

# STEELEY FLIES AGAIN



Capt. W. E. Johns

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# STEELEY FLIES AGAIN

BY  
W. E. JOHNS

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## CHAPTER I

“WELL, and what do you think of Paris?” I sipped my *Pernod* before turning to Brian Ballantyne for an answer to my question.

The early spring evening had drawn to a close in a fine drizzle of rain, so we were sitting at a small table under the pavement-awning of the Restaurant Chez Louis, just off the Place de l’Opera, sipping a pre-dinner *apéritif* after making a quick tour of the more important features of the French capital. It was Brian’s first visit and, curiously enough, it was unpremeditated. When he had looked in at my London flat earlier in the day, quite casually, as had become his habit since our mutual friend, “Steeley” Delaroy, had vanished into the blue, he found me packing a suitcase, with a flying trip to Paris in view, ostensibly to try out the new Puss Moth I had just acquired.

But I don’t think the lad was deceived, any more than I was, for in my heart I knew that my frequent trips to Paris since Steeley’s disappearance had been made in the hope of finding some clue that might reveal the whereabouts of our missing comrade, if he was still alive, or furnish confirmation of his death. Something told me that if he lived—and I could not bring myself to think otherwise—he would, sooner or later, return to the city he knew so well.

Further, the day was the anniversary of our last grim adventure,<sup>[1]</sup> although whether Brian was aware of it or not I do not know, for so far I had not mentioned it. With a borrowed suit of my pyjamas and a toothbrush which he purchased at the chemist’s next door, he declared himself fully equipped for the trip which, in due course, had been made without any untoward incident.

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<sup>[1]</sup> See *Sky High*, by the same author.

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He reached over to a vacant chair which stood next to his own, and picked up an abandoned newspaper before he replied to my question.

“I think it’s a great place,” he declared. “What I like about it most,” he continued warmly, “is the sense of freedom it exudes; the absence of

barriers, social and concrete. The place isn't hidebound with rules and regulations, or iron fences—not even the parks. You can step on to the grass if you like—in more ways than one—but if you slip, it's your own pigeon. There aren't any rails to go off, so to speak, so what you do is nobody's business; at least, that's the impression it gives me.”

“Which makes it no place for people like you, my lad,” I told him softly, with an inward chuckle at the jibe.

“What do you mean?” he enquired indignantly.

“It shouldn't be necessary for me to tell you. You're the most inquisitive young devil I ever came into contact with,” I announced, reaching for my drink.

“But dash it all, that's my business,” he protested quickly. “I'm a newspaper man, and a newspaper man's mission in life is to find out about things. If I see a door ajar it's up to me to push it open to see what's on the other side, in case there's a story hanging to it.”

“If you see a newspaper on a chair, I suppose it's up to you to pick it up for the same reason?”

“Exactly! A good pressman sees a story in everything, and he can make a story out of anything.”

“By being a sort of amateur sleuth, always on the prowl?”

“Or—say—like a prospector, always on the probe. The thing you're looking for might be anywhere. You never know your luck.”

“Well, and what's the luck like this time? What heart-stirring headline do you hope to obtain from the paper you have just picked up? Come on, my budding Sherlock; what are your deductions?” I chaffed.

“First, my dear Watson,” he replied, without turning a hair, “the reader was an Englishman.”

“Remarkable! Your penetration is astounding. The paper, I perceive, is the *Continental Daily Mail*, which is printed in English. But why not an American? There are plenty in Paris.”

“An American would have bought the *New York Times*, or *Herald*, both of which are published in France. Quite apart from that, the cut of his coat screamed of Savile Row.”

“You saw him, then?”

“I caught a glimpse of his rear view as he walked away a moment before we arrived. As a matter of detail, he took the taxi we had just stepped out of; it had joined the rank in the middle of the road.”

“I didn't notice that.”

“No reason why you should. You were too taken up with that platinum blonde, anyway.”

I laughed aloud. “You saw *that*, did you?”

“I certainly did.”

“She handed me the cold and stony.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Skipper; she never even saw you. She was all eyes for our friend who got into the taxi—either him or the driver.”

“What! That wall-eyed bandit in a beret?”

“Unlikely, I’ll admit. But there was no one else in the cab, so it must have been one or the other. Hence my assumption that it was the lad who left his newspaper behind.”

“You mean, he gave her the glad?”

“On the contrary, I don’t think he was so much as aware of her presence.”

“Wonderful! If we keep on at this rate we shall soon get a story out of it.”

“We! You haven’t contributed much, have you?”

“Maybe not, but I fancy you’re about at the end of your tether,” I suggested.

But Brian was pointing at the paper triumphantly. “Aha! What’s this?” he cried. “What have we here?”

“Well, what have we?”

“The paper has been cut. A small piece, which looks as if it might have been a news para., has been removed bodily from the centre of the second page. What does that suggest to you?”

“That the fellow wanted to keep it.”

“Pretty good, Skipper. You’re coming on.”

“Can you think of any other reason?” I enquired, curtly. “But what does it matter? As far as we are concerned, there the matter ends, I imagine.”

“My dear Skipper! I fear your employment of the word imagine in such a sense reveals the limit of your imagination, if I may say so.”

“Surely it would be difficult to pursue the matter further?”

“By no means; we’ve only just started,” he announced airily, tossing the paper on to the table and rising to his feet. “Forgive me for leaving you for a moment, but business calls.”

“Where are you going?” I asked in surprise.

“Shan’t be a tick,” was all the answer he gave me.

In two or three minutes he was back.

“What have you got there?” I asked, rather unnecessarily, as he came back with a newspaper in his hand.

“To-day’s *Continental Daily Mail*; what else? We will now see what it was that interested our unknown friend to such an extent that he went to the trouble of mutilating his paper. The average man is content to rely on his memory.”

“You’re a fanatic,” I told him.

“No, merely a reporter,” he parried, opening the paper with a faint smile of expectant curiosity. “Ah, here we are,” he went on, folding the paper at an inside page.

I saw his smile fade and a frown take its place. “Listen,” he said quietly. “‘Kidnapped Girl Drama,’” he read aloud. “‘No news has yet been received of Virginia Marven although it is now six days since her father, Silas P. Marven, the American aircraft manufacturer, handed over the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars demanded for her ransom. It is stated in New York that Mr. Marven is starting immediately for Paris, where, it will be recalled, the outrage was committed. The distracted parents . . .’ and so on and so forth. The rest is merely the usual grief-stuff,” he concluded.

“A dirty business,” I ground out through my teeth. “Those thugs need \_\_\_\_\_”

“Never mind what they need, let’s get on with our story,” broke in Brian. “It seems to be developing.”

“You’re not suggesting that our unknown friend was the kidnapper-in-chief?”

“No, I’m not; but if it comes to that, there’s no reason why not. He was sufficiently interested to clip his paper. Why? There was nothing in the para. he couldn’t have memorised quite easily.”

“Why, indeed?”

“The answer is obvious. He wanted to show it to somebody.”

“By God! I believe you’re right. But what can you do about it now? The trail is stone cold, and you didn’t even see the fellow’s face.”

“Maybe not, but the taxi driver is back on the rank over there. I can see him.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to ask him what his fare looked like?”

“You bet your life I am. I’m going to ask more. I’m going to ask where he took him—or I’ll get you to, if you don’t mind, as your French is better than mine. Stone cold! Why, the story’s getting red-hot.”



I sighed, for this was not my idea of an evening in Paris; nevertheless, I accompanied Brian to the rank where the taxi driver, still in his seat, was engrossed in the *Paris Soir*. He raised his eyebrows when I addressed him. At first, when he found that we did not propose to use his vehicle, he was inclined to be suspicious, but a ten-franc piece produced the desired result, although it did not get us very far, for it was soon plain that he retained no clear impression of his recent employer's appearance.

He became suspicious again when I asked him for the address to which he had taken him, but knowing the French peculiarity for siding with a transgressor rather than with the law, I was prepared for this. In the end I got round his reluctance to give away information that might mean trouble for someone by explaining that his late fare was a lost friend with whom we were anxious to get in touch. He still refused to give us the address, but finally offered, for a small matter of fifty francs, to compromise in such a way as would leave him conscience-free. He would take us to the same place and drop us there.

This plan met with Brian's undisguised approval, but I was by no means enthusiastic, for I could see that what I had promised myself would be a bright evening was likely to be wasted on a wild-goose chase. However, I gave in and we started.

We did not go far. A quarter of an hour brought us to the district which I recognised as Montparnasse, where, not far from the Dome Café, now ablaze with lights, we turned down a side-street into an insalubrious square of tall, gaunt buildings, typical of thousands of others just off the main boulevards of Paris. Our driver made for a corner as if he was going down another smaller, and definitely uninviting, street, but instead, jammed on his brakes and stopped outside the corner building. We stepped out, whereupon, without a word, he drove off, and we were left standing on the wet pavement.

I looked about me in disgust. All around, sombre buildings towered upwards to the starless sky, with streaks of yellow light showing here and there through the slats of their dilapidated shutters, while the usual mixed smell of garlic, stale fish, and cooking, peculiar to the poorer, thickly populated areas of French towns, hung over the place like a pall. The door of the house before which we stood was open; over it a crude, weather-faded board proclaimed it to be the *Pension au pauvre Garçon*. On the discoloured plaster wall was the inevitable warning "*Defense d'Afficher*," in large script type; below, as if in deliberate defiance of the order, somebody—presumably an urchin—had chalked some crude figures.

“This ceases to be amusing,” I observed coldly, turning to Brian, who was looking up and down with a puzzled expression on his face.

“I agree, but I’m working, not amusing myself,” he answered coolly. “If not amusing, it is at least intriguing, you must confess,” he added.

“I could find better entertainment elsewhere,” I told him a trifle sarcastically.

“No matter; we shan’t be long,” he declared confidently. “Do you know, I’d have bet a thousand to one that our cabby would have dropped us outside a fashionable hotel. This hardly seems to be the sort of place where one would expect to find a respectable Englishman.”

“Looks as if your theories are beginning to crumble,” I sneered.

“We shall see,” he returned, making for the door of the *pension*.

“What, in the name of thunder, are you going to do?”

“Ask if they’ve got an Englishman staying here.”

“But what earthly excuse can you give for such an intrusion?”

“None,” he replied frankly. “If I always had to find an excuse for my actions, I shouldn’t get far. Are you coming in, or are you going to wait outside?”

“I’ll come,” I grumbled, following him up the three steps that led into a sort of lobby, cheerless and drab.

The *concierge*, a female of uncertain age and unprepossessing appearance, sat in her box, knitting by such light as a pendant electric bulb could force through its dirt-encrusted glass. She looked up as we entered.

“Pardon, Madame,” began Brian; “but I am looking for a friend of mine—an Englishman. Have you an Englishman staying here by any chance?”

The woman put down her knitting, and regarded him for what must have been half a minute before she replied. “*Non*,” she said coldly.

Brian looked a bit taken aback. “An American, perhaps,” he suggested.

“*Non*.”

Brian looked crestfallen. “Well, I’m damned,” he muttered over his shoulder to me. “What do you make of that?”

“It looks as if you’ve come unstuck,” I answered, perhaps a little spitefully.

But he was not yet beaten. Against the far wall, as is customary in such French establishments, was an array of letter-boxes, each bearing a number and a name, the latter inscribed by the owner. This practice saves the postman many journeys up and down stairs. Three steps brought Brian to the

boxes, and a moment later a low cry of triumph broke from his lips. "I knew the hag was lying," he said tersely, laying a finger on the strip of pasteboard that bore the name "George Crabb." The number was seventeen. "That's an English name, I'll swear," he declared.

"The card looks as if it's been there for years."

"Never mind, we'll soon find out about that."

"But what in heaven's name will you tell the fellow, even if he is here?" I protested.

"I'll think of that as we go up the stairs," he answered. "Come on." Without further ado he set off up the clammy stone stairs that led to the upper storeys of the house.

We found number seventeen easily enough. It was on the second floor, and another grimy electric light revealed a card bearing the name, G. Crabb, pinned to the outside of the door.

Brian knocked quietly.

There was no reply.

He knocked again, louder.

Still no reply.

"Come on, let's go," I said shortly. "There's nobody there. Besides"—looking up and down the stairs—"this place gives me the willies."

"Just a second," he demurred quietly, and taking the door knob in his hand, tried it gently. It yielded and the door opened. Inside, the room was in utter darkness.

"By Heaven! You've got a nerve," I muttered, as he pushed the door still farther open, and crossed the threshold with his hand feeling along the wall for the electric-light switch. There was a click, and the room was flooded with light. I heard him catch his breath sharply; then there was silence.

For perhaps ten seconds my natural respect for another man's property held me back; then curiosity conquered, and I followed him into the room. A single glance showed that it was unfurnished. But it was occupied.

In the middle of the floor lay a man in an attitude so shockingly grotesque that it could mean but one thing. The knees were forced up tightly into the stomach, which had been drawn back by the arching spine, and the hands were raised, with fingers bent, claw-like, against the shoulders. I did not need telling that only the agony of sudden death could cause such frightful contortions. Something seemed to go stone cold inside me, yet, impelled by a horrid fascination, I took another step forward and looked down into the face. One glance at the curled-back lips and staring eyes

settled any possible doubt. The man was dead. And the reason was not hard to find.

From a little, bluish-purple hole in the right temple a ribbon of blood had flowed across the face and dripped on to the unvarnished boards, where it had formed a dark, sinister pool. Red-splashed nostrils, and bubbles of the same colour at the corners of the grinning mouth, suggested that at least one other bullet had gone through the body—probably the chest. So much I saw in one all-absorbing stare; then I looked at Brian. His face was ashen.

“He’s dead,” he breathed, moistening his lips.

The words seemed to break a spell. “Come on, let’s get out,” I snapped tersely, and crossed swiftly to the door. He followed closely behind, and not until we were both on the landing, with the door shut behind us, did I breathe with any degree of comfort.

At that moment I had one idea, and one only, which was to remove myself from such an unhealthy atmosphere with all possible speed, and with this object in view I took a pace in the direction of the stairs. But even as I moved, glancing down I saw something that made me shrink back; and it was at that moment, I think, that I experienced my first pang of real fear. In fact, I’ll go so far as to admit that I nearly panicked.

Two men were coming up the stairs. I could not see them, but I could see their shadows, cast on the opposite wall by the light on the landing below; and, in the deathly silence, I could hear them breathing—or I thought I could. Brian clutched my arm and looked at me with wide-open, questioning eyes. He had seen them, too.

There was no time to ponder the peril; something had to be done at once, and, in the instant that I had to make up my mind, I took what I thought to be the wisest course. Laying my finger on my lips for silence, I turned on my toes, and sped silently but swiftly up the next flight of stairs. As I went, I did not look forward, but kept my head turned in order to watch Brian and the sinister shadows behind him. Thus it was that I did not see the man on the next landing until I actually reached it. Then, as our eyes met, the shock turned my mouth dry, although there was little about him to produce such an effect.

He was sitting on an ordinary bedroom chair outside a door, a little rat of a fellow, quite young, with a pale, tired-looking face. But his eyes were as cold and dispassionate as those of a reptile, and there was something unpleasantly suggestive about the way his hands were thrust deep in the side-pockets of his coat. He did not move; only his jaws worked, slowly, like those of a tired animal chewing the cud. Nor did he speak. He just watched

me, but there was something so ominous in his studied calm that every nerve in my body grew taut. It may have been instinct. I don't know.

He still did not speak as I stood up straight and Brian fell in line with me. Nor, a moment later, when two other men appeared on the stairs. One remained on the top step lounging against the flimsy banister, as if disinterested in what was going on; the other crossed over to the foot of the next flight, sat on the bottom stair, took a loose cigarette from his top pocket, lit it, and then returned his hands to his pockets.

It was I who broke the silence. I had to speak, for my heart was fluttering like a slack flying-wire on a bumpy day. "Sorry if I've disturbed you, gentlemen, but I seem to have come to the wrong house," I said, in French, as naturally as I could, and turned back towards the stairs.

But the man who was lounging there blocked my path, and his pockets moved slightly as I advanced. The threat was unmistakable.

Now, during four and a half years of war I looked into the cold face of death many times, but never in such a grim relentless form as I did now. There was no room for doubt. We were within an ace of being murdered. I could feel it. Unarmed, we could not even put up a fight, yet, curiously enough, had any one or all of the men drawn the weapons they clearly had in their pockets, the strain would have been less unendurable. It was the unseen rather than the visible, together with the uncanny silence, that were so trying.

What might have happened during the next sixty seconds is, of course, purely problematical, but at the precise moment that I felt I could bear it no longer, and was mustering my muscles to launch an attack, the door, outside which the little fellow was sitting, opened, and another man stood on the threshold. I did not move, but my eyes switched to his face, and then I knew that the whole thing was hallucination. I was dreaming. For the man was Steeley.

Steeley Delaroy, pilot, philanthropist, gentleman adventurer, and best of comrades, who, exactly a year before, I had seen standing in a free balloon, drifting seaward.

"What's going on?" he asked sharply.

Then he saw us.

## CHAPTER II

ALTHOUGH the shock must have been as stunning for him as it was for us, not by a flicker of an eyelid did he betray it. "Hello, Tubby! Hello, Brian," he said calmly. Then, turning to the others, "O.K., boys," he added. "They're friends of mine."

"Then why the hell didn't they say so?" growled the doorkeeper spitefully. It was almost as though he resented our reprieve.

"Say! What's the party? Don't I get invited?" called a voice in a pungent American accent from inside the room.

For a second Steeley hesitated, and I knew without being told what was in his mind. Had it been possible he would have tumbled us down the stairs and out into the street, for—but what's the use of talking about what might have been. "O.K., boss," he replied quickly; and then to us, "Come in." We filed into the room.

In contrast to the rest of the building it was comfortably, almost luxuriously, furnished, but I paid little attention to the appointments, for automatically my eyes sought the "boss," and I saw "Slick" Ferrara for the first time.

There was nothing about his appearance to suggest that he was—well, what he was. On the contrary, he was an ordinary-looking individual, not unlike a successful, middle-aged tradesman. Certainly there was nothing unpleasant about his features. Indeed, in contrast to the generally accepted tenets, both of fiction and the screen, if anything he looked a better-tempered man than the average citizen. True, his eyes were perhaps a trifle too large for his face, and he wore his curly hair rather long, but that was all. Not by countenance or expression would one suspect that he had, in his time, killed at least a score of men. But I didn't know anything about that at that moment, for I didn't know who he was.

He was sitting at a small table in the middle of the room eating his dinner—or his supper. Anyway, he was eating. He glanced up as we entered, with Brian pump-handling Steeley's arm, but he did not pause in what he was doing. But when he spoke, I shivered.

"When you're through with the kissing maybe you'll recollect whose room this is," he sneered coldly.

“Sorry, Slick,” murmured Steeley apologetically. “Meet Tubby Wilde and Brian Ballantyne. Boys, this is Slick Ferrara.”

At the sound of the name my heart gave a lurch, for the reputation of Slick Ferrara, gunman, killer, and Public Enemy No. 1 in his own State of Texas, was as well known in Europe as America, for the Press had made big business out of his exploits. I hardly heard his muttered, “How do?”

“These are the boys who were with me in that last racket of mine over this side,” added Steeley.

Slick looked up again with his fork poised. “That’s swell,” he exclaimed. “I can do with some more pilots.” Then he went on eating.

Steeley flashed me a swift glance of warning. “I expect they’re running a racket of their own, Slick,” he said quickly.

“There’s only one racket in ‘Yurru’ when I’m in it, and that’s mine,” was the curt reply. “By the way, how did these guys find their way here?” he asked evenly.

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me,” answered Brian coolly.

“You can leave me to be judge of that,” was the crisp rejoinder.

“It was a pure fluke,” I butted in. Strange to relate, I was no longer afraid, although it would have been folly to imagine that our position was still anything but precarious. “Brian here picked up a newspaper outside a bar,” I went on. “A piece had been clipped out of it. Out of sheer idle curiosity we followed it up and it brought us here.”

“Yeah! And how?”

“Quite easy. By asking the driver of the taxi who drove the owner of the newspaper away to take us to the same place—after he came back.”

“What was the bar?”

“The Chez Louis.”

“What was the bit cut out of the paper? You found that out, I guess?”

“We did. It referred to Virginia——”

“This it?” He picked up a scrap of paper that was lying on the table in front of him and tossed it across.

From the shape of it I knew it must have been the identical cutting that had been clipped from the paper Brian had found. “That’s it,” I replied briefly.

Slick cleaned his knife and fork on a piece of bread, ate it, and then laid them down carefully on his plate. Then he wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve and turned his eyes on Steeley. “Toni always was careless,” he said,

in a curious voice. “But what about these friends o’ yours? As you know, we could do with a few more bright boys who can fly airplanes.”

“Nothing doing, Slick,” replied Steeley, shaking his head slowly. “This isn’t their line.”

“No? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. It’s O.K. by me, as you know, but—well, it’s a bit out of their reach.”

“It ain’t, not if I say so.” An ugly look crossed the gunman’s face; it was clear that he was seldom contradicted.

“I’d rather they kept out.”

Slick half closed his eyes. “Sure,” he said. “Just let ’em go loose, eh, after they’ve been here?”

“They’ll keep their mouths shut if I tell them to.”

“If *you* tell ’em to? I’ll see about that.”

Steeley frowned. “Don’t be a fool, Slick,” he snapped. “What’s the use of you taking me on because I know the ropes over this side if you don’t take any notice of what I say? You twist the old lion’s tail by bumping off a couple of Britishers, and you’ll start something that will surprise you. We’re not in New York now.”

“Are you telling me?”

“I’m telling *you*.”

“Meanin’ that your cops are smarter than ours, eh?”

“Not smarter. But they go farther; and when they get hold they don’t let go. But that’s beside the point. If you think I’m going to stand by and see these boys put on the spot, you’ve got me wrong. I don’t often buck you, Slick, but this is one time when I do.”

Slick stroked his jaw reflectively. “What I like about you Britishers is your sass,” he observed casually. “I——” The door opened, and the sentry put his head inside. “Blondie’s back,” he said.

“Swell! Ask her to step in. Where’s Joe and Al?”

“Gone back downstairs.”

“One of ’em had better go and fetch the car, to—you know.”

“O.K.”

The man departed, but before any of us could speak, the door opened again and a girl entered. I stared at her face, surmounted by a mop of blonde hair, incredulously, for it was the girl I had seen outside the Chez Louis. She



gave us no more than a passing glance, and then went straight across to Slick. It struck me that she was a little ill-at-ease.

“Hello, Slick,” she said. “You wanted to see me?”

“Sure! Sit down.” Slick pointed to a chair some way away from the desk. “Been out, eh?”

“Just a stroll down town.”

“Of course. Listen, kid. I’ve got some news for you—bad news.”

“What is it?”

“’Bout Toni.”

“What about him?”

“He did a bit of shopping to-day, I hear.”

“Shopping?”

“Yeah. What do you think he bought?”

“What did he buy?” I saw the girl’s hands slowly clenching.

“He bought a couple of reservations on the Rome express. When I asked why, he said he had a hunch to see his old mammy again.”

“Well?”

“I asked him why it was necessary to buy two tickets.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothin’. There was nothing he could say, was there?”

The girl didn’t answer, but I sensed a growing tension in her manner.

“Tell me, kid,” went on Slick. “How long have we been running together, you and me?”

“Four years—nearly five.”

“Bit too long for you, eh? Getting sort of tired?”

“What makes you think that?”

“How long since you and Toni had a letch on each other?”

“You’re crackers. I reckon he’s a nice boy—nothin’ more.”

“That so? You know his bag was all packed?”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“That’s what I was wondering—why your bag was packed too.”

There was dead silence. The atmosphere was pregnant with latent tragedy. Blondie ran her tongue over her lips. “Where’s Toni now?” she asked. “Fetch him here; he’ll tell you the truth.”

“’Fraid it’s a bit too late, kid.”

The girl's face went as white as chalk. Her mouth fell open. "You haven't—taken him—for a ride?" she said in an expressionless voice.

"Wasn't time. You see, he tried to make a get-away." Slick's manner seemed to be one of genuine apology.

I looked at the stricken girl. She seemed to have shrunk, and her face sagged pathetically, revealing her age in a manner that no make-up could disguise. Only her eyes remained bright. A dreadful smile crept round the corners of her mouth. "I see," she said at last, forcing the words through her teeth. "So you——"

"Couldn't do anything else."

There was another ghastly silence.

"Where is he?" she asked in a dead voice.

"Downstairs; in number seventeen. They'll be fetching him presently."

"It was my fault," she whispered. And then again, as if she was talking to herself, "It was my fault." Then she pulled herself together with a physical effort. "Well," she went on, "I expect you'll be sending me with him."

"That's what I was thinking."

I looked at the man unbelievably. He was picking his teeth with a matchstick. With his left hand he opened a drawer in the table, took out a small revolver, and pushed it towards me. "Do a little job for me?" he asked appealingly.

I looked at the weapon and then back at the man's face. "What do you want me to do?" I asked.

He inclined his head the merest fraction towards the girl.

"Are you asking me to shoot—her?" I enquired incredulously.

"Sure. Then if you go there won't be any squealing afterwards—see?"

I picked up the revolver, and as my hand closed over the butt my voice gave expression to my thoughts. "I'll see you frizzling in Hell first, you cold-blooded, mealy-mouthed crook," I snarled, and flashed the muzzle of the gun to cover him.

For the first time during the evening his face changed. He smiled, and turned his eyes sorrowfully towards Steeley. "Well, now, what do you know about that?" he complained. "Good thing it wasn't loaded."

"Your idea of a joke, was it?" I asked bitterly, throwing the revolver back on to the table.

"Sure." He picked up the weapon and "broke" it. Behind every cylinder was a round brass cap. It was loaded in every chamber.

