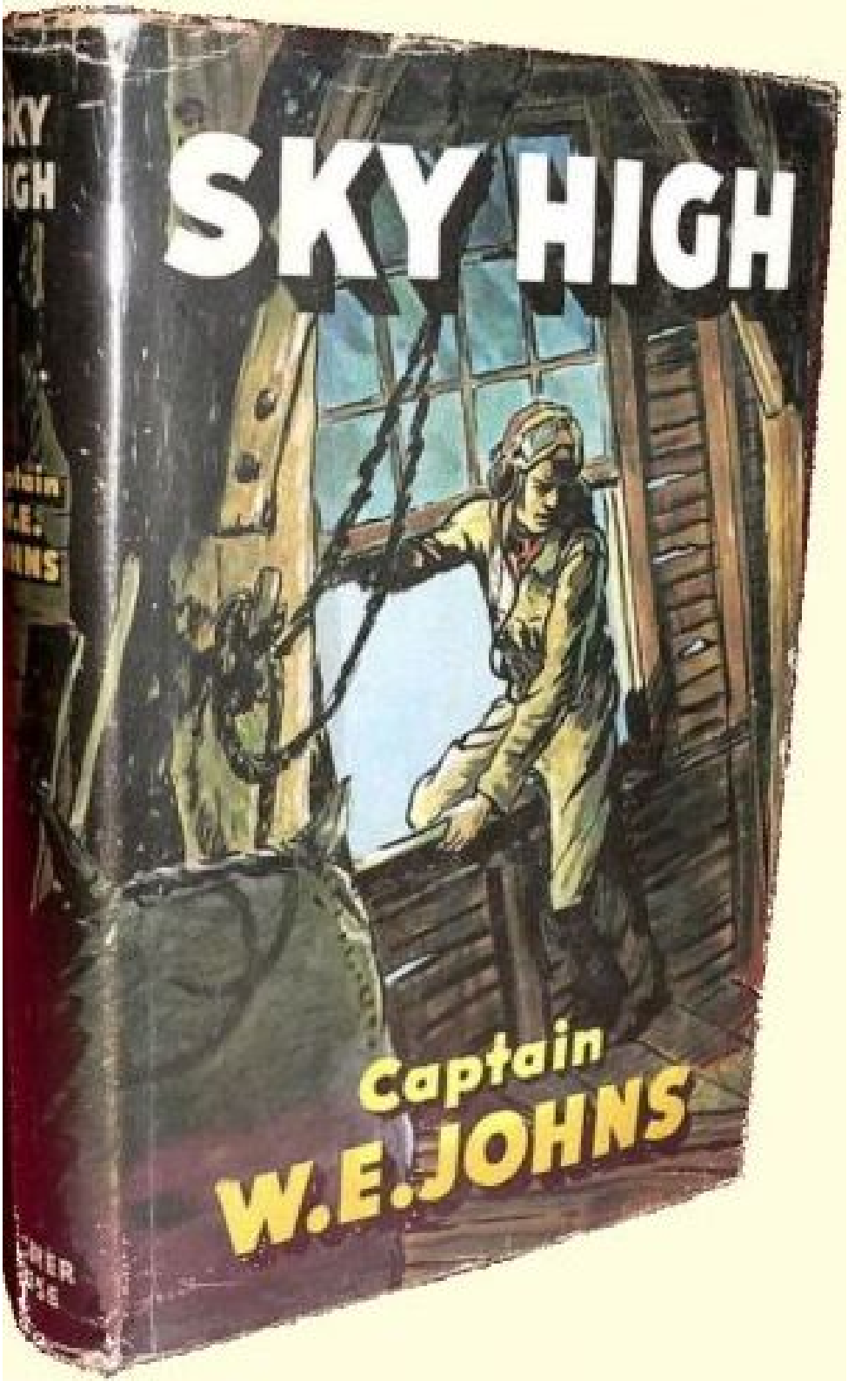
SKY HIGH
Captain
W.E. JOHNS

Title: Sky High
Date of first publication: 1936
Author: Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns (1893-1968)
Date first posted: May 4, 2022
Date last updated: June 3, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20220509

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

SKY HIGH

BY

W. E. JOHNS

LATIMER HOUSE LIMITED
LONDON

This edition, completely revised and reset June 1951
Second impression July 1951

Made and Printed in Great Britain by Purnell & Sons, Ltd.
Paulton (Somerset) and London

Being the strange story of Deeley Montfort Delaroy,
told by his war-time comrade and friend,
Captain Eric (Tubby) Wilde

CONTENTS

WHICH MIGHT BE DESCRIBED AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT AT THE WRONG END

IN looking through the proofs of the story narrated in the following pages, it struck me that, from the reader's point of view, something was missing. And presently I saw what is was. It lacked the—what shall I say?—intimate knowledge (that's the only way I can express it) that I, knowing something of the past of the man who forms the central figure of the story, was so well able to appreciate. So it seemed that it might be a good thing to make the reader acquainted with this particular period of his career, in order that he may understand from the very beginning the type of man to whom he is about to be introduced.

Hence these notes, which should, I suppose, have been incorporated in some way in the story.

I first met Deeley Montfort Delaroy some time in the late summer of 1916, when he joined my Squadron in France. Things were not going well for us at the time. The air was stiff with Huns, and we were up morning, noon, and night. Naturally, casualties were high, and new faces common in the Mess. Replacements were arriving every week, all too often to disappear "in the blue" before we old-timers learned to know their names. Deeley—or "Steeley" as he afterwards became known as—came up from Amiens one evening with three other typical replacements. But there was nothing typical about Steeley. He was in a class by himself. He looked different from the usual healthy-looking British lad we had got accustomed to seeing walk in; you know the type—smart, rather nervous, and desperately anxious to please. Steeley not only looked different, he spoke differently and acted differently. And I fancy it was because of his individuality that I took an interest in him right away. Maybe it was merely curiosity. If it was, I got small change out of the new pilot.

For a long time I tried to find out what part of the world he hailed from, but in vain. I never did find out. I don't know to this day.

His manner always stirred some chord in the dim recesses of my mind that I could never localize. But I think it was historical. Perhaps it was the Montfort part of his name that vaguely suggested Simon de Montfort, chain-mail and battle-axes. One thing I did discover about him, though, and this

came about in a curious way. I was on leave in London and had met Dr. Livvock, my old tutor, for lunch. As we sailed along in a taxi, I happened to glance out of the window and saw written up on the corner of a house "Delaroy Street." Presently we passed "Delaroy Square." Turning to my companion I said, "That's rather odd; we have a fellow of that name at the Squadron." "What name?" he asked. I told him his full name. Etymology, I knew, was his hobby.

After I was back in France I had a letter from Dr. Livvock. I still have it, and this is the excerpt that intrigued me:

> "*By the way*" (he wrote), "*I looked up your friend Delaroy the other day, and it may interest you to know he is a Duke—or would have been if his ancestors had acted with more discretion. Two successive generations lost their heads—and their lands—during the Middle Ages for fighting on the wrong side; that is, the losing side. Your friend is heir to the title by direct lineage, although he is now only a plain Mr., as the title lapsed with the last Duke's defection.*"

That accounted for something odd in Delaroy's manner. He was an aristocrat by birth, and that is just how he behaved. Yet, curiously enough, in spite of his breeding, he was very much a democrat, and regarded the upper classes, particularly that section of society whom he declared was responsible for the War, with a very bitter hostility. I've seen him stand at the aerodrome gate, with brooding eyes watching the troops going up to the lines, or the remnants of them coming back. "Look at them, poor devils," he would say. "Patriots! Fighting, sweating, freezing, digging, starving, dying—for what? A land that is to be fit for heroes to live in. It's a snare, Tubby." (That was my nickname, on account of my rather extensive waistline.) "A snare and a delusion. Wait until the bugles blow 'cease fire' and the newspapers put their glory stuff back in the old oak chest until it is wanted again, and you'll see how much all this is worth."

He often talked in this strain, and I perceived that the blood of his ancestors, who had chosen to fight for the losing side, ran strongly in his veins.

He was not a good mixer, but he got on better with me than with most people. Usually we flew together, and spent long evenings in our quarters, or strolling round the aerodrome, talking things over.

I suppose he would be about nineteen when he joined us, and I still retain a clear mental picture of him. He was tall, an inch or two over six feet, and as slim as a lance. His face was always rather pale, and never tanned

like ours did in the summer, although his skin was like satin, in keeping with his features, which were finely cut almost to the point of effeminacy. His hair was fair and naturally curly, and he used to let it grow rather long, longer than regulations approved. His eyes were that sort of soft brown that you sometimes see in a dog's eyes, and when he was upset they reflected the same kind of hurt-animal look. That was the only way he ever expressed emotion.

But his outstanding feature was his hands. They were beautiful. It may sound strange to describe a man's hands as beautiful, but they were, and there is no other word for it. I don't think he was particularly strong; nor did he admire physical strength. I cannot recall an occasion on which I saw him use force. Yet he often succeeded where a strong man would fail, including myself, and I don't reckon myself a chicken. I've seen him come along the tarmac when someone has been tearing at a sticky turn-buckle, or engine cowling bolt, with a spanner. "Coax it, man; coax it," he'd say quietly. "Here, give it to me." Then he'd take the spanner, look at the thread, give it a twist in the right direction and the job was done.

But if he lacked physical strength he had more than his share of pure stamina and mental balance. His nerves never showed signs of wear. When we were short of pilots I've seen him do three or four shows a day for a week on end, yet he might have spent the time sitting in the Mess for all the difference it made to his nerves. At the end of a year in France he was just the same, although many a tougher lad had gone home gibbering.

I'm not going to say he was brave, for I hold that bravery is a quality born of fear. If you can't be afraid you can't be brave. Steeley was never afraid; or if he was, he concealed it very cleverly. His attitude in the air gave one the impression that he didn't care whether he lived or died. If a volunteer was wanted to strafe a balloon, or fly low over a trench system to see if it was still occupied after a show, Steeley was always the first man on his feet. Yet there was nothing spectacular about his work. He did things, but said so little about them, treated them, in fact, as if they were not worth mentioning, that they passed unnoticed by most people, including the Higher Command. When they gave him the M.C. it was weeks before he put the ribbon on his tunic, and then only because he was severely ticked off by the C.O. about it.

The only time I ever saw him show signs of emotion like a normal human being was when Ballantyne, who was an N.C.O. pilot in our flight, was killed. Ballantyne was an older man than Steeley, and obviously not of the same social class, and it may have been due to this very reason that a sort of understanding and mutual admiration sprang up between them which

was carried as far as their respective ranks would permit. As far as Steeley was concerned neither class nor rank amounted to anything; it was the spirit only that counted. I liked Ballantyne myself; he was a downright good scout, always in the thick of it, and could be relied upon to see a dog-fight down to the tree tops when many another man was looking for a way out.

We were doing a late O.P.,[1] Steeley, Ballantyne, and myself, when it happened. I was leading. I saw five enemy Tripe-hounds about two thousand feet above us on our quarter, and turned away into the sun to get altitude. But Steeley did a foolish thing. I must admit that I didn't see the Hun two-seater near the ground, but I should have ignored it if I had, for to go down after a Hun at such a moment was to break every rule of air-fighting tactics. The first thing I knew about it was when Steeley's Camel stood on its nose and went down like a thunderbolt. Looking down I saw what he was after.

---

[1] Offensive Patrol.

I fancy the two-seater was acting as a trap for the five Huns up above, for as soon as Steeley broke formation they came down like a ton of bricks. They didn't stop for us. They went for Steeley, and in a brace of shakes he was twisting and turning for his life. We went down to help him, of course; we couldn't do otherwise, although as the silly move had been of Steeley's own choosing, we should have been justified in leaving him to work out his own salvation.

In the general mix-up I got a Hun, saw two others collide, and retained a clear impression of a Camel going down vertically with smoke pouring out of it. The remaining two Huns dived for home, and I pulled out, followed by the other Camel. Presently, it caught up with me, and I saw it was Steeley's machine, so I knew that it was poor Ballantyne who had gone down. We flew home together and landed, and I shall never forget Steeley's face when we climbed out.

"You saw him," he said, in an awful voice.

"Yes," I replied. "It was your fault. The next time you break formation like that when I'm leading, I'll have you put under close arrest the moment we get back. Your damn selfishness has cost Ballantyne his life."

Steeley went as white as a sheet. His eyes blazed in his head like a pair of Very lights on a dark night, and his nostrils quivered like a piece of trailing fabric in a power dive. "I know," was all he said.

"You'd better go and write to his wife," I concluded, for Ballantyne was a married man, and with that I went down to the Mess. We never referred to the matter again.

As a matter of fact, he was not a good officer from the military point of view. His formation flying was mediocre at any time, simply because he wouldn't bother to keep in place. Successive warnings and admonitions had no effect. He was essentially a lone performer, and asked nothing more than to be allowed to roam the sky at will, looking for E.A.[2] singly or in numbers. For this reason he was not popular with Wayne, his Flight-Commander at the time, although he never let him down in a scrap. Admittedly, Wayne was tough and inclined to be awkward, but he was a good officer, all the same.

---

[2] Enemy aircraft.

Just a word about Wayne—it may help you to get a better grasp of things later on. Wayne was the diametrical antithesis of Steeley in every possible characteristic. He was the typical hard-headed Anglo-Saxon, rather slow-witted except in moments of inspiration, but once he decided to do a thing he went about it with the grim determination of a bull-dog and the obstinacy of a mule. His manners were inclined to be crude, and his speech apt to be coarse if he was annoyed.

One thing he had in common with Steeley was his contempt for the upper classes, although, curiously enough, he put Steeley in this very class. Steeley, on the other hand, bore the Flight-Commander no animosity, but regarded him as something little better than an animal. Once, when they were having words, he told him he was a very common fellow, and that was just about the truth. On another occasion, when Wayne was ragging him about his rather fastidious appetite, he told him he was an uncouth oaf.

So there they were, two opposite ends of a pole brought together by the exigencies of the War, fighting a common enemy without ever fitting or attempting to fit. Wayne, short, bullet-headed, red-faced, thick-set, ox-like. Steeley, tall, slim, pale, with the proud poise of a falcon. Wayne, shallow, with everything in him exposed on the surface. Steeley, as deep as the deepest sea, with every emotion hidden far down in the depths. Wayne, blunt, striking like a bludgeon. Steeley, glittering, thrusting home like a lance. Yet each in his own way was a vital striking force.

I suppose my own mentality fell somewhere midway between them, and I could like them both, yet I would not flatter myself that I had either the heavy, bludgeoning ability of Wayne, or the deadly efficiency of Steeley.

Steeley was too casual for team work; he knew it, and made no attempt to correct himself. A pilot of less ability would have been sent home for further training.

I do not propose to go over his entire war record because space forbids, but I think I am right in saying that he shot down twenty-six enemy aircraft and four or five balloons. I once asked him how many Huns he had got, but he said he didn't know, and I believe he was telling the truth. He didn't bother to keep count. The Squadron Office had records of twenty-six, however, but I feel certain that he got more.

To sum up, Steeley always looked what he was, a gentleman, and invariably behaved like one. Noise or low behaviour he abhorred, and would walk out of the Mess if anyone started rough-housing. He was quiet and, one might think on first acquaintance, rather spineless; but behind the natural reserve there lay an unsuspected strength of will and a temper as cold and as hard as the steel rapiers that hung in his room, for he was a superb swordsman, and one of his two complaints about the War was that it could not be fought, as in days gone by, with the *arme blanche*.

Apart from sword-play his hobbies were reading—historical biographies and romances chiefly. His knowledge of Roman history was remarkable. And music—classical music, of course. One knew instinctively that he would hate jazz. He once told me that it made him feel physically ill, and affected his nerves far more than machine-gun fire. He played the piano brilliantly, although he seldom performed when anyone else was in the Mess; his knowledge of music was even greater than his ability at the keyboard.

He was still with the Squadron when the War ended, and after it was disbanded we drifted apart as most other people did. The last thing I heard of him was from Fraser, of "C" Flight, who I ran into one day in the Strand. He told me that he had seen Delaroy looking down and out, but he hadn't had a chance of speaking because Delaroy deliberately avoided him.

Time rolled on. My father died and left me a little money, sufficient to enable me to run a flat in Jermyn Street and keep a small yacht at moorings at Chichester Harbour, where I spent most of my week-ends in the summer. I gave up flying, and forgot there were such things as aeroplanes. I forgot the existence of the man who might have been a Duke. Eric Wilde—that's my

name, by the way—became what I suppose would be best described as a man-about-town.

Then, one day—but this is where the story begins.

CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE PAST

IT was a miserable day in early spring; April, to be precise. For a week or more the wind had blown steadily from the north-east, bringing with it low, scudding clouds that from time to time precipitated a cold drizzle on the long-suffering pedestrians who had to go about their business regardless of the weather.

The interior of my study-cum-sitting-room, cosy though it unquestionably was, began to pall, and I was at my wits' end to know where to look for distraction. "Oh, to be in England now that April's there," sang the poet—and took jolly good care to keep out of it. Obviously, he was a shrewd fellow. The thought struck me, why should I not follow him to the sunny blue skies of the Mediterranean? Yes, that was the thing to do. I would go and see about booking a passage right away.

I picked up my hat, walked down the stairs and opened the front door. Something made me look up. A magnificent Rolls-Royce was purring majestically down the narrow street. The driver glanced over his shoulder, and our eyes met. It was Steeley, as pale and serious as ever, but immaculately dressed. Was it Fate? Looking back, it seems strange that I should have chosen that very moment to—but why waste time in idle conjecture? As soon as he spotted me he had swung the car in alongside the kerb, and stopped, obviously waiting for me to come up.

"Well, well," he said, smiling his rare, whimsical smile. "I *thought* it was you. Are you lunching with anyone?"

I replied in the negative.

"Then step in," he invited, opening the door. "Lunch is on me."

I took the seat beside him and the car glided forward. "Where are you making for?" I asked, as we turned down the Haymarket.

"The Carlton. It will do as well as anywhere, won't it?"

I threw him a sidelong glance. "It suits me all right," I assured him. "Have you come into a fortune by any chance?"

"No," he said quite seriously.

"You seem to be doing yourself well."

"Not too badly," he admitted with a ghost of a smile.

“The last I heard of you was from Fraser. He told me you were on your uppers.”

“I was.”

“How was that? What happened to your gratuity when you left the service? You must have had five or six hundred pounds to draw after the War.”

“Something like that.”

“What happened to it?”

“I gave it away.”

“You *what*?”

“Gave it away.”

“Who on earth to?”

“Mrs. Ballantyne. When I wrote to her after poor Ballantyne was killed, I promised to call and see her when things were over and tell her about it. It seemed a fairly safe promise, because I didn’t think for a moment I should live to see the end. But I did, so I had to keep my promise. I found her dying from consumption, hastened by a broken heart. Her one concern was about her boy, a nipper a few months old. So I gave her the money, and arranged with the bank manager to see that it was spent on educating the boy and giving him a good start in the world. So she died happy.”

“What happened to the boy?”

“I’ve no idea. I didn’t keep up the acquaintanceship.”

“I see. And that left you broke?”

“Broke to the world. I made my last half-crown last me a month, by reducing my diet to one roll per day, and sleeping in St. Martin’s crypt. Surprising how little you can live on, you know.” He waved away the commissionaire who had run forward as the car drew into the kerb.

“Couldn’t you get a job?” I asked.

“Have you ever tried to get a job?”

“No, I must confess I haven’t.”

“Then try. The experience should be enlightening,” he replied grimly.

“But where did all this come from?” I indicated the luxurious appointments of the car with a wave of my hand.

A shadow of a smile flitted across his face. “Ah,” he said quietly. “That came later. But let us go in and tear a chop to pieces.”

There is no need to describe the meal, or the conversation that accompanied it, in detail. For the most part we talked of the old days, of the

men whom we had known and who had scattered to the far corners of the earth when the economy axe swept through their ranks in the year following the cessation of hostilities. Once or twice I brought the conversation back to present-day affairs, hoping he would tell me how he had acquired his apparent affluence, for I was curious, but in vain. He switched the subject with a subtle twist and we were back again on the things that had been.

Over coffee his manner suddenly changed. He leaned back in his chair and regarded me quizzically. "Civil life doesn't suit you, Tubby," he said in tones of gentle reproach. "You should have remained a soldier."

"As a matter of fact, the life I live——" I began, but he interrupted me.

"No, no," he protested. "You don't *live*. You merely exist. One has only to look at you to see that you have become a machine, refuelling yourself three or four times a day in order to keep running in a condition that I should describe as over-lubricated. Once in a while the old system starts knocking, or a joint works stiffly, and off you go to the sea for a top overhaul. Am I right?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "I suppose you are. But you don't seem to be doing yourself so badly in the matter of personal comfort, if you don't mind me pointing it out."

"That's true enough," he admitted; "but——" He hesitated. "I live," he concluded. "I'm still a vital force, while you are merely ticking over on a test bench, so to speak, and will continue to do so until something breaks or wears out. Then you become one of the tens of thousands of others on the human scrap-heap that lies between the West End and Kensington."

"Well, that suits me," I answered a trifle stiffly.

"You mean, you think it does. The truth is, you've changed, laddie, as you were bound to. They've all changed, all the old crowd. Oh, I see them about, fretting over trifles and breaking into a perspiration if a taxi brushes past them. That's what civil life does to one. What would you have thought of such a fellow a few years ago—when you were a man?"

"I've never thought about it," I answered, getting quite peeved. "What makes you think that you're still a man, anyway?"

He beckoned to the waiter and called for the bill. "Let's go home, and perhaps I'll tell you," he said quietly.

II

In ten minutes the Rolls had taken us to one of those great blocks of buildings in Park Lane that are usually described by agents as luxury flats;

and in this case I must admit the term was not an exaggeration, for Steeley's flat at once revealed all that modern science and art could produce in the way of extravagant decoration combined with utility and comfort. A manservant met us at the door, and as I handed him my hat, a vague idea crossed my mind that I'd seen him before.

"I thought I recognized your man," I told Steeley, as we went through into a spacious lounge overlooking the Park.

"You ought to; he was once your fitter when we were in France," he told me with a twinkle in his eye.

"Not Gubbins!"

"No other."

"But he's very much stouter——"

"So are you."

I sat down, feeling rather squashed. "What's the idea?" I asked curiously, for I was beginning to feel that there was more in all this than met the eye, so to speak.

The corners of Steeley's perfectly chiselled mouth twitched and a flash of humour sparkled in his frank eyes. "I wonder if I had better tell you," he said. "Would your ultra-respectability——"

At that moment there was a commotion outside the door, which was burst open suddenly to admit a rather dark lad of medium build, whose good-looking face was slightly flushed, either from excitement or embarrassment, or both. His hair, which he evidently kept brushed flat, was ruffled, and the jacket of his neat serge suit had been torn open, giving the impression that he had just been engaged in a wrestling bout; which, in fact, he had.

Behind him came Gubbins, white with anger, with his jaw set at an angle that boded no good for the intruder. "I've told this young hound half a dozen times that you're not at home to anyone," he snarled, stretching out his hand.

"Just a minute." Steeley's voice cut through the air; it held a snap that reminded me of a flying wire parting on a bumpy day. "Now Gubbins, will you please tell me what all this means?" he said coldly.

Gubbins took a deep breath. "Very good, sir," he said, pulling himself together as the old military training asserted itself. "This fellow came to the door this morning and said he wanted to see you urgently. Obeying your orders that you are not at home to anyone, I sent him away. He returned and the same thing happened, but he didn't go far, for I saw him 'anging about in the street. After you returned 'ome he came to the door again, but I wouldn't

let him in. He must have got in, though, by way of the fire-escape. I was in the kitchen, and hearing a noise, turned round just in time to see him slinking down the passage. He saw me after him and burst in here. That's all, sir."

Steeley nodded curtly. "I see," he said. Then he turned to the intruder, who by now had recovered his equanimity and was looking from one to the other of us with an interest he made no attempt to conceal. "And what have you to say? Is there any reason why I shouldn't send for the police and give you in charge for housebreaking?"

"There is," replied the lad coolly, "A very good reason."

"What is it?"

"Because I fancy the police are the last people you want to see up here, Captain Delaroy—or you, Mr. Wilde."

There was a sudden hush, in which I felt a growing tension in the atmosphere. But Steeley didn't turn a hair, and ignored my gasp of astonishment that the youth should know my name. He looked at the lad for some seconds with a curious expression on his face. "You're a smart lad, I perceive," he said quietly.

"I try to be; in fact, I have to be, on my job."

"And what may that be?"

"I'm in Fleet Street—a reporter's cub, to be precise."

"Really! And is this how you usually acquire information?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm not looking for information," he said quietly.

"Then why are you here?"

"To give you some," was the cool answer.

Steeley frowned. "You're rather an insolent cub, aren't you?"

"You may alter your mind when you have heard what I have to say."

"I don't know that I'm prepared to listen."

"Then that will be your loss, not mine."

I looked at Steeley. He was looking at the boy with a really extraordinary expression now. It was clear that for once he was at a loss to know what to say or do. For my part, the feeling that there was more in what was going on than was immediately apparent, grew in intensity.

Steeley took a cigarette from a box on the table, lighted it, and flicked the dead match into the grate. "Sit down," he said. "I must confess that you excite my curiosity. All right, Gubbins, you may go. I'll ring if I want you."

Gubbins, with a parting scowl at the intruder, withdrew. Steeley pulled up a chair near the fire, and invited the lad to sit in the one opposite. “Now,” he said, “perhaps you will kindly be a little more explicit.”

The new-comer looked at him with interest not unmixed with respect. “Thank you, sir,” he said with a change of tone. “You won’t mind me being quite frank, will you?”

“Of course not. Don’t waste time beating about the bush.”

The boy settled himself a little lower in the chair. “Good! That makes it easier,” he observed. “Very well then, sir. Primarily, I’ve come to say two things. First, to warn you that the police are on your trail; and second, to ask you if you want an assistant.”

My eyes switched to Steeley’s face. His expression did not change at the first announcement, but at the second a slow smile spread over his face. “Let us take things one at a time,” he said softly. “Why should the police be on my trail?”

“Because the other night you made your first slip, and the ’tecs got their first slant on the mysterious amateur international crook who has been putting across the cleverest coups of the century.”

“How very interesting. And what was the slip?”

