolls was still stationary.

Said Ginger: 'By gosh! They weren't long finding out they'd been tricked. How did they manage that in the time, I wonder? Now we know what they think about it. Did you get the number of that car?'

‘No, laddie. I did not. I’d got my head down—well down.’

‘Did you get the make?’

‘No. It wasn’t the Jag. and it wasn’t the Merc., that’s all I know. They seem to have a fleet of cars available,’ Bertie said. ‘Shall we go on?’

‘Might as well,’ agreed Ginger. ‘Keep an eye open for fast cars coming either way.’

‘You bet I shall, now they’ve told us they don’t stop short of murder. We’ve learned that much.’ Bertie drove on.

There was no more trouble, and an hour later the Rolls pulled up outside its destination. They went to the Air Police office. There, somewhat to their surprise, for they thought he might not have returned yet, at his desk, looking glum, sat Biggles. Algy was not there.

‘How did it go on, chaps?’ inquired Bertie, brightly.

‘It didn’t,’ Biggles answered moodily. ‘You did your part all right, but I made a mucker of it.’

‘That’s a pity. What went wrong?’

‘Sit down and I’ll tell you. Are you all right?’

‘More or less,’ Ginger answered. ‘Just a little shaky from shock.’

‘Shock! What caused it?’

‘On the way home we were shot at from another car.’

‘The devil you were!’ Biggles took more interest. ‘They didn’t waste any time. How did that happen?’

In a few short words Bertie told the story of the attack. ‘How did you come unstuck?’ he concluded.

‘I made the mistake of underestimating the enemy, that’s the simple truth of it.’ Biggles went on. ‘I saw everything that happened at Stamford. It all went like clockwork, if a bit faster than I’d allowed for. However, I set off to trail the villain who pinched the bag. I think I could have grabbed him there and then, but as you know, that wasn’t the idea. I wanted to see where he took the stuff. I was soon in trouble. Speed. I should have used a faster car. Had it not been for some hold-ups at road repairs and traffic lights, I’d have lost him. I admit I was lucky there. Anyway, I managed to keep in touch, although I daren’t get too close for fear of being spotted.’ Biggles paused to light a cigarette.

‘The trouble came just after leaving St Neots,’ he resumed. ‘From the speed he was going, on the A.1, I naturally supposed he was making for

London, where one would expect him to go; but suddenly he turned into a side road running across flat, open country, strange to me. The next surprise was when, without the slightest warning, he jammed on his brakes and stopped. Things happened so fast that I'm not sure he did actually come to a dead stop. A man was standing beside the road. The man in the car threw him the jewel case. I was close enough to recognize it. Then he put his foot down and went on. That put me in a flap. It wasn't much use going on after the car, which had got rid of the swag. It could have been abandoned anywhere. It might have been a stolen car, anyway. As a matter of fact I did start to follow it, and nearly ran into it coming back. It took me a minute to turn in the narrow road. I never saw it again. It must have gone back to the A.1, but which way it went after that I didn't know. By this time I saw why he had stopped.'

Ginger broke in. 'What was wrong with trailing the man who had taken over the jewel case?'

'I couldn't.'

'Why not?'

'For the simple reason he was away in a chopper. At least, that was what it looked like. It must have been standing close behind the hedge. I didn't see it until it was in the air. I wouldn't have seen it then if I hadn't heard it. It was a small machine I couldn't recognize from below. Without a fuselage all helicopters look alike. Well, you can't follow a chopper in a car. The last I saw of it was heading south-west. It was no use going after the car. It must have been miles away. So, as there was nothing more I could do I came home, kicking myself for being so easily outsmarted.'

'You could hardly blame yourself for that,' remonstrated Ginger.

'It caught me napping. I was ready for almost anything, but not for an aircraft,' stated Biggles frankly.

'What an extraordinary business,' commented Bertie. 'What could have been the idea of handing over the swag to a chopper?'

'That's pretty obvious,' averred Biggles. 'Supposing the jewels were in the case, it would naturally be assumed that the theft would be reported to the police right away. That would result in road blocks being set up to stop the Mercedes. If it was stopped, and it may have been for all we know—because until you came in I didn't know whether or not you had told the police about what had happened—the police wouldn't have been able to do anything. The jewel case wouldn't be in it.'

‘We decided against telling the police for fear of complications,’ Bertie said. ‘There was no bally point in it, any old how, since we hadn’t really lost anything of value.’

Biggles flicked the ash off his cigarette. ‘When all’s said and done we must admit the job was beautifully planned. The driver of the Merc. knew where he had to go to get rid of the swag. Once he had done that he was in the clear, free to go where he liked and no hurry. These villains think of everything and know how to work fast. In view of what you’ve told me about being shot at, I can tell you something else. The pilot of the chopper couldn’t have been long checking the contents of the jewel case. Moreover, when he saw how he’d been tricked he was pretty quick to demonstrate his displeasure. He gave orders for you to be taught a lesson.’

‘How was that done?’ Ginger asked the question.

‘By radio. It couldn’t have been done any other way in the time. We can check the actual timing presently. You didn’t even have time to get back to London. The Rolls was too conspicuous. That’s where we may have made another mistake. The car that attacked you must have been in touch by radio with the Boss. It was standing by for orders in case it was needed. The same, no doubt, with the Merc. We must remember that. The spare car was given orders to bump you off. It’s clear the brain behind these crooks leaves nothing to chance. He thinks of everything. Still, we haven’t entirely wasted our time. We know something about the way they work, and why so far they’ve got away with it.’

Algy spoke. He had come into the office while this conversation had been going on, but so far had taken no part in it. But he must have caught the gist of it for he said: ‘Funny you should mention a chopper because I saw one this afternoon. I noticed it particularly because it seemed to be losing height.’

‘Where was this?’ asked Biggles.

‘I was in Sussex.’

‘What were you doing there?’

‘It was like this,’ Algy answered. ‘As you know, for the last day or two I’ve been making inquiries about collectors of old French porcelain. From the leading auctioneers I got catalogues of their forthcoming sales. Going through them I found there was one to be held today: moreover, one of the items, listed in bold print to call special attention to it, was a piece of early French porcelain in the form of two cherubs holding a dish. I thought it might be the piece that was stolen, or, alternatively, a fellow piece to it, the

other half of a pair; in which case the man who had the stolen piece might try to buy it to complete his collection. So I went along to the sale, found a place at the back and watched. The article in which I was interested was put up. It was knocked down to—guess who?’

‘Let’s not waste time guessing,’ requested Biggles, shortly.

‘Lord Malboise.’

‘How do you know?’

‘The auctioneer called the name when the hammer fell; which could only mean that he knew him, by sight, anyway. No doubt his lordship had bought things there before. What shook me was the price paid for what looked to me like a useless piece of clutter; the sort of thing you might get at a fair for knocking down an Aunt Sally. Have you any idea of what these things fetch?’

‘I know they’re worth a lot of money.’

‘This one made twelve thousand five hundred pounds. Imagine it! Some people should have their heads examined.’

‘Get on with the story; never mind the trimmings,’ ordered Biggles. ‘What were you doing in Sussex?’

‘Give me a chance. I’m coming to that,’ said Algy, looking pained. He continued. ‘Well, naturally, I thought I’d drawn a blank. A peer of the realm was hardly the sort of man to engage in crime, so I left the building prepared to forget the whole thing. When I got back here, out of sheer curiosity, nothing more, never having heard of this particular lord, I looked him up in the book to see who he was and where he came from. His full name is Baron Roger de Malboise. I found he had a place in Sussex called Brindon Hall. Having nothing better to do, as you were all out, I thought it might be worth while to give this place the once-over, just to see what sort of place it was. That’s what I was doing in Sussex. I may say I had some difficulty in finding Brindon Hall because it’s nowhere near anywhere. I was cruising around looking for it when I saw the chopper. It was losing height, but I didn’t see it land. There were too many trees in the way.’

‘Did you see it again?’ asked Biggles.

‘No. I could think of no airfield anywhere near, so I didn’t think any more about it. Anyhow, it was soon after that I came to Brindon Hall, thanks to a private sign-post pointing the way.’

‘Is there any particular reason why this establishment should be honoured with a special sign-post, apparently to tell the general public how to get to it?’

Algy grinned. 'Too true there is. It seems his lordship is one of these impoverished noblemen who make money on the side by showing people over their houses. Quite a lot of them are doing it, I believe.'

'A man who can pay twelve thousand pounds for a piece of old pottery can't be short of ready cash.'

'Oh, I don't know. These big houses attract thousands of tourists, so there must be quite a lot of money in it. Some of them say they only do it to pay off taxes, and I understand they have some sort of arrangement with the tax collector to that effect. Lord Malboise probably does pretty well out of it. He has an extra attraction.'

'What sort of attraction?'

'Listen to this. I was cruising around when I found a road running beside a high brick wall. On the wall was a notice. It read *DANGER. Keep out. Wild animals at large.* Half a mile farther on there was another similar notice. Presently I came to tall iron gates and a lodge. Standing at the gates, with an assagai in his hand was a coloured gent all dolled up like a Zulu warrior: leopard skin kaross, a black cowhide shield with white bars across it and a black ring on his head.'

'What is this—some sort of kid's game?' inquired Biggles, sceptically.

'Not on your nellie. It's genuine, or as near genuine as anyone could make it. His lordship runs a private zoo.'

'A zoo!'

'Why not? He owns a lot of land. The park covers some thousand acres and there's a high wall round it. He's filled the park with wild animals.'

'What do you call wild animals? I know there is one lord who has decorated his estate with free-roaming lions to provide an unusual spectacle for people to goof at.'

'This one hasn't any lions, I was told. Lord Malboise seems to have gone one better. If he had lions they'd eat the buffalo.'

'Buffalo?'

'Among other things there's a herd of African buffalo, which I've heard are more dangerous than lions.'

'Either should stop kids from going bird's-nesting in the park,' chuckled Bertie.

Biggles came in again. 'How do prospective visitors get to the Hall without being horned, mauled or trampled to death?'

‘That’s all laid on. You pay five bob to the Zulu for a ticket. He hands you over to a chap dressed like an African white hunter just back from *safari*. He has a rifle, apparently in case of accidents, and drives you to the Hall in a Land-Rover. You have to leave your own car at the gate.’

‘Did you have five bob’s worth?’

‘Not me. I’m not paying to see the inside of anybody’s house. I could see some buffalo through the bars of the gate, grazing by a clump of trees, so there’s no doubt about ’em being there.’

‘What are the other animals?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t ask. I lost my interest in zoos after seeing animals where they should be, where they belong.’

‘You might have had a look at the place while you were there.’

‘Time was getting on, so I thought I’d better make for home in case you needed me.’

‘Did the chopper you saw look as if it might be going to land in this artificial African landscape?’

‘I wouldn’t know. I suppose it could have done. I didn’t give it a thought. When I saw it I knew nothing about this menagerie. It was later I saw the wall, and was following it round when I came to the entrance lodge.’

Biggles stubbed his cigarette thoughtfully, and after a pause went on. ‘I wonder . . . could this be one of those coincidences? The result of our day’s work boils down to this. The thieves got away with the jewel case in a chopper. You see an unidentified chopper over Sussex not far from the home of Lord Malboise who buys expensive French porcelain and lives inside a wall with a lot of wild animals for company. On the face of it there’s something wrong with that. I’m wondering if there could be more to it than meets the eye. Of course, a herd of buffalo would be a good way of discouraging burglars—or any other sort of trespassers, for that matter.’

‘I can’t imagine Lord Malboise fiddling other people’s jewellery—why should he?’ Algy said.

‘I’ve lived long enough to imagine anything,’ returned Biggles cynically. ‘I feel inclined to run down and have a look at this place, and I’m not thinking about the buffalo. I’ve seen plenty. If I can get into the Hall simply by taking a ticket I’d be interested to see his lordship’s collection of French porcelain—assuming he has one.’

‘I know where the place is. I could run you down tomorrow. I told the man at the lodge I’d probably come back later, so he won’t be surprised to see me.’

‘Not so fast. I’ve a better idea than that,’ Biggles said. ‘I’m thinking of that chopper you saw, too. If it *is* there, it’s not likely to be standing where the buffalo could knock it about, or where casual visitors could see it. Before we do anything else let’s have a look at this place from topsides. Get a picture of the entire set-up. I’ll fly down tomorrow if it’s fine. You can show me the way, Algy. We’ll get some photographs while we’re at it. Then we shall know more about it if we have a look round later from ground level. Let’s leave it like that for the moment. This noble lord may have thought of a good way of preventing lunatic teenagers, out for a giggle as they call it, from barging about all over his property; but he can’t stop an aircraft flying over it. Let’s go home. I’m sure Ginger must be itching to get those togs off and look more like himself.’

CHAPTER 5

BIGGLES IS NOT IMPRESSED

‘THAT’s the place, straight ahead. You can see the wall that runs all round the estate, so you can’t make any mistake.’ The speaker was Algy, and the time a little before ten on the morning following the events on the Great North Road.

He was sitting next to Biggles in the cockpit of the old Air Police *Auster*, now beginning to look its age but still reliable enough for operations near home. At his request Bertie had been allowed to sit in the two-seat cabin behind the pilots, to make himself familiar with the area of landscape it was intended to survey. Ginger, still somewhat self-conscious about his dark skin—which he had found harder to take off than put on—had been content to remain on telephone duty at the office.

Biggles, flying at something a little under 1,000 feet, changed his course a point to bring the aircraft directly in line with the objective, Brindon Hall, and its park which, as Algy had learned, was now a zoological garden. It was a typical English park, with a fair sprinkling of trees, some standing alone, others in small groups. The whole country below was in fact well wooded.

‘For a start I shall fly straight across,’ Biggles said. ‘We don’t want to attract attention. You can take a line of verticals while Bertie gets some obliques with the pistol-grip camera.’

It was a clear, fine day, without a cloud in the sky, so with visibility perfect conditions were ideal for the air photography which had been the primary objective of the sortie. It was also hoped, although without much confidence, that the helicopter which Algy had seen over the district might be spotted.

‘I don’t see any sign of a chopper,’ Biggles remarked as he flew on.

‘It can’t be here or we’d be bound to see it,’ Algy answered, his eyes going over the ground.

‘What do you suppose is the purpose of that biggish building on the open ground this side of the Hall?’ queried Biggles, losing a little altitude as he approached.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ replied Algy. ‘Is there any reason why a building of some sort shouldn’t be there?’

‘I was merely wondering about its purpose. It looks new. It can’t be stabling. In a place this size the stables and other outbuildings are usually attached to the house, or close to it, probably enclosing a yard.’

‘What’s in your mind?’

‘The thought occurred to me, as it stands at the end of that open stretch of grass, that it would be big enough to house a small aircraft—like a chopper, for instance. I know that’s a long shot, but it could be. The place is used for something, that’s certain. I can see tracks in the grass leading to it from the house. They’re plain enough from here, although they probably wouldn’t be so easy to see from ground level.’

‘I’ll tell you what it is,’ Algy announced, confidentially. ‘Cattle pens. Covered accommodation for the buffalo. I doubt if they’d survive an English winter in the open. I don’t know where the beasts came from, but if it was from Africa they’d take a dim view of our climate around Christmas.’

‘That’s a new building. Why make it square?’ questioned Biggles. ‘All the cowsheds I’ve ever seen were long and narrow.’

‘Well, the animals would have to be fed. Hay, or something of that nature. There wouldn’t be enough grass here in hard weather to keep a flock of sheep in good condition, never mind a herd of buffalo. There they are now, lying near that clump of trees over to the right.’

‘I can see tracks leading to the building,’ observed Biggles.

‘You’d expect cattle to make tracks,’ Algy pointed out with a touch of sarcasm.

‘Certainly you would. But cattle usually have hooves. They don’t have wheels or skids on their feet. Unless something’s gone wrong with my eyes, I can see tracks that were made by one or the other outside that building.’

‘I suppose a vehicle of some sort would have to be used to take fodder to the buffalo when it was needed,’ argued Algy.

‘It isn’t needed now. There’s all the grass in the world.’

‘Okay. Have it your way,’ Algy said. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘I was thinking that building would be large enough to house a small aircraft.’

‘It isn’t long enough.’

‘It’d take a small chopper. I know that sounds a pretty wild guess, but you did see one hereabouts. That’s what we were looking for. I don’t see one

anywhere.’

‘I wouldn’t expect to see one standing in the open.’

‘That’s exactly what I mean. It would be under cover, particularly if there was any reason to keep it out of sight. You could be right about that building being something to do with the animals that have been turned into the park, but I’d like to have a closer look at it. Call it just plain curiosity. Things without any apparent practical purpose always did make me inquisitive. Maybe it’s a hangover from war flying, when too often things were not what they appeared to be. Unfortunately we have no reasonable excuse for coming to this part of the park even if we paid a visit to the Hall as casual tourists.’

‘In which case we might as well forget it,’ Algy said, operating the vertical camera let into the floor of the cockpit. ‘Photographs may well tell us something.’

A sudden backfire of the engine made him look up sharply. Before he could speak it happened again. Biggles, with his hand on the throttle began ‘blipping’ the engine in quick successive bursts. Algy turned startled eyes to Biggles’ face. They asked a question.

‘We’re in trouble,’ Biggles stated calmly. He had begun to turn in wide circles over the open ground.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Algy, anxiously.

‘I’m afraid we shall have to go down.’

‘What a place to have engine trouble!’

‘I’m not going on, with nothing but trees in front of us. There may not be another place for miles to get on the floor.’

‘That’s lovely,’ growled Algy. ‘What about the buffalo?’

‘We shall have to take our luck. They may not be as nasty as they look. Anyhow, we’ve no choice.’

‘I hope you’re right, that’s all I can say about it,’ Algy said bitterly. ‘If those brutes come for us we’ve had it.’

‘We shall have it if we go on and barge into those trees. Don’t talk. Can’t you see I’m trying to get us on the carpet in one piece?’

Algy said no more.

Biggles, no longer blipping the engine, which had in fact now cut out altogether as a stationary airscrew revealed, was ‘S’ turning over the open grass area. Now of course, losing height, he made his approach run and put the aircraft on the ground with the expertise of the experienced pilot he was.

The machine ran to a stop some 20 or 30 yards from the building they had been discussing. No great distance away were the buffalo. They were no longer lying down, but standing up, staring at the Auster, noses thrust forward and massive horns lying back almost flat as in the manner of these creatures when disturbed or suspicious of something.

Biggles opened the cockpit door and prepared to step out.

‘What are you doing?’ demanded Algy, in a voice stiff with alarm.

‘I’ll see if I can find out what’s wrong. While I’m doing that you might have a good look at the building.’

‘What the devil does it matter?’

‘I can see something odd about it even from here.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘There aren’t any windows. Why should anyone build a nice brick building like this, quite recently too, by the look of it, and forget to put in any windows?’

‘There’s a skylight. I saw it as we came down. Watch what you’re doing. Look at the buffalo. They’re uneasy already.’

‘If we don’t interfere with them, and I’m not so daft as to try anything like that, they shouldn’t interfere with us. They must have seen plenty of humans.’

‘Here, I say chaps, have a heart,’ came Bertie’s voice from behind. ‘If those brutes take a dislike to us they’d make matchwood of this old crate in a brace of shakes.’

‘Not to worry. Just sit still and say your prayers,’ retorted Biggles. So saying he stepped down, and walking forward opened the engine cowling.

Algy was watching the buffalo. One of them, an old bull, was stamping a foot. ‘Get back in, you fool,’ he shouted to Biggles.

Biggles took no notice. He was apparently doing something to the engine; but his eyes were on the building that had aroused his curiosity. But the double wooden doors were closed, and as there were no windows it was still not possible to see what, if anything, was inside.

