

THE RAID

W. E. JOHNS.



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

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

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

Title: The Raid

Date of first publication: 1935

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

Date first posted: Oct. 25, 2022

Date last updated: Sep. 7, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20221049

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

OTHER BOOKS

by

CAPT. W. E. JOHNS:

SOME MILESTONES IN AVIATION

THE AIR V.C.'S

THRILLING FLIGHTS (*Edited by* W. E.

JOHNS)

FIGHTING PLANES AND ACES

Fiction

THE BLACK PERIL

BIGGLES OF THE CAMEL

SQUADRON

BIGGLES FLIES AGAIN

THE CAMELS ARE COMING

THE SPY FLYERS

THE CRUISE OF THE CONDOR

WINGS: FLYING ADVENTURES

THE RAID

BY

CAPT. W. E. JOHNS

Editor of *Popular Flying*

Author of *The Camels are Coming.*



PUBLISHERS

JOHN HAMILTON, LTD.

LONDON, W.C.1

CONTENTS

THE RAID [7](#)

[The story “The Raid” was first published in “Wings”—Volume 1 Number 2—Dated Autumn 1934 but actually published on 1st October 1934]

ALL’S FAIR [147](#)

[The story “All’s Fair” was first published in “Wings”—Volume 1 Number 1—Undated but actually published in 1934]

STRANGE FREIGHT [169](#)

[The story “Strange Freight” was first published in “Wings”—Volume 1 Number 3—Dated Winter 1935 but actually published on 1st January 1935]

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE [191](#)

[The story “Old Soldiers Never Die” was first published in “Wings”—Volume 1 Number 1—Undated but actually published in 1934]

ACE OF SPADES (a Biggles story) [200](#)

[The story “The Ace of Spades” was first published in “The Cockpit”—in August 1934]

THE RAID

CHAPTER I

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT GUY BARING hated the dry, dusty road between the Royal Air Force Station at Hinaidi and Baghdad, yet certain minor duties in connection with this self-imposed office of Station Sports Officer demanded his presence in the much-overrated City of the Caliphs, where the romance is not so immediately apparent as the aroma. So he had traversed it, requisitioning Service transport for the purpose.

Having done so it was quite a natural thing for him to look in at the Hotel Maude. There were two reasons for this, each in itself sufficient. The first, and by far the most important, was an earnest desire to hear the tinkle of a piece of ice against the side of a glass of lager; the second was curiosity as to the identity of the visitors who had arrived that evening by air, for the Maude is an Imperial Airways Rest House on the Far East Route. Strictly speaking, this semi-official inspection did not come within his sphere of duties as an Air Staff Intelligence officer, but he liked to think it did; anyway, it provided a not unreasonable excuse for the visit, which, moreover, might enable him to get his mail rather earlier than if he had waited for it to be delivered.

It was curious to reflect afterwards that, if he had not gone to the Maude, just how far-reaching would have been—but he did go to the Maude, so conjecture was really futile.

Fate—or call it what you like—played its first card when he met Sheila Forbes just inside the door. He behaved precisely as any ordinary man would have behaved in the circumstances, although his words were not well chosen. To be specific, he pulled up dead, stared, and ejaculated:

“My God! What on earth are you doing here?”

Sheila, on the other hand, betrayed no such obvious symptoms of astonishment. She said, quite simply, “Hello, Guy, how are you?” and held out her hand. But then it must be understood that she knew Guy was in Baghdad, or thereabouts, whereas he thought she was in London.

“I’m all right, thanks,” he replied slowly, “but I think you might have let me know you were coming back.” There was genuine reproach in his voice.

“Yes, I suppose I should have written, but—well, what was the use? Frankly, Guy, I thought about it, and I decided that it might be better if—if

we didn't meet; it was by no means inevitable that we should."

"Let's sit down," he suggested, "it's too hot to stand. Tell me, why have you come back? I mean, I can imagine why you have come back, but I thought your Uncle was—well, you know—finding archaeological research in Iraq a bit expensive. In fact, I believe he told me at the time that it was the sole reason why he packed up last year."

"Yes, that's quite right," she admitted frankly. "Uncle Henry nearly ruined himself by that last expedition; he found it was costing him a good deal more than he expected it would, although your help no doubt saved us a lot of expense. But things are different now; to make a long story short, someone has provided the necessary financial support for the work at Prensio to be completed."

"That's lucky. Who is it?"

"Professor Wiseman. He comes from Sweden, but has lived a good deal in England; he knows this part of the world quite well, too."

"So he backed the show for you; that was sporting of him."

"Well, you see, he wanted to come and finish the excavations, but on a point of etiquette he didn't like to take on the work which Uncle had already started, without his consent; that was the real reason."

"What! You mean he's here now?"

"Of course. That he should be one of the party was a foregone condition of the arrangement—not that Uncle Henry minds. On the contrary he is very pleased about it. What with a kindred spirit and all the money he needs, within reason, he is looking forward to a very congenial task. You must see him before you go; he is really very grateful for all you did last year. And you must meet the Professor—he is a dear, you'll like him."

"I like the sound of the word 'Professor,' I must admit. It sounds senile, hoary-headed and bewhiskered——"

"Oh, he's not a bit like that," interrupted Sheila, laughing; "he's really very good-looking."

Guy frowned suddenly. "How old is this chap?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, Guy, you don't think——"

"I might!"

"There's nothing like that about him."

"Sure? All right, I'm sorry." Guy passed his hand wearily over his face. "The fact is, my dear, I'm afraid I'm getting a bit—what do they call it—woman-starved in this God-forsaken dustbin. You know I did two years at

Aden before I came here. But this is my last hot season, thank God; I'm going home next trooping."

"Don't let Uncle hear you calling Iraq a dustbin," she warned him laughingly; "he thinks it's the most wonderful country in the world."

Guy looked at her longingly. How fresh she looked in her plain white frock and large shady hat, which just showed a smooth wave of corn-coloured hair under its fashionable tilt. Her eyes, grey-blue, reminded him of the sea that lapped the cool shores of England; her skin looked but recently drenched with its dews and soft rain, despite the torrid heat and garish colours of their present surroundings.

"Don't joke, Sheila," he said, soberly. "I'm serious. Can't we——"

"Now, Guy, really, we've settled all this, you know."

"I'm damned if we have. That is, you may have, but I haven't, not by a long shot. I don't think you gave me quite a fair deal."

She snatched a quick glance at his good-looking masterful face, a little tired-looking after four hot seasons in a land where the thermometer runs to 120 in the shade, and there is no shade. His keen grey eyes were watching her closely. He looked precisely what he was, she reflected, well equipped for the task of fighting the unruly elements in the air, and guarding the frontiers of one of the most difficult countries in the world. She noticed that he had turned a little pale under his tan.

"But I gave you an answer, Guy," she protested.

"It wasn't an answer: it was an ultimatum."

"Call it that if you like, but I think you use a hard word. After all, I can't help feeling as I do about things. I told you why that was before I left, last year. I told you that my father was killed flying in France during the War and my mother was killed in an air-raid. I was only a child at the time, but I've never quite got over the shock and horror of it. Can you wonder that I hate aeroplanes and everything to do with them. I loathed every minute of the journey here, and had to force myself to it for the sake of the others who were anxious to get here as quickly as possible. I was petrified with fright the whole way, and I'm not ashamed to admit it; the very sound of the engines makes me go cold all over. I'm sorry, but there it is. I am very fond of you, Guy, as I once admitted, but I couldn't marry an airman. I should never have a minute's peace of mind. Knowing this, do you think it is quite fair—but why go on. We've been over it all before."

"But I can't give up the Service; do be reasonable, my dear. It isn't so much that I love flying, or that my Guv'nor would be bitterly disappointed if I packed up. I am willing to put those things on one side. But what should I

do? I can fly an aeroplane, and that's about all. I should be useless at business or anything else, and I know it. Don't you see that if I resigned, then I couldn't ask you to marry me, for financial reasons, that's quite certain."

"Don't let's talk about it, Guy, please," she protested. "Something may turn up; anything can happen, you know."

"It's hard to see what. One of us will have to change."

"I'm afraid I shan't."

"And I can't."

"So there we are, back to where we started from. It's much too hot to argue. Come up and see the Professor and I'll tell Uncle you're here."

"All right," he agreed wearily.

They made their way slowly up the stairs and along the corridor. Sheila stopped before a door and tapped lightly. There was no reply, so she turned the handle. The door opened and she looked inside. "He's not here," she observed. "Never mind, wait a minute and I'll see if I can find him. He may be in Uncle's room. They said they wanted to rest, but I suppose they are busy over their plans again."

Guy took a couple of paces into the room and lighted a cigarette. The fact that he lighted a cigarette may seem a trivial event hardly worth recording, yet that is not so. It may sound absurd to say that British domination in the Middle East once depended upon a dead match-stalk, but that may not be exaggeration.

Guy blew out the match after he had lighted his cigarette, and in order to dispose of the stalk, walked across the room to a small writing-table upon which he could see a brass ash-tray. As he flicked the match into the receptacle, his eyes, without really looking, fell on three words that appeared at the head of a piece of paper that had been placed under the blotting paper on the pad. He was not inquisitive, hardly curious, but he could not help reading the words. They would have meant little to most people but to him they held a professional significance, for they formed the name of a sheikh whose anti-British activities had once been notorious from Mosul to Khartoum. That state of affairs had been changed by a curious incident in which Guy had played a small part.

With a puzzled expression on his face he deliberately reached out his hand and lifted the edge of the blotting paper, exposing the document that lay below it. On a sheet of paper had been written, quite carelessly, in lead pencil, three lists of names, all of native sheikhs or headmen, and a single glance was sufficient to show that they had been arranged in a certain order.

Those in the left-hand column, the top one of which was the name he had first seen, he would have described as definitely friendly; those in the middle were of doubtful loyalty, and those on the right were hostile, more or less actively, to British interests.

Now had the owners of all those names resided within striking distance of the excavations at Prensia, it is doubtful if he would have given the matter another moment's thought, except perhaps to congratulate the Professor mentally on his foresight in learning the inclinations of the people of the country, with whom he might come in contact during the course of the present expedition. But they did not. With one or two exceptions they were domiciled far from the ruins. In fact, the regions of their influence stretched from Kurdistan in the north, through Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan, right down to Aden in the south. It was perhaps the interest in this last-named area, so far away from the scene of operations, that first struck Guy as odd, although to say that at this stage he was already suspicious would be an exaggeration. He was not, but it was with a sense of expectant curiosity that might not otherwise have existed, that he turned to face the man whom he could hear approaching down the corridor in conversation with Sheila. Up to this time his interest in him had entirely been centred round his association with Sheila, but it was now tinged with professional attention. For the Professor was unquestionably a very well-informed man. The document was so complete and accurate that it might have been compiled in Guy's own office; in fact he would have been quite pleased to possess a copy of it.

Wondering vaguely how the Professor had gathered the information, or if he had not, then who had, he turned to meet him, and the first dim suspicion that he was not entirely what he pretended to be took form in his mind. For the Professor's eyes did not seek his visitor as he entered the room. They sought the desk, and Guy thought he knew the reason; he was not quite certain where he had left the document. His movements confirmed it, for not until he had placed himself between his desk and his visitor did he extend his hand. Thus described, the action would appear to be so unusual as to be conspicuous, but it was done in such an inconsequential manner that if Guy had not been half-prepared for something of the sort it would have passed unnoticed.

He took the proffered hand and, as convention demanded, expressed himself delighted to meet his friend's friend. But he was wondering where he had seen the Professor before; that he had seen him he felt almost sure, but he could not place him. He was a tall, powerfully-built man of about forty years of age with flaxen hair that tallied well with his professed

nationality, but his skin had not been tanned to its red-brown tint by the anæmic sun of Europe. Then Guy remembered that Sheila had said he knew the Middle East well.

“You’ve been in this part of the world before, Professor?” he suggested.

“Yes, but many years ago, when the Turks were here. I have worked in Egypt chiefly. Miss Forbes tells me you were very kind to her and her uncle when they were here last year.”

The adroit change of subject did not escape Guy. “Oh, I did what I could, you know,” he replied lightly. “There have been several expeditions working out here, and naturally we do our best to see that everything runs smoothly; no trouble with the natives, and all that sort of thing.”

“Quite,” nodded the Professor. “You still have a little trouble, though, occasionally, do you not?”

“Nothing but what we can handle, I think,” answered Guy. Then, as an afterthought, he added, “We know all the local bandits who are likely to kick over the traces if they get a chance, but they are finding aeroplanes and armoured-cars difficult propositions to compete with. If you like, I’ll give you the names of those near Prensic that it wouldn’t be wise to trust too far.” The words came easily and smoothly, and he looked the Professor squarely in the eyes as he spoke, knowing he had given him an invitation to declare his inside knowledge of the subject.

But the Professor did not accept it. “A most useful precaution,” he said slowly. “I should be very grateful for such information. I seem to remember reading the names of some of the recalcitrant tribes in the newspapers, such as——” he puckered his forehead as if trying to recall the names.

“I’ll make a list and send it along to you,” went on Guy casually, “but I don’t think you have any cause to worry; no one is likely to trouble you. You are only going as far as Prensic, I understand?”

“Yes, to Prensic.”

“About a couple of hundred miles as the crow flies, or a trifle more, which brings it within two hours of our machines. But, as I say, you’ll find things quiet. We’ve had a rough house once or twice with the lads who hang out in the hills to the north, but we cut them up pretty badly last time they made a raid, and collared most of their camels and horses, so they are not likely to try anything again for some time.”

“You bombed them, I suppose?”

“Well, we didn’t bomb them exactly. You see, this raiding business has been brought to a fine art over a period of time, but the Wogs^[1] now have to

adjust things to a new time schedule. Things are even changing in the changeless East. In the old days a raid was merely a matter of travelling fast enough to catch the objective village or tribe—usually Christians, by the way—unprepared. After that the raiders could go home in their own time. The position is now reversed, and the success of the raid depends upon the speed with which they can get back to cover, before we catch them. They can move like lightning on the way down, but it takes some time to get back on account of the plunder, which consists chiefly of livestock; that's what they come for, horses in particular. They know now that if our machines catch them in the open it's a grim business for them. The machines disorganise the column with bombs and machine-gun fire, and hold it up until the armoured-cars arrive to arrest the ring-leaders, and restore the stolen property to its rightful owners. When we catch them like that it's fairly plain sailing; it's when they get back to their villages that the matter becomes a little more difficult. Even then we don't bomb *them*."

[1] R.A.F. word for natives of Iraq.

"No?"

"Once upon a time we used to bomb their villages, but we found they didn't mind that very much. The lads of the village used to sit on the hills and watch their mud and camel-hair dwellings being scattered to the four winds by high explosive, and quite enjoy the show. As soon as we had gone they came back and built them up again in a couple of days; a simple matter since they do not go in for reinforced concrete. They left the old women at home, so that in point of fact we may have done them a good turn. Women count very little with them, and old women less than nothing; in fact, the old folks are only an encumbrance."

"What do you do about it now?"

"Well, we really discovered the trump card in the game by a fluke. One day a fellow missed the village with his bomb and hit the cattle. My word! That caused a fine old row; talk about weeping and gnashing of teeth. Remember, some of their horses and dogs have taken a few thousand years to breed; their pedigrees were old when Moses was wandering about looking for the footpath to milk and honey-land. Incidentally, when you've been out here for a bit, you'll realize why he had a job to find it. But you can well understand that when some of these four-legged aristocrats are in danger the matter gets beyond a joke. Even the toughest of the toughs had tears in their

eyes when they came in, and that gave us the key to the situation. Nowadays we don't go for the lads themselves; they can hide up in the caves, anyway. We go for the stock, and they have no means of protecting them. When a village gets on its toes a squadron of machines has only to make a demonstration and our dark-skinned brothers get worried, very worried. They aren't afraid for themselves, or the women, who can be replaced in the next raid. It's the thought of their prize pieces of furniture grazing on the hillsides being hurt that brings them in, all agitato, with the pipe of peace in one hand, and a hatchet to bury in the other."

"Very interesting," admitted the Professor, "but don't you think it's rather a barbaric thing to do, to bomb animals?"

"I can't see that it's any more barbaric than leading them into a slaughter-house to have their throats cut, which is the way many dumb animals end their days in Europe—those that aren't shot, or hunted to death by hounds. A hundred and twelve pounds of high explosive on the cranium of a calf is at least likely to produce sudden death, which is often more than the poor beast gets at home. I'll bet that the first people in England who would bleat about bombing animals are the very ones who walk about in the skins of dead animals that were flayed alive. Do you, when you eat lobster mayonnaise, imagine the feelings of the wretched crustacean as it is lifted over a pot of boiling water? Did you think about the death agonies of its rightful owner when you had that bit of astrakhan tacked on to the collar of that coat over there? No, when civilisation stops wearing furs and feathers for its adornment, then it can talk about cruelty to animals. But let's get back to more serious topics. When are you thinking of starting for Prensia?"

"Within the next two or three days, I hope," replied the Professor. "Our arrangements are well forward. A former servant of mine came up from Cairo a month ago to get the labourers and transport ready."

Guy opened his eyes in real astonishment. "Really!" he exclaimed. "Then all I can say is, he hasn't advertised himself much; this is the first I've heard about it."

"Would you expect to hear about it?"

"Certainly, either directly or indirectly through one of the Political Officers. We don't get many visitors, you know."

"No! Well, my agent is of the country, so perhaps that is why he evaded the limelight. I do not suppose that he would think of reporting the matter officially."

"Then he should have done."

“You seem to have turned very official suddenly, Guy,” observed Sheila, joining in the conversation for the first time. “I think we had better change the subject. Are you going to stay to dinner? Uncle says he is particularly anxious to see you again, but he is just resting at present; he always finds the heat very trying at first.”

“I’m sorry, old thing, but I’m afraid I can’t do that, much as I should like to, but it happens to be guest night and I haven’t warned out. I should be on the mat if I didn’t turn up; dinner is a parade, you know.”

“Ridiculous! When you are not on duty you should be allowed to dine where you like.”

“But we are always on duty,” he reminded her gently.

“Good gracious! You *have* gone all military,” she taunted. “By the time you’re a Wing Commander—or whatever it is—you’ll be as grumpy and officious as the rest of them.”

“Shall I? It won’t matter very much if I am, will it?” he challenged.

“Not very much,” she parried.

“That’s what I thought,” he observed evenly. “But I must be getting along. Ring me up at the aerodrome if I can help you in any way, won’t you?”

“Of course, but you’ll come and see us again before we start?”

“I will. I’ll try and run in to-morrow evening.”

“That would be splendid.”

Guy held out his hand. “Good-bye for the present, then,” he said. “Good-bye, Professor—take care of Miss Forbes, won’t you?”

There was a glint in the Professor’s eye, and something in his tone of voice when he replied, that warned Guy for the first time that he was in the presence of a rival. “I think I shall be able to do that,” he said coolly.

“I shall be about, anyway,” said Guy casually, picking up his hat. “Always remember——” he hesitated.

“Well?”

“That the one above sees all,” he concluded enigmatically.

“I’ll come with you as far as the door,” announced Sheila, but Guy hardly heard her. The Professor’s lips had parted in something that may have been intended for a smile; whatever it was he showed his teeth, and Guy bent quickly to adjust a shoelace, quite unnecessarily, in case the other saw the recognition in his eyes. The next moment, with Sheila at his elbow, he was walking quickly down the corridor toward the door and the street.

“Why, how pale you look, Guy,” she said suddenly, glancing up.

“Pale! Am I? Touch of sun, I suppose. I’m rather lucky that way; one or two fellows usually shoot themselves during the hot season.”

“How cheerful you are to-day,” she observed sarcastically.

“There isn’t very much here, outside a bottle, to make you cheerful,” he replied bitterly. “Well, here we are. Good-bye again. My compliments to your Uncle. Tell him I’m looking forward to seeing him to-morrow,” he added as he climbed into the waiting car.

CHAPTER II

His final departure had been almost abrupt, but he was unaware of it. He was hardly conscious of Sheila's presence, so deeply was he thinking about the Professor, for the recognition, if recognition it could be called, was so grotesque that he was already doubting it himself. Yet that fleeting glimpse of a perfect set of white teeth, perfect except for one that was a quarter covered with a gold crown, had brought back vividly a half-forgotten incident, which, by an amazing chance, was the same as that recalled by the name of the sheikh at the head of the Professor's list.

It had happened when he was at Aden. The Sheikh, Eyad-Ibn-Matuk, who in the past had given the authorities a good deal of trouble, had created a considerable sensation by arriving unexpectedly at the aerodrome. His son, who counted more with him than the rest of his people together, was sick unto death; would the white doctor do something about it? The white doctor did. He was flown out to the Sheikh's village, where he found the boy suffering from acute appendicitis. He was faced with a poser, for only an operation could save him; yet if he operated and the boy died, the fact would neither be forgotten nor forgiven. He would die anyway, so the authorities decided to take a chance. The patient was taken by air a matter of two hundred and fifty miles to Aden, and operated on forthwith. The operation was successful and the boy had been sent home fit and well. Guy had flown him back in the back seat of a Fairey "Gordon." He had, as a matter of detail, been selected as the pilot chiefly in order to reconnoitre the layout of the Sheikh's headquarters at a distance seldom permitted. Just as he was about to take off on the return journey, a horseman had ridden in from the desert, dressed in the clothes of a better-class Arab. He had joined the semi-circle of interested watchers, and as Guy looked at him, he had smiled.

Now Arabs in that part of the world are not given to smiling, chiefly because there is little in the desert to smile at; life is a strenuous and precarious affair in which humour plays no part. Then he had seen the sunlight flash on the gilded tooth, and the picture remained in his mind. At the time it had simply struck him as odd that an Arab should have received expert and expensive dental treatment at some time or other, but in thinking the matter over he realized that such a thing was by no means impossible. After all, he had reasoned, there were many European and European-trained

dentists in Egypt, and many Arabs were wealthy, even by Western reckoning. So the matter had passed from his mind until he had seen the name, Eyad-Ibn-Matuk, in the Professor's room, which recalled a picture which the Professor's dental formation had intensified.

He threw his cap on to the seat beside him and tried to reconcile the Western Professor with an Arab sheikh. His common sense told him that the thing was absurd. Yet it was queer, to say the least of it, he reflected, that there had been that sensation of having seen the Professor before, even before he smiled. Could it be possible that the Arab and the Professor were one and the same? No, of course it couldn't, he told himself angrily, the thing was fantastic. Then he remembered the complete lists of names, which for the moment he had forgotten.

After all, Lawrence did it, he mused. Lawrence played the Arab to such perfection that even the Arabs took him for one of themselves; and he wasn't the first, either. But what's his idea? I'm afraid the sun is getting me down.

It must be borne in mind that an Air Staff officer, even in the Intelligence Branch, is not a detective; even if he was, his duties would seldom demand the exercise of the prerogative. As far as Guy Baring was concerned, practical espionage existed only in very exclusive circles, and in books.

Arriving back at Hinaidi, he looked into the Mess for a drink, and then went on towards his quarters to dress. As he passed the Station Headquarters, Leo Fisher, the Station Adjutant, called to him.

"What's the matter, Fish?" he asked.

"Have you heard about Cronell?"

"No, I've heard nothing," replied Guy quickly. Wing Commander Cronell was senior Intelligence officer at Headquarters, and his immediate superior.

"He went down this afternoon with heatstroke. They've flown him down to Basra in the blood-tub."^[2]

^[2] R.A.F. slang for an aeroplane used as an ambulance. A special machine was kept for this purpose. A large red cross on the fuselage distinguished it.

"Good Lord! That's a bad show. He looked as right as rain at lunch-time."

“I know, but that’s the way the blasted thing gets you. As a matter of fact, he’s been a bit queer once or twice lately, because he told the M.O. about it, who told me. He didn’t want to report sick though, with promotion due next list.”

“Is he very bad?”

“No, not very. He thinks he’s coming back here in a day or two, but I don’t think they’ll let him. You’ll have to take over until it is decided whether he is coming back or not, or until a relief is posted. I shouldn’t be surprised if they send Benson up from Cairo.”

“Righto, but that’s rather a curse—I mean about taking over.”

“Why?”

“Because I had something to tell Cronell; I thought of asking him to let me fly down to Aden to-morrow.”

“What in the name of God for: isn’t it hot enough here?”

“Plenty, but—look, laddie, let’s go inside a minute. Something rather strange has happened. You’ll probably send me down to Basra, too, when I’ve told you about it, but I can’t help that. You heard about that funny business a couple of years or so ago, when old Ibn-Matuk’s son was operated on at Aden? I flew the kid back. Well, there was a fellow there, a Wog, or at least I thought he was. I didn’t speak to him—just saw him, that’s all. I’ve just seen him in Baghdad dressed as a respectable archæologist—or maybe it’s the other way about. Sounds damn silly, I know, and my very ordinary intelligence tells me that I am wrong, but something else, something that I can’t quite describe, tells me that I’m right. There is another thing, too, that makes me think there might be something in it.”

“Did he recognise you?”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but I don’t think he did; he couldn’t very well. He only saw me once before, and I was in flying kit, with my cap and goggles on, in the cockpit. So he wouldn’t see very much of me, or notice my build, or hear my voice, or anything like that.”

“No, of course not. How damn funny. What are you thinking of doing; it sounds like a matter for the Political blokes.”

“Yes, I suppose it is really, but it’s damned awkward. This chap is with old Garner, who’s back again with his niece; you remember Sheila Forbes?”

“Quite well.” Fisher looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “We all thought——”

“I know, and so did I at one time, but—well—never mind about that. But if I did anything to put the lid on this new Prensiss show it would settle things

for me, good and proper. She'd swear I'd done it on purpose; you know what women are."

"I don't, but I can see it's going to be thundering awkward. If you're right, something will have to be done about it whether it blots your copy-book or not. What about having a word with the C.O.?"

"I'd rather not; it hasn't reached that stage yet. I was going to tell Cron., of course, but his going sick has knocked that on the head. I don't want to stir up a mare's nest; if I was wrong, you'd hear the troops laughing from Kirkut to Karachi."

"What else can you do?"

"I had an idea of slipping down to Aden and asking Billy Brazier a thing or two. He'd have Ibn-Matuk's docket, anyway. Will you let me have a movement order to go down; you needn't say anything about the real reason. If you'll do that, I'll have a word with Ali Khan before I go."

"You mean that ex-Levie *wallah*?"

"Yes. We use him sometimes, you know. He was in the Indian Army before he joined the Iraq Levies. He's as straight as a die, and he lives in Baghdad now; keeps a carpet shop—officially. I could get him to cause trouble with Garner's labourers or transport people, and keep the Prentis show from starting until I get back. I'll try and learn something either at Aden or Cairo; it will only take a day or two. If everything is all right, then that's the end of it as far as I'm concerned."

"Yes, I think perhaps that would be the best thing to do."

"All right, then I'll fly down to-morrow. There's one thing I'll get you to do for me though; they're expecting me at the Maude to-morrow night for dinner. Ring them up after I've gone, sometime during the morning, and say I'd have rung up myself, but I had to leave at dawn. Tell them I've had to go down to Basra on duty; don't mention Aden."

"No, quite. But what about sending a signal to Aden, to save you making the trip?"

"I'd rather not do that; it might do more harm than good. It might start a ball rolling that would go on for years, particularly if a minute^[3] went Home about it. The thing would become international then. I'd rather tackle the thing myself, particularly as I've a personal interest in it, so to speak."

"Good enough. We'd better get dressed or we shall be late. I'll get a movement order made out for you. What are you going to fly, the Wapiti?"^[4]

"Yes. I'll have a word with you after dinner to settle the details."

