

*DON'T EXPECT  
ANY  
MERCY!*

*Henry Treece*

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*by the same author*

★

ASK FOR KING BILLY  
DESPERATE JOURNEY  
CARNIVAL KING  
THE EXILES  
THE HAUNTED GARDEN  
HUNTER HUNTED  
THE BLACK SEASONS  
INVITATION AND WARNING

# Don't Expect Any Mercy!

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HENRY TREECE

FABER AND FABER  
24 Russell Square  
London

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# TOP SECRET

## DOSSIER OF GORDON STEWART—GENERAL INVESTIGATOR NUMBER 15—Department KP7 (Internal Intelligence)

### GORDON STEWART

Born 14th November 1924, Wolverhampton, Staffs. Son of Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, Solicitor, of Wolverhampton. Educated: The Royal Grammar School, Wolverhampton and King's College, London, where he gained a B.A. degree (English; Third Class) in 1949, and was Vice-Captain of Football (Association) 1947-8.

Commission in the Royal Air Force—Flight-Lieutenant, Navigator, 1942-6, mainly on Lancaster bombers, in 44 and 58 Squadrons. D.F.C. awarded in 1944, after a low-level attack on Gelsenkirchen. Mentioned in despatches on three occasions.

Two convictions for speeding in built-up areas; September 1947 and August 1949; both at Shrewsbury. Nothing since; no endorsements.

(Inference: He has quietened down, perhaps. Initialled J.P.B.)

For a short time in 1950, a Private Investigator, self-employed; address, Bean Street, off Soho Square. Secretary: Miss Constance Hazledean, First Class Diploma, Peckham Secretarial College (Shorthand and French).

(Inference: Since this young lady married a grocer from Balham almost immediately on leaving Stewart's employment, one assumes either that her employer has not what is sometimes called "a way with women"; or that he is a ruthless employer and so turned the young lady's thoughts to marriage rather than continued work as a Secretary. Initialled J.P.B.)

August 1950: Stewart employed for the first time by this Government department in the "King Billy" case. Awarded a rating of 100 per cent Courage; 50 per cent Organizing Ability (If that! Initialled J.P.B.)

### MAJOR CASES GIVEN TO THIS INVESTIGATOR SINCE:

1. The Tchepilaff Documents; May 1951
  2. The MacCarthy Kidnapping Case; July '52
  3. The Beacon Hill Affair; April '56
- } All successfully concluded

Also 15 Cases of subsidiary importance, 1952-6; Satisfactory. (For details, see File j.p.b. A/4234/96)

## CURRENT RATING OF THIS INVESTIGATOR

(Dated August 1957):

Organization as haphazard as ever; courage and fortitude 200 per cent, if that were possible. (Initialled J.P.B.)

## FORECAST:

“This young man lacks judgement, intelligence, and almost every other mental quality which a first-class Government Investigator normally possesses. Nevertheless, I would rather have him on a case with me than any other three men in this department, and that is no criticism of our staff.

If he lives after the age of thirty-five, he will in all probability become the Head of Internal Intelligence. At present the odds are about fifty to one that he will ever blow out the candles on that cake.”

(Signed: J. P. Bohun, Deputy Head of Department.)

P.S.—If my forecast comes off, in this last respect, I shall resign, and be glad to. (Initialled in pencil: J.P.B.)



# I

## Merton Revisited

**A**s I swung the long nose of my Wolseley over the top of the hill, the sun struck down on me through the offside window, and a lark rose from a cornfield at my right hand, and there below me lay the broad Humber, just as I had last seen it, two years before—silver-blue and majestic, still lightly clothed in the pearl-grey mists of early morning. I pulled the car over to the grass verge and shut off the engine.

“Gordon Stewart, my boy,” I said to myself, “you’re back, and no mistake! And, gosh, isn’t it *good* to be back!”

As I gazed before me from the hilltop across the Humber, I picked out once again the green and golden Wolds of Yorkshire, and to my right hand the distant towers and chimneys, the domes and gantries of Hull, mysterious in the morning haze.

A blunt-nosed, foully smoking tramp-ship hooted three times, like a muffled owl, for a pilot-boat to shepherd her into port, and suddenly I shivered, like a man with a cold coming on.

But my shiver wasn’t due to a cold. No, it was that ship’s siren which had gone through me like a knife. I had last heard that precise note two years before, in Hull, just as I mounted the plinth of the golden statue they call “King Billy”. It had been such another morning as this, with the Yorkshire Wolds gleaming green and gold in the delicate sunlight.

Then a man had stepped out from behind that statue and had shot me. . . .

I got back into the car. I suddenly felt safer there!

“Stewart, old boy,” I said with a grim little smile, “you are tired. You need a rest. A tired Government Investigator is no good to anyone. Things have got too much on top of you in the last few weeks—you’ll have to take it easy.”

I switched on the engine and rolled down the hill towards Merton-on-Humber, the sleepy, tree-enshrouded town that would give me the rest I so

very much needed after the Beacon Hill affair.

Each house, each garden was like an old friend—a sleepy old friend, for Merton-on-Humber still slept in the morning sun, drawing its breath in gently, as it had done since the time of Hereward the Wake; then letting it out again with the calm sonority of great age.

Here and there cows moved from their byres, dogs barked in anxiety lest a boat or a bus be missed, dark-eyed tomcats lurched sullenly, growling homewards, and plump-breasted pert brown hens clucked impatiently to be complimented on their output.

The Grammar School stood ivy-coated, surrounded by its green lawns, sighing academically for Queen Anne, who, it had just heard, was dead; a policeman wobbled out of a lane before me, half-turned and then waved. It was Sergeant Gledmore! I almost stopped to remind him of that grim day when he was searching for me and I lay within a foot of him, in Doctor Thomas's black Rover! But I didn't—I kept right on, for now I was more than ever anxious to meet my friends, Peggie and Arthur Wadham again. Yes, and Mike, their son. Mike, dear Mike! He would be fifteen now, and no doubt a big fellow. I recalled how he knocked out a crook at thirty yards with a belemnite in his catapult, and smiled. Yes, Mike would be some opponent to tackle by now, I thought.

And I was right. I had scarcely pulled up before the Wadhams' little cream garden gate, when the front door of the red brick house was flung open, and there stood Mike, a husky fellow with a Tony Curtis haircut and shoulders broader than my own.

A slow grin spread over his features. He turned back into the hallway and yelled for all the street to hear, "Hi, Mum, Dad, guess who's rolled up! Why, it's Mr. Stewart!"

Then he was down beside me before I could get the door open, pumping my hand up and down till I felt dizzy, asking me a hundred questions all at once and never waiting for a single reply.

Peggie Wadham came down the path in a blue house-coat, smiling warmly, "Leave him alone, Mike," she said, "you'll kill the poor man! Down, Fido, down!"

As she clasped my hands Arthur Wadham peered out, his pipe in his mouth, his beard shaggier than ever—the typical absent-minded professor.

"Who is it?" he said. "Is it your brother, Peggie? He didn't say he was coming."

“No, you dumb-cluck, Pop,” said Mike. “It’s Mr. Stewart, don’t you remember?”

Mike turned round to apologize, but he hadn’t time. Arthur Wadham was already on the pavement, and his grip, if anything, was harder to bear than his son’s.

So I came back to Merton-on-Humber, to drink Peggie’s delicious strong coffee once more, and to stand gazing through the french windows up the long sloping garden, towards Mob Hall.

It was almost an hour later before the talk began to slow down, and after Peggie Wadham’s bacon and eggs and home-made marmalade, I was beginning to feel more human.

Mike gazed at me and said, “Gosh, Mr. Stewart, you *have* been up to some capers since we saw you last! Fancy, holding three crooks at bay all night on Beacon Hill till the police arrived and then driving on here to see us!”

“It’s not much more than a couple of hundred miles, Mike,” I said. “Besides, I wanted a rest. I wanted to get away from it all, and Merton seemed the quietest place I could think of!”

“Quiet!” said Mike. “After all you went through last time!” He glanced at his big chrome wristwatch. “Yes,” he went on, “it’s just time. Quiet! Wait till you hear this! Quiet, you say!”

He rose and flung open the french window and waited with an expectant, rather conspiratorial smile on his broad face.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the direction of the river, a strange noise came to our ears, such a noise as might be emitted by a monster Cadillac designed for an oil-happy sheikh, or a space-ship about to land.

“Good heavens!” I said. “Whatever’s that?”

Arthur Wadham took off his glasses and began to rub them violently with his red handkerchief. “You might well ask,” he snorted. “It’s the new diesel train. A soulless, shuffling thing, that howls its dreary way up and down the single-track line to New Holland and back at all hours. I didn’t mind the old engine hooter; you could sleep through that—but this abortion is enough to turn milk sour!”

Peggie Wadham began to clear away the breakfast things.

“Oh, Arthur,” she said, “I do declare, you grow to be more of an old diehard every day. Let’s hope you improve a bit when we get down to Caerleon.”

Then she stopped, a little confused. “Oh, dear,” she said. “That’s done it! I meant to keep it for later, Gordon. I wanted to break the news gently.”

“What news?” I said. “Come, Peggie, sweet one, you can speak without terror or embarrassment before Uncle Gordon. He has been around, you know, been shot in Hull, sandbagged in Scarborough, and had his pocket picked in Wolverhampton. He has seen life in the raw, one might say!”

She put down the teapot and said, “You are as crazy as ever, Gordon! Well, you’ve asked for it. You see, Arthur and I are due to go on a dig at Caerleon tomorrow for a fortnight, with folk from the National Museum of Wales.”

Arthur Wadham knocked out his black briar pipe and said, “Roman remains and what-not, you know. Terrific stuff there—gold coins, heads of Mithras, shop-frontages—everything except the kitchen sink, and we’ll probably find that before we’ve been there long!”

I nodded. “So,” I said, “I’m in the way, hey? I’ve come at the wrong moment? Well, that’s all right. I didn’t let you know I was coming, so I have only myself to blame. No doubt I can get a room at the *George* and spend a quiet two or three days looking up some of the folk I adventured with when I was here before. Dr. Thomas, Miss Peach. . . .”

Mike said with a grin, “The one has just gone off on a cruise to Madeira, and the other has retired to the outermost wilds of Manchester!”

Peggie Wadham said with a smile, “No, Gordon, no *George* for you. You stay here and do a stint at baby-sitting. Mike was to have gone to stay with my aunt in Northumberland—but, now you are here, well, you can look after him; see that he washes behind his ears, brushes his shoes, and all that!”

“Over my dead body,” said Mike, grinning and punching a chair cushion just where he thought it might hurt most.

I flung out my hands in resignation. “What must be, must!” I said. “I came here for a rest. No doubt, when you get back from Caerleon, you will find a bigger wreck on your doorstep than any the Romans left behind!”

Mike put on a mock hurt look. “Hey,” he said, “I’m not as bad as that, am I?”

“Worse,” I said. “Much worse. Only your mother and your best friends know just how bad you can be! Why, Mike, with a friend like you, a man doesn’t need any enemies.”

He jumped up and switched on a portable gramophone. From its depths came the sound of a young man singing a blues number and thrumming excitedly at a guitar.

“Listen to that, Mr. Stewart,” he said. “When they’ve gone, we’ll have that sort of thing all the time! Rock ’n’ Roll, hey?”

Arthur Wadham turned up his eyes and then passed a brown hand across his brow.

“Save us!” he growled. “The boy’s a maniac!”

Mike slapped me on the shoulder. “Great times ahead, Mr. Stewart!” he said. “Great times, boy, and no mistake!”

“I’ve bought it this time,” I said, screwing up my face.

“Not yet you haven’t,” said Mike, thumping me affectionately on the back. “Wait till you hear me roll that boogie piano! I’ve been practising ever since we saw you last. Oh boy, but do those notes roll!”

Arthur Wadham stood up and knocked the pipe-ash from his cherry waistcoat with a copy of the *New Statesman*.

“Roll out there into the kitchen, hep cat,” he growled, “and tinkle a few dishes round for your mother! Yes, go man, go!”

He pretended to aim a kick at the boy’s fast disappearing rear quarters. Mike grinned and slipped away down the passage.

When he had gone, Arthur Wadham turned to me with a strange little smile.

“I’m glad you’ve come back, Gordon,” he said. “The lad needs exercise. Something to drain off a little surplus energy. He gets a bit too much for us at times. Now there’s a pair of old boxing gloves in the garden shed. Take him up there and put him through it, when we’ve gone. It’ll do him a world of good. He’ll be quite chastened when we get back.”

I shook my head solemnly. “Arthur Wadham,” I said, “when I hit anyone, it is strictly in the line of business, and it usually seems to hurt. But I’d never raise a glove against that hulking light-heavyweight of yours. The Government pays me a very pleasant pittance for my doubtful services—I

want to go on receiving it. And I'm not so sure that I would, if I got Mike really riled."

Wadham shook his head and went out into the sunlit garden.

"You're as bad as he is," he said. "Every bit as bad."

He waited for a moment, turning over a stone with his toe. "But I must say I have a soft spot for madmen," he said. Then he went up the path towards the potting-shed.

## II

# A Smashing Idea

**M**IKE and I walked slowly back along the little station platform. The diesel train was pulling strongly towards Barrow Haven, bearing Peggie and Arthur Wadham away towards distant Grimsby, on the first stage of their journey towards Caerleon. I turned once and saw that Peggie's white handkerchief was still visibly waving from the rear window, though I couldn't distinguish the waver.

"Well, that's that, Mike," I said. "Now you can settle down to some steady holiday work and I can put a deck-chair out in the garden and relax."

Mike stopped and gave me a look that held just about enough power in it to curdle a fair-sized bottle of milk.

"Poor old man," he said, lifting the corner of his mouth up, like a gangster in a not-so-good film. "So you *have* come to the end of your tether, hey?"

I shrugged and said, "Well, you get on with your holiday task—no doubt you've got the odd exercise to do in French, and a few quadratic equations to knock off before the holidays end. And I'll go round in the car and look up our friend, Roger Graham, on the island."

Mike shook his head again. "Nothing doing, Captain," he said. "What holiday work I've got can be done at Break, the first morning back at school; and as for Fatty Graham, he's left—gone into big business as an office-boy at Saxboro' Chemical Works."

"Alas, alas!" I said. "How the old times change and the old faces pass away!"

Mike said, "Don't be a dope, Mr. Stewart! It's just as well some faces do pass away—Fatty Graham's, for example! Anyway, he's got a motor-scooter now and takes girls to the pictures in Brigg."

"Disgusting!" I said. "Well, what do you suggest we do today as a consolation for not seeing Fatty Graham?"

Mike drew a piece of stick along the railings as we passed out of the railway station yard. Suddenly he stopped and thumped one hand into the other.

“Gosh!” he said. “I’ve got an idea. A smashing idea! We’ll go to Bayon’s Manor! How does that strike you?”

“Provided it doesn’t mean that we get shot, shanghaied, or put on the rack by the lord of the manor, I’m game,” I said.

The boy grinned. “This manor has no lord, that I know of. It’s a derelict dump, diamond-paned windows and crumbling walls and all that. One of our masters, a fairly crazy sort of chap, had a play about it on television last year—bags of cobwebs and spies and swords in walking-sticks. It’s that sort of place.”

“Come on,” I said, “that suits me! Anything for a change!”

“You’ll never regret it,” said Mike, as we made our way along Fleetgate, nodding to right and left at various folk who had given a hand in the King Billy affair.

We pulled out of Merton well before midday, with a basket of assorted edibles and a flask of coffee in the boot of my car. Mike had put on his new duffle-coat and drain-pipe jeans.

“Mums doesn’t like me to go out in this rig when she’s at home,” he said. “She says it makes me look like a third-rate rock ‘n’ roll singer.”

I nodded as we swept past the heavy woods of Brocklesby Park.

“But I don’t agree,” I said.

Mike looked across at me hopefully.

“More like an out-of-work onion-seller, I thought,” I said, and then pretended to duck.

“Right,” said Mike. “That’s all I wanted to know. Now, Mr. Stewart, get into whatever tight corner you like—but never call on me again to help you.”

I nodded gravely. “Thanks for the warning, Sir Michael,” I said. “I won’t.”

Thirty miles later we swung round a corner in the little village of Tealby, past a thatched pub, and on down a lane. A few cars were parked on the narrow grass verge.



“Gosh, look at that red Jaguar XK 140,” said Mike. “She’s a smasher! Oh boy, what wouldn’t I give to have that car!”

But I wasn’t looking at red cars just then. My eyes travelled past a little bridge over a burbling stream, through a white wicket gate, and across a few acres of tussocky grazing-ground, to where a long low building stood, creamy-golden in the morning sun, its gables rising above the old trees that were scattered about the park, its chimneys standing in proud clusters here and there against the blue sky, its many-faceted windows glinting in the sunlight.

“Yes, Mike,” I said, “you are certainly right. That is some place. It looks more like a set for a film than a real house.”

Mike climbed out of the Wolseley. “Wait till you get up to it,” he said. “It’s just a dump now. What nature hasn’t done to it, visitors have.”

And Mike was right. As we walked around the manor, its many scars came into close and pathetic view. Pillars had been dragged down by the front door, bringing with them a mass of crumbled masonry; leading had been torn brutally from what had been noble windows; along the golden walls, semi-literate hands had scrawled such messages as:

“Beware; Ye gost walks hear at midnight!”

I felt slightly sickened.

Yet nature’s ravages had been almost as severe. The rafters of the great hall rustled with pigeons; the red curtains hung in shreds by the gaping windows, faded by sun and rain; the beetle had been busily at work in the crested woodwork that surrounded the great open fireplace.

“Come away, Mike,” I said. “This is just too sad to look at on a bright day like this.”

He nodded. “Yes, but let’s have a walk round the back first.”

He led the way past a high wall, thickly clustered with ivy, through an arched gate from the corner-stone of which grinned a particularly devilish gargoyle, and so to a little courtyard, overgrown with grass, from which we could see roof after roof, perched crazily against each other, like some problem in fiendish solid geometry. Through every gateway or door arch we could see the weeds and alder bushes clustered thickly, like some sinister army that had taken possession of man’s world and was determined not to let it escape again.

We passed through a little doorway and down a damp-smelling passageway. At a junction, Mike stopped and said, “The old library is back along there. It’s gutted by fire now, but it must have been a smashing place, once upon a time.”

Here and there in that great house we could hear the sound of people talking, or children laughing and shouting. Bayon’s Manor seemed to be a popular place for Lincolnshire families out for the day.

Then we came to a staircase that had once been proud and was now hanging together only by the strength of its memories.

Mike said, “I’m going up there, Gordon. I’ve never been to the top. There are some smashing attics and that sort of thing, they say. You coming?”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Mike,” I said, “that’s not my line of country. I’m going to look at the library—and I think you ought to come with me, too. Those upper floors must be rotten now. What would I say to your mother if anything happened to her darling boy?”

He gave me a sudden push which almost laid me flat and was already on his way to the stairs. “Oh, shucks!” he said. “You’ll be wanting me to join the Old Men’s Bowling Club next!”

Then he was gone, leaving behind him only a scattering of worm-rotten woodwork as he raced on upwards out of sight.

I made my way along the musty stone-flagged passageway and through a dark kitchen. Before me was a lobby where the willowherb grew bravely on through the floor towards a sun it would never see.

A sagging doorway stood open before me. I passed through it, and then stood still with shock.

The long narrow room was a mess of charred rafters and dipping shelves. Dandelions thrust strongly through the earth which littered the floorboards. The gallery at the far end sagged down to the ground at one corner. And the sun still shone mercilessly on this sad debris.

I gazed at the ravages of time and fire for a moment, and then I noticed that I was not alone in this room.

Another man stood at the farthest corner away from me, below the sagging gallery, his back turned towards me. He was quite still. A solid, broad-shouldered type of chap, I thought, and quite well-dressed. Probably a Lincolnshire farmer, come to brood on the futility of effort!

I ventured a remark. “It’s a shame the great houses have to come to this,” I said, dispassionately and much as one would speak about the weather.

The man did not move, did not make any sign that he had heard my words.

I said, more in curiosity than anything else, “How long has this place been deserted?”

The man’s hand came out of his pocket and touched the charred wooden shelf before him. Then, after a long pause, he said, “How should I know?”

My illusions were dispelled. This man was a stranger, like myself, but unlike myself, was not anxious to be friendly with the rest of the world.

I thanked him sarcastically for his information and went back along the musty passageway and so out into the small hall below the stairs again.

Mike was not there—but I did not have long to wait for him. He ran down those worm-eaten steps as though some demon were at his back, breathing on his neck.

As he came towards me, I saw that his face was pale and his eyes staring, as though he had seen something he didn’t like.

“Hey, what’s the matter, old son?” I asked, as he came up to me, visibly trembling.

His words were hoarse and whispered. He looked round from side to side as he spoke.

“There’s a man up there,” he said, “in the top attic, in a tall wall cupboard. He’s been shot.”

Instinctively I began to stride towards that worm-eaten staircase, but Mike grasped me tightly by the arm.

“Don’t go up, Gordon,” he said. “He begged me not to go near the place again, or *they* would find him.”

I tried to look cool about the whole thing. “But we can’t leave a wounded man up there without doing something, old boy,” I said. “It doesn’t stand to reason.”

Mike gave me a tug which turned me on my heel towards the door which led out on to the tussocky lawn. Once in the sunlight, he said urgently, “Look, Gordon, this is the story; he’s a good type, and the bad ones are after him. He has a gun, he showed it to me, a nice sort of Luger job, so he’s all

right for the moment. But he says that if I come up again, that will put the others on his track, if they have got as far as here after him.”

I nodded. “All right,” I said, “then what are we to do? Tell the police?”

Mike shook his head violently. “No,” he said, “he doesn’t want the police to hear of it. He says they would not understand his position, and would just take things at their face value and put him in prison for a lifetime.”

I sat down on a stone and shook my head from side to side.

“Somebody’s crazy about here,” I said.

Mike nodded solemnly. “Yes,” he said, “it’s you, for not seeing sense. This fellow up there’s in trouble. He wants us to go away and come back after nightfall tonight for him. If we tried to get him out of here now, he says, ten to one *they* would see us and then we’d get knocked off quietly at the far end of the park as we went back to the car.”

I raised my eyebrows. “The man is obviously a crackpot.”

In a tone of voice which went more than half-way to convincing me, Mike said quietly, “The bullet hole through his right shoulder is real enough, I had a close look at it. He has stopped the bleeding with a tourniquet made from his tie for the moment, but it is real enough.”

I took him by the arm. “Look, Mike,” I said, “I am not an ordinary citizen now, you understand. I work for the Government, and it’s my duty to take action on a thing like this. What do you expect me to do, after your story?”

As an answer, the boy thrust a package into my hand. It was bulky and covered with what seemed to be oilskin or polythene.

“Take care of that, and let him have it tonight when we come back for him. Now beat it back to the car and don’t be a stooge. This man’s life is at stake.”

All I could think of to say was, “A fine rest I get whenever I go to Merton-on-Humber. The place ought to be put out of bounds for all decently sane inhabitants of Great Britain.”

Inside the car, Mike said, “Go back to the first crossroads. You’ll see Cleethorpes marked on the sign. Drive there.”

And, in my state of dilemma, that’s just what I did.

### III

## Night Must Fall!

CLEETHORPES was no better and no worse than I had expected. Indeed, for those citizens who like to be whirled round in mid-air, to wallow in pink candy-floss and to put pennies in the slot to hear a model sailorman split his sides with laughter behind a glass case, it is quite ideal.

We parked on the promenade, three yards away from the sea wall. The ocean was almost invisible, though that did not seem to deter those indomitable holiday-makers who strolled back and forth along the coal-strewn sands, their trouser legs turned up to the knee, or wearing yellow and green Stetson hats. Weary donkeys plodded to the nearest breakwater and back, their fictitious names painted on their collars—*Mary, Fred, Annie, Bill*—while shouting or frightened infants kicked like Hopalong Cassidy at the shaggy flanks, or clung bawling for Mummy to the slippery pommel. A man with a cigarette stuck behind his red ear drew a picture in some wet sand with his big toenail and then went round with the hat among the clustered and admiring sightseers. Another man walked between the deck-chair somnolent holiday-makers with a wooden rattle, shouting, “Punch and Judy Show at three this afternoon! Roll up in your thousands, you lucky people, and see the finest show on earth!” No one seemed interested.

I said to Mike, “I am going to look at that package you gave me. It might be a matter of some consequence.”

The boy said, “He told me to take great care of it. Made me promise, on my word as an Englishman.”

That remark pulled me up with a jerk. “‘On your word as an Englishman’? That’s a strange thing to say, isn’t it? I mean, an Englishman wouldn’t say that, would he, Mike?”

The boy nodded, “Now you mention it, his voice did seem, well, rather thick, as though he usually spoke a more guttural sort of language. But I must say his English was very good.”

I kept quiet for a moment. “Look, Mike,” I said, “I know you had a pretty ghastly sort of shock up there in the attic and may have forgotten something. You’ve had time to think about things in peace while we drove here. Now, is there anything else you can remember that this man said? Anything at all?”

The boy began to look thoughtful, resting his forehead in the palm of one hand. Suddenly he looked up and said, “Yes! He mentioned a name. The name of a man.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Take it easy,” I said. “Just try quietly to remember the name. Don’t rush it; we have till nightfall anyway, old boy.”

Mike gazed emptily through the windscreen, out over the grey sand towards the invisible sea.

“Something like ‘Noyman’,” he said. “Yes, Herr Major Noyman, it seemed like that.”

“Right,” I said. “Herr Major Neumann, that’s what it might be. Yes, did he say anything else? For instance, did he tell you how he got to Bayon’s Manor?”

Mike’s face lightened up for a moment. “I remember,” he said. “He mentioned a motor-bike. Said he had ditched it beyond the village when he ran out of petrol, and came on across the park on foot.”

The boy was silent for a while, thinking, clasping one hand tightly within the other.

“Yes,” he said suddenly, “he was on holiday, riding his motor-bike. He came on Herr Major Noyman without warning somewhere—somewhere he didn’t expect—quite by accident, I think he said. That’s all. He didn’t say anything else, except that *they* were after him, and might have traced him as far as Bayon’s Manor. He didn’t know for sure.”

Suddenly I was back in that charred and pathetic library with the gallery sagging down to the floor at one end. And in the shadow stood a man, a broad-shouldered man, who was silent when I spoke to him. A well-to-do Lincolnshire farmer, I had thought then. Now I began to wonder . . . just to wonder.

“Look, Mike,” I said, “this is getting us nowhere. We are in on something rather awful, it seems. At least we ought to know as much as possible about what is going on before we plunge any deeper. I am going to open this package.”

Mike shrugged his shoulders and looked miserably out at the man drawing pictures in the sand with his toenail. He obviously did not approve of my attitude.

“Good old Mike,” I thought. “Solid and dependable as a rock.”

I slit open the oilskin wrapping of the package and unfolded the heavy parchment-like paper across my knees. There were three broad sheets. The first was a large-scale diagram, containing many lines and dimensions and symbols which meant nothing to me; the second was a manuscript sheet of formulae and figures; the third was a closely typed sheet, headed simply and laconically, “*Malder Wells Power Plant*”.

I gazed at Mike, almost awestricken in that terrible moment. “I say, old chap,” I said, “this is something too big for us.”

He stared back at me, blankly.

“What do you mean?” he said. “I don’t understand.”

I smoothed out the last sheet so that he could read its heading.

“Look,” I said, “you remember that a few months ago a big atomic power station was opened in the Lake District? Well, to put it simply, these three sheets contain all the necessary information about that plant. No more and no less.”

Mike’s face lost its blankness. “Cripes!” he said, with a gasp. “Oh, cripes! What shall we do?”

My own brain was racing at that moment. I wish I knew the answer to his question, I thought.

“Look,” I said, “this is a job for the department I work for—Internal Intelligence. But I shouldn’t take it on without orders. You see, we don’t know what the score is. Who is the man in the cupboard at Bayon’s Manor? Who is Herr Major Neumann? We don’t know. The man in the cupboard might be, say, a renegade scientist making off with the plans, while Major Neumann, whoever he is, might be trying to stop him from taking them out of the country.”

Mike said quietly, “Yes, and the chap in the cupboard might be on our side, trying to keep Herr Major Noyman from getting away with the plans. That seems the more likely to me. After all, he *is* wounded, and that seems to indicate that the fellow after him is pretty ruthless.”

I couldn’t help grinning at Mike’s innocence.

“Look, old boy,” I said, “when you know as much about this sort of thing as I do, you’ll realize that sometimes even the good men have to shoot first, when it is a matter of national urgency. The fact that your friend carries a bullet hole in his shoulder doesn’t prove his innocence.”

Mike gazed at me with the expression of a goldfish that had just been told about whales, his blue eyes wide with complete disbelief.

And at that moment a small girl, her flaxen pigtailed swinging behind her, raced down the promenade in front of the bonnet of our car. Two equally small boys, wearing cowboy hats much too large for them and great plastic spurs that seemed to hinder rather than assist their progress, shambled after her.

“Hi, Sylvia!” shouted the first cowboy. “I’ve shot you twice and you won’t lie down. It’s cheating. It’s not fair!”

The second boy puffed, “Well, I’ve shot her five times and she hasn’t fallen down. It’s not fairer to me than to you, John!”

The little girl, who had a good start by then, turned round and put out a very pink tongue.

“Yah! Pair of clots!” she said. “Whooooee! I’m an Apache! You can’t kill me! I bear a charmed life!”

Then she turned and ran on, easily and without effort.

Now the distance between them lengthened because the two cowboys had stopped to quarrel about who had shot her more often.

Mike watched them run down on to the sad grey sands. Then he groaned and slapped his fist against his thighs.

“Oh gee!” he said. “Those kids are happy. Really happy. I wish I were!”

I was just about to find some words of consolation for him when he cut me short, pointing up the promenade.

“Oh jeeppers!” he groaned, “I can’t bear it. Look, there’s old Maguire, our French master! A frightful bore; got eight kids and almost as many cats!”

I followed Mike’s pointing finger. Striding towards us with an immense purposefulness in his step was a plump man wearing a battered felt hat and a long dragging mackintosh. He carried a clumsily-rolled umbrella under his arm and puffed at a curved black briar pipe.



“He’s seen us! Oh cripes!” said Mike. “And he’s a frightful man. Talks about culture all the time, but never reads a book! Spouts about the great days of Racine and Corneille, but wouldn’t pay twopence to see one of their plays!”

I laughed. “Come now, Mike, that’s a bit hard,” I said. “Are you God’s spy to know all this?”

