

Sinister Service



CAPT. W. E. JOHNS

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BIGGLES IN BORNEO

SINISTER SERVICE

THE ADVENTURES OF LANCE LOVELL, COUNTER-ESPIONAGE
OFFICER, TOLD BY HIS BROTHER AND
UNOFFICIAL ASSISTANT, RODNEY LOVELL

Captain W. E. Johns

*Illustrated by
Stuart Tresilian*

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FOREWORD BY RODNEY LOVELL

BEFORE I tell you how all this came about—that is, how I came to be in the Secret Service (or, as some call it, the Sinister Service)—I had better tell you a few things about myself, and my brother Lancelot, because this will save a lot of explanation later on. Incidentally, I am afraid there will be a good many I's in my story, but this cannot be avoided if I am to tell you the part I played myself in these dark adventures.

As you will have seen, my name is Rodney Lovell, with the accent on the last syllable, please—*Lovell*. I am seventeen years old, tall for my age, and fairly tough from doing a lot of mountain-climbing when I was a kid. You see, I had the misfortune to be born in Germany, where my father was in the Diplomatic Service. He was away a good deal, but we had a nice home at Brengen, in the Black Forest, where there was some good climbing to be had. Lance and I often spent days together in the mountains. We went to school at Brengen, where, naturally, we learned to speak German as well as we spoke English. In the house, of course, we spoke English, but outside we spoke almost entirely in German—for obvious reasons.

Lance is three years older than I am, and so it came about that when I was fifteen he was eighteen, and went off to Oxford to finish his education. But just before this something happened, something which I suppose was responsible for what we are doing now. Lance went crazy on gliding. As you may know, in pre-war days gliding was all the rage in Germany, although what we did not realize then was that it was all part and parcel of a huge scheme for making the youth of Germany air-minded. But that is by the way. Lance took up gliding, and he must have been pretty good at it, for he won several competitions at the Wasserkuppe, where the national and international contests were held.

As a direct result of this he became interested in flying—that is, power-flying, in proper aeroplanes. He told me privately that as soon as he was old enough he was going to join the R.A.F. For the time being he had to be content to join a flying club. He often took me with him into the air, and although I was too young to take my 'ticket,' I could soon handle a plane fairly well. Well, to make a long story short, Lance went to Oxford, where he managed to get into the Oxford University Air Squadron. For the next

two years I saw him only during vacations. He was still wrapped up in flying.

Then, suddenly, everything seemed to go wrong. Our little world went to pieces.

You may have noticed that calamities seldom come singly, and thus it was with us. Hitler gained control in Germany, and we—that is, my mother and I—often found ourselves in embarrassing positions. Fellows at school, fellows I had known for years, instead of being friendly suddenly became—how shall I say? Well, they became arrogant and vicious. I couldn't understand it at all, and it made me miserable. One day I saw a small boy being kicked about, and, naturally, I took his part. It turned out that he was a Jew. I didn't know that, and I can't say that it would have made any difference if I had, for it wasn't his fault, and he was a harmless little fellow, anyway. I got some hard kicks for my pains, and after that I was unpopular at school.

As if things weren't bad enough, on top of this came the news that Lance had crashed, and was in hospital, badly injured. Another fellow, a pupil, had collided with him in the air. I was now seventeen, and in the ordinary way I should soon have followed him to Oxford; but then, to cap all, my father died. He died very suddenly. I have always felt that there was something strange about the manner of his death, for he was on his way to England at the time and was certainly fit enough when he started. So we never saw him again. The Germans said it was pneumonia. It may have been—I don't know.

My mother packed our things and we returned to England. It was a good thing we did, for the war broke out soon afterwards. My mother took a cottage in Scotland, near her old home, and there Lance, who by this time had been discharged from hospital, came to see us. He was thin and pale, and although he insisted that he was fit, he had obviously been very ill. He walked with a slight limp, which the doctors told him he would have for the rest of his days. But the real tragedy of the crash, from his point of view, was this: he had been turned down, on medical grounds, for the R.A.F. There was nothing he could do about it, and this made him miserable. He went off to London, and soon afterwards wrote to say that he had been successful in getting a job; but he was curiously vague as to what it was. Apparently it was some sort of traveller's job, for although he had a room in London he was seldom there.

A little later I followed him to London, where, as so many fellows had joined the forces, I was able to get an office job. I wasn't very happy in it, but it enabled me to keep myself so that I was no longer a financial

responsibility to my mother. In any case, I didn't care about the job because I intended, as soon as I was old enough, to join the R.A.F. as an aircraftman, hoping that pretty soon, owing to my flying experience, I would be able to get my 'wings.'

I saw Lance occasionally, although I seldom knew where he was or what he was doing. However, he seemed to be getting on very well, for he always had a fair amount of money. What was more important, he was now fit again, although he was still thin and walked with a limp. Sometimes when he came to see me I thought he looked very tired, but as he was sensitive about his health I thought it better not to mention this. Sometimes he gave me a little extra money. Once we went for a run in his car—a powerful Bentley. When I asked him how he had got it, he told me it wasn't his, really; it belonged to the firm. Which, I subsequently discovered, was true. But he didn't tell me the name of the 'firm.' I asked him how he managed to get petrol for such an extravagant car, but he said in a vague sort of way that he had a friend who fixed him up. This also was true, but I little guessed who the friend was. He wouldn't talk about himself. Naturally, I was curious, but whenever I brought the subject up he would change it deftly.

I admired him tremendously. I always did. In fact, I think most fellows do admire their elder brothers. In Lance I had something to look up to, for he was a grand chap and we had always been such pals. He was absolutely fearless, and would take any risk in the most casual sort of way. If he hadn't been so thin he would have been really handsome. When anything amused him he had a funny trick of smiling with his eyes, but he seldom laughed out loud. I put this down to the effects of the crash. I'm afraid I got very fed-up during the intervals he was away, for sometimes he would disappear for weeks on end. It was, I think, for this reason that he suggested I gave up my cheap diggings and used his rooms in Jermyn Street—to keep the bed aired, as he put it.

When the first dim suspicion entered my mind that he was in the Secret Service I do not know. The idea did not come suddenly, in the manner of a brainwave. It seemed to develop slowly, but once the thought had crystallized in my mind I felt that this was the answer to his mysterious behaviour. I determined to challenge him the next time I saw him.

About a week later, one Friday evening, he arrived home looking more tired than usual. I put my question to him, but he laughed it off without giving me a direct answer.

'What put that extraordinary idea into your head?' he chaffed me—but I noticed that his keen grey eyes were not smiling.

‘I’ve been putting two and two together,’ I told him. ‘You speak German like a Nazi, you know Germany inside out, and you can drive any sort of vehicle—including aeroplanes. These accomplishments would, I imagine, be very useful to a man in the Intelligence Service—particularly at a time like this.’

‘My dear Rod,’ he replied, in a bantering tone of voice, ‘may I remind you that you speak German, you know Germany, and you can fly aeroplanes, but *you’re* not in the Intelligence Service.’ He always called me Rod—short for Rodney.

‘That may be so, but you’re three years older than I am,’ I parried.

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. ‘Forget it,’ he said.

‘All right,’ I agreed reluctantly. ‘Are we going out to dinner?’

He shook his head. ‘Sorry, old boy, I can’t—not to-night. I shall have to be drifting along now.’

I was bitterly disappointed. ‘What? Going off again already?’ I cried. ‘Where are you going?’ I demanded.

Lance shrugged his shoulders. ‘Matter of fact, I’ve been doing rather a lot of work lately and I’m a bit run down. I’ve got a day or two off. It’s a bit stuffy in London and the sirens get on my nerves, so I thought of running down to the New Forest for a spot of fresh air.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Oh—just hiking.’

‘In that case,’ I said evenly, ‘there’s no reason why I shouldn’t come with you.’

He looked up sharply. ‘What about your job?’

‘I don’t go back until Monday morning. If it comes to that, I shouldn’t care if I never went back at all.’

‘Why, that’s fine,’ Lance astonished me by saying. ‘Come along, old boy, by all means. It will be like old times, you and I, tramping through the forest.’

‘Do you really mean that?’ I shouted delightedly.

‘Of course. I’ve got the Bentley outside. Put your pyjamas and a toothbrush in a bag and we’ll push off right away. We’ll find an inn somewhere to park for the night.’

At that moment the sirens wailed.

‘There goes Old Gloomy,’ he observed. ‘Come on, let’s get off before the bombs start banging.’

In half an hour we were on our way. Little did I dream where our journey was to end. For that night my adventures began, adventures which, I think you will agree, would satisfy the wildest craving for excitement. Now I'll get on with the story.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

AN INTERRUPTED JOURNEY

IT must have been about nine o'clock, and we were just on the fringe of the New Forest, when a girl crashed out of the bushes and stumbled on the road not twenty yards in front of our dimmed headlight. Lance was keeping a sharp look-out for stray forest ponies, but even so, I wouldn't have given much for her chance, for the Bentley was fairly lapping up the miles. The girl, seeing us bearing down on her, threw up her arms as if she had lost her head. She looked like losing her life.

Even now I don't know how Lance stopped the car in time. His arms and legs seemed to jerk like a steel spring that snaps across the middle; the car tried to hunch itself; the brakes screeched; the tyres, on locked wheels, bit into the macadam with the rasping wail of a circular saw. We stopped with a jerk that threw me forward against the instrument panel. By the time I had recovered myself the girl was groping her way towards the door. She seemed to be crazy.

Lance pushed open the door on his side. 'What the dickens do you think you're playing at?' he demanded crisply.

The girl didn't answer at once. After a glance over her shoulder, swift and apprehensive, she had the nerve to try to get into the car.

But Lance wasn't having it. 'Not so fast, young lady,' he said curtly. 'What's the idea?'

'Help me—help me—you must help me.'

The words fairly shot out of the girl's mouth, like bullets pouring from a machine-gun. It was obvious that she was very badly scared—or pretended to be.

'Take it easy—take it easy. What's the trouble?' asked Lance.

'Two men are after me.'

'Two, eh?' I saw Lance's sharply cut features relax into a ghost of a smile. I don't think he believed her. I didn't—I don't know why.

'If it's a lift you want, why not say so?' went on Lance reproachfully. 'Why all this dramatic——'

He got no farther. There was a crashing of undergrowth and two men charged out of the bushes. They pulled up dead when they saw the car.

Lance got out with alacrity and the girl dived into the seat he had just vacated. I got out quietly my side and walked round to the back of the car. I don't think the men saw me.

After a brief pause they came on, walking slowly up to the car. The beam of Lance's pocket-torch stabbed the gloom and revealed their faces in yellow spotlight.

'Lost something?' he inquired coldly.

Frankly, I don't quite know what my feelings were at this moment. I was rather annoyed at being stopped, and I may have been rather alarmed. Vaguely, at the back of my mind, I started thinking about fifth-columnists, and parachutists, and about people's cars being stolen. It seemed to be a funny business. But when I saw the faces of the two men I felt that there might be something in the girl's story after all. They weren't exactly toughs in the accepted sense of the word, but they were the sort of fellows ordinary men instinctively distrust. One was heavily jowled, with overhung eyebrows and a dour expression; the corners of his mouth were turned down at an aggressive angle. The other was taller, hatchet-faced, alert; the brim of his hat was well down over his eyes. Both were fairly well dressed. Neither answered Lance's question, so he spoke to them again.

'What's all this about?' he said tersely.

'Look out!' I fairly yelled the words, and at the same time dived at the nearest man.

He had taken a quick step forward with his arm raised, and I saw a revolver in his hand. I caught it coming down and landed him a crisp jab in the ribs that made him grunt. The gun went off, singeing my hair and temporarily blinding me. I didn't see the second man, but I felt him; he landed on my back like a sack of flour.

A brisk two minutes followed—a hazy two minutes. I have no clear recollection of the details, because, for one thing, it was dark. I nearly hit Lance by mistake, but throwing the fellow off my back, I grabbed the arm of the chap with the gun and gave it a twist that made him curse. The gun clattered on the hard road. He snatched at it, but I gave him a kick that sent him sprawling forward on his face. Having no time to pick up the gun, I caught it with the toe of my shoe and sent it farther down the road. Before I could get back one fellow was already climbing through the hedge. A moment later his companion broke away from Lance and followed him. I

ran to the gun, snatched it up, and started after them, but Lance shouted to me to get back in the car.

I got in beside him, and noticed that the girl had managed to get into the back seat. The car shot forward and raced for about a couple of hundred yards. Then Lance stood on the brake and stopped again. He took the weapon from my hand and examined it in the light of the instrument board.

‘Mauser,’ he said softly, in a queer tone of voice.

Then he turned to the girl.

‘Were those friends of yours?’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ she returned sharply.

Lance shrugged his shoulders in a way that told me that he was not entirely convinced, ‘What was the idea?’

‘Do you really want to know?’

‘I most certainly do,’ answered Lance in a brittle voice. ‘In fact, if you haven’t a good explanation to offer I’m going to take you to the nearest police station.’

‘All right,’ said the girl without hesitation. ‘I’m sorry I had to stop you, but—well, I bit off a bit more than I could chew. I’m grateful to you for getting me out of a mess. I live quite close. If you would care to run me home I’ll tell you all about it. Or, if you prefer, take me to the police station and I’ll make a statement.’

Lance hesitated, but only for a moment, ‘Where do you live?’

‘Back down the road about a mile, then turn left. Two hundred yards along and you’ll see a drive on your right. Turn in there.’

‘Very well. But make no mistake, young lady,’ said Lance evenly, ‘if there’s any nonsense somebody is liable to be hurt. It happens that I, too, have a pistol in my pocket.’

I may say that this was the first I knew about Lance carrying a weapon. Anyway, without another word he turned the car, took the turning and ran up a longish drive between silver birches to a pretty old cottage. He pulled up outside the door, and I saw his eyes make a quick reconnaissance. Not a light showed anywhere, although this, of course, was only to be expected on account of the black-out. All the same, even in a house that has been blacked-out one can usually see a faint chink of light somewhere if one looks hard enough.

‘Nobody at home, eh?’ murmured Lance.

‘No; since my maid went into munition work I live here alone. I have a dailly woman to look after the place, but at the moment she’s sick.’

‘Funny sort of place for a girl to live—alone, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t live here all the time,’ explained the girl. ‘During the week I work in London, but this house happened to be mine—it was left to me by my father—so I come down for week-ends.’

Lance helped her out of the car.

‘Are you coming in?’ she inquired.

‘Certainly,’ replied Lance smoothly.

She opened the door with a latchkey and we followed her in. A match flared. She lit a candle and went through into a sitting-room, where an oil-lamp soon made things considerably brighter.

Glancing round the room I saw that it was comfortably, even tastefully, furnished. Then I had another look at our new acquaintance. She was, I judged, not more than twenty, dark, good-looking rather than pretty, with steady brown eyes. She was neatly dressed in tweeds with flat-heeled walking shoes.

She looked at us appraisingly for a moment. ‘Would you like a cup of coffee?’

‘That’s not a bad idea,’ answered Lance.

She disappeared for a few minutes and then came back with a tray.

‘Do you take sugar, Mr ——?’ Her eyes caught mine and asked a question.

‘My name’s Lovell,’ I told her. ‘Rodney Lovell. This is my brother, Lancelot.’

‘Mine’s Ashton-Harcourt—Julia to my friends. Make yourselves at home. It’s a bit chilly—I’ll light the fire.’

Lance caught my eye and smiled faintly. Presently we were gathered round the fire, quite a snug little party.

‘And now, how about the story?’ suggested Lance.

Julia regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. ‘I’m afraid you won’t believe it,’ she said dubiously.

‘Suppose you tell us—and leave us to judge?’

Julia still looked doubtful. ‘I suppose you’ll think I’m crazy if I say that those two men were spies?’

Lance considered her sceptically. ‘You haven’t by any chance been reading——’

She interrupted him. ‘If you’re going to start talking like that I won’t say another word. Please get the idea out of your head that because I’m a girl

I'm a fool.'

'No such idea was in my head,' protested Lance. 'How about going on with the story?'

'Very well. Then I repeat, unless I'm right off my course, those two men were spies.'

Lance raised his eyebrows. 'You use an expression that has a familiar ring—being off your course. Was that just a figure of speech or does it imply that you're a sailor—or an air pilot?'

Julia laughed. 'That was rather clever of you. Yes, I've flown quite a lot. I hold the "B" licence.'

'Good,' I put in. 'We all talk the same language. We've done a bit of flying.'

'Why, that's splendid,' declared Julia. 'It should make things a lot easier to explain. It's a longish tale, but I'll cut out the details and give you the main facts.'

'Go ahead,' invited Lance.

'I've been flying for about two years,' went on Julia. 'The war, of course, put an end to it. I've never owned my own machine—that is, not a power-machine—but I once had a sailplane. To be quite frank, I found flying a bit expensive, so I took up gliding at the London Gliding Club, and did quite a bit of cross-country work. I mention this because it has a direct bearing on what happened to-night. About a month ago I was sitting here, just about this time, when I heard a noise that puzzled me not a little. A glider doesn't make much noise, but it does make a little, and, to anyone who has flown one, it is unmistakable. The noise I heard was the soft whine of a sailplane coming in very low. The weather was much like it is to-night, moonlight, just a little wind—perfect for soaring. I know what a sailplane sounds like, you needn't doubt that, and believe it or not, I distinctly heard one go over. Naturally, I ran out and looked up, but I couldn't see anything; not that I expected to; you know as well as I do that you can't see a machine very far away, at night, unless it carries navigation lights.'

Julia filled up our coffee-cups.

'Well, I came in and let it go at that,' she resumed. 'A week later, about the same time, I heard the same noise. That got me guessing—seriously. Who could it be? There hasn't been any gliding since the war started, and people don't glide at night, anyway. Well, I thought about the problem for some time, and the more I thought the more I became convinced that something funny was going on. Laugh if you like, but you can't say that the theory I'm going to put forward isn't possible. The Germans have some of

the finest glider pilots in the world, and it suddenly struck me that there was no reason why a power pilot shouldn't tow a glider to within striking distance of the coast. The glider pilot could then cast off and go anywhere he wanted to—always assuming that he knew the country. I remembered that the year before the war a team of star German sailplane pilots came over here. They stayed at Dunstable, and did quite a lot of gliding. They seemed rather partial to the New Forest—they said they always kept away from built-up areas because of the risk of an emergency landing. You see what I'm getting at?

'Go on,' said Lance quietly. 'You're doing fine.'

'Thanks. Very well, it is beyond dispute that German pilots could come over here if they wanted to, without anyone being the wiser. Sailplanes have a certain advantage over power planes in that they are silent—or comparatively so. Last week we had an ideal night for gliding, so I sat outside and waited. Just before midnight I distinctly heard a glider go over. I should say it was about a couple of hundred feet up. It was heading south. The hum of it told me that the pilot was losing height, as if he intended coming down. I followed the sound, but, of course, I couldn't keep up with it. I was left far behind.'

'So you don't know whether it landed or not?' Lance put the question.

'I didn't see it.'

'But if a machine came over and landed, could it get off again?' I asked.

'Certainly,' answered Julia. 'A car could tow it off. For years at Dunstable we used a car for towing off. You simply jack up the rear wheels and use the power to run a winch.'

Lance nodded. 'That's right.'

'Of course,' continued Julia, 'the glider needn't necessarily want to get off again. Its mission might be to bring something over, or somebody—a spy, for instance. But this is only surmise. I wanted facts, so to-night, being an ideal night for gliding, I decided to try to get them.'

'Did you tell the police about your suspicions?' queried Lance.

Julia's lip curled. 'The police!' she said scornfully. 'Of course I went to the police—and a lot of thanks I got. They thought I was a crazy woman with a spy complex. In desperation I wrote a report on the whole thing and sent it to the Ministry of Home Security. What happened? Nothing. It's true I got a brief note of acknowledgement, but it wasn't very encouraging.'

'How about finishing the story?' suggested Lance.

‘Yes, let’s stick to the facts. To-night I decided to do a bit of spy-catching on my own account, but, as you saw, I made a mess of it. They nearly caught me. I started early and walked to an open piece of country about three miles from here—the direction in which the machine seemed to be heading when I heard it. Sure enough I heard it coming, and started to follow the sound. But I didn’t get far. I collided with two men who, if their actions were anything to go by, were also waiting for the aircraft. They came after me and I ran for my life. I’d no weapon of any sort. Luckily, I know every inch of the country, so I made for the nearest road and managed to race them to it. You know the rest. I saw your car coming and made a dive for it. Believe me, the matter was urgent, for the men were close behind. You saved the situation—at least, as far as I am concerned.’

‘Yes, it rather looks that way,’ acknowledged Lance thoughtfully. ‘What are you going to do next?’

‘Nothing,’ answered Julia shortly. ‘I’ve had enough. I’m not going to make a bigger fool of myself trying to get the police interested. What can I do?’

Lance caught my eye. Then he turned to Julia. ‘Suppose we all have a go at trying to locate this mysterious glider?’

Julia sprang to her feet. ‘Now we’re getting somewhere,’ she declared enthusiastically. ‘What a joke it would be if we could teach these professional spy-catchers their business.’

Lance nodded. ‘Yes, it would be a joke, wouldn’t it?’ he agreed softly. ‘As a matter of fact——’

He broke off, and I jumped up as there came an unmistakable sound outside. A car-starter had whirred. Julia made a dash for the window, but Lance was after her in a flash. He caught her by the arm and pulled her back.

‘Put the light out,’ he snapped, and ran to the door.

Julia evidently obeyed his order, for as we got to the door the room was plunged into darkness.

‘Confound it,’ muttered Lance viciously.

The red tail-light of our car was just disappearing round a bend in the drive.

CHAPTER II

THE ENEMY STRIKES BACK

As the tail-light faded Lance turned quickly to our hostess.

‘Have you got a car?’

‘Yes—but no petrol.’

‘None?’

‘Not a drop. The tank’s dry.’

‘How far away is the nearest garage or petrol pump?’ asked Lance tersely.

‘The nearest is in the village—Lyndenham. It’s about three miles.’

A telephone stood on a writing bureau. Lance walked over to it and picked up the receiver. He wobbled the call-arm up and down. Not a sound came from it. ‘Dead,’ he said succinctly. ‘They must have cut the wire. How far away is the nearest call-box?’

‘There isn’t one nearer than Lyndenham.’

‘What a nuisance. Who’s your nearest neighbour?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Julia. ‘It’s a farmhouse standing back from the road nearly half a mile away. It changed hands just before war broke out. The purchaser wanted to buy this cottage at the same time—at least, a man came to see me about it—but I wouldn’t sell.’

‘Hm.’ Lance thought for a moment. ‘Look here,’ he said quietly, ‘I’m no alarmist, but I’ve got a feeling that we’re in a tight spot. Those men who attacked you must have followed us here—or watched the car lights from a distance. Now they’ve taken my car, but it’s pretty certain they didn’t take it merely because they wanted it. They took it to isolate us here. If we go out we may run into something unpleasant—that is, if we simply walk down the drive. We shall have to think of something better than that.’ Lance went over to a sideboard, and in the light of his torch examined the contents. He brought a bottle back with him. It was labelled brandy. ‘Do you happen to have another bottle of this stuff?’ he asked Julia.

‘I think so,’ she answered. ‘In fact, I believe there are two or three in the cellar. They belonged to my father. I always keep one up here in case of

accidents.’

‘Please go and fetch all you have.’

Julia went out, and presently came back with another bottle. ‘This is the only one I can find,’ she said.

Lance stood the two bottles together. ‘It should be enough. Where’s the garage?’

‘Just outside the front door, on the left.’

‘Is there an inside door—I mean, can you get into the garage without going outside?’

‘No, but there’s a side door opposite the back door. The garage used to be a garden shed until I converted it by knocking out one end and putting double doors in.’

‘Let’s go and have a look at it.’

Julia led the way to the kitchen. Through the window over the sink we could see a rectangular building. The side door showed up black in the starlight.

‘What’s the make of your car?’ asked Lance.

‘It’s a Vauxhall twelve.’

‘Apart from petrol, as far as you know, there’s nothing wrong with it?’

‘Oh no, it’s in perfect order.’

‘Fine.’ Lance moved towards the door.

‘Just a minute—what are you going to do?’

‘For a start, get out of here. As I’ve already said, I think it would be dangerous to walk out, although I wouldn’t take such a serious view if we didn’t know for certain that these people we’re up against carry firearms. That Mauser tells an ugly story. To start with, it’s German. People don’t carry that sort of gun for bluff—it’s too heavy and it’s too efficient. I intend, therefore, to drive the car out and make for the village.’

Understanding leapt into Julia’s eyes. ‘Using brandy for fuel instead of petrol?’

‘That’s my idea. If I may say so, you keep pace with the situation very well.’

‘Thanks. And when we get to the village—what then?’

‘You can go to the local inn; or, if you prefer, to the village constable, and ask for protection.’

‘That’s considerate of you,’ returned Julia, a hint of sarcasm in her tone. ‘And what are you going to do while I tell my story to a cynical police

officer?’

‘Take a stroll round the forest and try to find this glider.’

‘Oh no, you’re not,’ declared Julia emphatically. ‘Not without me. Please remember this is my affair.’

‘It may be your funeral. This is serious—more serious than you may suppose. We’re at war, don’t forget.’

‘I’m not likely to forget it,’ retorted Julia. ‘If you go wandering about the forest it’s more likely to be your funeral than mine. I know every inch of the country. Without me you’d be floundering about like a mosquito in a thunderstorm.’

Lance shrugged his shoulders. ‘All right, if that’s how you feel about it.’

‘It is. This is the first real excitement I’ve had since the war started. But let’s not argue. Let’s get clear of the house. I’ll get my coat.’

We went back to the sitting-room, saw that the fire was safe and got the brandy. Julia fetched her coat; then we went back to the kitchen. Lance opened the back door an inch and listened, but everything was quiet—or seemed to be.

‘Stay where you are until I give you the all-clear,’ he whispered.

With the two bottles under his left arm, and his gun in his right hand, he crept through the door and stood flattened against the house wall near a rain-water tank. I watched the garden and the drive. Nothing stirred. Lance glided across to the garage like a ghost; there was a faint click as he lifted the latch and disappeared inside. Still there was no sign of opposition, and I began to wonder if we weren’t going to a lot of unnecessary trouble after all.

There was a delay of about five minutes while Lance was putting the brandy in the tank—at least, I assumed that was what he was doing.

‘Your brother seems to be rather good at this sort of thing,’ whispered Julia in my ear.

I smiled in the darkness. ‘He is.’ Actually, I had been doing some fast thinking, and I was more than ever convinced that either directly or indirectly he was in the Intelligence or Counter-Espionage Service.

Presently his shadowy figure appeared in the opposite doorway. He whistled softly.

‘Over you go,’ I told Julia.

As she went across to the garage I distinctly heard a twig crack somewhere among the trees that lined the drive, but I could see nothing. I closed the door, locked it, and then went over. Lance was waiting.

‘Good,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ll drive. Julia, you get in the back seat. Rod, you’ll have to open the garage doors. I doubt if you’ll be able to do it without making a certain amount of noise, so speed is the great thing. Once you start, go right on whatever happens. Never mind about closing them. The instant the doors are wide enough for me to get through hop into the seat next to me as fast as you can. Here’s the Mauser. Keep it handy. As you open the garage doors I shall start the engine. If anything happens I shall make a rush for it.’

I went to the doors and investigated the lock to make sure that there should be no hitch once I started opening them. It was an ordinary Yale lock which, of course, I could open from the inside. There were bolts top and bottom, but they were already drawn.

‘All ready,’ I said, and turning the lock pushed the doors wide open—or tried to. One of them stuck half-way. I put my weight against it and shoved. The bottom scrunched on the gravel drive with a noise that settled any further question of silent tactics. I heard the car start up behind me. Simultaneously a shot smashed through the door—a glancing blow that sent splinters flying. I made a dive for the car. It was already on the move. I fell into my seat, slammed the door and wound down the window. Two yellow flashes close to each other leapt towards us from behind a rhododendron bush. I let drive at it, firing as fast as I could pull the trigger. Something hit the bonnet of the car with a metallic *whang*.

‘Get on the floor, Julia,’ snapped Lance, and we sped down the drive. Several shots were fired, and at least two bullets hit the car, but they did no serious damage. Swinging into the main road, we nearly collided with a big saloon that was just slowing up. Our wheels rasped on the macadam as we swerved past it. Lance tore on down the road.

‘Watch that car behind us, Rod,’ he said evenly.