In my blazing fury I nearly sprang at him, but before I could move he had clicked the weapon shut and turned the barrel towards me. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words never came. At that moment there was a deafening explosion, a crash of glass, and the room was plunged into darkness. The reek of burnt cordite stung my nostrils. Instantly the door was flung open, and the doorkeeper, gun in hand, stood framed in the yellow rectangle of light. There was another explosion, and a stream of orange sparks streaked across the room; they seemed to end at the doorkeeper's chest. He sagged to his knees and then pitched forward. The rest was a nightmare.

I leapt for the door, but before I could reach it a female form darted through with the lithe speed of a panther and disappeared down the stairs. I followed, ducking low, and it was as well that I did, for another bullet whistled over me. I snatched a glance behind to make sure that Brian was following, and then I went down the stairs, three, four, and five at a time, expecting at every jump to feel a bullet boring through me, either from behind or in front, for I had not forgotten the man on duty below. The other, I remembered, had been sent to fetch a car for something or other. Still, one man, armed, as he certainly would be, was likely to hinder our progress.

I was still on the landing of the second floor when I heard a babble of voices break out below, with a woman's raised above the rest, and looking over the banisters I saw, not one, but four or five men in the lobby. The blonde was with them, gesticulating and pushing her way towards the front door. Clearly, escape that way was out of the question. There were three doors on the landing on which Brian and I now stood, one of them being, of course, number seventeen. I tried the other two swiftly in turn, but they were both locked, so we were left no choice. I could hear Slick's voice on the landing above, cursing luridly, so, overcoming my repugnance, I opened the door of number seventeen and crept inside. Brian followed, and I heard him turn the key in the door.

"Put the light on," I said shortly.

He switched it on, and I took a deep breath as my eyes instinctively went to the fatal spot, for the body of the man I now knew to have been Toni was no longer there. I wasted no time in speculation as to what had become of it, but darted to the one window the room possessed. It was closed and shuttered on the outside with long French shutters, but I threw them open and peered down.

As far as it was possible to judge, the *pension* formed one of a hollow square of buildings, the interior space or area being entirely filled with a grey covering, a sort of flat roof that rose to a height of about six feet below

the window at which we stood. In it were set two skylights of frosted glass, through which filtered a dull yellow glow, showing that the lights were on in the place below. Both skylights were slightly open, presumably for ventilation, and through the apertures came a soft purring sound as of an engine ticking over.

Voices on the landing outside and the rattle of the door handle expedited my decision, and with a whispered, "Come on, I think we can do it," I swung my legs over the sill, and hanging at the full length of my arms, dropped lightly on to the flat roof. It sagged under my weight like thin ice, so I lay flat and squirmed towards the nearest light, for, as far as I could make out, there was no other means of egress from the place. My hands told me that the roof was made of that thin asbestos sheeting material commonly used for such purposes, but I reached the skylight safely and peeped through.

I saw at once that the place below was an ordinary public garage. Several cars, all more or less old and decrepit, stood about, but the one that interested me most was that almost immediately underneath me. It was a big saloon. Standing beside it was Joe—or Al—one of the two men who had followed us up the stairs. Apparently he had just got out of the car, or he was about to get in, for the door was open and the engine running.

It was soon clear that he was waiting for somebody, for he kept looking at the open entrance to the street, near which a single mechanic was carelessly sweeping the floor. Then, as if his impatience had got the better of him, he slammed the door, stalked towards the entrance, and finally disappeared round the corner as if he was going on an errand. The mechanic took not the slightest notice of him.

In a flash I had seized the opportunity thus presented. Opening the skylight wide, I slipped through and dropped on my toes beside the car. Brian needed no advice; he was beside me almost before I had regained my balance. "Quick," I breathed, and was about to make a dash for the doorway when the gangster reappeared. He halted just outside on the pavement, and stood staring down the street. The position was critical, for if he looked into the garage he could hardly fail to see us. There seemed to be only one thing to do, and I did it. I opened the door of the car and slipped into the driver's seat. Brian took the place next to me. "Shut the door—quietly," I whispered.

A glance through the windscreen showed that the gunman was still in the same place, but he was now moving his feet uneasily as if undecided what to do next. It was obvious that he might return to the car at any moment.

A sense of abandon swept over me, and I felt for the gears. “Hold tight and keep your head down,” I muttered as the car moved forward.

We were at the door before either the mechanic or our enemy saw us. The mechanic took no notice at all; neither at first did Joe—or Al—whoever it was—and we were actually passing him before he recognised the car. Then his astonishment cost him a second of time, and before he had recovered we were past him and tearing up the narrow street. I held my breath until we reached the end, for had another vehicle entered from the opposite way we should have been in a mess. Fortunately, no such calamity occurred, and we went on at ever-increasing speed. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the entrance to the *pension* as we swept past it, but could see nobody. A few seconds later we had emerged into the well-lighted Rue St. Antoine and were cruising towards the centre of the city.

It was at the corner of Rue Monsieur le Prince and the Boulevard Michel that the disaster occurred. For a moment I forgot that I was in France, where the rule of the road is opposite from our own, and I tried to pass an omnibus on the wrong side. A passenger stepped off the vehicle smack in front of us, and instinctively I stood on the foot brake. It worked all right; in fact, it worked too well. There was a vicious *swish* as our back wheels spun round on the greasy road in a wild skid. We hit the side of the bus with a crash and ricocheted on to a newspaper kiosk, which, fortunately for its usual occupant, was closed.

“Damn it,” I muttered, for although the jar was considerable, it wasn’t bad enough to cause us any injury. The back of the car had taken most of the shock; the handle of the rear door had caught the iron framework of the kiosk, with the result that the door was wrenched clean off its hinges. Luckily, few people were about, so nobody was hurt, and I stepped out on to the pavement to survey the full extent of the damage. A blanket had fallen out of the back of the car and was hanging in the gutter, and when the bus conductor reached me, I was trying to pull it out in order to refold it and put it inside out of the wet. Brian joined me and gave a hand, for it seemed to have got caught up in something. I gave a sharp tug and it came away, exposing something. It was the face of the dead man that we had last seen in room seventeen—Toni.

In a night of wild moments that was by far and away the worst. For a terrible second I was unable to think. All I could do was to stare at the frightful thing as if hypnotised.

It was Brian who came to the rescue. He flung the rug back over the horror, but there was no question of shutting the door, because there was no door to shut. The bus conductor who, luckily, had not seen what we had

seen, was looking at us oddly, and I could see a gendarme hurrying along from the next cross-roads. Panic, stark panic seized me. I caught Brian by the wrist, and set off up the footpath like a sprinter out to break a record.

We came to a side-turning—to this day I don't know the name of it—and went down it as if the devil was at our heels. Indeed, for five minutes I think we took every turning that we came to. Then I slowed down and glanced behind. There was no sign of pursuit. A taxi came crawling along, and I hailed it as naturally as I could. "Café de la Paix," I ordered like a man in a dream, and then sank back weakly on the cushioned seat.

During the short ride neither of us spoke. Indeed, I was well inside the café gulping a *Pernod sec* before I expressed my thoughts.

"Your blasted curiosity will be the death of me," I observed savagely.

"I'm afraid you may be right," admitted Brian apologetically.

## CHAPTER III

I LOOKED at the clock over the door. The time was 9.30. At eight o'clock we had been sitting outside the Chez Louis, so, difficult though it was to believe, all that had occurred since had taken place in eighty minutes.

We finished our drinks, and I called to the head waiter to bring two more, complaining that I had been trying to catch his eye for ten minutes. At the same time I asked him to confirm that his clock was right, making an appointment the excuse. I did this in a somewhat amateurish effort to establish an alibi in case we were traced as the drivers of the bandits' car with its grisly occupant; not that I considered it at all likely.

A minute or two later I paid the bill and led the way up to the restaurant on the first floor for our overdue meal. In spite of all that had happened, we had said very little. For my part, my brain was still in too much of a whirl for lucid thought, but as the meal progressed and the reactions of our sequence of shocks wore off, we began to take stock of the situation. Brian led the way with one of his facetious remarks.

"Well, where do we go from here?" he asked, as he tackled an *entrecôte minute* in a businesslike way.

"God knows," I answered piously. "But we've found Steeley; that's the main thing."

"What do you suppose he's doing with that gang of thugs? He looks about as much at home as a sheep in a pack of wolves."

"Don't ask me; but I can't think he's there from choice. He looked tired and ill. Did you notice his eyes?"

Brian nodded. "Yes," he replied. "He looked as if he'd been living on his nerves for some time. But I don't think it's much use guessing. He's got some scheme on, we may be sure of that, or he'd have bolted when we did. I was hoping he would. He must be pretty sure of himself, or he daren't have stayed after what happened. Slick, I imagine, will be a bit sore."

"What a foul swine that fellow must be. I wonder what happened to that wretched girl? I hope she got away."

"So do I, although Slick's summing up of the situation was probably right," I observed, calling for another *carafe* of wine. "She and Toni were going to hand in their resignation and he got wind of it. I'm not quite clear

as to what happened outside the Chez Louis, but it looks as if the fellow who left the paper behind was Toni, who was, I should say, an Italian, in spite of his English-cut suit. Slick had him under observation, that's certain, and I fancy the girl knew it. Maybe she was trying to warn him as he left the Chez Louis, but evidently she failed, and by the time she got back Slick had taxed him on his defection and put paid to his account in orthodox gangster style. How in the name of heaven Slick and his gang ever got into France without being spotted—for it's obvious the police don't know they're here—will need a bit of explaining, but there's no doubt that he's the man who abducted that girl—what's her name——”

“Virginia Marven. I don't think there's much doubt about that. But what are we going to do about it?”

“I wonder would it be any use going to the police?”

“And get Steeley sent to Devil's Island for life?”

“Of course not. I forgot that.”

“The only thing we can do, as far as I can see, is to try to get in touch with Steeley, and hear what he has to say before we do anything drastic.”

“Yes, but how? I'm not sure that he wants to get in touch with us. Had he wanted he could have easily written to me at home. Why didn't he write? The inference is that he was content to let us think he had gone West. Nevertheless, I can't help feeling that he needs—well, not exactly help—shall we say moral support? I can't get his face out of my mind; he looked positively haggard. We've got to make up our minds whether we leave him to it or whether we are going to butt in. There's a mystery behind it, I'm convinced. Slick Ferrara's got Virginia Marven, there's no doubt about that; kidnapping was his racket—as he calls it—in America, and you can bet he's up to the same game here, but nothing would make me believe that Steeley is in such a dirty business willingly. Yet where does he come in? If he's caught he'll go to gaol for life. My God! What a problem.” I'm afraid I ended on a note of despair.

“Yes, it's a bit of a poser,” admitted Brian, stirring his coffee. “Well, what's it going to be? Are we going to try to get in touch with him?”

I made up my mind there and then. “Yes,” I answered shortly.

“How are you going to set about it—hang around outside and try to catch him coming out?”

There was something about the suggestion that stirred my temper. “No,” I replied grimly. “I'm damned if I'm going to sneak round corners like a truant schoolboy or dodge about in doorways like the detective in a penny



dreadful, for any low-down Yankee thug. I've only got one question to ask Steeley, and I'm going the quickest way I know to get to him."

Brian looked startled. "You're not contemplating going back to that den of thieves?" he ejaculated.

"I am," I declared curtly.

"Have you gone off your rocker?"

"Possibly——"

"But——"

"Shut up; don't let's have an argument about it. I'm going."

"When?"

"Now. What's the time?"

"Nearly eleven. What time shall we start?"

"There's no 'we' about it. I'm going alone."

"Like hell you are!"

"You'll do what you're told or I'll leave you here to find your own way home."

Brian stared at me; I don't think he had ever seen me in such a mood before.

"You can come as far as the top corner of the square," I continued. "If I'm not out by the end of half an hour go to police headquarters and tell the facts. Suggest that they make a raid there and then. The names of Slick Ferrara and Virginia Marven should get them busy. If they won't act put a call through to Colonel Raymond at Scotland Yard; tell him what's happened, and ask him to speak to the French police. That clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Good! Then let's go."

"But aren't you going to take a weapon of some sort?"

"Don't get dramatic; of course not."

"Good God! Why not?"

"Don't be silly. If it came to shooting, what chance should I have against that bunch of experts?"

My decision seemed to take the wind out of Brian's sails, and he followed me meekly as I paid the bill and went down to the street. He made only one more suggestion, and that was that I should wait until morning; but I wouldn't hear of it, for the simple reason that I knew what he knew, and that was, if I waited until the morning, I should think better of it and not go at all.

A taxi took us to the Rue St. Antoine, and from there we walked down to the square. "This'll do," I said, when we reached a place that commanded a view of the *pension* door. "Stand fast. If I'm not back in half an hour you know what to do. Cheerio."

"For the love of Mike be careful," he almost wailed as I set off down the pavement.

I must confess that I experienced a sinking sensation in the stomach as I approached the steps of the *pension*, and I am quite certain that nothing except the errand on which I was bent would have induced me to cross them. But up I went, humming a tune to myself to brace my wilting courage.

I got the first set-back as I walked into the lobby, for the *concierge* was not in her place. That rather altered my plans, for it had been my intention to try to bribe her into talking. There was nobody in sight, and the place was as silent as the tomb, so I set off up the stairs, deliberately making as much noise as possible with my feet, reckoning that such a method of entry would be less likely to invite a sniper's bullet than stalking tactics.

I reached the first floor without seeing a soul, so I crossed the landing and went on up the next flight. At the top the number seventeen on the door of the fatal room met my eyes, but there was still no sign of occupation. "Anyone at home?" I called, both in English and French. My voice echoed eerily up the deserted staircase, but there was no answer.

I tried to whistle as I went up the next flight, but my lips were too dry. "Hi, Del," I called, as I reached the landing, for the silence began to get on my nerves; but there was still no answer.

This was something I hadn't bargained for, and far from feeling reassured it nearly sent me panicking back down the stairs to the street. No, I thought, I'm damned if I do, and raising my fist I hit Slick's door a sharp rap with my knuckles.

There was no answer.

It seemed pointless to knock again, for had anyone been in the room he must have heard me.

This unexpected turn of affairs put me in what, in flying parlance, is known as a flat spin. I simply did not know what to do. To retrace my steps after the effort I had made would, I felt, be a ridiculous anti-climax to an onset which deserved nothing less than the V.C. Where was Steeley? Where was Slick? Where were all of them? It began to look as if a complete evacuation had taken place. I tried the handle of the door. It gave under my pressure, so I pushed the door wide open, wincing as I did so, for I more than half expected to be greeted by a missile travelling the opposite way

with considerable velocity. But nothing happened. The room was in darkness, for the light had, I recalled, been shattered. "Anyone there?" I asked, feeling rather foolish. There was no reply, so I struck a match and walked in.

Even in the feeble light I could see that what I already half suspected was, in fact, the case, for the room showed every sign of a hasty departure. Loose sheets of packing paper lay scattered about, with empty drawers that had been pulled right out of the pieces of furniture to which they belonged. For a minute or two I stood amongst the debris striking matches and wondering what to do next. It occurred to me that a thorough search might reveal something, a letter, for instance, that had been overlooked, and might provide a clue to the gang's whereabouts; but I had only a few matches left, and such a procedure would need a torch. The thing to do, I decided, now that the coast was clear, was to go and fetch Brian, and then get an electric bulb from somewhere in order to prosecute a thorough search. Either that or wait until daylight. But as I stood pondering in the darkness I heard a sound that banished all such thoughts from my head, and brought my fears back with a rush. It was the unmistakable squeak of a door being opened, or shut, and the sound came from the landing.

I spun round with the alacrity of a schoolboy caught in the pantry, but could see nothing; whoever it was—and it was certainly somebody—was just outside my field of vision.

My position was ticklish, to say the least of it. To walk out calmly and expose myself at this juncture when, in the "jumpy" circumstances, it was more than likely that shots would be fired first and questions asked afterwards, was more than I felt inclined to risk. Perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say "more than I was physically capable of." But one advantage was on my side. I stood in the darkness, while whoever was outside was open to exposure by the electric light that hung over the landing; but in this I congratulated myself too soon. There was a click that sounded as loud as a pistol shot, and the landing light went out, leaving the whole place in utter darkness. Almost simultaneously with the click there was a scurrying movement at the door of the room in which I was standing, and I heard it shut quietly. I heard something more. I could hear the sound of breathing, faint but fast, and unmistakably it was in the room.

This was more than I could stand, and I did what I should have done at first. I spoke. "Go easy," I said, in a voice that I hardly recognised as my own. "I'm not armed, and I'm going to light a cigarette," I added, in what I hoped was a casual voice. Suiting the action to the word I rattled the matches in my box to emphasise my statement, extracted a cigarette from

my case, and struck a match. I knew I was standing nearer to sudden death than ever I had before, but it couldn't be helped. To prolong the agony could not improve matters.

I pride myself that I did not even look up as the match flared, but lit my cigarette as if it was all that mattered, well aware that my companion could see my face clearly. On the other hand, the flare of the match momentarily blinded me, and before my eyes could adjust themselves to the light the match had burned out. But I was not kept long in suspense. I heard a quick intake of breath, and then a voice said, "Say, you nearly got yours that time."

It was a woman's voice, and I recognised it at once. "Hello, Blondie," I said. "You're taking a bit of a chance coming back here, aren't you?"

"I've been taking chances so long that I don't notice them," was the quiet reply. "You're the guy Slick invited to perforate me, aren't you?"

"You've got it," I agreed, briefly.

"English?"

"Yes."

"Take your oath you aren't heeled?"

"I give you my word that I haven't a weapon of any sort, if that's what you mean," I answered.

"Then stay where you are till I put the light on."

A moment later the light on the landing flicked on, and I saw her. Her face was pale and her hair tousled. Her eyes looked as if she had been crying, but there was nothing feminine about the way she handled a tiny automatic she held in her hand.

"Is that the gun you shot the light out with when I was talking to Slick?" I enquired, for want of something to say.

She nodded. "Now," she went on, "what's your game?"

I glanced at my watch, and saw that I had been in the building twenty-eight minutes. "Listen, Blondie," I said earnestly, "unless I get out of here immediately, in a few minutes the police will raid the place. My partner's outside, and that's his move. Have you had anything to eat lately?"

"Nope."

"Then suppose we go and talk where we can eat?"

"Are you on the level?"

"I'm not on Slick's side, if that's what you mean, and I'll give you my word that I'll be what you call on the level with you unless you double-cross me," I replied.

She took a deep breath. “That goes with me,” she said, and turned towards the stairs.

“Better let me go first,” I suggested.

“My gun goes first,” she answered curtly. “And if we meet anyone coming up, it’s going to be just too bad for him.”

“Lead on,” I said, “and make it snappy. My partner will be getting impatient.”

Getting down to the street was nervy work, but we saw no one, and reached the shining pavement without trouble. At first I was afraid Brian had gone, but as I took a couple of paces towards the kerb he appeared some little distance higher up and hurried towards me. I could feel for his impatience, for he must have had a trying half-hour. His eyes went round when he saw who was with me.

“Strewth! The plot thickens,” he muttered, giving me a queer look.

“Never mind about that. Come on, let’s find a cab,” I answered tersely. “We don’t want to bump into Slick or any of his disciples.”

“You’re not likely to do that,” put in Blondie.

“Why not?”

“They’ve gone.”

“Gone! Where?”

“To England,” she announced dispassionately.

## CHAPTER IV

I STOPPED dead in my tracks. “To *England?*” I echoed foolishly.

“You heard me,” she answered shortly. “Keep a’ going; I’m pining for these eats you were crooning about just now.”

“Sorry, but you surprised me,” I explained, hurrying on. “By the way, is there anywhere in particular you’d like to go?”

“The Red Rat’s as good as anywhere, I guess.”

“It doesn’t sound so good to me,” I declared. “It sounds too much like *apaches* and things.”

“It’s all that—and then some.”

“I see. In which case I suggest that we go to my hotel; there’s a restaurant underneath. Dinner will be off, I expect, but no doubt they will be able to knock up an omelet.”

“That sounds good to me,” she replied wearily. “I’m a homeless orphan, broke, and in a foreign country without a passport.”

“One way and another life must look like a bed of roses,” suggested Brian, as I hailed a taxi.

“Yeah!—seen through rose-coloured glasses,” she sneered, bitterly, as we got into the cab.

I purposely refrained from pursuing the conversation during the drive home, because I could see that the girl was pretty well all in. Brian spoke only once.

“So the gang has departed, eh?” he mused.

“So she says.”

“And Steeley’s gone with them?”

“Presumably,” I replied briefly, as the taxi pulled up outside the hotel.

We went in. Dinner was off, but I ordered an omelet for the girl and some coffee for ourselves.

“Now, Blondie,” I went on, when she had some food in front of her, “there’s no sense in wasting words, because it means wasting time. Suppose we put the cards on the table and have a look at them?”

“Shoot,” she invited crisply.

"I've no ammunition," I told her frankly. "I was hoping you'd be able to tell us a thing or two."

"Where do you fit in this racket, anyway?" she asked. "Let's get that right for a start."

"I can tell you that in a dozen words," I assured her. "We're old partners of Steeley's. We saw him last a year ago; since then we have heard nothing. To-night we tumbled on him by accident, and we wanted to have a word with him. Slick invited us to join his show, but Steeley—you call him Del—said 'No.' We were arguing about it when you stepped in. That's all."

"What made you go back after you'd got away?"

"I decided that I was going to have a word with Steeley, with or without Slick's permission."

"You've sure got your nerve with you."

"Why did *you* go back?"

She hesitated. "Don't know for sure. Several reasons, I think. First, I aimed to get Slick. Secondly, there was—something else—I wanted to find."

"You were going to take on the whole bunch of 'em, eh?"

"Nope. Only Slick would have dared to turn a gun on me."

"Why didn't you shoot him when you had the chance, instead of plugging the light?"

"Because I'd only time for one shot, and if I'd have got Slick the rest would have got you—as well as me."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me. You gave Slick an earful, and it was about due, but no one's ever done that and got away with it."

"And you were in your room just now when I came up the stairs?"

"You've said it. Mind if I have some more eats?"

"Go ahead. Order what you like."

"That's swell. And what do you aim to do now?"

"To a great extent that rests with you. If the gang's gone to England we shall have a job to find them—unless you can help us. I suppose Slick's taken Virginia Marven with him?"

Blondie's eyes narrowed. "I'd lay off that talk if I were you," she replied coldly.

"Why? He's not going to get away with that."

"So you're going to squeal?"

“I’m going to shout that Slick’s around, if that’s what you mean,” I declared. “I fancy that someone else might have done it if that Rome trip had come off, and Slick knew it.”

“Maybe. He’s a wise guy.”

“I don’t think he was wise to leave you floating around. But what are you going to do? This business of not having a passport is likely to be awkward, whether you try to leave the country or not. How you got in without one beats me.”

“Can you see Slick being granted a passport for anywhere—except hell?”

“No, I can’t,” I admitted. “But surely he was taking a chance to leave you here?”

“He’d have taken a bigger chance if he’d have taken me with him,” she sneered. “But we’re nix on cops. We settle our own accounts. He knows that. I should have thought you’d have known it, too.”

“Yes—quite,” I answered lamely. “But, tell me,” I went on, “how long has Steeley—I mean Del—been with you?”

“’Bout a month.”

“How was that fixed up?”

“He got talking to Slick in the Red Rat. When Slick heard he could fly airplanes he put him on the pay-roll right away. Slick’s gone crackers on airplanes; reckons he’s going to start a new racket with ’em. He’s just flown to England in one.”

I started. “Are you sure of that?” I asked quickly.

“Every time. The boys don’t need passports that way.”

“They will if they go by air liner.”

“You’re telling me! Slick’s got his own ship. Del flies it for him. Two of the other boys fly as well.”

“That means he’s got an aerodrome over here. Do you know where it is?”

Blondie took her liqueur at a gulp, and then looked at me with cold, questioning eyes, “Say, big boy,” she said, “I’ve been doing most of the yapping so far; it’s about your turn for the say-so.”

“I’ve nothing to say—except that Slick seems to have left you in a bit of a jam. If you’ve no money, how are you going to get away—or live, if it comes to that?”

“You’re asking me? As far as I can see, there’s only one way for a woman to get any dough in this burg, and that isn’t my line.”



“Exactly. You want to get back to the States, I take it?”

“You’ve took it right. I’ve an old mammy ’way back in ’Frisco who’s piping her eyes out for me, but I can’t walk back and I’m no swimmer.”

“You don’t want to see Slick any more?”

Her teeth came together. “I sure do. I want to see that double-crossing crook, who wouldn’t give his dying mother a break, just once more—over the end of my gun. I’d take what’s coming to me if I could pass him his first.”

“That will have to wait. Meanwhile, you answer my questions and I’ll fix things up for you.”

Her eyes brightened, “Spill it, honey,” she invited.

“Are you certain that Steeley has left France?”

“I’m certain he hasn’t.”

“But——”

“Bah, you got me wrong. Slick and the rest have gone, but Del has got to wait until daylight before he starts. He’s to take a passenger in Slick’s private ship.”

“Who is it?”

“Search me! I’d be a liar if I said I knew.”

“Then Del is still here?”

“I’ve said so.”

“Where is he?”

“Waiting at the flying field.”

“Alone?”

“Yep. That was all fixed up this afternoon.”

“Where’s the flying field?”

“Near a one-horse town called St. Rochelle. You have to go through Versailles to get to it.”

“Is that the best description you can give me?”

“I’m nothing on the guide-book stuff.”

“Is there a hangar?”

“Two or three big sheds.”

“Would they be easy to find?”

“ ’Bout as easy as a black button in a coal pile on a dark night without a light.”

“That’s not much use,” I muttered, dismayed. Then I had an idea. “Could you find your way to it if I got a car?” I suggested.

“Of course. I’ve been there a score o’ times.”

“Will you come—now?”

“You on the level? If I show you this flying joint, you’ll hand me enough dough to get home? Is that the deal?”

“That’s it.”

“What are you going to do when you find the boy friend?”

“Talk, I expect.”

“You’ll bring me back?”

“Of course.”