Algy now had fresh cause for concern, although whether to be more, or less worried, he didn’t know. Coming quickly across the rough turf from the direction of the Hall was a Land-Rover. He could see two men in it. ‘Look what’s coming,’ he called to Biggles, still busy on the engine.

Biggles glanced up and went on with what he was doing.

The Land-Rover drew up. One of the men got out, the driver remaining in his seat. The man who had got out, and now walked up to Biggles, was smiling. 'In trouble?' he inquired, cheerfully. He was a big man, tall and broad-shouldered. Clean shaven, and with what might have been called an open countenance, he wore an old tweed jacket and a deerstalker cap.

'Just one of those things,' Biggles answered. 'I think I can put it right.'

'I saw you coming down from the house. Can I help you?'

'No thanks. This shouldn't take more than a minute or two. Some fool mechanic left a terminal not properly screwed up, with the result that the connection has come adrift. How careless can some people be!' Biggles was still working on the engine.

'You're welcome to come to my house if you want to use the telephone.'

'I can manage, I think, thanks all the same.'

'Well, come and have a drink, anyway. I can offer you a glass of excellent sherry.'

'That's very hospitable of you, sir,' Biggles said, closing the engine cowling. 'May I ask your name?'

'Certainly. There's no secret about it. Lord Malboise. That's my young brother, Clarence, driving the car. He was worried my pet animals might do you a mischief.'

'They haven't done us any harm so far,' returned Biggles.

'They might have done, you know,' Lord Malboise said seriously. 'They're used to seeing people, but they're still not entirely reliable with strangers. They know me, and my car, of course.'

'Why do you keep the big ugly brutes, if it isn't a rude question?' inquired Biggles, blandly.

'You might call them my watchdogs. They discourage trespassers on my property.'

'So I can imagine,' Biggles said dryly.

'Besides, people pay to come into the park to see them, and that helps pay my bills,' Lord Malboise volunteered, smiling broadly.

Biggles got down and went towards the cockpit. 'I'll see if that's cured the trouble,' he said.

'I'd better wait to see you safely off. We don't want an accident. Sure you won't come over to the house for a drink?'

‘Thanks again, but I haven’t time now. I’m late for an appointment already, so I must press on. I hope to give myself the pleasure of calling another day.’

‘Any time.’

Biggles got in and closed the door. Not seeing Bertie he looked round.

‘He’s all right,’ Algy said. ‘Looking for his eyeglass. Dropped it on the floor.’

Biggles pressed the starter. The engine sprang to life. He ran it up as far as he dared and gave Lord Malboise a wave to show all was well. Lord Malboise got back into the Rover, which moved to one side to give the Auster a clear run.

That was the end of the incident. Biggles took off, and having flown a straight course until he was well clear of the park began a wide turn for home.

‘Now we can talk more freely you can tell me something,’ Algy said, looking at Biggles suspiciously. ‘Was that forced landing genuine, or faked? Were you merely up to something?’

A slow smile spread over Biggles’ face. ‘I confess I was up to something.’

‘Up to what?’

‘I told you I wanted a close look at that curious building, and the easiest way of doing that seemed to be to go down. It worked out even better than I hoped. We also had a close look at Lord Malboise.’

‘Nice feller.’

‘That was the impression he gave, I’ll admit.’

‘He came over to make sure the buffalo didn’t interfere with us.’

‘I know that’s what he said. I notice he didn’t lose any time coming over to see what we were doing.’

Algy raised his eyebrows. ‘Don’t you believe him?’

‘I have a feeling his real reason for coming across may have been he didn’t like us too near that building.’

‘What a suspicious dog you are,’ protested Algy. ‘He couldn’t have been more pleasant and hospitable.’

‘That’s what makes me suspicious,’ Biggles returned evenly. ‘Why should he go to that trouble? He didn’t know us. We meant nothing to him. He was a bit too pleasant. I’ve learnt to be wary of people who smile a lot

when there's really nothing to laugh at. A famous philosopher once said, a long time ago, beware of people you don't know when they come with smiles and presents.'

'Okay. Have it your way. I thought he was a nice enough chap. Anyhow, having had a close look at the building, what do you make of it?'

'Not much. One can't see through a brick wall. I can tell you this, though. That place is used quite a lot. Moreover, it has been used recently. That knocks on the head your theory that it's used only to provide cover for the animals in winter. Perhaps the photos will tell us more.' Biggles half turned in his seat. 'Why were you fiddling about on the floor, Bertie?'

'When that Rover rolled up, old boy, I thought I'd better keep my mug out of sight.'

'Why?'

'Pull your belt up a notch, because this is going to shake you. The good-looking chappie driving that Rover was the one who tried to bribe me in the garage at the Savoy. I thought if he spotted I'd switched from a Rolls to a flying machine he might wonder why.'

For a moment Biggles did not speak. Then he said, softly: 'Well—well. That *is* interesting. Very interesting indeed. It makes our trip worth while. It all goes to show.'

'Show what, exactly, old boy?' inquired Bertie.

'That you can't judge a man by his manner or appearance. If his lordship's brother Clarence tried to bribe you to leave the Rolls so that he could steal the jewel case, that makes him a crook. Here we find him associating with, if not actually living with, Lord Malboise. If his lordship knows what his brother is doing, and surely he must, that makes him a crook, too. There's an old saying, if you fly with the rooks you're a rook.'

'Birds of a feather . . . and all that sort of thing, eh?'

'Exactly. Now I'm more than ever determined to find out what's inside that building that had me guessing.'

'And how are you going to do that?' Algy wanted to know.

'We'll find a way. But perhaps the next move should be to accept his lordship's kind invitation to sample his sherry. That would give us an opportunity to cast an eye over his establishment. Let's get home and think about it. There's no great hurry. We can take our time. I'm beginning to get a feeling there's more in Brindon Park than meets the eye of the casual visitor; and I'm not only thinking of buffalo. We shall see.'

CHAPTER 6

BIGGLES MAKES A DECISION

BIGGLES said little on the way back to Headquarters, but in the office he revealed the lines on which his thoughts had been running. ‘This is a queer business,’ he said, reaching for a cigarette. ‘It’s so queer that it would be dangerous to jump to conclusions. In the first place Lord Malboise struck me as a queer type. I don’t know quite what it was about him, but he gave me the impression of not being entirely normal.’

‘There was nothing sinister about him that I could see,’ put in Algy. ‘The reverse, in fact, I would have said he was merely a bit of a twit.’

‘You may be right,’ conceded Biggles. ‘But let’s look at it like this. If Bertie is right about Clarence being the fellow who accosted him, with what was obviously a bribe, in the Savoy garage, it sticks out a mile that he must have had some crooked business in view. Bertie, are you sure this Clarence was the same man?’

‘Absolutely, old boy,’ Bertie declared positively. ‘You need have no doubt about that. I knew him instantly.’

‘Okay. Let’s agree Clarence is a crook. Apparently he is closely associated with his brother, even if he doesn’t actually live with him. That means his lordship must know what his brother is up to. That would make him a crook, too. I wonder is Clarence *really* his brother! Algy, where did you get your information about Lord Malboise?’

‘From the obvious place. I looked him up in *Burke’s Peerage*.’

‘Was there anything about him having a brother?’

‘Not a word.’

‘You might look him up in *Who’s Who*. There may be more about him there. It usually names the heir to the title.’

Algy took the heavy reference book from the shelf and flipped through the pages. This took a minute. Then, stopping, he said, ‘Here we are, Malboise. The Honourable Clarence Edgar Brindon. Brindon Park, Sussex. Family name, Brindon. Formerly of Château Malboise, Normandy, France.’ Algy paused and then went on quickly in a voice tinged with excitement. ‘Hold your hats, chaps, and listen to this. Served R.A.F. 1939-45 War.

Squadron Leader, Special Air Service. Made frequent flights to Occupied France. Mentioned in dispatches, 1944.’ Algy looked up.

There was a short silence. Biggles was staring wide-eyed. ‘Well-well,’ he said softly. ‘Now we seem to be getting somewhere. So that’s how it goes. Clarence must be a pilot, or he was in the war. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t hold a civil licence. Funny, I can’t remember ever having heard of him.’

‘You probably wouldn’t if he was working for Intelligence, dropping and picking up spies, and that sort of lark—if you see what I mean,’ Bertie pointed out. ‘As we know, names weren’t used.’

‘True enough,’ murmured Biggles. ‘No doubt Clarence knows how to handle a chopper. He must also know France like the back of his hand. This gives us a new angle on the whole affair.’

‘So what are you going to do about it?’ Algy asked the question.

‘I’ll tell you one thing I’m going to do,’ Biggles replied tersely. ‘I’m more than ever determined to see what’s inside that building that puzzles me.’

‘How are you going to do that? The doors will be locked, that’s for sure, and there are no windows.’

‘There’s a skylight.’

‘How do you propose to get to it?’

‘There are such things as extending or telescopic ladders, usually made of light metal.’

‘Does this mean you’re going to stroll through a park stinking with dangerous animals?’

‘Unless you can think of any other way to get to it. Flying is out. The place is too close to the house.’

‘When are you contemplating this crazy frolic?’

‘It would be stupid to attempt it in broad daylight. The job will have to be done in the dark. We might as well have a crack at it tonight. It will mean going down by car.’

Bertie came in. ‘Who are you going to take with you on this moonlight picnic? You’ll need someone to hold the ladder, and all that caper—if you get my meaning.’

‘It won’t be you,’ Biggles answered, shortly. ‘If we ran into Clarence he’d recognize you as the chauffeur he spoke to at the Savoy. It had better be

Ginger. He kids himself he has a way with animals—tame ones, anyway. Algy can drive us down. He knows the way.'

'How about accepting his lordship's invitation to call and have a glass of sherry; I mean, before you start tiptoeing through his wild beast show?' suggested Algy.

'That can come later. First, I want to see what's in this place without windows. We've got to get some definite evidence before we can move; and we shall have to be mighty careful how we go about it. You can't go around arresting peers of the realm on mere suspicion.'

'What sort of evidence are you hoping to find?' asked Ginger.

'Frankly, I don't know,' confessed Biggles. 'If we could get proof that illegal flying has been going on from Brindon Park, it would be something to go on with. I had one or two ideas on the way home, but this latest development has thrown them out of gear. One thing I thought of doing was to ask Inspector Gaskin to let us know instantly if there was a big-scale robbery anywhere that looked as if it might be the work of the master-mind we're looking for. I could then make a bee-line for Sussex in the Auster to watch for a chopper in case one should be involved. With a helicopter Clarence could go anywhere any time he liked. Nobody takes any notice of a chopper nowadays. After his wartime sorties Clarence must know every yard of the coast of northern France. Maybe that's how the stuff now being nicked is getting out of the country. I'll speak to Gaskin, anyway. We can keep that idea in mind for another experiment after we'd had a closer look at this edifice in Brindon Park. That's enough for now. Let's have some lunch and then get organized for tonight. To make sure you're all clear about the programme, I'll recap. Algy, you'll take us to the Park by road. Park the car near the wall and wait till Ginger and I come back. If anyone comes along asking questions you can say you've run out of petrol and your friend has gone to fetch some. That's the drill.' Biggles stubbed his cigarette and got up.

'What time do we start on this jaunt?' Ginger asked.

'Not too early. I'd like to arrive a little before dawn, before the moon has set. That gives us time for a nap before we go into action.'

'Are you going to tell the Air Commodore about this?' Algy queried.

'Not on your life. He'd probably squash it with both feet. You know how he feels about us doing anything outside regulations. With a noble lord involved he'd throw a fit. He's a bit old-fashioned where titles are

concerned.’ Biggles grinned. ‘Fortunately, we’re not. Let’s go. We’ll drop in the photos we took this morning, to be developed on the way out.’

It was a little before midnight when, using Biggles’ own car, the party detailed for the operation drove quietly out of London bound for Sussex. Algy, knowing the way, was at the wheel, Biggles sat beside him, and Ginger occupied the back seat with the equipment. This consisted merely of a light metal telescopic ladder and two torches, one for each of those who were going over the wall.

Ginger, who had dozed on and off all the way down, was brought to attention by the car bumping over rough ground. It stopped. Looking out he saw they were on a wide grass verge, with overhanging trees, near a high brick wall. Seeing Biggles get out he followed with the equipment.

‘Sure you can find your way?’ Algy said anxiously.

‘Having seen the place from the air, I’ve got my bearings from the lodge,’ Biggles assured him. They had passed the lodge, with the gates closed and the house in darkness, as they had run for some distance beside the wall. There was not a soul in sight. All was quiet.

‘Don’t move from here or we may have a job to find you when we come back. We shouldn’t be long,’ were Biggles’ last words to Algy, who had remained in the car.

The ladder was extended and rested against the wall. Biggles and Ginger went up. From the top the ladder was pulled up and used to descend the far side. When they were down, as it would be needed again when they reached the final objective, it was closed again for easy transport.

They found themselves standing in utter darkness. The moon had not yet set, but its light was diffused by a thin layer of high cloud and insufficient to penetrate the tops of the trees, now in full leaf. Fortunately they were beeches, so there was no undergrowth. Dead leaves rustled under their feet.

‘You bring the ladder while I go ahead,’ Biggles said softly. ‘I think we can risk a light while we’re in this belt of timber,’ he went on, switching on his torch, ‘we’re not likely to meet anyone here. We shan’t need a light when we get to the open ground.’

They moved off, cautiously and in silence, and without trouble or difficulty advanced to a point from which they could see, through the low-hanging branches, pale moonlight shining on the open grassland. Here, as so often happens, there was a fringe of bushes, brambles and the like. Biggles switched off his torch, and as he stepped forward there came a reminder of the sort of place they were in. Something crashed in the bushes as if it had

been disturbed. They stopped. Biggles' light flashed on again. There was nothing there. He switched off.

'What was it?' Ginger said, in a voice that was not too steady.

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Biggles told him curtly.

They went on, only to halt again as suddenly the silence was shattered, close at hand, by a howl, ending in a series of sobs so horrible that instinctively Ginger clutched Biggles' arm. 'What on earth . . .' he gasped.

'Hyena,' snapped Biggles. 'Apparently another of the zoo specimens his lordship allows to run loose in his park. What's the matter with you? You'll get me nervous, too, if you go on like this.'

'Sorry,' Ginger said contritely.

'Surely you've heard a hyena laugh,' Biggles went on irritably. 'That's what they call that hellish row. The laughing hyena is the name.'

'Whoever thought that one up must have been joking,' Ginger declared.

'We needn't worry about him. There he goes.' Biggles pointed to a hunchbacked beast loping across the open field. 'He's not likely to interfere with us, nor with the buffalo unless one falls sick. Let's keep going. This way. The building's over here.' He struck off at a tangent.

Presently they could see the place they had come to investigate. It stood to one side of the open ground with the belt of trees rising behind it. Biggles stopped to survey the scene. All lay silent and still under a misty moon. There was not a movement anywhere.

'I can't see the buffalo,' breathed Ginger.

'So much the better,' Biggles answered. 'We can do without them. They must either have moved off or maybe are sleeping under the trees.' Again he moved on. But before he'd taken half a dozen paces he was hurled aside and thrown to the ground with some violence. Ginger ran to help him.

'Stand still,' snapped Biggles, sitting up. 'Don't move a yard. Phew! That was something I didn't expect to find here.'

'What was it?' Ginger's voice was brittle with anxiety.

'Nothing serious. A hot wire. Electric. Just enough juice to give anything a shock that came into contact with it. I saw it. Got hold of it to lift it to get under it.' Biggles got up. He went on. 'It's the device used by some farmers to keep cattle within certain bounds.'

'But why here?'

‘Something to do with the buffalo, I imagine. It may be switched on only at night. Anyway, no one has any right to be here, so if someone gets stung he can’t complain. Let’s keep going. We’re losing time. Crawl under the wire. It’s only a single strand. Don’t let the ladder touch it or you’ll get a shock.’

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

‘Yes. I’m okay. The shock was only slight, but it caught me on one foot.’

Beyond the wire they were on the open grass, but as they moved towards the objective they kept near the trees for the dark background they provided. Biggles walked in front. Ginger followed close behind with the ladder. It need hardly be said that he kept a watchful eye open for the buffalo, which he felt sure could not be far away; however, he could not see them, although in the slight ground mist that was beginning to rise that was hardly to be expected unless they were close. In this way, without any more surprises they came to the building that was the object of the expedition.

Biggles took the ladder, extended it and rested it against the brick wall. It was just long enough to reach the roof. ‘This shouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes,’ he said confidently as he prepared to mount it. ‘You stand here and keep cave. I don’t think anyone is likely to be about at this hour, but if you should see anyone moving let me know.’

He went on up the ladder.

Ginger took his place at the foot, facing the open field, lying flat and grey in the dim light. Not a sound broke the eerie silence.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PARK

GINGER, wide awake now and with nerves alert, concentrated on his task, his eyes roving over the field from one side to the other for as far as he could see in the uncertain light. In particular he gave his attention to the direction of the house, from where, he thought, danger might possibly come.

From time to time slight sounds from above suggested that Biggles was moving on a tin roof, or more probably corrugated iron, as in fact, he discovered later, it was. The pre-dawn air struck damp and chill. The dying moon was well down. Already the stars were dim with the approach of another day. Only the brightest lingered in the sky. He waited for some time, wondering what Biggles was doing. The business was taking longer than had been anticipated and he could only assume some difficulty had arisen.

Suddenly his nerves stiffened, his eyes focusing on one particular spot directly in front of him. Something was moving. Something dark and bulky. Gradually it took shape and he saw it was a buffalo. Just one. Alone. It was moving slowly but steadily towards the spot where he stood. Presently vast sweeping horns told him it was an old bull. Distorted by the half-light it looked enormous. There was nothing particularly hostile about its manner, but there was a menacing quality in the slow but deliberate advance, as if it had a purpose. Ginger stood absolutely still, hoping the beast was unaware of his presence, and so might stop or turn aside.

In this he was to be disappointed. The massive beast came on, occasionally snatching a mouthful of grass. Nearer and nearer it came. Ginger became really alarmed. He knew the moment it noticed him, or perhaps caught the human taint in the air, from the way it stopped abruptly, head thrust forward. It stamped a foot and snorted. Then it came on again, rather faster than before. Knowing he had been seen, Ginger waved his arms, making uncouth noises. These had not the slightest effect. Still the animal came on.

Ginger kept his head, although he felt that at any moment the brute might charge: but when it was no more than twenty yards away, and blew through its nose, he realized he couldn't stay where he was. To run would be fatal. He couldn't hope to reach the trees before being overtaken. But

something would have to be done. He took the obvious course; in fact, the only course. He went up the ladder. From the top he looked down. The buffalo had stopped and was looking up at him. He went on towards Biggles, whom he could see lying on the sloping metal roof beside the skylight, to let him know what had happened.

He must have made some slight noise, for Biggles looked round at him and muttered irritably. 'What the devil are you doing up here? I was just coming down. I told you to—'

'I know what you told me,' Ginger snapped back, his nerves on edge. 'I had to come up.'

'Why?'

'I was joined by a buffalo, and I don't think it liked me.'

'Where is it now?'

'Standing at the bottom of the ladder. You'd better think again about going down.'

'Damnation take the beast! We can't stay here. It'll start to get light at any minute. If someone came along, if he didn't see us he'd see the ladder.'

'We can wait a bit. The beast may move off. Have you found out what you wanted to know?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'The glass is frosted. Opaque. I can't see a thing inside. The torch simply makes a blur. But I can tell you this. People who will go to all this trouble must have something to hide. All I want to do now is get back to the car.'

