

BIGGLES FLIES NORTH



CAPT. W. E.
JOHNS



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: Biggles Flies North

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns (1893-1968)

Date first posted: Dec. 21, 2020

Date last updated: Dec. 21, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20201253

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

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/India Libraries.

BIGGLES FLIES NORTH

By

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by

HOWARD LEIGH and WILL NARRAWAY

**GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LEIGHTON HOUSE MELBOURNE**

Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C.4

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS CAPE TOWN

Geoffrey Cumberlege, Publisher to the University

Reprinted 1950

WHOLLY SET UP, PRINTED AND BOUND IN AUSTRALIA
BY THE SPECIALTY PRESS PTY. LTD., AND REGISTERED
AT THE G.P.O., MELBOURNE, FOR TRANSMISSION BY
POST AS A BOOK.

CONTENTS

I. BIGGLES GETS A LETTER	<u>9</u>
II. FORT BEAVER	<u>20</u>
III. A SATISFACTORY TRIP	<u>37</u>
IV. AT THE THREE STAR SALOON	<u>50</u>
V. GINGER GOES SCOUTING.	<u>66</u>
VI. A STAGGERING BLOW	<u>76</u>
VII. THE JUPITER HEADS NORTHWARD	<u>84</u>
VIII. A GRIM ENCOUNTER	<u>92</u>
IX. DOWN IN A FROZEN WORLD	<u>105</u>
X. A DESPERATE MEETING	<u>115</u>
XI. AN UNPLEASANT SHOCK.	<u>126</u>
XII. A ONE-SIDED DUEL	<u>135</u>
XIII. SOUTHWARD AGAIN	<u>146</u>
XIV. AN UNEXPECTED LANDING.	<u>154</u>
XV. UNDER ARREST	<u>162</u>
XVI. GINGER ACTS	<u>173</u>
XVII. A NEW PERIL	<u>182</u>
XVIII. TRAPPED!	<u>197</u>
XIX. A LIFE OR DEATH STRUGGLE	<u>207</u>
XX. LOST	<u>218</u>
XXI. THE PRISONER SPEAKS	<u>232</u>
XXII. AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR.	<u>243</u>
XXIII. CONCLUSION	<u>254</u>

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

[Transcriber Note: Not in the public domain until 2032.]

	PAGE
VERY SLOWLY HE BEGAN CREEPING ALONG BESIDE THE BAR	61
HE STOOD UPRIGHT AND WITH ALL HIS FORCE FLUNG THE HEAVY BOX OUTWARDS AND DOWNWARDS . . .	101
IN A FLASH THE BEAR WAS OVER HIM.	123
WHIPPING OUT HIS REVOLVER, HE COVERED THE THREE AIRMEN MENACINGLY	169
THEY DASHED DOWN THE REAR OF SOME FRAME BUILDINGS	193
CONSPICUOUS AGAINST THE SNOW ON THE ROOF WAS A DARK OBJECT	231

By
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

BIGGLES HITS THE TRAIL
BIGGLES FLIES EAST
BIGGLES & CO.
BIGGLES IN AFRICA
BIGGLES AIR COMMODORE
BIGGLES FLIES WEST
BIGGLES GOES TO WAR
BIGGLES FLIES SOUTH
BIGGLES IN SPAIN
BIGGLES FLIES NORTH
BIGGLES SECRET AGENT
BIGGLES IN THE BALTIC
BIGGLES IN THE SOUTH SEAS
BIGGLES CHARTER PILOT
BIGGLES SEES IT THROUGH
BIGGLES IN BORNEO
BIGGLES IN THE JUNGLE
BIGGLES DEFIES THE SWASTIKA
SPITFIRE PARADE
THE RESCUE FLIGHT

CHAPTER I

BIGGLES GETS A LETTER

BIGGLES was whistling softly as he walked into the breakfast-room of his flat in Mount Street, but he broke off as he reached for the letters lying beside his plate. With the exception of one they all bore halfpenny stamps, suggesting that they contained nothing more interesting than circulars, but the exception was a bulky package with Canadian stamps, while across the top was printed in block letters, 'CONFIDENTIAL. IF AWAY, PLEASE FORWARD.'

'What's Wilks doing in Canada, I wonder?' murmured Algy, from the other side of the table.

Biggles glanced up. 'Been doing a bit of Sherlock Holmes stuff with my correspondence, eh?'

'As I happen to know Wilks's fist, and am able to recognize a Canadian stamp when I see one, I put two and two together,' replied Algy casually.

'Smart work,' Biggles congratulated him, with cheerful sarcasm, as he tore open the flap of the envelope.

'Wilks? Who's Wilks?' Ginger asked Algy. He had finished his breakfast and was sitting by the fire.

'Wilks—or rather, Captain Wilkinson—was a flight commander in 187 Squadron, in France,' answered Algy. 'He was in South America, an officer in the Bolivian Air Force to be precise, when we last saw him,' he added. 'I wonder what sent him up north?' He said no more but winked at Ginger significantly as a frown settled on Biggles's face, a frown that grew deeper as he turned over the pages of the letter.

There was silence for several minutes. 'Your coffee will be stone cold,' observed Algy at last.

Biggles read the letter to the end before laying it on the table beside him and reaching for the toast. 'Poor old Wilks is in a jam,' he said quietly.

'I suspected it from your expression,' returned Algy. 'What's the trouble?'

Biggles drank some coffee and picked up his letter again. 'I'll read it to you, then you'll know as much as I do,' he said. 'Listen to this. He writes on paper headed "Arctic Airways, Fort Beaver, Mackenzie, North-West Territories, Canada."

‘“My dear Biggles,

‘“I am writing this on the off-chance of it reaching you, but knowing all about your nomadic habits I shall be surprised if it does. As you probably remember, letter-writing is not in my line, so you no doubt guessed before you opened this (if ever you do) that things must be pretty sticky. Believe me, they are all that, and more. To come to the point right away, having heard odd rumours of your adventures from time to time in one part of the world or another, it has just struck me that you might not be averse to starting on a fresh one. I do not know whether it is for fun or for profit that you go roaring round the globe; possibly both; but if you hunt adventure for the sake of it, well, old boy, right here I can supply you with the genuine article in unlimited quantities. But make no mistake. This isn’t a kid-glove game for the parlour; it’s knuckle-dusters in the wide open spaces; and I don’t mind telling you that out here the wide open spaces are so wide that you have to fly for a long, long time to get to the other side of them.

‘“Before I start on the real story I may as well say that the odds seem to be against my being alive by the time you get this. If I just disappear, or get wiped out in what looks like a genuine crash, find a fellow named McBain—‘Brindle’ Jake he is called around these parts—and hand him a bunch of slugs from me, as a last service for an old pal.”’

‘By gosh! Things must be pretty grim for old Wilks to write in that strain,’ broke in Algy.

‘Grim is the right word for it,’ broke in Biggles shortly. ‘But don’t interrupt—just listen to this.’

‘“You remember I was in Bolivia a few years ago. Well, there was a change of government, and as I didn’t like the new one—or maybe the new one didn’t like me—I packed my valise and headed north, thinking that the most likely point of the compass where I should find a concern in need of a pilot who had learned to fly by the seat of his pants, and not by these new-fangled instruments. I knocked about the States for a bit without getting fixed up with anything permanent, and ultimately drifted over the border into Canada, which is, I may say, a great country, although I have little to thank it for as yet.

‘“One day I struck lucky—at least, it looked that way to me at the time, although I am not so sure about it now. I got a charter job flying a mining engineer up to some new gold-fields which were then being surveyed. The concern has since been put over in a big way under the title of Moose Creek Gold-fields Corporation—Moose Creek being the name of the locality. You

may have heard tell of the ‘last place on earth’. Well, I can tell you just where it is. Moose Creek. It is well inside the Arctic circle. Why they call it Moose Creek I do not know, for no moose in its right mind—or any other animal, for that matter—would go within a hundred miles of the perishing place. But that’s by the way.

‘“Having got the low-down about these gold-fields, I had one of my rare inspirations. Moose Creek is eight hundred miles north of the nearest rail-head, and the journey, made by canoe in summer and dog-sled during the freeze-up, takes about six weeks’ heavy going. I had saved a bit of money while I was in Bolivia, and it struck me that since there was certain to be a fair amount of traffic to and from the gold-fields, an air-line might be worked up into a paying proposition. I counted on flying up staff, stores, mails, machinery, and so on, and bringing back the gold and the people who would rather ride home than walk eight hundred miles. In an aircraft the journey could be done in a day instead of six weeks. To make a long story as short as possible, I put all my savings into the venture, opening up my own landing-field and shed at Fort Beaver, which is the rail-head. I called it Arctic Airways.

‘“For a year or so it was touch and go. I was just about broke and preparing to pack up when real gold was struck at the Creek. That sent the balloon up. Traffic jumped. Things began to hum, and it looked at last as if all I had ever hoped for had come to pass. I got into the money, and with my profits I bought a second machine. Then, out of the blue—literally, as it happened—came the smack in the eye; one which, I must admit, I wasn’t expecting. Another fellow jumped my claim—the same Brindle Jake that I have already mentioned. It seemed a bit thick after all I had been through, blazing the trail and all that, for some one else to step in and start reaping my harvest. However, it couldn’t be helped, and I decided to make the best of a bad show. I figured it out that there ought to be enough money in the game for two of us, anyway; as it happened, Brindle had his own ideas about that. He decided that two in the game was one too many—and he wasn’t going to be the one to go. From that moment I learned that the gloves were off.

‘“I must explain the position in regard to Fort Beaver Aerodrome. (The one at the other end of my run, Moose Creek, belongs to the gold company, so I have nothing to do with that.) There is only one possible landing-ground within fifty miles of Fort Beaver, and that’s mine. I bought the land off a fellow named Angus Stirling, who had decided that he preferred prospecting for gold to farming. I paid him cash, whereupon he headed north with his traps and hasn’t been seen since. I cleared the ground, put up a shed, and the

land became Fort Beaver landing-field. There was never any question about the title of the land until recently; every one in Fort Beaver regarded it as mine until one day a bunch of toughs rolled up, and, in spite of my protests, without paying a cent, or so much as a by-your-leave, built a larger shed than mine on the edge of my field. A couple of days later two Weinkel Twelve transport planes landed, and out stepped Brindle Jake and his two pilots, Joe Sarton, a tall chap, good-looking in a rugged sort of way, and 'Tex' Ferroni, a slim, dark little fellow who looks—as, indeed, his name suggests—as if he came from one of the Latin states. McBain himself is a big, broad-shouldered bloke, with odd patches of grey in his hair and beard. That's how he gets his nickname, I am told. A half-breed French-Canadian named Jean Chicot trails about after him like a dog, and I've got my own idea as to *his* real job. I reckon he's McBain's bodyguard. Naturally, I asked Brindle what was the big idea, and you can guess my surprise when he calmly told me to clear off the land. I can't go into details now, but for the first time I learned that there was some doubt as to the title of the land I had bought off Stirling. For some extraordinary reason which I don't understand there seems to be no record of his having paid the Government for it. Anyway, the record has not yet been found, although, being so far away from the Record Office, correspondence is a slow business. He—that is, Stirling—told me that he got the land for a nominal figure under a settler's grant, but it looks to me as if he forgot to register it—or forget to collect the transfer. The fact remains he didn't give it to me, which was, I suppose, my own fault, for it went clean out of my head. I'm afraid I'm a bit careless in these matters. I took his word for it that it was O.K. There is this about it, though. If I don't own the land, neither does Brindle, although he tries to bluff me that he does.

‘“He started operating to Moose Creek right away. I flew up and saw the traffic manager of the gold-fields company, a decent little fellow named Canwell, and lodged a complaint, but it did not get me very far. Canwell's point is—and I suppose he is right—he is only concerned with getting his stuff to the rail-head, and he doesn't care two hoots who takes it as long as it goes, or as long as he gets efficient service. He was born and bred in the north, and he as good as told me that in this country it is up to a fellow to work out his own salvation. If he hasn't the gumption to do that—well, it's his own funeral. That was that.

‘“I got my first ideas of Brindle's methods when, a day or two later, one of my machines shed its wing just after it had taken off; yet I'd stake my life that that machine was airworthy the night before because I went over it myself. Brindle or his men tampered with it, I'm certain, but of course I

can't prove anything. The pilot, a nice chap named Walter Graves, was killed. I bought another machine and hired another pilot. Two days after taking delivery the machine went up in flames during the night. My new pilot was 'got at' by the other side, and had the wind put up him so much that he packed up. I've no money to buy another machine. The one I have left is a Rockheed freighter which I fly myself. I sleep in it—with a gun in my hand—but I can't stand the strain much longer. One by one my boys have left me, scared by Brindle's threats, so that I have to do my own repairs. That's how things stand at present. Brindle is operating two machines and is gradually wearing me down. I've been nearly killed two or three times by 'accident'. Brindle wants the aerodrome and my shed. I've told him he'll only get 'em over my dead body—and that isn't bluff.

“The fact is, old lad, it goes against the grain to be run out of the territory by a low-down grafter. I'm fighting a lone hand, for the 'Mounties'^[1] have other things to do besides interfering in what, to them, is a business squabble. With one man whom I could rely on absolutely, to take turn and turn about with me, I believe I could still beat Brindle and his toughs. The trouble is, I daren't leave the place; if did, I'd never get back; Brindle would see to that. Meanwhile, I'm hanging on. I'm in this up to the neck and I'm going to see it through to the last turn of the prop. It isn't just the money that matters now; I won't be jumped out by a crooked skunk. That's all. If you want a spot of real flying, flying with the lid off, step right across and give me a hand to keep the old flag flying. We did a job or two together in the old days. Let's do one more. All the best to Algy (remember that first E.A. he shot down? The laugh was certainly on you that time).

Yours ever,
WILKS.”

[1] North-West Mounted Police.

Biggles's face was set in hard lines as he tossed the letter on the table and picked up the envelope, to examine the postmark.

‘How long ago was it posted?’ asked Algy.

‘Nine days.’

‘Anything could have happened in that time.’

‘I was just thinking the same thing.’

‘What are you going to do?’ put in Ginger, looking from one to the other.

‘That remains to be seen,’ replied Biggles curtly. ‘For the moment we are just going to Fort Beaver as fast as we can get there. Algy, ring up and find out when the next boat sails. Ginger, pass me that directory. I’ll send a few cables. We shall want a machine waiting for us when we land—with the props ticking over. If I can get the machine I want we’ll show that blighter McBain how to shift freight. Get your bags packed, everybody, and put in plenty of woollen kit. I’ve never been to Canada, but I seem to have heard that the winters there are inclined to be chilly.’

‘Then let’s go and see if we can warm things up,’ murmured Algy.

CHAPTER II

FORT BEAVER

A LITTLE before two o'clock, sixteen days after Wilks's SOS had been received in London, a Bluewing 'Jupiter' air-liner circled low over the cluster of log huts which comprised Fort Beaver, preparatory to landing.

Biggles sat at the controls, Algy beside him, with Ginger braced in the narrow corridor that connected the pilot's control cabin—it could hardly be called a cockpit—with what normally would have been the main passenger saloon. Behind, amongst the luggage in the rear compartment, sat Flight-Sergeant Smyth, Biggles's old fitter and sharer of many of their adventures.

The 'Jupe'—as Ginger had already nicknamed the machine—was Biggles's first choice, and he accounted himself fortunate in being able to get a commercial transport machine with such a fine reputation. American built, the Jupiter, latest model of the Bluewing Company, was a twin-engined cantilever high-wing monoplane fitted with two 850 h.p. 'Cyclone' engines, one power unit being built into the leading edge of the wing on either side of the fuselage. The undercarriage was retractable. In the standard model there were four mail compartments forward of the main cabin, which normally provided accommodation for eighteen passengers, but Biggles, realizing that eighteen seats would rarely, if ever, be required, had had this number reduced to six, the space thus made available being cleared for freight. As he pointed out to the others, extra passengers, if any, could always travel in the freight compartments. The manufacturer's figures gave the maximum speed of the machine as 230 miles an hour, with normal cruising speed 205 miles an hour.

Negotiations for the aircraft had been carried on by wireless while they were on board ship. Not for a moment did Biggles contemplate taking a machine out with him, although, from choice, he would have preferred a British aeroplane, but that would have meant crating it for an ocean voyage, which is a very expensive business. The result of the negotiations was that when the party had landed at Quebec they had found the machine awaiting them, it having been flown up from the United States by a delivery pilot.

Three long hops had seen the Jupe at Fort McMurray, the base aerodrome of northern fliers, and another long journey northward over the 'bad lands' had brought the airmen to Fort Beaver, which lies mid-way between the north-east arm of Great Slave Lake and the Mackenzie River,

some fifty miles south-east of Bear Lake. They all wore heavy flying kit, with the fur outside, for although it was not yet winter it was already cold, and the annual freeze-up could be expected in the near future.

Behind the pilot's cabin, in the mail compartment, was piled their luggage—valises and suitcases. Stacked in the freight cabin were bales and bundles of spare parts, chiefly engine components; but perhaps the most striking item was an enormous pair of skis, so long that the ends projected into the doorway of the lavatory, which was situated in the tail. It had been left open for that purpose. These would, of course, be needed when the snow came.^[2] Until that time the ordinary retractable-wheel undercarriage would be used.

[2] Wheel undercarriages give way to skis during winter in all northern countries, where every lake, when frozen, becomes a potential landing-ground.

Biggles regarded the landing-ground dispassionately as he throttled back and prepared to glide in. Since it was the only level piece of ground within view it was unmistakable, although two blocks of wooden buildings on the edge of the field provided confirmation, were it needed.

‘What do you think of it?’ asked Algy.

‘Not much,’ returned Biggles briefly.

‘I never saw a more desolate-looking spot in all my life.’

‘What did you expect to find—concrete runways?’ inquired Biggles sarcastically. ‘This isn't a European terminus.’

‘No, I can see that,’ declared Algy warmly. ‘Wilks was certainly right about the wide open spaces—although he needn't have used the plural. From what I've seen of this country from topsides, it's just one big, wide open space, and nothing else.’

‘I fancy we shall find something else when we get on the carpet,’ observed Biggles, smiling faintly. ‘Is that old Wilks I can see, mending his hut?’

Algy peered through the side window. ‘That fellow is too tall for Wilks,’ he declared. ‘And he seems to be tearing the place down, not mending it, anyway.’

Biggles glanced across quickly. 'The dickens he does. That doesn't look too good. However, we shall soon learn what we came to learn.'

Nothing more was said, and a minute later the wheels of the big machine were trundling over the rough surface of the landing-ground, scored in a hundred places with tyre tracks.

Biggles allowed the machine to run to a standstill, and then, using his brakes, turned towards the smaller of the two sets of buildings. Moving slowly and majestically, the Jupiter roared up to where a little group of men stood staring at them from in front of a rough but stoutly built hangar, roofed with corrugated iron.

'Funny, I don't see Wilks,' murmured Algy.

'Which means, obviously, that he isn't here,' returned Biggles.

'Maybe he's in the air.'

'Maybe. We'll soon know. This is his shed, for there is the board with the name of his company on it leaning against the wall. It looks as if it had just been taken down. That being so, what is McBain doing here—for that's who the nasty-looking piece of work in the fur cap is, I'll bet my boots. I don't like the look of things; we'd better leave the engines running in case we want to go up again in a hurry. Tell Smyth to come here and take over, and keep an eye on us. Let's get out.'

As the three airmen stepped down from the saloon door, leaving Smyth in the control cabin with the engines idling, four men walked to meet them. A fifth, obviously an Indian, remained standing near the hangar. One of the four, a little ahead of the others and clearly the leader, was a tall, burly man, whose bristling, square-cut beard was curiously streaked with grey. There was something unnaturally cold about his pale blue eyes, which were set rather far apart, and, as is often the case with pale eyes, looked larger than they really were. Nevertheless, he was a powerful and arresting figure. On his head he wore a fur cap, with flaps hanging loosely over his ears, a check-patterned lumber shirt of blanket-like material, and dark corduroy trousers tucked into half-Wellington boots. A broad belt, with cartridge-pouches thrust through loops, was buckled tightly round his waist.

The man who walked close behind him was an entirely different type, although he was dressed in much the same fashion. Slight in build, undoubtedly good-looking in a rather effeminate way, his delicate features might have passed for those of a woman but for a wisp of black moustache that decorated his upper lip. His eyes, set under finely drawn eyebrows, were dark, but held a quality of restlessness that made it difficult to ascertain

what object most occupied his attention—the aerodrome, the aircraft, or the airmen, for he seemed to be watching all three at the same time. The fur jacket he wore was thrown open, revealing a beautifully worked Indian belt, through which he had hooked his thumbs in such a way that the bowie knife which hung on one side could just be seen.

At a distance of two or three paces behind strolled two other men, their hands thrust carelessly into their trousers pockets. One was a fresh-complexioned man of perhaps thirty-five years of age, with a fair moustache; his companion was younger, and as swarthy as the other was fair. Despite the fact that his jaws were working steadily, suggesting the gum-chewing habit acquired by residents in the United States, ‘southern Europe’ was written clearly on his dark skin.

Before a word was spoken, Biggles, remembering the descriptions in Wilks’s letter, could have named them all. The big man was obviously Brindle McBain; the man who walked close behind him, keeping at his heels like a dog, was Jean Chicot. The other two were the pilots, Joe Sarton, the fair man, and Tex Ferroni, the ‘slim, dark little fellow’. Wilks’s description had been brief, but singularly apt, thought Biggles, as he walked slowly to meet them, at the same time drawing off his gauntlets. His eyes wandered along the front of the hangar and the adjacent offices, now not more than twenty yards away, hoping to see Wilks, but there was no sign of him or of any member of his staff, despite the fact that the buildings were without question those of Arctic Airways. An atmosphere of desertion, almost of desolation, hung over them.

McBain was the first to speak. Seeing Biggles and his companions walking towards him, he stopped and waited for them to come up. The man with him did the same.

‘Ten bucks, stranger,’ he demanded curtly.

Biggles raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise. ‘Meaning?’ he queried.

‘Just ten dollars,’ returned McBain harshly.

‘Yes, I had gathered that much,’ nodded Biggles. ‘What I meant was, what for?’

‘Landing fee.’

‘Oh.’ Biggles reached the four men, who had formed a little group, and stopped. ‘Are you the authorized collector for Arctic Airways?’ he asked.

McBain big eyes rested broodingly on Biggles’s slight figure. ‘No,’ he said shortly, ‘I’m collecting for myself.’

‘I see. And who might you be?’

‘McBain is the name.’

‘Mine’s Bigglesworth,’ returned Biggles evenly.

‘Englishman?’

‘Guess again and you’ll be wrong.’

‘Smart guy, eh?’

‘No, just as ordinary as they make them,’ said Biggles, smiling faintly. ‘But aren’t you making a mistake, Mr. McBain?’

‘What gave you that idea?’

‘This field belongs to Arctic Airways.’

‘Yeah? Well, you’re making the mistake. It belongs to me,’ grated McBain.

‘What gave *you* that idea?’ inquired Biggles easily.

McBain hesitated. He took out a pipe and began to fill it. ‘What are you doing here, anyway?’ he asked in a curious voice.

‘Oh, I just dropped in to take a look at my property,’ replied Biggles casually.

The other started. ‘Your property?’

‘Well, I’ve just put a lot of money into Arctic Airways, so I seem to have some right to take a look at things at close quarters,’ observed Biggles.

There was a moment’s silence in which McBain’s swarthy companion took out a little bag of tobacco and rolled a cigarette with deft fingers.

‘Did you say you’d put money into this concern?’ McBain jerked his thumb towards Arctic Airways’ hangar.

‘That’s what I said, Mr. McBain.’

‘And you’ve come here to see where your money’s gone?’

‘No, I’ve come here to help spend it.’

‘You mean—you’ve come here—to *work*?’

‘That’s how I figured it out.’

‘Then your figgerin’ ain’t good, Swigglesworth.’

‘Bigglesworth, if you don’t mind. Awkward name, I know, but it’s the best my father could do for me, and as we’re likely to see quite a bit of each other, we might as well get things right at the start. It saves misunderstandings later on—if you get my meaning?’

The other nodded thoughtfully. ‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘I get your meaning. Do you know the guy what ran this Arctic Airways outfit?’

Biggles noted the use of the past tense but he did not reveal his anxiety. ‘Ran?’ he questioned. ‘Isn’t he still running it?’

‘Don’t look like it, does it?’

‘I haven’t had a chance to look round yet, so I can’t say. Still, you seem to know. What’s happened to him?’

‘Say, what do you think I am—a nurse?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it,’ murmured Biggles. ‘If Captain Wilkinson has disappeared it looks as if it’s time somebody tried to find him, doesn’t it?’

‘It may look that way to you.’

‘Any reason why it shouldn’t look that way to you?’

‘Plenty.’

‘Pity about that; maybe you’ll tell me why, sometime.’

‘I sure will, and there ain’t no need to wait. Get this, stranger. This airfield is bad medicine for visitors, and if you’re half as smart as you think you are, wise guy, you’ll pull your freight right now.’

Biggles’s grey eyes found McBain’s and held them. ‘That goes for you too, McBain—if you want it that way,’ he said in a voice that was as hard and brittle as ice. ‘But before you decide how soon you’re going, turn this over in your mind. I’m not greedy. There should be plenty of work here for two operators, and if they work together things could go easier for both. I’m willing to go ahead on that arrangement if you are. Naturally, as the field belongs to Arctic Airways you’ll have to pay landing fees for the privilege of using it. If, on the other hand, you’d rather have things the way you’ve been trying to run them——’

‘Yeah?’ broke in the other, the muscles of his face twitching. ‘I guess that’s how I’ll have ’em; and I’ll start by collecting them ten bucks.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘Not a cent, McBain,’ he said quietly. ‘You can’t get away with that bluff—not with me. My lawyers in Montreal are straightening out the title deeds of this property, and when we hear to whom it does belong I’ll let you know how much you owe Arctic Airways. That’s all—except that I’d rather you kept a bit farther away from my sheds.’

Biggles nodded curtly and moved towards what was obviously Arctic Airways’ reception office. For a moment it looked as though McBain would intercept him, for he took a pace forward, clenching and unclenching his

hands; but then his companion said something to him that the others could not catch, and he stopped, scowling.

Algy and Ginger followed Biggles into the office. There was nobody there, although by this time they did not expect to find any one. Everything was in confusion. Files had been pulled out and papers were strewn everywhere.

Algy's face was grim as he looked around. 'I don't like the look of this,' he said quietly. 'I'm afraid we've come too late.'

Before Biggles could answer there was a whip-like crack, followed instantly by a splintering thud. Several splinters flew across the room, one striking Biggles on the cheek and drawing blood.

'That was a shot!' snapped Algy, and then darted after Biggles, who had already flung open the door and was striding towards McBain and his companions, who had not moved. The effeminate-looking man, whom Biggles knew from Wilks's description must be Jean Chicot, was sitting on a chock, smiling, a small automatic held in his two hands. McBain and the two pilots were all grinning, but the humour went out of their eyes at the expression on Biggles's face.

Biggles went straight up to Chicot. 'Did you fire that shot?' he snapped.

The half-breed looked up, the affected smile still playing about his thin lips. He shrugged his shoulders and sent a puff of cigarette smoke up into Biggles's face before he replied, at the same time rising slowly to his feet. 'Eet vas an accident,' he smirked. 'I clean my gun—so; he go off. These accidents come sometime—yes?'

Biggles did not answer. His fist flew out in a vicious uppercut. Every scrap of the pent-up anger that was in him went behind the blow. There was a snap like a breaking twig as his fist caught Chicot on the point of the jaw.

The half-breed did not stagger. The blow lifted him clean off his feet. He went straight over backwards and crashed across the concrete apron, his cap going one way and the pistol another. He twisted for a moment and then lay still.

Biggles's face was white, and his lips were set in a straight line as he looked down at him.

'Keep your hands away from your belt, McBain.' It was Algy who spoke. Seeing what was coming, he had whipped out his automatic the instant Biggles struck the blow.

Biggles looked round and saw McBain hesitating; his hands, with the fingers clawed, were a few inches above his belt. 'Plug him if he moves,

Algy,' he said grimly. 'If this gang of crooks want it hot, by thunder, they can have it!' Then, to McBain, 'I've killed a lot better men than you in my time, McBain,' he said harshly, 'so I shouldn't lose any sleep on your account.'

'Say, what's going on?'

Biggles spun round and saw that a new-comer had arrived on the scene. There was no need to ask who it was, for his uniform told him that. It was a constable of the North-West Mounted Police.

'What's going on here?' said the constable again, looking suspiciously from one to the other.

'Nothing to speak of,' replied Biggles. 'My friends and I have just arrived by air. For some reason best known to himself—although I've a pretty good idea what it is—McBain objected to our landing and tried to scare us off by getting his half-breed playmate to pull a gun on us, so I had to hit him. That's all.'

The constable regarded Biggles speculatively. 'What are you doing in this out-of-the-way place, anyway?' he inquired.

'Any reason why I shouldn't come here?'

'I don't know—yet.'

'Then you'd better get in touch with your head-quarters and find out. If they don't know either, tell them to get into touch with the Department of Aviation—they know. I'm putting money into Arctic Airways, which belongs to a friend of mine, Wilkinson. You probably know him. I want to know where he is.'

'I don't know where he is.'

'Then ask McBain—I reckon he does.'

The constable turned to McBain. 'Where's Wilkinson?'

'Search me, Delaney.'

'When did you last see him?'

'Four days back.'

'Where?'

'Here.'

'What was he doing?'

'Taking off—heading north, I guess.'

'For Moose Creek?'

‘Why should he tell me where he was going?’

‘And he hasn’t come back?’

‘I ain’t looked for him.’

‘You had a good look at the inside of his office, at any rate,’ put in Biggles coldly.

‘Who said it was me?’

‘I do. I saw you come out as we landed.’

‘I figger——’

‘Wait a minute—I haven’t finished figuring myself yet. You knew Wilkinson wasn’t coming back, McBain—or you had good reason to suppose he wasn’t—or you wouldn’t have broken into his office and turned his papers upside-down. Nor would you have started to dismantle his shed.’

