

GIMLET GOES AGAIN



by

Captain
W.E.
JOHNS

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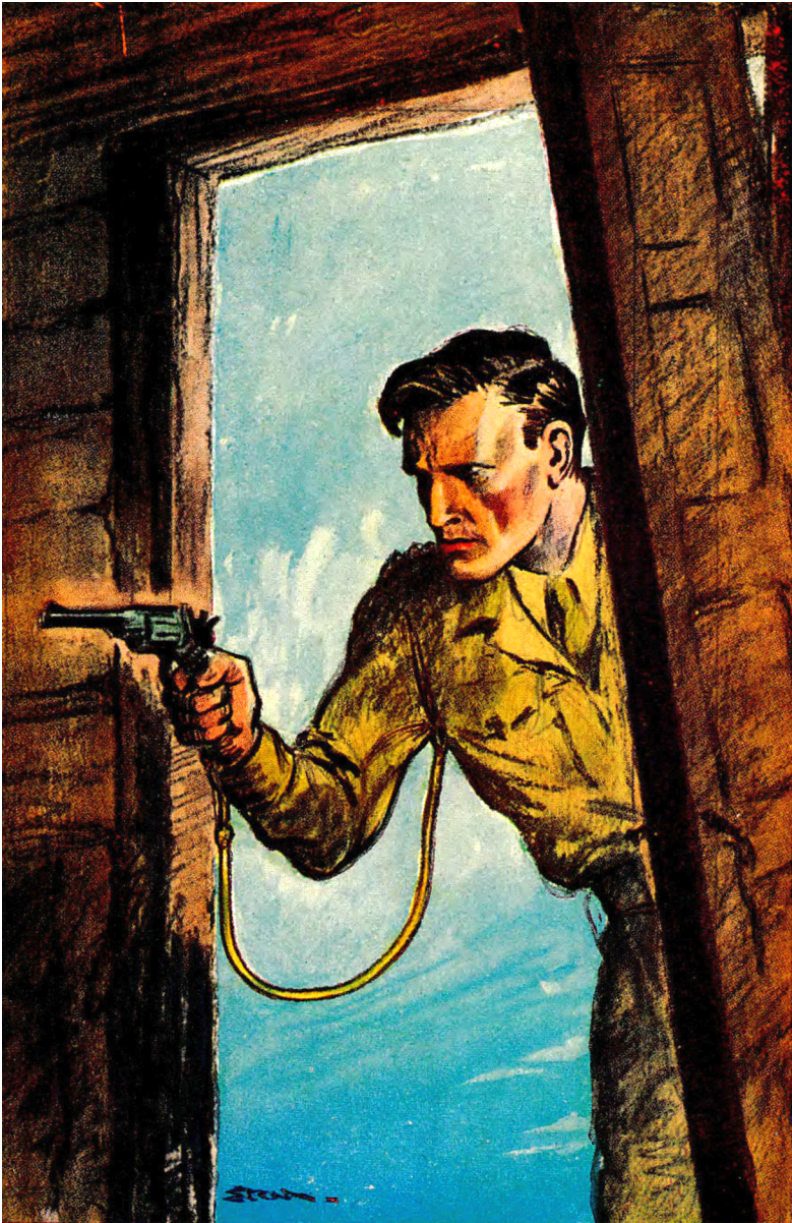
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“KEEP STILL AND DON’T MAKE A SOUND!”

GIMLET GOES AGAIN

**KING OF THE COMMANDOS
IN ANOTHER ADVENTURE WITH
FIGHTING FRANCE AND THE
GREY FLEAS OF THE NORTH**

**BY
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS**



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INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this foreword is that readers who are unfamiliar with the persons named in the following pages may read straight on without recourse to frequent footnotes, which otherwise would have been necessary, and must have interrupted the narrative. These characters first appear in a story told in full under the title of *King of the Commandos*. In that adventure the people most concerned were: Nigel Norman Peters, otherwise “Cub”; Captain Lorrington “Gimlet” King, D.S.O., M.C., leader of a special detachment of Combined Operations (Commandos) known as King’s “Kittens,” the distinguishing shoulder cypher being a wildcat; Corporal Albert Edward “Copper” Collson, an ex-London policeman; and Private “Trapper” Troublay, a French Canadian—these two being Captain King’s right-hand men in the Kittens. Here, briefly, is how the association came about.

When the British Army evacuated France, Nigel Peters, then aged 15, was at school in Essex. Hurrying—as did the rest of the school—to the nearest point of disembarkation, he learned from a soldier that his father, Colonel Peters, was last seen lying wounded on the beach at Dunkirk. Whereupon Peter, in a wild hope of effecting a rescue, stowed himself away on one of the ships plying between England and France. The ship was sunk, and he was left stranded on the bomb-torn beach. When the Nazi soldiers arrived on the scene he went into hiding, and so made the acquaintance of a French lad named Louis Morelle. Together they fled down the coast. Other boys, refugees, joined them.

From this meeting there developed, over the next two years, a band of youthful patriots who, from the cover of an ancient castle in the Forest of Caen, devoted themselves to the injury of the Nazis by every means they could invent. This organization was known as *Les Poux Gris du Nord*—meaning *The Grey Fleas of the North*. The boys concealed their real names by adopting those of the wild creatures that dwelt in the forest. Louis became *Le Renard*—otherwise The Fox. Nigel became Cub. Others were Hawk, Snake, Grasshopper, and the like.

During a British commando raid on the coast Cub falls in with Captain Gimlet King and his two able assistants, Copper Collson and Trapper Troublay. After some remarkable adventures the commandos return to England taking Cub with them, and leaving The Fleas well equipped with weapons and explosives to carry on their work of sabotage. At Combined Operations Headquarters Cub tells his story, and reveals the existence of the

gang of young French saboteurs. When it is realized that as a result of his sojourn in Nazi-occupied France Cub speaks French and German fluently, and knows his way about northern France better than most of the local inhabitants, it is decided to offer him a special enlistment as a cadet-commando under Captain King. The idea is that he shall maintain contact with the Fleas for the purpose of collecting information about the movements of the enemy, and should occasion arise, act as guide to Gimlet and his Kittens. Cub learns that his father is safe in Spain, and settles down to work with his new comrades.

CHAPTER I

A PATRIOT DIES FOR FRANCE

FROM the war-blinded soil of Northern France, like a radiant lance, a searchlight beam struck into the heart of the night: and by a million to one chance that must have astonished the operators it smote the aircraft at which it was directed, smote it fairly and squarely, so that the machine became at once a solitary firefly gleaming in the mighty vault of heaven.

This was unfortunate for Cub Peters. Extremely unfortunate. Besides which it was bad luck. The beam caught him half in and half out of the machine. A second earlier and he could have drawn back. A second later and he would have gone. As it was, it caught him—to use a service expression—on one leg, so that for two frantic seconds he knew not whether to hang on or let go, a problem which was not made easier by a temporary blindness caused by the glare. To say that in the end he jumped would not be strictly true. It would be more correct to say that the decision was made for him by his pilot, who took evading action. So Cub fell out, following into the void his leader, Captain Gimlet King, who had left the aircraft a second before the beam had flashed. For a fleeting instant, as Cub fell through the fierce white light, his parachute fluttering behind him like a wisp of smoke, he bore a curious resemblance to a comet. Then darkness engulfed him. But he knew that he must have been seen; knew, even while he was plunging earthward, that the Nazi anti-aircraft organization below would already be operating at full power to secure his arrest. It was a bad beginning.

He had not far to fall—a trifle more than a thousand feet; and when, a few seconds later, the earth loomed black and solid beneath him, his legs were already performing the action of running, to break his fall. One hand clutched the parachute release. Striking the ground he stumbled and fell; but he was up in a flash, and having discarded his harness, set off at a sprint for the nearest cover—a wide belt of timber that towered stark and black against the sky a hundred paces distant. Then a short sharp whistle with a peculiar trill in it, clear above the drone of the receding aircraft, made him swerve towards the sound. A moment later a figure came into view, running fast and crouching low. He recognized the slim form of his C.O. Another vague shape loomed suddenly behind it.

“Look out, sir!” shrilled Cub. “Behind you!”

Gimlet jumped sideways like a cat, whirling round at the same time.

A rifle blazed and a bullet zipped.

Red flame spurted from Gimlet's side, low down. With it came the crash of a heavy service revolver. The pursuing figure stumbled and dived into the ground.

"Run for it," said Gimlet curtly. "You know where we are better than I do, so you lead. We seem to have dropped into the middle of something."

"It was the searchlight. It caught me as I jumped," asserted Cub as he started off.

"I saw it," answered Gimlet shortly.

"I hope the Fleas are about. They would see what happened, and take defensive action," said Cub.

After that there was no more talking. For a while, noises made by converging enemy troops—shouts, whistles, and the roar of high-powered transport—decided Cub's course for him. He turned frequently to avoid trouble. But at length, reaching a hedge, he followed it back to the wood. An owl was hooting somewhere along the fringe, and he headed towards the sound. A hundred yards and there came a furtive rustle in the out-thrust arm of a great oak.

Cub pulled up short, uttering a sharp yap.

"Straight on," said a voice from the vague shadow overhead. "The Fox waits at the end."

Another quarter of a mile and the wood gave way to rough heath, broken by clumps of gorse and bramble. Cub yapped again.

A shadow separated itself from a mass of thorn not five paces distant. "Cub," breathed a voice, hoarse with urgency.

"Renard!"

"This way—*vivement*," snapped the Fox. "Name of a dog! Why must you jump into a hornets' nest?" He set off at a run towards a stand of timber that loomed darkly at no great distance. Half-way, and a wild boar squealed—or there came a sound like the squeal of a boar. Bushes rustled—it was hard to say where.

Instantly the Fox turned at right angles and dived flat into a fold of the rough ground. Plucking at Gimlet's sleeve, Cub followed. All lay still, trying to steady their breathing. Heavy footsteps approached, running; throats panted hoarsely with exertion; military accoutrements creaked, and a file of black shapes, appearing monstrous in the starlight, ran past.

"Nazis," grated Fox. The instant the troops were out of sight he was on his feet again, running. Just short of the forest a night-hawk screeched three

times.

“*Bon!*” said the Fox. “That means there are no more Boches this side.”

Another figure appeared mysteriously beside the runners. He spoke in a low voice to the Fox, and again faded into the night.

Said Gimlet to Cub as they ran on, “The Fleas have brought this business to a fine art.”

“They’ve had plenty of practice,” returned Cub briefly, as they neared the edge of the forest.

After walking a little way into the inky recesses of the trees the Fox stopped. “Phew! What an affair! But now we can take our time, *mon capitaine*,” he announced. “We were all ready for you in case you came. For two days and nights we have waited.”

“The signals were seen last night,” said Cub. “We came as quickly as arrangements could be made. What’s the trouble?”

“It would be better, *mon ami*, if we went to earth before we discuss that. It is a matter the most serious, and the story will take time.” The Fox set off at a steady pace, heading deeper and deeper into the forest, muttering an occasional warning, such as: “Beware the fallen tree,” or “Attention to rabbit holes.”

Half an hour of this, with the undergrowth getting ever thicker, and the Fox halted before a shapeless mass which the others knew was ivy-covered masonry. For a full minute he stood still, listening intently. Then he whistled softly. Instantly there came an answering whistle from the pile.

“All clear,” said Fox. “Enter.” Walking up to the ruin he dragged aside a mass of leaves, and switching on a torch disclosed a flight of steps leading downward. The party descended, and after traversing a short corridor emerged in a vaulted chamber lighted by a candle stuck in a bottle. The dim light revealed half a dozen urchins seated on stones and boxes. They sprang up and saluted when they recognized the visitors.

Gimlet returned the salute. “Sit down, everybody.” He himself found a seat on an empty case, glancing at his watch. “Let us get down to business,” he suggested. “We are all right for time, but we have none to waste.”

“What is the arrangement for getting back?” Fox asked Cub.

“Copper and Trapper are lying off-shore in a fast motor-boat, waiting for our signal to be picked up. If they do not get it before dawn they will return to base and come back to-morrow night. Why did you ask?”



GIMLET FOUND A SEAT ON AN EMPTY CASE.

“Because you may not be going back so soon,” was the reply. “Something has happened, something the most tragic.”

“Tell me about it,” invited Gimlet.

“First, *mon capitaine*, there is a question I am burning to ask you,” said the Fox. “Come this way, please. Cub, come if you wish, but I warn you the spectacle is not of the best.”

The Fox led the way to the far end of the chamber, where a long object lay on the ground under a brown blanket. On the blanket lay a small tricolour, the flag of France, and this gave Cub a clue to what lay beneath, so that the shock was not so great as otherwise it might have been when the Fox lifted the blanket to reveal the body of a man.

A torch put a spotlight on the face of a man of about thirty years of age. The features were composed in death, but they were pathetically thin, and held an expression of weariness, as if the man had been subject to great strain for a long period of time. For the rest, it was quite an ordinary face—that of a typical middle-class Parisian, thought Cub, who had seen too much

of death to be shocked. The only feature that could be called distinguishing was a slim black moustache turned down at the ends.

“Do you know this man, *mon capitaine*?” asked the Fox in a low voice.

“No,” answered Gimlet.

With reverent care the Fox replaced the blanket. “That is all,” he said. “Now he can be buried. I thought you had better see him first. Let us return to the others.”

Now in order that a better understanding of these sinister proceedings may be gained a few words of explanation become necessary. Following the events narrated in *King of the Commandos*, the commandos had made another sortie into Normandy, to re-establish contact with the Fleas, and to arrange a scheme whereby the organization, should it find itself in possession of important information, could get in touch with the commandos across the Channel. The arrangement was simple. Should the Fleas have vital information to transmit they were to flash the letter X, in the Morse code, thrice repeated, to British aircraft that operated nightly over that area. At home, Gimlet had arranged with the Higher Command that air crews should be warned to be on the look-out for such a signal. This plan was as fool-proof as could be devised. For five weeks nothing had happened. Then, the night before this story opens, more than one pilot had reported seeing the signal. An operation to make contact with the Fleas had at once been planned. Gimlet and Cub were to drop by parachute near the Fleas' headquarters in the Forest of Caen. A night landing by an aircraft at this spot being impracticable, Copper and Trapper were to stand by in a fast boat, watching the enemy coast for a pre-arranged signal that the parachutists were to send when they were ready to be picked up. All wore commando uniform, Gimlet insisting that as they were soldiers—at any rate, not officially secret agents—the sortie must be regarded as a military operation, at least in the first place. Should circumstances arise to make the wearing of uniforms suicidal, the matter could be reconsidered.

Everything had gone off as planned, except that, as already stated, by an unlucky chance a searchlight had picked up the operating aircraft at the very moment that Cub was leaving it. The enemy was therefore aware that at least one British parachutist was in the district, so that beyond all possible doubt an intensive search would follow. However, for the moment, in the heart of the forest, Cub felt reasonably safe. The difficulty of the return journey could be dealt with when the time came.

The Fox led the way back to the main chamber, and having reached it, invited Gimlet and Cub to make themselves comfortable while he told his

story.

“Four days ago,” began the Fox, “it was reported to me by the Grasshopper that a patriot had been found hiding in the barn near his house—the same barn in which the Grasshopper’s father once allowed us to take refuge when we were running from the Nazis. The unfortunate man had been wounded. Actually, although we did not know it, he was dying. Before he died he told us certain things—told them slowly, you understand, and with difficulty, for he was in great pain. It seems that he had been pursued from Paris, and was overtaken, at night, near the place where he was found. In spite of his wound he evaded the Nazis, and crawling under the straw in the barn, escaped detection. When he was discovered by the Grasshopper’s father he was in great distress, not only on account of his wound, but because of a mission he had undertaken but would not now be able to perform. The search for him was still going on, so we decided to bring him here where he would be safe. This was done, and we brought here a doctor whom we could trust; but there was little he could do. At great risk the doctor came, and helped us to remove the clothes so that he could make an operation. He took out a bullet, and having done all that was possible returned to Caen, leaving the wounded man in our hands. But all was in vain. He died, died for honour and country, which, *monsieur*, is as much as a man can do. It was here, with the sweat of death on his brow, that he told us what I shall now tell you; and you will perceive, *mon capitaine*, that the matter was of even greater importance than we supposed. This is what he told the Fleas as the life went slowly out of his eyes.

“His name was Jacques Catron, and he was of Paris, by trade a clerk. Yes, just a poor clerk; yet he was one of the original organizers, and the leader in his department of the French Underground Movement, which, as you know, is only waiting for the word from England for the right moment to strike. The Nazis know that too, and they have tried—so far in vain—to plant a traitor in the organization, to learn the names of everyone concerned. Also, they would like the Underground to strike before its proper time, for then all the members would betray themselves to no purpose. You comprehend, *monsieur*?”

“Perfectly,” answered Gimlet. “Continue.”

“Jacques Catron was on a special mission for the Underground. He was a courier, and his work was perhaps the most dangerous of all. His present task was to make contact and keep in touch with the British agents in Normandy. It was the work of the British agents to get to London the information which he brought. *Alors*, Jacques carried no papers. Everything he knew he carried in his head. For more than a year he had done this work

with great success. A week ago it became necessary for the Underground to transmit news of the first importance to England. Jacques volunteered for the job. Yet somehow, in spite of all the precautions, the Nazis learned of this. Not only did they know that a courier was going through to the coast, but they knew that Jacques Catron was the man. They *must* have known, or the things that have happened could not have happened. How do they learn these things? I do not know. Perhaps they had already been watching him. They watch everybody, the Gestapo. But what does it matter how they know? They knew, and Jacques was a doomed man.

“You would think that knowing Jacques to be a patriot they would have arrested him. But no. These Germans know more tricks than the devil himself. They let him start, hoping perhaps that he would betray some of his comrades *en route*. But we too have our spies, and Jacques was informed that he was being followed. And now this is the point, *mon capitaine*. He was followed so that when the moment came he could be seized, and another man, a Nazi spy, put in his place. Thus it would be the Nazi spy who arrived at the rendezvous to meet the British agent. No doubt the intention was that this Nazi should learn, or try to learn, what the British were doing. He would find out who the British agents were, and also the names of the French patriots who were communicating with them. In short, *monsieur*, the patriots and British Secret Service agents in France were to be wiped out together. At this moment there is a Nazi spy working between the French Underground and the British Secret Service.”

“But they did not catch Jacques,” Gimlet pointed out.

“No, but they saw him fall. They knew he was wounded. They knew he could not reach the rendezvous, so it would be safe for the spy to go there in his place.”

“Who is this spy—do you know?”

“*Non, monsieur.*”

“Is he a German or a renegade Frenchman?”

“We do not know, but he is probably of the Vichy French, the better to present himself as a patriot. Some of these Vichy rats are terrified now that they know the army of liberation is closing in on them.” The Fox spat.

“Did Jacques tell you the rendezvous?”

“Yes—the *Restaurant des Voyageurs*, at Caen. It is a cheap restaurant in the Rue Basse, just behind the Canal Maritime. Jacques, by skill and courage, had nearly reached Caen when he was overtaken by the enemy.”

“When was this appointment for?”

“To-night.”

“At what hour?”

“Ten-thirty.”

“They will have finished eating by then. Will the restaurant still be open?”

“Yes. The tables will be cleared, but the regular customers will be there, playing cards, or dominoes, drinking a little wine perhaps, as is the way in France.”

Gimlet looked at his watch. “It’s just on nine already,” he muttered.

“We should have got in touch with you at once, but the weather was bad and there were no planes over,” explained the Fox. “Not until last night could we send the signals.”

“They were seen, but it was too near dawn for us to do anything immediately,” put in Cub. “So we came to-night, as soon as it was dark.”

“Tell me this,” said Gimlet, speaking to the Fox. “What was the important information Jacques was so anxious to get to England?”

“I do not know, *monsieur*.”

“Jacques didn’t tell you?”

“He was about to do so when he died. He struggled hard, but death overtook him.”

“Pity,” murmured Gimlet softly. “It comes to this. If the Nazi plan succeeds, the whole French Underground movement may be exposed, and our agents on this side of the Channel rounded up and shot.”

“Of a certainty, *monsieur*.”

“We must stop that,” decided Gimlet. “Let me think.” He lit a cigarette, and stared fixedly at the floor for two or three minutes before he resumed. “There are two things we can do,” he said slowly. “We can either try to catch this Nazi spy, or warn the British agent of his danger. Unfortunately there seems to be a big snag in each case. We have no means of recognizing either of them. Did Jacques Catron tell you, or did he know, what this Nazi spy looked like?”

“He may have known, but he did not tell me, *monsieur*. He died before we could discuss such details.”

“What about the British agent? How was Jacques to recognize him?”

“Here perhaps I can help you,” declared the Fox. “Jacques did not know the man he was to meet, but he told me that the Englishman would be able to recognize *him* or would know him for the man he had come to meet.”

“How?”

“I do not know, *monsieur*.”

Gimlet frowned. “That doesn’t make sense to me. Jacques comes to Caen to meet a man he does not know. The man, presumably, has never seen him before, either. Both are taking their lives in their hands. If either makes a mistake the consequence might be fatal. How was this British agent to be *sure* that Jacques was his man? Was there a password?”

“Jacques did not mention one.”

“Was Jacques carrying a badge, a passport of some sort?”

“He told me he carried no papers. It was too dangerous. No man in France knows when he is going to be searched.”

“What was the point of Jacques telling you this? What did he expect you to do about it?”

“I told him the Fleas could get in touch with the British.”

“I see. That was the arrangement. You were to get in touch with us.”

“*Oui, monsieur*.”

“Nothing was said about you going to the *Restaurant des Voyageurs*?”

“*Non, monsieur*.”

“Why not, I wonder?”

“I would not know the Englishman, and he would not know me.”

“That brings us back to where we started from,” declared Gimlet. “How was Jacques to be known, if there was no password, and he carried no papers?”

The Fox puckered his forehead. “Now you speak of this I have a faint recollection that Jacques said something, just before he died, about a card of identity being given to him when he reached the restaurant. At the finish Jacques spoke with such difficulty and his mind wandered so much that it was not easy to follow him, *monsieur*.”

“If you got this right, it would seem that somebody in the restaurant would know Jacques. A member of the Underground, perhaps.”

The Fox shrugged. “Perhaps. I am not a member of the official Underground.”

Gimlet bit his lip thoughtfully. “It begins to look as if the men who sent Jacques on the trip had made arrangements about which he himself did not know.”

“It is possible,” agreed the Fox. “I know that every scheme undertaken by patriots is surrounded by secret safety devices, and still more devices, to prevent a trail from leading back to headquarters should anything go wrong.

Each man knows so much and no more, so that he could not betray his comrades even under torture. A man cannot tell what he does not know.”

Gimlet nodded. “Well, I don’t quite see how it is to be done, but we’ve got to try to prevent this meeting at the *Restaurant des Voyageurs* from taking place.”

Fox snapped his fingers. “*Zut!* An idea. I wonder if Georges Latroux could help us?”

“Who’s he?”

“The proprietor of the restaurant.”

“Is he to be trusted?”

“Absolutely, *monsieur*. At least, he knows of the Fleas, yet has never reported us, although a big reward has been offered.”

“That’s worth knowing, although I don’t see that it helps us much,” averred Gimlet. “I can’t just walk up to Latroux and ask him questions. For obvious reasons he wouldn’t tell me anything even if he was in the scheme. Another point is, after what has happened in Caen in the past, the town isn’t exactly a healthy place for us. I suppose *Generaloberst* Gunther is still in charge?”

“Yes.”

“He’d recognize me if he saw me, if not you, sir,” observed Cub.

“In the dark it’s unlikely that he would see us, even if he was about,” answered Gimlet. “All the same, we can’t go into the town in these uniforms. Fox, could you find plain clothes for us?”

“For Cub, yes, *mon capitaine*, because there are many Fleas of his size. But for you I have nothing, *monsieur*.”

“Then that settles it,” muttered Gimlet.

“Just a minute, sir. There is one way.” Cub was looking straight into Gimlet’s face.

“What is it?”

Cub hesitated for a moment. “I hardly like to suggest it, but Jacques Catron looked about your build. He won’t need his clothes any more.”

Gimlet’s eyes opened wide. “Well thought of, Cub,” he said softly. “As an idea, it isn’t exactly a pretty proposition, but when we go for a ride with the devil driving we can’t afford to be squeamish. You’ve hit on the answer. There’s one other thing. What are we going to do about Copper and Trapper?”

“They’ll go back to base when we don’t show up.”

“That is the arrangement, but I’m wondering if we can’t improve on that. One could go back and report what was happening. The Higher Command ought to know. The other might come here, and take charge of things while we’re in the town.”

“The Fox could send the signal to bring them ashore, and when they arrived, explain the position,” suggested Cub. “Trapper, who speaks French well enough to pass for a native, could come here. Copper could go home and report.”

Gimlet looked at the Fox. “Do you think you could handle that—bearing in mind that the Nazis saw our plane, and will be on the alert?”

“But certainly, *monsieur*.”

“All right then. Consider it settled,” stated Gimlet, rising.

“Just what are we going to do, sir?” asked Cub.

“There’s only one thing we *can* do,” answered Gimlet. “We’ll change our clothes, go into the town, and call at the restaurant to see how things are shaping. We’d better be moving.”

CHAPTER II

RESTAURANT DES VOYAGEURS

At a few minutes before ten-thirty Gimlet and Cub entered the restaurant, and selecting a wall table that commanded a view of the door, sat down. To be more precise, they sat side by side on a fixed wooden seat which ran the length of the room, with their backs against the wall and a small table in front of them. From this position they could see the entire dining room—if such it could be called.

For a moment or two Cub’s eyes remained on the door by which they had entered. He was not very comfortable, for he was by no means sure that they had not been followed. Outside, from the general military activity, it was evident that the hunt for the parachutists was going on with unabated zeal. Troops were everywhere, coming and going, on foot, on pedal cycles, on motor bikes and in cars. A number of curious spectators, civilians, were also in the streets, either to watch events or to ascertain what the fuss was about. This suited the two commandos, who turned the situation to advantage by keeping to the main thoroughfares, it being Gimlet’s opinion

that this was a safer method of approach than slinking through the side streets. This opinion was proved in practice; at any rate they reached the restaurant without hindrance, although the journey was not without its moments of anxiety.



ON HIS HEAD GIMLET WORE A BERET A TRIFLE TOO
SMALL FOR HIM.

Cub had discarded his uniform in favour of a miscellaneous set of garments that would take more time to describe than such a detail warrants. In an old jacket, knickerbockers, black stockings and rough shoes, he looked what he pretended to be—a nondescript youth of the lower middle class. Had he been alone he would have preferred to descend to the lowest class, but the attire of his companion called for something better. Too much of a contrast, it was decided, might look odd, if not suspicious. For Gimlet, in a dark striped suit of typical French cut, with the usual built-up shoulders, was almost smart. His shoes, which were of a sickly ochre tint, rather spoil the effect. On his head he wore a beret a trifle too small for him. These garments, of course, had been the property of the dead patriot. Gimlet had no compunction about using them, asserting that Catron, were he in a position to do so, would enjoy the spectacle of his clothes carrying on the work which his murderers, as far as he, personally, was concerned, had terminated.

The *Restaurant des Voyageurs* was a sorry hole as eating places go. The room and its furniture were drab, drab with a sordidness that not even a garish wallpaper could dissipate. The lighting, either because the proprietor economized in electricity or because the black-out was defective, was bad, giving the place an atmosphere of gloomy melancholy. A heavy smell, in which rancid fat, stale vegetables, and sour wine were the most noticeable ingredients, did nothing to raise the general tone of the establishment. There were several tables, with a fair amount of space between them. They presented plain deal boards to the diners. Some, in addition to sundry receptacles containing condiments, carried dirty crocks. One corner of the room was occupied by a short counter, or bar; behind it rose shelf after shelf of bottles in astonishing variety. This, presumably, was for effect, for even from where he sat Cub could see that most of the bottles were empty. Such was the *Restaurant des Voyageurs*, and it was much as he expected. Similar places are to be found in the lower-class quarter of any town in France.

Yet, surprisingly, the restaurant was fairly well patronized—an implication, if not actual proof, that the food was tolerably good. No Frenchman goes twice to eat where the food is poor, either in quality or quantity.

There were present no fewer than fifteen persons: thirteen were customers; the other two, behind the bar, were apparently the proprietor and his wife. To the customers Cub now directed his attention, for one of them might be—indeed, should be—the British agent. They were arranged in this fashion: at one table were three elderly working-class Frenchmen; at any rate, they spoke French loudly and volubly, as two played at dominoes while

the third watched and offered advice. Two fishermen, judging by their blue jerseys, also French, occupied another table. They talked in low tones with a carafe of wine between them. At another table were two tired-looking German sailors, smoking cigars. At another table three German soldiers were drinking beer and making a good deal of noise about it. A coarse, middle-aged man in blue overalls, and a slattern of a woman, sat at another table, somewhat apart, arguing. One man sat alone, reading a newspaper. He was short, fat, and heavily moustached; a peaked cap suggested that he was employed in a minor capacity by the local authority—a postman or a tram conductor, perhaps. These were the customers. To attend to their wants were the man and woman behind the bar. The man, in shirt-sleeves, was wiping glasses. He was a dark, pale, miserable-looking fellow, with furtive eyes and a jerky manner. He coughed almost incessantly, as if he suffered from some lung trouble. The woman, who was counting the money in the till, was a robust, capable type of female. Her movements were as assured as those of the man were hesitant.

This, then, was the scene that greeted the new arrivals; it took less time to survey than to describe.

“I don’t see anybody like the man we’re looking for,” murmured Cub, dropping naturally into French.

“I don’t suppose he’ll look anything like what either of us would expect,” returned Gimlet whimsically. “The business of these secret service fellows is to look like what they are *not*, not what they are, otherwise they wouldn’t last long.”

The woman behind the bar, who had made a thoughtful scrutiny of the new arrivals, spoke to the man in a low voice. He nodded, and flipping a piece of dirty rag over his arm in lieu of a napkin, came briskly to the table.

“*Monsieur?*” he queried, looking at Gimlet for his order.

Gimlet asked what there was to drink, and it turned out that there was little choice. He ordered a carafe of *vin ordinaire* and some water. This the man brought, and put on the table with two glasses. Even while he was doing this it struck Cub that his manner was not normal, although it was not easy to perceive exactly in what respect. It would create a false impression to say that there was anything remarkable about his manner; yet there was a certain stiffness, a slow deliberation, about his movements, and the way his dark eyes went from one customer to the other, that gave Cub a pang of uneasiness. With his back to the room, the man’s final act, with a motion that was definitely surreptitious, was to take a folded piece of stiff paper from his napkin and lay it on the table. With one finger resting on it he

looked Gimlet straight in the eyes. “*Voilà! monsieur,*” he said softly, and departed.

Without examining it, for his eyes were on the other customers to observe if any were watching, Gimlet transferred the paper to his pocket. With his clean-cut features set in thoughtful lines he switched his glance to the retreating figure, watched it for a moment, and then looked back at Cub. “Take it easy,” he breathed. “More is going on here than there would seem.”

“What was that paper?” whispered Cub.