'I'll see if that old devil is still there.' Ginger lowered himself carefully down the roof to a point from which he could see the ground. The buffalo was still there, still gazing up, showing no signs of moving. He crawled back to Biggles. 'It's still there,' he reported. 'The trouble is, it knows I'm here.'

Biggles looked at the sky towards the east, now showing clear signs of the coming day. 'This is ridiculous,' he said angrily. 'Algy will be wondering what the deuce we're playing at. The next thing will be he'll come along to find out what's happened to us. We shall have to think of a way out of this mess.'

'I'll tell you one thing we might try,' offered Ginger.

'Tell me.'

‘I could pull the ladder up and pass it to you. You could put it down the far side, where the bull couldn’t see us. We could then make a dash for the trees before he’d rumbled what we were doing.’

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘It might work, although I must say I’m not wildly enthusiastic about it,’ he decided. ‘We’ll give the animal a minute or two longer to push off. Then, if it’s still there—’ He broke off and raised a hand. ‘Listen!’

Through the hush of dawn, from afar off, came the sound of an aircraft.

‘Chopper,’ Ginger said succinctly, recognizing the unmistakable clatter made by such machines.

‘That settles it,’ Biggles stated, staring at the sky. ‘It’s getting lighter every minute. There’s a chance the chopper may be coming here. If it does, and it comes over low, we shall be spotted lying here. If the pilot of that thing lands, even if he didn’t spot us he couldn’t miss the ladder leaning against the wall. There’s only one thing for it. We shall have to do what you suggested; get off here and make a run for the trees. Pull the ladder up and push it to where I can reach it. Careful how you go. Fall off this perishing roof and we shall be in a right mess.’

‘I’ll watch it.’ Ginger lowered himself as before until he could reach the top rung of the ladder. It was tricky work. Should he lose his grip, as there was no guttering to save him he would inevitably fall off the roof altogether. A peep showed the buffalo still there, a few yards away, grazing; but the sound of the ladder being drawn up made him raise his head. Or it may have been the noise of the helicopter, now nearly overhead, that made him look up and snort defiance.

Then came another complication to hasten Ginger’s efforts. From the grass, strung out across the field, sprung half a dozen lights in the form of a letter L. From his elevated position Ginger could look down on them, although it may not have been possible to see them from ground level. He had seen this arrangement too many times not to know its purpose. Landing lights. They told their own story. Then, from the direction of the house came the sound of a motor vehicle being started.

With feverish haste Ginger hauled up the ladder, rung by rung, and pushed it up the roof until Biggles could reach it. Biggles dragged it up and tilting it across the ridge allowed it to slide down the far side of the building.

‘Come on,’ he ordered, tersely.

Ginger clambered back up to the top and lost no time in following Biggles who was already on his way down. He reached the ground close

behind him. The buffalo was not in sight, so apparently hadn't realized what was happening.

'We shall have to take the ladder with us,' Biggles said crisply. 'It won't do to leave it here.'

They didn't stop to collapse it, but each taking an end sprinted for the wall of trees that rose like a cliff against the sky. It was only a short run, but it was one to remember. Ginger didn't waste time looking round, but it was easy to imagine the thud of hooves on their heels. However, this did not happen, and they reached the comparative safety of the fringe of bushes breathless but unharmed.

'Watch out for the wire,' Biggles warned, peering into the gloom, for they had reached cover at a spot some distance from where they had left it. 'No doubt it comes right along here. Yes, here it is. Shove the ladder through to me. Careful not to let it touch the wire.'

Ginger pushed the ladder through and followed on all fours to find Biggles folding it to a more portable length. There was still no sign of the buffalo, so presumably it hadn't moved.

'What a crazy business,' growled Biggles, dourly, gazing across the open field, now grey with visibility steadily improving. The helicopter, which had lost some height, was now close, but not yet in sight.

'Now what?' questioned Ginger. 'Making for home?'

'Not on your life,' returned Biggles. 'This is an opportunity too good to be missed. We'll see the end of this. We should be all right here. We may not have had all this sweat for nothing, after all.'

Standing just inside the shelter of the trees they watched the field. With their eyes upturned for the first glimpse of the helicopter it was some seconds before Ginger saw a movement on the ground. A Land-Rover was fast approaching the building from the direction of the house. He called Biggles' attention to it.

'This gets more interesting every minute,' Biggles said. 'This is no accidental meeting. That car is here to meet whoever is in the chopper. This must have been arranged or they've been in touch. In this light it won't be easy to recognize anyone from here; but we shall be able to see what happens. That chopper came up from the south. I wonder where it has just come from?'

'From France, perhaps.'

'That could well be. If you're right it couldn't have checked in at a Customs airport because between here and the coast there isn't one.'

‘In your official capacity you’d be justified in questioning the pilot,’ Ginger pointed out. ‘The chopper’s going to land here, there’s no longer any doubt about that.’

‘Not so fast,’ Biggles answered. ‘Questions at this stage would get us nowhere. We might even get knocked on the head. We should merely have shown our hand for nothing.’

‘The chopper could have something dutiable on board.’

‘I think it’s more likely to have taken something somewhere, probably abroad. Quiet now. Here they are.’

The Rover had reached the building on the far side, for which reason it could no longer be seen. Apparently it had disturbed the buffalo, which was now retreating across the field. The sound of voices indicated there were at least two people in the car. Then came a rumbling noise as if heavy sliding doors were being pushed open. At the same time the helicopter touched down on the far side of the building, so that was also out of sight. This meant that the watchers could see nothing of what followed.

Said Biggles softly: ‘It would have been all the same had I been able to see through the skylight. The place was empty. Now we know why.’

‘You came here expecting to see a chopper inside,’ suggested Ginger.

‘Yes. No matter. This comes to the same thing. We know one goes to roost here. We’ve seen it. That’s all I wanted to know, anyway for the time being. It looks as if we’re working on the right lines. There’s something going on here, although it may take a bit of sorting out. Hark! There go the doors again, with the chopper put to bed inside, no doubt. I’d say the Rover came out simply to pick up the pilot. Yes, there’s the car going back to the house now. We shall learn nothing more here tonight, or rather, this morning, so we might as well go home. We’ve done a good night’s work after all, and I shan’t risk upsetting the apple cart by trying to do too much at one go. Algy will wonder what we’ve been doing all this time.’

‘He must have seen or heard the chopper so he should have a pretty good idea,’ Ginger said.

‘Let’s find out. It’ll soon be broad daylight and it wouldn’t do to be caught in the park.’

They set off through the wood, Biggles picking the easiest way and Ginger carrying the ladder. In a few minutes they arrived at the boundary wall. The ladder was used to enable them to surmount it, and after a quick look up and down they lost no time in getting on the road. They found they had struck it about two hundred yards from the car, still on the broad verge

where they had left it. They hurried along to it, to find Algy somewhat irritated by their long absence.

‘You said you wouldn’t be many minutes,’ he complained.

‘You must have seen why we were delayed,’ Biggles told him, while Ginger was stowing the ladder in the back seat.

‘You mean—the chopper?’

‘Of course.’

‘I probably knew about that before you did.’

‘How could you?’

‘It was travelling on a beam put up from somewhere near here. I was fiddling with the radio in case Gaskin was trying to contact us to say there’d been a big robbery when I picked up a beam which I’m sure could only be a navigation aid for an aircraft of some sort. It wasn’t one of the regulars. The next thing I heard the chopper coming and the beam faded out; from which I took it the chopper had arrived.’

‘Quite right. So they’ve even got navigation aids. Well—well. Gaskin didn’t come through?’

‘No.’

‘Okay. Let’s get home. We haven’t done so badly. I’ll tell you about it on the way.’

The car moved off.

CHAPTER 8

A NICE GLASS OF SHERRY

FOR the remainder of the day following the sortie into Brindon Hall Park nothing of an active nature was done, although after some breakfast and a rest, back in the office there was a good deal of talking over the events that had occurred. Everyone had an idea of what should next be done, but always Biggles had to point out objections, the chief reason being that while they now had a certain amount of evidence to support their suspicions it was all circumstantial; and that was not good enough. As Biggles put it: 'If we tried putting the handcuffs on a man in the position of Lord Malboise, without concrete proof of anything criminal, we'd be in for trouble in a big way.'

Their own records had yielded a certain amount of information, but it was mostly negative. Neither Lord Malboise nor his brother Clarence held a civilian pilot's licence, nor was there an aircraft of any sort registered in their name.

'The trouble is,' Biggles went on, 'contravention of Air Traffic Regulations in this case could hardly be called a criminal offence, and even if we got a conviction it would end in nothing more than a trivial fine. This is not the sort of fish we're trying to catch. No doubt a perfectly good reason could be produced for keeping a plane in Brindon Park. If it comes to that we couldn't swear that Lord Malboise, or Clarence, was operating an aircraft. We didn't actually see their faces. We only *assumed* it was them in the Park this morning.'

Bertie's scheme was to maintain a constant air patrol over the Park with the object of shadowing the helicopter when it left its base.

'Forget it,' Biggles said. 'You can't really be so naïve to suppose that a light plane could waffle around the Park for hours on end without the people below guessing what it was doing? True, if they had nothing to fear they might not give it a second thought; but if, as we suppose, they're up to something crooked, they'd take care not to pull that chopper out of its shed.'

Ginger was for more simple action. This was to go back to the Park, take up a position on the ground, in the trees, and watch the building from there.

‘We might be there for days, or even weeks, without anything happening,’ argued Biggles. ‘What would you use for food? You’d soon get bored with squatting on your bottom in a bush—that’s if the buffalo didn’t nose you out. We don’t know what other animals might be running loose in the Park, either.’

‘Very well, then,’ Algy said. ‘How about this? What’s wrong with having a look at things the other side of the Channel? This place Château Malboise, according to *Who’s Who*, in Normandy. You say the chopper came from that direction this morning, so there could be a hook-up there.’

‘The notice said *formerly* of Château Malboise,’ reminded Biggles.

‘I know it did, but there would still be family connections,’ Algy replied. ‘One of them might still own the place. Maybe that’s why Clarence was selected for Intelligence work in the Special Air Service during the war. As a result of that experience he must know every yard of the coast of Northern France. He probably knows the country round the Château, too, even if he doesn’t live there now. The family may have had reasons for getting out of France. How long they’ve been in this country I wouldn’t try to guess; but they may have been here since the Revolution, when most of the aristocrats who stayed lost their heads.’

‘You make a point,’ agreed Biggles, after consideration. ‘But I don’t think we should pursue this business abroad, anyway, not yet. It could lead to complications. The French police would take a dim view of our operating in their country without so much as a by your leave. Of course, we could have a quiet word with Marcel Brissac, in Paris; but I think it would be better to stay on our own ground until we have something more definite to work on. Let’s not lose sight of our original assignment, which is to locate the brain which we have reason to believe is organizing these big robberies. We have picked up some hints as to who might be involved, but as evidence, in court, against a man with a title to his name, it would sound pretty flimsy.’

‘Very well, then,’ Algy said. ‘Having picked holes in all our suggestions, what’s your own idea?’

‘I feel inclined to do what I intended after our forced landing in the Park, which is go down by road in broad daylight and call on our noble lord. After all, he did invite us to sample his sherry. Algy can come with me. Four eyes can see more than a single pair. He may spot something in the collection of antique porcelain, if it’s on view.’

‘Why Algy?’ asked Bertie.

‘For obvious reasons it wouldn’t do for you to be seen near the place for fear of Clarence, if he’s around, recognizing you as the chauffeur he spoke to in the Savoy garage. There’s just a chance, if a remote one, that he might recognize Ginger as the princess by whom you were supposed to be employed. He’d better keep out of the way, too. Remember, people engaged in criminal activities develop shrewd faculties. They’re always on the alert. They have to be. So I’ll go down tomorrow, taking Algy with me. You two,’ Biggles went on, looking at Bertie and Ginger, ‘can stand by in case Gaskin comes through with a report on another big raid somewhere; in which case I suggest you get off in the Auster as fast as you can and make flat out for the Park to see if that chopper has been busy. Of course, if you did see it you wouldn’t be able to do anything about it; but the fact that it had been airborne would support our suspicion that it’s all part of the big racket.’

‘You’re not going to tell the Air Commodore what we’re doing?’ queried Ginger.

‘Not yet. He always gets nervous, afraid of a political dust-up, when people with titles are involved. That’s understandable. He might order us to lay off. As soon as we’ve got something more conclusive to show him, I shall, of course, have to put our cards on the table. Okay, chaps, that’s enough for now. Let’s see about getting ready for tomorrow. If our visit to the Hall does no good it should do no harm, provided we step warily.’

‘One last question,’ Algy said. ‘At what time tomorrow do we start on this jaunt through rural Sussex?’

‘Any time,’ answered Biggles, inconsequentially. ‘We could push off before lunch, take our time, and have a bite to eat at a pub on the way. I don’t go for trying to break speed records on country roads without a very good reason.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Algy. ‘That suits me.’

And so it came about that at a little before noon the following day Biggles and Algy set off in Biggles’ own car for Brindon Hall, the Sussex home of Lord Malboise, leaving Bertie and Ginger to take care of the office with particular attention to any relevant news that might come through from their old colleague, Inspector Gaskin.

It was a perfect summer day, and as for once there was no need for haste, Biggles settled down to make the best of it. Being mid-week the traffic was not heavy; but they took no advantage of this, and after a leisurely lunch at a convenient wayside tavern near Petworth they cruised on to reach their

objective late in the afternoon, striking the wall that surrounded the Park a little distance from the one entrance that gave access to it.

Under Algy's guidance they went on to the lodge, to find the Zulu warrior (as Algy had described him) on duty at the iron gates complete with leopard skin, shield and assagai. Three cars, presumably those of casual visitors, were parked nearby. Biggles stopped. As the pseudo-warrior came forward to indicate where they could put the car, Biggles called Algy's attention to a notice hanging conspicuously on the gate. It read: *Park closes today at 4.30 p.m.*

Pointing at it Biggles said to the Zulu: 'Does that mean we have to be out by half-past four? It's nearly that now.'

'Yes, sir,' was the answer.

'Even if we've come to call on Lord Malboise personally, at his invitation?' inquired Biggles.

'That is different,' said the Zulu. 'What is the name, please?'

'Mr Bigglesworth. Can't we drive in?'

'No, sir. No private cars are allowed in the Park. We do not want an accident here. A car will come for you. Please to wait.' The Zulu went off to what apparently was a private telephone booth in the garden of the lodge.

Still sitting in the car while they waited, Algy said to Biggles: 'Well, what do you make of him? Is he a Zulu?'

'Zulu my foot,' replied Biggles. 'He's no more a native African than I am.' He smiled and went on: 'Still, he looks the part, all in keeping with the buffalo. I suppose the get-up is excusable—a touch of showmanship to give realism to the general performance. I'd call it a good idea. Kids would love it.'

The Zulu was on his way back to them.

'Here comes the car,' Algy observed, looking up the tree-lined avenue that ran through the estate to the mansion house. 'It's the Land-Rover. It'll be interesting to see who's driving it.'

The Zulu was opening the gates. The car came on, and through.

'Well blow me down!' exclaimed Biggles. 'It's his lordship himself, no less. I expected it would be Clarence. What's he doing today, I wonder?'

The Rover stopped. Lord Malboise got out, and came over, smiling recognition when he saw who his visitors were. 'So it's you,' he greeted cheerfully. 'I didn't recognize the name. I forgot to ask when you landed in the park. Never mind. I shall remember it in future. How nice of you to call.'

‘You gave us an open invitation to sample your sherry,’ reminded Biggles.

‘Of course—of course. Be sure it will be my pleasure to make you welcome.’

‘This is my friend. Algy Lacey.’

‘So now we all know each other,’ said Lord Malboise, offering Algy his hand. ‘But don’t let’s waste any more time here. Your car will be safe. Come along. I’ll run you up to the house.’

They all took their places in the Rover. They went through the gates, which were closed behind them, and on up the avenue. For a little way nobody spoke. Then, perhaps finding the silence somewhat embarrassing. Biggles said: ‘Tell me. I’ll admit I’m curious. Do you run this zoo as a sort of hobby?’

‘By no means,’ was the answer. ‘There are times when it’s a crashing nuisance. But today, in this country with its merciless taxation, most people with big estates have to do something if they want to keep their homes. It seemed to me that a few wild animals roaming loose in the park might attract visitors willing to pay for admission. After the initial outlay the upkeep is low. I have plenty of grass and I can run the place with one or two hands, such as the gatekeeper who sells the tickets. Of course, he isn’t really an African, as no doubt you realized; but he’s an attraction, part of the show,’ concluded Lord Malboise, with disarming frankness.

Biggles said: ‘I saw a notice on the gate saying the park closed at four-thirty. Do you usually shut up shop as early as this?’

‘No. The closing time varies with what I have to do,’ explained Lord Malboise. ‘This happens to be one of the days when I have some personal matters to attend to. To keep expenses to a minimum I employ only one man to show visitors round.’

‘I see you have a few today.’

‘Yes. We usually have one or two if the weather is fair. The week-ends are our busiest time. Then Clarence, my brother, gives a hand. He’s not here today.’

The car had now reached the house, a rambling Elizabethan mansion, and pulled up to the front entrance.

‘Follow me,’ requested Lord Malboise, getting out. ‘There’s no need to get mixed up with the party inside. I don’t suppose they’ll be long. Meanwhile we can go through to the terrace.’ Leading the way he took his guests through a well-furnished hall, down a corridor, across a room to

french windows that opened on to what he had called the terrace. And that in fact was what it was, overlooking the park; a small, raised, stone-flagged area enclosed within a low white wall, perhaps three feet high. Tubs of flowering plants were arranged at intervals. Some garden chairs, with gay cushions and small tables at hand, made a pleasant retreat.

‘Sit down and make yourselves comfortable while I fetch something to drink. I shan’t keep you a minute,’ said his lordship.

‘If you find this call inconvenient we could easily come back another day,’ Biggles said apologetically.

‘Not at all, not at all,’ returned his host quickly.

‘We shan’t keep you long, anyway,’ Biggles said.

Lord Malboise left them, to return with a silver tray on which stood a decanter and three glasses. This he put on one of the small tables, filled the glasses and served his guests. ‘Good health,’ he toasted, raising his glass. ‘Although I say it, I think you will find this quite excellent.’

Having sipped his drink Biggles agreed.

‘As you know, this opening of country houses to the public has become quite an industry,’ remarked Lord Malboise. ‘It was brought about by the present iniquitous taxation. People who want to save their property are forced into doing things that would have made their ancestors turn in their graves. When my father died a few years ago I found myself burdened with such a crushing mountain of taxes, for death duties, that I nearly gave up the struggle and went abroad, leaving the place to go to ruin. Then I had second thoughts and resolved to hang on to what is, after all, my family home, for as long as possible. What you see is the result. Wild animals in the park don’t worry me. They bring customers. I am gradually restoring the house to what we might say were its former glories.’ Lord Malboise concluded with an enigmatic smile that might have meant anything.

‘Good show,’ congratulated Biggles.

Lord Malboise went on, looking hard at Algy: ‘Forgive me if I appear to stare, but haven’t we met before?’

Algy shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. I can’t imagine where our paths would be likely to cross.’

‘Hm. Very strange. I have a good memory for faces. When I first saw you at the gates I felt sure I’d seen you somewhere quite recently; but I must have been mistaken.’

‘It’s possible I look like somebody else,’ suggested Algy.

‘Could be,’ agreed Lord Malboise. He smiled. ‘Anyhow, I shall remember you in future.’

Nothing more was said on the subject. Instead, Lord Malboise looking at Biggles’ feet, remarked suddenly: ‘That’s a smart pair of shoes you’re wearing.’