‘Who said I was dismantling his shed?’

Biggles pointed. ‘There’s the board—Arctic Airways. I have witnesses who saw you taking it down.’

McBain looked at Biggles evilly. Then he turned to the constable. ‘Well, what are you going to do about it?’ he inquired. ‘I’ve got something else to do besides stand here gassin’.’

‘So have I,’ returned the constable. ‘You ought to have reported Wilkinson missing, McBain. I shall have to ask fellows going north to look out for him.’

‘Don’t worry, constable; I’ll do that,’ said Biggles quickly.

‘You mean you’re going to look for him?’

‘I am.’

‘When?’

‘Right now. If I don’t find him before dark I shall come back here and make another search to-morrow. Meanwhile you might ask McBain to stay in his own sheds; and, while we’re away, you might keep an eye on these.’

The constable looked at McBain. ‘You stay on your own property,’ he said. Then to Biggles, as he moved away, ‘Let me know if you find Wilkinson.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I will,’ he said, and turned towards the Jupiter. ‘Come on, you fellows,’ he went on quietly to the others, taking no further notice of McBain. ‘Wilks must be down somewhere between here and Moose Creek; we’ve got nearly four hours of daylight left, so the sooner we start looking for him, the better.’

CHAPTER III

A SATISFACTORY TRIP

‘So that’s Mister McBain,’ observed Ginger, as they got back into the machine.

‘Yes, and now we know just how we stand,’ answered Biggles. ‘We shall have to watch our steps with that gentleman. A man with eyes like that was born to be a crook. I must confess that I’m a bit worried about old Wilks.’

‘Was McBain telling the truth, do you think, when he said Wilks had flown north?’ asked Algy.

‘I believe he was. Neither he nor his machine are here, so he must have gone off somewhere, and I imagine Moose Creek would be the most likely place for him to go.’

‘He might have gone to Moose Creek and decided to stay there.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘I can’t agree with that. Knowing the state of things here, if he had to go north my own feeling is that he would get back as quickly as he could. It is quite possible that his machine was got at; anyway, McBain had jolly good reason to suppose that Wilks wasn’t coming back, otherwise he wouldn’t have dared to take possession of his hangar—for that is what it amounts to, and he would have done it had we not arrived on the scene. If McBain wanted Wilks out of the way—and we know he did—the most certain way to bring it about was to tamper with his machine. Wilks was quite aware of that danger; he told us as much in his letter. It’s a hundred to one that he is on the ground somewhere between here and Moose Creek. I only hope the trouble was nothing vital, like structural failure; if it was, then I’m afraid we can say good-bye to Wilks. On the other hand, there is just a possibility that he had to make a perfectly natural forced landing, in which case he would get the machine down somehow. With all his experience the chances are that he would be able to do that without hurting himself, even if he damaged the machine. The only thing we can do now is to try to find out. Fortunately, we’ve plenty of petrol left in the tanks, so come on; let’s get away. All right, Smyth; get back aft, will you.’

As he finished speaking, Biggles took out his map and studied it intently. Both Fort Beaver and Moose Creek were shown, so it did not take him long to work out a compass course, and in five minutes the Jupiter was in the air

again, heading northwards, with Algy watching the ground on the starboard side and Ginger on the other.

It soon became evident that the task of picking out an aircraft on the ground, particularly a crashed one, was likely to be a good deal more difficult than they had supposed, for the country was rougher than any they had yet seen in Canada.

For a long time they flew over almost continuous forests of fir, with great outcrops of grey rock thrusting upwards like spurs, while here and there a river wound a tortuous course through gorge and valley. Then the country started to rise, and although the altimeter registered a thousand feet, the Jupiter was soon skimming over the tree-tops. Biggles eased the stick back and climbed slowly to a safer height.

At the end of an hour the forest had become broken into small, isolated groups of wind-twisted trees, and shortly afterwards even these failed to appear, giving way to a dismal panorama of gaunt rock. Ahead, and on either side, mountains towered upwards majestically, their peaks white with the first snow.

‘I don’t know about a forced landing, but if Wilks had to go down and land on that stuff I should say he hadn’t a hope,’ observed Biggles moodily, as he stared down at the weather-worn rock. ‘From the time we started I haven’t seen half a dozen places where there was the slightest chance of getting a machine down without a crackup. Goodness me! What a country!’

‘It looks as if it levels out a bit farther ahead,’ remarked Algy, who had turned to look forward through the wind-screen.

‘Yes, I agree, it does,’ returned Biggles. ‘But what sort of surface is it? I shouldn’t care to have to put a machine down on that stuff. It wouldn’t be so bad if you had engine power to fall back on in an emergency—but with a dead stick^[3] it would be an anxious business. Hello, what’s that ahead? That looks like something on the ground there . . . is it? Yes, by heaven, it is! It’s a machine. There’s somebody beside it—look, he’s moving. He’s seen us. He’s waving.’

[3] Dead stick. A flying expression meaning that the propeller is not revolving.

The roar of the Jupiter’s engines died away abruptly as Biggles cut the throttle and began gliding down to what, by this time, was obviously an

aeroplane.

‘It’s on even keel, anyway,’ remarked Algy, who had opened a side window in order to see more clearly.

‘It’s got its tail cocked up, which looks to me like a broken undercart,’ cried Ginger.

‘It must be Wilks,’ declared Biggles. ‘Nobody else would be flying up here. As long as he’s all right I don’t care much if he has smashed the machine. Give him a wave.’

With Algy hanging out of the window with an arm outstretched—for to wave literally in the open air when one is travelling more than a hundred miles an hour is practically impossible—the Jupiter dropped lower and lower until at last it was circling in a steep bank at not more than fifty feet above the other machine.

‘What’s the ground like, Algy?’ asked Biggles anxiously. ‘Can you see a decent place to get down? It all looks pretty rotten to me.’

‘Wilks is pointing. I think he means that there is a place over there where we can get down. He’s moving off in that direction—but he’s limping. He must be hurt.’

The man on the ground was, in fact, hobbling away from the stationary machine, from time to time stopping to pick up a piece of stone and throw it aside.

‘He’s clearing a runway for us,’ declared Algy.

‘So I see,’ answered Biggles, with a worried frown. ‘I don’t relish the thought of getting down on it, all the same.’ Nevertheless, he started lowering his undercarriage, which had, of course, been drawn up during the flight. He looked at the ground on which he would have to land, and shook his head.

‘We can’t leave Wilks down there,’ murmured Algy.

‘Of course we can’t,’ agreed Biggles irritably, ‘but I don’t want to bust a perfectly good aeroplane costing me the best part of forty thousand dollars. Nor do I want to walk home.’

‘I don’t think it’s too bad,’ muttered Algy, who was still staring down at the ground. ‘Wilks is beckoning, so it can’t be as bad as it looks.’

Biggles turned the big machine slowly until it was in line with the runway; then he allowed it to sink slowly towards it. Flattening out a few inches above the ground, he held the stick firmly, holding the machine off as long as he dared.

The Jupiter vibrated from nose to tail-skid as her wheels rumbled over the uneven ground, but they stood up to the strain, and the machine finally came to rest about two hundred yards from the lone figure which at once began hurrying towards them. There was no longer any doubt about who it was.

‘Biggles, by all that’s wonderful!’ cried Wilks enthusiastically.

‘Well might you say “by all that’s wonderful”,’ grinned Biggles, as he shook hands with his old war comrade. ‘What sort of a country do you call this?’

‘It’s a grand country when you get to know it,’ declared Wilks firmly.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ agreed Biggles doubtfully. ‘What happened to you?’

‘How the dickens did you know where I was?’

‘Just a minute, old boy; let’s take one thing at a time,’ suggested Biggles. ‘I’ll tell my story first, if you like. We’ve been to Fort Beaver—landed there about lunch-time to-day. We found McBain, and I might tell you that he and I had a few sharp words. He didn’t seem overjoyed to see us; in fact, we parted on anything but the best of terms. Constable Delaney blew in while the argument was in progress, and under interrogation McBain admitted that you’d flown off and hadn’t come back. In the circumstances we decided that you must have started for Moose Creek but failed to reach it, so we came along to pick up the pieces. What happened to you?’

Wilks’s smile faded as he told his story. ‘You were right about me starting for Moose Creek,’ he said bitterly. ‘Somebody was kind enough to put a handful of loose cotton-waste in my second tank and it choked the petrol leads. The engines packed up and I had to come down. As it happened I had enough juice in my gravity tank to enable me to reach this place, which I knew all about, having flown over it several times. Naturally, as it is one of the few places between Fort Beaver and Moose Creek where it is just possible to get a machine down, I had made a note of it. All the same, I was lucky to make it.’

‘The cotton-waste was McBain’s work, I reckon?’

‘Of course.’

While they had been speaking they had been moving slowly towards Wilks’s machine.

‘Did you knock your leg when you came down?’ asked Biggles, noting that Wilks was still limping.

‘I hit my knee a crack against the dashboard when we tipped up,’ returned Wilks briefly.

‘Machine damaged?’

‘Busted tyre and a bent prop; luckily, being metal it didn’t break. But of course there was no question of getting off again. With a groggy knee I was in no shape to start walking three hundred miles back to Fort Beaver, so I just sat here and waited, hoping that I should be missed and that some one would pass the word to the Canadian Airways fellows. They’re a grand lot of chaps, and would have come looking for me when they heard I was down.’

‘You would have waited a long time, I’m afraid,’ replied Biggles. ‘Only McBain and his gang knew that you were missing, and they told no one. Indeed, they were so certain that you were gone for good that they were making free with your office when we landed.’

‘The dickens they were!’

‘I told Delaney about it and he warned them to keep off, so I don’t think they’ll touch anything—not for a little while at any rate.’

‘I don’t wonder they didn’t expect me back,’ observed Wilks. ‘This is no country for a forced landing.’

‘So I’ve noticed,’ returned Biggles dryly, as he examined the damaged machine with professional ability. Smyth was already at work on it. ‘I see you’ve got a load on board,’ continued Biggles, as he looked into the cabin.

‘Yes. I was running some spare machine-parts up to Moose Creek; they were wanted urgently, so I am afraid the people up there will be fed up with this delay. They’ll probably refuse to give me any future work as I have let them down once or twice already, through no fault of my own you may be sure.’

Biggles bit his lip thoughtfully. ‘It’s too late to get the stuff up to them to-day,’ he said slowly, ‘but we might be able to manage it to-morrow. I think this is our best plan. We’ve brought all our tools and spare parts with us; luckily we hadn’t time to unload them at Fort Beaver. We’ll put all your stuff into my machine and fly it back to Fort Beaver. To-morrow I’ll take it up to Moose Creek. Ginger can come with me. Smyth and Algy had better stay here and get to work on your machine. There’s nothing you can’t fix up, is there, Smyth?’

‘I don’t think so, sir.’

‘Good. All right, let’s get to work. Algy, you’d better stay here with Smyth, and as soon as the machine is ready fly her back to Fort Beaver.

We'll leave you some grub and you can sleep in the cabin. I shall take Wilks back with me. He needs a rest. How long will it take you to fix things up, Smyth?

'I think I can get her finished by this time to-morrow, sir,' was the confident answer.

'Then we'll expect you back to-morrow evening, but don't take off unless you can get back to Fort Beaver before dark; it would be better to stay here another night than risk that. Is that all right with you, Algy?'

'As right as rain.'

'Fine! Then let's see about shifting this cargo into the Jupiter. I'd stay here with you but I don't like leaving Port Beaver for too long with McBain on the war-path. I'll fly low over you to-morrow on my way up to Moose Creek, but I shan't land unless you signal to me to do so. Come on, let's get to work; we've no time to waste.'

It took them, all working hard, about half an hour to transfer the freight from the damaged machine to the Jupiter, and once this was done Biggles lost no time in getting off, for the sun was already low over the western hills. In a few minutes the Jupiter was roaring back over her tracks.

In spite of the fact that Biggles flew on full throttle nearly all the way, it was practically dark when the scattered lights of Fort Beaver came into sight.

Suddenly Biggles started and stared ahead through the wind-screen. 'Don't tell me that McBain has thought better of it,' he jerked out. 'Are those landing flares on the aerodrome, or am I dreaming?'

'They're flares,' declared Wilks, who was as surprised as Biggles. 'I've never known him do that before, and I've had to land after dark more than once.'

Biggles said nothing, but a curious expression came over his face as he stared intently into the gloom. A moment or two later he cut the engines and glided down towards the lights, only to open up again an instant later and roar up into the darkening sky. 'He must take me for a fool,' he snarled savagely.

Wilks stared. 'Who?'

'McBain.'

'Why?'

'To fall into such an elementary trap as the one he has set. Those lights are in the wrong place. Had I landed up the line I should have bashed

straight into our hangar. Ginger, drop a signal flare and let's have a look at things. I'd rather trust to my own eyes than McBain's flares—the cunning hound. What sort of fellows can his pilots be to try deliberately to crash another machine?’

The signal light burst below the Jupiter, flooding the earth with its brilliant glare, and the trap was exposed to view. As Biggles had said, a machine trusting to the flares must have crashed to destruction in the Arctic Airways hangar. However, Biggles made no further remarks, but concentrated his attention on bringing the Jupiter down safely, and this he succeeded in doing. Taxi-ing swiftly up to the shed, he opened the cabin door and jumped down, looking sharply to left and right. Not a soul was in sight. And the flares had disappeared.

Without speaking they got the machine safely into the hangar, but they did not leave it.

‘Where do you usually sleep, Wilks?’ asked Biggles, as he took off his cap.

‘I used to sleep in my hut, in a room next to the office; but lately, as I told you in my letter, I have been sleeping in the hangar. It isn't safe to leave the machine.’

‘I can well believe that,’ answered Biggles, nodding thoughtfully. ‘Very well, we'll fix up quarters in the hangar, then the machine will always be in sight. Where's the pantry? I'm hungry.’

‘Not so hungry as I am,’ replied Wilks. ‘I've had precious little to eat for the last three days. By gosh!—that reminds me—I'm almost out of stores. Is there any food left in your machine?’

‘Very little except hard tack—emergency stuff—and I don't fancy that. In any case, I don't feel like touching it except in real emergency. You know what happens when you do that. When the emergency arises you go to the locker and find it empty. Where do you usually get your food supplies?’

‘At the stores down in the village.’

‘Whereabouts?’

‘In the main street. There's only one place where you can get grub—the Three Star Saloon.’

‘Then I'll go down and lay in a stock. We can't keep running up and down every day. Will you be all right here alone?’

‘Why not? I've had to handle things by myself for a long time.’

‘Good enough. Then I’ll take Ginger with me to help carry the parcels. You get your cooking-things out and fix up sleeping-quarters while we’re away. We shan’t be long. After we’ve had a bite we’ll have a talk about the position.’

CHAPTER IV

AT THE THREE STAR SALOON

IT was a walk of about two miles to the village of Fort Beaver, most of the way being across rough uncultivated country, from which in many places rugged masses of limestone rose up, worn by the storms of ages into fantastic shapes. Still, there was no risk of losing the way, for a vague footpath wound through the boulders towards the occasional yellow lights that glowed feebly from the log or frame huts which for the most part formed the houses.

Nor was there any mistaking the Three Star Saloon, a long building of rough-hewn timber, for three lanterns hung at regular intervals above the broad platform which ran along in front of it, enabling the sign to be read.

Without any misgivings Biggles pushed open the door and went inside. He had not given a thought to the possibility of McBain being there—not that he would have stayed away on that account. Nor did he imagine that the bar would be so well attended as it was. The loud buzz of conversation that greeted the ears of the two airmen as they walked in came, therefore, as a mild surprise.

The room was lighted by several paraffin lamps, mostly of the hanging sort, around which eddied a mist of rank tobacco smoke that set Ginger coughing. Along the entire length of one side ran a counter, or bar, one half of which was devoted to the serving of drinks, and the other half to dry goods—mostly foodstuffs.

Biggles's eyes wandered over the occupants without particular interest. He did not expect to know any one, nor was he anxious to make new acquaintanceships, for he had no intention of staying. As far as he was concerned the shop happened to be a bar, and his one idea was to get what he came for and depart in the shortest possible time.

With this object in view he started walking down the saloon towards the far end, which, as it so happened, was the section devoted to the sale of food; and he was nearly half-way down before he saw McBain, with the other members of his gang, sitting at a table near one of the two circular stoves which heated the room. He noticed that McBain saw him at the same time, and his conversation ended abruptly. However, Biggles took no notice, but went on until he came to that part of the bar where the counter merged with the food department.

‘Give it a name, stranger,’ said the barman, who, judging by his clothes, was also the proprietor.

Biggles hesitated for a moment. ‘As a matter of fact, boss, I didn’t come in for a drink,’ he answered in a friendly tone. ‘I came in to get a supply of grub, but since you mention it I feel that a drop of something hot would not come amiss while I have a look round to see what you can supply in the food line. Have you got any beef extract or malted milk?’

‘Both, though we don’t get much call for it,’ grinned the proprietor.

‘Then we’ll help to clear your stock. I’ll have a Bovril; you can give me a packet of biscuits to munch with it. What about you, Ginger?’

‘I’ll have some malted milk,’ decided Ginger.

The barman nodded and set about preparing the drinks, while Biggles took an old envelope from his pocket and started jotting down selected items from the things he saw exposed for sale—bread, biscuits, cheese, corned beef, tinned salmon, sardines, dried beans, and the like. By the time the barman returned with the drinks he had made a fairly lengthy list, and this he handed over for the things to be put together while he had his drink.

Ginger picked up his cup of malted milk, and realizing that there would be some minutes to wait, took it across to a vacant seat near the second stove; that is to say, the one other than that at which McBain and his company were sitting. The two stoves were some eight or ten yards apart. Actually, he did not see McBain until he was on the way to the stove, or it is possible that he would not have left Biggles; but having started he saw no reason for turning back, so he went on to the seat.

Several men, trappers or prospectors judging from their clothes, were sitting near the stove engaged in conversation, but he paid no attention to them, beyond glancing at them curiously, until a name reached his ears. The name was Wilkinson—pronounced Wilkson by the man who had uttered it.

He was an old man, certainly not less than sixty years of age, and he was dressed in the traditional garb of a prospector—thick boots, woollen trousers, and fur jacket. On the back of his head was balanced precariously an ancient and battered hat of the Stetson type. Around his neck was wound a white-spotted red scarf, held together in front—incongruously, Ginger thought—with an opal-headed tie-pin.

‘Ay, trust Angus to think o’ somethin’ for me to do,’ continued the old man in a wheezy voice, as Ginger regarded him with sudden interest. ‘I’m pullin’ out agin termorrer, and I near forgot. “If yer see that feller Wilkson,” ses Angus, “tell ’im I forgot to give ’im the transfer, but I’ve still got it.”

Maybe 'e'll need it and maybe 'e won't, so I guess I've got to trail across to that pesky airydrone.'

'Leave word 'ere, Mose,' went on one of the others. 'There ain't no call for you to go across to Wilkson yourself. One of us is bound to see 'im sometime, and we'll pass word on about the transfer.'

Ginger butted in. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but are you referring to Captain Wilkinson of the aerodrome?'

'Sure I am, boy,' answered the old man, stuffing tobacco into a short clay pipe with a grimy thumb.

Ginger realized at once the significance of the old man's message, knowing that the Angus of whom he had spoken could be no other than Angus Stirling from whom Wilks had bought the land; and the transfer to which he referred must be the Government title-deed transferring the property to him—that is, to Angus Stirling. 'That's all right,' went on Ginger, not a little excited by this stroke of good fortune. 'I'm a friend of Captain Wilkinson's. My boss—over there at the bar—is his partner. I'll give him the message. As it happens, we need the transfer. Where is Angus now? We shall probably go and see him.'

The old man uttered a cackling laugh, in which the other men joined. 'Sure, go ahead,' he grinned. 'You'll find him on Muskeg Bend.'

'Where's that?' asked Ginger doubtfully, perceiving that his inquiry had provoked mirth, and suspecting the reason.

'On the south corner o' Eskimo Island,' chuckled the old man. 'Me and Angus are working on a claim there.'

Ginger shook his head ruefully, feeling a bit self-conscious at his ignorance. 'I'm afraid I've never heard of Eskimo Island,' he said, smiling apologetically.

'Don't cher worry about that, son; nor ain't a lot of others,' nodded the old man. 'It's farther north than a lot 'ud care to go; nor me, neither, if I hadn't got Angus with me—for which reason I've got to start back termorrer.'

It may have been a movement, or it may have been instinct, that made Ginger glance over his shoulder, and he experience a sudden pang of apprehension when he saw a man standing so close behind him that he must have overheard every word that had been said. It was the Indian who had been on the aerodrome with McBain's party when they landed.

For a fleeting instant Ginger's eyes met those of the Indian, who then turned suddenly and glided away towards McBain.

Ginger turned quickly to the old man. ‘Just a minute,’ he said. ‘I’d like to bring my boss over here.’ So saying, he got up and walked quickly to where Biggles was still standing, checking the parcels as they were piled up on the counter. ‘Biggles,’ he said quietly but crisply, ‘I’ve had a bit of luck. You remember what Wilks said in his letter about Angus Stirling, the man from whom he bought the land, and not getting the proper transfer?’

Biggles stiffened. ‘What about it?’

‘Stirling’s partner is in here. I’ve just been talking to him. Apparently they’re working a claim together up north, and Stirling asked his partner—that’s him, the old man in the slouch hat—to tell Wilks that he still has the transfer. It struck me that we might fly him up and collect it. You’d better come and have a word with him.’

There was no need for Ginger to repeat his suggestion; almost before he had finished Biggles was on his way to the stove. ‘Careful,’ whispered Ginger, as he followed close behind. ‘McBain and Co. are watching us.’

Biggles nodded to show that he had heard, but he did not so much as glance in McBain’s direction.

‘You’re Angus Stirling’s partner?’ he began without preamble, addressing the old man.

‘Sure,’ was the brief reply.

‘Is it correct that Angus asked you to tell Wilkinson that he still has the transfer of the land he sold him?’

‘Ay, that’s right enow. That’s what he said.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ Biggles went on quickly. ‘As it happens we need that paper badly. How far away is this claim of yours?’

‘’Bout fifteen hunderd miles.’

Biggles’s eyes opened wide. ‘Gosh, that’s a bit farther than I bargained for,’ he admitted frankly. ‘Still, that doesn’t matter. Is it anywhere in Moose Creek direction?’

‘Pretty near due north of it—’bout twice as far, I guess.’

‘And you’re going back there?’

‘Sure.’

‘When?’

‘Termorrer. I aim to catch the freeze-up. She’ll be froze by the time I get to the water.’

In a vague sort of way Biggles realized that the old man meant that ice would have to form over a certain stretch of water so that he could get to the claim where Angus was working. 'How are you going to travel?' he asked.

The old man smiled and turned a bright eye on Biggles. 'There ain't no trains where I'm goin', mister,' he grinned. 'It's canoe to Moose River, where I aim to pick up my dogs.'

'Is Moose Creek somewhere on Moose River?'

'Sure.'

'I asked because I'm flying up to Moose Creek to-morrow,' went on Biggles. 'I reckon to make it in a day. If you care to come along with me that should save you quite a bit of time. Maybe we could go right on to the claim. How does that idea strike you?'

A childish grin spread slowly over the old man's face, and he scratched his ear thoughtfully. 'You mean—you aim to take me up in an airypine?'

'That's it.'

'Well, I ain't never thought about travellin' that road, but I'll try anything onst. Termorrer, did you say?'

'Yes.'

'All the way to Moose Creek?'

'We'll go right on to the claim if there is any place where I could land. Is there a flat patch anywhere near the claim?'

'Sure.'

'How big is it, roughly?'

'About ten thousand square miles.'

'*What!*'

''Tain't nothin' else but flat patch as far as yer can see—when it's froze.'

'You mean this flat patch is ice?'

'That's it.'

'Ah! I understand.'

'Will there be room for the grub?' inquired the old man. 'I've got a fair load to get along—'nough to last me and Angus till the break-up.'

'You can take anything up to a ton,' returned Biggles.

'I ain't got that much.'

‘That’s all the better. Be on the aerodrome at the crack of dawn and we’ll make Moose Creek in one jump. Is that a deal?’

‘You betcha.’

‘See you in the morning, then.’ Biggles turned, and saw McBain’s Indian backing stealthily away. ‘Was that fellow listening?’ he asked Ginger quietly.

‘I’m afraid so. I didn’t notice him, though, or I’d have warned you.’

‘Well, I don’t see that McBain can do anything to stop us,’ murmured Biggles as they returned to the bar. ‘I’ve got to go to Moose Creek in the morning, anyway, and it won’t be much extra trouble to go on to this claim, wherever it is. I’ll get the old chap—what did they call him, Mose?—to mark the place on my map when he comes up in the morning. But we’d better finish our drinks and be getting back; Wilks will wonder what has happened to us.’

Biggles paid the score and, subconsciously aware that a curious silence had fallen on the room, reached for the cup that contained the remainder of his Bovril. Simultaneously there was a deafening roar and the cup flew to smithereens, splashing the liquid in all directions.

For a moment Biggles stared with startled eyes at the spot where the cup had been. Then, recovering himself quickly, he looked round. McBain was standing farther along the bar, a smoking revolver in one hand and a bottle of whisky—which presumably he intended taking away with him—in the other. From the offensive leer on his face, and his heavy-lidded eyes, it was clear that he had been drinking.

No one spoke. The only sound in the room was the soft shuffle of feet as the other men in the bar began to back away out of the line of fire.

‘Give me another drink, boss,’ requested Biggles quietly.

Silence reigned while the barman prepared another cup and set it on the counter in front of Biggles, whose hand had barely started moving towards it when McBain’s gun roared again and the cup flew to pieces as the first one had done.

Unhurriedly, Biggles turned a reflective eye on McBain, who was now holding a glass in one hand while with the other he felt in his pocket, presumably for money to pay the score. The revolver, an almost imperceptible coil of smoke creeping from the muzzle, and the bottle of whisky rested on the bar in front of him.

‘Give me another drink, boss, will you?’ repeated Biggles, and put his hand in his pocket as if to take out the money to pay for it.

The barman set the cup in front of Biggles and then stepped back quickly.

McBain stood his glass on the bar. His hand moved towards the revolver, but on this occasion things did not go in accordance with his plan. Biggles's hand jerked out of his pocket. There was a double report, the two shots coming so close together that they almost sounded like one. There was a crash of shattering glass and a metallic *ping* as McBain's bottle of whisky splintered into a hundred pieces and his revolver spun along the polished bar before falling behind it.

Dead silence followed the shots. For a full ten seconds McBain stared unbelievably at the puddle where the bottle had been, his right hand groping for the revolver that was no longer there. The face which he then turned to Biggles was white, mottled with dull crimson blotches. His eyes glared and a stream of profanity burst from his lips.

'What's the matter, McBain?' asked Biggles evenly. 'Any fool can play a game single-handed; you don't mind me joining in, surely?'

The other did not answer. With his big eyes on Biggles's face, very slowly he began creeping along beside the bar, his right hand, with the fingers clawed, sliding along the shiny surface.

'That's far enough, McBain,' Biggles warned him curtly. He knew that it would be fatal to come to grips with the man, who was nearly twice his weight and clearly had the physical strength of a bull. Once in McBain's grip and he would stand no chance whatever. Knowing this, he had no intention of allowing McBain to get his hands on him.

Biggles addressed the bar-keeper. 'What is the usual procedure in a case like this, in this part of the world?' he inquired presently. 'Do I shoot him?'

' 'Ere, wait a minute,' snapped the bar-tender. 'I don't want no shooting 'ere.'

'I didn't start it,' Biggles pointed out.

'I know you didn't.' The bar-tender whirled round and snatched a heavy Colt revolver from a shelf behind him. He turned to McBain, scowling. 'That's enough, Brindle,' he said harshly. 'I ain't taking sides, but you asked for what you got. Now get this. You're always a causin' trouble in my bar. If yer can't carry yer liquor, go some place and learn, but yer ain't bustin' up my bar while I'm here.'

McBain ceased his bear-like advance towards Biggles, and turning slowly to the bar-keeper, called him by an obscene name.

‘I’d better plug him and rid the world of a dirty beast,’ suggested Biggles, wondering at the back of his mind why McBain’s friends did not take a hand. Snatching a glance in their direction, he understood. Ginger’s automatic was covering them.

How the matter would have ended it is impossible to say, but at that moment the outside door was flung open, and Delaney, the police constable, stood on the threshold, a carbine in his hands. ‘What’s the shooting?’ he inquired bluntly.

‘Only me and McBain seeing who can spill most liquor,’ replied Biggles.

‘You two at it again?’ The constable’s eyes went from one to the other. ‘See here, stranger,’ he went on, observing that Biggles was still holding his automatic in his hand, ‘gun-play’s finished in these parts—savvy? It went out with Buffalo Bill. This is a law-abiding township.’

Biggles nodded. ‘Yes, I’ve noticed it,’ he answered, smiling faintly.

‘And I don’t want any lip. Who pulled first?’

Biggles shook his head. ‘Not me. I can’t afford to waste ammunition.’

‘McBain shot his drink,’ shouted old Mose shrilly. ‘I seen ’im.’

‘Any more shooting between you two and I’ll take away your fire-arms certificates,’ declared the constable, eyeing Biggles and McBain in turn. ‘And that goes for every one else in this room.’

‘Quite right,’ murmured Biggles, putting his automatic back into his pocket and then drinking his Bovril. ‘Come on, Ginger; grab some of this stuff. Let’s be going.’

As they went out he nodded to Mose. ‘See you to-morrow—start at daylight,’ he called.

Then the door closed behind them and they hurried back to the aerodrome.

CHAPTER V

GINGER GOES SCOUTING

THEY said little on the way back beyond congratulating themselves on the discovery of Angus Stirling's whereabouts, and adding a few words about McBain's behaviour.

'One of these days somebody will plug the drunken swine—and the sooner the better,' growled Biggles, as they strode into the hangar and deposited their parcels on a bench.