She threw her serviette across the table and rose to her feet. “O.K. Let’s go,” she announced. “I’ve had a tough day, and I’m looking forward to hitting the hay.”

It was a simple matter to hire a car, and in a quarter of an hour we were heading for St. Rochelle. I took the wheel, while Blondie sat beside me in order to point out the way after we left the city. Brian sat behind. We didn’t talk. There were a lot of questions I could have asked, but Blondie made it clear that she was disinclined for conversation—at least, after I had refused rather tersely to discuss a proposition for a new racket, with her and myself as the chief operators. All the same, I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her.

I won’t go so far as to say that I enjoyed the drive, but the cool night air did me good, and after we got on to the open road outside the suburbs we made good time. I suppose it must have taken us nearly an hour to reach our destination.

“Go slow,” my companion warned me, as we turned down a side-turning from the main road, and a minute later she laid her hand on my arm as we ran up to a fairly large farm-house, in the state of dilapidation that seems to be usual with such dwellings in France. In the starlight I noticed that there were two or three outbuildings, each large enough to house an aeroplane. All was in darkness, and I took this as an indication that Blondie was correct when she said that the gang had departed.

“Are you coming in or are you going to wait here?” I asked her in a low voice.

“ ’Course I’ll come,” she answered quickly. “I’ll show you the way.”

We walked down the path to the door. Without knocking she opened it and stepped inside. “Come right in,” she said. “I’ll switch on the light, and then we’ll give Del a hail.” We followed her into the room. There was a

click, and the place was flooded with light, almost blinding after the darkness outside. But it didn't prevent me from seeing—what I saw. Seven or eight men were standing about a large table, at the head of which sat Slick Ferrara. He was eating spaghetti from a basin, and hardly deigned to look up.

“It was good of you boys to come all this way,” he said smoothly.

## II

But I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. She had removed her hat and was pushing up her mop of blonde hair from the back with both hands, where it had been flattened. Then, with a satisfied expression as of a tiresome job well done, she tossed her hat carelessly into a chair, and helped herself to a drink from a bottle that stood on the table.

Slick threw her a smile. “Tired, honey?” he asked solicitously.

She grimaced. “This pair of dumb guys would make anyone tired,” she muttered disgustedly, and only then, I think, did the real truth dawn upon me. She had deliberately led us into a trap, and the intense bitterness that swept over me at the realisation of that simple truth drove all fear out of me. I glanced towards the door, but a man was already leaning against it, so I followed Blondie's example and reached for the bottle.

“Mind?” I asked.

“Make yourself at home,” invited Slick, cordially.

I pulled out a chair and sat down, at the same time glancing round the circle of faces. Steeley was not there. Then I looked back at Slick. “You'll excuse my not unnatural curiosity if I ask you why you found it necessary to bring us all this way,” I said casually. “If there was any bumping off to be done, surely——”

Slick stopped me with a gesture of pained surprise. “Who in hell is talking about bumping off?” he protested.

“I am,” I told him curtly. “Of course, you may have gone to all this trouble just for the pleasure of seeing us again; or possibly you wanted me to sample this whisky—which, incidentally, is damn bad—but somehow, I don't think so.”

Two or three of the gangsters smiled.

“Maybe you're right,” admitted Slick, in a despondent sort of voice.

“By the way, where's Del?” I asked.

“Gone a-flying. You know, I can't keep that boy on the ground. He *would* go.”

"I know. He's a perfect devil for flying. Did he ever tell you how we borrowed a big bomber from Hertzovnia and parked it on the beach at Dover?"

Slick looked interested for the first time.

"You should get him to tell you about it some time," I continued. "One way and another we put in quite a bit of flying that day."

"Sure I will." Slick put down his fork, pushed the basin away from him, and then faced me squarely. "We were just having an interesting talk in our Paris joint, when Blondie butted in," he observed. "You don't know how sorry I was when you went off like you did."

"You don't know how pleased *I* was."

"I reckon I do." Slick almost smiled. "But we're wasting time, and we've got a long way to go before morning. It's turned out a nice night after all; what about going for a little ride?"

The muscles round my heart seemed to tighten, but I kept myself under control. "What, again?" I protested. "Why come all this way—for that?"

"Nothing else for it. When you went away like you did, without saying goodbye, I had to leave Blondie to round you up. I thought at first she wanted to go with you, but she stopped talking to the boys downstairs, and they persuaded her to come back."

I realised then that he did not know that I had gone back to the *pension*. Apparently he had made it up with Blondie, and somehow or other she had found us. She had watched me go back, and after that had played her hand with considerable cunning.

As if in confirmation of my thoughts, Slick looked across at her. "You were a long time," he said. "I'd begun to think you'd lost your way."

"Don't I ever get time to eat?" she complained.

"Sure, honey; course you do. Guess I forgot that," he murmured consolingly. Then he turned back to us. "Now listen, boys," he said seriously. "I don't quite get the low-down yet on how you Britishers think, and that's a fact, but Del says you've got brains—and what Del says goes with me—and I've seen you've got sand. Now maybe you've got a racket of your own. Well, forget it. Mine's got more dough in it than John Jacob Astor's li'l old tin chest, and I aim to pass you your share. They say I never give anyone a break. That's a lie. If I ain't giving you one, what is it?" He looked round the circle of faces appealingly.

"You must have taken a big fancy to us," I suggested.

The sarcasm passed unnoticed. “You’ve said a mouthful,” he declared. “I like you both in a big way. Now what would you call a good ‘touch’ for a week’s work—at any racket you like to name?”

“Ten thousand pounds,” suggested Brian, over my shoulder. Heaven knows what made him say it.

Slick raised his eyebrows. “For a youngster you aim sort o’ high, don’t you?” he murmured. “But never mind; let it pass. What would you say to a *hundred* thousand of these pounds you do your sums in?”

“Sounds generous to me,” I admitted. “You must be aiming a bit high yourself this time.”

“I aim to clean up a couple o’ million bucks at one go—maybe more.”

“Thinking of cracking the Bank of England?”

“No. It’s a lot easier than that. And the way I’m going to pick it up is all in loose cash. And, inside six weeks from now. What do you know about that?”

“There isn’t as much loose cash as that in any place outside a bank,” I told him confidently.

“No? That’s where you’re wrong.”

“But why this sudden anxiety to help a couple of strangers?”

“I’ll tell you. I’ve no secrets. No, *sir*. You can fly airplanes. I can’t; and what’s more, I don’t ever intend trying.”

“But there are plenty of pilots about.”

“Not your sort.”

“What do you mean by that?” I demanded, although I knew quite well.

“Well, you’ve been in a racket with Del. He told me so himself. Which means that the cops aim to get your finger-prints if they haven’t got ’em already. There’s plenty of pilots, yes, but if you’ll figure it out you’ll see I’ve got to show a little discretion in the matter of which ones I choose.”

“Yes, I can see that,” I said slowly. “So if we fly for you we come in on the big money. Is that it?”

“That’s it.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“There ain’t none. We don’t bother with alternatives.”

“Meaning?”

Slick looked hurt. “Fancy asking a question like that.”

“You mean—we’d go for that ride you spoke about just now?”

“The car’s outside.”

“But what’s to prevent us from saying we’ll fly for you and then bolting at the first opportunity?”

“Nothin’! Nothin’ at all. Only if you said you’d fly, you’d fly. Because that’d make you one of us, and you know what happens to squealers.”

“I’d like a bit of time to think it over,” I suggested. Anything to gain time.

“Well, that would go by me if I wasn’t in a hurry. We’re moving in a minute, so it’s got to be ‘yes’ or ‘no’ right now.”

“Aw! Lay off, Slick. You’re wasting time,” growled one of the men impatiently.

I saw the leader’s eyes glint. “You running this outfit?” he asked softly.

The man stirred uncomfortably. “Sorry, Slick,” he mumbled.

“O.K.” Slick looked me straight in the eyes. “Well, what’s the pay-off gonna be?” he asked evenly.

There it was. I had temporised as long as possible, but I knew the direct question was bound to come sooner or later. During the entire conversation my brain had been racing at full revs. seeking a way to evade or postpone the issue, but now that the crucial moment had arrived I was as far from finding a solution to the problem as I had been in the beginning. Indeed, I am inclined to think that no solution existed. “Join me and live; refuse and be shot” was, in effect, the ultimatum Slick presented. Obviously, he wanted us to join him, or he would not have gone to so much trouble either to find us or invite us; yet while this course was unthinkable, the alternative was equally, if not more, distasteful.

I could, of course, have chosen the Machiavellian way out by saying “yes” while meaning “no,” at least until such time as an opportunity for escape presented itself, but this would have been an outrage against such self-respect as I possessed, branding me as a liar and putting me on the same level as Slick himself. Oh yes! I was tempted; I’ll not deny it; but the thought was almost as repugnant to me as either of the courses offered. And Slick knew it; I’ve no doubt of that. Should I be given an opportunity of escape, anyway? Possibly, but Brian would be in their hands. One or other of us might go, but not both together. Slick wasn’t a fool. By always holding one he would hold both.

It was a knotty problem, and I was still wrestling with it when help came from an unexpected quarter, although nobody knows better than I do how nearly it expedited our demise. The door opened suddenly, and one of the gang, who had evidently been on guard outside, slipped swiftly but quietly into the room.

“Four or five cops coming up the path, boss,” he said tersely.

There was a sudden intake of breath, and then such a silence as I hope never to experience again. Hands flashed to pockets. All eyes were turned on me. Two men actually whipped out their revolvers, muzzles hovering in my direction as if their owners found it hard to restrain them. One man crouched forward, poised on his toes in the orthodox cowboy fashion.

Slick turned his big, pale eyes on me; cold, bitter, questioning.

“Nothing to do with me, Slick,” I said, with the calm of utter desperation, for I could see that my life hung by the merest thread. One word, one sound, one thoughtless movement would have been all that was necessary to set half a dozen guns roaring smoke, flame, and hot lead in my direction. I knew it.

“Then how the hell——”

“Don’t ask me. Ask Blondie. Think, man. I didn’t know this place existed until I met her. She knows that. And she’ll tell you that from that moment to this I haven’t been two yards away from her. I couldn’t have spoken to a soul, or batted an eyelid, even if I’d wanted to, without her being aware of it. Am I right, Blondie?”

“Yep, I guess that’s correct,” she conceded.

I felt—almost heard—the tension relax.

“Maybe it’s nothing,” I went on. “There’s no sense in letting our consciences get us into a jam. Don’t do anything in a hurry. Has anybody got a pack of cards?”

I spoke casually enough, but my heart was pounding against the inside of my ribs at this new development, which might offer us a chance of escape. It did, but not in the way I imagined.

A pack of cards was thrown on to the table, guns were put away, and in a couple of seconds we were picking up the cards that were being dealt to us.

There came a sharp rap on the door, and an instant later it opened to admit four gendarmes. I noticed vaguely that there was a civilian behind them. There was a moment’s silence while all eyes turned towards them.

“*Pardon, Messieurs,*” said the leading gendarme, and stepping forward briskly, he clapped his hand on my shoulder. “I arrest you in the name of the Republic,” he said loudly—in French, of course.

I stared at the man in amazement. “You arrest *me*?” I cried incredulously.

“You and your accomplice.”

“But what for?”

“For murder.”

My eyes went past him, and I saw the civilian properly for the first time. Then I understood. It was the bus conductor with whose vehicle I had collided in the Rue Monsieur le Prince, when I had a dead man as passenger.

Another gendarme moved forward, automatic in hand, and took Brian's arm.

"You are sure these are the men, Vendrier?" asked the chief gendarme curtly, glancing at the bus conductor.

"*Certainement!*"

I shrugged my shoulders. It was easy enough to see what had happened. The fellow had seen us after all; he had told the police, and a description of us had been circulated. Someone, possibly the man from whom we had hired the car, or the head waiter of the restaurant, had recognised us, notified the police of our presence, and we had been followed, with the result that it began to look as if we had simply exchanged one fate for another—the gun for the guillotine.

I looked at Slick, and saw by the expression of his face that whether he spoke French or not he understood that the word *assassiner* meant murder. But he didn't know quite what to do. If, as it appeared, we were likely to suffer death at the hands of the law, there was no need for him to appoint an executioner, an action which might now involve him in serious trouble. He might have been glad to take us on as pilots, but he was not prepared to jeopardise the gang's existence by indulging in a pistol fight for our benefit; his attitude made that quite clear. It wasn't his affair, and I fancy he was relieved to know that it was us, and not him, that the police were after. No doubt, judging by his own standards and what Steeley had told him about our association, he thought we *were* capable of murder. Anyway, I am sure the real solution never struck him, not that there was any reason why it should.

All this flashed through my head during the few seconds of time that I was rising to my feet under the firm persuasion of the gendarme's hand. He needn't have troubled, for to resist arrest at this juncture was the last thing in my mind.

"All right, I'll come," I said, with an air of resignation which I hoped sounded genuine. I glanced back at Slick, who was disinterestedly picking his teeth with a matchstick. "Feel like coming along to bail us out?" I asked.

"Wish I could," he replied sadly. "A thing like this *would* happen now, just when I'm short of dough—blast it." It sounded like real regret in his voice.

"I see. Well, remember me to Del."



“Be a good thing if you remember him, too.”

I knew what he was hinting at. He was telling me that if I disclosed his identity to the police I would be giving away Steeley as well as him.

“If I was going to talk, now would be the time, wouldn’t it?” I said coldly. Actually, it wouldn’t, for several reasons, but I hoped he wouldn’t realise it.

“So long,” he said, nodding. “If I get time I’ll come along and see them pull the string of that knife thing they use here instead of the Chair. It’s quicker, they say.”

“I’ll be on the look-out for you,” I promised, as I walked towards the door with Brian and his escort following close behind.

## CHAPTER V

It was rather like stepping out of the frying-pan into the fire, but in this case I infinitely preferred the fire. Anything was better than the icy, calculating relentlessness of the gangsters, compared with whom the gendarmes were Sisters of Mercy. The idea of attempting to escape from Slick's men, with their ever-ready revolvers, always gave me a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach. It seemed so hopeless from the start. To get away from the policemen, even though they were armed, seemed simple in comparison.

For I had no intention of going to the police-station if I could prevent it; at the best our release would take time and could only be achieved by narrating the events of the night, which would probably put Steeley into a worse position than the one in which we now found ourselves. But for him I would have gone to police headquarters willingly, and told them the whole story. I owed them nothing less. Slick could call it squealing if he wished; a fat lot I cared what he called it so long as he and his gang of public enemies were laid by the heels.

Nevertheless, if we were to escape it would have to be now, for once the doors of a French prison had closed behind us it would be impossible.

So deep in thought was I on this intriguing problem that I was hardly conscious of what was going on around me. Somebody opened the door and we all stepped outside. A gendarme went first, and then turned to wait for us, holding two pairs of handcuffs in his hand. I followed next, with a second gendarme holding my arm, while Brian was behind with another. The fourth brought up the rear. Where the bus conductor was or where he afterwards went, I have no idea. As we all trooped outside, more or less in a bunch, the first thing I noticed was that the moon had risen, flooding the place with light, anæmic, yet sufficient to reveal certain features that had not been apparent when we entered. I saw that the door was in the side of the house rather than in front; that is to say, the path did not lead directly to the house, but swung round to the side to where a small porch covered the actual door through which we had emerged. The path then continued on towards the farm buildings.

So much I observed, but it was subconscious rather than conscious, and I only mention all these details for reasons which will become immediately apparent.

Still seeking an avenue of escape in an abstract sort of way, my eyes followed the path in the direction of the buildings, and for the first time I became aware of the presence of a man who was walking briskly up the middle of it. When I first saw him he was about ten yards away, not more; it might have been less. He wore a flying coat, thrown open, and a helmet. He had unfastened the chin-straps, which hung loose, and pushed the goggles up from his eyes in the manner customary when on the ground. Thinking of Steeley I suddenly became acutely conscious, and tried to make out his features, and at that precise moment he seemed to see us for the first time. He stopped dead. Then, faster than I can write it, his hand flashed down and up. Simultaneously, I was both blinded and deafened by the roar of a revolver.

So utterly unexpected was it that I simply stood and stared; not at him, but at the gendarme who lay at my feet, twitching spasmodically, and making a horrible gurgling noise. *Bang! Bang!* blazed the gun again, drowning the sudden cries and the crash of overturned chairs in the room we had just left. Another gendarme fell, firing from the waist as he lurched forward. I saw the gunman stagger, and waited for no more.

“Come on, Brian,” I snapped, and darted towards the gate, but two figures sprang up in front of me, so I whirled round, colliding violently with Brian, who was close on my heels. “This way,” I panted, and in a sort of blind panic tore back down the path past the now fallen gunman towards the rear of the house. I have a vague recollection of other shots being fired as I ran, but the truth is, I was so beside myself that I have no clear memory of just what did happen. I recall splashing through a quagmire that reeked of cows and manure, and of vaulting a gate; then I found myself in a field, and the quiet landscape brought me to my senses. A glance over my shoulder showed Brian close behind, so I waited for him to come up.

“For God’s sake, let’s get out of this,” he panted. “Look!”

I looked, and caught my breath. Fifty yards away, close to the dark mass of the outbuildings, stood an aeroplane, presumably the one in which our unwitting benefactor had landed. It was a small cabin biplane of a type unknown to me—French, if the identification letters could be taken as indication. But I was not particularly concerned about that. It was an aeroplane, and provided it could be got into the air, it offered the simplest and swiftest method of removing ourselves from a locality that had become doubly obnoxious. Without a word I went towards it like a homing pigeon returning to its loft.

Reaching it, I laid my hand on the engine. It was hot. “Give me a swing,” I muttered, and darted under the lower wing to get to the cockpit,

throwing a swift glance in the direction we had come as I did so. No one was in sight, but I could hear a confused murmur of voices. I climbed into the cabin and fumbled a bit with the controls, but the light of a match showed me all I needed to know. In a twinkling I had turned on the petrol. "Suck in," I called.

Brian dragged the prop round with frantic haste. "Contact," he cried.

"Contact," I answered, and switched on.

Brian flung his weight on the prop, but *swish-swoosh* was the only sound it made. There came a shout from the house and my mouth went dry. "Switch off," I croaked. "Take your time," I added.

Again he "sucked in" and stopped when the prop was on compression. "Contact," he yelled.

"Contact!"

The engine started with a din that sounded as if it must be heard all over France. My hand groped for the throttle; Brian scrambled in and slammed the door. The angle at which I was sitting prevented me from seeing the house, but something struck the engine with a vicious *whack*, and I knew that the gangsters or the police were not far away. With my heart in my mouth I picked a mark on the edge of the field and thrust the throttle wide open. In an instant we were bumping crazily over the uneven surface with the hedge rushing towards us.

The machine took itself off. A hummock of grass, or it may have been a molehill, shot us into the air; for a horrible moment the machine hung as if it was going to stall, but then the engine picked us up and we roared into the sky.

"Thank goodness——" began Brian, but I cut him short.

"For God's sake don't talk," I muttered testily.

"But damn it, man, where are you making for?" he asked angrily. From which it will be seen that our nerves were getting a bit raw.

"Heaven knows. Wait a minute and let me think," I answered, for now that the immediate danger was passed, or at any rate held in abeyance, I seemed incapable of lucid thought. It was reaction, I suppose. "Petrol," I muttered. "That's the thing—petrol. How much have we got in the tank, I wonder; can you see a gauge anywhere? I can't."

"Neither can I," confessed Brian.

"Curse people who make aeroplanes and skimp the instruments," I snarled.

“If the fellow who last used this kite was in the air for any length of time, the engine might cut out at any moment,” observed Brian.

“That’s right; be cheerful,” I growled.

“I wonder if there is enough juice to get us to England?”

“What the devil is the use of wondering? I want to *know* before I set off on a trip like that.”

“But we’d better see about getting back to England, hadn’t we?”

“You’re dead right there,” I told him grimly. “What with Slick and *his* crowd, *and* the police, France is no place for us; but we shan’t get out of the country now unless we fly out, that’s certain. The port authorities will have a description of us and every Englishman will be looked over through a microscope.”

“How do they know we’re English?”

“The gendarmes who arrested us will tell them that.”

“If I know anything about Slick’s methods those gendarmes won’t tell anybody anything for a long time—if ever.”

“By God! You may be right,” I muttered. “I never thought of that. He’ll have to keep them quiet after what’s happened, anyway, until he is clear.”

“What *did* happen? I was behind you, and only heard the bang.”

“One of the gang—presumably the fellow who flew this machine—was coming up the path as we came out. I can only assume that when he saw the uniforms he thought there’d been a raid; he lost his head—went all gaga.”

“Well, what are you going to do? We’d better decide; this aimless cruising about won’t get us anywhere.”

“Shut up a minute and let me think.”

“What’s wrong with going to Bourget and getting your machine? There’s Paris over there; I can see the lights.”

“But look at the time, man. It’s half-past one. Even if we weren’t wanted by the police, we should be asking for trouble if we started agitating for an aeroplane at this hour of night.”

“What about the stuff at the hotel? Are you going to fetch it?”

“I am not. The hotel might be watched if the police have located us—not that I can see how they could have done that, since they only know us by the bus conductor’s description and not by our names. But there’s no need to take the chance; there’s nothing at the hotel that matters, anyway.”

“Has any of your kit got your name on it? I mean, won’t it be suspicious if we don’t go back?”

“I don’t think my name’s on anything. It was lucky that we went out before filling in the registration forms. The hotel people may suspect, but suspicion isn’t proof, and they won’t say anything unless they have to, you may be sure, because they’d get it in the neck for not making us register before we went out. Those forms that have to be filled in in France are checked against passports, and must be handed in to the police within a certain time—twelve hours, I think it is.”

“Well, come on; what are we going to do? I don’t like this idea of beetling about in the dark with an unknown quantity of fuel.”

“Hell’s bells! Do you suppose I do?”

“Then let’s go to Bourget and chance it. You’ve got to get your machine some time, if only because it’s registered in your name, so the sooner the better, before the hue and cry gets chronic—which it will when the morning papers come out.”

“What about *this* machine?”

“What about it? Let’s dump it. Won’t Slick be sick? I’ll bet he’s buzzing around looking for a conveyance. But never mind about him; let’s go to Bourget before we break our necks trying to get down in a bad patch. What does the ground look like?”

I opened the cabin window and peered down into the darkness. In the moonlight I could see the ground clearly, but what I saw did not make me any happier, for we were over the outlying suburbs of Paris.

“I tell you what,” I said, closing the window hurriedly. “Let’s look for a field in the open country beyond Bourget, and time our arrival at the aerodrome for daybreak. That won’t look so suspicious as if we landed now in a strange machine, which we might have to account for, and then ask for another. When we get there we’ll slip along to the hangar as unobtrusively as possible and ask for my machine. After all, it’s mine, and my papers are in order. But we’ll have to go round to reach Bourget; I daren’t risk flying right across the city in this state. We only need to make a forced landing in the Tuileries Gardens to set the kettle boiling over.”

“We should at least achieve international fame, and go down to posterity \_\_\_\_\_”

“Don’t talk rot,” I interrupted, for my nerves were getting on edge.

After that he subsided, while I swung round to the north-west to make a detour over more open country towards our objective. There is no need to dwell on the details of that miserable flight; if you have ever flown a machine by night, expecting the engine to peter out at any second, you’ll

know what I mean. Yet with all that I was so tired that I could hardly keep awake.

It took us about three-quarters of an hour to get to the flat country beyond the terminal Airport, and then I had no further say in the matter, for while I was looking down for a suitable place to land, the engine, after a warning gasp or two, cut out dead.

I flatter myself that I did all that was possible in the circumstances, and may have made the best forced landing of my life, if not the most successful. You probably know what the country round there is like: hedgeless fields chiefly, devoted to the culture of market garden produce, dotted with many isolated huts and houses, with housing estates thrown in here and there. Fortunately it was still bright moonlight, and as there were lights in most of the houses I could mark their positions fairly well. In fact, I avoided all visible obstacles, but I couldn't be expected to see telegraph wires.

I chose what subsequently turned out to be an extensive patch of early lettuces, and was just easing the stick back to glide in when there was a jar, a loud crack, and a nasty tearing noise. The machine seemed to hesitate, throwing us both forward against the instrument board, and then went on again. But the damage was done. I was creeping in at little more than stalling speed when we hit the wires, and although we burst through them—or tore them off the poles—the machine had had enough. It lurched forward like an unwilling diver going off a spring-board; the landing chassis collapsed with a splintering crash as the wheels struck the ground, and then the prop boss bored into the soft earth with the steady grinding pressure of a dentist's drill going into a decayed tooth. Then silence.

I was out like a shot. So was Brian. And we did not linger. One sorrowful look we cast at the undignified attitude of what a moment before had been a proud conveyance, and then we set off across the field at a steady double.

There was a moment's unpleasant *émeute* as Brian blundered into a formation of glass *cloches*, but he withdrew swiftly, and we changed direction without slackening speed; the ferocious barking of a dog not far away gave an added impetus to our mud-clogged feet. Soon after that we struck a road, and thereafter proceeded in the direction of the Airport in a more leisurely manner.

I shall never forget that walk as long as I live. We said little, but I remember telling Brian in no uncertain terms that I should think twice before I invited him to come with me for another quiet week-end in Paris. We were farther away from the aerodrome than I imagined, and I thought we

should never get to it, but we did in the end. The time was nearly five o'clock, and although it was still dark the stars were paling in the sky. I was too utterly weary to bother about what the officials were likely to think, and with my passport and licence in my hand I strode into the entrance.

The lights, sickly and yellow, were on, and the murmur of voices reached my ears; it sounded like the usual English crowd arguing in the ridiculous pidgin-English they adopt with foreigners. Suddenly I stopped. I took one look into the hall, and then dived through the nearest doorway, dragging Brian with me by the sleeve.

We found ourselves in the gentlemen's lavatory. I slipped into a W.C., still pulling Brian with me, slammed the door, and shot the bolt. Then I sagged weakly on to the seat.