‘I like them,’ Biggles said.

‘Rubber soles?’

‘No. Some sort of plastic, I think.’ Biggles raised a foot so that his host could see the sole.

‘I must get a pair like them, if they’re made in my size. I have a large foot. You, I see, have a small one.’

‘A bit on the small side, but they get me about,’ Biggles answered, smiling.

‘Another glass of sherry?’

‘No thanks. I make one the rule when I’m driving a car. Which reminds me.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘It’s time we were moving off, or we shall outstay our welcome.’ He got up from his chair.

‘Well, that’s up to you. Matter of fact I shall soon have to leave you to meet Clarence. It’s been nice meeting you again. Call again sometime.’ Lord Malboise also rose from his chair. ‘I’ll run you to the gates.’

That was all. They left the house as they had entered it, seeing nobody, so apparently the other visitors had gone. Lord Malboise ran them to the gates, where they parted on the most amiable terms, mutually hoping they would soon meet again. A parting wave from his own car and Biggles drove off.

CHAPTER 9

A MESSAGE FROM GINGER

AS BIGGLES drove on, saying nothing, leaving the Park behind them, Algy said, lugubriously: 'I must say I feel a mean sort of skunk, accepting a man's hospitality in order to spy on him; particularly when it's a decent fellow like Lord Malboise.'

'I wouldn't worry too much about that,' returned Biggles tartly, without taking his eyes off the road.

'What's that supposed to mean?' inquired Algy, in a voice of mild surprise.

'You may have been under the impression that we were spying on him, and that, I'll admit, was our intention. As it turned out, I have an uncomfortable suspicion that it was the other way round. He was having a good look at us from close quarters. A neat little trap was set, baited with a bottle of sherry, and we stepped straight into it with both feet. It's time I had my head examined.'

'How on earth do you work that out?'

Biggles took the car in close to the verge and stopped. 'Let this sink in,' he said grimly. 'Our noble lord may not know who we really are, but he has a thundering good idea of what we're doing.'

'How could he?'

'He knows I've been to that building in the Park. And if he knows that he must have realized that our forced landing near it was no accident. So, naturally, he's wondering just what we're up to.'

'I don't get it,' stated Algy. 'How could he know you'd been to look at the building?'

'I as good as told him. I'm afraid you missed the point of his interest in my shoes and the size of my feet. So did I, at first. I could only wonder why all that baloney about what I was wearing on my feet. He pretended to admire my shoes. Why should a man in his position take the slightest notice of my footwear, and remark on it? He wanted to see more, and I, like a fool, showed him exactly what he wanted to know.'

‘Showed him what?’

‘For Pete’s sake, don’t say the penny hasn’t dropped yet? The soles! That’s what he wanted to see.’

‘Why?’

‘There were some soft patches of muddy ground round that building and in the dark I must have walked across them, obviously leaving footprints. His lordship spotted them. Now he knows who made them. It’s as simple as that. So don’t be taken in by all that smooth charm he laid on. He’s a dangerous man. It’s a mistake to underestimate the enemy, but that’s what we’ve done. Now you know what I mean when I say it’s time I had my head examined.’ Biggles drove on.

Presently Algy said: ‘I must admit I was shaken when he said he’d seen me before, somewhere.’

‘He must have seen you at the sale when that piece of porcelain was put up for auction. It couldn’t have been anywhere else. You told me you were at the back of the hall.’

‘So I was.’

‘No matter. He spotted you as a stranger. He’s playing a dangerous game, and people who do that sort of thing develop eyes in the backs of their heads. He now knows as much about us, if not more, than we know about him. It won’t take him long to put two and two together and tot it up to make the right answer. Believe you me, we’re on thin ice—so thin that I can hear it cracking. Still, it hasn’t all been loss on our side. I learned one or two things this afternoon. I can tell you this. Lord Malboise is certainly getting a lot of money from somewhere. All that rebuilding and redecorating that’s been going on must have cost a packet. Where is he getting the money? From showing visitors over his house, as he pretends? Don’t give me that. Look at today. A fine day, but only three cars at the gates. Say six people at five bob each. Thirty shillings all told. That wouldn’t go far towards what he must have spent on the house. Did you notice anything in particular as we walked through to the terrace?’

‘No. There were plenty of ornaments about, including old French porcelain, but I didn’t see anything I recognized.’

‘You didn’t see the piece Lord Malboise bought at the sale?’

‘No. What else did you see?’

‘One thing I noticed as we approached the house from the drive was an aerial on the roof; and it wasn’t a TV aerial. I suspect that when the chopper is out his lordship is in touch with it by radio.’

‘So that’s it. I told you that when I was waiting for you in the car I picked up a beam. It was just before the chopper came in.’

‘If Lord Malboise is what I suspect he is, he probably has every modern device laid on for all occasions. He would. He’s that sort of man. It’s what one would expect from the brain that’s behind the wave of high-class crime that’s been bedevilling the police.’

‘You still think Malboise is the man?’

‘Could be. I’m more inclined to think so than when we started. Otherwise, for what possible reason should he take the slightest interest in a pair of casual strangers like us? I take that to mean he’s suspicious of everybody. That’s the normal behaviour of a man who’s scared of being caught doing something unlawful. I fancy Clarence is in the business, whatever it is. I’d bet he’s already been told of our visit this afternoon. He might have been in the house while we were there. Malboise could have spoken to him. He was longer fetching that sherry than he need have been. Why wasn’t it ready on the table? He may have gone to tell Clarence to keep out of the way. I know this sounds a pretty wild guess, but we now know more than when we arrived. There’s another detail that’s got me guessing. Did you notice anything odd about that wall round the terrace?’

‘No. Was there anything wrong with it?’

‘As I’ve often told you, anything out of the ordinary always arouses my curiosity. Why was the wall whitewashed in the first place? One might say why have a wall at all? If there had to be one, why wasn’t it built of stone to keep it in line with everything else?’

‘Perhaps ordinary bricks were cheaper.’

‘They weren’t ordinary bricks. Bricks are made to a standard size. These were a size I’ve never seen before. They reminded me of something but I can’t think what. It may come to me when I’ve had time to think. There was another thing about that wall. It was never finished. There was a brick missing at a corner in the top course as if the bricklayer had run out of bricks. Why should he run out of bricks? Why leave the job unfinished? What sort of workman was that? The whole thing gave me the impression of having been done by an amateur, and I shan’t sleep o’ nights till I find out why. One day I’m going to have another look at that wall. There must have been a purpose for it.’

‘It seems to me, if you don’t mind my saying so, that you’re making clues to fit a theory,’ Algy said, pensively. ‘Why should a man in Malboise’s position do anything crooked?’

‘For money. Everybody’s after lolly. Or perhaps for the sheer hell of it. There are some queer people in the world and social position has nothing to do with it. Malboise may have been genuine when he put up that groan about ruinous taxation. He may have worked out a way of getting his own back on the government. He’s certainly got a lot of money from somewhere, so what has he to complain about? One day we may find out the answer to all this, but it isn’t going to be easy, the more so now that through my stupidity he’s been warned that he’s under observation. We’ve had our warning, too. He knows what we’re doing.’

‘How dangerous a man is he, do you think?’ asked Algy.

Biggles shrugged. ‘Your guess is as good as mine. That’s something we shall only know when we come into head-on collision, should that happen.’

This long conversation had occupied most of the journey home, and, having parked the car, Biggles and Algy went into their office expecting to find Bertie and Ginger there. They were not there. Biggles walked over to his desk and picking up a slip of paper that lay on it, with a curious expression creeping over his face, read what was written.

‘Listen to this,’ he said. ‘It’s a note from Ginger.’ He read aloud. ‘Gaskin came through. Security van hijacked between London and Birmingham. Thieves got away with £50,000 in cash. We are taking action as you ordered. Ginger.’ Biggles looked up. ‘The message is timed five o’clock.’ He went on with a touch of bitterness creeping into his voice. ‘That was just after we left the Park, so had we hung around a little longer we might have seen something of the Auster, or the chopper if it was used for the raid.’

‘We don’t know that it was,’ Algy said.

‘Of course not. But it rather looks as if, while his lordship was flattering us with his glib tongue, dear Clarence was out on a job. No doubt the Auster would make straight for Brindon Park, so we may know more about it when it comes back. How annoying. Here’s the raid we’ve been waiting for, and where are we?—miles away.’

‘You can’t blame yourself for that,’ asserted Algy. ‘We can’t be in two places at once.’

‘Of course we can’t, but it sticks in my gizzard that our noble lord may have been laughing up his sleeve at the way he led us up the garden path. But we haven’t finished yet. There’s nothing we can do for the moment. It’s no use tearing about looking for the Auster, or a solitary chopper. We shall just have to cool our heels till the others come back and give us the latest

news—if there is any. Let me think.’ Biggles dropped into his chair, lit a cigarette and rested his chin between his hands.

Algy rang the canteen for a pot of tea.

Time went on. Six o’clock—seven—eight, without a sign of Bertie and Ginger. ‘What the devil can they be doing?’ muttered Biggles irritably. ‘They can’t still be in the air. Why don’t they phone to say where they are? They must know we’d be waiting here.’

‘They may have force-landed somewhere,’ offered Algy.

‘That wouldn’t stop one of them finding a phone. Had there been a serious crash we’d have had a report by now from the local police.’

Seeing the mood Biggles was in Algy did not answer.

At nine o’clock Biggles scrubbed out a cigarette and got up. ‘I’m not waiting here any longer,’ he announced. ‘They can find us at home. It’s time we had something to eat.’

Algy, too, got up. ‘Okay, if that’s how you feel.’

Later, at eleven o’clock, when Biggles said he was going to bed, there was still no word from Ginger or Bertie. ‘This can only mean one thing,’ he said wearily. ‘They’re in trouble. Just where, or how, we needn’t try to guess. There’s nothing we can do tonight, so we might as well get some sleep while we can.’

Disturbed in mind they went to bed.

CHAPTER 10

TRAPPED

BIGGLES was right when he had said Bertie and Ginger were in trouble. They were. They were in serious trouble. It came about like this.

Left in the office, with Biggles and Algy away to make their call on Lord Malboise, they occupied their time doing sundry odd jobs such as bringing their records up to date, a monotonous task which they always found tedious, although it had to be done from time to time as opportunity offered.

It made a welcome break, therefore, when the intercom telephone jangled, Bertie answered it, hoping the message would make an excuse to switch their activities to something more interesting. The hope was fulfilled. The caller was Inspector Gaskin, to report as he had promised, a big-scale robbery. As yet he had no details. He could only say what had happened and where. He did not waste time in speculation, but rang off to get on with his own investigation.

‘This is it, dear boy, now we can get on with something a bit more to our liking,’ Bertie told Ginger, having given him the gist of his conversation with Gaskin.

There was no discussion about what they should do. Their orders should such an event occur were explicit. In five minutes they were on their way to the Air Police hangar and within the hour they were airborne in the Auster making flat out for Sussex, the only area they knew where they might encounter the helicopter, should it in fact have been employed in this latest robbery. Of course, this was all guesswork, and there was a lot of ground to be covered. For obvious reasons they could not fly direct to Brindon Hall Park and circle over it without arousing the suspicions of the people on the ground; but there was no reason why they should not watch the sky above the helicopter’s lair from a safe distance.

It was a fine day with visibility as good as could be expected; the sky mostly misty blue, but with a broad belt of fleecy summer cloud creeping up from the south-west. Bertie sat at the controls, leaving Ginger free to survey the ground and the limitless expanse of sky above. Actually, Ginger was by no means optimistic of success in their quest. Indeed, if the truth must be told, he thought what they were doing was likely to prove a waste of time.

There were too many 'ifs' and 'buts' about it. But it was better than being cooped up in the office checking dusty files.

It was, therefore, with a yell of triumph that his eyes picked up and focused on a speck in the sky which he quickly identified as a helicopter. They were a few miles north of Brindon at the time, on a course which would cut across that of the helicopter and about 1,000 feet above it. There was of course no proof that this was the machine they were seeking; but at least it offered that possibility. In his enthusiasm he gave Bertie a slap on the back and called his attention to what he had spotted. Not for a moment did he take his eyes off it, knowing only too well how easy it was for one aircraft to lose touch with another, the result of the speed at which such machines travel.

Bertie left it to Ginger to keep the chopper under observation. All he did was ease the joystick back a little for more height which would give him a wider view. There was no risk of the chopper getting away by increasing its speed should it have reason to do so. The Auster would always 'have the legs' of it. The only risk of losing it would be should it suddenly drop closer to the broken landscape below.

Ginger, watching, observed, somewhat to his surprise, that the chopper still showed no signs of losing height, as he thought it should by now if Brindon Park was its objective. It became increasingly evident that this was not so; the aircraft was holding its height and flying straight on, a course which, if maintained, would take it miles from the Park. Naturally, Ginger began seriously to wonder if he had been too quick to jump to the conclusion that the chopper was the one they hoped to find. Such machines are not uncommon and this one might well be on legitimate business. They were too far apart for him to check registration markings. He passed on his doubts to Bertie. His doubts increased when he observed that the helicopter, far from losing height as if preparing to land, was now climbing, a manoeuvre which, if sustained, would take it into or above the approaching clouds. Had the chopper spotted that it was being followed by the Auster and was now taking evading action? he wondered. If it went into the clouds it would obviously be more difficult, if not impossible to keep under observation; yet to close in on it would almost certainly be to invite suspicion—that is, if the pilot of the chopper was in fact engaged in some improper business.

Ginger conveyed his thoughts to Bertie. 'What are we going to do about it?' he questioned, anxiously. 'At this rate we shall soon be over the coast. Then what?'

Bertie considered the matter while turning on a course that would take it closer, but not too close, to the helicopter. 'There's only one thing to do, laddie, and that's stick to the blighter for as long as possible,' he decided. 'If he goes through the cloud I'll go topsides, sit in the sun and watch him from there.'

'Fair enough,' agreed Ginger. 'I'll keep an eye on him.'

For the next five minutes, during which time the English Channel had crept up over the southern horizon, the helicopter continued to climb, finally to disappear into the cloud. The Auster, too, had been climbing steadily and at the same time closing the distance between the two machines. As soon as the helicopter was out of sight, Bertie, after a short dive for maximum speed, pulled the stick back sharply and went up like a rocket through the mass of vapour. For the short time they were in it they could of course see nothing, but as they burst out into clear air with only blue sky above Ginger at once picked up the machine they were shadowing, now flying level on its original course, which was slightly west of south.

'There he is,' he called to Bertie. 'Over the sea and still heading south. He must be going to France. He's got a nerve, going overseas in broad daylight without a Customs check.'

'What's to stop him?' returned Bertie. 'If anyone on the ground did happen to see him, he'd assume he was a navy type on some sort of rescue job. During the holiday season they do regular patrols along the coast on the look-out for silly asses who capsize their sailing dinghy or float away with the tide on one of those mattresses you can blow up. There's nothing unusual in a chopper being over the Channel at this time of the year.'

'Well, this chap's not on a rescue job, that's for sure,' declared Ginger. 'He's too high to see anything smaller than a tanker. What are we going to do?'

'Stay with him. What else? Having come so far, we'll see where he ends up,' replied Bertie cheerfully.

'If we had to come down in France, there'd be a fine old stink. That's happened before today.'

'Why should we have to go down?'

'How do we go for petrol?'

'All right for another hour, anyhow. You keep your eyes on the chopper in case he tries to give us the slip, as he might if he spots that we're trailing him.'

Nothing more was said. For the next 20 minutes the position remained unchanged; then the helicopter dropped into the cloud, now an almost unbroken layer. Bertie, having been advised of this by Ginger, went down after it, and there, below them, running east to west, were the same sandy beaches of the Normandy coast. The helicopter was flying directly inland into France.

Ginger, always cautious of breaking the Regulations it was their duty to enforce, was now for turning back; they knew the helicopter had gone to France and that was enough, he argued. But Bertie wouldn't hear of it. What was the use of going home with only half the story? he objected. 'Let's see where the blighter touches down. That's what Biggles will want to know.'

The subject was not pursued. Ginger concentrated on watching the helicopter, not so easy now that it was well below them and could only be seen against the multi-coloured fields of northern France. However, he was able to keep it in sight, and ten minutes later was relieved to see the chopper circling, obviously preparing to land. It went down in a meadow flanked by a wood that was almost large enough to be called a forest. It took shelter under the nearest trees.

Unfortunately Ginger had no means of pinpointing the actual spot. There was no main road, or a railway, near. There was a village about two miles away, but he had no means of ascertaining its name. The Auster did not carry the large-scale map of France that might have named it. He could make out only one conspicuous landmark anywhere near, and that was a large mansion house which two turrets, one at each end, might put it into the category of a *château*. It was half hidden by ancient trees.

Once the helicopter had landed Bertie swung away from the spot, a wide turn that headed it back towards the coast.

'Where are you going?' asked Ginger.

'Home, me boy. Home. That bally chopper may stay here for hours and I don't feel like fiddling about waiting for it, with a risk of running out of juice.'

'Have you any idea where we are?'

'Not a clue.'

'Don't you think we should find out? Biggles will want to know. Where is this place, will be the first question he'll ask. Could you find it again?'

'I wouldn't swear to it.'

'That's a fat lot of use. We must know the name of that village, or the house.'

‘How do we find out?’

‘There’s only one way. Go down and ask. I can see a man ploughing that big field on our right. He’ll tell us what we want to know. If there’s a report of us landing, we could say we drifted in over the clouds. That has happened before today.’

‘Okay, chum, if that’s how you feel. Where would you like me to land?’

‘Anywhere as long as it’s fairly close to the big house, otherwise that farm hand may not know the name of it.’

‘Right you are.’ Bertie looked over the side. The field where the man was ploughing had been more than half turned, leaving only a narrow strip of unbroken ground, so that was out of the question. He chose a large meadow on the near side of the wood already noted, and without any difficulty made a perfect landing. He touched the throttle to run on a little way, the reason being, as he afterwards explained, because he could see a man moving just inside the wood. Being nearer, this would save them a rather longer walk to the man who was ploughing.

It was then that it happened. The Auster stopped with a jerk. Its nose dipped until it nearly touched the ground, sending its tail cocked high. Bertie leapt out. Ginger followed. No explanation was necessary. Across the Auster’s undercarriage was a strand of wire. A short distance away, torn out of the ground, was the stake to which it had been attached.

‘Sheep wire,’ growled Ginger. ‘What stinking luck.’

‘What sheep? I can’t see any sheep,’ Bertie said. ‘This looks to me more like a trap. An aeroplane trap. It must have been laid by someone with wartime experience.’^[A]

[A] During both wars it was a common practice of both sides to stretch strands of wire across fields that might be used by planes putting down or picking up spies.

‘Biggles will have something to say about this,’ grumbled Ginger. ‘No matter. We will at least be able to find out where we are. I can see someone coming up that ride through the wood.’

It was now that Bertie explained why he had run on after landing.

From the wood, travelling faster than seemed necessary, appeared a covered jeep, or similar vehicle. It ran straight on to where the stranded pilots could only stand surveying the disabled aircraft and the extent of the damage. On arrival at the spot three men jumped out with alacrity, and

Ginger was startled to see each of them carried an automatic pistol. This was only the first shock. The second, more severe, was when he recognized one of the men. He had last seen him when, with Biggles, he had made the apparently forced landing on Brindon Park. Clarence, whom Lord Malboise had said was his 'young brother'. The three men advanced together, Clarence with a curious though not unpleasant smile on his face.

'So it's you,' he said, in a soft, cultured voice. 'I thought it might be.'

'And why did you think it might be?' inquired Ginger.

