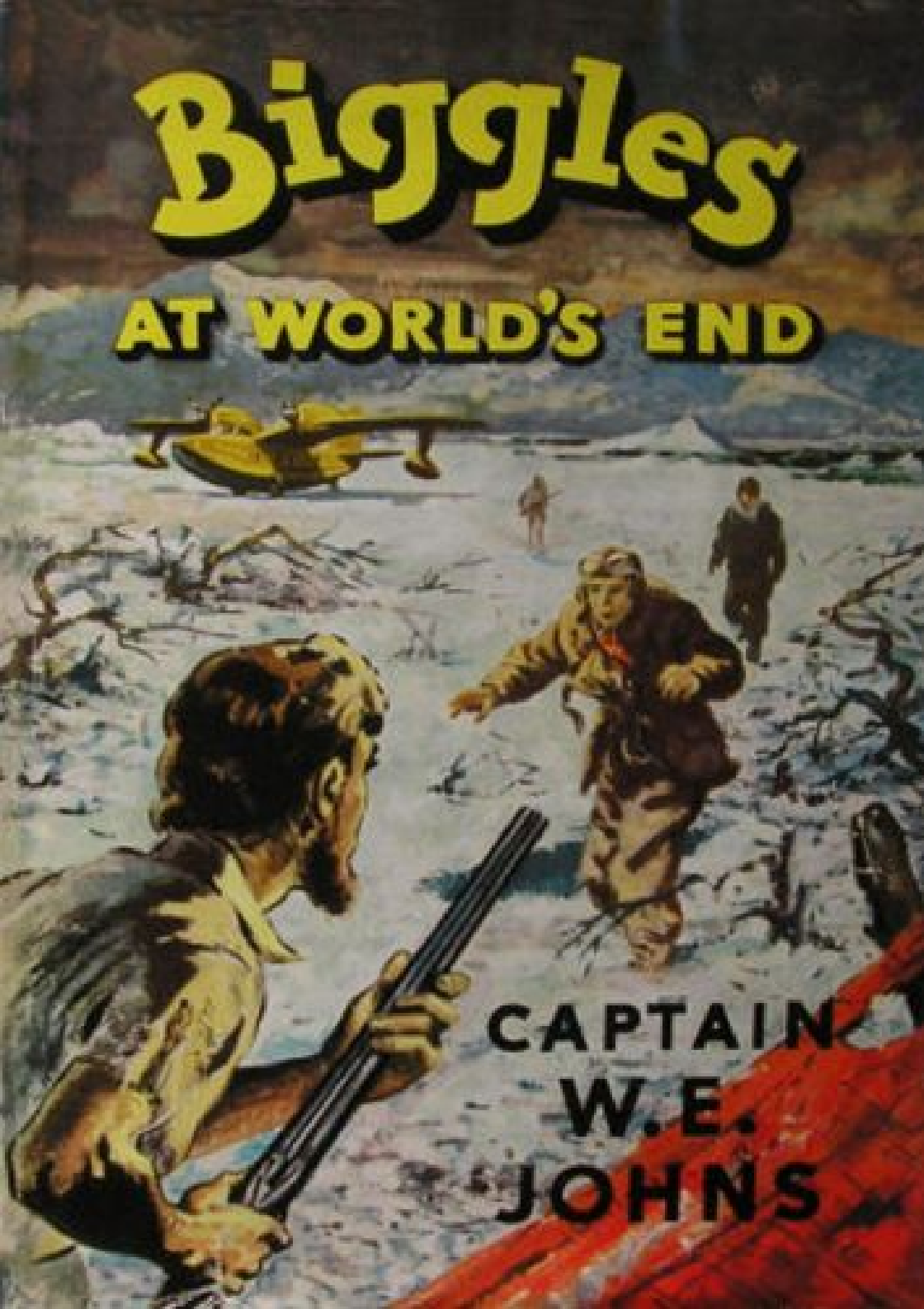
Biggles

AT WORLD'S END



CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

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BIGGLES AT WORLD'S END

Biggles of the Air Police has been called upon to fly over many lands, but on this assignment he must not only pit his wits against a formidable opponent but do so in what is acknowledged the most treacherous climate on earth for any type of craft, land, sea or air

BIGGLES AT WORLD'S END

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CAPT. W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Leslie Stead

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FOREWORD

TIERRA DEL FUEGO—LAND OF FIRE

To obviate breaks in the following narrative here are some facts the reader should know about the southernmost tip of the continent of South America which Ferdinand Magellan, the great Portuguese navigator and discoverer of the sixteenth century, named Tierra del Fuego, by reason of the signal fires he saw burning ashore as he made his celebrated and hazardous voyage from the Atlantic to the Pacific through the Strait that bears his name. He was the first man to make the passage.

Before the completion of the Panama Canal in 1920 a ship moving from one ocean to the other had to make the dangerous trip round 'The Horn', and a sailor having done this had something to boast about. Between the mainland and the maze of islands that lie south of it runs the Strait discovered by Magellan in 1520, three hundred and fifty miles long and between two and seventeen miles wide. The names of some of the jigsaw pattern of islands and channels speak for themselves: The Furies; Famine Reach; Mount Misery; Desolation Island; Gulf of Sorrows.

Far from being a Land of Fire, this place where the two oceans meet is a land of ice, of savage mountains, gale-lashed cliffs, mighty fjords and terrifying glaciers which crunch and crackle under their weight of ice and cast great masses of it into the sea. In a word, this is the supreme desolation, with the worst climate in the world. Nearly every day of the year it rains, icy rain lashed by furious gales. It is no matter for wonder that much of this inhospitable area has still to be explored. And no wonder this bleak and lonely land has sometimes been called the End of the World. As far as civilization is concerned, it is. Certainly it has been the graveyard of more ships than any other place on earth. One can travel for weeks through the gloomy channels between the islands without seeing any sign of life. Animals are rare, for even in 'summer' the ice never entirely disappears. When Magellan went through, his famished crew finished by eating the brine-soaked leather parts of their equipment.