I floundered over into the back seat and looked through the rear window. The car was following us.

‘It’s coming,’ I said.

‘How much lead have we got?’

‘About a hundred yards.’

‘It’s a Buick, so it’ll have speed of us; use your gun when it starts to draw up.’

‘You bet I will,’ I grated, and bashed the glass out of the window with the butt end of my gun.

‘Hey—go steady with my car,’ protested Julia.

‘I’ll buy you a new one,’ I promised, and took a long shot at the pursuing car, just to let the driver know what to expect if he tried to get too close.

We raced on down the road, doing about fifty miles an hour. The Buick made a spurt and started overhauling us, so I opened fire, taking careful aim, whereupon the car dropped back. Evidently the driver didn’t like the situation.

‘The village is half a mile, ahead,’ called Julia.

I watched the Buick. Presently a head appeared above the rim of the sunshine roof; a moment later a gun spat and I caught the faint whistle of a bullet. For the next two or three minutes I gave shot for shot, and then we ran into the village. It was, of course, in utter darkness on account of the black-out; no doubt it would have been dark at that hour, anyway.

Lance turned a corner. A yard yawned on our left. He ran into it, flicked off the lights and stopped the engine. Five seconds later the Buick tore past.

‘I don’t think they saw us,’ I said.

‘They’d hardly have the nerve to start a pitched battle in the middle of a village, I imagine,’ murmured Lance. He got out, walked as far as the main road, and came back. ‘I don’t see them,’ he said. ‘They must have gone right on.’

‘And where do we go from here?’ I inquired.

Lance thought for a moment. ‘Now that they think we’ve bolted I think our best plan is to fix Julia up somewhere and then go back to the house. They’d hardly expect us to——’

‘I like that,’ broke in Julia. ‘You’re not fixing me up anywhere. I’m in this as much as you are—more, in fact, since I started it, and it happens to be my house.’

‘Have it your own way,’ agreed Lance. ‘Don’t think I’m trying to get rid of you. My suggestion was dictated by common prudence. Perhaps my idea that girls should not be exposed to danger is antiquated.’

‘It passed out of fashion with crinolines,’ murmured Julia smoothly. ‘If you’re satisfied that we’ve thrown the enemy off the trail let’s go back to the cottage by all means.’

Lance said no more. He cruised quietly back up the road and brought the car to a stop a hundred yards or so short of the drive.

‘I think a reconnaissance would be advisable,’ he suggested. ‘You watch the car, Rod.’

‘Just a minute,’ I put in. ‘What was the idea of coming straight back here? Why didn’t you get some petrol while you were in the village?’

‘Because it would have taken time, and I wanted to get back here quickly,’ replied Lance. ‘If the enemy suppose that we’ve left the house they may come along to have a look at it—and I’m anxious to have a look at them. In any case, I don’t want to start a fuss in the village if it can be avoided. We can get petrol in the morning. Frankly, I only went to the village to get Julia to a place of safety, but since she has decided to stay with us I must act as if I were alone. There are more aspects to this affair than either of you realize—yet.’

With this cryptic remark Lance stepped on to the grass verge and disappeared among the silver birches. He was away about a quarter of an hour.

‘It’s all clear—as far as one can make out in the dark,’ he said when he came back. ‘All the same, keep your eyes open in case there are any sharpshooters lurking in the bushes.’

He drove the car up the drive. Nothing happened. We put it in the garage, closed the doors, and then stood still for a minute or two, listening. Everything seemed quiet enough, an oppressive sort of silence after what had happened. Nevertheless, I wasn’t convinced that the fellows into whose business we had crashed, whatever it might be, would be content to let it go at that. I couldn’t get the Mauser out of my mind, for, as Lance had remarked, it’s an ugly weapon, favoured only by people in ugly business.

We went across to the kitchen and listened again. It’s easy to get nervy in such circumstances. In an empty house absolute quiet is as ominous as sound.

‘It seems to be all right. Let’s go in,’ I suggested.

We stood for a moment or two in the kitchen, and I was just moving along the corridor towards the sitting-room when Lance spoke.

‘I don’t remember a clock here in the kitchen, when we stood here a little while ago.’

Julia answered: ‘There isn’t one.’

Lance’s manner became tense. His torch split the darkness. ‘Julia, open the back door,’ he said sharply, as, with the beam of light, he explored the furniture.

The only sound was a faint tick-tock . . . tick-tock. My pulses increased their tempo. The light came to rest on a low cupboard. Lance opened it. It was filled with pots and pans. Near by was the fireplace—an old-fashioned kitchen-range. Lance opened the oven door. Instantly the tick-tock became

more definite. He knelt, snatched something out of the oven, and went through the door with a rush. I heard him running and raced after him. I could just see his silhouette twisting through the trees of a small orchard. I saw his arm go up, and heard something fall with a thud on the grass. Instantly there was a sheet of flame, an explosion, and a blast of air that knocked me over backwards.

As I picked myself up I saw Lance doing the same thing.

‘Great Scott!’ I gasped. ‘That was a bit hot. Our friends certainly have all the equipment.’

‘Yes,’ said Lance quietly. ‘Let’s get back to the house.’

We walked back and found Julia picking up pieces of shattered glass and putting them into the sink. ‘What on earth was that?’ she asked in a shaken voice.

‘Just a squib our enemies left behind for a souvenir,’ returned Lance grimly. ‘If we hadn’t discovered it the house would have gone up, and we should have gone up with it. Everyone would have supposed that the house had been hit by a bomb dropped by enemy aircraft. There’s an alert on, don’t forget. Close the door, Rod.’ He led the way to the sitting-room.

‘Shall I light the lamp?’ asked Julia.

‘No, but be ready to do so if I say the word. Let’s sit down and be quiet—I fancy we may have visitors. I can’t help feeling that that bang will excite curiosity, and if the fellow who slipped the bomb in the oven comes back and finds the house still standing he’ll want to know why.’

This seemed to be a reasonable assumption, so I said nothing. Silence fell. Nobody spoke. Minutes went by. Then I heard a car coming—heard it turn into the drive. There was nothing furtive about its approach. It stopped. A door slammed. Footsteps crunched on the gravel and halted outside the front door. Knuckles rapped sharply.

‘Behave normally, Julia,’ whispered Lance. ‘Light the lamp, answer the door, and ask him in—whoever it is. Rod, keep your gun handy but out of sight.’

I must say that Julia didn’t lack nerve. She lit the lamp. Then quite calmly she went to the door and opened it.

‘Yes, who’s there?’ she asked evenly.

‘Sorry to trouble you,’ came a cheerful, casual voice. ‘I thought I heard an explosion somewhere about here, so I’m investigating.’

‘Come in,’ invited Julia.

A man walked into the room, and my taut nerves collapsed like a pricked balloon. It was a constable—or rather a special constable. He was a big, florid-looking man of about fifty, fresh-complexioned, with a fair moustache. He carried his uniform cap in his hand, and smiled affably when he saw us sitting there.

Julia turned to us with well-simulated nonchalance. ‘Did *you* hear any sort of explosion?’ she asked naïvely.

Lance shook his head. ‘No, I haven’t heard a sound. Why, what’s wrong, officer?’

‘I was on my beat and I thought I heard an explosion in this direction. Funny you didn’t hear it.’

‘Very odd,’ agreed Lance. ‘We were sitting here having a chat before going to bed.’ He glanced at his wrist-watch. ‘As a matter of fact I didn’t realize it was so late.’

‘In that case I won’t keep you up,’ announced our visitor. ‘Sorry to trouble you, but we’re all on our toes, you know, with one thing and another.’

‘Yes, I expect you are,’ murmured Lance, in a queer tone of voice.

He showed the officer to the door, waited until the car had driven off and then came back. His face was expressionless.

‘What do you make of that?’ I asked.

‘Nothing—except that special constables in this part of the world seem to be very keen on their job.’

‘But surely you don’t think——’

‘As a matter of fact, I’m doing a lot of thinking,’ interrupted Lance. He turned to Julia. ‘We can’t do anything more until morning, so I think you might as well go to bed. We’ll stay here, taking turns to keep guard—just in case.’

‘I suppose I might as well,’ agreed Julia, lighting a candle. At the door she turned. ‘Glad to have met you—it’s been quite fun, hasn’t it?’

Lance nodded, ‘So far,’ he agreed cautiously. ‘But don’t make any mistake. This business isn’t over yet, and we’re skating on thin ice.’

Julia hesitated. ‘Just one question. Do you think these people are fifth-columnists, or something?’

Lance took a cigarette thoughtfully from his case. ‘It’s a bit too early to say. But we shall find out. Good night.’

As soon as Julia had gone I turned questioning eyes to my brother. ‘It looks as if we’re on the track of something.’

‘Definitely. Julia was right. Something queer is going on, and unless I’m mistaken it’s serious. I don’t like her being here, but it’s a bit difficult to get rid of her without being brutal about it. I’m not altogether happy about you being here, if it comes to that. We’re playing a dangerous game, and we shall have to watch our step.’

‘There’s one thing in our favour,’ I pointed out. ‘These people, whoever they are, don’t know us. They’ll probably think we’re just a trio of inquisitive fools, easily scared off.’

Lance stared at the dying fire. ‘You always were an optimist, Rod, old boy,’ he remarked. ‘You appear to have overlooked the fact that they’ve pinched my car, that our suitcases were in it, and that in our suitcases are clothes. In the pocket of my spare jacket there were some letters I intended answering at the first opportunity. They will reveal my identity.’

‘Just what do you mean by that?’ I asked sharply.

Lance hesitated. Then he looked at me squarely. ‘For heaven’s sake never mention it, but your guess about the work I’ve been doing was right. I’m in the Counter-Espionage Service.’

I drew a deep breath. ‘I see,’ I said slowly, for want of something better to say. ‘And you think these people may know of you?’

‘If they do, they’ll be after me,’ returned Lance slowly. ‘But we’ll talk about this to-morrow. Try to get some sleep. I’ll keep guard.’

CHAPTER III

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

WE were on the move early the following morning after an uneventful night. Julia came down and got breakfast and we all gave a hand clearing up. Lance said little. He seemed to be doing some profound thinking. But as soon as we had finished our work he put on his coat and picked up his hat.

‘Let’s take a stroll,’ he suggested. ‘Julia, perhaps you would be kind enough to lead us to the open space where you ran into those two men last night?’

‘Is it safe, do you think?’

‘Frankly, I don’t think it is, but, after all, this is England, and I doubt if any gang would have the nerve to shoot three people in broad daylight. If our friends of last night are as clever as I think they must be, they’ll try guile rather than gunshots now that they’ve had time to think things over. Remember, they haven’t seen us yet—at least, not properly; and if they are going to shoot every hiker in the forest the place will soon look like a battlefield. Come on, let’s go—it’s after nine. We’ll lock up and take the key.’

The forest looked just the same as usual, so much so that I found it not easy to believe that the events of the previous night had really happened. We met one or two people and a party on horseback, but nobody suspicious, and an hour’s stroll brought us to an open area of several acres. There were others, similar, in the locality, but none as large. For the most part the country was rough, with gorse, heather, and occasional groups of trees. We didn’t stop walking. We just strolled on, but our eyes were busy—not that there was anything out of the ordinary to look at. On the far side of the piece of ground which we suspected was being used by the mysterious gliders, behind a thick belt of Scotch firs, rose the time-mellowed chimneys of a Tudor house of some size.

‘You’re right, Julia; there’s plenty of room here for a glider pilot to get in,’ observed Lance. ‘Naturally, we could hardly expect them to leave machines lying about. Who lives over there in the big house—do you know?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ returned Julia. ‘To tell the truth, I don’t know anybody about here.’

‘If there’s a house, there should be a road near it.’

‘There is. It’s about two hundred yards away on our left. It passes that house.’

‘Then let’s investigate.’

We walked over to the road, a typical forest highway, and followed it until we came to a gate hung on brick, ball-topped pillars, behind which a moss-grown gravel drive meandered between thickets of rhododendron, yew, and laurel towards the house. A labourer, or a gardener, was sweeping up wind-blown leaves.

‘Garthstone Manor,’ murmured Lance, reading the name carved on one of the pillars. ‘Let’s call and ask them if they’ve seen anything of our dog.’

‘Dog?’ Julia stared.

Lance smiled faintly. ‘Yes, our little fox-terrier; we’ve lost him, and we’re most upset about it. We must have an excuse, and that, I think, is as good as any.’

Julia nodded. ‘I understand.’

We went up the drive. The gardener looked up quickly when he heard our footsteps and asked us what we wanted. He was a nondescript sort of fellow. Lance told him we were looking for a dog. The man said it hadn’t come that way, whereupon Lance told him he was wrong, for he had just caught sight of it in the bushes. Without giving the man a chance to reply he walked on towards the house, whistling and calling ‘Bongo! Bongo!’ . . . ‘Dash it, he’s gone again,’ he said loudly when we were right up against the house.

The front door opened and a man came out, and as my eyes found his face I experienced a mild shock. For a moment I couldn’t recall where I had seen him before—then I remembered. It was our special constable caller of the previous night. But now he was in tweeds, a bag of golf clubs hanging from his shoulder. He raised his eyebrows when he saw us.

‘Good morning,’ he called cheerfully. ‘Is this a return visit?’

‘No; as a matter of fact I didn’t even know you lived here,’ answered Lance truthfully. ‘We’re chasing our dog. He went off after a rabbit, and the last we saw of him he was tearing through your shrubbery.’

‘I haven’t seen him.’ The man was frankness itself. ‘Look round by all means. No doubt he’ll turn up—they usually do. Perhaps you’d care to come in and have some refreshment while you’re waiting?’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ returned Lance warmly. ‘By the way, my name’s Lovell. This is Miss Ashton-Harcourt—and my brother.’

‘My name’s Smith—a nice easy name to remember.’ Our new acquaintance raised his hat. ‘Come in.’

We followed him into a well-furnished library, where he offered us hospitality. I don’t know about the others, but I felt a trifle embarrassed.

‘Did you succeed in locating the explosion last night?’ inquired Lance casually, strolling over to a window. It was half-open, and overlooked the outbuildings, shrubberies, and gardens usually to be found round a house of this size. In an open space a bonfire was smouldering; judging by the charred area it had evidently been a large one.

‘No, I can’t make it out at all,’ answered Smith readily. ‘Most disappointing. It’s a dull business, you know, this wandering about half the night. Nothing ever happens here. Still, it’s up to everyone to do his bit.’

‘Quite,’ said Lance vaguely, catching my eye as he turned away from the window.

I stiffened, trying to keep my expression under control, for I knew why Lance had turned away. A slant of wind had eddied the taint of the bonfire into the room, and it had an unusual odour. One doesn’t forget smells, and I had encountered that smell before. It was dope, aeroplane dope—that is to say, doped fabric.

Smith crossed over and closed the window. ‘Phew,’ he sniffed, wrinkling his nose. ‘Why must these confounded gardeners be continually lighting fires?’

‘They’re a trying tribe,’ laughed Lance. ‘Well, we mustn’t keep you from your game any longer,’ he went on. ‘I wonder where that dog went? It was kind of you to ask us in.’

‘Not a bit. Look in again some other time. I can’t ask you to stay to lunch because I’ve got a date at the golf club.’

We all strolled down to the drive. ‘Thanks again, and good-bye,’ said Lance.

‘It’s been a pleasure,’ returned our host.

We walked back towards the gate, whistling and making a pretence of looking for the imaginary dog. Not until we were back on the main road did Lance refer to our visit.

‘So that’s Mr Smith,’ he remarked thoughtfully.

‘What a nice fellow,’ observed Julia.

‘Charming,’ returned Lance drily. ‘Will this road take us home if we keep on it?’

‘Yes, it’s the road you were on last night when I stopped your car.’

‘Are there any more houses about?’

‘Only a public-house—it’s just round the next bend. I don’t think there are any other houses for miles. My cottage is probably the nearest.’

‘It’s rather early to go home; suppose we call at the tavern?’ suggested Lance.

‘I don’t want anything to drink,’ said Julia.

‘Neither do I,’ answered Lance. ‘But we can’t very well go into a public-house without having a drink—and I must have a look at this place. Ah! Here comes the postman. Perhaps he can give us some information.’

The deliverer of letters had just come round a corner on a push-bike. Lance stopped him.

‘Am I right in supposing that a Mr Smith lives at Garthstone Manor?’

‘Yes, he does,’ was the rather blunt answer.

‘I wonder if it is the same Mr Smith whom I used to know in America—Mr P. J. Smith?’

‘How should I know?’

‘I thought he might get some letters from America.’

‘He never gets any letters at all,’ declared the postman surprisingly, and he continued on his way.

Lance made a little grimace. ‘How very odd,’ he murmured, half to himself. ‘But here’s the tavern—the Rockham Arms. Let’s go in.’

The public-house was just opening. It wasn’t a very inviting place. There was nothing friendly or picturesque about it. It was just one of those red-brick houses that only succeed in looking dull. Inside, the rooms smelt disgustingly of stale beer and sawdust. It gave me the impression of not being a popular place, for which, I imagined, the landlord was largely responsible, for he was altogether the wrong sort of man to run a country hotel. He was youngish, about thirty-five, with deep-set eyes of peculiar intensity. They had an almost fanatical gleam, an impression that was aggravated by a mop of long, unkempt hair. I had a vague feeling that I had seen his face before, but couldn’t remember where. He gave us no cheerful greeting, but just stood waiting behind the bar.

We ordered our drinks.

‘I hear you’ve got a new neighbour up at the Manor,’ remarked Lance casually to the landlord.

‘What do you mean—new? He’s bin here a couple of years,’ answered the landlord in a surly voice.

‘I understand he’s a special constable?’ went on Lance.

‘I don’t know nuthin’ about him,’ was the churlish response.

Lance shrugged his shoulders. ‘All right, you needn’t be so bad-tempered about it. I was only trying to be agreeable.’

We were in the place about ten minutes, during which time nobody else came in. Then we walked on down the road.

‘Keep going—I’ll overtake you,’ said Lance quietly, when we had gone only a little way. Turning, I saw him scouting among the bushes at the back of the inn. He soon caught up with us.

‘Well, we don’t seem to be making much progress,’ complained Julia in a disappointed voice.

‘On the contrary we’re doing very well,’ answered Lance. ‘I suggest that we go back to the cottage, get the car, and go into Lyndenham for lunch. We’ll get some petrol at the same time.’

It sounded a good idea, so it was agreed.

We had nearly reached the drive when a car came along behind us travelling at high speed. I heard it coming, but paid no particular attention to it, for there seemed to be no reason why I should. Admittedly, there was no footpath, but I supposed that the driver could see us, and there was plenty of room for him to get by. Lance, who was on the outside, glanced over his shoulder. Instantly his hand flashed to his pocket. At the same time, with his left hand, he gave me a violent shove, and I took a header into the ditch with Julia on top of me. I could see Lance clinging to the hedge. The car swished past within a foot of us.

Furious, I scrambled up and tried to get its number, but if there was one it was smothered with mud. It tore on down the road and disappeared. The whole thing had happened in a few seconds.

Fortunately the ditch was dry. I got back on the road and helped Julia out; she was pale, and gave us her opinion of the crazy driver as she straightened her hat. Suddenly she stopped and stared at Lance as though a thought had struck her.

‘Good heavens! I believe that was done on purpose,’ she said breathlessly.

‘It could hardly have been an accident,’ replied Lance. ‘I had a feeling something of the sort was going to happen.’

‘Why?’ I demanded.

‘Surely you recognized the car?’

‘Great Scott! Of course. It was your Bentley!’

Lance nodded. ‘It was. Had it knocked us down no doubt the driver would have turned the car over on top of us and left it there. The police would have drawn their own conclusions after the publican had told them that we had called there, and that would have been that. I warned you that we were playing a dangerous game. Come on.’

We hurried on to the cottage.

‘Do you happen to have a telephone directory?’ Lance asked Julia, as soon as we were inside.

‘Yes.’

‘Would you mind looking up Smith’s number.’

She did so, and marked the place with her finger.

‘Lyndenham, 431,’ murmured Lance.

‘How on earth did you know that?’ cried Julia in amazement. She hadn’t mentioned the number.

‘I didn’t—but I suspected it. I’m afraid I rather overdid things at the tavern, and the bare mention of Smith’s name put the landlord on his guard. Of course, I wasn’t to know.’

‘Know what?’ I demanded.

‘That he was a friend of Smith’s. The inn was on the telephone. As soon as we went out the landlord rang up the Manor. I thought he might—that’s why I went back. I heard him give the number, but couldn’t catch the conversation. It rather looks as if Smith is the man we’re after. We’ve got to be very careful.’

Julia stared at Lance in astonishment. ‘What on earth gave you that idea?’

Lance lit a cigarette. ‘Several things,’ he answered. ‘In the first place, it’s unusual for gardeners to accost people when making a call. Then, Smith was *too* affable—people are not so free with their hospitality in these hard times. Finally, to clinch matters, there was the bonfire. Not even gardeners build a bonfire of that size so close to a house—anyway, not in war-time. The fire was still smouldering; therefore it had been made recently. When I caught the stink of burning cellulose dope, such as is used on aeroplane fabric, it seemed a safe guess that Mr Smith was a friend of the mysterious glider. You smelt the dope, too, didn’t you, Rod?’

‘Yes, I did,’ I answered. ‘And wasn’t Smith in a hurry to close the window!’

‘In such a hurry that it suggested a guilty conscience. I had no suspicion about the inn until I saw the landlord, and the state of the place. The inside was so filthy that it would certainly discourage customers—which, I fancy, was the intention. I suppose, Rod, you didn’t recognize the landlord?’

‘No, but his face was vaguely familiar. I had a feeling that I’d seen it in a newspaper.’

‘You probably have. The gentleman is Mr Henry Lothman, the disgruntled Bolshevik agitator, who got six months in prison not long ago for uttering threats against the Prime Minister. He’s a nasty piece of work.’

‘By Jove! You’re right!’ I cried. ‘What a memory you’ve got.’

‘A face like that isn’t easily forgotten,’ said Lance seriously. ‘I imagine anyone on the wrong side of the law would find him a ready and willing tool. Unless I’m very much mistaken he’s working for Smith. I’m afraid they realize that we suspect them—in fact, the car incident proves it. They won’t take their eyes off us after this. Frankly, I think that if there happened to be only one of us they’d make no bones about straightforward murder, but three people together are a more difficult proposition. Still, I’ve no doubt they’ll do it if they can—as they’ve just demonstrated.’

‘I wonder if Smith is really a special constable?’ conjectured Julia.

‘Ah! That’s something we don’t know, but we’ll find out. The first question we must ask ourselves is, are we going to stay here or would it be wiser to look for new quarters?’

‘I hate the idea of being driven out of my own house,’ protested Julia. ‘Suppose we stay here for the time being; if it gets too dangerous we can always move to an hotel.’

Lance nodded. ‘Very well, we’ll try it. Before we do anything else we’d better run into Lyndenham and get some lunch. I’ll get the tank filled with petrol at the same time.’

‘How? My ration-book’s empty.’

‘Mine isn’t,’ murmured Lance, smiling faintly. ‘To-night we’ll have a closer look at Mr Smith’s establishment.’

We locked the house, got the car out, and went on to Lyndenham.

‘Isn’t it time you told the police about your car being stolen?’ queried Julia.

‘I don’t think so,’ answered Lance. ‘With all due respect to them, at this juncture the local police might complicate things.’

Lance brought the car to a stop outside the one decent hotel in Lyndenham, one popular with tourists in the summer. He told me to take

Julia in and order lunch—he'd join us presently. He had a 'phone call to make. With that he walked away.

Julia and I went into the hotel. There were a number of men in the lounge, and the first one I saw was Mr Smith, chatting with a small group. He nodded to us when he saw us, and asked us to join him in a drink, but I said we were taking lunch and went on through to the dining-room, where we waited until Lance arrived about a quarter of an hour later. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

'I've managed to get the tank filled,' he told us.

Julia raised her eyebrows. 'Filled, eh? Are you a magician, or a friend of the Ministry of Supply?' she asked sarcastically.

'Just a friend of the Minister of Transport,' returned Lance humorously. 'By the way, I have ascertained that Mr Smith is not only a special constable but he's captain of the local force. He's lived at the Manor for just over two years; it doesn't belong to him; he took it furnished, on lease. Incidentally, Julia, you may be interested to know that it was Mr Smith, or rather an agent acting for him, who tried to buy your cottage. Evidently he was anxious to keep the district to himself—which he could have done of course by buying the few dwelling-houses that existed. Ah, here is the gentleman.'

The door of the dining-room opened and Mr Smith came in, followed by three other men. I recognized two of them at once. So, I could see, did Lance. They were the men who had attacked Julia on the road when she had stopped our car. Smith chose a table for four near a window overlooking the street and ordered food.

'Well, they're not going to spoil my lunch,' declared Julia emphatically. 'I'm hungry.'

'You can take your time,' replied Lance. 'We're in no great hurry.'

CHAPTER IV

THE ENEMY STRIKES AGAIN

AN hour passed. We had finished our coffee. Smith and his companions had also finished their lunch; but they sat on, talking in low tones. They rarely looked in our direction, but it was soon obvious that they were killing time waiting for us to make a move. Lance countered this by ordering more coffee, a move which told the party at the other table that we could play a waiting game, too. Smith said something to the others, got up and came across to us. He addressed Lance.

‘Are you thinking of staying long in these parts?’ he inquired casually.

‘Why?’ parried Lance blandly.

‘I thought you might care for a round of golf some time.’

‘What a pity we didn’t bring our clubs,’ murmured Lance. ‘As a matter of fact, we are leaving almost at once. Miss Harcourt is thinking of closing the cottage; she thinks it’s a bit—er—lonely, with a war on.’

‘I think she’s wise,’ returned Smith suavely. ‘I hear that the burglars are taking advantage of the black-out.’

‘Exactly. That’s what we’ve told her.’

Smith nodded. ‘Well, good-bye if we don’t meet again.’

‘We may run into each other some time,’ smiled Lance. ‘The world’s a small place.’

Smith returned to his party. Presently they all got up and went out, but Lance made no move.

‘What are you waiting for?’ I asked.

‘A message—I think this is it,’ answered Lance.

A man had entered the dining-room; he glanced around and then, seeing that we were the only people in the room, came over to us.

‘Mr Lovell?’ he queried.

‘Yes,’ said Lance. ‘Thanks.’ He took the letter the man held out to him.

‘Any answer, sir?’ questioned the newcomer.

‘I’ll tell you in a moment.’ Lance ripped open the letter. ‘By the way, how did you get down here?’

‘By road, sir.’

‘In a police car?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Hm—pity.’ Lance read the letter. ‘All right, there’s no answer,’ he said, and the man departed.

I could see that Julia was not a little puzzled by all this—and so was I, for that matter.

‘What’s going on?’ inquired Julia curiously.

Lance threw me a sidelong glance, then looked at her gravely.

‘I happen to have a friend at Scotland Yard,’ he explained. ‘I rang him up just before lunch and asked him if he could tell me anything about Smith. Unfortunately the messenger came down in a police car and Smith may have seen it as he went out. If he did, it will confirm his suspicions about us, and we can look out for trouble.’

‘You certainly have some useful friends,’ remarked Julia. ‘Why not get this pal of yours at Scotland Yard to send some men down and surround the forest? Then, when the mysterious glider pilot comes again they could nab him.’

Lance shook his head. ‘They might get the pilot, in which case they would probably scare the rest of the gang. That isn’t enough. We’ve got to find out who’s behind this business, and how far the organization extends, before we talk about arresting anyone.’

‘Well, what are we going to do next?’ asked Julia. ‘Do you really want me to leave the cottage?’

‘Yes. It’s getting dangerous—as Smith hinted, and he wasn’t joking. You fetch what things you need and we’ll find an hotel somewhere. My friend at Scotland Yard wants me to ring him up just before five, and it must be nearly that now. I’ll go and call him. Rod, you stay here with Julia. I shan’t be long—say, about twenty minutes.’

As soon as he had gone Julia got up. ‘Look here, I’ll tell you what. To save time I’ll slip back to the cottage and get the few things I need. I can be back inside twenty minutes. We shall save time that way. I mean, it won’t be necessary for us to go back to the cottage after your brother has finished ’phoning.’

I hesitated. ‘All right,’ I agreed reluctantly. ‘It’s still daylight, so I don’t think you should take any harm.’

‘I’ll watch it,’ smiled Julia, and away she went.