[3] Inter-service communications are passed on “minute” sheets, normally foolscap-sized documents.

[4] Westland Wapitis—aircraft largely used in Middle East.

CHAPTER III

THE dawn-wind had come and gone, but the rim of the sun had not shown above the horizon, when Guy climbed into the cockpit of his Wapiti aeroplane the following morning. The tanks had been filled overnight; the “desert-box,” containing those things which would sustain life until help arrived, in the event of a forced landing in the desert, had been stored, and the Duty Officer, shivering on the tarmac, watched the machine, ghostly in the half-light, taxi out on to the aerodrome to take off.

There was a roar from the engine as Guy opened the throttle, and the machine soared into the still air. Baghdad, with its white buildings half-hidden in palm groves, and the golden domes of Khadomain gleaming dully, slipped away quickly astern. Ahead lay the waste lands, an ugly, desolate, and barren expanse of hard-baked pebbly clay and sand of many colours, sometimes flat, sometimes rippling, and sometimes broken up in long, rolling dunes that cast curious blue-grey shadows.

The air became bumpy before the first emergency landing-ground, at Ramadi, was reached, and the machine rose and sank in a wide two-hundred-foot swell. The sky had turned a colour of polished steel, and the sand gleamed like gold-dust. The black, sinister-looking bitumen wells, where the core of the earth bubbled through its thin crust to make Babylonian roads and cement four thousand years before the word “tarmac” was heard, loomed up on the shimmering horizon. The bumps grew worse as the sun climbed to its zenith and drove its glittering rays into a convulsed world of rock and lava that flung back furnace-hot up-currents of air, as from the mouth of the pit.

Still more sand, with five-hundred-foot “dust-devils”^[5] swirling sluggishly towards Persia. The pilot watched them respectfully as he headed onwards to the waterless chaos near the Red Sea, where towering pinnacles thrust upwards, like the teeth of a legendary monster. Still more sand, dotted with the eternal camel thorn, and the seven hills of Jerusalem rocking in the mirage far to the north. El Arish, Kantara, with snake-like caravans moving slowly towards Egypt, and at last the Suez Canal, with its lotus-flower pattern of dredged mud on either side. Roaring low over the Pyramids, the Wapiti at last ran to a standstill on the aerodrome at Heliopolis, where Guy spent the night.

[5] The desert equivalent to a water-spout.

Dawn found him in the air again, heading southwards for his destination, with the Nile lying like a carelessly-dropped thread across the landscape, and the machine bucking in the down-draughts as it sped over an ocean of sand dotted with iceberg-like limestone boulders. He crossed the Red Sea, followed its *wadi*-lined eastern coast, and at last, tired but satisfied, touched his wheels on the sun-scorched aerodrome at Aden. The Duty Officer booked him in and he went in search of the Mess Secretary to find him accommodation for the night.

The following morning he sought Squadron-Leader “Bill” Brazier, with whom he had once served, and who had relieved him when he had been posted to Iraq.

“What can I do for you, young feller-me-lad?” inquired the Squadron-Leader as he entered his office. “How’s things up your way?”

“Oh, warmish, as usual,” replied Guy, without enthusiasm. “Look, I’ve got to get back as quickly as I can, so I mustn’t waste any time. Ever heard of a chap named Wiseman?”

“Never.”

“That’s that, then. You remember Ibn-Matuk?”

“Remember him—I know him; he’s the blue-eyed boy in these parts.”

Guy hesitated. “I see,” he said slowly, “in that case I’d better explain. You remember that affair when we operated on his kid?”

“It was before my time, but I heard about it.”

“That’s what I mean. To come to the point, do you happen to know any of Ibn-Matuk’s associates?”

Brazier shook his head.

“Never have any trouble with any of them?”

“We had plenty of trouble just after you left. Someone was inside stirring things up. We heard a tale about some chap trying to get the sheikhs together to start a big row, but we never really got to the bottom of it. As a matter of fact, it was old Ibn-Matuk who put us wise, warned us what was in the wind. He didn’t say very much, though, and I rather fancy he was one of the party until we pulled his lad out of the fire. Afterwards he thought better of it.”

“That’s interesting. What was the end of it?”

“What are you driving at?”

“It’s rather a long story—nothing very important. The fact is we’ve got a chap up at Baghdad, rather a queer customer, and I’m trying to learn something about him. That’s why I’m here.”

“I see, like that, is it?” observed Brazier. “Well, I can tell you in a few words what happened here. Naturally we got busy looking for this Wog who was on the warpath; we couldn’t make out who it could be as the usual nuisances were quiet. But we couldn’t ignore Ibn-Matuk’s tip that somebody was trying to set the country ablaze, particularly the Wahabis. The idea was to get them in touch with the people the other side of the Jordan and make a real war of it, but as far as we know the whole thing fizzled out, although the Old Man thinks things are too quiet to be true, if you get my meaning. We’re satisfied now that the fellow cleared out; we were making things too hot for him. The Political Officers found traces of his work as far north as Gaza, we were told, so there must have been plenty of money behind him.”

“I wonder?”

“Well?”

“Nothing very much. It just struck me, though, suppose this fellow had finished his work down here and was now working on the other side of the river. If the Wogs are going to make any move it will have to be during the next rains, which aren’t far off; it’s the only time they could make contact across the desert.”

“But I still don’t quite get the drift of this, Baring,” said Brazier. “Who are you actually looking for?”

“I was trying to find out something about this fellow Wiseman.”

“A European?”

“Of course.”

“But you don’t think he’s the fellow——”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about him, and that’s a fact. I’m acting more on hunch than anything else. All I know is that he’s got a list of the names of all the sheikhs in this part of the world who count, and I had an idea I’d seen him before, dressed as an Arab.”

“What sort of fellow is he?”

“A Swede. Tall chap; good-looking in a way with a fine set of teeth spoiled by one gold one.”

Brazier started. “A gold tooth, did you say?”

“That’s what I said.”

“That reminds me of something. I seem to have read something about a gold tooth lately.” Brazier wrinkled his forehead as he tried to recall the

connection. Then he went to his safe and took out a pile of buff-coloured docketts marked "Secret." He glanced through one or two of them, but laid them aside. Then he took another containing only a white foolscap sheet, a blue minute, and a photograph. "This is it," he said, and tossed the photograph on to his desk. "Is that anything like the fellow?" he asked.

Guy looked at the photograph and caught his breath. It was a head and shoulders portrait of a man in a loose, crumpled shirt; the face was unshaven and surmounted by a mop of dark hair. But the face was the face of Wiseman. He laid the photograph down, thinking quickly, but speaking slowly.

"Who is this bird?" he asked.

"A fellow we were asked to look out for at one time. That photo was taken in quod I believe; he was in for slave and hashish-running but, of course, that might mean anything. The docket came to us from H.Q.M.E.^[6] Fellow must be a queer fish from his record; here it is, take a look at it."

^[6] Headquarters, Middle East.

Guy took the docket which had been stamped "Secret" with a large rubber stamp, and read:

A/I, H.Q.M.E.

To A/I, Aden.

ERICH VON LERTZHARDT.

Information is wanted concerning the above-named, who may be in your Command.

DESCRIPTION

Eyes, brown. Hair, dark brown. Height, 6 feet. One gold tooth, front. Nat., German. B. 1893, Dessau. Educated Deutsches Eck Military Academy. War service: Cavalry (Middle East). German Imperial Air Service (Western Front). Served with distinction in and afterwards commanded 19th Jagdstaffel, Douai, 1917-1918. Awarded Iron Cross, First Class. Record reveals sixteen victories.

Post-War: Foreign Legion. Morocco and Syria. Did not complete service; reason unknown. Speaks English (fluently), French (fluently), Arabic (fluently), Persian (slightly). Believed to have been concerned with slave and hashish traffic, Red Sea,

1925-1928. Deported from Egypt 1931, but is believed to have returned to Middle East.

Guy drew a long breath when he came to the end.

“Our people are very thorough over these little things, aren’t they?” observed Brazier, smiling.

“Very,” agreed Guy.

“Well, is that your man?”

“It may be,” replied Guy, thinking swiftly. Just what prompted the words when he knew quite well that the face of the man staring at him out of the photograph was Wiseman, he did not know. He only knew that he wanted to think before he acted. He knew that he should have said, “Yes, that is the man; he is now in Baghdad,” but foremost in his mind was the knowledge that Sheila and her uncle were involved, and he wanted to think the matter out before making a definite statement.

“You’d better make sure,” suggested Brazier. “It’s getting hot; what about a drink? Have you finished with this stuff?” He replaced the contents of the docket.

“Yes, thanks,” replied Guy mechanically. “I think I’ll be getting back.”

“Already?”

“Yes. Cronell is down with heatstroke, and I’m holding the fort, so the sooner I’m back the better. If I start right away, I can just get to Heliopolis to-day. Cheerio, sir.”

“Cheerio, Baring. Remember me to Freddy Winton when you see him; he’s still at Hinaidi, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I will. Cheerio.”

Deep in thought Guy returned to the Mess, collected his kit, and paid his mess bill. Then he hurried to the hangars and within a few minutes was retracing his course to Baghdad. He broke his journey at Cairo, and spent a day at Villa Victoria, Headquarters of the Middle East Command, to try to pick up some further information about Wiseman, or Von Lertzhardt, to give him his right name. But he learned nothing more than he already knew, except that the original instructions concerning the German had been sent out by the Air Ministry.

On the evening of the third day he landed at Hinaidi, five days after he had left, and taxied his machine to the hangars. It was nearly dark, and he was very tired; nevertheless, he intended going to Baghdad to see what had transpired in his absence. But Fisher, who had seen him land, was waiting for him outside Station Headquarters.

“Good work. What luck?” he asked, as Guy joined him.

“I’ve found out a thing or two,” admitted Guy, “so I’m going to slip into Baghdad and have a word with old Garner.”

“You won’t find him in Baghdad.”

“Why not?”

“He’s gone. The party left for Prensiss three days ago.”

Guy looked at him in blank astonishment. “Then Ali let me down,” he declared. “He told me he would have no difficulty in holding them up.”

“It wasn’t his fault; he did his part all right, but this fellow Wiseman must be full of money. As soon as the trouble started he went out and bought two cars and a lorry, and off they went. Said he would get his labour locally—at least that’s the rumour, but how true it is, of course, I don’t know. Wiseman hasn’t advertised his plans. All I can say for certain is that he’s gone.”

Guy’s jaw set grimly. “I see,” he said slowly, “I see.” Then, with a change of tone, he added, “Right-ho, Fish, I’ll tell you all about it in the morning,” and turned towards the door.

“But hold hard, what did you find out at Aden?”

“I can’t tell you all about it now,” replied Guy casually, “I’ll let you see a written report about it to-morrow. I want to make quite sure about a few things first, so I shall slip over to Prensiss first thing in the morning.”

“Who are you going to take with you?”

“Nobody.”

Fisher opened his eyes wide. “You’ll get into trouble, flying about solo; you know the regulations,” he said seriously. “You should have another machine with you, anyway. If you happen to force-land, there will be one hell of a row at the Court of Inquiry, and I shall be for the high-jump as well as you.”

Guy thought for a moment. “Perhaps you’re right, Fish,” he agreed. “Very well, detail an escort. Ask Pip Bryant to come. I tell you what, we needn’t actually go together. Tell him to take off, say, half an hour after me. There is no need for him to land at Prensiss; tell him to cruise around and keep an eye on things. When I leave, we’ll rendezvous over Prensiss and come back together. How’s that?”

“Fine, but I’d rather you took somebody in the back seat with you.”

“I don’t want anybody. If you must know the truth, I’ve got an idea I might bring Miss Forbes back with me, but for God’s sake keep your mouth shut about it.”

Fisher looked at him curiously. "Well, I suppose you know what you're doing," he said disapprovingly.

"I think so. See you later."

Guy went on towards his quarters calling in the Mess on the way to collect his mail. There was only one letter, and he took it down from the rack quickly. The handwriting was Sheila's. With a curious sensation of uneasiness he tore open the envelope, but he was quite unprepared for the news it contained. The letter was dated three days previously, and had been written at the Maude.

"Dear Guy," he read, "It is not easy for me to write this letter to you, but it would be unfair if I did not. Professor Wiseman and I are engaged. He had already spoken to Uncle Henry when I last saw you, although I did not know it at the time, but he asked me to marry him that evening.

"As far as you and I are concerned the position is utterly hopeless, so it is no good our meeting and going over it all again. Perhaps it is the best thing that could have happened. There is no more I can say, but I do hope you will understand. I hope we shall always remain friends. Best of luck, yours sincerely, Sheila."

Guy re-read the letter. He was still staring at it when Fisher passed him on his way to the ante-room. He paused as he caught sight of Guy's face. "Not bad news, I hope, old boy?" he ventured.

Guy started. "No," he said, as he folded the letter and put it in his pocket. "Nothing like that."

CHAPTER IV

AFTER dinner he returned to his quarters to think the matter over, for Sheila's letter had thrown all his plans, personal and professional, into chaos. He had had ample time during the long hours in the air on his return flight from Aden to think out a course of action, and he had decided to follow the one dictated by duty. He could hardly do otherwise. Von Lertzhardt was not a criminal in the ordinary sense of the word, and in any case, even if he was warned, he could hardly leave a country like Iraq without being apprehended by the authorities if they decided to arrest him. In order to avoid Sheila and her uncle being dragged into the affair, he had decided, before reporting the matter officially, to warn them of what was likely to happen, hoping they would be able to find an excuse to leave the country before official action was taken. Von Lertzhardt would, he had hoped, proceed to the excavations, and an armoured-car would do the rest. He did not for one moment suppose that Sheila or her uncle were actually implicated in von Lertzhardt's machinations, whatever they were, and had decided on this plan solely to save them any unwelcome publicity in the matter. Otherwise, they might be kept hanging about Baghdad or Cairo for an interminable length of time, particularly if the matter assumed an international aspect, while courts sat and correspondence was carried on between Headquarters and the Air Ministry.

Whatever happened, he concluded, he would have to get them out of Iraq before the business began; after that the authorities could do what they pleased with von Lertzhardt and take as much time over it as they wished. That is what he had intended to do, but Sheila's letter made such a course distasteful, if not impossible. He hated the idea of being party to the arrest of a man who everyone in their circle would quickly recognise as his rival. Whatever was said or done they would think he had been actuated primarily by motives of personal prejudice or spite, and they could hardly be blamed for it.

Far into the night he sat under his *punkah* pondering the problem. If the German was the mischief-maker of the Aden hinterland, and it began to look as if he might be, were the authorities aware of it, or was he wanted for quite a different reason? Was von Lertzhardt the man he had seen with Ibn-Matuk two years ago at Aden, or the man named on the secret minute, or both? If

the former, what was his object in stirring up trouble? For whom was he working? Germany? Definitely no. Germany had no ambitions in the Middle East since the Berlin-Baghdad dream was dispelled in 1918. France? Possibly. French agents were always active in the region of the coveted Suez Canal; and the French were in Syria, the western boundary of Iraq. Italy? That was not impossible. Italy would like, but hardly dare. Russia? He got up and studied the map on the wall. Russia was active, very active in Persia, he knew that. Soviet anti-British propoganda was rampant, and responsible for the Persian Government's step, in opposition to the interests of Great Britain, in the building of the railway from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf, almost touching the oil fields, *en route*. Russia had never abandoned her policy of acquisition in the direction of Persia and Afghanistan, the gateway to India from the north, and would not rest until she had her warm-water port on the Persian Gulf. Again, had not Russian and German pilots flown the Junkers machines on the Persian air lines? Von Lertzhardt was a pilot. Had he been one of them?

The man could not be working for personal reasons, that was quite certain, because of the money that must be behind him. Of all the countries that might be concerned it looked as if Russia would be the most likely to start anti-British propoganda in Iraq. The whole thing was a jig-saw puzzle that would, no doubt, fit together one day. Obviously, his first act must be to get the innocent victims of the scheme, who had smoothed von Lertzhardt's path of entry into the country, out of the way. After that the German could be dealt with in the usual way.

Guy slept for a couple of hours, and was awakened, weary and unrefreshed, by the roar of the engines of a Mosul-bound patrol taking off. He dressed, drank a cup of coffee in the Mess, then made his way to the hangars and ordered his machine out. After a few words with Fisher, who told him that the second machine was following him as arranged, he climbed into his seat, and headed towards the scene of the excavations.

Leading Aircraftsman Clark, his fitter, and Aircraftsman Boyle, his rigger, watched him critically as he took off.

"Pretty to watch," murmured Boyle approvingly, as the pilot held the machine down for a moment before zooming high at the far side of the aerodrome, with a confidence born of long experience.

"Pretty, but *moost*,"^[7] declared Clark, who came from Plaistow, but had served in India. "'E'll buy it one day. D'you remember old Frosty Frogley's crash down at Basra? 'E was taking off like that. Flew straight into an air-pocket—that's what they called it—in the path of a dust-devil. The kite fell

straight out of his hands into the deck. Couldn't 'ave been nothing else. He didn't stall her, I'll swear; I was watching him."

[7] Hindustani—mad

"What's the matter with him to-day, anyway?" muttered Boyle, who came from Kensington. "Did you hear him fly off at the handle at me? Said she was flying left wing low all the way to Heliopolis. What else does he expect in these infernal bumps? I could have tied knots in his wires when he got back last night."

"I know what's wrong with 'im all right," declared Clark. "'Is gel's back again in Baghdad. Nutty Almond told me; he drove him in. 'E was the same last year when she was 'ere. Nothing right. Tore my guts out because his engine packed up and let 'im down near Mosul; as if I could see the inside of the perishing metal."

"This sex-business is the cause of half the trouble in the world," observed Boyle philosophically. "That and money."

"Money! What would be the use of money if there weren't any women? No! If you did away with sex the world would run like a barrer down the Old Kent Road."

"With nobody to stop it. What would happen to the population? People don't have children for the sake of having them."

"I reckon you're right, I've got four at 'ome. But to my way of thinking the 'ole business ought to 'ave been better arranged; it's either too much or it ain't enough. It would have been just as simple to 'ave only one sex, everyone to give birth every two or three years, by spontaneous combustion, so to speak. We should get a bit of extra leave then once in a while. That's what it ought to 'ave been, or else have more sexes, say, three or four."

"I'm afraid my imagination stops short at two."

"Two ain't enough; the world's sick of only two sexes. They've been doing the same thing for too long; that's what makes books all alike. The fellows who write 'em have worked on those two for so long that it doesn't give 'em a chance—see? Now, suppose there were four sexes. One-quarter could be males, one-quarter females, one-quarter both, and the other quarter neither. You can see 'ow that would liven things up with 'alf an eye. Ring the changes four ways instead of two. That opens up new possibilities, don't it?"

“That would be a bit hard on the ‘neithers’.”

“Damned ’ard, but what the eye doesn’t see the ’art doesn’t grieve, in a manner of speaking. I saw those unucks when I was down in Egypt with forty-five Squadron, and they didn’t seem to mind.”

“What about the others, the—er—‘boths’?”

“Ah, now you’ve said it; they’d be the lucky ones. They’d ’ave to be allowed to marry both ways. If I was one, for instance, a man could marry me and I could marry a woman. That ought to give the blokes who write books something to work on.”

“You’re getting crude.”

“Rude! Me! I’ve got a sense of ’umour, that’s all. There would be drawbacks, of course. I mean, fancy making up to a girl for six months, and then finding she was a ‘neither.’”

“In that case she wouldn’t be a girl.”

“No, that’s right enough. Well, then, they’d have to wear different togs. Four sorts of togs instead of two. Blimey! What a time the tailors would ’ave. And I tell you wot, they could make the ‘neithers’ into airmen; then, if they all got wiped out no one would care a damn, how’s that?”

“You’d better turn your fertile imagination to more practical channels. Come on, here comes the Flight-Sergeant; we’d better get back to that machine.”

Together the two mechanics turned towards a partly-disabled Wapiti in the dim heart of the hangar.

Against a fifteen-mile-an-hour head-wind it took Guy just over two hours to reach his objective, the rock, and desert-bound village of Prensic. He circled the shapeless heaps of earth, all that remained of the once majestic Assyrian city, where the luxury and civilization of a mighty nation had given place to the wretchedness of a half-barbarous tribe, and then glided in to land on an open space between the mud hovels and the excavations. Leaving the propeller ticking over, he walked quickly towards the white tents that marked the European camp; he had a disagreeable task to perform and was anxious to get it over as soon as possible.

There were four tents, including a large one that was evidently used as a mess or general room. Outside one of the smaller tents that stood a little apart from the others stood a sweating Arab pony, with heaving flanks, obviously having been hard-ridden. A sound of voices came from within.

“You there, Professor?” called Guy loudly.

There was a moment's silence. Then the flap-door of the tent was thrust aside, and two figures appeared together; the German, and a Kurdish Arab who, after a swift, suspicious glance at each of the white men in turn, vaulted on the pony and galloped away.

"May I come in?" asked Guy.

"Of course. This is an unexpected pleasure."

"You heard my machine land, surely?"

"We heard a machine, but we did not know it had landed."

"That was rather a nasty-looking piece of work you had with you; who was he?" asked Guy.

"The headman of a village near a new site we have under observation."

"I see. Well, there is really no point in my reminding you that your permit only takes you to Prensia. But I have more important things to say to you, *von Lertzhardt*."

The German did not turn a hair; he put on his jacket before he spoke. "So," he said softly, "and the object of this talk?"

"To ask you to leave the country."

"And if I refuse?"

"You will not refuse. I am giving you a chance and you must know that, though to be quite frank, I'm not doing it for your sake. But for your opportune engagement to Miss Forbes you would be under arrest at this moment. In the circumstances, I am giving you an opportunity of getting out without a scandal. If you go, the others will go with you. I am holding up my report pending your departure."

"You wasted no time," sneered the German.

"My position involves certain duties, and I carry them out to the best of my ability."

"Such as spying in bedrooms?"

Guy flushed, but held himself in hand. "Put it that way if you like," he said shortly, "but that sort of talk at this juncture will not make things easier for either of us. Try and grasp the fact that I am trying to avoid unpleasantness, even though by so doing I either exceed or fail in my duty, whichever way you care to look at it. I have told nobody what I know—yet."

"How much do you know?"

"More than enough to warrant your arrest. Do you want me to enumerate the items?"

"Have you told—her?"

“No.”

“And your suggestion is?”

“It is not a suggestion, von Lertzhardt; it is an order. You will give me your word that you will leave this country immediately and never return. The matter may end there as far as I am concerned.”

“And you will not tell Miss Forbes about this?”

“Whether I do or not depends upon your future actions.”

Von Lertzhardt’s hand went to his pocket. “It is in my mind to see that you never tell her,” he said grimly.

Guy could see the muzzle of the revolver in the German’s pocket pointing at him. “Have it that way if you like,” he said coldly.

Von Lertzhardt took the revolver from his pocket. “You should have made your report before you came,” he sneered.

Guy realized that he had put himself in the man’s hands. “Go ahead,” he said quietly, “I’m unarmed. If this is how you always did your fighting, I can understand how you were successful.”

The German’s nostrils quivered. He raised his hand, but paused and listened intently. Rising and falling on the still air came the unmistakable roar of an aero-engine.

“It’s only my escort,” Guy told him. “He will be here in five minutes and he has a machine-gunner with him. You will have to make haste.”

Sheila’s voice, coming towards them, could be heard not far away.

“Perhaps it would be better if I accepted your invitation,” said the German smoothly, replacing the revolver in his pocket. “Very well, it shall be as you say; I will leave here in the morning, and shake the dust of Iraq from my feet as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you. That would be a much more sensible procedure. I will make arrangements for your arrival in Baghdad to be notified to me.”

Guy turned on his heel and left the tent without another word. He was angry with himself for the part he had played, now that his mission was accomplished. He knew that his clear duty was to have reported the result of his investigations to the proper quarter immediately, and a resolve to resign his commission as soon as the business was over had already half-formed in his mind. As he hurried towards his machine he saw Sheila and her uncle hurrying to intercept him. He would have avoided the meeting had it been possible, but it was not.

“Hullo, Guy. What brings you here?” Sheila began cheerfully. “Why the hurry? We saw the machine land, and guessed it was you. Where have you

been?”

Guy turned to meet them. “Good morning, Sheila—good morning, Mr. Garner. I’ve just been having a word with the Professor,” he said evenly.

“Is he back then?” cried the older man.

“Back? Has he been away?”

Mr. Garner removed his solar topee and mopped his forehead with a large handkerchief. “Where hasn’t he been,” he said. “We’ve hardly seen him since we arrived. He’s been rushing about looking for more mounds—sites, you know—as if there isn’t enough to do here.”

“In which direction?” asked Guy quickly.

“Over that way, chiefly,” answered Mr. Garner, pointing to the jagged blue peaks of Kurdistan. “Lord! Isn’t it hot.”

Sheila had been watching Guy closely. “What is the matter?” she asked suddenly.

“Nothing very much, but there may be a little trouble with the Wogs up this way. We always try to keep visitors on the safe side, you know.”

“But they wouldn’t hurt us, surely?”

“They might. I don’t want to alarm you, but rumours have reached us about a raid in course of preparation, so I’ve just slipped over to warn the Professor that it might be wise to return to Baghdad until things are quiet again.”

“But why did you go to the Professor and not come to us? Surely, knowing us as you do, you might have told us all. I believe you were going away without speaking to us.”

“Well, I thought, it—er—struck me that the Professor would be more likely to pay attention. Your uncle’s enthusiasm might have kept him here in spite of the warning.”

“How long have you known about this?” she asked suspiciously.

“Only a few days.”

“Does this mean that you want us to leave here?”

“Yes, I’m afraid it does.”

“You didn’t want us to come here in the first place, did you?”

Guy hesitated. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” he said. “We have to be careful.”

“Then why did you not say so at once and be frank about it? The Professor said at the time that it was you who caused the trouble with our porters, in Baghdad, and it begins to look as if he was right. Why let the

Professor go to all the expense of getting us here, if all the time you did not intend us to remain?"

"That was his own affair," said Guy curtly. "We have to try to look after people, and we act as circumstances indicate."

"I believe you're being petty," she said coolly. "I don't think there is any cause for alarm at all; you just don't want us here. There was no difficulty last year," she reminded him.

Guy looked at her for a moment without speaking. Then, "Things were rather different," he said.

"So I perceive."

Guy turned and faced her squarely. "Sheila," he said earnestly, "please believe me when I tell you that there is a very good reason why you should leave this place; if you remain, you may regret it all your life."

"Don't be dramatic."

Sheila spoke slowly, for against her will something in his manner impressed her.

"I'm serious," went on Guy. "Shall I tell you the wisest thing you could do?"

"What is it?"

"Get into the back seat of my machine and let me fly you back to Baghdad; you can wait at the Maude until the others join you."

"Fly back with you!" cried Sheila incredulously. "That is the last thing I should be likely to do. I cannot imagine any circumstances that would induce me to do such a thing."

"Perhaps you can't but perhaps you haven't much imagination," snapped Guy, his temper rising. "One day you may be glad to."

"What's the argument about?" Von Lertzhardt, suave and cool in clean ducks, joined them.

"No argument. I was merely inviting Miss Forbes to fly back with me," replied Guy curtly.

"A hazard that I, for one, should be sorry to take," smiled the German.

"I've told them what I have already told you," went on Guy quickly. "There may be trouble in the hills."

Von Lertzhardt shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps," he said, "but I don't think so, or I should have heard about it."

"But you told me you would return to Baghdad," Guy reminded him.