When Charles Darwin, the famous English naturalist, went through the Strait in the ship *Beagle*, in 1831, he found a few wretched natives, called

Alakalufs, eking out a precarious existence on the islands, living on mussels and carrion washed up by the waves. Practically naked, sleeping on the wet ground like animals, always on the move in an endless search for food, he thought they were the lowest type of humanity on earth. Compared with them the Eskimo lived a life of luxury. He wrote: 'These poor wretches are stunted in growth, their faces hideous, their skins filthy and greasy, their voices discordant and their actions violent.' He also said: 'One sight of this dreadful coast is enough to make a man dream for a week of shipwreck, peril and death.' In his journal we find: 'The distant channels between the mountains appeared from their gloominess to lead beyond the confines of this world.'

In the Hydrography Records we read: 'Nowhere does the weather change more quickly or more violently. In no part of the world, the whole year round, is there worse weather. Winter and summer alike, rain, hail, snow and wind are absent only for brief periods. Ice is always present.'

It is not surprising that tourists are rare, although at least there are no flies or mosquitoes. The weather, it seems, is too much even for them!

However, between March and May there may be brief periods of clear skies; and the islands are not entirely destitute of vegetation. There are forests of antarctic birch, pines, willows, moss and lichens.

The territory, both the mainland and the islands, belongs partly to Chile and partly to the Argentine. Magellanes, until recently called Punta Arenas (and as it still appears as such on most maps we shall use that name) is the chief town, with a population of about twenty-five thousand. It is in Chile, and is the most southerly town in the world. It is the centre of the great Patagonian sheep and wool industry. Flocks of forty thousand are not uncommon. This business is chiefly in the hands of a mixed community of Europeans, including British.

With the opening of the Panama Canal the prosperity of Punta Arenas as a store depot and coaling station declined. Fewer ships call now. They nearly all take the shorter and easier route through the Canal.

It was to these inhospitable shores that Biggles was sent on a mission which, while perhaps not resulting in the most spectacular of his adventures, called for more than ordinary skill in airmanship and produced natural hazards that—as he himself put it—were enough to drive any pilot round the bend.

CHAPTER 1

A MATTER OF HISTORY

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND, chief of the Air Police based on Scotland Yard, leaned back in the chair behind his desk and with the tips of his fingers together regarded his senior operational pilot with the faint smile which Biggles had come to associate with a difficult question and perhaps an even more difficult assignment.

Biggles, who had been sent for, pulled up a chair, sat in it and reached for a cigarette from the box which had been pushed towards him. 'All right, sir, tell me the worst,' he requested sadly. 'I can take it.'

'How would you like to go on a treasure hunt?'

'I wouldn't.'

'You seem definite about it. Why not?'

'Because more often than not it means a lot of hard work for nothing.'

'I see. In that case I'd like to ask you another question. You probably know Erich von Stalhein better than anyone.'

'I should,' confirmed Biggles, grimly.

'If he made a statement supported by nothing but his bare word would you believe him?'

'Yes.'

'You would?'

'Most certainly.'

'In spite of his record?'

'If he gave me his word I'd take it in spite of anything. As for his record, mine through German eyes would look just as questionable.'

'Your confidence in a man whom we know has spent most of his life as a spy would surprise most of the people who know how often you've nearly killed each other.'

'Which means they're not judges of character. I know von Stalhein. What may be even more to the point, I know his type.'

‘He has on occasion pulled some murky tricks.’

‘So have I if it comes to that, although it could depend on what you mean by murky. It’s all a matter of which side you happen to be on and the methods you’ve been taught to employ.’

‘Well?’

‘Hauptmann von Stalhein is a Prussian, which means that by nature and by training he believes in ruthlessness plus efficiency as the best means of getting what he wants. But that doesn’t make him a liar. As an officer coming from an old military family his pride wouldn’t allow him to sink as low as that, which is why he was bound eventually to come to loggerheads with his late employers on the other side of the Iron Curtain whose clocks are set to tick on lies and hypocrisy. I knew he wouldn’t be able to stomach that for long; in fact I told him so. If he gave me his word I’d accept it, just as he would, I’m sure, accept mine. In that respect our codes are pretty much alike. But what is all this about? Do I understand he’s made a confession of some sort?’

‘Not a confession. Call it a statement.’

‘Voluntarily?’

‘Yes.’

‘He came to this country on the understanding that he wouldn’t be asked to rat on his previous associates. That, considering what they did to him, is a fair indication of the sort of man he is.’

‘He hasn’t ratted on anyone. What he told us came out of the blue. He just thought we might be interested.’

‘Are we?’

‘We most certainly are.’

‘Nothing to do with the Iron Curtain?’

‘Possibly indirectly, but that’s only surmise. Actually, as the information he has given us dates back to the first world war it’s really a matter of history.’

‘Does this in some way hook up with me?’

‘It might. Or let us say you might be involved. That’s for you to decide.’

Biggles nodded sombrely. ‘Ah! Now we’re getting there. Carry on, sir. What’s the job?’

‘It’s a long story, but you’ll have to be patient and listen if you’re to get a grasp on the set-up. Help yourself to cigarettes.’

‘Thanks. Where do we go?’

‘To one of the few parts of the world over which you have not, so far I know, flown. Tell me. Do you remember a German battleship that made front page news for some time in 1914-15?’

‘The *Emden*?’

‘No. A sister ship. The *Dresden*.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘If I knew the name I’ve forgotten it. It means nothing to me.’

‘In that case I shall have to refresh your memory. You must remember the sea battle of Coronel, off the coast of Chile, where a German squadron under Admiral Graf von Spee gave us a nasty smack in the eye by wiping out an inferior British fleet under Admiral Cradock.’

Biggles nodded. ‘That rings a bell. And shortly afterwards von Spee’s lot was wiped out at the Battle of the Falkland Islands. Von Spee went there to mop up our naval base and coaling station at Port Stanley. He found some of our boys in blue waiting for him. Right?’

‘Correct. The Admiralty had anticipated the move and rushed out two of our latest battleships, the *Invincible* and *Inflexible*. Actually they would have arrived too late had not von Spee stopped to fill his coal bunkers from a British collier. The coal had to be man-handled and it took him three days. That’s the luck of war. When he got to the Falklands he found, as you say, the boys in blue waiting. Outgunned and outclassed for speed he hadn’t a hope. His fleet was blown out of the water with the exception of one ship, the *Dresden*, which managed to get away by having the good fortune to find a bank of fog. Even so, with the Navy hunting for her she hadn’t much hope of getting back to Germany, wherefore her captain dived into the labyrinth of islands round Tierra del Fuego, and there remained in hiding for three months in spite of the efforts of our ships to find her. We knew she was there.’