'I was just beginning to get worried about you,' Wilks told them. 'You were a long time.'

'McBain was there, and he tried to be funny,' replied Biggles, and reported the shooting incident at the saloon. 'But forget about that,' he continued quickly. 'What is far more important, we've got on the track of Angus Stirling. He is working a claim somewhere up north with an old fellow named Mose, who is now in Fort Beaver collecting stores for the winter. Angus actually sent a message to you by Mose—which he gave to us—to the effect that he has got the transfer of the land you bought off him, and you can have it when you want it.'

Wilks sprang to his feet. 'Want it! Why, that document is the key to the whole situation,' he cried. 'With that in our possession we can give Mr. Nosey-Parker McBain his marching orders, and call in the police to eject him if he doesn't clear off.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's the way I see it,' he agreed. 'That being so, I've arranged to collect the transfer just as quickly as possible.'

'How?'

'Mose is starting back for the claim to-morrow, so I've offered to fly him up. We'll land at Moose Creek, where I'll dump the freight for the gold people, and Mose can pick up his dog-team. Then I'm going to fly him on to the claim. He says there is plenty of room to get down.'

'That's marvellous,' declared Wilks enthusiastically. 'What a stroke of luck! I reckon I'm about due for a break; your arrival seems to have turned the tide. Is Mose coming up here in the morning?'

'At dawn.'

‘Fine!’ A shadow of anxiety crossed his face. ‘You said McBain was there,’ he muttered. ‘Did he hear all this? If he did he may try to stop Mose _____,’

‘I think he heard, but I don’t see what he can do,’ answered Biggles thoughtfully. ‘From the way he chipped in over the shooting affair I don’t think he has any great love for McBain. We’d better turn in early; we’ve got a long day in front of us to-morrow. Have you managed to get things fixed up here?’

‘Yes, they’re a bit rough, but I think we can manage.’

Some of the tinned food was soon opened, and the three airmen, sitting round a candle-lighted table near the big machine, said little more while they enjoyed their overdue meal. At last Biggles set down the tin mug from which he had been drinking quantities of steaming coffee made over Wilks’s Primus stove.

‘All we want to-morrow is a fine day,’ he declared. ‘With any luck Algy and Smyth will be back with the other machine. The next day—or the day after—we ought to be back with the transfer. Then, having mustered our forces, we’ll see what McBain has to say. He’ll find things a bit more difficult now that there are four of us instead of you by yourself. I wonder what the weather’s doing?’

‘The prophets forecast an early freeze-up,’ Wilks pointed out.

‘It was clear enough when we came in,’ returned Biggles.

‘I’ll go and have a look at the sky,’ offered Ginger, and leaving the table, he walked slowly to the hangar door and looked out.

He shivered a little as he stepped on to the tarmac, for there was a real nip in the air that suggested that frost or snow was not far away. However, the sky was clear, and although there was no moon, the stars glittered hard and bright in the heavens. For a moment or two he stood with his face turned upwards, glad that he would be able to tell Biggles that there was every promise of a fine day on the morrow, and he was about to return to the others when a dull yellow gleam appeared in the darkness not very far away. Instinctively he looked at it, and an instant later realized that it came from McBain’s hangar or the workshops or office adjoining it.

‘It would be interesting to hear just what’s going on there,’ he mused. ‘Plotting some dirty business, I’ll warrant.’ The idea flashed into his mind that if his assumption was correct it would indeed be worth taking a little trouble to find out. There appeared to be no risk. ‘Shan’t be a minute,’ he called over his shoulder quickly to the others, and then began walking

cautiously towards the light—not in a straight line, but in a curve that would bring him to his objective from the rear.

He slowed down and moved with more caution as he neared the square of yellow light, which he now saw came from the window of one of the smaller buildings attached to the hangar. Step by step he advanced, every nerve keyed up, for he was quite prepared to find a sentry on guard. He decided that if he were challenged he would bolt for it.

But what he had feared did not happen, and a moment later he was crouching against the rough log wall of the hut, from the inside of which came a low, confused murmur of voices. Inch by inch he edged along the wall until he came to the window. He held his breath as he peeped into the room, for there was no blind or other obstruction to interfere with his view.

A glance showed him that four men were in the room, all sitting in various attitudes round a packing case on which stood various glasses and a black bottle. They were the two pilots, Sarton and Ferroni, Chicot, McBain's bodyguard, and the Indian. McBain himself was not there.

At first Ginger could not hear what was being said, but he found that by pressing his ear close to a chink in the log wall he could follow the conversation fairly well.

Sarton was speaking. 'He's a long time,' he muttered, picking up his glass. 'I reckon you'd better go and look fer 'im, Jean.'

'No. He say "go on",' protested the half-breed. 'I stay here.'

The words had barely left his lips when Ginger heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. His heart gave a nervous leap, but his fears were allayed when he heard the footsteps halt on the far side of the hut. There came the sound of a door being opened and closed.

To his satisfaction he found that by placing his eyes level with the chink in the logs he could see into the room, which was far less risky than peeping round the edge of the window, where he might be seen if any one in the room looked in that direction.

Through his peep-hole he saw that, as he suspected, the new-comer was McBain. Clad in a long and rather dilapidated skunk-skin coat—Ginger recognized the fur by the characteristic white blaze—he was standing just inside the door, glaring at the four who were already there. It struck Ginger that he seemed agitated about something, for his face was pale and his movements abrupt. There was definitely an atmosphere of tension in the room, and, if proof of this were needed, McBain's first words confirmed it.

'Waal,' he growled, 'ain't yer never seen me before? What's biting yer?'

‘Why—er—nothin’, boss,’ replied Sarton nervously.

‘Waal, go on gassin’ and don’t stare at me,’ growled McBain, dragging off his coat and hanging it on a peg on the inside of a cupboard door which he opened for the purpose.

‘We was just figgerin’ that you’d been a long time,’ continued Sarton, in an explanatory sort of voice.

McBain jerked round with an abruptness that made the other start. ‘That’s a lie,’ he fired out. ‘I ain’t been five minutes. Get that?’

‘O.K. if you say so, boss,’ agreed Sarton in a conciliatory way.

‘Fact is, I came up here when you did,’ went on McBain more quickly. ‘I’ve just bin outside watchin’ the weather, that’s all. Remember that; if any one arsts you if I came back ’ere with you, you’ll have to say yes or you’ll be tellin’ a lie. Savvy?’

‘Sure,’ agreed the others, in a sort of chorus.

‘All right,’ continued McBain, pouring himself out half a glass of what Ginger took to be neat spirit and throwing it down his throat. ‘We’re gettin’ busy to-morrow,’ he added.

‘Dey send de gold, ha?’ asked the breed quickly.

‘In a day or two,’ answered McBain. ‘About time, too.’

The word ‘gold’ made Ginger prick up his ears, and a moment later, for the first time, he saw McBain’s activities in a new light.

‘I reckon we’d have had it by now if this fool Wilkinson hadn’t clung on so long,’ went on McBain. ‘It was just a fluke he collected and brought down the last two loads that was worth while. These buddies of his may make things harder. I don’t like the look of that thin guy—Bigglesworth. He’s a wise guy—and smart. But he won’t be smart enough for me. I’ll tear him in ’arves before I’ve done with him.’

‘Do you think he’d come into the game if we gave him the low-down?’ suggested Sarton.

‘Not ’im. He ain’t that sort,’ growled McBain. ‘Anyway, four’s enough to split, without takin’ in four more. I wouldn’t ’a’ minded one, when Wilkinson was alone, but I didn’t trust ’im. No, we’ll play as we are. Everything’s all set. All we’ve got to do now is weigh in next time there’s a heap o’ dust ready to be brought down.’

‘I donta like thees new guy, Bigglesworth,’ muttered Chicot. ‘I think, mebbe, it better if we fineesh heem soon.’

‘Wait till Delaney’s out on patrol,’ said McBain. ‘Then we’ll see. Are they over there now?’ He jerked his head in the direction of Arctic Airways’ hangar.

‘They all went in; we watched them go,’ declared Sarton.

‘O.K. Then I’ll think about the best way of handling ’em between now and to-morrow. Got the ship ready to start?’

‘All set.’

‘Everything on board you’ll be likely to want?’

‘Everything.’

‘Then I’ll tell yer what to do in the mornin’. I’m goin’ to turn in. I’m tired. Don’t stay gassin’ here half the night.’ McBain picked up the bottle, and putting the mouth of it to his lips, emptied it.

The others stood up.

Ginger waited for no more. He had learned more than he had hoped for, so, after backing quietly away until he was what he considered a safe distance from the hut, he hurried back to the hangar, where he found the others just starting out to look for him.

‘Where the dickens have you been?’ asked Biggles sharply.

Ginger’s manner was terse as he waved them back to the table. ‘I’ve been indulging in what is generally reckoned to be a very questionable pastime. Some people might call it eavesdropping, but in time of war, like this, the best people call it scouting. I’ve been listening to McBain’s little party over the way.’ He turned and regarded Wilks with a curious smile. ‘If you think those guys are here simply to run you off your aerodrome, Wilks, you’ve been thinking wrong. That isn’t what they’re after.’

There was a moment’s silence.

‘What *are* they after?’ Biggles almost hissed the words.

Ginger drained his cup of half-cold coffee before he replied. ‘Gold,’ he said quickly. ‘The little bags of yellow metal which the people at Moose Creek are digging out of the ground.’

Wilks nodded slowly. ‘Kick me, somebody,’ he said weakly. ‘I never even thought of it.’

CHAPTER VI

A STAGGERING BLOW

THE stars were still twinkling in the sky, although those in the east were paling, when, the following morning, Biggles, Wilks, and Ginger pulled the Jupiter out of the shed and forced her head to wind ready to take off as soon as Mose arrived. A hearty breakfast, and Biggles and Ginger got into their flying kit, for it had been decided that it would be advisable for some one to remain on guard, and as Wilks was still feeling a bit shaken from his recent crash, he was to be the one to stay behind while the others took the delayed freight to Moose Creek.

While they were waiting they discussed the situation in the new aspect revealed by Ginger's opportune scouting expedition the previous night.

'It would be no use telling Delaney,' remarked Biggles quietly. 'Knowing that there is no love lost between us he'd think that we were just shooting a cock-and-bull story to put McBain and Co. under suspicion—and you couldn't blame him for that. At this stage it would be better to say nothing. Having got our own clock set right—so to speak—our game is to keep a closer watch on McBain's movements until we've got proof of his intentions.'

'How about warning the people at Moose Creek?' suggested Wilks.

'No use at all,' declared Biggles. 'They'd be less likely to believe us than Delaney. They would think, naturally, that it was simply a scheme to keep McBain out of the air-line business. They might even tell McBain that we had reported them for a gang of crooks, in which case he would guard his movements more closely and make our task of exposing him more difficult. No, at this juncture we say nothing to anybody.' Biggles glanced at his wristwatch as he finished speaking. 'Old Mose is late,' he observed, 'I thought he would be here before this.'

'Who's this coming?' asked Ginger, who was staring in the direction of the village.

'Some one on a horse,' put in Wilks.

'Looks like Delaney—yes, it is him,' declared Biggles. 'He seems to be in a hurry, too.'

It soon became obvious that the Irish-Canadian 'mountie' was making for the Arctic Airways buildings, and a minute later he pulled his horse up

and dismounted beside the waiting airmen. His blue eyes flashed to the Jupiter and then came to rest on Biggles's face.

'You pulling out?' he questioned crisply.

'Not exactly,' answered Biggles.

'What do you mean by that?'

'What I say. I'm going away, but not for good. As a matter of detail, I'm going to slip up to Moose Creek with some stuff they're waiting for.'

'Where did you go after you left the Three Star last night?'

Biggles raised his eyebrows at this change of subject. 'I came straight back here,' he said wonderingly.

'Could you prove that?' Delaney fired the question like a pistol-shot.

Biggles smiled faintly, and shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, naturally I don't clock my movements about, but if you are prepared to take Wilkinson's word, no doubt he's got a rough idea of what time I got back here. You saw how I was loaded up when I left the Three Star; it is hardly likely that I should go for a stroll at that time of night and with that load, is it?'

Delaney switched his eyes to Ginger. 'How about him?' he asked tersely.

'He came with me, of course,' declared Biggles. 'He had as many parcels as I had. What's all this about, anyway?'

'What were you three standing here for when I came along? You looked like you were expecting somebody.'

'We were,' agreed Biggles.

'Who?'

'Mose—I don't know his other name.'

'What did you plan to do with Mose?'

'Fly him up to Moose Creek, and then on to the claim he shares with Angus Stirling. Between ourselves, Delaney, Angus has still got the transfer of this property. If we can get it, it should enable us to give McBain the run-along.'

'I see,' said the constable slowly. 'Well, Mose won't be coming.'

'Why not?'

'He's dead.'

Biggles paled. 'Dead!' he cried incredulously. 'Why, he was as right as rain last night.'

‘No doubt he would have been this morning, too, if some one hadn’t clubbed his brains out.’

‘You mean—he was *murdered*?’

‘People don’t beat their own brains out.’

‘Great heavens!’ Biggles’s brain raced as he tried to focus the situation in its new aspect. ‘You don’t think we did it, by any chance, do you?’

‘I’m going to find out who *did* do it.’

‘Well, we had everything to lose and nothing to gain by his death,’ Biggles pointed out. ‘We want that transfer badly, and now he’s gone we don’t even know where the claim is.’

‘Yes, I know,’ broke in Ginger. ‘He told me before you spoke to him. It was—dash it, what was the name of the place?—Eskimo Bend—no, Eskimo Island, wherever that may be.’

‘By gosh, if we can’t find the place, things will look bad for Angus. Mose was taking up the winter grub,’ muttered Biggles.

‘If he’s on Eskimo Island he will be snowed in for six months when the freeze-up comes; so, as he won’t have much grub left by this time, he’s as good as a dead man,’ declared Delaney.

‘I’ll take the grub up,’ stated Biggles. ‘I’ll find his shack.’

‘Then you’ve no time to waste,’ said Delaney harshly. ‘The snow’s on the way. Don’t all go. One of you had better stay here in case I want you. I’ll go and have a word with McBain.’

‘You’ve no objection to me going to the claim?’ asked Biggles.

Delaney thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he said at last. ‘Get back as soon as you can, though.’

With a curt nod, leading his horse, the constable strode away in the direction of McBain’s shed, where McBain himself and his assistants were now pulling an aeroplane from the hangar.

As soon as Delaney was out of earshot Ginger swung round to Biggles. ‘McBain killed him,’ he whispered tensely. ‘That’s why he was so agitated when he came in to the others. I thought his manner was odd—I mentioned that when I was telling you what took place in the room.’

Ginger had, of course, described in detail to the others what had transpired in McBain’s hut while he had been watching.

‘I wonder,’ murmured Biggles. ‘Well, if he did, he certainly had a motive. No doubt he was told by that Indian of the arrangement I made with

Mose, so by killing the old man he might have reckoned on stopping us making contact with Angus. So certain was I that Mose was coming with us that I didn't bother to ask him the name of the place. It's lucky he told you, Ginger. What's the name of it?

'Muskeg Bend, on Eskimo Island, he called it.'

'That ought to be sufficient to enable us to find it,' muttered Biggles. 'The question is, does McBain know that we know where Angus is? It's no use guessing, anyway. We'll fly up there and let McBain do what he likes. You look after things here, Wilks. I'll take Ginger with me. With luck we ought to be back in two or three days—four at most. The first thing we've got to do is to get poor old Mose's grubstake up here, although it wouldn't surprise me if Angus packs up and pulls out when he learns what has happened. I imagine that Muskeg Bend isn't the sort of place where Angus would want to spend the winter alone. Let's see about fetching this grub.'

The business of fetching the food occupied some time, for it necessitated a journey to the village; more than one scowl was thrown at Biggles and Ginger as they walked through Fort Beaver, suggesting plainly that they were suspected of the crime that had cost Mose his life, but they took no notice. By the time they got back to the aerodrome Delaney had gone. So had the machine—one of McBain's Weinkel Twelve Transports—which had been outside the other hangar when they had left for the village.

'Where's that machine?' Biggles asked Wilks as they loaded the food in the Jupiter.

'It took off about twenty minutes ago, and headed north.'

'McBain go with it?'

'No. Sarton was flying. I think he only had Chicot with him.'

Biggles nodded, but made no comment on this piece of information as he climbed into the control cabin of the big machine. He was chiefly concerned with getting to Moose Creek as quickly as possible. He spent a minute studying his map, then folded it up and put it away. 'Eskimo Island isn't marked,' he told Ginger, who had got into the seat beside him. 'We shall have to ask where it is when we get to Moose Creek. I expect they'll know up there.'

He started the engines, ran them up, and tested his controls carefully. Satisfied that all was well, he waved to Wilks, who was watching them from the hangar, and then with his left hand moved the throttle slowly forward.

With its engines nearly under full power the Jupiter raced across the aerodrome, rose steadily into the air and sped away to the north.

CHAPTER VII

THE JUPITER HEADS NORTHWARD

BIGGLES only spoke twice during the next two hours; once, to tell Ginger to keep his eyes open for the Weinkel, and, some time later, to comment on its possible destination.

‘I fancy we shall find it at Moose Creek,’ he concluded, and in this he was correct.

They roared low over Wilks’ Rockheed, which was still standing as they had left it the day before, but receiving the O.K. signal from Algy, they did not land. Biggles tilted the Jupiter’s nose upwards as he climbed to his original height.

The country over which they now passed both fascinated and appalled Ginger, who had never seen anything like it before. He realized that he was looking at one of the forbidding sections of the world’s surface, a vast area that was absolutely untouched by the hand of man. For the most part it was gaunt grey rock, twisted into a thousand fantastic shapes by vast upheavals when the earth was young, and later cut and scored by glaciers into rifts and gorges both great and small. Occasionally a clump of sparse, wind-twisted bushes mottled the rock; that was all. Once or twice he saw moving objects, which showed that there was a certain amount of wild life even in this wilderness, but the plane was too high for him to identify the animals. Only a small herd of elk did he recognize by their antlers. ‘No wonder they call this the “bad lands”,’ he thought dismally. Instinctively—as most airmen do when flying over such country—he kept a look-out for possible landing places, but he saw none that he would have been willing to try except in the most extreme emergency.

The sun was hanging low over the western mountains like an enormous ball when Biggles picked up the river, which, judging from his map, would lead him to their destination. Soon afterwards the country became a little more open, but they were beyond the world of trees, and the stark barrenness persisted. They passed one or two isolated huts, and then, looking ahead, Biggles saw what he knew must be the gold-field. The river bayed out into a wide lagoon, on the banks of which were clustered a number of huts with corrugated iron roofs. Near them the ground was flat, rather like a marsh, and as they glided down they were able to discern wheel

tracks which told them where machines usually landed—for the place could hardly be called an aerodrome.

In ten minutes they had landed and taxied up to the buildings—log huts of the most primitive description—where a man in a fur jacket was waiting for them.

‘You Canwell?’ called Biggles, guessing that it was the traffic manager.

‘You’ve said it,’ was the curt reply. ‘You seen anything of Wilkinson?’

‘Yes. I’m his new partner. I’ve brought your stuff along.’

‘About time, too. If you fellows can’t do better than this, I’ll have to find another way of handling my output.’

‘We shall do better in future,’ Biggles promised him. ‘We’ve had a little trouble, but we’re all set now for a regular service.’

Canwell blew a whistle, at which some men appeared and began unloading the equipment. ‘I’ve had one of McBain’s machines here,’ he told Biggles.

‘When was it here?’

‘Just now. It’s just gone off.’

It struck Biggles as odd that they had not seen the Weinkel on its homeward journey, but he did not comment on it. ‘What did the pilot want?’ he inquired.

‘He has offered to carry all my stuff—*all* of it, you understand—at fifteen cents a pound.’

Biggles was a bit taken aback by this ‘cut’ rate, but he did not show it. A smile broke over his face. ‘Why, the fellow’s a profiteer,’ he said lightly. ‘I’ll do it—all of it—at twelve cents.’

Canwell registered surprise. ‘You *will*?’

‘Sure I will. We shan’t get very fat out of it, but on the off-chance of you developing into a big concern we’ll take a gamble on it—if you’ll give us a contract and a monopoly.’

‘Sounds fair to me,’ agreed Canwell. ‘I’ll think that over and give you an answer to-morrow. You’ll stay here the night, I reckon?’

Biggles looked at the sun. ‘How much daylight have I got left?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean—how much daylight?’

‘Well, what time will it get dark?’

‘In about a week or ten days it will get properly dark, not before.’

Enlightenment burst upon Biggles. He realized that they were so far north that the disc of the sun did not drop below the horizon for the whole twenty-four hours, until it went for good for the long winter months. This meant that he could continue on his way without being overtaken by darkness.

‘How far is it to Eskimo Island?’ he asked.

‘Best part of five hundred miles—as *you* travel.’

Biggles was relieved. He had supposed that it was even further.

‘What direction?’ he asked.

‘Due north as near as makes no difference—why, what’s the idea? There’s only two white men north of us here—Angus Stirling and Mose Jacobs. There aren’t two, now I come to think. Mose has gone out for grub.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I know. Mose won’t be coming back, either.’

‘How so?’

‘He was murdered last night.’

‘The deuce he was!’

‘Angus is expecting him back before freeze-up. Well, he won’t be coming, which means that if Angus gets snowed in without grub, he’s a goner.’

‘By thunder! You’re right there,’ declared Canwell. ‘Poor old Angus. He’s a bit daft, but I’d be sorry to see him go. Who’s paying you to take the grub up?’

‘Paying me? Nobody. You don’t suppose I’d let a man die unless some one paid me to save him, do you?’

‘Nice work, feller. Can I help?’

‘You’ve got petrol here?’

‘Sure.’

‘Then that’s all I want. I’ll give Angus his grub, or bring him back if he decides not to stop on.’

‘He won’t come, I reckon. If I was you I’d drop the stuff overboard near his shack; that’d save you landing.’

‘I shall land if I can.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s got a paper I want.’

Canwell's eyes clouded with suspicion. 'What sort of paper?'

'Wilkinson bought his landing-ground off Angus but Angus forgot to hand over the transfer. We've got a fellow trying to jump our claim——'

'Meanin' McBain?'

'Quite right. If we get the transfer we can ask him to find his own field.'

Canwell nodded understandingly. 'I get you,' he said. 'I heard something from Wilkinson about this dirty deal he's trying to put over. Well, you can handle my stuff in future—always provided that you are here on time to take it. Gold doesn't earn nothin' till it's in the bank, you understand, so the sooner it's in, the better. We can't afford to leave it lying about here. I aim to have a big shipment boxed ready to travel to-morrow, so if you're here you can take it down. I guess you'll be tired, though, if you're going up to Angus's shack.'

'Not too tired,' smiled Biggles.

'Fine. I shall expect you back here to-morrow, then. But whatever happens the metal's got to go to the bank, you understand that?'

'You mean—if I'm not here and McBain is, he'll take the stuff?'

'That's what I mean. My job is to make this concern show a profit, so personal tastes don't come into it.'

'Naturally.' For a moment Biggles was tempted to warn Canwell to be careful of McBain, but he thought better of it, realizing that the traffic manager was the sort of man who would take offence at any attempt to undermine a rival's character.

Biggles therefore turned away and attended to the refuelling of the machine. By the time this was completed Canwell had gone back to his work, so Biggles and Ginger climbed into their seats ready to renew their flight northwards.

'The thing that beats me,' muttered Biggles as he started the engines, 'is how Sarton got back past us without us seeing him.'

'He might have gone on to where we are going,' suggested Ginger.

Biggles started. 'Gosh! I never thought of that,' he admitted. 'Still, I don't think that's likely.'

'If he got to Angus first and induced him to part with the paper we should find it difficult to get it back.'

'That's true,' agreed Biggles. 'Well, we shall see.' He turned and looked Ginger straight in the face. 'You know, kid, I really ought to leave you here.'

Ginger opened his eyes wide. ‘Why?’

‘Because I imagine that the country we shall have to fly over is pretty grim; the sort that if we *do* hit trouble and have to come down, there’ll be no getting off again. I doubt if we should be able to get back on our feet. Some of these tough lads, like Angus and Mose, might, but we’re not used to it. We——’

‘Just give her the gun and let’s get off,’ broke in Ginger impatiently. ‘We’re wasting time.’

A ghost of a smile played about Biggles’s lips for a moment. Then he lifted a shoulder in an expressive gesture. His left hand felt for the throttle, and in a moment or two the big machine was nosing up into the sky, which had taken on a dull, leaden hue.

‘Canwell was right when he said we had no time to lose,’ he said.

‘Why?’

Biggles nodded towards the sky. ‘Take a look at that. It’s going to snow before very long—and when it starts it’s going to snow for a long, long time.’

CHAPTER VIII

A GRIM ENCOUNTER

FOR more than two hours Biggles held the Jupiter on its northerly course, flying by compass since there were no landmarks—or rather, no landmarks which could be identified. For the most part the land below appeared to be a sterile wilderness, broken up frequently by mountain groups and ranges, depressing in their utter desolation, their flanks scarred by forbidding glaciers. Several times he made rapid calculations on his writing block, checking compass variation, as was necessary so near the Pole.

At length the ground became concealed under wide stretches of snow, or ice—they could not tell which. These stretches became wider and wider in extent until at last they merged into a continuous landscape of dull white. The sun appeared to be resting, motionless, on the horizon, flooding the scene with a wan light. Stars appeared in the heavens, glittering like chips of blue ice, but it did not get darker.

Ginger shivered suddenly, conscious of a terrifying solitude. He thought of Angus, and marvelled that any man should choose to live in such a place of death, even with the possibility of finding a fortune in gold.

He was about to remark on this to Biggles when a sound reached his ears that caused every muscle in his body to stiffen. He had heard the sound before and knew what it was. It was the unmistakable rattle of a machine-gun. Before he could move, almost before he had thought of moving, the sound came again, this time much more distinctly, and almost simultaneously the Jupiter quivered as if it had been struck by a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Ginger's throat turned dry, and the next instant he was clinging desperately to his seat as the Jupiter soared upwards in a wild climbing turn. Bracing himself against the side of the cabin, he looked out of the window, and was just in time to see a Weinkel Transport go tearing past. The window nearest to him was open, and from it projected what appeared to be a short black stick, from the end of which danced a tiny streak of flame. Behind it was the face of the half-breed Chicot, his lips curled back from his teeth in something between a grin and a snarl.

'Use the signal pistol—it's all we've got.' Biggles's voice was like cracking ice.

Ginger glanced at him and saw that his face was white; his eyes glittered curiously.

‘Get a move on,’ continued Biggles. ‘I’ll try to put you into position for a shot. If you can hit ’em it may set ’em alight. You might hit a prop.’

A signal pistol against a machine-gun! Even Ginger was experienced enough to know that the odds were nearly hopeless. ‘Need we stop and fight?’ he asked tersely.

‘They’ve got the legs of us by ten miles an hour,’ was the curt reply. ‘Use your pistol. Careful you don’t fall out—I may have to throw the machine about.’

Ginger snatched the short large-bored signal pistol from its pocket, and taking one of the thick cartridges from its loop, thrust it into the breech. Forcing the hammer back with his thumb so that the weapon was at full cock, he put his arm through the window and waited. All he could see was sky, but the pressure inside his stomach—a force that seemed to glue him to his seat—told him that the machine was in a tight climbing turn.

Suddenly the Weinkel flashed into view, travelling like a meteor in the opposite direction, streaks of orange flame dancing from the muzzle of Chicot’s gun.

Ginger took swift aim and fired, and knew at once that he had missed. A ball of green fire flashed across the nose of the other machine.

Sarton, the pilot, must have seen it coming, for he swerved sharply, which probably spoilt Chicot’s aim. As he reloaded Ginger heard the burst of bullets strike the Jupiter somewhere near the tail.

In an instant the Weinkel had disappeared from his field of view, and he could only wait for it to reappear. It needed all his strength to brace himself against the window, for the Jupiter was never still for a moment. Subconsciously he wondered how long the heavy transport machine could stand such handling without falling to pieces.

Again the Weinkel whirled into view, this time coming at him almost head-on. The half-breed was no longer at the window. Apparently he had decided that from the cabin his field of fire was too restricted, so he had climbed up so that the top half of his body projected through the upper part of the fuselage between the wings, a position from which he would be able to fire in any direction.

Ginger realized at once the advantages of this all-round gun-platform, and determined to copy it if his shot missed. He took careful aim at the oncoming machine; unluckily for him, just as his finger was tightening on

the trigger, a bullet struck the window frame near his face and a tiny splinter stung his cheek, causing him to flinch, with the result that his shot went wide. In a flash, following his shot, for which Biggles had waited, the Jupiter whirled upwards and the Weinkel was hidden from view.

Ginger scrambled back into the cabin and grabbed the remaining cartridges—there were only four—and thrust them into his pocket.

‘What are you going to do?’ snapped Biggles.

‘I’m going outside,’ returned Ginger crisply.

‘Hang on tight.’

‘I’ll watch it.’

Another moment and Ginger had flung back the emergency trap in the roof and was climbing out. With one hand gripping the edge of the trap, and the pistol ready in the other, he looked round for the attacking machine, and saw it on the opposite side of the narrow circle round which both aircraft were racing. The icy blast of the slipstream smote his face and tore at his body as if he had been naked, and he knew that he would not be able to endure the exposure for long without becoming frozen. Furthermore, it was as much as he could do to hang on, for the Jupiter did not maintain a straight course for a moment, for which reason, no doubt, Chicot had failed to score a vital hit.

Twice Biggles took the big machine into position for a shot, but each time the tearing slipstream spoilt his aim. However, it had this effect; the erratic movements of the Weinkel showed that Sarton was nervous of being hit by a missile which would probably send him down in flames, and his jumping, combined with Biggles’s manœuvring, made Chicot’s task no easy one.