"I told you that I would leave here in the morning," said von Lertzhardt.

“Leave here in the morning!” cried Mr. Garner. “Preposterous! We are on the eve of the most important discoveries.”

“So I believe,” nodded Guy grimly.

“Do you mean that we’ve *got* to go?”

Guy drew a deep breath; the situation was becoming difficult. “If you don’t mind, I’ll leave you to discuss the matter with—er—the Professor. He knows as much about it as I do—possibly more.”

“Why doesn’t that dreadful machine go away; one can’t hear oneself speak!” cried Sheila irritably, holding her hands over her ears as the second Wapiti swooped low over them.

“He’ll go when I go,” Guy told her. “Even I don’t travel far in this country without an escort—a fact you might bear in mind. Good-bye.” He walked quickly towards his machine, climbed into the cockpit, and joined the other still circling overhead. Side by side the two machines turned towards Hinaidi.

CHAPTER V

FIVE thousand feet below them a tiny speck was moving slowly across the face of the desert; Guy noticed it, but paid no attention. Solitary travellers were not unusual.

Mazrak Mahomet, of the Iraq Levies, glanced up as the machines flashed overhead, and waved joyously. The way was long, and the weather was hot, even for Iraq, and he was thirsty; but he did not mind, for he was going home on leave. Nearly four days had elapsed since he had left the *menzil*,^[8] at Mosul, carrying two bags of dried bread, some water under his *gumbez*,^[9] and a little charcoal, for fuel is scarce in the desert. To-morrow, Allah be praised, he would reach his home at Prensiss, where he would tell his father, and others, of his adventures as a soldier of the *farengi*.^[10] He was tempted to make a detour by the village of Mel-Alik, where there would be much story-telling, but it was nearly ten miles off his course, so he held stubbornly on his way.

[8] Camp.

[9] Under-robe.

[10] Foreigner.

Presently the sun began to sink in the west, but still he walked on, although he took off his *kafieh*^[11] to breathe more freely. The moon, a great luminous crescent, rose in the sky, and still he marched on, but at last, finding shelter under a thick clump of camel thorn bushes, he sat down. He drank sparingly of his water, sipping it drop by drop with ineffable relish, and then lay down and slept. Once he awoke and listened intently as the muffled sound of galloping hooves reached his ears. “*Beduw!*”^[12] he breathed. “God’s will be done.” He was tempted to crawl farther into the bushes, but his military training excited his curiosity and he peeped over the edge of the dune on which the camel thorn grew. A single horseman was

galloping westward. He watched him until he merged into the night and then crept back to his shelter.

[11] Headcloth.

[12] Bedouins.

He awoke again before dawn, ate a piece of dried bread, softened with water and then continued on his way with no living thing to dispute his path. The sun rose and a pearly glow crept over the wilderness. Suddenly he stopped dead as the sound of distant rifle shots reaches his ears; he dropped on to his knees and stared ahead under the palm of his hand. Slowly, above the edge of a high dune a few miles away, rose a great pillar of white smoke. He looked at it for a moment and then started to run towards it. He came to a high dune, threw himself down and peeped over the rim. Below, perhaps two miles distant, lay Prensia. From it, a mighty cloud of smoke rose into the still air; below, tongues of flame licked hungrily upwards. Far to the north a wide swirl of dust was moving across the desert.

“*Ghrazzwat*,”^[13] muttered the Levite, “it is the will of God.” Then he turned his face towards Mel-Alik and ran.

[13] Raid.

Two hours later Flying-Officer Edward Brett, Officer Commanding No. 23 Armoured Car Company standing outside his temporary headquarters on the outskirts of Mel-Alik, watched his approach, over a barricade of ammunition boxes, without emotion. It was the first living thing he had seen that morning except the crew of his car, and a number of praying *mantis*,^[14] that he had evacuated from his tent. The bivouac stood in the centre of a round horizon, always the same, with a circle of flaming sky overhead, and he found the landscape monotonous. The moving figure was at least something to watch. Presently, as he watched, his stare became more fixed and he stirred slightly to glance over his shoulder at Corporal Clinton, his wireless operator, who was leaning languidly against the portable wireless mast as he regarded the other members of the crew who were cleaning their equipment.

[14] Insects common in Iraq. So named because of the attitude they adopt when at rest.

“Clinton!” called the officer.

“Sir!”

“Take a look through my glasses; is that fellow staggering, or is it mirage?”

The corporal entered the car and returned with a pair of binoculars, which he raised to his eyes and adjusted.

“He’s staggering, sir. Looks all in.”

“Take a man with you and go and meet him. Stand by, everybody!” Flying-Officer Brett was taking no chances.

The corporal and the airman he had detailed to go with him had not far to walk, for the newcomer, at the sight of the limp Union Jack, found a final burst of speed. With the two airmen supporting him he swayed up to the barricade and saluted. “*Ghrazzwat*—Prensis,” he croaked, and would have fallen, but the others caught him.

“Give him some water, Norris—not too much. Put a dash of condensed milk in it. Clinton, send a signal.”

The corporal sprang to his post. “Ready, sir.”

“O.C. No. 23 A.C.C., Mel-Alik to Station H.Q., Hinaidi. Native reports raid at Prensis. Stop. Proceeding to Prensis with all speed. Stop. Will report,” dictated Brett. “Get that off as quickly as you can,” he told the wireless operator. “Jump to it the rest of you, let’s be moving.”

CHAPTER VI

AS SHEILA watched the two machines disappear into the blue she experienced a twinge of uneasiness; there seemed to be something very deliberate and final in the swiftly-diminishing roar of the engines. She realized that with Guy's departure their link with civilization had been broken, and a sudden doubt assailed her. Whether he had been impelled by personal motives, which she now knew she had rather assumed without giving the matter consideration, or not, the menace must be a real one or he would hardly have dared to have acted as he had. And he had been so very much in earnest. She turned to speak to the others, but they were already on their way to the tents; they separated when they reached them, each going to his own. She hurried after her uncle and found him sitting, staring dejectedly at the sandy floor.

"I do hope you won't let this upset you, dear," she said quickly, patting his shoulder.

"We're leaving," he replied bitterly.

"He is really going, then?" she replied breathlessly.

"It seems like it."

"When?"

"In the morning."

"Must we really go?"

"You heard what that fellow said—what's his name—Baring. I suppose he knows what he's talking about."

"But the Professor pooh-poohed the idea of a raid."

Mr. Garner flung up his hands with a despairing gesture. "I know," he said, "that's what I don't understand. Now he says he's going."

"Well, refuse to go," Sheila declared furiously.

"That was the attitude I took."

"What did he say?"

"He just smiled and said, 'Very well,' but don't you see what it means?"

"What does it mean?"

"Think, my dear girl, think. Haven't you realized that this entire outfit is Wiseman's? The cars, the men, the supplies—everything is his, has been

paid for by him. If he goes, everything goes with him. Do you seriously suppose that we can remain here without him? In any case, there would be no point in it since we have no money to pay for labour.”

Sheila sat down suddenly, very pale. “But did he actually say he would leave us here, like that?” she asked, unbelievably.

“He did not say it, but that was the obvious inference—if we chose to stay.”

“Then I’ll go and talk to him at once.”

“Wait a minute.” Old Garner looked at his niece steadily. “Sheila, my dear,” he said anxiously, “there is something about this I don’t understand. The Professor has changed; I could sense it as we walked across here. Not openly, perhaps, but there is something—something. I felt it as soon as that aeroplane went away. There is something different about him.”

“How could he be different; why should he be?”

“Why, indeed? I confess I do not know, but there it is. He was almost brusque with me when I protested.”

“But this is outrageous. He can’t let us down like this; let me go and speak to him.”

“One moment, my dear.” The old man dropped his voice. “I wonder—was there more in this than young Baring told us?”

“You mean about a raid? I think that must be true or he would not have said it.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I will tell you what I think. I think he came here to-day with a very definite object, quite apart from the warning about the raid. It looks to me as if he has *ordered* Wiseman back to Baghdad.”

“Ordered him. How could he do such a thing?”

“By telling him to go—that’s how,” her uncle told her.

“But why should he? Surely if we are prepared to risk a raid——”

Her uncle held up his hand. “It’s something more than that,” he said slowly. “If it had been nothing more than that the Professor would have told him to go to the dickens. Besides, we could have taken steps for protection. I haven’t had long to think about this, but I have a suspicion that this has come about through something Wiseman has done since he has been here.”

“But he has done nothing!”

“How do we know? After all, we have seen very little of him. Now I think about it, it does seem rather odd that he should dash off looking for more ruins instead of concentrating on the work here. I’m afraid he has over-stepped the conditions of his permit, or done something foolish in one

of the villages he has visited. The authorities will not risk a disturbance, and rightly so.”

“But what on earth could he do?”

“That is a question I cannot answer. The fact remains that we have no alternative but to pack our trunks and prepare to leave in the morning.”

“Don’t do anything yet; perhaps I can persuade him.”

There was a soft footfall on the sand outside, and the Professor’s voice called, “May I come in?”

“What is all this panic about?” Sheila demanded instantly.

“Panic? Really, my dear, you exaggerate. There is no panic. I have simply said we must go; there is no desperate hurry.”

“But what a dreadful shame after coming all this way!”

“I’m afraid we have no choice in the matter.”

“Very well, you may go, but we shall remain here.”

Her uncle started. “But, Sheila, my child!” he cried. “What is the use of talking like that? If the Professor goes, we must go.”

“Not necessarily. I have a little money saved up, only a little, but enough to last us here for a few weeks with a small party of labourers. I will send a message to Baghdad asking Guy to send us out some stores. *He* will do all he can for us, I know.”

“Do you think so, after what you told him to-day?” The sneer in the Professor’s voice may have been unintentional.

Sheila flushed. “He was merely doing his duty,” she said.

“But, my dear, he would be the first to object to our remaining here. Remember he came here to warn us to leave,” her uncle reminded her.

“Very well, then, let us leave everything here just as it is while I take one of the cars to Baghdad to find out just how matters stand. I will go straight to Air Commodore Malling, at Headquarters. I met him last year. You two can go on with your work; I will start immediately.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Wiseman told her shortly.

“Absurd? You tell me I am absurd when I have made the most reasonable suggestion so far?”

“You would not be safe in the desert.”

“Nonsense! What about Gertrude Bell? She went everywhere and came to no harm. If there is a risk, then it is a risk I am prepared to take for the success of the expedition. If you feel like that about it, though, let us all go, as I suggested at first.”

"I'm sorry," said Wiseman, "but you can't go."

"*Can't* go! Do you mean you will not let me go?"

"If you put it like that."

"But you have no right to refuse to allow me to go; that decision rests with my uncle."

"Very well, if he agrees, how would you go?"

"By car, of course."

"The cars are mine."

Sheila stared at him for a moment white-faced, as she understood his meaning. "Professor Wiseman," she said curtly, "will you please be frank and tell us the truth of this matter? I think you owe it to us."

"I am sorry, but I've nothing more to say. You will do as I tell you."

"Then I think you assume the prerogative prematurely," she told him coldly. "You had better take back your ring."

She took the ring from her finger and laid it on the folding camp-table. "Now you may go if you wish, but I shall not go with you; I will get one of the villagers to take a message to the nearest R.A.F. post."

Wiseman turned very white. "But, Sheila——"

"Oh, please, please!" cried Garner, starting up. "Don't let us have all this bother. We have that interfering young hound Baring to blame for this," he added bitterly.

"I don't believe it," cried Sheila. "He was acting under orders!"

"Whose orders?" Wiseman asked her sharply.

"I don't know and I don't care, but I'm certain of one thing."

"And that is?"

Sheila looked at the two men with a peculiar expression on her face before she replied. "Whatever he has done, and whatever the reason of his visit here to-day, he was thinking primarily of my safety," she said slowly and deliberately.

Wiseman laughed harshly. "I didn't suppose he was thinking of mine," he said tersely. "Hasn't it occurred to you that he has a good reason for wishing me out of the way?"

"Are you suggesting that Guy Baring is a cad?"

"I say what I think."

"Then if you think that is the reason, why go?"

"That's true enough, Wiseman," observed Garner.

“Very well, since you force me to the truth, I must tell you that your young friend has ordered me out of the country.”

They both stared at him in astonishment. “Out of the country?” echoed Garner, catching his breath.

“He said so.”

Sheila’s jaw set grimly. “Then there must be a reason for it or he would not dare to take such a step,” she declared with more courage than she felt, as a glimmering of something like the truth struck her. She realized suddenly that the matter was far more important and urgent than Guy had pretended, and now she thought she could understand his reticence.

“I think this discussion has gone on long enough; further debate will serve no useful purpose,” replied Wiseman coldly. “We leave here in the morning.”

“Why are you so—final?”

“You may as well know the facts. I gave Baring my word that I would go, and I’ve never broken my word yet.”

“But why on earth did you do that?” demanded Sheila. “You should have refused to go.”

“Why persist with this interrogation? Do you suppose that I want to go?”

“It seems to me, Wiseman, that there is something behind all this,” observed Garner shortly. “Surely it was quite unnecessary for you to give your word without consulting us, unless, of course, Baring demanded it.”

Wiseman shrugged his shoulders. “We’re going round in circles,” he said quietly.

“We are, but to some extent that is inevitable if you will not explain this curious change in your attitude.”

“Surely it is your attitude that has changed.”

“Only because you are inconsistent. Frankly, Wiseman, this matter has taken a turn that I do not like; there are certain features that I cannot reconcile. In the first place, all was well until Baring came here this morning, ostensibly to warn us of an impending raid. Why did he go to you?”

“Because I’m the leader of the expedition.”

“That was not the reason; he hardly knows you. It would have been a far more natural thing for him to come to us, or speak to all three of us collectively. You pretended to laugh at his warning; now you admit he has ordered you out of the country. I very much doubt if any R.A.F. officer has the power or authority to do such a thing. In any case, I maintain that you

were certainly under no obligation to promise to return to Baghdad without consulting us. I have a right to know why you made this promise to return to Baghdad.”

“Baghdad was not stipulated, it was assumed.”

“Then you deceived Baring, and you have been deceiving us if you do not intend going to Baghdad. May I ask where you are going, if not to Baghdad?”

“I will tell you in the morning.”

“But this is preposterous. Why this secrecy?”

Wiseman shrugged his shoulders, but said nothing.

“Really, Wiseman,” went on Garner, “your behaviour is unpardonably insincere. Do you for one moment suppose that I, or my niece, are going to pack for an unknown destination in such undesirable circumstances? It borders on coercion. Where are you going?”

“I repeat, I will tell you in the morning.”

“I demand to know now.”

“I refuse to tell you.”

“Then you will travel alone,” declared Garner. “I regret to say it, but I fear our association must end.”

“I’m sorry but I cannot agree. Will you please be ready to leave first thing in the morning. Believe me when I say that I do not wish to cause you more inconvenience than is unavoidable.”

“Am I to understand that you are resorting to *force majeure!*” cried Garner incredulously.

“I’m prepared to, if necessary.”

“Good God!” Garner sat down suddenly. “This is an outrage. May I ask why you insist that we should go with you?”

“You may. I am in love with your niece, and I intend marrying her. That is the reason.” Wiseman picked up the ring, dropped it in his pocket, and left the tent.

There was silence for some moments after he had gone, then, “I’ve been a fool,” announced Sheila slowly. “Guy was right; I should have flown back with him.”

“And I was a fool to allow you to come on such a trip as this,” muttered her uncle, with a worried frown. “I cannot understand Wiseman’s attitude.”

“Recriminations will do no good; obviously we must get word through to Baghdad. I will write a note to Guy and hire one of the villagers to take

it.”

“But he could not reach Baghdad within two or three days; by the time he gets there, even if he had a fast horse, we shall have left—if Wiseman means what he says.”

Even as he spoke the sounds of a horse being hard-ridden came from outside, and they both hurried to the door of the tent. An Arab was riding furiously towards the distant hills.

“There goes Wiseman’s messenger, or I am much mistaken,” observed Garner grimly. “I have seen that fellow about the camp and wondered who he was, but I thought he was some casual acquaintance Wiseman had picked up at one of the villages. I wonder”—he caught his breath sharply—“if that is the direction Wiseman intends to take? My dear girl, what can we do?”

“I’ll write a letter to Guy; I can think of nothing else. It is out of the question for us to try and cross that ghastly desert without transport and supplies. I will let him know what has happened and he will follow us you may be sure. And, Uncle, I think, if you don’t mind, I’ll stay here to-night.”

“I would not dream of your doing otherwise. I wonder if it would be any use going to Wiseman and appealing to him to reconsider the matter. I still cannot believe he means what he says.”

“I’m afraid he does. He is not interested in the excavations. He never was. I can see that now. He intends that we shall go with him. Lend me your pen a moment, I will write the letter.”

“Dear Guy,” she wrote, “something has happened here. Professor Wiseman has just said that he is not going to Baghdad; he will not tell us where he is going, but insists on our going with him. I cannot believe that the matter is very serious, but we cannot help feeling rather alarmed; I wish you would get in touch with us. We shall do our best to remain here until you come. Yours sincerely, Sheila.”

“Now I will go and get someone to take it,” she said, as she addressed the envelope.

“No, I will go; I can speak the language,” said Garner.

He took the letter and threw back the flap of the tent. An Arab, with a rifle in the crook of his arm, stood at the entrance.

“What does this mean?” demanded Garner, knowing perfectly well what it meant. The Arab was gentle, but resolute, and Garner turned to his niece, white with anger. “To think that such a thing could happen,” he raged. “I’ll have the law——”

“There is only one law in this country, and that is the Air Force,” Sheila told him swiftly. “Give me the letter.” She picked up a riding crop.

The Arab stood to bar her progress, but before he was aware of her intention she had raised the crop and brought it down with all her force across his face. Without another glance at him she hurried on in the direction of the village. She found the headman, a miserable, dried-up old man, and with some difficulty made him understand that the letter was to be taken to Baghdad. A handful of coins did more than mere words, and presently she returned to the tent well satisfied with the result of her errand.

An hour later the flap was thrown aside, and the man who had been on guard tossed something inside with a malicious leer. Sheila knew that it was her letter before she picked it up. It had not been opened, but across the front of the envelope, in Wiseman’s neat hand, had been written, “I am sorry, but I cannot permit correspondence at present.”

Sheila clenched her hands until the knuckles showed white. “He has the audacity to do that,” she breathed.

“I’m afraid we are only just beginning to understand the Professor,” said Garner bitterly, “but if that villain so much as lays a hand on you——” He opened a box, took out a revolver and “broke” it to satisfy himself that it was loaded, but he flung it across the room with a curse as his eyes fell on the empty cylinders. “He has even been in here,” he exclaimed wrathfully. “Well, it seems to me that young Baring has got us into this mess; I only hope he’ll get us out of it, that’s all.”

“Not at all; he has already been here to get us out of it, but like fools we wouldn’t listen to him. I might have known——” She turned on her heel and under the watchful eye of the guard fetched her folding bed from her own tent opposite.

CHAPTER VII

SHEILA awoke the following morning with the instant knowledge that something had changed. Then she remembered, and after a swift glance at her uncle who was still sleeping, crossed to the door and peeped out. The Arab was still on guard, squatting on the sand a few yards away. It was dawn, the sky just turning from pink and gold to egg-shell blue, but people were already moving about, the slight noises they made being strangely magnified in the still air. From the village came the faint “*I-ee, I-ee, I-ee*”^[15] of men calling their camels, and the shrill “*Dhai! Yahh!*”^[16] of an early-moving driver. The Professor was talking to some men near the excavations, gesticulating as he spoke, as if endeavouring to force some point upon them. She noticed with surprise that he wore a *kafieh* over his head instead of the usual topee.

^[15] Native camel call.

^[16] “Rise! Go!”

Turning away she washed and dressed quickly, and woke her uncle. “The Professor is up, talking to the men,” she told him quickly.

“Well, if I’m not ready he’ll have to wait; I see no reason to hurry,” muttered the old man obstinately. “This is the most preposterous thing I ever heard of; I still find it hard to believe.”

“Well, here he comes,” she answered from the door, “so we shall soon know.”

“Are you ready?” asked Wiseman curtly, striding up.

“Ready for what?” asked Garner belligerently, as, still in his pyjamas, he dried his face with a towel.

“Ready to travel.”

“I may be presently if you will tell me where you are going.”

“That is where we are going,” replied Wiseman, and pointed to the distant hills.

“Are you raving mad, Wiseman?”

“I trust not.”

“But God alone knows what lies behind those hills.”

“You are mistaken, I know, also.”

“But that is Kurdistan, is it not?”

“It is.”

“And what in the name of heaven do you hope to find there?”

“The fulfilment of a dream for which I have laboured for many years.”

“I am pleased to notice that you are rather more communicative this morning,” observed Garner, sarcastically. “What is this dream?”

“I think I might even tell you that, now. It is the end of British rule in the Middle East.”

Garner stopped in the act of tying the laces of his sand shoes. “The end of *what?*” he ejaculated.

“I do not think I need repeat it; we shall watch the events of the next few days from the security of the frontier, and then, I hope, more leisurely towards my home in the Caucasus.”

“But, good God, man, you’re not going to take us to Russia!”

“I’m afraid I have no alternative. If I allowed you, personally, to return home, either now or in the future, you would, I suspect, induce your Government to take steps which might upset my domestic happiness.”

“You are quite right, I most certainly should. Well, I’m not going to Russia.”

“You are, but whether you ride in comfort or discomfort depends upon yourself.”

“But you can’t behave like this, Wiseman; it’s out of date; besides, I thought you were fond of Sheila?”

“I am; that is the only reason why I am burdening myself with you. I implore you to compose yourself to the——”

He broke off abruptly and stared through the tent door towards the hills, and then ran out a few paces as a babble of voices arose on the still air. An expression of annoyance swept over his face and he shaded his eyes with his right hand to see more clearly. The next instant he was shouting swift orders to the labourers who were running towards him in a wild panic. Then he turned sharply to the tent. “I cannot quite make out what is happening,” he said apologetically, “but there may be trouble. Never mind about dressing, Garner, let us go to the mess tent as if nothing is happening.”

Out in the open it was easy to see what had caused Wiseman's concern. Riding at breakneck speed in front of a huge cloud of dust came a large body of horsemen. A great cry of consternation arose from the village. "What is this?" asked Sheila tersely. "Is it a part of your programme for the—er—extermination of the British Empire?"

"No, it is not; to tell the truth, I don't understand it. It looks like a raid—surely they know I am here." He spoke quietly, as if to himself. There was no doubt that he meant what he said.

The others followed him to the large rectangular tent that was used for meals, and watched the approach of the horsemen. Wiseman's frown grew deeper, yet it did not seem to occur to him to seek safety in flight in one of the cars. His attitude indicated that there was no reason to suppose that they were in danger.

Just how far he was mistaken was made apparent when the leading horsemen reached the village. Appalling screams and wild yells rent the air; presently clouds of smoke began to curl upwards.

"Good God, Wiseman, they're firing the village!" cried Garner, with horror written on his face.

"I'm afraid they are," admitted the other, "but if they are, it is useless to try and stop them now. They are mad when they are like this."

"But are we to stand here looking on while these wretched people are being murdered? Many of them are Christians."

"I am not concerned with their religious denominations; if we attempt to interfere we should be likely to be murdered ourselves."

Sheila turned away, white-faced, and put her hands over her ears, but she looked round again a few moments later when the raiders came streaming up towards them, yelling, and thrashing their horses.

Wiseman awaited their arrival unperturbed. He flung up his hand and called aloud in a commanding voice as they surged round him, throwing themselves from their horses while still at the gallop. In a moment he was surrounded by a screaming, clamouring crowd, amongst whom Sheila recognized the Arab who had ridden out of camp the previous evening, and another, an evil-looking ruffian with a face deeply pitted with smallpox, whom she had also seen in the camp with Wiseman. He was now dressed in the clothes of a sheikh. She noticed his eyes on her more than once.

Presently Wiseman pushed his way through the crowd and rejoined them. "I'm afraid there is trouble," he said swiftly. "I don't understand it yet. They were promised something which they have not got, and they accuse me of planning to betray them. Someone has told them we were leaving

here. I am trying to pacify them, but whatever they do, offer no provocation. Behave normally.” Then he turned again to the mob and began speaking rapidly.

Sheila could not understand what he said, but she realized that the words were producing little or no effect. Whatever might be Wiseman’s usual relations with them, it was clear that they were now completely out of control. She felt her heart-strings tighten as her uncle caught her arm with a hand that trembled. “Get inside, my dear,” he whispered.

“I think it will be all right,” she replied quietly, but with a conviction she was far from feeling.

The end came suddenly. There was a sudden increase in the tumult, and the sheikh, followed by several others, poured into the tent. Sheila bit her lip to prevent herself from screaming. In the nightmare-like horror of the next few seconds things seemed to happen with a slow deliberation that was appalling, and with such vivid clarity that no detail escaped her. All fear seemed to vanish in the pent-up intensity of the moment and she watched with the fascination of a spectator watching a slow-motion film. Such movements as she made were purely instinctive.

The sheikh reached out and grabbed her arm. Wiseman, his face white with fury, seized him by the *abbas*^[17] and flung him clear. The sheikh moved like lightning. His hand went under his *gumbez*; he whipped out a pistol and fired at Wiseman’s head at point-blank range. There was a streak of flame and a deafening report. In a silence that could almost be felt. Wiseman swayed for an instant, then crumpled up and dropped to the floor like a garment falling from a peg. As he struck the ground pandemonium broke loose, and a scene followed, the details of which neither Sheila nor her uncle could afterwards clearly recollect. In a din that baffles description, rough hands seized them and dragged them outside. Horses appeared, rearing and snorting in the frenzy of noise. Sheila was picked up and flung on to one of them, and instinctively clutched at the rider to prevent herself from falling. Then they were galloping at full speed over the sand. A foul smell filled her nostrils and she tried to force herself farther from the man, but he only held her more tightly. She opened her eyes. Above her was the grinning face of the sheikh. All round them other horses were galloping.

[17] Camel-hair cape.

CHAPTER VIII

GUY was in his office at Station Headquarters, Hinaidi, when Leo Fisher entered.

“What about that report you were going to let me have?” asked the Adjutant.

“Wash-out. There was nothing to it,” replied Guy.

“You flew over to Prensic yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I went and had a word with them; they’re packing up.”

“What on earth for; they’ve only been there a week?”

“I know. They got hold of a rumour that the Wogs in the hills were restless and might start a war. Wiseman apparently got a bit nervous and decided to abandon the show; the others will go with him, of course. I gathered they will probably leave the country altogether, so there seemed to be no point in worrying the thing any farther.”

“But what about this war story—is there any truth in it, do you think?”

“I’m quite sure there isn’t. I hear the people farther south are peeved about something—a little matter of a strayed camel, I believe. They might cause trouble; but if there is one place in the country where peace, perfect peace, reigns—it is round Prensic. I didn’t tell them that, of course. If they go it’s one less responsibility for me. That reminds me; if you should happen to see any of them in Baghdad, and they mention this to you, don’t let me down. Let them think there was a chance of something happening, otherwise they’ll either say I don’t know my job or deliberately mislead them.”

“I understand. I can’t help wondering where this rumour started though.”

“Forget it: there will be no raid.”

A flight-sergeant, with the zig-zag badge of a qualified wireless operator on his sleeve, entered the room hurriedly. “Signal for you, sir,” he said.

Fisher took the slip and stared at it for so long that Guy became curious.

“What is it?” he asked.

The Adjutant looked at him suspiciously. “What the hell are you talking about?” he snapped. “The Wogs have raided Prensic.”