‘Did they ever find her?’

‘Not while she was there, which should give you an idea of what a fantastic maze of islands and creeks and narrow channels it is. Eventually shortage of stores, particularly coal, caused her to leave. She slipped out and managed to reach Juan Fernandez, in the Pacific—Robinson Crusoe’s island—before our cruisers, *Kent* and *Glasgow*, caught up with her. Then it was all over bar the shouting. That was the end of the last German warship left on the high seas.’

‘Very interesting,’ murmured Biggles. ‘But what has this to do with me?’

‘I’m coming to that if you’ll bear with me a little longer. It was known that the *Dresden* had sunk some British merchant shipping although not as much as the more famous *Emden*, which was sunk in the Cocos Islands by the *Sydney*. What was not known at the time, and is not generally known even now, was that one of the merchant ships sunk by Captain Ludecke of the *Dresden* was the *Wyndham Star*, out of Fremantle, Australia, bound for England with a valuable cargo under her hatches. Captain Ludecke couldn’t have known that. What he really wanted was her coal, he having no other means of refuelling except from ships at sea. The question was, had he found and taken the more valuable stuff? Nothing was said about it and it has always been the general belief that he didn’t find it.’

‘What exactly was this valuable cargo?’ interposed Biggles.

‘About a ton and a half of bar gold and nearly half a ton of platinum from the Australian mines.’

A slightly supercilious smile crept over Biggles’ face. ‘Now I get the drift. Would I guess right if I said it now turns out that the *Dresden* did in fact lift the boodle?’

The Air Commodore returned the smile. ‘You would. You might also guess, without putting any great strain on your brain, what he did with it. He knew his chances of getting home were remote. In fact, his chances of survival were about the same as an ice-cream dropped in a bucket of boiling water. So rather than take the risk of the gold falling back into our hands what did he do with it?’

‘He hid it.’

‘Right again. I see you’re keeping pace with the story. During his enforced stay in the uncharted channels round the islands of Tierra del Fuego he unloaded the stuff. It may well be that he hoped, when Germany had won the war, to retrieve it; but things didn’t work out that way. That gold, of course, is our property—if it is still there and can be found.’

‘And this, I take it, is the fascinating piece of information von Stalhein has handed you.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s not known definitely that the gold is still where Captain Ludecke put it?’

‘Von Stalhein has never heard of its recovery and he’d be in a position to know if it had ever reached Germany.’

‘How did he learn about this, anyway?’

‘The story was told to him in the first place by an officer of the *Dresden* who survived. His luck was in, for having been wounded in the Falklands battle he had been put ashore at Juan Fernandez. From his sick bed he watched the *Dresden* shot to pieces. After the war von Stalhein lost touch with this officer, but quite recently he learned that he was one of the many still being held prisoner by the Russians. He tried to make contact with him but failed. It has now occurred to him that this officer, in order to secure his release, might tell the Russians about the gold. Indeed, just before he himself was thrown into prison he heard a whisper of an expedition being fitted out to fetch some gold from somewhere, and he thinks it may be a part of the same story.’

‘What made von Stalhein decide to tell us about this?’

‘As you know, since he has been here we have kept the wolf from his door by giving him translation work to do; so he may have spilled the beans out of some spirit of gratitude. From the casual way he mentioned the business he didn’t attach any particular importance to it. The thing being outside politics he said he felt free to speak.’ The Air Commodore smiled. ‘What he actually said was, “Bigglesworth might like to know about this. It offers a job that might be right up his street”.’

‘Very kind of him, I’m sure,’ said Biggles, cynically. ‘Did he ask for any reward for this captivating piece of information?’

‘No. But he may have hoped that if the gold was recovered he’d get something out of it.’

‘Does he know exactly where the gold was hidden?’

‘No. He was given only a rough description of the place.’

‘Why wasn’t he told the precise spot?’

‘For the simple reason that having been weaving about in uncharted channels not much wider than his ship Captain Ludecke himself had only a rough idea of where he was. It’s doubtful if he would ever have found his way out had it not been for a German ex-sailor who happened to be working in Punta Arenas and knew those storm-torn waters.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I see. Well, what does all this add up to? Are you suggesting that I go to this ungodly spot in the wild hope of finding myself tripping over a pile of yellow ingots?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘I should think not. Surely this is a job for the Navy. What would I do with two tons of metal if I did find it? Put it in an aircraft and knock the bottom out of it?’

‘Just a minute. There’s no need to get in a flap.’

‘I’m not getting in a flap; but if half a dozen cruisers couldn’t find the *Dresden* in this uncomfortable glory hole what chance would I have of finding a few lumps of gold probably tucked in a hole in the ground?’

‘It isn’t intended you should look for the gold—anyhow, in the first place. The first thing would be to ascertain if a Russian ship is already there on the same job. I admit that our cruisers couldn’t find the *Dresden*, but they were looking with a limited view, from sea level. A search from the air would be a very different matter.’

‘I’ll grant you that,’ agreed Biggles.

‘There is also the question of speed. It wouldn’t take you long to get there. It may be a case of the early bird catching the golden worm.’

‘So the idea is, I go down and park myself amongst the ice and snow and rocks to watch that no one uncovers the *cache* before one of our ships gets there?’

‘That, broadly speaking, is the scheme.’

‘How do I get there?’

‘Fly down the eastern seaboard of South America. There’s an air route all the way with landing grounds when you get there, even on Tierra del Fuego itself. You’ll find them shown on the latest maps.’

‘And what excuse do I give for flying the length of Argentina? People are getting sticky about foreign aircraft waffling about over their territory.’

‘It isn’t like you to be stuck for an excuse.’

‘To say I was going to Cape Horn merely for a joy ride would, I suspect, produce only a long coarse laugh. I’m not pining to see the inside of a South American gaol.’