“You gave a begging ex-service-man at the Marble Arch five of the one-pound notes that you found in an envelope in the registered Air Mail bag that you pinched on March 7th from Croydon Airport, when you posed as the pilot of the outward-bound African Mail machine. While the real pilot was in the weighing room, you flew the machine off and got away with an aeroplane, fifteen thousand pounds in bar gold, five thousand in minted sovereigns, and the registered letters—which you were thoughtful enough to post after extracting their contents. The ex-service-man may have been an ex-service-man for all I know, but he was an outside man planted there by Scotland Yard.”

“Behold the pitfalls that beset the charitable,” said Steeley sombrely. “Go on; I find this vastly entertaining.”

“The notes, too, were a plant,” continued the boy. “Every outward-bound Air Mail bag since your first raid has carried an envelope containing marked treasury notes. The Yard knew that sooner or later you’d make another raid, when the notes would fall into the hands of Mr. X—that’s you, being an unknown quantity—and sooner or later you would part with them. When that happened, as sure as Fate they would be able to trace them back to you. The outside man was after you in a flash, and it looked as if your time had come. You got into a taxi; he followed in another, and would have followed

you home, but for the fact that another taxi charged across the traffic lights and blocked him. You heard the crash as the taxis collided, looked back through the rear window of your cab, and saw what you thought was an ordinary accident."

"Well?"

"It wasn't an accident; not by a long shot. You see, I was in the other taxi."

Steeley's eyes flickered. "*You* were?" he ejaculated.

"I was. I was in the driver's seat, having borrowed the cab from the nearest rank while its owner was gossiping with his pals. Now you know the truth of the newspaper story that appeared the following day about the disappearing taxi-driver. Naturally, I bolted after the crash, for I should have found it a bit difficult to explain my behaviour. So the outside man lost his bird, but he may have got your finger-prints on the notes."

"But how did you know——"

"Wait a minute, I'm coming to that," declared the boy, who was telling his story easily and coolly, and in a manner that left no doubt whatever in his mind that he was telling the truth.

"It was like this," he continued. "I was working hard on the Mr. X case for my paper, knowing that if I could get an exclusive story we should pull a scoop that would have done me a bit of good. I knew about the man planted at Marble Arch. Never mind how I knew; it's our job to know these things, and we have our own way of finding them out. Anyway, as you probably know, it pays the Yard to work in with the Press. As I was saying, that's how I came to be watching the outside man doing his work, and I saw everything that happened. I saw you stop, demand to see his papers to make sure he was an ex-service-man and not a fraud, take out your wallet, and hand over the notes. I saw the man from the Yard look at them, jump up, and knew that he had got you stone cold. But I also saw something else, and it made a world of difference to how I acted. For I had recognized you. I could have told the outside man your name, which was something he didn't know. But far from helping him, I knew I'd got to save you."

"Why should you want to do that?"

"Because I've been hoping to meet you for as many years as I can remember, and the dock at the Old Bailey was the last place I wanted to be the rendezvous."

"But how could you recognize me?" asked Steeley incredulously.

The lad took an old faded photograph from his pocket and held it face outward. It was only a snapshot, but I saw the faces of three men in old-

fashioned R.F.C. tunics staring at me out of the past. One was Steeley; one was myself; the other was Ballantyne. “Now you know how I knew your name,” he said quietly. “You see, the man on the right was my father.”

A hush, broken only by the distant roar of the traffic in the street, fell on the room. Steeley had turned a trifle pale and, I could see, was strangely moved. So was I. The boy’s lip quivered once as he looked at the treasured photograph with its portrait of the father he had never known.

“So you’re Brian Ballantyne,” said Steeley at last.

“Yes, I know what you did for my mother, and I know what you did for me; now you know why I couldn’t stand by and see you caught. But let me say this. In my heart I should have been sorry to see Mr. X caught, even if he hadn’t been you, because I know, as everyone in Fleet Street knows, what you do with the money you—er—make. But you’ll have to be careful from now on. For the first time, they’ve probably got your finger-prints, and once they lay hands on you it will be all over. And now for the second half of the business. By warning you I have become an accessory after the fact, and am liable to stand in the dock with you if you are caught. I don’t believe in half measures, and that’s one of the reasons why I’m asking you to let me work for you.”

“What are the other reasons?”

“Because I’ve seen some of the misery of this city of so-called civilization, and I’d sooner do your sort of work than the work I’m doing now.”

Steeley shook his head. “No,” he said. “That’s out of the question.”

“Secondly,” went on the boy, ignoring the remark, “you’ll need a bodyguard. Someone to prevent you from making another blunder like the one you made the other night, and I’m the one to do it. Why, I know every detective and outside man in the force. My chief has done nothing but Yard work for the last two years, and I know the ins and outs of the game as well as the police do. Thirdly, I can fly. I saved every penny I could scratch together to get my ‘A’ licence; that was two years ago, and I’ve done fifty hours’ solo flying since. But it’s the fact that the police will never rest until they’ve got you; even now they may be——”

There was a sharp knock on the door, and Gubbins entered quickly but quietly, locking the door behind him. “Number one action, sir,” he said evenly.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

STEELEY rose to his feet. There was no panic. “Where are they?” he said briskly.

“Coming up the stairs, sir.”

Steeley nodded and moved about the room unhurriedly; he might have rehearsed the thing a hundred times. He turned to a safe in the wall, opened it and filled his pockets with its contents. Then he picked up a suitcase that stood on a small side-table, obviously in readiness for just such an emergency. Then he turned and faced us. “I’m sorry, gentlemen,” he said coolly, “but the police are on the stairs. Would you rather wait here and meet them, or come with me and Gubbins? I offer you the alternative because, as your host, I should be sorry to see either you, Tubby, or you, Brian, subjected to the severe cross-examination that will be inevitable if you are found here. I must ask you to make up your minds quickly, please.”

Brian sprang forward at once, “I’m with you, sir,” he cried joyfully.

But I hung back, as indeed I had every reason to, for as far as I could see I had a lot to lose and nothing to gain by following Steeley. Heaven alone knows what made me act as I did afterwards. Something seemed to stir inside me, something of the old forgotten thrill that comes from playing a game of life and death. There was a rush of heavy footsteps outside the door. “Go ahead,” I said, wondering if the voice was mine.

Steeley crossed over to the oak panelling on one side of the room, touched a hidden stud, and a narrow section of it slid back noiselessly to reveal a dark passage. He slipped his hand round the edge, and a faint light appeared in the depths. “You lead the way, Gubbins,” he ordered. “The others will follow; I shall come last.”

I stepped inside the narrow corridor behind Brian, and nearly jumped out of my skin as the lounge door was burst open with a frightful crash. But the panel had already closed behind us, and we went on as if nothing had happened, our feet making no noise on the thick pile carpet which covered the floor. It was almost as if we were walking into a cinema.

“I don’t think there’s any cause for alarm,” said Steeley behind me.

His words were reassuring, but I was by no means comfortable in my mind. We walked for what I suppose would be about thirty or forty paces, and then Gubbins stopped and applied an eye to a tiny hole in the blank wall that confronted us. “All clear, sir,” he said, and a narrow doorway appeared miraculously.

To my surprise I found myself in another flat; but our guide did not stop. He crossed to the door, peered out cautiously, and then led the way down a public corridor to a lift.

“We’re in the east wing now; the one we have just left was the west wing,” said Steeley in a natural voice as the lift descended to the ground-floor.

On arriving at the bottom we walked through a veritable maze of passages that finally brought us out into a big courtyard. To my surprise I saw that it was nearly dark; a fine mizzle of rain was falling. Without hesitation Steeley led the way to a garage that took up the whole of one side of the courtyard; several men were on duty. “Let me have my car,” he said casually.

In a couple of minutes it had been wheeled forward and we climbed into our seats. I sat next to Steeley, who took the wheel, and the Rolls glided forward towards the exit. As it turned out into the main street a sigh of relief escaped my lips, for while the ordeal had hardly been severe, I had the average citizen’s wholesome dread of the law, and was glad it was all over. Presently, no doubt, Steeley would pull up and allow me to alight, and that would be that. But I was congratulating myself too soon.

As the car turned into the street, another car that had been parked on the opposite side shot forward, and I caught a glimpse of several dark uniforms.

“Stop there,” cried a voice, harshly.

But the Rolls accelerated with a speed that wedged me tightly into my seat, and as we sped towards Hyde Park Corner in what seemed to me to be a suicidal manner, my fear of collision was only exceeded by my stark fright of the screeching police whistles behind us. For the first time in my life I was a fugitive from the law, and the sensation was distinctly unnerving.

Steeley was as cool as a cucumber—not that I expected him to behave otherwise—and but for the speed at which we were travelling he might have been taking us to the theatre. We shot down Grosvenor Place with the Flying Squad car less than a hundred yards behind us, and at the bottom, to my horror, I saw that the traffic signals were against us. Not only that, but a dozen cars were lined up waiting for the lights to change, effectually blocking the road.

The Rolls swung round sharply into a narrow turning on the right—goodness alone knows how Steeley got it round without a skid—and then turned again to the left. A red light glowed like the eye of Fate at a cross-roads ahead, across which a line of taxis and buses were streaming. This time there was no side turning. Looking back I saw that the police car had slightly closed the distance between us. "They've got us," I cried in a panic.

"Really! You surprise me," said Steeley, quite quietly. Naturally, I expected him to stop at the signals. The idea that anyone in any circumstances would ignore them did not occur to me. But it did to Steeley. He did not even slacken speed, and I buried my face in my hands as we shot straight across the path of the on-coming traffic. Through my fingers I caught a fleeting glimpse of swerving buses and skidding taxis, and in my heated imagination I thought I could hear the cursing of the furious drivers. But we were through, and the Rolls was tearing across Eccleston Bridge. A minute later, crossing the river by Vauxhall Bridge, we were more fortunate, for the signals were right for us, but I could still hear the police car some distance behind. On the south side of the river the traffic began to open out a bit and we made good progress, but still at the risk of broken necks.

Brixton—Norbury—Croydon—across Purley Way we roared, with the aerodrome and its twinkling boundary lights on our right. At the cross-roads at the bottom of the hill a policeman leapt out with arms outstretched, in a futile attempt to stop us, having been advised of our approach, I suppose, by telephone. Poor fellow. He leapt aside in the nick of time, and I'll warrant his knees shook for many an hour. Anyway, I doubt if Steeley could have stopped, even if he had wanted to.

On we roared, through Caterham and Godstone, eating up the straight mile and a half below South Godstone station in one hair-raising rush, and I began to wonder where the chase was to end.

By this time my nerves were quivering like slack flying-wires in a dive, but strangely enough I realized suddenly with something like a shock that I was actually enjoying myself. For the first time for many a year I was doing something that I should not be doing, and the inherent devilment that is in us all applauded. What had happened to the police car I do not know, but I had no doubt that it was still hot on our trail. At the next big town it would catch us surely. The police there would have had time to throw a barrier across the road. What was the next town? I raked my bump of locality trying to recall the district. East Grinstead! Yes, that was it.

But before we crossed the county border of Surrey into Sussex the car slowed up with a grinding of brakes and we plunged into a narrow lane which led off to the right. Half a mile up the lane we slowed down again and

crept up a short drive into what appeared to be a farmyard. Several large haystacks loomed eerily in the headlights, and behind them I could make out the silhouette of a large house and some out-buildings.

To my astonishment Steeley did not stop the car, but drove straight on towards one of the ricks as if he intended ramming it. For a moment I thought that his brakes had failed, but a glance at his unconcerned profile made it clear that, however strange his actions might appear, they were deliberate. We weren't travelling fast, of course, but even so one doesn't normally drive intentionally into an obstacle.

I looked again at the stack, and blinked, trying to make out what on earth had happened, for where the blank side of the stack had been now yawned an opening wide enough to admit the car. We drove straight in. Steeley switched off the headlights. "Well, here we are," he said, picking up his suitcase and stepping out. I followed, with the pungent aroma of hay filling my nostrils. "All clear, Tasker," he called, as we all trooped outside the stack. A grey shadow seemed to flit across the aperture, and it was once more a substantial haystack—or appeared to be.

"That's the cunningest bit of camouflage I've seen for some time," I observed.

"Yes, it's quite neat," agreed Steeley, as he led the way towards the house. "Camouflage was brought to a high art during the War, but instead of being developed further, it is in danger of being forgotten altogether. Welcome to Haylands." At the door he stopped suddenly and stood listening in a tense attitude. A car was racing up the lane. "Let's get inside," he said quietly.

We followed him through the hall into a delightfully furnished lounge, in which a cheerful fire was burning in a great open fireplace. On a magnificent refectory table dinner was being laid for three, and my heart warmed at the sight of the sparkling glass and gleaming silver, for I was suddenly aware that I was ravenously hungry, which was unusual, for of late I had quite lost my appetite.

Gubbins came in, and I noticed that he had changed into a white steward's jacket; from his appearance it was hard to believe that he had just come in from a rather terrifying drive.

"Did that car go past?" asked Steeley.

"Yes, sir; but I think it has stopped about a quarter of a mile farther on. I fancy the driver is looking for a place to turn in order to come back."

"I see; then you had better serve dinner right away."

"Very good, sir." Gubbins departed.

"I heard you call someone by the name of Tasker," I told Steeley. "Wasn't that the name of your rigger in France?"

"Yes. He's still my rigger; he is also my cook," he replied briefly. "But never mind that now," he went on. "You heard what Gubbins said; that car is coming back. It may be looking for us. If we are going to have visitors we must behave as if we had been comfortably settled here for some time. Take your coat off and slip that old smoking-jacket of mine on—there it is, behind the door. Pass me my dressing-gown at the same time. Brian, you'll find a blazer just inside that cupboard; put it on, and let me have my house shoes; they're on the bottom shelf. Fine! Now we're all set. All right, Gubbins," he called, "let's have the soup."

I think we all heard the car come down the drive and pull up outside the front door. In my anxiety I was about to cross over to the window to look out, but Steeley anticipated me. "Sit still," he said tersely. "Carry on as if nothing is happening; they're probably watching us through the window already." And forthwith he began a story about some musician he had seen recently at the Albert Hall, speaking with an enthusiasm that made it difficult to believe that he was acting a part. Perhaps he was seriously enthusiastic. I don't know. I only know that, although I pretended to be listening, I didn't hear a word he said, for my ears were strained to catch the gentle purr of the engine outside.

"They're a long time," I couldn't help saying at last.

"Probably having a snoop round; they'll find nothing," smiled Steeley.

I broke into a perspiration as the door opened suddenly, but it was only Gubbins with the next course, and I breathed a sigh of relief. An instant later, however, there was a loud knock on the front door.

"I invite you to make the most of this lobster *à la Americaine*," murmured Steeley, as if nothing had happened. "I brought the fish alive all the way from——" He broke of with the fish servers poised, and glanced over his shoulder towards the door, where Gubbins's voice could be heard in angry protest. Before any of us could move, a dark, thick-set man with heavy eyebrows and piercing black eyes entered, followed by two uniformed policemen.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" began Steeley coldly, half rising in his chair. And then I heard him gasp.

For a moment I could only stare unbelievingly. "Why, it's Wayne of all people," I cried at last.

"Good God, so it is," declared Steeley. "Come in, Wayne, and make yourself at home."

"I didn't know you were giving a reunion dinner, Steeley," I went on, tearing my eyes from the three new-comers to Steeley, who was now on his feet and holding out his hand in greeting.

"Neither did I," he said. "What an extraordinary thing that Wayne, of all people, should roll up to-night. Sit down, old man. You'll join us, now you're here, of course? Have a drink? I'd no idea you were living in this part of the country, or I'd have hunted you up before this. But why the officers? Have you had burglars, or are you looking for something?"

Wayne stared from one to the other of us, and I could almost feel his brain working in its ponderous manner, trying to weigh up the situation.

"Yes," he growled, in the surly voice that we had known so well in France. "I'm looking for a Rolls-Royce car."

"Funny place to look for a Rolls, isn't it?"

"Where have you put it?"

"Put what?"

"The Rolls."

"Are you joking?"

"I'm not. We know it turned in here. The constable on point duty at Blindley Heath cross-roads says he saw the headlights turn up this lane; they disappeared somewhere about this point, and this is the only house for miles."

Steeley stared in well-feigned surprise, not unmixed with amusement. "Well, go ahead and find it; I've no objection to your looking. But surely you're not suggesting that I've got a Rolls?"

"I'm not suggesting anything; I'm telling you that a Rolls came in here."

"Still pig-headed as ever, I see," observed Steeley with a sigh. "Well, if you say it turned in here, it must still be here—unless it went out again. You're welcome to all the Rolls you can find, but I don't think any of our members are millionaires, and I don't remember ever seeing a Rolls on the place."

"Members?"

"Yes. This is the South Surrey Flying Club—didn't you know? Quite a small affair, of course. We just run a couple of Moths, for joyriding."

All this was double Dutch to me, and I shuddered in case Wayne should start asking me questions about the Club, the existence of which I knew nothing about.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" observed Wayne. "I saw the two machines outside in the shed."

“Are you anything to do with the police by any chance?” asked Steeley, as if the thought had suddenly occurred to him.

“Yes. I’m in charge of the Flying Squad at Scotland Yard,” replied Wayne coldly. Then he turned to me, and his first words bored into me like a burst of tracer, while my nerves started racing like an engine that has shed its prop. “Do you do much visiting in Park Lane?” he asked.

“Park Lane?” I echoed the words stupidly.

“Yes; don’t tell me you’ve never heard of it.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of it all right, but it’s a bit beyond my reach.”

“You haven’t been there lately?”

“I haven’t done any visiting there, if that’s what you mean.” I had a horrible feeling that something was coming, but I couldn’t imagine what it was. I was not kept long in doubt. Wayne felt in his pocket, took out a silver cigarette-case, and tossed it on to the table.

“Then how did that get there?” he snapped.

I stared at the case with what I hoped was well-simulated astonishment, but what I fear was utter dismay. For the case was mine. It was a brand-new one that had been sent to me by my sister on my birthday, only a few weeks before. There was no need for him to ask if it was mine, for on the inside, across the corner, was engraved, “Eric Wilde.” I must have left it on Steeley’s table in Park Lane.

“Well, I’m damned,” I cried at last. “Where on earth did you get that?”

“Where did you leave it?”

“I didn’t leave it anywhere. I sent it.”

“Sent it!” Wayne started.

“Yes, I sent it to a girl I know in Kenya for a birthday present.”

“How?”

“By registered air mail.”

“When?”

“About—let’s see—her birthday’s on the 18th of March, so I should have sent it off some time during the first week of the month—probably about the 6th or 7th.”

“Got the Post Office counterfoil?”

“Sorry, I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t actually post it myself. I wrapped it up and gave it to my man to post.”

"Where is he?"

"I've no idea."

"What do you mean—you've no idea?"

"I discharged him about ten days ago for pilfering. Good thing I did, from what I can see of it; the rascal must have stolen my case instead of posting it. What a confounded nuisance. I promised that girl a case with my name on; she'll think I've forgotten her. It will have to be an instance of better late than never; I'll send it on by the next mail. I'm much obliged to you for returning it." I picked up the case and dropped it into my pocket, while Wayne stared at me with an amazing expression on his face.

"I didn't say you could have it," he growled.

"But it's mine; you can't keep it."

Steeley came to my rescue. "Well, are you coming in or are you going out to look for that Rolls?" he asked Wayne casually. "Don't think me discourteous, but as you see, we're in the middle of dinner. You're welcome to join us, but don't let us spoil good food by allowing it to get cold. Let me send for another plate."

But Wayne wasn't listening. He was staring at Brian. "What are you doing here?" he enquired, curiously.

"Putting in a bit of flying time, Inspector," replied the lad promptly. "I'm a member here."

"Funny weather to think of flying."

"How did I know it was going to turn out like this?"

"But people don't go flying after dark, anyway."

"They have to if they want the 'B' Licence," Brian told him without hesitation. "I think I told you the other day at the Yard that I was hoping to have a shot at the Commercial Ticket."

"Yes, that's right, so you did," admitted Wayne slowly. "How did you get here, by the way? I saw you in Town at lunch time, and I don't see a car or a motor-bike outside."

"I flew down, of course."

"Where's your machine? There are only two in the shed, and Delaroy says they belong to the Club."

"I didn't say I flew myself, Stapleton flew me down, and then took off again."

"Who's he?"

"A fellow I met recently."

"Where is he now? I'd like a word with him."

"Ah, I'm sorry I can't help you there, Inspector."

"What do you mean?"

"He's gone on—to the Continent, I think—for a flying holiday. I don't think he actually told me where he was going. He wanted me to go with him, but I couldn't get away, so he gave me a lift as far as here and then went on." Brian spoke quite naturally, helping himself to a glass of water between sentences as if the conversation was only of passing interest.

Wayne drew a deep breath. "Well," he said. "I must be getting along. Looks as if that Rolls couldn't have come in here, after all. Funny about those headlights, though."

"I don't see that it is," put in Steeley. "The fellow probably switched them off in the lane and ran on his sidelights only; most people would."

"Yes, that must be the answer."

"Sure you won't stay?"

"No, thanks."

"Look in again some time; come on a fine morning and do a bit of flying," suggested Steeley.

"I'll try," promised Wayne from the door. "Good night."

"Cheerio, chaps," we called after him.

Steeley sat down again, calmly rearranging his serviette. As for me, my knees were knocking together under the table. "Congratulations, both of you. You were brilliant," he said, in a low voice, without looking up.

For a little while we chatted on commonplace subjects, and then Gubbins came in with a peculiar smile on his honest face. "All clear, sir," he said cheerfully. "They've gone."

Steeley leaned back in his chair and regarded us with approval. "Yes," he said, "you were both very good. Friend Wayne is on what are usually known as the horns of a dilemma, but make no mistake, he's only half convinced. Tenacity was, I recall, one of his few virtues, and now he thinks he's got his teeth into something he'll take a bit of prising off, unless I'm very much mistaken. Be careful what you say, both of you, in case he comes prowling about. I think it would be a good thing if we had a little music."

CHAPTER III

"THE BIRD THAT FLIES BY NIGHT"

FOR half an hour or so I leaned back in an easy chair and listened to his superb rendering of Chopin's nocturnes, but I was too agitated to give them my entire attention. There were many questions I wanted to ask, particularly in connection with my present position. On the other hand, Brian seemed content to accept things as they were without thought of the past or care for the future.

I therefore took an opportunity presented by a break in the music to interrupt Steeley's repertoire. "Steeley," I said, "I hate to interrupt you, but I really must ask you to concentrate for a moment on my unhappy plight, and devise a means of getting me out of it."

"Why, certainly," he replied quickly. "I hadn't realized that you were unhappy."

"You don't expect me to have any peace of mind while this threat of imminent arrest is hanging over my head, do you?"

"Why not? I am at peace with the world, although I have far more to exercise my mind than you have."

"I'll take your word for it," I answered. "But let us regard the situation from my point of view, as it now stands. I accepted your invitation to lunch this morning, believing you to be a perfectly respectable citizen. We need not go over what has happened since; let it suffice that it has been demonstrated to me beyond all doubt that your wealth is derived by ways and means not approved by the State. We need not——"

"Just a moment, just a moment," put in Steeley. "You speak of my wealth as if my operations were devoted entirely to my own personal enrichment. That is incorrect. We might as well have things fair and square while we're about it. It is true that I do not stint myself on the score of personal expenditure, but I would have you know that by far the major portion of my financial gains is passed on instantly and anonymously to deserving charities. Some of it goes to recognized institutions, and some I distribute personally to deserving cases that come under my notice. Do you remember those little debates we used to have in France, and my opinions that you more than once described as unpatriotic?"

"I do, perfectly."

"Was I right in my forecast of the treatment that would be meted out to those who did the dirty work?"

"Well—er—yes and no," I replied awkwardly.

"Yes and no! Just as non-committal as ever, I see. Well, I contend that I was right, basing my contention on the broad basis that the men who actually fought in France, or their dependants, should never be allowed to want for the normal necessities of life. If there is any surplus of wealth, of land, of food, of anything, it should belong to those who fought to save it, or the heirs of those who died to save it. Do you remember little Hilder? He got about a score of Huns, I believe, and was killed about the middle of 1918."

"Yes, I remember him."

"A brave lad?"

"One of the bravest."

"Do you know that both his brothers were killed in action?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"You can take it from me that it was so. His father was killed also. He gave up a lucrative job to become a Tommy when the great call went out for men. He died at Cambrai. His widow, the mother of three gallant sons, is still alive, dragging out her last years in the dismal conditions that the miserable pittance of a Tommy's pension only permits. She has lost everything; even her home had to go; it was sold to pay the household bills when her husband was killed. Yet all around her thousands of people who never lifted a hand to save their country live in luxury. Is *that* fair?"

"No," I confessed. "It isn't."

"Then you may be interested to know that by the means I employ I was able the other day to send her a thousand pounds, which will see her comfortable for life. Say I stole the money, if you like. Have I done an honourable or a dishonourable thing?"

"You're an idealist," I muttered. "The State does its best——"

"Pah! Tubby, without any false modesty, I did all that was in my power to do in France, did I not? Day after day I put my life in the hands of Fate, regardless of whether it was taken or spared."

"You did."

"Yet those who did not lift a finger would have seen me starve to death in the gutters of London without one moment's regret or care. Indeed, I did very nearly starve to death. Yet all I asked for was work, a means of earning a livelihood in any capacity in the country I had done my little bit to save. It was denied me. Is *that* fair?"

"No, I must say it isn't."

"Good! I'm glad you give me that. Perhaps you can imagine how I felt one dark night rather more than two years ago when I stood on the Embankment knowing that there was nothing left but the river. Believe me when I say that every fibre in my body revolted at the injustice of the thing, and in the end I determined that I would not die—or if I did, it would not be without a struggle. If the State or those about me would not give me of its own free will what I might, without favour, expect, then I would take it. I put my plan into execution within the hour, and it was successful. Slowly I amassed money until at last I could realize my ambition, which was to set up an organisation that would benefit those as deserving, or more deserving, than myself, yet lacked the will, the nerve, or the ability to do what I was doing. You may have read in the newspapers of one who signs himself 'Licinius Crassus,'[3] a great philanthropist, who is always ready to help the sick and the needy. No charity appeals to him in vain."

---

[3] A Roman tribune who achieved power and afterwards passed a law giving the plebeians the same rights as patricians in consular appointments.

"Yes, of course I've heard of him; everyone has."

"Then behold him."

I stared, thunderstruck. "You——" I breathed.