Ginger had now only two cartridges left, and he determined to make the most of them. He had his automatic, of course, and he knew that Biggles also had one, but he also knew that in air combat such weapons are practically useless. His first chance came when Biggles whirled like lightning and tore straight under the Weinkel, passing under it so close that Ginger instinctively ducked, thinking that he was likely to be knocked out of the Jupiter by the Weinkel’s undercarriage. He fired straight up, but the shot, failing to strike a rigid member, went slap through the fabric and out the other side, without doing any more damage than making a neat hole which did not affect the Weinkel’s performance.

With the tears that the icy blast forced from his eyes freezing on his cheeks, he thrust his last cartridge into the breech. He had to put the pistol in

his pocket in order to hang on with both hands while Biggles did an Immelmann turn, but he grabbed the weapon again as the Jupiter came out in the position this manœuvre is designed to effect—on the tail of the opposing machine.

Sarton must have known that Biggles was screaming down on his tail, and in his panic dived to such an extent that, although Chicot continued to fire short bursts at the Jupiter, now not more than twenty yards from his tail, he could not properly control the jumping gun.

Ginger clenched his teeth, and taking deliberate aim, fired down between the whirling circles of the Jupiter's propellers. To his dismay the cartridge misfired. As quickly as his numbed fingers would permit he opened the breech, moved the cartridge slightly so that the firing-pin would strike another place, and fired again. Once more the expected report failed to occur.

By this time the Jupiter was almost immediately above the Weinkel and fast overhauling it; so much so that Chicot was compelled to turn completely round in order to bring his gun—a squat sub-machine-gun—to bear. Ginger realized with a horrible choking sensation of fear that if Sarton, unaware of their close proximity, pulled his stick back, both machines would collide with such force that they would be reduced to matchwood. He did the only thing that was left for him to do. He flung the now useless pistol.

It was only by a matter of a few inches that he did not succeed in what he hoped to achieve; but a miss, they say, is as good as a mile, and so it was in this case. The pistol struck the port engine cowling just behind the propeller, bounced harmlessly, and then dropped off into space. At the same moment Biggles dragged the Jupiter away from its dangerous position, and Ginger, half dead with cold, slid back into the cabin.

Biggles looked at him inquiringly.

'Missed!' shouted Ginger. 'No more cartridges. Can you put us in that position again?'

Biggles merely nodded. He did not seem in the least perturbed, and something of his calm confidence transmitted itself to Ginger, who smiled as far as his frozen cheeks would permit and then staggered into the main cabin, from where he returned an instant later carrying a foot-square box branded with large black letters:

20 LB. CORNED BEEF
STOW AWAY FROM ENGINES

Not without difficulty Ginger dragged this unwieldy weapon up into his recently held position above the fuselage. Biggles had already begun the Immelmann which starts with a steep climbing turn, so that it seemed to Ginger that the world had suddenly broken adrift from its orbit and was spinning with dizzy speed.

Steadying the box with his left hand, he stared about him through streaming eyes for the Weinkel, and saw it some distance below, circling as if the pilot had temporarily lost them. Then, as if upborne by a current of air, it seemed to float upwards towards him. He knew, of course, that this was simply the effect of Biggles's dive, which had now begun.

Wondering if he would be able to force his fast-numbing muscles to act when the crucial moment came, Ginger waited for his opportunity. He had a feeling that he was mad, hoping to knock down an armed adversary with a weapon so prosaic as a box of corned beef. Still, by taking a big risk he did not see why it should not be done, and as far as risk was concerned it was a case of neck or nothing now.

With a calmness that surprised him he saw Chicot feverishly reloading his gun; saw him train the weapon on him; saw the tiny spurts of flame start leaping from the black muzzle. Twice he heard the vicious crack of a bullet boring through the machine, and found time to pray that Biggles had not been hit. For a ghastly moment, as the Jupiter suddenly steepened its dive, he feared that he had, and it may have been the horror of this suspicion that caused him to stake everything on one desperate chance. Raising himself on one knee, he waited while the two machines closed up as though drawn by an invisible magnet; then, as the Jupiter swooped low over the Weinkel, he stood upright and with all his force flung the heavy box outwards and downwards. For one terrible second he thought that he was going too, for he almost lost his balance. Dropping on to his knees, he clawed frantically at the smooth fabric; his questing fingers found a rib under the canvas, and although as a handhold this was poor enough, it stayed his progress long enough for him to grasp the edge of the trap and drag himself back to comparative safety.

Now during the brief instant of time in which this had occurred his eyes had never left the box; they had followed its course with a sort of morbid fascination. It was clear from the start that it would not hit the fuselage of the other machine; in fact, he thought that it would not hit it at all. Nor would it have done so but for the fact that at the last moment Sarton must have moved his joystick. The movement was so slight that it could hardly be regarded as such; but it was enough. The Weinkel's wing-tip seemed to

move towards the box, which was turning so slowly as it fell that subconsciously Ginger re-read the words on it as they came into view—20
LB. CORNED BEEF . . .

The box struck the Weinkel's wing about four feet from the tip. The impact occurred just behind the leading edge, and from what immediately happened it was clear that the weight, falling on the main spar where the strain was greatest, caused it to break instantly. The whole wing-tip seemed to crumple up like a piece of tissue paper, twisting back on itself like a worm under a clumsy gardener's heel.

Fortunately, the effect of this was at once exercised on the whole machine. The fractured wing, losing a great percentage of its lift, sagged, causing the machine to fall in that direction. Ginger could imagine the wretched Sarton fighting to right his machine, but in such a case an aircraft is as helpless as a bird with a broken wing. For a second or two the plane zoomed this way and that as the pilot tried to hold his crippled machine on even keel; then the nose followed the dropping wing, and an instant later the Weinkel was spinning earthward.

In fascinated horror Ginger watched it go; he saw the damaged wing 'balloon' as the air rushed into it; saw it rip off at the roots and follow the rest sluggishly, like a piece of torn paper; saw the fuselage spin faster and faster; saw the half-breed flung off and go plunging down beside it, clutching vainly at the air . . .

He turned away and fell back weakly into the cabin, limp from reaction now that the danger had passed. He felt no sympathy for the two doomed men in the Weinkel, for the fate that was theirs was what they had intended for those in the Jupiter. The poetic justice of it could not be denied. Dragging himself into his seat he turned a white face to Biggles and saw that he was looking down out of the side window, and the roar of the engine died away. From the angle of the floor he knew that the Jupiter was going down. Following Biggles's eyes he was just in time to see the Weinkel hit the snow and crumple to a thousand fragments. A great pillar of fire leapt heavenwards.

Biggles turned an expressionless face to Ginger. 'They got what they asked for,' he said grimly. 'It's no use our risking a landing.'

His hand went to the throttle; his engines burst into their full-throated bellow again and the nose of the Jupiter crept up until it was level with the horizon. With the machine levelled out Biggles turned again to Ginger. 'Good work, laddie,' he said. 'You'll find some hot coffee in the thermos; you look as if you need it.'

CHAPTER IX

DOWN IN A FROZEN WORLD

FOR some minutes neither of them spoke. Ginger literally gulped the hot coffee, for he was so cold that his lips were stiff and numb. Then he began a vigorous massage of his face and hands to restore the circulation.

He did not expect any great praise from Biggles for what he had done; nor did he get any—which did not mean that Biggles did not appreciate it. Biggles himself did whatever circumstances demanded; Algy did the same, and this example Ginger had learned to follow.

At last Biggles spoke. ‘Even now I can hardly believe that McBain would put over a show like that,’ he observed bitterly. ‘I knew he was pretty bad, but I thought there were limits to how far he would go. Well, it’s taught me a lesson. I’ll never move without a machine-gun in future. That devil Sarton deliberately waylaid us. But we had better start looking out for Eskimo Island; we can’t be far off it, but how on earth we are going to tell where it is or which it is I’m dashed if I know. In some silly way I had imagined that we were going to see an island with water round it, but everything seems to be frozen up. Some snow must have fallen, too, so we can’t tell which is land and which is water. Judging by its extent, and the flatness of it, I should say that that’s ice under us now. Those humps ahead should be land, but they may be icebergs frozen into the pack-ice. I don’t know. This is going to be a lot more difficult than I thought. I’m half sorry I started. Keep a sharp look-out; I’m not going to hang about long and risk running out of juice. This sort of landscape gives me the heeby-jeebies.’

Ginger, somewhat restored, caught his breath as he looked down at the scene of appalling desolation and loneliness underneath them. He was about to remark on it, to say that they must be off their course since it was inconceivable that a man should leave civilization with all its comforts for such a dreadful place, when one of the engines spluttered, picked up, and then spluttered again.

Biggles was already turning. ‘A pretty spot for an engine to pack up,’ he muttered viciously. ‘I——’

Whatever he had been going to say was left unsaid, for at that moment the port engine cut out dead. But it was not that alone that caused Ginger’s lips to part in dismay. The other engine was also spluttering.

A horrid suspicion flashed into his mind. Throwing open the narrow door that led into the freight compartment, he darted in, but was back in an instant, face ashen. 'It's petrol,' he cried, in a high-pitched voice. 'There is petrol everywhere; it's slopping over everything. One of Chicot's bullets must have holed the main tank.'

Even as he spoke the second engine, after a sullen backfire, died out. Both propellers stopped, and a weird silence fell, an unnerving silence broken only by the faint whine of the wind over the wings.

Biggles pumped frantically at the hand-pump that filled the gravity tank; but it drew its supply from the main tank, and the main tank was empty. Nothing happened, so he abandoned the useless task and concentrated his attention on bringing the machine down; it was, of course, already gliding towards the frozen wilderness below.

Ginger looked down to see where they were going. In a subconscious way, without actually thinking about it, he was quite certain that they were as good as dead. He did not give up hope easily, particularly since they had found a way out of so many tight corners, but try as he would, he could think of no possible way out of their present dilemma. Suppose Biggles did manage to put the machine down without breaking anything; what then? The only thing that could get them into the air again was petrol, and that was something they would certainly not find where they were going.

To walk all the way back to Moose Creek, a matter of four hundred miles, across such country as they had flown over, was so utterly out of the question that he did not even think of it.

The Jupiter continued to sink with that curious floating feeling customary in such cases, accompanied by the usual soft whine of wind blowing past the wings. As they sank lower it grew perceptibly darker, until, near the ground, the plane was moving through a peculiar twilight, dim, yet light enough to see clearly and for a considerable distance.

The need to choose a landing-place did not arise. The ground was all the same, a never-ending expanse of snow in all directions as far as the eye could see; only to the north a jagged ridge—ice or rock, they knew not which—showed clear and hard against a sky of dark, steely-blue.

Ginger braced himself as Biggles flattened out to land. He could see no obstruction, but he had a feeling that the dead-flat surface looked almost too good to be true. Again, there was no way of telling if the snow was hard or soft; if it was very soft, then the wheels of the now lowered undercarriage would certainly sink into it and cause the machine to pull up so suddenly that it would inevitably tip up on its nose.

Nothing of the sort happened. The wheels bumped softly, running through the snow with a gentle hissing sound; then, very slowly in the still air, the tail dragged and the machine came to rest.

For a little while neither of them spoke. Biggles yawned and rubbed his eyes. 'Lord!' he muttered, 'I'm tired. I could go to sleep easily.'

'From what I can see of it we shall shortly be going to sleep for a long, long time,' answered Ginger bitterly. 'Strewth! What a place! If I'd just woke up I should have thought I was on the moon.'

Biggles grinned. 'It isn't exactly what you'd call a hive of activity, is it?' he said evenly, feeling for his cigarette case. Then, the reek of petrol warning him of the danger of lighting a match where he was, he opened the door and jumped down.

Ginger followed him, noticing that their feet rested on black ice under an inch or two of snow. Looking about him, he was appalled by the stark desolation of the scene. They might have been the only people on earth. The only familiar object he could see was a narrow rim of the sun, blood-red, just showing above the horizon. But it was the silence that affected him most; it seemed to worry the ear-drums, and the noise of Biggles's match, as he struck it to light a cigarette, sounded like a crash.

Biggles nudged his arm. 'Look!' he said.

Half a mile away two whitish-grey shapes, one large and the other small, were moving in a tireless lope towards the south. Ginger started back in alarm as he recognized them for polar bears, a mother and a cub, but he recovered his composure when he perceived that they took not the slightest notice of them. They might have been accustomed to seeing aeroplanes standing on the ice all their lives. At a perfectly even speed they continued on their way, leaving a faint wake of smoky breath hanging in the air to mark their passage. Presently they seemed to fade into the surrounding gloom, and were seen no more. To Ginger they seemed like the living spirit of the frozen north, and he shivered as he turned back to Biggles, for the cold was intense.

'Well,' he said, 'what do we do next?'

'To tell the truth, laddie, I was just wondering,' replied Biggles. 'There doesn't seem to be an awful lot we can do, does there? But we needn't give up hope. The position may not be so bad as it appears at first sight.'

'Well, that's comforting, anyway,' muttered Ginger. 'How did you work it out?'

Biggles blew a puff of smoke into the still air before he replied. 'First of all, we've got enough grub inside to last us a long time. I'm afraid it's going to be a bit tough on Angus if we eat it, but since he is never likely to find us here, and we are unable to find him, we should be fools to starve ourselves to death on that account. We have also got the cabin to sleep in. It isn't much protection against this perishing cold, but it's better than nothing.'

'And when the grub's all gone?' prompted Ginger.

'Don't be so confoundedly pessimistic,' Biggles chided him. 'I haven't finished yet. As I see it, we've got two fairly sound chances. The first is, obviously, that Algy and Wilks will come to look for us in Wilks's Rockheed. We should hear their machine a great way off in this atmosphere, and if we lit a fire—which we could, easily—they could hardly fail to spot it. The place doesn't exactly bristle with illuminations, as you can see. The second chance is that we shall see or hear something of Angus. We must be somewhere near Eskimo Island, and we must be pretty close to the track he would follow if he started off to meet Mose. Not knowing the facts, he might think that he'd had a mishap, and come looking for him.'

'That's true enough,' acknowledged Ginger. 'Gosh! It's cold! I'm going——' He broke off, staring at the sky. He raised a quivering forefinger. 'Why—look! There's a searchlight,' he cried. 'It must be Algy. There's another—three—four—why, there's a dozen. What the dickens is going on?'

Biggles looked round sharply, then laughed. 'I've never seen it before in my life, but having read about it I should say it's the aurora borealis.'

Ginger nodded. 'Of course,' he said. 'I didn't think of that. My goodness! Look how the colours change. I could watch it for a long time.'

Biggles grinned. 'Well, you'll have plenty of opportunity,' he observed cheerfully.

'But *that* isn't the aurora borealis, I'll swear,' cried Ginger emphatically, pointing in the direction of the distant ridge. 'That's a fire, or I never saw one in my life.'

Biggles turned quickly. 'Where do you mean?' he asked tersely.

'Well, that's funny. It's gone now,' said Ginger in a puzzled voice. 'You see those two extra sharp peaks a little to the right? It seemed to be at the foot of those.'

'Are you sure you're not imagining things?' asked Biggles doubtfully.

'I'm absolutely certain I saw a light,' declared Ginger. 'It just flared up, remained steady for a moment, and then went out again. It was as if somebody had opened the door of a lighted room and then shut it again.'

‘I hope you are right,’ said Biggles. ‘If you are, it can only mean one thing—Angus. It is unlikely that there are two men up here. Those peaks must be Eskimo Island! What a stroke of luck.’

‘What shall we do?’

‘It’s no use staying here,’ answered Biggles. ‘I wonder if Angus is keeping watch for Mose to return. Let’s light a fire. We shall soon get an answer if he spots it, in which case we’ll load up some food and make for the shack. He’ll probably help us to fetch the rest. Come on, let’s get a fire going.’

With some pieces of petrol-soaked rag and packing-paper they soon had a bright fire burning at a safe distance from the machine, all the time watching the steely-blue haze that seemed to hang at the foot of the peaks, obscuring the physical features of the island—if, indeed, it was the island.

Nothing happened. There was no answering flame.

‘He must have gone inside,’ muttered Ginger in a disappointed voice.

‘I should feel happier if I had seen the light myself,’ said Biggles.

‘You can take it from me that there was one,’ returned Ginger.

‘It wasn’t a reflection of the aurora on a piece of ice, or anything like that?’

‘Definitely not. What I saw was yellow lamplight.’

‘All right. I’ll take your word for it. If Angus won’t come to us we had better go to him. It’s not much use staying here.’ Biggles turned towards the machine.

Nothing more was said. They both loaded themselves up with as many of the food boxes as they could conveniently carry, and then set off towards the distant peaks. How far away they were was difficult to judge. Ginger said two miles. Biggles guessed five. As it turned out, he was the nearer of the two, but he was a good deal out in his reckoning.

CHAPTER X

A DESPERATE MEETING

‘WELL, I don’t know, but those hills seem no nearer to me now than when we started.’

It was Biggles who spoke, and they had been walking for a good hour when he made the observation.

Ginger stopped and set his load down on the thin blanket of snow that covered the ice under their feet. ‘I didn’t like to mention it, but I also had noticed that,’ he said, massaging his lips, on which his breath had caused a film of hoar-frost to form. He turned and looked at the Jupiter, standing alone and forlorn at a distance which he would have judged to be not more than half a mile, although he knew from the length of time they had been walking, and the pace, that it could not be less than three miles.

There was just a hint of anxiety in Biggles’s voice when he spoke again. ‘Judging by the distance we must be from the machine, those hills ahead must be ten miles away. Still, it’s no use sitting down; that won’t get us there. Let’s keep going.’

Ginger picked up his luggage again.

Biggles was watching him. ‘What’s the matter—tired?’

‘Just a bit,’ admitted Ginger.

They said no more, but trudged on towards the still distant hills.

Another hour passed.

‘Angus doesn’t seem to be about,’ observed Ginger. ‘I wish he’d show that light again. It would—sort of—cheer one up.’

‘By the clock it’s somewhere about the middle of the night,’ Biggles told him. ‘He’s probably fast asleep in bed.’ He glanced up at the sky.

‘What do you keep looking up at the sky for?’ asked Ginger. ‘That’s the twentieth time you’ve done it.’

‘I was just looking at the stars,’ answered Biggles. ‘It may be my imagination, but it struck me that they weren’t quite so bright as they were.’

Ginger glanced up. ‘They’re not,’ he said shortly. ‘What’s that a sign of?’

‘I don’t know,’ confessed Biggles. ‘I know nothing about the meteorological conditions in this part of the world, but if I was nearer home I should say that there’s snow on the way.’

‘Then we’d better move a bit faster,’ rejoined Ginger. ‘Things won’t look too rosy if we get caught out here in the snow.’

Biggles did not answer, but, picking up his luggage, set off at an increased pace.

At the end of another hour it was apparent that the peaks towards which they were marching were definitely nearer. They could no longer see the Jupiter; it had merged into the vague background.

‘Not much farther,’ said Biggles brightly, taking a surreptitious glance at Ginger, for he had noticed for some time that he was lagging. This did not surprise him, for he, too, was conscious of an increasing weariness.

They toiled on again, both of them dragging their feet through the snow, whereas at first their trail had been clear cut. Biggles took one of the largest parcels from Ginger’s pile and added it to his own. Ginger started to protest, but Biggles silenced him with a word. ‘When in a jam, all pull on the same rope,’ he added. ‘I’m as fresh as when I started.’ This was not strictly true, but Ginger was too tired to argue. His hands and feet had begun to pain him.

Another half-hour brought them to their objective, and as Ginger looked at it his heart sank. It was darker than when they had started; the world was bathed in a sort of cold blue twilight, dim, yet sufficient to reveal the silent crags that rose straight up from the frozen sea, and formed the coast-line of the solitary island. The silence was unnerving; so profound was it that it seemed to Ginger that it should be possible to hear the stars twinkling. Nothing else moved. All around was a land of death, as devoid of life as the earth must have once been.

Biggles eyed the cliffs with disfavour. ‘I’ve seen more cheerful spots in my time,’ he remarked lightly. ‘We can’t climb that stuff; we’d better walk along the base until we come to a break.’

They set off again, now following the foot of the cliff, and soon afterwards came to a gigantic gorge, like a vast split in the rock’s face. It was not very wide, but the sheer walls were nearly a thousand feet in height, so that the airmen, as they stood at the entrance, looked like two microscopic insects in comparison.

Biggles regarded the chasm doubtfully. Nothing moved. Not a bush or a blade of grass grew; only, here and there, on the rock, a sort of grey lichen or moss. Not a sound broke the eerie silence but their laboured breathing. ‘It

doesn't seem possible that a human being would willingly exist in such a dreadful place as this,' he said quietly. 'But in the absence of any other way into the island, this must be—what did Mose call it?—Muskeg Bend. If it is, is the shack on the top or at the bottom? Well, I suppose we might as well go in a little way; we can always come back if we find we are wrong.'

They had proceeded a little way into the gloomy ravine when Ginger let out a sudden cry. 'Tracks!' he shouted excitedly. 'This must be the place!'

They hurried towards a long straight mark in the snow, but when they reached it Biggles stopped suddenly. There were two tracks, one wider than the other. 'They weren't made by human beings,' he said firmly. 'I've got it. Those two bears we saw must have come this way.'

Ginger's face fell. 'Confound it,' he muttered, 'I thought we'd struck lucky at last. Hello! What's that?' He looked ahead at a tiny moving object that was floating slowly downward in the still air in front of him. It was not unlike a small grey feather.

'Snow,' said Biggles, grimly, 'That's the first flake. We've got to find Angus pretty soon—or else——'

'How about shouting?' suggested Ginger. 'I should think sound would carry a long way in a place like this.'

'We can try it,' agreed Biggles. 'I think this will be better than shouting, though.' He put his hand in his pocket and took out his automatic. Pointing the muzzle in the air, he pulled the trigger three times at equal intervals.

Ginger flinched as the shots crashed out, reverberating again and again between the towering rock walls. The noise was more like a salvo of artillery fire than mere pistol reports. 'Gosh!' he murmured in an awestruck voice, as the echoes finally rolled away to silence. 'What a din! If Angus is within fifty miles I should think he'll hear that.'

Biggles smiled. 'A little hectic, wasn't it?' he agreed. 'The question is, do we go on or do we wait here?'

'We'd better go on a bit,' suggested Ginger. 'If he comes here he'll see our tracks and follow us. The trouble is, even if he showed a light it is doubtful if we should see it down here in the bottom of this gully.'

They moved on again, pausing from time to time to listen.

They had covered perhaps a hundred yards in this way, with big flakes of snow falling regularly, when Ginger suddenly pulled up short. 'There's something moving ahead,' he said quietly.

‘I can see it,’ came the swift answer. ‘Stand fast. It’s a bear. He is coming this way—following the tracks of the others. Don’t shoot whatever you do. Gosh, what a monster! He must be the father of that cub we saw. Here, let’s get over to one side; he may go past. If he comes for us then we shall have to use our pistols—not that they’ll be much use against that brute.’

Dropping their loads, they both ran as fast as they could towards the side of the ravine, giving free passage to the bear, which was following the tracks down the middle, snuffling and grunting to itself as it ambled along without any great haste. When the airmen could get no farther on account of the cliff, they turned to watch.

The bear, an enormous shaggy brute that looked grey in the half-light, snuffled along until it came to the place where the two airmen had stood. For a moment there seemed to be a chance that it would go right on, but the human taint seemed to upset it, for it sat up on its haunches and looked around. After a moment or two spent like this, during which time it did not appear to see the airmen crouching against the cliff, it dropped on to all fours again and began following their tracks towards where they waited breathlessly. It moved hesitatingly, grunting and snuffling in the footmarks, occasionally stopping to sit up and look around in a manner which, in a small animal, might have been funny. But a full-grown polar bear is a very large animal, and neither Biggles nor Ginger saw any humour in the situation as the huge beast slowly drew near to them.

Then, suddenly, during one of its sitting-up periods, it saw them. Instantly it raised itself on its hind legs and let out a deep snarling grunt.

‘Look out, he’s coming!’ jerked out Biggles. ‘It’s no use running. Wait until he gets close and then make every shot tell.’

With his heart hammering against his ribs, Ginger whipped out his automatic and waited. The pistol seemed a futile weapon against such a great beast, but it was all he had.

When the bear was about twenty yards away Biggles let out a yell, which caused it to pull up dead, emitting a rumbling growl deep in its throat. Then, with its head held low and muzzle thrust forward, it came on again.

Biggles took a pace to the right. ‘Keep to the other side of it,’ he jerked out.

As the words left his lips the beast rose up on its hind legs and ran forward in a stumbling charge. Biggles fired, and a choking grunt told them that the bullet had found its mark. But it did nothing to stop the beast’s

progress. At a distance of five or six yards Biggles fired again, at which the animal let out a roar and turned to bite at the place where the shot had struck. But its halt was only momentary, for with a roar of fury it darted forward again.

Biggles side-stepped and blazed point-blank at the pointed head, but without stopping its berserk progress. Then, in his haste to step aside, he slipped and measured his length in the snow. In a flash the bear was over him.

To Ginger the moment was one of stark panic. His one conscious thought was that he must save Biggles. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he rushed up to the bear and, thrusting the muzzle of the pistol into the thick fur behind the animal's ear, pulled the trigger. The next instant he was swept off his feet as the bear turned on its new aggressor; a hairy paw caught him a sweeping blow on the shoulder and he went over backwards, the pistol flying out of his hand as he fell. A sickening stench of bear filled his nostrils. A roaring report almost deafened him. Then a great weight seemed to settle on his body, crushing the life out of him. He felt himself being pressed farther and farther into the snow, but he still fought with the panic of despair. Something seized him by the arm and he let out a scream, thinking that it was the bear's jaws. Then the scene seemed to change and he scrambled to his feet, panting and muttering incoherently.

'Ach, now! Take it easy,' said a strange voice in a strong Scots accent.

Ginger stared at a short, broad-shouldered figure, with a rifle in the crook of its arm, that suddenly appeared in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Biggles picking himself up out of the snow. Then he understood.

'Are you Angus Stirling?' he blurted out.

'Ay, mon, that's me name,' was the casual reply. 'And what might ye be doin' in these parts, if I may ask?'

Ginger rubbed his shoulder ruefully. 'We were looking for you,' he said, thinking how silly the answer sounded. 'Did you shoot this brute?' he went on, pointing to the body of the bear.

'I did so,' replied Angus. ' 'Twas about time, too, I reckon.' Beyond that the bear did not appear to interest him. 'And what might your name be?' he inquired.

'Let's go to your shack and I'll tell you all about it,' put in Biggles.

'Ay, mebbe that'd be best,' agreed Angus, and, turning, led the way up the ravine.

CHAPTER XI

AN UNPLEASANT SHOCK

IT was not far to the old Scotsman's cabin, which was situated on the side of a hill which faced south, for which reason it had been seen by the airmen out on the icefield when he had opened the door to bring in some peat for the fire. He told them that he was just going to sleep when he heard the three shots fired by Biggles, and three shots at equal intervals being a universal summons for help, he had at once set off expecting to find Mose, even though it was early for him to return.

After they had shaken the snow from their clothes, Biggles asked the question that was uppermost in his mind. 'What about the weather?' he said. 'Is the snow going to keep on?'

Angus threw some lumps of peat—the only fuel available—into his stove before he replied. 'It might only be an early flurry, and stop again presently, or it may be the real fall,' he said.

'What's your opinion?' asked Biggles.

'I ain't got none; and it would be a wise man as 'ad any in these parts,' was the non-committal reply.

'If it's the real fall—what then?' inquired Biggles.

'We shall all be dead afore the break-up,' returned Angus with disconcerting frankness.

'We've got some food out yonder,' Biggles told him.

'Eh, mon, if this is the big snow it'll be buried afore morning. 'Twouldn't be no use thinkin' o' fetchin' it.'

'And there wouldn't be enough here without it to last us till spring?'

'Not half enough,' said the old man calmly. 'Where's Mose? Did he tell you I was here? What did you come up here for, anyway?'

'I'm coming to that,' replied Biggles, realizing that in his anxiety to try to discover what the weather was likely to do, he had told Angus nothing about his mission. For another moment or two he hesitated, wondering how to begin.

'I've got some bad news for you, Angus,' he said at last.

The Scotsman threw him a sidelong glance. 'Hm?'

‘Mose won’t be coming back.’

‘That means he’s dead.’

Biggles nodded. ‘Quite right. Mose is dead.’

‘How did it happen?’

‘He was murdered.’

Angus started. ‘Got drunk, I reckon, and talked about—talked too much.’

Biggles noted how the old man checked himself and wondered why. ‘No,’ he said. ‘At least, I only saw him once, and he was sober enough then.’ And thereafter he told the whole story; how Ginger overheard him inquiring for Wilks and the events that followed. This involved, naturally, an explanation of the state of affairs at the aerodrome.

‘You reckon Brindle done the killin’?’ put in the old man shrewdly, when Biggles had finished.

‘I’m pretty sure of it,’ replied Biggles. ‘But that doesn’t mean that I could prove it,’ he added.

‘So you aimed to bring up the grub and get the transfer at the same time?’

‘That’s it.’

‘What happened? How come you to be walking?’

Biggles had to disclose the incident of the air attack by Sarton—not that he had any desire to conceal the fact that he and Ginger had been responsible for the death of Sarton and Chicot.

When he had finished the old man stared at the stove for a long time in silence. ‘I reckon you’re tellin’ the truth,’ he said at last. ‘I know Brindle. He’s bad medicine. Poor old Mose. I never reckoned he’d go out that way. Well, it was mighty kind of yer to come up, stranger, but I guess you was just a day or two too late. You’re here, and here you’ll stop, I reckon. When the snow stops we’ll go and dig out the bear meat; that’ll last us for a bit. There’s just a chance that we might dig the grub out of the aeroplane; mebber we could make do with that. And since you’re liable to be stoppin’, I’ll tell yer something else. Mose was a rich man.’

Biggles looked surprised. ‘He didn’t look like that to me.’

‘No? Mebber he wouldn’t. To make my meanin’ plain, me and Mose struck it rich.’

Biggles understood then. ‘You mean you’ve found gold here?’