Mike snorted scornfully. “I tell you, one of the chaps asked him if he approved of Surrealism one day—we found the word in an old copy of the *Listener*. But Old Maguire just curled up his lips and said, ‘My dear fellow, my poor fellow, one doesn’t approve of Surrealism any more than one approves of influenza. It just happens, like all other filthy diseases and is best ignored where it cannot be cured!’ He’s such a stooge, he won’t even let his kids listen to the Light Programme. It has to be the Third, or nothing. Poor little fellows!”

The redoubtable Maguire was now within ten feet of the car and was making what might be taken for an ingratiating smile.

“Bet you he wants a lift,” muttered Mike. “He only smiles when he wants something.”

Then Mr. Maguire had opened the door on Mike’s side and said, “Well met, my young friend! What a relief to encounter a fellow sufferer in these benighted wilds!”

Mike gazed at him stonily, and when he spoke his voice carried just enough formal reverence to make the first day of next term safe—but no more.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Maguire,” he said. “I suppose Mrs. Maguire is down on the sands?”

The schoolmaster made a sign as though ordering Mike to move over and let him sit down, but the boy did not budge.

“Hm,” said Maguire, “my good lady is, as you so sapiently observe, on what pass for sands, keeping her brood amused in some simple way, no doubt. I have long tired of such pastimes and actually came up here to find out whether there was a train back to Merton.”

Mike said, “What, and leave them here?”

The schoolmaster nodded, like some incredibly powerful prince. “Yes,” he said, “my good lady is accustomed to my idiosyncrasies. We have a

working understanding, my boy. She looks after my children—I look after someone else’s children. It works out, you know.”

He gave a sly grin and I couldn’t help saying, “To your advantage, I’d say.”

Mike sucked in his breath sharply. But Maguire was not flustered in the slightest by my remark.

He said, “Why, you are the good young fellow whose exploits along the Humber side got into our local rag a couple of years ago, hey? I thought I recognized you from the picture in the *Lincolnshire Times*. Ah, such is fame, my dear young fellow, such is fame!”

He stood back, smirking, as though he expected me to burst my sides with mirth at his wit.

I looked at my watch and said to Mike, “Well, is it time to move on, do you think?”

But Maguire was not to be choked off as easily as that.

“If you are going back to Merton,” he said, “I shall greatly appreciate a lift in your resplendent automobile.”

I shook my head as courteously as I could. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but we propose to make quite a tour round before we return.”

Maguire rubbed his fat hands together and wheezed, “Capital! It would be a shame to go straight back home on this sunny day! We don’t know when we shall get another, do we, in this climate of ours! Well, that suits me. Where shall we go? Let’s be adventurous and push down into the balmy south—Skegness, say? What you think of that, Michael?”

To give Mike his full baptismal name was much like ruffling his hair the wrong way. I saw his face muscles twitch and I got ready for squalls! But he controlled his temper and did not speak.

Maguire took this as a victory and went on, “Yes, dear young chap, as we go I can put you through your paces. In return for the lift, we shall hear you say a few irregular verbs and what-not! A priceless opportunity, what?”

Mike nudged me. I knew the sign and turned the ignition key. The engine started at the first push of the button and I slipped into reverse to back out from the promenade.

“Sorry, Mr. Maguire,” I said, as I leaned over and pulled the door shut. “We have to visit a sick acquaintance whose circumstances would only

distress you. Good-bye.”

We roared round and shot away, leaving the schoolmaster staring angrily after us, clutching his umbrella, his face visibly reddening.

“Thanks, Gordon,” said Mike. “I was afraid we’d have him for the day—and we’ve *got* to get back to Bayon’s Manor at nightfall.”

The same thought had been on my mind, but the episode was past now and I saw no point in brooding over it.

So it was that we drove round Lincolnshire that afternoon, passing away time which hung only too heavily on both of us. We gaped at the red brick Tudor magnificence of Tattershall Castle, stood beneath the twisted mischief of the Lincoln Imp in a cathedral whose pillars soared like the thick-growing trees of a great oak forest, gazed across the limestone ridge which cuts down the long county, towards the clustered chimneys of Scunthorpe, their plumes of smoke rising sullenly into the early evening sky, as though they threatened the country with imminent disaster. But whatever we saw, our minds were set on one thing only—the man in the cupboard at Bayon’s Manor.

And when at last the sun sank beyond Scunthorpe, silhouetting those fearful chimneys against the sky, making of them something beautiful and tree-like, it was with relief that we both noticed the sudden coming on of twilight. I turned the car round and we made our way in the direction of Tealby once again; a strange anxiety tugging at our heart-strings now that, at last, we were once again on the move.

Mike said, “There comes an end to every day; then night must fall!”

To hide my own concern I said, “Quite the young philosopher, aren’t you, Michael dear! How would you like me to put you through your paces—hear a few irregular verbs, for instance?”

His muttered reply was anything but polite, and I think that if I hadn’t been driving he would have dug me hard in the ribs. I saw the movement start and then finish, as he recollected himself.

Then Bayon’s Manor came into sight once more, this time darkly etched against the tree-covered skyline—an ominous pile of ruined masonry, sinister in its shapeless dilapidation; by twilight, a place of potential tragedy, not romance.

As we pulled the car in on to the grass verge beside the little white wicket gate, I suddenly shivered, even though the night was not a cold one.

## IV

# The Man in the Cupboard

**A**s we picked our way across the uneven surface of the broad parkland, the moon suddenly came out from behind a bank of cloud, throwing a pall of ghostly silver over the grass and touching the upper edges of the pile of masonry with a livid light. The oak trees scattered here and there looked like hunched and waiting monsters, their overhanging boughs instantly transformed to groping, grasping tentacles.

An owl started up out of a clump of bushes, flapping its slow way about six feet above the grassland noiselessly, like a restless earthbound spirit that sought an impossible salvation.

I drew up alongside Mike and whispered, “Take it easy, old boy. We ought to keep in what shadow there is.”

He halted and turned on me a puzzled gaze, his eyes white in the moonlight.

“Why?” he said. “There’s nobody about.”

I recalled the occasion when a friend of mine, from the same bomber squadron, got shot down just outside Gelsenkirchen on a night raid. He clambered out of the burning wreckage of his Lancaster, buried his parachute according to instructions and, having made sure that no member of his crew was alive, began to walk in what he considered to be the general direction of France. As he told the tale later in the mess, he walked all night, solitary and alone, without meeting anyone, through the bright and moonlit German night. At dawn he started to see another man five yards from him, also walking with his head down, half exhausted. It was another Air Force man, a member of a bomber crew. They turned towards each other and my friend then saw that it was his own navigator.

I said to Mike, “Don’t be too sure, friend. A man could be standing under that oak, fifteen yards away, with a rifle trained on your nose—and you’d never see him until it was too late.”

I heard him draw in his breath suddenly, as though I had splashed him with ice-cold water. Then I was sorry for scaring the lad like that.

“Right, Gordon,” he said. “I reckon you are right. What shall we do?”

“We’ll just have to take a chance,” I said. “Follow me and we’ll keep our fingers crossed. Moonlight is tricky light, both for hunter and hunted.”

Then I bent double and moved obliquely towards the trees, finding what shadow, what cover, I could, and taking a chance that we did not run into anyone.

When we got to the outer wall of the manor, I must admit my heart was thumping just a little more than somewhat. We rested then and took what stock of our surroundings we could.

The manor lay as silent as the grave before us, a light breeze swaying the overgrown bushes about it, giving me the creeps every time my eyes caught the sudden movement of bough or leaf. On the tumbling roof, two white pigeons sat, looking down at us in the white moonlight, turning their stupid heads from side to side, quizzically, almost mockingly, as though they knew something that we didn’t.

I said, “Come on, Mike; in for a penny, in for a pound.”

He nodded. “What have we got to lose?” he said, with a white grin.

I should have hated to tell him, just then; it seemed a pity to ruin his self-confidence. We reached the great front door safely, and then halted a while in the hall, the pigeons swirling above us, startled, from the rafters, letting fall pieces of plaster and chips of rotten masonry.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Mike whispered hoarsely. “Let’s get on upstairs pronto.”

He made a movement as though he were about to plunge on along the passageway and up the crumbling stairs. I shot out my hand and took him hard, by the arm.

“Wait,” I whispered. “Keep quite still and listen.”

At first the silence pressed so heavily on my ear-drums that it almost hurt. Then, out of the minutely swirling chaos of indeterminate rustlings, a definite rhythm, tiny but sure, evolved. It was a slow, incredibly slow, pulsing, a pressure rather than a sound, which one sensed in the mind rather than heard. It was such a sound as a bamboo shoot might make in growing

through a hot afternoon, with a super-sensitive microphone held close against it! An idea, not a movement, almost.

“Someone is coming down the stairs,” I whispered, as quietly as I could. I felt Mike shudder and was sorry I had spoken then.

The sound stopped, and I was sorry for an entirely different reason. I licked my lips, for they had suddenly become very, very dry.

We waited for a century then; my leg muscles began to quiver uncontrollably, my hands clenched themselves so tightly that I had the insane fear they would never open again; I was frightened.

There’s no deceiving yourself when you are frightened. The signs are only too clear. And when you are *really* frightened, you can’t hide that fear from anyone near to you. Dogs know it, and so do sensitive human beings. Mike half-turned to me, and in the moonlight that streaked down through a hole in the broken roof, I could see that he had sensed my fear and shared it.

But there’s something you *can* do about fear; you can laugh at it, even if it kills you! That’s what our Saxon forefathers did at the Battle of Maldon, when the Danes ringed them round, swinging their bloody axes. Those Saxons knew they were done for, but they did not grovel and beg for mercy; they did not run away. No, instead, they looked fear in the face and sang a song to it, telling it that it wouldn’t beat them, come what may. That song lives today; it is the best tonic I know when one is in a tight spot.

I grinned back at Mike, a wide nigger-minstrel grin, and squeezed his arm tightly, telling him that we were bigger than fear, bigger than anything under the blue night sky, just then. After all, what was death? A little sleep, a state of rest, a forgetfulness of all the many burdens and shocks of life. . . . Hamlet had said it all.

Mike caught on in the gloom; it was as though we spoke to each other without words. Indeed, at that precise moment, words seemed an unnecessary formality, stiff, outworn and almost useless.

And suddenly our hearts soared; we were warriors, like our Saxon forefathers. Nothing could hurt us! In fact, to tell the truth, I think we both went just a little berserk for a moment!

I, for one, felt that I would have met any opponent, whatever the result of that encounter might be, and from the grim and smiling look on his moonlit face, I know that Mike felt the same. But our moment of pugnacious glory was denied us.

Instead, I heard a faint scuffing sound along the distant corridor, much like the rustle a badger might make; then a door banged to and the hall was deathly still once more.

Was it a badger? I asked myself. Had all my frenzied heartbeats been spent for nothing? Had I been imagining enemies where there were none?

I breathed a relieved sigh and said quietly, "Come on, Mike; this is our cue."

We picked our way over fallen masonry and between tumbled spars of rotten wood, towards the foot of the staircase up which Mike had scrambled earlier that day. I had a little pocket torch, the beam of which struck out almost as thin as a pencil—the sort of torch one might use, almost unobserved, from a distance, in precarious circumstances. With this I illuminated the stairs as we went up, gingerly, for here and there a tread was missing, and as I shone the beam through the blackness of the hole, it seemed to reach down and down, as though into a bottomless pit.

Once, as we turned on to the second landing, Mike drew back with a hurried clutch at my coat. I swept the torch downward to see that at my feet yawned a gap of perhaps a yard in width, and below that, far down, lay a distant and blurred prospect of passage-ways and cellars.

"Thanks, chum," I said. "I should have walked right into that one!"

Mike grinned and grunted, "A fine sort of detective you are! They don't act like that in Raymond Chandler's books! *His* detectives would sense a hole in the floor at a range of ten yards by instinct."

"Yes," I said, "but after all, they are American detectives. I'm just the home-grown variety, without any gold-plating. Come on, horseface!"

We strode across the gaping black hole and then on up another short flight of stairs. On the small landing, Mike paused and said, "In there, through that hanging door. The cupboard is by the right side of the fireplace. It reaches half-way up the wall, a massive thing."

"Go in bent double," I said. "You never know. Someone else might be there. So keep well behind me."

He began to protest, but I stepped forward and pushed open the door gently. It creaked in mild protest, but swung easily enough, despite its crooked posture.

By the doorway I waited a moment, but there was no sound from inside the room. I flicked on the torch and swept it rapidly round the place. No one

was there.

“In the cupboard, Gordon,” whispered Mike. “That’s where he went, as I left him.”

I strode across the room towards the tall grey doors of the cupboard and knocked gently.

“Are you there?” I said. “We are friends. We have come to fetch you as the boy promised this afternoon.”

There was no sound from within the cupboard. Outside the window a pigeon suddenly whirred its wings and fluttered away into the moonlight with a startled little cry. I felt almost unnerved.

“Hold the torch, Mike,” I whispered. “Shine it at head height so that if anyone is waiting to slug us, he will be temporarily blinded.”

So, with a quick movement, I swung open the door.

There was a strangely heavy pressure on the wood as I pulled it towards me. Then the thin silver beam of the torch picked up a face, a ghastly white face, which seemed to leer down on me as it came forward, forward and down, like something falling slowly . . . slowly . . . slowly . . . and then gathering a frightening and insupportable speed.



## V

# Torn Ticket

I WAS flung backwards on to the damp floor, the limp body across me, winding me horribly for a moment until I could wriggle free and stand up once more.

Then suddenly I was aware that Mike's teeth were chattering.

"Look, Gordon!" he said. "He's dead! Shot in the temple, look!"

I took the torch from the boy with a shaking hand and turned it hurriedly away from that sad white face.

"Are you certain, Mike, that this is the man you saw earlier in the day?" I remember saying. I did not recognize my own shuddering voice, however, in the echoing empty shell of that room.

Slowly Mike answered, "Yes. Do you think he shot himself?"

"Not unless he is left-handed," I said. "The wound is in the left temple, Mike."

I took a deep breath and flashed the beam across the body once more. All the pockets were turned inside out, as though the dead man had been most thoroughly searched.

Somewhere outside, a good distance away, a car engine started up—a powerful engine that could not disguise its note. It seemed a note of triumph, heard up there, in the silent room of death.

At last I went across to the cupboard. "You say he had a gun, Mike? I wonder if it is still about?"

It was. It lay in the corner of the cupboard, neglected and forgotten. I smelled the barrel; it had not been fired.

It was a small slim Italian Spirelli, much like a neater Luger, but heavily chromed and holding only three bullets in its flat magazine—three .22's, but long and sharp-nosed, deadly little things. This one had a skeleton grip to

cut down the weight, and an extra long trigger, which made it almost impossible *not* to fire, however much one's finger might be shaking. I flicked back the hammer and saw that the striking-pin had been filed almost to needle sharpness—as though its owner wished to be sure of an accurate and lethal impact.

“A nice little toy,” I said, conscious that Mike's face was almost touching the snub barrel in his interest. “But horrible, Mike. This instrument was made with only one purpose in view—to take life, quickly and efficiently and accurately. A bludgeon is more human! At least, it can miss!”

Mike said quietly, “He didn't have time to use it, though, poor fellow. And the other man, Major Neumann, must have killed him for the papers which he didn't have—*which we have.*”

I nodded. “Yes, Mike,” I said. “That's the way it seems to be. Now we have two things to do—or, rather, I have—to hand back these papers to those who should have them, and to track down this Major Neumann.”

Mike said, “You aren't going to turn me adrift, are you?”

I said, “No, old man, I'm going to drive you back to Merton when I have phoned the police; and I shall expect you to go on to your aunt in Northumberland tomorrow. You have the money for your fare.”

Mike's jaw began to protrude until it looked rather like the prow of a pocket battleship. He shook his tousled head definitely and defiantly. “I'm not going to miss this affair, Gordon Stewart,” he said. “I found this man first and gave you all the information—including the plans, which now reside so comfortably in your pocket. You try to send me back home and I shall first ask you for the papers back, and then I shall phone the Manchester office of the *Daily Express* with the whole story. Get me?”

I did my best to look as fiercely at him as I could, but it did not seem to work.

“And would you do that?” I said, in a voice of scorn.

He nodded. “You betcher,” he said, with a queer little smile.

I gave in. “All right,” I said. “On your own head be it. You will make your own peace with your parents—if you ever see them again.”

“That's a bargain,” he said, unperturbed by my veiled warning.

I turned away to look once more at the dead man. There was a vaguely un-English look about his face, which I could not place. But I had no

difficulty in recognizing his clothes as being foreign; both in cut and cloth they were *different*—perhaps Austrian, or Hungarian, I thought. And the name “Neumann” might be either. . . .

I put my hand inside his shirt; he had not been dead very long, even allowing for the chill of the room we were in. Perhaps an hour at the most.

Had I let his murderer escape? I wondered. Were the sounds I had heard, or thought I had heard, those of the murderer making his escape?

I began to examine the man’s pockets, without heart or hope, for they had been pretty thoroughly gone over before. Yet, by some strange chance, I found something in his left-hand breast pocket, tucked beside a white handkerchief. It was a fragment of green paper, bent double, and torn unevenly at either end.

In the light of the pencil-torch I examined this find. Printed words on it said:

“. . . il 30 . . .  
. . . say Cas . . .  
. . . ro . . .”

“What do you make of this, Mike?” I said.

He gazed at the piece of green paper and said, “Nothing. But it is obviously part of a torn entrance ticket to somewhere, and if ‘il’ is the last part of the month, then it was issued in April, on the 30th—which was yesterday. That makes it pretty hot stuff, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said, “in view of your story that the dead man had said he had run across Major Neumann by mistake and unexpectedly. It is a fair bet that he ran across him at the place where this ticket was issued—before this poor devil beat it across country to his last resting place, in this room.”

I stared at the torn ticket for a while, then suddenly it swung into perspective, like a blurred cinema image that is put in focus; “. . . ro . . .” would obviously be the county in which the ticket was sold, and there was only one which fitted: Shropshire.

This couldn’t be luckier. I was born in Wolverhampton, and my boyhood bike rides had taken me out to most of the beauty spots within a radius of forty miles or so.

“. . . say Cas . . .” to me, now meant one thing—Stokesay Castle, near to Craven Arms, the thirteenth-century home of the Norman, de Say, built to

protect the realm of England from the depredations of the lawless Welsh Marchers.

As I kneeled there, on the rotten boards of Bayon's Manor, I recalled the sunlit glories of that little border castle, its diminutive moat, its warm stone and its surprising half-timbering making it something more like a Walt Disney fastness, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* than a home of hard-bitten sword-swinging frontier-guards. . . .

I turned to Mike and said, "Come on; we'll go for a ride."

He stared at me as though I had suddenly gone stark raving mad.

"What!" he said. "At this time of the night? And where?"

I said, "I have a sudden urge to see the sun rise on the Welsh Marches. We can do nothing more here. This man is beyond any care of ours."

Mike followed me in a dream out of the room and down the treacherous sagging stairs.

All he found to say as we picked our way across the rough parkland was, "Well, it's a good job we didn't bring Old Maguire here! He'd have had fifty fits—him and his umbrella, and his irregular verbs!"

There was nothing to laugh at, really; but we both laughed all the same.

## VI

# Pussy!

**W**HEN we had passed again through the white wicket gate and over the stream, and had driven the Wolseley back up the main street of Tealby, I stopped at a little house with a post-box let into its outer wall. It was a shop of some sort, selling liquorice bootlaces and paraffin and budgerigar seed. A card in the window also proclaimed that it was a post office. The time was now ten-thirty and the shop was closed, of course; but this was one occasion when one felt justified in using what little influence a Government secret department allowed one.

I climbed out of the car and knocked on the shop door, not loudly, but firmly.

I had to knock four times before a window opened above my head and an old lady leaned out, angrily, a candle in her hand and her white hair in pins.

“Go away,” she said. “Go back to Grimsby. We want no dealings with the likes of you at this time of night. Drunk, you are, and that’s what. Go away!”

I smiled up at her in the mingled moon and candlelight and in my sweetest, soberest tones, said gently, “Madam, I do not come from Grimsby, I am shocked to confess; nor am I drunk, alas! alas! But if you do not come down and give me access to your post office telephone within two minutes, I will not be answerable for what the Prime Minister will call you in the House of Commons the day after tomorrow.”

She gazed down at me as though I had suddenly been transformed into a white rhinoceros.

“What did you say?” she quavered.

I said, “The Prime Minister would not like to think that one of his senior postmistresses tried to prevent the affairs of this country from running on unhampered. I can say no more, dear lady.”

She gave a strange sigh and her head disappeared from the window. In a minute the bolts were withdrawn from the door and she stood before me, a candle still in her hand, wearing a man's heavy dressing-gown that reached down to the ground.

"Come in," she said, "and woe betide you if you have got me up under false pretences."

I made what I thought was a passable imitation of a courtly bow and said, "Lady, may my dahlias never thrive if I have played you false!"

She gave a series of clucks and then said, "Follow me, the phone's in here." She moved before me like an irritable hen.

"In here" was a cosy parlour, with a fire still burning in the narrow black grate. The old lady switched on the electric light, whereupon a big black cat detached itself from the gloom by the side of the chimney breast and sat on my knee as though we were old friends.

"What call do you want?" said the old lady, still suspicious.

"Get me London, madam, and I'll go on from there," I said.

She pursed her lips and put on such an expression as must have terrified the local villagers. "Give me your number or you do not use my phone," she said. I suddenly recalled my first music mistress!

"Dear lady," I replied, "if I gave you my number I should find myself in irons in three hours time. But to go on with, get me Whitehall 1212, if that makes you feel better. I will get them to switch me on to my own department."

She snorted, and then went through all the motions of getting my number. After a seemingly endless wait, during which I called Mike inside to enjoy the post office fire, she handed me the phone, and I got to business on the startled duty policeman at the other end. He began by being frankly incredulous when I mentioned Lincolnshire—but after I had slung three swift official and officious phrases down the wire, you might almost have heard his heels click at the London end as he hastened to switch me to the department I wanted.

Butch Bohun answered—the man who looks like an outsize in Buddhas, a perpetual cigar-smoker, with the weight of a small elephant and the speed of an Olympics lightweight; the coolest customer in my department, with notches not only down the handle but also down the barrel of his sleek little

Smith and Wesson. I was glad to find that he was on duty, but he did not seem glad to have a call from me.

“Ho! Ho!” he said. “So you can’t even take a holiday in that forsaken cabbage-infested county without finding a body in some henhouse and bothering me at dead of night.”

I told him to wrap up if he wanted to keep his job! He laughed down the wire—his laughter has something of the quality of a tiger, tickled to death that a jocular but sympathetic hunter is just about to rescue that little antelope from his jaws.

“Right, dear boy, please do go on,” he snarled softly.

When I had told him a little more, his snarl turned to a gentle purr. “Yes, *do* go in chase,” he gurgled, “but leave the papers at the nearest police station—just in case. Good luck!”

Butch Bohun was the kindest-hearted man alive—I knew that; but he loved to give that impression of nonchalance—as though he didn’t care what happened to anyone, including himself. A giant with a heart of gold, and, when pitted against worthy enemies, with the skill and ferocity of a panther—that was Butch Bohun.

But he didn’t deceive me, that night, on the phone. I felt myself grinning as I answered, “Right, Butch, I’ll do that. The car’s in pretty good shape; I should be able to catch up with the killer before too many moons. So cheerio, old boy! Pleasant dreams, back there in the metropolis!”

He didn’t ring off at that, but said hurriedly, “I say, Nature Boy, watch yourself, won’t you? Not that you are worth much as an investigator—but I’d miss those games of chess. No one else plays up here, not even as badly as you do.”

He paused for a moment and then said, almost as an afterthought, “Which way will you be going? Through Lincoln, I expect?”

I saw through his game then. “Yes, I suppose so,” I said. “It seems the best way. I’ll perhaps drop the papers in at a police station there.”

He purred at the distant end of the wire.

“Yes,” he said, “I should do that. Now get off the line. Someone of importance may want to use it.”

I heard his receiver click, and smiled. In less than five seconds Butch Bohun would be phoning the Lincoln police I knew, telling them to watch

out for me—telling them to tail me and look after me, come what may, threatening them, in his sweet way, with all manner of dire vengeance if they did not tend me as carefully as they might have done the crown jewels or an early crocus. For Butch had taken me under his massive wing after the King Billy affair—and there was no dodging his protection, even though at times it came near to being a smothering act.

I turned back to Mike. “London gives us the go-ahead,” I said. “And no doubt in ten minutes, the Lincoln police will be up at the manor to collect the—evidence. We’d better be on our way, Sunshine.”

Mike rose with a smile, and we should have been outside that sleepy little post office inside a minute, but the old lady suddenly bustled round the door, concern written deeply across her gentle face. She wrung her hands as she looked up at me.

“Oh dear,” she said, “it’s Pussy! He’s gone and got lost—all because of you, coming in here at this time of the night and leaving the shop door open! That’s all the thanks I get for doing you a good turn—ringing London when I should be in my bed, fast asleep, like all the neighbours. It’s not right, I’ll tell you. And now you’ve let Pussy out and I’ll never find him—I know I won’t. He’s so headstrong, is Pussy. More like a man about the place than a cat.”

She went to the door and called out, “Pussy! Pussy! Pussy! Oh, you naughty, naughty boy! Come in straightway, or you’ll catch your deathercold!”

We waited a moment, then she turned to me and said, “Well, what are you going to do about it? You lost Pussy; you find him—or the policeman will know the reason why, I’m telling you; he’s my son-in-law, is the policeman. He won’t let you get away with losing my Pussy.”

Mike was grinning at me, amused that the old lady should give me such a strict talking-to, and perhaps wondering how I would get out of this one. . . .

But I wasn’t quite so amused; if she called a policeman at this moment, he would perhaps be awkward about letting us go on our way—one never knew with country policemen, they were often very loyal to local traditions and personalities.

I smiled at the old lady and said, “Don’t get yourself into a state. I’ll walk into the street and see if I can find Pussy for you—God bless his dear little black heart!”



The old lady put on an amazingly shrewd look and said, “If you go out, the boy stays here. I’m not having you skipping off in that black car o’ your’n, leaving me without Pussy. I know the tricks you London fellows get up to, my daughter was up there on a day trip last year. Something terrible, she said it was—all the goin’s-on there, smoking and that!”

“Very well,” I said. “Stay there, Mike. I may not be a minute.”

As I pushed open the street door to go out into the moonlight, Pussy walked past me into the room, a sleek black imp who ignored me and went across the room to the old lady, who was now smiling and clucking as though she had suddenly found a fortune.

“Come on, Mike,” I said, “the prodigal has returned. Our presence is now unnecessary.”

The old lady let us get to the door before she suddenly remembered; then she called out, “Hey, what about the phone money? I know your London tricks, trying to get away without paying for the call!”

I slapped a note on the side table and said, “Please don’t bother about the change, dear lady. The surplus can buy Pussy a nice thick chain, then you’ll always know where he is—the dear creature!”

As we got into the car the last picture I had of that old lady in the lamplight of her kitchen might have been sub-titled, “Amazement—or the Unexpected Windfall.”

Swinging round the bend of the road on to the Ermine Street sometime later, I said to Mike, “Old ladies like that are the real backbone of this country, son. They may seem an awful nuisance at times, with their pussies and so on—but when it comes to a showdown, it takes a pretty tough man to stand up to them.”

And Mike was nodding in agreement, no doubt recalling his own grandma in Newcastle, the only woman who ever made him wash behind his ears merely by glancing at him, he once said, when a flashlight swung across our path from the hedgeside, and a moment later a policeman stepped into our headlights, holding up his hand in a way that would not be denied.

## VII

# The Man in the Road

As I saw that dark-clothed figure standing so impassively within the brightness of my beam, I must confess I said a very wicked word under my breath, directed mainly against my dear friend Butch Bohun who, I imagined, had put through an alert to the Lincolnshire police to stop me. But then, even as I pressed down on the brake, I realized that there had not been time for this to happen. Not more than ten minutes could have elapsed since I put through my London call, and that would not be enough for a return alert to come through to Lincoln, be transmitted to local stations, and then let a constable be posted to stop me on this lonely and almost inaccessible road.

As this thought struck me, I decided to swerve and pass the policeman. A sudden fear had come to me that he was out after the Bayon's Manor murderer, and I did not wish to be implicated—for, with a strange little chill, I remembered that in my right-hand jacket pocket, a shining Italian Spirelli rested, with my fingerprints on the handle. . . .

But the policeman sensed my intention and gave a quick leap which brought him once more in line with my bonnet. This time he flashed his torch into my face and I pulled up within two feet of him.

When my sight cleared I saw that his face was stern. He was already feeling for his notebook.

I swung gently into the grass verge and turned the window down. He came over to my side and looked closely into my face as he spoke.

"That was a pretty risky thing to do—sir," he said, with a certain quiet note of menace in his voice.

I nodded, "Yes, Constable," I said, "I'm sorry. I was in a hurry and I thought you'd understand."

That excuse sounded weaker than anything I had ever heard—and even I almost smiled at its futility as I spoke. But the policeman's expression wiped

the smile off my face before it had begun.

“I could bring a charge against you that would put you down for ten years, my friend,” he said. “Trying to run over a policeman who is doing his duty could be a very serious business. But I’m going to skip that one and simply charge you with dangerous driving. . . . How does that suit you, Mister?”

I was regaining my wits by now, and said, “Look, Constable, I merely tried to get out of your way, that was all. It was you who put yourself in danger, after all.”

He suddenly opened the rear door of the car and flashed his torchbeam across the seat and on to the floor. The look on his face was one of disappointment, I felt. But when he spoke, it was with as much menace as before.

“Open the boot, sir. I want to make an inspection,” he said.

I got out of the driving seat and opened the boot. It contained a jack, two old inner tubes and a spare wheel—nothing more. He flashed his torch across the contents and said, “All right, at least you are not a poacher. They are the fellows I’m out after tonight—shooting hares with small-bore rifles when the poor stupid beggars are caught in the car beams. . . . They are the fellows I’m after, but . . .”

He began to lick his stub of pencil and to turn over the pages of his notebook until he found the right place in which to record my misdemeanours.

“Now, then, sir,” he said. “Name and address, business, where proceeding. But I’ll have name and address first, *if you please.*”

This time I could not resist the temptation he had placed in my way.

“Right, Constable,” I said. “Here are the details.”

I felt in my breast pocket and handed him the little red morocco case with the cellophane window. In it lay my government certificate of identity, with a brief description of my official position.

The policeman shone his torch on to it and I saw his eyes widen. He blew out his cheeks and looked away from the car, into the darkness that lay across the wide rich fields of Lincolnshire.