'My dear fellow, do you suppose I'm so blind that I couldn't see an Auster dodging about on my tail all the way from Sussex?' replied Clarence.

'So you were flying the chopper?'

'Of course. But no doubt you guessed that.'

'What's the idea of these guns?'

'Merely a precautionary measure. I hope we shan't have to use them.'

'Was it you who wired this field?' demanded Ginger.

'Not me, personally, but I arranged for it to be done.'

'Why?'

'We don't like unexpected visitors dropping in on us, and I was afraid that this field looked like an open invitation for passing strangers to land. But why are we standing here? Come along to the house, where I can offer you some refreshment after your rather long flight.'

All this was said in such a free and easy, almost cordial manner, that Ginger didn't know what to make of it. He was soon to learn.

'If you don't mind we'll press on to the village we saw from the air and see about getting some help,' he said.

'Ah! but I do mind,' returned Clarence. 'I'm afraid you and your friend will have to accept my hospitality whether you like it or not. We're going to have a little chat, and it will be in your interest to be co-operative. I trust I make myself clear.'

Up to now Bertie had not spoken, although he must have grasped the situation. The guns spoke for themselves. Now he came in with: 'Are you telling us what we can do and where we can go?'

'Exactly that. I thought you would have realized it by now,' answered Clarence, now with a slight edge on his voice. 'You're trespassing on my property. Let's not argue about it. Don't force me to take extreme measures. Anyone who starts a private war against me must accept the consequences.'

That's fair, as I'm sure you will agree. So be reasonable. Come along. We've stood here long enough.' Clarence made a gesture with his pistol. His companions stepped forward and ran their hands over the prisoners' pockets, presumably feeling for weapons.

Ginger looked at Bertie. Bertie shrugged. There was no proof that Clarence was serious in his threats, but at this juncture prudence dictated it was better not to put them to test. So under the guns of their captors they got into the jeep, which at once set off up the track through the wood. It had not far to go. A mere five minutes' drive. When they emerged from the wood, where they saw the helicopter parked under cover of the trees, they saw the mansion house facing them. It was an imposing grey stone building obviously of some age. And, as if to confirm this, as they crossed a bridge, it was protected by a moat.

'Welcome to my family home,' said Clarence as he got out. 'It's a bit old-fashioned, but for me it has certain advantages, as presently no doubt you will perceive. Remember that, and don't, I implore you, for your own sakes try anything foolish. Come along. This way.'

CHAPTER 11

THE CHÂTEAU DE MALBOISE

THE high stone walls of the main hall in which Bertie and Ginger presently found themselves, having crossed the moat by a crumbling bridge just wide enough for a small vehicle, struck cold and damp, like those of a vault. The windows were narrow, unglazed and set high, and the dim light that filtered through them did nothing to offset the dismal cheerlessness of the place. There was little in the way of furniture, so footsteps echoed eerily. Clarence went in front, with his two men, still carrying guns, bringing up the rear of the little party.

He turned off this depressing chamber to a flight of narrow stone steps of the type generally known as a spiral staircase. Up and up they wound until Ginger began to wonder if they were going to finish on the roof. He counted four floors with a small landing on each one, and a slit of a window to provide a little light on the stairs. These ended in a heavy oak door with a ponderous iron lock. The key hung from a hook just outside.

Clarence unlocked the door and showed his guests—or perhaps we should say prisoners—into a small room which, being circular in shape, was evidently in one of the turrets. It was furnished with a plain wooden table and two beds. There was a window, without glass, and barred with vertical iron bars.

‘Sorry I can’t offer you better accommodation at the moment, but I thought you would prefer it to the dungeons,’ Clarence said casually. ‘However, as you see, this might have been made for such an occasion as this. Just the job, in fact, as we used to say in the Service. As a matter of interest an ancestor of mine occupied this room for some years. The poor fellow was out of his mind so he had to be kept confined. By the way, don’t try to remove the bars from the window. It would serve no useful purpose even if you succeeded. It’s a sheer drop of fifty feet into the moat, which actually is more mud than water. The last man who tried to leave the house that way dived into the mud and was never seen again. We couldn’t even find his body, so he must still be down there somewhere. I hope you won’t join him. It was a pity. I hate to see a brave man come to such a sticky end.’

‘Who was he?’ asked Ginger, more for something to say than because he wanted to know.

‘A German spy. That was during the war, of course. He was a courageous man, if somewhat truculent. I should know, having done that sort of work. As a matter of detail it was I who caught him and brought him here for safe custody until I could make contact with friends in the French Resistance. No doubt he would have been shot anyway, so he merely anticipated his death by a few hours. But alas, war is war. It hardens one’s finer feelings, don’t you think?’

‘It seems to have turned you into a particularly cold-blooded specimen of humanity,’ observed Bertie. ‘How long do you intend to persist in this nonsense?’

‘That will depend.’

‘On what?’

‘My brother. I shall have to inform him of this unfortunate situation and take his advice on what should be done with you. His decision will probably depend on your behaviour. Now I must leave you *pro tem*. I’ll see you have some food sent up. I’ll come back later and we’ll have another chat. Do be careful while I’m away. My men are inclined to show their resentment of any sort of insubordination.’

‘What sort of behaviour do you expect from us?’ inquired Bertie, frostily.

‘One never knows, does one? You might decide it would be worth your while to be, shall we say, co-operative.’

‘Co-operative? In what way?’ asked Ginger, who realized that behind all this apparently harmless talk they were in grave danger, the more so because Biggles would not have the remotest idea of what had become of them. If he looked anywhere for them it would be at Brindon Hall, in Sussex. He certainly wouldn’t cross the Channel. So on the face of it, it seemed a forlorn hope to rely on him for help.

Standing in the doorway with the two gunmen behind him Clarence went on: ‘You might, for instance, tell me exactly who you are. That would merely save me a certain amount of time and trouble because I shall find out, anyway. When I know who or what you represent, I shall be able to judge your purpose in following me here.’

‘Let’s do a swop,’ suggested Bertie, light-heartedly. ‘You tell us what you brought here in your chopper and I’ll answer your question.’

‘That’s fair enough,’ agreed Clarence. ‘I brought a quantity of gold.’

‘For what purpose?’

‘To sell, of course. I need the money.’

‘Why?’

‘Look at this place! It’s falling to pieces. I don’t like to see it like this. Yet to put it as it should be would cost a mint of money. That’s my answer. Now, who are you?’

‘I’d have thought you’d have guessed that already,’ Ginger said bluntly. ‘We’ve no reason to hide anything. You’ll have to know eventually. We’re officers of the Special Air Police and our job is to crack down on criminal air activities such as those you’re engaged in.’

Clarence nodded. ‘I thought it might be something like that.’

‘Up to this moment we only suspected you, but now we’re convinced,’ Ginger said.

‘Naturally—naturally,’ replied Clarence, blandly. ‘Do you feel like telling me how you got on my track, so to speak? It would be of interest to me to know where we made a blunder, as I think must have happened, since neither of you strike me, if you’ll forgive me for saying so, as the Sherlock Holmes type.’

‘We have our own methods of spotting crooks,’ Ginger said.

Clarence’s expression changed. He scowled. ‘Are you calling me a crook?’

‘What else are you but a crook?’

Clarence flared up at that. ‘You have the brass face to call *me* a crook. It’s the government you work for who are the crooks. During the war I risked my life a hundred times. What did I get for it? My brother and I were taxed until we hadn’t a penny to put our property in order. Look at the state this place is in. Now you know why. Well, we’ve thought of a way to get over that difficulty, and you’re not going to stop us. Don’t you call *me* a crook.’

‘Have you ever thought of working for a living?’ snapped back Ginger.

Clarence went out and slammed the door behind him. The key grated in the lock.

Bertie turned serious eyes on Ginger. ‘You know, laddie, that little display of temper recalls to my mind something Biggles said about these fellows being no ordinary crooks. It was to the effect that they were smarting under a grievance, some sense of injustice. This is how they’re

getting their own back—or imagine they are. Clarence has a chip on his shoulder as big as a log, and it's not likely to fall off.'

'Oh, don't start to feel sorry for them,' returned Ginger. 'It doesn't make any difference that I can see. They're a pair of crooks, and nasty ones at that. They don't carry guns for fun. Having a grievance is no excuse for what they're doing. If everyone who felt frustrated went off the rails, what a mess the world would be in. It's bad enough as it is.' He crossed over to the window and looked out through the bars. Below, rolling away to the horizon was the pleasant French countryside. Clarence had not lied. Directly under them was the moat, black and evil-looking with slime. 'We shan't get out this way,' he said morosely, turning back to Bertie. 'What can we do about it?'

'I hate to say it, but if you want my frank opinion I can give it you in one word. Nothing.'

'Now Clarence knows who we are he isn't likely to throw open the front door and wish us godspeed,' observed Ginger with biting sarcasm.

'I couldn't agree with you more, dear boy,' returned Bertie. 'But I still can't see how we can do anything about it. We shall just have to bide our time. Clarence may change his mind about keeping us here.'

'I wouldn't reckon on that,' growled Ginger. 'He'd find it hard to get a place to hold us. Let's face it. He's got us where he wants us, and if it suits him he could keep us here till we rot.'

'You're forgetting something,' Bertie said.

'What?'

'You realize where we are?'

'I imagine this is the Château de Malboise.'

'Right first time.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'It's only a question of time before Biggles rolls up here,' declared Bertie.

'Why should he?'

'When we fail to return home, he'll pull out all the stops to find us.'

'Naturally.'

'He'll know we went out looking for the chopper. He'll work it out that we must have found it. Then what will he do?'

'Go to Brindon Hall to see if we're there,' surmised Ginger.

‘And when he finds we’re not there he’ll remember that the family have a place here. If I know Biggles he’ll tootle across to give the old château the once-over—if you see what I mean.’

‘I can only hope you’re right,’ Ginger answered lugubriously. ‘Otherwise we’re likely to be cooped up here for a long time. Don’t make any mistake about that. Clarence can’t let us go, knowing what we know. He and his brother are playing a deep game that’s likely to go on until they’ve got all the money they need. I still don’t know what to make of them. So far we’ve only seen the velvet glove, not the iron fist which I fancy is inside it. Clarence can talk like a gentleman, but that doesn’t fool me. Behind that smooth tongue there are fangs, with poison in ’em, as we’re likely to find out when he chooses to bite. And the men he employs here must be of the same kidney. The casual way he talked about that spy who went down into the moat made my blood run cold. When it comes to the punch he’s a killer. Listen!’ Ginger raised a hand.

From somewhere in the park below came the cough and clatter of an aero engine being started. ‘That’s the chopper,’ continued Ginger. ‘It’s my guess that Clarence is going back to England to talk things over with his brother. That’s what he said. No doubt the swag that was nicked today is now nicely tucked away somewhere in the château.’

They heard the helicopter take off, but were unable to see it. When the unmistakable noise of its departure had faded Bertie said: ‘So we’re now at the mercy of his precious pals. I hope they won’t forget we’re here and leave us to starve to death.’

As the sun went down and twilight began to creep in through the iron-barred window, it was made evident that this was not the intention. The door was opened and one of the guards, covered by the other, came in carrying a tray which he placed on the table. On it was what turned out to be an excellent cold meal; chicken, a salad, bread, butter and cheese, and a bottle of wine. There was also a candle. Without a word the men withdrew.

‘So far so good,’ remarked Bertie cheerfully, lighting the candle. ‘At least they’ve brought us some tuck, and they haven’t left us in the dark, as I thought they might. So things might be worse.’

‘Don’t fool yourself,’ returned Ginger grimly. ‘If I know anything, things’ll be worse before they’re better. It seems that what they decide to do with us will depend on Lord Malboise. Clarence as good as said so. That means his lordship is the boss of the gang.’

‘Don’t be so depressing,’ protested Bertie. ‘We’ve been in worse spots than this, and got out of ’em.’

The meal finished, he went to the window and tested the bars. Using all his strength he couldn't move them an inch. 'No use,' he said. 'No bally use at all.'

'What were you thinking of doing, taking a header into the moat?' inquired Ginger, with a touch of sarcasm.

'Not exactly, old boy; not exactly,' replied Bertie. 'I'm not that crazy. But I thought if we could clear the bars we might make some sort of rope out of our clobber.'

'Forget it.' Ginger snuffed out the candle. 'We might as well save it in case we don't get another,' he explained.

With darkness now taking over from daylight they sat on their beds to pass the night.

CHAPTER 12

BIGGLES LEARNS THE FACTS

BIGGLES was not long learning what had become of Bertie and Ginger, but the information was not arrived at in the manner that had been predicted. In fact, it came from a source which no stretch of imagination could have foreseen. This was the way of it.

At eight o'clock on the morning following the disappearance of the Auster the telephone rang. This of course was in the flat, the call having been relayed by the switchboard at Scotland Yard, which indicated that it was personal. Biggles came out of the bathroom to answer it, just beating Algy to the instrument. He picked up the receiver and said: 'Yes, this is Biggles,' which at least told Algy, who stood watching, that the caller was someone familiar. After that Biggles stood listening for some time without speaking. Then he broke in with: 'Have you got its registration?' Apparently the answer was in the affirmative, for he went on: 'Yes, that's one of ours. Thanks.' Another pause. 'Be seeing you. Eleven o'clock.'

With that he hung up, and turning to Algy said tersely: 'Well at least we know where they went. That was Marcel Brissac on the line. He rang up to find out if I knew anything about an Auster with British registration landing in northern France yesterday. As you must have guessed it's our lost lamb.'

'Where is it?'

'Near a village in Normandy called Malboise.'

Algy pursed his lips in a silent whistle. 'So that's it. How did Marcel hear about it?'

'Through a French farm labourer, who must be a fellow of unusual intelligence. He was working in a field when he saw a plane circling as if it was looking for somewhere to land. It came down in a field near him and nearly turned upside down. It wasn't a serious crash as he discovered when he went to it. There were no casualties. In fact, by the time he got to it there was no one with it. He, being an astute fellow, went to the village where he lived and reported the matter to the local copper, who went and had a look. Then, not knowing what to make of it, but observing British registration letters, he had the good sense to report to a higher authority. In due course

the story reached Marcel in his office at Air Security Headquarters in Paris. He, naturally, dashed along to have a look at it. Now, before doing anything else he's rung up to find out if we know anything about it. As you heard, I was able to tell him the machine was one of ours.'

'What's he doing about it?'

'For the moment, nothing. He's waiting for me to tell him what one of our machines was doing in France. There was too much to say on the phone, so I've arranged to fly over and explain. I'm meeting him at eleven o'clock at Berck aerodrome. He'll have a car there to meet me and take me to the crash, which means we shall have to get cracking. Meanwhile he's doing nothing about it. I fancy we shall be able to tell him more than he can tell us. It's easy to guess what happened.'

'Bertie and Ginger spotted the chopper and followed it to France.'

'That's the answer. They saw it land and tried to get down themselves, but made a mess of it,' Biggles said. 'How that happened I can't imagine.'

Algy looked puzzled. 'If they didn't stay with the machine, where could they have gone?'

'Probably to look for a telephone to let us know what had happened.'

'But surely they wouldn't both go. One of them should have stayed with the machine.'

'One would have thought so,' agreed Biggles. 'But there must have been a reason for what they did. One would have expected them to make for the nearest house of any size, which, as the village is called Malboise, could be the château of that name. That, if my memory is right, is the name of the Malboises' property in France, so we can guess why the chopper went there. Presumably it's all part of the organization.'

'I don't like the sound of that,' Algy said, seriously. 'If they went to the château, which would certainly be on the phone, why didn't they get in touch with us from there?'

'Use your head. If we're working on the right lines, can you see them ringing up Scotland Yard under the eyes of the people there? They'd have more sense than that, even if they were allowed to use the telephone. They may have found themselves in the middle of a hornet's nest, and having stirred it up got well and truly stung. That's how it looks to me.'

'So you think they could still be at the château?'

'Where else could they be? Had they gone to the village, Marcel would have found them there, in which case they would have told him what they

were doing and there would have been no need for him to ring me.'

'I'm surprised Marcel didn't go to the château to make inquiries, as it was the nearest big house.'

'Why should he? He'd have no reason to suspect that anything crooked was going on there. He may have gone to the château for all we know. For obvious reasons anyone there would deny all knowledge of the crash.'

'If the Auster followed the chopper to the château, if Clarence was flying it he should still be there.'

'I imagine he is.'

'Then we'd better have a look at it.'

'You're dead right. And lose no time about it. Anything could happen there if Clarence, or anyone else, realized who Bertie and Ginger were, and what they were doing. That's why I arranged to meet Marcel as soon as we can get to him. We can't do anything in France without him, and we should be asking for trouble if we tried.'

'You'll tell him the whole story?'

'Of course. We shall have to.'

'Does that mean I'm going with you?'

'Naturally. I may need help. But get your clothes on and let's get weaving. We haven't too much time.'

'How about going first to Brindon Hall and having it out with Lord Malboise?'

'No. It's too soon for that. Anyway, we'd get nothing out of him. We'd do better to make straight for France to see if Bertie and Ginger are all right. We could cast an eye over Brindon Park on the way to see if the chopper is about, although I imagine it's still in France. That's enough talking. Let's get a move on.'

A little more than an hour later, in the old 'Proctor' still used for short trips, they were in the air, over Sussex. Biggles made a small detour to fly across Brindon Hall Park. He flew straight over without lingering. He thought there was a chance they might see the helicopter; but he was not disappointed when he did not see it, or anything else of interest. As he remarked to Algy, the chopper might still be in France, where it could be presumed to have gone with the Auster following it. Or, of course, if it had returned it would be put out of sight in its usual hiding-place, the apparently purposeless building in the Park.

Another hour and they were over France, circling the old aerodrome at Berck, well-known to Biggles as a wartime refuelling station for ferry pilots delivering new machines to squadrons nearer the battle front. Having landed, he taxied in to find Marcel Brissac, his opposite number in the French Air Security Police, waiting as had been arranged.

After the usual friendly greetings, as they walked to his car Marcel said: 'Now, old warrior, what is all this about, *hein*?'

'It's a long story,' Biggles answered. 'I'll tell you on the way to Malboise. I'm anxious to get there as quickly as possible.'

'You can tell me this,' requested Marcel. 'Who was flying the Auster?'

'Bertie and Ginger.' Marcel, of course, knew them both.

'And you think they may be in trouble?'

'I'm sure of it, otherwise they would have let me know where they were.'

'What brought them here?'

'I think they were shadowing a helicopter which we suspect is being used to fly stolen property out of England. They must have tried to land near Malboise, but did not make a very good job of it. It was lucky that farm worker saw what happened, or we might have been a long time finding our missing machine.'

'So now you are worried.'

'Naturally. The helicopter belongs to a clever gang, and if Bertie and Ginger fell into their hands it could be serious.'

'Where could they be?'

'They can't be far from Malboise, so press on, old friend, without wasting any more time.'

It was a fairly long run to the scene of the crash, or rather, to the village of Malboise, which gave Biggles ample time to relate the circumstances that had led to the present situation.

There was not much Marcel could tell him. On hearing the report of a British aircraft on the ground, he had gone at once to inspect it, collecting the local policeman on the way to guide him to the crash. The Auster was not damaged. The metal airscrew was not even bent, which was proof that the machine must have been travelling slowly when it had tipped up on its nose. The farm worker had said he had often seen a helicopter come down near the spot.

‘Was there an obstruction of some sort in the field to cause the accident?’ inquired Biggles.

‘Perhaps. Wait, I will show you something,’ was Marcel’s rather mysterious answer. With the help of the local *gendarme*, he said, he had righted the plane, putting it on even keel. He had not tested the engine, but as far as he could judge it had not been damaged.