‘Ay, mon, dust a-plenty. A power o’ good it’s like to do us, though, now. Mose had a tidy poke here; he wouldn’t take it with him ’cause he was afeared he might get rubbed out for it. Yet he gets rubbed out anyway. Well, it all depends on the weather now; let’s see what it’s doin’.’

Angus crossed over to the door and flung it open. Outside the world lay still and white under the fresh fall, but it was no longer snowing. Once more the stars were twinkling brightly in the cold blue dome overhead.

Biggles went past him out into the snow, and found that it was only six or eight inches deep. ‘This looks like our chance to get the grub up from the machine,’ he said. ‘We shall have to have an hour or two’s sleep first, though. We’re about all in.’

‘Ay, I can see that,’ replied Angus. ‘You take a snooze then, while I go out and fetch the bear meat. Then, if you’re willin’, we’ll go to the airyplane.’

Biggles would have preferred to have gone straight back to the machine for fear the snow started again, but there are limits to human endurance, and he was at the end of his.

Angus took some furs from a heap in the corner and threw them on the floor near the stove. ‘Make a shake-down out of these,’ he said.

Ginger followed Biggles’s example in arranging a rough bed on the floor. He threw himself down on it and was asleep in a moment, so soundly that he did not even hear Angus go out and shut the door.

When he awoke he had no idea of how long he had been asleep. It did not seem long, but he knew it must be several hours because a great pile of raw meat was stacked on the far side of the room, the remains of the polar bear. There was more than a man could carry in one load, so he realized that if Angus had made two journeys it must be the next day. Neither Biggles nor Angus were in the room, but it did not occur to him that they were far away, so he got up leisurely and went outside to look for them. Instinctively his eyes went out across the open plain that lay between the shack and the Jupiter, and he was not a little surprised to see two figures moving across it. Presently he made them out to be Biggles and Angus, and what surprised him even more was the fact that they were returning.

‘Gosh! What a time I must have been asleep,’ he muttered, realizing that the others must have made a trip to the machine. He did not waste any more time in idle conjecture, however, but built up the fire, put the kettle on, and, finding a frying pan, started to fry three large bear steaks, which were just cooked to a turn when the others came in with their loads.

After a hearty meal Angus announced his intention of making another journey to the machine. 'It's a bit of luck, the snow holding off like this,' he explained, 'and we ought to make the most of it. If it starts again it might go on for a week or more.'

The others agreed with this project, for they realized that their lives depended on their getting sufficient food in to last them through the long Arctic winter. Coats and gloves were, therefore, donned, and they set off towards the distant machine.

As they trudged in single file through the snow, with Angus leading, Ginger discovered that he had lost all count of time. With so little difference between day and night he found that he had completely lost track of how many hours or days had passed since they had left Fort Beaver. Not that it mattered. Their actions in future would be ruled by the weather, not by the clock.

Vaguely he wondered what Algy and Wilks were doing, and what they thought of their non-return. As Biggles had said, it was certain that, weather permitting, they would set off in Wilks's machine to look for them, but there were long odds against them succeeding in locating them, with such a vast territory to cover. In any case, once the snow started again it would put an end to any idea of rescue, in which event Wilks and Algy would have to fight McBain as best they could.

The newly fallen snow appeared to have raised the temperature considerably, but it started to freeze again just as they reached the machine, a detail which would, Angus said, make their return trip easier, since it would harden the snow so that they would be able to walk on it, instead of ploughing through it as they had on the outward journey.

To Ginger's surprise the Jupiter was not half buried under the snow as he had expected to find it, but Biggles explained the mystery. On his previous visit, while the snow was still soft, he had brushed it off the exposed surfaces of the machine, so that, on the remote chance of Algy or Wilks finding it, it would be in a condition to fly—provided, of course, that it had petrol in the tanks and the bullet hole was mended.

The chances of the machine ever taking the air again seemed so slight that Ginger, although he did not say so, felt that Biggles had wasted his time. He himself thought no more about it, but set to work with the others unloading the remaining stores. This done, he was about to suggest to Biggles that they drain the crank cases of oil, which would be useful in many ways, when he heard the distant hum of an aeroplane. The sound was unmistakable, and his heart leapt when he heard it.

‘Good old Algy!’ he shouted gleefully.

Even Biggles had flushed with excitement. ‘A fire!’ he yelled. ‘Let’s get a fire going!’

They rushed into the cabin and threw out any odd scraps of packing they could find. An old map, a spare pair of gloves, and even the patching fabric went on the pile as Angus put a match to it. A tongue of orange fire leapt upwards, and in a moment the odds and ends were blazing like a beacon.

‘It should be possible to see that for fifty miles,’ declared Biggles, peering into the sky in the direction from which the sound had come. ‘There he is! There he is!’ He pointed with a quivering forefinger at a black speck that had materialized out of the dull haze concealing the southern horizon. ‘He’s seen us!’ went on Biggles gleefully. ‘I saw him turn. He’s coming—coming——’ His voice died away in a curious manner.

Ginger, staring at the fast approaching machine, knew why. It was not Wilks’s Rockheed. It was McBain’s second Weinkel that was roaring low towards them.

CHAPTER XII

A ONE-SIDED DUEL

To say that Ginger was flabbergasted would be to express his feelings only mildly. He was thunderstruck. For some reason the possibility of this development had not occurred to him, although he realized now that there was just as much reason for McBain to come searching for Sarton and Chicot, as for Wilks and Algy to come looking for them.

He turned to Biggles who was still staring at the oncoming machine with an expression of mingled chagrin and disgust. 'He was looking for Sarton, I expect,' he muttered.

Biggles nodded thoughtfully, 'And we were kind enough to light a fire and show him where we were,' he murmured.

'He may still think we're Sarton and Chicot.'

'If he does, he'll realize his mistake when he gets a bit closer,' returned Biggles bitterly. 'Hello—see that turn? He's spotted who we are. It will be interesting to see what he does,' he added. 'He'll hardly risk landing.'

Ginger did not reply. He was watching the movements of the Weinkel with a good deal of trepidation, for he felt that whatever McBain did—assuming that he was on board—it would be unpleasant.

That he was right in this assumption was soon made apparent. The Weinkel banked sharply, and putting its nose down, dived at the stranded Jupiter.

For an instant longer Biggles watched it. Then he let out a warning yell. 'Lie flat.'

Ginger flung himself down just in time. Above the bellow of the Weinkel's engines there came the vicious chatter of a machine-gun, and the line of the bullets could easily be followed by the splinters of ice and flecks of snow that leapt into the air in line with the machine.

As it swept past Ginger clearly saw McBain himself behind the gun, which he had thrust out of the side window of the control cabin.

A stream of belligerent imprecations from Angus made Biggles turn. 'You hit?' he asked anxiously.

'Och, mon, not I,' shouted Angus. 'If I ever get ma' hands on that——'

‘You keep down,’ shouted Biggles, seeing that the Weinkel was coming back.

Angus’s rifle cracked as the Weinkel roared past again, cutting a trail in the snow with its gun. Some of the shots went very near the prone airmen.

‘You’ll never hit him with that,’ Biggles told Angus. ‘He’ll hit one of us in a minute if we aren’t careful. We’d better scatter.’

The third time the Weinkel hurtled past the gun was silent. Instead, a small square object crashed down near the Jupiter; it bounced over and over and came to rest very close to the machine. Biggles started forward with the idea of finding out what it was, but before he could reach it, the Weinkel, which had swung round almost on its wing-tip, was coming back. A signal light cut a flaming line through the air; it struck the snow very near the square object, and a sheet of flame leapt upwards.

‘It’s petrol!’ yelled Biggles. ‘He threw a can of petrol with the cap off. Now he’s fired it with the pistol. He’s trying to burn the Jupiter.’

Two gallons of petrol make a considerable flame. The scene was bathed in a lurid glow, but it was soon clear that in this case, at any rate, the Jupiter would not be damaged. Owing to the snow the petrol did not spread far, and the flame was ten yards from the machine.

Seething with impotence, Biggles told the others to get farther away in order to reduce the chances of any one being hit. It was as well that he did so, for thrice more the Weinkel dived at them, the gun spitting. Another can of petrol was thrown down, and Ferroni, who was actually flying the machine, almost stalled as he turned slowly above the Jupiter in order to allow McBain to take careful aim.

Biggles sprang to his feet and blazed away with his automatic. It is probable that he hit the machine, for it dived away and climbed up out of pistol range. A signal flare came screaming down, but Biggles had not wasted the brief delay; running forward, he had snatched up the can, still nearly full, and carried it clear. The flare burnt itself out harmlessly in the snow.

For the next few seconds the movements of the Weinkel puzzled the watchers on the ground. The plane turned away sharply and began climbing steeply.

‘I think he’s going,’ said Biggles, rising to his feet. ‘He’s thought better of it. Maybe he was afraid of running out of petrol himself.’

‘No, that isn’t it,’ cried Ginger. ‘Look!’

Biggles followed the direction indicated. What he saw made him catch his breath sharply. 'It's Algy!' he muttered hoarsely.

Heading straight towards the scene was a Rockheed Freighter, attracted, no doubt, by the signal flares.

In normal circumstances this would have given Biggles and Ginger cause for jubilation, but now they both went cold with horror, for the Weinkel was racing towards the other machine, and they both knew that whatever Algy might have in the way of weapons, he would certainly have nothing capable of competing with a machine-gun.

'Judging by the way he flies, I don't think Algy has seen the Weinkel,' muttered Ginger, in a hopeless voice.

'He's probably got his eyes fixed on us,' returned Biggles tersely.

Helpless, they could only stand and watch.

The affair—it could hardly be called a combat—was over even more quickly than they had imagined it would be.

The Weinkel, confident, no doubt, of its superior armament, climbed straight up under the tail of the Rockheed, which had now cut its engines and was gliding down slowly, obviously looking for a place to land. An arm appeared out of the window, waving, making it obvious that those inside the machine had not the slightest suspicion of danger.

Ginger groaned aloud in his misery.

Biggles ground his teeth. 'What would I give for a single-seater and just one drum of ammunition—just one,' he forced out through his set teeth.

The two machines were within a quarter of a mile of the stranded Jupiter when the end came; the horrified watchers on the ground saw the whole thing clearly. They saw the Weinkel's side window open and the gun appear; saw McBain take slow and careful aim; saw the jabbing tongues of flame dance from the muzzle of the gun; saw the Rockheed shiver as the burst of fire struck her.

Ginger could hardly bear to watch, but he could not tear his eyes away. A kind of fascinated horror kept them glued to the machine. He was not quite certain what had happened, but it seemed that either whoever was flying it had been hit, or else the controls had been damaged.

The Rockheed fluttered like a wounded bird, careering from side to side with a sickening skidding movement. Its nose swung upward and sagged in turn.

Biggles said nothing. He did not move. With a face nearly as white as the surrounding snow he stared at the swaying machine with brooding eyes. Never in all his experience had he felt so utterly powerless; never before had he found himself in a position where he could do absolutely nothing. Instinctively, aware of the futility of it, he swayed with the machine as if by sheer will power he could correct the faults, leaning back when the nose dropped and pushing an imaginary joystick forward when the machine looked as though it must stall.

It was now so close that they could see the two men in her; could see Wilks fighting at the controls.

‘He isn’t hit, anyway,’ muttered Ginger through dry lips.

Biggles did not answer. He knew the end was not far away.

The Rockheed stalled, came out, and stalled again, this time missing the ground by inches. It was obviously out of control. The port wing sagged as it stalled again at the top of its zoom, perhaps a hundred feet above the snow-field. Instantly it began to fall again, the sagging wing heading towards the ground—the first movement of a spin.

Then, as if by a miracle, the machine righted itself. Neither Biggles nor Ginger could understand why. There seemed no reason for it. The machine turned sluggishly towards them, and the reason for the apparent miracle became revealed. Algy was out on the starboard wing, lying flat, clinging to the leading edge with his hands as, with his body, he counterbalanced the port wing.

The Rockheed swept down like a tired bird, nearly on even keel, but not quite. The port wing-tip touched the ground first, flinging the snow up like the bow-wave of a ship. After that the result was a foregone conclusion. The whole machine cart-wheeled, flinging Algy over and over across the snow. The nose buried itself. The fuselage tipped up, hanging poised for a moment, and then fell back. Movement ceased.

The Weinkel, its engines roaring triumphantly, swept up into the sky. It levelled out, its nose pointing to the south.

Neither Biggles nor Ginger paid any attention to it; they were both racing at full speed towards the crashed machine, which lay about a hundred yards away from the Jupiter.

‘Get to Algy; I’ll look after Wilks,’ yelled Biggles. His great fear was that the machine would go up in flames before he could reach it, for that is what happens all too often in such cases. He tore open the cabin door and disappeared inside.

Ginger went on to Algy, who, he was overjoyed to see, was moving, although ineffectually. Reaching him, he dropped on his knees beside him. ‘Algy,’ he cried, in a voice high-pitched with anxiety. ‘Algy, old man, are you badly hurt? It’s me—Ginger.’

Algy managed to get up on his hands and knees, his head thrust forward. His face was twisted in agony. A long-drawn groan burst from his lips.

Ginger’s blood ran cold. The groan convinced him that Algy was mortally hurt. In desperation he looked round for Biggles, but Algy, who apparently divined his intention, shook his head, at the same time groaning again. ‘I’m—I’m—I’m—’ he stammered, ‘on—on—only—winded.’

Ginger gasped his relief and waited for him to recover. There was little he could do. Fortunately, although the symptoms of ‘winding’ can be terrifying while they last, they do not last long, and once Algy managed to get an intake of breath, he recovered quickly.

‘Gosh!’ he groaned, smiling wanly. ‘Sorry to make such a fuss. How’s Wilks? Is he hurt?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Ginger. ‘Take your time. I’ll slip across and find out.’

He found that Biggles had managed to get Wilks out of the wreckage. He was sitting in the snow near by, very pale, while Biggles mopped blood from a cut in his forehead. Angus was binding a bandage tightly round his left wrist which, it subsequently transpired, he had sprained slightly.

‘How’s Algy?’ Biggles asked Ginger as he ran up.

‘Not bad, apart from being winded. I don’t think there is much wrong with him.’

‘Snow probably broke his fall,’ returned Biggles shortly.

‘I expect so,’ agreed Ginger.

Algy, his back slightly bent so that one hand rested on a knee, came limping over to them. ‘I’ve had nearly enough of this “farthest north” stuff,’ he declared. ‘One thing and another, we seem to be in a pretty bad way.’

‘Not so bad as it looks,’ grinned Biggles cheerfully. Actually, he was so relieved that neither Algy nor Wilks had suffered serious injury that he did not worry about anything else. ‘By the way,’ he went on, ‘this is Angus. Angus, this is my partner, Mr. Lacey. You and Wilkinson are already acquainted.’ He stood up and looked round.

‘Did you see that skunk McBain shoot us down?’ grated Algy.

‘Saw the whole thing,’ replied Biggles. ‘He was having a go at us when you arrived on the scene.’

‘Did he shoot you down, too?’

‘No. Sarton was responsible for that. He’s down, too—dead—and Chicot with him.’ Briefly Biggles described the incident.

‘Well, what are we going to do?’ asked Wilks.

‘We’d best be makin’ tracks for the shack,’ chipped in Angus. ‘If it starts to snow we may have a job to make it, and the snow’s due to arrive at any minute.’

‘Do you mean that we’re here for the winter?’ cried Algy aghast.

‘Looks that way to me, mister.’

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ put in Biggles. ‘We may have a chance yet. Had you got plenty of juice in your tanks?’

‘Fifty gallons, I reckon.’

‘Then if we can find the hole in our tank, and mend it, and swop the petrol over, we can still get back in the Jupiter.’

Algy looked from Biggles to the Jupiter’s wheels, more than half buried in the snow. ‘You’ll never get her off out of this stuff,’ he muttered. ‘Those wheels must be frozen in by this time.’

‘I agree,’ answered Biggles, ‘but we’ve got a pair of skis inside, don’t forget. If we can jack up the undercart while we get the wheels off, and put the skis on, we might still do it—if the snow will hold off for a little while longer.’

Algy sprang to his feet, his stiffness forgotten. ‘Then let’s get at it,’ he cried. ‘It’s our only chance.’

‘See if you can find that bullet hole, Ginger,’ ordered Biggles. ‘It’s a race against time now.’

CHAPTER XIII

SOUTHWARD AGAIN

FOR three hours the airmen worked feverishly. Ginger repaired the punctured tank, bemoaning the fact that Smyth, who was an expert sheet-metal-worker, was not there to help him. Algy explained that he had decided to leave him at Fort Beaver—where they had arrived as arranged in the Rockheed which now lay smashed in the snow—for two reasons: first, to leave a guard at the aerodrome, and, secondly, to reduce the load of the aircraft, and consequently the petrol consumption.

The others laboured at the undercarriage, the transformation of the Jupiter into a ski-plane being impeded to no small extent by the cold. However, at last it was done. Ginger had already repaired the tank, so the labourers' task of transferring the petrol from the Rockheed to the Jupiter began.

'Is there anything at the cabin you'll be wanting?' Biggles asked Angus, who was helping as far as he was able.

'Meanin' what?' answered the old Scotsman.

'Well, I take it you'll be coming with us.'

'Na, mon. I'm staying here.'

Biggles stopped work long enough to stare unbelievably. 'Do you mean that?'

'Ay.'

'You'd rather stay for months in this forsaken place than come back to civilization?'

'Ay, I'll stay.'

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, I suppose you know best what you want to do. All right; we'll taxi you back to the shack as soon as we are ready; that will save you dragging the stores through the snow. You can then give us the transfer and we'll get away before it starts to snow.'

Angus cocked an eye heavenward. 'Then ye've no time to waste,' he observed dispassionately. 'Here she comes.'

Following his eyes, Biggles saw one or two big flakes floating downwards languidly. He made no comment. There was no need. The others had seen the dreaded flakes, and were working with desperate speed.

It took them some time to start the Jupiter's engines, for they were stone cold, but a little petrol inserted into each of the cylinders finally did the trick. They all got aboard. A few moments to take the chill off the engines and the Jupiter began gliding across the snow in the direction of the island.

By the time Angus's stores were thrown out for him to collect in his own time, and the old man had returned from the shack with the precious transfer, it was snowing steadily.

The last few seconds on the ground were hectic. Angus heaved into the cabin an object that looked like a small sack.

'What's that?' yelled Biggles, who was itching to be off.

'Old Mose's poke,' shouted Angus.

'Mose's *what*?

'Poke.'

'He means that it is Mose's gold,' called Wilks.

'What do you want me to do with it?' Biggles asked Angus, not very pleased about the responsibility.

'Mose didn't want the gold for himself. He's got a darter down in Vancouver. I reckon he'd like her to have it. Find her and give it to her.'

'All right,' shouted Biggles, without enthusiasm. He was not in the least concerned about the gold; all he cared about at that moment was getting away.

'Stand clear!' he yelled.

The cabin door slammed.

A parting wave to the old Scotsman, who did not seem in the least concerned about his lonely fate, and the Jupiter swung round. There was no horizon, but Biggles did not hesitate. The engines bellowed, and the big machine raced across the snow. A moment later it rose slowly into the air. The ground disappeared from sight immediately, and Biggles fixed his eyes on the instruments.

'We ought to run out of this in ten minutes,' he told Wilks, who was sitting beside him.

Wilks agreed, knowing precisely what Biggles meant; which was that the snow was coming from the north, and, as it had only just started, and the Jupiter was heading south for Moose Creek, it would quickly pass beyond the snow area. The thought led to another. They had managed to get off safely, but how about getting down—if there was no snow at Moose Creek? He asked Biggles this question.

‘I hadn’t overlooked that,’ replied Biggles. ‘We’ll work that out when we get there. The skids may stand up to a turf landing, but whether they do or not, I’d sooner take the risk—even if we bust the machine—than stay in Angus’s shack for six months.’

Wilks nodded. He felt the same about it.

Already the snow through which they were flying was thinning, and a minute later they caught their first glimpse of the ground. Shortly afterwards they ran into clear weather, although the landscape was still snow-covered, the result of the earlier fall. Flying, however, was now a comparatively simple matter, and Biggles, relaxing, began to think of other things. With the major problem answered, that of their escape from being snowed in, minor worries presented themselves, as usually happens.

‘Pity we’ve lost the Rockheed,’ he remarked. ‘That leaves us only one machine to operate with.’

‘Never mind; we’ve got the transfer,’ Wilks reminded him. ‘If we can use that to get McBain off the aerodrome we shall manage all right. By the way, what are we going to do about McBain?’

‘What do you mean—do about him?’

‘Well, this attack on us. He tried to murder us; are we going to let him get away with it?’

‘It’s a bit hard to know what to do,’ replied Biggles thoughtfully. ‘It’s our word against his. He thinks we are out of the way, certainly for the winter, possibly for good. He’ll get a shock when we turn up. He’ll probably accuse us of murdering Sarton, but since the remains of the machine will probably be buried under snow for the next six months, he will have nothing to support his story. We’ve got a witness in Angus, but he won’t be available for six months, either. I think our wisest course would be to submit a report of the whole affair to police head-quarters and let them do what they like about it. Delaney, single-handed, can’t do much. There is this; our reputation will at least stand investigation, which is more than can be said for McBain, I imagine.’

They said no more, for it was obvious that the future was so problematical that it was impossible to make plans with any assurance.

The snow on the ground was now very patchy, and while they were still some distance from Moose Creek it died away altogether. Within a few days the snow coming down from the north would bury everything under a deep blanket, but for the present the ground was clear.

‘There’s just a chance that the Creek will be frozen over,’ said Wilks, referring to the almost land-locked stretch of water from which Moose Creek took its name. ‘It has been freezing pretty hard.’

‘How shall we know?’ asked Biggles.

‘I always use the lake in winter,’ replied Wilks. ‘If the ice is safe they shift the windstocking across to it, because the ice has a much better surface than the aerodrome. Being boggy, during the summer it gets churned up by the wheels, and when these ruts get frozen hard in the winter they are awful. However, we shall soon see which it is to be. There’s the creek, in the distance. It wouldn’t surprise me if we found McBain there.’

‘It would surprise him, I’ll bet,’ grinned Biggles.

‘He’s been there, anyway,’ declared Wilks, who was staring down through the window. ‘There are his wheelmarks on the ice—at least, those are aeroplane tracks, and it’s unlikely that any one else has been up here. And there’s the windstocking by the side of the creek; that means it is all right to land on the ice.’

‘Well, that’s better, anyway. I wasn’t feeling too happy at trying to put this big bus down in a frozen field on a pair of skis. Can you see McBain’s machine anywhere?’

‘No.’

‘Then he must have gone off again.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘We’ll find him at Fort Beaver, no doubt.’

Nothing more was said while Biggles concentrated on putting the Jupiter down on the lake on her new type of undercarriage.

To those in the machine the difference was barely perceptible, apart from the fact that the machine ran a long way before coming to a standstill.

‘What are we going to do?’ asked Wilks.

‘Refuel, put our wheels back on again, and head south for Fort Beaver,’ replied Biggles shortly. ‘There is no telling what lies McBain will spread about us if we leave him too long alone—particularly if he thinks we aren’t coming back to refute them.’

Leaving the others to attend to the refuelling and the replacement of the undercarriage wheels, Biggles walked across to the traffic manager’s office.

‘Here we are again, Mr. Canwell,’ he observed cheerfully.

The traffic manager looked up from a book in which he was just making some entries. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘but you are just too late.’

‘Too late—what for?’

‘To take the gold down.’

Biggles nodded slowly. ‘Ah—of course. I remember. So it’s gone, eh?’

‘Yep. Biggest shipment we’ve ever made in one go. I waited as long as I could for you. McBain blew in, so I let him take it. I’m sorry——’

‘You will be, I fancy,’ put in Biggles dryly.

Canwell started. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ murmured Biggles. ‘I fancy you would have found us a bit more reliable in the long run—that’s all. How long ago did McBain leave?’

‘About ten minutes.’

Biggles nodded. ‘Right-ho, then. We might as well be getting along, too. See you later, maybe.’

Biggles walked slowly to the door, but once outside he strode swiftly to where the others were waiting for him. ‘It looks as if McBain’s got away with the boodle,’ he said crisply. ‘He’s got ten minutes start. Not expecting to be followed, he’ll cruise; if we run on full throttle we may overhaul him. Get aboard—step on it.’

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNEXPECTED LANDING

NOT until the Jupiter was in the air, roaring southwards on the trail of the Weinkel, did Biggles settle down to contemplate the situation. The gold was temporarily in McBain's charge; if he intended stealing it, this, clearly, was his opportunity. In the circumstances it seemed unlikely that he would return to Fort Beaver, where transport from the rail-head would be waiting to take the gold on to the bank at Edmonton. Where, then, would he go? The more Biggles thought about it the more he became convinced that unless he overtook the Weinkel he would never see McBain again. He, with the machine and the gold in it, would disappear. In one way this would be to Wilks's advantage, for the feud for possession of the aerodrome would cease; nevertheless, it was not unlikely that the Moose Creek Company would be so sore at losing the gold-dust that they would never again trust gold to an aeroplane, in which case Arctic Airways would die for lack of business. If they could overtake the Weinkel and see where it went they might succeed in bringing the gold thieves to justice, which could hardly fail to cement their friendship with the Moose Creek Company. This opinion Biggles passed on to Algy, who was sitting beside him in the control cabin.

The Jupiter was now once more in the region of day and night, with the 'bad lands' gliding past underneath them. Biggles was staring ahead, striving to pick up their quarry, when Ginger, his eyes alight with excitement, pushed his way into the cabin.

'Starboard!' he yelled. 'The Weinkel's bearing west.'

Biggles did not answer. His eyes switched to the right, far away from the line he had been following. For a moment or two they studied the sky, section by section, before they settled on a tiny moving speck travelling on a south-westerly course at a slightly lower altitude than themselves. It was the Weinkel.

'I was right,' he said crisply to Algy. 'McBain isn't going to Fort Beaver; the course he is on will leave Fort Beaver miles to the east.'

As he spoke he touched the right-hand side of the rudder-bar with his foot, bringing the Jupiter round on a new course to follow the other machine.

For an hour the respective positions of the two machines did not change. Although in the circumstances it was hardly likely that the Jupiter would be seen by the men in the leading machine. Biggles kept at a safe distance, quite satisfied to watch. The only fear he had was that McBain should be carrying more petrol than they were, in which case they might ultimately be compelled to give up the chase for lack of fuel. He was, therefore, more than a little relieved when he saw the Weinkel going down. Grabbing his map, he studied closely the area they were over, then he turned a bewildered face to Algy.

‘There’s nothing there,’ he said.

‘Not even a village?’

‘Absolutely nothing.’

Algy stood up and surveyed the ground right to the horizon; it was all the same: open prairie broken by wide areas of fir forest, with a small lake here and there. ‘No,’ he agreed, at the end of his scrutiny, ‘there’s nothing in the shape of a town or village. What are you going to do?’

That was a question Biggles could not answer at once, for the problem facing him was a difficult one to solve. While the Weinkel was in the air it was extremely unlikely that McBain would see the Jupiter, but once it was on the ground, with its engines stopped, the noise of the Jupiter’s engines would certainly give them away. The Weinkel was still in the air, but it was now losing height rapidly, and it seemed only a matter of minutes before it would land.

His brain raced as he sought a solution to the puzzle. Studying the ground intently, he saw that to the right the ground was fairly open, and that it fell away quickly to the left, the locality in which the Weinkel looked as if it would land. It struck him that if he could put the Jupiter down on the high land behind one of the patches of timber, it might be possible for them to watch the Weinkel without being seen. Anyway, it seemed worth trying, so he at once proceeded to put the plan into execution. He cut the engines, and not until the Jupiter’s wheels trundled over the turf did the others realize what he had in mind.

The machine had barely come to a standstill before Biggles was out, running for all he was worth towards a line of spruce and fir that hid the whole of the country to the south. They were a mile or more from the Weinkel, so there was little risk of them being seen or heard. Ducking low under the drooping fir branches, they pushed their way to the far edge of the timber from where the country to the south lay open to their view.

‘There they are!’ Biggles’s voice was tense as, keeping under cover, he pointed out the Weinkel, which was now standing on the ground by a small log cabin near the edge of a lake. It so happened, however, that from their coign of vantage the Weinkel was between them and the cabin, so although they could see figures moving, they could not see exactly what was going on.

‘I should say they are unloading the gold,’ declared Ginger.

‘I don’t think there is any doubt about that,’ returned Biggles.

Several minutes passed during which no more was said; then, not a little to their surprise, the Weinkel’s engines suddenly opened up again, and almost before the watchers realized what was happening, the machine had taken off and was racing low over a south-easterly course. The cabin was deserted; or, at least, it appeared to be.

‘Gosh! We shall lose them if we are not careful. Come on.’ Suiting the action to the words, Biggles led the rush back to the machine.

In three minutes they were in the air again. But the Weinkel had had five minutes’ clear start, and an aeroplane can travel a long way in that time. There was no sign of it.

‘They were heading south-east. That’s the direction of Fort Beaver,’ Algy pointed out.

‘I know, but I don’t get the hang of this at all,’ muttered Biggles, with a worried frown. ‘If they’ve hidden the gold, they’ve got a bit of a nerve to go back to Fort Beaver.’

‘Maybe they’ll just land to pick up the things that belong to them, and, perhaps, refuel. Then they’ll come back, put the gold on board, and go straight on south to the United States,’ suggested Algy.

‘Possibly,’ agreed Biggles. ‘Yet, somehow, I don’t think that’s the answer. It’s got me beaten, and that’s a fact. One thing is certain; we’ve got to get back to Fort Beaver ourselves or we shall run out of petrol. Another forced landing would just about put the tin hat on things.’

‘Suits me,’ agreed Algy. ‘A night’s rest wouldn’t do any of us any harm.’

That closed the conversation for the time being. It was half an hour later before any one spoke again, by which time Fort Beaver aerodrome was in sight.

‘There’s the Weinkel,’ said Biggles. ‘And unless my eyes deceive me, that’s McBain and Ferroni standing beside it, talking to—it looks like

Delaney.’

‘Yes, it’s Delaney,’ put in Ginger. ‘If he is asking them what has happened to the gold we’ll be able to enlighten him,’ he added.