"Yes. I believe that prayers have actually been said for me in East End churches, but that would not save me from prison if I were caught. Tubby, I can honestly claim to have brought relief and joy into more homes than any man in London to-day. Is that anything to be ashamed of?"

I looked at him, hardly knowing what to say. His face was pale to the point of pallor, and his eyes were glowing. He looked exactly what he was, an idealist, prepared to suffer martyrdom for his cause.

"You raise a very difficult problem," I told him, rather sadly.

"Problem or not, I am doing what my destiny ordained, and that being so, I am happy, for I have brought happiness to others. What more can one ask of life than happiness?"

"What, indeed," I agreed. "But this is really all beyond the point, Steeley. What is to happen to me—and Brian?"

"Your fate is in your own hands."

"Is it? I doubt it. I don't want it to be in Wayne's."

"There is no reason why it should be. Go home, Tubby. Go home to your ordered life and forget all about to-day."

"It would hardly be wise to take the Rolls-Royce out, would it?"

"By the time the Rolls reappears, it will be hard to recognize it; but that will take a day or two. The Rolls is not the only car here."

I looked at Brian. "Are you coming with me?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not if I'm allowed to stay."

"What about it, Steeley?" I asked. "Are you going to let him join you?"

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. "I can hardly blame him for wanting to follow the same precepts as those I have just advocated, can I?" he replied. "He's old enough to choose for himself, anyway."

"Yes, I suppose he is," I agreed. "By the way," I went on, yawning, for the excitement of the day had left me strangely tired, although of late I had been sleeping badly. "Why did you tell Wayne this was a flying club?"

"It is, although I'm the only member."

"What's the idea of that?"

Steeley crossed over to the window and looked up at the night sky. "Because a certain amount of flying goes on from here; how else could I account for the aerial activity? It was certain to be noticed. But I see you're tired. I think it would be a good thing if we all turned in, but don't be surprised if I'm not here in the morning; Gubbins will run you home."

"Why? Where are you going?" I asked in surprise.

"I may have to go out."

"Not flying?"

He nodded.

"What, on a night like this?"

"Why not? The weather is ideal for my purpose. How long is it since you were in the air?"

"About five years."

"Five blank years in your life. Why not come with me; a little slipstream in your lungs would do you a power of good. There is no danger."

I caught my breath. The idea was so devastating that I alternately shuddered and thrilled at the prospect. "I wasn't thinking of danger," I muttered. "I was thinking of Wayne and his minions."

"They're not likely to interfere," he told me confidently.

"Where are you going?"

"France."

Something seemed to flutter inside me. The idea of a night flight to France appalled me, yet fascinated me by its very daring. A spark of the old fire seemed to come to life and I joined Steeley at the window, eyes probing the night sky. The rain had stopped, but there was still a good deal of cloud about although here and there the stars shone brightly. Dare I go? Had everything that held a spice of risk become abhorrent to me? Was I no longer a man, but merely an empty shell?

I had to brace myself to say the words. "What time do we start?" I said.

"About three in the morning," he answered casually. "Gubbins will call you at a quarter to the hour. We shall be back here in time for breakfast, I hope."

I hoped so, too, but I was by no means sure.

"All right," he said. "Let's go and put in a little sleep."

II

It was an odd sensation to be awakened at a quarter to three in the morning, and as I looked up into Gubbins's face, for a brief instant my brain leapt the span of years, and I thought I was in France, still with the old Squadron. And the sensation was emphasized when he said, in the most natural way in the world, "Here's your tea, sir; you leave the ground in fifteen minutes."

The words banished the last vestiges of sleep from my eyes. Leave the ground in fifteen minutes? Preposterous! I sat up in bed and looked out of the open window. It was still dark and the stars were bright in the sky. I'm crazy, I thought, as I sank back again. Mad as a hatter. What on earth possessed me to make such a ridiculous assignation? At that moment I would willingly have given all I possessed to withdraw from the foolhardy enterprise which, in the chilly hours of early morning, wore a very different aspect from what it did immediately after an excellent dinner. All the same, there was no denying that I felt fitter than I had for some time; I had slept soundly, and my waking thoughts were less sluggish than usual. It seemed as if there might be something in flying, after all. . . . I reached for my tea, and spilt quite a lot of it as I jumped when, from somewhere near at hand, an aero engine bellowed suddenly. It rose to a deafening crescendo and then died away suddenly as someone cut the throttle.

I sprang out of bed and looked out of the window. All was silent except for the rhythmic purr of the engine as it continued to tick over; a patch of

yellow light spread over the turf in front of a building some fifty yards away, and the feeling that I was back in France struck me with renewed force as the faint smell of burning oil reached my nostrils.

I was still only half dressed when there came a knock at my door, and Steeley, in full flying kit, walked in. Across his arm he carried a leather coat, flying cap, goggles, and gauntlets. " 'Morning, Tubby," he said quietly. "Here's some kit. You'll need it; it'll be a bit fresh up topsides."

Like a man in a dream I got into the flying kit, and a queer thrill ran through me as I once more inhaled the unmistakable aroma of oily leather.

"Anybody else coming?" I asked as we walked across to the shed in which our machine was evidently housed.

"No. Young Ballantyne wanted to come, but there isn't room on this occasion."

"Will there be anything I can do?"

"Nothing. There's no Archie and no Huns to annoy us, so you've nothing to do but sit still and enjoy yourself."

Enjoy myself? Heavens above! I was hardly likely to do that.

We rounded a corner and the machine stood in front of us; Brian, looking disappointed, was standing near it. I don't know what I expected to find, but it was certainly not the aircraft at which I now stared in surprise. It was an ordinary Moth, painted dark blue, but floats had been fitted to the landing chassis, although the wheels had been left on. They projected a few inches below the floats, making the machine an amphibian—that is, able to come down on either land or water. I had seen the device before; there was a time, I recalled, when certain Fleet Air Arm machines of the Royal Air Force were fitted with the same type of undercarriage.

"Were those floats on last night, when Wayne was prowling about?" I asked.

"Oh dear, no; they've only just been put on. They only take a few minutes to slip on and off."

"Why do we need them?"

"You'll see in due course. Get aboard—front seat; I fly her from the back. Strap yourself in."

There was something sinister about the last three words, but I did as I was told, and then looked round, wondering if it was really possible that I, myself, had once taken an aeroplane into the air.

Steeley waved his hands; the chocks were pulled away; the engine roared and the machine moved forward over the soaking turf with the

slipstream striking me in the face like a physical blow. Once more the noise of the engine died away for a moment as the pilot picked out a distant mark on which to fly, and then, with an air-splitting bellow of sound, we raced across the starlit aerodrome. The seat seemed to rise under me, lifting me upwards, and then we were in the air. The craziest adventure of my life had begun.

Up and up we climbed, circling steadily for height. Once, as we turned, I caught sight of the distant lights of Croydon far to the north, but the rest of the landscape was shrouded in darkness, and I could not pick out a single landmark that I could recognize; I could not even see the field from which we had taken off.

When we were at a height of between three and four thousand feet, as near as I could judge, Steeley straightened out and headed off in a direct line; nevertheless, I noticed that our nose was still tilted well up above the horizon, and I knew we were still climbing.

"Feeling all right?" The voice coming over the telephone without warning made me jump. I hadn't noticed the speaking tubes on my helmet, which Steeley must have connected up.

"Yes, I'm fine, thanks," I replied. It was quite true; I was. My repugnance had dropped off me like a blanket, leaving me clear-eyed and tingling with the joy of living. But I was hardly prepared for his next words.

"Good," came Steeley's voice. "You've got a dual joystick in front of you; take her over for a bit."

From the way I reached for the joystick it might have been a poisonous snake, but I found it, held it, and took over control, sliding my feet forward to the rudder bar. I could feel by the way the machine was moving that Steeley had relinquished his joystick, and the knowledge that the safety of the aircraft now rested on me turned my lips dry and sent the blood racing through my veins.

"Can you see a low hill on the horizon, shaped like a camel's hump?" asked Steeley.

"Yes," I answered.

"Take up a course towards it."

"I'll try." It was awkward at first, but Steeley, with admirable confidence, left me to work things out for myself, with the result that in ten minutes the old touch had come back, and within twenty, I was flying with an assurance that amazed me. I suppose flying is like swimming; once one can do it, one never entirely forgets. Only once had Steeley to correct me, and that was when I allowed the nose of the machine to drop a bit so that we

were not climbing as fast as he wished. We passed over the hill for which I had aimed, and which I now saw was part of the South Downs, and with the Channel lying in front of us Steeley again took over control.

For some distance we flew parallel with the coast, still climbing; then, turning his nose seaward, he cut the engine and forthwith began the longest glide I ever remember in my life. As silently as a shadow we crossed over the pale grey line that marked the beach.

"What's our height?" I asked, through the mouthpiece, for my cockpit was not fitted with an altimeter.

"Nine thousand."

Thereafter not a word was spoken for the best part of twenty minutes. We continued to glide straight out to sea with only the faint hum of the wind in the wires and the breeze on our cheeks to tell us that we were moving. We lost height steadily, of course, and we must have been within a thousand feet of the water when, to my relief, the engine opened up again with a roar. I say I was relieved because an uneasy feeling that the engine had failed had begun to creep over me. Ahead of us lay a long dark shadow, dotted here and there with isolated lights. No need to ask what it was. France!

"Mark the two green lights in line just south of Cap Gris Nez," came Steeley's voice.

"Yes, I see them," I answered.

"That's our objective."

But before we reached them I could see that the lights were not on land, but were riding on a small boat that was lying about a mile from the shore. No other vessels were in sight, so Steeley abandoned caution, simply cutting his engine and gliding down as soon as he was within reach of the boat.

I held my breath as our floats kissed the water, but we made a beautiful landing, finishing our run within a hundred yards of our objective, which instantly began to move towards us. Steeley, leaving the engine ticking over, stood up in his seat and hailed the on-coming boat, which I could now see was a small, dark-painted boat of Dutch design. "Stand by," he called.

"What ship is that?" was the instant response.

"The bird that flies by night," answered Steeley, "Who are you?"

"The fish that swims by night," was the quick answer.

I did not need telling that this was an exchange of pass-words, and a moment later Steeley confirmed it.

"Sorry to introduce all this dramatic nonsense," he said apologetically, "but it wouldn't do for either of us to make a mistake."

He had no time to say more, for the sloop had run right in as close to our fuselage as she could get, and Steeley boarded it by the simple expedient of walking along our lower wing and jumping aboard. Fortunately, the water was calm, but I suspected he was aware of this before he started, or he would not have come. He soon returned from his visit, coming in the sloop's dinghy with two other men who, as he climbed up into his seat, set about doing something underneath the machine. What it was I could not see, both on account of the darkness and my position in the front cockpit, which, of course, prevented me from seeing underneath the fuselage. All the same, I saw Steeley stow something away in the luggage compartment between the two cockpits, after which he passed the container back to the men in the boat. And that, to my astonishment, was all. I expected the business to take more time, although I really don't know why. The dinghy returned to the sloop; there was an exchange of *au revoirs*, and the Moth swung round under the power of its propeller to face the open sea.

There was a swift rush through clouds of spray, a confused sensation of bumping underneath us as the floats rode the tiny waves, and then a cessation of vibration as we roared into the air.

"All quite simple, wasn't it?" came Steeley's voice.

"It has been, so far, but we're not home yet," I reminded him cautiously.

A short laugh was the only answer.

CHAPTER IV

A FISHY BUSINESS

THE flight home was really the most enjoyable part of the trip. The east grew light while we were still at sea, climbing to the limit of our performance, and dawn saw us crossing the coastline at a high altitude. I noticed that Steeley did not cross at right angles, as if he had come from France, but took an oblique course that would give a watcher the impression that he was merely flying along the shore, not that I think anyone on the ground could see us, for there was quite a heavy ground mist and, as on the outward trip, Steeley cut the engine some distance from the coast, and did not open up again until he was some miles away from it.

I must confess that at this juncture I thought the journey was as good as over, and any lingering fears I may have had were swiftly dispelled by the rising sun. To all intents and purposes we were now two ordinary club pilots up on an early-morning pleasure jaunt.

The first sign of trouble came in an unexpected manner. I was looking down over the side of the cockpit at the pleasant English countryside, when something made me look up. Maybe it was a flash of the old instinct that made me aware of the proximity of another machine. I don't know. Anyway, I looked up, and there, roaring down past us, was another Moth. It was painted blue like our own, but it had no floats, and it took me a couple of seconds to realize that it was the other machine from our own private aerodrome. It gave me a nasty twinge too, for, as often happens in such cases, my first thought was a doubt as to whether or not the other pilot had seen us. But any doubts on this score were soon settled, for Brian, who, to my astonishment, I now perceived the pilot to be, looked across at us and then began gesticulating wildly with his left hand. At first I couldn't make out what he was trying to convey to us, for it was clear that he was making a signal, and all sorts of horrid possibilities flashed into my head. Had we shed a wheel in the air? Or a float? Was something wrong with our machine? Then I saw what he was trying to show us, and I waved what was intended to be a signal of understanding.

Along the side of the fuselage, over the area normally devoted to the identification letters, was a wide strip of fluttering canvas that had obviously been quickly put on. But it was not the fabric that intrigued me; it was the

word painted on it. In place of the usual five neat Roman letters, a single crude word had been scrawled. There were still five letters. They were W A Y N E. The word was followed by an arrow, pointing downwards.

There was no need to wonder at the meaning; it was all too painfully clear. Wayne was below, on our aerodrome, presumably waiting for us to return. I looked at Steeley, but instead of the dismay I expected to see written on his face, there was nothing but amused contempt. Personally, I could see nothing funny in the situation. Wayne's presence was hardly likely to be beneficial, for not for one moment could I suppose that his untimely arrival was occasioned by a renewed interest in flying.

Brian waved to show that our signal that we had seen the message had been understood, and then plunged earthward. Where he went I did not know at the time, for he passed underneath us and disappeared from my field of vision. So I stood up and looked ahead at the aerodrome, now plain enough in the near distance. At the same time Steeley cut the throttle and went down in a steep dive. He flattened out, opened up the engine again low down over a wood about two fields distant from the aerodrome, and then glided in to a neat landing, afterwards taxi-ing up to the shed near the house. As we ran to a standstill four men stepped forward out of the shadows in a manner so brisk and officious that it was clear that they were not on a friendly visit. The one in front was Wayne. The others I did not know.

There was something so deliberate and confident in their bearing that I am afraid my heart turned stone cold, for I could not imagine that their purpose was any other than to search the machine, in which case they would, beyond doubt or question, find the illicit cargo we had taken aboard from the sloop near the French coast.

But Steeley did not appear to be in the least perturbed, and the only emotion he registered—if any—was the natural one of surprise at seeing Wayne at such an early hour in the morning. He jumped to the ground just as the four men reached the machine, and extended his hand cheerfully, although what good purpose he hoped to serve by this bluff, for bluff it surely must be, I could not think.

"Hello! This is a great effort, Wayne," he cried. "I hardly expected to see you back so soon."

"No, I don't suppose you did," replied Wayne pointedly. "Let me introduce you to Captain Wilkins, of His Majesty's Excise and Customs."

The others, I suppose, were either police officers or underlings of Wilkins's.

Steeley did not appear to even notice Wayne's mention of his companion's profession. "Come to take a spot of instruction, eh?" he asked, smiling at Wilkins.

"No, not exactly," was the curt reply.

"Well——" Steeley looked from one to the other wonderingly. "Just come to watch the flying, perhaps?" he suggested.

"Not even that," declared Wayne. "We've come to have a look at your machine."

My heart sank, for as he spoke his eyes were fixed on the point of one of the floats, and following them with my own I saw what it was that had brought the faint smile of triumph to his lips. Hanging on the float was a piece of seaweed. It was wet, and had obviously just been taken from the sea.

"Of course," cried Steeley, "I should be only too pleased to show you over her, although there's nothing very outstanding, except perhaps this dual-purpose undercarriage."

Wayne did not beat about the bush any longer. "Where have you just come from?" he asked, in a tone that he may have intended to be intimidating.

But Steeley did not appear to notice it. "What, now?" he asked innocently.

"You heard what I said."

Steeley looked at his questioner wonderingly. "What on earth is the matter with you, Wayne?" he asked indignantly. "And what the dickens has it got to do with you where we've been, anyway? I took off from here, of course. You saw the machine last night, didn't you? But why these questions? The Air Ministry——"

"I know all about that, but where have you been?" broke in Wayne.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Brian coming in to land. The strip of fabric was no longer on the side of his machine, and I guessed the reason for his dive earthward. He had made a forced landing in order to remove it.

"As a matter of fact, we've been fishing," explained Steeley easily.

"Fishing!" cried Wayne incredulously.

"Yes, fishing," went on Steeley. "Nothing funny about that, is there? I like fishing, particularly sea fishing, and we often run down to the Solent when the water is smooth for a cast or two in the hope of picking up a cheap breakfast. That's why I had these floats designed."

“So you’ve been fishing, eh?” said Wayne with something as near to a smile on his face as I had ever seen.

“That’s what I said. Have you any reason to doubt it?”

“Let’s have a look at the catch,” suggested Wayne, stepping towards the machine.

By this time I was on the ground, wondering what was going to happen next, for it was plain that the inevitable disclosure could not be long delayed.

Wayne examined the front cockpit and then the back seat. He followed this up with a thorough examination of the whole machine. When he came to the luggage locker he nodded to Wilkins, as much as to say, “This is where it is,” and flung it open. Instantly a halibut of some seven or eight pounds weight shot out as if impelled by a spring and struck him flat in the face.

I roared with laughter. I couldn’t help it, although I was as astounded as the recipient of the fishy welcome.

But Steeley was by no means pleased, and he lost no time in making his displeasure known. Two or three plaice and several dabs had jumped out of the locker after the halibut. “Here, steady on,” he cried angrily. “What do you think you’re up to, Wayne? Don’t maul my machine about as if it were your own.”

Wayne wiped his face with his handkerchief and glared at him. “Anything else in there?” he snarled, thrusting his hand deep into the receptacle.

“Apparently,” replied Steeley, quietly, as Wayne leapt back with a curse and began waving his arm windmill fashion. Something seemed to be hanging on to the end of it, and as it flew off to describe a short parabola through the air, it resolved itself into a very fine lobster.

It was purely bad luck that Wilkins happened to be standing in its line of flight. It struck him fairly and squarely in the face and then fell to the ground, where it took up a belligerent attitude against the nearest float.

“Why the devil aren’t you more careful?” snarled the Excise officer, mopping his face with his sleeve.

Wayne pulled himself together with an effort. “Why didn’t you say you had lobsters in there?” he grated, in a voice that trembled with passion.

“Dash it, man, I told you I’d been fishing, didn’t I? What did you expect to find, mushrooms? You’re lucky I didn’t catch a conger,” Steeley went on, retrieving his fish. “Really, I can’t have you going on like this, Wayne. If

you want to come fishing, come by all means, but don't throw the fish about when we get back. And now, if you've quite finished with my machine, perhaps you'll allow me to put it away; I can do with some breakfast."

Wayne made no reply, but walked slowly back to the tarmac. It was clear that things had not panned out as he expected they would.

"Aren't you coming along for some breakfast?" called Steeley, as he started walking towards the house, where Brian was already waiting.

Wayne hesitated. "No, thanks," he said.

"Just a cup of coffee?"

"No, I'll be getting along. I was on my way back to Town with Wilkins, so we thought we'd just drop in and have a word or two on the way. Hope you don't mind——"

"Not in the least, my dear fellow," replied Steeley warmly. "Look in any old time you like. I hope we shall have something more interesting to show you next time you call."

"I hope so, too," was the significant reply.

"I'm afraid he's rather disappointed," said Steeley softly as we trooped into the dining-room, while Wayne and his friends climbed into their car and drove away. "What I should like to know is, how he got a slant on our little trip this morning. Was he guessing, I wonder?"

"I can tell you about that," declared Brian, seating himself at the table.

"How do you know about it?" asked Steeley quickly.

"Wayne discussed the matter with Wilkins while they were waiting for you to return. I happened to be within earshot, although they didn't know it."

Steeley smiled. "Case of walls having ears, eh?"

Brian nodded.

"Just a minute," I broke in, turning to Steeley. "I don't understand what's happened. You're not going to ask me to believe that we went all that way this morning just to collect a few fish, are you?"

"Good gracious, no. I have my living to earn."

"What actually did you bring back?"

"Six thousand pairs of silk stockings."

I stared. "Six *thousand* pairs?" I gasped. "Where the dickens are they?"

"Here, I hope."

I sat down limply. "Here!"

"Yes, in my little private warehouse."

“Then you must have thrown them overboard,” I cried, in a flash of inspiration.

“Not exactly. It would be more correct to say that I dropped them.”

“But I didn’t see you——”

“Of course you didn’t. I rarely carry anything inside the machine. They were slung underneath the fuselage in a light aluminium torpedo. I control the release from my cockpit. Sometimes, if it is dark, or very early in the morning—like this morning, for instance—I fly straight in with it on; but if it is late, or there is a likelihood of anyone being about, I drop the torpedo in that wood we passed over just outside the aerodrome, where Gubbins and Tasker wait to collect it and bring it back.”

“But how on earth do they lift it? It must weigh close on three hundred pounds.”

“My dear Tubby, do credit me with a little organizing ability. All these details have been thought out. The torpedo is in five sections, each detachable for easy transport, into which the stockings, which have been hydraulically compressed into cylindrical packets, just fit. Together, the whole thing forms one torpedo-shaped fitment. And now, if your curiosity is satisfied, perhaps Brian will tell us what happened here during our absence. Pass the coffee, will you?—thanks.”

CHAPTER V

CLOSE WORK

"IN a way, it was an odd coincidence that brought Wayne back here," began Brian. "When he was here last night he had absolutely no suspicion that the aeroplanes outside were anything but what they pretended to be ____"

"How do you know that?" put in Steeley quickly.

"I heard him tell Wilkins so. But let me start at the beginning. After you took off I went back to the house and mooned about, waiting for you to come back. Shortly after daylight I heard a car turn in at the gate, and when I saw Wayne sitting in it, you could have knocked me down with a feather. I was rather alarmed, too, for fear he should start asking me questions, so I kept out of the way. The car didn't stop at the house, but went straight down to the shed. And when the four of them got out and started nosing about, I had a nasty feeling that they knew what they were looking for. I saw them go into the shed, so I slipped out of the back door and went round by the rear of the buildings to keep an eye on them. I heard them ask Gubbins and Tasker where you were. They said you were in the air, and just went on with their work getting the other machine out on to the tarmac, whereupon Wayne and company sat down in a shed, presumably to wait for you. They started talking quietly, so I found a loose board on the outside and listened.

"I can't remember what they said word for word, but briefly, it amounted to this. After Wayne left here last night he went on for a mile or two on the off-chance of picking up the trail of the Rolls-Royce, but when he got to East Grinstead he gave it up. From our point of view it was rather unlucky, as events will show. He went into the police-box there, rang up the Yard, and told them what had happened, requesting that a description of the car be circulated. When he had finished he asked if there was any news of importance, because if there was he would come straight back.

"The fellow who was talking to him told him that nothing of importance had happened except that a fellow named Wilkins, of the Customs Service, had rung up to ask for his co-operation in some funny business that he suspected was going on in the air. At first, Wayne was only mildly interested; he was more concerned with the Rolls; but suddenly the coincidence struck him—to use his own words—like a ton of bricks. Flying!

Night-flying! And he had just seen two aeroplanes in what might easily prove to be suspicious circumstances. He was already half-way to the coast, so instead of returning to London he decided to go right on to Dover and talk to Wilkins himself. He went.

"While they were still talking things over in Wilkins's office, the listeners whom Wilkins had put out on duty—for these night-flying shows of yours have been heard, you may be interested to know—rang up to say that the mysterious aircraft was in the air again. And, in passing, I might say that the coast-guards have been trying to get to the bottom of this night-flying for two months or more, confirming whether or not R.A.F. machines were in the air on particular dates. But that is by the way.

"As soon as Wayne heard that the machine was in the air he had a brain-wave. It was no use looking for the machine in the darkness, *but* . . . He called it an inspiration, and between ourselves, it was. He knew he was shooting an arrow into the air, so to speak, but if it fell in the right place it would be a wonderful piece of work on his part. Anyway, it was worth trying, so he tumbled Wilkins and two of his men into the car and came dashing back here. Don't forget that he was still suspicious about the Rolls, and he had a feeling in his bones that the two things hung together, although he couldn't quite see how. That's what he said as I listened outside, all ears flapping, as you can well imagine. And the longer you were away the more confident he got that he was on the right track.

"But after a time they both got impatient and strolled along towards the house. That was my chance. Gubbins and Tasker joined me and implored me to warn you in case you landed with the—er—goods on board. We did a bit of quick painting on a strip of canvas, as the only means we could think of to give you the low-down, and off I went in the other machine. Wayne and party came sprinting back as I took off, but they were too late to stop me even if they had authority to do so, which I doubt. Naturally, I took care that the strip of canvas was on the off-side of the machine as I took off. After I knew you had spotted it I landed in a field, took it off, shoved it into a ditch and came back here. The rest you know."

Steeley stared at the floor for a moment or two, deep in thought. "Yes, I see," he said at last, slowly, as if he was trying to focus the situation in its correct perspective. "No matter; maybe it's all for the best," he continued quickly, looking up. "I've been so successful that perhaps I've been getting a trifle careless, and it needed this gentle reminder to pull me up. I shall have to step warily, I can see, for now that Wayne has turned his eagle eye in this direction, he'll swoop at the first slip I make. But there, it can't be helped. The game wouldn't be worth a candle if there was no risk. Many thanks,

Brian, for your bright display of initiative this morning. It's unfortunate, though, that this should all have come about at this particular moment."

"Why 'at this particular moment'?" I couldn't help asking.

"Because I've got an important job on hand, one that can't be delayed," he startled me by answering, quite simply.

"What sort of a job?" I blurted.

Steeley bit his lip thoughtfully. "Oh, quite a straightforward bit of business," he replied. "That is, I should have regarded it as straightforward in the ordinary way, but now that the sleuths are nosing about on our trail, it might be awkward. But that will apply to everything I do in the future, I suppose. Still, there it is. I passed my word to do the job, so obviously I must do it. I think you and Brian had better get out of the zone of operations before the thing begins."

"Not so fast," I told him, with a queer sense of disappointment. "Don't you want any help?"

A slow smile spread over his face. "Of course," he said. "In any case, it is always nice to have a comrade with one, someone to pull on a rope, as it were, in an emergency. But do you think you're being wise?"