“I’ll look at it in a minute. No hurry—sit still.”

At this juncture the door was thrown open—literally thrown open—and a man entered. Cub’s heart missed a beat. It was a German *Unteroffizier*, a military policeman, as denoted by an armlet. His manner was in accord with his uniform.

“Stay where you are, everybody,” he ordered harshly, speaking first in French and then repeating the order in German. In the uncomfortable silence that followed he strode to the nearest table, which happened to be the one occupied by the two German sailors. “Papers,” he demanded.

They were produced. The *Unteroffizier* scanned them and handed them back. “Your shore leave expires in fifteen minutes. Get back to your ship,” he snapped.

Without a word the sailors got up, threw some coins on the table and went out.

The *Unteroffizier* went on to the table occupied by the solitary Frenchman. He held out a hand. “Your card,” he said brusquely.

The Frenchman took a wallet from his breast pocket and produced his identity card.

“He’s going all round,” said Cub softly, conscious of a fluttering sensation under his ribs, for neither he nor Gimlet carried papers of any sort. He braced himself for trouble.

As it happened their turn came last, by which time the rest of the clientele, except for three soldiers who had followed the sailors, had resumed their occupations in a manner very much subdued.

“Cards,” said the *Unteroffizier* in a peremptory voice.

Gimlet met his eyes and answered apologetically, in French, “A thousand pardons, *monsieur*, but I left my *carte* in my working clothes. If you will excuse me for a moment I will fetch it.”

“But no, *monsieur,*” broke in a quiet but anxious voice. “I am sure you are mistaken, for a few minutes ago I saw you drop your card and pointed it

out to you. You put it in your pocket.” It was the proprietor who spoke. He had followed the *Unteroffizier* at a respectful distance.

The policeman glared at Gimlet. “Is this your idea of a joke?”

“But no, *monsieur*,” answered Gimlet quickly. By this time he was feeling in his pocket, the one into which he had put the paper left on the table by the proprietor. He took it out and stared at it with a surprise that was not simulated, for it was an identity card. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m very sorry,” he said contritely. “I was afraid I had left it at home.”

The German snatched the card. Reading it, a furrow appeared between his eyes. “What’s this?” he growled. “Why was your card not stamped last week? You know the orders.”

“I was ill, and it slipped my memory,” explained Gimlet in an abject voice.

The *Unteroffizier* kept the document. He looked at Cub.

“Where’s *your* card?”

“It’s in my other jacket, sir,” answered Cub meekly.

“So! Some of you people need a lesson,” grated the *Unteroffizier*. “Come with me, both of you. We’ll see what the *Herr Kommandant* has to say about this.”

“But——”

“You dare to argue with me?”

“No, *Herr Leutnant*.”

Gimlet stood up, and Cub, taking his cue, did the same. They followed the *Unteroffizier* towards the door. Just as they reached it, it was opened from the outside and a man came in. Cub was too occupied with his own predicament to pay much attention to him, but he noted in passing that the newcomer was a civilian, a Frenchman of about thirty years of age, with a thin, pale face. On his upper lip he wore a thin, black moustache turned down at the ends. The fellow reminded him vaguely of somebody, but he could not remember who. Not that he tried very hard. His mind was concerned with other matters. The man went on into the dining room while they followed the *Unteroffizier* into the deserted street; or it appeared to be deserted. But before they had taken six paces two men, again civilians, stepped out of a doorway. A torch flashed in Cub’s eyes.

“What’s this?” said a voice sharply, speaking in German.

The *Unteroffizier* answered in the same language. “Your authority, please?”

“Gestapo.”

“Pardon. I picked this pair up in that hole of a restaurant. I’m not satisfied with them, so I’m taking them to headquarters.”

“Are you acting under orders?”

“The street comes in my beat.”

“Very well. Pass on. Don’t come back this way.”

“*Jawohl.*”

The little party moved on. Nobody spoke. The corner of the street reached, the way lay beside the Canal Maritime on the one side, and low-class shops on the other. Not a soul was in sight. About fifty yards were covered in silence. Then, suddenly, the *Unteroffizier* said “Halt.” An automatic had appeared in his hand. He held it so that it could be seen. When his order was obeyed he went on quickly, tersely, speaking in French. “Stand with your backs to the wall.” Then, addressing Gimlet, he continued in a voice that had iron in it. “Tell me where you got those clothes. Speak quickly. No lies—unless you are in a hurry to die.”

For the first time a hazy suspicion of the truth penetrated Cub’s racing faculties. He heard Gimlet say, “They belonged to a friend of mine.”

“His name?”

“Jacques Catron.”

“Had you said any other name my answer would have been a bullet,” said the *Unteroffizier* coldly. “Where is Catron?”

“He is dead.”

“How did he die?”

“He was shot by the Gestapo.”

“Ah!” There was a brief pause. “What are you doing here, in his clothes?”

“Before he died he asked me to meet a friend with whom he had an assignation.”

“Where?”

“At the *Restaurant des Voyageurs.*”

“Do you know this friend?”

“No.”

“Does he know you?”

“No.”

“Then how could you recognize each other?”

“I hoped that by some chance it would be possible. It might be that Georges Latroux, the proprietor, would help. I was waiting when you came

in.”

Cub listened to this conversation in puzzled amazement. The two men, he realized, were sparring, like boxers, both on their toes, each expecting the other to strike. One thing only was clear. The *Unteroffizier* was not what he pretended to be. Wondering what was coming next, he became aware that a development was imminent. Approaching from the direction in which they themselves had come, keeping close against the dingy shop fronts, were two figures, one large and one small; and from the sinister method of their advance it was evident that these were no ordinary pedestrians. Already confused by a confusing situation, Cub did not know what to make of them; but if, as it appeared, they were stalking the German policeman, nothing was to be gained by interfering. He knew that the *Unteroffizier* had not seen the furtive shadows creeping along the pavement, for his back was towards them; but of Gimlet he was not so sure.

Meanwhile the conversation had ended in a sort of stalemate. The atmosphere was tense. Each was suspicious of the other. Neither was prepared to say the final word that would either betray or reveal his true identity.

The drama closed swiftly. Without a sound, without even a patter of footsteps, the two figures loomed suddenly behind the man in German uniform. Cub recognized the Fox. With him was a man he certainly did not expect to see. It was Trapper. In his right hand, held by the muzzle, was a revolver.

Gimlet must have seen this, too, for his voice cut into the silence like the lash of a whip. He spoke in English. “Hold hard, Trapper.”

The *Unteroffizier*, thus warned, spun round. As he did so Gimlet leapt forward and gripped him so that his arms were pinned to his sides. Trapper, too, jumped in and grabbed the hand holding the automatic. There was a brief struggle. Then a voice said, in English, “For God’s sake go easy. What the devil are you fellows playing at?”

The figures fell apart. “I thought so,” said Gimlet. “Are you the man Catron was to meet?”

“I am,” said the *Unteroffizier*.

“Then you’re British?”

“Sounds like it, doesn’t it? Who the deuce are you? I can’t get you weighed up at all.”

“I’m Captain King, Ninth Troop Combined Ops—you may have heard of the Kittens?”

“Spare my days!” exclaimed the pseudo-German. “So that’s it. No wonder I was all at sea. I’m Intelligence—but how did you get into this?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” answered Gimlet. He turned to Trapper, who was in ordinary battle dress. “What in thunder are you doing here?”

“The Fox told me what was cooking, sir. He brought me along in case you needed help. We were watching the pub. When you came out we followed.”

“Are you out of your mind, walking about this town in uniform?”

“The Fox brought me through the back streets—they’re pretty dark, sir.”

“What about Copper?”

“He’s gone back to base to report, sir.”

Gimlet turned to the secret agent. “We’d better not stand here. D’you know some place where we can talk?”

“Follow me,” was the quick response. “We haven’t far to go. Don’t follow in a bunch—break the party up.”

“Go ahead,” invited Gimlet.

By this time, of course, the situation was clear. Cub realized that the appointment at the restaurant had been kept—by a German N.C.O. He remembered Gimlet’s prediction that the British agent, when he came, would not look like anything they expected. He had been right. Not for an instant had Cub suspected the truth, and his respect for the men who did this sort of work went up with a bound.

The man in German uniform strode on, followed by the others, walking in pairs. He took a turning, skirted a churchyard, dived into a narrow alley, and after a few quick steps pulled up short before a little shop. A key clicked in a lock.

“Come in. Go straight ahead,” requested the agent.

They all went in. The door was closed. A match flared. The man in German uniform lighted a candle. “This way,” he invited, and going through to the back of the house opened another door disclosing a flight of steps leading to a cellar. They went down. “Make yourselves at home,” continued the secret service man. “You’ll find some empty casks and things to sit on.” He put the candle on a ledge. “Now let’s get this sorted out,” he suggested. “Sorry I can’t give you my name, for obvious reasons, but officially at home I’m known as Number Nine—Numero Neuf here. You can call me Numero, for short.”

“I’ve no proof of identity on me, naturally, but enough has been said, I think, to make it unnecessary,” returned Gimlet. “You’ll have to take me on

chance. I'll tell you what I know, and why I went to the restaurant." He gave a concise account of the night's work. "I realize now that Latroux, the proprietor of the restaurant, must be in the game, but I wasn't to know that when I went in. In fact, I was completely in the dark. What I still don't understand is how Latroux, and you, knew that *I* was your man."

"That suit you were wearing was your passport," explained Numero with a faint smile. "The material is cut so that the stripes on the lapels meet, forming a letter V. It isn't the sort of thing one would notice unless one was deliberately looking for it. The stripes on Latroux's dirty shirt meet in the same way. But never mind about that now. This is tragic news about Catron. My business here was to meet him. Incidentally, had he been in the restaurant I should have treated him just as I did you."

"Was that fake identity card really unstamped?" asked Gimlet.

"No. I put on that act to get you outside. It may sound rather silly and melodramatic, but believe me, when you're working under the eyes of the Gestapo it's better to have too many precautions than too few."

"Then you didn't know Catron by sight?"

"No. Couriers are changed constantly. The fewer the people who know each other the less chance there is of one giving the others away. Latroux knew a messenger was coming, so he was on the watch for a man with marked lapels. He tipped me the wink that you were the man as soon as I came in. The rest of the act was simply playing up to my part. That, too, was necessary. The town fairly stinks of Gestapo. When you failed to return the pre-arranged answers to my questions I knew that you were a phoney; at least, I knew that you weren't Catron—who should have come alone, anyway. I brought you outside to find out just who you were, and, if possible, what your game was. If I surprised you, you certainly surprised me. I didn't guess that I'd picked up a British commando—much less Gimlet King himself. Let's forget that now. Catron had vital information for me. Do you know what it was?"

"No. Catron didn't pass it on. Either he died before he could, or he daren't risk it."

"Then it must be very important. This has got me worried. From what you tell me there is a German agent in the restaurant at this very moment, passing himself off as Catron. He must be the man who came in as we went out."

"As a matter of fact he bore some slight resemblance to Catron," put in Cub.

“Is that so? He must be the man, then. The Gestapo was outside, watching him, as you noticed. They’ve probably got a cordon round the place. Fortunately they let us through. The question is, what to do next. The position is serious, we needn’t doubt that. If this fellow whom the Nazis have substituted for Catron manages to worm his way into the Underground, anything can happen. If the Underground cracks, the work of years will be wiped out in a flash. Thousands would die. Here in Caen alone there are hundreds of patriots whose lives are now in peril.”

“How about bumping off this phoney guy when he comes out, sir?” suggested Trapper.

Numero answered. “It might be done, but the risk would be enormous. If he’s a crooked Frenchman—and I expect he is—the Gestapo will have their eyes on him all the time. Moreover, if he was killed, the Nazis would probably shoot a hundred hostages to-morrow. No, we daren’t risk that—not for the moment, anyway. The biggest tragedy of all is, we haven’t got this information Catron was carrying in his head. To make it worse, the people who sent him will not know that he died before he could get in touch with me to pass it on.”

“Can’t you make contact with them?” queried Gimlet.

“Given time, yes. But my orders are to return to England to-night. Never mind how I get there, but my people are waiting for me. If I’m not back by dawn it will be presumed that I have slipped up, and another man will be sent out.”

“To the restaurant?”

“Yes. As things are he’ll walk into a trap. For that reason alone I must let my department know that the mission has failed. I can’t go to England and Paris as well. Wait though! There may be a way. We could . . .” Numero’s eyes were on Gimlet’s face.

“Go ahead.”

“How about you going to Paris? I could put you in touch with the Underground there.”

“Here, just a minute,” protested Gimlet. “I’m a soldier, not an Intelligence agent.”

Numero smiled lugubriously. “You’d have a job to convince the Nazis of that if they caught you in that rig-out. I’m not asking you to do any spying. I’m only asking you to act as a messenger. My suggestion was just an expedient to straighten things out. After all, it was this very job that brought you to France. Had Catron not been killed the Fleas would not have sent for

you. Of course, if you'd rather not go, I should be the last man to blame you. This game isn't everyone's cup of tea."

Gimlet moved uncomfortably. "Fair enough. If you put it like that I can't very well refuse. If you think that the situation calls for such a measure I'm willing to try it. You can let the people at my headquarters know what's cooking. But what about papers—travel permit, railway ticket, and all that?"

"Oh, I can fix those. We've facilities here for that sort of thing."

"All right, fix it."

"Going alone?"

"No. I'll take this lad with me." Gimlet indicated Cub. "He's been on the loose in France for two years, so he's probably better at this sort of thing than I am. Trapper and the Fox can go to the forest and wait there for orders. I take it that as soon as I've reported to the Underground in Paris what has happened here I'm at liberty to go home?"

"Of course. But if you're going you've no time to lose. It's just on eleven, and the last train for Paris leaves at eleven-forty. It gets in—if it's on time—about five. It will still be dark."

"Okay. Tell me what I do when I get to Paris."

Numero spoke slowly and distinctly. "Commit this to memory," he cautioned. "You will go to number 117, Rue de Lorraine, which is a little street behind the Opera. Number 117 is the workshop of a cabinet-maker named Pierre Sabonier. He repairs antique furniture. You will ask him what has become of Monsieur Rouge—that being the name by which the head of the Underground is known. He will answer that Monsieur Rouge has gone into the country, whereupon you will reply that you have urgent business with him. While this conversation is taking place you will hold in a casual manner the left lapel of your jacket, so that your thumb rests in the V. That's all—he'll do the rest; but for heaven's sake be careful. The Underground takes no chances. One slip and you'll be a dead man. When you have made contact you will report the fate of Catron. The next step will be for them to decide. They may send another messenger, or, if you are willing, and they know you are returning to England, they may ask you to bring the information across. Either way, you'd better get back across the Ditch as quickly as possible."

"Will you come back to France after you've been home?"

"Probably, unless I get orders to the contrary. If I am in Caen, all being well you will find me here—but the less you use this place the better. If I'm not here, there will be someone else who will recognize you."

Gimlet's eyes went up. "Recognize me—how?"

Numero smiled. "You have been covered by a gun ever since you came in here. You see, you *might* have been an enemy spy. Had you been one you would not have left here alive. The morning tide would have carried your body out to sea."

Gimlet frowned. "This is a murky business. I prefer to do my fighting in the open."

"So do we all, my dear fellow, but unfortunately the choice of what we do is not always in our own hands—not in times like these. Somebody has to do the shady work. We don't get any V.C.s in our department, either. The only crosses we get are when things go wrong, and then they're wooden ones."

"A cheerful look-out."

Numero laughed quietly. "You get used to it. Got a gun?"

"You bet I have."

"All right. It's time we were moving. You'd better have some food before you go." He went to the wall, knocked, and called, "Oh, Marie!"

A section of the wall folded back and a woman came into the cellar. Cub gasped, for it was the woman he had last seen checking the till in the *Restaurant des Voyageurs*.

"This place backs on the restaurant," explained Numero, observing his expression.

In the little room now disclosed two men were standing, revolvers in their hands. They did not speak. They did not smile. They gave no greeting, no signal. They just stood there, watching, and Cub began to understand the real meaning of the word Underground.

"Some food, Marie, please," requested Numero. "And tell Charles I want to see him about papers."

"*Oui, monsieur, tout de suite,*" answered Marie.

CHAPTER III

PARIS EXPRESS

At eleven thirty-five, with counterfeit documents in their pockets, Gimlet and Cub arrived at the *Gare de l'Ouest*, the main-line station and a regular halt for the fast trains running between Cherbourg and Paris. Numero had

departed about his business. Trapper and the Fox had gone to the forest, there to await events.

Probably no place ever devised by man is more dismal, more depressing, than a blacked-out railway station on a wet night; and if the structure has been damaged, and most of the glass shattered by bombs, the general effect of desolation and woe is even more pronounced. Thus was the station at Caen—at least, so thought Cub, as with his chief he stood beside a heap of fallen masonry waiting for the Paris train to come in. From time to time strange noises punctuated a sullen silence, which in the intervals was broken by the steady drip of rain. Metal clanged on metal. Cables rasped and signals clashed in the unseen distance. Human shapes, ghoulish in the gloom, moved about their business. A porter trailed a clattering barrow along the platform.

“How long does this train wait in the station?” Gimlet asked him.

“Three minutes, *monsieur*,” was the answer, as the porter disappeared into the murk.

The train, like most war-time trains, was behind schedule. It was twenty minutes late—the longest twenty minutes in Cub’s memory. But at length, with a heavy rumble, hissing and wheezing, a crimson glow casting fantastic shadows behind the footplate, the train rolled in. Simultaneously a few shaded lights were switched on, to make pools of sickly yellow light on the wet platform.

The coaches of French long-distance trains have only two pairs of doors, placed at either end. Gimlet walked quickly to the nearest, climbed in, and made his way along the corridor until he found an empty compartment. The train, Cub noted with satisfaction as he followed, was half empty. What passengers there were, were mostly German sailors, with a sprinkling of troops, presumably going home on leave.

Gimlet dropped into a corner seat facing the engine, and cautiously moving aside the black-out blind, peeped out. For a moment he was silent. Then he said, in a low voice: “Take a look—be careful.”

Cub looked, and clicked his tongue to indicate that he understood. Standing within the circle of light cast by one of the overhead lamps were three men. One, a civilian, had his back towards them so that his face could not be seen. The other two Cub recognized instantly. One, in uniform, was no less a person than *Generaloberst* Gunther, Kommandant of the town. The other was the pale-faced man whom they had seen enter the *Restaurant des Voyageurs*, the man who they had good reason to suppose was the false

Catron. The occasion now seemed to prove it. All three were engaged in earnest conversation.

Allowing the blind to fall back into place, Cub turned swiftly. “We’ve still two minutes to go,” he said urgently. “I’m going to find out what’s going on.”

“Watch your step,” warned Gimlet.

In a moment Cub was in the corridor. A quick glance to left and right and he hastened to that end of the coach near which the three men were standing. There he left the train, not by the door which gave access to the platform, but by the one that faced it, overlooking the permanent way. Ducking under the buffers and couplings, he brought up in a crouching position against the low wall of the platform, from which he had hoped to hear distinctly all that was said; but steam was hissing from a leaky joint, and, while this did not entirely defeat his object, it made hearing difficult. Tense, he listened until the raucous voice of the guard called, “*En voiture, messieurs, en voiture!*”

The party on the platform broke up. The general stepped back, making it clear that he was not to travel. Cub dare not wait to watch what happened to the others, but ducking back to his door, mounted the train and returned to his compartment.

Gimlet’s eyes asked a question.

“I couldn’t hear everything, but Paleface is on his way to Paris,” announced Cub. “I think the other civilian was a Gestapo man. I couldn’t see him distinctly.”

“Is he on the train?”

“I don’t know. He seemed to be giving Paleface some orders, and his job is to find out why Catron came to Caen. They know he was carrying information, and they’re anxious to find out what it was. I don’t think they realize that Catron is dead; in fact, I’m pretty sure of it, because the general said something about him being kept hidden by local partisans.”

“In other words, Paleface—as you call him—is going to Paris to try to worm his way into the Underground.”

“I imagine so.”

“How is he going to do that, I wonder?”

“But for the confounded steam hissing I might have heard. As it was, I could only hear enough to make me think that Paleface has been given information that should help him to make contact with certain people in Paris.”

The train started, and creaked slowly out of the station into the night.

“I wish I could have found out if that Gestapo man is aboard,” muttered Cub.

“If he and Paleface were going to travel together, there would seem to be no reason why they should discuss the thing on the platform,” remarked Gimlet. “Of course, it may be that they are both on the train, but don’t want to be seen together. Knowing the Gestapo, I should say it’s likely that they would travel independently.”

Cub’s eyes switched to the corridor as the sliding door was dragged aside. Framed in the opening was one of the men of whom they were speaking—Paleface. For a moment his eyes, cold and expressionless, rested on them. “*Pardon*,” he said, and withdrawing, went on down the corridor towards the rear of the train.

Cub looked at Gimlet, knowing that they were both thinking the same thing. “Did he recognize us, do you think?”

Gimlet shook his head. “I don’t know. He only saw us for a moment in the restaurant, and may not actually have looked at us. Sooner or later we shall know if he *did* recognize us, no doubt—that is, if he is suspicious. He may not be. After all, nothing happened in the restaurant to connect us with Catron.”

“We were with the *Unteroffizier*, don’t forget. By this time the Gestapo may have realized that he was a phoney.”

“Perhaps.”

“I’m inclined to think that he knew us, and is suspicious,” averred Cub.

“Why?”

“Why else should he beg our pardon, and find another compartment? There was plenty of room in here.”

“Maybe, like us, he was looking for an empty compartment. He has as much reason for being alone as we have.”

Cub said no more, but for some time he watched the door anxiously. Nothing happened. The train roared on, its wheels churning a monotonous rhythm, with an occasional break as they crashed over points. Still no one came into the compartment. Eventually he dozed.

Without any idea of how long he had been asleep he was awakened by the scraping of the door as it was pushed aside. A man entered, a civilian, a middle-aged man wearing a dark overcoat over a dark suit, and a soft black hat on his head. He might have been a lawyer, or a professional man of some sort, thought Cub. Without taking the slightest notice of his fellow

passengers the man took a corner seat, back to the engine—the same seat which, at the far end, was occupied by Cub, who was sitting facing Gimlet.

Cub noted that the train was getting up speed, as if it had slowed down. Looking at Gimlet, and speaking in French, he said, “I’ve been asleep. Do you know where we are?”

“You were asleep for some time. We’ve just left Evreux,” was the answer.

“Then we ought to be in Paris in just over an hour.”

Gimlet nodded. His eyes were on the man in the corner, who had now opened a newspaper—a French paper—and started to read, holding the paper up so that it concealed his face. Cub assumed that he had boarded the train at Evreux.

A few minutes later the door was again dragged aside and another passenger came in. This time it was a hungry-looking, hatchet-faced man of about thirty, dressed in a shoddy grey suit that had seen much wear. In his hand he carried a cheap wicker basket fastened by a skewer, the sort of basket in which working men in France usually carry their food. Cub summed him up as a mechanic, an engineer of some sort. At any rate, he was cheerful.

“*Bonsoir, messieurs,*” he greeted loudly, putting his basket on the luggage rack. “*Mauvais temps, n’est ce pas?*”

“*Bonsoir,*” murmured Cub and Gimlet together. The other man, still buried behind his paper, did not answer.

The newcomer, naturally, took the remaining corner seat, which was opposite the man with the newspaper.

The train roared on. Gimlet sat still, his eyes half closed. The man with the paper continued to read. He seemed to be spending a long time over one page, thought Cub. So far he had not turned over. The latest arrival made himself comfortable with his legs along the seat and promptly went to sleep. He snored, gently. The train roared on.

Cub yawned, putting his hands in his pockets, for the night was cold, and although the heat regulator was “on” the pipes gave out no heat. The next hour seemed like eternity. He tried hard to doze again, but sleep would not be courted. He was too alert; in fact, his nerves were humming. He knew not why, but a conviction came to him with increasing force that the scene in the compartment was not what it appeared to be; that it was, in fact, a scene in a play, in which everyone was taking a part. There were two or three things he would have liked to discuss with his chief, but private conversation was impossible, unless he whispered, and this was a course he preferred not to

take. The man who was reading had still not turned over his page. He could, reasoned Cub, have read every word on it a dozen times. Once, snatching a glance, he saw that the man's eyes were not on his paper, but on him, although he looked away instantly their eyes met. Then there was the other man. He gave the impression of having boarded the train at Evreux. When he came in he had said "*Mauvais temps*," which means bad weather. Normally a man would not make such a remark unless it was raining, or doing something violent; yet there was no sign of rain on the man's shoulders. His jacket and his hat were dry. Why, then, had he remarked on the weather? If it was raining at Evreux, and the black-coated man had boarded the train there, his hat would be wet, too. But it was not. Nor was his overcoat. It seemed to Cub that while both had sought to imply that they had got in at Evreux, they had, in fact, been on the train for some time. Gimlet had not moved. Like the mechanic, he appeared to be asleep.

At last, at long last, the train began to slow down. Cub moved the blind an inch and looked out. Dark storm-clouds were scudding across a sky about three-parts covered. Stars blinked mistily through the gaps. Below, the horizon was sharply broken by tall houses and chimney pots. Leaving the blind he tapped Gimlet on the knee.

"I think we're running into Paris," he announced, speaking of course in French.

Gimlet drew a deep breath and sat up. "*Bon*," he ejaculated, and started to move.

"Sit still," said a harsh voice.

Cub's nerves twitched, stiffened. Turning his head he saw that the man in the black coat was no longer reading his paper. It had fallen across his knees. On it rested a hand, and in the hand was a heavy automatic. The muzzle covered Gimlet.

Cub's first thought was, "So Paleface *did* recognize us after all."

Gimlet spoke, still in French. "If this is a hold-up you'll get little for your pains. I have no money."

The man answered, his lips curling in a supercilious sneer. "Bluff won't help you. Sit still until the train stops. When we go, we go together. If, before that time comes, either of you attempt to move, I shall shoot. Did you think you could so easily fool the Gestap——"

A muffled explosion cut the last word short. The black-coated man jerked convulsively. His pistol fell from his hand and clattered down. The body, quite slowly, subsided on the seat. The train bumped over a set of points and it rolled off on to the floor. From the jacket pocket of the man in

the cheap suit a thin miasma of smoke was rising. With an alacrity that banished all pretence of sleep he stood up.

“I’m sorry I had to do this in your presence, *messieurs*,” he said tersely. “But there was no other way.”

“Is this one of the men who were on the platform at Caen with *Generaloberst* Gunther?” asked Cub, suddenly understanding.

“He was. His name is Wilhelm Flugler of the Gestapo. My duty was to escort you to Paris. Had this German not molested you, you would not have known. There is no cause for alarm, but we must move quickly. The train has only a few hundred metres to go. Help me. Put off the light. Open the window.”

Cub jumped on a seat, and with his gun broke the single electric light globe. There was no switch. Gimlet went to the window. The blind went up with a rush. The window thudded down. Cold air poured in. The stranger caught the Gestapo man under the armpits, and Gimlet, seeing his intention, helped him. Together they lifted the body level with the window. For a second the shoulders rested on the frame.

“Now,” said the Frenchman.

The body slid through the window and disappeared. The man’s hat and paper followed. The Frenchman pulled up the window, brushed his hands as if contact with the German had soiled them, straightened his jacket, put on his hat, took his basket from the rack and pushed open the door leading into the corridor. “Adieu, *messieurs*,” he said calmly. Then he was gone.

“For heaven’s sake!” gasped Cub. “He was a cool customer. Who on earth was he?”

Gimlet shrugged. He himself looked a trifle shaken. “A partisan, obviously. Probably a member of the Underground. We’ve heard a lot about what goes on in the occupied countries; now we’ve seen a sample.”

“But who put him on our trail?”

“Ask me something easier. We must have been followed, watched, when we left Numero’s hide-out. Perhaps Numero himself set this fellow to watch us. Paleface must have been watched, too. I think it’s pretty clear now that he recognized us when he looked in here, and tipped off the Gestapo man that we were on the train. Everybody watches everybody in France. What a life!”

“That fellow made no bones about plugging the Gestapo man.”

“Why should he? The Nazis aren’t exactly lily-fingered. If French partisans employ the same methods, who is to blame them?”

“Not me.”

“Nor me, either. Look out—we’re running in. Get ready for a quick move. Paleface is still aboard, don’t forget. We must try to see him before he sees us, and keep clear.”

By this time the train was crawling into the terminus, the *Gare St. Lazare*. It stopped with a jolt. Gimlet looked into the corridor, left and right. “Come on,” he said.

They joined the little crowd on the platform, moving towards the barrier.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAP

UNDER grimy, shaded, overhead lights, the eastern terminus of the railway was almost as depressing as the station at Caen. At such an early hour, apart from the tardy passengers there were few people abroad. On the platform, inside the barrier, two storm-troopers stood watching the passengers file past. From time to time one of them would stop a traveller, apparently at random, and demand to see his travel permit. Cub and his leader escaped this ordeal. Their papers were in order, but—he knew there was always a “but” when under the eyes of the notorious German secret service. The ticket collector examined their tickets carefully, but here again there was no difficulty, and Cub breathed a sigh of relief as they moved towards the massive portals beyond which lay the open air. From first to last, although he had kept sharp watch, he had seen no sign of Paleface. Gimlet gave it as his opinion—and it sounded feasible—that the man, unaware of the fate of his German associate, if indeed they were associated, had hung back to wait for him. At any rate, he did not appear; neither did the hatchet-faced mechanic of their brief but dramatic acquaintance; and Cub was content to leave it at that.

It was no longer raining, but the streets were still wet from a recent shower and ragged clouds gave promise of more to come.

“How do we get to the Opera?” asked Cub.

“We shall have to walk,” answered Gimlet. “It’s a fair step but I know the way.”

“That man Wilhelm Flugler. He will be missed.”

“Of course. They’ll find his body on the line.”

“Then they’ll start looking for us.”

“Probably.”

“The sooner we’re out of Paris the better,” observed Cub.

“I agree—and the sooner I get back into my own clothes the better I shall be pleased,” asserted Gimlet. “Let’s get cracking.”

They set off through the dreary streets of what had once been the brightest capital of Europe, but now the crushing hand of war was everywhere apparent. What few people there were about moved through the hollow-sounding streets with weary tread or nervous haste.

It had turned six o’clock, with the eastern sky slowly turning grey, when Gimlet announced that the open space before them was the Place de l’Opera. The massive pile of the Opera itself loomed huge against the clouds. They walked on towards it. The city was just opening tired eyes for another day. An old man was dejectedly swilling the pavement in front of the Café de la Paix.

“When you look at this,” said Gimlet, as they walked on, “say to yourself, but for a little band of winged warriors, this was London.”

“Ghastly thought,” muttered Cub, out of the corners of his eyes watching a Nazi patrol march past.

Gimlet stopped a man and asked the way to the Rue de Lorraine.

The man pointed. “*A la bas*,” said he, curtly.

They turned into the street, a miserable little thoroughfare of dingy shops, many of them boarded up. Not a soul was in sight. Watching the numbers on the doors they proceeded to the one they sought, number 117. Cub noted that the door lay a little way back from the street, at the end of a short passage. Gimlet did not stop. He went on for another thirty yards before he pulled up. And he did not stop abruptly, but first slowed down, and finished in a convenient doorway.