I waited, feeling that I had been rather foolish to let her go; but it seemed easier than arguing with a strong-willed young woman. All the same, I awaited her return with impatience, and when twenty minutes had passed and she had not come back I began to get worried. Five minutes later Lance walked in. He looked sharply round the dining-room.

‘Where’s Julia?’

‘She’s gone to the cottage to get her kit,’ I explained. ‘She’s coming straight back.’

Lance’s eyes met mine for a moment. He shook his head. ‘You shouldn’t have let her go, Rod. Even now she doesn’t realize how serious this is. How long has she been gone?’

‘Nearly half an hour.’

Lance glanced at the window. Dusk, grey with a promise of frost, was closing in.

‘I’m sorry about this,’ he said tersely. ‘I hope to goodness everything is all right. We may as well start walking to meet her.’

‘Have you had a conversation with Scotland Yard?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I’ve been talking to Inspector Wayne. He knows about me. I’ll tell you about it later. He wants me to carry on. Let’s go.’

We paid the bill and went out. It was nearly dark now, and the place looked grim. A crescent moon hung low in the darkening sky. Having no vehicle—for Julia had, of course, taken the car—we strode on up the road. Not a soul did we see, and we finished by walking all the way to the cottage. It took us only half an hour, for we lengthened our strides as we went on without meeting the car. We fairly ran up the drive.

Julia’s car stood outside the front door, just as one might suppose she would leave it while she went in. There was nobody in the car. The engine was silent. Lance went to the front door. It was unlocked, so we walked in. The house was in darkness. Silence met us on the threshold.

‘Julia!’ called Lance sharply.

There was no reply.

Lance lit the lamp and looked around. Everything seemed to be in order. Nothing had been touched, but of Julia there was no sign. Nor was there anything, apart from the car, to show that she had been there.

‘I was afraid of this,’ muttered Lance.

‘I shouldn’t have let her go,’ I repented bitterly.

‘It’s no use talking about that now. Something’s happened to her, and before we do anything else we’ve got to find her. This is Smith’s work.’

‘Where do you suppose he’s taken her?’

‘To his house, I imagine. At least, I can think of nowhere else.’

‘But would he do that, knowing that we’d be bound to follow?’

‘That may be the very reason why he’d take her there,’ returned Lance drily. ‘I’m afraid we’ve played into his hands. It can’t be helped. Let’s go. We’ll take the car, park it somewhere handy near Garthstone Manor, and explore on foot.’

We put the light out, closed the door, and getting into the car cruised up the road towards the Manor. After the chilly air outside it was comfortably warm in the car. I began to feel drowsy—unusually drowsy.

‘There’s a car following us,’ murmured Lance.

I didn’t care very much. I yawned. ‘Are you sure it’s following us?’

‘I think so. We’ll soon see.’ Lance accelerated and then slowed down. ‘Yes, it’s keeping the same distance behind us.’

I yawned again. ‘Wake me up when we get there.’

Lance’s next words seemed to reach me from a great distance. ‘Rod! Rod! Smash the windscreen.’

The words meant nothing to me. I didn’t want to move. In fact, I couldn’t move. Hazily, as though in a dream, I saw Lance put his hand in his pocket and bring out his gun. Holding it by the muzzle he crashed the butt into the windscreen. Glass shattered. A blast of cold air struck me in the face and I stirred, feeling better, suddenly aware of the danger.

‘What’s happened?’ I gasped.

‘Gas,’ muttered Lance. ‘See if you can get your window open—mine seems to be jammed. They must have turned the exhaust-pipe up into the back of the car.’

I tried to open my window, but it wouldn’t budge.

‘They must have jammed them all,’ snapped Lance. ‘Keep your face near the hole in the windscreen. Lucky I saw you losing consciousness.’

I leaned forward to breathe in gulps of fresh air. Lance did the same.

‘That’s better,’ I announced.

‘Good! The car is still following us. I’m going to behave as if their trick had worked. When they come up with us, lie still as if you were unconscious.’

‘And then what?’

‘It will depend on what they do. Take your cue from me. Ready?’

‘Go ahead.’

By this time I could see that we were not far from the Manor. Lance steadied the pace and began steering an unsteady course to and fro across the road. The swerves became more and more acute. We hit the grass verge, swerved again, then left the road altogether and ran on the open heath on our left. For a minute we bumped over heather and rabbit-holes, keeping more or less parallel with the road, and then, travelling slowly, pushed our radiator into a clump of gorse. The car stopped. Silence fell. I lay still, slumped in my seat—but I kept my eyes open. In the reflector I could see the car behind us slowing down. It stopped with its near wheels on the grass verge less than a dozen yards away. The door opened. Hurrying footsteps swished through the heather. I half dropped my eyelids.

A moment later the door on my side was opened. I heard the one on Lance's side being opened, too, from which I gathered that we had at least two men to deal with. A torch blazed in my face.

'They're unconscious,' said a voice with a strong foreign accent.

'They must have guessed something was wrong for they've smashed the windscreen,' answered another. 'It was too late then, I expect.'

'What shall we do with them?' went on the first speaker.

'Did you bring that bottle of whisky?'

'Yes.'

'Take the cork out and throw it on the floor. That will provide evidence that they were both drunk. Then we'll lock the doors and leave the engine running. That should make sure of them.'

I began to wonder what Lance intended doing, for so far he hadn't moved. Then an entirely unlooked-for factor altered everything.

Julia's voice split the crisp air. She screamed only one word. It was 'Lance!'

The effect on me was like an electric shock. And so, apparently, it was with Lance.

'Get 'em,' he snapped, and sprang to life.

I grabbed the man on my side and we went down in a heap. Luckily, he fell underneath, and I drove my knees into his stomach with a force that made him whistle through his teeth. There were several pieces of flint lying about, so I grabbed a piece and banged it down on his head. As he went limp I jumped to my feet and made a dash for the other car, for I could hear the engine revving up.

The driver saw me coming, and by the time I reached the car it was already on the move. The door slammed. I took a flying leap on to the

running board and wrenched it open again. The fellow inside tried to kick me off, but I hung on, and we steered a crazy course down the road. I managed to get inside, but by this time the driver had put his foot down and we were travelling at high speed. The car was suddenly familiar, and I recognized our Bentley.

‘Stop,’ I snarled.

The driver cursed. The speedometer was on the seventy-miles-an-hour mark.

I was at a loss to know what to do next, for the driver was clutching the wheel with both hands, and it only needed a jerk one way or the other to cause a bad smash. I glanced over my shoulder, and saw Julia lying in a huddled heap.

‘Are you all right?’ I shouted.

‘Yes, but I’m tied up,’ she answered.

In the next few seconds I thought faster than I had ever thought before. I had no intention of being taken to the Manor where Smith and his gang were probably waiting for us. In sheer desperation I determined to take a risk—it was the only thing I could think of. I shouted to Julia to hunch her knees up to her chin and keep her arms over her face in case we crashed. Then I turned on the driver, feeling really savage. Drawing back my fist, I struck him on the jaw with every ounce of strength that I could muster. His head jerked back and he lost his grip on the wheel; I grabbed it, but at the pace we were travelling I wasn’t quick enough to keep the car on the road. I was reaching over from the left so that the car, when it swerved, went that way. We hit the grass verge with a bang that sent the car into the air. It came down on its off-side wheels, and for a nasty instant I thought we were going to overturn. Then we were on all four wheels, bouncing, bumping and banging over goodness knows what—gorse, bracken, mole-hills and rabbit-holes. We missed a tree by inches. A low-hanging branch scraped us. Julia screamed.

But we were slowing down now. I suppose the driver’s foot had slipped off the accelerator. Failing to find the foot-brake—his legs were in the way—steering with one hand I managed to reach the hand-brake. What happened after that I don’t exactly know. We seemed to go over a precipice. Julia screamed again. I fell in a heap with the driver on top of me. There was a bang and a crash and we stopped dead. Scrambling out of the car, I saw what had happened. We had gone over a steep bank into a sort of gully. Fortunately we had hit it at right angles, otherwise the car must have toppled on its side; as it was, it was standing with its front wheels well up the opposite bank.

‘Are you all right, Julia?’ I gasped.

‘I don’t know—I think so,’ came an unsteady voice. ‘Cut me loose.’

I dragged her out, and with my penknife cut the cords that bound her wrists and ankles.

‘Lance warned you,’ I grunted.

‘All right, I’m not grumbling, am I?’ she protested.

Which was true enough. I helped her to her feet. She staggered for a moment and then steadied herself.

‘What about Willy?’ she inquired.

‘Willy?’

‘The driver—that’s what the others called him. If he isn’t a Hun I never saw one. Take a look at his square head.’

‘Just a minute—don’t talk so much—let me think,’ I muttered. The fact was, I was in a bit of a daze.

‘Where did you leave Lance?’ asked Julia.

‘With your car, fighting two other men.’

‘Then we’d better get back in case he needs help.’

‘I think you’re right,’ I agreed.

With some difficulty we tied up the driver with the piece of cord that had been used to tie Julia. I fancy the fellow must have taken a bang when we crashed; anyway, he appeared to be stunned. We dragged him into the car. I couldn’t get it back up the bank so I set off along the gully. After a hundred yards or so it opened out and I was able to get on the road.

‘I hope you haven’t damaged my car,’ remarked Julia, as I tore back down the road.

‘Nothing to speak of. We’ve knocked a hole in the windscreen and I fancy the headlamps are buckled—that’s all. Those skunks turned the exhaust-pipe into the car and jolly nearly gassed us.’

‘Good heavens! Is that what they did? I heard them planning something.’

‘Yes, that’s what they did,’ I returned savagely. ‘They don’t stop short of murder.’

A car came up the road towards us. It stopped, and a man got out. With relief I saw that it was Lance.

‘Nice work, Rod,’ he remarked. ‘Is Julia safe?’

‘Yes, we’re both all right. Where are the two toughs?’

‘In the back of the car. I’m afraid they’ve got knocked about a bit—I had to beat them both on the head with my gun. Thinking I was unconscious

they weren't ready for it.'

'Great Scott! We can't go on collecting bodies at this rate,' I remonstrated. 'I've got another one here. What are we going to do with them?'

'We'll run them to the nearest hospital and notify Scotland Yard. My friend, Inspector Wayne, will probably be glad to have them under lock and key. Anyway, it's the only thing we can do. Where's the nearest hospital, Julia?'

'There's one at Lyndenham—the Forest Cottage Hospital.'

'Good, let's get along. We shall have to say there's been an accident—not that anyone's likely to doubt it when they see the casualties. You'd better stay in the Bentley, Rod. I'll drive the Vauxhall. When we've got rid of these fellows we'll come back and call on Smith.'

'But won't Scotland Yard want to know why——'

'They'll have to wait. We've got to clean up this business to-night, so we've no time to lose. Smith is probably waiting for these fellows to come back; when they fail to return he's likely to take fright.'

'But what are we going to do about Smith?' I asked. 'You've no evidence against him. It seems to me that he'll merely disown these fellows. We look like landing ourselves in trouble if Smith is able to make out a good case for himself.'

'Inspector Wayne will take care of that.'

'Who is this fellow Wayne you keep talking about?' put in Julia.

'He's my friend at Scotland Yard,' muttered Lance impatiently.

I could see Julia was curious, and would have asked more questions, but Lance wouldn't say any more. It took us the best part of twenty minutes to get back to Lyndenham, where we made up a pretty good tale for the hospital authorities. Our statement that there had been an accident was so obviously true that it wasn't questioned. Lance got on the telephone to London and then took the house surgeon on one side.

'These men are criminals,' he told him confidentially. 'An inspector from Scotland Yard is on his way down here to collect them. Meanwhile, keep your eye on them. We're busy, so we shall have to get along. Don't lose sight of these men until the police get here.'

The doctor looked a bit shocked, as he had every reason to be. However, we left him to work it out and went back to the cars. Julia's was parked in the garage to be repaired. The Bentley seemed to be all right, so after taking in some petrol we went back to the scene of action. Incidentally, it seemed

that Lance had a special card which entitled him to as much petrol as he wanted.

He brought the car to a stop some distance from the Manor drive. Leaving us, he made a reconnaissance in the bushes and came back to say that he had found a good place to hide it.

We moved the Bentley to the spot he had chosen and then went forward on foot. Lance tried to persuade Julia to stay in the car, but she wouldn't be left behind.

'I'm in this as much as you are,' she protested. 'Let me stay with you.'

Reluctantly, Lance agreed.

We went on until we reached the drive and then turned into the rhododendrons.

'Quiet, everybody,' whispered Lance. 'There may be guards about.'

You can't walk through a rhododendron wood without making a little noise—at least, not in the dark, because the leaves rustle and dead twigs have a nasty habit of cracking when you step on them. Naturally, we daren't use the torch. We saw nobody, however, and in due course came in sight of the house. Not a light showed anywhere, although this was due, of course, to the black-out. The place looked deserted. We approached from the front, so that the open area which we suspected was being used as a landing ground by enemy glider pilots lay on our right. It looked bleak enough now; one or two rabbits were scuttling about, but apart from that there was no sign of life.

'Let's go and have a look at the bonfire for a start,' suggested Lance. 'It should be cold by now.'

It was. Groping about in the fine wood-ash, we found several pieces of wire, a turnbuckle, and a metal fishplate such as is used to fasten the roots of an aeroplane wing to the fuselage.

'That settles any doubt about where the gliders finish up,' observed Lance softly. 'It rather looks as though they destroy the machines when they get here, either as a regular practice or possibly because we've scared them.'

There was ample moonlight for us to survey our surroundings. Behind us was the house, a massive pile, in silhouette. Near the house, not far from where we stood, separated by a yard paved with stones, were a number of outhouses—stables and the like; notably there was a large rectangular building surmounted by a wooden clock-tower. In the old days I imagine the building must have been a coach-house; it looked large enough to house several vehicles. Bounding the courtyard on one side was a plain brick wall, with a gateway leading into what seemed to be a walled garden. On the

opposite side rose a thick hedge, coal-black in the moonlight. Had I not seen it earlier in the day from the library window I might have wondered what it was, but I had noticed it and knew it to be a square-cut yew hedge. It looked impassable, but I knew that there was an opening, a sort of recess, cut in the middle.

For a minute or two we stood still surveying the scene, keeping, of course, under cover.

‘I think we’ll have a look at that big outbuilding first,’ whispered Lance. ‘S-sh!’ He tiptoed swiftly into the inky shade of the hedge as not far away a footfall crunched on a gravel path.

We had barely taken cover when a man came quietly round the corner of the house. He stopped, and stood in a listening attitude for the best part of a minute. Then, looking suspiciously about him, he resumed what appeared to be a definite patrol.

‘We shall have to be careful,’ whispered Lance, after he had gone. ‘Try not to make any noise—sound carries a long way on a night like this.’

Like shadows we glided to the large outbuilding. The door was locked. I guessed it would be. We tried every window in turn, but they were all fastened, and as we weren’t equipped for housebreaking we had no means of getting in—at any rate, not without making a noise. Lance took his torch from his pocket, pressed the bulb against the glass and switched it on, at the same time peering in. He stood like this for some time.

‘I can see four cars, all Buicks,’ he whispered. ‘I wonder what on earth they use them for?’

We turned to the house, which, as I have already said, was completely blacked-out. We moved slowly towards it. I happened to be leading, and when my foot caught against a wire I didn’t suspect what it was until I heard an electric bell jangling in the house. The others heard it too, of course. There was no need to wonder long what it was. I had tripped over a burglar-alarm. Voices were raised inside the house.

‘This way!’ Lance made a bolt for the yew hedge, but I overtook him, making for the opening that I knew existed. Behind us a door was opened and there came the sound of voices in urgent conversation; but by that time I had found the opening and darted into it, catching Julia by the hand to guide her.

CHAPTER V

WALLS WITHIN WALLS

FOR a moment I had an uncomfortable feeling that we might be in a cul-de-sac, one of those living summerhouses cut out of yew, once so popular; but to my intense relief the path went right on, with yew hedges on either side. It was pitch-dark inside. However, there was soft turf, or moss-grown gravel, under our feet, and we made no noise as we groped our way along. Very soon the path turned at right angles, then again, and yet again. This struck me as very odd to say the least of it, but no suspicion of the truth entered my mind.

Coming to another opening we stopped dead, and what with groping and peering we made out further openings on either side of us, although the path we were on went straight ahead. I was just about to ask Lance's opinion of it, for by this time I had lost all sense of direction and feared we might be travelling back towards the house, when a voice spoke. It was so close that my nerves twitched and my skin went gooseflesh. I recognized it at once. The speaker was Smith, and he couldn't have been more than six feet away. In fact, he seemed to be on the far side of the very hedge by which we were standing. This suggested that we had nearly returned to our starting-point.

Said Smith: 'There's nobody here. Ernst has been on duty—he would have seen anybody——'

'But the bell?' broke in a strange voice.

'Those infernal rabbits again, I expect,' resumed Smith. 'I told Gustav that he was setting the wires too low, but he would have it his way. There's no sense in getting jumpy.'

'You don't think it's likely to be that girl again—or the two men?'

'No. We shan't be troubled with them much longer. Willy has already rung up to say that he's got the girl; confirmation that he's got the two men ought to come in any minute now.'

While this interesting conversation was going on I could hear a number of other voices speaking in low tones in the background. I couldn't tell how many there were, but there were certainly several, which amazed me not a little. It seemed that the house was full of men. One, at least, spoke in

German, but others were talking at the same time so I didn't catch the words.

'We might as well get back to the house,' muttered Smith irritably. 'If there is someone in the grounds it would take an army to find him in these confounded bushes. It would have been better to have had them cleared. It might be a poacher after the rabbits.'

'If there is somebody about he may have bolted into the maze.'

The word 'maze' struck me—as the saying is—all of a heap. So that was it! We had floundered into one of those living labyrinths without which no country estate in the old days was considered complete. In spite of my anxiety I couldn't help smiling at the absurd chance which no mortal man could have foreseen.

Smith's next words took the smile off my face. They did more than that; they sent a nasty feeling down my spine.

'Anyone going into the maze is likely to have grey hair when he comes out—if ever he does come out,' he said.

'Why?'

'Hylde escaped this afternoon and ran in there. She's dangerous. Only one man can do anything with her, and that's Hans, and he's out with Willy. Only a brave man or an imbecile would attempt to get Hylde out in the dark, so she remains until Hans returns.'

'Why did he bring such a creature here?'

'He has great faith in her ability. He swears she's better than any watch-dog.'

'I see . . .'

Footsteps receded and the words faded. Presently a door was closed. Silence returned. I waited a minute or two to make sure that nobody had remained behind and then turned to the others; I could just make out their shadowy figures.

'Great Scott!' I breathed. 'Did you hear that?'

'Of course.'

'We'd better see about getting out,' I said nervously.

'That may not be easy,' returned Lance. 'We'd better try using our heads—not that I know anything about mazes beyond the fact that the object of them is to make getting out as difficult as possible. I seem to recall that there is usually a sort of key, though, a method, about these places. I mean, either you take every turning to the left or every turning to the right, or every alternate turning—or something of the sort.'

‘That’s it,’ declared Julia. ‘I once went into the one at Hampton Court; I couldn’t get out, and a man had to shout the key to me. But I forget what it was. I believe you can wander about in these places for hours.’

‘A nice cheerful prospect,’ I put in. ‘And while we are wandering about, what about Hylde? I don’t like the sound of her at all. What do you suppose _____,’

‘It’s no use standing here guessing,’ interrupted Lance. ‘She might be anything from a madwoman to an elephant. One thing is certain: we’ve got to be out of this before daylight, so the sooner we start moving the better.’

‘Lead on,’ I invited helplessly, for the situation would have been ridiculous if it hadn’t been so serious.

‘I’m going to try taking every turning to the right,’ said Lance imperturbably. ‘If that doesn’t work we’ll try turning to the left.’

We started off in single file, for the corridors, overgrown in places, were too narrow for us to walk abreast. Some of the passages were pitch-black; others were partly moonlit, according to the direction in which they led in relation to the moon. The evergreen walls were about six feet high—just too high for us to see over.

We seemed to walk for an hour, although no doubt it was a good deal less than that, without getting anywhere. It was infuriating that we could be so held up in a place that may not have covered more than an acre of ground. We started slowly on account of Hylde, but as time went on and we saw nothing of her we gradually increased our speed.

Suddenly Lance stopped dead, rigid, leaning slightly forward, his left arm thrown out behind him to halt us. He was staring fixedly at something ahead. I heard Julia give a little gasp. Then, over Lance’s shoulder, I saw it—or rather her.

Just in front of us the corridor which we were following opened out into a small, roofless chamber. Cold blue moonlight slanted across the black shadows. Projecting into the moonlight were the head and shoulders of a woman. White, she stood dead-still, gazing steadily and expectantly in our direction. The silence was broken by a single sound. It sounded like a chuckle and lasted only for an instant; then silence returned. I could feel my pulses pounding in my ears. Again came a sound, this time a frightened whimper.

My mouth went dry. ‘Lance! For heaven’s sake, what is it?’ I hissed.

He took a pace forward. Instantly the breathless hush was shattered by a frightful gibbering noise. I staggered back. Julia fell against me, clutching at

my arm. To confess the shameful truth, had there been anywhere to run to I'm afraid I should have bolted.

Then Lance laughed, softly, but with genuine mirth, and that snapped the tension. 'Come on,' he said, 'it's all right. Allow me to introduce you to Venus.'

We moved forward. The female didn't move—never would move. It was a marble statue, standing in a niche. I moistened my lips.

'What about the noise?' I asked.

'There's something in here, something alive, but goodness knows what it is,' answered Lance.

'It sounded horribly human to me.'

We went on a little way and came to a clearing. On one side of it stood a small, dilapidated summer-house.

'I think we've arrived at the middle,' said Lance.

The sound of his voice was answered by a low growl from the summer-house. I saw something dark begin to move, and the hair on the back of my neck began to tingle.

'Look out!' I warned.

Gun in hand, Lance went a little nearer. Another growl. He peered forward, then straightened himself.

'It's an ape,' he announced. 'A chimpanzee, I fancy. She must be Hylda. She looks vicious.'

'So am I,' I grunted. 'This is becoming fantastic. Let's turn back and try the left-hand method.'

We turned about and continued our crazy route march, now taking every opening that occurred on the left. Lance was fairly striding along and I knew that he was getting anxious about the waste of time. Yet, as far as I could see, we were as far from getting out as when we started.

After we had walked about a mile we arrived back at the summer-house. Hylda greeted us with a snarl. Lance stopped.

'This is ridiculous,' he muttered. 'We'd better try something else.'

He turned about, and presently I saw what he was doing. Taking the moon as an objective, he was working steadily towards it by taking every opening that led in the desired direction. After a while, faced by a blank wall, he stopped again.

'I'm getting sick of this,' he snapped. 'Give me a leg up. The top of the hedge might be solid enough to support our weight. If it is I may be able to

get some idea of where we are. I didn't want to have to do this because of the noise we shall make.'

I bent my back and gave him a bunk up. Clawing with his hands and floundering with his feet in the springy branches, making a fearful amount of noise—or so it seemed in the silence—he got into some sort of position on top of the hedge.

'All right,' he said at once. 'This is the outside wall. There's a field on the other side. Get Julia up to me—we'll get her over first.'

I made a back for Julia. Lance caught her under the arms and dragged her on the hedge, from where, half slipping and half rolling, she went down on the other side. This done, he lay flat and gave me his hands; but my added weight was too much for the hedge and we crashed down into it. However, somehow we managed to scramble through, leaving a fair amount of skin behind.

'Phew! I'm glad we're out of that,' I gasped.

For a minute or two we stood still, listening, but there was no sign of alarm.

'We appear to have come out on the side farthest from the house, so we're some distance from it,' remarked Lance. 'Keep your eyes skinned.'

'My face jolly nearly got skinned climbing over that hedge,' I grumbled. 'Where are we bound for?'

'Back to the house.'

'Why not go to Lyndenham and try to get in touch with this detective friend of yours? Surely you've got enough evidence now?'

Lance hesitated. 'Perhaps you're right. We could at least tell Wayne the story and leave it to him to decide what to do. After what's happened Smith and his colleagues may clear out and leave the place empty—that's what I'm afraid of. Hullo! What's going on?'

We both started, staring upward as faintly to our ears came a soft hum—the unmistakable whine of a motorless aircraft.

Lance caught my arm. 'By jingo! Look! That's why they didn't hear us—they're all out on the landing ground.' He pointed, not that there was any need, for as soon as he had mentioned landing ground I had dropped my eyes to the rough piece of waste land on the fringe of which the Manor stood.

It was, of course, too dark to pick out details, but a small group of men could be seen, standing still as if they were waiting. And as we watched

them in silence I distinctly heard a buzzer in the house zipping out a message in Morse code.

‘We’ll have a closer look at this,’ declared Lance, and taking advantage of the ample cover available, began running towards the back of the house, taking a course that would bring us to the rhododendron bushes, from where we should be able to get a closer view of the landing ground. By the time we got to within earshot a high-winged sailplane was on the ground, with the group disposed about it. We were, I suppose, about fifty yards away, close enough to catch snatches of the conversation. It conveyed little to us, however, and as far as I could gather related to the trip over, and something somebody had come to do.

Five men picked up the sailplane bodily and began carrying it in. The others, including the new arrival, who was still muffled up in flying kit, began walking towards the house. I saw that if they kept to their present course they would pass within twenty yards of us.

My one overwhelming sensation at that moment was of intense regret that Inspector Wayne and the police were not there, for had that been so we could have bagged the whole bunch with one cast of the net. As it was, eleven men—and for all we knew there were more in the house—were obviously too big a handful for us to take on alone. What all these men, clearly enemies, were doing in one place was beyond my comprehension. As they drew nearer it became clear that we ourselves were now the subject of the conversation, for I heard Smith mention our names.

At this moment there occurred a dramatic interruption. A man, staggering and stumbling as he ran, burst from the bushes lower down and hurried towards the group.

I heard Smith say in startled tones: ‘It’s Willy.’ He walked quickly to meet him. ‘What has happened?’ he demanded.

Willy was the man I had hit on the jaw in the Bentley. There was no need to wait for his reply to know what had happened. Somehow he had managed to get out of the hospital before the arrival of Lance’s Scotland Yard friend, and had hurried to the Manor to tell the story. I couldn’t hear what he said, for he spoke in a low voice, but whatever it was it upset Smith to no small extent. He cursed viciously, calling the wretched Willy some nasty names. At length he turned to the others.

‘We must go,’ he jerked out. ‘Wex can’t stay here now. This man Lovell is a police spy. He has sent for Scotland Yard men—Willy heard him tell the doctor at the hospital. The police may be here at any moment. We’ve no time to lose. Gustav, run in and tell Kurt to send a radio message to the boat

to say that we are coming straight up. The boat will have to come into the estuary right away. Watch for our signal and then pick us up. Erich, how long will it take you to drive us to Conway?’

‘Five hours—not less.’

‘We must be there before daylight.’

‘Jawohl, Herr Commandant. How many cars?’

‘We shall probably need them all.’

But it seemed as if the pilot who had just arrived was not very happy about this arrangement. ‘What about me?’ he protested, speaking in German. ‘You’ll have to wait for me, and I have letters to deliver.’

‘You’ll have to take your chance,’ returned Smith curtly, speaking in the same language. ‘It would be madness to stay here now.’

‘I’d think twice before abandoning this place after all the trouble that has been taken to organize it,’ said the pilot seriously. ‘What is more, some of our men who have been shot down may be making their way here at this very moment.’

I began to see daylight. I remembered that the crew of more than one German aeroplane that had been shot down on night raids over England had completely disappeared. It looked as if this was their rendezvous until such time as they could be got out of the country.

‘I’d sooner leave the place than face a firing squad,’ declared Smith harshly. He seemed to be on the point of panic. ‘Never mind that glider. There’s no time to burn it—anyway we daren’t make a fire. Get packed . . .’

The voices dwindled away to a murmur as the party disappeared round the back of the house.

‘What was all that about?’ whispered Julia. ‘I don’t speak German—was it German?’

Lance was curt. ‘Yes, but we’ve no time to talk now. They’re going to pack up and get out. We must try to stop them. Julia, I want you to do exactly as I tell you, and for heaven’s sake don’t argue. Go back to the car. Get to the hospital as fast as you can and ask for Inspector Wayne of Scotland Yard. If he’s started back for London you must go after him. If he hasn’t arrived, wait for him, but at all costs get hold of him and bring him here. Tell him he’ll need several men. He’d better pick up that crooked landlord on the way. Get the car filled up with petrol—Wayne will attend to that for you when he knows you’re working with me. If when he gets here the place has been evacuated tell him to make for Conway in North Wales.