Then suddenly he turned and saluted as he handed back the card. I saw him push his notebook into his pocket, and felt strangely relieved.

“Sorry, sir,” he said. “I won’t hold you up any longer. You must be on urgent business.”

Once more I could not resist the temptation.

“Look, Constable,” I said, “if you want to get in ahead of the city police, nip along smartly to the top attic of Bayon’s Manor. There’s a dead body up there. You can’t do anything about it—but at least it will give the Big Boys from Lincoln a bit of a jar if they find you are there first! It might mean a spot of promotion, who knows?”

He leaned on the car door as if he suddenly needed support.

“Good lord,” he said.

Then he pushed his helmet back and wiped his forehead with a most unpoliceman-like red handkerchief.

“Good lord,” he repeated slowly, staring at me with bulging blue eyes as though I had suddenly become a dinosaur or a four-headed dodo.

“Look,” I said, “a colleague of mine in London will no doubt have passed on the news to Lincoln by now. If you want to be in at the kill, breeze along like a good constable and find that body first. And good night!”

As I let in the clutch and pulled away, I saw him in my mirror staring after me and shaking his head. His torch lay on the highway now, scattering a broad beam of light across the gravelled road.

Mike shrugged his shoulders and said with a smile. “Today has been too much for me, Gordon! I can’t get straightened out. I think I’ll just go to sleep!”

Then, before I could answer, he had slumped to one side, his head against the nearside window, and was fast asleep.

Now it was my turn to shake my head and sigh with wonder. What wouldn’t I have given for such a capacity to sleep! Mike, dear Mike, I thought, but what a character you are! What a character!

Then the lights of night-time Lincoln swung up at me over a hilltop and I headed the car down towards the Newark Road.

## VIII

# The Road West

**W**ITH the great silhouette of Lincoln Cathedral on its hilltop eminence in my driving mirror, I struck the Newark Road, and was soon roaring south. The country-side fell flat on either side of me, for this was the land of airfields, Bomber Command's territory at one time. Here and there we passed a now silent Air Force station, its grey runways looking ghostly in the light of the moon, its hunched hangars seeming to crouch like great black monsters, brooding over the violent past. . . .

The needle flickered round, and now we were passing through Newark. I began to tell Mike that he should be keeping his eyes open for the ruined castle there, but then I remembered that he was asleep. He gave a healthy snore, and I was silent again!

Beyond Newark the road ran on mile after mile of smooth straight ribbon—the road the Romans had built, the Fosseway—and it was with a feeling of some relief that at length I swung right round a floral roundabout by a green-roofed garage, and saw the lights of Nottingham glowing ahead of me.

Mike only roused once and stared sleepily about him. “Shall I put the kettle on, Mum?” he asked. “I feel thirsty after that game.”

He was miles away, it was clear. I did not bother even to reply to him. He lay back and was soon off once more.

As we purred over Trent Bridge a young policeman halted in his patrolling and seemed to stare at us. I half-expected him to step into my path and tell me that I must go back to the station with him, to answer certain questions concerning a man who had been shot in a derelict manor house in Lincolnshire.

But he didn't, and we crossed the shining Trent, and so proceeded beyond Nottingham, past Longeaton and Ashby, and so towards Tamworth.

Now I was beginning to feel a little tired. The clock said that I had driven about a hundred and seventy miles that day. That distance, my nervous tension and the fact that I had not eaten much since lunchtime, all had their effects. I saw a little light ahead and slowed down. It came from a white-painted caravan with one side let down, which stood on the grass verge beside a clump of dark trees. A notice in big red capitals beside it read:

“JOE L. HOLLINGSWORTH  
TEAS AND SNACKS  
OPEN ALL NIGHT”

Joe L. Hollingsworth was a short red-faced man, as broad as he was tall. He was listening to a portable radio set as I pulled up beside his caravan. He did not seem to hear my engine at first, and jumped up hurriedly when his eye caught sight of my car bonnet.

He looked over the counter suspiciously at the car and then said, “Sorry, mister, I didn’t ’ear you pull up. I was just listenin’ to the late news on the wireless.”

I did my best to sound cool. “Anything interesting?” I said. “London Bridge been blow up, or a new Roman temple discovered in the Strand, or anything?”

The broad man shook his head. “No,” he said, “nowt like that, mister. But there ’as been a murder, in some old hall in Lincolnshire. It seems the police are after a black Morris or a Riley, they don’t seem to know which. Its number is MFU something or other, with an 8 in it, they think! I asks you, ’ow can they expect anybody to help them if they can’t do no better nor that!”

Mike had awakened now and he and I stood at the counter of the little caravan drinking hot tea and eating cheese sandwiches.

So Butch Bohun had tried to stop me after all! Unfortunately, although he was so needle-sharp in all other respects, he never could remember the makes of cars. In fact, he rather prided himself on being familiar with nothing less than Rolls and Bentleys.

True enough, he had got my registration letters right—MFU, but there was no 8 in my number. I felt safe again.

“Have you had much traffic through since eleven?” I said.

Joe L. Hollingsworth sat down and took a cheap cigarette from a little green packet. He lit it from the flame of his Primus stove and blowing a stream of blue smoke out into the night, said: “No! Business ’as been shockin’ today. You’d think all the motorists ’ad gone abroad for their ’olidays, that you would. Why, since ten, I’ve only seen one car—a long red Jaguar thing, XK 140, I thinks they call ’em, shockin’ brutes, in my opinion.”

Suddenly Mike put his half-eaten sandwich down.

“A red XK 140?” he said.

Joe L. Hollingsworth nodded. “Yus,” he answered. “But that’s no reason to get excited. It’s a Morris, or a Riley the police is after.”

Joe smiled and began to wash up our empty cups.

“Mind you,” he said, his cigarette dangling out at one corner of his mouth, “mind you—if them police wanted to catch this Jaguar fellow, they’d ’ave to get astride a streak o’ greased lightning to do it, I can tell you. ’E went round this corner like a hot knife through butter, that ’e did! Never seen nowt like it, I c’n tell you, mister.”

Mike turned away from the coffee-stall and said in a low voice, “There was an XK 140 outside Bayon’s Manor, remember? You don’t see many of them about. Suppose . . . just suppose . . .”

Then suddenly he broke off and said, “Gordon, why are we coming this way? What made you decide that this was the road to take?”

I said, “This is the only good road I know from Lincolnshire to Shropshire, to Craven Arms—to Stokesay Castle, Mike. Don’t forget, the dead man in the attic told you he had met Major Neumann unexpectedly somewhere—and I worked out that it might have been at Stokesay Castle. It was just a hunch . . . but it certainly seems strange that a red Jaguar should have passed over this road before us, and in that direction. It seems a chance too good to be true.”

Joe Hollingsworth was staring at us strangely.

“Did I hear the young fellow say ‘Bayon’s Manor’?” he said. “If so, that was the place they mentioned on the wireless, where that dead body was found. And you said you hadn’t heard the news.”

I smiled and said, “No, you didn’t hear it right, Mr. Hollingsworth. We have been round Fleance Bower today, on our trip out. It’s an old medieval

abbey next to Tattershall Castle, something to do with the Reformation, I think, but I never could remember those olden time things, can you?"

He shook his head as he put the cups down on the rack again.

"No," he said. "Got no interest in them places. Football pools and the Telly are more in my line, when I 'ave a minute to spare for 'em."

We were in the car again and speeding off towards Tamworth when Mike said, "Fleance Bower? Is there such a place?"

I shook my head. "No," I said, "but it seemed to satisfy Mr. Joe L. Hollingsworth. At least it will keep him busy thinking for a while. He looked too tough a customer for us to take any chances. I should say that Mr. Hollingsworth would just love to catch the murderer in the Morris, or Riley, and yank him by the scruff of the neck to the nearest police station. I had no wish to be dragged that distance by a man with hands as big as Mr. Hollingsworth's."

Mike did not reply. Instead, he gave a deep sigh and keeled over like a scuttled galleon. Before I had got into top gear he was fast asleep again.

And so he stayed for the rest of the journey—past Tamworth, through the outer edge of the Black Country, where the furnaces flung up their orange-red glows into the night sky, making a beauteous terror of foreboding above the pocked and pitted country-side; then into Shropshire, across the broad bridge of Bewdley, that delightful little town which crawls down the hillside to the banks of the Severn, and there spreads itself like some forgotten Italian township, oblivious of time. As we crossed the bridge, I saw once again the white swans floating among the reeds, like stately ghosts, and I recalled my boyhood bicycle tours which had so often brought me in this direction. . . .

Beyond Bewdley we struck the road to Cleobury Mortimer, and dropped down and down, among the heavily wooded hills until we came to that place of dreams, where the crooked steeple seems to hang over the little one-street town, with its gracious Georgian houses, and its half-timbered inns.

And on up the other side, over the great whaleback of the Glee Hill, with half of the Midlands spread out to the left hand, and the great hills of Malvern peering over the moonlit counterpaned fields and hedgerows of the valley between.

So into Ludlow, whose ruined shell of a castle stared back at me proudly as I took the road to Craven Arms. This was the place where Milton's masque, *Comus*, had first been performed, I recalled. One of the truly



historic castles of this country, one of those heaps of stone without which our heritage would be sadly depleted.

I wished I could have said that to Mike—but he was asleep. I did not wake him until I drew up outside the inn at Craven Arms.

“Come on,” I said, “this is where we get out—and not a moment too soon. The next trip we come on, you’ll have to drive. So get cracking on that driving test at the first available moment.”

As we rang on the doorbell for the night porter, Mike said, “Cars? They’re out! It’ll be a jet aircraft for me, or nothing!”

Then the door opened and a sleepy-eyed porter told us, with no great show of affection, that there was a room available. And the next time he’d appreciate it if we turned up before he turned in. I was too tired even to answer.

Almost before his feet had shuffled back down the corridor I was asleep—still in my clothes!

## IX

# Stokesay Castle

THE morning sun slanted across the wooded hills and a pair of larks trilled fit to burst their throats above us, as we stood at the lich-gate of Stokesay Church, looking beyond the tussocky graveyard to the magnificent half-timbered gatehouse, and the mellow stone of the castle behind it.

A man in a grey cloth cap came out of the gatehouse and stared at us for a moment. Then he went indoors again.

“Come on, Mike,” I said. “Let’s go into the church. It will be just as well if we do those things which tourists always do, don’t you think?”

“I can’t see why we should go into a church just because a man looks at us over a gate,” he said. “After all, perhaps he doesn’t see many folk out here in the wilds.”

I had my own ideas about that. Even at that distance of a hundred yards, I somehow sensed a certain watchfulness, a tension, in the movements of that man in the grey cloth cap. It was something I couldn’t explain and which, in any case, would not have made much sense if I had explained it. But to me it was something very real.

Inside the church some of my fears left me. It was such a wonderfully peaceful place, low-built, red-carpeted, with a dark oak gallery running across one end and a baroque organ at the other. The pews each had doors, to keep them private and snug in the winter time. It was a homely, comfortable church—a place where one might worship naturally and without self-consciousness.

Suddenly Mike said, “Come on, Gordon. We’ve been here twenty minutes! If we stay much longer you’ll have me joining the choir!”

I looked at my watch. Mike was right; time had passed so quickly in that little church. It was like an island of rest.

Had I known what was going to happen very soon, I might have enjoyed that period of ease a little while longer—but, thank goodness, we are not allowed to see what is in store for us!

So we went to the gatehouse, passed under its archway, and stood waiting on the smooth green lawn that bordered the castle for a custodian to come out and sell us an entrance ticket. But though we knocked on the black oak door, no one came.

The great hall of the castle stood bright in the sunlight, its open oak staircase still sturdy after so many centuries of feet, its rafters still sound in spite of all the history which had passed above and below them, trampling stallions and screaming fighter 'planes.

Mike went into ecstasies over the oak-panelled room which at one time had housed the lord and lady of the castle, and the little peep-holes through which they had looked down into the hall at times of too great merriment, to quell their over-enthusiastic men-at-arms, no doubt!

We went up onto the tower. Shropshire seemed to spread out around us, green and pastoral, the very heart of England. To my right hand loomed the Long Mynd, that sprawling great hill along which men had travelled ever since neolithic times, on their countless journeys from north to south and back again.

Suddenly Mike said, "Look down here, there's a little moat round the castle. Yes, and there's a man in a grey cloth cap in it."

I looked down to where he pointed. The little moat had long since been dry, and now I noticed with a humorous shock, it had been put to a very good and practical purpose. It was a kitchen garden! Where once the green waters had swirled about the stone walls, now cabbages stood in their sturdy rows and beans climbed up along their cane supports.

"Come on," I said. "We will go down and see what the man is doing."

The man in the moat looked up as we stood above him, casting our shadows across his narrow garden. His face was lean and his features pointed, in that way which I always associate with horsemen and grooms. His skin was of the texture of well-tanned hide.

He touched the threadbare peak of his grey cloth cap as he clambered up out of the moat, laying his spade carefully down on the turf beside him.

"I saw you go in, sir," he said quietly, "but I thought I'd wait till you came out again for your tickets. There was no point in stopping my work for

two bob, was there?”

He took a roll of green tickets from his jacket pocket. I almost gasped at the sight of that simple coil of paper. In my own pocket lay the torn remnants of such a green ticket. . . .

This man in the grey cloth cap had sold a green ticket to another man, the one who had lain dead in the attic in Bayon’s Manor, only two days before.

As I paid him he tore off two green tickets, then ripped them across and handed them to me.

“Thanks,” I said. “Do you get many visitors here?”

He picked up his spade and seemed about to jump back into the moat.

“Yes,” he said, without a great deal of interest. “A fair number during these summer months. They seem to like the old castle, though, for my part, I’d as soon be anywhere else. It gets on your nerves, living here day after day, with the rooks calling out of the old tower, and the old beams creaking fit to bust in the night. Fair creepy it is!”

I stopped him as he was almost on the point of jumping.

“Did you have any foreigners here a couple of days ago?” I said. “Austrians or Hungarians, or folk like that?”

He scratched his head, pushing his grey cloth cap back to do so.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t rightly know. We’re always getting foreigners as you might say—one sort and another. I’d never notice if a man from Timbuctoo walked in, mister, I get so used to it.”

I tried another tack. There was a strange look in his eyes.

“Do you, by any chance, know a Major Neumann?” I said.

Then, for the split part of a split second, it seemed to me that the smiling expression on his face changed. He began to say, “You mean . . .” Then he stopped and shook his head, “Major Neumann . . . Major Neumann . . .” he repeated. “No, can’t say as I’ve ever heard a name like that. Is he a local?”

I said, “Well, I don’t know. I was just interested in meeting him. I believe he is interested in some things I like talking about, that’s all.”

He gazed at me quizzically and then said, “Things such as what, mister?”

I began to walk away.

“Oh, old manors and that sort of thing,” I said.

Outside the lich-gate I said to Mike, “Well, that’s that. He doesn’t know anything. And if he did, he’s not the sort to spill his secrets to any chance acquaintance.”

At the car Mike said, “I shan’t be a minute, Gordon. I just want to look behind the gatehouse for a moment. There’s a carved stone I noticed there, covered with funny little designs, chiselled into the surface. Dad’s always thrilled about those old things. I’d like to tell him of one discovery at least when he comes back home.”

There was no stopping him. He was away and out of sight beyond the church almost before I could protest. I sat back and let my mind run over the situation again, from the moment when Mike first came down the stairs at Bayon’s Manor, with his frightening news, to the moment when the man in the grey cloth cap lost his smile and said that he did not know anyone named Neumann.

I felt inside my right-hand breast pocket. There was a small bundle of papers, wrapped tightly in oilskin. As I ran my fingers over the smooth surface of that packet, I allowed myself a smile. Then Mike was back at the car, rapping on the window in some agitation.

As I opened his door he slid inside and said, “Get going, Gordon! We’re on to something real at last! Head for the Long Mynd, wherever that is.”

I swung the car away from that quiet little church.

“The Long Mynd is a mountain, of sorts, over there to the north from here. You can see it from the tower top. But what makes it of such importance, just now?”

Mike could hardly get his words out, he was so excited.

“Look,” he said, “I went behind the gatehouse, as I said I should, to check up on that carved stone. I noticed that a phone wire ran up to the gatehouse on that side. I didn’t see it when we crossed the castle lawn. And while I was looking up at it I heard a voice, the voice of the man in the grey cloth cap. He was talking on the phone, it seemed.”

I was really interested now.

“Good for you, Mike,” I said. “And what did you hear him say?”

The boy gulped as though he had taken too large a swallow of lemonade.

“He said, ‘Is that the Long Mynd Gliding Club? Is Major Neumann there? No, don’t bother to fetch him. Tell him to do what he said. Things are a bit worrying.’ That’s all. Then he rang off and I dashed back here before he came out of the gatehouse and saw me.”

I was so engrossed in Mike’s words that I almost overshot the narrow tree-embowered lane, with the white finger-post which said, “Church Stretton and the Long Mynd”.

I went over those words again in my mind: ‘Tell him to do what he said. Things are a bit worrying.’ What had he said he would do? And were we, Mike and I, the “things” that were a bit worrying?

I was still pondering this when the clean hillside town of Church Stretton came into view, backed by the great grey bulk of the Long Mynd, one of the oldest mountains in the country.

# X

## Blow-Out!

**H**ALF an hour later the purple-covered plateau of the Long Mynd met our eyes. Behind us lay the steep ascent, which had almost caused my Wolseley to go up in smoke! To our right hand lay an immense valley, chopped up into many-shaped, many-coloured sections of field, cornland, woodland, and stone outcrop; and beyond the valley, the jagged ridge of the Stiperstones, as menacing as a shark's mouth—and still beyond that serrated range, the great blue-grey hills of Wales, sleeping in the morning sunshine, dreaming their strange and bloody dreams of past glory and of future greatness. Above them sailed fleecy-white clouds across a sky as blue as any that ever came out of a child's paintbox.

We seemed to be on the top of the world. Before us ran a narrow path, between banks of heather and bracken, away, away into the distance. This was the ancient ridge-way, along which our remote ancestors of the Dawn World had trotted, carrying their burdens of animal skins, barley grain and flint axeheads . . .

The Long Mynd seemed timeless—sad and timeless. A hawk soared above us, questing, for a moment, no doubt fixing our image in his bright and crystalline eye—speculating on our nature, our strength or edibility. Then he sheered away and seemed to fall out of vision into the air currents that swept up the steep side from Church Stretton.

Even as I watched this bird's flight, Mike pointed straight ahead through the windscreen.

“Look!” he said. “A glider! It started up from the other side of that hillock, away in the distance.”

It was a beautiful thing, silver and graceful in the sunlight, twisting and soaring, falling and sweeping up again, as though it were a true bird and not a man-made machine.

“The gliding club will lie in that direction,” I said. “Come on.”

I pushed hard on the accelerator and we roared along the ancient pathway, scattering gravel behind us, just missing rocks which jutted out from the verge, and scaring the wits out of the solemn-faced sheep which grazed here and there on the harsh grass.

As we topped the last rise of the hillock we had noticed, we observed a long low building on the horizon, and parked round it many gliders of various shapes and colours, some complete and ready to take off, others only half assembled. About them men moved, busy as bees. A bright red windsock strained at its ropes above the long building and a tractor raced across the plateau, towing a long wire rope behind it.

And as we surged forward towards our quarry, Mike whooped once again, for suddenly from behind the long clubhouse, a long low red car appeared, swung round towards us, then seemed to recollect itself, bumped over an area of half-cleared heather, and roared away, down a far slope and out of sight.

“Great cats!” gasped Mike. “That was the Jaguar. The XK 140!”

I said, “Are you sure? I couldn’t identify it at this distance.”

He looked at me as though I belonged to the age of the dinosaurs and didn’t know any better.

“Dear boy,” he said, “there’s only one car looks like a 140—and that’s a 140!”

To go in pursuit of that car we had to pass near to the clubhouse. I was within three yards of the nearest glider when a tall thin man, dressed in a camel duffle-coat and a blue woollen cap with a red bobble at its summit, ran out and stood in my path. His aquiline face was contorted with anger. His black moustache positively bristled as he glared at me with wide-open sea-blue eyes.

He almost wrenched the car door off its hinges to get at me.

“You confounded, blithering nincompoop!” he raged. “Do you realize that you got in the way of one of our gliders then? Do you realize that he was making his run-in to land and had to go up again, just because you haven’t any eyes in your stupid cabbage head?”

Mike began to bridle at the man’s tone and was half-rising when I stopped him, pushing him down into his seat again.

As evenly as I could, I said, “I’m awfully sorry. I’m afraid I was rather anxious to meet the man in the red Jaguar who just left your clubhouse.”



The man in the duffle-coat almost exploded again.

“What has that got to do with it, you numbskull!” he stormed. “The fact that you want to speak to Major Neumann has no bearing on the matter. If you had caused that glider to crash you’d have felt a pretty sort of fool, Jaguar or not, wouldn’t you?”

Now one can stand so much, just so much, and no more, however badly one is in the wrong.

I explained quietly, “I have said I am sorry. I can do no more. The glider hasn’t crashed and so there is no point in speculating any further. Kindly take your hand off my car door and allow me to get out of your way, once and for all.”

Now the man in the red bobble really exploded.

“Why, you half-baked idiot,” he said, “I am the secretary of this club, I’d have you know. I will have you prosecuted for this, messing up our flight, then thinking you can sit there abusing me!”

He reached forward in his anger to take me by the coat collar.

It was an unfortunate thing for him to do just then, because I was in a hurry and wanted to get away. Had things been different I think I might have let him shake me a little, just to satisfy himself that he had taught me a lesson; but today it was not to be.

I slipped to one side, in the old way, and poked him gently, ever so gently, with my right fist through the open car window.

As he sat gasping on the turf I revved up and swung past him.

“All my apologies,” I said. “I will explain later.”

He stared up at me like a pole-axed steer, his mouth open, his pale eyes as round as marbles. Mike was convulsed with laughter, but I was deadly serious.

“Now he’ll take the car number and we’ll have half the police in the Midlands looking for us on a charge of assault and battery,” I said. “That fellow was just asking for it, but I was everything he said about me to do a thing like that.”

Then there was no time for reflections of that sort, for as we swung over the brow of the hill we saw that we were now on the western scarp of the Long Mynd, and that the mountain sloped down like the side of a bowler

hat! I forced the car into low gear and eased her down the loose gravel slope as gently as I could.

Far below us the red tail of the car we were chasing suddenly disappeared behind a feathery clump of trees. We heard its engine roaring away into the distance.

For a moment I threw caution to the winds and took my foot off the brake; we swung towards the side of the path. Suddenly I saw an almost sheer drop of five hundred feet starting just three inches from my front wheel. I clapped my foot on the brake again and we skidded over to the other side, scraping the doors along the bank of heather on the mountain-side. I breathed a sigh of relief; Mike had his eyes shut and his fists clenched.

“All right, old boy,” I said. “We won’t try that again. We’ll just have to hope that he has a blow-out when he reaches the main road. Otherwise we’ll never catch him.”

Then something occurred to me which I should have thought of immediately, had I been in a calm state of mind.

“Feel in the tray, Mike,” I said. “There’s a pair of field-glasses there. Watch out for him appearing on one of the lanes lower down. Get his number if you can. It’s not much to go on, but it might be a help.”

Three minutes later a red flash way down the hillside announced that the Jaguar had broken cover for a moment on reaching road level. Mike swung the glasses in its direction. Then the red flash had gone as swiftly as a kingfisher.

“What did you get?” I asked, still wrestling with the wheel on a suddenly steep slope.

“Only some letters,” the boy said glumly. “They look like GBG.”

“That’s wonderful!” I said in exasperated tiredness. “It might be XYZ for all it means to me!”

The road swung round then, over a disused railway station covered with blocks of concrete and piles of wooden props.

I had to swing hard on the wheel to avoid a half-hidden iron girder that protruded from a low bush, and as I did so the car gave a lurch and ran out of control for a few yards.

I pulled up and got out to see what had happened. My front nearside wheel was as flat as a plate.

“Jeepers!” Mike groaned. “A blow-out at a time like this. How long will it take us to put the spare wheel on?”

I sat down on the wing of the car and wiped my hand across my forehead.

“It would take a lifetime,” I said. “There is no inner tube in the spare wheel. I’ve just remembered that’s the wheel I stuffed with straw after a puncture I got on Beacon Hill last week. I’ve never had it mended—I’ve been so busy chasing round with you.”

We looked at each other and started to laugh—not because we felt that there was anything funny to laugh at, but because if we had not done that we should have wept out of sheer frustration.

And when we had finished we started to laugh once more, for a milk lorry came trundling along the road below us and stopped. A young fellow in a bright blue shirt leaned out and said, “Had a puncture? I’ll give you a lift to Bishop’s Castle if you like. You can get a garageman there.”

I said, “Is there a railway station there, do you know?”

He smiled and nodded. “There’d better be,” he said slowly. “That’s where I’m delivering this lot.” He nodded back towards the bright churns which were stacked up on his lorry.

On the way to Bishop’s Castle, I said, “When does the London train come in?”

The young man in the blue shirt grinned again and said, “In half an hour, I reckon. But you can never tell over here. It might have been held up by Indians or something! Funny things happen out here!”

I laughed as convincingly as I could at his joke. Then Mike said, “Why London, Gordon?”

I thought I would prolong his agony a little while longer.

“Because,” I said, “I’ve just had a brainwave, and if my theory works out right, then London is the best place to be for the purpose I want.”

Outside the station I stopped an A.A. man and took him aside.

“Where do GBG cars come from?” I asked him.

He told me immediately.

“Come on, Mike,” I said. “It’s London for us, and the train is just steaming in.”

We caught it by the proverbial skin of our teeth. And when we could sit back, breathing fairly freely again, Mike said, “Come on, Stewart, out with it. Where do GBG cars come from?”

We were almost at Worcester before I put him out of his misery. Then he let out a gasp of excitement and said, “Gosh, won’t Mum be green with envy! She’s always wanted to go there!”

## XI

### *En Route to Violence*

THE engines of the silver Dakota throbbed sturdily. Mike was sitting next to the window, looking down upon the sea lit now by the sun of mid-evening.

He pointed down between the fleecy clouds above which we were flying.

“Look,” he said, “the steamer from Southampton. It looks like a toy ship, doesn’t it?”

I nodded; I was too preoccupied to speak at that moment. I still recalled vividly, a little too vividly, perhaps, Butch Bohun’s voice at the other end of the telephone wire when I rang him from London Airport, just before our flight took off.

“Why Guernsey, you blithering imbecile?” he had stormed. “Why imagine that a man who commits a murder in Lincolnshire should go to Guernsey of all fantastic places?”

I began to feel a little unsure myself when he spoke those words. After all, why should a man with a Guernsey registration number necessarily be making for Guernsey as he flew down the road below the Long Mynd? He might have gone, let us say, to Wigan, or Dumfries, or Chipping Camden. He might even have gone back to the scene of his crime, for all I knew. I had simply followed my nose, like any simple-minded spaniel looking for a rabbit’s warren.

“Look here, Stewart,” Butch had continued, “if you can’t do better than that, I shall have to think very seriously about having you put out to grass. I can find you a nice easy job, like making tea for the *real* investigators down here. Alternately, I can get you drafted out to Antarctica, to keep an eye on suspicious-looking penguins—though from your current performance, it would seem that any reasonably self-respecting penguin could draw the wool over your baby-blue eyes without a great deal of exertion.”

When he paused to take a new breath, I had said, “Give me a chance, Butch. I’m on to something which I can’t explain just now, really I am. All I ask is that you don’t try horning in to help me, or anything stupid like that. If my idea comes up, and I think it might, I shall be well able to cope.”

I heard him grunt at the other end as though someone had suddenly butted him in the stomach, rather hard.

“Why . . . you . . .” he said. “. . . if I could get there before you took off I’d yank you out of that aircraft like a truant schoolboy!”

Then he made an obvious effort to calm down a little before he spoke again.

“Look, Gordon,” he said, a little more kindly, “I have been in touch with the Lincoln police and they tell me that you did not leave the documents with them. Now what the fiddling filberts are you playing at? Where *are* those documents? I ask you, where *are* they?”

I smiled into the telephone receiver.

“They are safe, Dear One,” I said gently. “Very safe indeed.”

There was a grim silence for a moment. Then he said, with quite an edge showing through his voice, “Look, my lad, what is to stop me from having a pair of nice hefty policemen waiting for you at Guernsey Airport to relieve you of them? Answer me that, my clever chum.”

I did what I could to make my voice convincing as I replied.

“Dear Butch, sweet Butch,” I said, “my only playmate . . . if you do that you will make yourself look such a naughty stupid! You see, your two hefty strong-arm gorillas would find nothing—nothing at all. Then wouldn’t they be cross with you for sending them out on such a silly errand, eh? The name of Butch Bohun would pong more than somewhat in the Delectable Islands, old friend.”

Butch said a very wicked little word, which lost none of its venom even though he was speaking from some miles away.

“All right, Stewart,” he rasped. “Go ahead; get yourself into trouble, get yourself chopped up into tiny little pieces by some great nasty hairy gangsters—and wait for me to come and help you! Yes, wait for me, and you’ll have to wait a very long time. I am now telling you, and this is official—you are out on this alone; alone, I repeat—and the saints help you when you get back to London again, if you ever do, for I shall not raise a finger in your defence.”

He waited for me to scream or whimper or something, but I still kept on smiling into that little black mouthpiece and said nothing.

“Right,” he concluded, “right. Go ahead and I’ll have your blood when you get back to this country, I promise you. Don’t expect any mercy! As for your running away with secret documents which should have been handed into this office by all the laws, that will turn out to be a very interesting case when it comes up at the Old Bailey, I assure you of that. At the least, it will mean the end of your inglorious career as a government investigator; it will probably mean your end as a free citizen until such time as you are ready to draw the old age pension.”

I had expected him to say good-bye at least; but he didn’t. There was a nasty ominous little click at the other end, and then the air hostess began to beckon to me madly from the door.

“Please, sir,” she gasped, “*do* come on; your plane is about to take off. It will cost me my job if you do not come.”

I almost ran across the tarmac with her. Then Mike leaned out of the plane door and said, “Did he give us his blessing, Gordon?”

I blew out my cheeks at him.

“He doesn’t even know you are here,” I gasped. “If he did he would have me shot at dawn in the Tower, or Pomfret Castle, or some such glory-hole.”

The hostess pushed me up the steps and in a minute we were taxi-ing on to the runway.

So now I sat in the Dakota watching the sea and its little ships below me, wondering what on earth I would do if, say, Butch Bohun *did* happen to be right about this being a wild goose chase.