“It seems all quiet,” he said softly. “I’ve been thinking,” he went on. “I’ve decided to tackle this job alone—at any rate, until I confirm that everything is okay. There is no need for us both to go. If the place is connected with the Underground movement you may be pretty sure that they won’t let two strangers just walk into it. Again, although I don’t think it’s likely, there’s just a chance that we may have been followed. You hang about outside and keep your eyes open. Should things come unstuck, go back to Caen and report to Numero Neuf. If I whistle, come right along.”

“Very good, sir.”

Without any attempt at concealment Gimlet walked back along the pavement to the cabinet-maker's establishment, and turning into the entrance alcove knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer, but almost at once the wan daylight at the street end of the passage was blocked out by a dark form. Another joined it, filling the entrance, and Gimlet saw with disconcerting clarity that his retreat had been cut off. If the passage was a trap, he was secure inside it. The two figures moved towards him, slowly, quietly, but with a sort of relentless deliberation, almost to touching distance. Then they stopped. A voice, coldly polite, inquired, "Do you seek someone, *monsieur*?"

Gimlet answered: "Naturally, or I should not have come to the door. Surely this is the house of Pierre Sabonier?"

"Is he a friend of yours?" asked the voice.

"No," answered Gimlet, truthfully, for he could see no point in lying. "But I have business with him. It happens that he is a friend of a friend of mine. But permit me, *monsieur*—and I am sure you will comprehend my curiosity—what is the purpose of these questions?"

"It is possible that we may be of assistance," was the suave reply. "Monsieur Sabonier is away from home. We also are friends of his, so if we can be of service, pray command us."

Now Gimlet was in a quandary. He did not feel inclined to discuss his business with two absolute strangers whose faces he could not even see; but it was obvious that dissembling would get him nowhere. No matter whether these men were friends or foes a chance would have to be taken. It was imperative that he should make contact with the Underground, and if he abandoned this opening—even if he were allowed to do so—he would find himself at a loose end.

"I was hoping," he said slowly, "that Pierre Sabonier would be able to inform me of the whereabouts of a mutual friend."

"Perhaps we can help. What is his name?"

"Monsieur Rouge."

"Ah?" breathed the voice. "In that case it is possible that we may help you." Advancing to the door the man knocked on it thrice, a knock so peculiar that it was obviously a signal.

Gimlet heard, rather than saw, the door swing open. There was no light. Beyond the door was the darkness of the tomb. The figures moved towards it.

"Enter, *monsieur*," said the voice. The words were spoken quietly, but in them lay a command that was not to be ignored.

“Certainly,” agreed Gimlet, observing that he was in no case to refuse.

Nothing more was said. All moved forward into the darkness. Behind them the door was closed. A key turned smoothly. A bolt slid home. The passage went on for some little way, then the voice said, “*Halte!*” The party halted. An electric switch clicked. The light flashed on, and this was the scene it revealed.

It was a room, equipped in the nature of an upholsterer’s workshop, or warehouse, for scattered about—mostly packed against the walls to leave a clear space in the middle—was an assortment of furniture, either genuine antique or spurious. With this Gimlet was not concerned, for in view of Sabonier’s trade such a picture was only to be expected. In the open space there was a heavy oak desk. Behind it was a chair. In the chair sat a man who might have been anything between fifty and sixty years of age, well dressed in a rather severe style. His face was that of a scholar, or at any rate of a man of considerable mental capacity. His most noticeable feature was a high dome of a forehead, due to partial baldness. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles, from behind which blue eyes of remarkable intensity regarded the man in front of him. At his elbow stood a slim youth of perhaps nineteen, with a dark, saturnine cast of countenance. There were two others in the room. They stood one on either side of Gimlet, and were evidently the men who had escorted him in.

The man in the chair was the first to speak. He spoke, as was to be expected, in French, the rather hard French of the North. “I am sorry to put you to this inconvenience, to inflict upon you what must seem a melodramatic performance,” he said apologetically. “But you are unknown to us, and we cannot afford to accept strangers at their face value. Now tell me, what is your business here?”

Holding the left lapel of his jacket Gimlet answered: “I came here to see Monsieur Sabonier. If he is not available I will call some other time.” Had it been possible he would have retired, for he was by no means satisfied with the way things were going. Even if Sabonier was away, why, he wondered, did this man not proceed with the ritual prescribed by Numero?

“Sabonier is away,” went on the man in the chair.

“In that case I will wait,” decided Gimlet.

“You may have to wait for some time,” was the answer, spoken in a significant voice. “You will be mortified to know that Sabonier committed an indiscretion which has resulted in his being apprehended by the police.”

This information only served to deepen Gimlet’s quandary. It meant that either he would have to abandon his project or take the men who now

confronted him into his confidence.

“I understand that through Sabonier you wished to make contact with Monsieur Rouge?” proceeded the man in the chair, in a prompting voice.

“That is so,” admitted Gimlet.

“Why are you so anxious to meet Monsieur Rouge?”

“I had some private business to discuss with him.”

“You know, of course, that Monsieur Rouge is not a healthy man with whom to associate . . . that he is suspected of subversive activities?”

“I have heard a rumour to that effect.”

“It was, perhaps, in this connection that you wished to see him?”

This, Gimlet perceived, was a leading question. He must now either deny or admit his mission. He made up his mind. “Yes,” he answered firmly.

The man in the chair smiled. “We begin to understand each other, I think.”

At this juncture another man entered the room from somewhere in the rear, and walking quickly to the man in the chair whispered in his ear. The man in the chair stood up. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, speaking to Gimlet, and rising, followed the newcomer out of the room.

He was gone for some minutes. In the interval of waiting, without moving, Gimlet made a more thorough reconnaissance of that part of the room which could be seen without effort. And as his eyes wandered slowly over the odds and ends of furniture, littered with pewter, brass, and china bric-à-brac, they were arrested by a movement in one of the several mirrors of an ornate overmantel that stood askew in a broken wardrobe. Framed in the mirror was reflected a picture cast from an angle by yet another mirror which he could not see. For a moment he ceased to breathe, for the picture explained the situation perfectly—too perfectly. The reflection showed the interior of another room, a small one. At a table sat a man with a pencil poised over a writing pad, waiting. He wore the dark, sinister uniform of the Gestapo. Gimlet knew then that the interview was an interrogation, that the man’s job was to write down everything that was said. He realized also that he had already said enough to convict himself.

His interrogator came back into the room and resumed his seat at the desk. “So sorry,” he said casually. “We were speaking, if I remember, of Monsieur Rouge? You wanted to see him? That might be arranged, although, of course, it would be necessary for you to give us an idea of your business, so that we might judge whether the interview you seek is justified. Monsieur Rouge is a busy man.”

“Before I tell you what I have to say to Monsieur Rouge, it would not be unreasonable, I think you will agree, if I ask you to tell me to whom I am speaking. There must be precautions on my side, as well as on yours.”

“Of course,” admitted the man in the chair readily. “You are quite within your rights to make such a request. Our little play has gone far enough. Our masks may come off. We, here, are of the Underground—but you knew that. If you need proof I can perhaps provide it by informing you of your movements since you left the *Restaurant des Voyageurs*, at Caen, last night—or is that enough?”

“That is—enough,” said Gimlet slowly, striving to keep steady under the shock of this information.

“By the way, what happened to Catron—did he get through?” queried the man in the chair in an off-hand way.

“Yes,” lied Gimlet.

“Good. So the information he carried reached the British agent safely, eh?”

“Yes,” lied Gimlet again, determined if possible to mislead the enemy.

The man in the chair stood up, and came round to the front of the desk. “You know what his information was, no doubt?”

“No,” replied Gimlet.

“Liar!” snapped the man, and struck Gimlet across the face with such force that he reeled. The men on either side caught him by the arms and held him while his pockets were emptied on the table—his service revolver, among other things.

The leader of the enemy party regarded his prisoner with cold hostility. “Now what have you to say?” he grated viciously.

“Nothing,” answered Gimlet.

“Who killed the passenger on the Paris train this morning?”

“Not me.”

“Lying swine!”

“You know your name,” sneered Gimlet.

The German drew a deep breath. “Are you going to talk?”

“No.”



THE MEN ON EITHER SIDE CAUGHT HIM BY THE ARMS
AND HELD HIM WHILE HIS POCKETS WERE EMPTIED
ON THE TABLE.

“You may change your mind about that.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“That’s enough,” said the German harshly. “Put him with the rest. We’re catching a nice lot of rats in this trap,” he concluded, apparently for Gimlet’s benefit.

Gimlet was led away. As he passed the door of the room in which the uniformed man was sitting he understood the situation even more clearly. For in the same room, smoking a cigarette while he perused a paper, was Paleface. He caught Gimlet’s eyes in passing. He smiled—a sardonic, mocking smile.

“The game isn’t over yet,” said Gimlet evenly, and passed on.

A door was unlocked and opened, disclosing a small room with bare, whitewashed walls. The only furniture consisted of forms, set round the room. On them, in various attitudes of despair, dejection and defiance, sat seven men, some dishevelled and unshaven.

Gimlet was thrust inside. The door slammed. Seven pairs of eyes regarded him with mixed emotions. All the expressions of human affliction were there—compassion, mortification, bitterness, heartache.

“Say nothing, *monsieur*,” breathed an elderly bearded man. “The Nazis have a dictaphone. They listen to every word.”

Gimlet found a vacant seat on a form.

CHAPTER V

CUB SETS THE PACE

FROM the dark shelter of his doorway Cub watched his commanding officer enter the shop of Pierre Sabonier. Almost at once, to his alarm, he saw two figures appear from nowhere, as the saying goes, and follow him in. He tried to calm his fears by telling himself that these men were partisans, patriots, whose sinister movements were merely precautionary measures. And when nothing happened, and Gimlet did not reappear, it began to seem that this surmise was correct. Taking advantage of every doorway, Cub shifted his position, working nearer and crossing to the opposite side of the road to get an uninterrupted view of the establishment. Dawn was now breaking—grey, bleak, drear.

Five minutes later a man came walking briskly down the street, from the end at which they had entered it. At first Cub took little notice, supposing

him to be a man on his way to work; but when, as the fellow drew near, he caught sight of his features, he crouched back with his brain whirling from shock. It was Paleface: he went straight to the door, knocked, and disappeared.

What to make of this Cub did not know. Could it be possible, he wondered, that this man, this supposed spy, was a member of the Underground after all? It began to look like that. If he were not, then there was something fishy about this cabinet-maker's workshop.

Another ten minutes passed, with Cub getting more and more uneasy, and then a second man appeared in the street, following in the footsteps of Paleface. He strolled rather than walked, hands in his pockets, as if on no definite errand. As he came into clear view Cub had another shock. It was their hatchet-faced accomplice of the train. Of *his* standing there was no doubt, thought Cub with a spasm of relief, for that very morning with his own eyes he had seen him kill a member of the Gestapo—if the black-coated man *was* a member of the Gestapo. The trouble was, reflected Cub, in this Underground war it wasn't safe to believe anybody or anything, not even the evidence of one's own eyes.

Hatchet-face walked on until he came level with 117. There for a moment he appeared to hesitate, to falter; then, to Cub's surprise, he went on, the speed of his steps increasing.

Keeping close against the wall on his own side of the road, Cub hurried after him. Apparently Hatchet-face heard the footsteps, for he snatched a glance over his shoulder, and seeing that he was being followed he broke into a run.

"Wait, *monsieur*," called Cub, who also began to run.

The man halted instantly, as if he had recognized the voice. Turning, he stood back against a shop, waiting.

Breathing fast, Cub joined him. "Why did you walk past 117 as you did?" he questioned tersely. "I expected you to enter."

The man caught him by the arm and drew him close against the wall. "What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. Without waiting for an answer he went on, "At this instant this is probably the most dangerous street in Paris. Where is your friend?"

"He went inside—number 117."

The man's expression was like ice-water on Cub's heart.

"Then God help him," he said simply. "He is as good as dead."

"What do you mean?"

“The Nazis are in there.”

Cub was shaken to the very soul. “Are you sure?”

“But yes—*certainement*.”

“But you were going there yourself,” challenged Cub.

“True, but I took care not to go in when I saw . . .”

“What did you see?”

“Little chalk marks on either side of the window. They are our secret warning. They must have been made recently, by friends, for the benefit of any patriot who thought of entering.”

“Did you see a pale-faced man on the train—he was on the platform at Caen, with *Generaloberst* Gunther——”

“And Wilhelm Flugler, of the Gestapo—the man I killed. Yes, of course I saw him. Flugler travelled on the train to keep him under surveillance.”

“He, too, went into 117,” said Cub, sick at heart, and in something like panic.

Hatchet-face shrugged. “I did not know the Nazis were here. Why should I? As you are aware, I was in Caen last night. Two days ago all was well here, but the chalk marks can only mean that Sabonier has been arrested and the premises occupied by the Gestapo. The place is now a trap. They may have caught some patriots in it, but they will catch no more.”

“They’ve caught my chief, that’s what concerns me,” said Cub bitterly. “He walked straight into it. What can I do now, *monsieur*—I didn’t catch your name?”

“You can call me Dominique.”

“Is there anything I can do? This is awful.”

“I can only tell you not to go near that shop, *mon camarade*. You would be as certain to find death waiting for you as if you jumped from the top of the Eiffel Tower. I was not told that you were coming here. My orders were to see you safely as far as Paris. Not that I could have done anything had I known, for I myself did not know about the Nazis being in until I saw the chalk marks. I had business with Sabonier.”

“Has the shop any other door?”

“I know of none.”

“Then I shall stay here to watch what happens,” decided Cub.

“I will wait with you—for a little while anyway,” stated Dominique. “My headquarters will know about this already, so I need not hurry. By watching we may gather information about the prisoners the Nazis have

taken. There is danger, of course. Others may be watching, both friends and foes—one cannot tell. We ourselves may be watched even now. Eyes are everywhere in my unhappy Paris.”

Half an hour passed. Nothing happened. A few pedestrians and a bread cart went through the street without stopping. An old woman swept her shop front. Another vehicle appeared, a small motor van with a longish black body. It was travelling slowly, and presently stopped outside number 117.

“What’s that?” asked Cub.

“It is all over,” said Dominique heavily. “That’s the prison van. God knows how many Frenchmen have taken their last ride in it. It means that the prisoners are being taken away and the trap abandoned.”

“They will be shot, I suppose,” muttered Cub in a voice that he scarcely recognized as his own.

“*Sacré!* Instantly. The Boches do not believe in feeding those who are to die. I am desolated, but there is nothing we can do.”

“If that’s how you feel about it you’d better go home,” declared Cub in a desperate voice. “But I’m not going to stand here and watch my chief carted away without doing anything about it. None or all is our motto.”

“I implore you not to do anything insane. What can you do, alone?”

“I can at least kill a few Nazis,” answered Cub through his teeth. “*Au revoir, monsieur.*” He started off towards the van.

“Wait! *Tonnerre de Dieu!* This is madness, but I cannot see you go alone,” swore Dominique in a thin, hard voice.

“You’ll lose your life if you come with me,” asserted Cub. “I’m in no mood for finesse—the affair is too desperate.”

Dominique made a gesture of finality possible only to a Frenchman. “*Hélas!* We shall all lose our lives one day. What difference makes an hour or two, or a week or two? *Vive la France!*”

“Please yourself,” said Cub, still walking. “But a little less of the heroics, my friend, or someone will hear you, and we shall be shot before we get to the place.”

As they drew nearer Cub appraised the situation. There had been with the van two men, ordinary German soldiers of the transport service. One had dismounted, had gone to the rear of the vehicle, and, having unlocked the door, went on into the shop. The driver, in greatcoat and field service cap, remained lolling at the wheel. He had left the engine running.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Dominique—a trifle sarcastically.

“Say what are *we* going to do. I will tell you. It is all very simple. Can you drive a van?”

“But of course.”

“You still have your pistol?”

“Certainly.”

“*Bon.* This is all we have to do,” said Cub. “I will speak to the driver from this side. You will walk on, but hurrying round the back of the van, will come up quietly on the other side of the fellow. As he will be looking at me he will not see you. Hit him on the head with your pistol. When he falls, put on his greatcoat and cap and push the body under the van—clear of the wheels, so that you won’t run over him when you start. Take your place at the wheel and leave the rest to me. When I say go, drive away. That’s all.” Cub glanced at his companion’s face. “Try not to look so ill, *mon ami.* You look on the point of death.”

“I am,” answered Dominique simply. “My brain tells me that this thing is not possible.”

“Mine tells me that it is—and there is no need for nervousness.”

Dominique drew himself up. “*Monsieur!* My *sangfroid* is unbelievable. Remember, if I die, I died for France.”

“I’ll bear it in mind, but nevertheless, try not to die,” requested Cub. “*Voyons! A victoire!*”

They were now level with the van. Cub stopped, smiling at the German half sheepishly, half cheekily. “Good morning, *Herr Hauptmann,*” he greeted confidently, for this was a game the Fleas had often played. “Do I observe that you are collecting more material for the firing squad?”

The German threw him a surly, suspicious look, as if not sure how to take this sally. “Yes,” he growled. “And if you give me any of your sauce I’ll put you in with them.”

“*Oh la, la!*” cried Cub, affecting horror. “How about a cigarette to smoke your health?” he suggested roguishly.

“*Nein.*”

“Then the health of the Führer?”

“I’ll give you a clip over the ear if you don’t take yourself off.”

“So! I’ve been promised that before, but no one has been able to do it,” scoffed Cub, provokingly.

The German raised his hand for the blow. It never fell. The butt of Dominique’s pistol came down on his head. The hand dropped limply, and the Nazi collapsed without a sound.

“*Bon ça!*” congratulated Cub tersely, and without waiting to watch Dominique’s further activities, he walked to the rear of the van, where, hands in his pockets, he took up the attitude of an idle spectator; and it must be admitted that is precisely what he looked like.

He had not long to wait. Indeed, so soon was the shop door opened that, observing how finely cut for time had been the operation, his nerves tingled with mild shock.

A procession emerged from the cabinet-maker’s house. First came a soldier, the driver’s companion. He took up a position by the open door of the van, entry into which was facilitated by an iron footplate, and with a jerk of his thumb indicated that those who followed him were to get in. Behind him in single file came eight men with handcuffs on their wrists. Gimlet was the last of the line. He saw Cub instantly. For a split second their eyes met, but his expression did not change. Bringing up the rear, but not in the cavalcade, came two hard-faced civilians whose cropped hair and square-cut heads were sufficient to reveal their nationality. They came as far as the pavement, where they stopped to watch the prisoners file into the van. It was clear from the casual manner in which they did this that the event was no novelty, and nothing in the way of opposition was expected. As soon as the last prisoner had stepped into the van, helped unnecessarily by a vicious shove, the soldier slammed the door, and with his back to the lone spectator, who had been entirely ignored, reached for the lock to turn the key that was in it.

Cub snapped into movement like a steel spring released from tension. His hand came out of his pocket holding his automatic by the muzzle. Taking a quick step forward he slammed the German on the head in no half-hearted manner, and then, whirling round, blazed three shots at the two men in the doorway. In the face of this sudden attack they fell back into the passage. Whether they had been hit or not Cub did not know. He did not wait to see. Dashing along the side of the van to the front seat he leapt aboard shouting, “*Allez!*”

The van shot forward with such a jerk that he nearly fell out; but he managed to hang on and drag himself into the seat. In a detached sort of way he heard shots from behind, but as far as he could tell no bullet hit the van.



A PROCESSION EMERGED FROM THE CABINET-
MAKER'S HOUSE.

“Steady, you maniac!” he shouted, for the vehicle was now travelling at a speed worse than dangerous.

Dominique was, in fact, driving like a lunatic, taking the most outrageous risks, tearing straight across narrow cross-roads without any regard for traffic, pedestrians or anything else. He was obviously beside himself with excitement. Cub, who knew the French temperament only too well—and it is never so wildly enthusiastic as when success is in sight—was prepared to make allowances; but not to this extent. “Steady, fool!” he cried again, furiously. “Everyone is looking at us. Do you want to tell the world what we are doing? Slow down!”

Dominique steadied the pace a little. His face was chalk white and his eyes ablaze. “*Sacré!*” he choked. “The audacity. It was *superbe!* This will be the talk of Paris.”

“Then let us live to hear it,” snarled Cub, who could see nothing but disaster ahead. “Don’t talk. Watch what you’re doing. Turn the van over and it will be the end of all of us.”

They missed a heavy farm cart, piled high with logs, by inches. Dominique’s brakes screeched. The van skidded. Leaning out at a suicidal angle he yelled something at the driver of the cart.

Cub dragged him in.

“*Bon,*” said Dominique. “I know that man. He is of the fraternity. He will block the road behind us with his cart.”

He slowed down to a more sensible pace. “Where are we going?” he demanded suddenly.

“Why ask me?” rasped Cub. “This is your city. The prisoners are handcuffed, so they can’t step out into the street. Do you know anyone who can get the handcuffs off?”

“Yes, but I should be breaking orders.”

“What orders?”

“On no account to go near my district headquarters if I am pursued.”

“We don’t know that we are pursued.”

“*Zut!* We shall be.”

“Dash that for a tale,” retorted Cub hotly. “The circumstances justify anything. In five minutes the whole city will be buzzing. Where are these headquarters?”

“At the establishment of my brother, who is a builder of houses near the *Gare de Lyons.*”

“Is he of the Underground?”

“A section leader.”

“Then go there.”

“We will risk it,” decided Dominique, and swinging the van, which was running beside the river, across the first bridge, he tore on.

“How far away is the *Gare de Lyons*?” asked Cub.

“Less than ten minutes.”

Cub hoped sincerely that this estimate of time was correct, for almost everybody was looking hard at the conspicuous vehicle, the purpose of which was well known. Some people, more curious than the rest, stopped to watch it out of sight. There was this advantage, however; it was given priority in the traffic, sometimes by *gendarmes* on point duty, or the Vichy Militia which at important cross-roads supported them. Nevertheless, Cub realized that on this very account the course taken by the van would be traced.

“How are we going to get rid of the Black Maria?” he asked his companion.

“Yes, how?” returned Dominique vaguely.

“You tell me,” invited Cub. “I’m not a Parisian.”

Dominique drove on, looking worried. “It is a question,” he admitted.

“That’s why I put it to you,” retorted Cub, with gentle sarcasm. “If you can’t handle it, I will.”

“There is another danger,” asserted Dominique moodily.

“What have you thought of now?”

“When we drive into the yard of my brother Felix it may be he will think we have come to make the arrest. *Je ne sais pas*. He is a furious fellow. He may shoot. Perhaps a bomb will be thrown. He has no love for the Nazis.”

“So I gather. All right. As you drive into the yard you’d better lose no time in getting rid of that hat and coat. Yell that we are friends, then jump down and release the prisoners. I’ll get rid of this hearse.”

“How? It is not a thing to be put in the pocket—*hein*?”

“I’ll park it at a safe distance and then come back.”

“It might be possible,” agreed Dominique. “But get ready. We have arrived.”

The van was now running through the unpretentious streets of a squalid quarter. There were only a few people about, and they, apparently, had guilty consciences, for usually the sight of the vehicle was enough to send them down the nearest side street. Dominique turned suddenly between open gates into a builder’s yard and came to a skidding stop. A large board carried the notice:

Entreprise Felix Purcelle
Reparations et decorations.

Jumping down, Dominique tore off his overcoat, shouting. Some workmen, who had scuttled like rabbits at the van's appearance, stopped, looking back. Another man, swarthy, with bristling black moustaches, dashed out of the back door of the house, a revolver in his hand. There were a few seconds of confusion, understandable in the circumstances. Dominique continued to shout, bearing his chest to emphasize his words.

“Release the prisoners!” called Cub, wriggling into the driving seat.

Dominique ran to the rear of the van and opened the door. “*Descend, messieurs,*” he invited urgently.

Gimlet was the first out. Cub, leaning from the seat, hailed him. “You’re in safe hands. I’ve got to get rid of this pantehnicon. I’ll be back.”

The prisoners out, Dominique slammed the door. “*Avance!*” he shouted.

Cub revved the engine, spinning the wheel, and turning in a tight circle shot out through the gates into the narrow street. To his great relief not a soul was in sight, and he smiled grimly as he realized why. The arrival of the van had caused a prompt evacuation. He had no idea of where he was. Not that it mattered much, he thought, as he put his foot down on the accelerator and sped on, taking every turning that appeared, in order to leave a crooked trail.

It is a curious fact which has often been noticed, that almost all important railway stations are set in mediocre surroundings. At the best, small hotels and eating places hem them in. The *Gare de Lyons*, the great Paris terminus that serves the South of France, is no exception, as Cub noted when, shooting out of a miserable little street he saw the imposing building facing him across an open space of some dimensions. It was obviously a station, and recalling Dominique’s remark, he assumed it, correctly, to be the *Gare de Lyons*. It would, he decided instantly, suit his purpose as well as anywhere. He was desperately anxious to get rid of the van, for every minute now increased the likelihood of its being stopped. Without slowing down he drove up a short slope to the front of the station, and stopped when further progress was barred by a line of stationary vehicles, most of them of the heavy transport type, some loading, others unloading. Taking off his jacket and carrying it under his arm—for he was afraid it might help identification—he jumped down on to the broad pavement and dived behind a stack of boxes, from where he made a swift survey of the vicinity. What few men there were about were busy on their jobs, and so far, he thought, had not noticed the arrival of the sombre vehicle. One person had, however.

A boy. A thin, bright-eyed, ragged urchin of about fourteen, who had been engaged in sweeping the paving stones. He looked suspiciously from Cub to the van, and back again at Cub. This put a check on Cub's plan, which was to leave the locality with all speed. He knew that it could only be a matter of minutes before the van was discovered, when the boy would certainly be questioned. To confirm his fears, he could hear motor cycles roaring up the station ramp.

He went straight to the boy, who was resting on his broom. "Do you love France?" he questioned fiercely.

The boy's eyes opened wide. "*Mais oui.*"

"And you hate the Nazis?"

"*Mais oui.*"

"Then forget that you have ever seen me," said Cub tersely. "I am a messenger of the Underground and the Nazis are on my trail. Keep your head. Go on with your sweeping. I shall pretend to be working here."

Whistling cheerfully, but with nerves braced and eyes alert, he created a task by stacking the boxes nearer to the wall. He knew the motor cycles had stopped. He had heard their stands crash down on the off-side of the van. Footsteps approached. Voices spoke trenchantly in German.

"Here you, boy," snapped a voice in bad French.

Cub turned. Three storm-trooper motor cyclists, swastika-decorated, stood before him. One of them pointed a finger at the van. "How long has that been here?"

Cub pretended to think for a moment. "About five minutes, *Herr Leutnant.*"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive, *Herr Leutnant.* It nearly knocked me down it came in so fast."

The urchin chipped in, shrilly. "That's right. I saw it."

"Who was driving?"

Cub answered. "A stout man with a black beard, wearing a beret. He seemed much agitated, and swore at me for getting in his way."

"That's right. A stout man with a black beard," confirmed the urchin.

"Did he have a lad with him?"

Cub shook his head, looking at the urchin. "I saw no lad—did you?"

The urchin shook his head vigorously. "He had no lad with him—I would swear to that."

"Which way did he go?"

Cub pointed towards what looked like a goods yard. “He went that way, *Herr Leutnant*, walking like a man in a hurry to catch a train.”

“That’s right,” chirped the urchin. “That’s the way he went. I saw him—the fat pig.”

This, apparently, was as much as the Germans wanted to know. One had already opened the van, to find it empty. The leader rapped out some orders about telephoning to headquarters and taking the police van back to the depot. Cub resumed his work, continuing with it until the Germans had departed, taking the van with them. Then he slapped his untidy colleague on the back.

“Thanks, my friend,” he said. “Bravo! You were terrific.”

“Pah! Don’t speak of it. It was a pleasure,” announced the boy, grinning. “I lie to them all the time, so that they go the wrong way and miss their trains. May I join the Underground?”

“Not to-day, but I’ll remember you,” promised Cub. “*Au revoir*.”

“*Au revoir. Bon chance*.”

Cub made his way back to the builder’s yard—not without difficulty, for he had taken more turnings than he could remember. However, a woman with a shopping basket directed him to the *Entreprise Purcelle*. Finding the heavy wooden gates shut he banged on them with his fist. A small door was opened cautiously. He went in. The door was shut behind him. The first man he saw was his chief, in blue overalls, sitting on a pile of planks talking to the hatchet-faced Dominique and his brother Felix. A mechanic, file in hand, was just walking away with the handcuffs.

Gimlet smiled. “Grand work, Cub,” he commended. “I shan’t forget that. It was well thought out and brilliantly executed—real commando stuff.”

Cub flushed at this praise from one who seldom gave it. “Thank you, sir.”

“Get rid of the van?”

“I took it to the station and handed it over to the Nazis, who are now looking for the driver—a fat man with a black beard, wearing a beret.”

“Good!” exclaimed Gimlet. “We were waiting for you. I’ve told these gentlemen who we are. Monsieur Felix has been kind enough to offer us breakfast. Afterwards he is going to introduce us to the man we came to see.”

“Monsieur Rouge?”

Gimlet nodded. “That’s what they call him.”

CHAPTER VI

UNDERGROUND

OVER a frugal breakfast of potato rolls and *ersatz* coffee, for which Felix apologized, Gimlet decided that his only course, if there was not to be an indefinite delay, was to take the Purcelle brothers fully into his confidence. He had already revealed his own and Cub's identity, so he now related how they had come to be associated with the Catron affair. When he had finished, Dominique departed on urgent business, leaving Felix to return the confidence.

He began by stating that he was a section leader of the Underground movement. He had heard, he said, of the Grey Fleas of the North, but had hitherto taken the rumours of their exploits with a grain of salt. It now transpired that the escape of the prisoners from the Rue de Lorraine had been watched by Underground spies; the details had been reported to him, and he congratulated Cub warmly on the way he had handled so hazardous an affair. It was true, he confirmed, that Pierre Sabonier had been arrested on suspicion of being connected with the patriots. What neither Gimlet nor Cub knew—and this came as a pleasant surprise—was that Sabonier had been among the prisoners rescued. Felix admitted that he was worried about the arrest of the old cabinet-maker. Either a spy had penetrated their defences, or someone had been careless, he averred.

Gimlet reminded him of Paleface, whom he had mentioned in his report, pointing out that this man had been at Caen and also in the Rue de Lorraine.

"We shall have to find out who this fellow is," declared Felix. "From your description I do not recognize him. He must be a new man the Nazis have got hold of."

"I think he's French," put in Cub.