"What's the job?" I asked bluntly.

Steeley settled himself a little lower in his chair. "Ever hear of the Guggenmayer diamonds?" he enquired softly.

"Of course! Who hasn't?" I answered quickly. "You mean those that adorn the ample chest of the wife of the United States sausage king?"

"That's right. Call him sausage king, if you like, but king of sweated labour would be nearer the truth. He's made a fortune out of overworking underpaid men and women. Each facet of each stone in the string that his wife wears represents a million beads of perspiration and not a few salt tears. 'Unto him that hath shall be given,' says the Bible, but I propose to reverse the process. From he that hath shall be taken away is my motto, and it will give me the greatest satisfaction to hand back to those who have earned it a portion of Guggenmayer's ill-acquired wealth."

"And how do you propose to achieve that laudable object?" I asked.

Steeley lit a cigarette. "Ever hear of Dude Dale?" he asked.

"Vaguely. Professional crook, isn't he?"

Steeley frowned. "That's not a nice way of putting it," he protested. "Dale, whom I happen to know, is a very charming fellow and a gentleman, although I confess that the police records describe him as an expert international jewel thief of considerable talent."

"How does Dale come into this deal?"

"His will be the hand to remove the sparklers from their present ownership. Mrs. Guggenmayer is, at this very moment, on board the good ship *Laurentic*, bound from New York to Cherbourg. She has her famous—or from my point of view infamous—jewels with her. Now, in case you are unaware of it, the purloining of objects on board ship presents no insuperable difficulty. The snag lies in getting them ashore. You see, when the loss is discovered, the passenger list is scrutinized under a microscope, and no man or woman whose reputation is anything but watertight can hope to set foot on dry land without undergoing such a search that a grain of sand would inevitably be discovered. What hope would Dale have of getting ashore with the sparklers? None. None whatever. And he knows it. So he consulted me through channels which we need not discuss now, and between us we discovered a way out of the difficulty."

"What is he going to do?"

"When he gets the jewels he's going to throw them overboard."

"He's going to *what*?"

"Throw them overboard. Not all loose, of course. They will be contained in a small sealed canister that has as a part of its make-up a compartment containing stannic chloride. Stannic chloride, on exposure to the air, vaporizes in the form of white smoke, as you are no doubt aware. You have probably seen it used on aerodromes to denote the direction of the wind; it is also a basic ingredient used in sky-writing. You now begin to perceive the idea. Dale gets the stones, puts them into the tin, and throws it overboard. It remains floating on the surface. Presently an automatic valve opens and a trickle of white smoke drifts out. That's for our benefit, of course. We fly over, follow the back trail of the ship until we see the smoke, whereupon we land, pick up the parcel and take it to a rendezvous near Amsterdam, where Dale, who by that time will have landed and hurried to the spot in his car, will meet us and recover the—er—swag."

"So he gets the diamonds, eh?"

"Quite right."

"And what do you get out of it?"

"Twenty-five per cent of the proceeds. In due course a sum of money will be sent to me in the form of treasury notes."

"Have you any proof that he will do that?"

"None whatever—except that he has said he will."

"Suppose he double-crosses you?"

"Then I shall get nothing."

"And you are prepared to take that risk?"

"It isn't a risk. I've already told you that Dale is a gentleman. I'll trust anyone until he proves himself to be crooked."

"And when are you thinking of starting off on this jaunt?"

"Now—immediately. The *Laurentic* is due to dock in an hour. The jewels are already in the water."

"How do you know?"

"He sent a message in code by radio to my agent in France, who transmitted it to me by hand, on board the boat this morning."

I stared in genuine admiration. "You don't leave much to chance, I see."

Steeley shook his head. "No. It doesn't pay in this game," he replied quietly. "But I must be moving off," he added, rising. "What are you fellows going to do?"

"Well, it sounds a pretty safe trip," I stammered. "If you can find room for me I should like, well——"

Steeley laughed aloud. "Good for you, Tubby," he observed. "I shall make a buccaneer of you yet."

"That means I shall be left behind," cried Brian.

Steeley stroked his chin. "Not necessarily," he murmured. "Not if we take the big machine. I should probably take it anyway, though, if it comes to that."

"Big machine," I cried. "What big machine?"

"Come and see," invited Steeley, picking up his flying kit and making for the door.

II

He led the way across the yard and halted by the largest haystack. For a moment he groped under the long hay, presumably feeling for a concealed switch, and then the whole end of the stack rolled up like a curtain to reveal a three-ply-lined hangar in which stood a dark-painted monoplane with its wings folded. A glance showed me that it was a very different proposition to the two Moths ostensibly used for club purposes. In the first place, it was a real amphibian, with a boat-shaped hull which now rested on a retractable land undercarriage. A single engine, water-cooled, judging by the shape of the cowling, was mounted on the centre-section, and from its size it was clear that its power output was considerable.

"Nice, isn't she?" smiled Steeley.

"She certainly is," I agreed. "And unless I am very much mistaken, this is the mysterious black aeroplane about which the newspapers made such a big story not long ago."

Steeley looked puzzled. "Yes, I think it must be," he admitted. "She's fast, and sweet on controls, so I used to use her a lot. But unfortunately I was once seen by a coastguard when a lot of cloud blew away rather earlier than I expected. He noticed that I carried no identification letters—a silly slip on my part. Anyway, I thought it would be wise to put her in the stable for a bit until the matter died down. She'll seat five at a pinch, by the way. Two pilots side by side and three in the cabin. I shall use her to-day in case the sea is choppy, and because she has a far greater endurance range than either of the other machines."

"But what about identification letters?" I asked. "We shall be spotted before we've gone fifty miles."

Steeley pointed to the wall, on which hung a range of letters painted on a background the same colour as the hull of the boat. "I may make a slip once," he said seriously. "But not twice. As you see, I have plenty of sets of identification letters now, British, French, German, and so on, which enables me to change my identity at short notice. I think we'll carry Dutch markings to-day, as we're going to Holland. That should be sufficient to put curious spectators off the scent. The greatest danger we have to face, and I've always realized it, is the risk of someone—Wayne, for instance—turning up after the machine is out of the hangar, but has not had time to take off. For that reason everything is made ready for the flight inside the hangar, and then I get into the air with all speed."

I was astonished at the efficient way the programme was now carried out. A strip of canvas, bearing a series of letters prefixed by PH, was fastened to the side of the machine by special clips that had been fitted for the purpose. The same sequence of letters was affixed under the lower planes. The machine was then wheeled out, the wings unfolded, the engine started, and all was ready. Steeley gave the two mechanics some last-minute instructions, and within ten minutes from the time my eyes first fell on the "Wyvern," as the machine was named, we were in the air heading south-west for the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean.

Cruising at a speed of 160 miles an hour on three-quarter throttle—for Steeley was too old a pilot to run his engine all out unnecessarily—two hours saw us facing the broad expanse of the open ocean which, I was thankful to see, was fairly calm, except for a long swell that was just

discernible from our altitude. And I must confess that now that we were fairly embarked upon the adventure, the proposition looked as easy as A B C. There seemed to be no possible danger of failure, and the only thing that remained to be done was to find the floating box. Just how far I was wrong will presently be seen.

It was a very pleasant day. Spring seemed to have arrived at last, and for the most part the sky was one of unclouded blue, although big rolling cumulus clouds over our stern showed where the last of the Atlantic storms were still drifting over England and Northern France.

Steeley told me that he was flying on a course that should cut right across the wake of the big liner, and I expected some difficulty as to our being able to pick it up, but I need not have feared. We spotted it while we were still miles away, a wide, slightly undulating line of oily scum dotted at intervals with miscellaneous garbage such as kitchen refuse, empty bottles, and the thousand and one things that are discarded from such a ship. In fact, the wake stretched from horizon to horizon like a broad highway.

Steeley nodded and held on his course until we reached the line, when he turned, and keeping the conspicuous trail under our left wing, headed out to sea as if he was bound for America.

I suppose we must have travelled nearly a hundred miles, and the trail had broadened considerably, besides becoming difficult to see, before I spotted the anxiously expected wisp of white smoke curling upward from a point some distance south of our line of flight. It was clear that the box had already been caught by a current and was being carried rapidly away. To be quite honest, I was more than a little relieved, for the coast had long ago disappeared behind us, and it was disconcerting to know that we were far from land. However, I nudged Steeley, at the same time pointing to the tell-tale smudge, whereupon he altered his course, cut the throttle, and began a long glide down towards the water.

He made a good landing, the machine finally finishing its run about a quarter of a mile away from the objective, but a burst of the engine sent us foaming towards it. I climbed out on the wing, and was lying flat to pick up the box which was now clearly visible, when a movement caught my eye and made me look up. At first I thought it was a big fish, and visions of having my hand bitten off by a shark flashed into my mind, but an instant later I knew what it was. I had never seen one in my life before, but there was no mistaking it. It was the periscope of a submarine cutting through the water towards us. As quick as lightning I snatched up the box, tossed it into the cockpit, and climbed back into my seat just as the gleaming conning tower of the under-water craft broke the surface.

Let me digress for a moment to say that Steeley thought, and still believes, that the whole thing was a fluke. His view is that the submarine was cruising in the locality, saw the smoke from a distance, and quite naturally made towards it. But I don't believe it. I am convinced that we were seen leaving the coast, and a wireless message was promptly sent out to all ships in the vicinity to keep a look-out for us. This, I think, is borne out by the action of the submarine commander. Had the meeting been a casual one, I claim that he would have waved us a greeting, and after ascertaining that we were not in trouble, would have left us to go our way. He did nothing of the sort.

Simultaneously with the emergence of the conning tower, the lid, or hatch, or whatever they call the thing on top, was thrown back, and a jauntily capped head appeared. "Ahoy, there," yelled a voice.

"Ahoy nothing," snapped Steeley in my ear. "Sit tight, I'm off."

"Hi! Heave to, there," came the voice. "I'm coming aboard. . . ."

The rest of the sentence was drowned by the roar of the engine as Steeley opened up, and the next second we were racing across the water, leaving a trail of churning white foam behind us.

That submarine crew must have been a well-drilled crowd, for they got a shot at us before we were clear of the water. The shell, which I imagine was fired from a small quick-firer, ricocheted past without touching us, and then we were in the air, swinging up in a steep climbing turn to safety. By leaning over the side and craning my neck I could still see the submarine, now well clear of the water, with several members of the crew on deck. And that was that. Five minutes later it was a mere speck on the horizon, and if we gave it any further thought it was merely to express an opinion as to how it came to be there.

How it was that neither Steeley nor myself remembered the wireless equipment it would certainly carry, I don't know. But we didn't. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that we did not realize its deadly possibilities. Anyway, the first intimation we had of its uncanny power came as we were roaring back up the Channel with the Isle of Wight lying like a faint blue shadow over our port bow.

I saw three flying boats first, and thinking they were simply carrying out exercises from a base on the south coast, gave them no more than a passing glance. But presently my eyes returned to them, and I saw that they had altered their course to a line that would intercept ours a few miles farther on. A moment later, happening to glance behind, I saw three single-seater land machines—Hawker Furies, to be precise—hard on our trail. They were a

good deal lower than we were, but they were climbing fast, and obviously had the "legs" of us. With a sudden shock of understanding I grasped the position, and guessed how it had come about. So the situation, from being all plain sailing, became very critical in a few seconds, and I lost no time in communicating it to Steeley, who was leaning back comfortably in his seat contentedly munching a piece of chocolate that he had taken from a pigeon-hole under the instrument board. He merely raised his eyebrows and glanced through the windscreen to confirm what I had told him, at the same time pushing the throttle wide open.

"I'm afraid you're right," he murmured presently, as the machines with the red, white, and blue markings began to close in. "How far do you think we are away from that bank of cloud?" He nodded towards a heavy layer of cirro-cumulus that lay athwart our bows, the tail end of the storm-clouds I had observed on the outward journey.

"Ten miles for a rough guess," I replied.

"Then we shall just about do it," he declared.

"We might outmanœuvre the flying boats, but the fighters will catch up with us in a couple of minutes, and if they mean business it will be hard to shake them off," I answered doubtfully.

"I quite agree, but it's our only chance. You're not suggesting that I should glide down and land, are you?"

"Certainly not," I answered hotly.

"Then sit tight and watch the fun," he told me, pushing the joystick forward.

As our nose went down the needle of the air-speed indicator crept slowly round the dial until it came to rest on the 220 mark, but the inevitable loss of height had brought us down to the level of the Furies, and once on even keel they began to overtake us rapidly. The manœuvre had occupied perhaps two minutes, but in that time we had covered half the distance that separated us from the cloud curtain which was now our only hope of salvation.

A few seconds later a Fury swept up alongside with the pilot making emphatic gestures with his left hand. I knew what he meant. So did Steeley. He was telling us to go down, but Steeley took not the slightest notice. Another Fury roared past us in a steep dive, pulled up in a beautiful stalling turn, and then raced straight across our nose. Again the meaning was obvious, but still Steeley ignored it.

The flying boats passed across our stern. They had just failed to intercept us, and as they were clearly slower than we were, there was nothing more to be feared from them. But the Furies were well able to take care of us, or so it

seemed. The leader turned slowly towards us, and I knew instinctively what was coming. There came a series of jabbing orange flashes from the side of its fuselage and a streak of white smoke shot across our bows.

"That's a fair warning," I said quietly, although my heart was palpitating painfully. "Next time he'll aim at us."

"How far are we away from the cloud?" enquired Steeley calmly. There might not have been another machine in sight for all the anxiety he betrayed.

"A mile."

"Then here goes!"

I should like to draw a veil over the next few seconds. It was many years since I had flown, and although I had, during the last few hours, once more become accustomed to the sensation, my stomach now resented violently the indignity to which it was subjected. Steeley began by shoving the stick forward hard for speed, and then pulled up in a swerving turn that presented a target just about as difficult to hit as it is possible to imagine. All three Furies came at us, of course, but before they could bring their sights to bear we were side-slipping down with our wings at right angles to the earth. Down came our pursuers, but Steeley was watching and waiting for them. He levelled out, pulled up as if he was going to loop, but half rolled off the top and then plunged down again, swerving like a falling leaf towards the cloud. Long wraiths of white mist swirled past us; I heard something smash through the structure behind us with a vicious *whang*, and then everything grew dark as the cloud enfolded us in its clammy heart.

Blind, or instrument, flying was of course unknown in my day, but I had heard of it, and was now to see a demonstration of it. Had I been at the joystick the machine would have been out of control in a couple of minutes, for the cloud was not merely dense; it was so opaque as to appear to press on us. It appeared as a solid wall in front against which we must, the next second, collide, but always it moved forward just in front of our nose. I lost all idea of direction, time, and space.

But Steeley was quite unconcerned. He merely leaned forward a trifle with his sombre eyes on the little row of dials on the instrument board, now aglow in the eerie light of a concealed lamp.

According to the clock we flew in these conditions, without speaking a word, for forty minutes, but without an instrument to mark the progress of time I should have been prepared to swear that we were in that cloud for four hours. Never have I known a flight to seem so long. Then quite suddenly, the mist grew light about us and we flashed out into the open. Below us was the sea; above us, blue sky; ahead lay another bank of cloud.

But Steeley was evidently as tired of flying in "visibility nil" conditions as I was, and he at once cut the throttle and swept down to get below the cloud. There was no sign of our pursuers. Nor did I expect that there would be.

We reached the base of the cloud with our altimeter registering fifteen hundred feet, and to my intense satisfaction I saw a long colourless coastline in front of us not many miles away.

"Holland?" I queried.

"I hope so," replied Steeley with a faint smile. "If it isn't, I don't know what it is."

As a matter of fact he was quite right, and ten minutes later saw us pushing our way between great masses of broken cloud over a flat, uninteresting-looking country divided into sections by long straight canals. Once I saw a big town far away to the south. Steeley saw it too, and I saw his lips form the word "Rotterdam." He at once turned sharply to the north and began watching the ground closely.

"Keep your eyes open for a windmill with a white-painted roof," he said tersely. "I know pretty well where it is, but I haven't actually seen it, so it may take a little time to find."

I saw plenty of windmills, but none had a white roof, and in the end it was Steeley who spotted it and pointed it out to me. It stood on the edge of a large, emerald-green field, and almost before I was prepared for it, our wheels, which had, of course, been lowered, were rumbling across the thick turf.

"Well, I'm not sorry that's over," I remarked, standing up and stretching as we ran to a stop quite close to the windmill.

"Get away! Why not be honest and admit that you thoroughly enjoyed it," bantered Steeley.

"I never did enjoy being shot at, not even in my youth," I declared. "With the approach of old age——"

"Rot," laughed Steeley. "It relieved the monotony. But here we are. Are you coming with me?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm due to meet Dale during the next two or three hours on that road over there beside the dyke that runs by the mill—which, by the way, is empty."

"I thought it looked a bit dilapidated," I suggested.

"Well, there was no sense in running the risk of having questions asked by fixing on an occupied one, was there?"

"None whatever. Yes, I'll come with you by all means. I expect Brian will want to come, too; he's probably a bit bored with sitting alone in the cabin. Are you going to leave the prop ticking over?"

"No fear. No use wasting petrol. Besides, we may be some hours if Dale has had any bad luck on the road. We can pass the time by refuelling the machine."

"How?"

"A part of Dale's programme was to get a stock of petrol laid in for us. He said he'd put it inside the mill. We shall find it in two-gallon cans, I expect. I had to make provision for petrol, or else how on earth did you think we were going to get back to England? Without papers of any sort we're in no condition to land at any recognized airport. As it is, we shall have to wait until dusk before we dare cross the English coast."

"Quite," I said rather lamely, for the more I saw of Steeley's organization, the more apparent it became that he must have devoted hours of thought to the perfecting of details. Every contingency seemed to have been provided for; nothing was overlooked.

We taxied up to the windmill, switched off, and then jumped to the ground, where Brian joined us from the cabin. There was little to be said, so we walked over to the building. Steeley unlocked the door with a latchkey he took from his pocket—another example of his foresight—and we entered. There was no need to search for the petrol. There it was, facing us, a great stack of two-gallon cans, just as Steeley had anticipated.

"I'll tell you what, Brian," he said. "I think we ought to keep a sharp look-out both for Dale and for casual passers-by. Do you mind going upstairs and keeping an eye on the road? You'll probably find a window that commands a view of the countryside for miles."

"Good enough," agreed Brian, and started off up a rickety, cobweb-festooned ladder that disappeared through a trapdoor in the gloomy vault above, while Steeley and I set to work to carry the petrol out to the machine. When we had made two or three trips he commenced to fill the tanks while I kept him supplied from the dump. It took us about three-quarters of an hour to do the job, and when we had finished there was still no sign of Dale. Steeley, with his never-failing eye for precaution, moved the machine round so that it faced the open field ready for a quick take-off, should it be necessary, and then, with Steeley carrying the unusual jewel case under his arm, we walked slowly along a grass-covered track to the road.

Another hour passed, and I could see that Steeley was beginning to get impatient.

“I don’t want to have to take off in the dark, if I can prevent it,” he began, when he was interrupted by a shout from Brian, whose head protruded from a small, square window about half-way up the side of the mill.

“Car coming,” he called crisply.

“Good,” answered Steeley, rubbing his hands. “That must be him.”

And it was. All the same, I was hardly prepared for the whirlwind way in which he drew up. Indeed, I sprang back in a fright as the long racing car screamed to a dry-skid standstill. The door was flung open and an immaculate figure in a blue-serge suit jumped out. I saw his keen brown eyes flash on me, but Steeley answered the unspoken question.

“All right; friend of mine,” he said shortly.

“That’s good enough for me,” smiled Dale. “Sorry I can’t stay, boys, but the cops aren’t far behind. They frisked me when I landed, but they still can’t believe that I haven’t got the sparklers. I may have shown them my heels and given them the slip, but it’s no use taking chances. Did you get the goods, Delaroy?”

Steeley handed over the box I had retrieved from the sea. “If you put them in this they’re still there,” he said. “I haven’t opened it.”

“Swell,” grinned Dale. “They’re inside. Thanks. You’ll be hearing from me; same address in Paris, I suppose?”

Steeley nodded. He was about to say something, but Brian’s voice cut in, and thereafter things happened swiftly.

“ ’Ware car,” he called shrilly.

Dale flung a startled glance upwards to where Brian’s head protruded from the window. So did we all, in fact, for in my interest in the new-comer I had forgotten all about him.

“He’s my scout,” explained Steeley briefly.

“O.K. I’ll be going. You’d better do the same,” advised Dale. And then he did a remarkable thing. At least, it struck me as remarkable, although really it was but another example of the preparedness with which those who move outside the law do their work. Dale opened the back door of the car and pulled out a length of coco-nut matting. It was heavy, and he staggered under its weight as, regardless of the dust that smothered his suit, he unrolled it quickly across the road behind his car.

“What on earth are you doing?” asked Steeley curiously.

“Only giving my porcupine an airing,” grinned Dale.

It was a strip of ordinary matting, about twenty feet long by forty inches wide, for a guess, but as he unrolled it its secret was revealed. Throughout its length and breadth it bristled with gleaming steel spikes; horse nails, I think they were. The reason was plain enough. The tyre did not exist that could cross such a frightful obstacle without being punctured with as many holes as a sieve.

While I was still staring Dale jumped back into the driving seat. “So long,” he called. The car shot forward and was soon kicking up a cloud of dust as it sped down the road.

Steeley jerked my sleeve. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s be going. The police car—if it is a police car—will stop here, that’s certain. We’d better get into the air before they start snooping around and see us.”

We hurried down the short track that led to the far side of the windmill where we had left the machine. In passing, I thrust my head into the doorway to tell Brian to hurry along, but bolted out again as a cry broke from Steeley’s lips. It was the only time that I had ever heard him utter an ejaculation of dismay, and I looked round for the reason. It was not hard to find. The field in which the machine was parked was full of sheep. There were hundreds of them, or seemed to be. They crowded about the machine and drifted aimlessly in all directions, a mob of living obstructions. To say that I was shaken is to put it mildly, and Steeley’s next words did nothing to help me regain my composure.

“There’s a lesson for you, Tubby,” he said quietly. “Five minutes ago I would have been prepared to swear that I had left nothing to chance; that nothing could prevent us from getting into the air. I didn’t think of sheep. How could any ordinary mortal expect such a thing? There’s the gate they came in by, over there. Either it was open when we landed, in which case we ought to have seen it, or someone has opened it since; not that it matters now which it was. We’ve got two minutes to clear a lane through that mutton or we’re sunk.”

Brian came running up, and had the situation been less serious I could have laughed at the expression on his face when he saw the sheep. “Oh, great Scott,” he groaned. “Where the dickens——”

“Never mind where they came from, let’s see about getting rid of them,” snapped Steeley, as two violent explosions in quick succession from the direction of the road announced that the tyres of the police car had made the acquaintance of Dale’s “porcupine.”

“He ought to have laid that thing across the road farther along; we were fools to let him put it down so close to us,” I protested.

"Quite right, but it's a bit late to think of that; I was so surprised that I didn't think of it, and that's a fact," confessed Steeley.

"But the Dutch police have nothing on us, have they?"

"Maybe not, but you evidently don't know continental police. They're always happy to clap anyone in gaol, particularly a foreigner, on any pretext, and make enquiries afterwards. Our actions during the last few hours wouldn't stand the spot-light, as you'll admit," he continued. "Look, Tubby; you and Brian had better start moving these animals. If you do it quietly the police may not notice anything amiss. If they do, and you see them coming towards us, make for the machine wherever it is."

I set about the task with far more hope than confidence, for of all the brainless creatures in the world, surely the sheep is the most idiotic. To make matters worse, out of the corner of my eye I could see five uniformed men, who had got out of the stranded car, watching us. I tried to ignore them, concentrating my efforts on moving the sheep to one side in the most natural manner. Brian did the same, and to some extent we were successful, although the noise was indescribable. In a nightmare of baas and bleats we got the flock on the move towards the gate through which they had evidently come, and just as I thought we were going to be successful in clearing the lot, the police, who presumably had decided it was time to investigate, with one accord began to walk briskly towards us. Steeley must have seen them, too, for the engine came to life with a roar and the sound set both the police and the sheep running. It set me running, too.

By this time I was a good fifty yards away from the aeroplane, and Brian was even farther away, but actuated by the same thought, we both turned and raced back towards our only hope of escape. The last few yards was just a wild scramble. The machine had begun to move forward and I took a flying header at the open cabin doorway. Somehow I managed to land inside, but before I could get up the breath was knocked out of my body as Brian landed on top of me. Desperately I flung him off and tried to close the door. To my horror I saw the sheep, like the fools they are—for Heaven knows there was plenty of grass on the other side of the field—pouring back across the path we had cleared. The noise of the engine seemed to have sent them wild with fright, but they hadn't even the sense to run away from it.

How Steeley missed them I don't know, and how the undercarriage stood up to the strain of our swerving run baffles my imagination. Forty yards ahead the sheep met across our track in a milling press, and it seemed incredible that the machine could lift in time to clear them. Yet somehow we managed it, but it must have been a close thing. I had a fleeting impression of a mass of whirling wool, dotted with staring eyes, and then the bumping

of the undercarriage ceased. We were off. For a second or two the machine seemed to hang, tail down, as if she were going to stall, but then the threshing propeller picked us up and we climbed steadily into the air.

I flopped down and shuddered, for my system was unaccustomed to such shocks. Brian, the young fool, was actually laughing, as if the whole thing had been a joke. Maybe I should have done the same thing myself at his age, but as it was, my imagination gave me too vivid a picture of what the result of a stall would have been, and it was not in the least funny. It was anything but that.

Brian reached out and closed the door. I could not see the sheep, or the police, and not having the slightest desire to see them I crawled through and got into my seat next to Steeley. He threw me a ghost of a smile, and then resumed his business of flying the machine.

In five minutes we were at three thousand feet, flying on a south-westerly course, with flat, grey-green fields skimming along below us. It was still broad daylight, and I remembered what Steeley had said about not returning to England until dusk.

"Where are you making for?" I asked.

"Home," was the brief reply.

"But it's still light," I told him.

"I can't help that. We daren't risk a landing in Holland after what has happened. In any case, it will be pretty well dusk by the time we reach England, and as we haven't enough petrol to cruise about indefinitely, we shall have to take a chance."

And that was that. In a quarter of an hour a long, dark-blue strip came into view ahead. It was the North Sea, and in a few minutes we were over it, with the drab, uninteresting coastline fading away behind us.