‘All right. In case you were unable to think of a reasonable excuse I’ve turned up a genuine reason for the trip. Some months ago an English botanist named Carter, under the patronage of the Royal Horticultural Society, went with a friend to the islands to collect specimens of the flora. Nothing has been heard of them since they left Punta Arenas in a small craft which they hired there as the best way—indeed, the only way—of getting about. Foolishly, you may think, they went off without taking with them a local man who knew his way around. It would not be unreasonable if we sent an aircraft down to look for them, or find out, if possible, what has become of them.’

Biggles nodded, but without enthusiasm. ‘As you say, that sounds fair enough. I take it I could be provided with an official document to prove that

my purpose in this outlandish place was to find these two crazy plant collectors?'

'Of course. In fact, while you're on the spot you might as well have a shot at that, although they're probably dead by now.'

'Clubbed to death to make a dinner for the local natives?'

'That's most unlikely,' answered the Air Commodore, apparently taking the remark seriously. 'There are some natives, not many, and one of them once told a story of how, when food ran out, they knocked the old women on the head and ate them. But that was some time ago. I doubt if they're cannibals to-day, even if they ever were.'

'I hope you're right,' returned Biggles. 'I've thought of many ways I might end my career but never in a cooking-pot.' He got up.

'Well, what about it?' queried the Air Commodore.

'I'll go and have a look at the map, get the thing sized up, and let you know what I think.'

'All right. But don't be too long about it,' requested the Air Commodore.

At the door Biggles turned. 'By the way, sir. Should this project materialize what aircraft would I use?'

The question seemed to cause surprise. 'What's wrong with the machine you usually take on these missions? That old amphibian, the Sea Otter.'

Biggles came back, frowning. 'Have a heart, sir. There's nothing wrong with it—yet. That old flying tea chest has served us well and I wouldn't say a word against her; but she can't go on for ever, and if she let me down because I asked her to do too much I would only have myself to blame. Apart from the distance, from what you've told me about this objective it wouldn't be a jolly place to have a serious breakdown.'

'What about the Sunderland you took out to Oratovoa not long ago?'[A]

[A] See *Biggles on Mystery Island*.

'She's a bit on the big side for easy handling in enclosed waters and she takes a fair bit of room to get off. Why do we always have to borrow from the Air Ministry, anyway? If the government wants an Air Police section they'll have to provide it with equipment. What am I supposed to do—grow feathers? Surely it's time they gave us a nice new flying machine for long-

range work, something a bit more up to date than the obsolete crates we're expected to aviate.'

'What do you want—a jet?'

'Of what use would a jet be to me, the places I have to go and sometimes get down on? I couldn't expect always to find a mile-long concrete runway waiting for me.'

'What have you in mind?'

'A handy all-purpose job, say a five- or six-seater, with a couple of piston engines of proved reliability. Not too many gadgets. I still prefer to fly by the seat of my pants whenever it's possible.'

'I'll see what I can do about it,' promised the Air Commodore.

'I'm not complaining,' went on Biggles. 'But as you know, my job doesn't consist of making easy operational fights from one airfield to another with a staff of mechanics at each end. If the government wants an efficient service it's about time they spent some money on it.'

The Air Commodore agreed. 'As a matter of fact I heard the other day of a private venture job that should be about your weight. It's a prototype and may come on the market. It passed its tests and would have gone into production for the RAF had there not been a change of policy.'

'Do you mean the machine they named the Gadfly?'

'Yes.'

'I read about it. From the accommodation and performance figures it should suit us fine.'

'I'll make inquiries.'

'Thank you, sir.' Biggles went out.

CHAPTER 2

AN UNCIVIL RECEPTION

BIGGLES yawned. 'We shouldn't be long now, and I shan't be sorry when we get there,' he remarked to Ginger, who was sitting next to him at the controls of the Gadfly. 'That's the snag of these long-distance shows,' he went on. 'When things go wrong they're a pain in the neck. When everything goes right they become so confoundedly boring.'

'We can't have it both ways,' returned Ginger, tritely.

'On the contrary that's just what we do get,' argued Biggles. 'I doubt if there's a duller way of passing a day than sitting in an aircraft hour after hour doing nothing. Good weather sends you to sleep; bad weather gets you worried.'

'At least we have a comfortable machine in which to do nothing,' Ginger pointed out.

With that the casual conversation fizzled out. The plane droned on, heading south-west, thrusting the air behind it at ten thousand feet under a sky of cerulean blue flecked with wisps of wind-torn cirrus cloud.

Nearly a month had elapsed since 'Operation Recovery', to give the project its official name, had been discussed in the London headquarters; but it had been a period of activity, for Biggles had learned from experience that the success or failure of a long-distance flight depended as much on ground work before the start as the actual flying. Wherefore everyone engaged, and this was Biggles' entire staff, knew all there was to know and had made himself familiar with the objective as far as this was possible from maps, charts, Admiralty Instructions and the Meteorological Handbook on the locality.

In the matter of a new machine the Air Commodore had been as good, if not better, than his word. In view of the urgency and importance of the proposed mission, within three days authority had been obtained for the purchase of the Gadfly. Biggles had then put the machine through its acceptance trials, and being satisfied took delivery, with the result that it was now officially on the strength of the Air Police. After that, with the route

already mapped, documents prepared and preparations complete, the Gadfly was soon airborne on its first operation.

Actually, in appearance the machine bore little resemblance to the insect after which it had been named. It was an all-metal, high wing gull-shaped cantilever monoplane amphibian flying-boat of aluminium-alloy construction with twin thousand horse-power engines, horizontally opposed, installed in the wing. It had accommodation for two pilots, radio and navigation cabins, and seating capacity for six passengers. The endurance range was fifteen hundred miles, but an extra tank which had been fitted at Biggles' request gave it another five hundred. Side floats were attached to the wing by a single streamlined strut. Three-blade constant speed airscrews, retractable landing gear and hydraulic wheel brakes made up an aircraft that was easy to handle and promised to do efficiently any job within the capability of its performance. Biggles would have preferred a wooden hull, holding the view that this was less liable to be holed in the event of collision with an underwater obstruction. However, as he remarked, they couldn't have everything, and on the whole he was well satisfied with his new equipment. One thing in its favour was, being new, spare parts were available for both the airframe and the power units. So far the machine had lived up to expectations.