"What the devil's wrong?" gasped Brian.

"Nothing," I said with bitter sarcasm. "Only Slick and the whole blasted crew of 'em are outside."



## CHAPTER VI

OH yes, I meant it. I was sick. The thing was becoming one of those nightmares that go on and on without end. All I wanted at that moment was peace; peace and quiet; sleep. The nearer I had got to the aerodrome the less inclined I felt to fly. And I never wanted to hear Slick's name again as long as I lived. Yet there he was, outside. It was the last straw, and I mentally cursed him and his minions to all eternity.

There was nothing really remarkable about it; had I been equipped with real intelligence, I might have foreseen that he would make for Bourget, either in the hope of finding us there—a not unreasonable expectation—or for the purpose for which he actually came. What that was we were soon to learn. Perhaps he had both things in mind; I don't know.

Anyway, there I sat, fed up to the teeth, with Brian standing beside me staring morosely at the door not three inches from his face. I think he was sick as I was, and I fancy he was about to say something of the sort, but the next move in the crazy game settled any question of conversation between us. The handle of the far door turned sharply; there was a sound of heavy footsteps, and the door slammed again under the force of its automatic spring with a bang that made me flinch. Further sounds made it clear that someone had followed us into our inglorious retreat, although whether it was a gangster, or two or three gangsters, or merely members of the staff, I had no means of knowing. But I was not left long in doubt.

“Say! What's wrong with Slick lately?” asked a surly voice.

“What *ain't* wrong with him?” came the answer.

“He seems all cock-eyed since that guy Delaroy butted in.”

“It ain't Del, although he's to blame for settin' Slick on this airplane racket, all because he let out that he could fly the blasted things. Slick claims it was his idea, but it smells like Del to me.”

“No, it was Slick's,” declared the first speaker. “He was going to try to put it over in the States, before he ever heard of Del. I was there when Slick asked him how much dough he thought the crowd would have altogether. Del says ten million bucks, which made Slick laugh like hell.”

“Well, I ain't lookin' forward to this trip, not no how,” went on the other. “I don't mind gun-play in the right place, but—aw hell.”

“What were you going to say about Slick being crackers?”

“You mean, you ain’t wise to that?”

“Nope. Spill it.”

“He’s nuts on the Marven dame.”

There was a moment’s silence, in which I could almost visualise the recipient of this piece of information staring at the speaker. Then he gave vent to an oath that I won’t repeat, and the printers wouldn’t print it if I did. “You don’t say?” he added, in an amazed voice.

“I sure do. Why the hell else didn’t he let the Marven dame loose when he got the dough, instead of leaving her with Flo? She’s crazy. So’s he. What’s more, Flo ain’t safe. She’ll squeal one day, you watch it. She would right now if she got the low-down on the way Slick’s thinking—or else she’d bump Marven off on her own account. Remember how she tried to bump Blondie, when he first took up with her? She ain’t forgot that, neither. And the whole outfit’s got to take the risk of her squawking. Look at the way he handled those two English bums. He acts like he’s turned soft. He ought to have blown their guts out.”

“But he says we’re to let ’em have it on sight now.”

“Now, yes, but he oughta done it before. He only says that now because he sees that Cal and the rest of us are getting sore. I’d——”

“Here, come on, let’s go,” interrupted the other. “Slick will be looking for us else.”

The footsteps receded towards the door.

“What time do we leave?” asked the original speaker.

“In——”

The slam of the door cut short the conversation, and I relaxed limply with a deep breath. For the first time in my life I realised what Jim Hawkins must have suffered as he squatted in the apple barrel and heard Long John Silver planning the massacre of the loyal members of the *Hispaniola*’s crew.

Five minutes or so passed, and I began to breathe more freely.

“What are we going to do?” whispered Brian, staring down at me, white-faced.

“Let them get clear, and then we’ll follow them if we can; it’s a chance we may not get again.”

“What do you suppose that fellow meant about not liking the trip; it looks as if they’re going to fly somewhere—now. I should say they’ve chartered a machine from Air France or somebody.”

“I think that’s obvious.”

"I've got a feeling that there's something sinister going on judging by the way he spoke about it."

"I don't see what they can do," I answered, thinking hard. "If they're going to England—and it looks as if they are—they'll be landed at Croydon; and they aren't such fools as to start any rough stuff there."

"I wonder what this flying racket is, that—hark!"

"My God! They're off," I gasped, as the muffled bellow of an aero engine made all the place vibrate. "Come on."

We crept furtively into the departure hall, but there was no sign of Slick, so we hurried across to the aerodrome exit. Just visible in the grey light of dawn, a blue and silver Berline Breguet was standing some distance out, its propeller churning a long flat wake in the soaking grass. A moment later it began to move forward; its tail lifted, and it rose slowly into the air.

I glanced over my shoulder, and saw that the duty gendarme was regarding us suspiciously; an unshaven official was standing close by, yawning, and one or two porters were making up bundles of newspapers. The sound of a car pulling up outside the main entrance made me turn sharply; two gendarmes were getting out of an old Renault with unusual haste. I touched Brian's arm. "Come on," I said, and made for the hangar in which my machine was housed, dodging round to the back of the buildings as soon as we were out of sight of the main entrance.

Two mechanics were working on a machine near my own as we walked in; they both knew me by sight, and gave me a cheerful "*Bon jour, m'sieur,*" but nevertheless they looked surprised to see me so early. I discounted this by alluding to the weather, which was thickening, and looked as if it might become worse; at the same time I deplored the fact that I had to return to England that day. Delay might, I opined, result in my being hung up indefinitely waiting for the weather to clear if it got really bad. This was all perfectly natural, and after I had ascertained that my instructions regarding refuelling had been fulfilled, they dropped their work to help me out with the machine. We got it on to the apron, where, after tipping them well, we took our seats in the cabin, taking care to do this from the far side, so that we could not be seen from the control building. And it was as well that we did so, for a glance in that direction revealed three gendarmes walking briskly along the tarmac looking into each hangar as they came to it. No need to ask who they were looking for. They couldn't see us inside the cabin, and must have thought that the mechanics were simply going to run up the engine to test it, for they paid no particular attention.

After a couple of misfires the engine came to life, and with an eye on the gendarmes, who were now fairly close, I waved away the chocks. I saw one of the gendarmes stop and stare hard at the machine, and I knew that he had spotted that it was about to take off; he said something to the others, whereupon all three hurried towards us, calling out to the mechanics as they came. A puzzled look crossed the face of the one nearest to us, and he answered, but the noise of the engine prevented me from hearing what he said. I waited for no more. I gave the engine a couple of spurts to warm it as much as possible, and to warn the mechanics to stand clear. The gendarmes broke into a run, but we were already moving. What happened after that I don't know, for I did not look back.

My take off must have been pretty ghastly to watch, for too late I realised that I had forgotten all about the direction of the wind, but it was either down wind, or cross wind, or a bit of both, for we certainly steered a curious course, one that must have given the fellow on duty in the control tower a heart attack. A lot I cared about regulations, national, international, or anything else at that moment. We were off, that was all that mattered, and I forgave poor Brian his gasp of relief as the machine straightened out after its horrible swerving run.

“Did anyone teach you to fly, or did you teach yourself?” he asked coldly, as I went up in a steep climbing turn.

“That wasn't one of my best efforts,” I admitted.

“I only hope I'm not with you if you ever produce a worse one,” he replied. “A spot of extra dual wouldn't do you any harm.”

“I'll see about it when I've got you off my hands,” I promised him grimly, as I took up a course for the Channel on the trail of the Breguet which, by this time, must have had nearly ten minutes' start. But I knew that, provided all went well, I should catch it, for the Breguet was one of an old type and I had the legs of it by a good many miles an hour. All the same, the Channel was in sight before it came into view a couple of miles ahead and a bit higher than we were.

The weather was still inclined to be thick, with no horizon in any direction, but a watery glare in the east showed that the sun was up, and would, in all probability, disperse the mist as it gained strength. I touched the rudder bar with my right foot to get into the sun, at the same time easing the stick back for altitude, for I had no intention of letting Slick's crowd see us if it could be prevented, a circumstance that might lead them to suspect that they were being followed. We lost forward speed in the climb, of course, but as long as I could keep the Breguet in sight I didn't mind, and by

the time we were somewhere about the middle of the Channel we were sitting in the sun at seven thousand, with the French machine a couple of thousand feet below us and still well in front.

“Hello! What the devil’s he up to?”

I had taken my eyes off our quarry for a moment, but Brian’s startled exclamation brought them back, and I saw what had caused it. The Breguet was behaving in a most extraordinary manner, at any rate for a sober-sided commercial aircraft. At first it rocked violently, and then started to go down in a series of short steps, or stalls. Then, for perhaps twenty seconds, it behaved exactly as if it was out of control, but after that it came back to even keel and all seemed well again. Suddenly it banked steeply and headed straight down the Channel on a westerly course.

“What the——!” I began, and then fell silent again as another development occurred. At first I thought a piece of fabric was tearing away from the port side of the fuselage, near the tail end, but I could only see the top of it because I had slightly overshot and was on the opposite side.

“It’s the door,” said Brian breathlessly. “Some fool’s opened the door.”

I remembered the position of the door in the old Breguet, and knew that he was right. “Looks as if it’s being jammed open,” I muttered wonderingly.

Then Brian clutched my arm so tightly that it hurt, but I didn’t protest, for I was too spellbound by what was taking place in front of us. A bulky object had appeared, hanging below the bottom of the fuselage; for a moment it remained thus, then it broke away and hurtled downward. There could no longer be any mistake. It was the body of a man in a leather flying coat. Sick with horror, yet unable to tear my fascinated eyes away, I watched it fall, limp and lifeless, turning slowly over and over as it sped through space towards the foam-flecked surface of the sea. It seemed to be an age. Down—down—down, growing ever smaller until at last it appeared to be stationary, a tiny piece of brown flotsam floating amid the waves. Suddenly there was a scurry of creamy surf that turned swiftly back to green . . . then nothing.

I swallowed something in my throat.

“He was either dead or unconscious before he went overboard,” said Brian, in a thin, strained voice.

“It was the pilot,” I replied, working the muscles of my face which seemed to have become stiff.

“Of course. They’ve killed him and thrown him overboard. That’s why the machine rocked. Poor devil, he must have put up a fight. And now we know what that fellow meant in the lav. about not liking the trip. I suppose

one of Slick's pilots is flying now. My God! What swine! What hell-hounds! Skipper, we've got to get these——" He broke off, apparently at a loss for words.

"Yes," I said, "we'll see to it that they hang. I can't think that Steeley is there; he wouldn't stand for that. But what on earth can he be doing to get mixed up with such a murdering gang of thugs."

"God knows. By the way, I wonder what's happened to the wireless operator?"

"If there's one on board, I expect they'll kill him, too; but there may not be one on a simple charter job. I hope not, for his sake."

We watched for some time, but nothing happened except that the machine held on its westerly course.

"Where on earth are they making for?" I muttered presently. "From the way they're going they might be thinking of flying the Atlantic."

"They've got a bolt-hole somewhere; Slick wants that machine for his racket, I'll bet. No doubt it will be reported missing, believed lost at sea, in to-night's papers. Can't you see the headlines? 'Another mystery of the air.' It just shows what can happen."

"Well, if they've got a private aerodrome, we shall soon know where it is; I'll follow them while our juice lasts, if it takes us half-way to the Azores."

It was a long chase, always out of sight of land except for one occasion when I saw a grey blur on the northern horizon, and took it to be the Isle of Wight. We saw one or two ships, but only in the distance; it is curious, and I have often remarked it, how few ships one sees when crossing the Channel, considering that it has the reputation of being the most frequented sea-lane in the world.

An hour passed, and another ten minutes before there was any alteration in our respective positions; then I saw the nose of the Breguet come round slowly to take in a point or two of northerly.

"It's Devon," I said. "Devon or Cornwall."

"Or Dorset."

"Possibly, but I think we've come too far," I replied.

The sight of land didn't help us much, for I had no map of the area, which, in any case, was unfamiliar to me. One or two largish towns appeared on the coast, but as far as I was concerned they might have been anywhere between Land's End and Portland Bill; and anyway, the Breguet kept clear of them, and chose a deserted, rock-bound stretch of coast for its

landfall. Thereafter it began to lose height, but I stayed where I was, for I could still see the other machine quite well, and knew that if it landed we should be heard and probably seen. Presently, however, a great stretch of open moorland came into view, and it gave me my bearings, for I knew there was only one place like it, at least, in the south of England.

“Dartmoor,” I said. “I fancied it was going to be Devon.”

The Breguet was now very low, and I picked out what I suspected was going to be its objective some time before it reached it. As far as one could make out, it appeared to be a jumble of ruins spread over an area of two or three acres in the very heart of the moor. There was a derelict-looking stone house in the middle of them, and a long, low building with what looked like a slate roof. On all sides stretched a colourless expanse of moorland, bleak and inhospitable, dotted with outcrops of grey stone. There was not another house for miles. Nor could I see a road, although it was just possible to pick out a track that might once have been a road; it started near the outskirts of the buildings, and meandered away until it was lost in the distance.

I had a feeling that the country was undulating, possibly hilly, but it was impossible to determine that with certainty from my altitude. I was right above the machine’s destination; it sank lower and lower until it appeared to be crawling like a great insect across the moor towards the ruins, amid which one or two ant-like figures were now moving. It was still in flight, but deciding that there was no need to risk detection by watching it any longer, I turned steeply and edged back towards the coast, making a mental picture of the terrain as I did so. A large-scale ordnance map would tell me the rest.

“What are you thinking of doing?” asked Brian.

“I’m going straight back to Brooklands to park the machine; then I’m going to have a bath, a shave, a meal, and two or three hours’ sleep. Then I’m going to Scotland Yard to see Raymond,” I answered tersely.

“But what about Steeley? If Wayne brings his flying squad down here he’ll round up the lot of them, and it’s a hundred to one that Steeley will be amongst them. He’ll hang with the rest if we tell the police what we know.”

I groaned aloud, for I had forgotten all about Steeley for the moment.

“Why not go home for a clean up and then try to locate this place on the moors?” went on Brian. “We must give Steeley the tip that we’re going to the police; if he sticks with Slick after that it’s his own funeral, but I think we must give him a chance to get clear.”

“I’m damned if I do,” I retorted irritably. “Look what a mess we’ve got ourselves into as it is; why doesn’t he get in touch with us? And anyway, I’d

as soon be kicked to death as go anywhere near those bloodstained bandits again.”

We said very little during the trip home; there wasn't much to say, and I was too utterly weary to think. It was after twelve when we got to Brooklands, after having stopped at the Hampshire Club to refuel. We didn't stay for lunch, but hurried straight back to my flat in Jermyn Street, reaching it on the stroke of one.

“Why the devil Steeley couldn't have got word to us is what beats me,” I observed bitterly, as I let myself in with my latchkey and staggered into the hall.

My man came forward to meet me.

“Get me a drink, Henry—two drinks—for the love of Mike,” I told him.

“Very good, sir. By the way, there's somebody waiting to see you, sir,” he answered.

“Who is it?”

“Don't know, sir; he wouldn't give his name.”

“Where is he?”

“In the study, sir.”

I walked quickly to the door and threw it open. “Good God!” I gasped. “Steeley!”



## CHAPTER VII

IN spite of the fact that I was disgruntled about his newly formed association, a wave of something not far removed from compassion swept over me as he smiled his old smile, for it had taken on a new, wistful expression, and his face had aged almost beyond recognition. He was thinner, his pallor was more marked, and little lines that had not been there before were graven deeply between his eyes and down from the corners of his mouth.

“Hello, chaps,” he said, in a quiet, colourless sort of way. “I suppose you’re thinking hard thoughts about me.”

“Hardish,” I admitted, pouring him out a drink and pushing the cigarette-box across.

He nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, it must look pretty grim,” he replied with a faint, curious sort of smile.

“How the devil can it look otherwise?” I demanded abruptly. “Come on! Out with it! Just why are you hobnobbing with this gallows-fodder?”

“That’s what I’ve come here to tell you.”

“Well, go ahead,” I invited. “But first of all, what made you think you’d find us here?”

“Surely it was pretty certain that, after what happened at the *pension*, you’d make for home in a cloud of dust and small pebbles.”

“Possibly. As things turned out we should have been wise to have kept on running,” I told him rather curtly. “But as a matter of fact, we didn’t. Still, no matter. Now tell us why you’ve cultivated the friendship of a common thug like Ferrara.”

“I can soon tell you that. You don’t suppose I did it for mere monetary gain, I hope,” he retorted stiffly.

“I’ve no reason for supposing anything. All I know is that you are mixed up with him, and for that I can find no possible excuse. That’s why I’m asking you why.”

“Very well; I will ease the strain on your curiosity. You’ve heard, of course, about the kidnapping of an American girl named Virginia Marven, in France, some little time ago.”

“Naturally. And I know now that Ferrara was the man who did it.”

“Quite right.”

“Well?”

“Virginia Marven is my fiancée.”

I couldn't speak. I could only stare.

“But I need hardly tell you that Slick Ferrara doesn't know that,” he added grimly.

“But damn it, man—you—I——”

“Is there anything funny about my being engaged?”

“Er—no; I suppose not,” I stammered awkwardly. “But somehow I didn't think—I never imagined——”

“No, neither did I. As you know, women haven't been much in my line; which only shows that it's simply a matter of meeting the right girl at the right time in the right place. Well, there it is; and there was nothing really remarkable in the sequence of events that led to our engagement. I trust you now perceive the reason for my apparent turpitude,” he concluded. There was no reproach in his voice; only weariness.

“Sorry, old lad, but how was I to know?” I said quickly.

“Of course you couldn't. You see, it came about in this way. After our momentous night just a year ago I stayed in the balloon in the hope of reaching France; but I was out of luck—or so it seemed. The wind freshened and veered round, with the result that the balloon was blown out to sea and finally dropped into the ditch. It didn't sink, because of the gas in it; it simply blew about at the mercy of the wind, dragging the basket through the water behind it. I clung on and, as you can imagine, got very cold and very wet. However, my time had not yet come. Shortly after dawn I was spotted and picked up by a small Dutch fruit boat bound for Jamaica. She carried no wireless equipment, so the skipper was unable to tell the world about the occurrence. It took us five weeks to get to Jamaica. We ran into a hurricane, and in the middle of it saw a private yacht under the weather and flying a distress flag, near the St. Jago Reef. We stood by and learned that she'd an engine-room full of water, and was still taking in more than her manual pumps could throw back again. The yacht was the *Virginia*, owned by Silas Marven, the aeroplane man, who was taking a holiday cruise with his daughter. We took them off and went on. I got to know them well during the remainder of the trip, and liked them both; apparently this was mutual, for when the old man heard that I could fly—I accounted for my presence on such a queer craft by telling them about the balloon—which was true

enough—he offered me a job as test pilot at his works. In the circumstances it suited me very well, and I accepted.

“The rest was, I suppose, inevitable. I fell in love for the first time in my life, and when Virginia said she felt the same way about things, the future began to look as bright as a new metal prop on a ten-year-old machine. But she was only a kid, so before going to the old man to see how he’d take the news, I decided to give her a chance to make sure that she wasn’t making a mistake. She was due to go to a finishing school in France for a year; if when she came back she still felt the same, then we would go and ask Silas P. what about it.

“Well, she went. You know what happened. Inside two months the fate that her father feared might overtake her in America, which, incidentally, was one of the very reasons why he sent her out of the country, actually happened. Poor old man; his hair went grey in a night after they broke the news to him. As for me, the thought of that poor kid—but let’s not go into that. I thought it over, and the more I thought about it, the more I became sure that it was U.S. gangster work, even though the thing happened in France. I went to work in my own way to find out if any of the regular American racketeers had gone away. They had. I learned that Slick Ferrara had been put ‘on the spot’ by Two-gun Goldberg, his big East Side competitor, and had fled the country, taking his best boys with him. That was all I wanted to know. I took the next boat to Cherbourg.”

“But didn’t you tell the old man what you were going to do?”

“Good God, no. It would have been fatal. It was certainly no time to complicate matters by telling him how things stood between us, as I would have had to. Besides, if once it had leaked out why I was going to Europe—and it was bound to leak out if I told anyone—I shouldn’t have stood an earthly.”

“But what excuse did you give Marven for leaving so hurriedly?”

“None. I just handed in my notice and left. He was too sick about Virginia to ask why. But let me go on. In due course I got to Paris, where I learned that, although Silas P. had paid the ransom, Virginia had not been restored to him. I settled down to work, and I had soon covered most of the likely ground, for, as you know, I know Paris inside out. For a week I haunted the vice-clubs and bars, and then I heard what I was listening for.”

“Listening?”

“A Yankee drawl with an East Side accent.”

“You found Slick Ferrara?”

“I did—and the others. I got into conversation with Slick, told him about my air-smuggling racket, with press cuttings to prove it, and signed on with the gang as head of the new aviation racket he was already contemplating.”

“But do you mean to say that you still don’t know where Virginia is?” I asked incredulously.

“Do you suppose I should still be acting as I am if I did?”

“No. No—of course not.”

“I’ve no idea where she is. Nobody knows except Slick, the cunning devil, so I can only go on hoping that one day I shall find out what I want to know, or get him where I want him.”

“Flo knows where she is.”

Steeley looked at me in amazement. “How the devil do you know that?” he fired at me.

“I’ll tell you presently. Who is Flo, anyway?”

“His wife; that is, the woman he married.”

“I see,” I answered reflectively. “I suppose it’s no use going to the police?”

“Hopeless. They’ve done what they can, but they’re new to this sort of thing, to say nothing of the fact that they’re up against past-masters with years of experience behind them. Once I squealed, not only should I be a marked man, but I should have damned my only chance of success. I should probably be shot within twelve hours. Try to understand that these men with whom we’re dealing are the toughs you read about in the newspapers and see on the films. Nothing alarms them, much less intimidates them, and they don’t understand fear. The only answer they have for any argument is soft lead. What beats me, the thing I simply cannot understand, is why Slick took the risk of upsetting the whole bunch by hanging on to Virginia after the ransom was paid.”

“Do you mean to say that you don’t know the reason for that?” I asked, looking him straight in the eyes.

“Do you mean to say that you do?”

“I do, that is, if rumours inside the gang have any foundation.”

“What do they say?”

“They say that Slick himself is—er—keen on her.”

For a moment I thought Steeley was going to faint, so deathly white did his face become, but he pulled himself together by a visible effort.

“How in God’s name did you learn a thing like that?” he asked through colourless lips.

Briefly I narrated the events of the preceding evening, concluding with the incident of the lavatory conversation at Bourget. He heard me out in silence. Then, "How did you get over here?" he asked suddenly.

I told him. I also told him of the ghastly business of the unfortunate pilot of the Breguet. When I had finished he buried his face in his hands.

"Why not let me go to Raymond at Scotland Yard——" I began.

But he sprang to his feet and stopped me with a gesture. "Fatal! Absolutely fatal," he muttered hoarsely. "Whether Slick was caught or whether he got away, we should never hear of Virginia again, even if we heard of him. No, Tubby, old man, we've got to handle this ourselves. Believe me, it's our only chance. Slick is a loathsome hound where women are concerned. My God! What a complication, and I never thought of it."

"But what's going on down at Dartmoor?" I asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he almost snapped.

I forgave him, for I could see that his nerves were all to pieces. Suddenly he looked at his watch. "My goodness! I must be getting back," he said tersely. "They'll wonder what's happened to me."

"For Heaven's sake let's make some sort of plan before you go, even if it's only a rendezvous where we can get in touch," I urged desperately.

"I think you'd better keep out of it, both of you," he answered shortly. "After what's happened they'd shoot you down with no more compunction than you'd shoot a rabbit."

"And what am I going to do? Stand still and be shot at?" I asked harshly, for something was beginning to simmer inside me. "Like hell I am. They'll find two can play at that game. I'll shoot——"

"Oh, don't talk such damn nonsense, Tubby. You don't understand. These swine *murder* people; they don't just shoot them. They plug them through the back when they aren't looking, and then riddle them."

"I see," I agreed, for I realised that it was no use arguing. "But tell me this. What are you doing in London?"

"They don't know I'm in London. I shall have to plead a forced landing to account for the delay when I get back. They think I'm at Epsom."

"Epsom! What in thunder are you supposed to be doing at Epsom?"

"Surveying—measuring—and that sort of thing."

"Slick thinking of taking a house there?"

"No. Listen, Tubby; if I tell you something, will you give me your word not to repeat it to a living soul, either of you, without my permission."

We both promised.

“Epsom,” he continued, speaking in a low but deliberate voice, “is going to be the scene of the world’s greatest criminal coup—the greatest outrage ever committed against society by an organised gang of crooks.”

“But *Epsom*,” I cried. “What on earth can they do at Epsom? There’s nothing there.”

“Not to-day there isn’t. But there will be.”

“When?”

“On June the 5th.”

“But that’s Derby Day. All the world will be there then.”

“Precisely.”

I staggered back as enlightenment burst upon me. “What’s he going to do?” I asked in a curiously calm voice.

Steeley gave me a peculiar smile. “He’s going to soak a million people in lachrymatory gas. While they are temporarily blind, his men, who will be in the big rings with gas-proof goggles, will empty the bookmakers’ satchels, remove the wallets from the pockets of the wealthy, and relieve the ladies of their jewellery.”

“But the King will be there,” I almost shouted.

“Slick hopes he will,” was the dispassionate reply. “He says he hopes he’ll be wearing his crown, because he’d like it as a souvenir.”

I sat down limply. “But the thing’s fantastic. It’s impossible—absurd,” I whispered.