Judging from their conversation these people have a boat there. Rod and I will try to hold them. Is that clear?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Then off you go.’

‘See you later.’ Julia went off at a sprint.

‘Now,’ I said, ‘what next?’

CHAPTER VI
WARM WORK

LANCE stood still for a moment or two, deep in thought. 'The only thing we can do is stop those Buicks from getting away—or try, at any rate,' he decided.

'Two of us against a dozen men? We've got a job on.'

'All the same, we've got to try. Come on.'

Active noises came from the house, where chinks of light now revealed unexpected windows. We ran to the big garage, but we could still find no way in. Lance picked up a brick.

'If we can get in we ought to be able to keep them out,' he remarked calmly. 'Whatever happens we've simply got to crock those cars.'

At that moment the back door of the house was thrown open and a man ran out. He saw us at once—he was bound to. His voice bawled an alarm, and an instant later his pistol blazed. The shot came close to me, too close to be comfortable. Evidently he knew how to use the weapon, and was quite prepared to use it. I threw a brick-end at him and dived for cover behind the garage. Lance went the other way and joined me at the back, still carrying the brick he had picked up. He crashed it through the nearest window, but before he could make a serious attempt to get through and into the garage shots started zipping along the wall, fired by two men who had somehow got on our flank.

Lance answered their fire. 'We can't stay here,' he muttered, punctuating the words with shots. 'Let's get into the bushes where they can't see us.'

We bolted into the shrubbery and took up positions commanding a view of the garage door. It was a good spot, for no one could get into the garage without coming under Lance's fire, and it began to look as if we should stop them. At any rate that was the idea, but it didn't work out that way.

Smith's voice, high-pitched with alarm and excitement, came from an angle of the house. 'Where are they?' he shouted.

'They've bolted into the bushes.' A stone crashed in the undergrowth near us, thrown evidently by the speaker to indicate our position as near as he could judge it.

An instant later the night air was shattered by the snarling roar of a sub-machine-gun. A hail of bullets lashed the leaves and branches just over our heads. I flattened myself against the ground, not a little scared, for this was something I hadn't bargained for. Clearly, it was asking for trouble to stay where we were, so between bursts from the gun I rolled farther and farther back among the trees and finally pulled up behind a sturdy Scotch fir.

'Are you all right, Lance?' I said tersely.

There was no answer.

Nearly sick with anxiety, I made a mental survey of the position; I could see nothing, for under the trees it was as black as the inside of a sweep's pocket. I realized that Lance had either been hit or else had retired in a different direction. There seemed to be nothing I could do, for every few seconds short bursts of fire raked the undergrowth. To move would obviously be suicidal, so I remained where I was. From the sounds that reached me I could judge pretty well what was going on. A babble of voices told me that the whole gang was now outside; swift footsteps pattered on the stones; the garage doors grated as they were dragged open. A car engine began to purr. It began to look as though the spies would get away after all.

The machine-gun was now silent, so I began worming my way towards the edge of the bushes that fringed the drive in the hope of seeing something. It was no easy job, for the rhododendron bushes were thicker near the ground than they were higher up; they caught in my clothes and held me; broken twigs jabbed me in the face. My hand happened to close over a broken branch, and I kept it in case I should need a weapon.

Presently I heard the first car go past; it was followed by several shots, from which I gathered that Lance was still about. The second car went by, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. I blundered into the drive just as the third car came tearing along. I flung myself back and it missed me by inches. Half beside myself with excitement, I ran up the drive into the yard. There were no more shots, but the fourth car was just coming out of the garage. I hurled my piece of wood at the windscreen and had the satisfaction of hearing the glass shatter; at the same instant a figure leapt from the roof of the garage on to the top of the car. It was Lance.

He yelled, 'Look out!'—but I jumped on the running board of the car, grabbed the handle of the door and twisted it open. A hand was thrust out at me. I caught the wrist and jerked it down—only just in time, for a gun blazed and the shot went through my jacket, as I afterwards discovered. I grabbed the arm with both hands and pulled. The next instant I was on my back with a man on top of me. I flung him off and tried to hold him down,

but he struggled like a maniac. The trouble was, I daren't let go of his arm because I knew he had a gun; however, by throwing all my weight on him, and tripping him at the same time, I got him down on his back; his head hit the stones with a crack and he ceased to struggle. Lance came to my help and I staggered to my feet, to see that the car had stopped with its bonnet in the bushes. A man was lying on the ground near the door.

'Are there any more?' I panted.

'I don't think so,' answered Lance.

'What are we going to do with these fellows?'

'We shall have to leave them here,' answered Lance crisply. 'The police car ought to be here at any moment. Smith's the man I want—get in.'

I fell into the car. Lance got in the other side and took the wheel. He backed into the clear, then shot forward down the drive.

'They haven't got much of a lead so we ought to be able to catch them,' declared Lance.

I was doubtful. I knew Lance was a brilliant driver, but at the rate he was now travelling I had an uncomfortable feeling that we shouldn't get far without colliding with something. I settled down in my seat and hoped for the best. A moment later we shot out of the drive on to the open road. Lance slowed down while he took some loose pieces of glass out of the fractured windscreen and then settled in his seat. 'Hold on,' he said grimly.

The Buick fairly leapt forward. Glancing at the sky I saw that we were in for a change of weather, for low storm-clouds were now racing across the moon.

'What about the police?' I queried, as we approached the tavern kept by the fellow Lothman.

'We might find Wayne here or at the hospital,' answered Lance. 'If we don't I shall have to leave a message for him. Whatever happens I'm going on after Smith.'

Peering through the broken windscreen I saw a car standing outside the inn. 'It looks as if he's here,' I said.

Lance jammed on the brakes and brought us to a skidding stop. He lowered the window and a policeman came over.

'Is Inspector Wayne here?' snapped Lance.

'No, sir. We left him at the hospital. He's following.'

'Did three Buicks go past here a minute or two ago?'

'Three big saloons went past, sir, but I couldn't swear to the make.'

'You've got the landlord safe?'

‘Yes, sir.’

Lance spoke clearly. ‘Listen, officer,’ he said. ‘You’ve got a telephone here. Ring up Inspector Wayne at the hospital and give him this message. Tell him that the birds have flown, but he’d better send somebody up to the Manor to take charge. There are two casualties there—we left them lying in the yard. Tell him I’m going to follow the Buicks; if he wants to speak to me he’d better stop me on the road outside the hospital. We shall go through Lyndenham.’

‘Very good, sir.’

We resumed the chase.

‘That policeman seemed to recognize you,’ I remarked.

‘Quite a lot of policemen know me,’ answered Lance mysteriously.

In five minutes we were in Lyndenham. A uniformed inspector of police was waiting outside the hospital, beside a police car. Julia was there, too, with the Bentley.

The inspector hurried up. ‘What’s happened?’ he demanded. Then he peered forward. ‘Who’s that you’ve got in there with you?’

‘My brother,’ Lance told him. ‘How did that fellow manage to get away?’ he went on angrily. ‘He’s given the alarm. They’ve all bolted in three Buicks. They’re making for Conway, North Wales, where they’ve got a boat waiting for them. I can’t stop to tell you more now. We’re going on to Conway.’

‘Do you know which road these birds are taking?’ asked the inspector.

‘No, but I know the best way to Conway, so if we don’t overtake them we may cut them off. Ring up your point-duty men along the road and warn them about the Buicks—they may be able to stop them.’

‘Okay. I’ll ’phone the Yard. They’ll send out a general warning. I’ll follow on. Are you going to stay in that car?’

‘No—we’ll take the Bentley. Warn your men on the road not to stop us.’

‘Right! I’ve half a dozen men here. We’ll follow in the Buick as fast as we can.’

We hurried over to the Bentley. ‘Did you get the tanks filled, Julia?’ Lance asked curtly.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. There’s no time to talk now. Get in the back seat if you want to be in at the death.’

In a few seconds we were on our way again, having lost, I reckoned, the best part of five minutes. Lance put his foot down on the accelerator.

Julia leaned over from the back. ‘Did you say in at the death?’ she yelled. ‘I didn’t know you meant us.’

‘Sit back and hold tight,’ shouted Lance.

After that there was no more talking.

I guessed which road Lance would take, for we had more than once driven over it. We cut due north to Oxford, then took the high road across the Cotswolds. It was probable that the three Buicks had taken the same route, but I could see that Lance was chiefly concerned with getting to Conway first. On a long piece of straight road just before Chipping Norton we overtook a police motor-cyclist going flat out. As we passed I yelled: ‘Have you seen anything of three Buicks?’

‘Yes, I’m after them,’ he shouted back. ‘They were too fast for me.’

‘How far are they ahead?’

‘I should say three or four miles.’

We shot forward again, Lance hitting the speedometer up to ninety. From the top of the big hill where the Cotswolds slope down into Broadway village we got our first glimpse of the fugitives, racing through the valley far away below and to the left of us—at least, we saw three sets of lights close behind each other travelling at high speed, and it was reasonable to suppose that they were on the cars we were after. They still had a good lead, and probably increased it during the next few minutes for we had to steady the pace down the hill, particularly for that last nasty bend.

In Broadway village a policeman lay in the road beside a smashed bicycle. We roared on.

‘The poor chap must have tried to stop them,’ muttered Lance.

At Kidderminster we spotted our men again, about a mile ahead, and then lost two minutes trying to pass a bad-tempered lorry-driver—one of the sort who appear to think that the road belongs to them. On the narrow old bridge at Bridgenorth we were stopped at a police barrier, which showed that Wayne had been busy. From the sergeant in charge we learned that the Buicks hadn’t passed that way.

‘They must have turned off somewhere,’ said Lance, going on again. ‘They must know the police are after them so they’re avoiding main roads. If they’ve taken to by-roads we may not see them again. The snag about that is we shan’t know if they’re in front or behind us.’

We roared on through the Vale of Llangollen, but once we were in Wales our speed became slower and slower on account of the winding road. That last part of the drive seemed interminable. I was deadly tired, and I believe I

dozed. We saw no further sign of the Buicks. It was after five o'clock when we finally ran across the suspension bridge into Conway; a police sergeant and a constable were on duty, but they hadn't seen anything of the cars, either.

Lance surveyed the wide estuary of the river thoughtfully.

'Confound it,' he breathed. 'This is awkward. We don't even know which side of the river they're on. If they're out on those marshes nearer the sea we shall have a job to find them.'

'I should say they're more likely to be there than on the Deganwy side, where there are more houses; they'd be certain to pick a desolate spot for a rendezvous,' I declared.

Lance had a word with the police sergeant, who had, of course, been warned about the Buicks, 'You'd better come with us, Sergeant,' said Lance. 'You know the country better than we do. Perhaps the constable had better come too.' He looked again at the bleak estuary. 'Do you know the water here?'

'I ought to,' returned the sergeant, with a Welsh accent that you could cut with a knife. 'I've paddled in it and sailed on it all my life.'

'Which is the deepest part?'

'Over this side; there's a channel a few miles farther along.'

'Is there anywhere deep enough for a submarine to get in?'

'That's something I can't answer, sir. I don't know how much water a submarine takes. But I can show you where the deepest water is.'

'All right, you guide me,' ordered Lance.

We went on again, slowly now, and under the sergeant's instructions found ourselves cruising down a narrow track with flat salt marshes on either side.

'You know whom we're after, Sergeant?' queried Lance.

'I had a message from headquarters to get some men in three Buick cars, that's all I know, sir.'

'But just a minute, Lance,' I put in. 'How do we know they're here yet?'

'We don't.'

'Could they have got here before us?'

Lance pondered the question. 'I think so. Don't forget we lost a certain amount of time on the road. Again, they might have taken a short cut.'

'They didn't come into Conway over the bridge, sir,' put in the sergeant. 'I should have seen them.'

‘They could have crossed the river higher up and come in the back way. At any rate, unless they changed their plans at the last minute, which hardly seems likely since they had an appointment with a boat, they were coming to Conway. We’re at Conway now. We can’t sit still and do nothing in case they are already here, in which case they may slip away under our noses. We daren’t risk that. Our best plan, I think, is to scout round the most likely places. There can’t be many; after all, this isn’t a very big place. They’re bound to choose a lonely spot. This is about the loneliest, so it’s the best place to start. What are those old buildings over there on the right, Sergeant?’

‘Those are the old brickworks, sir.’

‘Are they still used?’

‘No, and haven’t been for many a year.’

I remarked that we were getting near the sea. The sergeant agreed. He told us that an old canal came up from the sea to the brickworks, where there was the remains of a wharf. He explained this by saying that years before nearly all the local traffic had been sea-borne.

‘There’s a light over there,’ I broke in, staring towards the brickworks. ‘Who would be showing a light?’

‘I thought I saw one, too,’ declared Lance, increasing the pace.

‘It might be a will-o’-the-wisp,’ warned the sergeant. ‘We often see them here. Careful how you go, sir; if you get off the road you might not be able to get back on again. The marsh is soft; I’ve known high tides to come right over it.’

While this conversation had been taking place we had approached to within half a mile of the brickworks, which appeared as a dark, isolated blot on the desolate landscape. There was no longer any doubt about the light. It did not remain constant, but I distinctly saw one flash. The sergeant saw it too, and remarked on it, but Lance’s eyes were on the track, which was overgrown in places, making it difficult to see. It was dangerously narrow, too.

‘I say, Lance, shouldn’t you have put your lights out?’ I suggested.

‘I couldn’t find my way without them. In any case, it’s too late to do anything about it now. If Smith is here he’ll have seen us by this time.’

‘Talking of lights, what’s that one out to sea?’ cried the sergeant excitedly.

I raised my eyes and saw a pin-point of green light. It was impossible to say how far away it was; it might have been a small light close in, or a bright

one some distance out. To make things more difficult, the storm-clouds fulfilled their threat and a squall blotted out the view. The car crept on along the track, which I could just see was now built up a foot or more above the surrounding land.

‘Aren’t we getting rather close?’ I said quietly to Lance. ‘I mean, Smith may have brought that machine-gun with him.’ To be quite frank, I was thinking about Julia. Her self-assurance was all very well, but a machine-gun is a nasty weapon.

‘I think you’re right,’ agreed Lance. ‘Dash the rain! Have you got a revolver, Sergeant?’

‘No, sir; only my baton.’

‘Then you’d better keep under cover if there’s any shooting. If our men are here there will be, I can promise you that. They may have a machine-gun.’ Lance stopped the car and we got out.

‘We’ll go forward on foot,’ he decided. ‘Julia, you’ll stay here. If they shoot at the car, get out and take cover behind the banking of the road. If I shout to you for the car, bring it along. Now let’s find out if we’re on the right track.’

CHAPTER VII

RUN TO EARTH

THE four of us—that is, Lance, myself, and the two police officers—began to walk forward, but we had only gone a little way when the squall passed as quickly as it had begun. Fifty yards away, the nearest building—a blank wall, as far as I could make out—was facing us. I made a dash for it, but before I had taken a dozen paces a gun streamed flame and a bullet whistled past my head. The shot was followed by a shout. I left the track and, finding the turf fairly firm under my feet, ran on, crouching and swerving. I reached the wall and flattened myself against it. The others joined me.

‘Well, that settles any doubt as to whether they’re here or not,’ remarked Lance tersely. ‘Let’s try this way.’ Taking the lead, he ran to the end of the wall, or rather a place where it had either fallen down or been broken off short. Inside was a big yard strewn with broken bricks, the remains of an old lorry or two, and goodness knows what other junk. I paid little heed to this, for my attention was concentrated on three big saloon cars standing close together at the far side of the yard.

‘Where’s that canal you spoke about, Sergeant?’ asked Lance.

‘I can’t say exactly, sir. It’s many a year since I was here.’

‘Hm,’ grunted Lance. ‘I don’t think much of this,’ he went on. ‘It will need more than four men to clean up a place this size. Sergeant, I think you’d better send your man back to the car. Tell him to ask the young lady to drive him back to Conway. He’ll have to wait there until Inspector Wayne arrives. He can explain to him how we’re fixed and then bring him here.’

The constable took the order direct, without waiting for the sergeant’s instructions.

‘Right you are, sir,’ he agreed willingly.

Poor fellow, they were the last words he ever spoke, for he hadn’t taken a dozen paces towards the car when a machine-gun chattered and he went down in a heap.

Lance muttered something under his breath. ‘Where the dickens are they shooting from?’ he grated, looking along the outside wall.

I looked, too, and saw the barrel of the gun sticking out; it was about twenty yards away and six or seven feet above the ground. I hadn't noticed a window as we came along, but obviously there was one. I made up my mind quickly. Keeping as close as possible to the wall, I ran along it, my feet making no sound on the tufty grass, and reached the gun just as it was being withdrawn. Taking a running jump at it, I grabbed the barrel with both hands, taking care to keep my body clear of the muzzle. The fellow inside hung on for a moment or two, but I had taken him by surprise and managed to twist the gun out of his grip. Jerking it up, I fairly splashed the hole above me with a burst of fire. Whoever was inside must have had a nasty moment. Satisfied with my effort I made a dash for the car.

'It sounds as if they're here,' remarked Julia calmly.

Panting, I told her to go back to the town and fetch Wayne, or wait for him. I didn't stay to see her go, but with my gun ready for action made a detour back to where Lance and the sergeant were waiting. Naturally, I felt that we ought to do something for the fallen police constable, but he was lying in a position that would have exposed me to the direct fire of the people in the building. Not that I could have done anything for him even if I had taken the risk.

'Good work, Rod,' complimented Lance quietly when I got back to them. 'For a beginner you're doing fine. Let's see if we can locate this canal. If Smith gets to the sea we shall lose him.'

'But a submarine couldn't get up a canal,' I disputed.

'Of course it couldn't, but a small boat might. The people who are waiting are certain to have a small craft suitable for such work.'

Considering what was going on a curious hush had fallen over the place. There wasn't a sound. I felt that we ought to be doing something, yet it was not easy to see what we could do without taking risks which, besides being merely foolish, could serve no useful purpose. Low squalls swept continually over the marshes, reducing visibility to a few yards; in the intervals there was sufficient light for us to get a rough idea of our surroundings.

The brickworks, roughly square in shape, covered perhaps an acre of ground, the whole place being surrounded by a brick wall in a bad state of repair; in places it had fallen down altogether. Inside, as I have already observed, there was an open space filled with junk. Round this were a lot of low, ramshackle buildings, most of them in the last stages of dilapidation. The sea was about a quarter of a mile away.

‘I’m worried about this canal,’ muttered Lance. ‘Let’s see if we can find it.’

Moving cautiously, we began to make our way along the outside wall. There were occasional windows in it, but it was impossible to see what was the other side of them. Eventually we reached the limit of the wall—that is to say, the corner where it turned at right angles. Turning, we followed it on its new course. There was still no sound from inside to indicate what Smith and Co. were doing.

Then, some distance away, I heard the chug-chug-chug of a motor-boat. ‘Can you hear that?’ I whispered tersely. ‘It sounds as if they’ve got away.’

Lance went on, faster now, and I breathed a prayer of thankfulness when the grey glow of dawn appeared in the east. Alas, it was only the false dawn, or else another storm came along, for presently it was darker than ever.

Suddenly Lance pulled up dead. ‘Hark,’ he whispered.

We stood still, nerves strained, listening. Footsteps, heavy footsteps splashing through mud, could be heard distinctly. They seemed to be some distance ahead of us and on the seaward side.

‘Come on,’ snapped Lance, and broke into a run.

I followed as fast as I could with the machine-gun on my shoulder, and as we ran the light grew stronger with the approach of the true dawn. In a few minutes it was possible to see a group of shadowy figures hurrying across the marsh in the direction of the sea. It wasn’t possible to count them, but there were at least a dozen men. They were about two hundred yards away, and had evidently slipped out of the brickworks in the darkness.

Then I saw something else, a mere blur at first, but as we drew nearer it was possible to make out another human form, in a curious crouching position. It appeared to be gliding through the grass. At first I couldn’t make out what the man was doing, or how he maintained such an even rate of progress. Then, suddenly, I understood. He was standing, or kneeling, in a boat, and the boat was being paddled up a narrow waterway—presumably the canal of which the police sergeant had spoken.

The situation was now clear. The fugitives were making for the boat, which had been sent in from another vessel to pick them up. We raced after them, blundering through mire sometimes up to the knees. What the three of us were going to do against such a crowd was not easy to see; however, I left that to Lance.

Then our quarry saw us—or one of them did. I saw the white face of the rearmost man as he looked back. He shouted something and they all looked round. Two or three shots were fired and I heard the bullets sing past.

‘Is there any ammunition left in that gun, Rod?’ asked Lance crisply.

‘Yes; but I don’t know how much,’ I told him.

‘Then let’s give ’em a burst to rattle them.’ Lance took the gun and, taking aim, let drive.

The weapon was only a sub-machine-gun, without a stand, and for that reason not much use for long-range work. In any case it only fired about a dozen rounds when it stopped—no doubt because the ammunition ran out. Lance dropped it, and drawing his automatic, ran on.

‘Open out and keep low,’ he ordered.

As we advanced, I got the Mauser ready for action. I was afraid we were going to be too late, for the fugitives had nearly reached the boat; and we were, in fact, still a good hundred yards away when they reached it and swarmed aboard. An engine was started up, and the boat made off towards the sea at a pace much faster than we could run in the boggy ground.

‘We’ve lost them!’ I cried, sick with disappointment.

‘Not yet! Look!’ yelled the sergeant, in a state of wild excitement.

Up to that moment my attention had been riveted on the spies; I hadn’t even looked at the sea, which, in the fast-increasing light, could now be seen clearly. Lifting my eyes, the first thing I saw was the conning tower of a submarine in the act of submerging. And the reason for its swift departure was also apparent, for racing towards the spot were three motor-boats of the submarine-chaser class. They could only just be seen through the spray of their feathering bow waves. Swinging round in a glorious curve, the boats seemed to bend as they roared over the place where the submarine had disappeared. In the distance I could see the sinister outline of a destroyer, also racing towards the spot.

Boom . . . boom . . . boom.

Columns of smoke and water leapt high into the air as depth charges exploded. It was a terrifying yet wonderful sight, and my mouth went dry with excitement as the three chasers roared round and round, laying their dreadful eggs. The motor-boat packed with refugees had turned down the coast, between the devil and the deep sea.

‘It looks as if the Navy’s here!’ cried Lance, losing for once his serene imperturbability. ‘Wayne has evidently been busy. Scotland Yard must have got into touch with the Admiralty.’

It was clear that the fugitives were trapped.

There came a shout behind us, and looking over my shoulder I saw another amazing sight. Motor-cyclist police and cars packed with troops

were coming across the marsh like an advancing army. I spotted our Bentley in the rear. Wayne, in uniform, with a number of men in civilian clothes, were in front.

‘Great Scott!’ I cried.

‘Look at Julia,’ remarked Lance. ‘She’s determined to be in at the death, even if she bogs my car in the attempt.’

Inspector Wayne ran up, puffing—but beaming. ‘We’ve got ’em,’ he announced with intense satisfaction.

This was obviously true, for the three naval motor-boats were now converging on the small craft with its load of enemy agents.

‘Yes,’ said Lance; ‘I think it’s all over bar the shouting. But, by Jingo! it was touch and go.’

For a little while we stood still, watching, while the Navy collected the runaways. Then I discovered that I felt cold, tired, and very dirty.

Julia ran up, also looking dirty, but very happy. ‘Was I in time?’ she cried.

‘You certainly were,’ answered Lance. ‘And you’re just in time for breakfast. How does a plate of ham-and-eggs sound to you? How do you feel about it, Rod?’

‘That sounds a very good idea to me,’ I declared.

Lance turned to Inspector Wayne. ‘Did you get everything cleared up at the Manor?’ he asked.

‘I think so. I haven’t got the details yet, of course, but I’ve spoken to headquarters on the telephone and they tell me they’re still exploring the place. It seems to have been a general headquarters for every perishing spy in the country, to say nothing of being a meeting-place for escaped prisoners, and German pilots who had to bale out. They had the place fitted up properly, too; there’s even directional wireless which they must have used for bringing the gliders in in bad weather. I’ll let you have the details later. Incidentally, that bolshie landlord has lost his nerve now he finds that he’s likely to face a firing-party as a spy instead of being put into an internment camp as a fifth-columnist. He’s telling headquarters all he knows about Smith in the hope of saving his life.’

While we had been talking we had walked back to the car.

‘Do you feel like joining us in a bite of breakfast at the Castle Hotel, Wayne?’ asked Lance.

‘I could certainly do with a snack,’ declared Wayne. ‘I can’t stay long though. I shall be wanted in London—and so will you. There hasn’t been

such a clean-up since the war started.’

Twenty minutes later, with most of the grime washed off us, we were comfortably settled in the dining-room of the Castle Hotel, which overlooked the scene of the recent battle. All that remained to show that it had happened was the destroyer, sitting over an ominous oily patch of water.

‘It looks as if the enemy have lost another U-boat,’ remarked Lance.

‘Taking it all round, we haven’t done so badly, for amateurs,’ observed Julia, with justifiable satisfaction.

‘What do you mean—amateurs?’ demanded Wayne.

‘Well—us. If it hadn’t been for us you wouldn’t have known anything about this affair, would you, and you can hardly call us professionals.’

Wayne looked at Lance, rubbing his jaw in thoughtful perplexity. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he told Julia, and finished his coffee at a gulp. ‘I shall have to be getting along. See you later.’

Julia gazed after him, a puzzled frown furrowing her forehead. Then she looked at Lance. ‘What did he mean?’ she asked curiously.

Lance smiled. ‘I’m afraid he didn’t understand what you meant when you referred to me as an amateur. You see, I’m not exactly a novice at this business.’

Julia stared. ‘You mean you *are* a professional sleuth?’

Lance put his hand in his breast-pocket, took out a letter and slowly unfolded it. ‘Does this explain anything to you?’

Julia picked up the paper, stared at it, started, and stared again. ‘But this—this is the report I sent to the Home Office,’ she gasped.

Lance nodded. The corners of his mouth twitched, as if he were enjoying a joke.

‘Quite right,’ he said. ‘I’m not supposed to tell you, but in fairness to the powers-that-be you ought to know that your report was handed to me with a request to investigate your suspicions. The Minister of Home Security doesn’t ignore letters like yours. As a matter of fact, I was on my way down to have a preliminary look round when you introduced yourself in somewhat unconventional circumstances. It wasn’t just an accident that I was there.’

Julia sank back in her chair. ‘Well I’m dashed,’ she breathed.

As for me, I was probably as much astonished by this piece of information as she was. I was still struggling to find words, for I hardly knew whether to be indignant or flattered, when Julia remarked, looking from one to the other of us: ‘So after all I said, you *were* professional spycatchers.’

‘Not me,’ I declared. ‘I knew no more about this than you did. I was merely invited to the New Forest for a quiet week-end.’ I turned to Lance. ‘You might at least have given me a hint that you were out on a real job of work,’ I said reproachfully.

He clapped me affectionately on the shoulder. ‘Never mind, old boy. Naturally, I didn’t know things were going to turn out as they did. My suggestion that we had a quiet week-end in the Forest was genuine. If I’d had the slightest suspicion that we were likely to find ourselves at loggerheads with a gang of dangerous spies you may be quite sure that I shouldn’t have taken you.’

‘Why not?’ I demanded coldly.

‘Well, you might have been shot.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ I protested. ‘A lot of people in this war are running the risk of being shot. Why should I be an exception?’

‘Your turn will come,’ said Lance consolingly.

‘I should say it’s come already,’ put in Julia. ‘You would have had your hands full without Rod.’

‘Yes, that’s true,’ admitted Lance. ‘When we started out Rod didn’t even know what my work was. He played up like an old hand, and I should be the last to deny it. But this won’t do—I must be getting back to London. If you like, Julia, you can drive us. I want to have a talk to Rod.’

In a few minutes we were on our way. My first adventure was over.

PART TWO

CHAPTER VIII
SECRET MISSION

I HAVE told you the story of the New Forest spies because that is how my association with the Counter-Espionage Service, through Lance, began. As I expected, after we had got back to London, he fondly supposed that I should return to my ordinary work, but I told him that after these exciting events the very idea was unreasonable. The thrill of the dangerous work was now in my blood, and the only service for me was the Secret Service.