It did not bear thinking about. I took out the brochure from below my seat and began to read of all the interesting air trips I could make, just to keep my mind away from the too stern realities of life at that precise moment. . . . Manchester to Newcastle upon Tyne. . . . Birmingham to Belfast, with only one change. . . . Oh blazes! I flung the thing on to the floor.

Mike said, “Steady, chum, don’t let life get on top of you! Try blowing up a sick-bag and bursting it. It’s awfully good for the morale. I did it once on the way to Dublin. An old lady swallowed a pencil and the captain of the

aircraft set course for home under the impression that he had bust his thingummy-whatsit!”

I said, “Just how disgusting *can* you get, Mike Wadham?”

But before he could answer me, the stewardess came along the aisle between the seats and commanded us, though sweetly, to fasten our safety belts as we were soon coming in to land.

Guernsey lay below us, then swung up and round us, its multitudinous glasshouses describing a glittering arc about us as the thousands of panes caught the reflection of the late sunshine. For a moment I wondered how on earth we could get in between all those greenhouses. . . .

And then we were making our approach. The green field plunged up at us and caught us with a little bump, and then we were rolling round towards the reception block.

“Phew!” said Mike. “That was smashing!”

I didn’t tell him that I had never landed or taken off, even in the slap-happy war days, without feeling a strange sinking of the stomach. There was no point in drawing a harrowing picture of the hazards at that moment.

“Come on,” I said, “there’s a taxi waiting over there. It will take us into the town.”

Though for the life of me I couldn’t think what our next move should be when we got there! After all, what proof was there that Major Neumann, the man in the red Jaguar, was in Guernsey at all? And if he was, how did one go about finding him? In any case, a man who was involved in murder would surely have a number of aliases, and not even the police need have any knowledge of his whereabouts, under any name at all.

Yet in spite of my doubts in one direction, I had few in another. . . . As our time-worn vehicle chugged its way down the narrow, palm-decorated lanes towards St. Peter Port, I had a sudden and quite overwhelming sensation of uneasiness. And there was no doubt about that!

It was not fear, but rather that sort of inner tension, internal excitement, which I have always experienced before violence has overtaken me.

I remember a dozen examples of this feeling during the war, and always it was infallible. I suppose that a sensitive big-game hunter feels it when he is wading knee-deep in grasses, just before he stumbles upon a waiting leopard or a cobra.



I suppose the first hunters of the dawn world knew this slight turning over of the stomach as their nostrils caught the faintest musk-like whiff of the waiting sabre-tooth tiger.

That is the sort of whiff I got in that decrepit taxi as we trundled our ordinary way round the last corner that gave on to the harbour, with its mass of parked cars and its anchored boats, their simple sails flapping idly in the first breezes of night.

## XII

# A Trip on the Briny

**A**T a little kiosk I bought a booklet called *The Glorious Channel Islands*. It contained maps and fairly full descriptions of Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark. The pictures of St. Peter Port were wonderfully pretty—indeed, had I not been on the very spot of which the coloured pictures were taken, I should have guessed that this little harbour was the be-all and end-all of creation.

But the sun had decided that it was time to go to bed and now the pretty technicolour had faded somewhat. A faint grey tinge was creeping over the island, and the gulls were becoming more daring—sweeping inland, over the heads of the white-shoed, panama-hatted Easter holiday-makers, bringing the sea and all its harshness on to their doorsteps, as it were.

I have always felt a little cynical about holidays by the sea, or by the mountains—or, indeed, by any of the great Acts of Nature. We petty human creatures tend to treat seas and mountains and rivers as though they were pets, meant by creation for our calm and pink-sweatered enjoyment.

Yet they are terrible enemies, if the truth were told, not friends. I have seen lightly clad young men and girls walk up a smiling mountain in Wales, armed with a bottle of lemonade and a small scale map, laughing and joking as though they were walking through their parlour in Walsall. Three hours later a mist has come down and those same young jokers have been lost up there, lying in the sweat of terror, behind some grinning rock, and hoping that someone had seen them go up into the no-man's-land of the mountain-top.

As a lad I was once swept over a weir in the Severn, a weir which I had swum many times before. But this time the river was in full flood, and I had taken no consideration of the fact, even if I had noticed it; for in youth one feels oneself indestructible!

I can still recall that, as I set my little strength against the waters and found that I made no more impression than a fly might do, beating his wings

against a marble pillar, I seemed to perspire in the water, even though it was a cold evening! I had suddenly understood the nature of that beast which we think we, the little menfolk of the earth, had tamed. . . .

I felt much the same that evening in St. Peter Port, as the grey birds came swirling in over the stone promenade, above the fishing smacks and the parked cars, and the ice-cream barrows and the taxis and the ladies in huge Mexican hats. . . .

The sea was coming back!

Mike said, “Well, Gordon, I have looked at every car in this park; there is no Jaguar here, of any sort. Mainly Austins and Fords, as you might expect. What do we do now?”

I said, “Let’s go along the pier and commune with the gull, the gannet and cormorant.”

Mike said, “Perhaps that’s intended to be clever; but if you really mean it, you have another think coming. There are no gannets nearer than Alderney.”

I raised my eyebrows in mock surprise.

“How do you know, Professor?” I said.

“Read it in the book you bought, that’s all,” he said, with a grin.

At the end of the pier we looked across the blue-grey sea. Before us Herm stood, its twin hills caught by the last rays of the sun, the jagged rocks between us starting up out of the freshening waters like the teeth of a submerged shark of gigantic proportions.

To our right, and floating in a grey haze now, lolled Sark. It was a long whale, hunched and vaguely vicious in the sunset, dreaming of Celt and Northman, Norman and Dane.

Mike said, “I’ve always wanted to go there, Gordon. It has a feudal system still, you know. It is more or less governed by a Dame, who lives in the Seigneurie, and the little Parliament meets in the schoolroom and talks in Norman French.”

“Hey,” I said, “you haven’t had time to read all that out of the handbook, have you?”

Mike shook his head and grinned, “No,” he answered, “that was on television one day. A fine thing for education—television, you know, friend Stewart! You ought to look at it one day and get educated! On this particular

programme I learned that there are no cars on Sark—hardly any roads, as we know them. And the pubs stay open all day! Not that that interests me—but I thought it might stimulate you to take a little holiday from this chase!”

He looked at me cheekily as he spoke; but suddenly I had stopped listening to him. I was hearing the conversation of the two men who had sauntered down the pier behind us and who were now standing within a yard of me, talking unselfconsciously, in their strong outdoor voices.

They were sailormen of some sort or other, dressed in dark woollen caps and oilskin jackets. They smoked short pipes and their brown hands were gnarled and calloused. That much I noticed.

But it was what they said which made my heart thump suddenly and took my attention away from Mike’s jocular remarks.

The elder of the two, a leather-faced man with a grey moustache, clipped so short that it stuck out like a scrubbing brush, was speaking to his younger companion, a man almost as broad as he was high—a man with arms which hung almost to his knees, it seemed.

And he said, “If I see him again, I’ll punch him on the nose, I tell you, George. He comes up, all lah-di-dah, and says, ‘Take me across to Sark, my good fellow. I’ve missed the regular boat.’ And when I got him across, he walked out of the *Marie Brune* as though he was a prince of Siam, or something. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘I’ve run out of small change. This is my address. You can write and remind me one of these days. I’ll send you a cheque. And if I don’t, then you have my permission to go over to London and collect my red Jaguar in exchange. That is a fair bargain—it is parked outside the Customs House at Southampton.’ ”

I could not resist such a clue, and turned round then. The elder sailor was holding a small piece of paper in his brown hand and showing it to his friend.

“That’s his address, he says,” the sailor grunted, spitting over the sea wall.

I moved up to him and said quietly, “Excuse me, but may I see that paper? This may be a friend of mine, a bit of an eccentric. If it is, I will pay his fare across.”

The elder sailor grunted, then grinned and pushed the scrap of paper into my hand willingly.

It was a piece of an old telegram form.

“Certainly, sir,” he said. “Only too pleased! The fare across is ten shillings return, children half-price!”

He glanced across at Mike who scowled and put on his most gangster-like frown.

The writing on that piece of soiled paper seemed worth the ten-shilling note which I handed to the sailor then. It said:

*Major Neumann,  
La Sorcière,  
Sark.*

I turned to Mike and took him by the arm. “Feel like a trip on the briny?” I asked.

“I feel more like a fish and chip supper at that café on the promenade,” he said.

I shook my head. “Not a hope, old boy,” I answered. “If these mariners will put out to sea again tonight, we’ll have our next meal on Sark.”

I turned to the elder sailor and smiled, as I thought, ingratiatingly. He shrugged his shoulders and then, at last, nodded.

“All right,” he said, “but I don’t like going over at this time, sir. Mine’s only a small boat and the channel’s littered with wrecks. But I’ll take you if you can’t get over any other way—and you can’t at this time.”

I pushed a pound note towards him. He stopped and looked down at it in something like contempt. At first I thought he was about to turn away from me. He already had his short-stemmed pipe out of his mouth, ready to spit over the sea wall again.

Then he seemed to relent, and said, in an almost hurt voice, “I have a wife and kids to support, sir.”

His pale blue eyes suddenly took on that appealing look which one sees in the eyes of cocker spaniels, though they are a different colour, of course.

It was my turn to shrug. “All right, you old pirate,” I said, “I’ll pay double if you’ll take me over immediately.”

He began to smile happily again once more and shoved my money into his oilskin so forcefully that I thought he would burst the seams of his pocket.

“Right you are, sir. You are a gent, that’s what!” he said. “Come back along the pier and we’ll go aboard directly. The *Marie Brune* is anchored in

the little wharf just behind that big crane you can see over there. It's not more than three hundred yards."

He began to walk away. The broad young man stayed behind a while and with a smile said, "Have you any luggage, mister? I'll take it aboard, if you have?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "Only us two! We travel light."

He nodded and said gently, "It's always as well, in my opinion. You can pack a trunkful of stuff and still not have what you need!"

Then he walked on after the elderly sailor, and we followed him down to the jetty.

The *Marie Brune* was a trim little yacht with an outboard motor. She was painted green.

We were out among the shark-toothed rocks between Guernsey and Herm before I remembered that I hated green, that I always swore never to fly in an aircraft that had any green in its camouflage, that I would run a mile rather than have dealings with anyone in a green tie, for example.

It was one of my "things". I was once dining at a green table in the Café de Paris when the place was blown sky-high by a stray enemy bomber; that was all! They dug me out of the debris a day later, and I swore to lay off green after that.

The *Marie Brune* was green.

# XIII

## Strange Encounter

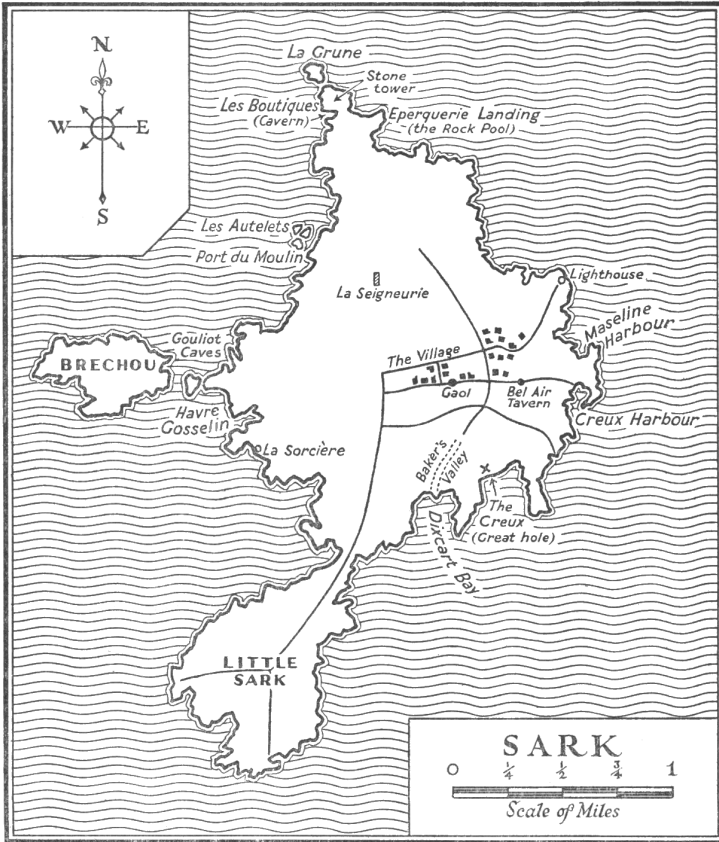
**A**s we drew nearer the dark hulk of Sark, up out of the grey-green waters of night, I turned to Mike and said “If I *have* backed the wrong horse this time, old boy, I’m done for.”

I was visualizing the sardonic look on Butch Bohun’s broad face when he saw me next, his shrug of resignation, as though he was saying silently that he had told me so. . . .

And as these pictures crossed my mind I felt more a fool than ever at plunging into this case with so little thought and preparation. After all, what did I know? Just this—an unidentified man, of obviously foreign extraction, had been shot in an old manor house in Lincolnshire. He had been carrying on his person certain secret documents to do with atomic development in the north of England. He had mentioned someone named Neumann, and we had later followed this Neumann to Shropshire and thence, as I thought, to Sark.

But suppose this Neumann had not killed the man in the cupboard? What did that leave us with? A bundle of papers on nuclear fission . . . and a wild cat journey over half the United Kingdom!

And, in any case, suppose my actions were investigated—and it was found that I had taken Mike along with me on what should have been a purely confidential government inquiry?



I stood to get an awful rap over the knuckles at the very least. Such behaviour could do me nothing but harm, I was thinking, when a gull swept low over the little boat and shocked me out of my morbid depression for an instant.

Then Mike was pointing at what had seemed a dark wall of rock.

“Look,” he said, his voice hushed in awe, “there is a harbour tucked in below the rock. Gosh, but it looks creepy!”

I followed the direction of his pointing finger. The high, grey rock-face seemed scooped out into a small basin at its base. And in this dark and enclosed space the deep green waves swelled viciously against the steep steps and sea-worn granite blocks of a small harbour. Over this twilight bowl towered a stark stone monolith, at the very lip of the gorge above us, warning, threatening us that it might topple down upon us at any moment.



Against the darkness of this place, three grey seabirds wheeled low over the surging water, crying incessantly in the voices of lost souls.

I shuddered, “Where is this place?” I asked the old man with the clipped grey moustache who held the tiller in his hard brown hand.

“Havre Gosselin,” he said, with a strange little smile curling the edges of his mouth. “A bit queer at this time of night, isn’t it?”

I was looking at the map of Sark in my guide-book and said, “Why don’t you go round to the big harbour on the other side of the island? What’s it called . . . Maseline?”

The young man suddenly spoke. His voice was hard and confident.

“We land here because this place is deserted, mister. We should be seen at the other harbour—and we do not want that to happen, tonight, at least.”

I turned towards him in surprise. “What do you mean?” I asked.

He smiled in my face and said, “Major Neumann has given strict orders that your landing is not to be observed by anyone on the island, and one does not disobey Major Neumann’s orders—if one is wise.”

Now all my doubts were cleared away and my worries swept aside. This was what I had been expecting, deep down, and now it had come and I was almost relieved.

“Right,” I said, stepping back a pace. “Then I will give an order or two, for a change, and we’ll see if you will obey mine!”

My hand was already clenched on the skeleton grip of the Italian Spirelli in my breast pocket, when I felt my arms pinioned to my side in a hold which I knew I was powerless to break.

The old man at the tiller was far stronger than I had thought! We were in the middle of the dark basin of the lonely harbour then, with the grey walls of the cliff-face seeming to lean forward over us, when Mike suddenly gave a yell and, flinging off his duffle-coat, plunged overboard.

“Come back, you fool!” I shouted. The old man clapped a hand over my mouth.

“Do not work yourself into a frenzy, my friend,” he said cruelly. “We shall pick your playmate up farther along the shore among the weeds and the rocks, at low tide. He will not get very far in the currents about this place. He has signed his own death warrant!”

Now Mike was heading strongly for the shore, but even as I watched him, I saw him half turn and seem to look appealingly towards the boat, as though he had struck a current which was beating him.

This was more than I could stand.

“I’m coming, Mike!” I yelled, at the top of my voice, and swaying sideways, I twisted round and took the elderly sailor by the leg, throwing him across the gunwale and half-winding him. His grip on me relaxed, and in that instant I stood clear and began my leap towards the dark green waters.

But even as I set my foot on the gunwale, a shower of bright sparks flew before my eyes, and I had the sensation of a cliff-face toppling down on my head. The sea and the cliffs and the birds and the monolith all began to spin round like some crazy catherine wheel.

Then I was lying on the planks at the bottom of the little boat, smiling foolishly up at nothing in particular. I saw the young man bend over me with a short heavy stick in his hand, and I heard the voice of the old man saying, “You crazy fool, Pierre! How many times must I tell you not to hit so hard! You’ll kill someone, one of these days.”

As the young man said, “Not this one, his skull is too thick,” I fainted off, and immediately had a wonderful dream in which I thought I was flying among the seabirds, frisking and curvetting over the waves, as lightly as thistledown, with the sun shining on me, making me warm and happy and carefree.

A huge cormorant swung in among us and singled me out. He flew at me with menacing cries and I did my best to avoid him. But at last he came up close to me and snarled, “Well, you wanted to meet me, didn’t you? Here I am—all yours. Now, pray, what can I do for you?”

I suddenly noticed that this cormorant had teeth, many sharp teeth, just like a shark!

“Who are you?” I heard myself asking.

His voice now came from very far away, as though out of a long speaking-tube.

“Why, Major Neumann. Didn’t you know?” he said. Then all the other birds began to cackle like maniacs.

## XIV

# The House on the Cliff

I WAS sitting in a comfortable leather chair, in a room surrounded by green filing cabinets. Before me was a huge mahogany desk with a space in the middle for the user to put his feet through. I saw some feet there, and a pair of legs, encased in a light blue cloth. . . . I looked farther up, over the top of the desk.

A man was sitting looking back at me. He was a bulky person, with close-cropped black hair and an olive complexion. His face was heavy and sardonic. He was smoking a very thick cigar, which he held in the extreme corner of his mouth.

This was the face I had seen the day before, in the charred library at Bayon's Manor—the face, in my ignorance, which I had thought belonged to a solid Lincolnshire farmer. . . .

"I am Major Neumann," he said gently. "Didn't you know?"

I tried to say something appropriately vicious, but I was still dazed from the heavy blow of Pierre's marlinspike. The words came out so twisted that even I could not understand them! It sounded like some foreign stranger speaking. I gave up for the moment and contented myself with glaring at him—though even that, in the strong light of the electric bulb which swung over the desk, was hard for me to do.

Major Neumann smiled and removed his cigar from the corner of his mouth for a moment. Then he pushed a thick glass tumbler over towards me.

"Drink this," he said. "It's a stiff dose of whisky. It will do you good. You have a nasty bump, I must say."

Now I found that I could speak.

"Yes," I said, "from your hired assassin, Pierre."

Major Neumann shook his massive head, slowly and sadly. His lips were smiling as he spoke.

“You have got it all wrong, my friend,” he said. “Pierre is no assassin. He is a Government representative, like yourself, Mr. Stewart. No, do not look so alarmed, we have taken the precaution of looking through your pockets. We have seen your card of identity. What a pity we didn’t know who you were before. It would have saved you so much travelling and me so much waste of time. You see, I suspected you when I first met you, in Lincolnshire, and I could not take any chances. I had to get you away to my—well, my lair, let us say, and find out about you.”

Suddenly the world crumbled beneath my feet. I saw Butch Bohun’s wicked smile as he handed me my dismissal notice. . . .

“But,” I began, “I thought you were the murderer. . . .”

Major Neumann held up his strong, thick hand for silence. He spoke as though the matter were one of grave seriousness and pain to him.

“I understand perfectly what you thought—and you were half-right. I *was* the killer, but it was a matter of killing before I was killed myself. The man in that cupboard at Bayon’s Manor was waiting to put me out for all time. I fired first, that is all. I had the better weapon, I must confess. That Italian Spirelli which you found, and of which we have relieved you, is a nice little popgun, but it is slow compared with a good old English Smith and Wesson.”

Everything was suddenly too much for me. I fought hard to save my sanity as I sat in that deep leather arm-chair, watching this sallow-faced man smiling at me across the great mahogany desk.

Then I knew what I wanted to say, “Look, my young companion, Mike Wadham . . . where is he?”

Major Neumann said gently, “Old Jean and Pierre are looking for him. They dumped you here and went off straightway for him. They think there is a fair chance that he will have swum with the current down to Les Autelets, a little way down the coast. They will bring him back here, I assure you. They are faithful servants of the Government.”

There was nothing more I could do. I reached for the heavy tumbler and drank a great gulp of the fiery amber liquid. It seemed to give me a new life for the moment.

“Who are you?” I asked directly.

The man with the cigar said calmly, “I am a Hungarian technical adviser, waiting for my British naturalization papers, and employed in a security

capacity at the new Malder Well Power Plant.”

I gazed at his gently smiling face in sheer astonishment.

“You are a trusted representative of the atomic station?” I heard myself ask breathlessly.

He nodded, slowly but positively, a man who was completely sure of himself.

“When my naturalization papers come through,” he said, “I shall become the chief technical adviser there.”

I reached for the tumbler and took another drink of the whisky. I felt that I needed something to steady my nerves.

Outside that high room the seabirds were crying mournfully, as though they carried the burden of all history’s mistakes upon their wings. Below us, deep below, the sea was lashing itself into a fury in the darkness.

But there was no darkness more solid, more profound, than that of my own heart at that moment. Mike was out there, somewhere, perhaps still battling with the waters. He was only a boy, a boy left in my care. I could not bear to think any further. . . .

I looked Major Neumann straight in the eye and said, “Who was the man you killed, then?”

As I heard my own words, they sounded like a challenge. I was amazed at my own audacity for a while. But his words were as gentle in reply as though I had spoken kindly to him.

And as he spoke he half-turned his head away from me, giving the impression that his words hurt him to speak.

“He was my brother,” he said. “My only brother.”

Now I sat up in my chair, dumbfounded. There was absolutely nothing that I could say in answer to such a statement. I gazed at him in compassion, mingled with horror.

He seemed to sense my confusion and waved his hand as though this was an affair which had been inevitable, though immeasurably sad.

And at last he went on, “Franz and I were almost the same age. We went to school together, to university together, played the same games, shared the same friends—everything. He was a part of me as my arm or my leg is a part of me.”

For a moment I thought that he was going to break down; but somehow he did not. He paused, and then, with a quiet shrug, went on.

“When our country changed its Government and let the invader enter and control its affairs, I immediately made arrangements to come to England, bringing with me such secrets as I was in possession of. Franz came with me, professing that he wished to start a new life with me. I obtained him a position in nuclear research, since he had some knowledge of science, though he had not specialized in it at the university, as I had done. At first he seemed happy. Then one day he came to me and suggested that our knowledge might be worth a great deal, if we sold it *in the right place*. I asked him where the right place was, and in a burst of confidence he told me that he had been contacted by certain of our old friends in Hungary, who were now enemy agents. They had offered us both what amounts to a fortune if we would bring to them the papers of which you already know.”

Suddenly he let his head fall into his hands and stayed for a while like that, bowed over the great mahogany desk. I said, “Please do not go on for the moment if you feel unable to do so.”

He raised his head and smiled, a weary smile of depression and even exhaustion.

“I must tell you,” he said, “if I am to have your confidence. I must tell somebody.”

Then he went on, “I refused to go with him. I argued with him, even threatened to report him to our superiors, though I would not have done so, at that stage. But he persisted, and now my loyalty to the country which had given me freedom again seemed greater even than the love which brother should bear for brother. I tried to get him dismissed from his post, so that temptation should not strike at him again—but no one would believe my story that he was inefficient. I was at my wit’s ends; then one night he ran away, taking with him the documents we have mentioned. I tracked him down, found him in his hiding-place at the old manor and pleaded with him to give me back the things which he had no right to have. He refused, but swore that if I would return at nightfall, he would have made up his mind what he was to do by then. I left him, hoping that he would indeed have come to his senses. And so I returned, as he had arranged with me, at nightfall. As I opened the door of that attic room he swung his cupboard door wide and pointed a pistol at me. I shot him then. What else could I do?”

He looked at me with all the pain of the situation still showing in his sallow face. I looked back at him helplessly.

Then he spoke again, his words dragging like tired footsteps.

“I waited a while, wondering where he could have hidden the papers, for they were not on his person. Then I heard someone coming into the Manor House, and I thought that it might be the desperadoes with whom he had communicated in Hungary. I knew that they would kill me and, I must confess, I fled like a coward. You know the rest. I went to Shropshire, where I have settled since I have become an inhabitant of your country. I could think of nothing else to do. And when I found that you were on my track I came here, to this house, which my brother and I rented as a holiday resort from the hardships of our work. On the way down I contacted government departments with which my secret work has made me familiar. They sent Pierre and Jean to protect me—and so now you know all.”

## XV

# Things Happen!

**T**HERE are times when the brain can take so much—but no more! As I sat there, before the massive mahogany desk in that austere room with the bare light bulb, high above the sea, I had come to that point exactly. I could absorb no more.

As a navigator in the war years I had often known that sensation, especially after a long night trip, when the only reality had become the uneven roaring of the bomber's engines and the constant shuddering of the metal skin of the machine which had become my world—a world whose only events were the sudden lighting up of the windows as a searchlight swung across us, or a coloured flare fell to our side; a world where the only inhabitants were those disembodied voices which came intermittently into my ear-phones, the voices of the rest of the crew, or Ground Control, or the Master Bomber. . . .

And after hours of that one ceases to be an individual human creature; one becomes a *thing*, part of the aircraft, insensitive, benumbed, uninterested, unable to establish one's own divine personality as being different from that of any casual piece of metal, lump of rock, trickle of water. One becomes nothing.

So I gazed, cow-like, across the big blotter at Major Neumann, unable any longer to think of his problems, or even my own. I was just done in—exhausted, physically and emotionally.

I do not know what would have happened just then if the side door had not opened. But the door *did* open—and Pierre and Jean came in. They were very wet, tired, it seemed. Pierre's leather-coloured face was perhaps even more than tired; it had the set expression of a man who feels anger welling up inside him, and knows that he will be unable to control it when the storm finally breaks.

He stepped over to where Major Neumann sat at the desk and held his hands out at shoulder level.



“There is nothing we can do,” he said. “It is a fool’s chase. I ask you, what could we do, *hein?* What, I ask you again?”

Major Neumann’s own face suddenly took on something of Pierre’s mask of annoyance.

His voice was no longer tender.

“Where is the boy, Pierre?” he snapped. “I told you not to come back without him, didn’t I?”

For an instant I thought that the grey-moustached sailor was about to strike the Major, and I wondered what I ought to do if this happened. But he stepped back and even made a little sarcastic bow before he went on.

“So,” he said, “you told us not to come back without him. So, we run down the coast, we walk into the water to fetch him out—and all we get for our trouble is this!”

He turned towards Jean and took a bundle from his arms. It was a boy’s blue blazer, Mike’s blazer, sodden wet and bedraggled. He flung it with a contemptuous gesture on to the desk. The Major did not touch it. He hardly gave any sign that he had even seen it.

Instead, he stared fixedly into Pierre’s face.

At last he said, “Where is the boy, Pierre?”

His voice was as hard and as chill as steel.

Pierre gazed back at him, his own gaze every bit as cold.

“So,” he repeated, “where is the boy, you say? I tell you where the boy is—he is somewhere among the weeds around Les Grands Autelets, if I am not mistaken. He is where we shall not find him again until low tide, I tell you. That is where the boy is, master!”

For a moment the tension in Major Neumann’s eyes relaxed. He turned and half-smiled at me, saying, “I am sorry, Stewart. Very sorry. I am sure these good fellows did their best.”

I sat there in a dreadful daze now, all the strength gone from me. But I was shocked back into some semblance of alertness a moment later when the Major asked brusquely, “Have you searched this blazer, Pierre? Did you find the papers?”

Pierre shook his head grimly. “There was nothing,” he said. “Only a schoolboy’s diary and a penknife. Nothing else.”

For a moment Major Neumann dropped his eyes as though he were stealing a moment of respite in which to think.

Then he turned suddenly to me and said, "My dear fellow, where *are* those papers? You know well enough which I mean, and now you know that I can be trusted with them. That is obvious."

I hesitated for a moment, wondering what I should say. He sensed my indecision and cut in with, "Yes, do tell us the truth, old boy. It will be better for everybody. You see, we checked up on the package in your breast pocket while you were—well, asleep. Though the outer casing is that of the documents which my brother stole, the contents, as you well know, consisted of nothing but blank telegram forms."

I nodded. "Yes," I said, "that was a matter of security, as Pierre and Jean will well understand, for they are members of the same organization as myself, as you told me."

As I spoke, I saw a strange look of wonder flash into the old sailor's eyes for an instant. Then he was smiling again and nodding.

"*Oui, oui*, security," he said. "Now, sir, where are the papers? Tell the Major and it will be all right again."

Yet, at that moment, the scientific documents which Mike had received from the man in the cupboard at Bayon's Manor were the last things of importance in my thoughts. I was wondering how I could ever explain to Peggie and Arthur Wadham what had happened.

"Come, come, Stewart," said the Major, speaking to me as though I were a backward child. "Where are those papers, I ask? Are they still in your car? Where is your car parked? Is it in London, for example? Do try to remember."

And such was my state of debility, I think that in another moment I should have told him just where the papers were, but even as I was trying to frame the words which would answer his question, there came a banging on the outer door to the right of the room, and a voice began to sing out:

*“Bless ’em all, bless ’em all,  
The long and the short and the tall;  
Bless all the sergeants and W.O. Ones,  
Bless all the corporals and their blinkin’ sons,  
For I’m saying good-bye to them all  
As back to the billets I crawl;  
You’ll get no promotion this side of the ocean,  
So cheer up my lads, bless ’em all!”*

It was a rich, fruity voice, that seemed to make no secret of the fact that its possessor had had a little too much to drink.

The banging started again and then the voice bawled, “Put out that light, you miserable lot of sinners! Don’t you know it’s ‘lights out’? Do you want to be up before the Colonel in the morning, you horrible lot of soldiers?”

Jean smiled wickedly. “It is a drunken soldier,” he said. “I will deal with him, Major.”

He moved towards the door of the outer room, light-footed as a cat, sliding swiftly across the floor, in spite of his great breadth and bulk.