“Don’t be damn silly.”

“Silly, my eye! This signal’s from Brett. He’s at Mel-Alik with his car. It’s right enough, you can bet on that.”

Guy’s chair went over with a crash as he sprang to his feet and reached for the message. “Unconfirmed native rumour,” he muttered.

“Brett knows what he’s talking about. Look out of the way. I’ve just time to stop Fifty-five Squadron flying south. I shall have to signal all units within reach to concentrate on Prensic. The Old Man had better see this—I believe he’s out on the tarmac.”

Guy snatched his cap and goggles from their peg on the wall.

“Where are you going?” cried Fisher from the door.

“To Prensic—where the hell do you think I’m going?”

“When did those people say they were going to leave Prensic?”

“To-day. I hope to God they’d started before this show came off. I shall soon know. My God! If they were still there——”

Fisher did not meet his eyes, but hurried off to report to the Air Officer Commanding.

Guy made for the shed, had his machine wheeled out, and beat the side of his cockpit impatiently as he waited for the engine to warm up. He still found Brett’s signal hard to believe, but if it was true, then his fictitious warning had become fact with a vengeance. He tried not to think of what might have happened, but the grisly possibilities would not be denied, and an icy hand seemed to clutch his heart as he imagined Sheila in the hands of the tribesmen. Curiously enough it did not occur to him at that moment to wonder if von Lertzhardt had played another card. That struck him later, when he was half-way to the scene, and his lips set in a thin line at the thought.

Far away to the south three armoured-cars were racing across the desert on a course that would intercept his own at Prensic; to the north, two more cars were making heavy weather over a bad patch of loose sand. He was flying at full throttle, the Wapiti kicking the air behind it well over a hundred and thirty miles an hour, but to his fevered mind it seemed to be crawling.

He knew that the story of the raid had not been without foundation long before he reached the stricken village, for he saw the smoke of the conflagration against the hard, steely-blue sky, while he was still twenty miles away. He examined the ground below with practised eyes, section by section, as he had searched it ever since he had taken off, for signs of the three cars which he knew had been at Prensic, but in vain; not a wheel mark broke the smooth surface of the sand. He leaned far out of the cockpit

scrutinizing the trail as far as the village, but not a movement broke its grim solitude.

“God Almighty!” he groaned, as the dreadful truth was forced upon him. “They’ve got them.”

A single armoured-car was standing by the tents, and the sight gave him renewed hope. He landed where he had landed the previous day, and taxied, tail up, in a swirling cloud of sand, to the armoured-car. The three cars belonging to the expedition were standing some little distance away. An officer in an open shirt and shorts ran out of the largest tent to meet him as he swung his machine round at the last moment to avoid collision with the armoured-car.

“Are they there?” cried Guy hoarsely, as he jumped to the ground.

“One of them,” replied Brett grimly. “How many whites were there?”

“Three, including a girl.”

“Well, they’ve got ’em, I’m afraid, all except the fellow here. Come and look at him.”

Guy ran towards the tent indicated but pulled up with a jerk at the entrance as his eyes fell on the prostrate figure of von Lertzhardt. Then he stepped forward; a cloud of flies rose into the air as he approached the German.

The raid had obviously not been organized by von Lertzhardt, for he must have been shot whilst defending the camp. A quick glance at the trampled sand and the padlocked boxes that had been too heavy for the raiders to carry away revealed the story. Von Lertzhardt, true to his word, had been on the point of departure when the blow had fallen.

“Got it in the head, poor devil,” said Brett sympathetically.

“Sure he’s dead?”

“’Fraid so. I thought he was still alive when I got here about twenty minutes ago, so I’ve been working on him with the medical chest, but I don’t seem to have done much good. He’s going top-sides all right if he hasn’t already gone.”

“I was a fool not to bring a doctor,” muttered Guy savagely. “I might have expected something of the sort. Look, Brett, it’s no use staying here. You’d better push on after these devils; they’ve had a long start, but we’ve got to stop them somehow. They’ve got a girl with them. If they reach the hills, well, I needn’t tell you. I passed some other cars on the way and I expect a squadron of machines will be here any minute. Good God!” he added as a new thought struck him, “I wonder if Fish thought to tell them

that the Wogs might have white prisoners with them? If they don't know that they'll plaster them with bombs and machine-guns. You're fitted with wireless, aren't you?"

"Yes, I can get in touch with the squadron, if that's what you mean."

"Then for God's sake tell them they can't use their eggs or guns. Make them understand the position."

"I'll do my best," Brett promised him.

"All right. I'm going on—push on behind me as fast as you can. Signal the squadron to keep straight on; there's no point in their landing here. I'm afraid vo—er—Wiseman—that's this chap's name by the way—will have to take his luck for a bit. The other cars will be here presently. Leave a note for one of them to rush him back to Hinaidi; they might do something with him in hospital if there's any life left in him. Have you been to the village?"

"Yes—it's best to keep away."

"Like that, eh?"

"Slaughter isn't the word for it."

"I see, but we're wasting time. Step on it, laddie."

Guy swung himself up into his machine and roared away, climbing steadily for height, towards the distant hills. He picked up the trail of the raiders almost at once; a broad band of hoof-churned sand. They had evidently gone back the way they came. Ten minutes later he saw them in front of him. As usual, they had ridden their horses to walking pace, but were still pressing them forward under the whip. Their pace had been slowed down, too, by the sheep they had taken from the village, and the loot with which every beast was burdened. They were still a good five miles away from the foothills, which was as far as the pursuing cars would be able to go, but it was clear at once that only one car at the most, Brett's, could hope to come up with them. Even that was doubtful. The aircraft would, of course, overtake them, and in normal circumstances would have been able to deal with them effectively; but the presence of Sheila and her uncle made the employment of their usual methods impossible. Landing was out of the question, for already the ground was broken up by shallow *wadis* dotted with the everlasting camel thorn and loose boulders that had been washed or cast down from the mountains at some remote period.

He went down to two thousand feet behind the retreating raiders, and then circled round them; there was nothing more he could do and he knew it. The position was maddening and he writhed with impotence. Once he swooped low, down to five hundred feet, in contravention of standing orders that had been established out of respect for native accuracy of marksmanship

with small arms. He saw the Arabs throw up their rifles and fire at him, and heard the ominous zip-flack of bullets striking the machine as he zoomed up again out of effective range. But his eyes had found what they sought; Sheila and her uncle were riding in the centre of the band. The Arabs had obviously realized that the pilot was powerless to do anything, for instead of scattering, as they did usually, they drew closer to the Europeans.

Guy looked back over his shoulder and saw a formation of nine machines close behind him; still farther behind he could see Brett's car ploughing through the deep sand, and he knew for certain that it would not overtake the Arabs before they reached the foothills, the barrier that would effectually bar its further progress. He swung the machine round and closed up with the approaching formation. The gunner in the rear seat of the leading machine raised his hand to attract attention, then made a deprecating gesture, held up two fingers and pointed to the raiders, making it clear that he was conversant with the real state of affairs.

Guy raised his hand to show that he understood, and racked his brain in an effort to find a solution to a problem which, as far as he knew, had never before arisen. Nineteen well-armed Englishmen were within half a mile of a girl of their own race who was being carried to a captivity that would be worse than death, yet they were powerless to do anything. In a few days, or perhaps weeks, the question of ransom would no doubt be raised, and after more weeks of negotiation, Sheila and her uncle would return to their own people. Weeks! One day would be too long for a woman to be in their hands. Guy felt suddenly sick, and fought dry-lipped and wild-eyed with the appalling situation. The raiders were now within a mile of the hills, gesticulating derisively at the machines and Brett's car, which was still two or three miles behind, and now steering a tortuous course through camel thorn and boulders. Still farther behind three more cars had appeared; one had stuck in the sand and its crew were struggling frantically with galvanized wire under the wheels, to release it.

He raced on ahead, flew low over the pass for which the raiders were obviously heading, and examined the country beyond. On the other side of the foothills the terrain again gave way to rolling, rock-strewn sandhills, increasing in altitude near the foot of the mountains proper, at the base of which a village was situated. It was just far enough forward to be convenient for the old, old business, or sport, of raiding the plainsman, yet near enough to the steep slopes of the mountains to make safe retreat a simple matter in the event of danger.

The next nearest village was ten miles away to the west; it had been equally notorious, but as a result of negotiations in which he had taken part,

it was now classed as “friendly.” He knew the village well, and its sheikh, for he had once been a guest within the gates, having accompanied a Political Officer there on an important mission. He was not likely to forget the occasion, for in order to conform to custom he had been compelled to eat large quantities of unpalatable food. The sheikh, in his own way, had done them well, with the result that Guy had been violently sick, an event which, reflecting adversely upon the quality of the fare, might have had lamentable consequences but for the presence of mind of the Political Officer who mentioned casually that his friend had a weak stomach, and the violence of his nausea was a sure sign of how much he had enjoyed his host’s hospitality. So the incident had been turned to credit, and all ended well.

The raiders were now defiling through a narrow *wadi*, and it was obvious that the armoured-cars would not be able to effect a rescue. The machines of the squadron were still circling over the horsemen, but they, too, were helpless. Their leader knew it; every pilot knew it, and Guy knew it; yet it was unthinkable that they should do nothing. White-faced, and with faculties half-numbed by despair, he tried to think. An almost overwhelming impulse came upon him to land, regardless of all risk, but he retained enough common sense to know that it could serve no useful purpose. Even if he escaped injury in the inevitable crash that would occur when his wheels struck the rocks, which seemed unlikely, the best he could hope for, since, single-handed, he could not fight the whole tribe successfully, was to be held captive for ransom with the others. Then a thought struck him like an inspiration. For a moment or two he stared hard at the scene below, memorising as far as possible the configuration of the land; then he swung round in a vertical bank and raced back towards Baghdad. He roared low over Prensia, now a seething hive of activity with cars, lorries and ambulances, but he did not land.

He saw little during the remainder of the journey, for he was completely engrossed in his project, and other matters. There was no longer any excuse for not reporting the true identity of Wiseman, although it was highly probable that the authorities would discover it for themselves as soon as inquiries were put through, as they certainly would be. The admission now that he had known who Wiseman was for three days, without reporting it, could not fail to have instant and far-reaching effects. He knew that it was more than probable that he would be put under arrest, possibly open arrest, perhaps close arrest, pending the inevitable Court of Enquiry, and this, by limiting his movements, would defeat his plans for the rescue. Von Lertzhardt was dead, anyway, so he could do no more harm, he told himself, so it was doubtful if the revelation of his identity could serve any useful

purpose. Yet if he remained silent he was taking a grave risk by aggravating his offence. Fisher would have to give evidence before the Court and he would be certain to refer to Guy's visit to Aden and his subsequent unofficial visit to Prensiss. Reference to Aden would lead to Squadron-Leader Brazier being called, and his evidence would show that Guy had been suspicious, if not in actual possession, of the facts concerning Wiseman's identity at that time. There would then be no doubt about the finding of the Court; he would be reprimanded, perhaps censured; he might even lose his commission. Even so, that was a risk he would have to take, at least until Sheila's rescue was accomplished. If he lost his life in the attempt, which seemed quite possible, then that would answer the question, as far as he was concerned, once and for all.

If von Lertzhardt had simply disappeared, or been party to the raid, then duty would have demanded that he should tell the Air Commodore all he knew, whatever the consequences might be. As things had turned out, it rather looked as if von Lertzhardt had played fair, and had been about to leave Iraq, as he had promised; his activities therefore could not have been of any great local or political importance.

He landed, taxied in, and leaving his machine to be re-fuelled, hurried towards the Station Headquarters.

"They've got 'em," he told Fisher shortly.

"I know."

"You're in touch with the cars, I suppose?"

Fisher nodded. "Bad show," he observed.

Guy drew a deep breath. "Yes," he said slowly. "Is the Air Commodore in?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I want a word with him."

"He's damn busy; the wires are fairly humming over this business. It's a bit tough on him; if anything happens to that girl or her uncle he'll lose his command."

"Have they brought Wiseman in yet?"

"Not yet—but they'll probably take him straight to Baghdad."

"You know he's been shot?"

"Yes; I got the essential facts from Brett. He says he left him in the tent when he pushed on; he was unable to catch the Kurds before they got to the hills. By the way, I suppose you know there are some funny rumours floating about concerning this chap Wiseman?"

“What sort of rumours?”

“Native, mostly, but it looks as if he wasn’t what he pretended to be. We can’t make head or tail of it yet, but Cairo is taking the matter very seriously—not only Cairo. There must be something in the wind, because word has come in from several different quarters. One rumour says the Wogs have either got, or are expecting, some rifles from somewhere. Sounds damned unlikely, I’ll admit, but there it is, and the bazaars are whispering that there is going to be another war. The most amazing thing is that our Liaison Officer with the French, in Beirut, has picked up the same tale. They’ve heard a similar tale at Basra. There’s a good one from Aden, though, about a scheme to collar the Imperial Airways machines at Bahrein, or Sharjah. That would cut the Imperial line to India, now that we’ve been hoisted out of Persia. It may be all talk, but some scaremonger has been busy; if the thing does come off, someone will be for the high-jump. The Old Man is going grey under the strain. He told me just now that down at Cairo they’re saying that a Boche—fellow named von Lertzhardt—is behind it all. Anyway, they’re hunting high and low for him, even in Baghdad.”

Guy turned stone-cold and stared at the other for a moment without speaking. Then, “When did you learn all this?” he asked quietly.

“During the last couple of days; if you’d been here instead of tearing about the sky, you’d have heard it, too. You’d better get busy and do something.”

“Yes,” said Guy slowly, “you’re right, I had. Tell the Old Man I want to see him.”

Fisher disappeared for a moment through a side-door. “Go in,” he said when he returned.

Guy took a couple of paces into the room and saluted.

The Air Commodore looked up from his desk with a worried frown. “Yes, Baring,” he said, “what is it? Don’t be long, I’m very busy.”

“Quite, sir. It’s about Mr. Garner and Miss Forbes. It’s a personal matter with me, sir.”

“Personal—oh, yes, quite. You know them well, I believe?”

“I do, sir; in fact, Miss Forbes and I are engaged—unofficially. I’ve got to do something—you see that, sir?”

“Wing Commander Hannen has just flown over to the raiders with a message to the effect that a reward will be paid for the prisoners, provided they are returned at once unharmed.”

“It depends what you call—unharmed, sir.”

“I understand what you mean, but it’s all we can do for the moment. Normal operations are, of course, prohibited by the presence of the two whites in the village, and unfortunately the Wogs know it. We shall probably get a message back within a few days asking for the amount of the reward. By that time I shall have received instructions as to how to proceed.”

“Two or three days is too long, sir. You know that as well as I do. Miss Forbes must be rescued within the next few hours.”

The Air Commodore shrugged his shoulders. “That,” he said, “is obviously impossible. I’m sorry, Baring.”

“There is one way, if I may say so, sir, and that is what I’ve come to see you about. It is irregular, and you will tell me it is a forlorn hope, but I submit to you that a forlorn hope is better than none at all. My suggestion is not covered by any regulation, nor is there any precedent as far as I am aware. On the face of it, it may sound—er—romantic; in reality it is essentially practical.”

“What is it?” asked the Air Commodore sharply.

CHAPTER IX

SHEILA, from the side of her undesirable escort, heard the musical drone of Guy's machine before she was able to turn her head sufficiently to see it. She could not, of course, see the pilot, but there was no doubt in her mind as to who it was, and she breathed a sigh of thankfulness for the deliverance which she supposed was at hand. But as the machine, which was quickly joined by others, continued circling without making any attempt to land, it slowly dawned upon her that her hopes of a speedy rescue were not to be fulfilled.

She was no longer riding on the sheikh's horse, for the wretched beast had been galloped until it had nearly fallen under its double burden, but on a spare horse which was secured to the sheikh's saddle by a head-ropes. She could not see her uncle, but she knew he was somewhere behind, for he called to her from time to time, presumably to let her know that he was there. She noted how the raiders drew together every time the circling machines drew near, and guessed the reason. Had she been able to send a signal she would have told the pilots to ignore her and do their worst, for her anger was greater than her fear. She was angry with Wiseman, who had been to blame for their predicament in the first place, for her numbed faculties were still unable to accept the fact that he was dead, although again and again in her over-wrought imagination she saw him fall. She realized, too, with surprise, that her reaction took the form of horror rather than sorrow. She had never pretended to love him, not even to herself, but even so his death caused her less grief than she would have expected. It was the way he had fallen that made her shudder; she had no idea that death could be so instantaneous. She was angry with herself, too, for not following Guy's advice, and in some perverse way because the truth of his admonition concerning her lack of imagination, when she had refused to fly back to Baghdad with him, had been so speedily demonstrated. At the moment she would have been prepared to fly in any aeroplane with any pilot. Still, she did not give up hope of rescue; with so many men of her own race watching her it seemed inconceivable that any harm could come to them, or that some effort would not be made to release them.

It was not until they reached the defile in the foothills that she fully realized just how desperate their position was. The continuous roar of the

machines in the air no longer irritated her, for it held a promise of assistance, but as the noise of the engines began to diminish, and she realized that the machines were returning to their base, something like panic seized her. The ghastly silence which followed their departure was dreadful in its intensity, and an unspeakable fear clutched her heart with an icy grip. Over and over again during the long ride through the foothills to the mountains proper, she told herself that she had nothing to fear, that all would be well; but she could not deceive herself. The sheikh's evil, leering face held terrifying possibilities. And to think that once, she reflected, as a girl at school, she had surrounded all sheikhs with a romantic glamour and dignity. The loathsome, evil-smelling creature by her side was the real thing; she could not have imagined anyone so utterly bestial.

The sun was well past its zenith when the Kurds halted their reeking horses in the sparse shade of a group of stunted palms and rested, smoking, and examining their loot. Sheila, finding that no restraint was put upon her, sought and found her uncle; the old man was in a state bordering on collapse from anxiety, exhaustion and the unpitying heat which blazed down upon them from above and radiated from the rocks around them.

"My dear," he said chokingly when he saw her, "what have I brought you to?"

"Now it's no use talking like that," she reproved him gently; "we must make the best of a bad job until help comes. I expect it will only be a matter of ransom."

He looked at her queerly. "Yes—yes, I suppose so," he muttered, and looked away.

"They wouldn't dare to hurt us."

"Dare! You don't know these people, my dear; they fear nobody."

"But the Air Force would blow their village up with bombs if they injured us."

"I do not doubt it, but what can they do while we are in the village? It was a terrible tragedy that Wiseman was killed; I think he could have handled them in time."

"Perhaps. Most of them seem quiet enough now, no doubt because they are pleased at the result of the raid. It's that horrible sheikh, or whatever he is, that I don't like."

Garner looked at her miserably out of the corner of his eye. "If any harm comes to you I shall never forgive myself as long as I live. I should have sent you back to Baghdad with young Baring. He knew what he was talking about when he told us of this projected raid."

Sheila shook her head. "He could not have known it was so imminent," she said, "or he would have made us return instantly."

"I do not understand it; there was something between him and Wiseman that we know nothing about. He knew more about him than we did. He was trying to help us; I can see that now."

"I'm afraid it's rather late in the day, dear, to think about that," Sheila told him, forcing a smile. "It is a comfort to think that he knows where we are and will be doing everything he can to help us at this very moment. And now I suppose I must say good-bye for the present," she added quickly as there was a general stir and the raiders remounted their horses.

The remainder of the journey was a nightmare in which thirst, heat, flies, and general fatigue played their parts, but at last, towards sunset, after dismounting and clambering over rocks for the last mile they reached the village. They were met by a crowd of women and children who, amidst joyful congratulations, escorted them to the group of primitive mud dwellings that formed the village. The stench that arose from it was awful, and Sheila held her handkerchief over her mouth in an effort not to be sick. She had no opportunity to speak to her uncle, but was taken quickly and roughly by some women towards the largest building, which had a small domed roof. They led her along a short passage into a room, unfurnished except for a few rugs on the floor, and crowded in behind her, clutching at her clothes and chattering in high-pitched voices. If the smell outside had been awful, inside it was appalling, and Sheila dabbed her face with some proffered tepid water with real thankfulness. There was a sudden silence as the sheikh strode into the room. One of the women, more persistent than the rest, was trying to remove Sheila's white jumper, and did not see him enter. He announced his presence to her with a blow that sent her reeling into a corner. Then he spoke. What he said Sheila did not know, but it seemed to evoke some mirth amongst those who did.

A very old woman, whose shrivelled, leathery face and toothless gums reminded her instantly of Gagool in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, took her to another room, again furnished with rugs, but with the addition of a low, primitive divan, and there left her. Presently she returned with an earthenware bowl of water and a dish of rice in which were some small pieces of meat, and a basket of spongy-looking figs. She would have liked to have been able to speak to the sheikh, to request that she and her uncle might remain together, but being unable to speak the language she was powerless to do so. Instead, she turned her attention to the food in order to try to maintain her strength, but she was physically and mentally exhausted and the sight of the food was nauseating. The room was in semi-darkness,

the only light entering through a small, square opening high up in the wall, too high for her to reach. There was no fastening of any sort on the door, which appeared to consist of loosely-woven palm fronds covered by a curtain. There was nothing else except the square stone on which the food and water had been placed, so with a sigh of utter weariness she threw herself on the divan to rest.

She must have dozed, for when she opened her eyes again night had evidently fallen, for the room was lighted by the bare, feeble flame of a small lamp. She noted this subconsciously for she was still only half-awake, trying to recall a dream in which vaguely an aeroplane had played a part. A slight noise awoke her thoroughly, yet still for a moment she did not understand what had happened or where she was. Then, with a shock of paralysing horror, she remembered, and looked in the direction of the door whence the noise had come. The sheikh stood just inside the room, near the door, which he had just closed behind him. She stared at him while her lips grew dry and the skin of her face tightened. She fought down a desire to scream.

“Yes,” she said, “what do you want?” The desire to scream became a hysterical impulse to laugh at the futility of the words. She caught her breath with something like a sob and sprang to her feet, eyes roving the room desperately for a weapon; but there was nothing, not even a stick. “Get out!” she cried, pointing to the door.

The sheikh crossed the room slowly towards her. He had removed his *kafieh*, revealing a tangle of black, greasy hair; a wisp of black beard concealed his chin; the light flickered feebly on his deeply-pitted face.

Sheila receded before his advance to the limit of the room imposed by the wall, watching him all the while in a kind of fascinated horror. As in a dreadful nightmare she watched him pick up her hand in his own; then, quietly, but firmly, he drew her towards him. She could bear it no longer, and feeling madness descending upon her struggled frantically to free herself. A scream of stark terror broke from her lips.

The arm that held her suddenly grew limp and she staggered back, gasping.

“Come on. Don’t make a noise,” said a voice tersely in English. The room seemed to rock about her, and she clutched at the wall behind her, staring. The sheikh lay on the floor. Another figure in khaki drill, stood over him.

“Oh, Guy, Guy,” she moaned, “thank God you’ve come,” and clutched at him blindly.

“All right, easy now, take a pull of this; make haste, we’ve no time to lose,” muttered Guy crisply, and passed her a flask.

She choked as the neat spirit burnt her throat, but it served its purpose.

“Better?” he asked quietly.

She nodded. “Yes,” she managed to gasp.

“Good. Now listen. First of all take this; you may need it; we aren’t out of the wood yet.” He handed her a squat automatic. “No pocket? Never mind, put it somewhere where you can get at it quickly. Now follow me and do exactly as I do, but if I stop and start shooting, you go on, never mind where, but keep on. You may find somewhere to hide until our lads find you.”

“What about uncle?”

“Sorry, dear, but he’ll have to wait. It will only be a matter of a day or two before his ransom comes. I don’t know where he is, anyway, and I daren’t waste time looking for him.”

“I understand.”

“Good, then let us be moving.”

He peeped out of the door and beckoned her to follow. “Watch your step—don’t trip,” he breathed, and she stepped over a body lying in the passage.

He looked cautiously through the outside doorway, for there was no actual door, and then taking her by the hand led her swiftly towards a narrow track on the opposite side of the rough street. It was very dark, for the moon had not yet risen, but her eyes soon grew accustomed to the darkness and she found no difficulty in following the dark figure in front of her. Once a dog sniffed at them, growling suspiciously, but Guy silenced it with a word of guttural Arabic. A few more yards and they were at the outskirts of the village; dark, rolling sandhills lay before them.

“Now,” said Guy, “let’s run.”

They set off at a steady dog-trot which they kept up for about a quarter of a mile, Guy looking from time to time at something he held in his hand, something that shone with a pale, luminous light.

“What’s that thing?” she asked once, from his elbow.

“Compass—don’t talk,” he muttered, and they ran on.

Presently they reached a thick clump of camel thorn.

“This should be it, I think,” he said quietly, half to himself, and groped amongst the bushes. “Yes, here we are,” he went on, “hold these as I pass them out.”

The bush yielded a water-bottle, a haversack and a rifle. "Now," he said, rising, "you take the grub and the water; there's enough there to last you a couple of days if I—if we—get separated. Let's keep going; we'll talk presently."

They set off again at a steady pace, threading their way through a maze of camel thorn and boulders, Guy keeping direction by the compass with Sheila close behind. The moon, a gleaming white crescent, rose above the serrated crests of the mountains to their right, and flooded the landscape with a liquid luminosity that cast curious hard blue-black shadows. Guy stopped abruptly and subjected the ground over which they had passed to a long and anxious scrutiny. Satisfied that their footprints did not show in the uneven sand and loose rock, he turned sharply to the left towards a mass of black, igneous rock that marked the beginning of the foothills which separated them from the desert. Reaching it he searched about until he found a deep, cup-like depression.

"This will do," he said, "let's rest for a bit." He took her arm to help her to the ground and felt her trembling violently. Quickly he set the rifle against the rock and took her in his arms. She began to cry, quietly.

"Take no notice of me," she said between sobs, "I can't help it, but I'll be all right in a minute."

"You poor soul; you've been marching on your nerves for the best part of an hour and I didn't know it. Come on, sweet, brace up." He rested her head on his shoulder and stroked her hair. "You've been flying on full throttle for too long, darling," he told her gently. "Take your time."

"I'm sorry I'm such a fool, Guy," she said brokenly, "but it was awful."

He knew she was suffering from shock and inevitable reaction, and he reached again for his flask. "Here, try and have another sip of this, it will pull you together," he said. "That's the idea. Better?"

"Yes, I'm all right now," she assured him with a smile, sitting down on the warm sand. "Silly of me to do that, wasn't it?"

"Not a bit of it; an overcharged battery has to discharge itself sometime, and the sooner the better. I have seen strong men do that, and more," he told her.

"What, cry?" she asked incredulously.

"Too true. I once saw a chap cry like a baby, and he wasn't even scratched; he was just getting rid of the tension he had stored up in five minutes while he was bringing a machine down from ten thousand. You see, he'd been rammed by another machine in the air, and his top plane was swinging about like a semaphore," he added, by way of explanation. He sat

down beside her and unwrapped a tissue paper package that he took from the haversack. "Have a sandwich," he said. "I expect they're pretty awful, but it was the best I could do at short notice," he went on, prising the top off a small bottle of soda water. "By the way, did you drink any water in the village?"

"Yes, a little."

"Then it's a dose of physic for you just as soon as we get back, and don't you forget it. The local water in these parts is about as healthy as a dose of prussic acid to the average European."

"Romance isn't exactly your long suit, is it, Guy?" she smiled.

"You wait and see," he told her. "You don't know me yet."

"But how did you get here?" she asked, reaching for another sandwich.

"Brolly."

"Brolly?"

"Yes—parachute."