"So much the worse for him, if we get our hands on him," said Felix in a hard voice. "We do not murder our countrymen, you understand, even in such a case as this," he added quickly. "Even traitors have a fair trial. Broadly speaking such men come into one of two categories. There are the men—and you will find a sprinkling of them in any community—who would betray their own mothers for money. They neither deserve nor receive mercy. But there are others who are forced to work for the Nazis against their will. They are different. You may say, what power could force a man to thus play Judas to his country? The Nazis know. I put it to you, comrades,

what would you do if you were told by the Gestapo that if you refused to obey orders, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your children, would all be shot, and your house burnt to the ground—*hein?* Remember, the Nazis carry out their threats. The plight of these unfortunates is terrible, and although we know what they are doing our hearts bleed for them. They are not to be judged by ordinary standards. We sometimes feel that there are people in England, which has escaped the horror, who forget this.”

Gimlet nodded. “It is not so much that they forget, as because, never having faced such tribulations, they know nothing of them.”

Felix admitted the truth of this. “In this war no man should judge his neighbour until he is sure that he knows all the facts,” he opined.

Another identity he revealed was that of the German who had been in charge of the trap that morning in the Rue de Lorraine. This man, he stated, was none other than Karl Bussemann, the hated head of the Gestapo in Paris. “We shall deal with him when the time comes,” was the ominous threat.

“The question is, what should be our next action?” asked Gimlet.

“That will be for the executive committee to decide,” answered Felix. “It is likely that you will be asked to attend and make your report in person. In fact, taking your willingness for granted, the arrangements are now being made by my brother Dominique.”

To this suggestion Gimlet readily agreed. Above all, he was anxious to know what information the unfortunate Catron had been carrying to Numero, at Caen, for transmission to the British authorities. It was obviously something of importance, he told Felix, so the sooner the information was across the Channel the better.

“It is a matter of the greatest urgency and importance,” admitted the builder. “Being a section leader in the area most concerned I know what it is, but I regret that I cannot disclose it to you without the permission of the committee. They may do so. I do not know. It is not for me to say, *monsieur*. The lives of many brave men depend upon the tightness of our communications, you comprehend?”

“I understand that,” agreed Gimlet.

Soon after this Dominique returned. Addressing his brother he said, “All is arranged. The committee was in session when I arrived, to discuss the betrayal of Pierre Sabonier. I am to instruct you to bring our allies before the committee instantly.” Looking at Cub he continued with a wry smile, “Our little *affaire* in the Rue de Lorraine this morning has, as you would say, put the grease in the stove. Paris talks of nothing else. Men smile as they walk

the streets, and when Paris smiles the Nazis rage. God knows how they know, but the street urchins are saying that the Fleas were responsible. At least, they call to each other that there are more fleas in Paris than ever before, and as they pass the German patrols they make pretence of scratching themselves. The Nazis glare, but can do nothing about it. Bussemann, they say, roars like a bull that smells blood. It would be a good thing, *mes amis*, not to fall into his hands at this moment. Every street, every road out of Paris, is watched.”

Felix rose. “If the committee is waiting we must go. They are busy men.”

Cub wondered how, if the streets were being watched, they were to get to the place of the meeting. He was soon to learn.

Felix led the way to a shed in which was stored the sundry equipment of the building trade. While two workmen stood on guard at the door some planks were lifted aside, disclosing a manhole.

Gimlet threw a sidelong glance at Cub. “This is where we go down the drain,” he murmured. “I hope it isn’t going to be a messy business.”

“It is an entrance to the old sewers of Paris,” explained Felix. “You may have heard of them, perhaps? They are famous for their rats, and for the excellent mushrooms which before the war were grown in great quantities. It happens that the temperature is perfect for their culture. Of course, it is many years since these old sewers were abandoned,” he added quickly. “The Germans know of them, and have occupied a part for the storage of ammunition—which we shall blow up when the time is ripe. But there is a labyrinth of tunnels about which the Nazis know nothing. Only a few old Frenchmen can find their way about them and they act as guides. Alone, a stranger would soon become lost. It would not be a good place to die . . . the rats, you understand? We French love the double meaning, and it is not for nothing that we call ourselves the Underground. Descend, *messieurs*.”

Dominique showed the way with a torch. An iron ladder made it possible to descend a vertical shaft to some twenty feet below ground level into the ancient sewer which, as a matter of detail, bore little resemblance to one. It was more like a bricked culvert, a narrow tunnel, just large enough for a man of normal stature to walk without stooping. The atmosphere was temperate, rather humid and oppressive, but not unduly so. The floor was dry.

An old man, blue-bloused after the French fashion, was waiting, lantern in hand. He touched a greasy beret with a respectful “*Bonjour, messieurs*,” waited until the manhole cover was replaced, then set off.



AN IRON LADDER MADE IT POSSIBLE TO DESCEND A VERTICAL SHAFT . . .

The walk turned out to be a long one—farther than Cub expected. He estimated that they must have travelled more than a mile. With secondary tunnels and drains branching off at all angles he was able to appreciate all that Felix had said about the place being a maze, although the old guide

went on like one who is at home. More than once they passed long platforms, or troughs, which appeared to be filled with eggs. These were, Cub ascertained, the famous mushroom beds which before the war had supplied half the capitals of Europe with the popular delicacy.

“I suppose the Germans have the mushrooms now?” he observed.

“No,” answered Dominique. “In the early days of the occupation they tried them, but the *champignons* did not agree with them.”

“Why not?”

“Because in some mysterious way a species of fungus got mixed up with the mushrooms. It happened to be a poisonous fungus,” he added naïvely. “Of course, such a thing is possible at the best of times, while there are people who do not know the difference between a mushroom and a toadstool. That is what we told the Nazis, and all they could do was to leave the mushrooms for the French to poison themselves.”

“Did the French poison themselves?”

“What a question! Of course not. After that, by a curious chance, there were no more fungi.”

Cub laughed.

“The Boches invented the phrase ‘total war,’” reminded Felix grimly. “The Underground has accepted it, and being French, we have introduced into it some of that artistry for which we have always been famous. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, *mon ami*, and as all the world knows, French sauces are *par excellence*.”

At this point of the conversation the walk came to an end. The guide halted before a side turning where two sentries stood guard. Felix went on alone. In a few minutes he was back. “Come,” he said, and the party moved forward towards an area of diffused light.

Cub hardly knew what to expect, but he was not prepared for the scene which presently met his gaze. He had rather taken it for granted that the Underground headquarters would be primitive in the extreme. It turned out to be very different. It might have been a military headquarters behind an army—as actually, of course, it was. There was radio, with operators at their posts. There was a telephone switchboard, with a chic brunette on duty. These things were noted in passing to an inner vault, where seven men sat round a table—one at the head and three on either side. There were extra chairs.

It was the man at the head of the table who held Cub’s attention. His commanding yet dignified poise, the high intelligent forehead, the steady eyes and pointed grey beard, seemed familiar. He was not surprised when

Gimlet stiffened to attention, saluted, and said, “*Bonjour, Monsieur le General.*”

The man at the head of the table rose and held out his hand. For an instant a faint smile softened the grave, careworn face. “So you recognized me, eh?”

Gimlet took the hand. “No one who has ever seen General Roularde is likely to forget him.”

“Ah well, it is better to forget names and titles here,” was the quiet reply. “My name is Monsieur Rouge. Please be seated. As you will easily believe, I am a busy man, and the affair in the Rue de Lorraine has caused me some extra work.” The General turned to Cub. “So you are one of the Grey Fleas, eh? We have watched your exploits—oh yes, we heard about them—with interest. At one time we were tempted to affiliate the Fleas with the regular Underground, but in the end we decided against it for fear the added responsibility would curb your audacity. Congratulations, my son. My felicitations to the Fox when next you see him. But now to work. Time presses.”

Seated at the table Gimlet recounted his version of the Catron episode. “What I am most concerned about is the information Catron was carrying to our agent in Caen,” he concluded. “British Intelligence, not having received it, will be getting anxious.”

“Naturally. Is it your intention to return to England immediately, *capitaine?*”

“Yes.”

“Has this been planned?”

“Not exactly. I can get across the Channel if I can get to the coast. Before considering ways and means of doing that I decided to wait until my mission here was complete.”

“It is complete now?”

“Yes. To make contact with Monsieur Rouge was my objective.”

“Very well. You would, I imagine, be prepared to act as messenger?”

“Certainly.”

“Good.” The general glanced round the table. “Is it agreed that we put Captain King in possession of the facts?”

Six hands were raised in acquiescence.

The general bowed, then looked at Gimlet and Cub in turn. “You can both hear this,” he said. “Should one fail to get through, the other may succeed. Here, then, is the information Catron was carrying.

“The situation which we are anxious to present to the British authorities embraces several issues,” the general began. “You will have heard of the great Renault motor works here in Paris. They were bombed some time ago, but are now in partial production again, producing aero engines. To prevent a repetition of the air raids the Germans have resorted to a ruse forbidden by the rules of war—not that they have ever abided by any rules when it was to their advantage to ignore them. A British prisoner-of-war camp has been set up in the works. Nothing has been said of this in your newspapers, but the Nazis arranged that the British Government should hear of it. Your Bomber Command is now faced with the problem that if it attacks the works, the prisoners—who, incidentally, are mostly commandos—will be killed. So the works cannot be bombed, and it was left to the Underground to find a solution to the problem. We think we have found one. We plan to evacuate the prison camp, and simultaneously, with the co-operation of Bomber Command, destroy the works. Many escapes have been made by tunnelling out from the inside of a prison camp, but as far as I know, escape has not been made possible by a tunnel driven in from the *outside*. Our engineers have cut a tunnel. The head of it is now twenty feet below the yard which contains the dormitory, the hutment, in which the prisoners are housed. Any night we can break upward through the crust and get the prisoners away. But when this happens the bombers must strike immediately, otherwise the Nazis will rush in fresh prisoners and the raid will be foiled. The success of this scheme, even more than most military operations, will depend upon perfect timing—but I need not tell you that. Now we come to the difficulties. There are a hundred men in the prison camp. What are we to do with them when we get them out? True, we could take them to a place where they would be safe for a while, at any rate, but the problem is, how to feed them. In Paris to-day rationing is so strict that it is not easy for one man to keep body and soul together. To feed a hundred men even for two or three days would be impossible. We simply do not possess the food. To men of experience like ourselves it is easy to see what would happen if food was not forthcoming. One or two undisciplined fellows would go out to find food. They would be caught and the whole scheme would fall to the ground.”

“Apart from feeding them, where are you going to put all these men, anyway?” asked Gimlet.

“In the event of our plan being adopted we should hide them in an old abandoned cloth mill at Claire, on the edge of the Forest de Pareil—about twenty-five miles from Paris.”

“How do you purpose getting them there?”

A ghost of a smile played for a moment on the general's austere face. "They will ride there on bicycles."

Gimlet stared. "A hundred British troops—riding out of Paris on *bicycles*? Pardon me, monsieur——"

"They will not be in uniform, of course. This is the idea. As you will know, road racing on bicycles has always been a popular sport in France. These races sometimes cover hundreds of miles—as the one from Paris to Nice. The Nazis, in an attempt to placate our people, have permitted such races, setting a limit of a hundred men in any one race. We are just within that limit. This is how it will go. The prisoners will be brought out of the camp through the tunnel into an old gymnasium from which the tunnel was started. There, each man will roll his uniform in a bag which we shall provide, and attire himself in racing clothes lent by the men who will lend the bicycles. At the blow of a whistle the race will start. The winning post, ostensibly, is opposite the cathedral at Rouen. It will take place at night—that is also a Nazi rule, so that it does not interfere with work."

"It might be done, by gad!" muttered Gimlet enthusiastically.

"We have done more incredible things."

"But what is going to happen when these men fail to arrive at Rouen? The Germans will know that they must have disappeared somewhere *en route*, and the game will soon be up."

"A reasonable question, *mon capitaine*. We have not overlooked a contingency so obvious. The racers *will* arrive—but they will not be the ones who set off. You see, on the night of the operation, a hundred members of the Underground, all cyclists, will be hiding in the old mill. It is on the bicycles of these men that the prisoners will be racing. As each escaper arrives at the mill he will hand over his cycle, which will bear a number, to its owner, who will then continue the race. Thus, at the appointed time, the crowd that will collect in Rouen to see the finish of the race will not be disappointed. If all goes well, the Nazis, who are not overburdened with imagination, will not connect the mass escape with the race."

"I must say that the idea of a hundred British troops riding out of Paris on bicycles under the noses of the Nazis fills me with joy," stated Gimlet. "But what next? Let us say that the prisoners are now hiding in the mill. What happens to them?"

"Precisely. Without food, which we cannot provide, in a day or two there would be trouble. We feel that in getting the men to the mill we shall have done our part. We must ask the British authorities to make arrangements for getting the prisoners to England."

Gimlet thought for a moment or two. "This mill must be a long way from the coast. Is there a field handy where aircraft could land?"

"Unfortunately, no. The country is wooded. It so happens that where there is a possible landing area we have no place suitable for hiding such a large body of men. There is a good landing place about twenty miles from the mill. Obstructions have been erected by the Germans, as elsewhere, to break up any British machine that tried to land, but it might be possible to remove these obstructions at a given moment. Our organization is now widespread and efficient."

"If we used this landing field we should need transport to get the men from the mill to the spot. To march all that way would be to risk everything. Have you any form of transport?"

"No. The Germans have taken everything except a few farm carts—and they would be too slow."

"Would it be possible to cut out the mill altogether—get the prisoners to ride direct to the landing field?"

"It might be possible, but it would complicate matters, particularly in respect of the time-table. In the first place, the landing field is nowhere near the Rouen road, to which the prisoners should keep. Again, some prisoners will cycle the distance much faster than others. It is a common mistake to attempt too much in one effort. Do not lose sight of the fact that the main military object of this affair is the destruction of the Renault works. Without appearing callous, I think you will agree with me that the ultimate escape of the prisoners to England, while greatly to be desired, is secondary. If Bomber Command raid the works, and provide transport planes for the prisoners, and guarantee perfect timing—well, let them try. But as you know, few operations work out exactly to plan. The unexpected always happens. Hold-ups are almost inevitable. Suppose the transport planes arrived and the prisoners were not there? Let us say that some unpredictable contingency arose to delay the escape. Again, the prisoners will not all arrive together; they will probably arrive in twos and threes over quite a period of time. What then? Obviously, the transport planes will not be able to sit in the field, waiting, and hope to escape detection. Radiolocation will spot the planes coming out, and note their whereabouts when they land. Within ten minutes German mobile units will be on the spot, and the scheme will end in disaster. It would be better to play safe—or as safe as is reasonably possible."

Gimlet considered the problem for a minute.

“I think this matter had better be left to the Higher Command to settle,” he decided. “The first thing is for me to let my people know about the scheme and hear what they have to say. With your permission I will start for home immediately.”

“If your Higher Command can think of a better plan, or devise modifications on the one I have just put forward, I hope they will not hesitate to say so. The great thing is not to incriminate—if it can be avoided—those of us who have to stop in France. Now about your return. You came to Paris from Caen, so presumably it is from somewhere near Caen that you will return to England?”

“Yes.”

“And you have made no arrangements for this journey?”

“None.”

“Will you leave it to us to prepare a programme? You would be well advised to do so. The Nazis must know that you are still in the city. Busseman has seen you. Your description even at this moment is being broadcast. But do not let that worry you. We will arrange something. Getting our people in and out of the capital has to be done so often that it has almost become a routine job—a regular service. Such journeys are usually made after dark—it is safer. Let us make you comfortable for a few hours while my transport experts work out a route for you.”

“Is there a similar route by which I can return to you to report, after I have passed this information to my people?”

“Since you do not know exactly when that will be I think you had better use the *service regulateur*. It has succeeded admirably so far. Every night a special train carrying farm produce leaves Normandy for Paris. It picks up trucks along the route. You will wish to board it at Caen, where it arrives at eight-fifteen. All you have to do is to go to the porters’ room under the east signal box at eight. There you will find a shunter. His name is Hilaire. Tell him that Monsieur Rouge wishes to see you in Paris and he will find a place for you in the truck that will be waiting for collection in a siding. On reaching Paris the train runs into a goods yard at the *Gare St. Lazare*. Friends will be there to meet you. From the station you will ride in a vegetable cart, or perhaps a milk float. Hilaire will have told the driver of the train that there is special freight on board, and the driver will pass the word to us. Do I make myself clear, *monsieur*?”

“Perfectly, sir,” answered Gimlet.

CHAPTER VII

THE "K" PLAN

THE assertion of Monsieur Rouge, that getting patriots in and out of Paris had become a routine job, proved to be no idle boast. His experts, he had said, would work out a plan. This they did, and it operated with such precision that four-thirty the following morning found Cub and his chief on the outskirts of Caen. To Cub the experience was particularly interesting in that it revealed the wide ramifications of the Underground network. It was also an object-lesson to demonstrate the folly of trying to hold an entire nation in subjection.

The return journey to Caen began at dusk, when the travellers, rested and fed, were informed that all was ready for their departure. Having been wished "*Bon voyage*" by Monsieur Rouge and the brothers Purcelle, they proceeded forthwith under the guidance of a man who was the very spirit of taciturnity. He rarely spoke. They never learned his name.

First there was a long walk through a "drain" that ended where the effluent had originally discharged into the River Seine. Here they were provided with filthy overalls which they were told to wear over their clothes. Near at hand a barge had just finished discharging coal. They went on board. No one spoke to them or appeared to notice them.

"This business gets dirtier and dirtier," remarked Gimlet in a voice heavy with disgust.

The barge cast off and chugged away downstream. On either side rose a fantastic silhouette of chimneys from the roofs of lightless Paris. Once, at a bridge, the barge was challenged, presumably by a Nazi sentry. The man at the wheel called out something. The barge did not stop. This, the first stage of the journey, was made with surprising ease.

It ended at Sèvres, home of famous china-ware. Gimlet recognized the outline of the great factory, which he had often passed in pre-war days. The barge crawled to a wharf and made fast. In front of the factory stood a line of vehicles. The guide furnished the information that this was a convoy of reconditioned lorries, driven by French drivers. Where they were going the guide did not say. He walked down the line to the last lorry, and, indicating that the others were to follow, climbed aboard. After a delay of about ten minutes the convoy started. A tiresome drive of about an hour followed; then the convoy ran through a large town. The driver of the rear lorry

stopped to make—or pretended to make—an adjustment to his engine. The guide said quietly, “*Messieurs*, this is Mantes; we have arrived.” The party dismounted.

A short walk took them to a railway line, within sight of a station. The guide took cover beside a side-tracked goods train, and volunteered the information that this was the western railway.

“This is where I leave you,” he said. “A goods train bound for Cherbourg will be along in a few minutes. At this place the train will slow down. It does so every night, in case there are passengers—you understand? You will travel with the guard. If you will tell him that you wish to descend at Caen he will arrange for the driver of the engine to slow down again just outside the town.”

Soon afterwards the goods train puffed into the station. After a wait of a few minutes it came on. The engine whistled, three short notes.

“All is well,” said the guide. “That is the signal. *Adieu, messieurs.*”

“Good-bye, and thank you,” returned Gimlet.

The train came on, the engine hissing. As it rumbled on a figure could be seen leaning out of the guard’s brake. Gimlet took a running jump and climbed aboard. Cub followed. The guard dragged him in. Then, to Cub’s surprise—not to say consternation—a third figure rolled into the dimly lighted brake. It was a German soldier. Before Cub could recover from his shock the man had scrambled to his feet and made a swift sign to the guard.

The guard nodded, quite unperturbed. He slammed the door. Then, turning, he said calmly, “Make yourselves comfortable, *messieurs.*” He looked at Gimlet. “Where do you wish to descend?”

“Caen.”

The guard switched his glance to the German, who said “Cherbourg.”

“*Bon,*” acknowledged the guard, and went on with his work.

Cub looked at Gimlet and back at the German. To his utter and complete amazement—although by this time he suspected the truth—the German deliberately winked. The idea of a German winking struck him as so incongruous that for a second or two he could only stare. Then, to cap all, the German said, in a casual voice, in perfect English, “Do either of you fellows happen to have a cigarette on you? I’ve run out.”

Gimlet took out his case. There were six cigarettes in it. “Take the lot,” he invited. “I hope to be where there are plenty, before dawn.”

“Lucky devils. I may be here for weeks,” murmured the man in German uniform, taking three of the cigarettes. “If you’ll excuse me now I’ll snatch

forty winks. It's some time since I had any sleep." He curled up in a corner, and lighting a cigarette inhaled the smoke with infinite relish.

Gimlet found a seat on a crate. He looked at Cub and smiled. "Takes all sorts to make a war," he remarked.

The train rolled on through the war-stricken night. After a while Cub, too, lay down and slept.

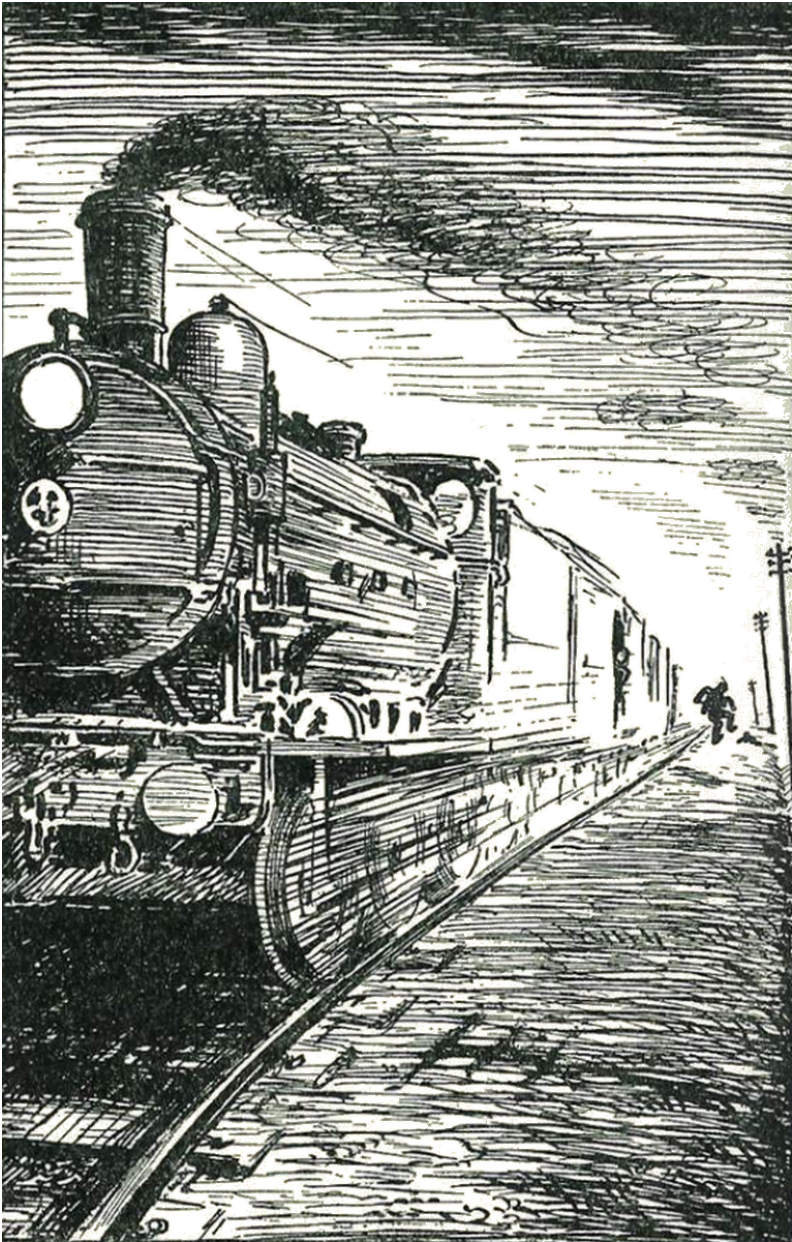
He was awakened by Gimlet shaking his arm. "On your feet," was the order. "The guard tells me we're approaching Caen."

Cub scrambled up. "What's the time?"

"Half past four."

The train slowed down. The guard opened the door. "*Bonjour, messieurs,*" he said evenly, as if all this was part of his everyday work. The "German" was still fast asleep in his corner.

Wondering if he would ever see either of their fellow passengers again, Cub, with a jump, followed his leader to the permanent way. For a little while they lay side by side on the embankment, listening, watching the tail light of the train disappear.



CUB FOLLOWED HIS LEADER TO THE PERMANENT
WAY.

“That was a knockout,” muttered Cub. “I’m beginning to wonder if anybody in France is what he appears to be.”

“Quite a lot of people are not, evidently,” returned Gimlet. “Well, let’s move along to the forest and get in touch with Trapper. He’ll be waiting.”

The journey to the Fleas’ headquarters was accomplished in just under an hour, without incident, but the end provided a surprise. Not only was Trapper in the cellar under the ancient hunting-box, but Copper, and the man they knew as Numero Neuf.

Gimlet made no attempt to conceal his astonishment. “What the devil’s all this?” he asked wonderingly.

Numero answered. “It’s all very simple. As you know, I slipped home last night and reported what had happened to my headquarters. There was a quick conference, and it was decided that I should come back right away to keep in touch with you, for reasons which I will explain presently. We got here about two hours ago.”

“But I was going home myself,” declared Gimlet.

“I know, but there’s a spot of bother about Catron’s information not getting through. Headquarters thought it would save time if I came back and contacted you.”

“But how did you find your way here?”

“You sent this corporal of yours home, too, didn’t you? He reported the position from your angle. Headquarters put two and two together, and as he was the only man who knew just where to find you they sent him back with me to act as guide.”

“Smart work. How did you get here?”

“Flew over—dropped by parachute.”

“But that’s all very fine,” argued Gimlet. “How the deuce am I going to get home? The corporal was going to pick me up in one of our boats.”

“That’s what I told them, sir,” put in Copper. “They said they would make other arrangements. The officer who I was to guide would give you your orders.”

Gimlet frowned. “Give *me* orders?” He turned to Numero. “I’m a soldier—or I thought I was one. I don’t take orders from civilians, even if they are in the Intelligence Service.”

“I’m not a civilian,” said Numero quietly. He smiled. “As a matter of fact, old boy, there’s no need to keep it a secret any longer; I’m General Sir Saxon Craig, Assistant Director of M.I.5.”

Gimlet was frankly shocked. “I’m very sorry, sir, but how was I to know?”

The general smiled again. “You weren’t. I pop to and fro from time to time to have a look at things with my own eyes. You’d better forget who I am, though. My contacts here only know me as Numero Neuf, so stick to that, if it’s all the same to you.”

“It’s all right with me,” agreed Gimlet. “But I’m still at sea about this business.”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you all about it,” invited Numero.

They made themselves comfortable.

“As I told you, we were more than a little worried about the non-arrival of this special information Catron was bringing us from Paris. You’ve been to Paris?”

“Yes.”

“And you made contact with the Underground as I suggested?”

“Not exactly. Sabonier was arrested just before we arrived—I’ll tell you about that later on. Actually, it made no difference in the long run. We made contact with the Underground.”

“Did you see Monsieur Rouge himself?”

“Yes.”

“Did he give you the information?”

“Yes.”

“Splendid. Now, what’s it all about?”

“Just a minute,” protested Gimlet. “Let’s get this straight, first. Am I to understand that *you* are taking this information home?”

“Yes.”

“Is there some particular reason for that?”

“Yes. You see—don’t get upset—you may not be going home . . . yet.”

“Ah,” breathed Gimlet. “You’d better give me the low-down of the new idea.”

“It’s quite simple, my dear fellow. We don’t know what his Underground information is. You do. It struck headquarters that it might involve some job which you could handle; and as you are already on the spot it seemed pointless to bring you home. If you *can* handle the job you can go straight ahead.”

Gimlet frowned. “That’s pretty cool, sir. Am I a commando or an Intelligence agent?”

“I’m afraid that in this war, King, you have to be what the exigencies of the service demand,” said Numero earnestly. “But suppose you tell me what

this information is? If it turns out to be an obvious Intelligence job, and you'd rather not do it, so well and good. But if a military operation is called for I know of no one better qualified to handle it than you are. Now, what's the news?"

"You don't mind if I talk in front of my chaps—we work together, you know, and they sometimes have ideas?"

"Not in the least. They're under your command. You can tell them what you like."

Sitting in the underground chamber, with Fleas on guard outside, Gimlet passed on the plan for the destruction of the Renault works and the disposal of the prisoners.

"So that's it," breathed Numero, when he had finished. "It's an ambitious scheme, by Jove, but it would be a fine job if we could pull it off. Of course, we knew about this revolting Nazi trick to prevent us from bombing the works."

"Why did they choose the Renault works, in particular, to try it on?" asked Gimlet. "There are other objectives."

"True, but there is a special workshop in the grounds of the Renault factory where we have reason to believe that something of a very important nature is going on. We know which shed it is—we have air photographs on which it is marked. It may be that experimental work of some sort is going on inside, but we don't know, because only Germans are employed in it. One detail which Monsieur Rouge did not tell you is this. The prisoners, or most of them, are commandos taken in the Dieppe raid—the fellows who were subsequently shackled. They still may be, for all we know. A large proportion are Canadians, but there are some Kittens, your own fellows, among them. But let us get down to brass tacks. The job begins to look more and more like a military operation. What's your opinion of it?"

"In Paris the whole thing was sprung on me suddenly, so I hadn't much time to think about it; but I've turned it over in my mind since, and this is what I think. The Underground scheme is all right, but it doesn't go far enough. I can't help feeling that with a hundred good men this show should be turned from a defensive to an offensive one. We ought to be able to do quite a bit of damage before we withdraw. I've done too much running away, lately. If we must run, let's hit the Nazis a crack first, while we're on the spot. What do you say, you fellows?" Gimlet glanced at the three Kittens, who were standing by.

"Bash 'em all round the clock, sir, anywhere, any time, that's what I says," answered Copper simply. "Am I right, Trapper?"

“Zut! I’ll say you’re right,” answered Trapper.

“We’ve got some useful equipment hidden here in the Forest, sir, that we left the last time we were out,” reminded Cub.

“Give me a rough idea, King, of what’s in your mind,” invited Numero.

“All right,” agreed Gimlet. “In the first place it will be necessary for someone to enter the Renault works to release the prisoners. As the tunnel is ready, that should be easy. But I say, while we are inside, let’s make a little smoke. With flares and grenades we could mark that special shed for the bombers with more accuracy than—with all due respect for them—our pathfinders. In short, while we’re on the job, we might as well set the place alight. Having lit a signal for the bombers to do their stuff, all we have to do is to retire into the tunnel, which would be blown up behind us to prevent anyone from following.”

“How many men would you need for this party?”

“Myself and the three fellows I have with me should be enough. The scheme can then follow the French plan until the prisoners arrive at the old mill at Claire, where, in any case, we are supposed to take over. The snag that the Underground was up against was feeding the men while they were in the mill, and later, transporting them to a place where they could be picked up by our aircraft. The nearest field is some distance from the mill. Now, instead of all this messing about, I suggest that we use the German aerodrome at Rambours, which is a lot more convenient and has a safer landing surface.”

“But Rambours landing field is occupied by a German bomber group—some of the fellows who raid London.”

“Ho! So that’s where they come from,” growled Copper. “I’ve been waiting for a chance to call on some of these blokes who knocked our ’ouse about——”

“All right, corporal. Keep your imagination under control,” advised Gimlet. He turned back to Numero. “My idea is that we—that is, ourselves and the prisoners—seize this bomber station and burn it out. Then, before the enemy can reorganize, our machines come in and pick us up. I like the idea of using a German landing field. It would give the show a more stylish finish than lying in some stinking ditch, round some dirty meadow, getting our clothes all messed up—you know how it is?”