‘It will be interesting to see just what is happening,’ observed Biggles smoothly, as he cut the Jupiter’s engines and glided down.

Their run in carried them very close to the Weinkel. McBain and Ferroni stared at them as they taxied past.

‘Yes, you might well stare,’ said Biggles quietly to himself, eyeing McBain and his pilot grimly. ‘You didn’t expect to see us back so soon—if at all—I’ll warrant.’ His eyes went past the two crooks and came to rest on something that lay on the ground beyond them. A strange expression crept over his face, but he made no further observation until he had switched off in front of their hangar. ‘Well,’ he said, in an odd tone of voice, ‘what do you make of that?’

‘Make of what?’ asked the others together.

‘Those are the Moose Creek gold boxes that they’re unloading,’ went on Biggles. ‘They haven’t stolen the gold after all. They’ll never get a better chance,’ He passed his hand wearily over his face and then shook his head. ‘That seems to knock all our calculations sideways, doesn’t it?’

‘I—I don’t understand it,’ blurted Wilks.

‘You’d be a clever fellow if you did, I think,’ muttered Biggles dryly. ‘According to Ginger, those chaps are crooks, waiting for a chance to get their hands on a pile of gold. They’ve actually had the gold in their possession, with nothing as far as I can see to prevent them from getting clear away with it. Yet they bring it back here and quietly hand it over to the bank messenger—that looks like him coming now—like law-abiding citizens. There’s a weak link somewhere in that chain of events. We had better go inside and put our thinking caps on and see if we can find it.’

CHAPTER XV

UNDER ARREST

FOR the remainder of the day and far into the night they discussed the problem that seemed to admit of no solution. At daybreak the following morning they resumed the debate. They could talk of nothing else. Biggles broke off long enough to send Smyth to the village, shopping, then he continued the discussion.

‘You can’t get away from it,’ he declared, staring out across the now deserted aerodrome. ‘If McBain stays here for ten years he won’t get a better chance to lift a load of gold than he had yesterday. If he is a crook, why did he deliver the gold instead of pushing off with it? That’s what I want to know. Had he wanted to, he could have been two thousand miles away by now. I give it up.’

‘The only answer seems to be that McBain isn’t a crook after all,’ suggested Wilks.

‘I tell you I heard them discussing ways and means of getting the gold,’ declared Ginger emphatically. ‘You’re not suggesting that I dreamed——’

‘Of course we’re not,’ broke in Biggles.

‘Maybe the haul wasn’t big enough, and they are waiting for another lot,’ suggested Algy.

Biggles shook his head. ‘That won’t do,’ he said. ‘Why, they might have to wait months. You remember that Canwell himself told us that it was an unusually big cargo of metal; and consider the other circumstances. The freeze-up has set in up north, and it’s only a question of days—perhaps hours—before it reaches us here. McBain must know by this time that something has happened to his other machine. He must know that we suspect him of the murder of old Mose. He probably guesses that we have got the transfer from Angus. Any one of those factors should be sufficient to send him scuttling out of this locality as fast as he can go. Why is he waiting? What is he waiting for? If he had hidden yesterday’s cargo of gold we might suppose that he is hanging about in order to pick up a second lot before clearing out, but with our own eyes we saw him hand the boxes over. There is something fishy about the whole thing. Talking of gold reminds me that we’ve still got Mose’s “poke” in the machine—the dust Angus handed over to us. We’d better put it somewhere safe pending such time as we can

hand it over to the authorities. No doubt they'll find Mose's daughter. I don't feel inclined to tear around at this moment looking for her. We'll tell Delaney about it next time he comes up here.'

'I've got a place where we can hide it,' said Wilks. 'There's a secret cavity under my office floor; I had it specially made for valuables.'

'With McBain and Co. about I think it would be a good thing if we put it in right away,' declared Biggles.

The small bag of gold was accordingly fetched from the machine and put into Wilks's hiding-place. The task done, they returned to the tarmac.

'To get down to brass tacks, what is the next move?' inquired Algy.

'The most important thing is that we now have the transfer,' answered Biggles. 'As far as I can see, there is nothing to stop us from showing it to Delaney, and asking him to order McBain off our property.'

'Yes, I think that is the right procedure,' agreed Wilks.

'Then we'll hang about for a bit to see if Delaney comes along; if he doesn't, then we'll go and find him,' declared Biggles. 'Go and brew a dish of coffee, Ginger. Bring it in the office when it is ready.'

Ginger nodded, got up, and made his way, deep in thought, to the back of the hangar, where the cooking stove had been installed.

The others sat outside the office door, smoking and discussing the situation. They were still waiting for the coffee when, to Biggles's astonishment, Constable Delaney appeared at the entrance to McBain's hangar.

'What do you make of that?' jerked out Algy.

'I wonder how long he has been there,' said Biggles.

'It must have been a long time or we should have seen him go in,' Wilks pointed out.

'I thought everything was very quiet over there,' muttered Biggles suspiciously. 'He's coming over to us now, by the look of it.'

Delaney was, in fact, walking towards the Arctic Airways hangar, followed by McBain and Ferroni.

'What the dickens do *they* want?' growled Algy.

'We shall soon know,' murmured Biggles, rising to his feet to greet the constable. 'Morning, Delaney; looking for something?' he called cheerfully.

Delaney nodded curtly. 'Yes,' he said shortly.

Biggles experienced a twinge of uneasiness. There was something about the constable's manner he did not like. However, he did not show it. 'Make yourself at home,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

The constable, carbine across his arm, came to a halt a couple of paces away and regarded the three airmen with an expression of shrewd suspicion. His eyes came to rest on Biggles.

'Were you at Moose Creek yesterday?'

'I was,' replied Biggles frankly. 'Any reason why I shouldn't be?'

'I'll do all the questioning.'

'Go ahead,' invited Biggles cheerfully.

The constable turned to Wilks. 'Any objection to my searching your outfit?' he inquired. 'I'm searching it, anyway,' he added.

Wilks waved a conscience-free hand. 'Help yourself,' he said. 'Maybe if I was told what you were looking for I could help you.'

'I shan't need any help,' rejoined the constable.

'You've had a look round McBain's outfit for whatever it is you've lost, I presume?' put in Biggles.

Delaney threw him a sidelong glance. 'I have,' he admitted.

'And you didn't find it?'

'No.'

'You won't find it here.'

'You talk like you know what I'm looking for.'

'If I had one guess, and if I hadn't seen the boxes being unloaded in the aerodrome yesterday, I should say it was the Moose Creek parcel of bullion.'

McBain took a quick pace forward. 'What are you suggesting?' he growled.

'Work it out for yourself,' replied Biggles evenly. He turned to Delaney. 'You won't find the Moose Creek gold here,' he said. 'Funny thing,' he went on easily, 'I should have thought that if those boxes had been empty you'd have noticed it.'

'They weren't opened till they got to Edmonton,' returned the constable curtly.

'I see. And what was in them?'

'Lead.'

'Oh!'

‘The dust was taken out of those boxes between Moose Creek and Edmonton.’

In a flash Biggles understood the meaning of McBain’s detour. The gold had been taken out of the boxes at the cabin, and lead substituted. There was one thing he did not understand, though, and this for the time being remained a mystery.

‘I thought the boxes were always *sealed* at Moose Creek?’

‘Quite right,’ returned the constable. ‘When these boxes were taken out of McBain’s machine the seals were intact, or I should have noticed it.’

‘If the seals were unbroken, then lead, not gold, must have been put into the boxes in the first instance.’

‘Any reason why the Moose Creek outfit should send out a parcel of lead?’

‘None that I can think of.’

‘Nor me.’

‘I don’t see how or where *we* could have got near it,’ protested Biggles.

‘You’re the only other outfit besides McBain’s that was at Moose Creek yesterday—and here. That being so you’re under suspicion till the dust’s found,’ said Delaney firmly.

While he had been speaking he had walked into the office, his keen eyes scrutinizing the walls, floor, and furniture. He came striding towards a cupboard when he stopped dead in his tracks, in the middle of a small rug. He stamped. The boards rang hollow. In a flash he had bent down and whipped the rug aside, disclosing the trap-door of Wilks’s secret locker.

‘Hello, what’s this?’ he exclaimed.

Biggles remembered Mose’s gold, which had temporarily escaped his memory. He saw their danger instantly, and hastened to try to rectify the oversight, but his very haste was in itself suspicious.

‘Oh, yes—I forgot—there is some gold in there,’ he said quickly.

Delaney started. His eyes hardened and he reached for his revolver. ‘Oh yeah? Just remembered it, eh?’

‘Believe it or not, but that’s the truth.’

‘A pile o’ gold’s the sort of thing you easily forget—huh?’

‘I was waiting for you to come along to tell you about it,’ said Biggles, realizing with dismay how thin the story sounded.

The constable knelt down, lifted the trap aside, put his hand into the aperture and lifted out a heavy doeskin bag. As he stared at it, turning it round and round, his whole manner became tense. Suddenly he tossed the bag on to the table and, whipping out his revolver, covered the three airmen menacingly. ‘So that’s it, eh?’ he snarled. ‘You dirty skunks! Stand still.’

‘Why, that’s the sort of poke old Mose allus used,’ cried McBain. ‘He allus used doeskin.’

‘Yes, and his initials are on it,’ grated Delaney. ‘Now we know who killed Mose—and why. This isn’t the dust I was looking for—but it’ll suit me better than the other.’

‘Just a minute, Delaney, you’ve got this all wrong,’ protested Biggles desperately. ‘Don’t jump to conclusions. I know how this must look to you—naturally; but you’re making a mistake. I can explain it.’

‘You wouldn’t have the nerve to suggest that this isn’t Mose’s poke, I reckon?’

‘Of course not. We were going to give it to you to hand over to his next-of-kin—he has a daughter——’

McBain burst into a roar of laughter. ‘By thunder, that’s a good one! It’s your turn to tell one, Delaney.’

The constable’s lips were dragged down at the corners. ‘So you killed an old man for his poke, did you?’ he sneered.

‘Angus Stirling gave us that gold yesterday when we told him that Mose was dead,’ said Biggles quietly.

‘What’s this? You trying to tell me that you saw Angus yesterday?’

‘I *am* telling you.’

‘Oh—shut up. He’s on Eskimo Island, and he’s froze in.’

‘He may be now, but he wasn’t yesterday.’

As he spoke Biggles realized with increasing horror just what the fact of Angus being frozen in was likely to mean to them. Not for six months would it be possible to make contact with him. As a witness he might as well not exist. The only scrap of evidence they had in support of their story was the transfer, and even so there was nothing to prove that Angus had given it to them with his own hands.

Delaney jerked his head towards the door. ‘Get going,’ he said.

‘Where to?’ asked Biggles.

‘You’ll see,’ was the harsh reply. ‘We’ve got a place for your sort.’

‘But——’

‘Cut it out. Anything you’ve got to say you’d better save for the court.’

‘Wait a minute. There’s another one of ’em,’ cried McBain suddenly. ‘Where’s the kid?’

As if in answer, the Jupiter’s engines burst into life.

Delaney cursed and dashed outside, but the big machine was already on the move. ‘Stop!’ he yelled. Seeing that his words had no effect, he blazed away with his revolver, McBain and Ferroni joining in with theirs.

‘You kill that kid and it will be the worst day’s work you’ve ever done!’ shouted Biggles furiously. In the swift sequence of events he had forgotten about Ginger and his coffee-making. To his heartfelt relief he saw the Jupiter run across the aerodrome untouched. A faint smile played about the corners of his mouth as he watched it climb into the air. ‘You’ll have a job to catch him now,’ he told Delaney, with savage satisfaction.

The constable whirled round furiously. ‘You won’t crow so loud presently,’ he snapped.

‘Nor, I fancy, will you,’ replied Biggles, with a good deal more confidence than he felt.

‘That’s enough. March,’ ordered Delaney. ‘Any one of you who tries to make a break won’t know what hits him.’

CHAPTER XVI

GINGER ACTS

WHEN GINGER had gone through to the rear of the hangar to make the coffee he had little reason to suspect the desperate events that were soon to follow. As it was, he whistled softly under his breath as he waited for the pot to boil.

There is an old oft-used proverb to the effect that a watched pot never boils and, while this may not be literally true, there is no doubt that whoever first coined the expression had good reason for it. So it was with Ginger. Impatient to return to the others, he was about to pump more pressure into the Primus stove when the sound of voices reached his ears. From the loud and concise tones he realized that visitors had arrived, and unfriendly ones at that. With pardonable curiosity he decided to find out who it was; meanwhile the pot could take its own time to come to the boil.

He did not go round to the front of the office. Had he done so, this story would certainly have ended differently. A few paces from where he stood a small square window allowed light to enter the back of the office, and towards this he made his way.

A description of the scene which met his astonished eyes is unnecessary. He was just in time to hear Delaney accuse Biggles of the murder of the old prospector. And, looking from the tense faces of his friends to the grim countenance of the constable, he realized the desperate nature of the trap into which they had unwittingly fallen. He forgot all about the coffee. The trend of the conversation, which he could hear distinctly, banished everything from his mind except the dire necessity for immediate action. While he had his freedom he might be able to do something. Just what he hoped to achieve he did not know; he had no time to think about it; he only knew that if all four of them were put behind prison bars anything could happen, and for this reason he decided to avoid arrest if this were possible. But how?

On the spur of the moment he could think only of the machine, if he could get it into the air he would be safe—anyway, safer than in any hiding-place on the ground. He lingered only long enough to assure himself that Biggles and the others were, in fact, under arrest; then, dropping everything, he retraced his steps to the rear of the hangar and so reached the machine, which, in accordance with their usual custom, during the hours of daylight, had been left on the tarmac.

Working quietly and methodically, he made his preparations for a swift take-off. He realized that there would be no time to run up the engines; once they were started the noise would bring Delaney out with a rush—as we know was the case.

The whirl of the self-starter was the first sound that broke the comparative silence, to be followed almost at once by the choking backfire of the engines as the propeller jerked into life. With the left wheel braked hard, Ginger slowly opened the throttle. The nose of the big machine swung round until it was facing the open turf. With both wheels free he risked a glance at the office, determined to remain where he was as long as possible in order to reduce the risks of taking off with cold engines; but the sight of Delaney racing towards him settled the matter. Picking a mark on the far side of the aerodrome in order to hold the machine straight, he pushed the throttle wide open. He heard the whang of a bullet somewhere behind him, but he paid no heed to it; indeed, there was nothing he could do now but hold straight on.

His heart missed a beat as the port engine signified its disapproval of this treatment by coughing twice in quick succession; but then it picked up and the Jupiter bored up into the still air.

At a thousand feet he turned, wondering which way to go. Looking down, he could see the little group outside the office staring up at him; watching, he saw Biggles wave, and he derived some comfort from the gesture, for he was by no means sure that he had done the right thing.

Still circling, and climbing steadily for height, he switched his thoughts to the immediate future. Where ought he to go? What ought he to do for the best? It occurred to him to go to Edmonton, or some other big town, and there lay the whole story before some important official—if he could find one; but he soon dismissed this plan as too risky. He thought of Angus. If only he could get hold of Angus, and fly him back, the Scotsman's story would confirm their own; then he remembered the snow. He might be able to reach the shack; he might even be able to land without hurting himself or seriously damaging the machine; but once the wheels had sunk into the deep snow no power on earth could get the Jupiter off again. He could see no point in going to Moose Creek, even if the snow had not yet reached there. Canwell would be unable to do anything even if he was willing to come back to Fort Beaver, which did not seem likely. Where else could he go with any hope of finding evidence to bear out the story which he imagined Biggles would tell—the true story?

He remembered the log cabin where the Weinkel had landed on its way down from Moose Creek. Thinking about it, he realized that in some way it was connected with the gang—possibly a hideaway in an emergency should their plans miscarry. It had appeared deserted when last he had seen it. It had this advantage; it was not far away. Provided he could locate it, for he was by no means confident that he could, forty minutes should be ample time for him to reach it. There was just a chance that he might find something there: a clue, perhaps, that would lead to something more important. Anyway, he decided, there was no harm in trying. It was better than submitting quietly to arrest at Fort Beaver.

Satisfied that he was at least doing his best, he swung the Jupiter round until its nose pointed to the north-west, the direction of the cabin.

Looking down, he observed the sterile desolation of the country below and was conscious suddenly of the loneliness. Not without alarm he passed over several patches of fresh snow; however, the sky was fairly clear except to the far north, where a heavy indigo belt of cloud promised more snow in the near future.

He picked up a landmark which he recognized, a diamond-shaped wood, and flew on with more assurance, watching for others. Soon afterwards a silver gleam, almost on the horizon, caught his eye and presently he made it out to be the lake on a bank of which the log cabin was situated.

Ginger flew on, feeling that it was no use doing anything else; for, if any one was below, the roar of the Jupiter's engines would make any attempt at concealment futile. He picked out the cabin; it looked pathetically forlorn, he thought, in its lonely surroundings; still, he was relieved to see that there was no sign of movement near it.

Cutting the engines, he began gliding down, passing, on his way, the higher ground where they had landed while they were trailing the Weinkel. A sleek animal was running low along the edge of the wood. As he got lower he realized it was a wolf. Presently it turned into the timber and was lost to sight. For a moment or two he wondered if it were better to land where they had landed on the previous day, or to go on to where the Weinkel had come on the same occasion. However, there seemed to be no point in giving himself an unnecessary walk, apart from which he did not like the idea of walking about in wolf country. True, he had an automatic in his pocket, but he preferred to avoid using it as long as possible. For these reasons he went on to the cabin, which he was now seeing at close quarters for the first time.

If the cabin was McBain's, and presumably it was, since he had called there, the reason for the selection of the site—apart from its isolation—was at once apparent. On the southern side stretched a wide expanse of open prairie land, large enough for any type of aeroplane to land on in any sort of weather. He noted this subconsciously as he lowered his wheels and glided towards it; actually, he was more than a little concerned with putting the machine down safely, for a broken undercarriage at this stage was the very last thing he wanted.

With his nerves braced with anxiety he flattened out for the landing; but he need not have worried: the wheels rumbled for a moment, the tail dropped, and the machine came to rest about a hundred yards from the cabin, which he now saw was an almost new, well-constructed building.

He did not bother to taxi up to it. There was no real need to do so. Switching off the engines, he glanced round to make sure that everything was in order, then he opened the door and jumped out. For a moment or two he stood watching the building keenly, feeling certain that if any one had been there he would by this time have shown himself. However, as there was no sign of life, he started walking briskly towards it.

He was still about twenty yards away when a sudden noise pulled him up short. He stood quite still, his eyes running over the building, seeking the cause of the sound which was very slight, and like the creaking of a tight door or a window being opened. Seeing nothing, he concluded that the sound—if, indeed, he had actually heard anything—was a natural one, such as a piece of loose board giving way, or two branches rubbing together in the belt of fir which began just beyond the hut and skirted the northern edge of the lake.

He was about to move forward again when a shadow flitted across the one window that faced in his direction. This time he knew that there was no mistake; some one was in the cabin. And an instant later all doubt was removed when the light flashed on the window as it was opened. He had no time to think. Regretting his rashness, he looked swiftly around for cover, for the furtive manner in which the window had been opened was at once suggestive of danger; but there was nothing, not even a bush behind which he might hide.

He opened his mouth to call a greeting—but the sound did not reach his lips. Still staring at the window, he saw something emerging; a split second later he realized what it was—a rifle barrel. He braced his muscles to jump aside, but such movement as he made was still little more than an impulse

when the rifle cracked. For a brief instant he swayed on his feet. Then he crashed forward on his face and lay still.

The cabin door was thrown open and an Indian, a smoking rifle in his hands and a leer of triumph on his face, strode towards the motionless figure with cat-like tread. A few paces away he halted and looked carefully around, presumably to make sure that there had been no witness of what had transpired; then, as if satisfied that all was well, he leaned his rifle against a tree stump, and, drawing a short curved knife from his belt, advanced confidently towards his victim, who was still lying as he had fallen. With his lips parted in a savage smile, the Indian bent over Ginger.

CHAPTER XVII

A NEW PERIL

WHILE these events were in progress, Biggles and his two companions had been marched by Delaney towards Fort Beaver. It was a grim journey. Algy raged. Wilks strode along, glowering his annoyance. Biggles was irritated, but endeavoured to preserve a calm front. The fact of the matter was, not one of them realized the real seriousness of their position. They were angry at being taken to the jail like common felons, but this, at the worst, would only be temporary. It had not yet occurred to them that they might not be able to prove their innocence of the crime for which they had been arrested. Nor did they imagine it possible that they would be tried by any but an official court of law.

Approaching Fort Beaver, McBain hurried on ahead. Biggles attached no special significance to this at the time, but before very long he realized what the man's purpose had been. Except for this, things might have turned out differently.

The first indication of McBain's errand—although this was not made apparent until some minutes later—occurred while the prisoners were still some distance from the town. Several men appeared, hurrying towards them in a manner that was definitely hostile, if not openly threatening. Muttering and casting malevolent glances at the prisoners, they joined the party. Others appeared, with a sprinkling of slatternly-looking women amongst them. At first vague murmurings were heard; then insults and imprecations were thrown at the three airmen.

Accustomed to civilized administration of justice, Biggles was amazed. He had not supposed that they would be condemned without a fair trial. He noticed that Delaney looked worried, and remarked on it.

'You keep close to me; I don't like the look of things,' said the constable. 'I'd turn back if it wasn't too late. If this crowd decides to take things into their own hands you won't stand a dog's chance. I don't know what's set 'em off like this.'

'McBain, probably,' replied Biggles, suddenly understanding, for he could see the man deliberately egging the crowd on to take the law into their own hands.

Yells, and not a few curses, reached the prisoners' ears. Presently a stone was thrown.

Algy looked at Biggles with startled eyes. 'I don't like the look of this,' he said anxiously. 'Delaney shouldn't have brought us here knowing that the crowd might behave like this.'

'He didn't know. McBain is responsible.'

'The sooner we are under lock and key, the better I shall be pleased,' declared Algy. 'Things look ugly.'

More and more men were hurrying out from the village to meet them and the noise swelled in volume. Above the medley of sound, odd phrases would be heard.

'String 'em up, the dirty murderers!' yelled an old man with a ferocious expression. 'String 'em up like we did in the old days.'

'Murdered Mose for his poke. Hand 'em over, Delaney,' roared another.

'A rope. Fetch a rope, somebody.'

'Hoist 'em up.'

'Old Mose once did me a good turn; now I'll do him one.'

'Hang 'em, hang 'em! Hang 'em!'

These were typical of the threats hurled at the three airmen by the crowd as it surged round them and their escort.

'That's it, hang 'em!' roared McBain.

Delaney halted and held up his hand for silence, but the gesture produced little or no effect. 'Get back to your work, all of you!' he bellowed. 'If this is a hanging job the right people will look after it.'

Those who heard the words only redoubled their demands for the prisoners to be handed over to them.

Delaney was past the stage of being worried. His face was pale and his manner distraught; it became increasingly clear that the situation was beyond his authority or ability to control. 'I can't do nothing with 'em,' he told Biggles hoarsely.

'You've got a rifle, man; why don't you use it? The law's on your side,' Biggles pointed out harshly. Inwardly he was disgusted at the revolting exhibition of hysteria which the cunning McBain had been able to foster.

'They'd tear me to bits if I so much as fired a shot into the air,' yelled Delaney above the uproar.

'I suppose it doesn't matter what they do to us?' sneered Biggles.

A stone was thrown. As it happened it was Delaney that it struck. It caught him on the temple, making an ugly wound. At the sight of the blood the noise died down for a moment, and the constable seized the opportunity provided by the lull to voice another protest. ‘What’s gone wrong with you?’ he shouted furiously. ‘What’s the idea? Would you hang a man without a fair trial?’

‘Yes!’ bellowed a red-headed miner. ‘Give ’em a trial and the lawyers will help ’em to dodge the noose. We’ve seen it happen before. Old Mose made his home in Fort Beaver; then it’s up to us in Fort Beaver to see justice done.’

‘Hear, hear! Hurrah!’ shouted the crowd. ‘They killed Mose.’

‘Who said they killed Mose?’ roared Delaney. The stone seemed to have stung him into action.

‘Brindle McBain says so,’ screeched a woman.

‘He seems mighty anxious to get ’em hanged,’ answered Delaney. ‘It strikes me that he’s a sight *too* anxious. Maybe he’s got a reason.’

All eyes turned to McBain who, for a moment, looked uncomfortable. ‘If they didn’t do it, why did you arrest ’em?’ he demanded shrewdly.

This was a poser the unfortunate constable found it difficult to answer, a matter which the crowd was not slow in observing.

‘Come on, boys. String ’em up!’ yelled McBain. ‘They’ll get off else.’

‘You’ve got one chance; it’s a poor one, but I’ll try to bring it off,’ Delaney told the airmen through set teeth. ‘We’ve got to humour them. Anything so long as we can cause a delay. Maybe later on they’ll come to their senses.’ He faced the crowd, hands aloft. ‘All right,’ he shouted. ‘If they killed Mose then they’ll hang, but I ain’t standing for murder. Let’s take ’em down to the Three Star and hear what they have to say.’

McBain objected, declaring that this suggestion was only a trick to get the airmen away. A discussion followed and in the end McBain was overruled. Possibly the blood on the constable’s face had sobered the crowd somewhat. If Delaney had been struck, it was not likely that the whole affair would be allowed to pass without some one being called to account when the chief constable of the area arrived—as he certainly would, sooner or later. Possibly Delaney’s aggressive attitude had something to do with it. Be that as it may, the crowd, still grimly demanding the prisoners’ lives, quietened down somewhat, and the procession moved off in some sort of order towards the Three Star Saloon.

Another delay occurred at the entrance, where the proprietor, fearful, no doubt, of damage to his property, endeavoured to keep the crowd out. But once a number of people get out of hand they seem to lend each other a sort of false courage to do what in normal circumstances they would not dare do. The door of the saloon was forced open and the crowd surged inside like a wave rushing through a breach in a sea wall. The proprietor took up his position behind the bar, revolver in hand, to prevent looting. He threatened to shoot the first man who attempted to touch a bottle without first paying for it, and from his manner he meant it. Delaney got up on the bar itself, made the prisoners line up under him, facing outwards, and from this commanding position, supported by his carbine, he called the crowd to order. Satisfied, perhaps, that it was now getting its own way, the uproar subsided, and presently a comparative silence fell. McBain and Ferroni, smugly complacent, pushed their way to the front near the prisoners. McBain bit the end off a cigar, spat the end away, and lighted it.

‘Make it short and sweet,’ he demanded.

‘One more word from you, McBain, and I’ll put you under arrest, too,’ snapped the constable.

‘Yeah?’ drawled McBain. ‘For what?’

‘For inciting a crowd to riot.’

McBain laughed as if this was a huge joke, and such was the power of his personality that the crowd laughed with him. He blew a cloud of smoke in the direction of the prisoners. ‘How are you going to try ’em—all together or one at a time?’ he questioned. ‘Not that it makes much difference,’ he added casually.

‘You can leave that to me,’ replied Delaney crisply. ‘I’ll say my piece first—but I want you all to know that this isn’t a legal——’

‘Cut out the legal stuff,’ shouted a young farmer. ‘We want the man—or the men—who killed poor old Mose, and we’re going to have him. And when we’re satisfied that we’ve got him we’re going to *hang* him. Am I right, folks?’

A roar of approval greeted these words.

Delaney held up his right hand. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll start. First of all, most of you know by now that a packet of gold has been stolen in transit between Moose Creek and Edmonton. Brindle McBain and his pilot flew the gold down, and I saw him hand the boxes over with my own eyes. What was inside those boxes I’m not prepared to swear because my eyes can’t see

through half-inch timber. But I'll swear this: the seals what was put on each box at Moose Creek hadn't been broken.'

'What's all this got to do with Mose?' drawled McBain in a bored voice.

'Yes, let's stick to the business,' muttered several others.

'I'm coming to that,' announced Delaney. 'I was asked to locate the metal, so I started by inquiring at the aerodrome. First I searched McBain's outfit, where I found nothing. I then went on to Arctic Airways outfit where I found more than I bargained for. I found, hid under the floor, six bags of gold-dust, done up as a single poke, them bags being the same as we all know Mose made for to carry his dust in. His initials was burnt on to the hide to prove that they was his. Mose must have struck it rich. I didn't know he had such a poke; he didn't say nothing about it when he was here a week or so ago; but it seems as if somebody else must have known. We all know Mose was murdered, and how he was murdered—now we know *why* he was murdered.'

'That's where you're wrong, Delaney,' put in Biggles quietly.

'I can't think of no better reason for killing a man than a heavy poke,' snapped the constable.

From the chorus of jeers that broke out it was evident that the crowd thought the same.

'On the strength of that poke I arrested every one in the outfit where it was found,' continued Delaney. 'And unless the prisoners can explain how they came to be hiding a murdered man's poke, particularly as at least one of 'em was with Mose on the night he was killed, then I reckon any court would find 'em guilty. This ain't a properly constituted court and nobody here has any right to take the law into his own hands. These prisoners will have a proper trial, but, as I say, unless they can prove that Mose *gave* 'em his poke—which I doubt—then they'll hang.'

On a point of law Delaney was, of course, incorrect, but none of the airmen thought it worth while to argue. They knew as well as any one how damning the evidence was, and Biggles, for one, could not find it in his heart to blame the crowd for its line of thought.

'It is one of the privileges of British justice,' he said loudly, 'that no man is condemned without being allowed to make a statement in his own defence.'

'I reckons we've heard enough,' sneered McBain.

'You shut your face, McBain,' cried Delaney angrily. Then to Biggles: 'Speak up,' he cried. 'You'd better get up here where every one can see

you.'

Biggles climbed up tin the bar and faced the sea of scowling faces in front of him. Perhaps it was his quiet manner, or the steadiness of his eyes, that had some effect on the crowd. A hush fell.

'First of all,' he began, 'let me say that I don't blame any one of you for feeling as you do, or for thinking as you do. Were I amongst you, and another man was standing where I am now, faced with such evidence as has been given by Constable Delaney, I should say "that man killed old Mose for his poke". But I should be wrong.'