I needn't go into all the arguments that followed, arguments which I backed up by pointing out that in the matter of qualifications I was as eligible for the service as Lance, even if I were not as proficient. My age, it seemed, was the great drawback. All the same, I could see that Lance was torn two ways. He believed that I could be of assistance to him, and would, I knew, be glad to have me with him; but he was afraid that I might lose my life, in which case he would hold himself responsible.

However, in the end he gave way to my pleading and said he would allow me to enter the Service provided that the authorities were willing, but only on the understanding that I would work directly under him so that he could keep an eye on me—at least for the time being. All this, I may say, took place in his rooms, for after a little dinner to celebrate the success of the New Forest affair Julia had gone back to her cottage.

A day or two later Lance came in with a smile on his face and told me that he had been able to fix things up. On account of my age I could not be taken into the Service officially, but if Lance cared to employ me in an unofficial capacity, at his own risk, his chief would raise no objection. There were, he told me, two reasons for this concession. The first was that my name had figured conspicuously in the report on the New Forest adventure, and the second, he had been asked to undertake a certain mission in which my services—in view of my special qualifications—might be usefully employed. What this mission was he did not yet know, but he had an appointment with his chief, General Carteret, V.C., for the following morning, to learn more about it, and I was to be present.

With what excitement and satisfaction I received this news I need not describe. At last I felt that I was doing something to help to win the war. But

I still had much to learn—as you will see.

The following morning, punctually at eleven o'clock, Lance and I reported to his chief at Scotland Yard. A constable showed us in. As soon as I clapped eyes on General Carteret I knew why he had been chosen for his job, for I have never seen any man who so impressed me with an air of quiet efficiency. As for his experience and personal bravery, a row of medal ribbons, headed by the V.C., told their own story. Tall, lean-faced, and keen-eyed, he was all that I had ever imagined a spy-catcher to be. At his elbow stood a pugnacious, bull-headed man in civilian clothes whom I now knew to be Inspector Wayne of the C.I.D. He was, so Lance had told me, the General's liaison officer with the police force. He nodded affably to us when we came in.

Lance introduced me to his chief, who shook hands gravely.

'Your brother tells me that you are keen on the Service,' he said in a deep, modulated voice.

'Yes, sir, I am,' I answered.

The General smiled. 'Well, you seem to have made a good start. I hope you will do as well in the mission I have in mind. Frankly, I don't altogether like the idea of one so young being mixed up in this sort of work, but, on the other hand, recruits with your qualifications—an intimate knowledge of Germany and the German language—are not easy to find.'

'I am prepared for the risks, sir,' I told him.

'So be it, my boy. There is this about it: in your brother you have an exceptional tutor. He has done some fine work for us. But we must get on, because I have a lot to say and little time to say it in. Sit down and make yourselves comfortable.'

As soon as we were settled the General looked at Lance inquiringly.

'Did you ever hear of a man named Colburg—Doctor Luther Colburg?' he asked.

'The name is vaguely familiar, but I can't recall exactly——'

'Never mind. I'll tell you,' broke in the General. 'Colburg is a Czech. He is an inventor—or perhaps it would be more correct to say an engineer, or a metallurgist. He is probably the cleverest man in the world in a certain line of research—too clever, perhaps, for his own safety at a time like this. He was in this country until recently, working for us. He saw the storm coming and got out of Czechoslovakia before it burst, much to Hitler's annoyance, because he can use fellows like Colburg. You see, Colburg is a specialist in armour-plating, which, as you may know, has been developed in recent years

at the Skoda Arms Works. Armour-plate is a vital factor in the mechanized warfare on which Hitler has banked his chances of winning the war.

‘Some time ago Colburg concluded years of experimental work by producing a bullet-proof armour-plating light enough to be used on aircraft, and the importance of such a factor can hardly be exaggerated. Unfortunately the news leaked out, with the result that a paragraph appeared in a certain newspaper. German agents, who had long been trying to get him back to Germany, or Czechoslovakia, which at the moment is the same thing, redoubled their efforts. We, on the other hand, surrounded the Doctor with plain-clothes men—a cordon so tight that we flattered ourselves a fly couldn’t get through it. We were wrong. A week ago Colburg went to the corner of the street in which he lived to buy a newspaper. Two of our men followed him, but they weren’t sharp enough. A car whirled up. Colburg was grabbed, flung into it, and carried away. We closed every road, and every possible exit from the country, to prevent him from being taken out of it. Yet somehow the Nazi agents managed to get him into Germany. We have agents, too, and they report that Colburg is now in Germany. We needn’t wonder why he’s been taken there. The enemy is going to make him produce the armour-plate formula, and they won’t be particular how they do it as long as they get it. I need hardly tell you that the matter is serious—very serious indeed. We’ve got to get Colburg back.’

‘Do we know the secret formula?’ put in Lance.

The General shook his head. ‘No. That’s the tragedy of it. Colburg was a queer fellow. He refused to put anything on paper for fear it was stolen. He carries the formula in his head. He was about to leave his home for one of our new workshops, where he was going to supervise the manufacture of the armour-plate, when he was seized. Well, that’s the position. All we know for certain is that Colburg has the secret locked up in his head, and that he is in Germany.’

‘The Huns must have picked him up in a night-flying plane.’

‘That, no doubt, is how he was transported to Germany.’

‘And you want us to fetch him back?’ Lance made the suggestion quite calmly, as though he were talking of fetching a parcel from a cloakroom.

The General nodded. ‘That’s it. Feel like tackling it?’

‘Of course, sir. Have you any idea where Colburg is at this moment?’

‘Yes. The information has just come through—that’s why I got into touch with you right away. I’ll give you all the help in my power. Now you know what the job is I’ll leave you to decide whether you take your brother or not. It strikes me as being a sticky mission for a beginner.’

Lance looked at me thoughtfully. ‘Yes,’ he said seriously; ‘I’ll have a word with him about it.’

‘Don’t bother,’ I said. ‘I’m going with you.’

Lance shrugged his shoulders.

The General smiled as he stood up. ‘Well, that seems to be that. I can’t say anything more at the moment, but I’ll let you know as soon as we get confirmation of our latest reports. I’m expecting a carrier-pigeon in from Germany any time now. You make your plans. You had better come to my house at nine o’clock to-night; I’ll give you the latest information then, and one or two tips that may be useful.’

‘Very good, sir.’

The General shook hands with us and we left him.

Four days later we were in Germany.

CHAPTER IX

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

THERE was no great difficulty about getting into Germany, but it was, I must admit, a nasty sensation to realize that we were in enemy territory, particularly when I remembered the inevitable penalty of failure.

We hadn't used an aircraft of our own to get into the country, the big drawback to this plan being the difficulty of disposing of the machine; otherwise, of course, it would have been pleasant to know that we had at hand a means of getting out of the country again in case of dire emergency. On mature consideration Lance decided that it would be better to drop by parachute from an R.A.F. machine. Our bomber pilot had crossed the frontier at a great height, cutting his engine when he reached it, so that we glided quietly to our objective, our presence unsuspected by the enemy anti-aircraft gunners below. At least, that is what we hoped.

My last sight of the machine was a vague black shadow over my head as I plunged earthward. What happened to it after that we had no means of knowing, although our arrangement with the pilot was that he should fly over a prearranged field at twelve midnight on Wednesdays and Sundays, landing only if he was given three red flashes on an electric torch which we carried for the purpose. This would be the signal that we had obtained possession of the person of Doctor Colburg, and that we were waiting to be picked up. We were aware that this business of picking up was likely to be more difficult, and more dangerous, than dropping in—but it would be time to think about that when we had got hold of Colburg.

We had a final interview with General Carteret before we started, but the information that he was able to give us was meagre enough—merely that Colburg had been seen with a police guard in the small town of Obendorf, on the Elbe, near which, naturally, we had made our unorthodox entry into the country. The Doctor's actual place of confinement was unknown, but the General had given us an address (which we had to memorize, for he would not let us write it down) where certain things, such as disguises and false papers, could be obtained if we got into difficulties. He didn't say so, but we took this to be the hiding-place of a British agent. For my part, I sincerely hoped that we should not have to go near it. For the rest, we had taken with

us such small kit as we thought we should be likely to require. We were dressed in German-made, good-class clothes, which we thought would be the least likely to attract attention. In our pockets we carried forged identification cards, and, of course, automatic pistols.

So it came about that, a little after nine o'clock on the fourth day, Lance and I were standing on the Hamburg-Obendorf road, near a cross-roads, having disposed of our parachutes by the simple expedient of filling them with stones and dropping them into the river. Beyond the fact that we were going to Obendorf, which was about three miles distant, we had no immediate plan, for it was difficult to see how one could be made until we had located Colburg and surveyed the land. What we did after we got to Obendorf would depend on how we found things there. I didn't say so to Lance, but now that we were actually in Germany the task before us seemed a lot more difficult than it did in London.

For a little while we stood on the road, listening and peering into the darkness. All was silent except for the usual distant sounds of civilization—the whistle of a railway engine, the rumble of a motor vehicle, and so on. Far to the north, flickering white fingers of searchlights quartered the sky, telling us that, as at home, anti-aircraft operators were vigilant at their posts.

'Well, let's get along,' said Lance quietly, and we were about to move off in the direction of Obendorf when he caught me by the arm. 'Just a minute,' he muttered. 'What's this coming? It sounds like a car. We'd better let it go past.'

We crouched back in the deep shade of the hedge as twin sparks of light, the screened headlights of a car, came slowly down the road from the direction of our objective. It would not be strictly correct to say that there was something sinister in the quiet way the car approached; maybe my nerves were on edge; I don't know; I only know that there was something significant, almost furtive, about the car that warned me of danger, so that I pressed myself farther back into the hedge. The car came slowly to a halt at the junction of the cross-roads—about a dozen yards away.

'We can't do anything in this darkness,' said a gruff voice—speaking, of course, in German.

'We shall have to do what we can,' said another curtly.

'The operator of the new detector swears he heard a machine coming this way,' said another voice. 'According to his calculations it got to somewhere about here, then turned round and went back. Why did it come here? It wouldn't drop bombs or leaflets over a place like this. It could only have come to drop more spies. The English are dropping spies everywhere.'

‘No doubt we’re doing the same thing ourselves,’ remarked the first speaker.

‘Of course we are, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to let the Englishers do it.’

‘What shall we do, then? There isn’t much sense in wandering about in this darkness. We couldn’t find an elephant, much less a spy.’

‘You’re right there. We’ll have a good look round in the morning. In the meanwhile we may as well go back to Obendorf, checking up on any strangers we overtake on the road. The chief seems to think—I don’t know why—that any spies arriving are bound to make for Obendorf. Let’s go back.’

I held my breath as there was a brief silence before the driver started his engine and the car moved on. I waited for it to get out of sight before I spoke.

‘Who were they?’ I breathed.

‘Gestapo, probably,’ replied Lance. ‘They were special agents of some sort, at any rate. It looks as if we’ve got to be even more careful than usual. They’re expecting spies, and they suspect some came down to-night. You heard what that fellow said? Their sound detector must be pretty powerful to pick up the hum of a machine gliding without its engine, at the height at which we came over. They don’t know definitely that we’re here, but they’re suspicious, so we shall have to watch every step we take. You didn’t fail to note the significance of that fellow’s last remark—I mean, about his chief expecting spies to make for Obendorf? The gentleman who spoke evidently doesn’t know what his chief knows—what we know. It looks as if Colburg is still at Obendorf.’

‘I wonder if they’ve got sentries posted along this road? If they have they’ll certainly see us, or hear us, before we spot them. We should look a pair of fools if we were nabbed before we’d been in the country an hour.’

‘We should look worse than fools,’ returned Lance grimly. ‘That’s a chance we’ve got to take. On a job like this you have to take chances all the time. But come on, it’s no use standing here. Let’s get to Obendorf. And by the way, from now on talk German; for one thing it will give us a chance to polish up our accent, and for another, it won’t matter if we’re overheard. English isn’t a popular language in Germany at the moment.’

I found the walk down the Obendorf road a disconcerting experience, for I was not yet accustomed to this sort of thing. Lance made light of it, however. He just strolled on, while I, aware of the vigilance of our enemies, stared at every shadow until my eyes ached. It is surprising how any odd

shape, a bush, or even a milestone, can look like a human form in starlight. Several times we took cover in the ditch while a car went past, for we knew that as private motoring had been curtailed in Germany, due to petrol control, the chances were that such vehicles contained either police or military.

We had reached the outskirts of the town—which was of course blacked-out as an air-raid precaution—when a figure, which I saw from its silhouette was that of a policeman, detached itself from a doorway, and demanded, with all the arrogance of Nazi officialdom, our identification cards.

Lance now revealed the iron nerve that had made him so successful at his job. Knowing my own limitations I should have said that no one with imagination could have faced the immediate situation without a qualm. But Lance didn't turn a hair. His manner was casual, inconsequential. He might have been asking a London policeman for the time. Thinking about it afterwards I realized that it must have been this particular trait that had so often brought him unscathed through situations where a lesser man might betray himself by nervousness, or by overplaying the part, which is just as easy—and just as fatal. He handed over the forged identification card which General Carteret had given him. Taking the cue I did the same, and the policeman took the cards—cards that identified us as respectable commercial travellers of Hamburg. I could feel my heart pounding under my ribs as the policeman examined them in the light of a small electric torch.

'Where have you been?' he asked curtly, as he handed the cards back to us.

'Just for a stroll, before turning in,' answered Lance evenly.

The light flashed on our faces in turn. 'Where are you going now?'

'Back to our hotel in Obendorf.'

'All right.'

We walked on—I, with my legs feeling curiously weak. Not until we had turned a corner did I speak.

'I should say that the sooner we find somewhere to park ourselves the better,' I remarked.

'You're right,' agreed Lance. 'The police here are certainly alert. They've probably had special instructions on account of the gentleman we are looking for. The Gestapo evidently expects that an attempt will be made to rescue him—all of which goes to show that he can't be far away.'

'Are we going to take rooms in an hotel?'

'I'm just wondering about that.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that, if things are as hot as they seem to be, an hotel may be a dangerous place. The police probably have to be notified of every new arrival, in which case two strangers turning up might excite their curiosity and result in an invitation to the local police station for examination.’

‘Good heavens!’ I muttered, aghast. ‘Where can we go if we don’t go to an hotel? We can’t be on our feet all the time, and we can’t sleep out in the open without looking like a couple of tramps.’

By this time we were in what appeared to be the main street. The sound of many voices singing came from behind a darkened doorway.

‘This looks like a *Bierhaus*. Let’s go in and sit down for a few minutes while we think the matter over,’ suggested Lance. ‘In any case, we should be safer in a crowd than prowling about by ourselves.’

I agreed, and we went in.

After the darkness outside the light was dazzling, and for a few seconds I stood blinking, taking in the scene before me—not that it was any different from the ordinary German beer-house. Arranged lengthways down a large room with a board floor were long tables at which sat men and women, and sometimes whole families, drinking beer, or ginger-beer, and community-singing to the accompaniment of a piano and violin. They were waited on by an elderly, buxom woman, who perspired copiously as she moved about carrying an incredible number of glasses and tankards. There were several soldiers and sailors present. We sat down at one of the tables, and Lance at once joined in the singing.

‘Don’t whisper if you speak,’ he told me in a quick aside. ‘Be natural. There are eyes in Germany always on the watch for whisperers.’

The woman brought us drinks. Lance had a glass of beer and I had ginger-beer. Between sips and singing, we had a few words of conversation.

‘We’re safer here than anywhere,’ said Lance. ‘Presently I’ll make some discreet inquiries about lodgings.’

At this point further discussion was curtailed by the arrival of a man who came in and sat at our table, almost at Lance’s elbow. He was a little fellow, a typical middle-class German, but of the commercial, not the military, type. He looked a respectable little chap, and he greeted us cheerfully. Nevertheless, I was not at all pleased when, having called for beer, he entered into conversation with us. Nor did I like the personal tone of his approach.

‘So! You’re strangers here, aren’t you?’ he began.

As it would have been dangerous to deny this, Lance admitted that we were.

‘I suppose you’re on Government work? Most people are on Government work now,’ was the next rather disconcerting observation from our new acquaintance.

‘No, nothing like that,’ replied Lance. He glanced round with affected nervousness. ‘As a matter of fact,’ he continued in an undertone, ‘you look like a family man yourself, so I don’t mind telling you the truth. I’m trying to find my brother. This,’ he added, indicating me, ‘is a friend who has come to help me. The last I heard of my brother he was in Obendorf, working as a barman.’

‘What was his name?’

‘Schaffer.’ Lance gave the name by which the papers he carried identified him.

Our companion stroked his jaw thoughtfully. ‘There are plenty of Schaffers in Obendorf, but I don’t know one who is a barman. He may have been taken for Government work. So many people have left here lately for that.’ Our German friend seemed to have Government work on the brain.

‘Yes, that’s why I was trying to get in touch with him,’ resumed Lance. ‘But it’s difficult to get in touch with anybody these days, now that it’s so hard to get a travel permit.’

‘Wouldn’t they let you have one?’

Lance glanced around again cautiously, and I guessed what he was leading up to. Knowing that the sympathies of people of all classes go with those nearest to their own rank, he was going to take a chance.

‘No,’ he whispered; ‘but blood is thicker than water, and I had to take the risk of travelling without one.’

Our little German looked grave. ‘You’ve come to a bad place,’ he warned us. ‘The town is suddenly full of police, storm-troopers, Gestapo, and all sorts of officials. They’ve taken over the college. I know that because my son has to go there every day. He’s only sixteen, but he’s been conscripted by the police for special guard duties.’

Lance raised his eyebrows. ‘Guard duties? Where?’

‘At the college.’

‘But why guard the college?’

The German shrugged his shoulders. ‘Nobody knows. Nobody knows anything these days—and it doesn’t do to ask questions.’ He glanced round

nervously, as if alarmed at his temerity in making such a reasonable statement.

Lance caught my eye and then turned back to the German. 'I'm glad you told me this,' he said gratefully. 'We look like getting into trouble if we go to an hotel.'

'Where are you staying?'

'We haven't fixed up anywhere yet.'

The German made a grimace, shaking his head seriously. 'The game will be up if you try to get in anywhere in Obendorf without a travel permit. They'll send straight for the police.'

Lance looked worried, and this, I knew, was not entirely feigned. 'I suppose you don't know anywhere where we could stay for a couple of nights?' he said quietly.

The German was silent for a moment. 'Well, before the war started Mamma used to take lodgers sometimes; now things are so bad we could do with a little extra money. Perhaps we could find room for you.'

'If any questions were asked you could say we were old friends of yours, and you didn't know we hadn't got travel permits. We would take the blame,' prompted Lance.

'Yes, perhaps it could be done,' murmured our new friend. 'The danger would be my son. He comes sometimes to see us, although there are times when we don't see him for days. Like all the young people he is very loyal to the new régime. He's proud of his uniform, and although I am his father, if he thought I was breaking regulations he wouldn't hesitate to report me.' The man said the words with a sadness which I could well understand; it was obvious that he had no love for a system which encouraged children to betray their parents.

'Have another drink?' suggested Lance, beckoning to the woman. He raised his glass when it came. 'Well, here's to happiness,' he said, sighing, as if he yearned for the old days.

Our new acquaintance shook his head. 'The trouble is, one never knows when the Gestapo is going to pounce and carry us off to a concentration camp.' Even as he spoke he seemed to stiffen. He put his glass down with a hand that trembled. 'It would be better, I think, if we did not talk for a little while,' he breathed.

Glancing up without raising my head I saw that two heavily built men in plain clothes had just entered the bar, and were walking slowly along one of the tables, eyeing the customers with the irritating contempt that is

inseparable from German officialdom. A hush, pregnant with fear, had settled on the room.

‘Who are they?’ whispered Lance.

The German’s lips did no more than form the word ‘Gestapo.’

As the two men walked slowly past us our German rose to his feet and bowed. ‘Good evening, Herr Commandant,’ he said ingratiatingly.

The taller of the two secret police nodded curtly and glanced at us suspiciously, but apparently he thought that we were with the German, whom he evidently knew, and nothing was said. To my unspeakable relief they passed on and went out of the door. There was a buzz of conversation as the tension relaxed, and it gave me an idea of the degree of servitude to which a country can be reduced.

‘Well, do you think you can fix us up?’ murmured Lance, resuming the conversation.

The German looked worried. It was obvious that the visit of the Gestapo had upset him.

‘If it’s only a matter of money, we could pay you well,’ urged Lance. Naturally, we had supplied ourselves with plenty of cash.

Our new friend got up. ‘Come with me and we’ll see what Mamma has to say,’ he suggested. ‘We could certainly do with the money. By the way, my name’s Schmidt.’

We went out into the darkened street and turned up our collars, for rain was beginning to fall.

‘This way.’ Schmidt set off along the pavement, while we followed as close as the darkness would permit, and in this way we went, I suppose, about a quarter of a mile before we came to a stop in front of a shuttered shop. Schmidt let himself in with a key, and after inviting us to enter, lit a gas burner, which revealed that we were in a tailor’s workshop.

‘Mamma! Mamma!’ called the little man. ‘Come here, I want you.’

A door, presumably the door of the kitchen, opened, and Mamma appeared. I was relieved to see that she was a motherly-looking soul with a kindly face. Nevertheless, she raised her eyebrows when she saw us.

Her husband explained the position to her in a low voice.

She listened, nodding from time to time. ‘It will be the concentration camp for us all if we are caught,’ she announced, almost defiantly. ‘We shall all be there one day, anyhow, if things go on as they are,’ she added bitterly—from which I was able to judge her opinion of the new order of things.

‘But what about Fritz?’ she demanded suddenly. Obviously Fritz was the son of whom Schmidt had spoken.

‘We will ask the gentlemen to stay in their room if he comes home,’ answered Schmidt.

‘We shall be out all day,’ Lance pointed out. ‘We shall just come here to sleep, that’s all.’

This seemed to satisfy Frau Schmidt, for she fetched a candle and showed us to a double-bedded room. ‘There will be some supper in about half an hour,’ she informed us.

As the door closed behind her Lance turned to me with a smile. ‘So far so good,’ he observed. ‘Frankly, I was hoping that something of this sort would turn up, for, make no mistake, a lot of people in Germany are fed up with the present state of things. Moreover, most of them are as poor as church mice, so a little extra money is a bait not likely to be refused. You heard what Schmidt said about the college being taken over by the authorities, and guarded? That sounds interesting. Over supper I’m going to try to get further particulars.’

We arranged our small kit, washed, and went down to the kitchen, where we found the Schmidts waiting for us to join them in a simple meal of bread, cheese, and *Sauerkraut*.

‘I suppose they are using the college as a billet for troops?’ suggested Lance, in an offhand manner.

‘Oh no, nothing like that,’ answered Schmidt readily. ‘There has been a whisper that it has been taken over for experimental work. You see, the college happens to possess a very fine laboratory. It is one of the best in the country. Many doctors are trained here.’

Lance nodded. ‘So your son has had to suspend his studies in order to turn soldier, or policeman?’

‘Yes; he says there is something very secret going on, something that may help us to win the war very soon.’

‘That will be a good thing, anyway,’ murmured Lance.

As the words left his lips the front door was banged open. There was a quick shuffle of footsteps through the shop. The kitchen door was flung wide, and a youth in a shoddy uniform several sizes too large for him stood on the threshold. A swastika armlet decorated his sleeve. He came to a sudden stop when he saw us, and the smile vanished from his face. I guessed it was Fritz. He was a precocious-looking little rascal and I disliked him on sight, although I did my best to conceal this behind a smile which, I fear, held little humour.

‘Why, Fritz, what are you doing home at this hour?’ cried his mother, wiping her mouth with a napkin and advancing towards her son with the object, I fancy, of covering her husband’s confusion.

Fritz flung up his arm in the Nazi salute. ‘Heil Hitler!’ he barked enthusiastically, and the smile returned to his face at the alacrity with which Lance followed suit. We all echoed the salutation and sat down again.

Fortunately, the brief respite had enabled Papa Schmidt to recover his composure. ‘Here are some old friends of mine, from Hamburg, called to see me,’ he said boisterously.

‘Hamburg? I didn’t know you’d been to Hamburg,’ replied the youth suspiciously.

‘When I was a young man—before you were born,’ explained the father. ‘They work for the Government,’ he added. That eased the situation considerably. Apparently anybody who worked for the Government was a sort of tin god to the Nazi youth.

The boy pulled up a chair and helped himself with a nice disregard for table manners.

‘Are you going to sleep at home to-night?’ inquired his mother.

The answer to this question shook me more than a little. ‘Yes,’ declared Fritz. ‘I shall be starting early in the morning though, on a spy hunt. We’ve had word that there are spies about, so to-morrow we’re going to sweep the whole district. I hope it will be my luck to spot them first; it would suit me well to put a bullet through an Englishman,’ rasped the bloodthirsty little beast.

‘Put two through him—one for me,’ smiled Lance.

‘They’ve let me come home to say that I shan’t be in to dinner to-morrow, so I shall want my food card,’ announced Fritz, scraping what remained in the dishes on to his plate.

‘Yes, dear,’ said Mamma Schmidt dotingly.

We finished a rather difficult meal to an enthusiastic account of Hitler and his immediate associates. It was a relief when eleven o’clock came and gave us an excuse to retire.

CHAPTER X
LANCE GETS BUSY

I WAS awakened the next morning by the boy thumping about in his room, which apparently was next to ours. Lance was up like a shot.

‘Get a move on,’ he told me crisply.

‘What’s the idea?’ I asked, jumping out of bed.

‘We’re going to walk with Fritz as far as the college. I want to have a look at the building, and it will be safer to go with him than go by ourselves.’

Presently we met Fritz downstairs, and he made no objection to the proposition. Indeed, he seemed glad to have someone to talk to, someone to whom he could pour out an inexhaustible stream of praise for the men who were going to put Germany on top of the world.

‘Who is your chief here?’ inquired Lance, playing up to the boy’s enthusiasm.

‘At the college? Commandant Wolff. He shot twelve Englishmen in the last war. You’d better keep out of his way to-day though, because he’s going to be busy. He’s expecting a visit from some officials of Bureau 17, in Berlin.’

‘Who’s coming?’ prompted Lance gently.

‘I don’t know. All I know is, it’s somebody important.’

My heart sank when I saw the college, a stone building of considerable size, for it literally swarmed with uniformed guards of one sort or another; it seemed to me that any attempt to get into the place was doomed to failure from the start. Near the main entrance we stood for a moment wishing the boy good luck in his spy hunt, and I noticed that Lance’s eyes were busy. Several youths of Fritz’s own age were converging on the spot, but they took no notice of us; nor did the guards, evidently presuming that we were all friends. Fritz at length made off, promising to shoot a couple of spies for us, and we strolled away.

‘Where do we go next?’ I asked.

‘To the railway station,’ returned Lance surprisingly.

‘Why the railway station?’

‘We’re going to Hamburg.’

‘What the dickens for?’

‘To put a telephone call through to Commandant Wolff.’

Just outside the station, under the pretence of reading a newspaper which he had bought, Lance spoke to me earnestly.

‘Rod, old boy,’ he said, ‘there is only one way of getting into the college, and that’s by bluff. There can be no question of trying to break in. We’ve got to march up to the front door in broad daylight, or we may as well not try. That boy Fritz has given us a chance—as good a chance as we shall ever get. Wolff, the Commandant, is expecting a visitor from Berlin, but apparently the time of his arrival is uncertain. I propose to be that visitor. If I know anything about German mentality, the fact that we are who we are—or who we are supposed to be—will reduce Wolff to such a state of nervousness that there will be no room in his head for suspicion; that is, if we play the game boldly enough. It’s only half an hour by train to Hamburg; I’m going there for the sole purpose of putting a telephone call through to Wolff, to tell him to make preparations for us. Actually, you’ll do the telephoning, speaking for me, Hauptmann Schaffer, of Bureau 17.’

‘All right,’ I agreed. Desperate though the enterprise sounded, I shared Lance’s view that it was better to risk all on one chance than fritter away our time, each moment in deadly peril, waiting for an opportunity which might never arise. The big risk, of course, lay in our arrival coinciding with the visit of the real official from Bureau 17.

As Lance bought our tickets I noticed a man in plain clothes standing by the barrier, watching us closely. There was a look about him that I did not like, and I told Lance so. If ever I saw a German policeman he was one.

Had I not known who he was, during the next two or three minutes Lance would have deceived me. In the manner of a true Prussian he treated me as if I were his servant, cursing me and generally making me run round. Taking the cue, I accepted all this with humility.

Lance then turned to the barrier. His eyes fell on the man still standing there, and he advanced towards him with a hostile glint in his eye.