“But for such an attack you would need weapons—weapons for a hundred men.”

“There shouldn’t be much difficulty about that. Machines could come over the mill and drop us the necessary small arms, grenades and what-nots.

My fellows would have to change back out of their racing togs into their uniforms, of course. As I see it, it's just a matter of timing."

"And at the finish there would be a hundred men to pick up—some of them casualties, no doubt."

"Half a dozen Lankies,^[1] or Wimpeys,^[2] could do the job."

^[1] Lancaster bombers.

^[2] Wellington bombers.

"It would be a pretty piece of work if it came off," agreed Numero. "But what's Monsieur Rouge going to say about all this?"

"I think he'll agree. In fact, he told me that if we could think of a better plan than his he would be quite willing to adopt it. His only stipulation was, bearing in mind that his organization would have to stay in France, he didn't want it exposed to too much risk. I'll tell him that once our fellows are at the old mill he can retire from the scheme and leave us to our own devices."

"All right. You work out the operation in detail—the time schedule, what you'll need, and so on. I'll take it home and present it to the Higher Authority for approval."

"When are you going home?"

Numero looked at his watch. "It will be light in an hour and a half. If you could work out your plan in half an hour I could get back to-night. I have a date with a pilot, at a field about three miles from here, just before dawn."

"And are you coming back here again, to let me know if the plan has the approval of the departments concerned?"

Numero considered the question before replying. "Probably not. There's really no need. Knowing exactly what you have in mind it might be better if I stayed in the operations room and watched things from there. Some emergency might arise—you never know. Let's leave it like this. If a machine comes over and drops two flares, green changing to red, you'll know it's okay for you to go ahead. Should anything occur to cause me to alter my mind, and come over, the machine will drop a string of three flares, red only. In that case, should you wish to get in touch with me, you'll find me in my apartment in the Rue Basse, in Caen."

"Good enough," agreed Gimlet. "I'll get to work on the plan right away."

“When would you schedule this show to come off?”

“The bicycle race has been arranged provisionally for Sunday night. Monsieur Rouge said it could be postponed if necessary, but Sunday would be most desirable because it’s the only night of the week that the works close down—which means that there will be no forced French labourers there then. To-morrow will be Saturday. Sunday means a bit of a rush, but we ought to be able to manage it. It should give us time to get back to Paris and put the plan before the Underground Committee, anyway. As far as I, personally, am concerned, the sooner the better.”

“Fair enough,” concurred Numero.

“Just one other thing,” concluded Gimlet. “There’s an Air Force squadron attached to Combined Ops. under the command of a chap named Bigglesworth. His outfit seems to know this game so well that they take it in their stride. They picked us up last time we were over, and I like the way they did it—no messing about. If you could arrange for them to handle the air side I’d feel there wouldn’t be much chance of it going wrong.”

“You mean the chap they call Biggles?”

“He’s the fellow. Tell him the story so that he can get his teeth into the whole set-up.”

“I’ll see what I can do about it,” promised Numero. “Get busy on the scheme. We’ll call it the ‘K’ plan.”

CHAPTER VIII

SATURDAY

THE following day, Saturday, passed quietly. It was, Cub suspected, the lull before the storm. With a map in front of him Gimlet went over his plan again and again, estimating times and checking distances, looking for weak spots and trying to foresee every possible contingency that might arise. This was the “K” plan, the plan that General Craig, or Numero Neuf, as he preferred to be called, had taken back to England for approval.

Gimlet knew from experience that in a scheme so intricate, involving a large number of personnel, should anyone fail in his duty, in no matter how small a degree, the whole plan would collapse and disaster would be shared by all. He was also well aware that be they never so carefully planned,

operations seldom proceed precisely according to schedule; that a hitch here, a moment's delay there, could upset the entire time-table. The best that a commander could do was to try to anticipate such breakdowns and have an alternative plan ready.

Security was his main worry. The enemy was aware that something was in the wind, and would at that very moment be employing their tremendous resources to discover what it was: should they get one whiff, the faintest suspicion of the truth, even if the scheme were not fore-doomed to failure the hazards would be multiplied a hundredfold. Never had he been so anxious. This was not on his own account, nor that of the men who would be under his command. They all knew the risks they were taking and accepted them as an inseparable part of their job. His greatest concern was for those brave Frenchmen, the civilian members of the Underground movement. It would be upon them that the heavy hand of the Nazis would fall, should their complicity be suspected—and it probably would be, regardless of whether the scheme was a failure or a success. For the commandos it would be simply a matter of life or death in action. For the patriots it would not be so easy. Working all the while in the grim shadow of the execution yard, they would doubtless accept their fates with the high philosophy of true patriots the world over; but it would not end there, and they knew it. Their homes would be wiped out. Their families—wives, children, fathers, mothers, and even distant relations, most of them entirely innocent—would be questioned, tortured after the Nazi fashion, and at the end brutally murdered or thrown into a concentration camp, which was practically the same thing. Wherefore Gimlet, as never before, was desperately anxious that the operation should not, through any fault of his, come “unstuck”; that no trail should be left which might lead back to the Underground. The onus of responsibility for this rested on his shoulders.

Not sharing the cares of leadership, Cub, Copper and Trapper suffered from no such pangs of apprehension. Their part was to obey orders. Although they did not discuss it, they knew well enough that their fate was in their leader's hands; and having complete confidence in him they were content to have it so. Wherefore, with a screen of Fleas thrown round the outskirts of the forest to watch for possible trouble, they sat under the ivy-clad wall of the ruin and talked of lighter matters, in the manner of old soldiers. While they talked, Trapper polished the little bow and arrows which were a part of his private equipment. After a while, to test the bow, he stuck the butt end of his cigarette on a tree about thirty paces distant for a target, and returning to the party impaled it at the first shot. The Fox, thinner

than ever, moving with all the nervous awareness of danger of his namesake, joined them. He was just in time to witness Trapper's exercise in archery.

"*Enfin*, but I should like to know how you do that, *mon brave*," he said admiringly.

"Pah! It is simple," was the casual reply. "All that is necessary is that you start practising when you are five years old. You practise every day for ten years. Then you begin to hit the things you shoot at. Then you practise every day for another five years, and hoopla! you cannot miss."

Smiling ruefully the Fox found a seat with the others. "*Hélas!* I am several years too late in the starting," he sighed.

"Where've you been to, Foxy me lad?" inquired Copper.

Fox shrugged. "I go to the town, to take to the mother of the Grasshopper a tin of the bully given to me by *Monsieur le Capitaine*. To-day she will eat well."

"You've got a nerve," returned Copper, grinning. "Don't you bring no 'ounds this way, a fox-huntin'. Ha! That's a joke. Fox-huntin'—get it? You know what happens when they catch the fox? They cut his head and tail off, and then skin 'im—so they tell me. That's what old Gunther would do to you, me lad, if he got 'is 'ands on you."

"Gunther will need a faster horse before he can catch me," scoffed the Fox. "Besides, he shouts so much with the rage that he sees nothing."

"Ho! Is that so?" murmured Copper. "*Now* who's trod on his toes?"

"The word is out that my cousin Edmond has gone to England to join the Fighting Navy. To do this he makes the general the big fool. *Oh la la!* The story goes round the town and everyone laughs. Even in Caen they still enjoy the joke. Ah! that Edmond—he is a droll one. Always they call him *le Tricher*."

"What's that mean?" growled Copper.

Cub answered. "The cheat."

Copper frowned. "I ain't got no time for cheats."

"But it is good to cheat the Nazis, *mon ami*," protested Fox.

"Tell us how Edmond pulls off his trick," invited Trapper.

"*Alors!* This was the way," asserted Fox. "Edmond, he is by trade a man of the fish—no, the fisherman, *n'est ce pas?* He has an idea the most superb. *Très, très fantastique*. But first I must tell you that the *generaloberst* finds out that Madame Elise, she who in the old days keeps the Hotel Metropole, has buried in her garden her stock of fine old brandy, *le cognac—très bon*. Over twenty dozens of bottles—*Oh la la!* The Nazis took the hotel from her,

you comprehend? So that she has no business, no money. Gunther, he takes the brandy. Edmond, who thinks for a long time how he can get to England, now thinks how he can get the brandy. He has an idea. *Une chance!* He goes to the *generaloberst*, and says he knows a man, one who lives down the coast and before the war was a smuggler. This man has much money but no brandy. For the cognac he would pay a thousand francs the bottle. That is much money, even for fine cognac, and the *generaloberst* loves money. So they make the arrangement. Edmond takes a bottle and is to have a hundred francs for the business. He brings back the money, but Gunther gives him only ten francs, not a hundred. Then Edmond takes two bottles, and brings back to the general two thousand francs, saying that the customer will take all the brandy at the same price. Says the *generaloberst*, but you cannot carry twenty dozens of bottles so that no one shall see them in the transportation. Edmond answers, if you will give me a permit, *Herr Generaloberst*, I will take it in my boat. To this Gunther agrees, telling Edmond he is a smart fellow. So the permit is written and signed by the *generaloberst*. Edmond carries the brandy to the boat, in which all his friends who wish to go to England are already hiding. *Hélas!* He sails out and does not come back. He goes straight across *La Manche*.”

“What’s *La Manche*?” demanded Copper.

“It’s the French name for the English Channel,” explained Cub. “It means The Sleeve. The Channel is supposed to bear some resemblance to a sleeve.”

“Ho! I get it. So Edmond had a card up his sleeve, as you might say. Ha! That’s a good ’un. Laugh, everybody.”

Fox smiled. “When Edmond lands in England he has brandy up both sleeves, *mon camarade*, which is even better, because the British Government gives him money for it and sends it to the hospitals. Now Edmond is in the Fighting Navy. What a man! What brains! What nerves! One day he will be president of France.”

“Swipe me with a blanket!” exclaimed Copper. “But how did you get hold of this tale, if Edmond is in England?” he added suspiciously.

“Because, *mon ami*—and this is something Gunther does not know—in the middle of the night a friend of Edmond arrives at the house of Madame Elise and gives her twenty-four hundred francs from the British Government, which is payment for the brandy at a hundred francs the bottle—a fair price. He tells the story, and to-day all Caen talks of nothing else. So once more we twist old Gunther’s nose. But he does not like this, and looks for an excuse to shoot hostages.”

“*Sacré!* Does he need an excuse?” asked Trapper.

“But yes. If there is no excuse it will be said that the shootings are because of the brandy, and the story might reach the ears of the Führer. Now he looks for Gimlet and some Kittens, who are known to be in Caen.”

“Strike a light! How does he know that?” demanded Copper.

The Fox shrugged. “Ah! I do not know. Spies of the Gestapo tell him, perhaps.”

“What beats me is, why old Gumboil ain’t rumbled this forest hide-out before now,” declared Copper.

“Many times they have been through it,” asserted Fox. “When they look in one place we go to another.”

Cub joined in, smiling. “Once or twice we have helped them to look, but their trouble is, they don’t know what they’re looking for. It would need an army to comb the place thoroughly. And suppose they did that? The Fleas would just move into the next forest. There are plenty of forests in France to choose from—and there are thousands of patriots hiding in them, too. What can the Boches do about it? Nothing. They need all the men they’ve got to guard the towns. After all, the Normans, who started out from Caen, you remember, tried pretty hard to find Robin Hood, who hid in Sherwood Forest, but they never did.”

“So now we’re ’avin’ a sort of return match, eh?” remarked Copper, grinning. “Aw, let’s forget the Jerries fer a bit. How about a slice of bully and a biscuit? I’m peckish. Blimy! Could I do with a basin o’ fish and chips from old Ma Smith’s joint down the Old Kent Road? Not ’alf I couldn’t. Lovely grub. Might ’ave bin ’aving it, too, but for this perishin’ war. Stop muckin’ abart and get on with it, I say. Am I right, Trapper?”

“Are you right? *I’ll* say you’re right,” agreed Trapper warmly.

And so the day wore on until dusk dimmed the scene. And an hour after sunset, high up in a sky that was being scissored into sections by questing searchlights, came the signal for which they were all waiting—two flares, green changing to red.

“That’s it,” said Gimlet cheerfully. “Now we can go ahead. We move off in twenty minutes. We’ve got to be at the signal box at eight sharp.”

“How about togs, sir?” asked Copper.

“We wear uniforms,” answered Gimlet. “This is a commando job now. Cub, you may have to do a spot of scouting, so you might keep your overalls on over your uniform for the time being. We shall need some equipment in addition to revolvers to crack open the Renault works—a couple of Sten

guns, some grenades, and a signal flare or two should do us. We'll carry them in a sack. Everyone will take an emergency ration of biscuits for his own use." Gimlet turned to the Fox. "When we move off you might put a screen of Fleas out in front of us to pass back word if anyone is about. Our objective is the east signal box at Caen."

"Oui, mon capitaine."

"After we've gone you'd better come back here and lie low."

"Oui, mon capitaine."

A quarter of an hour later, the party, in single file with the Fox leading, started off through the leafy aisles of the silent forest. To anyone making such a march for the first time the experience must have been an eerie one, but to those now engaged the manœuvre had become commonplace. There were occasional halts and brief delays, with signal calls and quiet conversations between the Fox and small figures that appeared out of the darkness, spoke fiercely, and disappeared whence they came. If ever there was any real danger the commandos saw nothing of it, and the railway line was reached without incident or alarm. The Fox had done his job well; he struck the track at a point about a hundred yards to the east of the signal box, which turned out to be the usual square, two-storied, box-like structure, with faint light showing through the glass sides of the upper part. Within the lighted area the spectral shape of the signalman could just be discerned as he went about his duties. A hundred yards or so beyond the signal box a few shaded lights revealed the position of the station. The time was five minutes to eight.

"Shall I have a prowl, sir, to make sure this shunter Hilaire is inside?" suggested Cub.

"Go ahead," agreed Gimlet. "A whistle will bring us along if it's all clear."

Keeping close against the side of the low embankment, and from habit taking advantage of any cover that offered. Cub moved forward with cat-like tread towards the signal box, which, as he drew near, he observed, was of the standard type, the upper part, containing the signal levers, being reached by an outside staircase. Closer reconnaissance disclosed that the ground-floor cabin had its own door, and one window facing the track; but as the window was blacked-out it was impossible to get a glimpse of the interior, or even a part of it. Advancing to the door Cub was about to try the handle when the sound of voices reached his ears. Listening, he made out that there were two men talking. One, he surmised, would be Hilaire. Who was the

other? A platelayer or a porter, perhaps? It might be a friend; on the other hand, it might not. He decided to wait.

Five minutes dragged by, with a desultory conversation still being carried on inside. Cub knew that the others would be wondering what he was doing, but without taking a risk there was nothing he could do about it. If he went back to them to report, the second man might emerge the moment his back was turned, and still more time would be lost in ascertaining that he had departed. Another five minutes passed. It was now well after eight, and the train was due at eight-fifteen. Already the time would be short for the shunter to make the necessary arrangements. It seemed that the only alternative to going back to Gimlet to report, which would involve the loss of two or three more minutes, was to risk a peep into the cabin.

The crash of a signal lever, and the harsh scraping of a cable almost under his feet, brought his heart into his mouth, as the saying is. But it hastened his movements, for there was sound reason to suppose that the train just signalled was the one which they intended to board. After feeling to make sure that his uniform was not showing anywhere, he reached for the door knob.

Precisely at that moment the door was opened from the inside, with the result that he came into collision with a man who attempted to come out. With a grunt of surprise the man recoiled a pace into the room. Light struck his face. Cub recognized him instantly; and he knew from the expression in the man's eyes that he, too, had been recognized. It was Paleface.

Cub was probably the more surprised. He had almost forgotten the man, whom he supposed to be in Paris. The last time he had seen him was in the Rue de Lorraine, when he had entered Sabonier's shop. Anyway, all that mattered for the moment was that recognition had been mutual. Cub had no particular quarrel with the Nazi spy—at any rate, not just then, when there were other, more pressing matters to attend to; but he realized that if the man got away, within five minutes there would be a hue and cry. Obviously, Paleface had to be stopped; and with this object Cub reached quickly for his gun, only to discover, to his chagrin, that it was under his overalls. Before he could do anything else Paleface had jumped forward, struck him a violent blow on the chest, and rushed out. Cub staggered, but grabbed the man in passing, and hung on. They both fell on the dirty gravel beside the track.

In the struggle that ensued Cub found himself fighting both an offensive and a defensive action. His antagonist, on account of age alone, was both heavier and stronger, and it was soon clear to Cub that he was likely to get the worst of the encounter; for which reason, had the circumstances been different, he would have been content to break away. But as things were,

even though he was receiving punishment, he dare not loose his hold for fear the man should get clear and raise an alarm. So he had to hold on, and at the same time defend himself against injury—no easy matter, for his opponent struck out and kicked with desperate energy. The irony of the situation was, although Cub had help near at hand he dare not call for it because of the proximity of the station. From Hilaire—assuming that he was the other man in the ground-floor room—he could expect no help, for the simple and obvious reason that the shunter, never having seen him before, would not know whether he was a friend or an enemy. And yet, curiously enough, it was from this direction that assistance came; and it was forthcoming when Cub's flimsy overalls were torn away from his neck, exposing the uniform beneath. Hilaire stepped into the fray, and for this intervention Cub was thankful, for his plight was precarious. He had been holding Paleface by the throat in a frantic endeavour to prevent him from shouting; but the man had broken loose, and rolling over, was in a fair way to break Cub's back across the nearest rail of the steel track. It was at this critical juncture that Hilaire, muttering incoherently, took a hand by seizing Paleface by the hair and hauling him off, at the same time smothering his face with a lump of oily cotton waste. Panting, Cub staggered to his feet, and finding himself unable to whistle, croaked hoarsely for Copper. He then went to the assistance of the shunter, who by this time was finding that he had, as it is said, bitten off rather more than he could chew.

It happened, however, that the commandos, alarmed by the delay, were already moving towards the signal box when Cub called. They now arrived at the double, and the issue was soon settled. Recognizing Paleface in the light that streamed from the open door of the cabin, Gimlet grabbed him by the collar and dragged him off the shunter with a muttered "Sock him, corporal."

Copper swung a hook to the jaw that lifted the man off his feet before stretching him senseless on the ground against the wall of the signal box.

"I told that swipe, in Sabonier's shop, not to crow too soon," muttered Gimlet.

"What do you want me to do with him, sir?" asked Copper calmly.

"Take care of him," answered Gimlet curtly, and turning to Cub, demanded, "Where the deuce did that stinker come from?"

"He came out of the cabin just as I was going in," explained Cub. "We knew each other. He had a crack at me and I tried to hold him. I daren't shout because of the station."

Gimlet faced the shunter. "Are you Hilaire?"

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“We have urgent business with Monsieur Rouge. He told us that you could arrange the passage to Paris.”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

Gimlet jerked his thumb towards the vague shadow in the upper part of the signal box. “What about him?”

“He is a friend, *monsieur.*”

Gimlet pointed at Paleface. “Do you know this man?”

“No, *monsieur.*”

“You have never seen him before?”

“No.”

“What was he doing here?”

“He came down the stairs from the signal box, just before this one arrived.” The shunter indicated Cub.

“What was he doing in the signal box?”

“He did not tell me.”

“What did he want?”

“At first he asked me questions about the trains. Then he told me he was of the Underground, and wanted to get to Paris.”

“And what did you say?”

“He did not give me the right signs, so I knew he was not of the Underground. I said I knew nothing of the Underground.”

“How do you know *we* are friends of the Underground?”

“Because I received a message to expect you, *monsieur.*”

“Good. Then that settles that. We’ve no time for talking—we’re late now. Can you make the arrangements?”

“There are none to make, *monsieur.* The trucks are in the siding and the train’s not yet in the station. Come this way.”

“What about him, sir?” put in Copper, jerking a thumb at the still unconscious spy.

“Obviously we can’t leave him here to raise a stink. Confounded nuisance, but we’ll have to take him with us. No matter. Monsieur Rouge would probably like a word with him. Lead on, Hilaire. Bring the sack along, Trapper.”

The shunter strode quickly down the line for a short distance towards the station and then turned into a siding where two goods vans were waiting. He

opened the door of the nearest. “*Montez, messieurs,*” he invited. “It is more comfortable to travel with the cabbages and watercress than with the milk churns which fill the other truck.” When the commandos had climbed aboard he added, “I make a mark on the outside with chalk, so that those in Paris will know where to look for you. When the train arrives in the goods yard of the Gare St. Lazare, remain seated behind the crates. Friends will find you. Ah! here comes the train. *Adieu, messieurs, et bon voyage.* My service to Monsieur Rouge if you see him.” The shunter swung the heavy door into place.

Gimlet switched on a torch, keeping the light down. “Tie the prisoner up in case he comes round at an inconvenient moment. I’m a bit worried at finding him here.”

“According to the Fox, Gunther knows we’re back at Caen,” contributed Cub. “Maybe Paleface was looking for us.”

“Well, now ’e’s found us I ’ope ’e’s ’appy,” remarked Copper, tying the man’s hands behind his back. “He’ll be a bit more careful next time. What say you, Trapper—am I right?”

Trapper clicked his tongue. “Sure, pal. *I’ll* say you’re right.”

A minute later the van jolted as the train shunted into the siding to pick it up. Buffers clanged. Coupling chains clanked. The train began to move.

“We’ll stack these crates and sit behind them, in case some inquisitive blighter pokes his nose in,” decided Gimlet. He laughed quietly. “Upon my life, I’ve gone to Paris a good many ways, but this is the first time I’ve travelled with the vegetables.”

“What time do you reckon we ought to arrive, sir?” inquired Copper.

“About four or five in the morning, I imagine.”

“Strike me purple!” muttered Copper in tones of deep disgust. “Nine hours sitting on a basket of perishing cauliflowers. If my old Ma could see me now, she’d say——”

“It serves you right,” concluded Gimlet.

“That’s it, sir. ’Ow did yer know?”

“Mothers all say that,” returned Gimlet evenly.

“I reckon they’re about right, too.”

“Sure they’re right,” put in Trapper moodily.

“Copper, you’ll take the first watch,” ordered Gimlet. “Keep an eye on the prisoner.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“The rest had better try to get some sleep,” concluded Gimlet.

CHAPTER IX

WARM WORK AT THE TERMINUS

THE journey to Paris was a tedious one. The train stopped often, and shunted to pick up more trucks of agricultural produce; and as its load increased its speed decreased. The prisoner recovered consciousness soon after the start. In the light of the torch which Gimlet turned on him he surveyed his captors with sullen, malevolent eyes. Once, Cub thought he caught a sardonic gleam in them, as though the man enjoyed some secret that was to his advantage. This produced in Cub an uneasy feeling, but he said nothing. Gimlet tried questioning the man, but neither threats nor the promise of fair treatment would induce him to open his lips. Later, this behaviour was to be explained, but at the time there was no clue to it. Gimlet came near to the truth when, speaking to Cub on one side, he remarked: "I wish we weren't cluttered up with this fellow, but he's here, and short of murdering him, which isn't our way of doing things, there's nothing we can do about it. I've an uncomfortable feeling that he's got—or thinks he's got—a trick up his sleeve. He should be more scared than he is at the thought of being handed over to the Underground. They'll make him talk, I'll warrant. Hilaire said he came down into the cabin from the signal box. I wonder if the man there gave anything away, by accident? When people talk, they usually say more than they intend. There would be a telephone and a telegraph instrument in the signal box . . . he may have spoken to Paris. But guessing won't get us anywhere. When we approach Paris we'll empty one of these cabbage crates and put him in it; that will keep him out of sight and at the same time prevent him from seeing anything. Remember to empty one of the crates, Cub—they're plenty large enough to hold a man."

"I may as well do it now," answered Cub.

As he moved to obey the order, he, too, made an observation which, in the light of subsequent events, showed sound reasoning.

"When we came from Paris to Caen, sir," he said in a voice too low to reach the prisoner, "we had a fellow-traveller—you remember the German soldier? I think the way he arrived, and got aboard, implies that the train is often used for getting people out of Paris. And didn't Monsieur Rouge say something about a regular service? This train back into Paris might be as commonly used. There may be more people aboard than we know about.

That's nothing to do with us, but there's an old saying about the pitcher that goes too often to the well getting its handle knocked off."

"Blimy! What's the matter with you?" growled Copper. "Are you tryin' to give me a nervous breakdown? I remember a feller down the Old Kent Road——"

"Never mind about the Old Kent Road," broke in Gimlet. "If you start talking about nerves you're not likely to see it again."

"True enough, sir," agreed Copper heavily. "All the same, if my old Ma could see me now she'd take a bottle of aspirins—s'welp me, she would."

It had turned five o'clock when, in the darkness that precedes the dawn, the train crawled laboriously into the Paris terminus. As was to be expected, it did not run into the main passenger platforms. Gimlet, who was watching from the door, announced that they were going into the goods depot. Cub got a glimpse of a vast covered yard, dimly illuminated by the usual shaded lights. There were no platforms; the lines ran in between broad flagged pavements, with roads beside them, wide enough to permit the assembly of motor traffic for the collection of the rail-borne freight. The place wore a deserted, dejected appearance. There were no other trains.

Copper threw open the crate that had been emptied, and lifting the prisoner by the collar, ordered him to get in. Showing his revolver he made a promise, in a tone of voice not to be doubted, that "one bleat would be all that was necessary to put him to sleep for a long time." The man got into the crate, and Copper tied down the lid with the string that had been used previously for that purpose.



COPPER LIFTED THE PRISONER BY THE COLLAR.

By the time this was done the train had almost run to a standstill; and it had gone far enough to reveal, through a blur of steam and smoke, a scene which gave Cub a sinking feeling in the stomach. True, the expected greengrocers' carts, and vans and barrows, were there to collect the farm

produce. But they were not all. There were other things, and they needed no explanation.

The “quay” into which the train had run was manned by a considerable reception committee. Uniforms predominated. There were Nazi uniforms, and uniforms of the quisling Feld Gendarmerie. There was also a sprinkling of civilians, some wearing swastika armlets. It was clear that the Nazis and their co-operatives had already been busy, and the precise situation, as Cub made it out, was this. The vans and carts, about a dozen of them, had arrived to meet the train. That some of the drivers were of the Underground, who had come more in order to pick up members of their organization, and refugees, than vegetables, was not to be doubted, although which they were, Cub, of course, had no means of telling. The Nazis had arrived, apparently a few minutes before the train, and had arrested certain suspected drivers or their helpers. At any rate some seven or eight men stood in line, some crestfallen, some protesting, some defiant, near their vehicles, which had been drawn up close together with their backs to the train in readiness to load up. Covering this line of men with rifles, under the direction of two swastika-decorated civilians, were several storm-troopers. A third man, an officer of the Gestapo, was shouting at the prisoners in a bullying voice. Cub heard Gimlet catch his breath and mutter, “By gad! It’s Bussemann himself.” Around these central figures, at scattered points, as if to keep outsiders at a distance, were some uniformed members of the French Militia. Others, accompanied by civilians, had started to search the train, beginning at the engine. The engine driver and his fireman had already been dragged off the footplate. One man was on the roof.

“Strewth! They’re goin’ to ask us fer our tickets,” muttered Copper.

“Yes, it’s a round-up,” said Gimlet in a hard voice.

“Zut! We chose the wrong train,” observed Trapper.

Confirmation of Gimlet’s remark was soon forthcoming, in a short, intense drama. There was a shout; a scuffle. A man leapt from the train and streaked across the quay. Rifles cracked, making the lights flicker. The running figure crumpled like a wet sack, skidded a little way across the greasy stones, and lay still. Men closed in on him. A murmur that was half a groan, half a gasp of compassion, broke from the line of men under arrest. Some moved. Voices snarled at them to stand still. Looking more closely at these men Cub’s mouth went dry. He recognized Dominique, who had evidently come to meet them. Bussemann was questioning him in a loud voice. What answer Dominique made Cub could not hear, but stepping forward, Bussemann struck him a blow across the face with his gloved hand that sent him reeling.

Gimlet spoke. "Things may not be as bad as they look," he said quietly. "We'll give them a run for their money, anyway. Listen carefully, everybody. Copper, when we break cover make for that light lorry at the end of the line. Don't let anyone stop you."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Having got to it your job will be to hold the Nazis off until everyone's aboard."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Knock off as many of the enemy as you can."

"Yessir."

"Start when you hear the bang of a bomb."

"Yessir."

"Trapper, you'll help me to cut a lane through this Nazi scum. Use a Sten gun, and hang on to the bag of equipment."

"Sure, sir."

"Cub, while we're dealing with the opposition you'll double to Dominique and tell him to get his friends to the end lorry. Having got them in, he'll take the wheel, ready to drive anywhere he likes. He knows Paris better than we do. That clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, then let's go." As he finished speaking Gimlet took a grenade from the sack. Sticking his revolver in his belt, he leaned out of the door and flung the bomb along the side of the train towards the spot where the Frenchman had fallen, where his body was now being dragged away by several Nazis. The grenade struck the ground, bounced, and in a blinding flash of light, exploded.

Cub was prepared for a bang, but in the confined space of the yard the effect was shattering—literally shattering. Glass crashed, some falling from the roof. Several lights went out, darkening a scene already dim. The immediate result was confusion, and a rising medley of sounds. Into this Copper leapt out, shouting "Gangway for a British officer!"

Hard on the reverberations of the explosion came the snarling of Trapper's Sten gun. Cub saw several Nazis fall, before his view was blotted out by Gimlet and Trapper jumping out together. Advancing, spasmodic flashes of yellow light lit the scene as their revolvers roared. Everything was noise, or so it seemed to Cub, as, automatic in hand, and feeling strangely unconscious of his limbs, he made a bee-line for Dominique, calling his name in a high-pitched voice. He tripped and fell over a fallen Nazi, and

rising, was nearly deafened by an explosion almost in his ear. He did not see who had fired the shot, but he saw one of the civilian Gestapo taking deliberate aim at Gimlet. He fired from his knees; the man dropped his gun and staggered away, groping at the air. Springing up, Cub dashed on through a scene that was no longer real, but pure nightmare. Some of the detained Frenchmen were milling about as if uncertain what to do; others had thrown themselves flat to escape the bullets that were flying in all directions. Some shots, apparently, were hitting the domed roof, for glass rained down. Cub caught Dominique by the arm. “Keep your head!” he shouted. “Make for the end lorry and get your crowd into it. You’ve got to drive!”

Dominique answered incoherently. He was, in fact, behaving like a man out of his mind, for which, admittedly, there was some excuse. In a frenzy of excitement he fired a volley of words at his companions, and spinning round, ran toward the lorry, with the rest streaming along behind him. Cub followed. Through a blur of smoke he saw that Copper had already reached the van. He was crouching near the tailboard, shooting with steady, methodical deliberation. Several bodies lay sprawled in grotesque positions along his line of fire. A Gestapo man was crawling towards a revolver that lay on the pavement in front of him. Cub took a running kick at the weapon. With a snarl of rage Dominique snatched it up and fired three shots at point-blank range into the Nazi.