“That’s what I said when he told me what he proposed to do; but it isn’t, not by a long shot. In fact, if it goes according to plan, the thing will be simplicity itself. It’s hard to see where it can go wrong. Work it out for yourself. At three o’clock, the moment the big Race is due to start, three aeroplanes will fly low over the crowd discharging liquid gas. They will circle the whole area putting down a blanket of it two or three miles square. It will only take a few minutes. Slick’s boys in the Rings will put on their goggles and proceed to fill their bags. The three machines, with pilots wearing gas-proof goggles, of course, will land on the actual racecourse. There’s a straight run-way a mile long, remember. They will load up to capacity with loot; the ground staff will then get aboard, and within five minutes they’ll be miles away, kicking the breeze behind them at a hundred and fifty miles an hour. They’ll go back to Dartmoor, where the machines will be dismantled, and the pieces thrown down the shafts of the old tin workings that are our present temporary headquarters; after that there’ll be a complete evacuation to where Slick’s yacht will be waiting at her moorings.

Thus, the gang will disappear without leaving a trace behind in accordance with the best traditions of popular thriller stories. Think that over, old son, and tell me what's to stop it coming off."

There was silence for a few seconds while I thought the thing out, and the more I thought the more clear it became that, provided Slick had the equipment—which presumably he had—there was nothing to prevent the colossal outrage from being successful. "But you're not going to let them get away with that, are you?" I breathed.

"To be quite frank, I don't know," he muttered. "I'm not really concerned about such trifling matters."

"Trifling," I echoed. "For Heaven's sake, old lad, don't let your sense of proportion get completely out of control."

"It's trifling compared with Virginia's position. I'm not going to jeopardise my standing with Slick, whatever he may do, until I find out where Virginia is."

"But you wouldn't stand by and see a million people robbed——"

"Robbed! *Robbed!* What does mere money matter when my girl's life is at stake?" he sneered bitterly. "Do you suppose I'm going to get all hot and bothered because a few people are going to get their pockets picked?"

"A few? What are you talking about? There'll be a million people——"

"The number is immaterial; the thing is the same in principle. Half of them will get their pockets picked, anyway, and those who don't will lose what they have to the bookies—so——"

"Well, I'm not standing for it," I interposed. "I shall tell Raymond."

"You won't."

"Why not?"

"Because you gave me your word that you wouldn't speak without my permission, and that permission I withhold. Break your word on that, old lad, and I'll bump you off, the pair of you, just as sure as Slick himself will if he gets half a chance."

"Where are you going to get your machines for this job?" I asked.

"We've got them. I've got everything we shall need in that line."

"*You* have!"

"Of course. Slick doesn't pay me for doing nothing. The organisation of things on this side of the ditch has been left to me. I bought the machines, and posing as a mining magnate, bought the tin mines as a speculation."

"And you came back here last night?"

“I did. I flew one of our machines over with all our goods and chattels. I was supposed to come back and fetch Slick, but there was so much to do over here that I sent Lew. He was the fellow who arrived so opportunely for you and got plugged for his pains.”

“You’ll be a machine short, now,” I reminded him. “I wrote Lew’s off last night when I forced landed in the dark.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll use the Breguet as a replacement. As a matter of fact, it will suit them better.”

I said no more, for I could see it was no use trying to reason with him while he was in his present mood.

He stood up and reached for his hat.

“But you’re not going to walk out on us like this?” I protested. “Let’s fix a rendezvous, at least.”

He hesitated. “All right, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You stand by for a message from me. If you don’t hear within seven days from now you’re at liberty to act as you think fit. Do anything you like, because if you don’t hear it will mean that I shall be gazing at the sky through several inches of dirt. There are some of Slick’s boys who would be glad of a chance to pay me off. They don’t like the English as a breed, and they don’t trust me as they trust themselves. Moreover, they’re jealous of my position with Slick. They only need one word, one gesture from him . . . but never mind about that. I’ll get in touch with you, somehow. Cheerio, chaps.”

With my brain in a whirl I saw him to the door and into a taxi. Then I went back to Brian, who had remained silent during the whole discussion. He was staring out of the window into the street, but he swung round as he heard me.

“What a story for my paper,” he breathed. “*What a scoop.*”

“You tell it, and I’ll bump you off, my lad,” I told him.

He shrugged his shoulders. “It looks to me as if our great adventure is rapidly degenerating into a mere bumping race,” he answered sadly.



## CHAPTER VIII

THE next seven days were, I think, the slowest and at the same time the most miserable that I ever remember. Brian spent most of the time dashing to and fro between his office in Fleet Street and my flat, where he slept, but I never went outside for fear a message or a 'phone call came during my absence. Torn by indecision and anxiety that was aggravated by the inaction, I paced up and down my room or sat at the window overlooking the street, forming plan after plan, only to discard them as the insuperable barrier of silence imposed by Steeley barred my path which ever way I turned. Maybe I was foolish to worry myself to such an extent, but the bond of sympathy that existed between me and the only friend I had ever known, now strengthened by the knowledge of his tragic love affair, was something beyond my control. Anyway, there it was.

But everything must come to an end, and my weary vigil was no exception. The seventh day came, and passed, but there came no word from Steeley.

Brian came in about half-past five in the evening. "Any news?" he asked tersely.

"Not a word," I answered morosely.

He tossed an evening paper on to the table. "They've found the body of the Breguet pilot."

"Who have?"

"The French coastguards; it was washed up near Brest."

"And what do they say?"

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "The only thing they can say. The machine is presumed to have been lost at sea. The story appears in most papers under the headline of 'Another Air Mystery'; but without giving away anything, I managed to persuade my editor to run a para. questioning this, pointing out the possibilities of foul play. That should put my stock up as a discerning reporter when the truth comes out, as it is bound to some time. Sooner or later we shall have to lay information at the right quarter."

"Yes, I suppose we shall," I agreed moodily. "And a nice row there'll be because we didn't speak right away."

“Well, the seven days are up; what are you going to do? Have you made any plans?”

“Yes, I’m going down to Scotland Yard to see Wayne, and if possible, Raymond, the Assistant Commissioner,” I told him decisively. “Any objection?”

“No,” he said slowly, biting his lip. “I suppose there’s nothing else we can do. Looks like a bad business for poor old Steeley, I’m afraid.”

“Come on, let’s get it over,” I muttered desperately, making for the door, and picking up my hat on the way.

In ten minutes we were there, and my card took us straight into Wayne’s office.

“Wayne,” I began without preamble, “I’ve got some very serious news for you—so serious that I should like the Assistant Commissioner to hear what I have to say.”

“About Delaroy?” he queried, with surprising shrewdness.

I nodded.

He did not look particularly pleased at my request to see Raymond. No doubt he would have liked to have handled the thing himself, but he spoke on his intercommunication ‘phone, with the result that we all went down to the floor below where the Colonel had his office.

“How are you, Wilde, and you, Ballantyne?” he smiled. “Not been getting into any more mischief, I hope?”

“It depends on what you call mischief,” I replied, sitting down in the chair he pulled out for me.

“What’s the trouble?” he went on, offering his cigarette-case.

I hesitated, hardly knowing where to begin, for naturally I did not want to commit Steeley—or ourselves—too far, until I saw how the police were going to take the whole affair. “Did you ever hear of a fellow named Ferrara—Slick Ferrara?” I enquired, at last.

“Of course; who hasn’t?”

“It would surprise you to know that he is in England?”

“It would; very much. So much, in fact, that I wouldn’t believe it.”

“I can assure you that he is.”

Raymond flashed a quick glance at Wayne.

“Quite impossible, sir,” said the Inspector, with a condescending sort of smile that irritated my already frayed nerves.

“Another observation like that, Wayne, and I shall have to tell you that I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I continued, coldly. “Do you think I’ve come here to burble through my hat? I repeat, Slick Ferrara is in England.”

“Brought his gang with him, I suppose?” There was the faintest suspicion of sarcasm in Wayne’s manner.

I subdued my rising anger with some difficulty. “Yes, he’s brought the best of them—or the worst of them, which ever way you look at it.”

“What are they going to do—open a string of speakeasies in the West End?”

“Nothing so elementary,” I answered shortly, still keeping a check on myself, for Wayne’s pig-headed, cocksure bearing annoyed me, just as it had in the old days in France.

“What’s he going to do?” Raymond asked the question, more out of curiosity than real interest—or so it seemed to me.

“He’s going to gas the Epsom crowd with tear gas on Derby Day, empty the bookmakers’ satchels and the public’s pockets,” I announced, and, feeling that I had launched my *pièce de résistance* well, I sat back to await the response. It came, but not in the way I expected.

There was a moment’s silence, and then Wayne burst into a roar of laughter. Raymond smiled.

Something seemed to shrivel up inside me, and I sprang to my feet in a fury, eyeing them grimly. “You’re behaving just as Steeley knew you’d behave,” I told them bitterly. “Come on, Brian, we’re wasting our time here.”

“But, my dear chap, you can’t expect us to believe——” began Wayne, but I cut him short.

“No, you’re quite right, I don’t. You have it your own way,” I snapped, making for the door. “Come on, Brian, we’ll handle this ourselves.”

“Oh, but let’s have the rest of the story,” called Raymond.

“I’m damned if I do,” I said between my teeth. “Do you think I came here to be laughed at? Like Hell I did. You work the rest of it out for yourselves. History bristles with people who slipped up because they couldn’t take a tip over something it was their own job to find out, and in due course yours will figure amongst them.”

“Before you go, tell us where you heard this amazing yarn,” said Raymond.

“Steeley told me—Steeley Delaroy.”

Wayne whistled. "So he's alive after all, eh?"

"He is."

"Where is he?"

"Find out."

"What's he doing—back at the old game?"

I gave Wayne the dirtiest look I could raise, and I was in a mood to do it properly. "No," I said coolly, "he's looking for Virginia Marven."

Wayne started. "Why?"

"Because she's his fiancée."

The atmosphere was now tense. "How does she come into this?" fired Raymond.

"Because Ferrara kidnapped her. Ram that down well into your pipe, Wayne, and smoke it if you can."

I saw them both stiffen. "Is Delaroy in England?" rasped Wayne.

"He is."

"How did he get in?"

"For God's sake use your head. How do you suppose he'd get in? He flew."

"And Ferrara?"

"He flew, too, having murdered the pilot of the Air France machine he chartered for his gang at Bourget, by throwing him overboard into the Channel. The body was washed up yesterday, as you may have noticed."

Raymond looked agitated, and threw a penetrating glance at Brian. "Ah," he said softly. "I saw your paragraph, and wondered if there was more in that than met the eye." Then he turned to me. "Where is Delaroy now?"

"Are you still holding a warrant for him?" I parried.

"We are."

"And would you execute it if you found him?"

"Naturally."

"I'm sorry, but in that case you'll have to find him yourself," I said icily. "But I fancy you're too late," I added.

"How so?"

"The chances are that he's dead. I may be by this time to-morrow. If you find Steeley's body, or ours, look for bullet-holes—and then for Ferrara. It'll be he who did it."

"What are you going to do?"

“I’m going to find Steeley, dead or alive. Before I go I shall write you a letter giving you the whole story, or what I know of it, and the rendezvous of Slick’s gang. That letter will be posted to-morrow from somewhere in the country, which means that you’ll get it first post on the following day. By that time I shall have warned Steeley, or discovered what I want to know, which comes to the same thing. Either way, it won’t matter much to us what you do after that.”

Raymond looked worried, while Wayne glanced from him to us with an expression on his face that suggested that the affair had got a bit beyond him.

“Very well,” said Raymond after a short pause. “A few hours more or less can’t make much difference. But don’t get into a mess yourselves.”

“We’ll try not to, but it doesn’t seem unlikely,” I told him. “Just one more tip. When you go after these thugs, if you do, don’t take half a dozen unarmed constables. Look up Slick’s record as a gunman; believe me, it hasn’t been exaggerated. A platoon of war-seasoned troops and a couple of machine-guns is what you’ll need. A field gun might not come amiss.”

The Colonel nodded, but there was a faint smile of incredulity about his lips. “Thanks! I’ll remember it,” he said.

## II

We drove back to the flat in silence.

“And that’s that,” observed Brian facetiously, when we got there.

“As you so sagely observe, that’s that,” I agreed. “We were damn fools to go near the place. Steeley’s quite right about the police; they’re all right when they’re handling something they understand, something orthodox; that’s why the crook with imagination so often gets away with it.”

“Were you serious when you said you were going to look for Steeley?”

“I most certainly was. I shan’t settle down to anything until the business is finished one way or the other. We can’t leave it in mid-air, so to speak; at least, not without knowing what’s happened to Steeley. If he’s gone West, then we owe it to him to see about getting Virginia back to her father. Are you coming with me?”

“Of course! You mean, to Dartmoor?”

“No use going anywhere else.”

“O.K. by me.”

“Right. That’s settled, then. We start to-morrow at the crack of dawn, leaving here for Brooklands at five.”

“You’ll fly down?”

“Yes. We might be helpless to do anything without a machine, if for any reason they suddenly took to theirs. Look here, while I’m putting some things together will you slip down to Stanford’s—you know, the map shop in Charing Cross—and get a set of six-inch scale maps of Dartmoor. If you can find the tin mines marked, get a twenty-five-inch ordnance map of the place. Be as quick as you can.”

“Good enough,” he replied, and departed forthwith.

While he was away I mustered all the things I thought might be useful, giving some thought to it. In the clothing department I got out a couple of heavy sweaters, one for each of us, my old trench-coat, and a well-worn Burberry. For the rest, I dug out and examined my old Service Webley revolver, a small automatic that I had bought during the War, and ammunition for both. Beside these I placed an electric torch, a pocket flask filled with brandy from the decanter, my old infantry luminous compass, a pair of binoculars, a haversack for carrying food—which I afterwards filled—and several boxes of matches. Then I rang up Brooklands and told them to have my machine ready for the morning. Finally, I sat down and wrote a long letter to Wayne, telling him the whole story, beginning with our adventures in Paris. By the time I had finished Brian was back, with a bulky packet of maps under his arm.

“Gregson is hanging about outside,” he said softly.

“Who the devil’s Gregson?” I asked in alarm.

“One of the Yard’s best outside men.”

“Then let him go on hanging about,” I declared. “I warrant he’ll be sick of it by to-morrow morning.”

“He’ll probably follow us down to Brooklands.”

“Let him. He’ll be pretty damn smart to follow us after that. Did you get the big-scale map?”

Brian nodded, and selected it from the heap.

“Let’s look at the smaller one first, to get the general location well fixed in our heads,” I suggested.

This did not take long, for a glance revealed that the mines lay just about half-way between Morton Hampstead and Belstow. Quickly memorising such landmarks, conspicuous by their isolation, as were likely to be useful, I then opened the large map. This was far more interesting, and for some minutes I pondered over it in silence. Fortunately, the tin mines, described as such, were just about in the middle.

“What we shall have to do is this,” I decided, referring again to the six-inch map, “We’ll fly to this village marked ‘Monkton,’ and find somewhere to get down. The land around the village is, as you see, under cultivation, so it shouldn’t be difficult. Then we’ll fix up with the fellow who owns the land to let us leave the machine there, and set off on foot.”

“But Monkton’s a long way away, surely?”

“Between five or six miles by the look of it. Anyway, it’s the nearest village to the mines, so it will have to do.”

“We could get nearer, by landing on the moor.”

“I don’t think it would be safe,” I said. “Apart from the difficulty of getting down amongst a lot of rocks and heather, if Slick happened to be in the air he’d be certain to spot us. A machine standing out by itself on the open moor would be as conspicuous as a black-beetle in a sugar-basin, and it could hardly fail to arouse his suspicions.”

Brian nodded. “Yes, you’re right there,” he acknowledged.

“Very well,” I went on. “Having fixed up with the farmer bloke to look after the machine, we then set off on foot like a couple of ordinary hikers.”

“Lunatic hikers would be nearer the mark.”

“It doesn’t matter which, as long as we set off,” I told him shortly. “Our objective will be this ridge, which terminates in a tor at the eastern end. We shall approach it from the side farthest from the mines, so we shall be under cover. Here is the five-hundred-foot contour.” I ran my finger along the line which marked the summit of the ridge. “From the top we shall be able to command a good view of our objective,” I concluded.

“Sounds a good scheme to me,” approved Brian.

“We shall be a good mile away, but that will be quite close enough for a preliminary reconnaissance. I’m taking my field-glasses.”

“And after that?”

“Our next move will depend on what we see. I think we’ve settled enough to go on with, but I imagine that if the signs are propitious, we might put in a bit of closer work after dark. Remember, our business is to find out whether Steeley is alive or dead; it doesn’t matter much about anything else for the moment.”

There was a short silence after I had finished. “Any suggestions to make?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think so, except that an early night seems indicated.”

“I agree,” I replied, folding up the maps. “Let’s go out and get a bit of dinner; then we’ll turn in early.”

## CHAPTER IX

I FELT a little quiver of a half-forgotten sensation run through me as, looking forward through the windscreen from an altitude of five thousand feet, I saw the rolling, colourless expanse of Dartmoor creep up over the horizon; then my eyes went to the watch on the instrument board, and I saw that it was just 7.45. "We've made good time," I told Brian, who was sitting beside me.

"A little breeze must have got under our tail," he replied laconically.

It was the obvious solution, for the air had been dead still when we took off, at six o'clock, and I estimated that the trip would take two hours at cruising speed. So far it had all been uneventful. The Scotland Yard outside man had, as Brian had prophesied, followed us to Brooklands in a taxi, but there we had left him, disconsolate on the tarmac, and there seemed to be no sign of pursuit. He might have hired another machine, with a pilot, for all I knew, but we were off and away so quickly that even if he had thought of it it was hard to know how he could find us with all four points of the compass to search.

It was a glorious early spring morning, cloudless, and warm for the time of the year, so I was in good spirits apart from the uncertainty as to Steeley's fate, and with the moor rolling up to meet us I throttled back a trifle to save the engine and at the same time give us an opportunity of making a survey of the countryside.

"Get the glasses out," I told Brian, a minute or two later, as our objective came into view a mile or two away on the starboard side. "I'm going to fly straight on, so you might be able to spot something as we go past."

Still flying at five thousand feet, we transversed the moor, with the mines in plain view, but the dilapidated buildings might have harboured nothing more than bats and mice for all the sign there was to show it. Presently they drifted away under our tail, for I had no intention of arousing suspicion by circling, and Brian put the glasses back in their case.

"See anything?" I asked, as I throttled right back and began to glide towards the little village of Monkton, now directly in front of us.

"Not a thing of interest," he answered in a disappointed tone. "One would have thought that somebody might have run out to have a look at us



when they heard us going over. That would at least have told us that they were still there.”

“I’ll bet they saw us all right,” I replied, grimly. “But they wouldn’t be such fools as to show themselves. Quite apart from us, any pilot might well wonder what people were doing in such a place.”

We said no more while I glided lower and lower, looking over the side anxiously for a suitable landing-place. Fortunately, there seemed to be two or three, and finally I decided on a long, treeless pasture in the corner of which two or three cows were grazing. I breathed a sigh of relief as our wheels ran smoothly to a standstill, for there is always an element of uncertainty in landing on anything but a recognised aerodrome. Such trifling things as overgrown ditches, rabbit holes, and even molehills have been known to upset the very best landings—in every sense of the word. A stout farmer and his family watched us land, and the man greeted us affably in broad Devonian as we taxied to the gate nearest the house and stepped out. Indeed, so broad was his burr, and so many strange words did he employ, that I found some difficulty in understanding him; a difficulty that he, apparently, also discovered in us.

However, we got on quite well, and in the end I made him understand that we wanted to have a look at the moor from ground level. Could we park the machine in his field? We could, on the understanding that we were not to hold him responsible for any damage, as he knew nothing about aeroplanes—a detail that did not surprise us. I told him that the machine couldn’t come to any harm as long as he kept his cows away from it, warning him that if they got close enough they might lick the dope on the wings with equally disastrous results to both the aeroplane and themselves. He promised to see that this didn’t happen. He looked a bit doubtful when I mentioned that our walk might be a protracted one, and that we might, in fact, go right on to another village, returning the next day, but I assured him that we had good maps and should not lose our way, so after sampling his excellent cider, we shouldered our mackintoshes and the haversack, and set off.

It was still quite early, and with the weather continuing fine, I found myself regretting that we had a definite mission; otherwise I could have enjoyed the walk. We made our way through the village, where I posted the letter I had written to Wayne, and for some distance followed the poor road that served it; but then the road swung away in the direction opposite from the one we wished to take, so we struck off across the moor. Curiously enough, after we had been walking for about ten minutes we came to a path. It was only the vaguest suspicion of a track, but a path it undoubtedly was, winding away through the heather towards the mines.

“Hello,” I said, “what’s this? I didn’t notice a path anywhere about here on the map. Just a minute; let’s have a look.” I sat down and unfolded the six-inch map. “No, the path isn’t shown,” I went on. “There’s another one, clearly marked, some distance ahead of us, running transversely across this part of the moor, but this is certainly not it. I’ll tell you what I think this is,” I continued. “The original road that led to the mines came from the other direction; this path must have been made by workmen coming from and going to the village we have just left. Probably came in at night for a drink at the pub; possibly some of them lived there, as it’s the nearest point of civilisation to the workings, and they went to and fro from work every day.” I folded the map, stood up, and stared down the path to where it disappeared into a hollow half a mile or so ahead.

“What are we going to do—stick to the path?” asked Brian.

“We might follow it for a bit, but I don’t think it would be wise to keep to it for too long. Suppose Slick or his lads decided to take a stroll as far as the village? We should look a pair of fools. They couldn’t ask for a better place for a nice, quiet murder. But we’re still a long way away from the mines, so we’ll carry on for a bit; after that we’ll give it a wide berth. All the same, we’d better keep our eyes skinned for anyone moving ahead. Provided we see them first, it should be easy enough to hide in the heather until they’ve gone past.”

Brian offered no objection to this, so we set off again at a brisk pace, but before we had gone two hundred yards he stopped dead with a low ejaculation, and picked up a small white object from the ground.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Take a look,” he said with a curious smile. “You were right; we’d better keep our eyes open.” He handed me the thing he had picked up. It was a cigarette stub, obviously quite recently discarded, and I felt my muscles grow tense as I read the name of the brand. It was a “Camel,” one of the most popular smokes in America.

I drew a deep breath. “Yes, we shall have to go warily,” I said, automatically lowering my voice and glancing around apprehensively. “We’ll stick to this path until it crosses the other, as it is bound to presently, and then we’ll take to the rough stuff.”

Another five minutes brought us to the other path, a dark purple weal that wound a serpentine course from east to west and lost itself in the heather in both directions; it was in a slight dip, which accounted for our not having seen it earlier. There was something else besides a path, something one would hardly expect to find at a spot so utterly remote. At the crossways

of the two paths there was a letter-box; it was not an ordinary box, but a square metal affair mounted on a wooden post. Originally, it had been painted red, but it had weathered to a sort of dull maroon, with patches of rust where the paint had peeled off; the obsolete royal monogram, V.R., in tarnished gilt, could just be picked out on the front. There was another inscription below, but it was too faded to be decipherable. An unusual feature was a small brass knob on the door that formed the entire front of the box below the slit.

I pointed it out to Brian. “Funny idea,” I said. “Why put a slit for the letters if the actual box can be opened by anybody?”

He looked puzzled for a moment, then a light of understanding came into his eyes. “I’ve got it,” he cried. “It’s one of those special boxes they put in out-of-the-way places—or they used to. I don’t think it’s done any longer. There are several of them dotted about Dartmoor; I remember reading about them somewhere. There’s no regular collection; anyone who happens to be passing is expected to open the box and take the letters, if any, into any post office they happen to be going near.”

“But nobody in his right mind would post a letter in such a box?” I protested.

“They used to, years ago, before things became so urgent, although only tourists do it now as a sort of a joke. For instance, anybody working at the mines could have posted a letter here instead of going right on to the village; then, if anyone came along the other path, travelling either way, they would take it into the post office of the village they happened to be making for. There’s rather a famous one near a pond, I remember; a fellow once told me he posted a letter in it when he was on holiday and it was delivered to him about a month later.”

“By Heaven! I should think you’d have to wait a long time for your letter if anyone posted it in *this* box,” I laughed. “Let’s have a look,” I went on, and opened the box. The laugh turned to a cry of surprise as my eyes fell on a white envelope lying face downwards in the bottom of the box. “Well, I’m damned,” I said, when I had recovered from my astonishment. “Would you believe it?” I picked up the envelope, and turned it over so that I could read the inscription.

How long I stared at it I don’t know, for I seemed to have been struck with a sort of mental paralysis. The name on the envelope was my own. So was the address. I’ve had some shocks in my time, but that, I think, produced in me the most peculiar sensation of unreality I ever remember. Vaguely, as from a distance, I heard Brian say, “What’s the matter?” I heard

him come closer, and heard his gasp of astonishment. But his next words brought me to my senses with a rush.

“By God!” he cried, in a shrill falsetto. “It’s Steeley’s writing.”

“You’re right,” I answered, in a sudden flash of inspiration. “He thought this was a proper box, and posted his letter to me here.” Feverishly I ripped it open and read the contents. It was quite short, bore no address, and was undated:

“DEAR TUBBY,

“All’s well, but nothing doing. Stand by for another week.

“S.”

“Thank God for that,” I said. “He’s still alive, anyway.”

Brian said “Yes,” but it was in such an odd tone of voice that I looked at him again. “Why, what’s wrong about that?” I asked.

“Have you forgotten about your letter to Wayne?”

I caught my breath. “By God,” I groaned, as the full extent of the calamity burst upon me. “That’s done it. Wayne will be down here within twenty-four hours, and Steeley will be all unprepared for it. He’ll think I’ve gone back on my word.”

“Well, we came down here to warn him; we’ve all the more reason for going on with it now.”

“I wonder is it any use going back to the village and trying to get the letter?”

“I don’t think there’s a hope, but we can try.”

We dashed back up the path, but we might have saved our legs, and our breath, for all the change we got out of the local postmaster. He eyed us with a particularly sinister sort of suspicion the moment we entered his shop, and not only did he tell us that the letter was on its way, but threatened to send for the police if we didn’t proceed on ours. Clearly, it was a case where argument could only do more harm than good, so without wasting any more time we set off once more towards the mines. And, with the day now half gone, we did not dawdle. We retraced our steps as far as the letter-box, and then took to the heather, taking advantage of such cover as offered itself, but keeping up a steady pace towards our objective.