"Good heavens, did you jump out of an aeroplane in the dark?"

"I did. It wasn't much use jumping in daylight; every Wog for miles would have taken pot-shots at me as I came down."

"But was there no other way of getting here?"

"I tried pretty hard to think of one, you may be sure. I don't find this parachuting business at all funny, but I couldn't think of anything else. I was lucky. There was no wind and I hit the ground just where I hoped I should—a patch of sand not far from the village. The rest was easier than I thought it would be. I had no trouble about finding where you were, as you were certain to be in the sheikh's house, and his is the only one with a dome. There was a fellow on guard at the door, but I don't think he even saw me; I'm afraid I hit him rather hard."

"But where is your machine?"

"Babs Brockwell flew me over; he's gone back to Hinaidi."

"I heard your machine. I was asleep, but I had a dream that you were coming to rescue me. Babs what's-his-name——"

"Brockwell."

"Yes. He couldn't land, I suppose?"

"If it had been possible to land anywhere near the village a dozen machines and a hundred men would have been there when you arrived."

"And where are we going now?"

“Karnak, a village a bit farther along. It’s about ten miles as the crow flies, but probably more like fifteen up and down these confounded sandhills. It’s a friendly village.”

“But why couldn’t we have gone back the way I came?”

“For several reasons, one being that there is only one *wadi*, the gap you came through, and there would be a sentry posted every hundred yards along it. All the same, I hope they’ll think we’ve gone that way, which is another reason why I came this way. It would be quite impossible to get across the foothills in the dark; I’ve seen them from the air, and I know what they’re like. We should fall and break our necks before we’d gone a hundred yards. I doubt if it would be possible in daylight; the sun on those rocks would just fry us alive. I had a good look at the place from the air before I went back to Hinaidi, and decided that the only possible chance, if I could get you out of Shibkut—that’s the village where you were, you know—was to make for Karnak. We should be able to borrow a couple of horses when we get there and ride to Prensic. When we get back to Baghdad, you’ll probably have the pleasure of seeing me clapped into jail.”

“What on earth for?”

“Failure to do my duty—conduct prejudicial to the best interests of the Service, or something like that.”

“But why?”

“For giving your fiancé a chance to get away; I shouldn’t have done so, though, had I known what I know now.”

“What has Wiseman done?”

“What hasn’t he? He’s been stirring up trouble all round, apparently.”

“He told us that we should have the pleasure of seeing the collapse of the British rule in the Middle East.”

“Good God! He told you that? When?”

“The morning of the raid—yesterday morning, although it seems days ago.”

“What did you do?”

“What could we do? He was bringing us here by force—or he threatened to.”

Guy stared at her in amazement. “What’s that?” he said.

“He wasn’t going to Baghdad if that’s what you think. He told us that he had given you his word that he would leave Prensic, and he was going to keep it; but he was bringing us here. We were all ready to start when the raid occurred.”

“Of course you know he was hit?”

“Yes. Uncle and I were there; we saw it happen. That horrible sheikh grabbed hold of me and the Professor went for him. Then the sheikh shot him—it was ghastly.”

“Then he went out like a man, anyway,” observed Guy, “but it was no more than he deserved; he’s been asking for trouble for some time. You don’t know who he really was, I suppose?”

“I don’t understand.”

“He was a German—a spy, in plain language. What in the name of God was he going to do with you in these hills?”

“He said he was going to take us to Russia, where I was to marry him.”

“Hell’s bells! His plans must have gone wrong somewhere; he couldn’t have known about that raid. It seems funny. If von Lertzhardt—that’s his real name, by the way—was friendly with the Wogs, how on earth did the trouble start?”

“He said they were promised something they had not received.”

“Ah! I can guess what that was.”

“What?”

“Rifles. I begin to see the drift of this. Russia is sending rifles down to the Wogs and von Lertzhardt was acting as a sort of local agent, attending to the distribution. Well, the people at Hinaidi know all about it by now. Before I left I wrote out a full report of my part in the proceedings, and left it with Fisher, the Adjutant. I pushed off before he had time to read it or I should probably have been put under arrest. In any case I should not have been allowed to come here. But never mind about that now, we must be moving. S-s-sh!” He laid his hand on her arm and listened intently for a moment, then crept to the rim of the depression, which overlooked their original course. The mingled sounds of a troop of horsemen came softly through the night. “Don’t move and don’t speak,” he whispered.

Round the end of a sand dune appeared a body of between fifty and sixty mounted men travelling in the direction of the village they had just left. They were moving at walking pace, some of the riders leading heavily-laden pack-horses. They travelled quietly, the only sounds they made being the soft thud of hooves on the sand and the occasional jingle of a bridle. Slowly they wound their way through the dunes and presently disappeared from sight.

“What the devil does that mean, I wonder?” breathed Guy, after they had gone. “I don’t like the look of it. They might be people from Karnak going

to Shibkut to try and rescue you; that's just possible if they got word that you were there. Come on, darling, let's be moving on, but we shall have to keep our eyes and ears open if people are moving about."

They resumed the march, keeping as close to the foothills as obstructions would permit, Guy checking his position by the stars, and with his compass, from time to time. After what seemed an eternity, during which neither of them spoke, he stopped again.

"The moon will be gone presently," he said, "and then it will be too dark for us to move without risking a fall. We can't be very far away from the village now, and it will soon be daylight. It would be better to stay here than go past it in the dark." He looked at his watch. "Quarter to four," he muttered, "we'll just move along slowly until we find a good place to rest, and then sit down and wait for morning—down!"

He flung himself flat, dragging her down with him and wriggled into the black shadow of a rock. Sheila could hear her heart thumping as she lay beside him, and for a moment, nothing else; then she heard the sound of horses approaching. For a quarter of an hour they lay still, hardly daring to breathe, while a troop of mounted men wound past them, apparently the same party they had seen before, now travelling in the opposite direction. At last Guy stirred and stood up. "All right, they've gone," he whispered. "My God! That was a close shave. They looked like the same crowd going back. I can't understand what's going on, but I don't mind telling you I shall feel happier when we get to Karnak. I'm no good at this Red Indian stuff. It may be all right for boy scouts, but I hate it. Now let's be getting along and find a good place to hide up."

For twenty minutes they crept along slowly, moving from shadow to shadow, and crouching low where there was no cover. Then the moon disappeared behind the foothills and the world about them grew dark.

"We shall have to stop now and wait for morning," whispered Guy.

"Thank goodness, I'm desperately tired," Sheila admitted weakly.

"I don't wonder at it, you poor soul," he said gently, and turning took her into his arms. "One little thing before we rest," he smiled.

"Yes?" she asked with a quick intake of breath.

"This." Guy held her closely and kissed her on the lips.

She made no protest. Then for a few moments they stood, she with her head on his shoulder, in the brooding silence and solitude of the wilderness that was old when Ruth had declared her love to Naomi. Her breathing became deeper and regular, and Guy looked into her face. Her eyes were closed; she was asleep.

With infinite tenderness he laid her on the warm sand and then sat beside her, the rifle over his knees. A wan, grey light appeared in the eastern sky. Somewhere far away in the desert a jackal yelped its greeting to the dawn. The glow of the false dawn faded and another sound came out of the infinite distance, a low, vibrant hum that seemed to rise and fall on the breath of the dawn-wind, but always increasing in volume. It was the roar of an aero-engine at a great altitude. Guy followed the sound with his ears, eyes straining upwards. Then he saw it, almost overhead, a tiny gleaming speck of orange caught in a ray of the still invisible sun which had flashed for an instant on a wing as the machine banked.

Guy felt in his pocket, took out an electric torch and pointed it upwards. Three long flashes, followed by two more, separated by a short one, he signalled in the Morse code. "O.K." were the two letters he sent, the two letters that mean the same thing the world over. Twice he repeated the signal before it was acknowledged. A tiny emerald spark of light, dropping slowly earthward, appeared against the purple-velvet background of the sky. The drone of the engine receded as the pilot began to retrace his course, and Guy replaced the torch in his pocket.

Sheila awoke suddenly. "What was that?" she whispered.

"Only Babs Brockwell. He told me he'd come over and see if we were all right."

"But he couldn't see us down here?"

"The one above sees all," he reminded her with a smile. "Don't go to sleep again, sweet; sit up and watch the unchanging miracle of the Eastern dawn—although I confess I would rather we were watching it from Hinaidi," he added as an afterthought.

Sheila sat up and rubbed her eyes. A brilliant shaft of light, quickly followed by others, tinged the sky with crimson, merging swiftly to pink, gold and turquoise. They watched it in silence. Then they drank a little water, ate the remainder of their sandwiches, and rose to their feet.

"The last lap," said Guy, looking about him. "Stand fast while I take a look round." He wormed his way to the top of a steep rise and surveyed the landscape; he was back almost at once. "The village is over there, about a quarter of a mile away," he told her, "we're nearer than I thought. Our navigation was pretty good, wasn't it?" he smiled.

"Yours, you mean," she corrected him.

"We needn't argue about that. Come on, let's go and see if our black brothers will lend us a couple of horses."

They threw caution to the winds and hurried towards the village which they could see from time to time as they threaded their way through the dunes towards it. It was already astir, for an excited babble of voices reached their ears. They rounded the final sandhill and came upon it suddenly. A group of Arabs were gathered about a large wooden packing-case on the ground near the sheikh's house. Nearer to them, another, with his back towards them, was watching the scene. They approached him unobserved. When they were only a few yards away Guy raised his hand, "*Salaam aleikum!*"^[18] he called.

The figure spun round, stared at them for an instant, and then bowed.

"*Aleikum salaam!*"^[19] was the mocking reply.

[18] "Peace be unto you."

[19] "And upon you, peace."

Guy stopped dead, staring foolishly, for the face and voice were those of von Lertzhardt. He was dressed in Arab clothes, the *haik* partly concealing a thick bandage that had been bound round his head. For perhaps a minute they stared at each other.

"How in the name of God did you get here?" asked Guy coldly.

Von Lertzhardt smiled. "I rode in, on horseback." Then he turned to Sheila. "This is an unexpected pleasure," he said.

Sheila stiffened. "Then it is entirely on your side," she told him icily.

"You'll have to come back with us, von Lertzhardt," Guy told him. "You're under arrest."

The German threw his head back and laughed so loudly that several of the natives ran up to ascertain the cause of his merriment. "Pardon me," he said at last, "but that is really an excellent joke."

"You may change your mind presently," Guy observed grimly.

"Indeed, and when will that be?"

"Just as soon as we get to Hinaidi."

Von Lertzhardt shook his head. "I'm afraid you've got this figured out all wrong, Baring," he said seriously. "You'd better hand that rifle over; I shouldn't like to see my men cut you down."

"*Your* men?"

“Yes, my men.”

“But this is Karnak, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“I see,” said Guy slowly, with understanding dawning upon him. “I suppose you’ve been busy here; this village was friendly.”

“Your employment of the past tense describes the position exactly—but we are keeping Miss Forbes standing. She would no doubt like to see her uncle.”

“My uncle?” gasped Sheila.

“You’ll find him in that small house over on the right—it’s quite clean.”

“Do you mean uncle is here?” cried Sheila in amazement. “I don’t believe it.”

“Come, come, why should I prevaricate about such a matter?”

“But how did he get here? We left him at Shibkut last night.”

“Yes, I know, but I went over with a small party to fetch you both, only to find that someone had denied me the honour of rescuing you—not that I had any doubt as to whom it was. Your uncle came back with me. We were both afraid you might have attempted to cross the foothills in the dark, so he will be more than glad to see you. Now, if you’ll leave us, Baring and I have important matters to discuss.”

Guy nodded. “Better go, dear,” he said, “I’ll join you presently.” He understood now, about the Arabs they had seen during the night.

A ghost of a smile flittered over von Lertzhardt’s face as he watched her go.

“Purely as a matter of interest, will you tell me how you managed this resurrection?” asked Guy, curiously.

“The explanation of the apparent miracle is rather disappointing. The shot simply grazed my head. I recovered consciousness just before your young friend arrived with his armoured-car, but too late to get away without being seen. I had no desire to go back with him to Baghdad, so I took the only course open to me. I lay perfectly still. Then you came.” Von Lertzhardt’s manner became confidential. “Do you know, Baring,” he went on, “that you missed the chance of a lifetime then. Had you have thought to look in my pocket, you would have found such documents that could not have failed to ensure your early promotion.”

“I’ll remember that next time,” said Guy coolly. “Go on.”

“After you had gone I went down to the village, found an ancient hack that the raiders had not thought worth while taking with them, and rode here.

You all went off after those mutinous friends of mine, so you did not see me. Had you drifted a mile or two from your course, you might have done so. But why are we standing here? Come across to my room, and I will do my best in the matter of hospitality.”

“Just a moment. What exactly are you thinking of doing next?”

“For the present we shall remain here.”

“I’ll have a word with the sheikh about that.”

“He’s busy unpacking a case of rifles. They should have been here a week ago; it was, in fact, their non-arrival that brought about the raid—that, and your untimely intervention in my affairs, necessitating as it did my departure from Prensis. The people at Shibkut thought I was going back on my word. This case of rifles, by the way, is merely an earnest of more to come; I need hardly say that it has put our friends on good terms with themselves. My prestige is greater than ever it was. But I haven’t congratulated you yet on your remarkably fine performance of last night; it was—how do you call it—a good show.”

“Never mind about that,” Guy told him. “I suppose you know that our people know all about you now?”

“The knowledge will not help them. I shall not return to Iraq; my work is practically finished.”

“You mean running arms and ammunition into the country?”

“Yes. Within a week there will be thirty thousand rifles, a hundred machine-guns, and millions of rounds of small-arms ammunition distributed in Iraq to the friends of the country I serve.”

“Aren’t you rather rash, telling me this?”

“Not in the least. There is not the slightest possibility of your making use of the information. I’m being as frank as possible because I rather like you, Baring, and you gave me a very fair deal at Prensis. I am prepared to make things as easy as possible for you, but obviously you will have to consider yourself my prisoner, which really is the most fortunate thing that could happen to you, although you may not be aware of it. The rest of the people in Iraq, and Arabia and Syria for that matter, are in for a very trying time in the near future. We wish if possible to avoid a massacre, but the natives are so apt to get out of hand when they start fighting.”

Guy stared at the German unbelievably, although in his heart he knew he was telling the truth. “But what——”

“I think I have told you enough,” interrupted von Lertzhardt. “You would not care to give me your parole, I suppose?”

“I most certainly would not,” replied Guy emphatically.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t. It’s rather a pity because it would make things easier for you; as things are, I shall have to keep you in confinement and place you under guard.”

“What about Miss Forbes?” asked Guy, speaking to gain time while he looked round to see if he could see the sheikh.

“I will go and have a word with her now. And I might as well tell you,” he went on, noticing Guy’s questing eyes, “that if you hope to find assistance here, you are doomed to disappointment. But I have work to do and must leave you.” His manner changed abruptly and he spoke to the watching tribesmen quickly in Arabic.

Guy was seized and held, while von Lertzhardt removed his rifle and revolver.

“Have you any other weapons?” asked the German curtly.

“No,” answered Guy shortly.

Von Lertzhardt spoke again to the natives and Guy was led towards one of the houses at the far side of the village. Resistance, in the circumstances, was useless; indeed, he knew that at this juncture to risk an injury that might put him out of action would be an act of folly. Escape he must, and would, but for the moment he would have to play the docile prisoner.

CHAPTER X

HENRY GARNER sprang to his feet as Sheila entered. "Thank God!" he cried chokingly.

Sheila threw herself into her uncle's arms with a cry of pleasure and relief. "Now we're together again," she said huskily. "You know, I had to leave you to go with Guy, because——"

"Yes, my dear, I know," broke in her uncle, stroking her hair. "Quite right. But why did you come here of all places? But, of course, you didn't know Wiseman was here."

"Of course not. His real name is not Wiseman, though—it's von Lertzhardt. He's a spy."

The old man nodded. "Yes, I know," he said bitterly.

"You mean you know he is a spy?"

"Of course—that is, I know it now. I half-suspected something of the sort that last morning at Prensic; and I've heard about these rifles he's brought into the country."

"But you didn't know his real name was von Lertzhardt?"

Garner hesitated. "Yes," he admitted slowly, "I even knew that."

"But, uncle——"

"Oh, I know it all sounds very silly now, but it did not seem so bad when he first approached me. I've no excuse, though; this mania of mine for excavating is the real cause of the trouble. When he got in touch with me about financing an expedition, he told me he was a German, and as such, he doubted if the Foreign Office would grant him a permit to land in Iraq. He suggested the subterfuge of using a false name, and I connived. It all seemed so harmless; it seemed dreadful to lose such a wonderful opportunity as he presented. I can see the folly of it now, but——" The old man threw up his hands despairingly. "It's the thought of you that worries me most. What a terrible tragedy that you should choose this of all places; it has played straight into his hands. What a tragedy, what a tragedy." The old man sat down and buried his face in his hands. "Where's Baring now?" he went on, looking up.

"I left him talking to the Pro—I mean, von Lertzhardt."

“Then we shall be lucky to see him again,” declared Garner despairingly.

“You don’t mean——”

“I don’t think von Lertzhardt will cause him any bodily harm, if that is what you were going to say; he cannot be as bad as that. But you realize we are all prisoners, don’t you?”

“I do,” she agreed. “Well, we’ve been in a worse plight during the last twenty-four hours, and escaped, and I think we shall do so again,” she declared optimistically.

“Here comes von Lertzhardt now,” muttered Garner, as the German’s voice was heard outside. “Let me talk to him. If he won’t listen to reason I’ll give him a piece of my mind.”

“I’m afraid that won’t help us.”

Von Lertzhardt came briskly into the room. “So here we are, all together again,” he began pleasantly.

“Is that the only observation you have to make?” asked Garner coldly. “How long is this outrage to continue?”

“Not very much longer, I hope,” replied von Lertzhardt, cheerfully. “A message has just arrived with the gratifying information that the consignment of—er—merchandise which I am expecting, is only twenty miles away. When it arrives the final distribution will be complete, and we shall be free to depart. I have drilled the sheikhs very thoroughly in what they are to do.”

“You contemptible villain!”

The German held up his hand. “No personalities please,” he said sharply. “We shall have ample leisure to discuss the whole thing from every angle when we are back in Europe, or perhaps when we are excavating again in Iraq. Do you know, Garner, that I have even made arrangements with the man who will presently rule this country, to be allowed to return here after this affair is over, in order to continue the work at Prensiss. As you know, I saw very little of it, but sufficient to arouse my interest.”

“Would you dare to attempt cajolery?” cried Sheila indignantly.

Von Lertzhardt looked pained. “I am simply trying to get you to see things in the brightest possible light,” he complained.

“Then you are wasting your time,” Sheila told him shortly. “Where is Mr. Baring?”

“In his—er—room.”

“You mean he is locked up?”

“If one can lock a man up in a room without a lock on the door, yes. It’s rather difficult to know what to do with him; I’m afraid he’s going to be *de trop*.”

“May I see him?”

Von Lertzhardt thought for a moment. “There is really no reason why you should not,” he said slowly, “I am willing to allow anything within reason.”

“Thank you.”

“You wish to go now?”

“Yes.”

“Very well—you will not mind if I come with you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry, but that is a condition I must make; I cannot afford to take chances.”

“I shan’t be very long, dear,” Sheila told her uncle as she turned towards the door.

With von Lertzhardt at her side she walked down the village street until they came to the house in which Guy was confined. He was standing in the middle of the room with his hands deep in his pockets when they entered, and Sheila caught her breath as she looked at his weary, unshaven face.

“Miss Forbes wanted a word with you, so I’ve brought her along,” began von Lertzhardt. “Please say what you have to say, quickly; I must keep an eye on my friends outside. They are apt to be precipitate if they are not watched closely.”

“Would you mind leaving the room for a moment?” Sheila asked him, looking him squarely in the eyes. “You may stand outside the door to make sure we do not run away.”

Von Lertzhardt flushed and bowed stiffly. “Very well,” he said, “but please remember there are limits to my desire to be—obliging.”

“Thank you.”

As the door closed behind him, Sheila crossed the room in swift strides, and keeping her back towards the door flung her arms around Guy’s neck. “Quick!” she breathed, “take it out—it’s under my jumper in the belt of my skirt—he may be watching and see it if I take it out myself.”

Guy knew what she meant at once. With his right arm round her waist his left hand sought and found the automatic, and transferred it swiftly to his pocket.

Sheila gave a little laugh of relief. “You must get back to Hinaidi and tell them what is happening, never mind about me.” Then, raising her voice, “Well, here we are,” she went on, with a meaning glance towards the door.

“Yes, here we are,” he admitted ruefully, taking her cue. “Out of the frying-pan into the fire, I’m afraid.”

“He means to take us to Russia,” she whispered.

“How does he propose to get us there?”

“I don’t know, but he’s going to make me marry him whether I agree or not.”

Guy frowned. “Is he?” he said softly. “Is he?”

“He has just told me there is a caravan with a consignment of rifles, I think, about twenty miles away. As soon as it arrives we are leaving.”

Guy pursed his lips. “He’ll cut across Armenia to the Caspian, I suppose. Well, I’ve got to stop those rifles getting through, my dear,” he said. “Whatever else happens I must stop that—you understand, don’t you?”

Sheila nodded.

Guy took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. “I want you to remember this, little girl,” he said. “Wherever you are, wherever you go, if that devil takes you away before I get back, I shall not be far away. If ever I stop looking for you it will be because there is no breath left in my body. I love you, and you know it. I have always loved you and you have always known it; and I shall love you as long as the dawn-wind marches out of Persia and the sun sets over the Jordan. You’ll never forget that, will you?”

“Never.”

“And you are going to love me just the same?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s all that matters. Now, listen, sweetheart, I’ve got a ticklish job in front of me, but please God I shall pull it off. I still find it hard to believe that all our people in Iraq are in danger, but one never knows. There are a hundred thousand Christians, though, on the plains, poor, helpless tillers of the soil, who look to us for protection. You saw what happened at Prensis; unless I get through, the same thing will happen to a thousand villages between Mosul and Basra. Once the thing starts it will blaze from Armenia to Aden. I’ve got to stop it, or die in the attempt, and that’s plain sober fact, not heroic drama. Remember, too, that I am partly responsible for this, for not reporting what I knew days ago.”

“You’ll get through, Guy, I know you will,” she whispered bravely. “If it hadn’t have been for me——”

There was a tap on the door and von Lertzhardt came back into the room. "I'm sorry to interrupt," he said brusquely, "but I really must ask you to return now, Miss Forbes; I have much to do."

"I'm ready," she said curtly, and then, turning to Guy, "Good-bye, dear, for a little while."

Guy kissed her on the forehead. "*Au revoir*, sweetheart," he said.

CHAPTER XI

THE heat-distorted mountain ranges of Kurdistan turned from uncertain, palpitating brown to glowing crimson, from crimson to purple, and from purple to deep cobalt; sombre, indigo shadows marked the storm-riven clefts and *nullahs* that scored their age-old sides. A single star, suspended from a dome of soft, deep-blue velvet by an invisible thread, hung low above the wilderness, over which the hush that precedes the desert night had fallen.

Guy stood in his prison and watched the colour slowly fade from the narrow, oblong slit high in the wall, that served as a window. A curious smile crept over his face as he crossed the room and beat upon the flimsy door with his fists. It was opened at once; a Kurd, rifle at the ready, stood before him. In halting Arabic, Guy demanded to speak with the *farengi* sheikh. He did not know the name by which von Lertzhardt was known to the natives. The Kurd closed the door.

Presently von Lertzhardt came, imperturbable and immaculate. "You wish to see me?" he asked.

"Yes," said Guy, "I want a few words with you; not many, but to the point. Now what I'm going to say I want you to believe. If ever I spoke the truth in my life I'm going to speak it now."

"You seem very emphatic on the point," smiled the other, raising his eyebrows.

"I am. I want to make quite sure that you grasp that fact before I say what I am going to say."

"And that is——?"

"That if you move an inch, or make one sound, I'll drill you with as many shots as this gun holds."

Von Lertzhardt's eyes narrowed as he looked into the shining, round muzzle of Guy's automatic, and then up at the hard, set face above it.

"So! You lied," he sneered.

"I did not, but that's a point I'm not prepared to argue. Now, listen, von Lertzhardt," went on Guy quietly, but rapidly, "get this clear. If I go west on this show, you're going first. Do what you are told and we both may live to see to-morrow. Put up your hands."

Von Lertzhardt raised his hands as high as his shoulders.

“Higher.”

“All right, don’t get excited,” observed the German suavely as he obeyed, noting that Guy’s finger had tightened perceptibly on the trigger as he stepped a pace nearer. With the muzzle of the automatic within an inch of the German’s chest, Guy felt under his *abbas*^[20] and removed his revolver, which he dropped into his own pocket. “Now,” he said, “I’ll have those papers I forgot last time. Will you hand them over, or shall I take them—be careful how you move,” he added quickly as the German’s hand went to his pocket. “Thank you.” He took the papers which the other handed to him.

[20] Camel-hair cape.

“Don’t mention it. You’re quite welcome. I think their utility, as far as you are concerned, ended about two days ago,” observed von Lertzhardt coolly.

“We’ll see,” said Guy. “Now let’s go for a walk. You may drop your hands, but if you make one false move I shall shoot, don’t forget that.”

“I hope you are not going to ask me to walk to Baghdad,” said von Lertzhardt with a faint sneer. Then, with a change of tone, he went on, “Don’t be a fool, Baring, the country will be up before you can get half-way to Baghdad; it is too late to prevent it. The first band of Arabs you meet will cut you to pieces. Why throw your life away?”

“We are going to walk to the head of the *wadi* that leads down to the desert,” Guy told him coldly, ignoring the question, “and the muzzle of this gun will never be more than an inch from your side. If you make one sign to anyone we meet you’ll get the first shot—understand?”

“Perfectly, nothing could be more clear.” It was obvious that von Lertzhardt had lost nothing of his confidence in regard to the success of his plans.

“Ready?” asked Guy.

“Quite.”

“Then march.”

The guard stood aside to let them through, and they walked, apparently unconcernedly into the open, and then towards the outskirts of the village. “A little more to the right, I think,” suggested Guy. “You see, I happen to have been here before and know the way.”

“Ah, I was not aware of that.”

“I thought not.”

Two natives who were leading in a strayed donkey looked at them curiously, but said nothing, and in five minutes they came to the head of a deep ravine into which they plunged, to emerge a quarter of an hour later amongst a wild confusion of shale and rock, through which a fairly well-marked trail led.

“I think this is far enough,” said Guy suddenly. “I’m going on alone from here; you may go back.”

Von Lertzhardt breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief. “Thank heaven,” he said, “I was afraid you were going to try and make me walk to Baghdad without water. It’s too far, you know; you’ll never do it.”

“We shall see,” returned Guy. “No doubt you are wondering why I am letting you go back?”

“I imagine it is because you don’t like the idea of Miss Forbes being left alone with my friends.”

“Exactly! Whatever else you may be, von Lertzhardt, you are a white man, and I ask you to remember that. I hope to see you again shortly,” he went on, backing away.

“You would be much better advised to come back with me,” called von Lertzhardt a few minutes later from the darkness.

“I shall probably come back *for* you,” replied Guy, and then set his face to the path.