‘Are you on duty here?’ he demanded arrogantly.

The man, assuming not unnaturally that Lance was a senior official of some sort, became positively servile. ‘Yes, sir,’ he said.

‘Then keep your eyes open,’ snarled Lance. ‘It is known that there are English spies about, and if they get through this barrier it will be the worse

for you.'

'Yes, sir,' answered the man, saluting.

Lance, with a curt nod, strode on, while I followed at his heels. From our places in the train we could see the man marching up and down, making a big show of efficiency.

At Hamburg we did not leave the station, but from a telephone booth rang up Commandant Wolff. I did the talking. There was no difficulty in getting through to the Commandant, whose manner became more than polite when I told him that I was assistant to Hauptmann Schaffer of Bureau 17. I said that we were then at Hamburg, but that we were coming on the next train to Obendorf, and requested him to have a car at the station to meet us. I also told him that we had an important matter to discuss, but in order not to attract too much attention we were coming in plain clothes.

To my relief, the man whom I was trying to fool seemed to fall for my bluff. What was even more important, he made no reference to any other message from Bureau 17, which suggested that no previous arrangement had been made. Our hope now was that no one would ring him up from the Bureau before we got to him, or that he would not find an excuse to ring up the Bureau from his end. That was a chance we had to take, Lance pointed out, as we got into the next train for Obendorf.

We had about a quarter of an hour to wait before the train started, and it is surprising how slowly time can go in such circumstances. For sheer nerve-strain I know of nothing more devastating than sitting in a stationary train in a hostile country, in a station stiff with enemy police and troops, knowing that everyone is your enemy. A criminal on the run may live in dread of the hand of the law falling on his shoulder, but this is nothing to what I endured during those ghastly fifteen minutes. However, at last the train steamed out, and I braced myself for the ordeal that lay before us.

As the train drew slowly in to Obendorf it took me all my time to maintain a calm front, for even before the train stopped I could see that the station was swarming with police and officials. That they were waiting for us I did not doubt. But in what capacity? Were we going to leave the station in state, in a manner becoming two senior officials from Berlin, or were we going to be dragged out, two spies whose fate was a foregone conclusion? The next two minutes would answer that question.

Actually, one was enough. Lance jumped down, and with me trailing along behind him, marched straight up to a stout, swastika-decorated officer in an immaculate uniform, who was watching the coaches with obvious anxiety. Lance understood German psychology too well to make a friendly

approach. His manner, as he raised his arm in the Nazi salute, was brusque to the point of rudeness. Commandant Wolff, his flabby face pale with worry, echoed the salute, 'Heil Hitler,' and opened his mouth to say something else, but Lance cut him short.

'Have you a car for me?' he demanded harshly.

'Ya, Hauptmann Schaffer.' The wretched fellow nearly fell over himself in his anxiety to do the right thing.

A minute later we were whizzing through the town. I sat beside a blackshirt driver in the front seat. Lance and the Commandant sat behind. Swinging round a corner who should I see but Schmidt, our little host of the night before, a shopping-bag in his hand. He was just going into a shop. Fortunately he did not look at the car. I hate to think what might have happened had he seen us. It was a nasty moment. Shortly afterwards we shot through the college gates escorted by two motor-cycle police, saluted by the guard that had evidently been on the watch for us.

'We will go straight to your office, Commandant,' said Lance shortly.

Commandant Wolff kicked a dog that got under his feet and led the way up a broad flight of stone stairs to the first floor. Two blackshirts followed us into the Commandant's office, but Lance dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

'I want to talk to you alone,' he told Wolff.

The Commandant pulled forward an armchair and Lance sank into it.

'How is the prisoner?' he inquired.

'The same,' replied Wolff nervously.

Lance fixed him with a hostile stare. 'So! He won't do what he is told, eh?'

'No. I reported that to the Bureau yesterday——'

'Yes, so I heard,' snapped Lance. 'I had better have a word with Colburg myself.'

My heart stood still. Lance had taken the frightful plunge without turning a hair. Had the prisoner been anyone but Colburg goodness knows what would have happened, but the Commandant's behaviour left this no longer in doubt. He rang a bell, and the alacrity with which it was answered showed that the blackshirts had remained on duty outside the door. He gave an order and the men marched away.

While we were waiting for the prisoner to be brought in Lance walked over to a second door and opened it. A flight of steps led downwards.

'Where do these steps lead to?' he asked.

‘That is my private way to the front courtyard,’ was the answer.

Lance nodded and closed the door. ‘I don’t want anybody listening,’ he said by way of explanation.

A moment later the main door was thrown open to admit a man whom I recognized, from photographs which General Carteret had shown us, as Doctor Colburg. He was a middle-aged man with a high, clever forehead, but he looked pale and ill—as well he might, after what he had been through. Two storm-troopers, with revolver holsters on their belts, brought him in.

Lance dismissed them. ‘See that we are not disturbed,’ he ordered icily, and locked the door behind them. This done, ignoring the Doctor, he walked back to where the Commandant was standing, watching these proceedings with an expression on his face that caused me some alarm. It was too much like suspicion.

Now it is perhaps unfortunate, but nevertheless a fact that cannot be denied, that ruthlessness is one of the vital elements of success in any desperate enterprise. It has always been so, and will, presumably, always be so. And there is no greater truth than the old saying, ‘He who hesitates is lost.’ The man who gets there is the one who, having started, allows nothing to stand in his way. That Lance had this quality to a considerable degree I knew. Indeed, had it not been so, it would have been futile to embark on a project such as the one on which we were engaged. He now revealed it, but it is significant that he had enough feeling to apologize for what he did. With a swift movement he tipped the Commandant’s peaked cap over his eyes, and brought the butt of his automatic down on his head with a thud that made me wince.

‘Sorry,’ he said softly, as he caught the limp body in his arms and allowed it to sink gently to the floor. ‘There was no other way,’ and he put the automatic back in his pocket. He then addressed the Doctor in crisp, decisive tones.

‘Doctor Colburg, we are British agents. We’re going to take you back to England. Please do exactly as you are told.’

The Doctor looked bewildered, but he nodded.

Lance ripped off the Commandant’s jacket and picked up his cap. He passed them to the Doctor. ‘Put those on,’ he said. ‘They’re too big for you, so you had better put them on over the clothes you are wearing.’

The Doctor obeyed like a man in a dream. The jacket was still a bit on the big side, but the cap fitted fairly well.

‘This way,’ said Lance, opening the small door. ‘Behave as naturally as you can, and above all try not to look nervous. We are going to walk down to where Wolff left his car and drive away.’ With that he set off down the stairs.

They ended in a corridor, at the end of which an outside door stood open. A storm-trooper was on duty, but Lance walked past him as if he did not exist—no easy matter as I soon discovered, for there is something sinister about the Nazi uniform. Another minute and we turned a corner that brought us to the front of the building, an extensive asphalted area, and the place where Wolff had left the car. It was no longer there. This must have been a terrible shock to Lance, but he didn’t turn a hair.

‘It looks as if we shall have to walk,’ he said calmly. ‘Don’t hurry—that would be fatal.’

He started walking diagonally across the asphalt square towards the front gate, where four storm-troopers under an N.C.O. were on duty.

Before he had taken half a dozen steps, however, a big saloon car drew up. Two men in uniform, their arms decorated with the inevitable swastika, got out, and leaving the driver standing by the open door, walked briskly towards the building.

Lance halted, and turned to face us. ‘I should say these are the gentlemen from Bureau 17,’ he said evenly.

CHAPTER XI
ON THE ROAD

I WENT cold all over with shock. My mouth went dry.

‘What are we going to do?’ I muttered.

Lance seemed quite unperturbed. ‘Having successfully borrowed their identities, now let us see if we can borrow their car,’ he said.

He waited for the two men to enter the building and then walked towards the front gate, outside which the vehicle was standing. We followed.

Again he ignored the guards, although they looked hard at him as he approached. Luckily, one of them must have recognized us for the officials who had so recently driven in with the Commandant, for he sprang to attention, and the others, following his lead, did the same. I only noticed this in a subconscious way, for my attention was unpleasantly attracted to something that was going on behind us—something that indicated all too clearly that either our flight, or the unconscious body of the Commandant, had been discovered. There was a sudden outcry and a volley of shouted orders. Even the chauffeur, still standing by his car, looked towards the building to see what the noise was about.

‘You are wanted inside,’ Lance told him sharply.

It has often been said, by those well qualified to judge, that in the matter of discipline the Nazi High Command rather overdoes it. That they do, in fact, demand such blind obedience that subordinates cannot, or dare not, use their heads is beyond doubt. In all circumstances their most dominating thought is that they must do exactly as they are told, do it at once, and without question. Thus it was with the chauffeur, who perceived in Lance’s curt manner a measure of authority. He didn’t hesitate. He saluted and went off across the courtyard at the double.

Thereafter Lance excelled himself. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the men on gate-duty all watching us curiously, and it was obvious that even if they were not actually suspicious of us they felt that there was something queer going on. Lance turned the handle of the rear door, and as it swung open he made a joking remark—I forget what it was. Then, quite calmly, as if he had the rest of the day at his disposal, he lit a cigarette. We

got into the car—that is, all except Lance. Unhurriedly he closed the door behind us. Then, without glancing at the guards, he strolled—there is no other word for it—round to the driver’s seat. He got in and started the engine. As he did so there came a yell from the building, a cry that told us that we had been spotted.

Actually, I have an idea that as far as the guards were concerned the shout defeated its object, for they all turned to look in the direction of the sound—not an unnatural thing to do—to see what the trouble was about. By the time they had grasped the situation the car was fifty yards away, accelerating swiftly. A bullet zipped through the top right-hand corner of the bodywork. Lance, the cigarette still between his lips, swerved slightly to spoil the marksman’s aim and sped on down the Hamburg road.

As we shot through the outskirts of the town into open country I shouted: ‘How far do you think you can get in this car without being stopped?’

He removed the cigarette with his left hand. ‘I should say we’re pretty safe for five minutes, and by that time we ought to be on the fringe of the Forest of Claushaus. I’m not afraid of anyone overtaking us, but no doubt the road will be barricaded at the next village.’

There was little traffic on the road, and we must have covered four miles in as many minutes. Already the fields on either side were breaking into clumps of silver birch and drooping firs that marked the beginning of the forest, and I got ready to abandon the car as soon as we were in the thickest part of it. I supposed that to be Lance’s intention.

A minute later a sandy lane forked to the left and, after a swift glance over his shoulder to make sure that the pursuers who would by this time be on our trail were not in sight, Lance steered the car into it. For a quarter of a mile we ran on, not so fast now, for the ground was soft and the lane twisted uphill, with fir-trees, gorse, and heather on either side.

Swinging round a corner, a cry of dismay broke from my lips when I saw that a hundred yards ahead the lane was entirely blocked by a stationary lorry, facing the same way that we were travelling. It was a ramshackle vehicle, filthy beyond description, evidently a farm wagon, for it was half full of cabbages. So much I had time to see before Lance turned the car off the road and bumped on for a little way between the trees. He brought the car to a standstill on the edge of a dell, the sides of which were thick with holly shrubs.

‘Get out,’ he said tersely.

He jumped out himself, but as he stepped clear he put the car into gear. It jerked forward and, after crashing a little way through the bushes, turned a somersault and rolled to the bottom. Before the noise of the crash had died away he was running back towards the road, cutting diagonally in the direction of the lorry.

‘We’re changing vehicles,’ he told us coolly, as we panted after him. ‘We’ve got to have that lorry. Bury yourselves under the greenstuff and keep covered up whatever happens.’

At the verge of the lane he halted for a moment to listen. Motor-cycles could be heard travelling at high speed along the main road, but nothing seemed to be coming our way, so he went on towards the lorry, now about twenty yards distant. It seemed to be abandoned, but as we drew nearer an old man with a bovine face, who had been cutting cabbages on a plot of cultivated ground, stood up from behind the heap on which he had been working.

Lance addressed him harshly. ‘Is this your lorry?’

The old man, who appeared to be not a little startled at our abrupt arrival, admitted that it was.

‘We are Gestapo,’ Lance told him sternly. ‘We have just caught a spy, and as we are in a hurry we shall have to take your lorry. Where do you live?’

The old man pointed to a whitewashed cottage that nestled among the trees at the far end of the clearing.

‘Very well,’ returned Lance. ‘Go home, and say nothing of what you have seen or it will be the worse for you. Hurry!’

The poor old chap didn’t stop to argue. The word Gestapo was enough to drive all the colour out of his face. He dropped his bill-hook and bolted.

Lance turned to us. ‘Get in,’ he ordered, his eyes gleaming, and I had a feeling that he was thoroughly enjoying himself. ‘Rod, you cover the Doctor with cabbages, and then cover yourself. For heaven’s sake keep under cover. I’m afraid it won’t be pleasant, but you’ll have to bear it.’

What Doctor Colburg thought of all this goodness only knows; his brain must have been in a whirl at the speed of events, but taking it all round he kept pace with the situation pretty well. So far he hadn’t spoken a word—nor did he now, for that matter. Understanding exactly what was required, he scrambled over the tail-board of the battered vehicle and I smothered him with cabbages. By the time he was well and truly buried Lance was in the driving seat. I hardly knew him. He had taken off his coat and hat, which presumably were on the floor; he had tousled his hair and smeared mud on

his face, to say nothing of his shirt, now undone at the neck. I don't know how he got himself into such a mess in such a short space of time; but if, as he obviously intended, he wanted to make himself look like a farm-hand, he had succeeded. As I lay down and began to burrow my way into the cabbages the lorry jerked forward with a grinding clash of gears that set my teeth on edge.

Faintly to my ears, as I covered my face with the spreading leaves of what must have been the father of all cabbages, came a strange sound. It was Lance singing. What he sang about I don't know; nor did I care, for the jolting of the crazy vehicle, which I felt must fall to pieces at any moment, gave me plenty to think about. Fortunately there was a certain amount of spring in the cabbages underneath us, but even so it was bad enough. What with the pounding and the stink of cabbages I felt that we were well on the way to becoming pickled cabbage.

The lorry rumbled on.

Five minutes later I heard a motor-cycle roaring along behind us. It drew level, and the rider shouted something, something about 'Had a car passed us?' Lance replied with a gruff, '*Nein,*' and I heard the motor-bike speed on ahead.

After that nothing happened for what I judged to be about twenty minutes. Then Lance sang out the unwelcome news that there was a barrier ahead. He said we couldn't go back, as we had already been seen, so we should have to go on. We were to keep our heads down.

I needed no encouragement to do this. Presently there was a shout calling on us to stop, and I felt the lorry begin to slow down.

Then Lance yelled, presumably to the people at the barrier: 'For mercy's sake, don't make me stop; if you do it'll take me half an hour to start this devil's mangle.'

This sally was answered by a shout of laughter. 'Have you seen anything of a saloon car along the road?' asked someone.

'No, but I've seen plenty of cabbages,' declared Lance.

There was more laughter. Then, to my infinite relief, I heard a voice telling us to go on. As a matter of fact the lorry had not entirely stopped, and as the gears clashed like a pair of iron gates coming together there was a burst of jeering. A fat lot I cared about that. We were through.

The old engine got into its stride again and the rickety chassis rumbled on. Shortly afterwards, however, the vibration lessened considerably, and I suspected that we were now on a main road—a fact which Lance presently confirmed.

‘There’s no one in sight,’ he sang—for of course we couldn’t see anything. ‘I’m making for Hamburg. According to a signpost we’ve just passed it’s twenty-two miles, but I don’t know if we shall get there because I don’t know how much petrol there is in the tank. There’s no gauge; but I’m going on as far as the tank will take us.’

‘Keep going; we’re all right,’ I told him.

Lying there under the cabbages, thinking about the position, I reaped that we owed our success so far to Lance’s alert brain, so quick to seize every opportunity, and to his peculiar attention to detail. For instance, an ordinary man would have been content to steal the vehicle that was now carrying us away from Obendorf. But not Lance. He had also managed to dispose of the driver by a simple yet most effective trick. Had he not done so, the old fellow would no doubt have stood beside his cabbage patch to tell the first storm-trooper who came along that three men had taken his lorry, in which case we should by this time have been recaptured. As it was, the word Gestapo would be enough to keep the old chap indoors for several hours. Another thing Lance had not overlooked was the disposal of the car, for had it been left within sight of the road it would have been a guide to our line of flight. It is, I know, easy to sit at home and think of these little things which make all the difference between success and failure, but it is a horse of another colour when one is actually on the job, being hounded about a hostile country by a gang of armed hunters, with a brick wall and a firing-party the penalty for the slightest slip.

Another half-hour went past, and I judged that we must be well on our way to Hamburg, when Lance called out that there was another barrier ahead.

This time the *Unteroffizier* in charge of the post was no humorist. He ordered Lance to stop in a tone of voice that was decidedly ugly. Clearly, no spies were going to get past *him*. Buried as I was I could see nothing, but I could hear the conversation clearly enough. He started by asking Lance where he had come from. Lance named a village which I had never heard of, but was, I imagined, one of those through which we had passed. Where was he going? ‘Hamburg,’ said Lance unhesitatingly. Where to in Hamburg? ‘The food controller’s office,’ answered Lance.

It was obvious that the *Unteroffizier* had no further excuse for delaying the lorry, but evidently he was one of those sort of men who delight in authority and make the most of it on every possible occasion. I heard his heavy boots crunching on the road as he walked round the lorry surveying the farm produce.

‘All right,’ he said at last reluctantly, and the vibration of the rattling engine increased to its normal cruising stroke as the lorry moved forward. Lance told me afterwards that there were a dozen storm-troopers at the barrier, which consisted of a telegraph pole right across the road, resting on trestles.

A few minutes later, having first warned us that it was not on account of any danger, Lance announced his intention of stopping. This, however, did not mean that we could uncover ourselves. The lorry came to a standstill, and still sitting in his seat, Lance opened what was in the nature of a council of war by declaring that it was about half-past two and we were within six miles of Hamburg.

‘I can’t make up my mind whether to go straight on and enter the town in daylight, or pretend that I’ve had a breakdown, which would allow us to hang about here until it is dark,’ he explained. ‘The whole country must be up by this time, looking for us. I don’t like the idea of leaving you to rot under those cabbages, but I think it would be safer to enter the town after dark. Of course, we shall have to abandon the lorry.’

I could see clearly enough the lines on which his brain was working. We had dropped into the country on a Sunday, so to-day was Monday, and our plane wouldn’t be over until midnight on Wednesday. The fact of the matter was, we had got hold of the Doctor far sooner than we expected—indeed, sooner than we could have dared to hope—with the result that we now had to kill two days before we could be picked up. This meant that we would either have to wander about the country or go to the address of the British agent in Hamburg—the one General Carteret had told us about—and ask him to hide us, and feed us, until the time arrived for us to depart. It was ironical that we were at that moment not more than two or three miles from the rendezvous where our R.A.F. confederate was to pick us up; but since he wasn’t due for a couple of days we might as well have been fifty miles away. I gave Lance my opinion that our best plan would be to hang about until dark and then go on into the town. Having got rid of the lorry we could then make our way to the address the General had given us.

He had only one objection to this plan, an objection which, as it subsequently turned out, was a very real one; and that was the difficulty of finding the address in the black-out—for the city was, of course, blacked-out on account of our bombers. Hamburg is a big place, and neither of us, nor the Doctor, had ever been there. However, in the end this plan was decided upon with minor modifications, and Lance spent the next couple of hours fooling about with his crazy engine, making a pretence of repairing it, in order to kill time. Several times I heard cars and motor-cycles tear past,

which suggested that the hunt for us was still going on with unabated activity. Once a driver shouted something about getting the lorry off the road, but beyond that nothing occurred to worry us.

At last Lance informed us that the sun was setting, which meant that by the time we reached Hamburg it would be pretty well dark. He thought this would be better than arriving in pitch-blackness, when, not knowing the streets, we might collide with something or somebody, or break the traffic regulations, with disastrous results. He started the engine, and with the usual internal commotion the lorry lurched forward.

A quarter of an hour later the engine backfired, causing me to break into a cold perspiration thinking that we were being shot at. But another backfire, and then a quick succession of them, revealed the unhappy truth. We had run out of petrol. We made perhaps another hundred yards in fits and starts and then the engine packed up. As a matter of fact, this compulsory halt did us no harm, for it transpired that several storm-troopers on bicycles were coming along behind us, and they did not need telling that we had come to grief. The result was they passed us without stopping, offering the sarcastic advice usual in such cases.

‘We’ve three miles to go,’ Lance announced, after they had gone on.

‘What do we do next?’ I inquired from my bed of cabbages.

‘We wait here until dark and then take to the fields,’ he replied.

CHAPTER XII

HAMBURG

As soon as it was dark Lance waited until the road was clear and then told us to alight. At the same time he told the Doctor to take off Wolff's uniform jacket and cap, for by this time it would be known that we had taken them, so they would be a danger rather than a safety device. We disposed of them by burying them under the cabbages.

This done, we walked down the road until we came to a gate, over which we climbed, and then continued on behind the hedge, keeping parallel with the road. And this, I may say, was by no means as easy as it sounds, for darkness closed in as black as pitch, and what with stumbling over ruts, and bumping into unseen obstacles, our nerves were soon on edge. However, we struggled on. Once we had to make a detour round a spot where the sound of voices and the flashing of lamps told us that the traffic was being held up. Shortly afterwards we found ourselves on the outskirts of the town. It was no longer possible to proceed cross-country, so whether we liked it or not we had to walk down the road.

The fact that there were three of us presented a danger in itself, for it would be generally known by now that there were three escapers, but that was a risk we had to take. There could be no question of parting company, for had we separated it is unlikely that we should ever have found each other again in the darkness. However, as soon as we reached the streets we compromised by walking in single file, keeping no closer together than visibility demanded.

What part of the town we were in, in relation to the address we were seeking, none of us had the slightest idea. The name of the British agent was Nather, and his address was 219 Lindenstrasse, so the Lindenstrasse we now had to find. The name suggested a residential area, whereas we were now in what was clearly an industrial quarter, so we walked on, hoping to find something better. We must have walked miles. In the end we walked right through the centre of the town, and at length came to what seemed a better-class locality. Lance stopped several pedestrians and asked them if they could direct him to the Lindenstrasse, but not one of them had ever heard of

it. It began to look as if we might go on walking all night. We were fortunate that the weather remained fair.

Then, by accident, we stumbled on a railway station, outside which two or three horse vehicles of the 'growler' type were standing. Lance stopped.

'Even if we find somebody able to direct us we shall have a dickens of a job trying to find our way in this confounded black-out,' he said quietly. 'I imagine it would take anybody all his time to find an address even if he knew the place well. I'm going to ask one of these fellows to drive us there.' He pointed to the vehicles. 'It might be dangerous for us to go together, since everybody is probably on the look-out for three strangers. It won't be possible for the driver to go faster than walking pace in this darkness, so if I can get one of them to take me you'll have to follow on foot. Have either of you any objection?'

We agreed that this was the best plan in the circumstances, so the Doctor and I waited while Lance crossed the road and accosted one of the drivers. There was a brief conversation; then he got in. The driver picked up his reins, and the hack started off at something between a walk and a trot. We had no difficulty in keeping pace with it, for apart from the fact that the animal was painfully thin, and probably incapable of going faster, the darkness was such that anything in the nature of rapid movement would have been dangerous.

It turned out to be a fair way to the Lindenstrasse. I was tired when we started, and was soon praying for the end of the journey. My companion was in even worse case; before the end he was showing signs of distress and I had to give him my arm. I suspected that he was suffering as much from the after-effects of shock as from fatigue. We finished up in what was definitely a residential quarter, the vehicle coming to a stop in a pretentious avenue—from what we could see of it. I could just make out the branches of leafless trees against the sky over our heads. We stood still while Lance paid the cabby, and the growler disappeared into the gloom in the direction from which it had come. Then we joined Lance, who was walking along a broad pavement. He struck a match, shading it with his hands, to read the number on a gate.

'This is the place,' he said as we drew level with him.

He opened the gate, and our shoes crunched on a gravel drive. Ahead, at the end of a short, shrub-flanked approach, I could see the silhouette of a large house. I was rather surprised at the style of the place, although I don't know why, for the General had given us no indication of what we should find; but I had certainly expected a more humble dwelling, perhaps a shop of

some sort, in a more thickly populated part of the town. Possibly it was because I had always associated spies with slums and narrow streets, whereas we were obviously approaching the residence of a wealthy man. I couldn't help feeling some misgivings.

If Lance felt the same he gave no sign of it, for he walked straight up to the front door and rang the bell. There was a short, nervous interval of silence, and then I heard a key grate in a lock. The door was opened, but nothing could be seen, for there was no light in the hall—or whatever lay beyond the open door.

'What do you want?' said a woman's voice, rather sharply.

'Things are not as bright as they were,' answered Lance glibly. This was the secret password that the General had given us.

'Come in,' said the voice and we crossed the threshold.

In a most uncomfortable silence the door was closed and locked. Then came the click of an electric light switch and the hall was flooded with light. With her hand still on the switch, a woman in a nurse's uniform was regarding us keenly. She was dark, elderly, with a cold, expressionless face. There was no colour about her at all; she gave me the impression of having just recovered from a long illness. For a few seconds her brooding eyes rested on each of us in turn.

'This is a strange time to call,' she said.

'Beggars can't be choosers,' returned Lance smoothly. This, too, was part of the catechism we had been taught by the General.

It seemed to satisfy her. 'Come this way,' she said, and we followed her into a large, well-appointed room furnished as a library, but without the atmosphere of one. The impression it gave me was that of a doctor's consulting-room.

'Wait,' said the woman curtly, and retired through the door by which we had entered.

We waited in silence. Doctor Colburg sank down in a chair; it was obvious that he was near the end of his strength.

The door opened again and a man came into the room, not at all the sort of man I expected to see. Without giving the matter any particular thought I had rather imagined that I should find myself facing a hawk-eyed sleuth, perhaps a man of Lance's type; instead of which we were confronted by a short, tubby, middle-aged man with a quick, nervous manner. From his name I thought he might be a Jew, and his features tended to confirm it.

'What do you want?' he asked sharply.

‘This is Doctor Colburg. We’re trying to get him back to England,’ answered Lance.

The agent’s face went pale. He looked shaken—and really, I don’t wonder at it.

‘What on earth made you bring him here?’ he demanded.

‘We had to go somewhere. We’ve two days to kill before we can get out.’

Our new acquaintance received this information without enthusiasm. ‘All the same, gentlemen, I wish you hadn’t come here,’ he said. ‘It was never suggested that I should have to do this sort of thing. My work lies in a different direction.’

‘I’m sorry,’ answered Lance. ‘We didn’t know. This was the address given us. I have no doubt that the people you serve will make things right with you.’

‘All the same, I don’t like it.’

‘Nobody knows we’re in Hamburg. Nobody saw us come here.’

Nather shook his head. ‘You don’t know our Gestapo,’ he said bitterly. ‘Surely you realize that the entire country is looking for you, that the resources of the police are concentrated on finding you?’

Lance took out a cigarette and tapped it on the back of his hand. ‘That’s why we’ve come here,’ he pointed out. ‘Let’s get down to facts. We’re here, and unless you can find somewhere else to hide us we shall have to stay here—at any rate until we’ve had a rest. We’ve had a hard day. We need food. I think Doctor Colburg could do with a little stimulant. Suppose we stop arguing while you offer us a little hospitality?’

Lance’s cool manner appeared to reassure the agent to some extent. ‘Very well,’ he said. ‘I’ll see what I can do. I don’t wish to appear discourteous, but things have been very difficult here. I’ve been living for months on the edge of a precipice and my nerves are beginning to suffer.’

‘We appreciate that,’ replied Lance. ‘We’ll get away as soon as we can.’

Nather crossed to a sideboard and produced a bottle of cognac; he gave Colburg a little, and it seemed to do him good. He offered some to us, but we said we’d rather have coffee. He rang a bell and the woman who had let us in presently brought us coffee and sandwiches on a tray.

‘Help yourselves,’ invited Nather. ‘How long do you wish to stay here?’

‘Until Wednesday evening,’ Lance told him. ‘Have you a motor-car?’

‘Yes, but I have no petrol.’

‘Then you must get some.’

‘I dare say it can be managed, for bribery goes on even here—but one has to be careful.’

‘I can let you have a couple of thousand marks if it will make matters any easier.’