The expressions on the faces of some of his hearers changed, suggesting that the words had had the desired effect. Biggles noticed it. Delaney noticed it, and breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that if once the hot indignation of the crowd could be calmed they would be more likely to listen to reason and allow the law to take its course in the usual way.

But another man had noticed it too—McBain. And he perceived, apparently, that if Biggles were allowed to continue, his plans for the swift and easy disposal of his enemies might even yet fail.

'Don't take any notice of him,' he sneered. 'He reckons we're a lot of suckers. Let him talk and he'll put one over. Come on, boys, we're wasting time. We know he killed Mose, and he ain't goin' to get away with it.'

'Cut the gas!' snapped Delaney, but his words were drowned in a fresh uproar started by the more headstrong elements of the crowd. The cry went up, 'Lynch 'em!' and it was echoed on all sides. The mob surged forward towards the prisoners.

'Stand back!' The bar-keeper was on the counter, the muzzle of his heavy revolver threatening the upturned faces below. 'You'd better get 'em down to the jail, Delaney,' he said in a swift aside. 'I'll hold this rabble. Go the back way.'

Biggles and the others did not know it, but the proprietor of the Three Star was a retired sergeant of the 'mounties', which no doubt accounted for his partisanship on the side of the law. The habits of twenty years are not easily cast aside.

Delaney looked at the now clamouring crowd, and what he saw convinced him of the futility of further argument. He turned to Biggles. 'If we don't make the jail they'll hang you, and I shan't be able to stop them. Follow me. If you try to get away I'll plug you.'

Algy and Wilks, now pressed by the crowd, climbed up on to the counter. Instantly there was a yell of 'Stop 'em', and a shot was fired from

somewhere in the rear of the mob. The bar-keeper's left arm fell limply to his side. Without a word he blazed back at the man who had shot him. The red-headed miner collapsed in a heap on the floor. Pandemonium followed. A revolver barked again and the bar-keeper pitched head first into the crowd. Delaney, white with fury, shot the man who had fired. He waited for no more. 'Come on,' he yelled, and dashed to the rear of the bar, followed closely by the prisoners.

There was a brief respite as they dashed pell-mell out of the back door of the saloon, for most of the crowd was inside, and those who had run out of the front door had not yet had time to get round to the rear.

'The jail is our only chance,' snapped Delaney. 'If we can get inside we may be able to hold it. This way.'

They dashed down the rear of some frame buildings and cut back into the main street of the village, just as the crowd surged into sight round the end of the saloon. Several shots were fired, but they went wide, flecking up the earth or ripping splinters from the wooden buildings.

The constable and his prisoners did not stop. With Delaney leading, they raced towards a heavily built log cabin which stood in the middle of the track facing the direction from which they had come. A single iron-barred window plainly announced its purpose.

Delaney was feeling in his pocket for the key even before they reached it. He was fumbling with the lock as the crowd, led by McBain, poured into sight. McBain fired, and a bullet thudded into the logs. Biggles fired four quick shots over the heads of the crowd, and while it did not stop their progress, it delayed the leaders long enough for the constable to get the door open.

They all rushed inside, Delaney slamming the massive door behind them and locking it.

'Where did you get that gun?' he asked angrily.

'It was the bar-keeper's,' answered Biggles simply.

The constable did not pursue the subject. He closed two shutters on the window and bolted them, but a dim light still came through the numerous cracks in them.

'Well, we've made it,' he said moodily, 'but I don't know what good it's going to do us. We can't hold it for ever. McBain's got that crowd into a good enough state for anything.'

'Well, at least it gives us breathing space,' replied Biggles, looking round the single large room which comprised the jail. 'I reckon we've got

one chance left.'

'What's that?'

'Ginger.'

'You mean that kid who got away in the 'plane?'

'That's right.'

Algy looked up. 'Gosh! I'd forgotten all about him,' he confessed. 'What can he do, do you suppose?'

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'Goodness knows. But he'll do something, you can bet your life on that. By the way, I wonder what became of Smyth? He must have seen Delaney marching us towards the village, and guessing what had happened, found some place to hide. He'll take care of himself. I'm more worried about Ginger. I should like to know what he's doing at this moment.'

CHAPTER XVIII

TRAPPED!

‘WELL, whatever it is he’s doing, he’ll have to be quick about it,’ remarked Delaney coldly.

‘You think the crowd will attack us here—in a Government building?’ asked Biggles.

A bullet thudded against the side of the cabin; a splinter of wood jerked out into the room.

‘There’s your answer,’ said Delaney.

From a safe place Biggles looked through the barred window at the sky, now pink-flushed with the approach of sunset. He could not imagine what Ginger was doing or where he had gone, but as Delaney had said, if he was coming back he would have to be quick, if for no other reason than that it would soon be dark.

Biggles looked back at the constable. ‘Curious situation, isn’t it?’ he observed. ‘Are we allowed to defend ourselves? I mean, if we kill any one in defending our lives, are we liable to be charged with murder?’

‘Not while I’m here, I reckon,’ replied Delaney dubiously, as though he was not quite sure himself. ‘It’s McBain who is causing the trouble; but for him I think the others would clear off.’

‘Why don’t you go out and arrest him?’ suggested Biggles.

The constable started. ‘That’s an idea,’ he confessed.

‘They’re not likely to shoot *you*,’ urged Biggles.

‘Maybe not, but they’re likely to shoot you if I open this door,’ returned Delaney grimly.

He ducked as a stone whirled through the window. It struck the opposite wall with a crash, and fell to the floor. They all looked at the missile and observed at once that there was something unusual about it. Biggles picked it up. ‘Hello,’ he said, ‘this looks like a message.’

A piece of paper had, in fact, been tied to the stone with a piece of string.

Delaney, asserting his authority, took it out of Biggles’s hands, unfolded it, and, in the fast-waning light, read something that had been written on it.

‘What is it?’ asked Algy, unable to restrain his curiosity.

‘It’s from that fellow of yours—Smyth,’ said Delaney. ‘He says he’s found and saddled my mare and is going to Blackfoot Point for help. . . . There’s an officer and four troopers there,’ he added, by way of explanation. ‘Somebody in the crowd must have given him the tip.’

‘How far away is this place?’ asked Biggles.

‘Twenty miles—a bit over.’

‘Well, that’s a hope, anyway; but twenty miles—it means that if Smyth gets there we couldn’t expect help much before dawn.’

‘And I reckon that’ll be about six hours too late,’ returned Delaney. ‘What are they up to outside?’

There was little need to ask. While the foregoing conversation had been taking place the crowd had surged round the jail, and the demands for the prisoners had reached an alarming pitch of frenzy. ‘We want the men who killed Mose,’ was the gist of the cries.

‘Bring ’em out, Delaney, or we’ll tear the jail down,’ yelled a strident voice.

‘This is Government property and I’ll plug the first man who lays hands on it,’ roared the constable. ‘Go home, the lot of you.’

‘Not till we’ve hung the murderers,’ was the reply.

‘You won’t come in here while I’m on my feet,’ declared Delaney wrathfully.

The crash of another bullet against the door was the answer.

‘Look here, Delaney, you’d better go,’ suggested Biggles. ‘There’s no sense in your getting killed from a mistaken idea of duty. Leave us to it. We’ll hold ’em off as long as we can.’

‘The Force has never lost a prisoner yet, and I ain’t going to be the first,’ was the curt rejoinder.

‘Get a log, somebody,’ came from outside. ‘Bring a log, and we’ll soon have the door down.’

The words were taken up on all sides. ‘A log—a log.’ McBain’s voice could also be heard demanding torches.

By this time it was quite dark, so the need for some means of illumination was easily understood.

‘Well, I’m afraid it means bloodshed,’ said Delaney regretfully. He took up a position beside the window and waited.

‘Here they come with a tree,’ he answered presently, and levelling his revolver, fired two shots.

There came a yell from outside. The two shots were answered by a dozen, and Delaney staggered back, clutching at his shoulder.

‘Have they hit you?’ cried Biggles anxiously.

‘Got me through the shoulder,’ snarled the constable, leaning back against the wall.

Biggles went to the window, shouted out that the constable had been hit, and demanded a truce while bandages were fetched.

A howl of execration was the reply, and he ducked back just in time to escape a fusillade.

‘Their blood’s up,’ groaned Delaney. ‘Nothing will stop ’em now. I know. I’ve seen this sort of thing before.’

‘Maybe we’d better surrender,’ suggested Biggles. ‘I don’t like this idea of you losing your life to save us.’

‘I’ve never lost a prisoner yet, and I ain’t starting now,’ returned Delaney obstinately.

Biggles shrugged his shoulders.

A moment later the building shook as a heavy weight struck the door with a crash.

Delaney cursed, and snatching up his revolver with his left hand, emptied it into the middle of the rough-hewn pine logs from which the door was made.

The shots were followed by a sudden silence.

‘They’ve killed Fred,’ said a voice charged with passion. Instantly such a yell arose as made the others weak by comparison. Again the building shook as the attack on the door was resumed.

Biggles’s jaw set. Revolver in hand, he crept to the window and peeped out, hoping to see the man who had been responsible for the riot. But if McBain was there he was too wise to show himself. Four men were just lifting the heavy log which was being used as a battering-ram. The eyes of the spectators were on them. Biggles took careful aim at the nearest man’s arm and pulled the trigger. The man staggered, and released his hold on the log, which fell on the feet of the next man to him. Again Biggles fired, shooting at the legs of the other three. Another man fell, and there was a general dash for cover. Biggles jumped aside as the answering shots came, and coughed as the acrid smell of cordite drifted back into the room.

Several times as the night wore on the attack was resumed, but on each occasion it was beaten off by the defenders.

‘With luck we shall just last one more attack,’ announced Delaney during a pause.

‘How so?’ asked Biggles.

‘I’ve only one cartridge left.’

‘And I’ve none. My gun’s empty,’ said Biggles quietly, tossing the now useless weapon on the floor.

‘What do you reckon the time is?’ asked Wilks, who had spent most of the night leaning against the wall smoking, since there was nothing he could do.

‘Can’t be far short of dawn,’ said Delaney. ‘I wonder what they’re up to out there. They seem to be sort of quiet.’

‘We shall soon know, I fancy,’ replied Biggles, as the sound of stealthy footsteps, accompanied by furtive muttering and whispering, came from outside.

There came a sudden rush, and then again silence.

An orange light flickered on the window frame, faint at first, but growing rapidly brighter. A crisp crackling told the defenders the worst.

‘They’ve set the place on fire,’ gasped Biggles.

‘That’s the end of it, then,’ announced Algy calmly. ‘Either we go out or we stay here and fry.’

‘Of the two I prefer to go out,’ said Biggles.

‘And me,’ nodded Wilks.

Delaney swore soundly, but it did no good. Smoke oozed under the door and eddied in through the window. Presently they were all coughing.

Delaney went over to the door. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but I can’t do any more. If you can save yourselves, do it, but if you should get clear give yourselves up at the nearest police post. I shall be after you again, else.’

Biggles nodded. ‘We’re ready to stand our trial when the time comes,’ he said. ‘But I’m afraid the crowd thinks otherwise. Come on. Let’s get it over.’

Smoke and flames poured into the room as Delaney threw open the door against which faggots had been piled. A yell went up.

‘I’ll go first,’ said the constable, and took a running jump over the blazing faggots.

Biggles followed. Almost before his feet touched the ground on the far side of the fire many hands had seized him and borne him to the ground, where, helpless, his wrists were tied behind his back. He was then dragged to his feet and marched off.

The same fate befell the others, and presently the three of them were assembled in the middle of a jubilant throng. Only the constable had not had his wrists tied together. He remained with his prisoners, protesting in the strongest possible terms at the crowd's behaviour, but he might as well have saved his breath for all the effect the words had. The crowd had nothing against him, so beyond a certain amount of horse-play he was left alone.

A shout went up for ropes, which were soon produced, whereupon a move was made up the main street, the crowd surging along with the prisoners in its centre.

'Where are we going?' Biggles asked Delaney, who was walking beside him.

'There ain't no sense in telling you lies,' answered the constable. 'There's a tree up on the top there, on the way to the aerodrome, with a convenient branch.'

'Thanks,' replied Biggles, not without bitterness.

The eastern sky had already been grey with the approach of dawn when they had evacuated the jail; by the time they reached the tree—which was, in fact, near the edge of the aerodrome—it was comparatively light.

The prisoners were led under a branch, which projected at right-angles from the trunk. Three ropes, with nooses already made, were thrown over it.

'It's hard to believe that this is really happening, isn't it?' said Algy, looking at the tree and then at the eager crowd in a dazed sort of way.

'It is,' agreed Biggles.

'Silly sort of way to die,' complained Algy.

'And all my fault for bringing you out here,' muttered Wilks, in a voice heavy with remorse.

'Rot!' said Biggles. 'You've nothing to blame yourself for. It's just a bit of luck that nobody could have foreseen. My greatest regret is that that hound McBain looks like getting away with it.'

'No use trying to get the crowd to listen to us, I suppose?' suggested Algy without enthusiasm.

'Not the slightest,' returned Biggles. 'I should have tried it had there been any hope of them listening, you may be sure. Look at 'em. They won't

even listen to Delaney, who most of 'em must have known for years. No, I don't usually give up easily, but I must confess that there seems to be no way out of this pickle.'

A noose was slipped round his neck. Turning, he watched the others being treated in the same way, regardless of Delaney's frantic expostulations.

'Keep your eyes on McBain, Delaney,' called Biggles loudly. 'He's the man who murdered Mose.' Then, quick to the others, 'Poor old Ginger. Looks as if he's not coming back after all.'

CHAPTER XIX

A LIFE OR DEATH STRUGGLE

WHEN GINGER had fallen outside the remote cabin he had not been killed. He had not even been hit by the shot which had been fired at him. He felt the whistle of the bullet as it passed his cheek, and the shock had caused him to stumble. And even as he stumbled he realized with a lightning flash of inspiration that the moment he recovered himself he would be a mark for a second shot. So he dived headlong to the ground.

This was, primarily, an act of pure self-preservation, for in this position he offered a smaller target than in any other, and he was well aware of it. In moments of extreme peril the brain often works faster than at any other time, and hard upon Ginger's first thought came another, the recollection of a trick that is as old as the hills. Men have practised it from the beginning of time. Animals still practise it—some regularly. Indeed, after one of them has the ruse been named—playing 'possum. In short, Ginger feigned death hoping that the man who had fired at him would be deceived and might give the pretended corpse a chance to turn the tables.

Lying absolutely still on the turf, Ginger heard the cabin door open, heard some one emerge and walk towards him. It was a nasty moment, and it required all his fortitude to remain as he was, because, for all he knew, the man was even then sighting his rifle to make sure of his work. It was not to be wondered at that Ginger's scalp tingled—almost as if it was conscious of what was about to happen to it.

The grass rustled as the unseen man approached. There was a momentary pause, then a hand closed over the back of Ginger's head, and he knew it was time to move.

With a grunt he sprang to his feet, looking wildly for his attacker, and saw a man whom he recognized at once—the Indian member of McBain's gang.

With the scalping knife in his hand, the Indian had instinctively started back at Ginger's unexpected return to life; but the withdrawal was only momentary; with his smile of victory replaced by a snarl of disappointment and anger, he leapt forward again to the attack.

But the brief respite had given Ginger a chance to get his balance. His right hand flew to his pocket and came up grasping his automatic, but before

he could pull the trigger the Indian, with a lightning sweep of his left arm, had knocked the weapon aside so that the bullet crashed into the end of the cabin. What was more, the blow knocked the automatic clean out of Ginger's hand; it described a short flight through the air and came to rest on the turf some ten yards or more away.

Ginger did not attempt to run, for he knew that the fleet-footed Redskin would quickly overtake him. In desperation, he leapt forward to seize the arm that held the knife; he did this before the Indian had time to recover fully from the blow he had struck at the automatic, with the result that they both went down with a crash, Ginger falling across the arm which he had seized so that the knife was not six inches from his face. To prise the weapon from the Indian's hand would be, he knew, beyond his strength, so he resorted to a method which he once saw employed during a fight between two drunken miners. He used his teeth. Taking the bones in the back of the brown hand between his jaws, he bit with all his strength. Under the excruciating agony the Indian let out a scream, and the hand jerked open convulsively. But before Ginger could possess himself of the knife, the Indian, with a tremendous effort, flung himself sideways, with the result that they both rolled over away from the weapon.

Both were now disarmed, but of the two the Indian was the heavier and Ginger knew that in the end this must tell against him. The automatic was his only chance. Somehow he must reach it, although, having by this time rolled over several times, he was by no means sure of its exact whereabouts. Meanwhile, all his strength was needed to keep the Indian's hands from his throat.

For perhaps a minute the struggle continued without marked advantage on either side. Sometimes the Indian was on top, and sometimes Ginger, who, knowing what his fate would be if he weakened, was now fighting with the fury of despair. He managed to get on top again, but before he could break free and make a dash for the automatic the Indian had flung him off again, this time with such force that he rolled some distance away. He was brought up by a stone against which he struck his head with a force that made him gasp. Yet even in his sorry plight he had the wit to realize that it was a stone, and that a stone can be a useful weapon in emergency.

By the time his wildly groping hand had found and closed over the stone, the Indian was more than half-way towards him, so slightly raising himself, he flung the missile with every ounce of his fast-waning strength, and then twisted sideways.

The stone caught the Redskin full in the mouth, producing an animal snarl of rage and pulling him up short, spitting blood. For a brief moment his sombre eyes blazed into Ginger's; then they went beyond him, and he darted forward.

Ginger was on his feet in an instant, and it took him not more than a split second to see what his adversary was after. It was the rifle which had been left against the tree stump, and which Ginger now saw for the first time. To reach the weapon first was obviously impossible. Frantically his eyes scanned the short turf, seeking the automatic. He saw it, made a rush for it, and reached it at the precise moment that the Indian grabbed the rifle. Both weapons came up together and two reports rang out, one following the other so closely that the sounds blended. But Ginger's shot had been fired first, by an interval of time so short as to be immeasurable. But it was enough.

Where the rifle bullet went Ginger did not know. It had not hit him, and that was all that concerned him. He was staring at the Indian, whose behaviour was unlike anything he had ever seen before. At Ginger's shot he had appeared to throw the weapon up into the air before taking several running steps backward, then he fell and finished up flat on his back.

Ginger, gasping for breath, concluded, not unnaturally, that he had killed the man. Reeling with exhaustion, he took a pace towards him, whereupon to his amazement and dismay the Indian sprang to his feet and dashed away.

Ginger was in no mood to let the man get away; he represented too big a danger. Jerking up his weapon, he let drive at the running form, and missed. At least, the Indian continued running; furthermore, as he ran he twisted and turned in a manner that made shooting almost a waste of powder. Three times Ginger fired without any of the shots taking the slightest effect, and by that time the Redskin was out of effective pistol range. Still running, he disappeared from sight in the belt of timber that skirted the water's edge.

With a grunt of mortification Ginger dropped the muzzle of the automatic and walked across to where the rifle was lying; on picking it up he perceived the cause of the Indian's strange behaviour. His—that is, Ginger's—first shot had not hit the man; it had hit the rifle. By a strange chance the bullet had struck the trigger-guard, and the force of the impact had, of course, knocked the weapon from the man's hands. Also, it must have spoilt his shot. Considering the matter, Ginger could not make up his mind who was the luckier—he or the Indian.

Looking at the sky he saw that the day was fast drawing to a close, so he made his way towards the open door of the cabin in order to pursue the quest that had brought him to the spot.

He did not intend to stay long. The surprise of his encounter with the Indian had left him not a little shaken; moreover, he was rather worried for fear the Indian would find some means of turning the tables on him; he saw that it was going to be difficult to search the cabin thoroughly and at the same time keep a close watch on the trees in which the Redskin had disappeared. To make matters worse, the light was failing. It would soon be dark, and the possibility of his being benighted in the cabin had not previously entered into his calculations. He still hoped to avoid it, particularly as the Indian was at large. Standing the rifle against the door, ready for action should it be needed, he looked around.

The first thing he saw was a fur coat hanging from a peg on the opposite wall. Its presence gave him something of a turn, for he recognized it at once from its unmistakable white blaze. It was McBain's. He had worn it, he recalled, on the night of the murder of old Mose. What it was doing there he did not know, but it seemed evident that McBain had either left it behind by accident or else he had lent it to the Indian—probably the latter. Anyway, he reflected, its presence proved, if proof were needed, that McBain was closely concerned with the cabin even if he did not actually own it.

A preliminary examination of such objects as were in view revealed nothing more of particular interest. There were a few pieces of furniture, mostly home-made, and of the roughest possible character. A packing case, on which were strewn some odds and ends of food, served for a table. Two chairs, a bench, an iron stove of the covered-in variety, a heap of firewood, a lamp of the hurricane type, a small pyramid of stores—that was all.

In the ordinary way Ginger would have looked no further, for there was nothing suspicious about such articles; indeed, they were normal camp equipment, and it would have been more surprising had they not been there; but two circumstances combined to make him feel sure that there was more in the cabin than met the eye. In the first place, why had McBain's machine landed there when there was every reason to suppose that it had the gold on board? Secondly, why had the Indian been left there? McBain was not the sort of man who would do anything without a good reason, certainly not when he was in the middle of a carefully prepared scheme. The presence of the Indian indicated that there was something in the cabin that needed guarding, and, in the circumstances, what could be more likely than that it was the gold?

Satisfied that his reasoning was correct, Ginger broke off in his ruminating and looked steadily in the direction of the trees, but there was no sign of the Indian, so without further loss of time he proceeded with the

search. If the gold was there, then he would not rest until he had found it, he decided.

There was no question of there being a concealed cavity in the walls, for they were of solid tree-trunks set one above the other in single thickness. The roof was of split pine, through which daylight showed in many places, and clearly offered no hiding-place. There remained only the floor, and this, as far as it was visible, was solid enough.

Ginger regarded the heap of firewood reflectively. 'If the gold is here it is under this pile,' he told himself confidently as he began dragging the branches aside. It took him some time to get down to floor level, for he was still rather worried about the Indian, and he broke off from his task several times to study the landscape. However, at last he pushed the remaining few branches aside and dropped on his hands and knees, feeling for the trap-door which he felt certain was there. He could hardly believe it when he discovered that nothing of the sort was there. Again and again he examined the floor inch by inch, but in the end he was compelled to admit to himself that he had been mistaken. The floor at that point was as solid as the rest.

Half sick with disappointment, he stood up and stared down at the spot as though he still found the obvious truth difficult to believe. If the gold was not there, he thought with fast sinking hopes, then it must be buried somewhere outside, in which case he would be very lucky indeed if he found it. It might be anywhere within a hundred yards, which meant that he might dig for a week, or even a month, without striking the spot. The more he thought about it the more depressed he became. It was infuriating to be so near and yet so far, for he was still convinced that the gold was there. He began to hate the sound of the word.

Remembering the Indian, he crossed again to the window and looked out over the darkening landscape. Somewhere out there was the Indian, he mused, unless he had started off on foot for Fort Beaver to warn the others of what had happened, which did not seem likely.

He started as a thought flashed into his mind. The Indian! He would know where the gold was hidden. What a pity he had got away; otherwise he would have made him divulge the hiding-place. Perhaps he was not so far away—perhaps—Ginger caught his breath as the idea took root. 'It's my only chance,' he muttered. 'I've got to find that blighter. I've got his rifle, so it shouldn't be very difficult.'

Three swift strides took him to the door, where he had left the rifle. He put his hand out for it, confidently, only to draw back with a little gasp of

amazement. He stopped, staring at the place where it had been—where he was certain he had put it. But it was no longer there.

CHAPTER XX

LOST

GINGER's first sensation on discovering his loss was one of utter amazement. He was incredulous. It was followed by one of doubt. In his mind he was absolutely certain that he had leaned the rifle against the doorpost. True, he had performed the action subconsciously, for at the time his thoughts were concentrated on the interior of the cabin; but, nevertheless, casting his mind back—as one often can in such circumstances—he had a clear recollection of standing the weapon against the doorpost as he surveyed the interior of the room. Was it possible that he had been mistaken? Had he, without thinking what he was doing, moved it again afterwards? He could not remember doing so, but it was just possible. With a frown of perplexity lining his forehead, he looked at all the likely places in turn—the walls, the table, and even the stove. But there was no sign of the rifle.

As he stared, almost bewildered, vaguely into his mind came stories he had read of the stealth with which an Indian could move; skill in the art of self-effacement, born of a thousand years of inter-tribal warfare, had been the theme of many of the stories he had read in his not-very-distant school-days. Without giving the matter serious thought, he had always regarded this alleged cunning with a certain amount of scepticism. It made good reading, but that did not necessarily mean that it was true. It now began to look as if it were. Somehow the Indian must have crept up to the cabin and recovered the rifle. There was no other explanation.

For nearly a minute Ginger stood still, deep in thought, conscious that the loss of the weapon completely altered the circumstances. It meant that he would have to abandon his recently formed plan, for to go out into country which he did not know, armed only with a pistol, to look for a man who probably knew every inch of the ground, and was, moreover, in possession of a rifle, would be sheer lunacy. Still pondering, he became aware that it meant a good deal more than that. If the Indian was still in the vicinity, which seemed most likely, the chances were that he would remain as near to the cabin as possible, covering the door, waiting for him—Ginger—to step outside. With a fresh twinge of alarm, he perceived that he would not be able to get back to the machine without running the gauntlet of the Indian's fire.

Reproaching himself bitterly for his carelessness, he looked up, and saw that he was standing in line with the small window, not much more than a

loophole, that looked out from the rear of the cabin. Instinctively he stepped aside. He was only just in time. A bullet ripped a splinter of wood from the side of the window and buried itself with a crisp *zut* in the opposite wall.

Although thoroughly startled by the narrow margin of his escape, Ginger realized that the shot settled any remaining doubt as to the whereabouts of the weapon. The Indian had got it, and the direction from which the shot had come gave him a rough idea of his position; and since the ground on that side of the cabin was level as far as the trees, he realized that the Indian had probably taken up a position on the edge of the wood.

Ginger, keeping well away from the window, examined the situation in this new light. He no longer entertained the idea of going out to look for his enemy. He was more concerned with preserving his life, and the machine; and he experienced a fresh pang of apprehension when the thought flashed into his head that the Indian might, under cover of darkness, set fire to the Jupiter, or put it out of action in some other way. At all costs he must prevent that, he thought desperately.

Still racking his brain for a solution to the difficult problem with which he was now faced, he fell back on his old resort. What would Biggles do in such a case? A careful reconnaissance near the door confirmed his belief that it was possible, by making a rush, to reach the machine; but the idea of becoming the fugitive, leaving the Indian in command of the situation, was repugnant to him, quite apart from which it meant, definitely, that his mission had failed. In any case, it was nearly dark, and his common sense told him that it would be an act of the greatest folly to try to find his way back to Fort Beaver in the dark. Even if he found the aerodrome, which was not very likely, the business of landing the big machine without lights of any sort was a responsibility he preferred not to shoulder. If he started and lost his way, the machine would probably be wrecked in the inevitable forced landing when his petrol was exhausted. Having seen the country, he knew that it would be hopeless to try to get down anywhere in the inhospitable region between the place where he was and Fort Beaver. If he crashed it might be months before he was found. He might never be found.

To make matters worse, it had turned bitterly cold, and there was a feeling of snow in the air. Torn by indecision, he tried to make up his mind what to do for the best. Suppose by a miracle he did get back? What then? He would be in the same predicament as the others. Fortunately, he did not know that their plight was as desperate as it actually was, or his anxiety would have turned to something worse.

Now as he stood near the cabin door busy with these worrying thoughts, he perceived something which hitherto he had not noticed, possibly because up to the present moment it had held no significance. Not far from the door there was a depression, a slight fold in the ground. As a feature of the landscape it was negligible, but he knew that by lying flat in extended order a regiment could have taken cover in it. He recalled that once, years before, he had watched a troop of boy scouts practising taking cover in just such a trifling depression. At the time he had not known that the depression was there. From the edge of the field where he stood it could not be seen. When the scouts stood up they appeared as one would expect to see them, a definite and unmistakable party of human beings; yet when they lay down they disappeared from sight as if the ground had opened and swallowed them up. After they had gone, his curiosity was such that he had examined the place, and was amazed to find that the depression was so shallow that he was by no means sure when he had reached it.

Standing on tiptoe, Ginger now tried to see how far the depression extended, but was unable to do so with any degree of certainty; but he saw that it swept round in such a way that if it persisted in its course it would pass near the northern extremity of the wood in which, if his deductions were correct, the Indian had taken cover.

He made another critical survey of the weather, for he knew that he could not afford to leave it out of his calculations. Should it begin to snow in earnest, then that would be the end of the undertaking. It might be the end of everything, for the machine would certainly be snowed in, in which case he would be marooned as effectively as if he were on a desert island. The sky was about three parts covered, with occasional stars beginning to twinkle through the broken masses of cumulus. Still, visibility was fairly good. It had settled down to a deceptive twilight, and he knew from experience that, as far north as he was, it would get no darker; it might even get lighter, for the northern sky was faintly suffused with the mysterious ever-moving glow of the aurora borealis; he knew that should the sky clear the rays would become stronger, and reflect more light over the landscape.

Filled by doubts and misgivings, for he was by no means certain that he was doing the right thing, he darted swiftly to the depression, where he threw himself flat on the ground and endeavoured to make out what course the shallow place of concealment took. But it merged into an indistinct background, and his scrutiny told him nothing. Behind him, the cabin showed up against the sky as a square black silhouette. The machine, looking forlorn and deserted, stood about a hundred yards to his right.

Now that the moment had come to leave these recognizable objects he hesitated, but comforted himself with the thought that if anything went wrong he could return to them. Anyway, he decided, he would keep them in sight as long as possible. Stealthily, sometimes crawling, and where the depression was particularly shallow pulling himself along flat on his stomach, he began to make his way along the fold, pausing from time to time to listen or take a surreptitious peep at the cabin. For he had not overlooked the possibility of the Indian playing the same game as himself. He knew that it was not at all unlikely that his enemy was even then endeavouring to creep unseen to the cabin; but what the Indian would not expect, he told himself, was that he had left it. In fact, if that were so, then of the two positions he preferred his own, for it seemed to hold a certain advantage.