Von Lertzhardt’s supposition concerning his return had been correct, but it was only one of the reasons why Guy had decided on this course. His first intention had been to attempt to bring them all, von Lertzhardt, Sheila and Garner, down to the desert, but on second thoughts he decided that the risks were too great, both in the matter of escape at the onset, and what they might encounter when they reached the desert. Another reason why he had allowed the German to go was because he knew it would have been an utter impossibility to keep him, a desperate man, covered, in the broken country they would have to pass through for the two hours that it would take them to reach the open desert. Even the short walk through the first *wadi* had involved a considerable strain, for he had found it necessary to watch the ground in order to pick his way through the boulders, and at the same time keep von Lertzhardt covered. As it was, on more than one occasion the German had had a sporting chance of escaping if he had cared to risk making a bolt for it; the fact that he had not done so was further proof of his

conviction that Guy would not reach the nearest outpost of civilization on foot and without water.

Several times Guy stopped and listened intently for signs of pursuit, but there were none, and he strode along more briskly, sometimes, when the ground permitted it, even breaking into a trot. The moon had not yet risen but the stars were bright and he made good progress, keeping a look-out ahead for possible sentries, not that he really expected to encounter any. Several times the track led over great masses of rock that would not have been difficult to surmount in the light of day, but were by no means easy in the uncertain starlight. He realized more than ever that his decision to send his prisoner back had been a wise one. Presently the country became more open, the rock giving way to hard-baked clay with patches of sand, and in rather more than an hour and a half, as near as he could judge, from the time he had left the village, he scrambled down the side of the last steep slope. Half-way down he stopped to listen, but not a sound broke the almost tangible silence except his own heavy breathing. He raised his hands and cupped them round his mouth. "Brett!" he called sharply. The cry rang weirdly over the silent solitude.

"Hullo, there!" came a reply, so close that he started.

"That you, Brett?"

"Mr. Brett's here, sir."

"Good. Show a light will you?"

There was a sudden hum of activity in the darkness; then a light blazed up in the dark shadow of the hillside and Guy strode towards it.

"Halt! Who goes there?" rang a challenge through the night.

"Friend—Flight-Lieutenant Baring here," replied Guy, knowing that Brett was quite right not to take a chance.

An electric torch cut a narrow arc through the darkness and came to rest on him.

"Come in, Baring," said Brett's voice. "'Strewth, you are in a bonny mess," he went on, as Guy scrambled over a barricade of ammunition boxes and sandbags.

"It's this blasted camel thorn that cuts you about so," grumbled Guy. "Show a light here, will you, I want to look at something."

They entered Brett's tent and Guy took von Lertzhardt's papers from his pocket. "Curse it, they're in German," he snapped as he examined them. "Can any of your fellows speak German?"

"You know a bit of German, don't you, Collins?" Brett called.

“A little, sir,” was the reply.

“Then come and read this,” ordered Guy. “We shall be able to make out the numbers and the names of the places, anyway; they’re almost certain to be the same as in English. Is your wireless functioning, Brett?”

“Yes.”

“Then stand by to send a signal.”

CHAPTER XII

LEO FISHER flung his cap on his bed and yawned; he had had a tiring day and the thermometer still stood at a hundred and twelve. Nature demanded that he should go to bed, but he expected to perspire rather than sleep. There came a sharp tap on his door, and in reply to his disinterested, "Come in," a night duty orderly of the Air Staff Signals Branch entered. He seemed to be excited.

"Yes, what is it?" asked Fisher wearily.

"Flight-Sergeant Browning says will you please come over at once, sir; there is a very important signal coming through. He says it's urgent, sir, or he would not fetch you."

"Where's the Orderly Officer?"

"We can't find him, sir."

"All right."

Making a mental note to publish a reminder in Daily Routine Orders that the Orderly Officer must keep all personnel on duty informed of his whereabouts, Fisher strolled to the wireless hut where an N.C.O. was taking a message that could be faintly heard coming through in the Morse code. The "message ends" symbol came through, and the instrument became silent. The N.C.O. stood up and handed the Adjutant the sheet of paper on which he had been writing.

"What the hell is this!" cried Fisher, after he had read the first three or four lines. He turned back again to the beginning, the colour slowly draining from his face as he read.

"Flt.-Lt. G. M. Baring, on detached duty. To A.O.C. Iraq Command *via* No. 23 A.C.C. Signals. Position five miles S.W. Karnak.

"5,000 rifles, 10 machine-guns, 100,000 rounds S.A.A.,^[21] approx. ten miles N.E. Karnak. Destination Karnak. Expected to arrive 10.00 hrs. to-morrow, 21.9.33. Stop.

"20,000 rifles, 40 M.G., 200,000 rounds S.A.A., seaborne, due at cove two miles N. Kalat el Akabar. To be landed at dawn, 21.9.33. Stop.

"8,000 rifles, 20 M.G., 100,000 rounds S.A.A., seaborne, due seven miles N.W. Bahrein, Persian Gulf, 21.9.33. Stop. Rifles, M.G., S.A.A.,

quantity unknown, due Jebel Anzab, dawn, 21.9.33. Stop.

“Request strong force Levies, by No. 70 Bomber Transport Squadron, to intercept consignment due Karnak. Ground cleared for landing. Stop. Landing lights available. Stop. Pilots should cut engines four miles from objective. Stop. Baring, 21.40 hrs., 20.9.33. Message ends.”

[21] Small arms ammunition.

Fisher read the message twice and then rushed from the room. He burst into Air Commodore Malling’s quarter without knocking and handed him the message. The Air Commodore stared at him for a moment in amazement, and then looked down at the slip of paper.

“You don’t suppose Baring’s got a touch of sun by any chance?” he muttered once as he read.

“No, sir.”

The A.O.C.’s manner became terse. “What’s the time?” he snapped, glancing at his wrist-watch. “Repeat this message to Middle East and Aden Commands and obtain confirmation of receipt. Warn everyone on the Station to stand to. Detail 203 Flying-boat Squadron to proceed to Bahrein with war loads. Tell them to locate the craft at sea if possible and take charge; it will be a dhow, I expect, one or more. Sink them if they offer resistance. Send four machines of 70 Squadron with seventy-five Levies and numbers one and two Armoured-car Companies to Jebel Anzab; the machines will land as soon as there is sufficient light. 55 Squadron will escort and co-operate. Detail five machines of 70 Squadron, with ninety Levies, to proceed at once and join Baring; I shall go with them. Baring says he has cleared the ground, so we should get down all right. Better tell numbers three and four Armoured-car Companies to start at once in case we need them. 84 Squadron will leave the ground an hour before dawn and co-operate. Got that down?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, I’ll see you in the Orderly Room in five minutes; let me know if you are in any doubt about anything. Don’t forget to tell 70 Squadron pilots to get enough height to cut their engines some distance from the objective—we don’t want to warn the enemy of our arrival.”

It was nearly two o'clock in the small hours when the first "Victoria" Troop Carrier, with eighteen Levies on board, arrived at the mouth of the *wadi* Karnak.

Guy, with Brett at his elbow, stood staring into the moonlit radiance to the south-east, waiting. From afar off came the low drone of the engines; then they faded away. Guy waited until he heard the moan of the wind in the wires of the big machine overhead, and then blew a sharp blast on Brett's whistle. Instantly five sparks of light sprang up in the desert as five members of the armoured-car crew lighted their petrol-soaked rags, as arranged, to indicate the boundaries of the improvised aerodrome. The aeroplane, like a great black shadow glided, low over their heads, and came to earth; her wheels rumbled heavily as they touched the ground. The door in the fuselage opened, and the Levies, in full marching order, filed out and fell into line. The Air Commodore climbed down from the second pilot's seat, and under his direction the machine was wheeled clear of the aerodrome to make way for the other machines. One by one, at intervals of a few minutes, they landed, and the full force of Levies took up position by the armoured-car.

"Where did you get this information, Baring?" asked the C.O. crisply.

Briefly, Guy told him of the events of the past few hours, and handed him the documents he had taken from von Lertzhardt. Air Commodore Mailing examined them by the light of the torch, and then drew a deep breath. "My God!" he said. "This has been a close thing. What do you suggest is our best course of action? You know the place better than I do, so you had better take command, at least until we make our dispositions round the village. We shall have to wait until daylight before we occupy it."

"Very good, sir."

"All right, move off as soon as you are ready."

• • • • •

So slowly as to be hardly noticeable, the moon lost its brilliancy. The pale, flickering fingers of another day felt searchingly in the Eastern sky and shed a grey, mysterious light over the desert, and the village of Karnak. A shaft of light leapt upwards from the horizon and turned the mist-wreathed summits of the mountains into minarets of gold.

Guy rose from his position from behind a mass of rock overlooking the village, and glanced at the Air Commodore. "I'll go down now, sir," he said.

"Take care, Baring."

“I think it will be all right, sir.”

An Arab emerged from the doorway of a house and began walking down the street. Then came another with a bag over his shoulder, making his way towards a tethered pony. Happening to glance up, he saw Guy approaching, thirty or forty yards away. He dropped his bag and ran back into the house. Guy halted and raised both his hands. “Oh, Sheikh Ali Mereb Azab!” he called loudly. The echoes rang in the still air until they were lost in the distance. “Sheikh Ali Mereb Azab!” he called again.

Figures appeared in the doorways, pointing and gesticulating. The sheikh, clad only in his *gumbez*, appeared at the door of his house, and Guy turned towards him.

“*Es salaat wes salaam aleik!*”^[22] he cried.

[22] “Peace be with thee, and the glory.” Form of salutation.

Von Lertzhardt, clad in pyjamas, came slowly round a corner. “Hullo, Baring,” he said coolly, “so you’ve come back!”

“Stand still, Lertzhardt,” Guy warned him. “Tell the sheikh I have a hundred rifles and five machine-guns covering the village at close-range. My Commanding Officer wishes to avoid bloodshed, and if his people will lay down their arms the friendly relations we have enjoyed will continue.” Then turning to the sheikh he told him in halting Arabic that if he resisted, not a soul would be left alive in the village. He asked only that the white man should be delivered up to him.

Von Lertzhardt laughed loudly. “What do you hope to gain by that bluff?” he asked.

An Arab had been moving stealthily towards a row of tethered horses; thinking he was clear, he began to run.

The sharp staccato rattle of a machine-gun split the silence; there was a shrill whirr of ricocheting bullets on the rocks some distance in front of him. He stopped and ran back towards the houses. A circle of Levies began to move from cover to cover towards the village. Nine silver-winged aeroplanes appeared, roaring low over the foothills; they broke formation and began circling over the village.

“Better not try anything funny, von Lertzhardt,” Guy told the German, “you haven’t a chance.”

“So it would seem,” smiled the other, imperturbable still in defeat.

“Where is Miss Forbes?”

Before von Lertzhardt could answer Sheila and her uncle appeared; Sheila began to run towards Guy.

The Levies were advancing at the double and Guy pointed towards them. “Get behind the men!” he roared, but his fears of resistance were groundless. The sheikh, submitting to superior force, laid down his weapons without a word, although he scowled malevolently at von Lertzhardt, who was soon in the centre of an escort.

“Oh, Guy, how wonderful, how did you do it?” cried Sheila a few moments later when he joined her.

“There’s nothing wonderful about it, dear,” he told her as he took her into his arms. “You see, I had arranged with Brett to wait for us at the other end of the *wadi*; I found him there and wireless did the rest.”

“What is going to happen now?” she asked.

“We’re going to Baghdad, of course.”

“How are we going to get there?”

“Well, personally, I’m going to fly, but as you cannot imagine any circumstances that would make you get into an aeroplane, I have arranged for you——”

“But that was days—or was it years—ago?” she interrupted. And then, as she gazed into his eyes, “‘Whither thou goest’—you know the rest,” she whispered.

CONCLUSION

The story of the great gun-running plot in the Middle East never reached the newspapers, but several relevant records are filed in the archives of the Air Ministry.

One relates to a short, but brisk action in the Persian Gulf in which a large dhow was called upon by four flying-boats, one of which had landed alongside, to submit its cargo for examination. The crew of the dhow had opened fire, killing No. 493171 L.A.C. Brown, M.L., whereupon a single bomb had sent the dhow to the bottom. Three members of the crew were picked up and taken to Basra.

A second relates to a similar incident in the Gulf of Akabah. A third, to the seizure of a caravan by a company of Iraq Levies near Jebel Anzab, and a fourth, to a similar affair at Karnak, under the date 21/9/33. Number 1 Company Assyrian Levies had taken charge of the caravan and brought it to Baghdad where certain cases had been confiscated at the order of the A.O.C., Iraq Command.

No less than three entries were made by the Personnel Branch in the docket of Flight-Lieutenant G. M. Baring.

The first was: "Mentioned in Despatches and recommended for Distinguished Flying Cross, 22/9/33."

The second: "Special recommendation for three months' leave and transfer to Home Establishment. Approved A.O.C., Iraq Command, and confirmed by Chief of the Air Staff, 24/9/33."

The third: "Married, Baghdad, 25/9/33. Transferred to Married Establishment. Sheila N. Baring, *née* Forbes, taken on the strength of the Royal Air Force with effect from the same date."

Another entry, made by the Stores Branch, would probably pass unnoticed.

"Written off charge, H.Q., Iraq Command. Parachute Mark VII. No. 41373. With effect from 21/9/33. Salvage. Rip cord ring. Retained by Flt.-Lt. G. M. Baring. Charged 2d. Accounts Branch please note."

ALL'S FAIR

CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN PETER LOGAN, CHIEF INSTRUCTOR at the South London Aero Club, leaned against the flimsy wooden balustrade of the club-house verandah, and watched the evolutions of a Gipsy Moth, a thousand feet above the aerodrome, with silent disapproval. He might have been a statue, so still did he stand, his lean, bronzed chin tilted upwards towards the blue dome of heaven, eyes half-closed, and a little furrow across his forehead; only a leather flying-coat, slung loosely over his left arm, moved gently in the slight breeze.

The pilot of the Moth suddenly cut the engine and sideslipped steeply towards the sun-baked aerodrome. The watcher on the verandah caught his breath sharply as the machine skimmed between the wind-stocking pole and a hangar, and swung round, cross-wind, to a neat one-wheel landing that only a Gosport-trained Service pilot could have fully appreciated. Then, before the Moth had finished its run, the pilot whirled round and taxied, tail up, towards the club-house. The propeller stopped and a lithe figure slipped quickly to the ground. Goggles and flying-cap were removed, disclosing the face of a pretty girl about twenty years of age, who shook out her helmet-flattened hair into a mop of short, fair curls as she turned towards the sober-faced instructor, still leaning motionless on the balcony.

“Hullo, Grumpy,” she called cheerfully, “not so bad, eh?”

Logan regarded her coldly. “I’ve told you about flying like that before, Miss Sanderson,” he said harshly. The tone of his voice was low, but vibrant with anger. In the Service it had earned him the doubtful soubriquet of “Gimlet.”

“If you ever stunt again over this aerodrome I shall report you for dangerous flying,” he added. There was no doubt that he meant what he said.

Sheila Sanderson pulled up short and stared at him. The smile in her eyes faded quickly into an expression of surprise, which was followed by one of defiance and hostility.

“You’ll report me,” she echoed incredulously. “What’s wrong with my flying, anyway?”

“You should know, I’ve told you often enough,” replied Logan tersely. “If your engine had cut out on that climbing turn as you took off, if——”

“If fiddlesticks!” she broke in. “The machine’s my own and my life’s my own; I suppose I can do what I like with them?”

“Not here, you can’t,” Logan told her shortly. “This happens to be my aerodrome, and I don’t want any nasty blackened spots on it. You know that stunting is forbidden over the aerodrome, why do it? I’ll tell you. People only stunt low over aerodromes for one reason—to show off.”

The girl took a quick pace forward, the knuckles of the hand that gripped her cap and goggles shining whitely.

“Show off!” she cried. “Who to—you? Who do you think you are?” she snapped. “*You* can stunt as much as you like. You’re always right. You think because you shot down one or two miserable Huns, as you call them, in France, or merely because I’m a woman, that I come in a different category from you.”

“I do,” he agreed curtly.

“You mean you can do things a woman can’t?”

“That’s about it. When you’ve been flying as long as I have——”

“The trouble with you is you’ve been flying too long; your nerve’s petering out,” she interrupted him coolly.

Logan hesitated. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said slowly, “but that is a point I’m not prepared to argue with a spoilt chit of a girl with a couple of dozen hours’ flying in her log-book.” He picked up his flying-coat and half-turned towards the hangars.

“Wait a minute. I notice you he-men are always ready to run away. Perhaps you’ll tell me just where women fail?”

Logan looked at her over his shoulder. “It’s hard to say, exactly,” he replied reflectively. “In the air, as on the ground, they’re not quite—stable. There’s just something, the little detail they’re apt to overlook, that means so much in a difficult job or a tight corner. But that’s not the point. I haven’t lost a pupil yet, and I don’t want you to be the first.”

“I see. Thinking about your own precious reputation,” she answered with the suspicion of a sneer. “The pupil doesn’t matter, I suppose?”

“Not very much,” he confessed. “I teach people to fly for a business, not for the fun of it; all’s fair in love and business. It’s taken me sixteen years to know what I know about flying, and I’m not going to lose my job for any feather-brained young woman who hardly knows the difference between a prop-boss and a tail-skid. You may be a good pilot, Miss Sanderson, but

you've a lot to learn yet," he concluded icily, and turned towards a man who had just landed and was strolling towards the club-house. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sheila make her way, deep in thought, towards the ladies' room.

"Hulla, Jimmy," he greeted the newcomer wearily. "What a life! Thank God I'm getting away from it for a day or two—come and have a drink."

"Getting away from it?" queried Jimmy Larkin, test pilot to the Seagull Aviation Company, as they settled themselves in the lounge. "How so?"

"I've been offered a job of work by the *Daily Pictorial*. Tommy Newbold put it my way; you remember Tommy, used to be in 197 Squadron at St. Omer. He's on the staff in Fleet Street now."

"Where are you going?"

"Morocco—but not a word. The paper wants a set of air pictures of the French operations against the Riff. They're paying well for 'em, too, because they want me to fly low to get some good stuff."

"Be like old times."

"That's what I thought. Get a kick out of life for a change, instead of aviating ham-fisted pupils round the atmosphere."

"Which way are you going?"

"Paris, Lyons, Alicante, then down the coast and across the Mediterranean to Oran. The French have given me the O.K."

"When are you going?"

"The day after to-morrow, that is, Wednesday morning. I hope to make Oran the same night. I shall do the show on Thursday and get back here on Friday, so that the pictures will be in Saturday's paper. My kite's in the sheds, having a quick overhaul. Let's go and look at her."

The two men rose, finished their drinks, and left the lounge. As they walked along the tarmac towards the hangars Logan caught a movement with the tail of his eye and glanced back. Sheila Sanderson was sitting on the verandah, under the lounge window, apparently in earnest contemplation of the crows that were optimistically looking for sustenance in the middle of the aerodrome.

"I wonder how long she's been there," he muttered. "If she heard what I told you I hope to goodness she'll keep her mouth shut. I was asked to keep the whole thing under my hat, but I didn't mind you knowing, because you're not likely to let it go any farther."

"Who is she?"

“Sheila Sanderson. Old Sanderson’s only daughter—you know, the soup king. She’s a good kid in many ways, full of pluck and looks you straight in the eye, but she leads me a hell of a dance. I’m scared stiff she’ll kill herself one of these days and that’s a fact. She doesn’t know it, but the old man committed her to my special care, placed her precious life in my hands, so to speak, after she had made up her mind that she was going to learn to fly. He was all against it at first, but she got her way in the end, the same as she always has done, I imagine. But I don’t mind admitting that she weighs heavily on my peace of mind. She’s turned out a good little pilot—a bit too good, perhaps. She’ll try anything, and I’m afraid she’ll try something once too often.”

Jimmy gave him a quick sidelong glance as if a new idea had been born in his mind. “Yes—quite,” he observed drily, with a twinkle in his eye. “It must be a bit of an anxiety.”

Logan looked at him quickly. “What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing—I mean, you’d lose your job if anything happened to her.”

“Exactly! That’s what *I* meant,” returned Logan emphatically. “But here’s the kite,” he went on as they entered a hangar in which a little group of mechanics were working on a sports aeroplane of popular make.

“I shall want her at the first streak of dawn on Wednesday, Browne,” he told the Ground Engineer.

“She’ll be ready, sir,” was the quick reply.

CHAPTER II

THE sun was already low over the misty blue mountains of the Sierra Morena, when, two days later, Peter Logan landed on the Spanish airport of Alicante. He taxied in, switched off, and climbed stiffly from the cockpit, a frown of disappointment on his face, for a faulty petrol lead had held him up for more than three hours at Lyons, with the result that he was so far behind his scheduled time that the Mediterranean crossing that night was out of the question. That, in turn, would inevitably cut short the time at his disposal for obtaining the photographs the following day.

He was about to turn towards the airport buildings when the musical hum of an aero-engine caught his ear, and he glanced casually upwards in the direction of the sound. His eyes found and focused on an aircraft coming in to land from the south, and he watched it, at first curiously, and then fixedly. It was a Gipsy Moth, and his lips set in a straight line as he picked out the identification letters, "G-AAAY." He knew the machine well. It was Sheila Sanderson's.

It dropped down in a neat three-point landing and taxied quickly towards the group of waiting mechanics on the tarmac. A figure climbed lightly from the cockpit, and there was no longer any doubt as to the identity of the pilot. It was Sheila.

"*Essence*," she snapped, and then, turning, saw Logan leaning against the leading edge of his lower starboard plane. She flushed slightly and then turned to superintend the refuelling of her machine.

Logan walked slowly across to her. "Where have you been?" he asked grimly, a little wave of sympathy sweeping over him as he noted the weary dark-ringed eyes.

"Morocco," was the brief reply.

"What for?"

"To get a set of photographs of the Riff campaign for the *Daily Searchlight*."

"Did you get them?"

"I did. I exposed twenty-four plates at altitudes from fifty to five hundred feet."

“Fifty feet! Good God!” Logan started and instinctively cast a probing eye over the Moth. In one place, across the fuselage, a line of neat round holes told their own story. An interplane strut was splintered for a third of its length and half its width, and a piece of torn fabric trailed from a lower plane. “What are you going to do now?” he asked sharply.

“I’m pushing on to Lyons, so that I can get back in good time tomorrow.”

“You can’t fly that machine in that condition,” he told her harshly.

“Can’t I! You’ll see whether I can or not.”

“If the air gets through those bullet holes into the wing, it will ‘balloon’ and rip to smithereens.”

“That’s a risk I’m prepared to take.”

Logan’s face turned very white under its tan. “But, Sheila——” he began.

“Miss Sanderson,” she corrected.

Logan bit his lip. Then he stepped forward and seized her by both arms. “Listen, you little fool,” he ground out through clenched teeth. “You’re crazy. If anything happens to you——”

The girl wrenched herself free. “Don’t be dramatic,” she snapped. “I quite understand your desire to discourage me from going on. You’ve missed the boat, Captain Logan; I shall be home with the photos well ahead of you.”

Logan took a pace backward. “I see,” he said, and then again, “I see. How much are they paying you for double-crossing me?”

“Double-crossing? All’s fair in love and business—you said so yourself,” she taunted him. “A thousand pounds, since you ask, and my photograph on the front page.”

Logan looked at her reproachfully.

He seemed to have aged appreciably during the last few minutes. “Miss Sanderson,” he said distinctly, “if you will not go on until your machine has been overhauled, I’ll promise you, on my honour, not to move a mile nearer Morocco until you give me permission. In fact, I’ll stay and help you repair your machine.”

“And unscrew a turnbuckle or puncture the tank when I’m not looking. No, thank you,” was the quick reply.

Logan’s nostrils quivered once very slightly at the jibe, but the girl saw it and turned quickly to her machine to hide the self-reproach in her eyes. The mechanics had finished their task and were waiting for her instructions. She

climbed lightly into her seat. A mechanic swung the propeller, the engine started with a roar, the machine swung round into the wind and sped across the aerodrome like an arrow. Logan drew a deep breath as it left the ground, and after watching it out of sight, turned thoughtfully towards the aerodrome hotel.

Not until he had learned over the telephone from the duty officer at Bron Aerodrome, Lyons, that a British Gipsy Moth, G-AAAY, had landed safely, did he make his way moodily to his room.

CHAPTER III

THE sky grew pale and lifeless as the moon's silver gleam grew dim in a pallid twilight. It was not yet 4.30 a.m., but the sun, on its upward course, had stabbed its first flickering beam on the peaks of the distant mountains, as Logan taxied out on to the deserted aerodrome, opened his throttle, and with a roar that shattered the silence, took off and headed out over the open sea towards Africa. It was broad daylight long before the white buildings and shining minarets of Oran came into view, and his watch showed that he had been in the air more than two hours when he landed on the dusty North African aerodrome. He spent twenty minutes in refuelling and looking over his machine, and then he was off again, this time towards his final objective, the nine thousand feet high Jebel Badu, in the high Atlas, where the dissident tribesmen were making their last stand against the French.

He took a map from the side pocket of his cockpit and examined it closely, comparing it from time to time with the ground underneath. A few roads and tracks, with occasionally a column of infantry marching along them, could be seen until he reached the foothills, but there they gave way to a panorama of arid desolation. Once, a Breguet bomber, bearing the red, white and blue cockades of the French Flying Corps, coming from the opposite direction, passed so close to him that he could see the puzzled expression on the face of the gunner as he waved a greeting to the unusual visitor. The earth below rose steadily towards him, although he was not losing altitude, and the machine began to rock in the treacherous currents rising from the sun-scorched rocks below. Then, far ahead, where the mountains towered up in a wild series of jagged peaks, his eye caught the flash of guns, and he altered his course slightly in that direction. He could see the blue-coated French troops now, clustered along the mountain slopes, and he wondered vaguely if any of them were of the famous, or notorious, Foreign Legion, and if any Englishmen were among them.

He passed several mountain batteries of artillery, and instinctively made his way towards the distant flashes of the bursting shells. There seemed to be little activity on the ground, yet he knew that on those narrow ledges of rock nearly thirty thousand men were sweltering in a life or death struggle. He reached for his camera, a portable one of the "pistol" type, and pushed the joystick forward, every nerve tense. At a thousand feet he flattened out

and stared below, banking sharply as something ricocheted off his engine with a shrill metallic whang. He grimaced and skidded violently as a hole appeared in his wing, near the fuselage, but he picked out the group of tribesmen from which the shots were coming, and swept low down over them, “firing” his camera as he passed. Four or five more holes had appeared in his wings.

“God,” he muttered savagely as he zoomed up after his dive. “To think that she had the nerve to face this sort of thing; these fellows are as hot as the Wogs on the North-West Frontier.”

For twenty minutes he raced to and fro above the scene of operations, twisting and turning like a wounded snipe to spoil the aim of the Riff marksmen, and snapping his camera whenever an opportunity presented itself, sometimes at the advanced French posts and sometimes at the isolated bodies of Riff tribesmen that clustered on the precipitous sides of the mountains.

He had one very narrow escape. While flying low along a ledge of rock that dropped sheer into a valley thousands of feet below, a terrific explosion nearly turned his machine over, and glancing up he was startled to see a formation of French bombers unloading their bombs. Cursing himself for his stupidity in overlooking the possibility of such an event, but satisfied that he had obtained a unique set of photographs, he zigzagged out of the vicinity, and with a parting dip to a French battery he headed for the coast and home.

He stopped at Oran to refuel and snatch a mouthful of food, and then he pushed on again, anxious to get as near London as possible by nightfall. But he had to fight his way against a head-wind up the Rhône Valley, and the light was failing by the time he reached Lyons. Reluctantly he gave up the idea of reaching Paris that day. However, by cancelling his proposed rest at Oran he was working fairly well to his time schedule, so after cabling the *Daily Pictorial* the probable time of his arrival at the South London Aerodrome on the following day, he turned towards the hotel intending to get in as much sleep as possible.