It was nearly one o’clock when we reached the ridge without seeing a soul on the way; in fact, we might have been the only living creatures on the whole moor. The last few yards we covered on all fours, and bearing in mind the disadvantages of taking up a position on the actual skyline, we slithered

over the top like snakes and came to rest in a thick patch of fairly tall heather on the other side from which the mine buildings were clearly visible about a mile away. The walk had made me ravenously hungry, but before opening the haversack I took out the binoculars and subjected the workings to a long scrutiny. But I could see no one. The place seemed as deserted as a cemetery at midnight, so presently I put down the glasses within easy reach and stretched out my hand for our food supply. "There's nobody moving at present," I told Brian, who was watching me. "So we might as well have a bite; we can keep watch while we eat."

## CHAPTER X

If we expected to get a large measure of excitement from this surreptitious observation of the enemy's camp, we were disappointed. At first, admittedly, the spice of danger that our position entailed, and the momentary expectation of action, supplied a tonic to keep us on the *qui vive*, but as the afternoon wore on, and nothing happened, a sort of reaction set in, and our interest began to flag. Perhaps our surroundings had something to do with it, for they were depressing in the extreme. The sterile loneliness, the lack of colour, and the absence of all sound and movement stirred within me the lingering spark of some primitive fear, of an unseen evil influence, an apprehension of things not understood. One began to appreciate why, after all, mankind was gregarious, not so much from deliberate choice as from a deep-rooted, instinctive dread of being alone. Once, a raven drifted by on silent wings, and its presence did nothing to dispel the uneasy atmosphere that hung over the landscape like a pall.

It seemed inconceivable that seven or eight men could remain in the grey buildings for so long without once showing themselves, and I began to wonder if, for some reason or other, the rendezvous had been evacuated in favour of another. The thought produced in turn an urge, a temptation to get closer in order to confirm or disprove this, and had there been any sort of cover I should undoubtedly have pursued it; but the ruins, standing stark as they did on the open moor, made discovery inevitable if a sentry, unseen by us, did happen to be on duty. And it was as well that I abandoned the idea, for shortly after tea-time the muffled crescendo roar of an aero engine being run up told us what we wanted to know.

"We shall have to wait until it's dark before we move any nearer," I told Brian quietly, and set about re-checking the bearings I had taken of the ruins with the compass until I was satisfied that I should have no difficulty in finding them, no matter how dark it became. I had no delusions about the danger of wandering over the bog-ridden moor at night, so, with the glasses, I studied every yard of the ground that lay between us and our objective for possible obstacles.

The sun went down, and with its going there was a sharp drop in temperature. But for a long time a deceptive twilight hung over the scene, now mournful beyond description. On all sides stretched the dull,

monotonous expanse of heather, broken only by outcrops of water-worn grey stone which, in the gathering gloom, looked like fossilised galleons becalmed in a stagnant Sargasso. Nothing moved. Not a light glowed. Not a sound broke the aching silence. One by one the salient points on the distant horizons merged into the darkening sky, and night enfolded us in a shroud of such utter blackness that literally I could not see my hand in front of my face. I have heard of darkness being “as black as pitch” or “as black as your hat,” but neither can compare with Dartmoor on a moonless night.

I shivered suddenly, for no particular reason, and turned up the collar of the trench-coat I was wearing. “It’s time we made a move,” I whispered, knowing that in such conditions sounds travel far.

“Do you think there is any need to go closer, now that Steeley is O.K.?” he asked.

“But he isn’t,” I reminded him. “He might have been, if I hadn’t blown the whole story to Wayne, but God knows what will happen if he comes blundering down here. By hook or by crook we must give Steeley the tip about what’s likely to happen, however much he may curse us for upsetting his plans.”

“Good enough, then let’s start,” he replied briefly.

“I shall have to steer a compass course, so you get hold of the belt of my coat and don’t let go of it,” I said. “If once we get separated in this murk, we should never find each other again without light signals, and we don’t want to have to start striking matches, or flashing the torch.”

“Lead on, Macduff,” he answered lightly.

With the compass held in my left hand I led the way, keeping rough note of the distance we covered by counting my paces. There was no other way of judging distance, and, provided we were not compelled to make a detour, there was no reason why it should not be fairly accurate. The going was not altogether easy, for the heather was often thick and woody, and clung to our feet, while loose pieces of rock often caused us to stumble. But we kept on, and when I had counted up to seventeen hundred I stopped, straining my eyes to pierce the darkness ahead, knowing that we must be very close to the buildings. But it was no use; I could see nothing. I tried lying down to see if it was possible to see the silhouette of the house against the sky but the heavens were as black as the ground, so I gave it up and started moving forward again, pausing between each step to listen. A temptation to speak, to voice what I was thinking, came upon me, but knowing the folly of it, I fought it down and went on. Some idea of the quality of the darkness may be gathered when I say that I actually walked into a wall before I saw it. It gave

my nerves a jolt, but I was relieved to know that the compass had not let us down, and taking Brian by the hand I drew him forward in order to convey to him what had happened without the necessity of speech. He tapped me on the arm to show that he understood.

Then, suddenly, while I stood hesitating, wondering which way to turn, I saw the vague outline of the building appear before me, and, turning, observed the reason; the horn of a thin crescent moon showed mistily above the horizon. "That's better," I breathed, and closing the lid of the compass, put the instrument into my pocket. Henceforth we should be able to use our eyes.

Brian cupped his hands round his mouth, and putting them near my ear, whispered, "Let's get back a bit; we shall get a wider view, and I want to say something."

I nodded, and we retraced our steps for about a hundred yards, when we sank down into the heather, with the whole workings, which reminded me vividly of a shell-torn village in Flanders, silhouetted in front of us. There was not a light anywhere.

"Listen," whispered Brian. "I tell you what. Don't you think it would be better for one of us to reconnoitre instead of both of us going? Let me go and have a prowl round. One makes less noise than two; besides, if anything goes wrong, the other can barge in afterwards. It gives us a double chance. If we go together, whatever happens to one will happen to the other."

It was the old problem; whether to keep a unit intact or to divide it into halves. How often I have heard it argued by officers and men in the trenches before going out on patrol, or listening-post duty, or whilst actually on patrol. The Higher Command was faced with the same question in a bigger way: whether to employ a maximum striking force, or whether to weaken it in order to hold a reserve. Afterwards I heard, and took part in, the same argument, in connection with air-fighting tactics. Generally speaking, I was always in favour of keeping a unit intact, because experience showed that once it was split it was so difficult to bring the two parts together again with any degree of safety, chiefly owing to the jumpy state of one's nerves and the ever-present fear of mistaking friend for foe, or *vice versa*.

But in the present case there was much to be said for Brian's plan, and it was hard to see how it could fail. It was not as if we were both going out on patrol, which might well have ended in us stalking each other. Provided only one went out, knowing that the other would not move until he returned, it was safe. The one who went out would always be aware of the exact



position of the other, who might, in emergency, cover his retreat in the event of discovery.

These were the thoughts that flashed through my head in the few seconds that I was considering Brian's proposal, and although my experience made me disapprove of the plan in principle, in the end I agreed—a decision which, as I have said, was governed by the peculiar circumstances in which it was difficult to see how things could go wrong. I was a fool. My common sense should have told me that it is not the expected that throws such plans out of gear, for every possible contingency that can be anticipated should be allowed for; it is the unexpected, the unknown factor that all too often occurs, that throws the spanner into the gears. And so it was in this case, as will be seen in due course.

In a few words I told him that I thought his plan was a sound one, but suggested that I should be the one to do the scouting. This he opposed, on the grounds that the idea being his, he should be the one to go. In the end we tossed for it, and he won.

“Be careful,” I warned him. “Keep your gun handy, and don't hesitate to use it. I think it's unlikely that you'll be lucky enough to find Steeley by himself, but if you do, tell him what has happened, and then get back here as quickly as you can. If you are discovered, try to get back to me; if you can't, but manage to get clear, work your way back to the ridge we've just left. I shall go back there. We had better have a time limit. Half an hour should be enough. If you're not back here in half an hour I shall know that something's gone wrong and shall come to look for you.”

“O.K.,” he whispered.

“Then let's synchronise our watches.”

It was 7.29, so, after waiting another minute to adjust them to round figures, he set off, gun in hand, moving with the stealth of an Indian towards the buildings. The moon was up now, although partly obscured by a curtain of haze, so I could see him clearly until he disappeared round the corner of the nearest wall.

Then began one of those nerve-racking periods of waiting that are such a trial to endure. I could not smoke, for I dare not risk striking a match; I could only sit and stare at the buildings as the big hand of my watch crept round towards the hour of eight. Such periods cannot be reckoned as time as we understand it in the ordinary way, and by five minutes to eight I should have judged the interval to be two hours instead of twenty-five minutes.

Then the fog came down. There was no warning; no preliminary swirl of mist; no gradual dimming of the light. It just dropped down from above like

a blanket, and smothered everything in thick, clammy, opaque moisture.

My first reaction was one of anger with myself for not making allowance for it in an area where sudden fogs are notorious. My airman's knowledge of meteorology should have warned me; all the signs were there; the sudden drop in temperature and the misty appearance of the moon should have been quite sufficient to tell me what was impending. In fact, the atmospheric conditions had fairly shouted "Fog," yet I had not noticed them.

My next feeling was one of acute alarm. The darkness alone had been bad enough, but in such fog as this one might as well have been blind. Brian would never find his way back to me now, that was certain, even if he was in a condition to do so, which was by no means certain since, with only four minutes to go, he had not shown up. Bitterly but uselessly I cursed the weakness that had led me to agree to our parting, for together, with the compass and the torch, we could have found our way anywhere, and the cover provided by the fog might have been a blessing instead of a curse. As things were, I was safe enough, but Heaven alone knew what might happen to Brian, particularly if he tried to find his way back to me or the rendezvous on the hill. I could only hope that he would not try. I glanced at my watch. The time was 8.1. He was already overdue. I rose to my feet and felt for my Webley. Then, with the compass in my left hand and the gun in my right, I set off towards the buildings.

## CHAPTER XI

THE compass did not fail me. Within five minutes I had reached the wall round the corner of which Brian had disappeared, so I did the obvious thing and followed him. The compass, no longer being of immediate service, I put back in my pocket, and replaced it with the torch in case a light became imperative. The wall came to an end, but having a more or less clear impression of the layout of the place from my bird's-eye-view earlier on, I knew fairly well where I was. Some twenty or thirty yards ahead was the nearest end of the long, slate-roofed building, while at the far end of it and at right angles to it was the house. Round about were scattered several smaller buildings—engine rooms, offices, and store rooms, I assumed. The pit-heads were farther over to the left. A moment's consideration suggested that the region of the house was the most likely place to find Brian, so towards it I turned my steps, making first for the end of the long building.

It was an eerie business. The silence, broken only by the occasional patter of the moisture now dripping from the roof, the appalling darkness, and the momentary expectation of colliding with something or somebody, screwed my nerves to breaking-point. I reached the long building, felt my way to the end of it, and then rested while I stared into the gloom ahead, trying to make out a light patch in the fog that would reveal the position of a lighted window which I felt certain must be there. As I waited I heard a sound; then another. The first sounded like a stone being dropped into a pool of water; it appeared to be close at hand, yet, paradoxically, far away. It seemed to rise up from below. The second sound persisted, and presently I made it out to be the distant confused murmur of voices, but in which direction it was impossible to tell.

Then the silence was broken by an outcry so close, so loud, and so dreadful that my nerves recoiled like cut elastic; but it galvanised me into action. For it was Brian's voice, horribly distorted.

"Tubby! Tubby! Help—quick," he cried, his voice rising to a scream on the last word. It broke off into a sort of gasping note.

"I'm coming," I shouted, all caution going by the board. "Where are you?" I went on, plunging about helplessly and stumbling over old brick-ends as I strove to locate the sound.

"Here!"

The word seemed to boom up from my feet, and I started forward again, switching on the torch as I did so. And it was a good thing I did, or it would have been all up with both of us, for in front of me yawned a round hole, either an old shaft or an air hole for the workings below. Throwing myself flat I squirmed to the brink, and holding the torch downward could just make out a figure lying asprawl a baulk of timber. It was about eight or ten feet down.

“Quick; it’s slipping!” he gasped.

There was no rope, but I had my trench-coat off in a flash and lowered it down to him. I saw an arm grope upward and felt the coat take the strain. Dropping the torch I got a firm grip on the collar with both hands. “Get any sort of a hold to take the weight off the beam,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Then get the best grip you can. Use your teeth as well as your hands.”

The strain increased.

“Got it?” I called.

A grunt was the answer, so I began to haul. It was a tricky business getting him on to his feet, and we were only just in time, for I heard the beam go crashing downwards and the sudden weight on the coat told me what had happened as clearly as if I could see it. Brian was swinging on the end of my coat. “Hang on,” I grunted, and exerted all my strength. It was touch and go until I could get him by the wrist, but after that it was easy. By sheer brute strength I dragged him up over the lip and flung him clear; at the same time I lost my own balance and sprawled headlong beside him.

His gasping sobs told their own story of nervous and physical exhaustion, and I was patting him gently on the shoulder when, not twenty yards away, a door was thrown open to emit a rectangular shaft of orange light.

“Ssh!” I breathed in Brian’s ear, and looked round in an agony of fright for the torch, but could not see it anywhere.

Brian subsided at once, but I could feel his body quivering.

“It was only them blasted rats squealing,” growled a voice.

“Rats hell! I tell you, I heard someone holler,” answered another.

“Aw, shucks,” came yet a third voice, that I recognised vaguely. “What the hell would anyone be doing here on a night like this.”

“Wa-al, it sounded human to me,” protested the second speaker.

“Why not go and have a look round?” suggested another.

“With all them blasted holes about? Not me. No, *sir*.” There was a general laugh.

“Aw, forget it; let’s go and get on with the game.”

The door slammed and the light disappeared.

“Can you get on your feet?” I whispered.

I heard Brian scramble up, but I could not see him.

“Better?” I asked.

“O.K.,” he replied, but I knew he had had a nasty shock.

“Put your hand on my shoulder,” I ordered. “I’m going to try to find my coat and the torch.”

He obeyed, and I groped my way back carefully towards the shaft. I found the coat at once, and presently, feeling about on the ground, my hand came in contact with the torch, but as I had already suspected, the bulb was broken. I put the coat on, felt in the pocket for the brandy flask, and passed it to Brian. “Take a swig of this; it’ll pull you together,” I said.

He did so, and handed it back. I had a nip myself, for I needed it, and then felt for the compass. “Let’s get back on to the moor,” I suggested. “We shall be able to talk better there, and a bite of bread and cheese won’t do us any harm. I left the haversack there. Pity about the torch, but luckily we’ve plenty of matches. It’s——” I broke off with a cry of dismay. “Hell’s bells, that’s done it,” I muttered aghast.

“What’s the matter?” he asked quickly.

“I’ve lost the compass,” I told him grimly. “It must have fallen out of my mack pocket when I lowered it down to you. My God! now we’re in a bonny mess. Well, it isn’t much good looking for it. Tell me, did you discover anything?” I enquired.

“Nothing. Not a damn thing,” he answered despondently. “I found the house, and that was all. I couldn’t even find a window. At five minutes to eight I started back to tell you, and fell down that perishing hole. I stuck it as long as I could, but when the plank started slipping, I lost my head and yelled.”

“Damn good thing you did,” I replied. “But we’d better not stand talking here.”

“Let’s try to find the haversack,” he suggested.

Try was the right word. We groped our way back to the wall and then, having decided we were facing the right direction we set off. A hundred paces and I stopped. “It should be here,” I declared. But it wasn’t, so we started circling, slowly increasing the circles. But it was all in vain. For

another five minutes we walked up and down feeling about on the ground with our feet for the bulky bag, but we might as well have looked for a spent bullet on an aerodrome.

“Well, we shall have to do without it, that’s all,” I said quietly, at last. “I only hope we haven’t got too far adrift on the moor. If you’re feeling well enough, I suggest that we make one more patrol round the buildings, if we can find them, and if we fail to discover anything, head back for the ridge. We’ve got to be out of sight of the mines by daylight in case the fog lifts, or Slick’s boys will be out to see what’s going on. I’m going to light a cigarette; we must be some way from the buildings, and a floodlight couldn’t be seen from more than ten yards in this confounded soup.” I struck a match, and as it flared up we saw each other for the first time since I had looked down into the shaft.

But Brian suddenly looked past me with an amazing expression of surprise and alarm on his face. “What the devil——” he ejaculated, and struck the match from my hand. “It’s the house,” he gasped. “We’re standing by the front door.”

A feeling of desperation surged over me, and a nightmare-like sense of unreality that made movement seem merely futile. “All right, stand fast,” I said calmly, for although I could no longer see him, I was aware that Brian was prepared to dash off into the fog. It was understandable; only a curious sense of detachment prevented me from bolting pell-mell out on to the moor. “Stand fast,” I said again. “The odds are on our side. Even if they knew we were here, they couldn’t see us, but we should be able to see them. They’d never find us on the moor. Hark!”

Kneeling down and putting my ear to the keyhole, I could just make out an occasional murmur of voices.

“I think I know what it is,” I whispered. “They’re down in the cellar; that’s why there are no lights.”

“What can we do about it?”

Very gently I tried the door. Somewhat to my surprise it opened easily, and one can only assume that the gang felt so secure in their retreat that they considered such simple precautions as the locking of doors quite unnecessary.

“For God’s sake be careful,” breathed Brian.

“I’m going to hear what they’re talking about if I can,” I replied softly. “Don’t lose your head and shoot me by mistake if I have to make a bolt for it.”

He made no answer, so I crept quietly over the threshold. Then, realising that my shoes would make a noise on the bare board floor, I slipped them off, and passed them back to him to hold, and went on in stockinged feet.

It was a nervy business, but not so risky as it might appear at first glance, for I felt certain that all the members of the gang would be together, and any move they made would be heard by me before they were aware of my presence. So confident was I of this that I even struck a match to get a mental picture of my immediate surroundings. I blew it out again instantly, but I had seen all I needed to know. The passage I was in was the usual straight one found in medium-sized houses. From a point near the door, on the right-hand side, a flight of stairs led straight upward to the first floor, while at the far end of the passage, behind a yard or two of flimsy banister, another flight, also on the right, led down to the cellar from which the sounds emanated. At intervals along the left-hand side of the passage were two doors; both were shut, so what sort of rooms lay behind them I had no means of knowing; nor did I particularly care.

Quite quickly, feeling my way by the wall, I walked to the far end of the passage and leaned over the banisters to listen, but I had not been in that position for more than a minute, which was sufficient to tell me that the gangsters were playing poker, when there was a sharp click upstairs, and the place was flooded with light; not only the staircase, but the passage in which I crouched with my gun at the ready. It was a ghastly moment, for, naturally, I expected that I should be seen immediately by whoever had switched on the light. Fortunately, this was not so, but my relief at this discovery was short-lived, for the next sound brought my heart into my mouth. There was no possibility of mistake. Somebody was coming down the stairs, quickly, someone in bare or stockinged feet like my own. The position was desperate. To return to the door was out of the question, for I should be seen instantly by whoever was on the stairs; yet to go forward meant going down into the cellar, a course I most certainly had no desire to take. So I took the only avenue of escape left open. Swiftly but noiselessly I crossed the corridor, opened the nearest door, stepped inside, and closed it behind me. Almost at once I heard the front door slam; simultaneously a voice let out a loud hail.

“Hi! Down there; who the hell left this door open?” The voice was Slick’s.

The voices in the cellar died away abruptly; chair legs scraped on the floor, and the door was thrown open.

“What’s that, Slick?” called somebody.

I could hear Slick coming along the corridor towards the cellar steps, and peeping through the keyhole saw him pass. He seemed to be in pyjamas, with an overcoat draped round his shoulders.

“I said, who the hell left this door open?” he growled. “Ain’t I sick enough as it is in this dungeon of a place without some fool making it worse?”

There was a muttered conversation below. “No one down here opened the door, boss,” said a voice. “The wind must have blown it open.”

“Wind! What wind? There ain’t no wind.”

“Well, then, it couldn’t ’a’ bin properly shut.”

I blessed the unseen speaker, for the explanation, flimsy as it was, appeared to allay suspicion.

“Did Del get back? That’s what I came down to ask,” went on Slick.

“Not yet.”

“Ain’t heard no word or nothin’?”

“Nope; guess it must be the fog held him up. He won’t get back to-night now; it’s thick enough outside to be cut with a knife.”

“I see. Well, let me know if he does come. I’m going back to bed. I can’t do nothing till I get rid of this blasted cold. Is Blondie down there?”

“Yep.”

“Tell her to come up and talk to me for a change; what the hell does she think I am—a leper?” At his next words my heart sank into my boots. “And I’m going to lock this front door and keep the key, so that it don’t come open again. You’ll have to use the back door,” he added.

“O.K., Slick.”

“Let me know if you hear anything of Del.”

“O.K.”

I heard Slick’s footsteps retreating down the passage; heard him halt at the door, lock it, and then go on up the stairs. The cellar door was closed. The light outside was switched off, and all was as it had been when I entered, except that the door was now locked and I was on the wrong side of it.

I drew a deep breath as the sounds died away and wiped the beads of perspiration from my forehead with my sleeve. Obviously, the thing to do was to find the back door, and quickly, unless the room I was in had a window. It had, but there was no escape that way, for it was protected by two strong iron bars that had been let into the stonework when the house was built. A cat might have got between them, but I couldn’t; not for



nothing had I been nicknamed “Tubby.” I struck a match to make sure. By its light I saw that the room had been furnished very crudely as a sort of office. There was a table, with a cheap writing block and some envelopes lying on it, a chair, and two or three books and maps. There was nothing else of interest, but just as the match went out I noticed that there had been a fire in the grate and several odds and ends of paper were lying in the hearth. With some sort of vague idea at the back of my mind that, according to orthodox detective literature, the best clues are usually furnished by half-burnt scraps of paper discovered in the fireplace, I struck another match and, feeling rather dramatic, gathered up the pieces and slipped them into my pocket.

Then I returned to the door and listened for a moment; but all was quiet, so I stepped outside and closed the door behind me. Which was the back door? First I tried the other door in the corridor only to find myself in an empty room; there were two windows, but they were both barred, so I wasted no more time, but hastened to the top of the cellar steps. Clearly, the back door was at a lower level than the one I was on, and there was no longer any doubt but that it was somewhere near the room in which the gang was playing cards. I remembered the speed with which the door had been opened when Brian had called out from the shaft.

Realising that delay could only make my plight more precarious, I walked quickly down the stairs. A thin line of yellow light showed under the first door on the right. Beyond that I could not see, so I struck a match, confident that the men inside were making too much noise to hear me. By its light I saw that I was in a stone-flagged passage; there were two or three small doors on either side, but facing me at the far end a larger one beckoned like an aerodrome beacon on a stormy night. A dozen paces took me to it, and rather than fumble for the handle I struck another match to see just where it was. It was as well that I did so, for when my eyes found it I saw that it was slowly turning. At first I thought it was a trick of the light, but as the door slowly began to open I knew I was not mistaken. Somebody was outside. Then, in a flash, I understood. Never did Brian come nearer to sudden death than he did at that moment; and neither, so he told me a few minutes later, did I.

“Careful, Brian,” I said quietly. “It’s me.”

He pushed the door wide open from outside, and then I saw him, an extraordinary sight, with his white face, staring eyes, gun in one hand and my shoes in the other. I crept outside and shut the door. “Give me my shoes,” I said tersely. “I’m going home. I’ve had quite enough of this.”

## CHAPTER XII

“WHAT happened?” he began, as we crept along the side of the house; but I cut him short.

“Don’t ask questions now,” I said irritably. “I’ll tell you about it later on. Slick’s here; so are the rest, except Steeley. So that lets us out, and a good thing, too. My nerves won’t stand much more of this Sherlock Holmes stuff.”

Nothing more was said until we reached the end of the house. Then, “Where is Steeley?” asked Brian.

“I’ve no idea,” I answered. “But he’s expected back. They reckon the fog’s holding him up. That’s all that matters. But never mind about that now; let’s see about getting across to that next wall—I mean, the long building. We’ll use that as a guide to take us back to the place where we started from. After that we shall have to creep out on to the moor and wait for the fog to lift. I’m nothing for meandering about a place punctured with old mine shafts.”

We managed to keep fairly straight for the short distance that separated us from what we called the long building, but our line wasn’t quite true, and we struck it at a point not previously seen.

“Never mind,” I said. “This side will suit us as well as the other.” And feeling my way with my hand, I moved along cautiously with Brian hanging on to my coat tails; but I had only taken two or three paces when the brick wall gave way to a substance that felt like canvas, or rather, a heavy tarpaulin. “Just a minute,” I said; “what’s all this about? Let’s have a look.”

“Be careful with the matches,” he muttered anxiously.

But I was becoming desperate, or, what was more probable, inured to danger, and I struck a match in a kind of daredevil exhilaration. By its light I saw that nearly the whole side of the building, which was the side overlooking the moor, was draped with a sort of curtain—or curtains, as it seemed to be in several lengths. “I can tell you what’s in here,” I said. “Go back a pace to the end; we can get in there and have a look.”

As we dragged aside the end of the curtain and took a tentative step forward, we were greeted by the familiar and unmistakable smell of aeroplanes, which is chiefly a mixture of oil, petrol, and dope. Another

match revealed three, standing in line facing the curtain, ready, one supposed, to take off. The one nearest to us was the blue and white Breguet of tragic memory. Next to it stood a high-wing cabin monoplane bearing French registration letters, a three or four seater by the look of it. Beyond that was an old "X" type Moth, with the engine cowling off, and a lot of miscellaneous gear lying around it. "Looks as if Slick's got a mechanic in his crowd," I observed, nodding towards the Moth.