Biggles had taken the old route across the Atlantic, from Dakar in West Africa to Natal in Brazil. Thereafter the trunk line down South America had been followed via Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Bahia Blanca and Santa Cruz. After that the air had become progressively cooler as they approached Rio Gallegos, which had been their last port of call. The weather had been fine all the way, and as they were now in the month of April, in the southern summer, it might be expected to continue.

There had in fact been no trouble of any sort, technical or political, the documents with which Biggles had been provided smoothing the way in the matter of fuel, food and sleeping accommodation at each airport where a night had been spent. There had been no night flying. As Biggles told the others, Ginger, Bertie and Algy, they were not in all that hurry.

Perhaps the most important paper he carried, after the *carnet* which enabled him to buy fuel and oil on credit, was the one which related to the alleged purpose of the flight. This was to make a search for the missing botanists, Mr Carter and his companion, a man named, it had been ascertained by the Air Commodore, Barlow. Both were middle-aged men with experience of plant collecting in the Andes, but had never before been so far south. No further information had come in about them and the Society that had sponsored their trip was happy about the rescue flight, as they

assumed it to be. Biggles had of course every intention of looking for the missing men while he was on the spot, as a sideline to his real purpose for being there.

As far as this was concerned there was so little to go on that in his heart Biggles had not much hope of success. He had seen von Stalhein at his London flat, but all his old enemy could tell him was this: the cache was on the north side of a small island from the top of which, between two cone-shaped hills, it was possible, looking south-east, to see Mount Sarmiento, 7,200 feet, and beyond it, in line, the tip of Mount Italia, 7,700 feet. All this did was to indicate that the cache was in one of the channels towards the far end of the Magellan Strait, nearer the Pacific than the Atlantic ocean. Whether or not the spot had been marked von Stalhein did not know. Nothing could have been more vague, for as Biggles pointed out, there was no suggestion of distance. The two mountains named might be anything from ten to fifty miles from the island where the gold had been unloaded.

'All we have to do, old boy, is to trot up all the bally hills until we find the one from which we can spot the jolly old mountains lined up, if you see what I mean,' Bertie had remarked, cheerfully.

'You can do the trotting,' Biggles had told him. 'I'm nothing for mountains, anywhere or at any time.'

'I'd make a small bet that we shall never need a spade or shovel,' Algy had offered.

On the way south there had been some curiosity by customs officials about a spade, shovel and crow-bar, which Biggles had included in the equipment. In reply to questions about the purpose for which these tools were intended he pointed out that should the missing botanists be found dead they would have to be buried, and he would prefer not to scratch a grave with his bare hands. This turned into a grim joke what might have caused embarrassment, for the real purpose of the tools was an entirely different matter. Biggles himself was doubtful if they would be needed, but he thought it advisable to be prepared. As he said to the others, they might have to do some digging, and they would look silly if they had nothing with which to make a hole.

Incidentally, their small-arms, pistols and a rifle, they were allowed to keep as they were in transit. Knowing the import of firearms was forbidden in the countries through which they would have to pass they had declared them to the Customs officers, and this correct procedure had, as so often happens, paid off. They were merely requested not to use them except in the unlikely event of being attacked by man or beast. They would have to show

them on their way home to prove that they had not been sold in the country concerned.

Biggles' final instructions had been simple and explicit. Should the cache be located all he had to do was make a signal home when a ship would be sent out to collect the bullion. It would of course be too heavy for the aircraft to carry, and in any case its transportation by air would almost certainly lead to political difficulties. They would have to wait for the ship to arrive in order to point out the spot. Should a foreign ship or party be observed obviously conducting a search a prearranged signal was also to be sent to the Air Commodore.

The Gadfly was now on the last leg of its long journey to Punta Arenas, where Biggles hoped to establish a base from which to make survey flights over the neighbouring land masses and the tortuous channels between them.

Here it should be explained that Tierra del Fuego, the large island that forms the tip of the South American continent, is divided into two parts, the eastern half belonging to Argentina and the western half to Chile. Each country has its own terminal airport, the Argentine air route (which Biggles had so far followed) ending at Rio Grande on the actual island of Tierra del Fuego. Punta Arenas is on the Chilean mainland, on the north side of the Magellan Strait, but Biggles had purposed using it for two reasons, the first being because it was by far the nearer to the area he proposed to search, and the second because Rio Grande, being on the open Atlantic coast, is more exposed to the fury of the gales for which these waters are notorious. In effect, this meant that when he landed he would be on Chilean soil for the first time. After taking off from Rio Gallegos he had for a little while been over Argentina, but having crossed the frontier he was now flying over Chilean territory. It was only a short run, a matter of a hundred and fifty miles, to Punta Arenas, the ultimate objective.

Ahead now appeared a wide stretch of water which he knew must be the famous Magellan Strait, and the purple smudge behind it, the coast of Tierra del Fuego. He made a remark to Ginger to that effect, at the same time retarding the throttle to drop off some altitude.

To Ginger the difference in the temperature was already noticeable even in the cockpit, the more so no doubt because the Gadfly had come straight down from the tropical north. He surveyed the terrain below with interest, and while what he saw may have been impressive it was not conducive to peace of mind in view of what had to be done. Although he had spent some time before the start making himself acquainted with the territory, as far as this was possible from books, in reality it looked even worse than he had imagined. Indeed, what he saw filled him with misgivings, if not alarm; and

the idea of looking for anything in such a chaos struck him as being futile. He could well appreciate why the *Dresden* had not been found.

From two thousand feet the place looked like what it had been called, and in fact was: the end of the earth. An apparently endless accumulation of rocks, water and snow, flung down without any sort of order. Peaks and ridges of rock, some high and some low but all black and forbidding except where they were streaked with snow, cut everywhere into a sombre sky. On the water, white areas that could only mean ice, had been piled up by the pressure of wind into many bays and creeks. Mist hung like cotton wool in valleys. To the east, where the Strait broadened into the Atlantic, waves were leaping to a tremendous height as they fought the stubborn land with savage and relentless fury. Even the vegetation that had secured a foothold on some of the lower slopes looked grim and repellent.

'Not too hot, old boy,' said Bertie, putting his head into the cockpit. 'Glad I brought my winter woollies.'

'You'll need 'em,' Biggles told him, briefly.