As he passed through the hotel lounge a photograph on a front page of an open newspaper caught his eye. It was the current issue of the *Searchlight*, and the photograph showed Sheila Sanderson in flying kit, standing beside her machine. A curious smile spread slowly over his face as he read the caption under it.

“DARE-DEVIL BRITISH AIRWOMAN SECURES
AMAZING PHOTOGRAPHS FOR ‘DAILY
SEARCHLIGHT.’

“Miss Sheila Sanderson, the noted airwoman and daughter of Sir Ickmann Sanderson, who is now on her way back from Morocco with a sensational collection of photographs of the Riff stronghold. They were taken at great risk while her machine was actually under fire, and will be published in to-morrow’s issue of the *Daily Searchlight*.”

“Well, that’s that,” he mused as he passed on.

CHAPTER IV

HE left Bron Aerodrome for Le Bourget, the great Parisian airport, at the first streak of dawn, and with a twenty-mile-an-hour wind under his tail, arrived at the South London Aerodrome, grim-faced, and weary, shortly after ten o'clock. As he expected, the aerodrome was deserted, for the usual week-end crowd had not yet arrived; only two human beings were in sight. One was the driver of the *Pictorial* service car, who hurried towards him as he clambered stiffly from the cockpit, and to whom he handed a parcel of plates with a curt, "Here they are." The other was Sheila Sanderson.

She was sitting on the verandah, gazing across the aerodrome, in almost exactly the same position as she had been when he had walked down to the sheds with Jimmy Larkin two days previously. Without so much as a second glance in her direction he made his way to the instructors' room, hung up his flying kit, filled in his log-book, washed, and then turned towards the letter-rack in the hall. He glanced through the envelopes quickly, fully expecting to find a letter or telegram from the *Daily Pictorial* notifying him that the "scoop" had already been secured by another pilot for a rival paper. He pursed his lips in surprise as the post failed to reveal any such message, and he went through into the lounge to look for the *Daily Searchlight*.

It was not there. Walking across to the window he saw it lying on the end of the bench on which Sheila was seated. For a moment he hesitated, unwilling to betray his curiosity, which he knew the girl would naturally put down to anxiety. Then, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he strolled unconcernedly through the open doorway.

"Well, how did they come out?" he asked quietly.

"Why not look and see," she replied without moving.

"I will, if you've finished with the paper."

"Take it, by all means." Out of the corner of her eye she watched him pick it up.

Not a muscle of his face moved, nor did the expression in his eyes alter in the slightest degree as he glanced at the headline. "HEAVY FRENCH CASUALTIES IN MOROCCO," he read. Then a boxed paragraph, in black type, in the centre of the page, caught his eye.

“We regret to announce that we are unable to fulfil our promise to publish exclusive photographs of the French Riffian campaign, previously referred to in these columns. Miss Sheila Sanderson, who on Tuesday last flew her own aeroplane to the front, states that she is unable, for personal reasons, to release for publication the photographs she obtained. We very much regret any inconvenience that our inability to fulfil our promise may have caused. An article on the present position, by our special correspondent, appears on page 4.”

That was all. He folded the paper carefully and replaced it on the bench. Then he took out a cigarette-case, selected a cigarette with care, lit it, and flicked the dead match over the balcony. For perhaps a couple of minutes he smoked, eyes on the distant trees. Then, very deliberately, he threw the cigarette after the match, and turned.

“Come here,” he said quietly.

“Why should I?”

“Don’t argue, come here.” Again there was that quality in his voice that can only be acquired by years of instilling discipline and receiving obedience.

Sheila opened her mouth as if to speak, closed it again, rose, and came towards him. “Why should I?” she asked again, a trifle pale.

He ignored the question. “Why did you do it?” he demanded instead.

She did not answer.

“Shall I tell you?” he suggested. “Was it because you are too good a little sportsman? You thought you could do a double-cross, but when it came to brass tacks you just couldn’t do it. No—wait,” he went on quickly as she made as if to speak. “You knew that if the *Searchlight* published your pictures, my paper wouldn’t take mine, and I should be left in the cart.”

“All’s fair in love and business,” she reminded him, a trifle breathlessly.

“That’s what I wanted to hear you say. You’re right, it is,” he said fiercely, and caught her up in his arms.

She struggled at first, but desisted when he kissed her. “But you don’t—love me,” she whispered presently.

“I should consider what I am doing a waste of time if I didn’t, and life is too short to fritter away uselessly. I’m telling you that I do love you, that I’ve always loved you, and always shall love you. I am telling you this now because—well—in future you’re going to fly as I tell you; say ‘no’ to that and you can start looking for a new instructor right now.”

“You are quite sure—you love me? I shouldn’t have suspected it.”

“I took good care you didn’t. Yes, I’m quite sure.”

“Nothing could make any difference?”

“Nothing.”

She hesitated. “Then if you’re quite sure, I’ve a confession to make,” she whispered nervously.

He frowned. “Confession?”

“Yes,” she went on quickly, as if her resolution was weakening. “I went after those photographs intending to publish them. I should have gone through with it, too; I would have done anything to take you down a peg—but——”

“Well?”

“The photos were duds,” she breathed, very white. “Every one of them had a smudge right across the middle, that’s why they weren’t published. You were right, like you always are,” she added bitterly. “You said, ‘in flying women fail in the details.’ I thought of everything, except the lens. There was a smear of oil across it.”

“Yes, darling, I know,” he replied gravely.

“You what?” she cried incredulously, starting back.

“I said I know. You see, I put the oil on.”

“You put the oil on?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly do it myself,” he confessed, “but when I got to Bourget they told me you were ahead of me, and not being entirely a fool I realized it could only mean one thing. So I rang up old Père Legendre, at Alicante, and told him to blot your lens. As I told you in the beginning——”

“You brute.”

“I warned you in the beginning that all’s fair in love and business,” he protested, pulling her towards him, “but at the moment I’m not interested in business.”

STRANGE FREIGHT

STRANGE FREIGHT

WHEN BILL DAVENISH walked into the Club yesterday, I thought I had never seen such a change in a man in my life. He looked more like the old Bill of 60 Squadron, R.F.C., rather than the older, placid, and rather jaded-looking individual that he had become in recent years. There was a spring in his stride and a new light in his eye; his face, burnt bricky-red by the sun, was lean, and fairly glowed with health. In fact, he looked as if he had been thoroughly overhauled and reconditioned—as you might say.

I was glad, too, for Bill had been my best friend for too long not to cause me some concern when I saw him drifting the same way as so many of the old crowd have when they have found themselves up against it. One way and another Bill hadn't had much luck since he left the Service; he couldn't sort of fit into a peace-time existence, anyhow.

He spotted me as soon as he came in; in fact, I fancy he actually looked round for me, and catching sight of me in the corner came striding across with a real old-fashioned grin on his face.

"Hullo, you big scab," was his cheerful greeting.

"You're a nice fellow, aren't you?" I told him. "Pushing off without saying a damn word about where you were going, or why. Where the devil have you been, anyway? It must be three months since——"

"I know, I know, old lad," he put in quietly. "It must have looked a bit steep after the way you helped me out——"

"Never mind about that," I interrupted, "what I want to know is why the devil you took it into your head to fade out without so much as a single word."

"I'll tell you all about it, and by the time I've finished you'll know all the whys and wherefores. What are you drinking?"

"Scotch."

He called for drinks, lit a cigarette and sat back regarding me whimsically with a twinkle in his eye. "Now, my writer of stories," he observed, "I'm going to tell you a tale that will knock all your wild and woolliest efforts into a cocked hat. Another difference between my story and yours, that I would ask you to bear in mind, is that the one I am going to tell you is true, whereas yours——"

“All right, all right, cut out the rough stuff,” I broke in shortly. “I don’t write stories to amuse you. I write them to enable me to buy a little jam once in a while to put on the bread and butter.”

“Quite. But I am going to tell you one that should not only amuse you, but one that has enabled me to buy a little jam, too, by way of a change.”

“Well, come on, get on with it,” I suggested.

Bill leaned back and regarded the end of his cigarette meditatively. “You will remember that about three months ago I was in a pretty nasty mess, one way and another,” he began. “Things were getting desperate, and that’s a fact. My sole possessions were the clothes I stood up in, which included some dilapidated flying kit, a well worn second-hand Desoutter three-seater, and about thirty bob in cash. My idea of running private charter business was a good one, as other people have since found, but I couldn’t run it on air alone. I needed petrol, oil and a lot of other things. If business had been as bright as I hoped it would be, I could have managed, but my big boob was starting in the middle of winter. There was nothing doing. Things went from bad to worse until at about the time I last saw you I was down to rock bottom. My tanks were empty, and the poor old kite was mortgaged to such an extent that I couldn’t get any more credit. What was worse, my C. of A. needed renewing and I hadn’t the cash to pay for it. In short, my career as a civil pilot was likely to be terminated at any moment.

“Then I had a brainwave. I don’t get many, but this one was a stormer. As I told you, I had about thirty bob in cash between me and starvation, so I took my courage in both hands and spent twenty-five of it on an advertisement in *The Times*. You know the sort of thing. ‘Private owner willing to fly anywhere, anyhow, with anybody; time and distance no object.’ It was my last shot, fired into the blue, so to speak, and to tell you the honest truth I didn’t expect it to produce a reply. But it did. That shot scored a bull.

“The day after I put the ad. in the paper I was standing on the tarmac looking at the old Desoutter for the last time—as I thought—when a car pulled up and a queer-looking little cove came tripping across waving a newspaper.

“‘Is this you?’ he asked, without any preliminaries, stabbing at the paper with his finger.

“I couldn’t think what he meant at first, but I had a quick look and saw my ad. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘that’s me.’

“‘And this is your machine?’ he questioned, giving it the once-over.

“‘Yes,’ I told him, ‘this is the machine. Where do you want to go?’

“‘To Central Africa.’

“That shook me. It is true I had said that I was prepared to go anywhere, but this was a bit farther than I bargained for. ‘When?’ I asked.

“‘Now,’ he said promptly.

“‘*Now?*’

“‘Instantly.’

“Well, a joke’s a joke, but to be asked to set off for Central Africa at a moment’s notice is not funny. I had to tell him that it couldn’t be done.

“‘Then I shall have to find someone else to take me,’ he said, and prepared to depart.

“‘Hold hard!’ I cried, seeing my first and last inquiry going west. ‘But you can’t just push off to Africa in an aeroplane without papers and God knows what else. What about Customs and——’

“‘I cannot wait for these things,’ he broke in, ‘I must leave immediately.’

“Well, I’ll try and make a long story short and tell you what happened. We went into the office, and after a bit of argument I decided to go. He was to pay me twenty-five pounds cash every day for hire of myself and the machine for as long as he needed me, which he said might be anything up to three weeks or a month. He agreed to pay for all oil and petrol, but if the machine broke down beyond repair, that was my pigeon. He would just push on and leave me to it. His idea was that if such a thing occurred he would try and hire another machine. It was a funny business; he wouldn’t tell me anything about where we were actually going, or why, except that I was to take him to a point in Central Africa somewhere in the region of Lake Chad. He said he would tell me more when we got nearer.

“You may be shocked to hear that we proposed to waive all formalities and regulations, both national and international. We would get a full load of petrol on board at Lympne, and then fly south as far as we could. We couldn’t land at proper airports, of course, on account of having no papers, and the scheme was to land in a field and get petrol as and how we could from the nearest village. The thing seemed to bristle with difficulties, yet curiously enough, it all panned out very smoothly; moreover, the old engine ran like a sewing machine.

“We started off about lunch-time and came down just this side of Lyons as it was getting dark. We walked to a village, hired a car, and spent most of the night filling up with petrol. Next morning he handed me twenty-five pounds and off we went again. And so it went on. It was tiring work, but Castleton—that was his name, by the way—didn’t seem to mind, and I

certainly didn't while five fivers moved from his pocket to mine every morning.

"We quite expected that this mode of travelling was going to be more difficult in Africa, where we shouldn't be able to get petrol except at regulation aerodromes, but as a matter of fact it wasn't. Our first stop over the other side of the ditch was at Algiers, where we got away with it just as easily as we had done before. At Bidon Five—you know the post on the trans-Sahara motor route?—there was only one fellow on duty, and he sold us petrol from the pump without a word. The next hop was to Gao, and we got a wonderful story ready to tell of how the authorities at the last port of call had mislaid our papers, and had asked us to pick them up again on the way back. But the question did not arise. The poor devils down there were so glad to see someone other than themselves that they not only filled us up, but gave us quarters for the night.

"Now you might have thought that by this time I was getting curious about what sort of errand could possibly bring a fellow like Castleton to such a place. But I wasn't. I was concerned with one thing only, and that was to keep the old Desoutter going until I had transferred as many notes as possible from his wad to mine. My common sense told me that it couldn't go on indefinitely, but twenty-five Jimmy o' Goblins *per diem* are not to be sniffed at, and it was a long time since I had so much money in my pocket. I was beginning to do mental arithmetic, working out how I could pay everybody when I got home, and start afresh with a clean sheet. But that's by the way. Where did I get to—— Oh yes, we were at Gao.

"I had just got into bed when there came a knock on my door, and I walked Castleton. He was in pyjamas, for it was hot, damned hot, and it was pretty obvious that now we were getting near the end of our journey he was all worked up and excited. He was a mean-looking little devil, and certainly didn't look like the sort of man to be trailing around with the best part of a thousand pounds in his pocket, for that was what I estimated his wad to be worth. His clothes were those of a city man, but quite ordinary; he might have been any one of the ten thousand clerks who disgorge at the London termini every morning. There was nothing much about him to look at, I mean, neither good nor bad, but he had a suave, ingratiating sort of manner that sometimes made me want to kick him.

"Well, in he came and planted himself at the end of my bed.

"'Davenish,' he said, 'I want to tell you something. Quite frankly, I shouldn't tell you what I am about to tell you but for the fact that you are bound to see—how can I put it—well, you've got to know because it can't be otherwise.'

“‘You needn’t tell me if you don’t want to,’ I told him, pretty cuttingly.

“‘But you would think it rather odd if I didn’t offer some sort of explanation?’ he protested.

“‘Go ahead,’ I said.

“He hummed and hawed a bit, but in the end this was the gist of his story. The following day we should, all being well, arrive at a point a few miles north of Lake Chad. When we reached this place I was to keep a sharp look-out for three low, rocky hills, two close together, and the other a little distance away. Between the two hills that were close together there was a sandy valley. That was our destination. The idea was to land as near that valley as possible, but the thing that worried me a bit was the fact that he hadn’t the remotest idea of what the surrounding terrain was like. It might be forest, desert, scrub—anything. As it happened it was a sort of rough plain dotted about with mimosa and other bushes; but I didn’t know that then, and I asked Castleton what was going to happen if I couldn’t find a place to land. He said we should manage it somehow and it didn’t really matter if the machine was broken as long as we got down safely. ‘Doesn’t it, by God?’ I said, getting peeved. ‘D’you realize where we are? What about petrol, food and water, and who’s going to pay for the machine?’ His answer to that was that he had arranged for a good supply of water, food and petrol—in two-gallon tins—to be ready in the morning, as much as the machine would carry. ‘But how the devil do you know how much the machine will carry?’ I snapped, for it seemed to me that he was taking too much on himself without consulting me.

“‘You can leave behind what we can’t carry,’ he replied calmly.

“‘What are we going to do when we get to this valley?’ I asked. I was ready for him to say something about gold or diamonds, but his answer fairly took me aback.

“‘We are going to get some tusks,’ he said quietly, ‘elephant tusks.’

“‘How many?’

“‘About two thousand eight hundred.’

“I looked at the chap for a minute or two as it suddenly struck me that I was dealing with an escaped lunatic, although he looked sane enough.

“‘You’re not thinking of bringing them back in the machine by any chance, are you?’ I inquired.

“‘No,’ he said, ‘I am not. For the present I am simply going to move them.’

“‘*You* are?’

“‘Well, we are.’

“‘Like Hell we are!’ I told him. ‘I’m a pilot, not a navy.’

“‘Your rate of pay will continue while you are thus engaged,’ he shook me by saying. ‘The fact is, Davenish, unauthorized people have discovered the whereabouts of the hoard—one might almost call it treasure—and it becomes necessary for me to move it without delay. Now what I propose is this. If we can find a good landing-ground we will transfer the whole lot to a spot a few miles away, by air, and hide it as best we can. We could at least do that as long as the petrol lasts.’

“‘And what about getting back?’ I asked him.

“‘I’m not coming back,’ was his staggering answer, ‘but I will leave you enough petrol to enable you to return to the nearest point of civilization, where I expect you will have to abandon the machine, at least, *pro tem*. Provided the ivory is safely cached, I will pay you five hundred pounds for the loss of the machine, and one hundred pounds to enable you to return home. That, of course, is over and above what I am now paying you.’

“‘That suits me,’ I agreed promptly. ‘But what are you going to do?’

“‘That need not concern you,’ he told me.

“‘Who does this ivory belong to, anyway?’ I questioned.

“‘I was waiting for you to say that,’ he half-sneered. ‘It belongs to me, of course. In the first instance it belonged to my father, who was—I may as well be frank—an ivory poacher in Belgian territory, which as you know is not far away. He obtained this ivory over a period of many years, and hid it where it still remains. It was his intention to sell the lot when the time was ripe, but unfortunately for him, wind of what was going on reached the ears of the Belgian Government officials and they set out to round him up. He dodged about for a time, but things got too hot, so finally he went to England to give things time to blow over. Six months ago he was negotiating with a Portuguese dealer at Dar es Salaam—a fellow he knew well—for the sale of the entire stock, intending to come out under an assumed name and fetch the stuff when the deal was concluded. A few weeks ago he went out without an overcoat, got wet through, caught pneumonia, and died. I was away at the time, or he would, no doubt, have told me where to find the ivory. As it was, he left his papers to me, but they were in a dreadful mess, and it has taken me all this time to find the document that I knew existed—the one showing the position of the ivory.’

“‘But why the hurry?’ I couldn’t help chipping in.

“‘Because,’ he said, ‘on the very day that I found the sketch-map and instructions for finding the ivory, I received a letter—addressed to my father,

naturally—from the Portuguese, saying that a native who had worked for my father had been arrested on some trumped-up charge, and was being coerced into opening his mouth by the offer of his freedom in exchange for the information he could provide. As you will agree, the value of this hoard is a stake worth playing for, and I did not hesitate. Speed was everything. I went to my bank, withdrew my entire savings, and was about to charter an aeroplane at Croydon, when I saw your advertisement. To be quite candid, I chose you because I thought an individual was less likely to ask awkward questions than a big company. I am now glad to think that my decision was a wise one.’ ”

Bill looked at me and grinned before he went on with his story. “Well, that was that,” he continued. “I hardly knew what to think about it, and that’s a fact. It sounded a Hell of a yarn, as you must admit, but I had to agree that in similar circumstances I should have acted just as he did. It was clear enough what he intended to do. Having re-hidden the stuff, he was going to make his way down to Dar es Salaam and put through the deal that the old man had started. And as far as one could see it presented no serious difficulties. Anyway, I told him it was all right with me, but made a mental note that I’d believe in the ivory when I actually set eyes on it.

“I needn’t have worried. It was there all right. I was handling it the very next day. I saw the hills miles away, found a clear stretch of ground quite close to the valley and set the machine down fairly comfortably. The ground was a bit rough, as you’d expect, but it was not too bad, and we did no damage. We left it just where it stopped and went off down into the valley, which ran into a sort of bottle neck at the end. At the far extremity of the neck, where the sandy floor of the valley ran into the rock wall, a great heap of sand had been piled up. We dug into it with our hands and there was the ivory. We didn’t stop to count the tusks; from the size of the pile of sand the number of tusks that Castleton had mentioned looked about right.

“First thing next morning he sent me off on a scouting trip to find a place to build a new dump. There were plenty of suitable places, and I selected one about three or four miles away, which was a kind of deep flaw in the base of the third hill. The ground was clear and it might have been specially made for the job. When I got back to the valley I found Castleton busy clearing the loose rock off the sandy floor, which was fairly wide and not very deep. He said he thought it would be easier for me to land there, and much nearer the ivory, and I told him it was a good idea, which it was.

“Well, I won’t bore you with the story of how we shifted the loot. We dumped our spares, stores and petrol, made a camp, and got busy. Sometimes, in the case of the large tusks, I could only take three or four;

sometimes I could take as many as six or seven. I did the flying and dumped the stuff at the other end—after he'd been to have a look at the place—while he hauled it out of the sand and loaded up on the original site. In this way we shifted, in three and a half days, working from dawn to dusk, about seven-eighths of the ivory, and then I called a halt.

“‘I’ve got just about enough juice left to see me back to that village we passed on the way down, which I reckon is about thirty miles away,’ I told him. ‘I don’t feel like hoofing it alone and unarmed, so I’m going to fly.’”

“He looked at the rest of the ivory and he looked back at me; then he sat down and counted what was left of his money. When he had finished he got up and handed me six hundred pounds, which was correct according to our arrangement, for he had gone on paying me the twenty-five daily.

“‘There you are, Davenish,’ he said, ‘I think you will find that correct. I am very much obliged to you. But before you go I’d like to ask you if you are open to consider another proposition.’”

“‘What is it?’ I asked, wondering what the dickens he was driving at.

“‘I’ve got a hundred and eighty pounds left,’ he said, ‘and eighty will be sufficient to see me to where I am going. I will pay you the other hundred, and send you a cheque for another hundred as soon as I get back, if you will carry the rest of this stuff across. You will, of course, have to walk to the village if you run out of petrol. You can do the journey in one day, in daylight, so you should come to no harm.’”

“‘That’s a deal,’ I replied quickly.

“You see, old boy, I reckoned the machine was worth about three hundred and fifty pounds at most, and I’d already cleaned up, all told, about nine hundred pounds in cash. I’d nothing to grumble about, particularly as I thought that with any luck I could get some native boys to pack petrol to wherever I had to leave the machine, and salve it. Oh yes, it suited me to pick up another easy two hundred. You can well understand that I was tickled to death at making as much in two weeks as I’d made in the previous two years.

“Off I went, and by nightfall I had taken the last load to the new cache. I knew I was cutting things pretty fine, but the tank was lower than I thought. The prop petered out when I was on my way back to Castleton, about a mile from the valley. I thought at first that I should just about make it, but I failed by ten yards. My wheels hit the rocks on the edge, and bang went everything. I was only crawling along so I didn’t hurt myself, but I could see at a glance that the old Desoutter had gone for good.

“It was just about dusk, with the rim of the sun blazing like fire over the lip of the horizon. I stood there looking at the machine, rather sorrowfully—you know how you feel about a kite that you’ve flown a long time?—and wondering what Castleton would say, when something made me turn. Don’t ask me what it was because I don’t know. You know that *feeling* of a Hun sitting up in the sun. You can’t see him, but you *know* he’s there. That’s just how I felt at that moment. Sort of instinct, I suppose. I spun round, and there was Castleton, about six yards away, with a revolver in his hand. When he saw that I had seen him he jerked up the gun and fired. But I jumped at the same time, and the shot bored into the fuselage of the wreck. As I jumped my foot caught in a briar or something and down I went, but I twisted like an eel as I hit the ground and I heard him fire again. He was a rotten shot or I shouldn’t be here now; I think it is quite likely that he had never fired a revolver in his life before—but that’s by the way. As I fell my hand hit a lump of rock, and I snatched it up. He just had time for the third shot, which grazed my shoulder, and then I let drive. The rock caught him fair and square on the temple. I didn’t just pitch it. I hurled it with every atom of fury that his murderous attack had roused in me. It caught him, as I say, on the temple, and it made a noise like a hammer going into a ripe melon. Down he went like a pole-axed ox, and just about as dead. Did I worry? I should say not. I don’t mind confessing to you that it was as much as I could do to prevent myself from beating his body to pulp—the murdering swine. It was all plain enough to see now. He had two good reasons for killing me. In the first place he wanted to get rid of the only person in the world who knew where the ivory was hidden; and in the second, he wanted his money back. No wonder he was lavish with his notes. I’m convinced that he intended to murder me from the beginning, which is why he didn’t want anybody to know where we had gone.

“Well, there he lay, as dead as a doornail, and a fat lot I cared. But I began to look around to see how I was fixed. I was in the wilds of wildest Africa with a busted aeroplane, a little food and water, and a half-empty revolver. I’m no pioneer and I didn’t relish padding the hoof to civilization, particularly as I could hear lions roaring not far away. It was dark by this time so I got back into the inverted cabin of the Desoutter and sat there all night with the revolver in my hand, waiting for *felix leo* to call. But he got all he wanted outside—or else it was the hyenas—as I discovered when morning came and I crawled out to look around. There wasn’t any Castleton. There were a few bits of rag and a nasty, bloody mess; that was all. It saved me a lot of trouble, and I didn’t shed any crocodile tears. I ate a bit of grub,

collected up what was left, picked up a petrol tin of water and was all ready to trek.

“I was taking a last look around when I heard a sound, common enough here, but not so common where I was. It was an aero-engine. At first I couldn’t believe my ears, but there was no doubt about it, and presently I saw it, a Puss Moth, heading in my direction. I made a mental note that the people who say that the age of miracles is past don’t know what they’re talking about. Here was a Cape-bound record-breaker, sent specially off his course by Providence to pick me up. Was it? Not on your life. The Puss circled round, obviously in competent hands, and presently made a neat landing on my original landing-ground, pulling up not a dozen yards from the wreck. When the pilot stepped out I nearly threw a fit. It was a girl—and what a girl. But I’ll spare you the details. With her was a nasty-looking piece of work in khaki drill with government sahib written all over him.

“He pushed his way to the front. ‘What’s your name?’ he snapped.

“‘Davenish,’ I said, ‘what’s yours?’

“‘Where’s Castleton?’ he demanded.

“I pointed to the bloody mess. ‘There,’ I said.

“The girl gave a kind of scream and got all upset. ‘How did that happen?’ inquired Standish—that was his name, by the way. He wasn’t a bad sort of fellow, really.

“‘Don’t ask me, ask the hyenas,’ I suggested.

“‘I warn you that anything you say may be used——’ began Standish, going all military and official, but I cut him short.

“‘Don’t get uppish,’ I said, ‘I’m fed up and I’m tired, but if you’ll come over here in the shade I’ll tell you about it.’ And I did.

“When I had finished the girl told her story. It seemed that the ivory-poaching tale was true enough, but the fellow was the *girl’s* father and nothing to do with Castleton. The old man had died just as he had described, but Castleton was merely a clerk in their lawyer’s office. He had had the handling of the will and other documents, which included the description of the cache. The opportunity to acquire sudden wealth thus presented was evidently too much for him. He forged a cheque on his employers to get money, made a copy of the sketch-map, and set about getting to the place before the daughter, who had declared her intention of going to Africa to see about the disposal of the ivory. Her original intention had been to go by steamer to Dar es Salaam and arrange with the Portuguese ivory dealer to fetch the stuff, but she had been amusing herself by learning to fly at Brooklands while her father was in England, and when Castleton’s

defalcation was discovered, she guessed what was in the wind, got a machine and followed him. As a matter of fact Castleton's plan worked out well, but he made two mistakes. The first when he tried to do me in, and the second when he bungled it. If he had had the sense to let well alone I should have been miles away by the time the Puss Moth arrived; so would he; and the ivory would have disappeared."

• • • • •

Bill looked at his empty glass and I called the waiter.

"What happened to the ivory in the end?" I asked.