"No use tinkering with them, I suppose?" mused Brian thoughtfully.

"Meaning?"

"Put the whole lot out of action. Bust the tanks—cut the controls—saw through the joysticks—anything," he answered dispassionately.

I shook my head. "It might spoil Steeley's plans; it might even result in him breaking his neck," I declared.

"All right. Then we might as well be moving on."

"Half a minute; I was just wondering about that," I said slowly. "If we go out on to the moor we shall be lost to the world within five minutes. Goodness knows where we should finish up. Tumble down a precipice or get stuck in a bog as like as not. I'm not infatuated with the idea of spending the rest of the night on the moor, and that's a fact. Slick's crowd won't be likely to sit up all night; even if they do it seems highly improbable that they'll come out here. That being so, we might as well stay under cover until it begins to get light. Damn nuisance about losing that compass."

Brian admitted that the shed was infinitely preferable to the soaking moor, so having found a couple of empty petrol cans to serve as seats, we squatted down in the corner, just inside the curtain, prepared to bolt at the slightest sign of danger. I looked at my watch; the time was nearly one o'clock. "It won't be light for another five hours yet," I said. "And if this fog persists, we shan't be much better off then than we are now."

"I think we ought to be able to reach the ridge," he opined.

"You might think and that's about as far as you'd get," I told him seriously. "Read the stories of convicts who have escaped from Princetown Prison, on the other side of the moor, in fogs of this sort, if you want to get an idea of what it's like to be out in a Dartmoor mist. One man ran all night, and when daylight came he found himself outside the gates, within fifty yards of the place from where he had started."

"That was tough," admitted Brian. "What did he do?"

"The story didn't say, but I should think he flung himself down and beat his brains out on the nearest rock. *I* should have. A crack like that is more than anyone could be expected to stand without getting the screaming

willies. I couldn't stand it. That's why I mean we'd better be careful. For the moment we're better off here than in the open. By the way, I've just remembered something." I felt in my pocket and took out the pieces of paper I had collected from the grate in Slick's room—at least, I imagine it was his room. "Strike a match, and make it last as long as you can," I ordered.

He did as I told him, and I made a general examination of the fragments. Most of them were half-burnt, or badly charred at the edges. There were some pieces of notepaper, all of which seemed to be parts of the same letter, which had been typewritten, in French. There were only one or two whole words on each piece, so it was impossible to form any idea of the context. On one I caught the words "*salle*" and "*quatre*." On another "*moyenne*" and "*Mont*" and on another "*pêche*." "Do these words mean anything to you?" I said. "Hall, four, middle, mount and peach."

"Not a damn thing," he replied promptly.

"Nor do they to me," I admitted. "Strike another match. Ah!" I went on as he did so, "these look more interesting."

"These" were five pieces of what had evidently been a photograph, or two or more photographs. One showed about a third of a white, flat-roofed house, with a tangled patch of creeper clinging to one side, "That looks like the Mediterranean coast to me," I said. "That creeper is bougainvillea, unless I'm very much mistaken." The next piece showed a small expanse of garden, with a terrace, built of octagonal-shaped pieces of stone, in the background. The branch of a tree obtruded into the photo.

"Looks like a willow tree," murmured Brian, who was peering over my shoulder.

"No, it isn't; it's an olive," I contradicted him excitedly. "I'm right. This place is on the French or Italian Riviera. By God, yes. *Moyenne!* You remember that word I read out to you—*moyenne*? A thousand pounds to a pinch of snuff that this is a villa on the Riviera, on the Moyenne-Corniche Road that runs from Nice to Monte Carlo. I thought the word seemed familiar. Ever been to the Riviera?"

"Never."

"No matter. There's no doubt about it. Let's look at the others. Strike another light."

The next piece was a blank. It might have been sky. The fourth piece was nearly the same, but a dark-tinted area ran right across it. I did not understand what it was then, but the fifth and last piece told me, for it showed a similar area adjacent to a stretch of high, rocky coast, surmounted by a thick clump of pine trees. I recognised it at once, as almost anyone who

has ever been to the Riviera would have done. It was the Castle Hill, at Nice. The dark shaded patch was the sea. Another word of the letter recurred to me and I understood. It was “Mont”—with a capital M. There is only one Mont within miles overlooking the old castle at Nice, and that is Mont Boron, which is not a mountain in the true sense of the word, but a fairly steep bank rising up to perhaps a thousand feet around which the Corniche roads wind. “That’s it,” I mused. Then to Brian I said, “It looks to me as if the letter was from someone, possibly a French Estate Agent, about a house in the South of France. He enclosed some photos as they often do. One or two were of the actual house, and the other, or others, the view from its windows. The villa is on the Middle Corniche road, on a place called Mont Boron, near Nice. The question is, did Slick take the house, or did he not; and if he did, for what purpose?”

“To keep Virginia Marven in.”

Brian’s prompt answer knocked me all of a heap, as the saying is, for I had clean forgotten all about the girl.

“Suffering Icarus!” I muttered. “I believe you’ve hit it. If you have, we’ve got Slick cold. All we need do is to get hold of Steeley and raid the place. Once we’ve got Virginia, Wayne can go right ahead, and show Slick where he steps off. It begins to look as if we’ve done a good night’s work after all.” I carefully collected the pieces and put them in my breast pocket. “If it wasn’t for this confounded fog, things would begin to look rosy,” I concluded, with considerable satisfaction.

“We can’t have it all our own way,” protested Brian pessimistically.

I made no reply to this cheerless observation, but went to the end of the curtain and peered out into the night. The weather was unchanged. If anything the fog seemed worse than ever, for it was now steaming into the improvised hangar, so I returned to my seat and prepared to make myself as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

## II

I awoke with a start and sprang to my feet, staring owlishly this way and that into a dim, grey haze as my sleep-soaked brain strove to take in my surroundings. Brian, slumped forward with his head between his hands, was still sleeping peacefully. I grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him violently. “Brian! Brian!” I hissed. “For God’s sake! We’ve been asleep.”

He was up in a moment, staggering and blinking in a sort of mild panic. “What is it?” he gasped.

“It’s daylight,” I breathed. “Something woke me. I heard something in my sleep. It sounded like a car. Hark!”

We stood tense for a few seconds, but there was no repetition of the sound, so I sprang at the curtain and pulled it aside. Normally, it would have been broad daylight, but the fog that still clung to the ground like a smokescreen blotted out everything.

“We had better move off,” said Brian, now wide awake.

“You’re right,” I agreed, and looked at my watch. It was nearly nine o’clock. “We’re lucky Slick’s boys sleep late,” I said grimly. “Come on, let’s go. We’ll try to find the haversack, and then the ridge, but it’s a thousand to one against us finding either. Anyway, we can’t stay here.”

We hurried along the outside of the curtain to the far corner and the open moor lay before us. Visibility was not quite so bad as it had been during the night, and it was now possible to see four or five yards, which was little enough for our task. “I’ll lead,” I said. “Don’t take your eyes off me. If for any reason you do lose sight of me, give a hail instantly. Whatever happens, we must keep together.”

We walked a hundred paces, and then I stopped, bending down to look at the ground; but there was no sign of the haversack. “We daren’t stop to look for it,” I said. “If once we lose our line as like as not we shall come blundering back to the mines. Our only chance to keep straight is to go right on—hark!” I had started off again, but I jerked to a standstill as the distant sound of a motor-car engine was borne to my ears. “Who the devil can be on the moor in a car at this hour, and in this stuff?” I gasped. “Which direction do you make it?”

Brian pointed to the right. “Over there,” he said.

“No, it’s over there,” I declared, pointing to the left. As it transpired, we were both wrong, but it made little difference in the end, for at that moment the fog started to lift. It was just like a curtain going up. From the time it started until the time it was twenty or thirty feet over our heads, with the whole moor exposed to view, it could not have been more than a few seconds.

I caught Brian by the arm and dragged him down into the heather. “My God! That’s torn it,” I muttered, raising my head cautiously to examine the landscape.

After that things happened so swiftly that I don’t really know the best order to narrate them, for so many people were involved that they often acted together, and there was no clearly defined sequence of events. It is worth noting, however, that the short time we had been on the moor was

sufficient for us to lose our sense of direction. Far from facing the ridge, we had swung round in a half-circle, and were already working away from it. And so it came about that the first thing I saw was just about the last thing one would expect to see in such a place. Coming down the track that wound through the rocks and heath from the direction of Morton Hampstead was a char-à-banc. It was about half a mile away, and moving very slowly, but as I watched it it began to accelerate, and it was evidently the noise of this move that attracted the attention of a man who was walking briskly down the track in front of it, just about half-way between it and the mine buildings. Even at that distance there was no mistaking the slim, lithe figure of Steeley.

Now up to that moment there was no indication of the chaos that was to follow immediately. It started with a pistol shot that crashed through the stagnant atmosphere like a Mills bomb bursting; another followed it, and the echoes went rolling away amongst the distant tors. An instant later a man sprang up from some rocks close to the track just in front of the char-à-banc and began backing away into the moor, firing as he went. Steeley, who had not moved from the time he had first heard the vehicle behind him, but had stood staring at what was going on, suddenly turned round and began running like a hare towards the house, in which pandemonium now reigned. Doors slammed; voices shouted and heavy boots thumped on the uncarpeted boards.

The next phase put an entirely different complexion on things and explained much. The running gunman was still firing at the char-à-banc from which answering shots now came. Then, as if the driver had been hit, it swerved sickeningly; the front off-side wheel struck a large rock; it tipped up and then crashed over on to its side. A second later the passengers began to crawl out through the windows that were uppermost. One look at their blue uniforms was enough. They were policemen.

I felt the blood drain from my face. "Great God! It must be Wayne," I breathed through dry lips.

At that an aero engine came to life with a bellow, and a man ran out of the long building dragging frantically at the curtain. For a short distance of its length it slid along easily; then it stuck. Another man joined the first; they both flung their weight on it, and the whole thing came down, burying them under its folds. The nose of the Breguet appeared, moving slowly forward, prop whirling. Voices were still shouting as the machine taxied out into the open with the cabin door wide open. The two men who had fallen under the curtain crawled out and threw themselves inside as the machine shot forward in the craziest take-off I ever saw in my life, just as Steeley dashed round the corner waving furiously for it to stop.

I waited for no more. “Steeley! Steeley!” I yelled at the top of my voice, but I knew that he could not hear me for the noise made by the Breguet’s engine, and without once glancing in our direction he darted into the hangar.

I started towards it, but a bullet whizzed past my head and another ploughed through the heather near my feet, so I dived for cover again, but not before I had seen where the shots were coming from. The police, now not more than two hundred yards away, had spread out, fan-wise; some were carrying rifles, and the flank men, who could see us, were taking snapshots as they ran. I heard the engine of the other serviceable machine start up and, helpless to do anything else, I cursed fluently and bitterly, I say helpless because the police, wisely perhaps, set up a regular fusillade, and bullets were fairly buzzing, and the range was too close for my liking.

“For God’s sake keep your head down,” I told Brian, who was a bit white about the gills, and I don’t wonder at it. I risked a peep myself, and in a frenzy of impotence saw the other machine take off through an absolute barrage of fire. Steeley must have had a hot ten seconds, but once he was in the air they might have saved their ammunition, for he twisted and dodged with the skill of long experience and didn’t give them a chance. The noise of the engines receded swiftly and a ghastly silence fell.

“There’s Wayne,” I cried, and jumping to my feet, I raised my hands above my head. Brian did the same, and in this fashion we approached the crux of the scene on which the police were now converging. One of them soon saw us and raised a shout, and I saw Wayne stop, staring.

“Where the devil have you come from?” he roared.

“Where have you?” I answered curtly.

He was still panting heavily when we reached him, as they all were, if it comes to that, for they had had a long run.

“Well?” he said savagely.

“Well?” I answered calmly. “It looks as if the birds have flown.”

“That blasted fog did us,” he snarled.

“Yes,” I admitted. “It thunderingly nearly did us, too.”

He started cursing luridly.

“That sort of talk won’t help you, or us,” I said coldly. “How did you get my letter so soon?”

“Pah! Before you’d been out of the Yard five minutes Raymond had signalled all post offices to watch for the letter every time the boxes were cleared, and gave instructions that he was to be telephoned as soon as it was



found. We had a copy of your letter in front of us within two hours of your posting it.”

I stared. No wonder the postmaster in Monkton had looked at us suspiciously. “Pretty smart,” I admitted. “What are you going to do with us?”

“With you? Nothing! I’ve plenty to worry me without adding to my troubles. That blue and white machine was the one they pinched from France, wasn’t it?”

“That’s the one.”

“Well, they won’t get far in that, either in this country or in France, if that’s where they’ve gone. I’ll get through to Paris on the phone, and if I know anything about French police they’ll turn the whole air force out to stop it.”

I should have liked to know whether or not he had spotted the identification letters of the machine Steeley was flying, and if he knew who was flying it. His next words suggested that he did not.

“The two machines will stick together, I suppose?” he said reflectively.

“I should think it’s more than likely,” I agreed.

“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to follow them both.”

“Why?”

“To try to find Steeley’s girl.”

“How will you follow them?”

“In my machine.”

“Where is it?”

“Monkton. Would you like to come? I’ve room for a second passenger.”

“I’d like to, but I daren’t leave the country.”

“Well, do you mind if we get off? They’ve got a long start as it is.”

He thought for a moment. “No,” he said; “but be careful what you’re up to.”

“Will you stand guarantee for our good intentions if we do happen to get in a jam anywhere? Brian will see that you get credit for the show in his paper, when he writes the story.”

He eyed us suspiciously. “I should have to ask Colonel Raymond about that,” he said, in a surly tone.

“Right-o, then we’ll be getting along,” I declared.

“Ring me up if you learn anything important,” was his parting request.

“I will,” I promised him.

## CHAPTER XIII

IT took us an hour and a quarter to get back to Monkton. We were off the ground in five minutes, but we lost another three-quarters of an hour going up to Bristol Airport to get our papers in order. This could not be avoided, for I knew it was out of the question for us to try getting about France without our documents being properly tied up with the usual red tape. However, we got away at last, and I headed south for Paris and the Riviera, where lay our only chance of picking up the trail. If that proved to be a mare's nest, I knew we might as well chuck up the whole thing as try to find either Steeley or Slick anywhere else.

As I told Brian when we were waiting at the Airport, all sorts of possibilities were open, even if we were on the right track. In the first place, it was highly improbable that Slick would be such a fool as to try to fly right across France in a machine that had been reported lost at sea, for once he was spotted—as he most certainly would be sooner or later—all sorts of aircraft would be chasing him to have a close look at the “ghost” machine. It seemed far more likely that he would realise this danger, and land at the first lonely place he came to, where he could abandon such a dangerous vehicle, and afterwards go on by surface craft. In any case, he would not be able to reach the Riviera in one hop—assuming he was going there—and he would certainly not be mad enough to try refuelling anywhere.

I didn't know what to think about Steeley. If he could keep the Breguet in sight, he would follow it to the bitter end, there was no doubt of that, for he must have been aware that, if once he lost it, he would have a job to get on the track of the gang again, when his chances of finding Virginia would be very remote indeed. But it was not improbable that he would lose the Breguet, even if he had picked it up after he had taken off, which was by no means certain. Again, if the Breguet landed, the gang might disperse before he could come up with them.

Boiled down, it all came to this, we decided. Slick and his crowd would make for the villa on the Riviera—or we hoped so—but there was likely to be some delay before he arrived, and it was far more likely that he would turn up in Nice by train, or car, than by air. Steeley would follow him if he could, but if he lost him, then he might land anywhere between Berck in the north and Marignane in the south. There was this to be said, though; there

were not many aerodromes on the straight run down, and presuming that his papers were in order—which seemed quite likely, as he had been flying his machine about until recently—there was always a chance of dropping across him at one of them. Anyway, the only thing we could do was to make for Nice and hope for the best.

There was no sign of either aeroplane at Berck as we passed over it, nor anywhere else on the way down to Bourget, where we refuelled and had a belated lunch. There were a lot of machines about, but neither of those we sought was amongst them so far as we could tell by a quick look round. Frankly, I was rather disappointed, for I had hoped to find Steeley there; it seemed the most natural place he would make for unless, of course, he had overtaken the Breguet and stuck to it. I would not stay for a more thorough examination of the place for two reasons; the first was that the weather was getting threatening, a lot of low stuff drifting up from the south bringing with it a strong promise of rain, and the second was that I wanted to reach Nice in daylight, and we already had little enough time.

Just as we were getting back into our seats preparatory to taking off, I happened to catch a word or two of the conversation of a group of mechanics who were standing close to us, all staring to the north, which made me prick up my ears. I went over to them. “Pardon, but what is this I hear?” I said.

“The lost machine. The Berline Breguet which disappeared has been seen,” replied one of the lads.

“Where?”

“Near Beauvais.”

“In the air or on the ground?”

“On the ground.”

“And what of the pilot and passengers?”

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders expressively. “There is no information,” he said. “The Breguet was observed by a *sous-officier* of one of the *Escadrilles à la bas*, but he was in a hurry, so he did not land, but reported it when he got here. Another machine with Air France officials has gone out to see if it is true; we are waiting for them to come back.”

I can’t say I was surprised, for I had half expected that something of the sort would happen. I thanked the lad for his information, and returned to Brian. “The Breguet’s been spotted,” I said. “It’s down near Beauvais.”

“Are you going to wait for further news?”

“No, there seems to be no point in it. It’s hardly likely that there will be anyone in it by the time the police or the authorities get there. Slick will be on his way south by now; in fact, he is probably in Paris by this time. There’s just a chance that the French police might lay him by the heels if Wayne has got through to them over the phone, otherwise I imagine he’ll catch the Ventimiglia *Rapide* that goes from the Gare de Lyon about half-past five; either that or the nine-thirty.”

“What time does the train get there?”

“Both trains get to Nice to-morrow morning; one about breakfast time and the other just after lunch. If Slick’s on either of them, we ought to be there before him. Come on, let’s get away.”

We got into our seats, and my hand was already on the throttle when I saw a high-wing monoplane come sailing in from the direction of St. Denys. “Half a minute,” I said; “what’s this coming in?”

We watched the machine land. Its nose was pointing directly towards us, so we could not see its identification letters. After it was down it came straight on to the reception park where we were, and not until it was only a few yards away did the pilot swing round into position. My heart gave a lurch as my eyes fell on the letters painted on the side of the fuselage. “It’s him,” I cried, and sprang out just as the door of the other machine opened and Steeley stepped on to the tarmac.

“Steeley,” I called.

He spun round as if he had been stung by a wasp; never have I seen a man so taken aback. His jaw dropped and his eyes stared unbelievably. Then his mouth shut like a trap and his eyes glinted ominously.

“Why did you break your word, and tell Wayne——” he began, but I stopped him with a gesture.

“Why the hell didn’t you post your letter in a proper letter-box?” I asked him coldly.

He stared. “I did.”

“One that’s emptied about twice a year. Do you call that a proper box?”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” he snapped.

“No matter,” I said. “Don’t let’s stand arguing here. You’ve lost Slick, I suppose?”

“I never found him. He disappeared into that confounded murk, and I never saw him again. I’ve been hunting for him ever since. This place was my last hope; I’ve been here once before.”

“He abandoned the Breguet at Beauvais,” I told him.

A look of despair crossed his face. "Then I'm sunk," he muttered. "God knows where he is now, or where he'll go."

"We think we know," I answered quickly. "It isn't by any means certain, but there's a good chance that we're right."

"Where?"

"Nice."

"Nice? Why Nice?"

"Because we have reason to suppose that is where Virginia is."

He came to life at once. "Tell me," he began eagerly, but I waved him towards the machine.

"Get in," I said. "We're wasting time. I'll fly, and Brian can tell you all about it."

The weather was atrocious by the time we got to Bron, the aerodrome for Lyon, and nothing but desperate emergency would have induced me to go on flying. To follow the Air France route to the Riviera, which cuts straight across the Alps to Cannes, was out of the question, for the last pilot in had reported ice-forming conditions over five thousand, and I had no intention of trying to contour-chase through the valleys. "We shall have to dog's-leg it, by going down to Marseilles and along the coast," I declared.

We set off, following the Rhône Valley, but it was a swine of a trip, bumpy, clouds nearly on the ground, with rain and hail at times. Moreover, it was pretty well dark by the time we touched the fringe of that abominable wilderness called the Plaine de Crau, where there must be more stones than anywhere else in the world. However, we got through, and landed at the dreary aerodrome of Marignane, which serves Marseilles, in a sort of dismal twilight. The weather was still awful, but I no longer cared, so relieved was I to get my feet on the ground again.

Steeley was for pushing straight on to Nice, or rather, Antibes, which, as far as I could remember, was the nearest landing-ground to it. The need for urgency was plain enough, but no one in his right mind would have taken off again in a machine not fitted with blind-flying instruments. In the end we got a car into Marseilles, and caught the next train along the coast, arriving at Nice just before eleven o'clock.

During the train journey we made Steeley *au fait* with all that had transpired, including the reason for our present journey, after which I tried to make some sort of plan before locating the right villa in the first place, and tackling it in the second, for I was the only one of the party who knew the district. I pointed out that there were a lot of villas on Mont Boron, so we were likely to be faced with a stiff task, although the fact that it was near the

Corniche should narrow our search. Just what we were going to do when we did find the place was more or less left in the air. Always cautious, I tentatively suggested going to the police and telling them of our suspicions, but Steeley laughed this procedure out of court.

“What on earth good would that do?” he asked, “The French police get more licence than ours do, but even so, they have to proceed according to regulations. They’d probably send a couple of fellows up to the front door to make enquiries, or else put somebody on to watch the place—that is, assuming they believed our story, which is by no means certain. In fact, if I know anything about Continental police methods, the first thing they’d be likely to do would be to clap us all in gaol while they made enquiries about us.”

With this I was compelled to agree, so in the end we decided to act on our own account. On arrival at Nice we had a quick drink and a snack at one of the bar-café’s opposite the station; then we walked back to the station and called a taxi.

## II

Between Nice, the popular resort on the Riviera, and Mentone, on the Italian frontier, a short half-hour’s run by car, the Alpes Maritimes come marching down to the sea in great cliffs and scree’s that vary in height from a few hundred to three thousand feet. Around the face of this massive barrier, which connects the two towns and embraces the Principality of Monte Carlo, three spectacular roads wind a tortuous course, sometimes clinging literally to the face of the cliffs, like cornices, whence come their names, sometimes winding upward in a series of breathtaking zigzags, and sometimes plunging downward in long serpentine sweeps through gorges veiled with ancient growths of pine, olive, and spire-like cypress.

Why there should be three roads connecting the same towns is hard to say, particularly as the top one, the famous Grande Corniche, far from going the shortest way, appears to make a point of taking the widest possible detours, carefully avoiding as many intermediate villages as possible. The next one, lower down, the middle, or Moyenne-Corniche, probably carries most tourist traffic, while the bottom one is generally given over to mercantile transport. Primarily they were military roads, commenced by the Roman Augustus for the conquest of eastern Europe, and completed by Napoleon for his conquest of Italy. All three look down over cliff and crag and wooded glen to the turquoise sea, while along them and between them nestle the modest villas of the residents and the sumptuous establishments of

the wealthiest class of five continents. Rarely are these built on level sites, for the simple reason that few level sites are to be found on what is, in effect, a stupendous bank tumbling from the peaks of the Alps into the Mediterranean; they either cling precariously, like a swallow's nest, to the lip of some chasm, or are supported at one end by massive buttresses built up from the lower, or seaward, side.

These conditions are more pronounced in some places than others, and those built on Mont Boron, which was our immediate objective, come into the latter category, for the Mont is a vast mound rather than a natural cliff; but even so, there are many places where it drops away sharply, and a fall might have serious consequences. It overlooks the old town of Nice, the Port, and the pine-covered ruins of the Castle—standing on a small crag of its own—which so opportunely appeared in our photograph. The angle from which the photograph was taken, together with the tell-tale growth of bougainvillaea, were the factors that we should have to rely on to narrow our field of operations.

And so it proved. We paid off the taxi at the foot of the hill, and setting off on foot were able to discount at once those villas that either had no floral decoration of the type we sought, or stood at such an angle as to make it impossible for the photograph we possessed to have been taken from their windows. Fortunately, the rain had stopped, and the night was generally clear, but isolated patches of cloud obscured the moon from time to time.

We walked for an hour, and then suddenly we came upon the villa, and a further comparison with the photograph showed there was little room for doubt but that it was the right one. It was a good deal larger than I had expected it to be, and the end that bore the bougainvillaea was a wing rather than the side of the villa itself. But the shape of the tropical creeper was precisely that of the photograph and, further, the aspect was correct. The building stood by itself in an extensive garden, with one end built into the solid earth, but with the front, which faced the sea, resting on four carved-stone pillars, so that the garden—if the tangle of palms and vines could be called a garden—extended right under the house itself. The garden on the inner, or hill, side was a good deal higher than the seaward side, and held a short, palm-lined drive, like a miniature *corniche*, which ran back into the main road, one side of which was built up with the usual octagonal stones, forming the terrace that appeared in another photograph.

This may not be a good description of a structure which, by reason of its peculiar features, is by no means easy to describe, but it must suffice. That is how it appeared to us as we stood in a bend of the road a hundred yards away watching it from an angle which commanded a view of the end, not



the front. It would have been impossible to see the front of the house without going a considerable distance away, for even if we had gone to that part of the garden, we should simply have been below it, and looked up from an extremely foreshortened worm's-eye view. Two windows faced us, and by moving nearer we could see several others overlooking the road, but none was lighted.

"Well, there it is," observed Brian casually. "What are we going to do now we're here?"

"It would make it a lot easier if we knew who was inside," I answered. "It might still be empty, for all we know. If it is Slick's hide-away, and there is only the woman Flo there with Virginia, we might take the place by storm."

"On the other hand, if Slick has left a gunman there, we might bump into something unpleasant," said Steeley seriously, staring hard at the villa. "We don't want to make a boob—for Virginia's sake."