‘I’ll see what can be done,’ promised Nather. ‘Meanwhile you’d better stay in here.’ He put his hand against a shelf of the bookcase and a section of it slid back, disclosing another room beyond. We followed him into it. ‘You must not leave this room until you go,’ he said. ‘I am sorry there are no beds, but I will have mattresses and blankets brought down.’

Lance thanked him, and we looked round the room, which was no more than a cell some ten feet square. It was fitted with a couch, a couple of chairs, and a table, and was obviously intended to be a hiding-place. An amazing assortment of clothes and uniforms hung on pegs and hangers at one end, revealed by the light of a single electric bulb which hung from the ceiling.

‘I’ll see about getting you some more substantial food,’ said Nather, and went out, closing the bookcase entrance behind him. There was no other door. Nor, for that matter, was there a window.

‘I’m afraid that fellow’s nerves are on the jump,’ remarked Lance. ‘It’s a pity, but it can’t be helped. I hope they’ll hold out for another couple of days.’ He turned to Doctor Colburg, who was already sitting in a chair gazing at us with tired eyes. ‘I’m sorry to drag you about like this, Doctor,’ he said apologetically, ‘but we’re doing the best we can for you in rather difficult circumstances.’

‘Thank you. I realized that. It is very kind of you,’ said the Doctor, in perfect English, but with a marked foreign accent. ‘Don’t think because I have remained silent that I don’t appreciate what you are doing. I do, and I am sorry to have put you to so much trouble. I shall be better presently, after I have had some food. I’ve had practically none since I was brought to Germany; that was done deliberately, of course, to lower my vitality. My resistance was still further lowered by drug injections.’

‘I might have guessed that,’ grated Lance. ‘What swine they are!’

Nather came back into the room with a tray on which there was a bottle of light Rhenish wine, bread, cheese, and sausage. There were also some cold potatoes and apples. ‘This is the best I can do for the moment,’ he said. ‘Food is getting scarce.’

‘We shan’t take any harm if we do no worse,’ remarked Lance philosophically, as he began cutting up the bread.

The woman who had opened the door to us came in with a load of blankets. She made several journeys while we were eating, bringing mattresses, a jug of water, and an enamel bowl for washing. By the time she had finished we were pretty well fixed up for a brief stay.

‘I shall leave you now,’ said Nather, who had remained to watch these proceedings. ‘On no account make a noise. You may talk, but speak quietly, for I may have other visitors. Good night.’

We thanked him for what he had done, and then finished the meal, which went far to restore us to normal strength and confidence. Indeed, for my part, I felt almost exuberant now that success seemed assured. We discussed the situation in low voices for a few minutes and then lay down on our beds. Lance switched out the light and I was soon asleep. My last thought was what poor old Schmidt and his wife would be thinking about our failure to return to the room in Obendorf. No doubt they would assume that we had been arrested by the Gestapo for travelling without permits.

CHAPTER XIII

SHOCKS

WHEN I awoke, Lance, to whom personal untidiness was misery, was shaving. I asked him what time it was and he told me half-past seven. Doctor Colburg was still asleep. There seemed to be no reason for early rising, so for a little while I lay where I was, thinking over the situation. Lance agreed with me that so far we had good reason to congratulate ourselves.

I was still lying on my bed when the library panel slid open and Nather came in, with coffee and rolls on a tray, and a morning newspaper. He seemed to be in better spirits than he had been the night before, when our unexpected arrival had no doubt given him a jolt.

‘You will see from the newspaper what sort of hornets’ nest you’ve stirred up,’ he said grimly. ‘The country is buzzing. Still, I think you are fairly safe where you are. There is nothing you can do except remain here quietly until it is time for you to move off to-morrow evening. I am sorry if I seemed upset last night, but there have been so many arrests lately that my nerves are not what they were. And, as I told you, this sort of thing is really outside my undertaking.’

‘What’s your usual job then?’ inquired Lance.

‘Merely to provide clothes, disguises, and forged passports to get people out of the country—mostly German people who are sick of the régime and want to get to Switzerland. Do you need disguises, or papers of any sort?’

Lance shook his head. ‘We shan’t need them if our existing arrangements pan out all right. What we do need is a vehicle to get us to our rendezvous, which is about five miles out of the town. We could, of course, walk there if there was no other means, but it would be safer to ride, because we could then keep out of sight. Will you try to get some petrol?’

‘Yes, I’m going out to do that now. It can only be done by bribery, so perhaps you would be good enough to let me have the money you mentioned last night.’

‘Certainly.’ Lance took two thousand-mark notes from his pocket and passed them over.

‘Hannah will bring you some lunch about midday,’ said Nather. ‘Meanwhile, I will leave you some books from the library to help you to pass the time.’

With that he went out, brought us the books, and then departed, while we settled down to while away the day as comfortably as the circumstances permitted.

It was, I imagine—for I didn’t look at my watch—about twelve noon when there came to our ears a sound like a distant cry. We all heard it and commented on it, but nobody was particularly concerned. I only mention this in view of what followed. Shortly afterwards there came to us faintly through the wall the sound of voices, male voices, in earnest conversation. I fancied I could hear Nather’s among them, but I wasn’t sure. It went on for some time, but again we paid no particular attention, for the agent had warned us that he might have other visitors. But the significance of this conversation became apparent later on.

One o’clock came, but no lunch. By two o’clock we were puzzled; but when three o’clock came, and there was still no sign of either Nather or Hannah, I could see that Lance was getting worried. So, for that matter, was I, for it was pretty obvious that something had happened.

‘I’m sorry to sound pessimistic, but it’s no use kidding ourselves any longer,’ said Lance gravely, after we had sat for some time staring at the panel. ‘Something’s gone wrong. Had Nather managed to get the petrol I feel certain that he would have told us. In any case, Hannah should have brought lunch in long ago. Still, there is nothing we can do except wait—and we’d better keep quiet.’

Somewhere about five o’clock there came again the sound of voices talking in the library, and I felt my nerves relax, for it now seemed certain that Nather had returned. Someone laughed—but the panel did not open. The place fell silent again. We sat on our beds, watching the panel, waiting—and hoping. It was no longer possible to compose ourselves to reading, although I made a pretence of reading in the newspaper the Nazi version of our escape from Obendorf. There was of course no mention of Doctor Colburg.

Lance looked at his watch for the hundredth time. ‘Eight o’clock,’ he said softly. ‘Something’s happened.’

‘What could have happened?’ I asked.

Lance shrugged his shoulders. ‘Anything. This is Germany—not England. Nather may have been arrested by the police for trying to get petrol through irregular channels.’

‘Even so, what about Hannah?’

‘Yes, it’s extraordinary that she hasn’t turned up. I can only conclude that if the police have got Nather they found out where he lived and arrested everyone in the house. That is normal Gestapo procedure. I’m afraid things are going to be difficult.’

‘What are we going to do about it?’

‘Nothing—yet. We’ll give them a bit longer. It would be unfair to Nather to take the slightest risk while we’re in his house.’

Lance’s idea of a bit longer was to wait until midnight. Then he got up and walked over to the small lever that operated the panel from our side of the wall.

‘Be ready for anything,’ he warned us. ‘Don’t make a sound. Put the light out.’

I crossed to the switch and flicked out the light.

In the utter darkness the silence seemed to bear down on me like a tangible substance. Seconds passed, while I waited, tense and expectant. Suddenly a thin strip of light appeared in the wall; it fell across our cell like a luminous knife-blade. Watching it, I saw the greater part of its length blotted out, and knew that Lance had applied his eye to the opening he had made. There was another brief interval while he widened the slit to about half an inch. He looked again and then came over to me.

‘Take a look,’ he breathed.

I crept on tiptoe to the aperture. Holding my breath I peeped through it. The library was empty, but that there had been visitors was instantly apparent. The place looked as if it had been burgled—as indeed it had. Cupboards were open, and their contents had been thrown on the floor. The drawers of Nather’s desk had been pulled out; papers lay everywhere. Then, even as I stared at this alarming spectacle, trying to grasp the full significance of what it implied, a storm-trooper strolled into the room. Crossing over to the desk, he hitched himself on a corner of it, yawned, and lit a cigarette, like a man who is bored with his job. He picked up a paper at random, read it for a moment or two disinterestedly, and then let it fall on the floor.

My nerves twitched when he spoke, so unexpected was the sound, for I had assumed that he was alone. He was answered by someone in the hall, and presently a second storm-trooper strolled in. For a little while they stood talking, casually, but the subject of their conversation made me go stone cold, for I learned the staggering news that the unfortunate Nather had been arrested in connection with a sabotage affair that had happened the previous

week; and that was not the worst of it: he had attempted to escape—at least, that was what the Gestapo said. In doing so he had been shot. Hannah, who had also been arrested, learning of this, had committed suicide in her cell.

This frightful news shocked me more than I could say; it seemed incredible that the little man who had befriended us was now lying dead. He had paid the penalty he feared. What concerned us, personally, even more, was the fact that the house was now under guard.

Still chatting about the matter, the two storm-troopers strolled slowly out of the room. I heard their footsteps receding across the tiled hall.

In a flash I had reached for the lever and closed the panel.

‘Did you hear that?’ I breathed tensely.

‘Yes, but I couldn’t see,’ answered Lance. ‘Who was speaking?’

‘Storm-troopers. Obviously, they’re staying in the house. What are we going to do?’

‘Remain where we are,’ answered Lance calmly. ‘This is still the safest place in Hamburg—for us.’

Doctor Colburg said nothing, although he must have done a lot of thinking. He was an amazing fellow. He appeared to be quite content to leave everything to us—which, in a way, was probably the best thing he could do.

‘There’s just a chance that now the house has been searched the guard may be withdrawn,’ remarked Lance. ‘We do at least know just how we stand. But whether the guard is withdrawn or not we shall have to leave the place to-morrow. There’s absolutely nothing we can do at the moment, so we may as well lie down and try to get some sleep.’

I lay down, but not to sleep. How long I lay awake staring into the suffocating darkness I don’t know, but it must have been hours. And I must confess that there were moments when I wondered if I had been wise in choosing such a nerve-testing occupation. All the time my ears were strained to catch the slightest sound in the next room. But at length I must have dropped into an uneasy doze, for when I opened my eyes it was with a violent start to see that the light was on. Lance was squatting on his bed, studying a map of the district. I looked over his shoulder.

‘We’re on this side of the town,’ he said, pointing with his finger to the south-east corner of the small, inset plan of Hamburg. ‘We’ve got to get across to the far side to reach our field. If we follow the main road to this new suburb, Neufgarten, we shall be pretty well clear of the town.’

I nodded. ‘Why did you put the light on?’ I inquired.

‘It’s nearly nine o’clock so it must be daylight outside, in which case there’s no longer any risk of the light being seen.’

I helped myself to a drink, for the stuffy atmosphere had made my throat dry. ‘It looks as if we shall have to walk to the field to-night after all,’ I observed, as I set the jug down.

‘There’s no doubt about that,’ agreed Lance. ‘At the moment I’m more concerned about getting out of the house. I’m afraid it may be difficult—not to say noisy, if they see us. Judging from what you saw there are at least two men inside the house, but there are probably others posted outside. I have a feeling that this place has been left open as a trap.’

‘A trap?’ I queried.

‘Certainly. A trap left open to catch any British agents who may be on the run in Germany. We’re not the only agents in the country, don’t forget. We’ve other people to think about besides ourselves.’

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ I admitted.

‘The General will have to know about this,’ went on Lance. ‘Even at this moment he may be sending fellows out here, giving them this address. Suppose Nather had been arrested two days before he was? We should have walked straight into the fire. Never mind, we may be able to do something about it ourselves when we leave. We ought to be thankful the Gestapo didn’t raid the place a day earlier.’

‘Just a minute,’ I said, as a thought struck me. ‘Has it occurred to you that the police may have known about Nather being a spy for some time, and only pulled him in because we were on the run? Perhaps they thought we might make for here.’

Lance stared at me. ‘Yes, you may be right,’ he said. ‘They may be waiting for us to turn up, little suspecting that we are already inside—which, as I said before, makes this the safest place in Germany as far as we are concerned. Unfortunately we can’t stay here. We’ve got five miles to walk, which means that in order to reach the rendezvous by midnight we must leave here not later than ten o’clock. It might be better to start even earlier, in case we are delayed. We’d better make it nine.’

I nodded. ‘How do you propose to get out of the house?’

Lance smiled faintly. ‘The cards are already dealt; we can only play them as circumstances indicate. Frankly, I don’t think there’s the slightest chance of our getting out without being seen, but we may get a start by timing our departure when there is nobody in the library.’

‘If the worst comes to the worst I suppose we shall have to try to fight our way through?’

‘We might as well. They’re not going to take me alive. I always did hate brick walls, ever since I fell off one when I was a kid. I’m afraid you’ve struck a tough situation, laddie, for your first trip.’

No more was said. There was nothing more to say. At least, I could think of nothing. We were in a tight spot and had got to get out of it somehow. Knowing what our fate would be if we were caught, I, for one, was resolved to fight it out rather than be captured.

The time passed slowly, as it always does in such circumstances—I mean, when one’s nerves are on edge. Hunger, too, put an edge on my impatience. Consequently I drew a long breath of relief when Lance stood up, for I assumed that it was time to go. Instead of which he informed us that it was still only eight o’clock, but an idea had just occurred to him. He put forward the suggestion that in case descriptions of us had been circulated it might be a good thing if we changed our appearance somewhat by the means at our disposal. He pointed to the collection of garments hanging on the wall.

It seemed a good idea, and the Doctor, who had kept pace with the situation, agreed. Now that the effects of the drug with which he had been injected were working off, he was taking a more active interest in things. I had a feeling that he, like us, would rather die fighting than fall into the hands of the enemy.

Examining the garments, I selected the uniform of a German private soldier which fitted me fairly well. Lance put on a sports jacket of Austrian cut, which, with a feathered Tyrolean hat, would have given him a musical-comedy appearance in London, but was common enough in Germany to pass without comment. The Doctor did better than both of us by finding a female wig of grey hair with a bonnet attached. A long, cheap-looking fur coat transformed him into a passable old woman. I don’t think he would have passed muster in broad daylight, but in a black-out the disguise would be all right. As a matter of detail there were some grease-paints in a box, but Lance would have nothing to do with them.

By the time we had fixed ourselves up it was nearly nine o’clock, and Lance made the first move in our desperate adventure by switching off the light.

‘Now, not a sound,’ he whispered, and my muscles stiffened as I heard the panel move.

I watched for the slit of light to appear, but none came, and I realized that the library was in darkness. This was a good start—provided that no one was in the room.

CHAPTER XIV

DESPERATE WORK

LANCE opened the slit wide enough for us to pass through into the library.

‘Stay here for a minute while I have a scout round,’ he breathed. ‘There’s no need for us all to go; one will make less noise than three.’

He was away about five minutes. Staring into the darkness I saw a ray of light appear at the far side of the room, and knew that he had opened the door leading into the hall.

‘There’s a storm-trooper sitting just inside the front door,’ he announced when he returned to us.

‘He’ll raise the place if he sees us,’ I said—somewhat unnecessarily.

‘I hope to arrange things so that he won’t see us,’ returned Lance grimly. ‘Go and fetch me that empty wine-bottle.’

By the light of my torch I found the bottle; it was one of those long, slim bottles without shoulders.

‘Hang on to it a minute,’ he ordered, and then began collecting all the loose papers that lay about. Three armfuls he carried into the cell we had just vacated, heaping them loosely under the garments that hung on the pegs. This done, he struck a match and put flame to the paper.

‘It’s up to us to save any of our fellows who even now may be on their way here,’ he muttered. ‘If we burn the trap they can’t walk into it.’ He came back into the library, half-closing the panel behind him. He then asked me to remain where I was, that is, just beside the panel, and in precisely one minute, whistle.

I didn’t waste time asking why. I watched his torch flicker across the floor and stop near the door that opened into the hall. For a moment or two I waited, and when I judged that a minute had elapsed, I whistled.

Nothing happened—except that my heart beat faster. I whistled again, louder, for smoke was now drifting through the panel. It made me cough.

I heard the legs of a chair scrape sharply on a tiled floor. The door-handle rattled, and an instant later the light was switched on, revealing a scene that photographed itself on my brain as permanently as an image is imprinted on the emulsion of a film. A storm-trooper stood in the doorway,

staring at us with an expression of utter incredulity on his face—as well he might. I don't think he even saw Lance, pressed against the wall not more than a yard away from him. His attention was all for us, which in the circumstances was understandable. His hand dropped to his revolver holster. At that precise moment Lance swung the bottle. It came down on the German's head. He flopped to the floor like a coat slipping off a hook. Lance switched out the light.

Now for all this I had been more or less prepared, but I wasn't ready for the next act—nor, I imagine, was Lance. There was a quick rush of footsteps and the light was switched on again, revealing a second storm-trooper standing in the doorway. He must have joined his comrade in the hall during the brief interval that Lance had been making arrangements. The expression on his face, too, was one of amazement, but at least he had been warned that something was wrong, and his revolver was ready in his hand. He took a quick look at me, but he must have caught a movement out of the tail of his eye, for he suddenly swung round on Lance, at the same time taking two quick paces away from him. There was no time for any more bottle-work, desirable on account of its silence. I knew that Lance wanted to get out of the house without making a noise, but this was no longer possible, and my finger was tightening on the trigger of my automatic when Lance's gun blazed. The German stumbled and crashed across the unconscious body of his comrade.

There was a split second of ghastly silence as the reverberations of the explosion, which sounded like a thunderclap, ran through the house.

'Come on,' snapped Lance, and dashed into the hall.

I reached the door in time to take a hand in the next act, for which I was fully prepared, for it was obvious that stealth could no longer help us. The front door was flung open violently, and two storm-troopers, who had evidently been on duty outside, rushed into the hall, guns in their hands. They pulled up short when they saw us.

It was no time for squeamishness. Lance's pistol barked. He got his man. I, firing past his shoulder, got the other. I was only just in time, for his gun was already on its way up. It went off; a soft lead bullet struck the tiles near my feet, and ricocheted, whining shrilly, against the wall. The three shots had followed each other so quickly that they sounded like a burst of machine-gun fire.

Outside, the screech of a police whistle split the still night air.

'Keep going,' ordered Lance curtly, and switching off the light, jumped into the darkness outside. We followed him, although we could see little in

the gloom. Half way down the gravel drive we collided with somebody coming the other way, but under the trees it was as black as pitch and impossible to see a thing.

‘Is that you, Karl?’ said a voice, hoarse with excitement.

‘Yes,’ grunted Lance, and I heard the thud of a blow.

‘Come on!’ Lance rapped out the words, and we blundered on to the street. There was nobody there—at least, we could see no one. A motorcycle was leaning against a tree, its masked lamp throwing a pool of light on the pavement. As there were three of us it was no use to us. Running footsteps were approaching. Across the street windows were being thrown up.

‘All right,’ said Lance. ‘This way. Keep in single file.’ With that he started walking quickly along the pavement, away from the running footsteps.

Fifty yards brought us to a turning. We took it, and presently another. In the darkness behind us pandemonium had broken loose. A car tore down the road at suicidal speed.

‘I’m afraid we’ve rather stirred things up,’ Lance remarked over his shoulder. ‘It’s a pity, but it couldn’t be prevented. I’m making for the centre of the town—I think I can find it. The important thing is to keep going. Minutes count now. It won’t take them long to send out a general alarm. Don’t lose sight of me.’

Behind us an orange glow was spreading across the sky; it was a comfort to know that we had at least succeeded in disposing of what might well have turned out to be a death-trap for fellows who were in the country on similar work to ourselves.

Two fire-engines went tearing past us, but there were not many people about, due, I suppose, to the darkness of the night and the stringency of the black-out regulations. Lance stopped a pedestrian and inquired the way to the station, receiving the reply, ‘Keep straight on.’

It seemed to me that a railway station was now a place to be avoided, for stations would certainly be among the first places covered by the police. Lance evidently thought this, too, and waited for us to come up with him.

‘If I can find the station it will give me my bearings,’ he said, and then walked on.

Another ten minutes and the dimmed lights of the station appeared in front of us. Lance halted again.

‘I can see a cab over there,’ he said quietly. ‘I think we might risk hiring it, and ask the driver to take us to Neufgarten. That will get us out of the town on the right side, and save our legs the best part of three miles.’

The cabby was just removing the nose-bag from his nag. He looked a bit doubtful when Lance told him where we wanted to go, and named a fare greatly in excess of the normal one for a ride of such a distance. Lance demurred, but finally agreed. He also promised a good tip.

The matter settled, we got into the vehicle; and it was as well that we did so, for hardly had we taken our seats than four motor-cyclists, following closely behind each other, roared up to the station entrance. We had no doubt as to who they were, and what their mission was. I heard them dismount and put their cycles on stands. What happened to them after that I don’t know, for our driver climbed up to his seat and the horse moved off at a slow trot.

I began to feel more comfortable, for I could not believe that the Gestapo would stop and search every vehicle in the town. In any case, we had got a fair start, so it seemed that we ought to get some distance before the hue-and-cry reached its peak. After all, nobody knew who had done the shooting—for I imagined that none of the storm-troopers was in a state to talk—and nobody knew where we were bound for. It was not as though we had to get out of the country by normal methods. I even began to hope that we might find an opportunity of getting something to eat when we dismissed our driver.

The old horse plodded on. Through the window I could see that we were passing through the centre of the town. From time to time cars and motor-cycles overtook us, but our driver kept up a steady pace and no one troubled us. In this way, still keeping to what I judged to be main streets, we must have covered a good two miles, and I knew that we were getting near Neufgarten. Shortly afterwards, the shops on either side of the road—as much as I could see of them—no longer displayed the ostentatious fronts of big stores, but had given way to the smaller type of establishment which one usually finds on the outskirts of a town. The road, however, remained fairly wide.

Lance had just told us that it was ten o’clock when the cab came to a standstill, and there was a rather unpleasant silence while we waited for the reason to reveal itself. Nothing happened. Two or three minutes went by and still nothing happened. I could hear the horse’s hooves fidgiting on the macadam road and, around us, what sounded like the low buzz of conversation. And there we sat for what must have been a good ten minutes, although it seemed longer. Lance gave it as his opinion that we had run into a traffic jam at a cross-roads, but changed his mind when once or twice we

advanced a short distance, only to stop again. Occasionally a pedestrian shuffled past, a vague shape in the murk. That was all. The darkness began to get on my nerves; there was something sinister about the whole thing, but because we were anxious not to show ourselves we just sat where we were.

‘What the dickens is going on?’ muttered Lance at last.

Knowing that we could not answer the question he lowered the window, put his head out, and held a low conversation with the driver. When it was finished he gave us the unwelcome news that we were in a hold-up due to a police barrier about a hundred yards ahead. Vehicles were only being allowed to pass one at a time. There was a line of traffic behind us as well as in front. As if this were not enough, British bombers were over the country heading in the direction of Hamburg, so an air-raid was expected. How the driver got this information, and whether it was true or only a rumour, I do not know.

‘How far are we from Neufgarten?’ I asked Lance.

He consulted the driver, who said that it was about half a mile.

‘Then for the love of Mike let’s get out and walk,’ I said, and Lance agreed.

He paid the driver, who seemed quite content with the arrangement.

We made our way to the pavement, where we held a brief discussion. What was happening ahead we could only surmise, but it seemed that the exits of the town had been closed—at any rate to traffic. What the position was in regard to pedestrians we had no means of knowing, but Lance thought we ought to find out, and volunteered to do the scouting. Leaving us where we were, he disappeared into the night, and there we remained for about twenty minutes, at the end of which time he returned with the distasteful information that everyone was being stopped and questioned.

‘You couldn’t get past the barrier in that uniform, that’s a certainty,’ he told me. ‘Every soldier in Germany carries military papers, and you haven’t any. They’d arrest you for a deserter.’

‘That’s pleasant,’ I muttered. ‘What’s the answer?’

Lance’s suggestion was unexpected. ‘Let’s see if we can get something to eat; maybe we shall be able to think better. I noticed a little restaurant farther along.’

We walked on down the pavement for twenty or thirty yards and came to a halt in front of an unpretentious *Speisehaus*. Letters cut in the blind announced that it was open, so we went in. The place was practically empty, and the waiter came forward with a menu card in his hand. Lance took it, and reading down the short list of dishes available, suggested soup, bread

and cheese and pickles. We couldn't have meat because we had no coupons, and we couldn't have fish because there wasn't any. However, hungry as we were, we were in no case to be particular, and at least we satisfied our hunger, washing down the dry bread with imitation coffee. For once I regretted that our blockade was so effective. We stayed for about twenty minutes in the place, and then Lance said he thought it was time we were moving along. We went out feeling better than when we went in.

'Now,' said Lance, when we were outside, 'let's see about getting through this barrier.'

'Suppose we have a closer look at the traffic?' I suggested, staring at the silhouettes of vehicles that stretched away on either side. 'We might be able to find a hiding-place in an empty van.'

'That's not a bad idea,' agreed Lance.

'How far are we from the barrier?' I inquired.

'About fifty yards. You can see the tail end of the pedestrian queue on your left.'

We walked over to the traffic and made our way along the line, moving towards the barrier. There was the usual assortment of vehicles—one or two private cars, several lorries, tradesmen's vans, an ambulance, and—of all things—a hearse. I suggested that we might try to hide in one of these, but Lance didn't take kindly to the idea.

'I don't like it,' he said. 'From what I could see near the barrier they were going over the vehicles too thoroughly. This looks a better proposition.'

He pointed to a load of straw, piled high on a military lorry—at least I judged it to be military from the two soldiers who sat on the box. The vehicle was only third in line from the barrier.

'We can't get on that,' I protested, for it seemed to me that if we tried we should pull half the stuff on to the road.

'I wasn't thinking of getting on it,' returned Lance evenly. 'I was thinking of causing a slight diversion.'

'Such as?'

'Setting fire to it. In this traffic block a fire ought to cause a stampede. With any luck we should be able to get through the barrier in the general scramble.'

'Good enough,' I agreed hopefully.

Lance thought for a moment. 'You take the Doctor along to the end of the pedestrian queue,' he ordered. 'If the police manage to hold the barrier

when the fun starts, stand fast, but if the crowd knocks it down, go through in the rush. I'll join you on the other side.'

'This ought to be really entertaining,' I told the Doctor, as we walked to the end of the queue. Actually, it wasn't exactly a queue, for the people were getting impatient and had formed a sort of mob which only diminished to single file at the point where it reached the barrier, through which people were being allowed to pass one at a time. What I did not realize at the time was that the building on our left was a cinema, and I only noticed it when the crowd started to swell. Apparently the 'flicks' were over, and the audience, pouring out, filled up much of the space between us and Lance, which rather worried me, for if our scheme failed it was obviously going to be difficult to find him again.

At this juncture a shout behind us gave warning that Lance had put the scheme into operation, and looking along the line of traffic I saw a tongue of flame licking up the side of the straw. I didn't realize until that moment how well loose straw burns. In a surprisingly short time the entire pile was ablaze, making everything as light as day. But in this brief space of time several things had happened.

At first the crowd surged towards the blaze to see what all the fuss was about, but when the fire reached dangerous dimensions, and horses started to rear, and cars began to back, they changed their minds and made a rush to get away. What I didn't know until the crowd started shouting was that one of the vehicles near the blaze was a petrol lorry. The driver, not unnaturally, tried to move his load to a healthier spot; but other drivers had the same idea, and the result was a lovely scrum, in which everyone yelled at everyone else but nobody got anywhere. It was obvious from this moment that there was going to be no question of the police holding the barrier. They left their posts, as any police would in such circumstances, and tried to quell the tumult. I suppose there were about a dozen storm-troopers on duty altogether, and, to do them justice, they did their best to put the fire out; but they might as well have tried to extinguish a volcano. Once the straw had properly caught hold I doubt if a fire-engine could have put it out quickly. One of the police gave me a shock by yelling to me to help, for I had forgotten that I was in uniform; I did follow him for a little way, but then I mingled with the crowd and got back to the Doctor. Linking my arm through his, we pressed with the mob towards the barrier, which was soon knocked down. Quite apart from the police, for a minute or two things looked really ugly, for in their desperate haste to get away car drivers were backing into the crowd and people were in danger of being knocked down. I was nearly run over myself.

One storm-trooper only remained at his post, shouting and flourishing his revolver in a vain attempt to stem the panic, but he might as well have kept his mouth shut for all the attention people paid to him. We struggled, on with the crowd.

At that moment the air-raid sirens howled.