When he had gone Major Neumann said calmly to me, “You are tired, Mr. Stewart. But all the same, you must realize that there are some things which must be considered as being of greater importance than one’s tiredness. I must ask you again, in spite of your fatigue, and the great tragedy that has befallen you—where are those papers?”

It flashed across my mind that in a dilemma of this sort, I should consult Butch Bohun. He would know what I should do.

I said, “May I use your phone, Major?”

A look of irritation crossed his face.

“What number do you want?” he said suddenly.

That was something I had not bargained for. I turned to Pierre and said, “I want a number which you, too, must know, since you work in the same department as myself, the Major tells me. Will you get it for me?”

But Pierre turned on me such a gaze of fury that I would have shrunk back, had not the chair I sat in been immovable.

“What should I know of numbers?” he said. “*Mon Dieu*, but who is mad here, you or I?”

Then Major Neumann stood up. I noticed that he had twisted the stub of his cigar so fiercely in his fingers that it was now nothing more than a bundle of brown tobacco shreds.

“Why all this argument?” he said. “The phone is out of action. It has been so for three days. We cannot ring a number, whoever knows the number. Where are the papers, Stewart?”

Then two things happened very suddenly. We heard the sound of a scuffle, and then Jean’s voice calling out, “Help! Pierre! Pierre! Drag this madman off me!”

Pierre and Major Neumann went through the door without a moment’s delay. I was left alone.

And as I waited, listening to the struggle that went on only a room away from me, I suddenly saw something which I had not noticed before.

Directly before me, in the outer face of the mahogany desk, was a circular hole. At first I had thought it to be part of the decoration of the desk, which was carved in a rather florid Victorian manner; but now I leaned forward and pushed my little finger into the hole. It fitted almost exactly. I pulled my finger out and then noticed that its top joint was quite black. I smelled my finger, for there was something familiar about the odour which came from that hole.

And after I had smelled it, I stood up and looked under the desk, in that space where the feet rest. There was a small round metal knob, rather like the dipper in the floorboards of a car, placed in such a position that it could be pressed by the person sitting at the desk.

I stood away from this spot and walked behind the desk, now staring at the chair in which I had been sitting. The arms and seat were of a dark and maturated brown leather. But the back was much lighter in colour. It was of an almost new cowhide—as though it belonged to a different chair, one just bought and not yet used.

The sinister meaning of this discovery swept all other thoughts from my mind. I strode across that small room, while the heated argument still raged at the outer door, and felt the back of the chair. It was hard, very hard. It was as though, beneath that layer of new cowhide, the chair was solid steel.

I took it by the arm and tried to swing it round. It would not budge. It was bolted in position to the solid oak floorboards.

I straightened up again, my head whirling with the discovery. And it was at that moment that I saw what had not been within my line of vision before—a skylight, just to the back of the chair, which looked as though its purpose was to bring the light of the setting sun into this little room, which was otherwise windowless.

And framed in that skylight for a moment was a face. A face which looked down on me and then smiled. A face which I knew almost as well as I knew my own. It was Mike—Mike smiling and triumphant, Mike putting his finger over his lips to stop me from shouting out at the joy of my discovery. . . .

Then the door of that strange room opened and Mike's face faded from the skylight.

# XVI

## Into the Darkness

**M**AJOR NEUMANN came in first. His face was set in anger as he marched across to his desk and immediately sat down. Pierre followed him slowly, his arm about Jean's shoulders. I saw that both the sailors were looking decidedly the worse for wear. Jean's right eye was completely closed and his cheekbones were blue with bruises. I saw that Pierre's mouth was bleeding at the right corner and that his knuckles were raw. Apparently the drunken soldier had given a good account of himself before they had driven him away.

I observed also that Major Neumann's hands were trembling as he waved to me to sit down again.

"I wish to talk with you seriously, Mr. Stewart," he said, his lips now pale and drawn tight.

I nodded, as coolly as I could, though I was so light-hearted now at my discovery of Mike's safety that to speak normally was a great effort.

I sat down as I was bidden and waited for the Major to speak.

He did not keep me waiting long, and when he spoke his voice had a point on it like a well-tempered Toledo rapier.

"Look, my friend," he said, "we are well disposed towards you because we think that you may be what you say you are. You may indeed be a government investigator. If you are, that is good enough for us, for we are loyal subjects and wish only good to come to Britain."

He paused a moment and felt in his breast pocket for his cigar-case. At last he found it. I saw that it was of solid gold and had a strangely decorative crest on its lid in bright enamels.

Then, with an air of friendship, he offered me the case.

"Have a cigar," he said, leaning forward.

I reached out my hand and, at the last moment, whipped the gold case away from him. I heard him gasp with astonishment—and then I had seen the crest. It was one with which I was very familiar, since it figured in many newspaper cartoons with a political significance; but it was not such a crest as I would have carried on my own personal belongings.

“So . . .” I said, smiling at him gently.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, a curiously twisted little smile.

“A souvenir, my friend,” he said. “I took it from a Russian pilot I shot down in the war.”

I looked into his eyes.

“What war?” I said. “Were we not all allies during the only war we have known, we of this generation? And what aircraft did you fly, Herr Major?”

I almost flung the cigar-case across the desk at him in my triumph.

Then Pierre was behind me, pinning me back to the chair, the cowhide chair with the bright new back.

And Major Neumann was smiling at me differently now, his eyes almost encased in their heavy folds, his strong hands clenched on the polished surface of the mahogany desk.

“My dear friend,” he was saying, “you are far too pert, it would seem. You take far too many chances. How you have existed so long I do not know.”

Then once again his tone changed. He leaned forward, almost confidentially now, and said, “Look, Stewart, I am a man of the world. You know my story—I am a Hungarian who is now anxious to become a true British citizen and give my talents and experience to the British Government. Now prove that you are as true, prove to me that you are not, for example, a foreign spy masquerading as an Englishman.”

The whole thing was so absurd that I laughed outright.

His face was immediately contorted with fury.

“So,” he said, “you are what I suspected! You are a spy and not a government investigator at all!”

My laughter had worn itself out now. I said, “Don’t be an idiot, Neumann. I am what I profess to be, no more and no less.”

He slapped his hand on the desk with force.

“Right,” he said. “Then hand over to me those papers. I will regard that as proof of your loyalty—nothing less will do.”

Now my laughter returned, spasmodically, with the sheer stupidity of the whole situation.

Major Neumann got up from the desk impulsively and strode towards me.

“Stop that laughter!” he shouted. “Stop it, I say!”

And as I went on laughing at him he struck me again and again across the face with his clenched fist, while Pierre still held me.

In my student days I knew what it was to be punched about more than somewhat, as a member of a fairly energetic boxing team—but Major Neumann really knew how to punch, and he wore no softening gloves.

And all the time he was punching, he kept shouting, “You are a spy, a dirty spy. That’s what you are, a spy!”

At last, when I could laugh no more and when the room had begun to twist over sideways beneath me, he stopped striking at me and sat down once again.

Now his voice was silky and even more wicked.

“Very well, Stewart,” he said, “I shall now regard you as an enemy of the British Government. I shall consider that I am justified in any step I care to take on behalf of the country which has given me freedom.”

I had just strength to say, “Oh, go and boil your head, you fantastic specimen.”

Pierre held me in a vice-like grip which had never slackened.

Major Neumann began to smile. He poised his chin on his hands, which he had folded into an attitude of prayer. So he surveyed me, quizzically but without any spark of mercy gleaming in his dark eyes.

“Poor, poor Stewart,” he said, “so you will not take your last chance! Oh, what a fool! What a waste of a good man! Look, I give you one more chance, because I am a generous fellow to fools like you. Tell me where those papers are and I will see that you are not troubled by the police when you go back to England.”

The absurdity of his offer was too much for me. I began to laugh again, despite the fact that to do so hurt my face considerably.



“Very well,” said Major Neumann, “this is it. You may well wish that you had accepted my offer, in a minute. Now, Mr. Stewart, will you kindly look straight before you, at the big panel of the desk which is on a level with your stomach? You observe that there is a little hole in that panel?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “That hole is of a .38 calibre. It is lined with rifled steel, and it is coated with burned gunpowder.”

Neumann’s eyes flickered with amazement at my words.

“My, my,” he said, “but you are a little more intelligent than I gave you credit for being. Still, a spy must be clever, in an animal way, must he not?”

I said, “You should know.”

He nodded, as though he was in complete agreement over some purely friendly matter.

Then he said, “And do you know how that desk-pistol is operated, my astute friend?”

I said, “Yes, you press a button on the floor with your foot. This chair has a steel backrest. Whoever sits in the chair cannot hope to dodge the bullet. You have used the chair fairly recently for that purpose and have since had it covered, to hide the bullet-holes in the leather.”

Now Neumann clapped his hands, “Oh, you fool,” he said, in a strange glee, “why do you persist in being so silly? Why do you not play in with me? You are too cute to kill like this.”

This seemed to be the chance I waited for. I made myself put on an expression of deep thought. Then I nodded seriously, as though my line of thought had convinced me of the error of my previous ways.

“You are a hard man, Major Neumann,” I said. “Look, would you mind if I smoked a cigarette? This situation needs a few seconds to sort out.”

Major Neumann nodded confidently. His foot was already on that little round metal knob in the floor, I could see that. Pierre loosed me and stood back from the chair a foot.

I began to reach for my own cigarette-case, but Pierre leaned forward and pushed a cigarette into my mouth.

“Thanks,” I said. “May I use your lighter, Major?”

As I spoke I reached towards the desk where a handsome silver table-lighter stood, glinting richly in the light of the electric bulb. He made no

move to stop me and I took the thing in my hands, feeling its finely polished surface. It was quite heavy and fitted nicely into the hand.

“This is a pretty thing,” I said, with a smile. “Why has it not got the crest engraved on it?”

As I lit my cigarette I looked through the smoke and saw that Major Neumann was smiling a little bitterly at my weak joke.

In the middle of that smile I leaned sideways a little and then suddenly flung the lighter upwards with all my force towards the light bulb.

There was an explosion and fragments of glass spattered down upon us as the room was swept into darkness. I continued my quick sideways movement, feeling Pierre’s clutching fingers sliding from my shoulders, and then there was a stuttering series of reports and thin red flames shot horizontally across the room from the desk into the chair I had been sitting in a second before.

But I was on the floor rolling sideways with all my strength.

I hit the wall, groped for the door, and found it. Then I had wrenched it open and was running blind through the outer room. I saw before me a window of the french type, which reached down to the floor. I did not stop to find its handle this time, but plunged bodily forward, my hands before my eyes, hoping to all the gods that this door had wooden and not steel frames.

It had; my luck was in! After the first brutal impact the wood gave and I plunged forward into the darkness.

For a few paces my feet thudded on soft, springy turf, and then I was stumbling over rock, with the sea coming louder and louder into my ears.

I heard a vicious shout behind me and saw a spurt of flame.

I did not wait, but ducked and leaped onwards.

Then the rock no longer thrust up against my feet. *Nothing* thrust up against my feet. Nothing, only air—and I could not feel that.

I was tumbling, tumbling, and the sea was growing noisier and noisier. I felt the wind rushing past my ears, and so I plunged down and down into the darkness.

## XVII

# Sweet Reunion!

IT is a common belief that a man about to die sees the whole of his past life unfold before him, like a film, I suppose.

I was always interested in this idea and once, on a particularly overworked bomber station, asked a hard-bitten little Welsh rear-gunner about this. His nickname in the mess was “Umbrella Evans”, because he had been forced to make three parachute jumps in his two tours of operations. In the last, his rear turret had been blown off when the aircraft was only five hundred feet up in a low-level attack on a French V-site. He fell out into the air, among all sorts of debris, and pulled his ripcord as soon as he remembered to do so. The chute never really opened, but it *did* catch in a high cypress tree and leave “Umbrella Evans” swinging safely until he could slither down to the ground.

“Did all your past life unfold before your eyes, Umbrella?” I asked him, as we sat before the roaring anteroom fire, lolling in our great easy chairs with the stuffing hanging out of the back, where some Canadian boys had been trying out their escape knives.

Umbrella put down his tankard of foaming ale and snorted, “Past life, mun,” he said with a sarcastic grin, “there was no time for that, I can tell you, bach! All that was in my mind was a blinkin’ Jerry sentry with a submachine-gun and a massive big dog on a chain comin’ towards that tree like a bat out of Hell, like! That’s all I thought about! No past life, Gordon bach, and that’s a fact!”

Then he went on to tell me an incredibly long tale about how he had dodged round trees, making noises like a French squirrel to put the dog off, until he had finally hidden in a haycart, and then got away up to the north of France in time for the Allied landings.

Umbrella Evans was a very brave little fellow, but he always covered his embarrassment when telling his stories by making some sort of imitation to

embroider his fantasies. On this occasion he was in the middle of his squirrel impersonations when the Group Captain walked in behind us.

“Good show, Evans,” he said laconically, as he walked to the bar. “You can do that for us tomorrow night at the camp concert. It is a splendid imitation of a jet aircraft.”

Poor Umbrella! He was more scared about that than about any of his parachute jumps or his low-level attacks.

And as I fell that night over the edge of the cliff I thought of Umbrella Evans. It was only a fleeting memory, of course, for there was no time to indulge in prolonged reminiscences!

Then, with the swirl of the tides almost in my ears themselves, I felt my feet touch a slope, not hard enough to steady myself, and I swung over forwards again, sprawling now, grazed against a hummock of turf, and then plunged into a thicket of high gorse.

The impact was cruel in the extreme, but the gnarled and wiry gorse-stems held. Luckily for me the spikes had not yet gained their summer harshness and needle-like penetrative qualities!

All the same, I felt more like a pincushion than anything human for a moment or two. Then I sat up and found that though I had been bumped about more than somewhat, I could use all my limbs, and that what brain I had ever had was working as well as usual!

I now listened intently. Through the sound of the sea I could hear voices high above me. I even thought I recognized them.

“He’s gone right over, Major,” said Pierre. “He won’t stand a chance, not a dog’s chance!”

Then I thought I heard the Major say, “With that sort, one can never be sure. We must take the usual precautions, Pierre. Have you the rifle, Jean?”

I did not hear an answer to this question. But it was a good enough warning to me to start moving.

And while I was still picking my way down among the now steeply sloping hillside, towards the rocky shore, I heard another movement up above me, and for a brief instant as the moon uncovered herself, I saw a dark figure coming down after me—a man with a rifle in his hands. There was no doubt about that; I saw the moonlight glimmer along the barrel of the weapon.

The only thing that puzzled me was that he did not pause in his downward rush and shoot me then and there. I must have been an easy target. But he didn't, and I put that down to the possibility that my dark clothes made sighting me too difficult. Besides that, I must admit, I was weaving about like a frightened rabbit just at that moment!

At last, with a final leap, I gained the shore, only to feel bitterly disappointed once again. The rounded rocks which composed the shore were far too difficult to negotiate with speed. I stumbled and staggered among them for a while, tripping over long strands of brown weed, until I felt that I was in the middle of a nightmare. And always I heard other sounds behind me, sounds which showed only too plainly that the man with the rifle was gaining ground on me.

Then, as in a miracle, my luck held once more. I saw a narrow opening in the rock and squeezed inside it. The mouth of this gully was just wide enough to admit me. Then I was in darkness.

And as I stood there, with the rock pressing on my chest and my back, sending its damp chill through me, I heard footsteps approaching. I made an immense effort to stop myself from breathing so loudly and almost choked.

Then the footsteps passed the narrow opening at a shambling run, as though Jean, my pursuer, was so intent on finishing me off that he had not noticed the fissure in which I crouched.

After that, for a few seconds there was silence, broken only by the strong surge of the waters and the occasional melancholy crying of seabirds.

It would be too dangerous to stay here any longer, yet I did not dare to go out on to that rock-strewn beach again in case the moon played me a treacherous trick and left me exposed to the view of the man with the rifle.

I did the only thing possible; I squeezed a little farther into the narrow gully and then, to my surprise, I found that it opened out until it must have been at least three yards wide. The sky was now visible above me and I saw the bland-faced moon scudding along in the midst of a bevy of clouds.

In front of me the rock-face loomed up once more at the end of the stone cul-de-sac in which I floundered.

Now I was wet through to the waist from falling, again and again, into rock pools, and my knees and hands were grazed from their impact with the many shell-fish which clung to the rocks over which I clambered. Time and time again I trod on long thick strands of weed, which stretched like

disgusting snakes over the floor of the gully. Then I would slide and slither this way and that, losing my balance and tumbling headlong.

Once, when I had fallen so often that all the strength had gone from me for the moment, I lay still and listened. Someone was blowing a whistle up above on the cliff-top, I thought, though it was difficult within that enclosed stone box to be really certain of the directions from which sounds came.

I was still lying there when I heard another sound—this time a more terrible one—the vicious swishing of the sea making its way through the little fissure which had admitted me.

Then I realized, with a cold shock of horror, that the tide was rising and that this place would become a swirling maelstrom of cruel water before very long. I had trapped myself and the new enemy in whose clutches I would soon be held was not noted for mercy. The Major and his thugs were far more tolerant—beasts of the jungle though they were! The sea knew no mercy.

I got to my feet again and after an incredibly long time reached the end of the gully. A sheer and slippery wall faced me and with the first onrush of the waters behind me, I began at last to be really afraid.

It is one thing to face an opponent of one's own world, or even of the vicious animal or reptile world—but to face the untamable forces of Nature herself is another matter. An avalanche, a rockfall, an earthquake, the rising tide—these are opponents outside all the strength, the courage, the philosophy of puny man.

Then, while I was scrabbling like a mad thing at that slippery rock-face, a strange peace suddenly came over me. I felt sure that I was going to die—and yet I felt deeply thankful for one thing; that Mike was safe somewhere. At least I would not have his death on my conscience.

And as I thought that, my frantically searching fingers closed round a rope—a very old and worn rope, slimy with damp sea-lichens, but a rope nevertheless. I tugged at it and it held. It was obviously a mooring-rope, left by some fisherman who had once kept his dinghy in this little gully at high tide.

I swung on to this rope and, with my feet against the wet rock, began to haul myself up. It was perhaps not more than ten feet to the lip of the gully, yet to get there seemed to need the strength of a Hercules.

But I made it at last and, with the sea now not more than a yard below me, boiling round in the narrow space I had just left, I lay down panting on

the thin harsh grass which straggled down almost to the water-line.

It must have been a full half-hour before I felt strong enough to tackle the steep scramble up the slope once more.

When I did, I found that this area was not cliff-face, but steeply-shelving moorland, scattered here and there with rocks and thick clumps of gorse and even hawthorn.

I was half-way up this slope when I saw a light above me. It came from a house, half-hidden by trees, at what seemed the very summit of the rise.

I summoned all my energies and set off once more.

A hundred yards from this house I crouched in a clump of bracken and took stock of the place. It was a long low building, with tall chimneys. The rose-red light from a drawing-room cast long panels of pink across the smooth lawn which fronted the house. I looked through the long uncurtained windows. The room within seemed warm and comfortably furnished. I could see the roses which patterned the wallpaper, the brass warming-pan which hung beside a dark oak dresser, on which were arranged many coloured plates and pewter tankards.

And then I knew that this was the *right* sort of house—a place where folk were sane and solid and had a care for the decent values of life.

I stood up boldly now and walked across the smooth lawn, in and out of the rose light which flowed through the generous windows. I knocked gently on the glass-fronted door, and when no one came, turned the handle and dared to walk inside.

I felt that if my presence there was questioned by the owner, I would explain to him what the situation was, and then everything would be all right.

In that warm and comfortable drawing-room, I waited for a while, examining this and that—a jade vase, a Saxton map of Wiltshire, and so on.

Then I heard a slight movement in the room behind the white painted door.

I went towards it and knocked quietly. A low voice said, “Come in.”

I opened the door and went in.

Three men were facing me; men I already knew. They sat in a room which I already knew, a room where there was a desk with a hole in it and a leather chair with a steel back.

“Do come in, friend Stewart,” said Major Neumann. “We were expecting you. We left the light of the other room on to attract you if you got lost.”

My first impulse was to run back through the white door, and so across the lawn again.

And then I noticed that Jean’s rifle was trained on my chest. I saw his dark eye squinting down the sights at me and I knew that if I moved, that tense white finger on the trigger would twitch—though ever so slightly.

I went forward into the room. There was nothing else I could do.



## XVIII

# A New Development

**F**OR a moment or two the atmosphere was electric. Then Neumann smiled and said, “Do sit down, you must be tired.”

He waved towards the leather chair. I followed his gesture and saw a number of neat round holes which punctured the new leather at the back of the chair.

The situation was so ridiculous that in spite of my tiredness, I laughed out loud.

And strangely, by some curious quirk of the mind, Major Neumann laughed too, almost in sympathy, but perhaps rather as one who also sees the point of a grim joke from the opposite side of the fence.

“Very well, my friend,” he said, “sit on the desk if you would feel more safe there! I must admit, it was rather a stupid thing to do, especially as Pierre will now have to reupholster again, a job which he likes least of all!”

I said, “Why did you do such a positively crude thing? To drown a man, let us say, is understandable; but to shoot a man on an island like this must surely cause some comment?”

Pierre said, “You forget, I have a boat. A weighted body could be dropped without any trouble, between here and Jersey, or out towards Alderney, for example, in the off season, and there would be no one the wiser.”

Neumann said, with a smile, “You are perhaps right, Stewart. But I pressed the button automatically when you moved. One does not have to consider the crudity of a situation, or whether or not the islanders would become inquisitive, when one’s own life is in danger. All the same, your drowning idea isn’t a bad one, that is, if one is merely interested in disposal and not in obtaining information. And for the moment the latter is really what I am interested in—where are the papers?”

I felt that for a little while at least I was in a strong position. I actually lolled back on the desk and took a cigarette from the box there. Neumann leaned towards me and lit it, a strange smile on his face.

“The papers are still where they were when we last spoke, Major Neumann,” I said, blowing a blue stream of smoke into the air. “And as far as I am concerned, there they will stay.”

He began to speak, but I cut him short with a wave of the hand.

“Look,” I said, “you spun me a pathetic yarn about killing your own brother. You made out that you were on the side of the British Government, and so on. Yet your actions have proved that you are in just the opposite camp.”

As I spoke, Neumann regarded me narrowly, his hands folded on the desk-top. When I had finished he said, “Your own credentials are undoubtedly forged, my friend. You are attributing to me failings of your own, it seems. But even if we were, for the sake of pleasant argument, to assume that I am an agent of a non-British power, what proof is there that you, too, are not exactly in the same boat? It would be very easy to forge such a Government document as you carry—then what? As for the unfortunate fellow who was shot in Lincolnshire a few days ago, it does not matter greatly whose brother he was. The important fact was that he had in his possession certain plans and specifications which he had no right to, and which would do just as well in the hands of someone else who could make good use of them.”

I echoed his words, “good use”, in disgust. He opened his hands, palms upwards and smiled with a shrug.

“Look, my silly young friend,” he said, “this discussion will get us nowhere, on its present lines. So let us talk sense for the first time tonight. You are in possession of the papers, that much is certain. Now, if you persist in keeping your secret, it is unlikely that you will ever be able to hand those papers to those from whom they were, let us put it, abstracted. One way or another, you will not be in a position to return the documents. So, let us be realists. Let us face the facts like citizens of the world, not like hidebound nationalists, of whatever side.”

He paused for a moment and stared through me.

“What are you suggesting?” I asked. “That I come in with you and betray my own country?”

He smiled again and nodded, "Come in with us, yes, for that is good sense. But do not use such old-fashioned phrases as 'betraying one's country'. After all, does not each succeeding Government of your country betray the one that went before it? Are not politics always in a state of flux and even turmoil? History is full of cases of men who were imprisoned by one Government and turned into heroes by the next. How should ordinary mortals like us know what is betrayal?"

I stood up and faced him then. "Neumann," I said, "you are exactly the sort of skunk I suspected. I would rather burn those papers, then blow my own brains out, than go into partnership with a creature like you. You make honour and loyalty a mockery!"

He rose from his seat and said, "You will not offend me by such silly words, my friend. You are as yet inexperienced in the affairs of the world. One day, if you live so long, you will realize that I have spoken the truth to you here tonight."

He reached down to a small whitewood bookshelf which stood beside the biggest of the green files, and took from it a small red-bound book. Straightening up, he flicked open the cover and showed me the title-page.

"You see, I know something of what I am talking about, do I not?" he said.

I read the page which he held before me. It announced the title of the book, *The Philosophy of Totalitarian Government*. I saw that the author was "Professor Heinrich Neumann", and that this author had held a number of appointments in various continental universities before the last war.

Perhaps I lingered a little too long over my reading, or perhaps I was almost out on my feet anyway; but it was no surprise to me when Pierre placed his arms about me, in a grip which I had now come to respect, so that I was powerless to defend myself.

Major Neumann flung the red-backed book on to the desk.

"It has served its purpose," he said calmly. "You really should beware of such simple tricks, my friend, Stewart."

He came towards me and ripped back my jacket so that my chest was uncovered. In his hand I saw now, was a bright nickel-plated hypodermic syringe.

"This will not hurt too much," he said, as he pushed the needle at me. I tried to move back, away from it, but Pierre held me fast.

“Why, you swine!” I began to say.

Then Neumann waved to Pierre, who loosed me immediately.

“Come, come,” said Neumann, “You will soon be feeling differently about things. The effects are hastened considerably when the injection is made in the heart region and not in the arm.”

I felt my remaining strength leaving me rapidly.

I leaned on the edge of the desk.

“What are you going to do?” I said. “Are you going to kill me?”

Neumann shook his head. Already my swimming senses made him appear like some floating monster, which came up to my eyes and then receded.

“No,” he said, “we only intend to persuade you to tell us where the papers are, in the first instance. We may kill you later, who knows? In the meantime, when the drug has begun to work nicely, we shall turn you over to another colleague of ours, who has his own methods of persuasion. When you meet him tonight you will find him well fed and not too vicious. But by dawn he will again need sustenance, and if we do not take you away from him, he may forget all the good manners we have tried to teach him. But it will all depend on you, really; for we shall come to visit you an hour before dawn to see whether you still persist in being stupid, talking about ‘betraying countries’, and so on. Really, my dear young friend, it would be better if you told us what you know now. It would save you much inconvenience, and us a great deal of trouble.”

As his smiling face swung towards me I knew what I must do now. I steadied myself and, with my last strength, hit him fair and square on the jaw.

I saw his cigar fly from his mouth and gloried in the strangely surprised look which flashed across his swarthy face.

Then he slumped down at my feet, out to the wide.

I turned towards the door. Pierre was standing there, his fists clenched, waiting for me.

“Right,” I said, with a stiff smile on my face, “you have asked for it, and now you are going to get it.”

My fist was actually drawn back to strike him when I fell to my knees, the drug coursing through my body. I saw Pierre’s cynical leather-coloured

face above me as I sank down farther to the carpet.

Then a great curtain was drawn across my consciousness.

Before my head hit the floorboards, I heard Jean say, “It is a pity. This one has the heart of a lion. We could do with more like him in our organization. Alas, alas!”

Then I felt the bump.

# XIX

## Strange Companion

**W**HEN I came to again I was extremely cold. My teeth were chattering and my limbs were trembling uncontrollably. I felt that I was supporting an immensely heavy load, as though I had the weight of the world pressing down upon me, and could never shake it off. I tried to move my arms and legs, but they would not obey me. Then I tried to sit up, but nothing happened.

I shut my eyes again and tried to think. My mind was clear enough now; I could recall very accurately all the events of the previous night. Then I wondered whether I might not be tied, perhaps. I thought this over a while and decided that my arms and legs were not bound, for I felt no constriction. Yet I could not move. . . .

I opened my eyes again and found, to my great relief, that at least I could move *them!* I saw that by my side lay an electric torch, switched on, throwing its beam of light away to my right side. All the rest was darkness, except for a strange almost-green glimmer of translucence which seemed to lie alongside me.

I shut my eyes again and tried to think this out. . . . Yes, I was lying on my side, my right side, and there was something very cold and damp at my back. It must be a rock wall.

I listened intently now, for many sounds came flooding into my consciousness. Close to me, water was lapping. I could feel its chilly atmosphere striking up into my face. I was lying on a narrow ledge, it seemed, just above the water.

Then, to my nostrils came the unmistakable scent of salty mustiness—a heavy, almost sickly odour, thick and foully oppressive. Then I knew where I was; I was lying, helpless with the effects of the drug which had been pumped into me, in a cavern just above the highest point of the tide.

Dispassionately I gazed along the stream of light which came from the torch. In the silver beam glistened dozens of small round blobs of shining

tissue, red and brown and green, fixed like natural decorations to the wall of the cavern opposite me. They were sea-anemones.

The water that swung below me was at times black and then dark green. Sometimes a light phosphorescent glow, as delicate as the colour of spring-time leaves, flowed alongside my ledge, beneath the water. I wondered whether this was reflection of light from outside somewhere. . . . Suppose when the water went down there was a cave entrance beside my ledge? That would produce such a glow, surely. But to do that it would have to be daylight outside . . . daylight . . . dawn. . . .

Suddenly, terror clutched my heart; I recalled what Major Neumann had said to me in the house on the cliff, the night before.

“. . . But by dawn he will need sustenance. . . .”

I tried to sit up again, but nothing happened; my muscles could not obey me.

Then, as I lay there, staring into the darkness, I heard a new sound, a rushing, almost furious sound, as though a heavy body was thrusting its way along in the dark water below me.

I was still wondering, when into the beam of light swam a long grey-black shape, as viciously moulded as a torpedo. With a shrill creeping horror, I noted the high triangular fin which protruded above the surface of the black waters, and did my best to force myself back from the edge of my rock.

Slowly the thing swept past me, almost brushing my face with its filthy head as it swung a little above the water-line. Then it had gone, into the darkness beyond the circle of light around my torch.

I breathed in relief for a moment; but that respite was shortlived, for there was another swishing of water and I knew, although I could not move my head, that the creature was coming back.

This time it seemed to rub along the ledge, like a great pig scratching its back on a fence. Its wet and slippery side slid past my cheek, touching my body as it plunged back down the dark cavern.

Then I noticed that my left foot was sticking out beyond the ledge, over the water itself. I tried to draw it back; it would not come. I began to shout at it, ordering it to move when I commanded. . . . I think that I was almost insane just then, such was the depth of my terror.

Now the vile sea-creature came at me once more, this time seeming to halt a yard or so before it reached me. Then, with a movement which made me feel violently sick, I saw it slowly roll over on to its back and snap out into the air. Its many rows of teeth flashed in the torchlight. . . . It missed my foot by a yard.