“Go easy on the ammo, Frenchie!” growled Copper. “Whatcher, Cub. How yer doin’? What a crimson beano!”

Cub thrust Dominique towards the driving seat of the lorry. “Get in, but don’t start till you get the word,” he ordered, and dashed back to the rear to see if the patriots were getting aboard. They were—one, limping, was being helped by the others.

Trapper appeared through the smoke, walking backwards, still firing the Sten gun in short bursts, spraying the train, and the other vehicles, evidently with the idea of forcing the enemy, who had taken cover, to keep under cover. In this he succeeded. The only Nazis Cub could see were casualties. Reaching the van, Trapper tossed his Sten gun in the back, and drawing his two revolvers began shooting at flashes that showed from time to time at different points.

“Where’s Gimlet?” cried Cub, in a panic.

“Why ask me?” returned Trapper, between shots.

“Copper—Gimlet’s down!” shouted Cub, and ran forward, looking at the figures on the ground. One seemed larger than the rest. It heaved, and rolled over. Cub caught sight of khaki tangled with dark blue, and running close,

found Gimlet locked in a clinch with Bussemann. The German had just torn his right arm free. The hand clutched a revolver. Cub dare not shoot; the figures were too close. He seized the arm, forced it down on the stone pavement, and knelt on it, striking at the hand with the butt of his pistol. Gimlet twisted, and breaking free, struck at Bussemann's head as he rose. The German went limp. Cub sprang up, and in doing so caught a glimpse of his chief. He was in a fearful state. His uniform was filthy. His collar was twisted round the back of his neck. Hatless, his hair was plastered on his forehead with sweat. His face was black with the greasy grime of the quay.

"Disgusting business," snarled Gimlet. "How are things going?"

"Fine," answered Cub. "Everyone's at the truck. Dominique's waiting to start."

"Okay. Let's go."

They ran to the lorry, meeting Copper half-way. He turned back with them.

By this time the din had largely subsided, like a storm that blows itself out. There were still occasional shots, and the whistle or smack of a bullet; but as far as the fight was concerned, it was over—temporarily, at any rate.

Gimlet was well aware that the lull would not last long. "Get aboard, everyone," he ordered. "I'm going in front with Dominique."

Cub remembered something. "What about Paleface—in the crate?"

"We can't stop for him," rapped out Gimlet. He disappeared towards the front of the lorry.

Trapper had already climbed into the back. Sitting on the equipment sack, gun in hand, he kept close watch on the battlefield for further trouble. Copper swung Cub aboard and climbed in. "Let 'er go!" he shouted.

The lorry shot forward. Through a scene now entirely deserted it raced through the station yard into the dark streets of the city. Where they were, or where they were going, Cub did not know. For one thing, he did not know Paris, and secondly, reaction from the fight left him slightly dazed. The lorry went on, through interminable streets, each one like the last—what little could be seen of it, for darkness still held the city in close embrace. The rescued Frenchmen seemed dazed too. None spoke. Only Copper appeared unperturbed, as if nothing unusual were happening. He nudged Cub playfully in the ribs with his elbow. "How goes it, chum?"

"Frightful," answered Cub frankly.

"Pah! You'll get used to it," replied Copper. "Blimy! You ought to have been in the Dieppe raid. Now that *was* a show. Am I right, Trapper?"

"I'll say you're right," agreed Trapper, a smile twisting his scarred face.

"My knees have gone to jelly," declared Cub.

"Jelly? What's that? I ain't seen none since the war started. Ha! What a joke." Copper sighed. "Strewth! Did I like jelly when I was a kid? My old Ma used to say——"

"Tell us some other time," implored Trapper.

"Okay—okay," returned Copper airily. "Lumme, a bucket o' tea would go down well—not 'alf it wouldn't."

He gurgled suddenly in his throat.

"What's funny?" asked Cub. "Have I missed a joke?"

"I just remembered we left Paleface done up in the cabbage basket. S'welp me, what a present *he'll* be for someone buying a feed for the rabbits."

"It was a bit tough on him," commented Cub.

Copper chuckled. "Tougher on the rabbits, chum. What say you, Trapper, old pal?"

"It's going to be tough on a lot of people in Paris, to-morrow, when the Nazis get busy looking for a bunch of commandos," remarked Trapper.

"Aw! Forget it," growled Copper. "Hello—looks like we're arriving."

The lorry had swung sharply into a drive, bounded by thick evergreen shrubs. It ran on a little way, then stopped, in darkness and in silence.

"I wonder where we are?" murmured Cub.

"What's the odds?" returned Copper. "What I want's a basin of tea. What's the French for tea?"

"*Thé*," Cub told him.

"That's lucky," answered Copper. "I ought ter be able ter remember that one. How about trying to scrounge a pot? A rough house always did give me dry tonsils."

Gimlet appeared. "Don't talk so much," he ordered. "We're there. Get yourselves tidied up. I've asked Dominique to arrange for baths." He walked away.

Copper buried his face in his hands. "Knock me over with a blanket," he pleaded. "Did yer 'ear that, mates? We blind our way into Paris, and all he can think to ask for is baths. What does he reckon we are—a bunch o' kids togged up fer a school treat? Baths on the brain, that's what he's got. Next thing he'll be tellin' us ter go out and get an 'air cut. Blimy, it's a bit 'ard."

Gimlet reappeared. "Were you saying something, corporal?"

“No, sir,” answered Copper. “Just thinkin’ aloud, as you might say.”

“Dangerous habit, corporal. You should cure yourself before someone hears you.”

“Yessir.”

“Come on—this way.”

CHAPTER X

SUNDAY

COPPER did not get his basin of tea, for the simple reason that in enemy-occupied France tea had practically ceased to exist; but he had—they all had—some coffee which, as Copper remarked, while it was “nothin’ ter write ’ome about,” was better than nothing. This they drank while resting in a large, well-appointed house, in front of which, it transpired, Dominique had pulled up. Where the house was situated, to whom it belonged, and what it looked like from the outside they did not know. A peculiar knock had brought a man to the door. With him Dominique had had a whispered conversation, as a result of which the commandos were invited in. Dominique disappeared, and presently Cub heard the van being driven away. What happened to the Frenchmen who were in it was a matter for conjecture. They did not come into the house, so it could only be assumed that they had dispersed to their homes, or had gone into hiding at some other place.

The commandos relaxed in a comfortable lounge for about twenty minutes, waited on by a woman who was attentive to their welfare but who said little; then Dominique returned, bringing with him his brother Felix. Felix was agitated. Dominique had told him of the affair at the Gare St. Lazare. All he could say about it was that it was “*fantastique*,” and this he said several times. He did not reproach Gimlet for what he had done, but it was clear from his manner that he regarded this sort of open warfare in the heart of Paris with no small trepidation. No doubt the fear of reprisals weighed heavily upon him. However, he greeted Gimlet warmly and with respect, and informed him that although Paris was being combed by the Nazis for the desperadoes who had created such havoc at the railway station, they were reasonably safe where they were. Monsieur Rouge had been informed of the circumstances, and as soon as the Executive Committee

could be got together the commandos would be taken to Underground Headquarters. As Cub expected, this involved a journey through the sewer, a branch of which passed beneath the outbuildings of the house in which they had found refuge.

At nine o'clock they were all at Underground Headquarters, Gimlet in earnest conversation with Monsieur Rouge, a large-scale map of Paris and a plan of the Renault works on a table before them. Gimlet went over the modified plan in detail. Monsieur Rouge looked startled, and then dubious, when Gimlet came to the proposed attack on the Luftwaffe airfield, which had the double purpose of destroying the enemy bomber base and providing a landing ground for the British planes that were to take the commandos home; but when Gimlet pointed out that the Underground would have no hand in this, that it would, in fact, have already faded out of the picture, he made no demur, although he confessed that the audacity and magnitude of the operation left him somewhat breathless. Gimlet observed that in these very factors lay their best hope of success. The Nazis would hardly be expecting an enterprise so ambitious.

“The plan will operate to-night,” he went on, “The race is due to start at eight-thirty, so I have fixed zero hour for eight. The bombers will arrive at eight-thirty-five. There is only one factor for which I have not been able to provide. It is this. We—that is, the three men here with me and myself—will be the last to leave the works. My intention is, unless we are prevented, to retire by the way we enter—through the tunnel, which you will then blow up to prevent the enemy from following should he attempt to do so. But the question is—and here I am hoping you will be able to make a suggestion—how are *we* to get from Paris to the old mill at Claire? The cyclists will have started. It is likely that they will be well ahead of us. At the worst, we shall have to cycle too; but no one knows what may happen in the works, and we may be in no state to cycle twenty-five miles. Also, we shall be in uniform, in order that the attack may be claimed as a legitimate military operation. That is as much for your benefit as ours. British commandos will carry the responsibility, so that the Germans will have no excuse for blaming or punishing the civil population of Paris. Of course, the Nazis will guess that the Underground had a hand in it, but if British commandos are seen, they will be regarded as the prime agents. Again, the Nazis do not like commandos, and if we were caught in plain clothes they would be glad of an excuse to tell the world that we were a gang of civilian cut-throats under arms, wearing uniforms only when it suited us. We are soldiers, and this attack will be made by soldiers. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, *mon capitaine*.”

“To return to the question of getting to Claire, it is important that I should be there when the cyclists arrive, to take control. Without motor transport I should arrive long after them—if I arrived at all. We have no transport in France, so in making my plan I had to rely on you to provide us with a vehicle large enough to hold five.”

“Five?”

“There will be four of us, but it will be necessary for us to have a guide, otherwise we may lose our way. Perhaps Dominique will oblige, assuming that he knows the road?”

In the absence of Dominique, Felix asserted that his brother would be willing to drive—if a car could be found.

“But surely you have a car of some sort?” queried Gimlet.

“It is not a matter of a car,” put in Monsieur Rouge. “It is a matter of petrol.”

“What about the van we just arrived in?”

“Every German in Paris is looking for it. You would not get far in that.”

“A carpenter with some paint could alter the look of it by to-night.”

“That could be done, but there will not be more than a litre of petrol in the tank,” declared Monsieur Rouge. “The Nazis hand out petrol only in sufficient quantity for a stipulated journey. The van might have enough petrol to take it to the outskirts of Paris, certainly not more.”

Gimlet thought for a moment. “There should be plenty of petrol in the Renault works.”

Monsieur Rouge started. “Surely you have enough to do without carrying petrol?”

“It could be done.”

“Perhaps.” Monsieur Rouge laid a finger on the map of the works. “This is the petrol store, but it is in big tanks.”

“Is there no private garage?”

“Yes, at the house occupied by Herr Streiner, the German overseer of the works. He uses a big touring Renault car. Doubtless there is petrol in his garage.”

“Then we will see what can be done about it,” declared Gimlet.

“A point in your favour is that you will not have far to go,” observed Monsieur Rouge. “The house and garage are near the experimental shed, which you intend to destroy.”

“You still don’t know what’s inside this shed?”

“No.”

“Very well, *monsieur*,” said Gimlet. “We shall arrive, I hope, with petrol, so please have a vehicle waiting. There is one last thing that disturbs me,” he went on. “As you have heard, the Nazi spy who we call Paleface, the man who tried to impersonate Catron at Caen, is in Paris. There is good reason to think that he was responsible for the searching of the train at the Gare St. Lazare this morning. At all events, he was in the signal box at Caen last night. We caught him, and brought him to Paris with us, but there was something in his manner, a sort of confidence, that makes me think he knew what was going to happen in Paris. We put him in a cabbage crate intending to deliver him to you, but in our hurried departure he was left behind.”

Monsieur Rouge looked concerned. A furrow appeared between his eyes as he glanced round the committee and back to Gimlet. “What you tell us answers a riddle, *monsieur*. We have this man, but could not comprehend who he could be.”

“You’ve got him?” Gimlet looked amazed.

“After the affair at the station the vegetables were distributed as usual, although the retailers had to go to the station to get the produce,” explained Monsieur Rouge. “One crate, when it was opened in a shop at Montmartre, was discovered to have a man in it. The man who found him, knowing for what purpose the train was sometimes used, asked him if he was of the Underground. He answered yes, whereupon, unknown to the stranger, the matter was reported to us. We gave instructions for the man to be brought here, and he should now be on the way. But in view of what you tell us he should be more closely guarded. What explanation he intends to give us when he gets here I cannot imagine, but he certainly seized a chance to get into the Underground and may have already seen and heard more than is good for any of us. We will attend to him. Meanwhile, as you are not likely to get much sleep to-night I suggest that you pass the day quietly in repose. Any difficulties as the result of this morning’s affair will be reported to you. There is only one thing I fear.”

“What is it?”

“That the cycle race will be cancelled, if only as a form of retribution for the trouble at the station. The Nazis are mean in little things. If they can hurt us, they do.”

“Hm. That *would* be awkward,” admitted Gimlet. “Nothing has happened so far, so they may let it go.”

“Let us hope so.”

Gimlet rose. "That seems to be all for the time being, *monsieur*. We will leave the transport arrangements to you."

"You may with confidence do so," averred Monsieur Rouge.

Thereafter the day passed quietly enough. The commandos returned to the private house, where they had nothing to do except wait for zero hour. From time to time Dominique or Felix brought snatches of news about what was happening outside. As was to be expected, the affair at the Gare St. Lazare had created a sensation, and roused Nazi fury to boiling point. They were making ugly threats, and Cub wondered to what excesses their anger would lead them if, following the battle at the station, the Renault works project was successful. Bussemann was about with his head in bandages, Felix informed them. Rewards were out for the commandos, who were thought to be still in Paris. Anyone concealing them was promised instant death. Dominique may have hit a nail on the head when he said that what really upset the Nazis was not so much that there were British commandos loose in Paris, as the obvious inference that they were there for some special purpose, and the Nazis could not discover what that purpose was.

"They will, in due course," murmured Gimlet drily.

The first disconcerting news came about six o'clock, when Monsieur Rouge and Felix appeared together. One glance at their faces and Cub knew that something had gone wrong, but he would never have guessed what it was.

"The plan cannot go through," said Monsieur Rouge abruptly.

Gimlet's eyebrows went up a little. "Why not?"

"*Ecoutez*. I will tell you," averred the Frenchman. "I told you we had the man you call Paleface. He was brought to me for questioning. We, knowing what we did about him, and he, knowing the fate that we mete out to traitors, broke down, and in the hope of saving his life confessed everything. He is not true French, thank God, but half an Italian, from the Savoy. As you thought, in the first instance his task was to impersonate Catron, and work his way into the confidence of British agents and the French Underground. That does not matter now. What does matter is this. Permission to hold the cycle race to-night has not been withdrawn as we thought it might be, because the Nazis think, if they do not actually suspect, that it has some connection with Underground activities. They do not connect it directly with the arrival of British commandos at the Gare St. Lazare, but they are watching, and there is to be a check. At Villant, which is on the road to Rouen—between here and Claire, unfortunately—there will be a trap. Villant is about twenty miles from this spot. It is a small village. A short

distance away there is a level crossing, with the usual small house in which lives the man who opens and shuts the gates. This house will be converted into a military post. The level-crossing gates will be shut. When the cyclists arrive there they will be stopped, examined and questioned. You see how impossible it is to go on. The scheme will be exposed immediately when it is discovered that the cyclists cannot even speak French.”

“Who is going to discover that?”

“The Germans at the post, of course.”

“And what do you think our fellows will be doing while the Germans are making this discovery—standing like a lot of sheep waiting for the butcher to drive them to the slaughter-house? My dear general, these men are commandos.”

“But they will not be armed.”

“Maybe not, but they’ve got hands, and you’d be surprised what they can do with them. But it may not come to that. *We* shall be armed, and we may be there first. How many Nazis will man this post?”

“We do not know—not many, probably, since the Nazis will hardly expect violence so near to Paris. If our information is correct it will be a small mobile unit from St. Armand, under the command of Hauptmann Hausmayer—a man of vile temper often chosen for such work.”

“The great thing in war is to give the enemy what he doesn’t expect. On this occasion we shall do that, I trust, *Monsieur le General*. The scheme *must* go through.”

“Why not postpone it until things settle down?”

“Because the bombers will come, and I have no way of stopping them. Unless the prisoners are brought out of the works they are likely to be killed by our own bombs. That will not do. Whatever happens afterwards, the prisoners must be removed.”

Monsieur Rouge concurred, but he still looked worried.

“Let us go ahead and deal with trouble when we meet it,” suggested Gimlet.

“Very well, *capitaine*. Everything is in order. The engineers are standing by to break through the final section of the tunnel. The explosive charges are in place, ready to be fired when the prisoners have made their escape. We hope that the explosion will be thought to be a bomb dropped by the bombers, so that it will not be investigated. You understand that whatever else happens the tunnel must be destroyed rather than there should be a risk of it being discovered?”

“Of course. Let us meet at the head of the tunnel a few minutes before eight, with the engineers and mechanics at hand to strike off the shackles of any prisoners who may be so handicapped.”

“I shall be there,” answered Monsieur Rouge. He saluted and departed.

CHAPTER XI

ZERO HOUR

At a quarter to eight, with an engineer guide leading the way, accompanied by Monsieur Rouge, Felix and Dominique, Gimlet and his small party proceeded to the head of the tunnel. It bore no resemblance to the sewer system, being no more than a narrow passage driven through the bare earth, as if it might have been a giant rabbit burrow, although here and there, where faults in the subsoil made it necessary, the roof was shored up with timbers.

It was of some length—nearly a quarter of a mile, Cub estimated—and had its entrance in one of the several dressing rooms of a gymnasium. This building had been selected, Monsieur Rouge said, because, as well as being convenient, it was connected with the sewer. It was also the headquarters of a cycle racing club. A large assembly of cycles, therefore, would not invoke comment among the neighbours, or arouse the suspicions of the Nazis. The cycles were there, more than a hundred of them, with suitable racing kit, and sandbags, in which the prisoners were to carry their uniforms when they changed; and Cub marvelled at the new spirit that was rising in France, wherein men were willing to risk losing or lending their precious cycles, which could not be replaced, to strangers.

The commandos were equipped for their work. In addition to normal small arms and grenades, Copper and Trapper each carried a Sten gun and wire cutters. Thrust through his belt Copper also carried a short iron bar, bent and flattened at one end, which he called a “jemmy.” It was, in fact, an improvised copy of the tool much favoured by burglars. Its purpose was to force the door of the prison hut should the key not be forthcoming. Balancing it in his hand Copper asserted that it would open anything.

The tunnel opened out at its head, forming a rough compartment some six feet high. In it a number of men, specialists in their trades, had assembled. All were quiet and serious, aware of the deadly peril in which

the night's work would place them. There were two civil engineers, highly paid consultants in private life, who had been responsible for the construction of the tunnel. As yet they had no proof, but they were confident that the head of the tunnel was where they intended it should be—below the inside of the barbed-wire enclosure in which the prison hut was situated. There was also in attendance a blacksmith with a portable anvil, and a fitter with his tools, to remove the shackles from any prisoner who wore them.

Other conspirators remained in the gymnasium—one man, who spoke English fluently, to inform the prisoners when they arrived of what was happening, and two expert cyclists who were to lead the “race.” They knew every inch of the road between the gymnasium and Rouen, having competed in many races. In the gymnasium yard stood the disguised van in which, if petrol could be obtained, Dominique would drive the commandos to the old cloth mill at Claire. Much depended on this petrol, for it was Gimlet's intention to get to the Nazi trap, the level crossing at Villant, and “liquidate” it before the cyclists arrived.

Darkness had fallen. There was as yet no moon, but it was starlight, with little cloud and no threat of rain. This was important, for, as Gimlet remarked, weather conditions could play a vital part in the flying operations. Should the weather deteriorate, restricting visibility, the pilots might have difficulty in finding the mill, where they were to drop equipment, and in the landing operations on the enemy airfield at Rambours.

At a few minutes before eight, after looking at his watch, Gimlet turned to Monsieur Rouge and said: “I think the sappers might make a start.”

Monsieur Rouge spoke to the engineers, who, requesting the others to stand aside, put together a clumsy but efficient wooden platform, large enough for three or four men to stand on together. Mounting this, they began driving upwards in a cavity where this work had been begun. Dirt and stones fell in a steady shower, and after a while the platform was raised higher. Very soon Cub could only see the legs of the men who were working. As they went higher they worked with more caution, sometimes pausing to listen. At last there was a significant silence. The men descended.

“*Voilà! messieurs,*” said one in a low voice. “We are in the compound, correct to a metre.”

“Good work,” said Gimlet.

The engineer shrugged. “When one has dug tunnels through mountains, a little hole like this is a simple matter. All is quiet.”

“How far are we from the prison hut?”

“Thirty paces, *monsieur.*”

Monsieur Rouge faced Gimlet and saluted. "It is now for you to proceed, *capitaine*. We shall wait here. You understand that should you fail, or should the plan miscarry, you may not be able to return this way? The tunnel will be blown up, to prevent pursuit from reaching the gymnasium."

Gimlet nodded. "Quite right. At all costs the Underground must be protected." He turned to his companions. "You all know what we have to do. If I'm knocked out, ignore me; Copper will take over and carry on. Is that clear?"

"Aye aye, sir," murmured Copper.

"Stand fast while I have a look round."

In dead silence Gimlet mounted the platform. For perhaps a minute he remained motionless. Cub, standing below, could see a solitary star; it was like looking up from the bottom of a manhole. Then Gimlet descended and asked the engineers to enlarge the hole a trifle. This occupied only two minutes, for the surface crust broke away easily. The work done, Gimlet made a sign to the others to follow him and remounted the platform. He went no farther. Cub found himself with his head projecting above the ground in an extensive gravelled area, square in shape, which reminded him of a school playground. Its boundary, a thickly stranded barbed-wire fence, could just be discerned. At one point it was broken by a small box-like building, which Cub knew from the plan was the guard-house. He could not see the sentry, who presumably was standing at the far side of the hut, near which was the gate that gave access to the prison camp. There was a larger building near at hand, a long low structure about thirty yards distant. Not a light showed. All was silent.

"Get your bearings," whispered Gimlet. "The long building in front of us is the dormitory where our fellows are locked up. A sentry is patrolling it—he's round the back now. That small building over there is the guard-hut; we don't know how many men are in it, but there shouldn't be more than half a dozen at most. If it was only a matter of getting the prisoners away there would be no need for us to bother with them, but we've got to go out to the works, and we daren't leave enemy troops in our rear to cut off our retreat. Our first job is to get the prisoners out, and we shall have to do it without any noise. That line of buildings outside the wire, like a row of hangars, is the main works. The secret workshop is at the eastern end—somewhere about there." Gimlet pointed. "The manager's house is close by it. We shall be going there presently—or rather to the garage—for petrol. Well, it's time we were moving. Trapper, you go first and see what you can do about that sentry. He should come into sight in about thirty seconds, round the right-hand end of the dormitory."

Trapper gave his Sten gun to Copper to hold, drew himself up to ground level, wormed his way out and lay flat. He reached back for the Sten, drew it beside him, and, still flat on the ground, merged into the darkness. The only sign of him was a slight hump that might have been an irregularity in the ground. Gimlet followed. Copper went next. Striving to steady his racing pulses, Cub drew himself up and lay flat. The show had begun. What had gone before was only the prelude. The events of the next half-hour, regardless of Gimlet's meticulous planning, were largely in the hands of the fickle gods who control the fortunes of war. Only one thing was certain. There could be no turning back.

The drama opened, as Cub expected it would, when the German sentry appeared at the end of the prisoners' hutment. His department was that of ninety-nine sentries out of a hundred when the firing line is far away, and, consequently, danger is not seriously considered. The man had his rifle at the slope, but he carried it carelessly, loosely, and walked in the manner of one who is bored by the dull routine of his job. Sometimes he stopped, and for want of any other entertainment gazed at the stars. Once he yawned loudly before walking on. In a way, while unpardonable, this attitude was understandable. The man's job was to keep the prisoners from getting out. It probably never occurred to him that there might be people outside anxious to get in. It is likely that his thoughts were far away—the thoughts of sentries often are. However that may be, about half-way along the hut he stopped, and leaning his rifle against the boards, stood gazing at some distant object.

Cub saw the hump that he knew was Trapper take shape. It became a kneeling figure. There was a vibrant *whang*; a thud; a gasp. Crouching low, Trapper ran forward, his knife swishing from its sheath. He did not need it. The sentry was dead, with an arrow through his heart, never knowing what had killed him. This Cub saw when, with Gimlet and Copper, he reached the hut.

Keeping close in the black shadow of the hutment they turned and stared at the guard-house, now about sixty yards distant, to confirm that their entry had not been observed. The silhouette of the sentry on duty at the gate could just be seen. He was walking to and fro across the gateway in a manner from which it was clear that he had no suspicion that anything was wrong.

"All right, Copper. See what you can do with that door," ordered Gimlet.

Copper produced his jemmy. Inserting the thin end between the door and the jamb he put his weight on the iron. Greater and greater became the strain. The door creaked. The jemmy began to bend. Then, with a sharp, rending crack, the lock tore out and the door flew open.

Cub held his breath, for he felt sure that the sentry at the gate must have heard the noise. And apparently he did, for advancing a few steps he called, but without alarm: "What are you doing, Fritz?"

Gimlet answered, "Nothing. Sounded like one of the *Englanders* falling out of bed." He laughed shortly.

The sentry laughed too, and walked back to his post.

"He'll be laughing the other side of his mug presently," growled Copper.

While this brief conversation was going on there had been a certain amount of movement inside the dormitory. A voice, rich with trans-Atlantic brogue, drawled, "What's the joke, Heinie?"

"Shut up and keep still," snapped Gimlet, in English.

They went in. Gimlet closed the door. "Listen, everybody," he said tersely. "We're commandos. Don't make a sound. Are you listening?"

A low chorus of voices answered "Yes." A single voice, thin with suppressed excitement, added, "Cor lumme! It's Gimlet himself."

"Are there any Kittens here?" queried Gimlet.

"Yes, sir," came from several places.

"What about a light?"

"The switch is just inside the door, sir."

"Can the light be seen from the outside?"

"No, sir—the hut's blacked-out."

Gimlet switched on the light, revealing a number of men in various stages of undress. "Who's the senior N.C.O.?" he demanded.

A powerfully-built middle-aged man stepped forward, "I am, sor. Sergeant-Major Macready," came in a thick northern burr.

"Good. Listen, boys," went on Gimlet, raising his voice a trifle. "We've come to get you out of this. Slip into your battle rags and make it snappy. Our bombers are due in twenty minutes. Is anyone not able to walk?"

"We're all fit men, sor," said the sergeant-major. "Twenty-two men are wearing leg shackles."

"The others will have to help them."

"Yes, sor."

"Go to it. We don't want any noise. No talking."

There was a rush to get dressed.

Gimlet turned to Trapper. "Stay here until the party is ready to move off, then get everyone to the tunnel. You will remain outside the entrance to cover our retreat in case we need support."

“Very good, sir.”

Gimlet spoke to the sergeant-major. “Keep your fellows together. As soon as they’re ready to go, follow this man. You’re going out through a tunnel. When you get to it you’ll be told what to do by some members of the French Underground. Obey their orders. Presently you will be leaving Paris. Try to keep at the head of the party so that I shall know where to find you when I come along.”

“Yes, sor,” answered the Scot.

“Switch the light off, Trapper, while we go out, and shut the door behind us.”

The light was switched off.

Gimlet, with Copper and Cub, went out. Copper carried his Sten gun at the ready, but he did not need it. All was quiet.

“We’ll tackle the guard-hut next,” said Gimlet. “If we keep the hut between us and the sentry he won’t see us. If he shows up on either side, drop flat. Come on—single file.”

Walking on their toes they made straight for the hut. There was no cover. Once, when the sentry appeared, they dropped, and lay still for about a minute. Then the sentry moved back behind the hut. They went on, and did not stop again until they were close against the wooden timbers of the hut, which was inside the wire. Advancing slowly and with infinite caution to the corner, it became possible to see that the barbed-wire obstacle that was used to fill the gateway stood slightly open, sufficient to permit the passage of one man at a time. The sentry, rifle at the slope, was twelve or fifteen yards distant, still walking away, slowly, to the limit of his beat. From within the hut came a low murmur of voices.

Cupping his hands round Copper’s ear, Gimlet breathed: “We’ve got to get this sentry before the boys start going across to the tunnel. Handle him, but no noise.”

Copper nodded, and moved forward to the corner of the hut.

The sentry had turned and was now coming back, still at the same pace. Each step occupied a second of time, and each second seemed to screw Cub’s nerves a little tighter. The German, unaware of his peril, reached the hut. He turned about and “ordered” his rifle. As the butt thudded on the ground Copper glided forward. Silent though he was, the sentry evidently heard something. Or he may have turned to enter the hut. Anyway, he turned; but by that time Copper was within striking distance. His fist flew out, and behind the punch was the skill, the force and timing, that can only be acquired, even by professional boxers, by long practice. His fist took the

man on the jaw with a shattering crack that made Cub wince. He had heard the sound before. It always made him wince. It sounded frightful, he thought.



COPPER'S FIST TOOK THE MAN ON THE JAW WITH A SHATTERING CRACK.

Copper reappeared dragging the unconscious sentry. He dropped the body, as if it might have been a sack of potatoes, at Gimlet's feet. "Here you are, sir," he remarked nonchalantly.

"How long will he be asleep, do you think?"

"A fair time, sir, I should say," replied Copper. "I 'ad to 'it 'im 'ard, pore blighter."

"Bring him along," ordered Gimlet. "Now for the fellows in the hut."

"What are we going to do with them, sir—mop 'em up?" queried Copper.

"Not if it can be prevented. That would be a bit too much like murder," decided Gimlet. "I hope you'll be able to take care of them while Cub and I complete the operation. Then we'll lock them in and leave them to it."

"They'll kick up a noise if we leave them, sir."

"By the time we leave them there will probably be plenty of noise, anyway," answered Gimlet evenly. "Come on. Cub, as soon as we're inside, shut the door. We don't want any light showing."

"Yes, sir."

Revolver in hand, Gimlet led the way to the door. He reached for the knob. It turned. He opened the door an inch. The sound of voices swelled in volume, like a radio turned up. Then he pushed the door wide open, and with the same movement stepped inside. "Keep still and don't make a sound," he rapped out, in German.

There were five men in the guard-room—a sergeant, two others sitting at a small table playing cards, and two men lying in their bunks. The sergeant stood with his back to a small iron stove, arms folded, watching the card players. Weapons and equipment hung on a rack just inside the door.

When the commandos entered none of the Nazis moved. Their first reactions were natural enough. Their eyes opened wide. Their faces paled. The sergeant's jaw sagged. One of the card players half rose in his chair.

Gimlet's revolver covered him, and he sank back. Cub closed the door, and Copper deposited the unconscious sentry on the floor.

"One sound and you die," said Gimlet with cold earnestness. "Cub, is the key inside the lock?"

Cub looked. "No, sir."

Gimlet addressed the sergeant. "Where's the key?"

The sergeant moved his lips. He seemed to be recovering from the first stunning shock. "It isn't here."

"You ask him, Copper," invited Gimlet.