The Gadfly went on losing height slowly, and presently, having followed the northern shore of the Strait, picked up the town of Punta Arenas and, conspicuous from its flat area, and the buildings on it, the airfield. A small air liner carrying Chilean registration letters stood near them.

Biggles made a landing on muddy ground, taxied on to the buildings and switched off. 'Well, we're here, anyway,' he said. 'Mind your p's and q's, everyone. You all know the drill. Whatever happens we must keep on good terms with these people or we shall have wasted our time coming here.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Algy.

'We'll check in and make known why we're here, for a start. After that we'll go into the town, and having found lodgings, ask if there's any recent news of Carter and Barlow, the botanists.'

'I don't know about botanists. They must be fanatics to come to a place like this to look for buttercups and daisies, and what have you,' muttered Ginger.

'It's all a matter of taste,' returned Biggles. 'Some people would rather find a new flower than a gold mine. Let's get out and stretch our legs. I prefer sitting to standing, but one can have too much of it. Let's hope someone here speaks English.'

Having got out, as they walked towards what appeared to be the central office a man emerged and strode purposefully to meet them; and before many words had been spoken Ginger perceived they had struck officialdom in the place where it was least to be desired. Indeed, even before the man

spoke he saw from his truculent expression and a pompous manner that they were regarded with disfavour. A powerfully built type of perhaps fifty years of age, he wore a faded dark blue uniform. His eyes, under shaggy iron-grey brows, were the colour of ice, and as cold. An untrimmed beard, well streaked with grey, created an impression that he had once been a seaman. Between his teeth he held a curly pipe with a large bowl. He certainly did not look Latin, neither Chilean nor an Argentine, as was the case with a much younger man, also in uniform, who followed at a respectful distance.

The older man spoke. 'You are British,' he said, in good English, although the way he said it had the ring of a challenge.

To Ginger it seemed the question was unnecessary in view of the registration marks on the Gadfly.

'We are,' acknowledged Biggles.

'Huh.' There was a wealth of meaning in the ejaculation. 'You can't leave your machine here,' went on the official, curtly.

Biggles looked surprised. 'Why not?'

'You will be in the way of this one which is soon to leave.' The man indicated the liner.

'I'm sorry,' said Biggles. 'Where would you like me to put it?'

'Over there.' The man pointed.

By this time Ginger had realized that they were out of luck. The awkward nature of the official was all too evident, for the liner had ample room to manœuvre for its take-off. Why the man should take this attitude was not so clear.

They all waited while Biggles walked back to the Gadfly, and having moved it to the position ordered, returned.

'You stay long time?' was the next question, put harshly by the official.

'Perhaps. I'm not sure about that,' answered Biggles.

'Why you come here?'

'I was on my way to your office to tell you. Are you the manager here?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' said Biggles, imperturbably. 'I have in my pocket a letter signed by the Chilean Secretary in London requesting the co-operation of Chilean officials in this country. Would you like to see it?'

The man's aggressive manner abated somewhat. 'Presently. What you do?'

'I have come to make a search for two missing English plant collectors.'

The airport manager smiled unpleasantly. ‘You waste your time. They are dead.’

‘Have their bodies been found?’

‘No.’

‘Then how do you know they are dead?’

‘How can they be alive?’

‘That is what I’ve come to find out.’

The man nodded. ‘We will talk in my office. But first the Customs.’ Turning, he gave an order to his assistant, in his own language, to search the machine. Ginger knew enough Spanish to understand that.

‘*Si*, Señor Gontermann,’ acknowledged the young man respectfully. He was evidently the assistant manager, and had charge of Customs arrangements.

‘We shall of course obey your orders while we are here,’ said Biggles, evenly.

As they followed the manager to his office Biggles said softly to the others: ‘Pity about this. I’m afraid we’ve struck an unpleasant customer.’

‘What’s biting him?’ asked Algy, indignantly.

Biggles shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t know. If you asked me to make a guess I’d say, from his name, he’s a German, or of German parentage. He’s got a chip on his shoulder about something. Something to do with the war, maybe. Anyway, he has the say-so here, so keep civil tongues in your heads, no matter how he behaves, or we might as well go home—that’s if he’d let us.’

The pilots and crew of the liner came out followed by half a dozen or so passengers.

Having watched it take off and take up a course north-west they followed the manager to his office.

CHAPTER 3

DISTURBING NEWS

THERE is no need to narrate in detail the conversation, most of it argument, that went on for more than an hour in the airport manager's office. While Gontermann did not exceed his official duties he was as difficult as was possible for a man in such a position to be. But, as Biggles said afterwards, he might have been worse had it not been for the letter provided by the Chilean office in London, which he showed with the rest of his credentials. Incidentally, as he was travelling purely as a civilian there was, of course, no mention of his association with the police of Great Britain.

Whether Gontermann behaved in this churlish fashion with every visiting aircraft, or whether it was simply because they were British, there was as yet no means of knowing. Gontermann knew about the missing botanists but made it clear from his manner that he couldn't care less about them. However, he agreed to allow them to use the airfield for the purpose of their search, stipulating that they were not to take aerial photographs. He gave no reason for this, possibly because there wasn't one, for national security could hardly come into the picture. The truth of the matter was, Ginger suspected, permission to use the airfield was only granted because it could not very well be refused, the travellers and their aircraft being in order according to International Aviation Regulations. It was used by few machines other than the regular service of the LAN (Linea Aerea Nacional) the government-owned company which operated from Santiago, the capital, in the north.

There was trouble about the weapons they carried. Biggles knew there would be. Gontermann wanted to impound them. He would, he said with studied politeness, give them a receipt for them and release them on their departure. Biggles argued that they had been allowed to pass through Brazilian and Argentine airports, and while he did not expect to use them he would feel safer for some sort of protection. In the event of mechanical trouble with the aircraft they might have to shoot something for food. In the end Gontermann said he would allow them to keep the guns provided import duty was paid on them. To this Biggles agreed.

There was another argument about the digging tools, the existence of which was reported by the young Chilean under-manager and Customs officer when he presented his list of contents. Biggles pointed out that should they find the dead bodies of the missing men they would have to bury them. He also said that as it was unlikely they would be able to see the bodies from the air they would make landings if suitable places could be found; in which case, should the machine become bogged, they would need tools to free it. Gontermann was obviously suspicious, and declared that as the visitors had not applied for a prospector's licence they were forbidden to explore for minerals. However, again he conceded the point, the reason being that there was no law against the importation of such tools.