Slowly I understood why; it was blind. In the rays of the torch I saw that its eyes were white, like those of creatures which have lived all their lives in the darkness.

It knew that I was there, somewhere; indeed, its passage to and fro, alongside my ledge, had been in the nature of explorations, to check up on my position, no doubt. But it had misjudged, this time.

How many times could I hope that it would misjudge the position of my foot . . . ?

It swung away from me again, its forked tail swinging up and over, then disappeared into the blackness of the cave. Now its movements were those of a frustrated creature, a hungry beast deprived of its food and angry at the deprivation. . . .

Now it was coming back again. With all my strength I tried to drag my foot away as the ghastly teeth snapped within six inches of it. Then I heard myself shouting, shouting with all the force of my lungs. . . . "Help, for God's sake! Help! Help!"

And as I realized that this was my own voice, I found also that I could move my head, and my neck, and then my arms. . . . The critical moment had arrived when the effects of the drug were fading.

I began to pray that I should be able to move my legs and feet before the thing came down the passage at me for the last time. . . .

Now it was here again, and rolling slowly over, like some filthy nightmare. . . . It was closer than ever; it could not miss me this time.

And yet my foot would not move. I tried to bend towards it and pull it away with my hands. . . . Suddenly the creature was bobbing towards me, its black mouth gaping, and I think I screamed in my terror.

Then above me there was a sharp crack, and another, and another. I saw the grey-black monster heel over and float away from my ledge. It suddenly began to thrash the water violently with its great tail, splashing me all over. In the torchlight I saw that the water had suddenly changed from dark green to red. . . .



Then the thing vanished below the surface of the waters, leaving behind it a circle of bloody froth.

I was still gazing at this in numbed fascination when a man came scrambling down out of the darkness towards me, kicking stones and rock fragments before him in his haste.

I heard his voice before I saw him.

“Why, you perishin’ maniac!” he was saying. “What do yer mean by it, kippin’ down ’ere with that blinkin’ thing at yer elbow! Yer want yer ’ead examined, that yer do!”

In the circle of light thrown by my torch stood a soldier. At least, he wore a khaki uniform, though it was much tattered and thick with mud. On his sandy hair he wore a greasy side-cap. He carried an army rifle slung at his back.

“Come on, nah,” he said, his face still grim. “Get up with yer. I can’t stop ’ere all night. I’ll catch me deathercold if I do. Got a weak chest, I ’ave; so be a bit considerate. Come on nah.”

I struggled hard and found that I could just sit up. He pushed his soiled cap back and began to scratch his ginger head.

“Well, blow me dahn,” he said. “What’s wrong with you, mate?”

I said, “I am not well. I can’t move out of here without your help, I’m sorry to say.”

“Cor, stone the crows,” he said, with a grin now. “But don’t you drop in for it, Charlie ’Arris!”

He bent and slowly lifted me to my feet, then, putting my arm about his shoulders, he began to lead me towards a great tumbled heap of rocks, at the top of which I saw the first faint rays of the dawn.

“Well,” he kept saying, “I’ve wasted three rahnds of precious ammunition, but at least I’ve got myself a torch—and, brother, believe me, I was badly in need of one. . . .”

As we struggled up towards the growing circle of light I said, “Who are you? I owe you a great debt, I must say.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Arsk no questions, ’ear no lies, mate. That’s all I’ll say. I don’t arsk you no names, don’t arsk me none. That’s all I say.”

I couldn't help smiling. "Look," I said, "I know your name is Charlie Harris, you said so a short while ago. What I meant was, what are you doing here, at this precise time?"

He stared at me aghast.

"Did I say that was my name, mate?" he said. "I must be losing my grip. . . . Well, it's a fair cop, china. Yus, that is my name—but as for what I'm doin' 'ere, well, let's 'ave a gent's agreement not to discuss that any more, hey?"

I nodded. He seemed a simple soul and he had done me a great service. I should have been churlish to embarrass him further.

As we climbed I felt my strength coming back rapidly. And at last we stood outside the mouth of the great cavern, with a winding path before us, along the steep side of a hill.

"We've got to get along there, mate," he said. "Can yer manage it?"

I said that I thought I could. Indeed, I knew that it was a matter of life or death for me to do so now, for at dawn Major Neumann and his two thugs would be coming down to see how I had fared, and whether I was willing to tell them where the papers were hidden.

Yet, as we scrambled along that sloping hillside, out of sight of the black cave mouth, my dominant emotion was one not of fear, but of immense anger—anger that Neumann should have let this happen, should have let the dawn break without coming down to see that I was unharmed. For he had said that the creature would not be hungry until dawn—yet it had been, obviously.

Then, as I speculated on this, another horrible thought struck me—suppose this delay was intentional, suppose that Neumann had meant the creature to attack me, to mutilate me, no more. . . .

Indeed, that would have impressed me with his ruthlessness. That would have made me talk, when I was able to again, *and no mistake!*

For I should then have been afraid of what would happen to me next time . . . and there would have been a next time, without any doubt.

## XX

# View Halloo!

**N**EARLY half a mile from the cave we sat down in the lee of some gorse-bushes. The cover was perfect; as I was to observe many times during that morning on this curious island, the gorse grew to an almost giant size, with brambles flourishing below it and ground ivy clustering half-way up the bramble stems. A man could have stood up and not been seen.

It was in such a place with the shore down below on our left, that we ate thick hunks of bread and cheese, and drank from a small flask of rum, all provided by the soldier. As the warm liquid ran down my throat I seemed to lose my tiredness and stopped shivering. I have never known bread and cheese, honest-to-goodness mouse-trap cheese at that, taste so much like an emperor's feast!

Yet I observed that the soldier ate sparingly, letting fall no crumb, and carefully putting back into his soiled haversack every crust or rind that we did not consume. The circling gulls got no pickings from that dawn breakfast!

Down below us, to the left hand, lay a great rocky bay, boulder-strewn and primeval. Within the semicircle of rocks immensely long brown strands of weed lolled in the water, half-submerged but stretching away out of sight, into the depths of the sea. I visualized this forest of strangling sea-growth below the water-line, its leg-thick strands wreathing hither and thither as the currents swept through it. A diver might be lost among such a fearsome wood, might be tossed from branch to branch, encircled, choked. . . .

The soldier followed my gaze.

He spoke with his mouth full of bread. "A shockin' sight, ain't it?" he said. "They calls it *Port du Moulin*; there's a big natural harch dahn there, see it, where I'm pointin'? Looks like a flyin' buttress on a cafedral, don't it?"

I nodded and gazed beyond the arch. Out offshore, a great slab of stone held itself erect, straight-edged as though some monstrous force had chiselled it with the aid of a cosmic ruler. Along its top ledge, the white birds sat in a long row, one of them occasionally leaving the group to circle above the immense rock, and then settle again, amid squawkings and chatterings.

The soldier said, “That’s the Altar Stone. Some hare-brained chaps ’ave tried to climb it, they say. Once they got an expert from Switzerland, or Haustria, one o’ them places. A mountain guide, ’e was, a proper climber, like. ’E got up there all right, and then couldn’t get dahn. A shockin’ thing it was, I ’eard. They got ’im dahn at last, but ’e was never the same again, they say.”

I looked across the early morning sea; Brechou lay close at hand, like a grey alligator. No smoke came from the few chimneys which clustered near each other at the summit of this small island. And way beyond Brechou lay the misty shape of Guernsey, still asleep.

I turned to the soldier. “I hope you don’t mind my asking,” I said, “but where do you live?”

He stared at me for a moment as though suspicious of my motives in asking such a question. Then he shrugged and, waving his hand vaguely towards the north, said, “Up there, matey. I don’t welcome no visitors, like, if I can ’elp it. . . . But if you’re ever stuck, make for that direction. You can’t go much farther, it’s only sea, more or less, after that—with a little row of islands, more like rocks, stickin’ out o’ the water. If you need me again, make for a little ’ill like, with a sort of little stone castle on the top, only as ’igh as my chest, like, and all ruined. It’s an old shooting range, or summat.”

“Do you live in that?” I asked, half in amusement. He cut me short with a scornful glare.

“Nah,” he said. “Don’t be daft! That’s just a landmark, like, I’m tellin’ you abaht. You get up there and whistle three times, nice an’ loud, or I shan’t ’ear you. I live a fair way from that, in a ’ole in the ground, matey. You won’t get no plush chairs to sit in when you come to see me, I c’n tell yer! No, nor no cups o’ china tea aht o’ willow-pattern mugs neither. You’ll live rough. So only come up there if you’re in *real* trouble!”

He made a movement as though he wished to leave me then. But I put my hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

“Wait,” I said. “I’ve heard your voice before. You were singing last night, outside a house on the cliff-top, weren’t you?”

He shook himself free of my grasp. His face was set in a frown of suspicion now.

“What if I was, hey?” he almost shouted. “Whose business is it whether I sing or not? Ain’t you never been carol-singing?”

I let that one pass and pressed on to my next question, the only one I really wanted to ask him.

“What you do with your own time is your own business,” I said. “What I want to know is—when you were up there, did you see a young fellow, a boy?”

He looked away from me for a moment or two. Then he nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “There *was* a young chap trying to climb on a roof, I noticed. I thought maybe ’e lived there and was playin’ a trick on somebody. It weren’t my business, one way or another.”

“All right,” I said, “that’s fine. But did you see what happened to him afterwards?”

He smiled and nodded. “I ’adn’t got much more than a ’undred yards from that place when I heard someone breaking glass windows, and then the lad beat it, past me and in the direction of the village, I’d say. I reckon ’e broke a window and then was scared what ’is pa would say! ’E didn’t seem to want to wait to find aht, either!”

Now I could smile again. So Mike had jumped off the low roof when I had broken my way through the french window, and had run to the village. . . . Therefore, he must be safe, at least.

“Where’s the village?” I asked then.

The soldier stood up and waved to our right. I followed his gesture and saw the top edge of a red roof or two, and a great stone tower surmounting them all.

“That’s the Seigneurie,” said the soldier. “Where the Dame lives, like. She’s the queen o’ this island, like. A fewdil overlord, they calls ’er.”

And as I stood up beside him to get a better view of the Seigneurie, I saw a faint puff of blue smoke on the hillside we had just left. And immediately afterwards, something whirred through the air by my ear. A sprig of gorse blossom broke off and fell at my feet.

“Get dahn, you perishin’ fool!” the soldier snarled. “Someone’s shootin’ at you. Don’t you understand, you ninny?”

He took me by the arm and almost flung me to the ground. As he did so three more sprays of gorse fell about us.

The soldier frowned. “Funny thing,” he said, “I didn’t ’ear any reports. They must ’ave jolly good silencers on them weapons. And telescopic sights, I shouldn’t wonder.”

I lay still for a moment wondering what I ought to do next. The soldier was already on his hands and knees.

“Well, mate,” he said, “I’m off ’ome. It ain’t healthy ’ere right now. I’d like to send ’em one or two back, but I’ve only got three rounds left, and I’d like to ’ang on to them, just in case. You never know when they might be needed, like.”

He began to crawl away, using the gorse cover to its best advantage. When I set off in the same direction he stopped and growled at me, “Hey, beat it! I don’t want you with me just now. Find a place o’ yer own, mate.”

I stared back at him in bewilderment. “But where can I go?” I asked him.

His face softened for a moment. “Try to make for the village,” he said. “And if they cut you off there, head south, past ’em again, towards Dixcart Bay. You’ll find that on a map, if you’ve got one. Don’t go right dahn to the bay or they’ll get yer there. No, hide out in Baker’s Valley. It’s a deep gully all covered with greenery—rhubarb bigger than a man, with leaves what you could put to sea in! Real tropical it is, dahn there. If you can ’ide there till this ’ere island wakes up, then you might be safe. Cheerio, I can’t wait gossipin’ with you. I’ve got to go ’ome and collect the post!”

Then he was gone. The only trace of his presence was a slight movement of the gorse along the hillside.

I stood up, knees bent, and peered through the topmost branches of the gorse-bushes. Fanning out, between the village and myself, ran three men—Neumann, Pierre and Jean. The early morning sunlight glinted on the barrels of the rifles which each man carried.

There was nothing for it, I could not reach the sanctuary of that little village—therefore I must make my way, as best I could, to Baker’s Valley. Stopping for a moment or two to locate this place on the map in my guide-book, I followed the soldier’s example, and bending low in the gorse, began

to make my way south again, covering much of the ground over which I had already come that morning.

But I had not gone more than a hundred yards when, away to my left, I heard a high cry.

“Halloo! There he is!” called Jean.

Keeping as low as I could for fear of being picked off by these rifles with telescopic sights, I began to race like a mad thing towards the south end of the island.

## XXI

# Tour in Haste!

I HAVE always kept myself pretty fit, even in those difficult war days, when it was not always so easy to get exercise—but as I ran across the rough and treacherous fields of this island, leaping ditches, scrambling under rusting barbed wire, my heart began to thump and my breath to whistle in my throat. My last two days of exertion were telling their tale, it seemed.

Once I had almost staggered to the end of a narrow lane only to find Pierre waiting at the end of it, his rifle at the ready. Then weaving and ducking, I raced back along the rutted pathway and then plunged to my left, down a steep and ivy-shrouded slope. Before me reared a huge wall of rock, with a doorway in it. I was within a breath of leaping through that hole when I saw, two hundred feet below, the sea lashing itself to a frenzy on the jagged grey rocks. I drew back once more from this sheer drop and doubled back the way I had come.

Above me, I heard the footsteps of two of the party which pursued me. I was well past them going in a contrary direction before they caught the sound of my footsteps; then they turned and I heard them in the distance, running somewhere behind me.

This time I made the road safely. Before me, not five hundred yards away, a small row of houses stood, quietly asleep. . . . Then a woman came round the corner on an old bicycle, wobbling from side to side, her head bent.

I raced towards her and, as I got nearer, saw that her machine was loaded with artist's materials, an easel, a stool, paintbox and small luncheon basket.

I stood in the middle of the narrow road, my arms held wide.

“Can you help me?” I said, in an urgent voice. “Will you lend me your bike? I will see that you get it back.”



She woke from her wobbling daydream and stared at me, through me, as she still came on. I had time to observe that her battered felt hat had done service through three reigns; her steel spectacles were mended with string at one side; her wispy grey hair had not known a brush or comb for a long time. . . . She was unlikely to belong to the world which I inhabited at that moment—the world of violence and haste.

“Get out of my way, young man,” she called, in an astonishingly strong voice. “Stand back or I shall report you to the constable. This is no place for wandering vagabonds; we are good folk here. . . . Get away, I say, or I will run you down!”

Such was the expression of ferocity on her gentle face that I could not help but smile. Then, far back along the road, I saw three men walking swiftly for they, too, had seen the old lady and were anxious not to rouse her suspicions.

“Good day, madam,” I said. “And I hope you have a pleasant morning sketching.”

She gave an annoyed snort and pedalled away down a side road. I waited no longer, but ran on with all my force, trying to make up for the time I had wasted in this fruitless conversation.

Now I was nearer the village. Indeed, I passed a number of secluded houses, their curtains still drawn, which tempted me to run along those quiet garden paths and knock on the locked doors for sanctuary.

But it was obvious to me, even as I gave way to such thoughts, that the men who pursued me would follow and drag me away before anyone could get downstairs to listen to my story.

There was even a more sinister possibility—that the good householder would arrive at the door just in time to find a newly dead body on the doorstep.

So I ran on, praying for the little place to wake up, for chimneys to smoke and men to appear in the streets.

Soon I turned across a high field which gave a magnificent view of the sea towards Jersey. Then over a wire fence and on down a bracken-covered slope. Once I almost ran headlong into the wide open mouth of a great circular pit.

As I swerved and ran alongside this chasm I glanced down and saw that it fell a hundred and fifty feet, and that below the sea swirled in and out

hungrily.

At this point I leaned against a rock to regain my breath. From above me two dark shapes appeared, two heads on the skyline. A chip of rock fell on to my head and my eyes were suddenly filled with dust. I heard no report.

I ran round the rock and, zigzagging like a frightened rabbit, plunged down into a small stunted forest, whose trees were grey with fungus and twined about with ivy from root to topmost branch . . . a dying forest . . . a forest of death perhaps.

And then, miraculously, I was in Baker's Valley!

I did not need to consult my little map to verify this; for in the green bottom of this sheltered place grew masses of rhubarb plants, as tall as a man, and bearing great leaves, five feet across. I did not hesitate, but shot off the narrow pathway and down among the ivy and vetch and nettles which grew with a tropical energy in this curiously verdant place.

And there I lay, my body damp with dew, my chest heaving, my face running with sweat, while the gnats buzzed round me, causing me the greatest irritation when they settled on my face or hands, which they often did.

And as in a wickedly slow dream, I heard the footsteps of my pursuers approach down that little path. . . . I heard them pass me, swearing and grunting as they went.

One voice I recognized. It was Neumann's. He said, "When we get round the next bend we shall see where he is. If he is in the bay he is done for!"

Then they ran on, and no sooner had their footsteps faded than I rose again and ran back to the path. Now my mind was made up; I would go north again, across the common, and try to find that little grey stone shooting-range that the soldier had mentioned. There I might elude them until the smoke started rising from the chimneys of Sark.

It was here that my confidence led me astray. I clambered down a grassy slope to my right to drink from a stream which gushed from beneath a gorse bush. As I drank I saw the white shape of the lighthouse, perched high on the rocks, behind me. And only a few yards away, a rockpool. I gazed at the white lighthouse, like a child on holiday; then I gazed at the rockpool, as though I had all time before me to enjoy these sights. Indeed, in that moment, it seemed to me that time did in fact stand still.

I have thought about this since; it was not so much that I had lost all sense of the gravity of my situation—it was rather that after my violent exertions, my emotional stresses, and so on, my mind had called a halt. It was not prepared to go on with this fiendish chase. It turned to these relatively unimportant things. . . .

I strolled over to the rockpool. It seemed to be visited daily by the sea, for it was thickly encrusted with a white deposit and so stood out, in all its striations and planes, from the flat face of the grey-green rocks about it.

I bent over it and gazed down. It was a little world of its own, bearing no relation to any other world. I felt that I, too, could become small, minutely small, and dive down there and lose myself, among the sea-anemones, the white and pink encrustations, the gay ribbons of weed which floated towards the surface, anchored on all sides of the pool. . . . And far down in that glycerine-like water, moving gently in and out of the khaki-brown and olive-green weeds, were two fishes, left by a recent tide . . . small monarchs of this world of tiny green crabs, and semi-transparent prawns. . . . How I envied those fishes!

Then a sound above me broke through this dream of inertia. I gazed upwards, past a rusting cannon which propped itself drunkenly against a blackened spar of wood, past the grey-green slope of harsh salty grass, where three rabbits nibbled away without concern. . . .

Neumann was up there, the bright sky burning behind him, a small figure against a blue backcloth—a figure of death.

I watched his shoulders hunch into a characteristic pose, and then saw the little puff of blue smoke. I dived forward towards the rocks as the bullets whirred above me ricocheting from the rocks and splashing into the rockpool.

Now I realized that I had put myself in a bad position. While I had stayed on top of the island I could always double back, or even go round in circles. . . . But down here, at sea level, I could only follow the shore—and *they* were always above me.

Soon they would come down to me, no doubt; then all I could do would be to take to the sea. . . . I shuddered at this thought, suddenly recalling those immense and cruel brown weeds near the Altar Stone on the other side of the island.

Then I knew what it was like to be a hare, or a stag, or a fox; to be a hunted creature, in fact.

“Right,” I remember saying, “at least I’ll give you a run for your money, and if only you had left me that little Italian Spirelli, I might have given you something else!”

So I stumbled on, smiling grimly, without a hope in the world. . . . Now and again bullets spattered themselves flat on the rocks before or behind me, but nothing had hit me so far. Once, however, a chip of granite flew up from under my feet and gashed my cheek. I ran on, the blood running down my face unheeded.

And at last I rounded a rocky bend and saw then that I had come to the end of the island itself.

Before me, at the other side of a channel of surging water, stood a series of small islets, each smaller than the one before it.

The nearest of them stood up out of the sea, triangular and gnarled, its rocks tumbled this way and that, as though it had been born in some ghastly upheaval of the earth.

I did not know how deep was the channel which separated me from that island, or how strong the current which ran through it might be. I tore off my tattered shoes and plunged into the heavy green seas, and then swallowed a mouthful of salt and went under.

For a moment I think I lost consciousness. I only knew that there was a rushing, roaring sound in my ears, and that I now lived in a world of green and black . . .

Then I was clutching something like a slippery rope . . . it was a strand of that weed which I had so feared. I was clinging on to it, letting it keep me afloat, letting it swing me with the current onto the little triangular island. . . .

A great wave flung me behind a rock; the one which followed it tried to drag me into the sea again. But I would not allow it to do that!

I scabbled at the grey granite until my fingers bled. . . . And pulling with all my remaining strength, I dragged myself to safety for the moment, between two knife-edged stones and, there wedged, drew in a deep breath.

I was on the island called La Grune—and what was more, I was on the opposite side of the rocks from my pursuers. Fire as they might, they could never hit me. They could not lay a finger on me—until the tide went down; unless they chose to leap into the boiling channel as I had done.

And somehow I could not picture any of them doing that—not if there was a chance of taking me an easier way. And here they could afford to wait, for we were at the extreme northern end of the island, not a place likely to be frequented by fisherfolk or holiday-makers for some hours. . . .

I lay back in the warm sunshine and began to think of poor David Balfour in *Kidnapped*. He, too, was left on a small island; but the difference between us was that he did not know that the tide would ever go down. I did, and the thought did not give me too much satisfaction!

## XXII

# La Grune

**Y**ET it was not the tide, or even my enemies with their rifles, that caused me my next discomfort.

As I lay in the shelter of the rocks, getting back my breath, my strength, a swift shadow passed over me with a vicious rustle. I sat up, just as it came again—and then lay down without further persuasion. A great gull was swooping at me and coming a little too close to be pleasant.

Suddenly the air was filled with the discordant shrieking of these birds, some of them seeming to hurl abuse, some laughing like feathered maniacs, and all discussing my presence at the tops of their harsh voices.

And now the sky directly above me was thick with gulls, swooping, soaring, whirling, skimming about my rocks.

I stood up and they rose a little, but still repeated their warning, threatening cries. Once more their leader swung down at me, so swiftly that I had no time to strike at him to drive him higher. His tail feathers brushed the back of my head and then he rose, squawking, away to my right. I wished then that I had a stick to keep him from me, I felt so helpless.

It was while I was staring up after him that I understood why these birds had become so suddenly angry with me; they were obviously hatching out some young ones up there, near the summit of the triangular hillock. Sentinel gulls stood watch near the cairn-like stones above me.

But I had no wish to be blinded by these furious birds. So I began to make my way round the islet trying to put as much distance as I could between myself and their nests.

Yet this, too, was a dangerous thing to do, for the bigger gulls now began to swoop one after the other, and once I came near to missing my footing and rolling down in that deep green channel of water again. Perhaps that was what they wanted me to do, I thought grimly. Well, I would show them that I was not so easily scared.

I stood up and waved my handkerchief at them as they swooped.

Instantly the air was filled with a whirring, whizzing sound. I felt a sudden violent shock just above my wrist and my arm fell by my side. At the same time a gull just above my head shrieked out and fell fluttering into the water channel, to be swept away, its wings thrashing helplessly, its white breast stained red.

I sat down suddenly behind a rock and looked at my wrist. There was a deep red wound running across it on the outside. Blood was pouring freely from it now that it hung down.

My first action was to try to move all my fingers. Thank Heaven, I could do that, so there was nothing seriously wrong. Nor was the bone broken, I thought.

All the same, my right hand was now useless as a weapon of attack or defence. I bit my lip as I bound my white handkerchief about it and tied it as tightly as I could bear.

For a while the gulls were silent, having been scared by the sudden and inexplicable death of their leader. But soon they began to come down at me again.

I think that it was at this point that my self-control snapped. A man can stand a great deal of fear and pain, but there comes a moment in time when his very inner spirit revolts against taking any more punishment. Then that man, like a rogue elephant, is likely to become very, very dangerous, for he loses all fear, and is even happy to give himself to death, provided that he can make his tormentors suffer at the same time.

So, as the next covey of gulls swung into line and dived down upon me, I stood up and struck at them with my jacket. One of them got himself caught in the folds and was flung to the ground, where he lay screaming in his fury for a while before dragging himself away. Then I struck again and again, doing little damage, but succeeding at last in sending them away. In the respite which I gained, I scabbled up a handful of rock fragments, though I found it difficult to throw these with my left hand.

Then, when I was in the midst of this battle with the birds, I suddenly realized that no one had shot me, as I had expected they would!

I clambered on to the rock above me and then on to the one above that. From this point I could see well on to the main island. What was more, I could see that little stone tower which the soldier had described to me. And

beyond that, running across the open moorland, I could see three figures with whom I was now only too painfully familiar.

And even as I watched my enemies running away, weaving and ducking, as I had done before, I saw a man's head appear above the top of the little tower. Then that head bowed itself to one side, and I saw that a bright rifle barrel was trained on the retreating figures.

The sharp crack of that rifle came to my ears as clearly as though it had been fired five yards away, instead of a quarter of a mile.

A blue puff of smoke rose lazily into the air and dispersed as it caught the air stream which blew across the island.

Then, with a savage exultation in my heart, I saw the last of the three figures which sped across the common spin round, stagger for a pace or two, and then fall.

The others halted and after some words to each other which I could not hear, they ran back, bent double, and lifted their fallen comrade.

"Well, that's Jean put out of action!" I said, as they scuttled away, obviously in mortal terror that the rifle would crack again and lay another of them low.

But that did not happen, to my annoyance!

Instead, a man came running down the slope from the little tower, waving his rifle, shouting urgently, "Come on, you stupid So-and-so! What did you want to get yourself caught up there for? You've made me use up the last of my ammo now, you silly fellow!"

It was the soldier, and his expression was anything but friendly, until he stood on the opposite side of the narrow channel and saw that my right wrist was wrapped in a bloodstained bandage.

Then his face changed. "Hey," he said, "I didn't know they 'ad nicked you, china! Is it bad?"

I shook my head and did my best to look happy about the whole thing, as though any day that passed without my getting such a flesh wound was another day wasted.

He shook his head again. "You'll have to take it easy, mate," he said. "We don't want you passin' out on that knob of rock, or they'll come again later an' get you as sure as eggs!"



He said no more, but ran back up the hillock and disappeared. I sat down on the nearest rock and began to feel depressed. What did he expect me to do? Ought I to jump into the channel and take my chance of getting across to the main island? I was still thinking this out when the soldier appeared carrying a length of line.

Standing firm on the far side, he flung the line across to me.

“Hey,” he called, “tie this rahnd yer waist and jump in. I’ll see you don’t get carried aht to sea, that’s what I’ll do, mate.”

I rose wearily and tied the rope as he had said.

At the edge of the rocks I said, “Well, here goes nothing!” and jumped.

As the waves swirled about me, dragging me along the waterway, I was able to glance up at the red-haired soldier. He was standing, legs wide apart, and pulling for all he was worth. I hoped that he would have me out before too long, for the water was even colder now than it had been before, it seemed to me.

So, almost without any emotion, I felt myself being dragged towards the rock on which Charlie Harris stood. In another minute he was leaning down, his hands beneath my arms, hauling me up to his safe ledge.

And then we were both sitting side by side, laughing in the sunshine.

“Well,” he was saying, “I must say you’re a perishin’ joker, and not ’arf! Come on, before they come back. We’ll go to my place and see if the butler ’as put the kettle on for tea!”

Then, laughing and staggering, I leaned on his strong shoulder as he guided me over the hillock, past the little stone tower, and so down to a narrow gully that fell down and down, dark and frightening, and then curved surprisingly, and led upwards again for a few paces, to the low mouth of a dark cavern.

I almost fell a dozen times, but Charlie Harris was always there to pull or push me back to safety.

At the mouth of the cave he said, “Now take it easy when you go through the front door. If you step too far to the right, you’ll just tumble a straight eighty feet, wiv nothin’ to save yer! That’s all—and welcome to ’Arris ’All, yer lordship!”

## XXIII

# New Acquaintance

FOR the first time since my arrival on Sark the evening before, I sat down and relaxed. 'Arris 'All was, in fact, the old smugglers' caves known as *Les Boutiques*, vast and echoing, but full of sheltered nooks and crannies. Down behind us the sea rolled, in a subterranean cavern; boulder strewn on boulder by some great natural upheaval had formed such steps as a giant might have walked on—but not us.

We stayed where we were, out of reach of wind and weather, but high above the sea. As for me, I had had enough of the sea in the last two days. I decided that I was a dry land creature after all!

Charlie Harris had produced from somewhere a small meths stove with its solid fuel, and had boiled up some water in a collapsible billy-can. So we had the cup of tea he had mentioned, but we drank it out of the can, with the tea added, and taking it in turns to sip the boiling brew! All the same, it was the best cup of tea I ever remembered having!

I recall telling Charlie Harris that he should get a job in the best hotel in London for making a drink like that. He grinned and then frowned.

"I've 'ad enough of kitchens, matey," he said. "Most of my army service 'as been spent in kitchens, in one place or another."

He lit a sodden cigarette from a paper packet and went on, "It's a funny thing, I've 'ad a great many jobs in my time, but never one I 'ated so much as peelin' spuds for the camp cook! Oh, chum, the millions o' spuds I've peeled—you'd never believe it! I've peeled spuds in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Suez! And me what's been a full-blown barrow-boy in me time. Yus, and a lightweight boxer, too. The Pride o' Stepney they used ter call me, way back, before I stopped bein' able to fiddle my way aht o' the army any longer! But the sad day came—they caught up with me, and then it's good-bye to the barrow and the boxing gloves.

"The Colonel looks at me aht of 'is eyeglass and 'e says, ' 'Arris, my good man,' 'e says, ' 'Arris, we intend to make a man of you, you miserable

little squirt! So get crackin' an' peel them spuds!' the Colonel says.

"So for the first three weeks in the army I peel just abaht firty fahsand spuds, till me fingers is raw, real raw. It's a trufe I'm tellin' you, matey; I wore four kitchen knives aht, peelin' 'em spuds. Swelp me, but I did. Four brand new Sheffield knives.

"When they give me the fifth knife, I sees red, like. Or at least, pink! So that day, when I 'as ter go up to the stores, to draw a new saucepan for that fat slob of a cook, I just gets on a bus and comes 'ome.

"Cor, you should 'ave seen my sister Florrie's face, 'er what's married to a copper!

"Leave my 'ouse right away, you good-for-nothing,' she says.