CHAPTER XV

STILL ON THE RUN

As a matter of fact, the sirens sounding at that moment probably did us more harm than good, for the crowd had already broken down the barrier, and with the police dispersed there was nothing to bar our passage. All the sirens did was turn panic into frenzy. Mind you, I don't suppose the Germans always behaved like that. It happened that they were already worked up to a dangerous state of nerves by the fire, and the alarm, coming on top of it, sent one or two of the most nervous over the borderline of self-control. Nothing is more infectious than panic, and once it starts there is no stopping it. Thus was it now. It was every man for himself, and nobody cared what happened to anybody else. The Doctor was knocked down in the mad scramble at the barrier, and had I not been there to help him I doubt if he would have been able to get up again. As it was, I saw to my horror that his false hair and bonnet had been knocked off. There could be no question of trying to recover them. It took me all my time to keep in touch with him.

At the finish, we didn't walk over the barrier; we were pushed over it. Even then the press was so thick that I became seriously alarmed. It seemed impossible that we could ever find Lance again. However, we plunged on up the road. There was nothing else we could do. Fortunately, after going a little way, the crowd began to thin, this being due, I suppose, to people going down side turnings. I grabbed the Doctor's arm and had a look round.

'Hadn't we better wait here?' he suggested.

'Not yet,' I answered. 'We'll get along. Lance won't expect us to stop in this scrum. If we walk on he'll overtake us—I hope.'

We went on without speaking for perhaps two hundred yards, by which time we were more or less alone in the darkened street. I halted in a gateway and told the Doctor that I proposed to wait there and so catch Lance as he came along. It wasn't long before he came, whistling a favourite tune of his, an air from *Faust*, which he knew I would recognize.

'Here we are,' I said. 'Great Scott! What a hornets' nest you stirred up. You certainly made a good job of the fire.'

Lance laughed softly. 'Not bad, was it?' he murmured. 'Simple methods usually turn out best. Let's get on—we're on the right road. With any luck we ought to get away without any more hold-ups. Hark!'

We listened. From the air above came the steady drone of bombers.

'Sounds like the R.A.F. arriving,' said Lance. 'They should keep the police occupied for a little while. Come on.'

We struck off down the street at a brisk pace, for the modern type of villa on either side suggested that we were now in Neufgarten. A mile farther on the pavement came to an end, and shortly afterwards we found ourselves in open country. Everything now looked comparatively simple—always provided that our pilot turned up. Until now no doubt of this had entered my mind, but as we trudged on, realizing for the first time how much depended on the pilot keeping the appointment, I began to feel misgivings. However, I said nothing. Once in a while a vehicle passed us, and on such occasions we took cover in the ditch until it was out of sight.

Lance, who, with his usual thoroughness, had studied the map until he knew every inch of the district, turned down a secondary road to the left, and soon afterwards announced that we were approaching the rendezvous. From the city we had just left came the thunder of exploding bombs, but we had plenty to occupy our minds without worrying about other people's troubles.

I looked up at the sky, for since our pilot would have to make a landing in the dark, without even boundary lights, a good deal depended on the weather—in fact, one might almost say everything. Fog, for instance, would see us marooned on the ground as effectively as if we had been stranded on a reef in the middle of an ocean. Fortunately, there was no suggestion of it; the night was dark, for there was no moon, but a fair display of stars gave us enough visibility to see where we were. There were a few clouds about; the sky, in aviation language, was about one-third covered. There had been a sprinkling of rain once or twice as we walked along, but nothing serious, and now it seemed to have cleared off.

A thought that afforded me considerable consolation was this: there was little risk of our pilot not finding the field, for before the war he had been on the British Airways night mail service from Gatwick to Hamburg, and while he no longer had any beacons to guide him, he knew every landmark along the route—which was, in fact, why he had chosen this particular field. It was made conspicuous by the road we were on, and a triangular group of trees—a small wood—at its southern extremity.

To this clump of trees we now made our way, entering it from the road and groping our way through it until we were on the far side, a distance of

perhaps forty yards, facing the wide, slightly undulating pasture on which the machine would land. Lance announced that it was eleven-thirty, which meant that if our man was on time we had half an hour to wait. There was nothing more we could do. The landscape seemed to be entirely deserted, so to pass the time Doctor Colburg gave us a brief account of the treatment he had received while he had been a prisoner. I need not repeat it, for Nazi methods with political prisoners are well known.

In this way some ten minutes passed, and then Lance interrupted the Doctor with a laconic ‘Hark!’

I had heard the sound which I imagined had produced the exclamation, but until Lance spoke I paid no particular attention to it. It was the distant bark of a dog—or, to be more accurate, the bay of a hound.

We all stood perfectly still for some time, listening, but as the sound was not repeated I asked Lance in a low voice if it was, in fact, the bay that had worried him.

He admitted that it was. ‘The Germans use a lot of dogs,’ he added. ‘They have dog patrols all round the frontier, and a lot of escaping prisoners are caught that way.’

‘I don’t see how they could get hounds on our trail,’ I declared. ‘After all, we rode out of the town.’

‘That wouldn’t prevent them from questing all the roads leading out of Hamburg.’

‘But what could they use to give the animals our scent?’

‘They might have grabbed the clothes we left behind at Nather’s house, before the place was burnt out. Apart from that, they must have plenty of articles belonging to the Doctor, things he left in his room at the college. Far be it from me to be pessimistic, but it’s no use blinking the facts.’

‘Another quarter of an hour ought to see us in the air, anyway,’ I said hopefully. And hardly had the words left my lips when on the still night air there came two sharp, excited bays. I judged them to be somewhere about the junction of our road with the main road.

‘There they are,’ said Lance softly. ‘I’m afraid they’ve got our taint.’

I took out my automatic. ‘We ought to be able to deal with them,’ I answered.

‘I’m not thinking only of the hounds,’ returned Lance. ‘The trouble will be, as soon as the fellows with them see this field they’ll guess what’s happening, and then, if they’ve got any sense, they’ll stretch a wire across it

and throw obstacles about to cause the machine to crash when it tries to land.’

‘In that case the result will depend on how many men there are with the dogs,’ I surmised.

Lance looked at his watch. ‘Ten minutes to go,’ he announced. ‘Those hounds are coming up the road, and I’m afraid they’ll be here before the machine. We’re in a bad spot to receive them; it’s impossible to see anything under these trees. I think our best plan would be to go back to the road, where we shall be in a better position to see just what’s happening. We may have time to lay a cross-trail.’

I agreed, so without loss of time we started groping our way back to the road. By the time we reached it the hounds, as near as we could judge, were about two hundred yards away. We could hear them panting as they strained on their leads.

By this time, however, a new factor had arisen, one that both gave us hope yet at the same time alarmed us. Faintly to our ears from the west came the sound of anti-aircraft gunfire; it was possible to make out the flashes of the bursting shells.

‘That looks like our man coming,’ said Lance quietly.

‘And it looks as if all the world knows about it,’ I observed bitterly, as a searchlight stabbed the sky in the direction of the approaching aircraft. In a few seconds there were four or five beams scissoring the cloudy heavens.

For a little while I think even Lance was at a loss to know what to do for the best. We just stood there, staring first down the road and then up at the sky. I could hear a high-powered car tearing down the main road and suspected that it was following the aircraft, but I did not comment on it; nor did Lance, although he must have heard it too. Comment was unnecessary.

‘Follow me,’ ordered Lance abruptly, and set off down the road away from the hounds. This meant that we crossed our original trail leading into the wood, which would cause the hounds to falter. And so we played a crazy game of follow-my-leader down the road, crossing and recrossing our trail, and occasionally splashing along in the semi-liquid mud at the bottom of the ditch that accompanied the road at this point.

That our scheme had at any rate been partly successful was soon apparent, for the hounds, which we could hear but could not see, seemed to be at fault at the wood. There was a good deal of shouting and crashing in the undergrowth. Then the dimmed headlights of a car appeared in the road coming towards us, and put an end to our dodge of laying false trails. Lance led the way over a low hedge, which brought us into a ploughed field next to

the one in which our machine was to land. Without stopping, he cut diagonally across it to the hedge that separated the two fields.

We heard the car on the road stop when it reached the hounds. The searchlights were still quartering the sky, but there was no more *flak*, nor could I hear the aircraft, from which I guessed that the pilot had cut his engine and was gliding, no doubt watching for our signal.

We were now in a very awkward fix, for it was necessary for us to show three red flashes to bring the machine down, and how this was to be accomplished without the flashes being seen by our enemies on the road was not clear; nor was there time to discuss the problem. Matters were too urgent—much too urgent. However, we reached the hedge, and Lance made what seemed to me to be a shocking noise getting through it. It was, of course, unavoidable. I pushed the Doctor through, and then, scratching myself badly in the process, scrambled through myself.

‘Take off your coat, Rod, to make a shield—you too, Doctor,’ snapped Lance.

In a jiffy we both had our coats off and had opened them out as wide as they would go, keeping between Lance and the road. The Doctor’s fur coat now came in useful. Lance took out his torch, and switching the colour to red, held it in a vertical position with the light on. Three times he showed the light, and then, after a pause, repeated the signal. We could do no more, so there we stood, staring apprehensively towards the road. Curiously enough, everything had fallen silent. I could hear neither the hounds nor the aircraft. We might have been alone in the world for all the indication there was of any other presence.

A moment later everything happened at once.

CHAPTER XVI

A FIGHT FOR LIFE

FIRST, my ears caught that faint, musical hum that an aeroplane makes when it is gliding. Simultaneously the hounds broke into violent outcry. Men shouted. Twigs and branches crashed as they were trampled underfoot. Then, to crown all, and to drown all other sounds, our unseen pilot, who must have undershot the field, switched on both his engines. After the silence the noise was so appalling that I flinched.

Lance took out his automatic. 'It looks like being a close finish,' he remarked casually. He was always at his best when things looked their worst.

Even then we could only stand where we were, against the hedge, for to run out into the open field was to risk disaster two ways—either by being shot at, or by being knocked down by the machine when the pilot brought it in, for he would be unable to see us until he was right on top of us, and then, if he tried to turn, he would probably crash. Strain my eyes as I would I couldn't see a thing.

I heard a hound coming along the hedge before I saw it. Whether it had broken loose, or had simply been released, I don't know. I only knew that the animal was there. There was a swift patter of pads, and then it ran into sight, a big brute, looking enormous in the dim light. For some absurd reason I remembered the Hound of the Baskervilles.

'Look out,' said Lance tersely, and levelled his pistol.

But the animal either sensed danger or knew what a pistol was, for it pulled up dead, growling fiercely in its throat.

We were not the only ones to hear the sound; the Nazis heard it, and evidently they knew what it meant as well as we did—probably better. There was a shout of encouragement, followed immediately by the thump of running feet.

'I'm afraid this is where the bullets start flying,' said Lance, still quite calm. 'Rod, you get the Doctor under cover. If I fall, leave me and run to the machine the moment you hear its wheels touch the ground. Is that clear?'

'Yes, but——'

‘Don’t argue,’ rasped Lance. ‘Do as you’re told.’

‘Very well,’ I agreed. I hated the idea of leaving him.

But there was no time to think about it. The burly figure of a storm-trooper took shape in the darkness, and he must have seen Lance, who was standing a little way away from the hedge, at the same moment that we saw him. Why he didn’t shoot immediately was, I can only surmise, because instructions had gone out that the Doctor was to be taken alive, and in the darkness the fellow couldn’t see who was who.

‘Surrender!’ he shouted.

The word was followed by a grunt as Lance’s automatic spat.

The hound bounded forward at the same instant, snarling furiously. I hated to do it, but we were in no case to be particular and I let drive at it. I didn’t kill the animal, but I must have hit it, for it let out a yelp, and indicated that it had had enough by making off.

The storm-trooper at whom Lance had fired was flat on the ground, groaning, but I could see another coming along behind him, so I took a long shot to discourage him.

‘Steady with your ammunition, Rod; we may need it,’ said Lance quietly.

‘If ever we need it more than we do now, heaven help us,’ I said angrily, for now that the business had started in earnest I was feeling vicious.

It was at that moment that the machine touched the ground. For some seconds I had heard the shrill whine of wind over its wings, but now came the soft bump, followed by the heavy trundling sound that a big machine makes when running over the ground.

‘Make a dash for it, Rod,’ snapped Lance. ‘Take the Doctor with you.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Don’t ask questions—or this is the last time you’ll come with me. Get the Doctor aboard.’

I grabbed the Doctor’s arm. ‘Come on,’ I said, and began running towards the machine, the position of which I could judge from the sound. ‘Whatever happens, you get aboard,’ I told Doctor Colburg.

A regular battle had broken out behind us. I could distinguish the whip-like crack of Lance’s automatic above the deep booming of the heavy German revolvers. But when, a moment later, a machine-gun started chattering I’m afraid I lost my head. But I couldn’t stop running. Once or twice I snatched a glance over my shoulder to see if we were being pursued, but as far as I could make out we were not.

By this time I could see the vague shape of the machine in the darkness, and we were within twenty yards of it—it was a Blenheim, by the way—when a yell told me that the Germans had spotted it, too. Bullets started to whistle round us. The shooting was wild, as was only to be expected in such a difficult light, but even so, some of the shots came unpleasantly close. One actually hit the torch in my pocket and knocked me flying, but I was on my feet again before the Doctor's cry of horror had entirely left his lips.

‘Get in the machine,’ I told him frantically.

Now, somehow I fully expected the pilot to be on his feet in the cockpit, or at least in such a position that he could see what was going on. But there wasn't a sign of him. The machine just stood there, a black hulk in the gloom, looking as if it had been abandoned—except that the propellers were still ticking over. The Doctor would have run straight into one of them and so settled his troubles for good if I hadn't grabbed him by the arm and swung him clear. Even then I doubt if he realized what he had missed. I thought it extraordinary when I saw that the pilot hadn't even opened the door for us, but somehow I managed to get it open and pushed the Doctor inside.

‘Lie flat on the floor!’ I shouted, for bullets were beginning to come too close to be healthy. I lost a couple of seconds staring back over our trail to see if I could see anything of Lance; but there wasn't a sign of him; all I could see was the flash of shots, so I went through to the cockpit to let the pilot know what was happening. After all, he was sharing our risks.

He was sitting in his seat. At first I thought he was asleep, so still was he, and in such a relaxed position. Not until I was right up to him and saw his face in the glow of the luminous instrument panel did I realize that I had a dead man on my hands—or, if not dead, badly hurt. His face was streaked with blood, which had run down over the front of his flying kit, and a jagged hole in the windscreen told me what had done it. I realized that he must have been hit in the *flak* barrage which he had just come through, but the stout-hearted lad had hung on to consciousness long enough to bring the machine down and keep his appointment.

With trembling hands I unfastened the safety-belt, and—with scant ceremony, I fear—dragged him clear of the seat. He rolled on the floor, and I had a job to get him away from the controls. However, by exerting all my strength I dragged him to the Doctor and told him to do what he could for him. This done, I climbed up into the central gun-turret and brought the guns to bear on the enemy. Ammunition was already in place.

I was just in time. Lance was streaking across the field, twisting like a snipe as he ran, taking snapshots at his pursuers. Seven or eight Germans were close behind him—but not too close. After all, whatever those who have had no experience of it may think, in actual fact it takes a lot of nerve to rush a desperate man armed with a gun which he is fully prepared to use. So while the Nazis encouraged each other on, every man gave his comrades the chance to be first—or so it seemed to me. I'm afraid I should have done the same thing myself.

Before I started shooting I thought it would be a good thing to let Lance know what had happened to the pilot, so I shouted the information at the top of my voice. 'Make for the cockpit!' I yelled. 'You'll have to fly her. I'll hold them off.'

Lance didn't answer, but I knew that he had heard by the way he swerved out of my line of fire and raced across the nose of the machine to get to the cockpit. Satisfied that even if he hadn't grasped the full significance of all I had said he would know how to handle the situation as soon as he reached the empty cockpit, I turned my attention to more pressing matters.

At least a dozen Germans were now in sight, but they were not exactly together; they were strung out across the field like runners at the end of a long race. I couldn't see my sights in the darkness, so I took rough aim by looking along the barrels and let drive at the nearest man. As soon as he was down I raised the muzzles slightly and sprayed the line behind him. This was evidently more than the Huns had bargained for, for some of them flung themselves flat and the rest scattered. Most of them opened fire, and odd bullets continued to thud into the machine. I didn't mind much now that we were all aboard. Something inside me seemed to be repeating in a kind of exultant frenzy: 'We've done it . . . we've done it.'

Still, the spot was not a healthy one, and I was more than relieved when the two engines burst into song and the machine started to move. Fortunately, there was practically no wind, so the direction of the take-off didn't matter much, except that it was necessary to turn the machine so as to give us a long enough run.

Lance soon had the aircraft round; it raced across the soaking turf into the darkness, and swept up into the air.

Gasping my relief, I remained where I was, to get hold of myself, for the last few minutes had been pretty strenuous, not to say exciting. Then I began to think about things, and I can't say that I felt entirely happy, for to be over Germany is not necessarily to be out of Germany. Ahead of us there were

anti-aircraft guns. No doubt interceptors would be sent up to look for us and bring us down. Staring at the ground, I saw the headlights of a car racing down the main road, and knew that it would not be long before the telephones were buzzing. For the rest, beneath us lay a blanket of utter blackness, unbroken by a light of any sort, and stretching, it seemed, to eternity. I crouched under cover of the glass turret and waited for what might befall.

CHAPTER XVII
TOUCH AND GO

PRESENTLY I thought I had better have a word with Lance, because, for all I knew, he might have been wounded; anyway, he might wish to speak to me. The machine was in darkness; that is to say, it carried no navigation lights, but dimly in the cockpit I could see the black bulk of Lance's head and shoulders against the dials. I found the Doctor, and asked him about the pilot. The Doctor told me that he was still unconscious, and beyond bandaging the wound in his head he could do nothing because he was unable to see. I couldn't make any suggestion so I went forward to Lance.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

'Of course—why not?' he answered, smiling up over his shoulder.

'I thought you might have been hit.'

'It was a tricky light for shooting.'

I glanced at the compass and saw that he was heading due west, which was, of course, our nearest way to the North Sea. Judging from memory I thought our course would bring us out over, or somewhere near, Heligoland Bay.

'It's as dark as the inside of a black cow,' I remarked. 'You'll have a job to make out the coast.'

'Leave that to me. We ought to be home in three hours.'

'What part of England are you making for?' I inquired.

'I haven't decided yet,' he answered. 'When we get over England I may ask the Air Ministry by radio where they want me to land—that is, unless the pilot recovers consciousness and tells us what his arrangements were. The Doctor told me about him as I got aboard. Is he badly hurt?'

'I only know what the Doctor has told me,' I answered. 'He thinks a piece of shrapnel has lifted a lump of the poor chap's scalp, but he's inclined to think that it isn't very bad.'

'Good. What are you going to do?'

'I'd better stand by the gun in case we run into trouble,' I suggested.

Lance nodded. 'That's the idea. Keep a sharp look-out.'

That left nothing more to be said for the moment, so I made my way back to the gun-turret and surveyed the sky, not that there was anything to see except a couple of searchlight beams in the distance ahead of us. I could tell from the angle of the machine that we were still climbing, and I knew that the sound-detectors would be listening for us, so I wasn't surprised when, a few minutes later, *flak* started sparkling in the sky. The shooting was poor, however, and I suspected that the enemy was putting up a blind barrage trusting more to luck than judgement for a hit. The shells were bursting some distance away; I could tell that by the crimson glow of the flashes. When it's close the colour is a vivid yellow, but only when the noise of the explosions can be heard above the engines is it really dangerous.

More searchlights appeared; they had a nasty knack of leaping up unexpectedly out of the darkness, but Lance could see them as well as I could and employed all the known tricks to dodge them—turning away, and side-slipping end-on to present the smallest possible surface to the beam.

As we approached the coast the barrage became fierce, even though by that time we'd climbed to a tremendous height. There was a fair amount of low cloud about, which probably made things more difficult for the gunners; in fact, there were one or two patches of cloud so wide that I began to get alarmed that we might lose sight of the ground altogether, and arrive over England to find a solid cloudbank underneath us—not a pretty prospect in a black-out.

We must have been in the region of Emden, not far from the Dutch frontier, when I saw the first interceptors, and I saw them in a curious way. They were just above an almost level cloudbank, so thick that the searchlights couldn't pierce it, but the lights were visible to me in the form of a ghostly glow. A number of these white 'ghosts' were prowling about, and I happened to be looking at one of them when I distinctly saw a small machine pass over it. I couldn't be certain, but I took it to be a Messerschmitt. It was followed by two more, which told me that there were at least three fighters in the air, probably looking for us. If there were three, I reasoned, no doubt there were more. The machines disappeared again into the darkness and for a few minutes I saw nothing; then, by a slice of bad luck, we were passing over a break in the clouds when a beam shot up and caught us fair and square. It struck me full in the face, and before I could turn away it had nearly blinded me.

The Blenheim swerved like a startled horse as Lance dragged it away, and I waited anxiously to see if our Messerschmitt trailers had spotted us. I hadn't long to wait. At first I could see nothing because, as I have said, I was temporarily blinded by the beam; but as my vision returned to normal I saw

two pairs of navigation lights on our starboard bow. It was impossible to tell how far away they were, but I fired a short burst in their direction to let Lance know that we were being attacked—or soon would be—for the Messerschmitts were certainly close enough to see the glow of our exhausts, which could not be hidden.

Lance indicated that he had heard, and understood the danger, by pushing the nose of the machine down and racing at a steep angle for the clouds, which were several thousand feet below us; this, no doubt, was the wisest thing he could do, for the last thing we wanted was to engage in a combat. In the clouds we should be safe from anything except collision with another plane.

We went down at what must have been a good three hundred miles an hour. Still keeping watch, I saw a fighter coming up from below in a terrific zoom. Its navigation lights went out. A moment later I saw his guns flashing, so I replied with a long burst. One or two bullets hit the Blenheim; one or two of mine must have gone pretty near my target, for the Messerschmitt swerved away and disappeared. Faintly, I could hear another gun chattering; it seemed to be behind us; but the fellow was out of my field of fire and I could do nothing about it.

The last two or three minutes before we plunged into the clammy embrace of the cloud were pretty hot. It was an eerie business, firing at the black shapes that were now swarming around us. Several more shots hit us, but whether they did any damage or not I could not tell. At any rate, the machine was still under control so I knew that Lance was all right. All the same I wasn't sorry when we levelled out inside the cloud, and there I hoped we should remain until we were well out over the North Sea.

Minutes passed, minutes during which I could only stand and gaze blankly at the vapour that hemmed us in like a blanket. I sensed rather than felt the machine losing height, and when, about twenty minutes later, we glided into clear air, I could hardly repress a yell of triumph, for there, a few hundred feet below us, lay the sea, as placid as a lake, and glistening dully where the starlight reached it. Not a vessel of any sort could I see, although this did not necessarily mean that none were there, for, naturally, no lights would be shown. Still, it looked as if our troubles were over. I say 'looked' because, in point of fact, they were not.

It was the Doctor who gave me the unwelcome information that he thought something was wrong by coming up to me and shouting in my ear that there was a strong smell of petrol in the cabin. I hurried down. Smell! The place reeked of petrol. It was obvious that either the tank or a petrol lead was leaking, and I lost no time in letting Lance know about it. It

seemed that one of the bullets fired at us had found a lucky billet after all. He raised his eyes to mine and merely shrugged his shoulders in a manner which signified that he could do nothing about it—which, of course, was true enough. He held the machine on its way. There was nothing else he could do.

‘How far do you think we are from home?’ I asked, after a while.

‘Forty miles.’

‘A quarter of an hour’s flight.’

‘About that.’

Our prospects did not look bright, for even if we lasted for a quarter of an hour, which seemed unlikely, we should only reach the coast, and that did not necessarily mean a landing ground. It seemed to me, therefore, that our flight would end in one of three disasters. The aircraft might catch fire at any moment due to the escaping petrol gas being ignited by the exhaust—a not improbable event. If this did not happen, either we should be flung into the sea or pile up in a heap against a cliff, on the beach, or just beyond. My paramount sensation at that moment was not so much fear as one of profound disappointment that after having got so far, in the face of innumerable dangers, we were to come unstuck so near to home.

I remained by Lance, one eye on the altimeter, which now registered only a thousand feet, and the other—so to speak—on the point where the coast should appear, counting the minutes as they passed, knowing that each one brought us nearer to safety. And as I watched, sure enough I saw the dark outline of the coast take shape.

I was just beginning to hope that we might get through after all when one of the engines coughed, and coughed again. A moment later the other choked in sympathy. There was a series of violent backfires, and then the drone of the engines died away. Our nose went down, and I knew that we were ‘for it.’ I kicked off my shoes in readiness.

A couple of minutes later the Blenheim struck the cold face of the North Sea in a cloud of spray. Lance made a good pancake landing, so we didn’t turn turtle as I feared we might, and as we certainly should have done had the sea been rough. As it was, the aircraft settled down on the water and floated, held up by the air in the wings and empty tank.

‘Tough luck,’ observed Lance philosophically. ‘We’re within a couple of miles of the shore.’

‘Did you send out an S O S?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t know the code, and a message in clear English might bring a German E-boat along, or an enemy bomber.’

‘True enough,’ I admitted despondently.

‘Maybe something will come along,’ said Lance cheerfully. ‘After all, these coastal waters are stiff with patrol boats. It’s quite on the boards that somebody on the shore heard us come down. Let’s see if we can find the signalling pistol and some flares.’

There was no difficulty about that, and we soon sent a light soaring skyward. A minute later I fired another, and so I went on while the machine settled deeper and deeper in the water.

‘It’s no use,’ I said, when I had fired the last cartridge. ‘You’d have thought the people on shore would have kept some sort of look-out,’ I added bitterly.

To tell the truth I was thinking more about the unconscious pilot and Doctor Colburg than myself. Lance and I were both pretty useful swimmers, and there was still a hope that if the tide was right we might reach the shore. The pilot would have no chance at all. I didn’t know if Doctor Colburg could swim, so I asked him, and was not surprised when he said, ‘No.’ He was quite calm about it.

‘We shall float for a few more minutes,’ observed Lance, who, as usual, was the prince of optimists when things were looking just about as black as they could be. ‘Something will come along,’ he said confidently.

And sure enough it did. It was only just in time, though, for we were squatting on the top of the fuselage with the rest of the machine awash. A patrol motor-boat not only found us but nearly ran us down. We heard, later, that our signals had been seen by a shore station, and a radio signal had been sent to the boat. What a relief it was to hear English voices again after hearing nothing but German for days that seemed like weeks. I could hardly believe that we had only been away for three days.

Wet through, we were hauled aboard the motor-boat and soon transported to a naval base ashore, where we were provided with dry clothes and other comforts. The wounded pilot was taken to the sick bay, and a little while later we were gratified when the Medical Officer came in to tell us that he was not seriously wounded, and should soon be all right. As a matter of detail I went to see him a few days later and told him the story of our escape. He said he was sorry that he had missed all the ‘fun.’ The last thing he remembered was gliding down into the landing field as arranged. In the circumstances that was a pretty stout effort on his part.

Well, that is really all there is to tell. Lance got in touch with General Carteret on the telephone, with the result that an order came through for us to be taken at once by road to London. In view of the time—it was now the early hours of the morning—we went to his house, taking Doctor Colburg with us, where we told the story of our adventures.

After congratulating us on the success of our mission, and the Doctor on his escape, the General expressed his astonishment at the speed with which we had accomplished our task.

‘I could hardly believe it when I learned that you were back,’ he remarked, looking at me.

‘I could hardly believe it myself,’ I told him frankly—which made him laugh.

‘What do you think of the Secret Service now?’ he inquired.

‘I’m afraid anything else would seem tame in comparison, sir,’ I answered.

‘Then you’d like to carry on?’

‘That’s what I’m hoping.’

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘After this it shouldn’t be hard to fix you up—at any rate, I’ll do my best,’ he promised.

And there I must end the story, not by any means of my adventures in the Secret Service, but of how I began, and my first definite job. Any official recognition that I had gained over the New Forest affair was, if I may say so, capped by this latest trip. As a result of it I was soon enrolled as an active member of General Carteret’s staff, and thereafter had no complaint to make on the score of dearth of adventures. I still worked with Lance, and although we made several trips together, none will live in my memory more clearly than our rescue of Doctor Colburg, who, through our efforts, was able to continue his work in that field of research from which he had been snatched by the Nazi agents.

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.

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[The end of *Sinister Service* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]