‘You say there is a big house not far away,’ prompted Biggles.

‘*Mais oui*. Le château de Malboise.’

‘Did you go to it to make inquiries?’

‘*Non*. I think better to wait for you, to learn what this is about. I think there must be some crook business.’

‘That was sensible. I’m glad you did.’

‘Now I understand. We go to the château now, *hein?*’

‘I feel that is the obvious thing to do.’

Presently Marcel said, ‘*Voilà!* Here is the village. Do you want to talk to the man who saw your plane come down? I can stop at his house.’

‘I’d like a word with him, although I imagine he can’t tell me more than he has told you.’

Marcel agreed: but in the event Biggles did not see the man. His wife said he was at work somewhere in the fields. They didn’t trouble to look for him. Marcel, who had already seen the plane, knowing exactly where it was drove on. A rough farm track took them part of the way. Then the going became so bad that they had to leave the car and do the last 200 yards on foot. So they came to the scene of Bertie and Ginger’s mishap.

Even before reaching the spot Marcel faltered with a sharp exclamation of surprise. ‘Someone has been here,’ he declared.

‘How do you know?’

‘The plane has been moved. When I came it was here.’ Marcel pointed. ‘Now it is over there, by the wood, under a tree. Why is this? I do not understand.’

‘If you are asking me I’d say it was put under the tree so that it could not be seen from the air, should someone fly over looking for it,’ answered Biggles.

‘Ah! Always you have the answer, you wise old dog,’ confirmed Marcel, as they walked on to the Auster. It stood on even keel and had obviously been wheeled to the spot where it now stood. Biggles examined it, then

turned a puzzled face to the field. 'I can't understand why this should have happened; why the machine should have had any trouble getting down. There is plenty of room, and I see nothing to cause trouble, not even a rabbit-hole.'

'Come. I show you something.' Marcel took them a little way along the edge of the wood and pointed to something that lay on the ground. It was a bundle of looped wire and some rough wooden stakes, the sharpened ends of which had recently been in the ground. 'What is this?' he asked.

A deep frown lined Biggles' forehead. 'You know as well as I do,' he answered.

'A fence for sheep, perhaps. But no sheep. So!'

'This field was trapped for planes. Now we know why the Auster went up on its nose.'

Marcel nodded. 'This is what I think, but I wait to hear you say it. Now tell me, old cabbage. Who does this and why?'

'Does this land belong to the château?'

'But certainly.'

'Then we know who set the trap. Let's have a look at the place. I saw a track going through the wood. There were wheel marks in the ground. Now I begin to understand.'

They walked on through the wood. Reaching the far side, the château came into view. Biggles stopped to consider it, a little disconcerted because seen from ground level it was a larger building than he had supposed. It was older, too, than he had imagined. And for the first time he saw the moat. It was now evident that with its battlements and turrets the place had been built originally, probably in the era known as the Dark Ages, the historical period of wars and unrest, as a fortified residence. He made a remark to Marcel to that effect. 'This looks to me more like a castle than a château.'

'I think bad things have happened here,' Marcel said. 'From what little talk I heard in the village the place has a sinister reputation. People keep away from it.'

'What sort of bad things?' asked Algy.

'Fighting, murder, I don't know. Things happened here in the last war during the German occupation, but the local people will not talk of them.' Marcel smiled wanly. 'Perhaps they did some of the murders. They only say the place is haunted by the ghosts of the people who died here.'

‘If we have nothing worse to face than ghosts, we have nothing to worry about,’ Biggles said dryly. They were still standing inside the wood.

‘Why do we stop?’ asked Marcel. ‘I thought we go to the house to ask questions.’

‘What will you say?’

‘I shall ask about the plane.’

‘And I can tell you what the answer will be,’ predicted Biggles. ‘They will look surprised and say they know nothing of a plane.’

‘But you think your friends are inside?’

‘I’m pretty sure of it.’

‘Then I can get a search warrant and we will find them.’

‘Listen, Marcel,’ Biggles said seriously, ‘In that house there must be nearly a hundred rooms. Could we search them all? Prisoners could be moved from one room to another while we searched. And the house being old there may be secret rooms which we would never find. The men who own this place are clever. Why let them know we suspect them? I say let us do nothing in a hurry.’

‘Then what shall we do?’ Marcel threw out his hands in a typical French gesture.

‘Did I see a little restaurant in the village?’

Marcel looked surprised by the question. ‘But yes. Perhaps it is not very good.’

‘No matter. I suggest we have some lunch and think about this affair. No doubt *madame* has some eggs. An omelette. That and some of your excellent French bread and butter, a little cheese and a glass of wine will be enough for me.’

Marcel shrugged. ‘As you wish. It is your friends who are lost, not mine.’

‘You needn’t remind me; but I can think better when I am not hungry.’

Talking over the problem they made their way back to the village, and at the one small *estaminet*, still discussing the matter, had a simple but excellent meal. Lingering over their coffee, it was well into the afternoon by the time they were ready to leave. Nothing definite had been decided. Marcel was still in favour of making direct inquiries, but Biggles opposed this, feeling sure they would learn nothing, and by putting the occupants of the château on their guard were likely to do more harm than good. By this time, to Biggles, the original investigation had become a matter of

secondary importance. He was more concerned with the safety of Bertie and Ginger. A false move now, he averred, and they might never see them again.

At the finish the argument ended in a compromise. Marcel, in his official capacity, would go openly to the main entrance of the château and merely say there had been a report of a plane landing in the district. Biggles and Algy could watch the proceedings, without showing themselves, from the cover of the wood. Being of course in uniform, with a pistol in its holster on the belt round his waist, he was confident that no harm could come to him.

With this in mind they made their way back to the wood. As they paused by the abandoned Auster for a second look at it, they were startled by the sound of an aero engine being started not far away. A minute later they caught a glimpse of a helicopter through the trees. It went off in a northerly direction.

‘Now what?’ muttered Marcel, looking at Biggles.

‘I can only guess, but I’d say it’s on its way back to England,’ surmised Biggles.

‘Who flies it?’

‘How would I know? Unless they have a spare pilot, probably Clarence.’

‘Now I *must* go to the house,’ declared Marcel. ‘This is France and I have a duty to do. Planes cannot come and go as they please, ignoring regulations.’

‘As you say, we are in your country, so the decision of what to do rests with you,’ agreed Biggles. ‘We will wait here.’

‘A *bientôt*,’ was Marcel’s last word. He strode off.

‘I only hope he’s doing the right thing,’ Biggles murmured, moving a little farther into the trees and finding a seat on a fallen tree with the house still in view. He lit a cigarette. Algy joined him. They waited, watching, and presently saw Marcel cross the bridge over the moat. He pulled a chain that hung outside. An old-fashioned bell clanged.

Their wait was shorter than might have been expected. Within minutes they saw Marcel coming back. He looked anything but pleased. Finding Biggles and Algy under the trees he said: ‘Always you are right.’

Biggles looked slightly amused. ‘I do my best to make it a habit, although it doesn’t always come off. What did they say?’

‘They looked astonished. They know nothing of a plane landing near here.’

‘Without committing themselves, what else could they say? Who answered the door?’

‘A man.’

‘Describe him.’

‘He was fat, ugly and had a beard.’

‘Then it couldn’t have been Clarence or his brother. Didn’t they ask you in and offer you some hospitality?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll bet they didn’t.’

‘The man filled the door. I saw no one else. What will you do now? I must go back to Paris. I have work to do there. I left everything to meet you.’

‘I shall stay here,’ Biggles said.

‘How can you do that?’

‘I see no reason why we shouldn’t stay here.’

‘For what purpose?’

‘I shall see anyone who comes or leaves the house. I may see other things. Later we shall take it in turns to have some food in the village. In that way someone will always be watching.’

‘You may find yourself in trouble. Have you a pistol?’

‘No. I do not carry firearms in France without permission.’

‘You may need one. I can lend you this and get another.’ Marcel took his pistol from its holster and offered it.

‘Thanks.’ Biggles put it in his jacket pocket. ‘There is one other thing,’ he went on. ‘If you leave us we shall be without transport and unable to get back to Berck aerodrome should that be necessary.’

‘I have not finished with this place,’ declared Marcel. ‘I shall come back.’

‘When?’

Marcel frowned. ‘That is difficult to say. As soon as possible. I will leave you my car outside the *estaminet*. Someone in the village will have a car. I will get him to drive me to the railway station. It is only a few kilometres.’

‘If you could do that it would suit us fine, thanks,’ acknowledged Biggles.

‘Now I must go,’ continued Marcel. After a few paces he turned. ‘Be careful,’ he warned.

‘You can trust me for that,’ answered Biggles. ‘You know I never take risks.’

Marcel threw him a peculiar smile and went on his way.

CHAPTER 13

LORD MALBOISE MAKES AN OFFER

WHILE the events recorded in the preceding chapter were taking place, Bertie and Ginger remained incarcerated in their lofty prison cell, for that, clearly, was the purpose for which the turret chamber was being used. They were not badly treated, and as the weather was warm, even though the window had no glass in it, they passed a reasonably comfortable night. Naturally, they did a lot of talking, discussing the situation in which they found themselves; and although this was considered from every angle, they could see no hope of escape unless they were rescued. What their captor would eventually do with them was a matter for surmise, and here again the prospects were gloomy if not alarming.

Knowing what they knew, they could hardly expect to be set free, yet on the other hand it seemed impossible that they would be held prisoner indefinitely. The alternative was not pleasant to contemplate, although remembering what Clarence had said about people disappearing in the moat, they had to face up to the possibility of sharing their fate. That, all too obviously, would be an easy way of disposing of them. Ginger said he could not believe that a man of Clarence's breeding and education would stoop to sheer cold-blooded murder, but Bertie was not so sure of it. 'History shows that when murder is the answer to a problem, class has nothing to do with it,' he claimed. 'Some of the most brutal murders have been committed by men, and women, who one would have said wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'That's a comforting thought,' growled Ginger. 'Well, we got ourselves into this mess, so I suppose we shall have to get ourselves out of it.'

'That's how it looks to me, dear boy,' agreed Bertie. 'But how? Tell me that? Frankly, I'm stumped, if you see what I mean.'

'I can see what you mean all right,' returned Ginger caustically. 'But remember, it's one of Biggles' axioms that there's always an answer to any problem if you can find it.'

'Well, you find it and I'm with you,' Bertie said.

'I shall think about it,' promised Ginger, and after that they fell silent.

As already stated they passed a reasonably comfortable night. Once Bertie awoke to find the candle alight and Ginger standing at the window making as it were a windmill of his arms. 'What the dickens are you doing?' he demanded.

'Signalling.'

'To whom?'

'Nobody, as far as I know. Anybody. I'm sending out an S.O.S. Somebody might notice it. It's possible somebody might spot it, even a poacher.'

'And you're assuming he'll be able to read the Morse Code? What a hope!'

'It's better than no hope at all,' retorted Ginger. 'At least I'm doing *something*. Besides, Biggles may have come over.'

'You can forget Biggles,' declared Bertie. 'I'll tell you where he is. At home and nicely tucked up in bed. If you can't sleep yourself, you might let me get some.'

Ginger accepted the advice. 'It was just an idea.'

'Think of another,' Bertie said shortly.

'I shall try,' answered Ginger.

Soon after dawn they were awakened by footsteps on the stone flags outside the door. The big iron key grated. The door was opened and the same two gunmen entered, one carrying a tray. It was breakfast, the customary French breakfast of rolls, butter, jam and a pot of coffee. They did not speak as the tray was put on the table.

'How long is this going on?' demanded Ginger.

No answer.

'Where's Clarence?' asked Bertie.

The men withdrew without speaking.

'Nice cheerful fellers, I must say,' grumbled Bertie.

They took their time over breakfast, having nothing else to do. After a while Ginger said, cheerfully: 'Biggles should soon be on his way here.'

'How do you work that out?' Bertie wanted to know.

'Perfectly simple,' answered Ginger. 'When no report comes through of an Auster on the carpet somewhere he'll go to Brindon Hall to look for it. When he finds it isn't there he'll come on here.' Ginger spoke confidently, although he would have been more surprised than anyone had he known that

Biggles was already on the way, although not for the reason he had put forward.

‘Even if Biggles did come over I’m dashed if I can see what he could do,’ opined Bertie. ‘If he came to the door asking for us the people here would deny all knowledge of us. Unless he has a magic wand he could hardly be expected to break in even if he tried.’

‘You are a nice comforting partner,’ grumbled Ginger. ‘We shall have to let him know we’re here and exactly where we are, that’s all there is about it,’ he asserted.

‘And just how do you propose to do that, if I may ask? Start howling from the window?’ inquired Bertie with a touch of sarcasm.

Ginger brought his fist down smartly on the table. ‘No. I’ve got a better scheme than that. It could be the answer we’ve been looking for. Have you got those nail scissors on you, those you usually carry?’

‘Of course.’ Bertie took a small pair of folding scissors from his waistcoat pocket. ‘What are you going to do with them? If you’re thinking of trying to cut a hole through that door, I can tell you right away that they won’t stand up to that sort of exercise.’ He passed the scissors.

‘Nothing like it,’ Ginger answered, with a tinge of enthusiasm in his voice. ‘Watch me. I reckon if Biggles comes here he won’t march straight up to the front door. I know him. He’s too canny for that. He’ll approach slowly, probably through the wood, to have a good look at the place. I aim to plant a message for him.’

‘How?’

‘I’ll show you.’

Then Ginger got busy on a game he had often played in more frivolous moments, a pastime, sometimes a competition, frequently enjoyed by junior R.A.F. officers to relieve boredom. In fact, in the earlier days of flying instruction it was sometimes used to demonstrate the theory of flight. With practice it can be made to produce remarkable results. Taking some letters from his pocket he selected one, and having tested the paper for quality went to work.

By this time Bertie had realized what he was doing, as the slow smile that spread over his face testified. ‘Jolly good,’ he chuckled. ‘Top marks. Go to the top of the form.’ Then the smile faded. ‘The big question is, will Biggles be there?’

‘That’s something I can’t guarantee,’ replied Ginger.

‘And if he comes will he find it?’

‘I can’t guarantee that either, but there’s a fair chance.’

What in fact Ginger was doing was cutting out a miniature paper aeroplane. One that would glide. It is quite simple, if one has any knowledge of aerodynamics. In the ordinary way a piece of paper dropped from a height, with no inherent stability merely flutters to the ground; but once stability is applied, with a little practice the same piece of paper—the size is not important—can be made to travel a long way provided there is no wind. The greater the height from which the model is dropped the farther it will go. By bending the paper an expert can make it perform aerobatics. Even a fragile slip like a cigarette paper will glide the length of a fair-sized room.

Using the table as a rest Ginger folded the paper double. Then, cutting it double to make sure both sides were equal, he cut out a piece of the required shape; that is, the shape of an orthodox aeroplane, wings, fuselage, and elevators. These were bent into shape. Ginger then took a match, cut it in half and using the heavier end made a slit in it so that it could be slipped on the model to provide the necessary weight which, in a full-sized machine would be provided by the engine. The weight of course produces the forward momentum.

‘As there’s no wind, from this height, this should go far beyond the moat,’ declared Ginger, studying his model to make sure it was evenly balanced. ‘Biggles has only to find this to know we are here.’

‘What’s written on the paper?’

‘Nothing—yet. It’s a plain piece of the office notepaper I carry for emergencies. If Biggles finds it he’ll recognize it. To make sure I’ll put our initials on it and say where we are. You carry on making some more while I test this one. We’ll make as many as we can because they won’t all land in the same place, and the more there are the better will be his chance of finding one.’ So saying Ginger stood on the table, and holding the model by the tail, dropped it. It floated slowly across the room.

‘Great work,’ congratulated Bertie.

Ginger recovered the model, and accompanied by Bertie took it to the window. Putting an arm between the bars he held it nose down for a moment and then released it. The piece of paper at once took up flying position and sailed away hardly losing any height. It crossed the moat and floated on, finally to disappear in the trees beyond.

‘How’s that!’ exclaimed Ginger.

‘Jolly good.’

‘If I warp the port wing a fraction in the next one it should land near the track through the wood. Let’s carry on. We might as well use all the paper we have.’

Bertie grinned. ‘They’ll think there’s been a bally paper-chase.’

‘So much the better.’

The work went on for some time and several models were launched, some with the messages printed on them; but the exercise was brought to an end by the sound of voices and footsteps outside the door. Ginger just had time to scrape together the discarded scraps of paper and stuff them in his pocket when the door was opened and Clarence, followed by his brother, walked in.

‘Well—well, so here we are,’ greeted Lord Malboise affably. ‘Good day to you, gentlemen. I trust you have been well looked after and found everything to your liking?’

‘Never mind about that,’ returned Bertie, stiffly. ‘How long are you going to keep us here?’

‘That’s really up to you,’ was the reply, spoken without a trace of malice or hostility. ‘In fact, that’s really what I’ve come to talk to you about.’

‘What are we to take that to mean?’

‘I’m going to put a proposition to you.’

‘We’re listening,’ Ginger said coldly.

‘Well, let me put it like this,’ went on Lord Malboise, smoothly. ‘My instinct tells me you are both gentlemen of honour who, having given their word would not break it. To put it plainly, I am prepared to trust you. Will you promise, if I set you free with my blessing, that you will go away, never return, and say nothing of what you know to your superiors.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ Bertie said, with affected incredulity.

‘But of course. I was never more serious in my life.’

‘Then your instinct has failed you. Your offer is an insult.’

Lord Malboise shook his head sadly. ‘Believe me I’m sincere when I say I am grieved that you should take that attitude. You realize you are putting me in an awkward position.’

‘What’s so difficult about it?’

‘The alternative, which I find distasteful. It must be evident to you that it would be foolish of me to turn you loose to continue your activities against me, which, if successful, would ruin all my plans for the future.’

‘They’ll be ruined anyway. It’s only a matter of time. What is the alternative?’

‘I shall have to shoot you, or as I cannot stand the sight of blood myself, have you shot. My men here are not so squeamish. With the moat conveniently at hand there would be no difficulty in your final disposal. I am sorry to have to put the matter so bluntly, but you leave me no choice. This is no time to mince words.’

‘I agree, and the answer is still no,’ replied Bertie. ‘And when I say that you can take it I am speaking for both of us.’

‘What did I tell you?’ murmured Clarence softly.

His brother ignored the gibe. ‘What a pity,’ he went on. ‘Two nice young fellows like you, it seems tragic that you should throw away your lives for no useful purpose. Would you be interested in a sum of money, a sum large enough to enable you to retire in comfort should your conscience worry you?’

‘No.’

‘You’re sure you won’t change your minds, so that we could part as friends and not as enemies?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘You know what we have been doing, and why. Don’t you find it excusable?’

‘No.’

‘Very well, then. As we don’t see eye to eye there is no point in prolonging this conversation. It seemed to me I was giving you a fair chance. Some men would call that weakness on my part. We can’t both win, and as the choice is mine I’m afraid you’ll have to be the losers. However, there is no particular urgency. I will give you twenty-four hours to think things over. You will still be here tomorrow. Until then, goodbye.’

With that Lord Malboise left the room followed by his brother. The door closed. The key turned in the lock.

After the sound of footsteps had retreated Ginger looked at Bertie and said: ‘Do you really think he means that?’

‘I’m quite sure of it,’ answered Bertie. ‘Behind all that blah talk there is a villain. The chip he has on his shoulder has affected his brain.’

‘He can’t be as bad as all that,’ rejoined Ginger. ‘At least he gave us a chance. There was no need for that. There was no reason why he shouldn’t

have bumped us off here and now. I can see his point. It's either him or us and he's the one in a position to call the tune.'