CHAPTER VI

A FLIGHT AND A FIGHT

IT was about six o'clock when the English coast came into sight, and soon I was able to make out the Thames estuary a little to the north of the place where, if we held on our present course, we should cross.

Steeley held straight on; it was clear that he intended making a bee-line for our home aerodrome at Haylands; and so it transpired—up to a point. He veered a little as we approached the beach between Sandwich and Deal, in order, as before, to create the impression that we were merely flying down the coast, but once we were over the land he turned sharply to the right, and headed due west for that part of Surrey in which our base was situated.

I was disappointed to see that the weather had become very threatening again. Great masses of heavy cloud were marching eastward on a stiff breeze; some were as low as a thousand feet, but others towered up to ten thousand or more, and as we were flying at five thousand, we were in the thick of them, so that more often than not the ground was hidden from view. Once I heard the ominous mutter of thunder above the drone of the engine, and the machine rocked as the bumps increased in severity.

It was shortly after we had left Canterbury under our tail that things began to happen, things that not only altered our preconceived plans, but put an entirely new construction on the business in which we were engaged. They began when a dark-painted amphibian monoplane, very much like our own, shot out of the cloud a little below us and on our left front, and raced nose down for a mile or two before disappearing into another cloud. I was so taken aback that for a moment I was half inclined to believe that what I had seen had been our shadow on the face of the cloud, but a glance at the position of the sun soon knocked this theory on the head.

I glanced at Steeley. His face wore the most extraordinary expression. He did not look at me, but remained staring at the spot where the dark monoplane had disappeared. Then, suddenly, he seized my right arm with his left hand in a vice-like grip. "Look!" he cried in a strained voice.

Following the direction of his eyes I saw a silver-painted two-seater bearing the red, white and blue roundel of the Royal Air Force on its fuselage, streaking nose down for the place where the monoplane had disappeared. A second or two later it had plunged into the cloud at almost

precisely the same spot, and I heard the note of our own engine change as Steeley thrust the throttle wide open and began to climb.

"What's going on?" I asked anxiously.

Steeley's lips were pressed together in a straight line. "I don't know," he said harshly; "but it's something unpleasant, or I'm a Dutchman. You noticed the gun in the back seat of that Hart?"

"A Hart, was it?"

"Yes; did you see the fellow crouching over his gun?"

"I saw something like that."

"He was after the monoplane."

"Well——?"

Steeley did not reply. We surmounted the cloud in which the two machines had disappeared, and the view beyond lay clear in front of us. Towering masses of greyish cloud, with deep indigo shadows, rose up like the sides of a giant basin round an area of depression the bottom of which was lost in gloom. Racing across the centre of it were the two machines, and we were just in time to see the last act of an unbelievable drama.

The Hart had caught up with the monoplane and was, judging by what followed, shooting at it—or threatening to shoot. Like a streak of black lightning the monoplane whirled round, and I distinctly saw the flash of a gun over its nose. The Hart reared up like a stricken horse and fell over on to its back. A spark of brilliant orange fire burst from its fuselage, and a tongue of flame licked along the side. There was a burst of black smoke, and something seemed to break away from it, something that fluttered wildly for a moment and then opened out into the form of a large white mushroom that floated slowly earthwards. But there was only one! With the muscles of my throat threatening to choke me, I watched for the other, for obviously there had been two men in the machine that was now plunging downward wrapped in flames from end to end. But it never came, and the debris fell, still burning, into the clouds, leaving only a plume of black, oily smoke to prove that the horror we had witnessed had really happened.

Dragging my eyes away I saw that the monoplane was also going down, and what was more, it appeared to be in difficulties. Steeley, with his face as white as a sheet, shoved the nose of our machine down to follow, and under the impetus of full throttle we could not have been more than a quarter of a mile behind it when it vanished into the clouds.

I glanced at the altimeter and saw that we were at two thousand feet. What would Steeley do? He didn't hesitate. The noise of the engine died away as he cut the throttle, and I caught hold of the side of the cockpit as the

clinging vapour enfolded us. Down—down we went, the altimeter needle slowly following our descent. At five hundred feet we came out into a dim grey world, just in time to see the end.

We had emerged from the clouds over a wide expanse of thinly wooded country which I suspected was the outskirts of Ashdown Forest. For the most part the ground was covered with bracken and gorse, from which here and there rose clumps of spruce and fir, although a little farther on I could see open grass-land and cultivated fields. Towards these the monoplane was now steering an erratic course. At first glance I thought that the pilot would just succeed in reaching them, but in a few moments it became clear that he was faced with a hopeless task.

He never came out of the glide. He held straight on as if he was going to land on an open aerodrome, and the result was a foregone conclusion. The machine stopped with horrid suddenness, as if its progress had been arrested by an invisible hand. The tail swung up and over. Splinters of wood and strips of canvas whirled through the air in all directions, and I could almost fancy that I could hear the sickening crash.

Steeley did not look at me. He opened the throttle and tore down over the wreck at a height that could not have been more than ten feet, while we both looked down with horrified eyes. There was no movement to indicate that the unlucky pilot still lived.

In a couple of minutes we were down on the field for which the unknown pilot had been making, and turning about in our own length, we came taxi-ing back, tail up, to the nearest point to the crash that we could reach.

I was out first, but Steeley was not far behind, while Brian, clamouring to know what it was all about—for he had seen nothing—brought up the rear. To my infinite relief I saw that the wreck had not taken fire, as I feared it would, but I caught my breath as I picked my way through the shattered remains of the monoplane.

We had no difficulty in finding the pilot; he lay in the middle of it, still with the safety belt around him. His eyes were open, and to my astonishment they moved towards us as we approached noisily. I was still more amazed when he spoke, but a little trickle of blood from a corner of his mouth told its own grim story.

“All right chaps, take it easy,” he said in quite a normal voice. “I shan’t run away.” He moistened his lips, and then tried to wipe them with his sleeve, but the effort was too much for him.

"Are you badly hurt?" I asked, rather foolishly, perhaps, but to tell the truth, I didn't know what on earth to say.

"I've got a bullet through the lungs," he replied calmly; "so I've got about ten minutes left, I suppose. That was a snappy spot of shooting of yours."

"We didn't shoot you," Steeley told him quickly. "We were in another machine and saw the whole thing, though. You got the Hart that was after you."

"Got it?"

"Yes—a flamer."

"Good God! Then it's as well I'm going—topsides."

"You talk as if you'd been in the Service," I muttered, as we lifted him carefully and carried him to a softer bed amid the bracken.

"I was R.F.C.," he said. "I remember you. You're Tubby Wilde, aren't you? I met you once in Amiens——"

"Don't talk," cut in Steeley. "Lie still; we can't very well carry you, but we can soon fetch a doctor and an ambulance——"

"No, don't do that," interrupted the dying man. "I should be gone before you got back, anyway. I'd much rather tell you something. Please listen; I haven't long."

There was something so dreadfully appealing in the words that a lump came into my throat as I knelt beside him. The others squatted down on the far side. It was a grim scene, for by now it was nearly dark, and the very atmosphere seemed charged with tragedy.

"You remember me, Wilde, don't you?" asked the stricken pilot anxiously.

"Vaguely," I admitted, racking my memory.

"Norton's my name. Twenty Squadron. I gave you a lift home one night."

"Why, yes, so you did; of course I remember," I cried. "But never mind about the past. How did this come about?"

"You remember some talk in the papers a month or so ago about a mysterious black aeroplane?"

Steeley threw me a swift glance. "Yes, I do," he answered quickly.

"Well, this is it. I was the pilot."

The expression on Steeley's face would have been comical in less harrowing circumstances, and mine may have been the same for all I know.

“Really! You astonish me,” he replied.

“Well, it’s a fact,” went on Norton.

“But what were you doing? Why the mystery?” asked Steeley.

Norton hesitated. “Gun running,” he said awkwardly. “Nasty business, but it was that or nothing, and I’ve got a wife in a sanatorium. I was a prisoner at the end of the War, and while I was in Germany I got to know an interpreter chap. One day I met him in London. He put up a proposition to me, and the upshot of it was I contracted to fly certain equipment from England to Hertzovnia.”

“Where’s that?” I asked.

“A little State just the other side of Germany. Big countries all round, all with covetous eyes on it. Impossible to get arms in except by air. Brunheim—fellow I knew—was agent. Bought stuff over here, consigned it to a friendly country, but we opened cases at the docks and sent the stuff in small parcels—to the place where I kept the machine. They provided that. I got expenses paid, but my fee—a thousand pounds—wasn’t due until the last load was delivered. There’s only one more lot to take—tough luck——”

Norton broke off. I wiped a little bubble of red froth from his lips with my handkerchief; it was obvious that he was nearing the end.

“Where’s your hangar?” I asked.

“You’ll find it marked on the map—and all the other particulars—in my breast pocket. Take it—take everything—when you go. Just leave one of my cards—so that—well, you know.”

“Is this stuff, this last load, at the hangar now?” asked Steeley.

“Yes, it’s waiting to be taken across. Seventy machine-gun locks. Without them the stuff I have taken is no use.”

“Where do you deliver it?”

“You’ll find—place marked—on my map,” gasped the dying pilot. “Brunheim will be there. Tell him—about this. He’ll pay you—cash due to me. Give it—to my—wife.” His head lolled to one side.

“Oughtn’t we to fetch a doctor?” I asked Steeley, *sotto voce*, for it seemed awful to sit and just watch the poor fellow die.

Steeley shook his head. “No use,” he whispered. “In a couple of minutes he will be gone.”

There was silence for a moment. “I didn’t ask you chaps if you’d take the stuff,” panted Norton.

“That’s all right, old lad; we’ll see it through, don’t you worry,” Steeley assured him. “And well see that your wife gets the cash.”

"That's grand. And tell—the boys—in the Squadron—machine I shot down—sorry," came a feeble whisper.

"Yes, we'll tell them," I promised.

"Fine—cheerio, chaps." A queer smile crept over Norton's face; he seemed to be looking beyond me, and I half turned to see what it was, but all I could see was the black silhouette of the drooping trees against the storm-torn sky.

It was the end. Norton didn't speak again. Presently Steeley struck a match and bent over the still form. "He's gone," he said quietly. Then he turned to Brian, who was blowing his nose violently. "Blow away, my lad," he said. "Never mind us; we've seen it before, haven't we, Tubby?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said, in a dead sort of voice. "Well, and what's the next move?"

"We'd better get back."

"And leave him here?"

"We can't do anything else."

"I'm not very keen on flying at the moment."

"It's quicker than walking."

"Yes, I suppose it is," I admitted, consoling myself with the thought that we hadn't very far to go.

Steeley bent for a moment over the dead pilot and groped in the pocket under the flying jacket. He rose, stuffing some papers into his own pocket. "Yes, let's get back, and we'll think of a way of getting word to the authorities about this without betraying ourselves. Come on."

"How do you figure this business out?" I asked, as we made our way back to the machine.

"Plain as a pikestaff," answered Steeley without hesitation. "I saw through it all from the beginning. When we left Holland the Dutch police 'phoned through to Scotland Yard and advised them. The Yard commandeered a Service aircraft, perhaps several, to keep a look-out for us. Poor Norton was just in front of us, returning with an empty machine from Hertzovnia, after delivering a consignment of stuff, and he was mistaken for us. His machine is a product of the same works as mine, so the mistake is understandable. Indirectly we were responsible for his death. I'm beginning to see daylight in one or two other things that have puzzled me, too. I wondered how on earth the police had got on the track of my machine—the newspaper story. It wasn't mine at all. It was Norton they had seen. It was Norton who that chap Wilkins was after when he brought Wayne up to our

place, but it never occurred to me to suspect the existence of another unregistered aircraft. It's all very upsetting, because to-day's business is likely to have far-reaching results, and I shall be glad to get back to study the situation in its new aspect."

"And so shall I," I declared emphatically, as we reached the machine and climbed into our seats.

I held my breath as we took off, but I need not have feared, for, as I realized when we were in the air, Steeley had had plenty of recent practice in night-flying.

In a few minutes we were over Haylands, and Steeley pointed to where a green light glowed among the out-buildings.

"That's the all-clear signal," he said. "Gubbins attends to it when I'm out after dark. If anyone is about, or if for any reason it is unsafe to land, he lights a red lamp."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for that," I muttered. "I've had about all I can stand for one day."

Steeley did not reply. He cut the throttle, glided in to his usual clean landing, and then taxied up to the shed. He switched off, and we all stepped out on to the dew-soaked turf. Steeley felt in his pocket, took out a cigarette-case, and offered it to me. "Have a cigarette," he said.

I reached out my hand, but I did not take the cigarette. Instead, I sprang round with my heart in my mouth as, with a rush of heavy footsteps, a number of dark figures closed in on us.

"Don't move, anybody," snapped a harsh familiar voice.

There was a moment's silence that was broken by Steeley. "Why, if it isn't Wayne," he said calmly.

II

A figure detached itself from the group and approached us menacingly.

Steeley lit a cigarette, flicked the match away, and turned towards the police inspector. "Thinking of taking a course of night-flying for the 'B' Licence?" he asked evenly.

"Delaroy, it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you," answered Wayne crisply. "This is a murder job," he added quietly.

Steeley stared in well-feigned astonishment. "Really, Wayne," he murmured. "If you go on like this I shall begin seriously to doubt your sanity. Do I understand you to mean that you are accusing me of *murder*?"

"You do!"

"Purely as a matter of interest, who have I murdered?"

"Flight-Lieutenant Dayborne, of the Royal Air Force."

Steeley started. "Ah, I begin to get the drift of things," he declared, "Was Dayborne one of the crew of a Hawker Hart, flying over Ashdown Forest about three-quarters of an hour ago?"

"He was, and I arrest you——"

"Not so fast, my dear fellow," protested Steeley. "Surely you don't think that I was the pilot of the monoplane that fired on the Hart, do you?"

"I'm certain you were."

"But dash it all, man; why should I shoot at a Hart, or any other machine for that matter?"

"I saw you!"

"*Saw me?*"

"I saw your machine, which comes to the same thing. I was in the back seat of the Hart, and was lucky enough to get out with my parachute. Dayborne couldn't get clear. He was killed."

"What a shocking tragedy," murmured Steeley. "As it happens, I can help you, for I saw the whole thing," he added.

"I should say you did," replied Wayne grimly.

"Don't be a fool, Wayne," went on Steeley angrily. "I can understand the mistake, because I happened to be flying a machine not unlike the one that did the shooting, but as for shooting at you myself——"

"All right, that's enough," interrupted Wayne impatiently. "Perhaps you'll be able to prove that to a jury."

"That should be quite a simple matter," observed Steeley casually. "I'd prove it to you if you weren't so infernally conclusive."

A policeman turned his torch on us, and in its beam I could see Wayne looking at Steeley in an odd manner. "Well, I'm not stopping you," he said.

"Tell me," asked Steeley. "Was it you or Dayborne who shot at the monoplane?"

"It was me."

"Then you'll be able to tell the story to a coroner."

"What are you getting at?"

"You killed your man—or I think you did."

Wayne stared incredulously. "What do you mean?" He muttered the words almost, it seemed, against his will.

“The monoplane went down when you did, and crashed badly in Ashdown Forest. I can’t think the pilot could have survived.”

“These lies won’t help you,” sneered Wayne.

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. “Years ago there were times when you tried my patience sorely, Wayne,” he said evenly. “And you still do. As you rightly say, how could such a lie help me—if it was a lie? Use your brains, man. I tell you, the monoplane crashed. I was cruising in the vicinity and saw it all; if you like I’ll describe every phase of the fight. When the pilot of the monoplane got you, I naturally pursued him and, as I have said, he piled up trying to get down in Ashdown Forest. It is quite certain that the machine is still there, even if the pilot isn’t. I should have made a landing at the nearest village to inform the police but for the fact that it was nearly dark. As it was, I lost my way, and I have been beetling about for half an hour trying to find my way home. If you hadn’t held me up, I should have been on the ’phone and the police would have known all about it by now. For Heaven’s sake don’t let us waste any more time in case the pilot, poor beggar, is still alive.”

Steeley’s manner was convincing, there was no doubt of that; chiefly, I suppose, because he was telling the truth, or nearly the truth, and it was clear that even Wayne was impressed. “Let’s go and ring up from the house,” continued Steeley. “You can put your handcuffs on me if you think I’m likely to run away. After all, you can still get confirmation of what I’ve told you from the police at Forest Row.”

“No need for that. I can send a couple of my own men; we’ve got a car here.”

“So much the better.”

“Perhaps you’ll describe to them the exact spot where the crash took place?”

“Of course.”

Wayne called two of his men forward, and they listened while Steeley explained the position of the crash and showed them the exact spot on his map. They departed at once, while the rest of us trooped up to the house.

“Where did you get that machine you’re flying?” asked Wayne bluntly, as we sat down in the lounge to await the report of the two men.

“I bought it, of course.”

“When?”

“To-day. I’ve just brought it home.”

“Where from?”

"A private aerodrome near Burnham, in Buckinghamshire."

"Who did you buy it from?"

"Fellow named Meulemeester. Don't know what nationality he is—probably Dutch. The machine is German, of course, but Meulemeester has been flying in Holland, which is why the kite still wears Dutch markings. He had to go abroad at short notice, so he was compelled to dispose of the machine as best he could. We wanted one here, for joyriding, and as this one was going at a job price, I snatched at it, and went over to his place this afternoon to bring it home. I found it a bit tricky on controls at first," continued Steeley, and then plunged into a maze of technical details that made my head whirl.

I knew what he was doing. He was simply out-talking Wayne, either to prevent him from asking embarrassing questions, or else to make him thoroughly sick of the whole subject. By the time he had finished Wayne was looking painfully bored, and it was evident that the constructional advantages of the machine that Steeley had been at pains to enumerate left him unmoved.

Steeley's story was quite a feasible one, and even knowing the truth, I could find no flaw in it, unless, of course, Wayne asked about Meulemeester, who was obviously a fictional character. But it never came to that. A policeman came in and whispered something in Wayne's ear. I fancy he had made a thorough search of the machine, and had failed to find anything incriminating. There was no gun on board, nor was there any mounting to which one could be attached, which all helped to prove our story. When the fellow had gone out again Steeley adroitly switched the conversation to the old days in France, and was still expounding on combat tactics when the telephone rang.

Wayne answered it, and I saw his face change as he listened. He remained with the receiver to his ear for some time and then, with a curt reply or two in the affirmative, he hung it up, and rising, reached for his cap.

"I shall have to be going," he announced. "You're quite right; the machine's there. Pilot's dead as a doornail, they say. Bullet through the chest. Sorry I butted in as I did, Delaroy," he went on half apologetically. "But you can see easily enough how I came to make the mistake. Queer coincidence that the only two machines alike in perhaps the whole country, both amphibian monoplanes, should be flying within a mile or two of each other at such a critical time, wasn't it?"

"Remarkable," agreed Steeley. "Naturally, you weren't to know there were two. All the same, you will realize that I was justified in being peeved

to think that you thought me capable of shooting at anyone—one of our own fellows, particularly, and if I was a bit short with you I take back what I said."

"Oh, that's all right," replied Wayne gruffly. "Let's say no more about it," he added, as he made for the door. "I'll look in again and see you some time, if I can find time."

"Do. Oh, and by the way, Wayne. Keep me out of the inquest, if you can. I'll turn up if I must, of course, but it's a sticky business and——"

"Quite! I'll see what I can do."

With a parting nod Wayne disappeared into the night, and a few seconds later we heard his car going down the drive.

No one spoke a word until the sound had faded away; then Steeley reached for the cigarettes.

"This business of mine seems to be getting into a bit of a tangle," he murmured ruefully.

CHAPTER VII

COUNCIL OF WAR

THE matter was serious; it was no use pretending otherwise, and Steeley made no attempt to minimize the dangers of our position.

"I see it all now," he said thoughtfully. "It was the coming and going of *Norton's* machine that has thrown the spanner into the gears of my organization. He must have been careless. It was he who attracted Wilkins's notice, and sent Wayne scurrying back here the other night. In fact, things must have been buzzing to a far greater extent than I was aware. How was I to know? I went about things quietly enough, yet there was poor Norton, fairly howling for trouble, and unwittingly throwing suspicion on me. Wayne is in a quandary now. He has gone, it's true, but don't imagine for one moment that he has put us out of his mind. No fear. We've cleared ourselves for the present, but he knows—by instinct, if nothing else—that something funny is going on here. He'll watch us as a first soloist watches his air-speed indicator. I'll bet he's sitting somewhere at this moment, sucking that foul pipe of his, trying to work things out; trying to work out the connection between us and Norton in all probability. Whatever conclusions he arrives at, one thing is certain: he'll keep his eye on us. And that being so, we'll have to be very very careful. It's a pity, and unfortunate for you, because up to the very moment that you arrived on the scene things went along swimmingly." Steeley tossed his cigarette-end into the grate.

"Why did Wayne come here to-night?" he continued. "Why should he associate me—or us—with the monoplane that he was chasing? There is only one possible answer to these questions. He came because his suspicions had already been aroused, and there was an odd chance of finding something. Where else could he look? When he saw us land in what must have looked like the same machine, he must have been tickled to death. But he was wrong, and he realizes it now. It was a very lucky thing for us that we followed Norton's machine down and saw it crash, so that we could tell him just where to find it, or we should have been in the cells by now. One thing I don't understand is, why the green light was displayed. Perhaps Gubbins can explain it." He pushed the bell, and the mechanic appeared in the doorway, looking rather worried.

"You rang, sir?" he said respectfully.

"Yes, Gubbins. Why did you show the green light when those fellows were about?"

"I didn't see them, sir," was the instant reply. "They didn't come openly. I didn't see a sign of anyone until after you landed, and then they appeared like magic. Their car must have crept up the lane with its lights off, and then, when they heard you coming, they crept on foot down the aerodrome boundary."

"Ah! That was it, was it? I thought it must have been something like that," murmured Steeley. "All right, Gubbins; it wasn't your fault. That's all."

"Very good, sir," Gubbins withdrew, and Steeley turned to us again.

"Wayne is getting a bit cunning," he observed. "Well, there it is. The question I must ask myself is, is it worth while going on, or is it time to pack up? I'm inclined to think the latter, yet I'm loth to do it, because it means throwing a lot of people out of work."

"How so?" I asked.

Steeley pondered for a moment, and then looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. "Did you ever hear of Madame Montforte?"

"The name seems familiar," I answered. "I seem to have seen it somewhere."

"Over a shop?" he suggested.

"That's right," I agreed. "At Knightsbridge. And unless my memory's at fault there's another in Oxford Street."

"You've got it," smiled Steeley. "There are eighteen Madame Montforte shops in and around London."

"But what in the name of goodness has she got to do with us?" I cried in astonishment.

"More than you think."

"How?"

"I'm Madame Montforte."

The thing was so preposterous that I could only stare. "You're joking," I protested, knowing quite well in my heart that he was not.

"This is no time to joke," went on Steeley seriously. "Can you recall what this good lady sells in her shop? Perhaps that will help you."

"Yes. Women's clothes, I think, stockings and things."

"Precisely!"

The solution struck me all of a heap, as the saying is. "Of course," I gasped, "The shops sell the—er—stuff you bring over."

Steeley nodded, "That's it," he said. "My dear chap, how on earth else do you suppose I could dispose of thousands of pairs of silk stockings, to say nothing of other garments? The greatest difficulty with which I was faced in the early days was to find a market for my wares; one that didn't ask awkward questions. I found one, of sorts, but in the circumstances my prices were cut to zero, so as soon as I had sufficient money I laid down what I hoped was a watertight organization of my own. First of all, operating as a wholesaler, I buy the stuff openly in Paris under the name of Leroy et Cie. I have an office in the Rue St. Paul, run by an ex-service-man whom I can trust. That, by the way, is the address I gave Dale. My agent there packs up the stuff and sends it by road to a depot on the coast, whence it is shipped out to sea in the boat as opportunity occurs. I collect it in the manner you have seen. All the same, to be on the safe side, from time to time he sends consignments direct to my shops through the ordinary channels, which would enable me to show statements, receipts, and books, if ever they were demanded by the authorities. All quite simple and straightforward. One way and another I employ between sixty and seventy ex-service-men, mostly ex-officers who have fallen on evil days, or the women dependants of those who fell in the War. They do well out of it because my profits are good, cutting out distributors and wholesalers as I do. If I pack up, these people will lose their jobs."

"But you found them the jobs, and on your own telling they haven't done badly, so they've no cause for complaint," I protested. "I'm not saying that you *should* give up, but in coming to a decision I don't think the fate of your employees need weigh heavily on your conscience."

"We might compromise," mused Steeley thoughtfully. "I hold a fair stock in France; if I could make one or two quick trips and get it all over here, it would last for some time. As things are, it's risky, of course——"

"What about Norton's stuff?" I reminded him. "We told him we'd see it through."

"I haven't forgotten that," he replied. "I'll do that before I do anything else, in case of accidents; the sooner it's done the better. It wouldn't be a bad plan if we had a look at Norton's map with a view to locating his hide-out over here and his landing-ground in Hertzovnia."

As he spoke he took out a bundle of papers from his pocket, laid them on the table, and turned them over one by one. There were several letters; a written contract signed by Otto Brunheim; some miscellaneous notes, and

two maps, which looked as if they had been drawn by hand on thin tracing paper. One was a large-scale map of the New Forest, and the other, drawn to a much smaller scale, but with a wealth of detail, showed the eastern boundary of Germany and an area beyond. On both maps a tiny red cross had been marked, and around it a number of circles representing distance in miles. In the case of the map of Hertzovnia, two blue pencil lines, converging on each other on the eastern side, had been drawn near the red cross; the area between them had been shaded lightly with the same blue pencil.

"I wonder what that means?" murmured Steeley, laying a finger on the spot.

"Not much use guessing; might mean anything," I replied.

"Well there they are," observed Steeley. "Neither place should be difficult to find."

"You're going to have a shot at it?"

"Yes, I shall have a look round in the morning. Nothing can be done to-night, for obvious reasons."

"What machine will you use?"

"The big one. Wayne knows we've got it, so there's no longer any point in hiding it."

"Suppose he makes enquiries about Meulemeester?"

"They'll take him round in circles. He'll find that he's abroad, and the only way to get in touch with him will be by letter to his bank. The letter will be forwarded and in due course it will reach me."

"Why you?"

"Because I'm Meulemeester."

I looked at him blankly. "*You* are?" I ejaculated.