"It was decided on a point of law that it belonged to the girl. The Belgian government could not prove that it was obtained in their territory, and to tell the truth our people were glad that they couldn't. The British government had no real claim to it because they couldn't prove anything either. So the case was settled by arbitration, the government and the girl each taking half the proceeds of the sale. There was only one snag."

"What was that?"

"I was the only person who knew where the stuff was, and I quite forgot where it had been hidden. In the end the government cured my temporary loss of memory with a cheque for two thousand pounds."

"You artful devil! And how did you get home?"

"Well, after our debate on the site of the tragedy, Standish departed on foot for the village and the girl flew me home. We were delayed for best part of a month in the South of France——"

"Customs difficulties, I suppose?"

"No, it just seemed a better place than England for a honeymoon, that's all."

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

HIS HIGHNESS, PRINCE ALEXIS ROWENSTEIN, REGENT of the civil war-ridden state of Sonovia, tugged the wisp of moustache that adorned his upper lip and eyed the few remaining loyal members of his Cabinet with ill-concealed anxiety.

“We must face the facts,” he announced petulantly for the hundredth time, “the rebels are almost at the gates. A week ago the scum were beaten; to-day they are advancing, thanks to the efforts of that interfering foreigner who is terrorizing our army with his infernal aeroplane. Our lack of foresight in not providing ourselves with aeroplanes when the storm was brewing will lose us the war. We have only one chance, and that is, to check the activities of this airman. With him disposed of, our troops might regain some of their lost morale and turn the tide. Only a fortnight ago Captain Barton, of the British Falkner Aviation Company, was here, demonstrating a new fighting machine. But for you, Blaunmaer, and your haggling”—he scowled malevolently at the Chancellor of the Exchequer—“he would still be here and we should have an Air Force.”

“But, your Excellency——”

“Bah! You and your snivelling bleating about the public purse. What does the public purse or any other purse matter? We could have wrung the money out of them. Where is it now? Gone to arm the rebels. Well, I have taken it upon myself to recall this Britisher from Le Bourget; he is here now.”

“But, your Highness, think of the money,” muttered the Chancellor white-lipped.

“Think rather of the result if we do not stop the other man,” sneered the Prince. “We might as well empty your money-bags as let them fall into the hands of the rebels. Leave it to me; this may not cost as much as you think,” he added craftily, picking up a telephone on his desk. “I’ll see Captain Barton,” he said curtly.

The door opened to admit an orderly, followed by a slim, athletic figure upon whose face flickered the ghost of a smile.

“Please sit down, Captain Barton,” began the Prince, with what was intended to be a disarming smile. “You may wonder why I sent a cable

asking you to return? I will come straight to the point. The fact is, that although you gave us an excellent demonstration of the capabilities of your new Falcon Fighter we were not altogether satisfied at the time that it could do all you claimed for it. In thinking the matter over we have decided that we may have been a trifle hasty in our judgment. Er—we have also reconsidered the question of terms.”

The Englishman nodded. “I am glad to hear it,” he said slowly.

“An opportunity now occurs for you to *prove* what your machine can do.”

“Prove it! I thought I did prove it; besides, Martlesham Heath figures don’t lie,” replied Barton shortly.

“I mean under active service conditions—in the field.”

“In the field?” echoed the pilot with a puzzled air.

“Precisely,” went on the Prince. “You may possibly have heard that we are having a little trouble here—nothing to speak of—but the insurgents have an aeroplane operating for them which is causing a certain amount of inconvenience.”

Barton raised his eyebrows. “Really?” he said. “Well they are, at least, modern in their methods. Who is flying it?”

“I don’t know,” replied the Prince. “I wish I did.” A smile hovered about his thin lips. “But if you can shoot his aircraft down it will prove conclusively the superiority of your machine, in which case we should not hesitate to place an order—a substantial order—with your firm.”

Barton, who knew something of the Prince’s reputation, thought swiftly.

“Very good, sir,” he said, “but of course I must have an agreement.”

“You shall have that immediately you have proved your machine,” broke in the Prince.

“An agreement and a cash payment sufficient to guarantee the order,” concluded Barton imperturbably.

“Do you doubt our word?” cried the Prince angrily, springing to his feet.

“Not at all,” said the pilot calmly, “but business is business. Suppose you lose the war, after all?”

“Preposterous! I will report you to your firm for insolence,” cried the Prince.

“My firm leaves these things to me; that is why they have sent me here instead of sending you a catalogue,” retorted Barton coldly. “I must insist that you deposit the money in gold in the British bank. A clause in the

agreement would allow you to withdraw it if I fail to stop the activities of your troublesome aviator.”

The Prince caught the eye of the Chancellor. “Very well,” he said, endeavouring to conceal his chagrin, “it shall be as you say. The money shall be deposited, and the agreement prepared before nightfall. May I ask you to pursue your task as expeditiously as possible; the matter is—er—rather urgent.”

“So I gather, sir,” replied the pilot coolly, rising to his feet. “I shall be in the air at dawn.”

“And I shall be at the front to watch,” said the Prince significantly. “You will probably find your man harassing our forces on the ground.”

Outside the Council Chamber a suspicion of a smile played about the lips of the pilot. “God! They must be in a tight hole,” he mused. “Still, what does expense matter to them as long as they keep their strangle-hold on the pockets of the people. Bah! What skunks they are—for two pins I’d join the rebels.”

• • • • •

On the following morning, the first glimmer of dawn found Captain Barton warming up the engine of his Falkner “Falcon”; he had already filled the belts of his guns with ammunition under the eyes of two or three alleged mechanics, and was ready for the combat. He waved away the chocks and sped across the primitive sun-baked landing-ground, leaving a swirling dust-cloud in his wake. He eased the stick back, held the machine down for a moment, and then zoomed like a rocket; he glanced at the compass and headed in the direction of the fighting line.

Ten minutes later the scene of action was visible below, and he scanned the sky closely for the enemy machine. His eye fell on a swiftly moving speck, before which, on the ground, a mob of troops was scattering like chaff before the wind. Holy mackerel, no wonder they want him out of the way, grinned Barton, as he put his nose down in a wire-screaming dive, warming his guns as he went. At a range of three hundred feet he fired a short burst across the nose of the other machine, which instantly whirled round to meet him, and a moment later both machines were tearing round in a tight circle, each trying to get “on the tail” of the other.

From a safe distance the Prince and his staff watched the combat with bated breath.

“He’s being beaten,” cried the Prince, white with excitement, as the two machines suddenly swung round and raced towards them, guns cracking

viciously. The “Falcon” was in front, frantically dodging and twisting in a wild effort to escape its pursuer. A groan burst from the Chancellor’s lips, which quickly turned to a cry of horror as a stream of lead struck the rocks a short distance away and ricocheted past them with a shrill scream. The Prince turned his horse and galloped madly in the opposite direction.

High into the blue climbed the two circling planes, the rattle of guns still audible to the spellbound spectators on the ground. Higher and still higher they climbed, zooming, circling and twisting in the fury of the combat. They were drifting with the wind and were soon some distance away from the battlefield. A cry of excitement broke from the Prince’s lips.

“Look!” he cried exultantly. “He’s got him.”

It was true. The rebel plane staggered drunkenly for a moment, wallowed like a rolling porpoise, and then plunged downwards, a long feather of smoke trailing out behind it. As it fell into a spin cheer after cheer from the Prince’s army followed its fall until it vanished from sight behind the blue mountains to the south.

The “Falcon” nosed down for a moment to watch its falling adversary, and then swung low over the Royalist army on its way back to the aerodrome.

• • • • •

Jerry Barton and Bill Reeves, old comrades of 296 Squadron, R.F.C., now test pilots in the employ of the Falkner Aviation Company, sat drinking in the Rôtisserie Perigoudine in Paris.

“—And the cash went through all right?” queried Reeves.

“It did,” smiled Barton, “they couldn’t get out of it. Well, they had a good show for their money. That ground strafing of yours certainly looked like the real thing; and that stannic chloride made a wonderful smoke when you went down. They’re still looking for your remains in the mountains!”

“I slipped across the frontier at about fifty feet—don’t think anybody saw me,” grinned his companion. “I could only get an order for three machines out of the rebels though,” he added regretfully, “that was all the ready money they could raise, so it was no use trying to sell more. Well, don’t forget it’s my turn in the ‘Falcon’ next time. Let us drink!”

THE ACE OF SPADES

CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN BIGGLESWORTH, of 266 Squadron, R.F.C., known to his friends as "Biggles," homeward bound from a solitary patrol, glanced casually at the watch on his instrument board. "Twelve-fifteen," he mused, "just time to look in and have a word with Wilks before lunch." He altered his course a trifle, and a few minutes later set his Sopwith Camel down neatly on the aerodrome of No. 287 Squadron, where his friend, Captain Wilkinson—more often referred to simply as "Wilks"—commanded a Flight of S.E.5's.

"Is Wilks about?" he called to a group of pilots who were lounging about the entrance to a hangar, in which the dim outlines of some square-nosed S.E.5's could just be seen.

"Hullo, Biggles! Yes, I think he's down in the Mess," was the reply.

"Good enough, I'll stroll down."

"Do you want your tanks filling?"

"No, thanks, laddie, I've plenty to see me home." Biggles tossed his cap and goggles into his cockpit and walked quickly towards the Mess, where he found Wilks, with two or three members of his Flight, indulging in a pre-luncheon apéritif.

"Ah—speak of the devil," declared Wilks.

"Do you often talk about yourself?" inquired Biggles.

"Bah! When are your crowd going to knock a few Huns down?" grinned Wilks.

"Just as soon as the Boche opposite to us have fixed up what few fellows we've left alive with some new machines. Why?"

"We've got seven this week, so far."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" observed Biggles. "Well, you lot so seldom get a Hun that I suppose there is an excuse for you to get a bit chirpy. But you start riding too high on the cock-horse and you'll stall and bruise yourselves. What about providing me with a little refreshment, somebody?"

"The fact is, our new S.E.5a's are a bit better than your Camels," explained Wilks apologetically, as he ordered Biggles' drink.

"You think so, eh? Well, let me tell you something. I'd back a Bentley Camel against a long-nosed S.E., as a Hun-getter, any day."

“And let me tell you something,” declared Wilks, setting his glass down. “The worst S.E. in this Squadron could make rings round the best Camel you’ve got—’cos why? Because we’ve got speed and height on you.”

Biggles’ eyes glittered. “Well, speed and height aren’t everything,” he said shortly. “My kite’ll turn twice before you’re half-way round the first turn. You think that over.”

“You’d have to prove that.”

“I’ll do that.”

“How?”

“Camera guns.”

“When?”

“Any time you like. Now seems to be the best time; there’s no need to wait, as far as I can see.”

“How would you arrange it?” inquired Wilks curiously.

“It doesn’t need any arranging. We take off with six films each and rendezvous over the aerodrome at ten thousand. No surprise tactics allowed. The show starts as soon as both pilots see each other, and ends as soon as the first man has got his six pictures. Then we’ll develop both films and tot up points for hits in the usual way.”

“I’ll take that on!” cried Wilks, starting up. “I’ll show you whether a perishing, oil-swilling Camel can hold a candle to an S.E.”

“Get ready, then. Your jaw will seize up one day, talking so much.”

There was a general babble of voices and a move towards the door as everyone hurried out on to the aerodrome to watch the match. “Get one of your fitters to fix me up a gun,” Biggles told Wilks.

“I’ll see to it.”

CHAPTER II

TEN minutes later the stage was set, and both pilots were ready to climb into their machines.

“Rendezvous over the aerodrome you said?” queried Wilks.

“That’s right; take off how you like. I’ll approach from the north and you come in from the south. It doesn’t matter about the sun, as the shooting doesn’t start until we see each other.”

“Good enough.”

“Wait a minute, though!” cried Biggles, suddenly remembering something. “Have you got any ammunition in your Vickers?”

“No, they’re just being overhauled.”

“Hold you hard a minute, then,” retorted Biggles. “I’ve got a full belt in mine and they weigh something. I’ll have them taken out and then we’ll be square.”

It was the work of a moment for a fitter to remove the belt of ammunition, and both machines then took off amid the joyful applause of the assembled aerodrome staff, officers, and ack-emmas.

Biggles headed away to the north, climbing as steeply as possible in order to reach the arranged altitude without loss of time. At eight thousand feet he swung round in a wide circle and headed back towards the aerodrome, knowing that he would be able to make the other two thousand feet by the time he reached it. He peered ahead through his centre section for the S.E., although he was still a long way away from the aerodrome, but Wilks had gone as far to the south as he had to the north, and they were still invisible to each other.

Biggles was, of course, backing the manoeuvrability of the Camel against the slight pull in speed and ceiling held by the other. He hoped to beat Wilks on the turn, for the Camel’s famous right-hand turn, caused by the terrific torque of the rotary engine, was a very real advantage in a combat. That was really all he had in his favour, but it was chiefly upon that quality that he had developed his own technique in air fighting, and hoped to catch Wilks unprepared for the manoeuvre.

Again he peered ahead for his opponent, and pressed gently on the rudder-bar to swing his nose clear from the head-on position. The movement

may have saved his life. There came the shrill chatter of a machine-gun at point-blank range; at the same moment a stream of tracer poured between his wings.

The shock was almost stunning in its intensity, so utterly unprepared was he for anything of the sort, and his actions for at least two seconds were purely automatic and instinctive. He kicked out his left foot hard, and dragged the joystick back into his right thigh. The Camel bucked like a wild horse, and before it came out he had recovered his composure and was looking for his aggressor. He had done quite a lot of thinking in the brief interval of the half-roll. His first impression was that Wilks had attacked him, thinking he had been seen, and by some accident ammunition had been left in his guns. But he dismissed the thought at once and knew that he had nearly fallen victim to a prowling Hun, operating for once in a while over the British side of the lines. That, he reasoned, could only mean that the Hun—if Hun it was—was an old hand at the game; a novice would hardly dare to take such a risk.

If it was so, then he was by no means out of the wood, for unarmed, he could only make for the ground, an operation that would require a few minutes of time, a period of which the Hun, finding his fire was not returned, would certainly take full advantage.

Then he saw him, an orange and black Fokker D.VII, with a large ace of spades painted on the side of his fuselage. Biggles brought the Camel round in a lightning turn that put him on the tail of the black-crossed machine for a few seconds. Automatically he sighted his guns and swore bitterly when his pressure on the Bowden lever produced no result. At that moment he thought he could have got his man, but there was no time for idle speculation. The Hun had reversed the position by a clever move, and a tattered skylight warned Biggles that he had better follow the old adage of running away if he wished to fight again another day.

He spun, counted six turns, and came out. Instantly the chatter of guns sounded so close that he winced. He held the Camel in a dizzy turn for a minute, with the Hun racing behind him trying to bring his guns to bear, and then he spun again. All the time, at the back of his mind, was a fierce condemnation of his utter and inexcusable folly of flying without ammunition, and an equally fierce conviction that if he did succeed in reaching the ground alive, he would never again be guilty of such madness. He spun for so long that he became giddy, and pulled out sluggishly. But the Hun was still with him, and he heard his bullets ripping through the spruce and canvas of his fuselage.

For the first time in his life he nearly panicked. He twisted and turned like a minnow with a pike on his tail, losing height on every possible occasion, and finally sideslipped steeply into a field that appeared invitingly under him. He did not notice that a narrow ditch ran diagonally across the field, and it would have made no difference if he had. Fortunately, the Camel had nearly run to a stop when he reached it, so it suffered no serious damage. It lurched sickeningly, stopped dead, and cocked its tail up into the air. The prop disintegrated into flying splinters, mixed with clods of earth.

Biggles was jerked forward and struck his nose on the padded ends of his guns with a force that made him “see stars.” He swore, tersely, but effectively, undid his safety belt, and looked up just in time to see the Hun waving him an ironic farewell. He watched it disappear into the distance, followed by a long trail ofarchie bursts, and then climbed out on to the ground to survey the damage. As he did so he noticed for the first time that a road bounded the field, over the hedge of which a number of Tommies were grinning at him. He heard a car pull up with a grinding of brakes, but he paid no attention to it until a sharp commanding voice brought him round with a jerk. No less than three red-tabbed officers were coming towards him; the first, an elderly, hard-faced man, wore the badges of a General.

“My God! Here’s a General come to sympathize with me. I couldn’t bear it,” muttered Biggles to himself, and he was framing a suitable reply when the General spoke. The voice was not sympathetic; in fact, there was something in the tone of his voice that made him wince, and may have resulted in his subsequent attitude.

“How long have you been in France,” began the General, coldly.

“About eleven months, sir,” replied Biggles.

“That seems to have been quite long enough.”

Biggles stared, hardly able to believe his ears. Then, suddenly understanding the implication behind the General’s words, he froze, and clenched his teeth.

“I witnessed the whole affair—I should hardly call it a combat—from start to finish,” went on the General contemptuously. “Not once did you make the slightest attempt to return the German’s fire. In fact, to put the matter still more clearly, you ran away. Am I right?”

“Quite right, sir,” answered Biggles, frostily.

“I thought so. That orange and black Fokker has been causing a lot of trouble over our side of the lines lately, and you had an admirable opportunity to shoot him down, such an opportunity that may not occur

again. It is a pity you did not take advantage of it, but it would seem that he was the better man.”

“It would seem so, sir.”

“It would be futile to deny it,” went on the General, icily. “What is your name?”

“Bigglesworth, sir.”

“Squadron?”

“Two-six-six, sir.”

“At Maranique, I believe.”

“That is so, sir.”

“Very well. Report back to your unit at once.”

“Very good, sir.”

The General turned on his heel, closely followed by his two *aides*. Biggles watched them go, sullen anger smouldering in his eyes. “Never been in the air in your lives, any of you, I’ll bet. You’d jump like cats if you heard a gun go off. Then, without asking why, you come and call me a coward,” he mused. “The fact is, I suppose that Hun has been shooting up your snug little Headquarters, and you don’t like it. You wouldn’t. Well, I hope he blows your dug-out as high as the Eiffel Tower, and I hope you’re inside it when he does,” he soliloquized, as he made his way slowly down the road in search of a telephone, to ask for transport to fetch him, and the wrecked Camel, home.

CHAPTER III

MAJOR MULLEN'S opening remark when, an hour later, he reported at the Squadron Office, was an inopportune one, particularly with Biggles in his present mood. Far from pouring oil on troubled waters, it added fuel to a conflagration.

"You've let me down badly, Bigglesworth," he began.

Biggles drew a deep breath, and stiffened. This sort of talk from the General had merely irritated him, but that his own C.O. should doubt him put him in a cold fury.

"You let a Hun run you into the ground without firing a shot at him." The Major did not ask a question; he made a statement, and Biggles, who was about to explain the true facts of the case, shut up like an oyster. He made no reply.

"You've broken your machine, I hear," went on the C.O.

"I have, sir."

"Brigadier-General Sir Hales-Morier, of Air Headquarters, has just been on the 'phone to me. I will spare your feelings by not repeating what he said, but I gather he proposes to post you to Home Establishment; in the meantime, he wants a report to-night from me on the matter. It is to reach him by 6.30, so will you please make out your own report and let me have it by 5 o'clock."

"I will, sir."

"That's all."

Biggles did not go to the Mess. Instead, seething with anger, he made his way moodily to the sheds. He stood on the deserted tarmac for a few minutes and then sent an ack-emma down to the Mess with a message to Algy Lacey, of his Flight, informing him that he was borrowing his machine and would be back some time. Then he took off and hedge-hopped—finding some satisfaction in the risks he took—to 287 Squadron, and told Wilks, whom he found at lunch, just what had occurred.

Wilks, who was about to pull Biggles' leg in connection with his failure to turn up at the appointed place, swore luridly.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

“Do? Nothing—not a blessed thing.”

“You might have told your Old Man about only having celluloid in your guns.”

“I’m making no excuses to anybody; people can think what they like. Brass-hats should either ask why, or look at a fellow’s record before they jump down his throat, and mine isn’t too bad, although I say it myself.”

“They’ll think you’ve lost your nerve and send you home,” observed Wilks, soberly.

“Let ’em. I’d as soon be busted by a ham-fisted pupil at an F.T.S.^[23] as have my inside perforated by explosive bullets. We’ll be able to finish that little duel sometime when you come home on leave.”

[23] Flying Training School.

“Don’t talk rot. You go and tell Mullen that you hadn’t any ammunition, or I will.”

“You mind your own blooming business, Wilks,” Biggles told him coldly, and refusing an invitation to stay to lunch, returned to his Camel.

He swept into the air in a climbing turn, so steep that if his engine had conked the story of his war exploits would have ended there and then; he knew it perfectly well, and derived a bitter sort of satisfaction from the knowledge. But his engine continued to give full revs., and on a wide throttle he climbed in ever-increasing circles. He knew precisely where he was, for as one landmark disappeared from view he picked up another, although this procedure was purely automatic, and demanded no conscious thought. Yet where he was going he did not know; he was simply flying for the sake of flying. In his present frame of mind he had no desire to talk to anyone, least of all of his own Squadron. So he continued to climb, thinking about the affair of the morning.

It was a burst of white archie about two hundred yards ahead that brought him out of his reverie. It was only a single burst, and as it was British archie it could only mean one thing—a signal. Mentally thanking the gunners for what should have been quite unnecessary, he scanned the sky around quickly for the hostile machine that he knew must be in the vicinity, and was just in time to see a vague shadow disappear into the eye of the sun. It had gone too quickly for him to recognize the type, but as he could see no other machines in the sky, he assumed it was an enemy.

Now a newcomer to the game would have turned at once, and thus made it clear to the stalker—if stalker it was—that he had been observed; but Biggles did nothing of the sort. He did certain things quickly, but he held straight on his course. The first thing he did was to pull up the handle of his C.C. gear and fire two or three shots to satisfy himself that the guns were working; then he twisted round in his seat as far as his thick flying kit and the cramped space would permit, and squinted through his extended fingers in the direction of the sun. The glare was blinding, but by just keeping the ball of his thumb over the blazing disc and opening his fingers only wide enough to get a blurred view through the bristles of his gauntlet, he was able to search the danger zone. He picked out a straight-winged machine, in silhouette, end on, and knew that the enemy pilot was just launching his attack.

Not by a single movement of joystick or rudder did he reveal that he had spotted the attacker; he watched its approach coolly. Only when the Hun, who now appeared as a thick black spot, was about three hundred yards away, did he push his joystick forward for more speed; then, when he judged that the other was about to fire, he made a lightning Immelmann turn. He knew that at that moment the enemy pilot would be squinting through his sights, and the disappearance of the Camel from his limited field of view would not unduly alarm him.

In this he was correct. The Boche, thinking he had a “sitter,” wasted three precious seconds looking for him in his sights, and it was the sharp stutter of Biggles’ guns that warned him of his peril, and sent him half-rolling wildly.

Now it is a curious fact that, although Biggles had been thinking about his orange and black acquaintance of the morning when the archie gunners had fired their well-timed shot, all thought of him went out of his head when he realized that he was being stalked; so it was with something of a mild shock, swiftly followed by savage exultation, that he saw the well-remembered colours through his sights as he took the Hun broadside on and grabbed his Bowden lever.

The pilot of the black-crossed machine came out of his life-saving manœuvre, looking around with a speed born of long experience. He saw the Camel anywhere but where he expected to find him, and in the last place he hoped to find him—on his tail. But he was, as Biggles had assumed, no novice at the game, and did not allow the British machine to retain the coveted position long enough to do him any harm. Biggles did actually get in a quick burst just as the other machine darted out of his sights, but it was

ineffective, and the duel began in earnest, both pilots aware that it could only end in the downfall of one of them.

They were evenly matched, although Biggles, smarting from his reprimand of the morning—for which, rightly or wrongly, he blamed the pilot of the orange machine—fought with a ferocity that would not have been possible in a normal cold-blooded battle. He hit the other machine several times, but without causing it any apparent damage, and he took several shots through his own empennage in return.

The fight had opened over the British side of the lines, the Hun evidently repeating his tactics of the morning, but a fairly strong wind was carrying both machines towards the pock-marked, barren strip of no-man's-land. Naturally, this was not to Biggles' liking, for unless the Hun made a bad mistake, which was hardly to be expected, he would soon be fighting with enemy territory below. So, gambling on the Hun repeating the tactics he had followed during the encounter of the morning, he deliberately spun. As he hoped, the other machine followed him. Twisting his head round, he could see the Hun spinning down behind him. He counted six turns, came out, and instantly spun the other way. This time, however, he allowed the machine to make only one turn; he pulled it out into a loop, half rolled on to even keel on top of the loop, and to his intense satisfaction saw the Hun go spinning past him. The short spin had caught him off his guard, and as he came out, Biggles thrust home his attack. He deliberately held his fire until it was impossible to miss, and then fired one of the longest bursts he ever fired in his life.

The Hun jerked upwards, fell off on to its wing, and spun. Biggles was taking no chances. He followed it down without taking his eyes off it for an instant, in case it was a ruse. But it was no ruse. The orange Fokker went nose first into the ground with its engine full on, and Biggles stiffened in his seat as he watched that fearful crash. He circled for a minute or two, looking for a suitable place to land; it was not his usual practice to look at unpleasant sights too closely, but on this occasion an idea had struck him, and he had a definite object in view.

He saw people hurrying towards the crash from all points of the compass, and put the Camel down in an adjacent field and joined the hurrying crowd. His great fear was that the wreck would be removed piecemeal by souvenir hunters before he could reach it, but he found an officer on the spot when he got there, and the machine lay exactly as it had fallen.

It was five o'clock when he reported to the Squadron Office.

Major Mullen looked up from his desk as he entered. "Ah, you've brought your report," he said.

"Er—yes, sir."

"Good. First of all, though, you had better read what I have said. Here is the minute; I shall attach your report to it."

Biggles took the buff sheet and felt his face go red with shame as he read a eulogy of his conduct and exploits since he had joined the Squadron. The C.O., he knew, must have gone to considerable trouble in the matter, for he had looked up a large number of combat reports—not all his own—and pinned them to the minute. Further, he had evidently been in communication with Major Paynter, for a lengthy report from his old C.O. was also attached.

Biggles did not read it all through, but laid it on the C.O.'s desk. "Thank you, sir," he said quietly, "but I'm afraid I don't deserve such praise."

"That is for me to decide," replied the C.O. Then, with a quick change of tone, he added, "What on earth possessed you to behave like that this morning, and before such an audience, too?"

A slow smile spread over Biggles' face. "Well, the fact of the matter is, sir," he said sheepishly, "I was in the air without any ammunition. It sounds silly, I know, but I had arranged to fight a camera gun duel with Wilks—that is, Wilkinson, of 287, who claimed that his S.E. was better than my Camel."

"Then why, in the name of heaven, didn't you tell that interfering old fool—no, I don't mean that—why didn't you tell the General so?"

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. "I find it hard to argue with people who form their own opinions before they know the facts."

"Like that, was it?"

"Just like that, sir."

"I see. Well, let me have your report."

"I'm afraid it's rather a bulky one, sir," replied Biggles, struggling with something under his tunic.

The C.O. stared in wide-eyed amazement. "What in the name of goodness have you got there?" he gasped.

Biggles slowly unfolded a large sheet of orange fabric on which was painted the Maltese Cross, and beside it an Ace of Spades. He laid it on the C.O.'s desk. "That, sir, is the hide of the hound who made me bust my Camel this morning. I chanced to meet him again this afternoon, and on that occasion I had lead in my guns. I think H.Q. will recognize that Ace of

Spades, and perhaps it will speak plainer than words. I'm not much of a hand with a pen, anyway."

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.

A Table of Contents was added for reader convenience.

[The end of *The Raid* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]