"I tells 'er to be natural, but it's no use. I 'as to go back to camp. Though I must say, 'er 'usband, the copper, gives me ten bob to see me through till my next leave. A good sort, for a copper, that is. I got nothin' against 'im. 'E can't 'elp being a copper, can 'e?

"Well, when the Sergeant sees me, 'e twirls 'is big moustache till it stands aht like a cow's 'orns. Then 'e smiles till 'is teef stick aht like a wolf's molars!

"Ha! Ha!' he says, sarcastic-like. 'Why, 'ere's ahr Little Lord Fauntleroy come back to peel ahr spuds for us!'

"Then 'e puts me on cookhouse duty for three weeks solid—peelin' spuds all the time. I tell you, china, if I never see a spud again in my life, that'll be all right with me.

"But such torment can't go on for ever, mate, can it? There's a limit to what flesh an' blood can stand.

"So one night, when I'm on duty in the Sergeants' Mess, I wait in the corridor till 'Is Nibs goes to the barroom. Then I nips into 'is room, shifts 'is bed to the other side and takes 'is light bulb aht.

"'E comes back from 'is bath, all spruce like, slams the door and leaps into bed—as 'e thinks! China, you should 'ave 'eard the bang 'e made on that concrete floor! Well, 'e was a big man, sixteen stone at least—a real 'eavyweight!

"But there it was; I larfed so much, I was bent double when 'e stormed aht of 'is billet. I 'adn't the strength to run away, you see!"

I said, "What happened, then, Charlie? More spuds?"

His face assumed a morose look.

“Nah,” he said. “It might ’ave been better if it ’ad a been spuds. Instead, ’e ’ad me clapped on guard duty for a solid week. All night, that was. Well, on the fourth night I felt I’d had enough. So I walks up the road to check up on a small dog what was ’anging abaht the camp entrance, suspicious-like. Then I gets on that bus, rifle an’ all, calls at my sister Florrie’s to get a few bob off of ’er copper-’usband, and ’ere I am.

“I felt I’d like a change; some nice quiet spot where nobody wants any spuds peelin’ or guard duty doin’.”

I thought for a while.

Then I said, “Look, Charlie, you’re only making things bad for yourself, running away from the army. When they catch up with you again you’ll get put through the hoop for this absence without leave lark. Why not go back and give yourself up?”

Charlie Harris stared at me as though I had crawled from under a stone.

“Hey,” he said sharply, “what’s all this ’ere? Are you preachin’ to me? After what I’ve done for you, mate?”

I said, “I’m grateful for everything, Charlie. I’m just trying to take the long view. After all, I’ve done my time in the service, I know how they look at these things.”

Suddenly he rose and looked down at me severely.

“Look ’ere matey,” he said, almost with menace. “You keep your perishin’ mouth shut about this, see? I like you, in a sort of way. I don’t want any trouble with you. I don’t want to hurt you, see?”

He was now so serious that I felt I had gone far enough.

I did say, however, “If you go back and give yourself up, I know a chap in London who will speak up for you, get you off, maybe, for what you’ve done for me.”

Charlie Harris screwed up his lips and spat.

Then, with all the contempt in the world in his voice, he said, “Do you know what I fink you are, mate? I fink you are a perishin’ copper, that’s what. A plain-clothes copper! And do you know what I would like to do with plain-clothes coppers, hey?”

He was about to tell me, in no uncertain terms, when from above us a shadow fell down and we saw that a man stood in the high cavern mouth, a short, strongly built man with something in his hand.

We stood in silence then, our quarrel forgotten.

From over us a voice spoke, sternly, commanding.

“Right, that’s it, you two. The game’s up. Throw that rifle down and come on out.”

Charlie Harris groaned, “Gripes, that sahnds just like ahr Sergeant! But it can’t be—’e’s taller’n that fellow up there.”

But he threw the rifle down. It clattered against the side of the dark cavern and sent echoes toppling one after the other down to the rumbling sea.

I followed Charlie up towards the light. As we got nearer to the cave entrance I looked at my watch. It said eight o’clock.

I had never done so much before breakfast in my life, and hope never to do so much again.

## XXIV

# Strange Safety

**A**s I came up to where the man still stood, I saw first of all his stout, nailed boots; then his strong legs, clad in blue jeans; his barrel chest swathed in a thick black reefer jacket; and lastly, his broad, tanned face, surmounted by a black beret pulled well down over his forehead in a most unglamorous manner!

The face beneath the beret had no pretensions to being glamorous, in any case; it was a most practical and business-like face, from its lined forehead and bushy grey eyebrows, down its short thick nose, under which bristled a short military moustache, to its wide unsmiling mouth and firm, cleft chin, which had not been too carefully shaved that morning it seemed, as though its possessor had come out in something of a hurry.

In his right hand the man carried, not a pistol, but a very ordinary though none the less realistic truncheon.

“Come along,” he said crisply, as we paused by the cavern mouth. “Put a jerk into it, I’m hungry.”

Charlie Harris surveyed this man a little rebelliously, having made sure that he wasn’t the Sergeant who figured in his fantasies.

“Hey,” he said at last, “who do you think you are, matey, orderin’ us abaht like that?”

The man with the truncheon smiled, quietly but with an immense confidence. “My name is Bill Lacey,” he said, “and I am the senior constable of Sark, that’s who I am. And if I choose to order you, or anyone else, about on this island, my word carries weight, see?”

He seemed to stand back a little then, swinging his stick and surveying us separately, as though taking stock of us as we blinked in the morning sunlight which struck into our eyes from the eastern side of the island.

Then he stepped forward a pace and, clearing his throat, said, “I arrest you both. You, sir, on a charge of vagrancy; and you, soldier, on a charge of

desertion from Her Majesty's armed forces. Follow me and offer no resistance, unless you wish the charges against you to become those of the utmost gravity. I must warn you that you cannot escape from this island."

Then he turned on his heel and began to climb back up the sunken steep path, towards the little stone tower at the summit of the hillock.

I hesitated, but Charlie Harris pushed me forward.

"Go on, mate," he said. "It's a fair cop. He's treatin' us right. We don't want to get into real trouble, now, do we?"

I whispered, "I was thinking about you, Charlie boy, not myself. I can probably fix things when I get to the village."

The constable halted and surveyed me with a look which was anything but friendly. He had obviously heard my words.

"Look, mister," he said curtly, "if that's what you think, then forget it. I have power to lock you up for two days, whatever strings you think you can pull, see? After that, I can appeal to Guernsey and get you taken over there. What they do with you is not my affair. But don't try any funny business while you are under my arrest, got that?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Constable, you may find that you are making a big mistake."

He cut me short with a wave of his truncheon.

"The only mistake I shall make, my lad," he said, "is to listen to you. I don't propose to do that from now on—so march!"

He pointed down the narrow pathway that led southwards, between high banks of gorse, towards the first red roofs of the village.

We set off without another word. The constable stopped by a gate and dragged a bicycle out from behind the stone wall. Then, riding slightly behind us, he shepherded us towards the line of trees at the end of which we saw a long squat grey stone building.

On the way we passed a number of men, all dressed in dark blue jerseys and jeans, washed and rewashed to a pale shade of amethyst. They nodded or called out to the constable, some of them asking jocularly whether we were murderers or what!

The constable answered gravely, but no doubt with a wink behind our backs.

Outside a little villa surrounded by rather moth-eaten palm trees and cacti, we stopped and the constable called out, “Are you in, Miss Wheeler?”

There came a sudden twittering from the glass-fronted door, and the elderly lady I had met earlier on the bicycle came on to the step, holding a saucepan in her hand.

“Is this the man who frightened you, Miss Wheeler?” asked the constable, pointing to me with his truncheon.

The lady looked at me over her steel-rimmed glasses and nodded happily.

“Yes, Constable,” she cooed, “that is the young man. Though in all honesty, I must say he doesn’t look nearly so terrifying now that I see him clearly. Quite a good head, in fact. Perhaps he will allow me to come down to the gaol and draw him this afternoon? Or is that against the law, Constable? I really do need a model for my Saint Anthony.”

The constable shrugged his shoulders and said, “There’s no accounting for tastes, Miss Wheeler. But I have no objection—and it doesn’t matter what he says.”

As we set off again I turned and made such a frightful face at the old lady that she stared back at me aghast, astounded by human duplicity, no doubt. I felt sure then that she would not trouble me at the gaol that afternoon.

Once more, before we reached the long grey building, I tried to speak to the constable seriously.

“Look,” I said, “I work for an important Government department and they . . .”

He gave me a substantial push in the middle of the back with the truncheon.

“So do I,” he said. “Now get along there, I’m waiting for my breakfast.”

Charlie Harris took a turn in the conversation then.

“Hey, you,” he said, “and what abaht my rifle, hey? It’s dahn there in the cave, where you made me leave it.”

“I’ll send my boy to fetch that,” said the constable. “You can forget it. It’s impounded now. No longer your responsibility. I shall see that it appears in time for your court martial.”



Charlie Harris gave the constable a very dirty look, and then we were outside the gaol.

It was a smallish building of granite, with one door and two small windows high up under the hemispherical roof. The stout oak door stood open as though the place had been left ready for our arrival.

But before I went in I leaned against the lintel and said, “Look, Constable, I’m as law-abiding a citizen as you are yourself. And I’m telling you that you are doing a very stupid thing in locking me up at this moment.”

He came forward smiling.

“Oh, am I?” he said. “Well, all right. I’ll be stupid, just for the fun of it, hey?”

I pushed his hand down as he came to take me by the shoulder.

“If you shut me up the three crooks I had tracked to this crazy island will undoubtedly make a clear getaway. And I’m telling you, the British Government will take a pretty dim view of a certain constable we both know.”

He stood back for an instant and surveyed me, his eyes narrowed, his strong hands on his hips.

“Oh,” he said, stretching the exclamation out until it sounded unbelievably foolish. “Oh, so you have tracked three dangerous enemies to the Government here, have you? Strange I’ve never heard of them, isn’t it? Do tell me about it, sometime, when we’ve lots of time to spare. Next week, say?”

I opened my mouth to protest but he held up his hand and said, with an astounding change of manner, “Get in there, Claude, or I’ll be forced to treat you as resisting arrest and bat you on the head.”

I stared him in the eye.

“And that would be the last blow you ever struck, friend,” I said.

His face changed. I think he saw that I really meant it.

“Right,” he said. “Get in there, all the same. There’s someone waiting for you.”

I turned from him, puzzled, and walked into the little gaolhouse. Then I almost fell backwards out of the door.

Mike was sitting at a small table, stuffing away fit to bust, at a breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast—and, indeed, everything that goes to make up a hungry man’s dream of Paradise!

“Hiya, Big Sleuthman!” he said, his mouth full and bulging. “I thought you’d never find your way back to civilization! Where’s your little map, Sherlock dear?”

I think that I might have slung that young man round by the ear had not the constable slapped me on the back and told me to sit down.

“I’ll bring your breakfast over in a jiffy,” he said. “My wife’s already got it in the frying-pan, I smelled it as we passed my house.”

I gazed at him in astonishment, but he smiled and said, “Oh, don’t thank me; it’s an old Sark custom! We have to feed our prisoners, you know. Can’t let ’em starve. That would be awfully expensive, one way and another! Sit there and I’ll be back in a shake!”

So we had breakfast in gaol on Sark, the four of us, for the constable said that his wife had finished hers and that he’d only have to help with the washing-up if he stayed over at the house.

While Charlie Harris and the constable talked, afterwards, Mike and I stood by the open door exchanging our stories. Apparently he had gone straight to the constable after jumping off the roof the night before, at the house on the cliff, and had told him that I was in danger.

The constable hadn’t believed a word of it all and had kept Mike under observation for the night, or what was left of it. But when little Miss Wheeler, the local artist, had come in to the police station early that morning, to report that a wild-eyed young man had tried to stop her and take her bicycle, then the constable had decided that there had been something in Mike’s tale and had started out to look for me.

The constable filled in the rest of the pattern by saying that he had been attracted towards the sound of Charlie Harris’s rifle fire, and had guessed that we had disappeared into the *Boutiques* caves.

Then the constable’s wife came across with a bowl of warm water, some antiseptic and a roll of bandages.

“You poor fellow,” she said. “I saw you go by with Bill and noticed you had hurt your wrist. Is it painful? We’ll soon have it strapped up and right as rain.”

And while she did this Charlie Harris and Mike played draughts and the constable brought his family's shoes over and cleaned them all.

“One of my daily chores,” he grinned. “Six kids need a bit of looking after. I'm usually busy at one thing and another. And when there are no shoes to clean, or murderers to catch, I go out and look at the lobster-pots. Do quite a nice trade at that, in the season.”

Then he began to tell me that on Sark there are always two constables— islanders who are elected in the Parliament to serve for two years, a senior and a junior constable.

“You've got to have a proper job, you know,” he said. “You don't make anything at being an arm of the law!”

I didn't dare ask him what his proper job was; it might have been a risky thing to do with his wife still present. But I did try once again to get him to let me phone London, since he seemed to be in a good mood now.

He turned slowly towards me. “Who would you phone there?” he asked.

I said, “A secret Government department. I am not at liberty to give you the number, but I can assure you that a message is being awaited from me at this moment, very probably.”

I spoke earnestly, full of a righteous sense of duty to Butch Bohun and his merry gang of investigators.

Then I noticed the quick look which the constable gave his wife, the sly smile that faded even as I glanced up. Obviously he had told her about me when he went to fetch the breakfast. And equally obviously, they both thought that I was a little cracked.

As she went out she leaned over to him and said, “Shall I phone the doctor? I think he needs careful watching. That wound's not deep, but you never know what they lead to. I think he's a bit delirious.”

The constable followed her out, with a keen glance at me. I heard him say, “I shouldn't send for the doctor yet. He might quieten down when he's had a little rest.”

I shrugged and sat down next to Mike, who was deeply absorbed in his fifth game of draughts—every one of which he had won, against Charlie Harris, who may have been a good boxer, but who was certainly no champion when it came to board games!

When the constable came in again I said, with a smile on my face, “Look, Mr. Lacey, speaking man to man, what would you do if I walked out of here and tried to get away?”

He waited for a while before answering. Then he said softly, “I should try to stop you, using force if needs be. And if you got away from me I should blow my whistle and call every able-bodied man within earshot to my help. That is the old law. You would be hunted like a fox and caught and put back in here. Then I should prefer a new charge against you and they would probably phone me from Guernsey and give me permission to keep you in custody for two days and nights.”

I groaned. “They will have got away with it by then,” I said. “Look, can’t you stretch a point? Can’t you persuade yourself to see reason, just once in a while?”

He came over towards me. “Now don’t excite yourself,” he said. “You are not well.”

I resented the gentle tones he used when talking to me, as though I were a sick child who needed motherly warmth and care. Somehow I had come to like this sturdy little guardian of the law. He was incorruptibly honest and sincere, I felt sure; but when he spoke to me in such a wheedling manner, I felt like punching him on the nose, truncheon or not!

He seemed to sense my anger and said hastily, “Come, now, tell me where these crooks live and what their names are. Then maybe I’ll check up on them when I’m round their way next time.”

I couldn’t help smiling then, the whole situation was so farcical.

“All right,” I said, “they live in a house on the cliff above the *Havre Gosselin*, and their leader is an Austrian or Hungarian named Neumann. He has two helpers named Jean and Pierre. Pierre has a . . .”

He cut me short. “Ho, ho?” he said. “Two helpers, Jean and Pierre, hey? That sounds serious, very serious! And a Hungarian or an Austrian. That is also very serious.”

He waited a moment, watching me out of the corner of his eye. And then he said, “Look, sir, you lie down on the bed in the corner, out of the draught, and I’ll fetch you a blanket. Get a bit of rest and then maybe I’ll find out if Mr. Neumann is in this afternoon and warn him he’d better mend his ways for the future unless he wants to find himself in gaol.”

I gave up then, and with an inward groan lay down on the little iron bed in the corner. The constable went out, shaking his head, to fetch the blanket.

When he had gone I said to Charlie Harris, “Look, chum, what do you think of the idea of breaking gaol?”

He put down his draughts and stared at me steadily.

Then he shook his head, very definitely.

“See ’ere, matey,” he said, “I’ve been in the service long enough to know that a sensible man don’t resist arrest. Once it’s a fair cop, then you takes what’s comin’ your way, and no moaning, see?”

He went back to his game.

Mike said, “Do you want me to break out, Gordon? I’m game.”

This time I shook my head. “No,” I said, “I can’t risk getting you into more trouble. You’ve had your fun; now you settle down till we get home again, if we ever do!”

Some time later a head peeped round the door. It was old Miss Wheeler. She was smiling and her glasses were on one side. This gave her a very owlish look that quite suited her.

“Dear boy,” she said, “they’ve told me about you, how poorly you are. I’m awfully sorry if I misrepresented you this morning, but really, you *did* look so terrifying when you asked for my bicycle, my dear bicycle Agatha, that my sister Emily left me as a parting gift when she sailed away thirty years ago. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Did she go far?” I dared to ask.

Miss Wheeler nodded. “Yes, dear boy,” she whispered. “She married a Jersey man and settled there.”

Then, with a brave little sniff, she leaned round the door and pushed a brown-paper package towards me. “One of my own Swiss rolls, dear boy,” she said. “I thought it might help, you know. A sort of peace-offering, and awfully good for the morale, you know!”

Then she left, clucking and cooing across the street.

Mike came up to me, “I’ll eat it if you don’t want it, sport,” he said. “My morale is a bit weak right now.”

I gave it to him and he and Charlie Harris attacked it with most unseemly vigour.

Then a thought struck me. “I say, Charlie,” I said, “what if the thugs come for us here? We’d be sitting targets, wouldn’t we?”

His mouth bulged with Miss Wheeler’s Swiss roll as he replied. “Don’t worry, matey. I know how these campaigns work out. I bin in a few do’s, ’ere and there, like. The henemy won’t strike till nightfall, you can bet your boots on that!”

At these words I looked down at my own feet; I had torn my shoes off when I plunged into the water off *La Grune*, and now my socks were torn to shreds from the rock-scrambling I had done. I felt more than ever hopeless. I couldn’t possibly escape from Sark in my bare feet—the stony road would cripple me; I would be caught within fifty yards by any man wearing a pair of boots.

With a groan I lay back on the bed and covered my face. Inside ten seconds I was fast asleep—the anxieties and exertions of the past few days were telling on me. That was the simple truth.

## XXV

# Most Primitive Transport!

**T**HEN, as I lay in the darkness, truth seemed to shine into the sombre places of my brain. I suddenly realized where I was—I was in the dark cavern with the water lapping by my head and the faint and dying glimmer of the outworn torch fighting a losing battle against the vicious blackness about me. . . . And I still could not move my foot. . . . The drug was still as strong as ever.

Along the salty cave the torpedo-shaped monster was swinging round to come at me again. . . . I could hear the swishing of his mighty tail as he battled against the current. . . .

So, it had all been a dream! The soldier, Charlie Harris, did not exist, except in that realistic nightmare that had closed over my brain when the blind sea-creature had last attacked me. . . .

All of it, the chase through the gorse, the tropical valley with rhubarb as big as a boat and stalks the height of a man . . . the triangular islet with the swirling gulls squawking about my head . . . the fantastic rockpool . . . the smugglers' cave . . . the funny story of the soldier and the sergeant's bed . . . even silly little Miss Wheeler and the stout constable and his fairy-tale gaol. . . . All a dream!

And now the blind killer was coming along the water channel towards me, sending up lapping waves that splashed against my face, half-choking me.

I began to struggle against the dreadful effects of that drug; I thought I was getting my arms free, but once more the poison in my veins took control, and with a gasp I lay back as the grey-black horror leaned over the ledge of rock and took me in his frightful jaws, clenching them tightly about me.

And even as those teeth bit into my arms I found myself struggling against them, crying out loud, "You devil, let me go! Let me go!"

Then the constable was smiling down at me as he held on to me tightly.

“Steady on, old lad,” he said. “There’s no need to shout.”

I lay back in the little iron bed and stared at him, unbelievably.

“We’ve had a bit of a time with you,” he said, wiping his forehead with a red handkerchief. “You had a shocking nightmare by the sound of it—frightened us all to death!”

I sat up in bed. Yes, I *was* in the little gaol and Mike and Charlie Harris *were* there, as real as they’d ever been.

“You are very tired, old man,” said the constable. “Here, put these plimsolls on, my wife sent them. She noticed you’d got no shoes on your feet. Then, when you’ve got those on, you three can come across to the house to sleep. This place gets a bit chilly in the night and we can’t afford to keep a fire going, you know.”

As I pulled on the dirty white plimsolls he leaned down and said, “Just to put your mind at rest, old man, I ought to tell you I’ve been down to the house on the cliff.”

I left my laces untied in my anxiety. “Yes, yes,” I said. “And did you find the three men, the crooks?”

He smiled and said, “I found three men, but they’re not crooks. They are Scotsmen who have rented *La Sorcière* to do a bit of fishing off the coast. They have a little sailing boat, the *Marie Brune*. A nice pair of chaps, the older ones—doctors from Inverness, they tell me. The other chap, the young one, is a solicitor. He’s hurt his arm messing about in the *Marie Brune*. Got it in a sling. I invited him to come over here in the morning to let my wife have a look at it. She’s a wonder with a roll of bandages, as you know. So you’ll be meeting the three of them in the morning, no doubt, and then you’ll see how badly you have slandered them. Still, all’s well that ends well. And now we’ll go across to my house and have a bite of supper, and then off to roost for you. You need it.”

I followed him, in a daze, to the doorway. Mike and Charlie Harris were standing there looking over the fast-darkening Hog’s Back which seemed to jut right out into the sea.

Mike stared at me anxiously when I appeared in the doorway, as though he shared the constable’s opinion of my health. I felt that they would soon have me feeling sorry for myself, if they did not stop this whispering and nudging and glancing.



“Come on,” said the constable. “We cross the road and make for that white house with the light shining in the bedroom window. That must be the missus making your bed, old man!”

An old fellow was hobbling along the lane, bent over a stick, with a white panama hat gleaming on his head in the dusk. He waved the stick to us and went on a pace or two. But suddenly a tractor swung round the corner and came almost up to him before it slowed down. Two young fellows sat astride it, in berets and heavy jerseys. They looked the typical islanders I had seen before.

“Why, you silly old chap, Dad!” called one. “We nearly ran you down in the dark. Be a bit more careful, can’t you?”

Then the constable shouted out, too, “Hey, you lot, I don’t know who you are, but get about your business. We don’t want any squabbling here at this time of night. Be off about your business!”

There came a strange laugh from the men on the tractor and then one of them spoke. His voice had something about it which I seemed to recognize.

“This *is* our business, mister!” he said.

Then everything seemed to happen at once.

“For Pete’s sake, duck down,” shouted Charlie Harris, as he fell flat on the ground. I saw that Mike had taken his advice and, even as I fell, I heard a violent rat-tat-tatting from the tractor and saw spurt after spurt of yellow-red flame. Chips of stone flew from the gaolhouse and spattered us as we lay.

Then in the dusk I saw the constable stagger, fling up his arms, seem to recollect himself and begin running towards the men on that vehicle. The tractor started up viciously and roared round the corner, the old man in the white panama clinging to it.

And Bill Lacey, the constable of Sark, was lying face downwards in the road.

I had hardly got to my feet when Charlie Harris was bending over him, feeling the constable’s body gently, anxiously. Mike was standing shivering, brushing the dust from his hair.

Bill Lacey sat up with a little groan. “I’m all right. Not hurt much. They must have been unsighted in the dark. It’s my leg, my right leg. They put one through that, I think. I can’t move it.”

A woman came running from the house with the light in the bedroom window. “Are you all right, Bill?” she called anxiously.

The constable did his best to smile.

“Don’t worry about me, Meg,” he said. “I’ll mend. Get me into the house and phone the doctor. As for you fellows, get down to the pub, the *Bel Air*, as fast as you can. Get the men out and stop those maniacs on the tractor.”

Charlie Harris said stubbornly, “Look ’ere, matey, we aint’ a-leavin’ you in your state, not bloomin’ likely, china!”

The constable groaned with annoyance.

“Don’t be a stupid fool!” he said. “Your duty is to catch those men—nothing else. My wife can see to me. What do you think she’s been doing all these years, eh?”

And truth to tell, Meg certainly did seem to be able to deal with her heavy husband. We watched her begin to help him towards the lighted house, then we ran as fast as we could down the narrow lane in the direction Bill Lacey had indicated, towards the *Bel Air*.

It was a long, single-storey building, white in the growing moonlight, perched above the sea. Its windows were blazing with cheerful light, and from the open door a golden stream fell across the cobblestones of the little cul-de-sac in which it was situated.

As we raced towards it we heard the sounds of many voices—men talking, singing, arguing, jesting; in English, French, and the ancient patois of the island.

At any other time I should have said that these were cheerful sounds; now they took on a different connotation, since by our entrance they would all be changed to something else.

I was the first one to reach the open door, and I took in the bright scene at a glance.

To my left a shock-headed landlord in a striped blue shirt leaned over his little bar, teasing a massive man with a wooden leg, and wearing the blue jersey and tight woollen cap of a sailor. In the middle of the red-tiled and sanded floor a group of young men played darts, laughing and pushing each other about with the free abandon of old friends. To my right, in the corner,

sat a group of older sailors, fishermen, it seemed, playing cards and singing uproariously whenever there was a pause in their game. A plump black-haired woman moved from group to group, collecting empty glasses, or arranging the flowers in a great vase which stood in a window embrasure over-looking the moonlit sea.

I stood there for a split second, half-hesitant to break up such a scene. Then I called out, “The constable has been shot! He orders you to follow us and catch the gunmen!”

The big man with the wooden leg turned quizzically and clenched his teeth on the short stem of his briar pipe.

“Shot?” he said, in a heavy Sark accent. “’Ow shot, then? Shot with a catapult, hein? What you want, hein? I’ll buy you a drink, mister. Come in then.”

The landlord came round the bar counter.

“Look,” he said, “if you want to make trouble, go somewhere else. We don’t want your custom if you want to make trouble, see?”

Mike pushed forward and said, “Three men on a tractor have just shot Bill Lacey in the leg. Meg, his wife, has dragged him home and is going to phone the doctor. Bill Lacey sent us to fetch you all.”

The big man with the wooden leg took out his pipe and spat vigorously on to the sanded floor.

“Look, *mon vieux*,” he said, “Bill Lacey is my friend. I don’t like to ’ear you say ’e is shot! I am Old Gaston, and I don’ like to ’ear my friend gets ’urt, you underst’n’?”

It was obvious that the old man did not quite realize the truth of what we were trying to tell him. He seemed to think that we were playing some stupid practical joke.

Indeed, I think that he might have done his best to box Mike’s ears, there and then, had not the door been flung violently open.

“All right, everybody!” said a brutal voice which I now recognized only too well. “Keep still and most of you won’t get hurt!”

I turned and looked towards that voice.

In the doorway stood clustered the three men I had wanted to pursue—but now they were bringing the war into my own camp. It was no longer necessary to call out the good men of Sark—Neumann stood before them,

his sub-machine-gun swinging round the company in the bar, Pierre and Jean just behind him, each one holding a vicious-looking automatic pistol, and looking as though they knew how to use them.

Suddenly Neumann stepped forward and pointed his gun at my chest.

“Get over there,” he said curtly, “by the wall. *You* are the one we are interested in.”

## XXVI

### *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis Est!*

**A**S NEUMANN spoke, a chill ran down my spine, for his eyes were as ruthless as his voice. I knew then that I could expect no mercy from this man who had determined, it seemed, to destroy me now that I had thwarted him in gaining the papers and had held to his track like a bloodhound—though, I must confess, at that moment, a very meek bloodhound, faced by the snub blue nose of that sub-machine-gun, with that incredibly vicious little black hole in its centre. . . .

I felt like turning to the men of Sark, on whom a great silence had now fallen, to ask their help. I even began to make a gesture of the hands towards them as they stood, clustered in groups about the long room of the tavern, staring in bewilderment.

But Neumann's voice cut across my gesture like an ice-cold razor.

"You can expect no help from these fellows," he said. "They will be as anxious to catch an enemy agent as I am. They will be as glad to kill the man who shot down Bill Lacey as I am."

I found myself taking a step towards him, my fists clenched.

"Get back!" he said. "Or I'll save this island the trouble of providing a lynching-party for you, you double-crossing spy!"

In my shock of amazement I glanced at the faces of the men around me; they were cold and revengeful now, and their eyes gazed back into mine with hatred.

I do not know what power this Neumann had—it might have been some sort of hypnotism, some peculiarly animal attraction—yet I swear that as he spoke, even I felt a twinge of guilt, as though I was truly a spy, and had indeed shot down Bill Lacey on the grey highway just outside the little stone gaolhouse that evening. . . .

"Get back against that wall," snarled Neumann now. "We'll put an end to this for all time! Get back, I say!"

I had a swift picture of the landlord of the *Bel Air*, Henri, suddenly stretching out his hands, imploring Neumann not to do anything which might injure the custom of his tavern. But Neumann waved him aside.

Then I found myself stepping back as he had commanded, towards the blank whitewashed wall at the other side of the room.

I do not know what would have happened then, for it was obvious that the sailormen in the bar would not have lifted a finger to help me, so captivated were they by the wicked magic of this man's lies—but luckily Fate took another turn, at the precise moment when I had thought my number was up.

Even as Neumann swung his machine-gun up towards his shoulder, and as I felt a sudden trickle of perspiration run down my spine, Mike broke out with a great yell and flung himself in the direction of Neumann.

“Why, you blithering imbecile!” he began to shout.

But now my own fear for myself turned to concern for the boy's safety. I flung out my arm to keep him back.

And as I did so Neumann's gun cracked. Mike stopped short and swung round, facing me, a sudden gash along his temple. Then he fell sideways across my feet.

The low room was full of the acrid scent of burnt powder. A little blue wisp of smoke hung and eddied in the still air of the room. I heard a gasp from the men around me and a sudden shout from Charlie Harris.

“Why, you murderous swine!” he said.

Then I found myself walking forward towards Neumann. My jaws were set till they ached and my fists were clenched so hard that the nails dug into the flesh of my palms.

I found that I was smiling in a strange grim smile which I did not know myself capable of, and which had come automatically, savagely, without my having anything to smile about. . . . It was perhaps such a smile as our berserk ancestors smiled at the Battle of Hastings, with their dead and beloved king lying at their feet.

Then I heard myself say, “That is the last shot you will ever fire, Neumann. I am coming to break your cowardly neck. . . .”