"Certainly. I bought the machine in the regulation way, under the name of Meulemeester, and then sold it to myself. I have the receipt, with the date left blank so that it could be filled in as required. I shall insert to-day's date on it before I go to bed in case Wayne comes back and asks to see it."

"You seem to be a lot of people in this affair," I suggested.

"I had to be," he replied. "You see, Tubby, there was no one but myself that I could really trust. It may sound complicated, but really it is all very simple. But I think it's time we turned in. You won't be coming to-morrow, I suppose?"

I looked at Brian and he nodded. "We might as well be hung for sheep as lambs—if we're going to hang," I said. "We'll see the game through to the

end now that we've taken a hand."

"That's fine," declared Steeley. "Believe me, I'm grateful. It was a bit lonely, running the show single-handed, until you turned up," he added, and there was a pathetic note in his voice that haunted me until I dropped off to sleep.

. . . . .

It was barely daylight when Gubbins called me, bringing the indispensable cup of tea. I was wide awake instantly, which suggested that my constitution, if nothing else, had profited by the adventures of the last two days. I dressed quickly and hurried down to the shed, to find Steeley and Brian already there. Gubbins and Tasker were just starting up the two Moths.

"What are you doing?" I asked Steeley in surprise. "I thought you had decided to use the big machine."

"Later on, yes," he answered, "but on second thoughts I decided that it would be better to use the Moths to go down to the New Forest. They'll be less likely to attract attention. I'll fly one and Brian can follow in the other. We can divide the load we expect to bring back and transfer it to the amphibian when we get here; Gubbins will have it ready for us."

"That's a good scheme," I acknowledged. "Is it going to be hard to find Norton's place in the Forest?"

"I don't think so; it's marked clearly on the map, and I fancy the house is quite a big one. Blake's Farm is its name, and it stands by a lane which has the appropriate title of Smuggler's Way. I assume that there is a landing-ground or a field where we can get down."

"How do you know all this?"

"I went through Norton's papers thoroughly after you went to bed last night, hoping to find some clue to the meaning of that blue area on the Hertzovnia map."

"Find anything?"

"Nothing. But come on, we've got a long day's work in front of us, so the sooner we start the better."

In a few minutes we were in the air on our way to Hampshire. Steeley took the lead, with me in the spare seat, while Brian took up a position some twenty or thirty yards away on our starboard quarter. The fifty odd miles that separated us from our objective were soon covered, and with the broad expanse of the famous Forest under our wings, I began to search the landscape for the Farm, the finding of which now appeared to present more

difficulties than had been apparent before we started. But in this I was mistaken. Blake's Farm stood out by very reason of its isolation, the object, no doubt, for which it had been chosen, and a winding green lane that meandered across the countryside, unmistakably the Smuggler's Way, took us directly to it. If confirmation were needed, it was supplied by a twenty-five or thirty-acre field that spread out on the south side of the house and, changing its character to heath and gorse on the outskirts, finally lost itself under the green oaks of the Forest proper.

We got down without any trouble and taxied straight up to the house, or rather, its overgrown garden. No one spoke as we climbed out and made our way along a weed-covered path to the front door. Personally, I was conscious of a sense of depression, for I couldn't help thinking of poor Norton, and I fancy the others felt it, too. A few drops of rain fell, which did nothing to improve my spirits, although generally speaking the weather was good, and the rain nothing more than a passing April shower.

As I expected, the door was locked, but Steeley had evidently found a note in Norton's papers about the hiding-place of the key, for without hesitation he lifted a mud-encrusted boot scraper that stood on the step, and picked up the key from underneath it. He opened the door, and we stood for a moment regarding sadly the signs of its recent occupation. The house was unfurnished in the usual sense of the word, but a variety of war-worn camp kit—a bed, table, canvas bath, and so on—had been set up in the living-room, and a quantity of tinned food erupted from a case in the corner.

There was no need to look for Norton's "last load." It lay in the centre of the room near a pile of broken packing-cases—four small, stoutly-sewn canvas bags. He had evidently taken the machine-gun locks out of their wooden cases and put them into canvas bags, either to save weight or make them easier to handle, or both.

Steeley opened the top of one of the bags, looked inside, and closed it again. "This is it," he said shortly. "I don't think we need waste any time here. Let's move on."

This proposal met with my entire approval, for the atmosphere of the place was anything but cheerful, and with the bags in our hands we filed back to the machine, Steeley stopping to lock the door behind him. Three of the bags were placed in the cockpit of Brian's machine, while ours, being the more heavily loaded, carried the other, which I put on the floor between my feet.

We took off, and in a trifle more than half an hour landed again at Haylands with the first part of our mission successfully accomplished.

I had grown so used to seeing Wayne waiting for us that automatically I looked around for him, but to my relief he was not there. Nor had anything been seen of him, so Gubbins, who was waiting on the tarmac, told us. He also informed us that the "Wyvern" was in order, with her tanks filled, so we lost no time in transferring our doubtful cargo.

We snatched a quick breakfast, and then, putting on our full flying kit, for it was by no means warm, we went back to the amphibian. I mention this matter of flying kit because, although we were naturally unaware of it at the time, a good deal was to hang on this apparent detail, as will be seen in due course.

As we got into our seats, Steeley made a remark that echoed my own thoughts, for although I had not mentioned it, the point had already occurred to me.

"I hope we shall be able to refuel at the other end; we can't carry enough petrol for both journeys," he said.

"I was wondering about that myself," I answered. "Furthermore, I doubt if we shall be able to do the double journey in one day; Hertzovnia is a long way away."

"I'm not worrying about that," declared Steeley. "We'll have a shot at it, although it doesn't in the least matter what time we get back. We can land here after dark if necessary. It all depends on how long this fellow Brunheim keeps us. If it is simply a matter of dumping the cargo and collecting the cash, we ought to be back here this evening by six, or seven at the latest."

As we were about to take off, a second incident occurred that was to play a vital part in our destinies, although we were blissfully ignorant of the fact. A saloon car came racing up the lane; it swung in at the gate and came bumping down the rough drive towards the house.

"Who the dickens is this?" I muttered anxiously.

"Wayne, probably," snapped Steeley. "It would be like him to roll up at this moment. Well, he's just too late."

I was recalling the fact that we had never seen Wayne's car in daylight, so we had no means of identifying it, when Steeley shoved the throttle open and we were off. Looking down I could see a single figure standing beside the car, waving, but I was not particularly concerned. Had we returned, things might have panned out very differently from what they did, but we didn't, and in a few minutes Haylands, and the unknown motorist, had merged into the misty blue background behind us. By the time we reached the coast I had forgotten all about him.

CHAPTER VIII

"DOWN!"

THERE is no need to describe our journey across Europe. It was quite uneventful. Steeley, flying partly by compass and partly by prominent landmarks, took us straight across Germany to that formidable jumble of mountains in the south-east corner, near where the frontiers of Germany, Austria, and Italy meet; and then he handed me Norton's map.

"Open it up and hold it so that I can see it," he said.

I looked at it, too, and comparing it with the ground underneath picked out a bow-shaped lake, that was marked unmistakably, near the western end of that section which had been shaded on the map in blue pencil. A trifle farther on the mountains tumbled down in great cliffs and screes to form a clearly defined valley, and towards this Steeley now altered his course. It was quite a natural thing to do. According to the map the valley led straight into the heart of the country we were making for, and it was obviously easier—and safer—to fly through it, than to climb over the jagged peaks on either side. In fact, it almost looked as if Norton had deliberately marked the valley as the best course to our destination. In this assumption we were very much mistaken, as will soon be seen. In point of fact, it was the very reverse. But Steeley thought it was the best way, so he throttled back and started losing height, in order, I imagine, to get a closer view of the ground.

We were about half-way up the valley, cruising along at about a thousand feet, when it happened. There was no warning. Not a sign; not a signal. First of all a single shell burst just in front of us. The gunner who fired it either knew his job remarkably well, or else his equipment included a device for perfect sighting. It came so close that the "Wyvern" reeled like a wounded partridge, and before we had recovered from the shock we were staggering through the middle of a cloud of smoke and flame such as I had never before seen—not even in France. Even allowing for the fact that the gunners, from constant practice, knew every inch of the atmosphere at that particular spot, the shooting was remarkably accurate, and it was obviously only a question of seconds before we were hit. A fast, manœuvrable, single-seater fighter might have got out of it by spinning down to the ground and then zigzagging, but although we were fairly fast we were not fast enough. Steeley tried it, of course; it was the only thing he could do, and I clung to

the side of the cockpit with both hands as the "Wyvern" slipped, skidded, and dodged on its way to the ground.

We nearly succeeded, too. Another five seconds and we should have been below the angle of fire of the guns, but a shell burst smack under our wing tip and carried it away in a cloud of flying splinters. Unfortunately, the end of the aileron went with it, with the result that it hung by one hinge only at right angles to the plane. By my side Steeley was fighting like a madman to keep us on an even keel, but it was beyond his power.

I don't quite know how to describe the stunt we started to execute, for we were nearly out of control, but not quite. It wasn't a spin, and it wasn't a series of flat turns. It was something between the two. We were going to crash, that was clear, and I drew up my knees to be ready for it. Steeley had cut the throttle instantly, of course, and when he saw the case was hopeless he was cool enough to switch off the ignition, and it was no doubt due to this that we were saved the horror of fire.

As far as one could ascertain in such conditions, our loss of stability was due only to the shattered wing tip, owing to loss of lift causing the machine to fall that way, and the control surfaces not being equal to the task of correcting the fault. I realized it, but it never occurred to me to do anything about it. Not so Brian, and the first thing I knew about that was when I saw him lying flat on the starboard wing. How he wasn't thrown off I don't know. Indeed, I think he must have been but for the fact that he had managed to reach the leading edge to which he clung for dear life. His weight made a world of difference, and the wing slowly came down until we were almost on an even keel. Had we been higher I honestly believe that his action would have enabled Steeley to make some sort of landing, but as it was we were practically on the ground. Still, it had the effect of partly righting the machine, and our nose came up an instant before we struck.

I have no clear recollection of what happened immediately after that. The country was heavily wooded with thick forests of fir-trees, so it would have been sheer bad luck if we had missed them, but we didn't, and they broke our fall; otherwise we must have been killed. They gave way under our weight as we swept into them at a speed that could not have been less than seventy or eighty miles an hour. At the same time there was a frightful rending sound as the branches snapped off short and ripped the woodwork and fabric from our fuselage and wings. Then there was one mighty splintering crash and—silence. Silence broken only by the drip, drip, drip of petrol as it leaked from the punctured tank.

I was quite conscious of this, but for a second or two I was incapable of movement. The shock seemed to have paralysed me, but the stench of petrol

reached my nostrils and acted like an elixir. Fire! The next instant I was fighting my way out of the wreckage like a maniac, regardless of cuts, bruises, and everything else. How I got clear I don't know. I don't remember anything about it. My first really conscious thought came when I found myself running aimlessly round the wreck, "Steeley! Steeley!" I cried hysterically, impatiently wiping away the blood that kept getting into my eyes.

"All right, keep your head. Give me a hand," came a quiet voice from beneath a tangle of torn fabric. I dragged it aside, and there lay Steeley, flat on his back, with the main spar across his chest. I lifted it with a frenzied burst of strength, and to my unspeakable relief he crawled clear. Then he rose unsteadily to his feet. "Where's Brian?" he said.

Brian! I'd forgotten the lad. Running round to the other side of the machine, I saw him lying in a crumpled heap quite a distance away, where he had been thrown clear. At first I thought he was dead, but as I dropped on to my knees beside him he moaned weakly and tried to move. Steeley joined me, and together we lifted him into the shade of a tree. His groans became great gasps for breath, and I thought he was on the point of dying, but Steeley, who had run his hands over him, announced that in his opinion he was only badly winded. And so it proved. In two or three minutes he was sitting up, looking very groggy, and obviously badly shaken, although he protested repeatedly that he was "quite all right".

Actually, I had the worst wound of the lot, a long jagged cut along my forehead, narrowly missing my left eye, from which blood oozed rapidly. Steeley tied it up with his handkerchief and then looked about him. His brain, even after our nerve-trying experience, still seemed to work normally. "Give me a hand to find those machine-gun parts, Tubby, if you're able to stand," he said. "It won't do to be found with those on board."

They were easy enough to find, and in a short time I had helped him to carry them to the edge of a low cliff, about twenty feet or so high, that dropped away from our level a few yards away amongst some bushes. They fell with a squelch into some reeds that evidently had their roots in water. Then we hurried back to the machine.

What we should have done next in the ordinary course of events I do not know, but at that moment a rifle cracked not far away, and a bullet smashed into the remains of our recent conveyance with a vicious *zip*. Looking in the direction of the sound of the shot, we saw a party of uniformed men scrambling down a steep bank towards us about two hundred yards away. Others stood on the top, and others were lying down. Another shot rang out, and I felt the whiz of the bullet as it passed my face.

“My God! They mean to finish us, Steeley,” I cried in alarm.

His eyes flashed with cold fury as he looked at our enemies; then they swept over the surrounding country. “Come on,” he said, and bending low, dashed off through the trees. “Can you keep going, Brian?” he called over his shoulder.

“Yes, I’m O.K.,” replied Brian weakly, in such a way I feared he would not be able to get far at such a pace.

Several more bullets whistled about us as we sped through the drooping firs, which reminded me vividly of illustrations I had seen as a child in books of fairy stories. On we ran, panting and stumbling over fallen branches, but for the most part making no noise on the thick mat of fir needles.

An open space lay across our path. We would have avoided it had it been possible, but it was not. We broke cover, and then pulled up in dismay. Ahead of us the ground rose steeply for a quarter of a mile or more to a high bluff. Down it, a score of dry water-courses cut silvery white gashes in the dark-green heather which grew wherever it could find a hold for its roots.

“Keep going,” panted Steeley, and set off up the hill, following one of the water-courses. We followed. I don’t think any of us had the slightest idea where we were going; nor were we particularly concerned on that score. To get clear of the rifles of our pursuers was the only thing that mattered. The hill grew steeper as we neared the top, and with one accord we slowed down, for to go on running over the loose shingle that slipped under our feet was out of the question.

We were still twenty or thirty yards from the top when there came a shot behind us, and bullets were soon flicking up the gravel. They inspired us to make a final spurt, but then, suddenly, the end came. Steeley, who was in front, was actually reaching for the ridge, grabbing at a tuft of heather to pull himself up. There was the sound of a shot. He seemed to falter in mid-air, and then fell backwards. There was something appalling in the way he collapsed. Over and over he rolled, taking a small avalanche of loose shingle with him, for a good hundred yards down the path up which we had come, until he came to rest asprawl a buttress of sun-baked earth.

I stopped. So did Brian. Then, with one accord, we raced back down the hill to the spot where Steeley lay. With such a look of smouldering rage in his eyes as I have never seen on any human being, he dragged himself to his feet and faced the marksman, while I muttered a fervent, “Thank God,” for I felt certain that he had been killed outright.

“Where did they get you?” I asked.

“Shoulder. Nothing much,” he replied laconically.

The soldiers—or whatever they were—had ceased firing when Steeley fell, for they must have realized that we could not escape, so we just stood still and waited for them to come up to us. Any further attempt to get away would have been merely suicidal. They were far more excited than we were, or so it seemed to me. In fact, the N.C.O. in charge was almost beside himself. He addressed us in what I took to be German, but not being able to speak the language his words conveyed nothing to me. Nor did they to Brian. But Steeley understood, and he turned to us grimly.

“He says we are to follow him, and if we attempt to escape we shall be shot,” he said.

Then began a long trail back over the way we had come, but just before we reached the wrecked machine we turned off to the left and presently struck a well-worn path. How far we walked after that I have but a vague recollection. I only know it seemed like miles. Possibly it was two or three, not more. It was wild country, uncultivated, chiefly fir forests with wide sandy glades in which heather, gorse, and mountain-ash grew luxuriantly. To make matters worse the path was uphill nearly all the way, winding up, it seemed, to a ridge. Then, unexpectedly, we turned a corner, and found ourselves facing a number of buildings in front of which the country fell away steeply for a short distance and then levelled out to a wide, sandy plain, the far edge of which seemed to fall sheer into the valley.

It struck me at once, not unnaturally, that the plain was a ready-made aerodrome, but not a machine was in sight. Nor could I see a hangar. Yet the sand was certainly scored by wheel-marks. What was the mystery? We were not left long in speculation. Before we reached the buildings towards which we were now marching, a low-wing monoplane, of typical Continental design, appeared over the far hills and glided down towards the plain. So close to the ridge on which we were walking did the pilot come before he throttled back that I felt certain he would collide with it. His wheels touched the ground not thirty yards away in quite a fast landing, and then ran on to what seemed certain destruction. Our guards took not the slightest notice, but instinctively I braced myself for the crash. It never came. The machine disappeared into the side of the hill as if the sand and rock were as nebulous as a cloud. For a few seconds I could hear the engine ticking over. Then there was silence. I caught Steeley’s eye, and knew we were both thinking the same thing. We were walking above an underground hangar.

Another dozen paces brought us to the nearest of the buildings, a large stone and timber house of uncertain age, with a walled courtyard beyond. In front was a neatly kept garden, dotted with a number of well-established

shrubs which suggested that the house was by no means new. Without stopping, we turned in at the gate and walked down the path to the front door, where a sentry stood on duty. He stepped aside to let us pass, throwing us a curious glance as he did so, and we found ourselves in a large hall. Here our escort was reduced to two, not counting the N.C.O., who took a few steps down the corridor, knocked sharply on a door, and disappeared from sight, only to reappear a moment later and beckon us to follow him. In single file we marched into the room.

It was plainly furnished, and reminded me at once of a regimental orderly room. A number of box files lined the walls except where, curiously enough, a lift, with its gate open, occupied a fair space. But I gave these no more than a passing glance, for my gaze was drawn to a hard-faced, grey-haired man who sat at a document-littered table on which an automatic lay within easy reach. He was obviously waiting for us, for he had pushed aside the papers he had been reading and was leaning back regarding us quizzically. The two guards halted just inside the door, but the N.C.O. accompanied us up to the table, saluted, turned a hostile eye on us, and returned to the door.

For perhaps five seconds the man at the table did not speak, but just ran his eyes over our travel-stained flying kit. Then, "Who is the leader of this party?" he asked in perfect English.

"I am," replied Steeley imperturbably.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was flying on a special charter to Hertzovnia when I was shot down; my two friends merely came for the trip."

The German's eyes narrowed. "To where?"

"Hertzovnia."

"And who or what do you hope to find in Hertzovnia?"

"A man named Otto Brunheim."

The other started slightly. Then a curious, rather cynical smile spread over his face. "Well," he said, "here I am."

For a moment we all stared. Even Steeley was too amazed to speak. "You're—Brunheim?" he managed to get out at last.

"I am."

"Purely as a matter of formality, could you substantiate that?"

The other picked up an envelope at random from his desk and turned it so that we could see the superscription. "Lieutenant Otto Brunheim" we

read, and then looked back at the German, who seemed to be taking a vicious pleasure in our surprise.

"Now," he went on cuttingly, "perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me what you are really doing in Hertzovnia?"

"We are actually over the frontier, then?"

"You are."

Steeley caught his eye and held it. "Very well," he said. "We came here in lieu of Captain Norton."

Brunheim's eyes half closed. "So," he said softly. "So. And where is Norton?"

"Norton is dead."

Brunheim didn't turn a hair. Not by a quiver of an eyelid did he betray what the information meant to him. "How did it happen, and how did you come to take over his—work?" he asked.

"He was followed by a Royal Air Force aeroplane and shot down after killing the pilot of the military machine," answered Steeley frankly. "We saw it happen. We were in the air at the time, and landed near Norton, who had crashed. We didn't know who he was then, but he recognized in us comrades who had served with him during the War. He died in our arms. But before he died he asked us to do something for him; to deliver something to you, and take the money due to him back to his wife. That was yesterday. To-day we came. While we were looking for the aerodrome, we were, as you are doubtless aware, fired on without warning and shot down. That's all, except that I hold you responsible for the destruction of our machine."

CHAPTER IX

"LIKE OLD TIMES"

THE merest flicker of a smile appeared in Brunheim's cold eyes for a fleeting instant, and there was something so cruel, so calculating, and so complacently confident about it that every instinct in me recoiled. My reaction was as if I had seen a snake lying across my path. From that moment I knew he was an enemy and a man to be feared. The snake is symbolical of all that is evil; the desire to destroy it is instinctive; and I felt the same about Brunheim. Nor was I mistaken.

For a little while, after Steeley had finished speaking, he did not answer. Then, "I wondered how it happened," he said softly.

"Wondered! Then you knew?" asked Steeley quickly.

Brunheim nodded towards a flimsy form lying in a filing basket on his desk, "Of course. What sort of an Intelligence system do you suppose I have?"

I felt that the conversation was becoming strained. Steeley evidently thought so, too, for he attempted to expedite the conclusion of what now promised to be a very unprofitable affair. "Well, if that's all," he said, "we'll see about getting back. My lawyers and the Royal Aero Club will take up the matter of compensation for my machine after I have made my report to them."

Recollection of the machine-gun parts now lying in the swamp flashed into my mind, and I wondered if Steeley and Brunheim had forgotten them.

"Have you Norton's money here?" concluded Steeley bluntly.

Before Brunheim could answer there was a rap on the door and another man in uniform appeared. He crossed the room with military precision, and with a few quick words laid a number of articles on Brunheim's desk. Then he turned on his heel and marched out. A glance showed me that the things he had brought in had been salved from our machine—maps, log-books, and the like.

Brunheim examined them with irritating slowness. "Where are the machine-gun parts?" he asked quietly.

"Where is Norton's money?" parried Steeley.

The German frowned. “So you lied,” he snapped. “Your mission was ——” he hesitated.

“Give me the money, and I’ll give you the locks,” said Steeley coldly.

Brunheim opened a drawer, took out a thick roll of English Treasury notes, and tossed them across the desk.

Steeley picked the bundle up and put it in his pocket. “The locks are among the rushes at the foot of the low cliff near the crash,” he said.

“Thank you,” returned Brunheim suavely. “That was what I wanted to know.”

“Well, if that’s all, we’ll be getting along,” suggested Steeley.

Again the sinister smile flashed in Brunheim’s eyes. “You do not appear to have fully grasped the situation,” he said calmly.

A puzzled look crossed Steeley’s face. “In what way do you mean?” he demanded.

“But you cannot seriously suppose that I can permit you to return to England after what you have seen here, do you?”

“But Norton must have seen the same thing,” protested Steeley. “We’re no more likely to talk than he was.”

“You are more correct than perhaps you know,” murmured the other, and I sensed the dual meaning of his words. “Norton was forbidden to fly over a certain area, the area that was marked in blue on his map,” he continued. “He omitted to advise you of that. Not that it would have made any difference in the end. It was merely a precaution to prevent him from seeing things, not intended for foreign eyes, until his task was complete. Even so, he knew too much.”

Steeley’s lips curled in a faint sneer. “I see,” he said grimly. “After his work was finished you would have—er—disposed of him, simply because he was a witness of your preparations here. By taking over his task we have put ourselves in the same position. Is that it?”

“Precisely,” bowed Brunheim. “I congratulate you on your perspicacity.”

“What are you going to do—hold us prisoners?”

“I’m afraid I’ve no facilities for keeping prisoners indefinitely.”

“So you were going to put Norton out of the way, eh?”

Brunheim nodded casually.

Steeley went very white, and I saw that he was finding it difficult to keep his temper under control. “You assassin! You unutterable thug,” he said quietly, in a voice that trembled.

Brunheim didn't turn a hair. He went on turning over the things that had been taken from our machine, "Go on," he said. "Say what you like if it helps you at all. It doesn't hurt me. By the way, what's this?" He held up a small, round, white-metal box with a screw top. He had removed the lid and was examining the inside with interest.

Steeley pulled himself together with an effort. "It's a device of my own; I carry it when I'm flying in dangerous conditions," he said. "Look! let me show you. You may learn something from it," he added, stepping forward and taking the case from the German's hands. He gave it a slight shake, and then inverting it allowed two small glass tubes to fall into his right hand. I saw that they were filled with a thick, whitish emulsion, but for the life of me I couldn't make out what on earth they were for.

"The idea is this," continued Steeley, in the manner of a schoolmaster explaining a problem in a lecture room. "Sometimes I fly on business that is not approved by the guardians of the law in England, and I have always borne in mind that should the necessity arise it might be as well to have something, something easily accessible, with which I could destroy my machine after, say, a forced landing in an awkward place. I used to carry a Very pistol, but that is a clumsy weapon at the best, so I experimented and produced these, and I flatter myself they're quite neat. Each tube contains a preparation of thermite, sodium, and distilled water. Perhaps you begin to grasp the idea?"

I saw Brunheim's face blanche.

"In your military capacity you will no doubt be acquainted with the peculiar qualities of thermite, so named because of the incredible heat it generates in a remarkably short space of time," went on Steely imperturbably. "It is claimed for it that it will melt down the toughest steel like a piece of hot toast melts down a pat of butter. Very intriguing, don't you think?"

I felt that if he didn't soon stop my nerves would go to pieces. Something inside me told me what was coming, and every fibre of my body was stretched, like a piece of elastic, in tension.

"As it is," continued Steeley in a dispassionate voice that chilled me, "this little child of my brain is going to expend its energy in melting down, not steel, which is a good honest metal, but *you*, you lying, cheating, double-dealing murderer."

As he finished speaking his arm flashed back and then forward. In a kind of fascinated horror I saw the tube strike the desk and burst. It made a noise like an electric light bulb when it is dropped on a stone floor. Instantly there

was a sheet of blinding, scorching flame that removed my eyebrows and eyelashes in one stroke. Quick as lightning Steeley whirled round and hurled the other tube at the ceiling above the heads of the two guards. It exploded like a star-shell, sending glowing white-hot sparks in all directions.

Then came a moment of horror that will live in my memory for ever. I have a nightmare-like recollection of a chaotic blur of smoke and flame, choking fumes, the pungent reek of singeing hair—and screams. Voices shouted. Somebody grabbed me by the arm. A gate slammed with a metallic clang. Then the earth seemed to fall away from under my feet.

I took my hands from my face and opened my eyes. We were all in the lift, which was descending with its usual peculiar *whir*.

"Sorry, Tubby," said Steeley, "but he deserved it, and there was no other way out." I noticed that he was putting Brunheim's automatic and some papers in his pocket.

"Where are we going?" I gasped.