He had made his way for what he judged to be about two hundred yards when a gust of wind brought a flurry of snowflakes with it. He stopped at once, almost overcome with dismay. It was no use going on. Not that there was much point in going back, he reflected bitterly. If there was going to be a heavy fall it would mean the end of everything. 'Still, I suppose I shall be better off inside than out here,' he thought morosely, as he stood up in the whirling flakes, knowing that there was no longer any need for him to remain prone. The snow effectually blotted out everything outside a radius of a few yards. Turning up his collar, he walked swiftly towards the cabin—or, since he could not see, where he imagined it to be.

It surprised him to find how far he had gone. Surely he should have reached the cabin by now? He began counting his paces. When he reached fifty he stopped, knowing that he must have passed his objective. Irritated, but without any alarm, he began to retrace his steps. Presently he broke into a run, only to pull up abruptly as he realized that he was lost. Even then he was not unduly perturbed, for he knew that the cabin could not be more than a hundred yards from where he stood. There was no need for him to lose his head, he told himself. Obviously, the thing to do was to retrace his steps in the thin mantle of snow which now covered the ground. But he soon discovered that this plan, while satisfactory in theory, was, in fact, impracticable, for his trail was obliterated almost as fast as he made it.

He did not attempt to deceive himself any longer. He knew that he had not the remotest idea of where he stood in relation to the cabin. He did the only thing left; he started quartering up and down, this way and that, counting his steps so that he did not go too far in any one direction.

A sharp blow in the face pulled him up with a jerk. Indeed, he staggered back, hand to his face, for the blow had hurt. What had he walked into? It was certainly not the cabin. It was not the machine, for there was no projection on it so sharp as whatever it was that had struck his face. Holding his hands in front of him, he moved slowly forward, feeling his way. They encountered the object, and he knew at once what it was. The blunt end of a twig. His hands groped their way along it until they were met by a tangle of branches, and finally the trunk of a tree. He realized that he had wandered to the wood, but what part of it he had no means of knowing.

And while he stood there, thrown into confusion by his discovery, the snow stopped as suddenly as it had started. The moon broke through the clouds and shone whitely on the snow that lay like a spotless sheet over everything. He saw the cabin and the machine. With a sigh of relief he took a pace forward, for the thought of getting back to the cabin was still uppermost in his mind; but then he backed hurriedly, realizing that the hazard was more dangerous than the one he had first embarked upon. There was no sign of the Indian. Not that he expected it. But that did not mean that his enemy had gone away. On the contrary, in view of the uncertainty of the weather, he would be even more anxious to recover the shelter of the cabin.

Still turning the matter over in his mind, his body stiffened suddenly as a dreadful cry was borne to his ears. It was the howl of a wolf, and at the long-drawn-out cry his blood ran cold. Of course there were wolves there! He had seen them when he had first landed there with Biggles, when they had been following McBain. All the gruesome stories he had heard about wolves pursuing and tearing lonely travellers to pieces rushed through his mind. One wolf, two wolves, or a pack, he hated the whole tribe. He was terrified of them, and he knew it.

Again came the ghastly howl, nearer this time, and before it had come to a quivering end it was taken up by another.

Ginger forgot the Indian. He forget everything. His one idea now was to get inside the sheltering walls of the cabin and shut the door. The next instant he was flying for his life across the snow in the direction of the haven of refuge. A score of paces, and a chorus of howls broke out behind him. A frantic glance over his shoulder told him the worst; a line of black shapes had broken cover some distance higher up the wood and were streaking after him, running diagonally in such a way that they would, he knew, cut him off before he reached the hut. Hardly knowing what he was doing, acting from an instinct of self-preservation rather than thought, he swerved away from his original objective and raced towards the machine.

He ran as he had never run before, for he could hear the soft patter of footsteps and the panting breath of his pursuers.

And as he ran Ginger knew that his life depended upon a circumstance so trivial that he could not have imagined it. The wolves were so close behind that he knew that if the cabin door of the Jupiter was shut he would not have time to open it and get inside before they pulled him down. He could not remember whether he had closed it or left it open. Nor could he see until he was within a dozen paces whether it was open or shut. It was open. With a last convulsive effort he took a flying leap at the aperture and slammed the door behind him just as the leading wolf launched itself through the air. It struck the door with a crash that made the machine rock. Ginger, on his back, still half crazed with panic, snatched out his automatic and blazed at the door from the inside. There was a shrill yelp, followed instantly by a dreadful snarling and scuffling. He knew all about wolves killing and eating one of their number that was wounded or incapacitated, and that is what he imagined was going on outside. He hoped it was true. Nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to see the wolves tearing each other to pieces.

Panting, he made his way through into the cockpit, where he sank down in the control seat to consider the situation in its latest form. He was tired. He was cold. He felt weak and hungry. In fact, he was sick of the whole business. Things seemed to be going from bad to worse, and it is not surprising that he found himself wishing that he had never undertaken a mission which was fast proving to be beyond his ability to fulfil. He could hear the wolves outside. Looking through the side window he could see them, some sitting on their haunches staring up at the cockpit, others sniffing round the undercarriage. One, bolder than the rest, made a leap at the window, only to fall back again as Ginger's pistol cracked. Again came the ghastly business of the wolves devouring their wounded companion.

Ginger felt that he was safe where he was. He would, he decided, stay there until the morning; as soon as it was light enough for safe flying he would abandon his project, and return to Fort Beaver, no matter what the result might be. Searching about, he found a few pieces of broken biscuit in the pocket on the inside of the door, and it was while he was munching these ravenously that he noticed a change in the behaviour of the wolves. One of them, sniffing about some distance from the rest, suddenly threw up his head and let out its hateful howl, after which it loped off towards the log cabin where, as Ginger now noticed for the first time, several wolves were already prowling. One by one the others broke away from the machine and joined the party now circling the hut.

Ginger watched them with a new interest, wondering what it was that had attracted their attention. At first he thought that they had simply found his trail, the scent he had left behind when he had started off on his last ill-fated enterprise; but then, seeing that they were all looking upwards, he, too, raised his eyes. Then he understood. Conspicuous against the snow on the roof was a dark object. Even as Ginger watched he saw it move, and he was no longer in any doubt as to what it was—or rather, who it was. It was a man, and there was only one man likely to be in such a place at such a time. The Indian!

CHAPTER XXI

THE PRISONER SPEAKS

How long the Indian had been there, or how he had got there, Ginger, of course, did not know. He did not particularly care. One thing was certain, and that was what concerned him most. The man was 'treed' by the wolves as effectively—in fact, more effectively—than he was himself. His plight was a good deal more precarious.

Twice, as he watched, Ginger saw the Indian slip, and climb back to the ridge by what seemed to be an effort. He wondered why the man had not fired at him, or why he did not fire at the wolves. Watching the man's hands as he clung to the ridge, he suspected the reason; and presently he became fairly certain that his assumption was correct. The Indian had not got the rifle with him. Either he had dropped it in his haste to climb on the roof out of reach of the wolves, or he had accidentally let it slip after he was up. Either way, as far as Ginger was concerned, the effect was the same. If the man was unarmed it put a very different complexion on the whole situation, and he began to take a fresh interest in the proceedings; particularly when, a minute or two later, he heard what he took to be a cry for help.

Opening the side window quietly, he looked out. 'Hi!' he yelled. 'Have you got the rifle?' The words seemed strangely loud in the icy silence. The wolves stopped their prowling and stared at the machine.

'No . . . on ground,' came the reply, rather faintly.

'Can you hold on until the morning?' was Ginger's next question.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Too cold. Die with cold here,' came the tragic announcement.

It did not occur to Ginger to doubt the word of a man whose position was obviously far too precarious for him to hope to gain anything by lying. 'Hold on!' he shouted.

The last thing he wanted now was that the Indian should die, and carry the secret of the gold with him to the grave—or, as seemed more likely, into the stomachs of the brutes prowling below, who appeared to sense that, of the two men, this was the one more likely to satisfy their appetites.

It did not take Ginger long to make up his mind what to do. There was, in fact, only one thing he could do; for, whether the Indian died or not, he had no intention of taking on the pack single-handed, on the ground, armed only with a pistol. And he lost no time in putting his plan into execution. The self-starter whirred. It did not surprise him when the engines refused to start, for he knew that they must be stone cold. However, it was only a matter of time.

Actually, it took him nearly ten minutes to get the first kick out of one of the propellers. A minute later one engine started with its customary roar. A streak of blue flame shot out of the exhaust. He did not bother about the other engine. One, he hoped, would be sufficient for his purpose. And he was right.

If he had any doubts as to how the wolves would behave in the face of a roaring aero-engine they were soon dismissed. Even before the machine moved, most of them were skulking towards the wood, and by the time it was half-way to the cabin, with Ginger making the night hideous with occasional bursts of throttle, they were in full flight. Slowly, on the alert for any sign of treachery, he taxied the machine right up to the cabin wall and then switched off. 'Stay where you are until I tell you to move,' he called to the Indian; and then, jumping down, he picked up the rifle, which he could now see lying near the cabin wall half buried in snow.

'All right, come down,' he said curtly. 'Be careful what you are doing or you'll get shot.'

He stepped back as the Indian slid off the roof, bringing a small avalanche of snow with him, and fell heavily to the ground. Ginger did not take his eyes off him for a moment, but he saw that, unless the man was a clever actor, he was at his last gasp. He was so stiff with cold that he had difficulty in getting him to his feet.

Ginger, stooping down, took the Indian's knife from his belt and tossed it, with the rifle, into the machine. He kept him covered with his pistol, and with some difficulty managed to get him into the hut, where he allowed him to sink down again near the stove. Still keeping one eye on him, he lit the lamp, by the light of which he saw that the man was really in a bad way. There was blood on his left arm, from which he assumed that his bullet must, after all, have wounded him. The stove, he discovered, was out, but he did not bother about lighting it. The lamp would give a certain amount of heat.

'Now,' he said, turning to his prisoner, 'I am going to ask you some questions. If you are wise you will answer them truthfully. You can

understand English, I think?'

'Sure,' returned the Indian weakly, with a soft American accent.

'Where is the gold?'

The Indian did not reply.

'Where is the gold?' asked Ginger again.

'Gold? No gold.'

'Don't lie to me!' snapped Ginger. 'You know the gold is here. I know it's here. You'd better remember where it is—unless you want to go back outside to the wolves. You needn't be afraid to speak. McBain won't worry you.'

The Indian started, and Ginger knew that his shot had gone home.

'By the time this business is over McBain will be hanging by the neck,' he announced confidently. 'He is probably under arrest by now.'

The Indian looked up. 'What for, huh?' he asked.

'For murdering Mose Jacobs. You were in that too.'

'No! No—no! Not me!' flashed back the Indian quickly.

'We'll talk about that presently,' declared Ginger. 'What I want to know first of all is where McBain has hidden the gold. Speak up. You'd better tell me what you know. It's your only chance of escaping the rope.'

The Indian looked worried, but he did not answer.

'They'll make you speak when they try you for murdering Mose,' went on Ginger remorselessly. 'You killed him, didn't you?'

'No.'

'Was it McBain?'

'Yes, McBain,' agreed the Indian sullenly.

'How do you know?' fired back Ginger.

'I know.'

'How do you know? Did McBain tell you?'

'No. I guessed. Then I found the——'

'The what? Come on, out with it.'

'He hit Mose with—the butt end of his gun.'

'How do you know?'

'I saw him cleaning blood and hair off his gun afterwards.'

'What did he clean it with?'

‘A towel.’

‘Where did he put it?’

The Indian hesitated.

‘Come on,’ prompted Ginger.

‘He put towel under some sacks in the corner of office.’

Ginger was more than pleased about this piece of additional evidence—always assuming that the Indian spoke the truth, and he could think of no sound reason why he should lie. ‘Of course, there is a way you can save your own neck if you like,’ he went on insinuatingly.

‘How?’

‘By turning King’s Evidence. You tell the truth to the police and maybe they’ll let you off. If you don’t tell all you know it makes you as bad as the actual murderer. Remember that when we get back to-morrow.’

The Indian started. His dark eyes sought Ginger’s. ‘Back—to-morrow?’

‘Yes. You’re coming back with me. What else did you think you were going to do?’

Again the Indian did not answer.

Ginger was not particularly concerned about the Indian’s fate. What he wanted was all the evidence he could muster against McBain, particularly the gold that would prove his guilt, so he spent some time in planting in the Indian’s mind the idea that if he confessed all he knew there was a chance that the law would take a lenient view of his association with McBain. He assured him that McBain would certainly be hanged, and in this belief he was sincere. ‘If you won’t tell me where the gold is, you’ll jolly soon tell Constable Delaney when he gets his hands on you,’ he concluded. ‘For the last time, where is the gold?’

The Indian turned his face slowly towards the stove. ‘Under there,’ he said simply.

Ginger could have kicked himself for not thinking of it; or rather, for overlooking such an obvious place. Looking at the stove now, he saw that it stood on a small piece of thin iron sheeting, which had probably been supplied with the stove. Seizing the upper part, he dragged it aside. He swept the iron sheeting away with his foot and a cavity was revealed. Reaching down, his hand came into contact with a small bag, or sack, of harsh material. He dragged it up into the room, and knew from its weight that it contained gold.

There were eight sacks, each tied and sealed. On the side of each one was printed in black letters MOOSE CREEK GOLDFIELDS INC. There was only one other thing in the cache, a small iron object, and for a moment he wondered what it could be; but when, on the base, he saw the brand of the Moose Creek company, he understood. ‘A spare seal, eh?’ he murmured. ‘So that’s how McBain was able to do the trick. And he came here to do it. Well, when we get back to Fort Beaver with this little lot several people are going to get a shock.’

The Indian said nothing. Ginger, having obtained what he wanted, had nothing more to say. The only thing that remained was for him to wait until daylight and then get back to Fort Beaver as quickly as possible.

The lamp had taken the chill off the room, but it was by no means warm, and although the Indian had recovered somewhat he looked far from happy. Ginger examined the wound in his arm; it was only a flesh wound, but sufficient to cause the Indian to lose a good deal of blood, which, with the exposure he had experienced on the roof, accounted for his weakness.

Ginger remembered McBain’s fur coat. He did not need it himself, but it struck him that his prisoner would be more comfortable in it, so he lifted it from its peg intending to hand it to him. As he took it down, something sharp pierced his forearm, bringing an exclamation of pain and surprise to his lips. The object, whatever it was, seemed to be in the sleeve, so thinking that it was possibly a thorn, he examined the sleeve carefully in order to remove it. He was some time finding the object, but at length he located it in the turned-up fold of the sleeve. Taking it out, he regarded it for some moments in silence, an extraordinary expression on his face. He glanced quickly at the Indian, but the man’s back was turned towards him and it was clear that he had not noticed the incident. Slipping the object quickly back into the turn-up of the sleeve, he spread the coat over the shoulders of his prisoner.

The night passed as slowly as any he could remember, but at long last the grey dawn for which he had waited shed its feeble light through the window. There had, of course, been no question of going to sleep with a dangerous character like the Indian in the room.

He went over to the window and looked out. Nothing moved. There was no sign of the wolves.

‘Well, it’s daylight and I don’t see any wolves,’ he told the Indian.

‘The wolves go back into the wood at dawn,’ was the cold reply. ‘They not come out again now.’

‘Well, come on; on your feet. We’ll get along,’ ordered Ginger.

The Indian pleaded to be left behind, to be given his freedom, swearing that he would never work for McBain again. But this was something Ginger was not prepared to grant. He compelled his prisoner to help him to carry the gold across to the machine.

When the last of it was safely on board, he closed the hut and made the Indian sit beside him in the Jupiter, reckoning that once in the air the Indian would be powerless to do any harm—unless he deliberately did something calculated to crash the machine and kill them both, which hardly seemed likely.

It took Ginger some time to start the engines, for they were very cold, but in the end he got them going, and just as the first rays of the rising sun flashed up over the horizon the Jupiter roared into the air on its return journey to Fort Beaver.

Had Ginger known what was happening there his cheerful confidence would have received a rude shock. As it was, he was so pleased with the success of his mission that he hummed softly to himself as the landmarks he recognized slipped away behind.

‘They must have wondered what has happened to me,’ he thought seriously.

CHAPTER XXII

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR

As we know, the others had more than once wondered what had happened to him. But now, as they stood under the fatal tree with the end so near, he slipped from their minds.

It was Biggles who knew first that the machine was coming; his keen ears picked up the drone of the motors before he saw it.

‘Here comes Ginger,’ he said, by which time others in the crowd had heard it too.

There was a quick babble of excited conversation. The immediate preparations for the hanging were temporarily abandoned, and several people pointed to the fast approaching Jupiter.

‘Never mind about that,’ shouted McBain. It was almost as if he sensed that the oncoming aeroplane was a danger to the success of his plans. Ferroni, who was with him, raised his voice in a demand that the hanging should be proceeded with, but the attention of the crowd was distracted by the behaviour of the machine.

At first it seemed that the pilot was going to glide straight to the aerodrome and land, but at the last moment the machine turned suddenly, as if the pilot had observed the crowd and wished to see it at close quarters. Straight over the tree at a height of not more than fifty feet the Jupiter soared, and then went into a tight circle. The watchers on the ground could see the pale face of the pilot looking down at them.

‘Come on; ain’t yer never seen an airypine before? Let’s get on with the hangin’,’ roared McBain. But the noise of the Jupiter’s engines so drowned the words that only those in his immediate vicinity heard them.

‘What does he think he’s up to?’ Delaney asked Biggles, who was watching the side window of the control cabin.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered, ‘but I rather fancy that he is going to throw something out. Yes, he is,’ he went on quickly, raising his voice, as a bulky object blocked the cabin window. ‘Watch your heads, everybody.’

The next moment a dark object was hurtling downwards, turning slowly as it fell. There was a yell of alarm from the crowd, each member of which took steps to make sure that it did not hit him; only the prisoners and Delaney remained still, eyes on the falling object, which finally crashed to

earth in the middle of the scattered spectators, but, fortunately, without hitting any one.

The actual moment of impact produced a curious effect: so curious, in fact, that it is doubtful if any one of the watchers had the slightest idea of what had happened. There seemed to be a sort of brilliant yellow flash, almost like a tongue of flame, which licked along the short turf for a brief moment before it disappeared. The phenomenon had occurred about ten or twelve yards from the tree.

‘What the dickens was that?’ ejaculated Algy.

‘Goodness knows,’ replied Biggles, who was still staring at the spot; he could see a small, buff-coloured object, and beside it a yellow streak. Then the crowd converged on it and it was hidden from his view. There was an excited whisper, almost a hiss, and then a shout went up.

Delaney had run forward with the others. ‘Stand away there!’ he ordered crisply.

Curiously enough, the crowd gave way to him, as though it once more respected his authority. Mass hysteria is a strange thing; it can die down as quickly as it can arise; and thus it was in this case. It was as if the crowd had been shocked by what it saw on the ground.

Delaney perceived his opportunity, and was not slow in taking advantage of it. ‘Stand clear!’ he snapped. ‘Don’t touch it, anybody. And that goes for you, too, McBain,’ he went on curtly.

One of the first to reach the fallen object had been McBain, and he stared at it as if he could not believe his eyes. Delaney stooped and picked up something from the ground; it looked like a piece of torn sacking. ‘Moose Creek Gold-fields!’ he cried in an amazed voice. Then, a tone higher, he added, ‘Boys, it’s the Moose Creek gold!’

The words were received with a loud buzz of excitement, and every one pressed forward to see the pile of yellow dust that had burst from the bag when it had hit the ground.

Delaney placed two men on guard over the gold. They obeyed without question. Then he strode to where the prisoners were still standing, the ropes around their necks. The crowd, its anger melting in the face of this new mystery, surged after him.

‘What do you know about this?’ Delaney asked Biggles sternly.

‘Not much more than you do,’ replied Biggles. ‘I suggest that you let the boy tell his story in his own way. Here he comes, now.’

Ginger, who by this time had landed, was, in fact, marching towards the crowd; and he did not come alone. In front of him, covered by his automatic, walked the Indian, draped in a long skunk-skin coat.

The crowd fell silent as it watched the approach of this curious procession. On all faces was astonishment not far from incredulity.

Straight through the crowd to where Delaney was standing Ginger marched his prisoner, the spectators forming a lane to allow them to pass. His eyes opened wide when he saw the dangling ropes and for whom they were intended.

‘What’s the idea?’ asked Delaney, the words sounding strangely loud in the hush that had fallen.

‘I’ve brought back evidence to prove that my friends, who have been arrested for the murder of Mose Jacobs, or the theft of the Moose Creek gold, or both, are innocent,’ cried Ginger. ‘I have brought back the gold,’ he went on. ‘Some of it you have seen.’ He pointed in the direction of that which lay on the ground. ‘The rest is in the aeroplane.’

‘Where did you find it?’ asked Delaney.

‘I found it under the floor of a cabin up on the edge of the bad lands—where the thief had hidden it until such time as it suited him to collect it. This Indian was left on guard over it, and he will tell you to whom the cabin belongs. It belongs to Brindle McBain.’

McBain, white with passion, pushed his way to the front. ‘What are you saying?’ he snarled.

‘I’m saying that you stole the gold,’ answered Ginger in a hard voice. ‘Instead of flying it straight down here you landed at your cabin, broke the seals of the boxes, took out the gold, substituted lead which you had already prepared, and then resealed the boxes. Here is the seal with which you did the job.’ Ginger handed Delaney the duplicate seal.

‘That’s a lie!’ roared McBain.

‘We shall see,’ retorted Ginger imperturbably. He raised his voice. ‘Does any one here recognize the coat the Indian is wearing?’ he asked.

A dozen voices answered: ‘It’s McBain’s.’

‘Do you deny that the coat is yours, McBain?’ asked Ginger.

McBain hesitated. It was quite certain that he could not deny it without proving himself to be a liar, for the peculiar white blaze on the coat would have identified it in ten thousand.

‘This coat was in McBain’s hidden cabin,’ declared Ginger, taking the garment from the Indian and tossing it carelessly to its rightful owner, who caught it and flung it over his shoulder.

‘Now,’ continued Ginger, ‘I want to recall something to the minds of those who were in the Three Star the night Mose was killed. Are the two men here who were sitting by the fire talking to Mose when I joined in the conversation?’

The two men pushed their way to the front.

‘You would remember what Mose was wearing that night?’ Ginger challenged them.

‘I reckon so,’ they agreed.

‘Very well. You will remember that after the row between my friend, Major Bigglesworth, who stands over there, and McBain, we went home. Mose and McBain were still there.’

‘That’s right. I was there myself, so I can vouch for that,’ declared Delaney.

‘After that, who went out first—Mose or McBain?’

‘McBain.’

Ginger turned to McBain. ‘Did you ever, from the moment you left the Three Star, see Mose again?’

‘No.’ McBain’s denial was emphatic.

Ginger nodded. ‘I see,’ he said. ‘On the night Mose was murdered I believe I am right in saying that you were wearing the coat you now have on your arm.’

Again McBain hesitated. It was as if he suspected a trap, but could think of no way of avoiding it. He could not deny that he had worn the coat, for nearly every man present had been in the saloon that night, and must have seen him in it.

‘Well, what if I *was* wearing it?’ he snarled belligerently.

‘Has any one else but you ever worn that coat—except the Indian who was wearing it when I arrived here?’

Again a moment’s hesitation. The atmosphere was electric.

‘Had any one but you worn the coat it is likely that it would have been noticed, isn’t it?’ prompted Ginger.

‘It’s my coat, and nobody else has had it—if that’s what you’re getting at,’ grated McBain.

Ginger pointed to the turn-up at the bottom of the fur sleeve. ‘Just feel in there and take out what you find,’ he said quietly. ‘And then, since you did not see Mose again after you left the saloon, perhaps you will tell us how it got there.’

Like a man in a dream, almost against his will it seemed, McBain’s finger went down into the turn-up. The silence was such that every member of the crowd might have been holding his breath. A look of relief passed over McBain’s face as he found what was evidently an insignificant object; with a short laugh he took it out and looked at it. As he did so his face blanched. Yet the object was simple enough. It was merely an opal-headed tie-pin.

‘Does any one recognize that pin?’ called Ginger loudly.

Had he said, ‘Does any one not recognize that pin?’ there would have been fewer to answer. Nearly every one present recognized it, and knew to whom it belonged—the murdered prospector.

Delaney raised his hand for silence. Then he took a revolver from the hand of a man standing near him. The man did not protest.

‘McBain,’ said Delaney, ‘I reckon I know why you were so anxious to lynch three innocent men.’

The crowd surged forward, muttering ominously. Nor did it heed Delaney’s orders to stand still. Possibly the fact that most of the men felt that they had been duped by McBain had something to do with it. Be that as it may, McBain evidently suspected what his fate might be and it rather seemed as if he lost his nerve. Accompanied by Ferroni, with a wild rush he swept those who stood around him from his path, and drove a lane through the outskirts of the spectators, heading for safety.

‘Stop!’ roared Delaney above the uproar, but the fugitives took no notice.

‘Look out, they’re making for the machine,’ shouted Biggles. ‘And the gold’s in it. If you don’t stop them they’ll get away and take the gold with them.’

McBain and Ferroni were, in fact, running like hares towards the Jupiter, which was still standing out in the middle of the aerodrome where Ginger had left it. And it seemed likely that they would have succeeded in their object but for an unexpected development.

From the far side of the aerodrome, riding at a gallop, came five uniformed figures.

Delaney yelled a warning. He had now reached the outskirts of the crowd, a position from which he dare use his revolver without the risk of hitting the wrong man, and although he emptied it at the fast retreating figures, the range was too long and the shots did not touch their mark. But they served another purpose, just as useful. They gave the oncoming horsemen at least an inkling of what was happening, as was revealed by the manner in which they swerved to cut them off.

McBain and his pilot swerved too, but they could not hope to compete with horses. Seeing that they were trapped they both drew their revolvers and tried to shoot their way to the machine. They did succeed in emptying one saddle, but then a fusillade of shots rang out and McBain pitched face downward on the turf. Ferroni, evidently seeing that his case was hopeless, threw down his weapon and raised his hands above his head.

The crowd started running towards the new scene of action.

‘Here, Delaney, haven’t we been trussed up like this long enough?’ asked Biggles reproachfully.

The constable took out his jack-knife and cut the prisoners free. ‘That kid of yours was just about in time,’ he said gravely.

‘He usually is,’ grinned Biggles. ‘Who are these new-comers?’

‘Captain Lanton and the troopers from Blackfoot Point,’ answered Delaney. ‘That mechanic of yours must have got through to ’em. Phew! What a report I shall have to make. You’d better not go away; the Captain will want to see you too.’

CHAPTER XXIII

CONCLUSION

‘I SUPPOSE you are no longer in any doubt as to who killed old Mose?’ Biggles asked Delaney as they walked across the aerodrome towards the Jupiter, near which the crowd had reassembled.

‘None whatever,’ replied Delaney.

‘Then in that case I assume we are no longer under arrest?’

‘No, you’re free as far as I’m concerned.’

‘Then if it’s all the same to you we’ll get our machine inside its hangar, and tidy things up a bit. I suppose I ought to fly up to Moose Creek and tell them there that the gold is safe.’

‘Better not go away until you’ve had a word with the Captain,’ advised Delaney.

They stood still as a little procession passed them, carrying a body. They learned that it was McBain, and that he was dead. A bullet had gone through his heart, killing him instantly. Ferroni, with handcuffs on his wrists, was standing near the troopers, towards whom Delaney now continued his way.

‘You’ll find us in Arctic Airways shed if you want us,’ Biggles told him, as their paths separated, the airmen making for the Jupiter with the object of putting it in the shed. This they did, after which, over a hastily prepared meal, Ginger gave an account of his adventures at the cabin. When he had finished, the others, for his benefit, described what had happened in Fort Beaver.

They were concluding the meal with coffee when Delaney and his superior officer entered. At the officer’s request Biggles narrated the entire story of their adventures from the time they had received Wilks’s letter in London. The tale took a long time to tell, but both the officer and the constable listened breathlessly, particularly when Biggles related the events that had occurred near Angus Stirling’s cabin.

‘And what are you fellows going to do now?’ the officer asked, when at last the story was told.

‘As far as I can see our work is finished,’ answered Biggles. ‘The transfer which we got from Angus Stirling settles any doubt as to who owns the aerodrome, and now that there is only one line operating between Fort

Beaver and Moose Creek, the gold-fields people will be glad enough to use it. Anyway, they should be grateful for the recovery of that last consignment of metal, because, but for Arctic Airways, they would have lost it. I reckon that Canwell, when he hears what has happened, ought to give Arctic Airways a contract for handling all their freight.'

'I think so, too,' agreed the officer. 'I know the chairman of the company; I'll have a word with him about it at the first opportunity.'

Which, in fact, he did a day or two later, with the result that the contract was soon forthcoming, as well as an offer of extra finance for spare equipment should it be required.

And that is really the end of the story. Wilks implored the others to remain on at Fort Beaver and share the profits of his enterprise which had been so nearly wrecked, but Biggles was adamant in his refusal to tie himself to any one spot. However, they stayed on until Arctic Airways was reorganized on proper lines, which did not take very long, for Wilks found no difficulty in getting staff once McBain and his gang had been removed.

Wilks flew the party back to Quebec in one of the two Jupiters the firm now possessed, and it was there that good-byes were said.

'Let me know how things go on,' shouted Biggles from the deck of the ship that was to take them back to England.

'I will,' promised Wilks. 'Thanks for coming over.'

'Don't mention it,' grinned Biggles. 'It's been a pleasure.'

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.

Illustrations by Howard Leigh (1909-1942?) and Will Narraway (1915-1979) are not in the public domain and can not be used in this ebook until 2032.

[The end of *Biggles Flies North* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]