Copper stepped forward. His huge fist closed over the collar of the German's tunic and screwed it into a ball. He thrust his face forward, jaw belligerent. "You 'eard 'im. Where is it, chum?" he questioned in a slow, deep voice.

Gimlet repeated the question in German.

The sergeant lost his nerve. "The officer has it."

Gimlet realized that this might be true. "Where is the officer?"

"I don't know."

"What time does he come round?"

The sergeant's eyes flashed to a cheap clock that hung on the wall. "Any time, now," he answered.

"Search him, Copper," ordered Gimlet.

Copper's hands went through the sergeant's pockets. The key was not there.

"All right. We mustn't waste any more time," asserted Gimlet. "Copper, take care of this bunch. We'll collect you on the way back. Come on, Cub."

Gimlet went out. Cub followed. Everything was still quiet. Looking across the barbed-wire enclosure it was possible to see the prisoners streaming towards the tunnel, where they disappeared like rabbits into a burrow. Trapper was standing by, watching.

"Things are going nicely," remarked Gimlet. "Let's see about finding some petrol."

CHAPTER XII

THE RAID

GIMLET took a pace forward, to move off, but Cub caught him by the arm.

"Just a minute, sir," he said tersely. "Who's this coming—look, over to the right."

Gimlet backed swiftly to the wall of the hut, staring in the direction indicated. Two figures had appeared, but beyond the fact that they marched in military style they were as yet too far away for details to be made out. They were coming directly towards the guard-hut, which, in the absence of other buildings, was obviously their objective.

It did not take Gimlet long to realize who they were. "It's the orderly officer and the senior N.C.O. of the guard," he announced. "He's chosen a bad time to make his round. We'll wait here. Dear—dear . . . won't they be surprised to see us!"

Cub looked across the barbed-wire enclosure and saw prisoners streaming from the dormitory to the tunnel, at the entrance of which there was quite a group waiting to enter. It struck him that the approaching Germans could hardly fail to see what was going on, and he made a remark to that effect. Hardly had the words left his lips when, with a shout, the Germans broke into a run.

"This, I fancy, is where the balloon goes up," said Gimlet quietly. "Stand fast."

At first it struck Cub as funny that the two Nazis should run straight towards them; yet it was natural enough, he perceived, that they should make for the hut, to turn out the guard.

"On second thoughts we had better warn Copper that there may be a fracas," decided Gimlet. "Moreover, there may be some noise, and if we are inside it is less likely to be heard."

"Those fellows will see the light when we go in," Cub pointed out.

"They'll suppose we are sentries." Gimlet laughed softly. "One thing we can be sure of—they will not suppose we are what we are."

They went inside, leaving the door closed, but not latched. The situation was precisely as they had last seen it. Copper, chewing a dead matchstalk, was covering the Germans, watching them with steady, pensive eyes.

"There are visitors on the way," Gimlet told him. "I think it's an orderly officer and an N.C.O. Leave them to me. You keep your eyes on these fellows."

Copper spat out the matchstalk. "Aye aye, sir."

The German officer and his orderly sergeant—as the other turned out to be—did not walk into the guard-hut. They ran in, the officer in front, shouting something about *Englanders*.

Gimlet was standing just inside the door, a little to one side, gun ready. As soon as the Germans were over the threshold he kicked the door shut, and standing with his back to it, said crisply: "Hands up—and keep them up. Cub, take their weapons."

Cub obeyed. The Germans made no protest. They may have been too surprised. In fact, they looked dazed with shock, which in the circumstances

was understandable. The spectacle of three uniformed British commandos, fully armed, must have been hard to believe.

Gimlet waved them back against the stove in line with the sergeant of the guard, and there they stood, still staring, as men might stare at an apparition. The officer's lips moved, but no sound came.

Gimlet held out a hand. "The key of the hut," he said curtly.

The German did not move.

"The key!" snapped Gimlet, with an edge on his voice.

The officer started violently, put his hand in his pocket and passed the key without a word. Gimlet tossed it to Copper. "When the time comes for you to leave the hut, lock them in. Meanwhile, if they try any funny stuff, let them have it."

"Aye aye, sir," acknowledged Copper imperturbably. His expression did not change.

Gimlet beckoned to Cub and they went out. "That's all right, but it's cost us five minutes," he observed. "We shall have to get on faster than this. The garage comes next. Bring that sack of equipment along."

Comparatively speaking, it was no great distance to their objective, but in the circumstances it was far enough—the best part of two hundred yards. No time could be afforded for reconnaissance, apart from what could be seen as they approached. This was in a direct line, for there was no cover of any sort unless they made a considerable detour and came upon the house from the rear. The building was a black silhouette, unbroken by a light of any sort. All was quiet. The garage, a flat-roofed building detached from the house, was less than twenty yards away, and Cub was just congratulating himself that everything was going fine, that the sortie was going to be easy, when a sound broke the silence, one that put a different complexion on the situation and at the same time gave his nerves a jolt, so unexpected and so sharp was it. It was the unmistakable slam of a car door. He stopped abruptly, naturally, as did Gimlet. Staring ahead in the direction from which the sound had come he saw that the garage doors were wide open. The interior of the building was in pitch darkness, so that beyond that nothing could be seen. A second sound followed the first—the usual partner of it. The whirr of a starter. Nothing more was needed to indicate what was happening. Someone was in the garage. He had just got into the car with a journey in view. Who it was did not matter—it would certainly not be a friend.

Cub's common sense told him what would happen next. The headlights would be switched on. Gimlet evidently realized it too, for without a word

they moved together, and they moved fast, making a dash to get clear of the garage doors. But they were too late. The lights flicked on, cutting a path through the darkness, so that for two seconds the commandos were revealed as clearly as though it had been daylight. They reached the dark area beyond the twin beams, but Cub knew that they must have been seen by the man in the car. What to do next he did not know, so he waited for his chief to give him a lead. This Gimlet did by running straight at the car—or, rather, into the garage, for all that could actually be seen were the headlights, which only served to make the darkness beyond them the more profound. From this darkness, above the purr of the engine, there now came a slight noise. It was brief—the mere click of a latch and a scuffle, as if someone had moved quickly. Silence followed. Gimlet reached the nearest door of the car and wrenched it open. Cub, following closely, saw that the vehicle was empty.

“He must still be in the garage,” breathed Gimlet, “Watch your step.” Then, raising his voice, he said sharply in German, “Come out or we shoot!”

There was no answer.

Crouching, Gimlet worked his way along the side of the car to get to the back of the garage. His torch sliced a wedge of light out of the blackness. The light moved slowly across the floor. It leapt to the rear wall, moved a little way, then stopped, stopped at an open door—an ordinary door. It was open. Further explanation was unnecessary. The man had gone.

“He must have bolted into the house,” said Gimlet.

“He saw us.”

“Of course he did. The game’s up. We’ve got to move fast. We’re behind schedule, anyway.”

As the words died on Gimlet’s lips, as if to confirm them came the short ring of a telephone bell when the receiver is lifted. It came from the house, and was followed by a man’s voice speaking in quick excited sentences.

“That’s ripped it,” said Gimlet. “We came here for petrol. Let’s find some and get out.”

In the light of the torch Cub saw a pile of five or six cans. He made a dive for them, only to drop them one after the other with grunts of disgust as he realized from their weight that they were empty. There was a drum of oil, but that they did not need. Gimlet joined in the search. It was brief, and they soon knew the worst. There was no petrol. Gimlet turned back to the car, a big tourer, and looked in the back. “Nothing doing,” he said, slamming the door. He ran his torch over the outside of the vehicle. It stopped at the running board. On it, clamped in a metal clip, was a fitted petrol can. The

seal was intact. The clip was secured by a bolt, held by a nut. Having no tool, Gimlet tried to turn the nut with his fingers, but failed.

“There should be a spanner somewhere in the car,” said Cub.

“We haven’t time to look for it,” answered Gimlet.

This was obviously true, for by now there was a considerable amount of noise, of one sort and another, outside, mostly in the direction of the house. Voices were shouting. Doors banged. Footsteps could be heard, running. A weapon cracked and a bullet came through the window of the garage, shattering the glass and ripping through the body of the car. Cub felt the wind of it on his cheek, so close to his head did it pass.

“Get in,” ordered Gimlet.

For a moment Cub did not understand.

“In the car,” said Gimlet shortly. “It’ll be quicker than walking and we may have a chance presently to get that petrol can off. Bring the equipment. We’ll lob a cookie in that secret workshop and set a marker for the bombers whatever else happens.”

They scrambled into the car and slammed the doors. The engine was still purring. Cub could see a swastika pennant hanging limply from the radiator cap. Gimlet switched off the lights. The car moved forward, swiftly gathering speed. A bullet struck a metal part with a whang, but did no damage. Cub looked at his watch and saw that it was twenty-two minutes past eight. They were well behind schedule. However, he did not comment, for nothing he could say would help matters. He knew that the shooting must have started a general alarm, but nothing could be done about that, either.

Gimlet brought the car to a dry-skid stop flush against the wall, and under one of the windows of a long, low workshop that stood apart from the main assembly line. Painted on the wall in enormous letters, Cub noticed, in German and in French, the words “Smoking forbidden.” No light showed, from which it seemed reasonable to suppose that work had been suspended in the building. He hoped so, at any rate, for Gimlet climbed on to the roof of the car, and without hesitation smashed the glass out of the window with the butt of his gun.

“Pass the bag,” he ordered.

Cub handed up the sack, and followed it. Gimlet’s torch was probing the interior of the shed, but all that could be seen was a long test bench on which rested some laboratory equipment and a number of large glass jars.

“I should say they’re experimenting with high-octane petrol,” remarked Gimlet, selecting some delayed-action grenades from his sack.

“There’s a notice on the wall says no smoking,” said Cub.



GIMLET’S TORCH WAS PROBING THE INTERIOR OF THE SHED.

“That doesn’t apply to us,” returned Gimlet, with a suspicion of humour in his voice.

Cub was to remember this remark.

“Never mind me; keep a look-out, and stop anybody who tries to interfere,” continued Gimlet.

Turning, Cub faced a scene in which there was now several lights and a good deal of activity. Men were running about. Orders were being shouted, but in a way that suggested that although an alarm had been given, no one knew quite what the fuss was about. A hooter started hooting in short staccato blasts. Behind him Cub could hear Gimlet throwing things into the workshop. Then, to add a final touch, a siren wailed its hideous warning. In a few seconds all the Paris sirens were howling.

“The bombers are coming, sir,” he said, taking a quick shot at a man who came running along the side of the building towards the car.

“So I hear,” answered Gimlet evenly. “There should be quite a noise here presently—yes, quite a noise. Pity we can’t stay to watch. All right. That’s all. Get back in the car. We’ll get along.”

As Cub jumped down a machine gun started stuttering and a line of tracer bullets leapt from the front of the guard-hut towards the main gates of the works. Glancing, he saw that they were open. Headlights, of cars or motor cycles, were pouring in.

“That sounds like Copper, warming up his gun,” remarked Gimlet, as he joined Cub in the car. He looked at his watch. “By gad! It’s turned half past. We’re cutting it fine.”

“A bit too fine,” muttered Cub in a voice stiff with anxiety, for he could now hear the drone of the approaching bombers, a drone that grew relentlessly in volume, sinister, as inexorable as death itself. Punctuating the drone was the coughing and grunting of flak and the crackle of small arms. Lights flashed in the air as well as on the ground. Bullets were flying in all directions.

“Things are certainly beginning to hum,” said Gimlet, as he sent the car racing across the short distance separating them from the guard-hut.

Copper was squatting outside, firing short bursts at selected targets. From time to time he sent a burst into the secret workshop, from which crimson smoke was now billowing.

“Our lads upstairs should have no difficulty in seeing that, I think,” observed Gimlet as they got out of the car. To Copper he said, “What about your prisoners?”

“I locked ’em in, sir, so I could come out and see what was cookin’,” answered Copper.

“I see. Come here and see if you can unscrew this nut.” Gimlet pointed at the clip holding the petrol can.

Copper rose to his feet. As he did so there was a blinding flash, and an explosion of such violence that Cub was hurled backwards by blast into the barbed-wire fence. For a few seconds he was too stunned to grasp what had happened, but in a vague sort of way he assumed that the bombers had arrived, and had started to unload. But as he unhooked himself from the wire he heard Copper say: “Blimy! sir, what a beauty. What did you put in that one?”

“It wasn’t what I put in it. It must have been something in the hut,” asserted Gimlet.

Looking across the open space Cub saw that the secret workshop was no longer there. A rain of burning debris was dropping on the place where it

had been.

“Never mind about that—get this petrol can off,” said Gimlet to Copper. “We’ve only two minutes left.”

Copper seized the nut between finger and thumb. Nothing happened. “So you’d be awkward, would you?” he growled, and seized the nut for a fresh effort.

To Cub, this standing by doing nothing while Copper tried to unscrew the nut was the most nerve-racking part of the operation. All around them pandemonium reigned. The bombers were roaring almost overhead. Flak was lacerating the sky. Searchlights thrust waving fingers at the stars. Tracer shells cut curious curves across the dome of heaven. It was almost as light as day. Looking across the barbed-wire enclosure he could see Trapper standing alone at the entrance of the tunnel. Another figure appeared out of the ground. He recognized Dominique. Both of them started running towards the guard-hut.

“Here comes Trapper, sir,” he warned.

Gimlet looked round, and as he did so a sheet of flame leapt up behind the running figures, leaving a pillar of smoke hanging in the air. Again came the roar of an explosion.

“What the deuce was that?” muttered Gimlet.

Again Cub thought it must be a bomb from the first of the bombers.

Gimlet turned to Copper, still struggling with the petrol can. “Pack up,” he said. “We shall have to leave it. Come on.”

Trapper dashed up. “The tunnel’s gone,” he announced.

“Gone? What the devil are you talking about?” snapped Gimlet.

“Blown up, sir.”

Cub felt his stomach going down like a lift.

“*Monsieur*, it was the water,” cried Dominique. “*Monsieur Rouge* sends me to tell you that you cannot pass.”

“Water?”

“There is an explosion,” gabbled Dominique. “The earth shakes. It falls. A water main bursts. The tunnel is full of water. *Monsieur Rouge* cannot wait, or he is drowned. He says the tunnel must go. *Voilà!* The charge is fired.”

“That must have been the workshop going up, what bust the water main,” observed Copper dispassionately. “Means we’re shut out—or shut in, I dunno which.”

“Did the prisoners get clear?” Gimlet asked Dominique.

“But yes, *monsieur*.”

It took Cub a minute to realize the enormity of the disaster. Why did something always have to go wrong with military operations? he thought bitterly. Something had certainly gone wrong this time. Yet no one could be blamed, for neither the explosion in the workshop, nor the result of it, could have been foreseen.

“What next, sir?” asked Copper.

The answer came from the sky, and it came with the shrill crescendo wail of falling bombs.

Trapper clicked his tongue. “Here come the cookies,” he announced.

“Into the car, everybody,” ordered Gimlet. “There’s only one way out now, and that’s through the main gate. That’s the way we go. I’ll drive. Dominique, sit next to me. I shall need a guide when we’re out—Copper—Trapper, take the side windows and deal with any opposition. Look out! Duck!”

They all went flat, and an instant later, with a roar like thunder, the first stick of bombs straddled the works. The earth rocked. Blast swept the scene like a typhoon. The car nearly went over. There was a general scramble to get into it. The doors slammed, but such was the roar overhead that the sound was no more than the clicking of mousetraps. The car leapt forward into a hail of incendiaries. Fortunately, none touched it, and it raced on through a blinding glare, swerving wildly to miss the areas of fire. Two motor cyclists shot out from behind a building and came tearing towards the car. Copper’s Sten gun chattered and they crashed. There were others, but none attempted to interfere with the car. Indeed, although several Nazis were seen, they were more concerned with getting away from what was arriving overhead than anything else, for by this time, as Cub realized, the bombers’ objective was no longer in doubt. Again the air was filled with the scream of bombs. When they burst, again the car, heavily loaded though it was, nearly went over. It ran on two wheels for some distance, and only Gimlet’s experience as a racing driver prevented catastrophe. All around flames were leaping up.

“Blimy! Talk about falling backwards through ’ell,” muttered Copper. “If my old Ma——”

“Don’t tell us,” rasped Trapper.

“What’s the matter with you?” snorted Copper.

“I’m scared stiff.”

Cub was glad to learn that someone else besides himself was scared stiff.

The car shot through the main gates at a speed which caused him to catch his breath. They stood wide open. No one attempted to stop it. In fact, not a soul was in sight. Cub was not surprised. From behind came a roar, a persistent roar, as if the earth itself was falling to pieces. Debris rained. Several pieces crashed on the roof of the car, without affecting it. Dominique's face was buried in his hands.

"Here, you, wake up and show me the way to the gymnasium," said Gimlet.

"I was not asleep, *monsieur*," said Dominique in a dull voice.

"Ho! I'll bet 'e wasn't," put in Copper.

"Next turning to the right," said Dominique.

Copper nudged Cub playfully in the ribs. "I'll bet he'll think twice before he hooks up agin with commandos," he chuckled. "My oath he will."

"So shall I," said Cub grimly.

CHAPTER XIII

CUB SPRINGS THE TRAP

WITH DOMINIQUE saying, "Left . . . right . . . left," like a vocal puppet, the car sped on through abandoned streets. During the drive, which lasted only a few minutes, Cub did not see a single living soul. Not that this was any matter for wonder; with a cascade blitz in full swing on the threshold of the city the civil population at least would take cover. All anti-aircraft defences were in action, and flame flashed against a sky that glowed as though it might have been red hot, like a blacksmith's furnace, from the glare of the blazing motor works. The air quivered and rocked with the dreadful music of modern war. Smoke rolled and spread like the waves of a sluggish sea.

"Well, whatever else 'appens, we've knocked their blinkin' works fer six," observed Copper, with deep satisfaction.

"We left those Germans locked in the guard-hut," reminded Cub.

"What abart it?" demanded Copper aggressively. "They locked our fellers in a barbed-wire cage—didn't they? Would they have cared if they'd been bombed? Not on your blinkin' life. Look what they did to our 'ouse, anyway. 'Bout time they rumbled that two can play at this game, I say—what say you, Trapper, old pal? Am I right?"

“Tck! I’ll say you’re right,” returned Trapper succinctly.

“*Halte!*” cried Dominique. “*Voilà!*” He pointed. “*La bas.* The gymnasium.”

Gimlet brought the car to a stop a few yards short of the building.

“Shall I have another go at gettin’ that petrol can off, sir?” suggested Copper.

Gimlet thought for a moment. “No. There’s no point in it now. We shall do better with this car. With that flag on the bonnet we’re not so likely to be stopped. Stand fast.” He ran down the path to the gymnasium.

He was away only two or three minutes. When he came back he said: “The race started before the raid began, so the boys should be well on their way. This devil’s din going on behind them should encourage them to make good time. The Underground are evacuating the gymnasium and setting fire to it, to cover up. The Nazis will think an incendiary got it. I said good-bye to Monsieur Rouge for all of us. He’s satisfied that we’ve done a good job. I told him it was thanks to him. All right. Take over, Dominique. Head straight for Claire. Slow down as you pass the head of the column of cyclists—I want to speak to the sergeant-major. Your brother Felix says when you return to Paris go to his house by the Gare de Lyons.”

“They must have been surprised to see you, sir, thinking we were trapped in the works,” remarked Cub.

“They looked a trifle taken aback when I walked in,” admitted Gimlet. “Go ahead, Dominique. Drive carefully.”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

The car moved forward, smoothly.

Paris might have been a city of the dead. In the entire trip to the suburbs Cub saw fewer than a dozen persons, and these were civil defence men; taking cover in convenient doorways, they were evidently too taken up with the major event of the night—the raid—to stop a car carrying the Nazi pennant. The only traffic was fire engines, tearing towards the conflagration, and as they raced on through deserted boulevards Cub appreciated how right Gimlet had been when he predicted that the raid would prove a valuable ally. The bombers still droned overhead. Unmolested, the car ran on through the squalid northwestern suburbs which, reluctantly it seemed, at length gave way to open countryside.

“You know the level crossing at Villant?” Gimlet asked Dominique.

“*Oui, monsieur.* It is just beyond the village.”

“There should be a warning notice for motorists at a hundred metres.”^[3]

[3] In France it is customary for road danger signals to show the distance to the object—school, dangerous turning, level crossing, or whatever it may be.

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“Stop when you come to it.”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

Soon after this they caught up with the tail end of the “race.” As the car overtook the cyclists Copper leaned out and offered words of encouragement and advice. Occasionally he recognized a Kitten, and exchanged enthusiastic greetings with him, at the same time keeping Trapper informed as to the identity of the rider. Once—for the first time in the operation—he got really excited. “Blimy! There’s Shorty Hughes—or else his ghost!” he cried. “Watcher, Shorty!” he hailed. “What are yer doin’ on that grid? They told me you was dead as spam, in the casino at Dieppe.”

“Indeed to goodness I am,” returned Shorty. “I’m just looking round to see how you get on without me, look you. How about getting out and letting me have a ride, you big flatfoot?”

The progress of the car put a stop to this interesting but unprofitable conversation. The cyclists were strung out for a distance of half a mile, and when the head of the column was reached Dominique slowed down to the same speed so that Gimlet could speak to Sergeant-Major Macready, and the French guide who rode beside him. He told them of the trap ahead, and warned them to stop at the level-crossing sign, unless they got a signal that it was safe to proceed. The car went on again for about ten minutes, when Dominique, slowing down and calling attention to a red light in the road ahead, said: “*Voilà, monsieur!* The crossing. The gates are shut.”

“Pull into the side of the road and stop,” ordered Gimlet.

“’Ere we go again,” sighed Copper.

The car stopped. Overhead the bombers were droning home.

Gimlet turned to those behind. “We’d better have a look at this crossing before we go any farther. Our boys are only a mile or two behind, so we can’t afford much time. Monsieur Rouge said that according to Paleface the post was manned by a small mobile unit from St. Armand, under a fellow named Hausmayer—but a lot depends on what he calls small. Cub, you’ve had a lot of practice at this sort of thing; would you like to run along and cast an eye over the set-up?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Don’t take any chances and be as quick as you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cub got out of the car, closed the door quietly, and making for the hedge which lined the road, moved quickly but quietly towards a cottage that stood beside the crossing, and in normal times was occupied by the gate-keeper. Any slight noise that he made was smothered by the drone of the bombers. It occurred to him that this factor should help him in another way; it seemed likely that the entire post would have assembled to watch the sky for possible combats with night fighters, and if the Germans were watching the sky they would not be paying much attention to the road. In these assumptions he was right, but he was not prepared for the sight that met his gaze when, getting through the hedge and skirting the tiny garden of the cottage, he dropped flat and wormed his way forward until he could see the railway line. The first thing he saw was a double line of motor cycles, on their stands, parked beside the track. Running his eyes over them he counted forty-eight, which meant that there must be that number of enemy troops there. This shook him more than a little, for he knew that Gimlet did not expect anything like that number. Rising a little, he could see the troops assembled in a little crowd, without any sort of order, on the line in front of the cottage. As he expected, their faces were turned upwards. From them came a buzz of conversation. This was really all he needed to know, but he paused for a moment to make a survey of the cottage before retiring. He ran the last forty yards to the car.

“Well?” greeted Gimlet.

“There are at least forty-eight men of a motor cycle unit,” informed Cub.

Gimlet started. “*How* many?”

“I counted forty-eight motor cycles parked beside the track. The men are standing in a bunch near the gate.”

“Good Lord!” Gimlet’s tone of voice expressed his surprise and concern. “We can’t handle that lot—and get away with it.”

“I don’t see why not, sir,” growled Copper.

“I do,” put in Cub. “The moment we started anything someone would go to the phone and report what was going on. That would bring reinforcements.”

“So the cottage is on the phone?” queried Gimlet.

“Yes, sir. I saw the wire.”

“That makes it worse,” rejoined Gimlet. “Either Paleface was misinformed or else he lied. This is a bigger show than an ordinary police trap. Of course, Bussemann may have increased the scope of the thing after the affair at the Gare St. Lazare.”

“May I make a suggestion, sir?” requested Cub.

“I’d be glad of one.”

“Why not give the post a miss altogether? I mean, there’s no reason why the cyclists should use the level crossing. Their racing bikes weigh practically nothing. Our chaps could dismount here, pick up their bikes, walk across the fields for, say, a quarter of a mile, cross the railway line, and then strike diagonally to hit the road well beyond the crossing.”

“Blimy! It’s simple,” muttered Copper.

Gimlet shook his head. “No. Sorry, Cub, but that won’t do. This race must end at Rouen. What do you suppose would happen when the French cyclists arrived at the winning post without having gone through this gate? The Nazis aren’t fools. They would know that the trap had been deliberately avoided, and they wouldn’t be long discovering that. They would probably discover it even before the cyclists got to Rouen. The Frenchmen who are taking over the bikes would be questioned. What possible reason could they give for leaving the road? None. The Nazis would guess what had happened and shoot the lot of them. No, we can’t let the Underground down like that.”

“I see that now, sir,” agreed Cub.

“My original idea was for us to storm the post, so that the show would be attributed to British commandos—nothing to do with the race. But I did not expect to have to deal with more than half a dozen men.”

“Why not wait for the boys to arrive, and then attack the post in force?” suggested Trapper.

“That won’t do either,” declared Gimlet. “At all cost the cyclists must be kept out of this. That phone is the snag. One word to Paris that the post was being attacked, and the cyclists were going through, and the game will be up. Nazi troops would converge on the area and everyone would be wiped out, long before we could get to the mill, let alone the aerodrome. I see nothing else for it but a legitimate commando attack on the post, although four against forty-eight is a pretty tall order, even taking into account the advantage of surprise.”

“Just a minute, sir, before we take on anything as desperate as that,” demurred Cub. “Let’s try a ruse first, *a la* Fleas.”

“Ruse?”

“Yes, sir. You see, when I was with the Fleas we had to rely all the time on cunning. We had no weapons to fight battles, although as a matter of fact, from what I’ve seen of the Germans, it’s easier to trick them than fight them. Their discipline is marvellous, so marvellous that it never occurs to them to question an order from a senior officer—you know that, sir. The Fleas always tried to take advantage of that, and we usually got away with it. If my ruse fails we can always fall back on fighting.”

“What’s the ruse?”

“Simply this. You go back to the public call box outside the village post office and ring up Hauptmann von Hausmayer, who’s in charge at the level crossing, and say that you are Busseman, speaking from Paris. Or if you can’t imitate Busseman’s voice say you are Major somebody or other, any senior rank, speaking for Busseman. Say that owing to the raid the race was cancelled. That shouldn’t be hard to believe. They must have heard the din from here, and I’ll bet anything Hausmayer will believe it. You simply tell him to pack up, return to barracks, and stand by for orders. The Nazis will depart, leaving everything quiet for the boys to go through. It may be hours before they discover the trick.”

“Strewth! For a nipper you certainly get bright ideas,” asserted Copper, in a voice of astonishment.

“I see a snag,” said Gimlet. “Suppose they do pack up—and come this way. They’ll run straight into the race.”

“Monsieur Rouge said the troops were from St. Armand. That’s the other way.”

“*Oui. C’est ça,*” confirmed Dominique.

“It sounds too good to be true, but I’ll try it,” declared Gimlet.

“All you stand to lose is a few minutes of time,” averred Cub.

“If this comes off I’ll see you get a stripe on your sleeve,” promised Gimlet.

“And if it don’t I’ll see you get one across the backside of your pants,” said Copper, grinning.

“Back the car, Dominique,” ordered Gimlet.

The car backed slowly down the road until it was opposite the call box. Gimlet got out. “Stop the cyclists if they get here before I’m back,” he commanded, and he went on to the phone.

A minute passed . . . two minutes. The head of the column of cyclists appeared. Copper jumped out and held up his arms. “’Arf a mo, sergeant-major,” he said. “Gimlet’s orders are that you stand fast while we clear up a

spot of trouble. Tell the boys to dismount where they are, to stop 'em piling up in a mob. No talking."

Gimlet reappeared. He was smiling. "Swallowed it, hook, line and sinker," he said, tersely. "Hark!"

From the darkness ahead came the throb and clatter of motor cycles being started up.

"If they do come this way we're goin' ter 'ave a picnic," asserted Copper, holding his gun forward to cover the road.

The throb of motor cycles grew into a roar, drowning even the drone of the bombers. It rose to a high note, then started to fall. It became a hum. The hum faded. Silence fell.

"Gorne, by thunder!" said Copper in tones of stark incredulity. "If I wasn't 'ere ter see this with me own eyes I'd never 'ave believed it, s'welp me. Strike me scarlet! If they'd make Cub a general there wouldn't be no need to fight no more crimson battles."

"Don't chatter so much," admonished Gimlet. "Let's push along and see what's happened. The red light has gone, so they must have opened the gate before they left. Sergeant-major, bring the column along slowly. The all-clear signal will be a hoot on the klaxon. We've lost some time, so try to make it up."

"Yes, sor," answered the sergeant-major.

The others got back into the car. Dominique drove on, somewhat nervously. Nothing happened. The car bumped slowly over the rails. Still nothing happened. Not a soul was in sight. The car crawled on a little way and Gimlet gave the order to stop.

"We'd better have a look round," he decided. "We're not in any hurry—we shall easily overtake the cyclists. Sound the klaxon, Dominique."

Dominique obliged. Leaving him in the car, the others walked back to the level crossing, across which the race was now proceeding at a good speed.

"What a picture," murmured Copper as they stood and watched the cyclists go past. "If I told my old Ma about this she wouldn't believe it."

"Neither would anyone else," returned Gimlet drily. "Let's have a look round."

A quick inspection of the scene revealed nothing of interest. Inside the deserted cottage the telephone bell was jangling in the persistent manner of such instruments. Gimlet opened the door and picked up the receiver. "*Jahwohl, Herr Kommandant,*" he said in a gruff voice, and hung up.

“What was that about, if I may ask?” inquired Copper.

“Somebody wanted to know if everything was all right. I told him yes.”

Copper grinned. “Well, that wasn’t no lie.”

“Let’s get along.”

They went out. As Trapper closed the door behind them Gimlet stiffened. “What’s this coming?” he muttered. “Sounds like somebody in a hurry.”

Down the road, from the direction of Paris, came the hum of a powerful car.

“It may be nothing to do with us,” observed Gimlet. “Stand back close against the wall. We shall soon know.”

They knew within a minute. A car pulled up with a grinding of brakes and two men jumped out. Both wore uniforms. One was hatless—his head was in bandages. Cub recognized Bussemann. Running up the track, to stop within a dozen paces of the commandos, the German shouted furiously, almost hysterically, for Hausmayer. It was clear from his manner that the absence of personnel was beyond his understanding. In fact he said so in a high-pitched voice to his companion, an army major. At the same time it was evident that he did not expect trouble, much less danger.

Gimlet whispered to Copper. “You get the driver of the car. It mustn’t get away.”

Bussemann yelled again for Hauptmann Hausmayer.

Gimlet took a pace forward. “He isn’t here,” he said evenly.