"I haven't the remotest idea; we shall have to wait and see," he smiled.

In all the years I have known him, that moment of all others revealed the depth of his self-control. He was as cool as if we were in the lift of a London hotel.

Then, from somewhere below us, came a deep vibrating roar, as if we were approaching the mouth of Hell itself. The lift commenced to slow down—you know that curious hesitancy before it comes to a stop—and we all turned towards the lattice-work gate to see what fate had in store for us.

It stopped, and we all stood still, staring. Whatever we expected to see, if we expected anything at all, we certainly did not find it.

Before us was the interior of a hangar. But it was not an ordinary hangar. It was such a hangar as Dante might have imagined. It was colossal. It was not particularly high, but the back and sides were so far away that they were lost in the distance. It was as if the whole interior of the hill had been hollowed out—as indeed it had—leaving a cavity in which all the air forces of the world had been concentrated. There must have been hundreds of aeroplanes, of all classes. Heavy bombers, light bombers, and single-seaters stood nose by tail with goodness knows what other sorts besides. So much I took in with a single amazed glance, and then I was outside, following Steeley, who had pushed the gate open and was walking quickly towards the exit, a strip of white light that extended the entire length of the hangar. There were a lot of people about, mechanics in blue overalls chiefly, but others were in military uniforms and a few in leather flying jackets.

No one took the slightest notice of us, and at first I wondered why, but then I saw that our flying kit made us indistinguishable from those who had either been flying or were preparing to take the air. What was happening overhead I neither knew nor cared. The only thing that exercised my mind was whether or not we should be able to reach the open unmolested, and what was going to happen when we got there.

What a wonderful thing moral support is. Alone, I am sure I should have passed out from sheer nervelessness, but with Steeley stalking along as if the place belonged to him it was quite a different matter. Young Brian, too, seemed quite unconcerned, although what he was thinking about all this Heaven alone knew.

We reached the entrance and paused for a moment to take stock of our surroundings. Immediately in front of us stood a six-engined monster, dripping oil, that had evidently just arrived from somewhere. But the props were stationary, so it was no use to us. A little farther along two or three machines were being started up. One, a tri-motored bomber, a little in advance of the others, was roaring as its engines were revved up by a mechanic who was standing in the cockpit watching the instruments. Two others were standing by the chocks, while a short distance away two men in flying kit, who looked like the pilots, were finishing their cigarettes.

"That bird will suit us," said Steeley tersely. "Clear the chocks, you two, and then get aboard." So saying he started off towards it. As in a dream I saw the flashing propellers slow down as the mechanic throttled back and commenced to climb out, hailing the two pilots as he did so.

The next few seconds were, beyond all doubt or question, the most intense of my life, and I trust that I shall never have to go through anything like it again. Not another word was spoken. Nor did any of us hesitate in our tasks.

Brian went round the tail to get to the man holding the far chock, and I strolled as naturally as I could towards the nearer. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Steeley enter the cabin and disappear from sight, and at that precise moment, from somewhere in the direction of the lift we had just vacated, came the shrill blast of a whistle and a shouted order. Everyone in sight sprang to attention and stared in the direction of the sound—that is, everyone except Brian and myself. We kept going, and not until I was actually up to my man did he turn to look at me askance.

Perhaps he read trouble in my eyes. I don't know, but I saw a look of alarm come into his, and he took a step backward, at the same time raising his arm as if to ward off a blow. But all the advantage of surprise attack was

on my side, and he was too late. I fetched him a terrific uppercut that was meant for the point of the chin, but he started to duck and I caught him clean between the eyes, temporarily paralysing my arm and breaking, as I thought, every bone in my fingers. However, the blow served its purpose, for he fell backwards on to the concrete apron, his head striking it with a crack that suggested he was likely to remain on his back for some time.

I pulled my chock clear and looked across at Brian. He had evidently been less fortunate, but he had managed to seize the chock rope and pull the triangle of wood clear of the wheel. At that the fellow came at him again, whereupon Brian had swung the chock round on the end of its rope, and I happened to look across just in time to see it catch the wretched fellow across the shins. He let out a frightful yell and went down, grabbing at his legs, whereupon Brian left him and darted towards the machine.

I looked up at the cockpit, confidently expecting to see Steeley there, but to my horror there was nobody in it, so in a dreadful panic I made a wild leap for the cabin. As I reached it a revolver blazed just inside, but there was no stopping now, and I took a flying leap through the doorway. One glance showed me Steeley standing with a smoking automatic in his hand, breathing heavily as he looked down on a massive figure in flying kit that was lying on the floor. He thrust the weapon into my hand. "Hold 'em off," he snapped, and darted along the fuselage towards the cockpit. I heaved the fallen man outside. How badly he was hurt I don't know. Brian appeared in the doorway and helped me. Then he climbed in and slammed the door behind him while I scrambled up a couple of metal steps and thrust my head out of the rear gunner's cockpit.

People—mechanics, soldiers, and pilots—were converging on us from all sides. A bullet ricocheted off the barrel of a machine-gun that was mounted on a new-fangled gun-ring a couple of inches from my shoulder, and I let drive at the man who had fired the shot; the bullet missed him, but it spoilt his aim for the next shot. I heard the engines roar, and felt the machine quiver as Steeley shoved the throttle open. One fellow, in a commendable final effort to stop us, made a rush at our tail with an axe in his hand, but I stopped him with a bullet through the leg, and he pitched on to his face, cursing. As the machine gathered speed I emptied the remaining chambers of the weapon into the crowd at random, sending them ducking for cover; then I threw the empty gun at them and fell back inside the cabin in a condition as near to hysteria as I had ever been in my life.

First I laughed until I was sick, then I put my trembling hands over my face and very nearly cried. The funny part was, I knew I was doing it, yet I couldn't prevent it. I had seen the same thing often enough before, in

France, and for the first time understood what those fellows must have suffered. On Brian the affair had produced no visible effect; if it had he didn't show it, but merely stood regarding me with a sort of sheepish grin. Steeley was no more concerned than if he had been flying a club machine over its own aerodrome, as I discovered when the sudden tilting of the cabin floor sent me scurrying through to the cockpit to see what was the matter.

We were well in the air, but it gave me a mild shock to discover that we were not yet out of the wood, and I caught my breath as my eyes fell on some perilously close "Archie" bursts above us.

Steeley had, I found, reached the edge of the aerodrome, and instead of climbing, had plunged down into the valley to get out of the field of fire of the guns, and the last thing I saw as our tail dropped below the level of the aerodrome was the flashing metal props of a number of small machines that swept out of the hillside and raced across the plain with long, swirling dust-clouds to mark their tracks. I informed Steeley of this, but he merely nodded and went on with what he was doing.

On a westerly course, straight down the valley we roared with our starboard wing tip almost brushing the face of the cliff on our right, and I hung over the side of the cockpit to see if there were any clouds in front of us that might serve as cover. There was a certain amount of cloud, but it was very high up and not very thick, the sort which I believe is called strato-cumulus, and I doubted our ability to reach them—not that I persuaded myself that they were likely to be much good if we did. Steeley was obviously concentrating, in the first place, on getting out of the danger zone of the ground defences, regardless of anything else, and this course was the right one.

We roared out of the end of the valley, and the great plain of Central Europe lay before us. Our nose came round on a slightly more southerly course until the sun, long since past its zenith, was on our starboard bow, and I guessed that Steeley was taking the shortest cut to France via Switzerland.

Then I went stone cold as all three engines cut out dead at the same moment, but it was only the gravity tank running dry, and I breathed again as they picked up when Steeley switched over to the main tank. But the experience suggested a new danger to me. How much petrol had we aboard? I could see no gauge to indicate it. Had we enough to reach England? Time would show. Anyway, I sincerely hoped so, for after what had happened I didn't relish the idea of coming down in Germany—or France, for that matter. A foreign bomber could hardly fail to attract attention, and we were in no case to answer awkward questions.

Deciding that it would be time to answer those queries when they arose, I made my way aft to see what had become of our pursuers. Brian was sitting on the floor, reflectively munching a biscuit that he had produced from somewhere, and the spectacle reminded me that I was ravenously hungry, for so much had happened since our last meal, breakfast, that it seemed ages ago.

I climbed up into the gunner's cockpit and looked back over our tail. There was no need to seek the other machines. There they were, five of them in a bunch, quite close, and several others tailed out at various distances behind. And at the sight of their straight wings something inside me was reborn. Seventeen years rolled away like water off an oily wing, and I eyed them malevolently. "All right, you skunks, if you want it come and get it," I muttered, reaching for the gun. It was a new sort to me, but all light machine-guns are the same in principle; actually it was very much like a Lewis, inverted, so it didn't take me long to get the hang of it. The ammunition drums I found neatly stacked in compartments ready to hand. I pulled the top one out and clapped it on, for I could tell by the weight of it that it was full, and its cheerful stutter as I tested it was like the voice of an old friend. I pulled it round, squatted down on the funny little strap seat provided, and waited.

Brian's head popped up by my knees, and he raised his eyebrows when he saw what I was doing. "Must be like old times to you," he yelled, above the tearing slipstream.

"You keep your head down, or it may get in the way of something in a minute," I advised him. "Go and tell Steeley to swing his tail a fraction if I start firing bursts of five. He'll know what I mean."

"Good enough, Skipper," replied the lad, and off he went on his errand, while I returned to my vigil.

Far away over the western horizon the sun was sinking in a glow of old rose and amber. To the east, behind our tail, the sky had already turned to the misty blue of evening. Against it hung a number of dun-coloured specks that grew ever larger. As Brian had said, it was like old times. Presently we would see if these post-war products knew their business.

CHAPTER X

EXPERIENTIA DOCET

I SUPPOSE it would be about twenty minutes after our unorthodox departure from Brunheim's aerodrome that the first of the enemy scouts caught us. We were flying due west into the eye of the setting sun at the time, with the inspiring snow-capped peaks of the Swiss Alps on our left.

I had been watching this particular fellow for some time; his engine seemed to be a little better than the others, a by no means unusual occurrence even with standard types, and he had established a lead of a couple of hundred yards or more, to say nothing of taking quite a bit of altitude over us. But his first move convinced me that either he knew very little about fighting tactics or else he credited me with very little ability as a gunner. It may have been that he did not know our machine carried a rear gun, although if he had looked hard enough he would certainly have seen it.

Anyway, when he judged himself to be in an ideal position for a shot, he launched his first attack, presumably oblivious to the fact that coming down on me from above as he did, he was an even better target for me than I was for him. Furthermore, my gun was a mobile one, while his was fixed to fire through the propeller. Down dropped his nose, and in he came to smite us, and my opinion of his skill did not improve when he opened fire from a range that was a sheer waste of ammunition. I saw the flashes of his gun, but where the shots went I do not know; they did not come near me. So I waited for him, patiently, with a coolness that astonished me.

I saw his helmeted head pop over the side of the cockpit to see if I was still there, from which I deduced that he was having a job to keep me in his sights; if so, it was due entirely to his own erratic flying, for we were sailing along an even keel, and the air was as firm and steady as a bowl of milk. At a hundred yards his first shot to touch us plopped through our wing, so I took him in my sights and let him have it.

I'm not going to make an excuse for what followed. I'm no murderer, but I've been a soldier, and when a man tries to shoot me I've no scruples about returning the compliment if I can. In this case I could. And I did.

Before five rounds had left the muzzle of my gun my opponent suspected that he had made a mistake. I could tell that by the way his nose jerked up suddenly, but by that time it was a bit late in the day for him to

change his mind. Another fifteen rounds and he was sure of it. If he thought anything at all after that, which I doubt, he must have been quick about it, and I am sure that the escaping bomber no longer concerned him. For his machine burst into flames and commenced to fall like a stone. It's no use pretending I was sorry. The man meant nothing to me; I'd never seen his face, so I regarded his untimely end purely in the abstract. The combat had been of his choosing; he had asked for trouble, and he had found it. He had met the fate that he would have handed out to me if he could, and anyway, I'd seen the same thing too many times before for it to weigh heavily on my conscience.

The second machine acted as if the pilot was bent on revenge, and he did at least display some discretion. Its nose went down in an almost vertical dive until it must have been travelling at close on four hundred miles an hour. Then, the pilot eased the stick back, causing the machine to zoom up under our tail in the most stupendous zoom I have ever seen in my life. His tactics were definitely an improvement on the last, and it caused me a few seconds' disquiet, for he disappeared from sight in the blind spot under my elevators. Fortunately, I had prepared for this eventuality.

I fired two sharp bursts of five into the air. Steeley heard me, for instantly our empennage[4] wagged aside, and there was my friend in the fighter standing on his tail a hundred feet below, blazing away at us good and hearty. He must have been a rotten shot, or he would have got us. No doubt he was surprised to find himself staring into the muzzle of my gun, and his surprise probably turned to chagrin when I let him have a long raking burst. He stuck it for a moment or two, then fell off on to his wing and disappeared into the void. Whether he was hit or not it was impossible to tell, for naturally we did not follow him down, and my attention was demanded by the others who were now getting unpleasantly close.

---

[4] The rear part of the machine, sometimes known as the tail unit.

Whether the fate of their two leading pilots affected them or not I have no means of knowing, but it may have been so, for their enthusiasm seemed to wane suddenly. They held on for a bit, but dusk was closing in fast, and either they felt that it was a case where discretion was the better part of valour, or else they feared a collision in the gathering gloom. Anyway, one by one they turned away, and the twilit sky was our own. I was not sorry to see them go. That was the end of the combat, and presently, as there seemed

to be no point in remaining outside in the draught, which was getting perishing cold, I went back into the cabin.

"Get any?" asked Brian, in the most matter-of-fact manner imaginable.

"One," I replied. "Possibly two. The others have gone."

"That's the stuff," he answered approvingly.

I went forward to the cockpit. Steeley was still sitting in the same position, gazing out ahead, but he flashed a swift smile at me as I got into the seat beside him.

"Gone?" he asked briefly.

I nodded. "Where are we?" I enquired.

"I'm not quite sure," he returned frankly. "But I've got a fair idea," he added. "I think I shall be able to pick up our exact position when we hit the North Sea."

It took us just over an hour and a half to reach the coast. We struck it a few miles north of Calais, but being unable to recognize the spot, we turned south and followed it until the familiar harbour came into view. It was pitch-dark by then, and as we turned and headed out over the Channel I could see the lights of the south coast towns, so it seemed as if the troubles of the day were over. I was just about to say so to Steeley when one after the other, in quick succession, our engines coughed, coughed again, and then petered out.

"That's the end of our juice," murmured Steeley as automatically he pushed our nose down towards the distant lights. There was no point in turning back, for we were just about over mid-Channel. I glanced at the altimeter, and saw the needle quivering on the six thousand feet mark.

"Can we make it?" I asked.

"It's going to be a close thing," was his non-committal response.

He was quite right. It was. Several times before in my life I had sat in the cockpit of an aeroplane with the engine out of action, and watched, with the curious fatalistic detachment that comes over one at such times, the objective that spelt safety coming closer in direct ratio with the loss of height that brought one ever nearer to the danger zone; but never with such profound calm as now. I felt that our fate was out of our hands, as indeed it was, and the trouble about such situations is that one can do nothing except sit still and wait. In our case, every minute brought us appreciably nearer to the lights; but it also brought us closer to the dark, heaving surface of the ocean.

Another thousand feet of height slipped off our altimeter; it was down to three thousand feet now. How far were we from the shore? I had no idea.

Lights seen through darkness without comparable objects are deceptive, as every motorist knows, for there is no apparent difference between a bright light many miles away and a small light close at hand. In our case it was almost impossible to judge our distance from the lights, now drifting away to starboard as Steeley turned flatly towards the sable shadow that lay to the left. Obviously, we could not land in, or on, a town itself. Nor would it have been advisable to land too close, for reasons that require no explanation. Farther along to the west I could see another cluster of lights that I knew must be Folkestone.

Slowly, but with inexorable deliberation, the finger of the instrument slipped back to 2,000—1,500—1,000. I hung over the side, and cupping my hands round my eyes, stared down into the void, trying to pierce the gloom. But it was no use: I could see nothing. The needle approached the 500 figure on the dial and then passed silently over it.

"Tell Brian to get out on to the centre-section," said Steeley quietly, his words sounding strangely loud in the noiseless machine. "We might somersault when we hit the water, and I don't want him to be trapped in the cabin."

"Right you are," I replied, and, putting my head through the little door behind me, passed on the warning.

It was just in time. I had barely regained my seat, and was looking back at Brian's dark silhouette, when the machine made a sickening swerve that brought my heart into my mouth. Almost at once there was a horrible crunching noise underneath us and the forward momentum of the machine ceased abruptly, as if it had been caught in a net. There was a violent jar and all movement ceased. I was thrown hard against the instrument board and Brian fell head-first on top of me, but I pushed him aside and scrambled to my feet, staring into the darkness. "Where are we?" I said breathlessly.

"On the beach, by the look of it," answered Steeley with a funny little laugh, which told me that his nerves had been sorely tried. "We're amongst the sand dunes, I think," he went on. "The altimeter must have been out of truth, or was set, probably, for the aerodrome in Hertzovnia. I was nearly into the dunes before I saw them; they just jumped out of the darkness at me, but I managed to get round in time. I've broken the machine rather badly, I'm afraid, but it's something to be on dry ground; I thought we were in for a ducking."

"And me," I agreed, as we jumped down and peered into the darkness about us. "What are we going to do?" I added.

"Make for Dover and get back to Haylands as fast as we can."

"What about the machine?"

"Leave it where it is. We can't do anything else."

"That's right enough," I admitted. "It'll give the coast-guards something to think about when they find it."

"And the newspapers something to talk about when they hear of it," put in Brian, with the professional instinct ever to the front.

"We can't very well go into Dover dressed like this, though," I demurred. "We'd better get rid of our flying kit, or we shall have a crowd following us, and the mystery of the Hun bomber won't be a mystery very long."

"True enough, Tubby. We shall have to get rid of our kit and appear as respectable citizens."

"What shall we do with it—bury it?"

"That's the easiest way. It should be easy enough to make a hole in the sand."

In about ten minutes the job was done. We removed our overalls, caps, and goggles, and buried them in the soft sand a good hundred yards from the machine; then, hatless, but otherwise normally dressed, we set off towards the distant lights.

We took an oblique course inland at first, and soon found what we hoped to find, the sea road. Two or three cars passed us, and I was all for asking for a lift, but Steeley wouldn't hear of it. Instead, he made us lie down until the cars had passed, in order that our presence would not be observed and subsequently connected with the bomber.

It was a long walk. I don't know about the others, but I was tired when I started, and had pretty well reached the end of my tether by the time we reached the outskirts of the town. We halted as we came to the first lamp-post, and I dropped wearily into a wooden seat near an omnibus stop.

"If I don't soon have something to eat you'll have to carry me," I told Steeley. "So hurry up and let us know what you propose to do."

"It's all plain sailing," he answered. "We'll go into a restaurant and have a bite, and then catch the next train to London. I thought of buying or hiring a car at first, but I've been thinking it over, and have come to the conclusion that the train would be the wisest plan. The less we do to call attention to ourselves the better, and a garage proprietor who sells a car at this time of the night will hardly be likely to forget it. The police will soon hear of the machine on the beach and start making enquiries about it. I suggest that we take our tickets separately at the station; that will help to keep them off the

track; at any rate, they won't know how many there were of us. Come on, let's get along."

It all fell out according to plan, except that we did not eat at a restaurant. A hundred yards along the road we came to a mobile café, at which a soldier and a couple of sailors were talking to the proprietor as they drank their tea or coffee. The sight of the sandwiches was too much for me, and in a twinkling I had taken my place at the bar and was eating more ravenously than I had ever eaten before. How many sandwiches we ate altogether before our appetites were appeased, I don't know; nor am I certain what they were made of. Not that it mattered. We did not eat them all at the café. After the first half-dozen or so Steeley bought a number—to take home, so he said—so we finished our coffee and ate the rest as we walked along, for fear of our unusual appetites causing comment. We had to wait half an hour for a train, a miserable wait on a miserable platform; but we took advantage of the delay to examine Steeley's wound. It was the first opportunity we had had of doing so since he received it. I had thought about it several times, but as he did not mention it, I assumed it was less severe than we first had reason to suspect.

We found that it was not serious, but on the other hand it was too bad to be ignored. The bullet had gone clean through his shoulder, just under the collar-bone, fortunately without breaking anything. It was a clean hole, but it had bled a lot, and the part of his shirt that had been in contact with it was a nasty, sticky mess. I wanted him to go to a doctor, but he refused, saying that it would start enquiries. Probably he was right. Doctors in England are apt to look askance at gunshot wounds. So he insisted that it could wait until we got home, when I could do anything that was necessary.

I had retied up the cut on my forehead by making a bandage of my handkerchief. Nobody had taken any notice of it except the man at the café, whom I noticed took a second look at it when we first walked up, so I passed it off by discussing with the others a fictitious motor-cycle accident in which I had been involved. Still, it ached a good deal.

It must have been after eleven o'clock when we reached Victoria Station. Steeley went off, and presently came back with an old second-hand car he had bought somewhere, and feeling that we were now on the last lap of a memorable journey, we set off for Haylands in good spirits. I was asleep before we reached Brixton, and knew nothing more until Steeley nudged me in the ribs and announced that we were at our destination.

"Fine," I said drowsily as I got out, still more asleep than awake, conscious only of a roaring headache. My one idea was to get into bed, for I don't remember ever being so tired, not even during the War.

We left the car where it was and walked through into the dining-room. The lights were alight, and at the door I saw Steeley stop dead, with his mouth slightly open, staring. Peering over his shoulder, I saw something that banished all thought of sleep from my mind. A man who had been dozing in an arm-chair rose up and came towards us.

It was Dale—Dude Dale.

CHAPTER XI

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

"WHAT are you doing here, Dale?" Steeley's voice had a snap in it that made me jump; I'd never heard him speak like it before.

Dale grinned apologetically, and looked a bit shame-faced. "The cops got me," he explained sheepishly. "I got away, but had to leave my jacket behind."

"What's that got to do with me?"

Dale fidgeted uncomfortably. "Well, you see, old man, unfortunately my notebook was in my pocket, and it had your Paris address in it. I thought that when they spotted it, as they were bound to, they might get busy and follow the trail right through to here. So I rushed along to warn you. I arrived just as you were taking off—missed you by a minute."

So Dale was the unknown motorist who had arrived at the aerodrome just as we were leaving for Hertzovnia, I thought, but Steeley's next words set my teeth on edge.

"You fool," he hissed. "You miserable fool. You utter imbecile. Haven't you got more sense than to come here and drag me into it? You've carted us all."

Dale frowned. "How so?" he muttered. "If that's all the thanks——"

"Thanks! *Thanks!* You expect me to thank you for laying a trail that a country copper couldn't miss, straight to my headquarters?"

"Well, I thought I'd let you down, so I made a bee-line to let you know—well, to let you know what had happened."

Steeley shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "The damage is done now, so moaning won't get us anywhere," he muttered through his teeth. "It means a clean-up and a clear-out—and quickly."

"Then the cops will be able to follow the line from Paris to here."

"I'm afraid so. They'd grab my fellow there without giving him a chance to burn everything out. He'd be taken absolutely unprepared. You know what they are: if they find one clue, one scrap of paper, they'll start off on a scent that sooner or later will end here. If you'd warned *him* you might have done some good. But it isn't that that alarms me. Where did they catch you?"

"In Holland."

"Why do you suppose the Dutch police let you go?"

"Let me go, be damned. I got away."

"Pah! Don't kid yourself, Dude. They knew you couldn't have handled this Guggenmayer diamond affair single-handed. Either they wanted to know who was behind you, or else they wanted you to lead them to where you'd hidden the stones, so they worked the old trick on you. I'll bet you hadn't the stones on you when you were caught, had you?"

"As a matter of fact, I hadn't," admitted Dale.

"What had you done with them?"

"Hidden 'em."

"Precisely! Not much use catching you without the stones, was it? A hundred thousand is a lot of money. Did you go and fetch the stones?"

"No!"

"Pity you didn't," exclaimed Steeley bitterly. "If you had they'd have nailed you again before you got here. Where are they?"

Dale hesitated.

"Better let me know, so that if anything happens to one of us the other can collect them and take care of them."

"Dutch Joe's got 'em. He knows you're in on the deal, so he'll hand 'em over to you if you get there before me and say the word. We can meet there if necessary."

"All right, Dude. That's all. You'd better be moving. I'm packing up here myself right now. Every minute is valuable."

"O.K. Got any 'ready' on you?"

Steeley pulled out Brunheim's wad of notes, peeled off several, and handed them over without a word.

Dale tucked them in his pocket and picked up his cap. "S'long, Del," he said. "Sorry if I've made a mucker of it, but I acted for the best."

"I know you did, Dude," Steeley told him quietly. "By the way, have you seen my two fellows about? They ought to be here."

"They were here until about an hour ago; I haven't seen them since. They said something about going down to the hangar and putting landing lights out."

"I see. How did you get here?"

"Taxi."

"How are you going?"

"On the soles of my feet, I expect."

"No need for that. There's a car outside you can have; I shan't need it again."

"Thanks. That's swell. You know where to find me if you want me."

Steeley nodded.

"S'long, then. S'long, boys." Dale put his cap on and disappeared through the door.

We watched him go in silence, each of us aware, I think, that our adventure was drawing to a close. We heard Dale's footsteps on the gravel outside, and Steeley crossed over to the window, and pushed it open, evidently with the idea of offering some final advice. It was, of course, quite dark; there was no moon, but the stars were shining brightly, making it just possible for us to see the grim finale of Dale's career of crime. It happened with such appalling suddenness that I was stunned. Indeed, I think we all were.

Dale was half-way to the car, which we had left at the junction of the main drive and the road leading to the proper garage, when a number of dark figures emerged from various points around it. I saw two glide out of a small shrubbery; the others materialized out of the gloom.

Dale saw them at once. He didn't make a sound, but made a dash for the car. His case was hopeless from the start. We knew it. He must have known it, but he did everything he could. He reached the car first and made a flying leap at the door. A voice shouted something—I didn't catch what it was—but Dale paid no attention. There was a shot. Dude staggered, but recovered and drew himself up to his full height on the running board. Then his hand flashed to his pocket and came up spurting flame. *Bang-bang-bang* spat the gun, each explosion crashing into my brain like the knell of doom. I saw a policeman stumble and slip forward on to his face; his helmet flew off and rolled over and over down the drive. There was another report, this time the deep bellow of a service Webley. Dale twisted convulsively. His gun blazed again harmlessly, into the ground. Then he collapsed, horribly, limply, like a suit of clothes falling from a peg, head downwards over the side of the car.