The matter of their stay being settled, in an atmosphere that was anything but pleasant the party broke up, Gontermann getting into his car without another word and driving off towards the town.

Biggles breathed a sigh of relief and turned to the young Chilean officer who had watched the proceedings with an expression that suggested sympathy for the visitors. 'Is he always as difficult as that?' he asked, in Spanish.

The officer, smiling sadly, replied in English. 'It depends.'

'On what?'

'The nationality of the visitors.'

'Meaning he doesn't like Englishmen?'

'That's right.'

'He's a German, isn't he?'

'No, he's a Chilean, but his father, who married a local woman, was a German sailor who had served in the Imperial German Navy.'

'Perhaps that explains it.'

'He's a difficult man for anyone to get on with. He is much alone and spends all his spare time sailing in a little yacht which he keeps in the town. But don't worry. The staff here are good fellows and they'll give you service. They don't like him, either. He is what you would call a bit of a bully. You were unlucky to arrive to-day. He only came because it was the day for the big machine you saw to come.'

'Will he be here to-morrow?'

'I think not. I expect he will go sailing.'

'What's his Christian name?'

'Hugo.'

'And yours, if I may ask?'

‘Juan Vendez, I am always on duty, not that there is much to do. Few people come here, sometimes a prospector or a salesman, but mostly agents for wool and mutton. For the outward journey it may be an official going home on leave or a man who has had enough of the place going back to his own country.’

‘How is it that you speak English so well?’ inquired Biggles, curiously.

‘I lived in England for a year, also France and Germany, to learn the languages necessary for my work. This is an international port, you know, with many foreigners.’

‘Do you like the place?’

‘No. I come from the north where it is warm; but everyone in the Customs and Excise Service must take a turn of duty here because this is not a popular station and no one would volunteer for it.’

‘I can believe that,’ murmured Ginger.

‘I have only a few months left to do, then I return to Santiago.’

‘Tell me, how can I get to the town?’ asked Biggles. ‘Is there a regular conveyance of any sort?’

‘No. With so few passengers such a service wouldn’t pay. One or two taxis may come out to meet incoming machines on the days they are due to arrive. I could telephone your hotel and they would send a car out for you.’

‘We haven’t fixed up anywhere yet.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I shall be going home presently and will take you in the car I use to go to and fro.’

‘Can you recommend an hotel—not too expensive?’

‘I know the very place that should suit you. It is small but clean, and is run by a woman from Scotland whose husband came here to farm sheep but was killed in an accident.’

‘That sounds like our cup of tea,’ said Biggles. ‘Thank you. That’s very kind of you. By the way, do you know anything about the two English plant collectors who came here, went off in a boat and did not return?’

‘I only know what was common gossip at the time. The matter is now forgotten. It is assumed they are dead. The man you should see is Mr Scott, a ship’s chandler near the new mole. Well, they still call it new although it was built in 1927. He will know as much as anyone because it was he who hired out the boat. Naturally, he was not pleased at losing it.’

‘We’ll go and see him,’ said Biggles.

Presently the amiable young officer drove them to the town, and while the absence of trees gave the place a somewhat forlorn aspect Ginger found

the streets surprisingly clean with many excellent shops on both sides of the broad main thoroughfare. There was a uniformity about the houses and he saw no large ones.

Vendez dropped them off at the hotel he had suggested, and there they were made welcome and provided with the accommodation they needed by a buxom and rather severe lady who had not lost her native accent. Very soon they were being served in a spotless dining-room with man-sized beef steaks, which met with general approval, for the keen atmosphere had given them all an appetite. Afterwards, over coffee and a cigarette, Biggles fell quiet.

'What's on your mind?' asked Algy, after a while.

'I'm thinking about this fellow Gontermann,' answered Biggles, pensively. 'We shall have to watch our step with him. He'd only need an excuse to start trouble. Frankly, I find myself wondering if his father had any connexion with the *Dresden* when she was hiding hereabouts. This man we saw this morning would know all about that affair and it might account for his dislike not only of us but of all Englishmen.'

'In other words, old boy, you think he may be suffering from the same complaint that caused dear Erich to get all worked up about the British?' guessed Bertie.

'Something of the sort. But the reason doesn't really matter. He dislikes us, and we shall do well to remember that.'

'I was thinking farther than that,' put in Ginger. 'Could this passion for sailing, as Vendez told us, have anything to do with the *Dresden*?'

'In what way?'

'He may, or his father may, have heard a whisper about the bullion the *Dresden* was carrying; in which case he might be looking for it.'

'I suppose that's possible.'

'If I'm right, he wouldn't take kindly to the idea of other people, which means ourselves, prowling about the islands for any reason whatsoever. Apart from the gold, we might wonder what *he* was doing. Is that why he was so disagreeable this morning?'

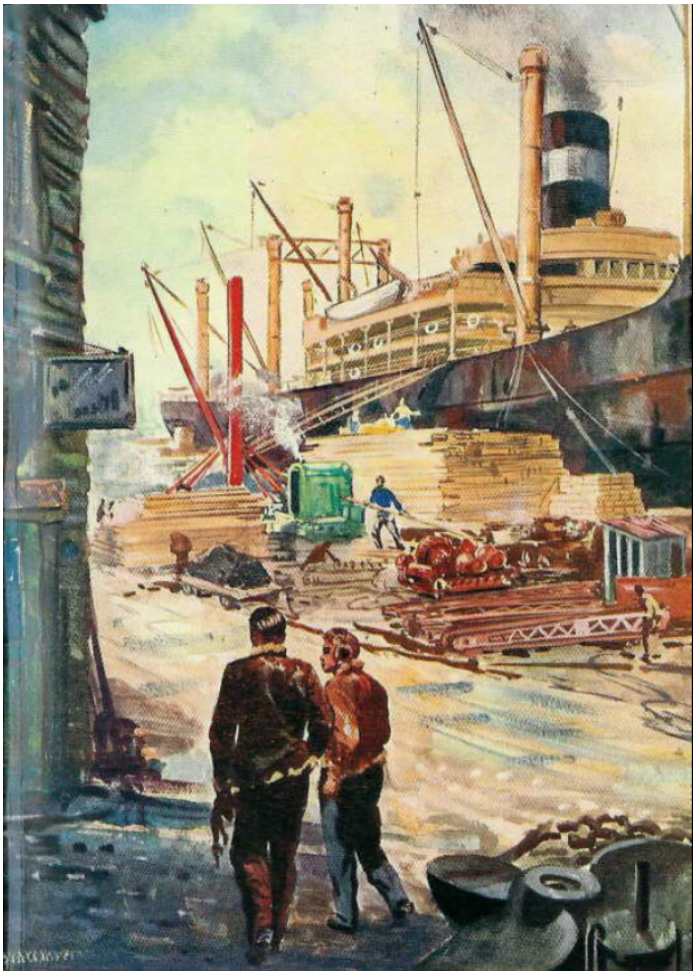
Biggles drew on his cigarette. 'Could be. We should soon know if you're right.'