'Don't let him fool you,' replied Bertie. 'He's a crook, and I wouldn't trust him the length of a foot ruler. Even if we gave our word to pack up, there would be nothing to prevent him, or his henchmen, from knocking us off—if you see what I mean.'

'I'm not sure that I agree with you,' answered Ginger. 'It doesn't make sense. If he intended to do us in there was no reason why he should have come here with a proposition. He could have done it anyway.'

'Have it your way, old boy. It isn't worth arguing about.'

Ginger sighed. 'So it looks as if our only chance now is Biggles.'

'I think that just about hits the nail on the boko,' agreed Bertie. 'And if he's going to do anything about us, he'll have to be quick off the mark. How about making some more little planes? We've another message now. Twenty-four hours is the deadline.'

'We've no more paper,' Ginger said.

'Then it looks as if we shall just have to sit here and tell each other funny stories,' concluded Bertie.

'I'm not feeling in the least funny at the moment,' Ginger said, biting.

The atmosphere in the room might have been less chilly had the occupants known that Biggles, at that very moment, was surveying the château from the recesses of the wood beyond the moat. But of course they were not to know that, and could hardly be expected to imagine it.

CHAPTER 14

SURPRISES

IT will be remembered that we left Biggles and Algy in the wood overlooking the château watching the departure of Marcel. They sat there for some time until, with the sun going down and nothing to engage their interest, Algy came out with: 'Isn't it time we did something?'

'Do what, exactly?'

'Well, make a move.'

'What can we do?'

'It isn't like you to just sit on your backside and do nothing.'

'The circumstances are unusual,' Biggles pointed out. 'There's something in the old saying, when in doubt do nothing. It's no use knocking on the front door hoping they'd let us in. And we certainly couldn't break in if we tried, which would be taking the law into our own hands, anyway. The windows are either too small or they're barred, and it would need a battering ram to knock that massive door off its hinges. And if by some miracle we did get inside, then what? Even supposing Bertie and Ginger are there, and we've no actual proof that they are, how are we going to find them in what must be a labyrinth of rooms and corridors? No doubt they'll be locked up or they wouldn't stay. At this stage I think our best plan is to lie low and watch for something to happen. If it does we might see an opportunity for action.'

'And if nothing happens?'

'Don't ask awkward questions. Something is bound to happen if we have the patience to wait long enough.'

'It'll soon be getting dark.'

'Lights in the place, or coming and going, might tell us something,' Biggles went on. 'If you're bored there's no need for you to stay here. One pair of eyes should be enough to see anything that goes on. I suggest you take a walk as far as the village and top your stomach up with something to eat. Whatever happens we can't do without food, and it's some time since we had any; and by the way things are going to we may be here for some time yet.'

‘What about you?’

‘I shan’t leave here. You can bring me something when you come back—anything, a sandwich or a bite of bread and cheese. At the moment I’m too preoccupied to be particular about what I eat. You could also bring me a packet of cigarettes. Any sort will do. I’m nearly out. You push along. You’ll find me here when you come back. If I’m not here you’ll know something has happened, in which case you’ll have to do what you think best.’

‘Okay, if you say so. See you later.’ With some reluctance Algy got up and walked away in the direction of the village.

In a matter of minutes Biggles was startled to hear him coming back; and rapid footsteps suggested haste. Algy arrived running. ‘They’re inside,’ he announced, breathlessly.

‘That’s what we supposed.’

‘Now we know for certain.’

‘Why are you suddenly so sure?’

‘Take a look at this!’ Algy held out a scrap of paper shaped like an aeroplane. ‘You realize what it is? More than once you’ve had to stop Ginger playing about with these things in the office.’

Biggles leapt to his feet. ‘Of course I know what it is. Where did you get it?’

‘I found it under the trees. As I came back I picked up another. There seems to be something written on it. Under the trees it was too dark for me to read.’

‘This *must* be Ginger’s work,’ declared Biggles, taking the miniature plane. ‘I can’t imagine anyone else playing this sort of game. If this was launched from the house it must have been from pretty high up, or it would never have got as far as this.’ Biggles moved to a position where there was a little more light and read aloud: ‘S.O.S. Urgent. Top turret west wing. What’s on the other paper?’ He held out a hand for it.

Algy said, ‘It’s in block capitals so I could read it. Just B AND G, which I take to mean Bertie and Ginger.’

‘This is better,’ Biggles said tersely. ‘Now we have something definite to work on. I don’t like the word urgent. It can only mean they’re in a tight spot.’

‘Then we’d better do something quickly.’

‘Yes, but what? Wait a minute. Let’s not get excited. This needs thinking about. We can’t crack open that castle of a place single-handed. And we’re

not at home. This is France, where we have no official authority. We shall have to be careful what we get up to. What a pity Marcel had to leave us. We shall have to call on him for help.'

'That's going to take time.'

'I realize that, but I don't see how we can manage without him.'

'He may not even have got to Paris yet.'

'Unfortunately he didn't tell us what train he was catching, but I don't suppose he'd know until he got to the station. If he had to wait any length of time for a train you might just catch him. He said he'd leave us his car. He wouldn't take a slow train if by waiting he could pick up an express, one of the through trains from the north coast to Paris. You go to the village and make inquiries. See what you can make of it. I leave it to you. If all else fails you might phone his headquarters in Paris, and if you can't get hold of him, leave a message for as soon as he comes in. Say we need him here immediately. It's vital. Get on with it. I won't move from here till you get back.'

'Okay. See you.' Algy departed at the double.

Left alone, and worried now, Biggles resumed his seat on the fallen tree, lit one of his few remaining cigarettes and prepared to wait. With the shadows lengthening the big building in front of him looked even more forbidding, a place that had gathered many ugly secrets in its long life. Naturally he found himself wondering what conditions were like inside, and the circumstances that had caused Ginger to put such a suggestion of urgency in his airborne message. But speculation was of course futile. Perhaps it was as well that he didn't know, or he would have been even more disturbed in his mind.

Time dragged on. Twilight fell slowly to give way to dusk. It was then that he was brought to the alert by the appearance of a light in the room on which he had concentrated his attention: the top room in the west turret. He could just discern bars silhouetted against the light. For an instant the light was partly blocked out by a shadow as if someone had passed between it and the window.

He watched intently. The shadow appeared again, but this time it filled the windows as if it was being done deliberately. This lasted only for a moment. Again it happened. But now the blackout lasted longer. When the whole process was repeated it did not take him long to perceive a definite pattern. The long and short exposures were the dots and dashes of the Morse Code. Someone inside was signalling, and there was never any doubt in

Biggles' mind as to who it was. Thanks to the model plane he knew who was in the room. He read the message. It was a repetition of the same thing. *Mayday*. The international call sign of an aircraft in distress or in urgent need of help. Once the signal changed to the simple dots and dashes of S.O.S., which was equally significant.

Biggles fidgeted with impatience and frustration because there was nothing he could do about it, and single-handed it would be futile to try. To make the situation more irritating he had no means of returning the signal to show that it had been received and understood; or what was even more important, to reveal his presence there. He could imagine either Bertie or Ginger standing at the window using a jacket as a shield to make the dots and dashes, the long and short strokes, of which the Code consists. Once or twice he actually saw a figure at the window, but was unable to make out which of them it was. Not that it mattered very much. Obviously they would be working together.

Then he remembered something, and could have kicked himself for not thinking of it earlier. The Auster. If it had not been moved, and he did not think it had or he would have heard the sounds, it should still be where he had last seen it, and that was not far away. But it was not the machine in which he was so suddenly interested. There should be, in the pocket of the cockpit if it had not been taken away, an emergency hand torch. Was there time to fetch it before Algy returned? He did not want to be absent when that happened, or Algy would be at a complete loss to know what to do. He resolved to risk it, and set off at the fastest pace possible in the circumstances. He realized that the trip was not going to be easy, for it was now almost pitch-dark and the ground was still strange to him. To become lost now would be fatal.

However, he reached his objective and saw to his relief that the Auster was still there. Now the question was, had the machine been searched and the torch removed? It took only a moment to ascertain that it was still there in its usual place. With it in his hand he was on the point of starting on the return journey when a figure stepped out of the shadows and accosted him. It might be more correct to say challenged him, for there was a note of authority in the voice that ordered him to stop.

Biggles switched on the torch. The light fell on a stalwart figure in uniform in the act of taking a pistol from the holster on his belt. It was the village police officer, who now demanded to be told what he was doing. Biggles provided the answer briefly because he was anxious to get back to the rendezvous with Algy. He simply said the aircraft was his and he wanted

the torch to send a signal. Naturally, the gendarme wanted to know why, and to whom. Evidently he was suspicious, as he had every reason to be. This meant that Biggles, fuming with impatience, had to explain that two British police officers were being held prisoners in the château. They were making signals to which he wanted to reply. That was why he needed the torch. He made it clear of course that he himself was a police officer, although he did not wear uniform.

‘I will come with you,’ offered the gendarme. He went on to say that he suspected from the arrival of Monsieur Brissac from Paris that something was happening and he thought he had better keep an eye on the plane, about which of course he knew, to make sure no one interfered with it.

Biggles didn’t really want him, thinking he might be in the way, but he raised no objection. The man was only doing his duty efficiently.

On the return journey to the rendezvous the gendarme said, ‘If your comrades are prisoners in the château, why can’t you fetch them out?’

Biggles answered, somewhat shortly, that he hoped to do that, but the place was locked and he couldn’t get in.

They reached the rendezvous to find that Algy had not yet returned. There was no light in the turret window: Biggles now had to explain that he had sent a friend to get in touch with Paris for help.

‘You should have sent for me,’ said the gendarme.

‘What could you do about it?’ inquired Biggles.

‘You want to get in, *m’sieur*?’

‘Of course I want to get in. My friends inside are in danger. But how is it possible to get in? That is why I must wait for help.’

‘But if you want to get in, *m’sieur*, this is simple.’

Biggles stared. ‘*Comment?*’

‘There is a way under the ground. *Un passage souterrain.*’

This of course was a possibility that had not occurred to Biggles. ‘How do you know?’ he asked.

The gendarme explained that during the war he was the leader of the local French Resistance, and that the château was used as a place to hide, and wait, when there was to be *droppage*.^[B] His brother, who had once worked in the château, had shown them the *passage souterrain* as a way to escape if ever they found themselves trapped by the Germans.

[B] The operation of receiving arms by air, usually by parachute, at a certain spot and at a certain time, from England, was known to the Resistance workers as a *droppage*. They had to be on the spot to collect the weapons.

‘But I don’t want to get out. I want to get in,’ Biggles said.

‘It is the same thing, *monsieur*. If one can go one way one can go the other way,’ said the gendarme with simple logic. ‘Come. I show you.’

He led the way into the heart of the wood where the undergrowth was thick. ‘The passage ends in there,’ he said, pointing. ‘It is hidden by some stones. It is old and wet and dirty, with things that live in the dark. But they do not bite,’ he added comfortingly. ‘Shall we go in?’

Now Biggles hesitated. Should he go in, or wait for Algy and possibly Marcel? It was a knotty problem. Here was a slice of luck he could not have anticipated, but there were difficulties in taking advantage of it. There were risks the helpful gendarme would not be able to appreciate unless he was told the whole story. If Algy returned and he was not there, not knowing what had happened he would be at a loss to know what to do, and in his anxiety might do something fatal to the enterprise. Prudence counselled that it would be better to wait. Anyhow, as far as Biggles was aware there was no call for immediate action.

‘First I will try to send a message to my friends inside to let them know that I am here,’ he told the gendarme.

‘As you wish,’ said the policeman with a shrug.

They returned to the fallen tree. There was still no sign of Algy, although it was really too early to expect him back considering what he had to do. The château was in complete darkness. Nothing showed in the turret room. Biggles flashed his torch two or three times, but there was no answer. Had Bertie and Ginger been moved, he wondered, or had they given up and gone to sleep?

He settled down to wait and watch. ‘You needn’t stay if you have other things to do,’ he told his amiable companion.

‘I will stay,’ decided the gendarme. ‘You may need my help.’

Biggles thought this was more than likely.

The policeman volunteered the information that his name was Antoine. Antoine Charlot.

Biggles made a mental note of it and returned the compliment by giving his own.

CHAPTER 15

THE PASSAGE

It was getting on for four o'clock in the morning, with the first tinge of grey dawn creeping out of the eastern horizon, when Algy appeared; by which time Biggles was slumped with his head between his hands from sheer weariness and his companion was sound asleep. However, hearing Algy approaching—at least, he hoped it was him—he rose to meet him. ‘What luck?’ he questioned anxiously, for upon the answer would so much depend.

‘Not good, I’m afraid,’ reported Algy, sinking down on the log. ‘Strewth! What a night I’ve had. And after all my sweat I didn’t manage to make personal contact with Marcel. Who’s this with you?’

‘The village cop. He’s on our side. I’ll tell you about him in a minute. Tell me what happened. What have you done and what’s the position now?’

‘One at a time,’ pleaded Algy. ‘Let me get my breath. I’ve been rushing about non-stop since I left you. I went to the village. There I learned that Marcel could only catch a slow train to Amiens, the nearest station where he could pick up the Paris express. As you know it stops there. Using his car, which he had left for us as he promised, I tore off hoping I might catch him. The train had just left. So I got on the phone to Amiens hoping I might catch him there. It was too late. The train was just pulling out of the station. All this, I may tell you, took time. So there was only one thing left for me to do. It was no use me trying to race the train to Paris. All I could do was ring Marcel’s office in Paris and leave a message to be handed to him the moment he came in. I said it was vital that he should return here immediately as we now had definite information.’

‘Did he get the message?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t wait. I thought it was time I started back here. I had a long way to go. That’s all I can tell you. I had to leave it at that. I put your name to the message. Marcel should get it. The man I spoke to at the *Sûreté* sounded like an intelligent fellow. What’s happened here? Where did this chap pop up from?’

‘I found him guarding the Auster. I went to fetch the torch if it hadn’t been pinched. Someone in the top turret room started to send out an S.O.S.;

and I wanted to let him know we were here, I had to assume it was either Bertie or Ginger. In the dark I couldn't tell. I thought the torch would help me to find out, but by the time I got back here with it the light was out and I haven't seen it since.'

'So what do we do? It'll be hours before Marcel can get here whether he comes by road or by train, even if he gets my message.' Algy sounded depressed.

'We can either wait or we can barge into the château right away and attempt a rescue,' Biggles said.

Algy stared. 'What are you talking about? Barge in? How?'

'My friend here says he knows of an underground passage. It seems as if he was in the Resistance during the war when the place was used as a hideout.'

'Then what are we waiting for?'

'I was waiting for you to come back to tell me the position with Marcel. We have no authority here in France to force our way in anywhere. He has. Besides, for all we know there may be a dozen men in the house. I was in no condition to take on a mob single-handed, or even with the help of my friend here. His name, by the way, is Antoine Charlot.'

'Does he know the way to the turret if we did get inside?'

Biggles put the question. Antoine said he did.

'Have you ever been up to it?' asked Biggles.

Antoine said he hadn't, but he could see no difficulty about that.

Biggles had to accept this, although he was not too happy about it. But it was not the time to raise doubts or difficulties.

Algy came in again. 'If we're going to wait here for Marcel, it may mean sitting here all day tomorrow,' he pointed out gloomily.

'Let's hear what Antoine thinks about it,' suggested Biggles.

By this time of course Antoine was wide awake, having been awakened by the voices. He had listened to the conversation, but as it had naturally been in English, how much of it he had understood was another matter. That would depend on how well he spoke English. Up to now Biggles had only spoken to him in French. He now asked him if he understood what they had been talking about.

It turned out that he spoke very little English, only what he had picked up from British soldiers during the war, and that, as Biggles observed dryly, was not likely to be very helpful. So he had to go over the story again in

French to make the situation absolutely clear. At the finish he asked Antoine what he thought they had better do. Would he come with them if they decided to go into the house by using the underground passage?

Antoine considered the proposal. He decided he would probably be exceeding his duties if he did, but he could see no harm in doing a little quiet exploring. He admitted it was many years since he had seen the tunnel, so anything could have happened to it in the meantime. It might have collapsed, or perhaps been blocked up.

‘That’s a charming thought,’ put in Algy.

Biggles said to Antoine. ‘We know our friends are inside and we know exactly where they are. That should make things easier.’

‘You say the men who own the château now are crooks and robbers?’ queried Antoine.

‘Yes.’

‘So we can expect them to fight us.’

‘If they catch us inside, without a doubt,’ Biggles had to admit. ‘They may have much stolen property, brought from England, we think, by helicopter.’

‘I have sometimes seen this helicopter,’ Antoine said thoughtfully. ‘I ask myself, what is it doing?’

‘Now I have told you,’ replied Biggles. ‘If we recover some of the money you will get promotion. If we find nothing we shall all get the cane for breaking in.’

‘We will go in,’ declared Antoine. He chuckled. ‘*Alors!* This will be like the exciting days of the war. *Tiens!* What days they were. I will show you the way, *messieurs.*’

So they set off on what was going to be a hazardous operation, Biggles with some trepidation, not on account of the danger, but because he knew that if it failed, for taking the law into their own hands they would come in for more criticism than thanks; from both sides of the Channel. Also he felt a little conscious that it was wrong of him to lead the friendly Antoine into such an adventure. Had he known that Bertie and Ginger were virtually under sentence of death it would have been a different matter. Then he would not have hesitated for a moment. But he did not know that, even though the signals had indicated that the situation was serious and urgent. Algy had said that he could not imagine men like Lord Malboise and his brother stooping to murder; but in view of what they had at stake he was not so confident of this. Considering what Bertie and Ginger now must know

they would not be released, at all events for a long time, that was certain. Which was another reason why, although he knew they were overstepping their authority, Biggles felt that what they proposed to do was the only answer to their problem, even if now it was largely a personal one.

With Antoine leading the way they went to the thicket and in due course reached the entrance to the tunnel. Biggles fully expected to find it blocked up. It was, by some slabs of moss-covered rocks. Antoine made light of these by casting them to one side to reveal a yawning black hole in the ground. 'That's it,' he said cheerfully. 'Enter, *monsieur*.'

Biggles now took the lead because he held the torch. He went to the hole and lowered himself into it to be greeted by the stench of wet earth, decaying vegetation and general corruption. He took a few paces and then waited for the others to join him, giving them the benefit of the light he held.

The journey through the tunnel was an experience not easily to be forgotten. The ex-Resistance man had said it was bad, and it was. It was worse. There may be something romantic in medieval history about an underground escape route. But romantic was the last adjective Algy would have applied to this one. Or Biggles, for that matter. He was anything but happy at what they were doing. This was not watching a play on television when the viewer knows, no matter how desperate the situation, everything will come right at the end. This was cold hard fact, and he was by no means sure of the outcome. Anything could happen, and it was more likely to be all wrong than all right.

The tunnel was a horror. It was narrow. The floor was slush. The walls were coated with evil-smelling slime and water dripped from the roof just over their heads, presumably seeping from the moat. In places they had to stoop. At first the floor sloped steadily downwards, and at the lowest point they had to wade knee deep in water. After that the incline was upwards.

Algy's thoughts were hardly less dismal than the passage. He wondered what they would encounter at the other end. The exit might have been bricked up or finish behind an obstruction through which no opening could be found. They might not even reach the far end. The tunnel could have collapsed, in which case they would have no alternative than to retrace their steps, the operation having been a waste of time and effort and a very nasty one at that. No doubt Biggles' thoughts were running on the same lines, but he did not express them.