The two Nazis spun round as if they had been shot. Cub distinctly heard them catch their breath when they saw the slim figure standing there. Gimlet’s gun was in his hand.

“Hausmayer’s gone back to barracks,” he said casually. “I told him to go.”

“He—I—you—what . . . ?” Bussemann groped for words with conspicuous lack of success.

“You remember me, of course?” continued Gimlet imperturbably. “You hit me across the face—remember? Well, it’s my turn to do the slapping. We’re just moving off, and you’re coming with us. I know several Frenchmen who will be delighted to have a word with you, now you haven’t a company of bayonets to back you up—you thug.”

Bussemann’s companion was responsible for what followed. It may be that he thought that with luck he might reach the car. Maybe he thought that in the tricky light the commandos would miss him if they shot at him. What

he thought will never be known. He jumped sideways, and ran. Gimlet's gun blazed and he crashed across the rails. Bussemann snatched at the opportunity to grab his automatic, and it might have gone badly with Gimlet had not Trapper fired. He used the Sten gun, which all this time he had been holding in his hands. He fired a burst of five shots. Bussemann spun round, stood upright for a moment, gasping, then dropped like a coat falling from a peg. He did not move again.

"Thanks, Trapper," said Gimlet quietly. "Maybe it's better this way. I hope Copper hasn't killed the driver of that car—I expect there was one. I want it to be known that this was a Commando job—not the Underground." As he spoke he walked quickly towards the road.

The car was there. A man was lying along the running board and Copper was sitting on him. "What do you want me to do with this pip-squeak, sir?" he inquired.

"What is it, exactly?"

Copper examined his prisoner, who offered no resistance. "It's a soldier, sir," he announced. "Just a common gorblimy private."

"Put something in his mouth, tie him up, dump him in the cottage and lock him in," ordered Gimlet. "Somebody will find him sooner or later. By that time we shall be well on our way."

"Aye aye, sir." Copper set about his task, while Gimlet punctured the two rear tyres of the car by the simple expedient of sticking his dagger into them. This done, he took a piece of chalk from his pocket and made his mark, a rough drawing in the shape of a gimlet, on both sides of the car. "That should leave the Nazis in no doubt as to who did the job," he remarked.

Copper walked over to the cottage with the prisoner slung over his shoulder like a sack of flour. He tossed his burden inside, shut the door and locked it. Whistling under his breath he returned.

"All right, let's get along," ordered Gimlet, and led the way back to Dominique, whom they found, what with the delay and the shooting, in a state bordering on panic.

"What was that shooting?" he asked anxiously.

Copper answered. "That was Bussemann."

Dominique stared. "What of him?"

"Aw, nothin' much. 'E just rolled up in time for a busman's holiday, that's all."

"He's gone where he has sent a lot of other people," put in Gimlet.

Dominique shook his head. "I don't get it."

Trapper clicked his tongue. "Bussemann did."

"What-ho, that's a good 'un," chuckled Copper. "I must remember that
_____"

"Stop chattering and get on with the job," ordered Gimlet curtly.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Drive on to the mill, Dominique."

"*Oui, monsieur—tout de suite.*"

The car cruised up the road.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MUSTER AT THE MILL

THE old cloth mill turned out to be a much larger building than Cub expected. Situated on the north bank of the Seine, it was in fact a place of considerable size, and in its heyday must have been a factory of importance. But that, judging by appearances, was a long time ago—unless, being built of wood, it had easily become dilapidated. It was now little better than a ramshackle ruin—not that this mattered in the slightest degree as far as the scheme was affected. It lay about a quarter of a mile from the main road, and could be reached only by a single drive, much overgrown in places, for the adjacent country was thickly, although not entirely, wooded. Looking at the towering silhouette as it came into sight, balanced precariously, as it seemed, on the bank of the wide, turgid river, the thought occurred to Cub that no building could have been more appropriate to their design, either in practical utility or appearance; as a base for plots and a rendezvous for plotters it was the perfect setting.

Bearing in mind the swastika decorations of the car, Gimlet requested Dominique to stop some distance short of the mill, to avoid starting anything like a false alarm among the patriots who would certainly be on the watch.

"We shan't need the car again, I hope," he told Dominique as he walked on. "I shall have to leave you to dispose of it."

"But certainly, *monsieur*," answered the driver readily.

"Will you destroy it?"

“No, *monsieur*. Our method is to take marked cars to pieces, and distribute the component parts in many places until such time as they may again be required.”

“Good idea,” opined Gimlet.

At this juncture they were challenged by an invisible sentry. Having given the password they were escorted, by two men who then appeared, to the mill, where, in the light of a few candles stuck on convenient shelves, a remarkable sight was revealed—a hundred men of all ages in skimpy racing clothes, sitting about on dilapidated looms and derelict machinery. Each man carried his identification number on a white card. It was the first time that Cub had seen the Underground in force, and he found the spectacle inspiring. Enthusiasm and high spirits were apparent everywhere. There was no sign of nervousness or fear.

An elderly man in ordinary clothes came forward and announced that he was in charge of the party while it was at the mill, whereupon Gimlet informed him that the cyclists were approaching, information that was received by the assembly with obvious satisfaction. Gimlet went on to say that while they were waiting he would like to make a few remarks to the partisans, a suggestion that was welcomed by a quiet buzz of applause. Standing on a broken loom of obsolete pattern he addressed the meeting:

“Men of France and comrades in arms,” he began. “This has been a great day for us and a bad day for the Nazis, for we have struck the enemy a blow where it will hurt for a long time. Presently we must part, but that does not mean that we shall not meet again. Soon, in a few weeks, a few months, perhaps, by our efforts and yours, the vandals from across the Rhine who now defile your soil will be flung back whence they came, except those, like the scoundrel Bussemann—now dead on the railway line at Villant—who leave their bones in the land they came to despoil.” (This tit-bit of news was greeted with another burst of applause.) “I hope one day we shall meet again in a Paris that is free, when we will celebrate this occasion in a manner worthy of it. You all know why we are here,” continued Gimlet. “If our project is to succeed every man must play his part, cost what it may, even life itself—and that, after all, *messieurs*, is but a small price to pay for such a reward as we hope to secure. In a few minutes the British prisoners from Paris will be here. Take your cycles and complete the race, a race which, you may be sure, will in due course find an honoured place in the history of France. No doubt when you reach Rouen you will be questioned about an incident that has occurred at the railway crossing at Villant. All you have to say is that when you rode through no one was there. If there was trouble you saw nothing of it—which will be true. Stick to that story and the Nazis will

have nothing against you. That is all, except that on behalf of your British comrades who are sharing with you the perils of this night, I thank you for your courage, your loyalty, and your co-operation. When my men arrive, take your cycles and go about your business quietly, and without loss of time. Good-bye, and good luck.”

Gimlet stepped down to a quiet but fervent murmur of approbation. After a glance at his watch, to the leader of the French party he said questioningly: “You will not be going on with the cyclists?”

“*Non, monsieur.* It happens that I have a cottage near by, so I was asked to superintend events here.”

“Then you must know the district very well?”

“*Mais oui, monsieur.* Every centimetre of it.”

“I’m expecting some supplies to be dropped by air. An open space, not too large, surrounded by trees so that a ground signal could not be seen except from above, would be the most suitable. Do you know of such a place, near at hand?”

“I know the perfect place,” answered the man without hesitation. “It is only a few minutes’ walk.”

“Would you show it to one of my men, so that when the time comes for our machines to arrive—which will be in about fifteen minutes—we shall know where it is?”

“Certainly, *monsieur.* Instantly.”

“Go with him, Cub,” commanded Gimlet. “Mark the place well. You’ll have to find your way back to it when the planes are due.”

Cub accompanied the guide to the spot, a woodland glade perhaps two acres in extent, noting carefully the direction and distance. They were away only for a few minutes, but returned to find a scene of great activity, and, at first glance, confusion. The cyclists had begun to arrive. Activity there was, but not confusion. Gimlet called the number of each cycle as it entered, and the Frenchman bearing the same number came forward to claim it. He would wait for the commando to remove his uniform bag, then ride away. Thus, as one came, one departed, so that the number of men in the mill remained the same.

“Get our fellows into their uniforms as quickly as you can, sergeant-major,” Gimlet told the senior N.C.O. “I shall want some of them to go out and bring in the equipment that is being delivered by air. The planes are due in ten minutes.”

As soon as the first dozen men were properly dressed, Cub, with his torch ready for use, led them to the fringe of the glade. “Tell your chaps to mark the stuff as it comes down,” he told the sergeant-major, who was with him. “We’d better keep close against a tree or we may get a case of rifles on our heads. The equipment will come down on parachutes, of course, but even so it will land with a tidy bump.”

They had not long to wait. As soon as Cub heard the machines coming he ran into the open, winked the pre-arranged signal—the letter K, in Morse—several times on his torch, stuck the torch into the ground with the light pointing upwards, and bolted back to his tree. The first machine roared over. It was not seen, but as the roar receded there was a double bump, as if two heavy objects had struck the ground. Some commandos ran out and came back staggering under heavy loads. By that time the second machine was nearly overhead. More bumps. More loads were brought in. This was repeated six times. Only one load missed the glade; it crashed down into a tree, but its weight carried it through the branches and it was quickly found. More commandos arrived and the equipment was carried to the mill, by which time the noise of aircraft was a distant drone.

“The machines were dead on time, sir,” Cub reported to Gimlet. “Here’s the equipment.”

“Just like blinkin’ clockwork,” remarked Copper.

“That’s the way things *should* go, when you have the right men on the job,” asserted Gimlet.

“Two packages seem lighter than the rest,” remarked Cub. “They’re sacks. I don’t know what’s in them.”

“Unpack them and find out.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a gasp of astonishment and delight that ended in laughter when the first sack was unpacked. It brought Gimlet over in a hurry.

“What have you got there?” he asked sharply.

“Hams, sir,” reported Cub weakly. “Four hams and about twenty pounds of cheese. From the feel of the other sack I should say it contains loaves of bread.”

“That wasn’t in my schedule,” declared Gimlet, “but it’s nice to have it all the same. I’ll wager that was Bigglesworth upstairs—this was his idea.”

“Not a bad idea either,” murmured Copper. “What say you, Trapper? Am I right?”

“Sure—every time,” confirmed Trapper.

“Has everyone arrived, sergeant-major?” asked Gimlet

“Yes, sor.”

“How many men?”

“One hundred, sor.”

“Anyone not changed yet?”

“No, sor. We’re pretty well ready to move off.”

“Good. Make up this food into one hundred and four rations, and be quick about it. It can be eaten right away—but don’t get the idea that this is a picnic. We’ve a long way to go yet. Anyone who isn’t ready to march in ten minutes will be left behind.”

“Very good, sor.”

Gimlet sat down, lit a cigarette, and with a faint smile on his face watched knives making short work of the hams, the cheese, and the bread.

“Marvellous what a bite o’ grub’ll do, ain’t it, chum?” remarked Copper to Cub, between bites of an enormous sandwich. “Nothin’ like a scrap to give you an appetite.”

“So I notice,” assented Cub, eating ravenously.

Ten minutes later Gimlet rose. “All right. Finish up. Hand out the equipment, sergeant-major, and get the party on parade.”

“Yes, sor.”

The meal came to a hasty conclusion. Rifles, automatics, Sten guns and grenades appeared, and were passed from hand to hand. This done, the sergeant-major mustered the parade in a double line. He called the troop to attention, made his inspection, and reported to Gimlet, “All present and correct, sor.”

Gimlet stood the parade “at ease,” and addressed it quietly.

“This is the position,” he announced. “We’ve got a four-mile march ahead of us. The objective is the German-occupied aerodrome at Rambours, which is one of the bases from which enemy bombers operate against Britain. Our job is to capture the airfield and liquidate it—or at any rate hold it long enough for our planes to pick us up. Obviously, if we don’t capture the airfield our planes will not be able to land, and if they don’t land we shan’t be going home. I needn’t tell you what is likely to happen if we find ourselves stuck in France, so when we go into action it will be up to every man to hit hard and keep on hitting until the enemy has had enough. When you get the signal to break off, disengage and retire on a rallying point which will be selected when we arrive. Lose no time, because the same signal will bring the planes down. Keep off the landing area. There may be

casualties. I don't want anyone left behind. Those who aren't hurt will bring in those who are. As I shall have to maintain control of the operation and act as liaison with the aircraft I shall not be able to lead the attack in person—but I shall be watching. When we leave here we shall travel cross-country to avoid being seen. The march will be made in silence—and when I say silence I mean silence. If I hear any talking in the ranks the men responsible will go home under arrest. No smoking. Corporal Collson, Private Troublay and Cadet Peters will remain with me for special duties. That's all. Any questions?"

"What about prisoners, sir?" asked a lanky, loose-limbed commando.

"There shouldn't be any," answered Gimlet. "If there are—well, some of you will have to give them your places in the aircraft."

"Then there won't be any," growled the commando, to a titter of mirth.

Gimlet took out his pocket compass, nodded to the sergeant-major, and strode to the door, followed by Copper, Trapper and Cub.

The sergeant-major called the parade to attention. "Ye all heard what the C.O. said about talking," he rasped. His eyes wandered threateningly down the line. "I don't want to have to remind anyone. Left turn. Forrard."

In silence the commandos filed out into the night.

CHAPTER XV

GRAND FINALE

TO CUB, the march across the silent countryside had the illusory, unsubstantial quality of a dream remembered long afterwards. For this, no doubt, the lack of sound was largely responsible. Gimlet strode on ahead. Behind, in double file, like phantoms of the night, came the commandos, silent, grim, accoutred as if they might have been invaders from another planet. The moon, a slender crescent, swept up from a distant cloudbank, and hanging like a fiery sickle in the sky cast a pallid light upon a landscape typical of northern France—vast hedgeless fields, wide sheets of reed-fringed stagnant water, and twin lines of poplars that accompanied roads as straight as railway tracks. Once, the horizon was broken by a stand of elms, the branches blotched in uncouth patterns by clumps of mistletoe. Although Cub was familiar with such scenery, after a time a feeling came over him that this was not really happening; that it was all a story, a fairy tale, in

which he was one of the characters, forced by an evil power against his will to play a part, and that was to march, and march, and keep on marching to eternity. Time no longer meant anything. There were moments when he wished something would happen—moments indeed when he felt that if something did not happen to break the hideous spell of silence he would scream. But no. The only sound was the monotonous tramp-tramp, tramp-tramp of martial feet on new-ploughed earth or the swish-swish, swish-swish of the same feet brushing through grass or stubble.

Yet the march lasted only an hour and ten minutes. Then, from beyond an horizon formed by a long fold in the ground not far ahead, there came a sound which with one stroke banished all sensation of unreality. It was the snarling of an aero engine being started up. Another joined it. A glow of light appeared in the sky, to cast the little hill ahead in high relief. Gimlet raised his hand. The column halted. There was a rustle, a sigh of a hundred indrawn breaths. Gimlet turned and spoke in a low voice to Cub. “Go ahead and see what you can make out. Don’t show yourself against the skyline. We shall follow on, slowly.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cub went forward at the double, but when he neared the rising ground he dropped flat and dragged himself with his elbows to the top. He was not unprepared for the scene that greeted his eyes—except in one respect. He knew, of course, that there would be an airfield. And an airfield was there, with a line of hump-backed hangars, hutments in regular order, and a wind-stocking pole standing stark against the sky. There were aircraft, most of them parked round the perimeter of the landing area. That, too, was to be expected. What did surprise him was the amount of light, which enabled him to see these things. It was mostly concentrated on the concrete apron in front of the hangars, where three twin-engined bombers were being started up. Another was being fuelled from a mobile tank. Three men in flying kit were cutting across a runway towards another bomber, followed by a tractor trailing a load of bombs. A vehicle of some sort was cruising towards the airfield along the hedgeless accommodation road which served the camp. The main road, Cub knew from the map he had studied, was nearly a mile away. The nearest bomber, a Messerschmitt 410, was not more than fifty yards from where he lay. He could see no one near it. There was another machine about the same distance beyond it. There was no sign of the crew.

From all this Cub soon came to two conclusions. The first was that preparations for a raid were in progress—had just begun. The second was that no British aircraft was near, or the lights would be dowsed. In short, the squadron was casually getting ready for a sortie with no fear of interruption.

That, for the present, was as much as he needed to know, so after backing away from the skyline he returned to the troops, who had moved nearer and had dropped to the prone position. He found Gimlet and made his report.

“Sounds like money for jam, sir,” remarked Copper, who listened.

“I think it’s safe for you to advance to the ridge, sir; from there you could see things for yourself,” suggested Cub.

Gimlet stood up. “Sergeant-major, tell all N.C.O.s to join me here,” he ordered. With the aero engines ticking over there was no possibility of being heard.

Word was passed back down the line and the N.C.O.s came forward. They advanced with Gimlet to the brow of the rise, where they lay flat, looking at the scene before them. Cub went with them.

Gimlet considered the airfield for a good three minutes before he spoke. “I fancy we’ve got them cold,” he said softly, looking at his watch. “Our machines are due in eighteen minutes,” he went on. “That means they’ll be crossing the coast in about eight minutes. As they will be on a course for this district the airfield will be warned, and we may expect the lights to go out. The bombers may try to get away before our fellows arrive or they may decide to pack up and lie low until they have gone. If we strike first they won’t be able to do either; but if we’re going to do that we shall have to move fast, to get into position. This is how we’ll handle it, but the action will not start until I fire a green light from this point. Sergeant-major, I shall hand over the main assault to you. Take fifty men, and without being seen get within striking distance of those hangars. Cut any telephone wires you see to prevent the enemy from calling for help. When the action begins, deal as you think best with any opposition and do as much damage as you can. Set fire to anything and everything, particularly the oil and petrol stores if you can locate them. I shall detail Sergeant Brown to follow you up with ten men and give support should you need it. They can pick up your casualties, if any. Keep off the landing area or you may be knocked down by our planes coming in. Rally here when I fire a red light. Watch for it. That clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right—move off.”

The sergeant-major backed away and disappeared into the darkness.

Gimlet continued. “Sergeant Brown, take ten men and support the sergeant-major. Keep your fellows together and hold them back unless you see that the sergeant-major’s force is in trouble. If that happens, attack from a flank. Keep off the landing area and rally on the red light. Move off.”

The sergeant retired.

“Corporal Collson, as your home was blitzed, I’ve reserved a job for you that you should enjoy,” continued Gimlet. “Take thirty men, and working your way round the boundary of the airfield, leave one or two with every aircraft, according to the strength of any opposition you may encounter. Actually, I don’t think there is anyone near the machines parked on the perimeter. When the action signal is fired—not before—the job of your detachment is to destroy the machines. Set fire to them—smash them—riddle them with bullets. Don’t try to do too much yourself; stand where you can keep things under control, and hold a few men back to cut down the enemy if he tries to interfere. Rally on the red light. Don’t get in the way of landing aircraft. Bring your casualties back with you. Go ahead.”

Copper spat on his hands. “This is hoopla for chocolates,” he whispered hoarsely to Cub in passing.

One N.C.O. remained—a lance-corporal wearing the Kitten cypher on his arm. Gimlet tossed him a greeting. “Hello, Corporal Miles. Nice to see you again. How are you?”

“Fine, sir, thanks.”

“Sorry I lost you at Dieppe.”

“My own fault, sir. I got too far and couldn’t get back.”

“Don’t make the same mistake to-night. I’m holding ten men in reserve. Go back to them, stand fast, and tell them they may get their chance presently.”

“Yes, sir.”

Again Gimlet looked at his watch. “Four minutes to go. It will be interesting to see how the enemy deals with a show like this. We ought to be able to do him a lot of mischief—quite a lot of mischief.”

“Yes, sir,” agreed Cub—a trifle dubiously.

“What beats me is, why Jerry doesn’t keep a better guard,” murmured Trapper.

“If the Nazis put a cordon of sentries round every airfield he’s holding he wouldn’t have any men left to do the fighting,” returned Gimlet.

“Looks like in the next war everyone not flying will be guarding airdromes,” observed Trapper moodily.

“Never mind the next war, let’s get on with this one,” said Gimlet curtly. Taking his signalling pistol from his pocket he stood up. With his eyes on the watch on his left wrist he raised his right arm. There was a flash and a report. A brilliant green star appeared in the sky, smoking as it described a graceful parabola before starting to fall.

Cub held his breath, staring all eyes, as the saying goes, wondering what would happen next.

Actually, in the event, things did not happen so fast as he expected. At first, the Germans on the concrete merely stopped what they were doing and gazed up at the light, probably wondering what it signified. Some may have guessed, for soon there were shouts, followed by a general move towards the hangars. An officer ran out on the concrete. He shouted an order. A whistle blew. Then, above all other noises came the satanic chatter of a Sten gun. Another joined it, and another. Small arms crackled. Tracer swept the tarmac. A cloud of bullets struck the mobile petrol tank like a flail. A trickle of blue flame appeared. It became a stream. With a terrific *whoosh* the tank blew up in a blaze of ghastly blue light, throwing blazing petrol on all sides. The bomber near which it was standing was drenched. Yellow flames appeared in the blue. Fires appeared in other places, in hangars, in workshops, to bathe the scene in a lurid light that grew ever brighter. Commandos appeared, running along the concrete, shooting as they ran. They seemed to be meeting with little opposition; ground crews and air crews who had been working on the machines scattered like wisps of snipe—those who had not fallen. Cub, watching, could almost feel sorry for them. The surprise was complete. It must have been shattering. Probably few, if any, of the men on the airfield carried weapons. Later, armed and organized, they might put up a stiffer resistance, but caught as they were, utterly unprepared, there was little they could do except run for cover. The result was confusion approaching panic. Cub could imagine the same thing happening on any airfield, in any country, suddenly attacked by a strong body of trained men in the dead of night. Even paratroops, he reflected, could not reach an objective without their aircraft being spotted by radio-location operators, and a hot reception prepared. But for an airfield, far from the sea, far from any fighting front, without the slightest warning to suddenly be stormed by commandos, must be outside even Nazi calculations. They would wonder where on earth—or heaven—the commandos had come from.

The light grew brighter as more buildings were fired. The crash of grenades punctuated the now incessant rattle of small arms. More fires appeared on the perimeter of the airfield as the aircraft parked there were attacked by Copper and his detachment. Here, there had been little shooting, and Cub imagined that Copper had had an easy task—as later was confirmed. The airfield was soon ringed by flames. The buildings were an inferno. Cub, although he knew that success had crowned their efforts, was appalled by the fearful spectacle presented. Gimlet was watching, apparently

unconcerned. The reserve troops had moved up to see what was going on. Some were muttering.

Gimlet turned and spoke to them. “Sorry, you fellows. I know it’s hard to watch the fun without taking a hand, but that’s how it is. Keep your eyes open for casualties coming back; you can help them.” He looked at his watch. “Our planes should be over in three minutes—and they won’t need pathfinders to guide them, by gad! This bonfire must be visible from the coast. Keep your heads down, or some of you will be stopping these stray bullets.”

The bullets to which he referred were those bursting from the exploding ammunition in the gun turrets of the blazing aircraft.

“What are those lights, sir?” Cub pointed beyond the hangars, where a string of lights were moving.

“Headlights,” answered Gimlet. “Either enemy reinforcements or fire-fighting appliances—perhaps both. Every enemy unit within fifty miles must see this glare.”

Odd commandos were now beginning to trickle back, some limping, or walking with difficulty; others were being helped, and Cub realized that they had not had things entirely their own way. Soon there was a line of figures on the ground at the rallying point, some laughing, some groaning, some swearing, as the reserve troops applied first aid. Gimlet went to them. “All right, boys. With luck we’ll have you in hospital in half——”

The rest of the sentence was lost in a violent explosion as one of the bombers on the tarmac, one that had taken fire, blew up—or rather, the bombs that it had taken aboard went off. Fortunately, they were only canisters containing incendiaries, or the result might have been serious for commandos in the vicinity. As it was, the incendiaries—perhaps allocated for London—were scattered far and wide, to illuminate the landscape in an unearthly flickering glare.

“Blimy! Talk about Brock’s blooming benefit! The old Crystal Palace never put on a better show, not even when it went up itself,” called a voice, and looking round Cub saw Copper walking back, followed by his detachment. One man was being helped by two others.

A sound overhead took Cub’s eyes upward. It was the drone of aircraft, flying low. Light from the ground was reflected on the underside of the machine as it turned.

“Dead on time,” said Gimlet. He raised his right arm and a red flare soared upwards. He beckoned to Copper. “Take your men and cover the sergeant-major’s withdrawal,” he ordered. “Keep off the grass.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Shouting to the others to follow, Copper went off at the double to meet the troops who, having seen the red light, were now retiring, most of them walking backwards, some still shooting, some holding an arm across the face to protect it from the heat of the conflagration.

Cub noted that the lights on the road were getting dangerously close, and he was about to remind Gimlet of them when they scattered. The nearer noises made it impossible to hear anything, but he saw tracer cutting through the sky above the road. He had no time to work out what this might mean, for events close at hand compelled his attention. The first aircraft, a Wellington, was just landing. Commandos were rallying in a steady stream—Copper and his men with them. Only a few, he was relieved to note, were being carried. The Wellington, having landed, swung round and taxied quickly towards Gimlet, who was waving a torch. Leaving the engines running the pilot jumped down, paused to light a cigarette, and walked on.

“Is that Captain King?” inquired a voice.

“King here,” answered Gimlet. “That’s Bigglesworth, isn’t it?”

“Right first time,” answered the pilot cheerfully. “Everything under control?”

“Yes, going nicely,” returned Gimlet.

“Fine. We had no difficulty in finding you. You gave us quite a mark to fly on.”

“Burns nicely, doesn’t it?”

“Very nicely,” agreed Biggles. “My fellows will follow me in. I’ve brought six machines. They’ll take twenty men each at a crush. Oh, by the way, there is what I take to be an enemy relief party coming up the road, but I don’t think we need worry about it. I detailed some of my boys, flying Mosquitoes, to take care of the surrounding country, in case outsiders tried to crash into the party. All the same, it would be a good idea, don’t you think, if we started to get the wounded away? There’s the machine, wearing a red cross, just coming in. There’s a doctor on board with bandages and things.”

“You think of everything.”

“Not everything—but we try.”

“Are you anxious to push off right away—I mean you, personally?” asked Gimlet.

“Good lor, no. I shall stay and see the show through. Take you home if you like.”

“Thanks. I’ll accept that offer. By the way, is Bertie Lissie with you?”

“Yes, but he’s in a hurry to get back—got a foxhound bitch due to whelp to-night, and won’t trust the vet to handle it.”

“Quite right. If the bitch knows him she’ll probably do better than with a stranger. Tell him I hope he gets some nice pups.”

“You’ll probably see him yourself when we get back.”

“I might give him a hand.”

“He’d be glad, I’m sure.”

“We shall need the pups. Be pretty sickening, by gad, if after all this sweat there was no huntin’.”

Copper nudged Cub. “Blinkin’ marvellous, ain’t it? Foxhound pups. That’s all they think about. How’s yer horses? What’s the fishin’ like? Strike me puce! One day they’ll wake up with a jerk and discover there’s a war on.”

“Don’t let them kid you, Copper,” returned Cub. “*They* know there’s a war on. Lord Lissie’s pack of hounds means as much to them as the Old Kent Road does to you. It’s just a matter of taste.”

“Maybe—maybe, but I’d sooner go to the dogs at Clapham stadium and do my fishin’ with a pile o’ chips,” growled Copper.

Biggles was still talking to Gimlet. “I’d better get along to keep an eye on things. See you presently.” He strolled away.

Gimlet turned to Copper. “Don’t stand there dreaming, corporal. There’s plenty to do.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Eighteen wounded men, the total number of casualties, were lifted into the ambulance machine, which at once took off and disappeared into the night. One by one the other aircraft taxied over, took its complement from the commandos who had mustered in single file under the critical eyes of the sergeant-major, and took off. Presently only one Wellington remained. Sixteen men stood by, including Gimlet, Copper, Trapper and Cub. Occasionally a shot whistled from the direction of the hangars, but of organized resistance there was none. Bursts of machine gun and cannon fire came from the distance as Mosquitoes harried vehicles that attempted to approach.

Biggles joined the party and spoke to Gimlet. “Ready to move off?” he inquired.

“Yes. I don’t think there’s any more we can do here,” answered Gimlet.

“Then let’s get along.”

The party filed into the Wellington. Cub found a seat on the floor with Copper and Trapper. It vibrated as the engines roared and bumped a little as the machine took off; then it settled down in steady flight, climbing for altitude.

A hatless, ginger-haired flying officer appeared from the forward part of the aircraft. "Everyone all right?" he inquired brightly. Then, as his eyes fell on the three comrades, he went on, smiling, raising his eyebrows. "What—you again? You'd better take season tickets."

"We will when you put on a restaurant car, sir," returned Copper promptly.

"It's hardly worth it on these short runs," bantered the officer, "Besides, it's better to eat on the ground—you're not so likely to spill the soup. Dinners will be waiting when we get down. We ought to be home in twenty minutes."

Copper looked pained. "Is there any doubt about it, sir?"

The officer nodded. "Rather. The Nazis don't really approve of our going to and fro like this. Sometimes they try to stop us. But don't worry—you've got the best pilot in the service at the stick." The officer smiled again and went back.

"Cheerful coves, ain't they?" remarked Copper.

* * *

If the Nazis did try to stop the aircraft those in the cabin had little indication of it. The machine turned sharply once or twice, and for a little while, for about a minute, flak barked its throaty cough. That was all. Soon afterwards the bellow of the engines sank to a contented purr; the floor of the aircraft tilted down; the wheels rumbled as they ran over the ground; movement stopped.

"'Ome," said Copper dispassionately. "Anyone got a pencil?"

"What on earth do you want a pencil for?" demanded Cub.

"To drop a line ter my old Ma before she rolls up at the War Office to ask 'em what they've done with 'er little boy. Never forget to write ter yer Ma. Am I right, Trapper, old chum?"

"You're always right," asserted Trapper.

Gimlet's head appeared in the doorway. "Dinners are waiting, so get yourselves cleaned up and washed."

"This everlastin' washin'," muttered Copper. "A spot of clean dirt never stopped my teeth workin'."

Gimlet reappeared. “Did you say something, corporal?”

“No, sir.”

“Just thinking aloud again, eh?”

“Yessir.”

Gimlet smiled and turned to Cub. “I’ve been asked to pass you an item of news that should please you.”

Cub’s eyes opened wide. “Me, sir?”

“Your father came home from Spain by air two days ago. He’s here, in the officers’ mess, waiting for you. I promised you a stripe, but it seems you won’t need it—he’s talking of your going to an officers’ training unit. Make haste.” Gimlet departed.

Copper glared at Cub. “Ho! So stripes ain’t good enough for yer? Goin’ in fer pips, eh? Maybe you think me and Trapper are goin’ ter salute you? Pah! Don’t make me laugh.”

Controlling his expression, Cub nodded seriously. “Do you know the first order you’ll get from me?”

“What?”

“Get your hair cut,” snapped Cub, imitating Gimlet’s manner. Laughing aloud and dodging Copper’s fist he jumped down and ran towards the officers’ mess.

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.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Gimlet Goes Again* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]