I was too shocked to speak. My brain seemed numbed. It was as if I had been shot myself, and I could only stare helplessly at Steeley. His face was ashen, but expressionless, and his first remark was typical of him.

"I'm sorry to have got you into this jam, Tubby," he said simply.

Then he moved like lightning, but carefully and noiselessly. First he closed the window and drew the blind. Then he reached up, grasped a small handle above the window, and pulled something down like the cover of a

roll-top desk. It made the same noise as one—a sort of metallic *grrrr*. "Stand fast," he said crisply, and darted from the room, I heard the key grate in the front door, and again the *grrrr* of a roll-blind falling. The same noise was repeated at intervals all over the house.

This period of inaction was dreadful. The minutes seemed like years, and I thought he would never come back. Brian was standing by the fireplace trying to look unconcerned, but his eyes were round with horror, or excitement, or both. He caught my eye, and stirred in an embarrassed sort of way, with a deep intake of breath.

"He's killed a policeman," he said in a tight, strained voice. "You can't do that over here and get away with it. They'll hang the lot of us if they catch us."

"It looks as if they will catch us, too," I remarked grimly. "It's only a question of time. I expect the house is surrounded."

"Bound to be," was the cheerless answer. "They may have been here when we rolled up. They could afford to let us in, knowing that they could tighten the net to stop us getting out. It'd take a mouse all its time to get out of this place now, after what's happened, without being seen. I——"

There came a hammering on the door, and at the ominous sound my heart quailed while my self-control seemed to be running out of my feet. But I steadied myself with an effort, thrusting my trembling hands into my pockets so that Brian couldn't see the state I was in.

Steeley came back into the room, brushing some dust from his long, slim fingers. "Sorry I've been so long," he said calmly.

"What are we going to do—shoot our way out?" I asked sarcastically.

He shook his head. "I don't fight the law with lethal weapons," he answered. "Nor should I have associated myself with Dale if I had known he carried a gun. He told me he didn't carry one, although I confess that was some time ago; perhaps he acquired one after his so-called escape. But come on; I'd a feeling this might happen one day, so I prepared for it. I've drawn what Gubbins calls the torpedo nets—he was once in the Navy—and they should be police proof for about half an hour."

"What are they?"

"Steel blinds. I had them installed against burglars—so I told the builder."

As he spoke he led the way upstairs, and we both followed.

"In which case we've simply penned ourselves in," I suggested.

“The police have thrown a strong cordon round the place, if that’s what you mean,” he replied. “They’re closing up now, and probably looking for tools to break in.”

“You haven’t got an underground bolt-hole, I suppose?” I asked hopefully.

“No! Subterranean passages are obsolete; they belong to the Middle Ages. I always use up-to-date methods if they’re possible.”

The hammering on the door below became insistent, threatening, and inwardly I quaked.

“Hammer away, my friends,” said Steeley softly. “Hammering won’t help them much,” he added, turning to us. “They’ll need acetylene blow-lamps or a hack-saw to shift those blinds.”

We had ascended two flights of stairs, and now he pulled up in front of what looked like an ordinary bedroom door. “Welcome to the Chamber of Horrors—as Gubbins calls it,” he said lightly, throwing it open.

“We’re likely to be there soon enough,” I observed bitterly, as I stepped over the threshold, peering into the darkness ahead. An electric switch snapped and the place was flooded with light. The door slammed behind us with a metallic clang, but I paid little attention to it, for my eyes were too taken up with the furniture of the most surprising room I ever stepped into.

In the first place, there was no ceiling. The four square walls rose sheer to the night sky and a thousand stars twinkled at us through the opening at the top. The entire area of the floor, to within a foot of the walls, was covered by a thick carpet of flimsy material which rose to a great hump in the middle. Around the walls lay heavy metal cylinders with rubber tubes attached to their nozzles.

“What the dickens is all this?” I gasped, although already I suspected.

There was a hiss of gas as Steeley switched on a master tap, and instantly the fabric on the floor began to quiver. “Allow me to introduce you to Corpulent Cuthbert,” he murmured. “Gubbins was responsible for the christening—not me. Keep an eye on the silk, Tubby. Brian, get round to the far side and keep an eye on the lines. Watch that they don’t get crossed or tangled. Play them out as she inflates.”

“A balloon, eh?” I cried, my heart giving a great leap of hope.

“No less. I should prefer an aeroplane, but quite apart from the fact that an aeroplane has not yet been designed that will take off from such a limited field as this, a balloon possesses one great quality that an aeroplane doesn’t.”

"What's that?"

"It makes no noise. It rises silently into the air without announcing its departure; an aeroplane, as you may have noticed, tells the world about it. This particular vehicle was designed for three passengers; Gubbins, Tasker, and myself. Gubbins and Tasker are not here, which is just as well, as you can now take their places. Five would have been a crowd."

"What's happened to them, do you think?"

"There's a chance that they may have been caught, but I am hoping that they saw the trap being laid, and evaded it. Those were my explicit instructions if ever such a contingency arose."

While he was talking, Steeley was busy attending to the balloon, which was now beginning to take shape; and I helped him to keep the fabric clear of the ropes. A terrible noise of hammering was going on downstairs, and occasionally somebody shouted, but we paid little attention, although it was obviously going to be a race as to whether the balloon would be ready to ascend, or whether the police would break in first.

Quickly, but with what seemed to be irritating slowness, the balloon bellied out and filled the area above us, blotting out the sky like a great black shadow. The guy-ropes tightened and it began to strain at its moorings, which I now saw was a single cable connecting the bottom centre of the basket with a fitment in the floor.

There was a frightful crash below, and the whole building shook; it sounded as if the side of the house had fallen in.

"Get aboard, everybody," ordered Steeley promptly.

I needed no second invitation, and scrambling over the side found myself standing in the basket of a free balloon for the first time in my life. The others followed and their weight brought the basket down to the floor level again.

Downstairs doors were slamming and voices calling; I could recognize Wayne's above the rest. My impatience became physical agony. "Can we let go?" I asked breathlessly.

"Not yet," replied Steeley coolly. "We'll take in all the gas we can."

A new fear assailed me. "Do you know anything about free ballooning?" I asked anxiously.

"Not a lot," came the unnerving reply. "I took a short course in Germany where, in case you don't know, ballooning is still practised as a sport, and made two ascents with an instructor. I intended taking my ticket, but urgent matters over here demanded my return."

The next two or three minutes became a nightmare of suspense. Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs while voices called to each other in sharp staccato tones. The handle of our door was rattled.

"Come on out of that; the game's up," came a crisp command. The voice was Wayne's.

Steeley laid a finger on his lips to ensure silence, and believe me or not, there was a twinkle in his eye.

"Hi! Hawkins! Bring that axe here," cried Wayne.

Steeley bent down and groped for something on the floor. "Hold on! I'm casting off," he whispered.

Something crashed against the door with a violence that made me jump. More footsteps thumped on the stairs. Then the door, and the room, seemed to sink like a lift, leaving us hanging in space. Steeley took something from his pocket and dropped it over the side. A little white spark of light appeared in the chamber we had just vacated. It grew larger and larger, turning to orange and scarlet at the edges. The noise of hammering became indistinct, far away. In the distance a railway train whistled. The details of the ground became blurred; little points of yellow light, dotted about here and there, alone retained their clarity. Below us a great conflagration raged.

I glanced at Steeley. He was looking down with an expressionless face at the destruction of his home. Then he sighed and smiled wanly. "Well, here we are again," he said.

CHAPTER XII

THE END

FOR a few minutes none of us spoke; we just stood silently regarding the distant earth, each one occupied with his own thoughts.

Then Steeley cleared his throat and turned to me. "I've got an idea," he said.

"That's more than I have," I told him moodily.

"It's this," he went on, disregarding my pessimistic observation. "The time has come for us to part company."

"What, *now*?"

"At this very moment."

I glanced at the sombre void below and the star-spangled sky above. "Is that a joke?" I asked; "or has this business gone to your brain? Just how do you suggest——"

"Don't interrupt, Tubby," he reproved me, "Let us first look at the position, logically—sanely. What little wind there is is coming from the north-north-east, which means that we're heading for western France. France will suit me as well as anywhere, but I don't think it will suit you."

"Why not?"

"Because your interests are centred in England, and if you go out of it at this juncture you'll never get into it again without being apprehended. We are fugitives from justice, remember. And you've no passport. The same applies to Brian. On the other hand, I want to get out of England. If we landed in this country now, I should find it very difficult indeed to get out, because after what has happened every port will be watched. To sum up, there is every reason why you should alight now, while, conversely, there is every reason why I should go on."

The truth of this was so apparent that I could not deny it.

"And there is another aspect worth considering," he continued. "As we left the ground I dropped, as you no doubt saw, one of my baby incendiary bombs, on Haylands. The police would therefore have to evacuate it quickly—very quickly—and I very much doubt if they had time even to search my desk. To prevent that was my intention, of course. Moreover, they will be uncertain as to our fate, or if any or all of us were actually inside the

building when it caught fire, if it comes to that. They might guess, or conjecture, but they certainly could not swear to it. All they will find when the fire subsides will be the metal gas cylinders, but it is by no means certain that they will guess their purpose. As I say, they may conjecture, but surmise isn't proof. And a court of law needs proof, not supposition. Very well, then. Let us assume that Wayne believes the worst of us; that we were all inside the building when the fire broke out, but in some miraculous way managed to escape. What would he say if Brian turned up at Haylands on, say, a motor-cycle, or in an aeroplane, at this very moment. Obviously, even if he suspected that he was there when the constable was shot, he could not fail to think that he had been mistaken."

"But doesn't that apply to all of us?" I asked quickly.

"No, it doesn't apply to me. It is almost certain that he saw me at the window when I tried to close it, but I doubt if he saw you or Brian. Suppose he realizes by now that whoever was in the house escaped by a balloon? How can he swear who was in it?"

"He may have seen us arrive in the car."

"True, but I doubt it. Anyway, he couldn't swear identification. It was dark, don't forget, and we stepped straight out of the car into the house."

"I begin to see what you're driving at," I said. "But isn't it all rather futile? How could we part company even if we wanted to? You've either got to come down in England to suit us, or we shall have to go on to France with you."

"Nothing of the sort. You and Brian can return to earth at once by parachute."

"Good God! Have you got a 'brolly' aboard?"

"There are three, secured outside the basket after the manner of kite balloon equipment in France."

I had noticed the three bulges, but curiously enough it did not occur to me what they were. Feeling under the rim of the basket my hands came in contact with the harness.

"Brian, your future, perhaps your life, depends upon your actions during the next few hours," went on Steeley earnestly. "Remain with me and you are lost. You may survive, it's true, but you will never dare to return to your native country again. Your presence in France would prove your guilt, particularly as you would not be able to say how you got there without confessing the truth. But by a bold stroke, played daringly, you may even now clear yourself of suspicion and achieve fame at the same time."

"Fame," gasped Brian incredulously. "How?"

"Think! Remember what you know. What a press story it will make, carefully handled. What about the Hun bomber? There's a scoop for you, *if* you like. While every paper in the country is hazarding wild guesses, your paper comes out with a story that will set Europe rocking. Think of it! Why, the information at your disposal will set even the wires of Whitehall and Westminster buzzing. What a headline! 'Hertzovnia signs war agreement with Germany.' Believe me, there won't be a statesman in Europe who won't have heard of your name. You'll be the most talked-of journalist in the world. But you must decide quickly or it will be too late."

"How do you know about this agreement between Hertzovnia and Germany?" asked Brian, wide-eyed.

"It was pretty obvious, wasn't it? And if you want proof, take these; the Prime Minister himself should be willing to give his ears for them." Steeley thrust a packet of documents into Brian's hand. "These are the papers I took from Brunheim's desk," he explained. "And you, Tubby; if you're wise, you'll follow Brian," he went on seriously. "Return to your rooms, or go down to your yacht—anything you like. Profess ignorance of everything, and let Wayne prove anything against you—if he can."

"Steeley, old lad, I hate to leave you, but common sense tells me you're right," I answered sadly.

"Of course I'm right," he cried emphatically.

Brian was already struggling into a set of parachute harness. Steeley helped him to buckle it on, and satisfied himself that it was correctly adjusted. I followed suit. Then we turned and faced each other.

It was a moving moment. I saw that Brian's eyes were moist. "Goodbye, Steeley," he said huskily. "And good luck. I shan't forget you."

"Goodbye, Brian," answered Steeley quietly. "I'll give you Cassius's adieu to Brutus. 'Farewell! If we do meet again, why we shall smile; if not, why then this parting was well made.' Keep on the right side of the law in future; it's easier than—the other side."

Brian nodded, but did not speak. We clasped hands for a moment, then he climbed over the rim of the basket until his legs were hanging on the outside. His right hand went up in salute. "Goodbye to the two best comrades in the world. I shall live for our next meeting," he said chokingly. Then he disappeared from our sight.

"Your turn, Tubby old man," said Steeley softly.

I swung my legs over the side. "Let me know—where you are—if you can," I said. "Just a line, a single word, will do."

"Of course. By the way, there's one small thing you might do for me," he said hesitatingly.

"What's that?"

He handed me the balance of Brunheim's wad of notes. "Give those to Mrs. Norton," he said, "It isn't quite the full amount, but perhaps you would like to make it up."

"Of course I will. But what about you? You'll need money," I protested.

"I have a little left in my pocket, and some more in a safe deposit in Paris, so I shall be all right," he answered.

"If you get short at any time, let me know."

"I will."

For another moment I waited, gazing down into the fathomless vault below. I felt no fear. I was conscious only of a great grief, and hated to make the parting. Our hands met for the last time. "Whatever happens, I should like you to know that it's been worth it," I said.

"Then that's all that matters. *Bon voyage*, old comrade."

I took one final look at his pale face, now strangely tired and wistful. Then I launched myself into the void.

A moment later I hung suspended in space, in a world of silent solitude. Far away to the right the starlight caught the rippling waters of the Channel. In all other directions stretched a great expanse of indigo shadow, dotted here and there with pin-points of light. High above, a tiny black sphere, growing ever smaller, was drifting slowly to the south-west.

II

There is no need for me to describe in detail my actions during the remainder of that never-to-be-forgotten night. I landed—struck the ground would perhaps be more correct—in a field of young corn. I took rather a nasty fall, but there was little or no wind, so I got clear of the "brolly" without being dragged.

I rolled it into a ball and carried it to the edge of the field, where it found a final resting-place in the bottom of a deep ditch that formed the boundary. For the next half-hour I floundered about seeking a path, and then had the good fortune to strike a main road on which, after walking some distance, I was overtaken by a London-bound lorry loaded with garden produce. The driver gave me a lift to London; on Waterloo Bridge I thanked him and said goodbye. The time was half-past three in the morning.

A taxi took me to the lock-up garage in the mews where I parked my car. I had the key in my pocket, and I don't think anyone heard me get the car out; if they did, the occurrence was too commonplace to be likely to call for comment. Then I set out for Chichester Harbour.

Strange though it may seem, I was no longer tired. My body appeared to have become strangely light, and my brain alert.

At six o'clock, just as it was getting light, I got into my dinghy and rowed out to where the yacht swung at her buoy. I made the painter fast, got aboard, and went down the few steps into the tiny cabin. The bunk seemed to float towards me . . . and that is all I remember.

CHAPTER XIII

GOODBYE!

FOR many hours I slept the sleep of the dead, and I should have gone on sleeping, I suspect, had I not been awakened. The noise that fetched me up with a start was the unmistakable one of a small boat scraping against the hull. I raised myself up until I could see out of a porthole. To my surprise it was pitch-dark. What the time was I hadn't the remotest idea, for my wristwatch, which had luminous figures, had stopped. It was broken, in fact; I must have smashed it when I fell on to the bunk. Anyway, I scrambled up, switched on the electric light, and just had time to ruffle the blankets and throw off my jacket when the door opened and in walked Wayne, followed by two other men in plain clothes. And I could tell by the expression on his face that he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

"Good God, Wayne," I cried. "What on earth are you doing here? Are you following me about?"

He ignored my question. "Wilde, this is Colonel Raymond, Assistant Commissioner of Police," he said, by way of introduction, nodding towards the taller of the two strangers. "Detective Inspector Warley," he added curtly, with an inclination of his head towards the other.

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," I said. "What may I have the pleasure of doing for you? Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks," replied Raymond, rather tersely I thought.

He looked around the little cabin inquisitively, then his eyes came back to me and settled on my bandaged forehead. "Had an accident, I see," he observed dryly.

I'd forgotten all about my head, with its tell-tale bandage. "Yes," I admitted. "I fell down the companion-way and knocked myself out. I managed to tie the bump up and get to my bunk——"

"When?"

"Yesterday—or was it to-day? To tell the truth I'm not quite sure. What's the time now?"

"Half-past eight."

"What day?"

"Wednesday."

“Then I must have done it yesterday,” I declared.

As a matter of fact, I was surprised to find that it was still Wednesday. It was six o’clock in the morning when I came aboard. It was now half-past eight the same night, which meant that I had been asleep for nearly fifteen hours. “But tell me; what’s happened?” I added quickly. “I cannot suppose that this is just a friendly call.”

“Where’s Delaroy?” asked Wayne bluntly.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea. Why, what’s he been up to? And how did you know I was here?”

“I’ll answer your questions, perhaps, in due course. In the meantime, suppose you answer mine?” suggested Raymond coldly.

“If they’re something to do with Delaroy, I can’t help you,” I returned stiffly. “I’ve already told you that I don’t even know where he is. If it is another matter, kindly be brief, as I am feeling rather shaken and should like to see my doctor.”

“Have you seen Brian Ballantyne lately?”

“Yes, I saw him the other day. Has he been up to something?”

“You haven’t seen to-day’s papers, evidently.”

“No, I haven’t,” I confessed. “I must have been here all day. My last clear recollection is of standing on the deck just as it was getting light; about six, I suppose it would be. Then I must have stepped backwards and fallen down the companion.”

“Watch got broken in the fall, eh?”

“I suppose so. It was all right last night.”

“Let’s have a look at it.”

I held out my wrist, glancing at the position of the hands as I did so. It had stopped at five minutes past six.

Raymond looked at the watch and then at the Inspector. “I see,” he said slowly, and I knew he was trying to work out how, if I had been in the Haylands affair, I could have got down to the yacht by six o’clock.

“But what’s this about Brian Ballantyne?” I enquired.

Raymond passed me two newspapers. One was a morning paper bearing the day’s date, and the other was a London evening paper, printed only a few hours ago.

“You got the name of my boat from my flat, I suppose?” I asked carelessly, as I reached for the papers, conscious that three pairs of eyes were watching every move I made.

"Quite right, we did," admitted Raymond.

"My man told you I was here, eh?"

"No, he said he didn't know where you were."

"Silly ass. I told him I should be here," I growled. "You just ran down on the off-chance, I imagine," I added, although what was far more likely was that they had ransacked my flat for incriminating documents, found some reference to the boat, and then dashed down to search her, little expecting to find me on board. I didn't catch Raymond's reply to my question, for now that I had unfolded the daily paper, I was too taken up with the leading article.

Brian had followed Steeley's advice, there was no doubt about that, and he had leapt into fame at one swoop.

The first page of the paper was devoted entirely to the alarming German-Hertzovnia alliance, with details of the air armada and its underground hangar on the frontier. Brian's name appeared at the head of it above those familiar words "our special correspondent." And the lad had told his story well, as indeed he had every reason to, considering what he knew.

In the evening paper he had wrapped a wonderful story, a real thriller, about the German bomber on the beach that was now a centre of attraction for visitors and a mystery no longer. Part of the story was true in detail; all of it was correct in substance except that he had credited the affair to an unnamed hero, at the same time admitting that he had been concerned with the business.

I did not read it all, but turned over to find the second page ablaze with startling headlines about the Haylands "drama." Brian had pulled the scoop for his paper with a vengeance. It was vividly done, and was obviously so sincere that I was afraid that it would lead the police to think that he had actually been an eye-witness. He said nothing about the balloon though, and rather led the reader to believe that the "gangsters" had perished in the flames. There was no suggestion that the affair of the German bomber and the business at Haylands were interwoven.

"Somebody seems to have done the Government a good turn," I remarked, tossing the papers on to the end of the bunk.

"Ballantyne has done the Foreign Office a very good turn indeed," admitted Raymond. "He is down there in person at this moment, telling them all about it, I believe. I only hope all this publicity will not turn his head. And, Captain Wilde; I think we've beaten about the bush long enough. What do you know about this?"

"Shouldn't you warn me that anything I say may be used as evidence against me?" I chaffed.

"I've no warrant for you, so that aspect does not arise," replied Raymond, in a not unfriendly manner.

"Why haven't you?"

"Because we have thoroughly examined your record, in the Service and out of it, and we are satisfied that your connection with these affairs—if you were connected with them, of course—was unintentional. All we want is information so that we can find out just where we are."

I rested my chin in my hand and thought the matter over very carefully for two or three minutes. "Very well," I said wearily. "If you'll give me a written document to the effect that nothing I say will be used as evidence against *anybody*, I'll tell you a few things that you ought to know, because they have become matters of national importance. Even so, don't ever expect me to give evidence against Delaroy, because I won't. Wayne, you knew Delaroy in the Service. He was a gentleman then, and he's a gentleman now—according to the way I look at it, anyway. He may have been guilty of breaking certain regulations, but that's all. He was just as horrified as you were—and I was—about the shooting of the policeman at Haylands last night. How is he, by the way?"

"The doctors think he'll recover."

"Good! I was afraid he was a goner by the way he fell," I admitted brazenly.

While I had been speaking Raymond had been busy writing on a page of his notebook. Now he tore it out and passed it to me. I folded it up carefully and put it in my pocket. Then I made myself comfortable on the bunk, lit a cigarette, and regarded them all in turn.

"Very well, gentlemen," I began. "I'll give you the gist of the matter. You've heard of one who calls himself Licinius Crassus, no doubt? You have? Well, I doubt if you'll ever hear of him again. His real name was Deeley Montfort Delaroy. Briefly, Delaroy ran a smuggling business—garments, chiefly, not dope—partly for something to do and partly for profit. The profits he distributed to disabled or impoverished ex-soldiers.

"A week ago I knew no more about this than you did. I ran into Delaroy by accident in London, and as an old comrade he asked me to have lunch with him. Afterwards we went round to his flat in Park Lane to have a chat. While I was there, Brian Ballantyne, who was working for his paper, turned up, and revealed himself to be the son of Sergeant Ballantyne. You remember him, Wayne; as stout a pilot as ever gripped the cocking handle of

a Lewis gun. He was killed, and it was partly Delaroy's fault. While we were talking you made your raid. Brian and I bolted with Steeley—that's Delaroy—for no other reason than we thought we might get into trouble as accomplices. We went with him to Haylands, where you subsequently found us.

"The next big event was when we saw, from the air, your combat with Norton—the one in which Dayborne was killed. We landed beside Norton, and before he died he told us that he had been employed by a Hun to run guns into Hertzovnia, and Steeley offered, like the sportsman he was, to run the last lot of stuff over for him so that his wife—Norton's wife—could have the money her husband had earned. The next day we went to Hertzovnia in Steeley's machine. That was yesterday.

"I can't go over all that happened there, but we were lucky to get away with our lives. Young Brian runs pretty close to the truth in his article. Steeley was the man who got us out of the jam. We got away in a Boche machine and piled up on the beach near Folkestone. When we got back to Haylands we were astounded to find there a fellow named Dale, a professional crook with whom Steeley had once done some business. You know what happened. Delaroy told him to clear out. He never carried a gun himself and didn't know that Dale carried one. I think he would have handed him over to the police rather than let him loose if he had known. That's about all. You got Dale, and that was the end of everything as far as we were concerned. I'm not opposed to a little unorthodox excitement, but I'm no gunman. Nor is Delaroy or Ballantyne, although in the circumstances we might all be indicted as accessories before or after the fact.

"We parted company as soon as we got away from Haylands, and knowing him as I do, I doubt if we shall ever see Steeley again. What happened to Brian I did not know, but I can readily imagine, now that I have seen the papers. He made a bee-line for Fleet Street. I came on here. Those are the facts, and I think you will agree that cutting out the shooting affair at Haylands, for which we were not responsible, any wrong Steeley may have done has been far outweighed by the good he has brought about, both in the matter of helping the ex-service men he pitied and admired, and in exposing this German-Hertzovnia pact, which one day might have had far-reaching results. As it is, the thing will probably fizzle out. Steeley has gone. His organization no longer exists, and I don't think he will worry you again. It is up to you to act as you think fit."

There was silence for some minutes after I finished speaking. Then Wayne made one comment.

“How did you get away from Haylands, that’s what I should like to know?” he asked curiously.

“Perhaps I’ll tell you one day, Wayne; in the Club, or somewhere where we can smile about it. At present I don’t feel at all funny. I’m rather sad, and very, very tired.”

Raymond took the hint. He got up and held out his hand. “Thanks very much for what you’ve told us, Wilde,” he said, “It clears the air a lot. Taking it all in all, I think we might do worse than to let things remain as they are. I may want you to come along and have a word with the Commissioner one day, to put the complete story on our records, if you are agreeable. Meanwhile, take things quietly, and see that young Ballantyne doesn’t develop too strong a taste for adventure. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, sir, and many thanks,” I replied. “Goodbye, Wayne. If you want a flying detective at any time, you’ll find we shall be as ready to work on your side as we were on the other.”

Wayne produced something that was as near a smile as I had ever seen on his face. “I’ll remember it,” he said.

Then they went away, and I went back to bed.

. . . . .

A FINAL WORD

That's really all there is to say. The days rolled on into weeks, and the weeks into months, but there came no word from Steeley. The day following our adventure, a brief notice appeared in a French paper to the effect that a fishing boat had sighted a balloon in the early hours of the morning, well out to sea, and drifting seaward. Nothing more was seen or heard of him that I could discover. Yet I can't think that he has gone for ever, and every morning I hurry down for my mail in the hope of finding a line from him.

I heard nothing more from Scotland Yard.

Brian is doing well, and is now a full-blown reporter on a great national daily paper. I see him sometimes, and once in a while we have a bite of dinner together, to talk over old times and drink the health of one of the finest men it has been my good fortune to know—Steeley Delaroy.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Sky High* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]