It looked as if their fears were justified when they were finally brought to a halt by a flat wooden barrier. But Antoine knew what to do. He stepped forward, and after groping about found what must have been some sort of

handhold to provide a grip. Now without difficulty he was able to move what was evidently a sliding panel in the woodwork to provide a narrow aperture. Through this they squeezed to find themselves in a vault, a sort of ante-room of a much larger chamber. Here Antoine raised a warning hand and they stopped to listen. There was not a sound apart from their own heavy breathing. The place had the atmosphere of a sepulchre.

Antoine must have seen all this before, for taking the torch from Biggles he moved forward confidently and beckoned the others to follow. They could now see the size of the place in which they had arrived. It was a great stone hall in the manner of a church. It could have been the entrance hall. As Antoine swept the walls with the torch and allowed the light to rest for a moment on a heavy door, they realized that was in fact what it was. They were inside the château. There was another pause to listen. Not a sound. Algy would have expected to find someone on guard, but apparently one was not considered necessary at such an hour. Antoine would have gone on, but Biggles restrained him. 'Just a minute. When I first put on uniform I was taught that a wise soldier always keeps an eye on his rear for a possible line of retreat. Wait.' He took the torch and walked quickly but quietly to the big double entrance doors. He was pleased to see inset in one of them a small accommodation door to save opening the big ones. The key was in the lock. It scraped with an alarming amount of noise as he turned it. There were also two bolts, one at the top, the other at the bottom. He drew them. Satisfied that the door would open he returned to the others. 'It wouldn't surprise me if we have to leave here in a hurry,' he explained with grim humour. 'I'd rather not go through that stinking rabbit-hole again.' He returned the torch to Antoine. 'Lead on. You know the way.'

Antoine advanced. Keeping close to the wall he followed it round presently to pull up at a narrow stone stairway that spiralled upwards. '*Voilà messieurs,*' he said in a hoarse whisper that echoed round the high ceiling like the sighs of a lost soul. 'To the turret.'

'*Ssh!* Not so loud,' requested Biggles. 'I will go first.' Again he took the torch and began to mount the steps.

They spiralled anti-clockwise, from right to left, as is usual in ancient buildings. There is a good reason for this. Defence. A swordsman guarding the steps would have his right arm free from obstructions to use his sword, whereas a man with a similar weapon coming up would find his sword arm impeded by the elbow coming in contact with the wall.

Without being challenged they reached a landing where a narrow window allowed a little grey light to enter from outside where dawn was

breaking. After a short pause to listen they went on up to a second landing exactly the same as the first. Two more of these, it was reckoned, should take them to the fourth floor and their objective. It began to look as if they would reach it without trouble. The only question then was whether they would be able to get into the room where there was reason to suppose Bertie and Ginger were confined.

Hopes were squashed as they paused for breath on the third landing. From somewhere below came first a shout and then the rumble of men's voices, distorted by the echoing walls.

‘Stand still,’ breathed Biggles.

CHAPTER 16

THE LAST STAND

EVERYONE on the small landing stood still, nerves taut, listening.

The tread of footsteps on the stone floor of the great hall below was now joined by a confused murmur of voices, as if the men talking were moving about. For a time it was impossible to hear what was being said; nor was it possible to judge the number of men engaged. Then, during a break in the general conversation, a voice said clearly, speaking in French: 'Where is this draught coming from?' After another pause a more distant voice answered: 'In here.' Another silence, except footsteps. Then a different voice, apparently a new arrival, speaking with a crisp note of authority, demanded to be told what was happening. Someone answered: 'We think there is somebody in the house, *monsieur*.'

Biggles had to make up his mind quickly on what action to take. Obviously it could only be a question of time before they were discovered. 'You stay here while I go on to find the boys,' he ordered. 'Don't make a sound. But if they come up the stairs you'll have to do your best to stop them.'

'If we stay here we shall be in a trap,' said Algy.

'It looks as if we're in one already,' returned Biggles grimly.

'*Entendu*,' murmured Antoine, drawing his pistol.

'No shooting unless you have to,' requested Biggles.

He went on up the stairs, what he thought must be the final flight. In this he was correct. He came to a landing. There were no more steps. Daylight slanted through a narrow slit of a window giving him ample light to see his surroundings without using the torch. He put it in his pocket to leave both hands free.

There was only one door leading off the landing, so there was no question of choice. It looked heavy, and clearly was very old, for it was studded with iron nails. For a few seconds Biggles gazed at it in dismay. Then, to his great relief and satisfaction he saw a big iron key hanging from a hook on the doorpost. Surely it could only be the one for the door! In a moment it was in his hand and in the keyhole. It scraped as he turned it. The

door creaked as he pushed it wide open, to see Bertie and Ginger sitting up in bed, staring as if they had been asleep and awakened by his entrance. They were fully dressed except for their shoes which lay on the floor.

‘Biggles!’ cried Ginger. ‘Brother, am I glad to see you! How—’

‘Don’t talk now,’ cut in Biggles. ‘Jump to it. We’ve got to get out of here fast and it may not be easy. It’s known we’re in the house.’

The prisoners needed no further urging. They sprang from their beds reaching for their shoes. ‘Lead on, old boy,’ said Bertie. ‘You’ve arrived in the jolly old nick of time, whatever a nick may be—if you see what I mean. They were going to shoot us today and dump us in that beastly moat,’ he added, pulling on his shoes.

Biggles stared. ‘You don’t mean that!’

‘Too true, chaps. That’s what the blighters said.’

‘But why shoot you?’

Ginger answered. ‘Because we wouldn’t play ball with them. Today was the deadline.’

‘Who do you mean by them?’

‘The noble lord, no less, and his perishing brother.’

‘Are they here?’

‘I imagine so. They were here yesterday. How did you work the oracle to get in?’

‘Never mind that. The problem now is to get out. Come on. Don’t make a noise.’

They all hurried down to the lower landing to find the others still standing there in silence. A low buzz of voices came up from below.

‘Anything happened?’ questioned Biggles tersely.

Algy answered. ‘Not a thing. I think they’ve been looking for us. Now they seem to be talking about it.’

Biggles listened. ‘They’re still in the hall. They’ll come up here next. I reckoned on leaving by the front door, but we can’t get to it without them seeing us.’

‘What about the tunnel?’

‘Same thing applies. We can’t get to it without being seen. Anyhow, I don’t want to go through that filthy hole again.’

‘You’ve got Marcel’s gun.’

‘We’ll avoid shooting if we can. Shooting’s almost bound to mean one of us being hit. That won’t help matters. This is no time or place for casualties.’

‘What the devil could have roused them?’ muttered Algy.

‘We may have triggered off a burglar alarm, although I wouldn’t have expected to find one here.’

‘I don’t see why not considering what’s been going on here. Come to think of it, while you were away I thought I heard the tinkle of a bell in the distance.’

‘That must have been it.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘Wait here for a minute to see what they do next, but I can guess what that will be. It won’t be long before they realize we must be up here. Or they’ll come up to see if the prisoners are safe. I wonder if they’ve discovered the front door has been unlocked. If we have to make a bolt we may have to depend on it.’ This conversation had been carried on in whispers. ‘*Ssh!* I fancy someone’s on the way up the steps now.’

They waited. What Biggles had said was soon confirmed. Footsteps came nearer. The head of a man appeared, instantly to be withdrawn when he saw the party standing on the landing. Footsteps retreated quickly.

‘That’s done it,’ muttered Biggles. ‘But it was bound to happen,’ he added.

Antoine spoke. ‘I know that man who came up. He lives near. His name is Gaston Marow. He was with me in the Resistance. I will go down and talk to him.’

‘He’s in a different sort of Resistance now,’ replied Biggles grimly. ‘Don’t be in a hurry. If you go down you’re likely to get yourself shot. Stay here. When we go down we’ll all go together. Let’s hear what they have to say.’

‘I have a pistol.’ Antoine tapped his holster.

‘But I understand you are only allowed to use it in self-defence.’

‘That is true, *m sieur*.’

‘I have a pistol, too, one that Monsieur Brissac lent me. But for all we know there may be six men down there.’

‘They wouldn’t dare to shoot at me.’

‘I wouldn’t count on that,’ returned Biggles. ‘These are now desperate men. If we tried rushing them, one of us would almost certainly be hurt. We

don't want that to happen. Wait.'

While this conversation had been going on a buzz of conversation had floated up the stairs.

'They're doing what we're doing, talking about it,' Biggles said. 'There is this about it. If we can't go down they daren't come up.'

Then came a voice from below, loudly and clearly as if the speaker was already on the stairs. It said, in English: 'Come on down. We know you're up there.'

'Come and fetch us,' taunted Biggles.

'That was dear Clarence; I know his voice,' Bertie said. 'We knew he was here. He came with his noble brother to put a proposition to us. We turned it down. They gave us 24 hours to change our minds. Today we were for the high jump. They're a pair of stinkers.'

Biggles did not answer. He was listening to what was going on below, where there seemed to be a lot of activity. It sounded as if someone was smashing furniture. This stopped and a voice called in English: 'This is your last chance. Are you coming down?'

Biggles answered. 'We'll come if you'll guarantee us a safe conduct to the door.'

'Have it your own way,' came back the voice. 'When we drag you out you'll be red herrings.'

'Red herrings?' queried Ginger in a puzzled voice. 'What's he talking about?'

Nobody answered. But they were soon to know. From below came a sudden crackle. Biggles sniffed as a trickle of smoke came drifting up the stairs. 'So that's it,' he growled. 'They've lit a fire to smoke us out. We shan't be able to stand too much of this. It looks as if we shall have to fight our way out after all,' he added, as a billow of smoke reached the landing.

Ginger coughed and went to the narrow window, through which broad daylight was now pouring in, for fresh air. He looked out, stared and shouted: 'Here's somebody coming!'

Biggles pushed him aside to look. 'It's Marcel,' he cried. 'He's got a couple of men with him. Bless his heart. He's just about in time.' They were now all coughing.

'That's if he can get in,' Algy said.

'He should have no trouble provided no one has discovered the door has been unlocked and relocked it. He'll have seen the smoke. I'd better let him

know where we are.’ Biggles took Marcel’s pistol from his pocket and putting an arm through the window fired three quick shots. Through the smoke he saw the three men stop, look up, and then run on. ‘Everything now depends on whether he will be able to get in,’ he told the others crisply. ‘I’m going down. I’d as soon be shot as smoked like a haddock.’ With his handkerchief held over his mouth and nose he started groping his way down the steps, for the smoke was now too thick for anything to be seen. Antoine followed at his heels and the others fell in behind. They could hear the great door bell jangling, so they knew Marcel must have reached it.

Someone below must have heard them coming down, for a shot was fired. The bullet whistled round the circular wall fortunately without hitting anyone. Biggles returned the shot, firing blindly; there was no further opposition, but there was a sound of running footsteps on the stone-flagged floor of the hall.

Pistol in hand Biggles reached the fire at the bottom of the steps and jumped over it into clear air. He looked round swiftly, then unbelievably, for there was not a soul in sight. He was still standing there, poised ready for action, wondering what could have become of the men, when the small door in the main entrance was flung open and Marcel, pistol in hand, ran in. His two men followed. ‘Where are they?’ he shouted, seeing Biggles.

‘I don’t know. They were here a moment ago.’

‘Seeing the smoke I thought the place was on fire,’ Marcel said.

‘No. They knew we were in the turret. They daren’t come up and we wouldn’t come down, so they were trying to smoke us out. Thanks for coming so quickly. You were just in time. We were in a tight spot.’

‘Where could they have gone? Not through the door, or we would have seen them.’

‘There’s another way out; the way we came in.’ Biggles turned to Antoine. ‘This man Gaston Marow. Did he know of the tunnel?’

‘But of course. He was with me in the Resistance.’

Biggles explained to Marcel. ‘There’s an underground passage into the wood. Antoine knew of it. That’s how we got in.’ As he spoke Biggles strode to the ante-room where the tunnel emerged. He stopped abruptly when from somewhere not far away came a sound they all knew well; the noise of an aircraft engine being started. He dashed to the front door, which had been left open, and looked out. Climbing away from the château into a clouding sky was the helicopter; or *a* helicopter, although there was not much doubt as to whom it belonged. He pointed. ‘There they go! That

machine must have been parked on the roof ready for a quick getaway. When they saw you coming, Marcel, they must have realized that the game was up.'

'Have no fear, we shall catch them,' declared Marcel, watching the departing aircraft disappear into the clouds. 'They cannot get far. I have my plane here, but by the time I get to it they will have gone, and hard to find. From the village I will telephone a signal for all stations to watch for it.'

'You say you've got a plane here!'

'But of course. How else could I have got here so quickly? When I get your message I do not even wait for my coffee. We will have some in the village. We will search this den of animals. Also, I must talk to Antoine. You need not stay. You can go home and leave this business to me.'

'There may still be people in the house.'

'We shall find them.'

'Very well. Perhaps that would be the best thing to do. My Chief will be wondering what has become of me. It's time I went home to report, before he starts looking for me. We will wait for you in the village. While we have some breakfast I will tell you all I know and leave this end for you to clean up. Come on, chaps.'

Biggles set off for the village.

That, really, apart from the usual process of the law, was the end of the strange adventure of a noble lord. Within two hours of having a quick meal in the village with Marcel, the British Air Police officers were on their way back to their own country. Antoine of course having been suitably thanked for his timely assistance.

What Marcel said to Antoine after they had gone they never knew, or what story Antoine told Marcel to account for the fact that not a living soul was found in the château when it was searched. It seemed fairly certain that any men who had been living there had escaped through the tunnel, and Biggles had a suspicion that Antoine may have looked the other way, bearing in mind that one of them at least was an old comrade who had served with him in the perilous days of the Resistance. That would have been understandable and excusable. Once outside the château the fugitives, would not be easy to catch. However, the search revealed a quantity of jewellery, and some of the gold that had been transported to France, hidden in one place or another.

CHAPTER 17

THE FINAL RECKONING

It only remains to be said that in one respect, to Biggles' annoyance, Marcel was wrong. The helicopter was not found, in spite of Marcel's conviction that there would be no difficulty about this. In fact, there was no report of it ever being seen again. Where it went, or what became of it, had to remain a matter for surmise. It certainly did not return to England, at all events not to Brindon Hall, for the first thing Biggles did on landing was to have a close guard put on the place. So where it went had to remain a mystery that up to date has never been solved, although it remained a subject for discussion on both sides of the Channel for some time.

Marcel was of the opinion that having cover in the clouds it had lost its way and running out of petrol, or having engine trouble it had gone down in the sea. Or it may have crashed, as have so many aircraft, in the lonely mountains of the Pyrenees while trying to reach safety in Spain. It might even have reached North Africa where the people in it would probably remain to escape arrest. Antoine's friend, Gaston Marow, may have been on board. Anyway, as far as it is known neither Lord Malboise nor his brother have so far returned to England.

One other matter deserves mention. On landing in England Biggles went straight to his Chief, Air Commodore Raymond, and told him the whole story, as he was bound to. As a result of this a guard from the Yard's Special Branch was sent to Brindon Hall to make a search and keep the house under surveillance, for at this time it was thought that Lord Malboise and his brother would return to their home if only to collect some of their ill-gotten gains. When at the end of a week they had not appeared, a search warrant was issued for the house to be searched thoroughly from end to end. A considerable amount of stolen property, jewellery and the like, and a large sum in Treasury notes, which may or may not have been stolen, but were undoubtedly the profits of criminal activities, found. But of the gold bullion which should have been there, and, indeed, which Biggles was sure was there, there was no trace. It seemed unlikely that it could all have been transported across the Channel.

When Biggles, who had gone to Brindon Hall to examine the building that had housed the helicopter, was given this information by Inspector Gaskin, he was astonished. 'I don't understand it,' he said. 'It must be in the house somewhere,' he declared. 'I know some of the bullion was taken to France because Clarence had the nerve to admit it to Bertie and Ginger. But it couldn't all have gone. Not much was found at the château. Where is it?'

'You tell me,' invited Gaskin, with cold sarcasm. 'If it's buried in the garden or in the park we may never find it, even though we spend months looking for it.'

'Well, it isn't in here.' Biggles jabbed a thumb. 'I've been over every inch of the place.' This conversation took place outside the building in the Park. 'It can't be far away.'

'The stuff that was found in France had been moulded into small bricks. I suppose for easy transport,' volunteered Inspector Gaskin.

'Gold bricks! That rings a bell with me. I've just remembered something. Let's go across.'

They walked over to the house and Biggles led the way to the little terrace where he had taken sherry with Lord Malboise on the occasion of his first visit. After considering the low surrounding wall for a minute he said to his companion. 'Fetch me a hammer. There must be one in the house somewhere.'

'What do you want a hammer for?' asked the Inspector. 'Thinking of doing a little bricklaying, to finish the wall?'

'No. There's just a chance it might be more profitable to try a little demolition work. Fetch me a hammer.'

With a dour smile on his face Gaskin went off, shortly to return with the tool requested. He handed it to Biggles. Without a word Biggles took it and walked to the low, surrounding, whitewashed wall, to the point where it appeared to be unfinished, in that one of the top bricks was missing. With a few blows he loosened the next one. He stooped to pick it up and nearly dropped it. In fact he had to drop the hammer. Using both hands he dropped the brick on the table. 'Feel the weight of that,' he invited.

Inspector Gaskin picked up the brick, and he, too, had to use both hands. 'What the devil—' He looked at Biggles with saucer eyes.

A slow smile spread over Biggles' face as he answered: 'If my guess is right this must be the most expensive piece of brickwork in the country.' Taking out his penknife he cut a nick in the brick. The cut gleamed yellow.

His smile broadened. 'Help yourself,' he said. 'Here it is, in the open for all the world to see. Ready and handy for easy transport.'

Inspector Gaskin was still staring goggle-eyed. For a moment he appeared to grope for words, 'Well I'll go hopping!' he muttered. 'What a way to hide it.'

'Could you think of a better way? I told you these people were clever. The stuff was safer here, under a coat of whitewash, than it would have been in the vaults of a bank.'

The Inspector stuffed some tobacco into his pipe. 'What beats me is, how the devil did you work that one out?'

Biggles grinned. 'It's a gift,' he claimed, with affected modesty. 'Some sort of instinct, maybe. Or else it's my nose. I seem to be able to smell gold from quite a way off. I sometimes think I'm in the wrong job. I should have been a prospector, and made a fortune.'

'You seem to be doing pretty well as it is,' grunted the Inspector. 'Let's go in. We'll have a drink on this.'

It only remains to be said that the discovery of the gold compensated Biggles for what he thought was a failure, or at any rate an unsatisfactory affair, in that the ringleaders had escaped. Being only human, it may have flattered the vanity he often criticized in others, that he had been able to find what the regular police had overlooked, and might never have been found.

Today Brindon Hall, and the building in the Park that once housed the helicopter, stand empty. The fake Zulu no longer stands at the lodge. The entrance gates are locked. The notice-boards advertising the zoo have been taken down, for the animals, for their own good, have been dispersed to other establishments.

The house is likely to be empty for some time, for by law it is still the property of Lord Malboise, and will remain so until his death is proved beyond doubt. When an inventory of the contents was being made Biggles went over it. In a cabinet, gathering dust in the drawing room, he noticed, among other valuable pieces of old French porcelain, the ornament that had provided the first clue to the answer to the riddle.

The question of whether Lord Malboise would have carried out his threat of murder was often discussed. As Biggles remarked, everyone was entitled to his opinion. Bertie and Ginger should be thankful that it had never been put to the test.

To Biggles the case had an unsatisfactory ending; yet in his heart of hearts he found some consolation in the fact that Clarence had not been

taken into custody. A man who had served his country so well during the war deserved a better fate than to spend the best years of his life in prison.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Biggles and the Noble Lord* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]