I wasn't thinking so much about Virginia as myself, but I didn't say so. "It looks as if we shall have to do a bit of scouting," I murmured. "Shall we all go together, or take it in turns?"

"Have you fellows got any weapons?" asked Steeley suddenly.

I told him that I had my Webley and Brian an automatic, at which he seemed relieved. He himself was unarmed.

"I'll go and have a look round," he decided at last. "Wait here until I come back."

He was away about a quarter of an hour. "There is a light in one of the front-room windows, on the first floor," he told us when he came back. "You can just see it from the lower end of the front garden. And there seems to be a sort of balcony jutting out right across the front, on the lower floor, but there's no way of getting to it except through the house or by climbing one of the pillars."

"Suppose we got up on to the balcony; is there any way of getting to the lighted window?"

"Not without a ladder."

"Hell!" I muttered, "that's awkward. What about the other side of the house—the side that overlooks the drive and the road?"

"There's a front door with white marble or plaster pillars on each side, making a sort of porch, and there are plenty of windows."

"Did you try any?"

“No. We shall have to do some careful thinking before we start house-breaking. We’ll do that, of course, if there’s no other way, but I didn’t want to raise an alarm unnecessarily.”

“Well, it’s time we did something,” I declared. “I tell you what,” I went on, as an idea struck me. “Nobody in the house is likely to know me. Suppose I go and ring the front-door bell with some sort of excuse—ask for somebody—anybody, on the off-chance of learning something from whoever answers it. It might tell us something.”

“That’s a good idea,” he agreed.

“Then stand fast,” I said, and set off up the road; and, incidentally, on the maddest adventure of the whole business.

## CHAPTER XIV

I TURNED in through the gate, strode openly along the little piece of private *corniche*, went up to the front door, and knocked on it with my knuckles. There was no reply, so I found the bell-push and heard it jangle loudly inside. There was still no answer. Then I heard a sound, hard to describe, and had a sudden feeling that someone was watching me, but whether it was through one of the windows, or through the letter-box opening, I could not say. Call it inspiration, call it madness, call it what you like, but the words that came to my lips were certainly not those I intended saying. To this day I don't know what made me say them. "Come on, Flo," I said quietly. "Open up; I've got bad news for you."

I heard the bolts being drawn. A key grated in the door, and a light was switched on. The door opened, and a woman's voice said, with a nasal American drawl, "Step right in, honey."

I stepped inside, and found myself looking with interest at a smartly dressed woman of about forty-five, whose most striking feature was a round mop of red hair. At first I could only see her back, for she was busy fastening the door again. Then she turned and faced me, and it was only with difficulty that I restrained a shudder, for of all the human faces I have seen between the East End of London and Port Said, hers was the worst. At least, what could be seen of it, for she was "made up" to the point of absurdity. Her face was chalk white, across which her mouth showed as a vivid vermilion slit; her eyes were dark, but beneath heavy lids they sparkled like those of a bird—or a reptile. But it was her expression that sent cold shivers down my spine, for she positively leered at me in a manner that I can only describe as obscene.

"Wa-al?" she drawled. "Spill it."

Spill what? I didn't know, but obviously I should have to say something. "The cops have got the low-down on Slick," I said, automatically dropping into gangster jargon.

"Yeah! What do you know about it? Who are you?" she asked in a cold sort of voice.

"Tubby, they call me," I answered. "New pilot Slick took on in England for his airplane racket. Used to be a pal of Del's. You know Del?"

“That lily-fingered polecat! I sure do. I’ve only seen him once, though he didn’t see me, but it was enough. I wouldn’t trust that dude a yard. How did you get here before Slick?”

“Slick and some of the boys went off in one machine, Del in another, and I went in another,” I told her. “We lost each other in the clouds, and I haven’t seen any of them since, so I came straight on through, same as Slick told us all to if there was a break-up.”

“Where was Slick heading for—here?”

“Sure.”

“What for?”

“To fetch the Marven dame, I suppose.”

The look that crossed her face frightened me. “What makes you think that?” she asked harshly.

“I’m only going by what Slick said before the cops broke up the party,” I replied quickly.

“Yeah, and what did he say?”

I felt I was on dangerous ground, and realised that the sooner I got off it the better. “Oh, just said something about collecting the dame if it came to a show-down any time. He told us about this place, and said we’d better head for it if we got split up,” I said airily.

“And what about me? Did he say anything about that?”

“No,” I told her, wondering how the conversation was going to end.

“And how about that blonde piece he’s trailing around? What did she have to say about it?”

“I’ve never heard Blondie say anything about it,” I answered truthfully.

“I’d perforate them both for a brass dime,” she hissed.

“Well, there’s nothing to stop you perforating one of them now, as far as I can see,” I observed, as a new idea began to form in my mind.

“No? What’ll I tell Slick?”

“Tell him she made a get-away, and you had to let her have it to stop her squealing,” I suggested.

“What, here?”

“Not in the house. Take her for a ride and bump her over the cliff.”

“Ride—what in?”

“Well, take her for a walk. I’ll come with you, if you like. By the way, what’s she like to look at?” I added.

“Swell,” she leered.

I inclined my head towards the stairs. “Let’s have an eyeful,” I suggested.

“O.K.,” she agreed, with an unpleasant sort of smile.

She led the way to the first floor, where she halted in front of a door, unlocked it with a key she took from a small table nearby, and pushed it open.

I walked through and saw Virginia Marven for the first time. I’m not much good at description; certainly not of the female face and form when superlatives are demanded, so I will content myself by saying that I could well understand Steeley falling in love with her, for she certainly was very beautiful, in spite of the pallor of her cheeks. She was lying on the bed, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling, and did not move when we entered.

“Hello, kid,” I said easily.

Slowly she turned her eyes in my direction, until they rested full upon me. Then an astonishing thing happened. A light of dawning recognition, quickly gathering strength, came into them; at the same time she sprang up and held out her hands. “Oh, Tubby,” she cried in a deep sobbing voice. “Thank God you’ve come. I knew Del would do something.”

To say that I was staggered was to put it mildly. I was stunned, and for a second or two could only stare incredulously, trying to work out how she knew me. Then, at the same moment as I realised what the words would convey to Flo, I heard a sound behind me and spun round. I was only just in time. I saw her gun come up, and twisted sideways like a cat just as it roared.

I make no excuse for what followed. I’m no woman-beater, but a female armed with a man-sized automatic no longer comes into the category of the fair sex—at least, not where I’m concerned. I had no time to reach for my own gun, which was in my mackintosh pocket, so I grabbed the only thing within reach, which was a china bowl, and heaved it with all my strength. It caught her fair and square on the forehead, just as her finger was tightening on the trigger for another shot, and she went over backwards like a dummy at a fair, the gun exploding into the carpet as she fell. I was across the room in a bound and kicked the gun clear of her hand, but I needn’t have hurried; one look at her face, and I saw that she was down for the count.

I picked up the gun and then turned and looked at Virginia. She was standing with her hands over her mouth as if trying to stifle a scream; her eyes were round with horror. “Sorry, little lady,” I said apologetically; “but it couldn’t be helped. It was either her or us for it.”

“But what made her turn on you like that?” she cried, as I lifted the insensible woman and laid her on the bed. “Was it what I said?”

“It was,” I confessed. “She thought I was on her side, but your friendly greeting told a different story. How the dickens did you know me, anyway?”

“Del has shown me your photograph more than once; he carries one in his pocket-book. He told me about some of your adventures together, too,” she answered simply.

So that was it, was it? I thought. “Never mind, there’s no great harm done,” I reassured her. “Del’s outside; he’d have been in here instead of me but for the fact that I managed to slip in by a fluke. Come on, let’s be moving.”

At the mention of her lover’s name she became a different girl. Her face flushed, her eyes sparkled, and her lethargic manner dropped from her like a silk garment falling from a peg.

“Anything here you want?” I asked taking a quick glance round.

“Nothing,” she answered promptly.

“Then let’s jump to it; the sooner we’re out of this place the better,” I declared.

We were half-way down the stairs when there came a loud knock on the front door. At first it did not occur to me that it could be anyone except Steeley and Brian, coming to look for me, and I went on down until a murmur of voices outside the door advised me of my mistake. There was another knock, and a voice called, “Step on it, Flo.” The voice was Slick’s.

It was a nasty moment. Ghastly, in fact. From being a light-hearted lad tripping cheerfully down the stairs with the satisfaction of a job well and smartly done, I became an old man, shouldering a load of sorrow, sadly. I caught Virginia by the hand, put my finger to my lips, and then looked about me quickly, while I strove to force my numbed brain to suggest some sort of action, some plan of escape from the unholy trap into which I had so blithely stepped.

With time at my disposal I might have thought of something, but there was no time; nor was Slick’s impatient hammering on the door conducive to calm reasoning. I give Virginia full marks for the way she stood up to it. She must have known what had happened, and many a girl would have panicked, but she didn’t turn a hair; nor did she ask questions. She simply waited for me to act.

The first thing that emerged from the chaos that was going on in my head was that escape by the road side of the house was impossible; whether we emerged from door or window there was not the remotest chance of

evading the observation of those whom I could picture standing round the porch wondering why the door was not opened. How long would it take them to realise that something was wrong? Could I rely on them waiting outside for some minutes under the impression that Flo was either asleep, drunk, or merely out on a shopping expedition? Could I call to Steeley and Brian from the other side of the house without the gang hearing me? for the desirability of letting them know of our predicament was patent. These were the sort of questions for which I endeavoured to work out answers during the twenty seconds I crouched at the foot of the stairs trying to make up my mind which way to go.

In the end we went down, and hurried into the nearest room that we knew must face seaward. A fleeting glance told us it was a dining-room, but I did not stop to examine it; I went straight across and opened one of the long windows that gave access to the balcony, and peeped down over the ornamental wrought-iron railings that fringed it. It was a sheer drop of forty or fifty feet into a rocky jungle; clearly there was no escape that way without a rope. I ran to the end of the balcony and looked in the direction of the road where I had left the others, but the spot was in heavy shadow, and I could see nothing. Dare I call—whistle? No, I decided; in the stillness of the night any sound of that sort would be heard and remarked by the people at the door. Surely Steeley must have seen them arrive—heard them knocking? Why didn't he do some thing? A rope. If only I had a rope. . . .

A series of thundering bangs on the door spurred me to action, and I ran back towards the window. Virginia caught my arm.

"There's somebody down in the garden," she said, pointing. "I saw the bushes move."

I took the bull by the horns. "Get back into the room," I said curtly. "There may be lead flying in a minute." At the same time I drew my gun and leaned over the balcony. "Steeley!" I called sharply, "is that you?"

A figure detached itself from the shadow of some peach trees. "We're here, Tubby," came Steeley's voice.

"I've got Virginia," I said crisply. "Slick and the gang are at the front door. We daren't jump, and we've no rope. Our only chance is to get back to the bedroom and try knotting up the sheets. If we can, I shall let her down from this side. One of you stand by to catch her, and the other go round to the front to see about launching an attack in the rear when the row starts. Watch out. I'm dropping you a spare gun." I dropped Flo's automatic into an overgrown flower-bed.

I didn't wait to see if he found it, but with Virginia at my heels went back through the hall and up the stairs like a lamplighter. As we passed it the door was creaking ominously, as if a heavy pressure was being applied. Flo was still lying on the bed just as we had left her, but I rolled her off and began pulling off the bedclothes.

"We shall have to get through another window; this one's barred," said Virginia quietly. She seemed to be keeping pace with the situation very well.

A glance at the window showed that she was right. "What's in the next room?" I said, as I sorted out the sheets.

"I've never been across, but I think it's Flo's bedroom," she answered.

"Go across, put the light on, and get the sheets off the bed," I told her tersely, as I picked up those I had already secured. There were only two and a thickish sort of bed cover. I heard the light click on and followed her across, taking the precaution of locking the door behind me. "Give me a hand with these," I told her, when she had stripped the bed.

She jumped to obey.

"Now look, Virginia," I went on, as I started trying to tear the sheets into halves. "It's going to be a matter of time. If the front door caves in I shall have to hold the stairs, and you'll have to finish making the rope yourself. Tie one end to a chair or something, and make sure the knots are tight before you start down or you'll break your neck."

"Sure," she said quietly.

Have you ever tried tearing linen sheets? No, I don't suppose you have. If the occasion ever arises, allow yourself plenty of time. They're the devil. It was necessary, of course, to tear them lengthways, but I found that there was a hem at the top and bottom, and the difficulty was to get a start. I tried knotting them without tearing them, hoping that I should have enough material to reach the ground without halving them, but the bulk of the knots took up half the length of each sheet and I could see it was no use. I had often wondered, when houses have caught fire, why the inmates did not get down to the ground by making a rope of sheets. Now I know. Believe me, it is not so easy as it sounds.

Then Virginia, who, thank God, didn't lose her head, found a pair of nail scissors in a drawer, and the matter became easier. In another couple of minutes the sheets lay in halves and I knelt down to begin knotting them together. The next moment there was a terrific crash that shook the house, and I knew that Slick's patience was exhausted; in another few seconds the door would be burst open. It was no easy matter to remain calm in such circumstances, but taking it all round, I think we put up a pretty good show,



particularly Virginia, who was helping with the knotting now, going about the job coolly and methodically.

It occurred to me to run down and open fire on the door with the object of keeping the gang at a distance, but I rejected the idea for fear the knowledge that the house was occupied by enemies might send them round to the place where we proposed to evacuate it. At present they were unaware of my presence, and on reflection I realised that it was better that those conditions should obtain for as long as possible.

There was a frightful crash followed by a long splintering sound, and I knew the door had been forced. "There she goes," I said, rising quickly to my feet. "You will have to finish it by yourself. Be as quick as you can; I'll hold the stairs as long as possible."

She paused for an instant in her work to seize my hand and squeeze it. "Steeley always said you were a stout fellow," she said huskily; and that amply repaid me for anything I had done to effect her rescue.

There was no cover of any sort, so with the gun at full cock in my right hand I wormed my way along the landing to a spot that commanded a view of the large entrance hall, or vestibule, which was really more like a large room than a hall, with the front door opening into the porch on the far side. A glance showed me that they were all inside, six of them, including Slick, looking this way and that, as if they couldn't make out what had happened. Blondie was not with them. The door, with the bolt slots hanging on it, and one hinge torn off, gaped open.

"Flo," yelled Slick, looking up the stairs, and instinctively I crouched lower, although I knew he could not see me, for I was in darkness. "Where the hell is the bitch?" he growled, and then went through to what I supposed to be the kitchen. He was back in a moment. "She was here not many minutes ago, because the gas-cooker's alight, and there's grub in it," he told the others in a puzzled voice. "I'll try upstairs."

I gripped my gun, for I saw that the moment had come, but he stopped dead as a horrible noise broke out behind me. It was a woman's voice, calling for help. At first my blood ran cold, for I had forgotten all about Flo, and thought it was Virginia, but then a commotion of muffled hammering on a door, accompanied by a stream of foul language, told me what had happened. Flo had regained consciousness. Actually, her ill-timed recovery made very little difference, if any, for Slick was actually bound for the stairs when the row began. He let out a lurid curse and pulled his gun as the significance of the noise struck him. I could have shot him at that moment, but somehow it went against the grain to shoot a man, even that dirtiest type

of criminal of all, a kidnapper, without giving him warning. He started forward with the others following in a bunch.

“Stand back everybody,” I said loudly. “I’ll plug the first man who puts foot on the stairs.”

It was almost comical to see how they reacted. For five or six valuable seconds none of them moved or spoke; they just stood still, staring towards the head of the stairs; then, with one accord, they made a rush for cover. Most of them dodged behind pieces of furniture; two disappeared altogether under the stairs out of my field of view; one evidently went into the dining-room, for I heard the door open. Slick took up a position behind one of those massive turquoise-coloured jardinières on a pedestal, without which no Riviera villa seems to be considered furnished, that stood just inside the door. A hand came round the side of it; a gun roared, and a piece of plaster fell down from the ceiling above my head.

I did not return the shot, primarily because I was playing for time; in any case, I couldn’t afford to waste ammunition. And it may have been this that misled them into thinking I was unarmed, for one of them, a sallow-faced youth with the expression of a weasel, broke cover and made a dash for the staircase. As far as I was concerned, he was cold meat from the time he started; I let him get to the bottom of the stairs and then, quite dispassionately, I took aim and fired. He jerked convulsively into the air, fell face downwards on the stairs, and then began sliding backwards until he came to rest in a crumpled heap on the bearskin rug at the bottom.

“If anyone else would like theirs, step right up and get it,” I sneered, with the idea of gibing them into exposing themselves.

Two shots were the answer, and they came unpleasantly close, one ripping a long splinter of wood from the tread of the top stair which caught me a nasty smack across the cheek. I could see Slick’s shoulder distinctly as it projected from behind the pedestal that was too narrow to completely conceal his broad frame, so I let drive at it. I missed him, but hit the pedestal, and a great lump of it broke off and crashed to the tessellated floor with a noise that suggested the proverbial bull in a china shop. With half his cover gone, Slick shot out from behind it like a bolted rabbit. I fired again as he crossed the hall, missed, but had a stroke of luck. The bullet ricocheted off the floor, went through a wooden chest, and hit the fellow who was lying behind it. I knew he was there, but hadn’t fired, because I thought the chest was stout enough to stop my lead. The gangster—it was Al—jumped up and started off towards the dining-room, but his knees gave out half-way and he collapsed, moaning, with his hands across his stomach. “That’s two out,” I told myself, with considerable satisfaction, and then pressed myself flat on

the floor as a red-hot barrage was put up. It was unpleasant while it lasted, particularly as I had to expose the top of my head, and one eye, to watch the stairs, but they were shooting blind, and none of the shots touched me, although I was liberally besprinkled with splinters and plaster.

Then two men appeared from the region of the dining-room and dashed across the vestibule, carrying a machine-gun they had produced from somewhere. This was something I hadn't reckoned on, and knowing that it wouldn't do to let them get it into position, I opened fire. My first shot missed, but the second got one of them in the leg, and he limped for cover, cursing. My sixth and last shot made the other duck, but it didn't stop what he was doing, and I was compelled to let him get away with it while I reloaded. Before I had finished he had got behind an overturned chair and the gun, after the manner of its kind, was spouting death and destruction; the stairs, the ceiling and the banisters seemed to go to pieces in a cloud of splinters. I couldn't face that, so I slid back on my stomach, still pushing new rounds into the cylinders of my Webley. Something like a ton weight banged against my left shoulder, and I knew I was hit, for I had been wounded before, and the sensation produced by the introduction of hot lead into one's person is not easily forgotten.

But my gun was ready for action again now. The machine-gun broke off its infernal chatter abruptly, and I slid forward to my old position, raising myself on my right elbow to take a snap shot at the gunner. To my surprise he was stretched out on the floor with Slick trying to pull him aside, so that he could handle the weapon. I opened fire at once, snapshooting rather than taking careful aim in order to rattle him and prevent him carrying out his obvious intention with the gun; and to a great extent I succeeded, for grabbing the gun by the barrel he threw himself behind a bank of ferns and half-dead palms that stood in a corner, where I could no longer see him.

A quick mental calculation told me that half the enemy forces were now non-effective. Three were dead, or badly wounded, leaving Slick, another who had gone into the dining-room, and the fellow who was hit in the leg. Where the last two were now I did not know.

Brian's voice coming from behind me in a sort of husky whisper made me jump.

"How the devil did you get here?" I asked. "Keep your skull down, you young fool; Slick's behind the greenhouse stuff in the corner with a machine-gun; it'll be unhealthy here when he gets it going."

"Virginia's O.K.," he replied. "She fixed the sheets and came down it like a caterpillar. Steeley told me to come up and tell you to get out."

“Where is he?”

“Round outside the front door, covering the hall. I heard him fire just now.”

I understood now how the machine-gunner had got his *quietus*. “And where’s Virginia?” I asked.

“He told her to go like hell to Nice, and wait in the first big hotel she came to.”

“In that case we may as well retire,” I declared, and we started wriggling backwards, hastened somewhat by two sharp bursts from Slick’s gun. It was my first experience of the weapon at such close range, and the effect was most unnerving. It sounded and felt as if the house were falling down.

“You go on,” I said, when we reached the bedroom window. “I’ll keep them back until you get down. Then I’ll follow. When I start, let drive at anybody who shows up above me.” As a matter of fact, I was beginning to wonder if I should be able to get down the rope, for my left shoulder seemed to have turned to jelly and my hand was dripping blood, although I didn’t let Brian see it. He threw one leg over the window-sill where the rope had been tied, but a shot crashed out from below, and he tumbled back into the room, grabbing at his foot.

“You hit?” I gasped in alarm.

“Don’t think so. The swipe has knocked the sole off my shoe, though.”

“Where is he?”

“On the balcony below, I think.”

“Hell,” I muttered. “That’s awkward. We’re cut off. I know the skunk; I saw him run back into the room when the show started. Thank God Virginia was down first.”

“How many are there of them left?”

“Two and a half, I think. Slick, the chap who shot at you, and another fellow who I pipped in the leg.”

“What had we better do?”

“It’s no use trying to get down that rope,” I answered, thinking hard. “That fellow down there would be able to pot at us from cover. Let’s get back to where we were. Keep an eye backward in case anyone tries climbing up the rope to get behind us. Got your gun?”

“You bet I have.”

“Then let’s plaster those palms in the corner. I don’t know what there’s between us and Slick, but it can’t be anything very solid. When I start, just blaze into them as fast as you can.”

When we got back I saw Slick peeping out, but he spotted me at once and disappeared from sight again. I flung myself back and flat, only just in time, for the hellish rattle of his gun broke out again and sent the plaster flying. I waited for it to stop. Then, "Now," I said, and began pumping out lead as fast as I could pull the trigger, blazing blindly into the fernery, for there was no definite target. I stopped while I still had a round in the gun, in case of accidents. "What's the matter?" I asked Brian, who had only fired three shots.

"The damn thing's jammed, I'm afraid," he said ruefully.

"Automatics usually choose moments like this to do it," I told him. "It's a thousand to one against your being able to clear it. We—hello!" I broke off as a loud whistle screeched through the night; it sounded as if it was somewhere in the drive. "Sounds like a police whistle," I went on. "They must have heard the shooting. Watch out. French police carry pistols, and they are apt to get excited when they use them."

There was the sound of many footsteps on the gravel. Then they stopped. "Tubby!" roared Steeley's voice.

"Hello," I answered. "Keep clear. Slick's on his feet, and he's got a machine-gun. There are two of them in the hall somewhere and another one in the back room."

"Either of you hurt?" he called.

"Nothing to speak of."

There was silence for a few moments; a lull in the storm. I could just hear voices faintly, outside. Then I saw a shadowy figure creep into the porch.

"Bail up, Slick, the police are here," I called.

There was no answer.

Another five minutes passed, and I began to feel sick. In a kind of dream I saw a gendarme, with his little automatic held out in front of him, creep with mincing comic-opera steps through the porch into the room. With infinitesimal slowness but considerable courage he advanced towards the palms, while in fascinated horror I held my breath and waited for the burst that would shatter his body. But it never came. I saw him stop, peer, and then step forward quickly, putting his weapon into its holster. He called out something aloud, in French, of course. I caught the word "*mort*". There was a noise of hurrying footsteps outside . . . they seemed to be a long way away . . . receding. . . . In an abstract sort of way I wondered what was happening to the lights . . . why they were going out. . . .

## CURTAIN

WHEN I opened my eyes it was broad daylight, and the bright spring sunshine was shining across the bed in which I lay. Presently I became aware of a tall, slim figure that leaned over the foot of it; it was blurred, like an image seen in the view-finder of a camera out of focus. Suddenly it cleared, and I saw that it was Steeley, and in the queer, unnatural sort of way that one wakes up from an anæsthetic I remembered everything and understood. "Hello," I said foolishly, and then I saw that there were other people in the room.

"Feeling better?" asked Steeley, with a friendly sort of grin.

"Well, I'm damned," I muttered angrily. "Did I pass out?"

"You certainly did," he answered. "And I don't wonder."

"Got it in the shoulder, didn't I?"

He nodded.

"Badly?"

"No, thank God. Shot went right through, just under the collar-bone, so the M.O. says. But you bled like a pig."

"Don't be horrid," put in Virginia quickly. "He bled like a gallant soldier."

I laughed, but not for long, because it hurt. "Where am I?" I asked, in the orthodox manner.

"In the English hospital, in Nice."

"Where the dickens did those gendarmes come from?"

"Virginia fetched them; she went into the next villa down the road and called up the police-station on the phone. They didn't lose any time. Apparently Wayne had spoken to Paris, and Paris had told all stations to keep their eyes and ears open."

"So that was it, eh? Where's Slick?"

"He's gone topsides—or bottomsides. He was stone dead when we found him; got one right through the heart. Three of the others have gone west, too, including Flo. The machine-gun got her; the room she was in was like a sieve. Two are in hospital. We don't know what's happened to the fellow who was round at the back; he disappeared, and so far he hasn't been

caught. Apparently they dropped Blondie somewhere on the way, and she hasn't been found yet, either. That's about all, I think, except that Wayne is on his way down here to get a statement from us."

"The devil he is. How long have I been here?"

"Only since yesterday; the show was last night."

"How long before I can leave?"

"A week, the M.O. says. Then he recommends a sea voyage."

"Sea nothing," I snorted. "Where would I go?"

"To a little old place called New York."

"Why there?"

"Because that's where Virginia and I are being married, and I don't know who else to get for best man. Silas P. has given his O.K. He'd give anybody anything at the moment, and he wants to meet you. Brian's coming; his paper's given him three weeks' holiday on the understanding that he turns in his story before he goes. How about it?"

"Well, there doesn't seem anything more exciting to do at the moment, so I suppose I might as well," I agreed. "It's the best man's privilege to kiss the bride, isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe that is the custom," he admitted.

"Then that settles it," I told him emphatically.

## 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 *Steeley Flies Again* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]