I kept walking on, for somehow I wanted him to suffer as much as possible before I reached him. I had no fear of his machine-gun now. I felt

almost invulnerable, immortal, with my vengeance before me.

As in a mist, I saw Neumann's face change; his eyes widened and his mouth sagged. He began to back away from me. The two men behind him disappeared into the darkness outside the bar-room door.

"Don't come a step nearer!" screamed Neumann. "I did not mean to hurt the boy, but I will shoot you down without mercy! I swear it!"

I still walked on, his threats meaning no more to me than the howling of the wind or the night-crying of seabirds. . . .

Then Neumann seemed to pull himself together as he felt the door-post at his back.

His pale face wrinkled into a horrible smile of desperation.

"Right," he yelled. "You've asked for it. Here it comes!"

Then, with a savage movement, and without sighting his weapon, he swung it round on to me and pressed the trigger.

I could hear the staccato reports echoing in the room and saw the thick blue smoke swirling upwards from the little snub muzzle of the gun. I felt as though a great wind had caught the right side of my jacket and was dragging it away from me. . . .

And as I walked the last pace towards him my hands outstretched, a shopping bag swung round the door from the outer darkness and struck Neumann full across the face, blinding him.

He staggered sideways, and then Miss Wheeler stood on the step looking down at him, her glasses on one side, her nose red, her grey hair sticking out in untidy wisps below her old felt hat.

"Of all the nerve!" she said. "Making that stupid din in a place like this! Have you no shame? Have you no sense of decency? What are you, my man, a day-tripper? I will speak to the Dame about you, I assure you. . . ."

But Neumann had regained his wits and was past her, into the darkness.

I felt myself leaning against the wooden bar counter then, all the fight gone out of me for the moment. . . . Miss Wheeler was helping Mike to sit up, telling him he had had a nasty graze that might have been much worse. . . . Charlie Harris was pumping my hand and saying, "Cor stone the crows, matey! You fair frightened the living daylight's out 'im, that you did! Cripes, I'd give a fahsand pahnd to be able to do what you just did, china! Nerves o' blinkin' steel, that's what, chum!"

But only I knew just how wrong Charlie was at that moment. If I had any nerve left, it was about as strong as a frayed bit of spider-web, if that.

Mike was standing now and saying, “Well, you blithering clots! Get out after that bunch, can’t you?”

And as though a spell was broken suddenly, we all made for the door, even old Gaston with the wooden leg.

Only Miss Wheeler remained calm.

“You’ll find them down at the harbour. They have a boat called the *Marie Brune* in the Creux tonight, at least they *had*. . . . I saw the other two running down towards it as I came up here. You need not hurry too violently; I do not think the *Marie Brune* will sail tonight!”

She gave a thin wintry smile as she said that.

Henri the landlord was half-way out of the door, but he turned back with a wicked grin.

“Look after the bar while I’m away, Miss Wheeler,” he said. “And, don’t forget—help yourself free of charge! It’s celebration night tonight!”

Then we were all running down the winding hill towards *Le Creux* harbour, baying like hounds on the scent, all of one mind at last, and that mind intent on destroying these enemies of good.



## XXVII

# The Final Tumuli

**A**s we burst at last out of the winding lane with the gorse and hawthorn growing thick above it, we came to the narrow door in the great grey rock that protects Sark and out on to the little square stone harbour, *Le Creux*.

In the moonlight a dozen boats were bobbing on the tide, their white sides and graceful masts catching the silver shafts of light.

And at the end of the stone slipway stood three dark shadows. Even in the semi-darkness it was easily possible to see that they were puzzled and disappointed men. It was not hard to guess the reason why—almost at their feet the *Marie Brune* was settling slowly into the harbour waters, three planks at her nose stove in.

“God bless Miss Wheeler!” someone said, and then we ran on, shouting at the three to give themselves up.

In reply Neumann fired a burst which splintered the cobblestones at our feet and brought us up with an involuntary jerk.

Then Pierre had run across two moored boats to a low-slung motor craft that lay alongside them. He was obviously a mechanic of experience for the engine was throbbing almost before his companions were beside him.

“Stand back! Do not try to follow!” screamed Neumann as their craft swung round and roared towards the narrow harbour mouth. “I will shoot any man who comes within range!”

A great and baffled roar went up around me on the quayside. Then, from all sides, voices sounded, urgently, hopefully. . . .

“I ’ave my boat, the *Magnifique*, my friends. We can take her!”

“No, Gaston, my *Spindrift* is faster. . . . She is ready to start. . . .”

“You are both idiots! Get into the *Belle Nancy*! She’ll pick up with these swine before they reach the *Grune*. . . .”

Motors roared here and there all over the little harbour. Men rushed into one boat or another, vowing vengeance, vowing all sorts of things—but all of them eager, as eager as I was, to run down Neumann and his two fellow-killers. . . .

So, in the moonlight, our improvised fleet of revenge chugged and roared and throbbed out of the little harbour entrance and into the open sea, past the lighthouse, which now glimmered like a gigantic ghost half-way up the side of the cliff.

In the moonlight it seemed that we were all sitting waist-deep in the water, with the gulls swooping over us. . . . The night waves broke high around us, often hiding one boat from another. The grey-brown weeds slapped against our boat's sides, as though trying to drag us back. The spray splashed into our faces, wetting us through.

Mike sat beside me in the bows, his face white in the moonlight. I gripped his hand and was reassured to feel that he returned the pressure as strongly. "Thanks, Gordon," he said. "I almost wish you could have got to him before Miss Wheeler arrived."

"There's still time, pal," I said, as our boat plunged forward into the seas. "If he doesn't get me first!"

It was Charlie Harris who first sighted the fugitives. As he pointed, I picked them up, riding the waves steadily, a quarter of a mile in front of us.

"They are in Jimmy Robinson's *Sheila*," snorted Old Gaston. "*Mon Dieu*, but he will kill them with his bare 'ands if they 'arm his boat. She is the apple of 'is eye, as you say!"

Then a heavy sea caught us, rolling us away from the others for a while, drenching us with spray.

Mike grinned and said, "What price Moby Dick now, Stewart? Can you sight the white whale yet?"

Old Gaston was not as dim as he might appear. He tapped his wooden leg and said to the boy, "But you are wrong this time, *mon vieux*! Zis leg is not ivory! It is good willow, like your cricket bats! My own brother-in-law chopped it down out of his garden in Jersey and turned this leg on his lathe! So, you are wrong, *mon petit*!"

Then we were clear of the seas again and swinging round *La Grune*. Even at that late hour the gulls were still keeping watch over the two cairns of stone on the pinnacle of the islet.

I shuddered as we passed the place.

Suddenly Henri, the landlord of the *Bel Air*, called out from the foremost boat, "They are heading for Herm!"

We all stared then. Gaston said shrewdly, "If they pass Herm and reach Guernsey our chase will be for nothing. We shall never find them there."

It was perhaps ten minutes later when someone in a boat to our starboard called out, "Their engine note has changed. They are breaking down, I think! They will never make Guernsey!"

I stared across the moonlit sea until I began to imagine I could see all manner of things—mermaids, whales, and the lost legion of Vikings who had once harried the coasts of Normandy. . . .

And suddenly I saw the *Sheila*, lying low in the water, bucketing about as though she was out of control. . . .

Then, in the now bright moonlight, my eyes played me false and I lost her again. Our own boat kept up her solid, steady throb as we drew ahead of the others. . . .

Mike seemed to sense my thoughts. "I hope that we catch up with her first, Gordon," he whispered.

Behind me, Charlie Harris said, "Oh, cripes! 'Ow I wished I 'ad my little old rifle nah. . . . I'd just love the charnce of pickin' that bunch off. . . . Child's play, it'd be, a bright night like this, an' no perishin' mistake, boyo!"

And then Herm loomed up before us, its long shell beach glistening white in the moonlight, a beach out of fairyland. . . . And above that beach, the two high hillocks which decorate the most easterly tongue of the island.

Old Gaston said in some awe, "There are stones up there on the hills, *mon vieux* . . . ancient stones . . . in a circle. They say that the 'Old Ones' buried their chieftains up there, long before my time. . . . Long before the Kaiser, or Wellington, or the Romans, they say. I don't know, you understand, *mon vieux*. . . . But I would not go up there when the moon is out, like tonight, my friends. . . . I tell you, that is so!"

And even as we listened to him we saw the *Sheila* beach violently on the shells, heel over and lie still.

Against the white of the shell beach, I saw the three black figures tumble out and then begin to run. . . . Two of them ran towards one of the hills, and one towards the other.

“They have split up, Mike,” I said.

Then Charlie Harris spoke. “Do you mind if I stick with you two?” he said. “I think there might be more fun if we all go for the same lot.”

I did not answer him for just then we, too, were running full tilt at the white shell beach.

Then there was a shock and we, too, rolled over, our crew spilling out among the rough shells and sand-grains. . . . There we lay for a moment, spluttering and trying to shake the stuff from our clothes.

Then the chase was on.

It was old Pierre who had separated from the Neumann group. He was running as fast as he could across the rough gorse-strewn moorland between the shell beach and the far hillock.

Half of our force began to give chase after him, shouting like fiends.

As for us, our attention was drawn to the two figures which clambered above us towards the summit of the nearer hill.

They climbed like some doom-driven creatures out of an old Greek tragedy, as though the furies were at their heels. And perhaps in that moment this was not so far wide of the mark. . . .

It was when we were twenty-five yards from the summit of the hill that I noticed Mike was not with me. Charlie Harris saw my look of concern and whispered, “It’s all right, matey. He said he felt a bit creased-like and wanted to sit down. He said ’e’d join us a bit later, when ’e’d ’ad a rest. That knock on the ’ead ’as tired ’im aht a bit, I think.”

I nodded and set myself once more at the hill. Then with the scattered stones of the tumuli up above me, thrown up by the moonlight, I stopped to take another breath.

I could hear the men of Sark behind me, grunting and puffing with the exertion of that steep slope. But up among the stones I could hear something more serious.

Neumann was saying, “Jean, my dear friend, Jean—I swear, I will not be taken alive. This is the end—for me or them, I tell you!”

I heard them arguing for a moment, then I called out, “Give yourself up, Neumann. This is the end of the road, you crook!”

There was a sudden burst of fire and the earth about me was churned up. Then I saw Neumann standing on a toppled stone, gazing down on the men who were struggling up the moonlit hillside to take him.

“Go back, you fools!” he yelled. I heard the feet stop behind me.

I turned to tell the men of Sark not to be put off by this mountebank, but a sudden spurt of fire sprayed us all with soil.

I looked up and saw Neumann silhouetted against the moonlit sky. He looked like a mad god of some prehistoric time, a God of Sacrifice, calling on men to let themselves bleed at his altar.

I decided that there was only one thing to do, and tried to do it. I got up and began to stride towards that ruined tumulus.

“Come down, Neumann!” I called, remembering his terror in the *Bel Air*.

As I took my second step towards him I heard him laugh, a high mad laugh. Then a line of bullets sprayed up the turf before me, and suddenly I felt a terrific thud against my thigh and I toppled over, against my will, and had to grab hold of a tuft of gorse to keep myself from rolling back down the steep slope.

From above me I could hear Neumann’s triumphant laugh.

Beside me Charlie Harris was kneeling. His face was white and bitter in the moonlight. “I’ll get that blasted swine,” he was saying. “You lie ’ere, matey. I’ll get ’im, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Before I could stop him he was walking up the hill towards the stones, quietly, evenly, as though he was on the parade ground at an important review.

“Get back, you fool!” shouted Neumann. “I have no quarrel with you!”

Charlie Harris’s voice came back clear and cold in the moonlight.

“No, matey,” he said, “but I ’ave a quarrel wiv you, and no mistake! And I’m comin’ to settle it, chum, wiv my bare ’ands . . .”

Then I watched Neumann aim carefully at the soldier.

I felt a sudden terror rise in my heart.

“Duck, for heaven’s sake, Charlie!” I yelled.

But he only shook his head and walked on.

In the dusk I thought I heard him say, “What you can do, mate, Charlie Harris can do. . . .”

Then Neumann gave a savage yell and seemed to press the trigger. I waited for the blast that would mow the soldier down. . . . All I heard was a series of sharp clicks as the hammer of the weapon struck against its empty seating.

Then Charlie went forward at the double, yelling like a fiend for revenge. Behind him raced the men of Sark.

I heard Neumann give a high shout of dismay. And then I saw his companion step forward and strike him at the back of the head. Jean had turned traitor when the hunt was up. . . .

With a feeling of disgust I was about to turn away when I saw someone rise above Jean and leap on to his back. Even at that distance I saw that it was Mike. . . . Mike who had come round the far side of the hill to trap Neumann, but having got there too late for the big lion had caught the jackal. . . .

I was beginning to smile now, I felt. I was quite comfortable except for the dull pain in my leg. I felt quite sleepy, really sleepy, and vaguely amused, as though at a late-night theatre.

I rolled over in a leisurely manner and surveyed the far hillock, to which Pierre had run. It was clearly etched in the white moonlight, as though it were fifty yards away instead of a hundred or more.

In one instant of keen recognition I watched old Pierre put his automatic pistol to his head and fire. I watched him roll down the steep hillock and saw the men of Sark move aside to let the body pass into peace.

Then I, too, passed into peace—still smiling, still feeling that this had been a most curious little play. . . .

## XXVIII

# Interim Report

**I**T seemed no more than two minutes later. . . . I was lying down quite comfortably and a fresh-faced young woman was staring down at me. She wore a white cap and a dress which had many small blue stripes running down it.

I tried to focus her and then, when she looked fairly clear-cut, said, “Are you a nurse by any chance, miss?”

She nodded, and then tried to smile.

I shut my eyes again.

“All right,” I heard myself saying. Then there was nothing else I could think of, or dared, to say.

I heard the young woman’s voice say above me, “You are in hospital on Guernsey. Everything is fine. Your leg has been seen to. The doctor says it will be as right as rain in a month or two. As a matter of fact, what he did say was, ‘He can play football for Arsenal in two months, if he likes.’ ”

I grinned and said, “If I’ve got to play Association football again, I’d rather play for the Wolves, if the doctor doesn’t mind!”

There was a long silence above me. I opened my eyes and saw that the nurse was looking down at me as though she didn’t know what to say now.

I felt that I had better make a move in this conversation.

“Where is Mike?” I said. “And Charlie Harris? Did the police get there in time?”

At last the nurse said, “The boy Mike was here at your bedside for the first two days, but then his parents came over and took him back home, on doctor’s orders. He left a message to say that he would phone every day. Oh, yes, there was something about a runaway soldier. . . .”

“That was Charlie Harris,” I said anxiously. “Is he all right?”

The nurse seemed to recollect and then said, “I can’t tell you, that’s the trouble. They are still looking for him! You see, when the police from Guernsey came over to pick up those crooks you caught on Herm, the soldier disappeared in one of the Sark boats and hasn’t been seen since!”

I couldn’t help myself.

“Good old Charlie!” I said. “May you prosper, you’re a good chap!”

The nurse looked down at me in shocked wonder. Then she said gently, “Now go to sleep, sir. You need all the sleep you can get the doctor said.”

I lay back for a while, then I dared to ask, “How long have I been here, Nurse?”

She counted off on her fingers with a frown. Then she said, “Nearly a week, sir. You have been very poorly, indeed. But it’s all right now, they say—and *they* should know!”

I nodded up at her. “Yes,” I said, “they should know. And if Mike phones me, do give him all my love and tell him I’ll be back at Merton-on-Humber as soon as I get out of here. I need that holiday more than ever!”

I think I went to sleep even before I finished the sentence.



# Epilogue

THE afternoon sun was slanting through the high uncurtained windows, across the lemon and cerise room, with its fresh whitewood furniture.

I slammed the cream-painted door to behind me and hobbled across the off-white Indian rug towards the one man in London who could still make me feel like a truant fourth former.

Butch Bohun, looking more than ever like a plump and complacent Buddha carved from polished ivory, glanced up from a thick sheaf of documents and then grinned across his desk-top at me, wrinkling up his eyes and nodding with a mock-solemn approval.

“Oh, yes!” he wheezed. “Most definitely *yes!* But, my dear young man; yes, my dear *dear* young man, I do declare, you are really *something!*”

I stood before him, grinning nervously, wondering when the bite would come. It always did, if one waited—and sometimes whether one waited or not. It caught one in mid-air, so to speak. I did not answer him. That was safer.

“Indeed, dear boy,” he went on, “I have seldom seen a man on a crutch move with such *élan*, such, er, grace, might one say?”

He paused for a while, letting his plump hands come together in something like the attitude of prayer. The smoke from his cigar coiled up from the ashtray, like incense from a joss-stick beside some Oriental shrine. His eyes were as cold as ice.

“Have you considered taking a part as Long John Silver in this year’s pantomimes? No doubt they will start rehearsals before the summer is out. Might it not be a wise move to get your name on the books of some reputable agent, dear boy?”

I waited a moment while his ice-grey eyes cut a neat hole from my sternum to my third vertebra, or thereabouts.

Then I said, “So, I’m sacked? That’s it, isn’t it?”

Butch Bohun picked up his cigar and began to turn over page after page of the sheaf of documents, occasionally pencilling a comment in the broad margins, as the thought took him.

The ormolu clock on the white marble mantelpiece ticked away discreetly, chuckling at my dismay.

After a thousand years Butch Bohun looked up and said, “Yes, I suppose you might call it that. We will cooperate with you naturally in getting another post; to the extent, that is, of marking your references as ‘Redundant’. That would suit, no doubt?”

I began to fiddle about with my crutch on the Indian rug. At last I nodded, “I suppose so, Butch,” I said. “I shall not complain.”

He studied me for a second or two, then said, “You will have a certain amount of salary in lieu of longer notice, of course. There is the matter of your car, as well. I’m awfully afraid it is not worth a great deal now, except for what you might get by selling the fittings—clock and speedometer, and what-not.”

I stared up at him aghast—my precious Wolseley!

He shrugged his shoulders. “What could we do, dear boy? You did not tell us where the Malder Wells papers were, so we had no alternative but to assume that they were secreted at the last moment somewhere in your heap of junk. We did a pretty thorough job of stripping, as you will see if you care to walk round to the yard—engine, upholstery, petrol tank, tyres, and so on. Yes, a complete wreck now, I’m proud to say.”

The ormolu clock was chuckling now, wickedly, at my discomfiture.

“But . . .” I began. Then the plump white hands waved me to silence.

“We are prepared to be generous, dear boy, in the curious circumstances,” he said. “There is a certain Jaguar XK 140, a red job, which we picked up at Southampton and impounded. Its former owner will be in no position to drive about freely for a very considerable time, and we feel that it would be a shame to let such a car rot in the police garage. You can have it. . . . Though I don’t imagine for a moment that on your new salary as a public baths attendant you will be able to afford to run it. Still, you can always sell it again in one of these bomb-site car marts, can’t you? It would keep the old wolf from the door for a while, at least. . . .”

I stood up and bowed my head slightly, already half-turning towards the door. So this was the end of my career as a Government investigator. . . .

“Thank you, Butch,” I said. “I’ll try the red car. If I like it, I’ll keep it; if not, I’ll flog it and buy a new Wolseley. If I can remember your address by then I’ll send you the difference—in halfpenny stamps.”

Then I hobbled towards the door.

My hand was actually turning the door-handle when Butch Bohun’s voice sounded behind me, in the sort of roar that I imagine a rogue elephant must make when he sees his prey disappearing down a hole in the ground.

“Why, you purple-bottomed moron!” he was shouting. “Do you think you can play fast and loose with this department, careering up and down some crazy island, getting yourself shot in the leg, and wasting the time of half the internal Intelligence Staff—and then come up here simply to hand in your resignation like that? I tell you, Stewart, if you set foot outside that door, I’ll have you arrested! I’ll have you clamped in the Tower before you can say ‘Aberystwyth’.”

I turned back to him. He was leaning over his desk, his bland face purple with effort. His chewed cigar had gone out.

I walked back towards him, smiling. He lowered himself gently into his red leather chair, like a deflated balloon.

“Sit down,” he said quietly. “Now we can perhaps talk sense.”

I looked down at the carpet. I didn’t dare let him see that I was grinning.

“I thought I was fired,” I said.

He snorted, something of his old manner returning now.

“Don’t be a supersonic imbecile,” he said. “Can’t you take a telling-off like anybody else who has made a mess of things? Do you think we want to fire a man who has cost us as much effort to train as you have?”

I shrugged my shoulders as though I didn’t know; and indeed, at that precise moment I *was* in a bit of a daze about my whole position in Butch Bohun’s highly secret department.

Butch covered his embarrassment by ringing a bell under his desk. A tall blonde girl came in almost immediately with a tray of coffee and biscuits. Obviously he had laid this on in advance. There had never been any intention of sacking me; Butch had tried to scare me and I had called his bluff, that was all.

I made a mental note of that—I had called Butch’s bluff! Few men could live to say that, I observed silently, as I sipped the coffee and nibbled at the

biscuits.

At last Butch said, “Look here, Gordon, you didn’t do badly, in a way. You got your man—or at least, *someone* did, which comes to the same thing. However, I can’t say that I think you succeeded entirely; after all, you let the other crook shoot himself, and that is a mark against you. Besides, who gave you permission to take a young boy out on a job like that? What if he had got himself knocked off? That would have been a nasty business, wouldn’t it?”

I had to agree that it would. But I also felt I ought to tell him that it would have taken something of the horsepower of an earthquake to prevent Mike from joining in on any hunt which attracted him. However, I let that pass. And Butch went on.

“Look,” he said, “I don’t particularly mind being snubbed by hospital authorities every time I ring up to inquire how my patient is; I don’t mind flying over to Guernsey three times, at the busiest time of the year, to be told I can’t visit you; I don’t mind sending a Special Branch man over to guard you—but I *do* object to being kept in the dark about the one important thing in this case.”

I stared at him in wonder for a moment, then I said, “What is that?”

His face turned gradually red and then a delicate shade of puce.

“The papers, you idiot!” he said. “That is what started the whole business, isn’t it? Where are they? Hey? Where on earth did you hide them?”

I gazed at him innocently. “Oh, the papers,” I said. “I had almost forgotten them. Are they important? I thought catching the murderer was the important thing, not the papers.”

Butch seemed to take a long time before he got his breath. When he did, he smiled very, very gently at me; but that smile was more frightening than a frown to those who knew him.

“My dear boy,” he almost whispered. “The murderer, as you call him, was of no importance whatever, as such. All he did was to shoot another agent, like himself, only one who worked for a rival Government. Neither of them adds up to one good man. And as for the papers, they are merely copies. Malder Wells Atomic Station have a dozen other copies and those are, in any event, almost obsolescent now. But what was important is that no one else should have them, to work along the same lines, at whatever distance behind. If you had flung those papers into a furnace it would not

have mattered one bit—but to let anyone else in the world have them would be a matter of the utmost gravity. Now where are they?”

I answered him as calmly as he had spoken to me—but with no undertone of menace in *my* voice!

“Oh,” I said, with gentle surprise, “I merely popped them down behind a picture, in the post office at Tealby, the night we called there to phone you, that’s all.”

Butch gripped the sides of his desk. His pale eyes seemed to protrude for half an inch as he gazed at me, swallowing and swallowing whatever it was he had first meant to say to me.

At length he ran a plump finger round the inside of his immaculate white collar and wheezed faintly, “A picture, dear boy? A picture in the post office, hey? And what sort of picture, might one respectfully ask?”

“Well,” I said slowly, “it is a bit difficult to describe. I would say that it had been cut out of a copy of the *Illustrated London News*, in the year eighteen-something. It showed Lord Roberts in full regimentals, reviewing a contingent entraining for the Boer War, I imagine, at a rough guess. . . .”

Butch Bohun’s jaws clenched as I went on. A tiny nerve in his temple began to throb, rhythmically, then faster and faster. I gazed above him, towards a bright Cézanne reproduction on the far wall.

“I slipped it behind that picture while the postmistress was out looking for Pussy,” I said. “The thing was covered with cobwebs. It hasn’t been disturbed since King Edward ascended the throne, one might say. It will be perfectly safe. . . .”

Suddenly Butch rose and went over to the fireplace. He took up a short, delicately wrought iron poker. He grasped it firmly in both hands, then bent it slowly into a hairpin shape. When he had done this he flung it into the hearth with a clatter and turned to me with a twisted smile.

“Well, well,” he said. “So while the old lady was out looking for Pussy you popped—that was the word, wasn’t it?—a document behind a picture of Lord Roberts? A document so secret, so powerful in its implications that the Malder Wells Station dared not entrust its safe keeping even to the strongest vault of the Bank of England! A cobwebbed picture torn from the *Illustrated London News*. . . . Are you certain that it might not have been torn from *Punch*, let us say?”

I did not answer him. It would have been dangerous just then. I knew the signs.

Quickly he crossed the room and spoke into a wall-tube. I did not hear what he said, but I sensed that he was giving urgent instructions.

Then he turned back to me, smiling now. “Thank goodness we still have one of our men in Tealby, staying at the local pub as a primary school head teacher on vacation. He will go along and collect the papers, if they are still there. That is, if the postmistress hasn’t been doing a bit of spring cleaning and thrown them into the nearest dust-bin for any wandering vagabond to skip away with. . . . We shall see, dear boy, we shall see. . . .”

I wiped a bead of perspiration from my forehead and thought I might as well keep up the conversation.

“Our organization seems pretty far-flung,” I observed, without much enthusiasm.

He nodded slyly. “Yes,” he said. “Our Miss Wheeler is worth her weight in gold, don’t you think? After so long out there with nothing to do except paint rather futile chocolate-box landscapes—and then to save your life, *and* almost catch the crooks by knocking a hole in their boat with a handy axe that someone had left lying about.”

I felt my mouth fall open. “Miss Wheeler?” I gasped.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I tipped her off to look out for you as soon as I heard from you at the airport that you were going in that direction. Her bicycle reconnaissance was pretty good, don’t you think? She phoned me back less than ten minutes after you tried to pinch the blooming thing. Oh yes, my boy, we had a good picture of the whole operation, including that poor devil of a blind porpoise that was trapped in the cave. I gather it gave you quite a scare!”

I fanned myself with a copy of the *Financial Times*. It was suddenly very hot in that room.

Butch Bohun went on, “Bill Lacey sends his love. His leg wasn’t as badly bust up as yours, it appears. He invites you over, when you can spare the time, to do another stretch in his little gaolhouse. Is there anyone else you want to know about?”

It was on the tip of my tongue then to mention Charlie Harris, but I drew back at the last moment. I decided to keep him right out of this conversation;

it would be poor gratitude for what he had done, to say anything which might put the Military Police on to him.

I compromised and said, “Yes, Butch. That man who issues the tickets at Stokesay Castle. What of him?”

Butch said, “Oh, he is a perfectly good fellow, as good an Englishman as you’d find anywhere. He was just taken in by Major Neumann, that’s all. The so-called Major had established himself down there as something of a gentleman farmer—in fact, he had a number of centres, in various parts, including Sark, as you know—and the man at Stokesay took him at his face value. He tells us that the Major had told him to keep an eye open for two shady characters who were pestering him to put money into a crack-brained agricultural scheme. When you turned up at the castle, inquiring for Neumann, that good chap immediately phoned the Major to warn him. . . .”

I said weakly, “And the secretary of the gliding club?”

Butch grinned. “As solid as a rock. Ex-fighter pilot with a string of medals longer than your arm, or mine. A splendid chap—but once more, taken in by the Major’s apparent wealth and influence.”

I said, “I give up!”

Just then the buzzer on the wall rang. Butch went to the speaking-tube. He listened to what was being said to him for a while, then said nonchalantly, “Right, 87; tell him to shove them into the nearest incinerator and send a certificate of destruction to Malder Wells. No, no other formalities needed. I’ll see to the rest.”

He turned to me and said, “The papers *were* there, as you said. But the old lady was mighty peeved, it seems. If you ever go that way again she threatens to give you something she calls ‘what for!’”

I got up from the chair. “So all’s well that ends well?”

He nodded. “It seems that way,” he said softly. “Now you have a month’s sick leave on double pay, with a new Jaguar to drive around in. . . . How I envy you, you positively fortunate maniac!”

As I crossed the room he took my hand in his and said, “Take care how you drive that thing. They are lethal weapons, I hear! And in spite of all I have said, we don’t want to lose you yet. Not till the winter, maybe, when trade’s slack!”

I was about to turn and make my way to the outer office. But Butch said with a wry smile, “No, go out the Top Secret way! There’s someone who’d

like to see you again out there.”

My eyes must have lit up. . . . “What, Mike and his folk?” I asked.

Butch pushed open the cream door and I passed into a narrow little office. A young man in a dark city suit sat collating documents at a chromium desk. He looked up and smiled at me, and I almost fainted. In spite of the suit and the white collar; the gold ring on his finger and the sleeked down red hair, there was no mistaking Charlie Harris!

I stepped back a pace, in astonishment.

Butch pushed me forward. “Go on,” he said, “meet our youngest Special Branch man, James Frobisher, Eton and Balliol, ex-Guards and what-not. . . .”

I said faintly, “Ex-Guards! Oh cripes!”

James Frobisher came round the desk and echoed my words, “Oh cripes, matey,” he said, “wot a perishin’ carry-on, hey?”

Butch said behind me, “We got him over there by charter plane only just before you landed! And I can tell you, the War Office have played up fit to beat the band about that rifle the constable impounded! You’d think it was worth its weight in gold!”

I said, “It was, matey, it was, an’ no perishin’ horror!” Then, laughing, I went out of the far door into the waiting-room.

Mike was sitting with Peggie and his father. They jumped up as I went towards them.

Mike said, “What do you think of my scar, Gordon? Isn’t it a positive smasher! All the fellows at school’ll be green with envy when the new term starts!”

I looked over his shoulder at Peggie Wadham.

“Am I forgiven?” I asked.

She nodded, and began to clasp my hand.

I said, “Mike, you remember that Jaguar? It’s mine now. Let’s go for a holiday now, a real holiday! All of us, if we can squeeze in!”

Arthur Wadham slapped me on the shoulder. “You bet we’ll squeeze in,” he said. “At least we’ll get *something* out of your gallingvanting round!”

Mike said, “Sure, Gordon. And I know just the place for a holiday. . . .”



I groaned, “Not Bayon’s Manor,” I said.

Then we all began to laugh as we went down the white steps into the roar of the London afternoon sunshine.

Butch stood on the top step grinning and waving gently.

“Look after him, Mike,” he said. “He needs someone like you.”

Then he went inside again and I led them towards the shining red car which waited for us at the kerbside.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Don't Expect Any Mercy!* by Henry Treece]