'Are we doing any more flying to-day?' asked Algy.

'No. We need a day off. I think the first thing is to have a word with this Mr Scott who hired Carter and Barlow their boat. If anyone has any ideas of

what may have happened to them he should be the man. Let's walk along.' Biggles got up.

Without any great difficulty they found the ship's chandler's establishment with its masses of cordage and the reek of tar. It was, as Vendez had told them, near the mole, where two rust-streaked refrigerator ships, one of them flying the Red Ensign, were busy loading from an extensive freezing plant innumerable carcases of frozen mutton. The odd thought struck Ginger that he might one day, after he had arrived home, find himself eating a chop from one of those same dead sheep.



The ship's chandler's establishment was near the mole (page 40)

They went into the shop and made themselves known to the proprietor whose accent again revealed the land of his birth. Having explained what

they had come to do Biggles asked Mr Scott if he could give him any information that would assist them in their search.

Mr Scott soon made it clear that this was a sore subject with him, although he was willing to tell them as much as he knew. The two men, he assured them, must have been out of their minds, and he must have been out of his mind to let them have his boat, a ten-ton ketch named the *Seaspray*, fitted with a small Petter engine. He had suggested they took a pilot with them but they declined on account of the extra expense. They had said they were both experienced yachtsmen and had no fear of not being able to handle the boat. To handle sail at the Isle of Wight was one thing, declared Mr Scott, bitterly; to handle it here was another matter altogether. However, as the men were dead he wouldn't say unkind things about them.

'Why are you so sure they must be dead?' asked Biggles, although as a matter of fact he was of the same opinion.

'How could they be alive?' was the reply. 'They haven't come back. They had stores for a month, or six weeks at the outside. They couldn't live on nothing but sea birds even if they had any means of catching them. There's nothing else except mussels, and there aren't too many of them.'

'They didn't give you any idea of where they were going?'

'None at all. I doubt if they knew themselves. They just said they were going to cruise among the islands. The weather was fair at the time. They said if it got bad they'd come back.'

'And did it get bad?'

'Of course it did. It always does. I told them it would. It never stays fair for long. But they were so cocksure of themselves, the poor fools. I should have known better than to let them go.'

'What do you supposed happened to them?'

'A score of things could have happened. They might have been swamped, or capsized trying to get ashore somewhere; or maybe crushed flat by growlers. Places like Icy Reach are always full of 'em.'

'Growlers?'

'Aye. Lumps of ice the size of a hoose, or larger, that break off the glaciers and fall into the water. That's always happening. You'll hear it if you don't see it.'

'You know what we're hoping to do, Mr Scott. Can you give me any advice?'

'Aye. The same as I gave Carter and Barlow. Go home. You don't know what you're taking on.'

‘I can’t do that without making an effort. I was sent here to do a job and if it’s humanly possible I shall do it.’

‘Have it your own way.’

‘Are we likely to see any natives?’

‘Why?’

‘They might be able to give us some information.’

‘You might see some begging-canoe Indians, as we call ’em, in Indian Reach. A few of ’em hang about there hoping passing ships will throw ’em some food. They need it, poor devils, but don’t give ’em anything.’

Biggles looked astonished. ‘Why not?’

‘Because if you do you’ll never get rid of ’em. The women and kids wouldn’t get any of it, anyway. The men would scoff the lot. They’re a dirty, selfish lot.’

‘They’re not dangerous?’

‘They haven’t much chance to be.’

‘If they’re so badly off why don’t they come here?’

‘Scared, I reckon.’

‘Why should they be scared?’

‘That’s an old story. Years ago, when people started raising sheep, the Indians, who had never seen as much food walking about in their lives, started to help themselves to the sheep, with the result that they were hunted like wolves and nearly exterminated. I suppose they haven’t forgotten it.’

‘So that was it. Tell me this. Had your boat, the *Seaspray*, any distinguishing features that would enable us to recognize her if we happened to find any wreckage?’

‘Not much. She was painted white and had dark red canvas. The fores’l had been patched a bit with a lighter red. She was the only craft here with sails that colour.’

‘One last question. Can you think of any reason why Hugo Gontermann, the airport manager, should have treated us as if we were a gang of crooks when we landed this morning?’

Mr Scott pursed his lips. ‘I don’t know him well. He seems to be a cross-grained fellow by nature. Perhaps because he comes from German stock he has a particular grievance against anybody British. It was before my time, but the story here is his father served in the *Dresden*, which as you may know, ran in here to hide after the Battle of the Falklands. You’ve heard of that, no doubt. Gontermann’s mother was a local girl and he was born and brought up here. During Hitler’s war he disappeared and someone told me

he'd gone to Germany to enlist. It seems he got in the Air Force, and had become a station commander, or something of that sort. Anyhow, when he came back after the war he seemed to know a lot about planes, and that, with his knowledge of the weather and water here, got him the job at the airport. He was the right man for it. He keeps mostly to himself. Goes sailing a lot on his own. He's a good sailor, and what's more important, he knows these waters as well as any living man. Some people reckon he was a German spy, but I don't know anything about that, except his sympathies are German. But that doesn't make him a spy. You'll see his boat, *Der Wespe*, tied up at the wharf.'

'Thank you Mr Scott. Now I understand, although why he should hold the war against us I don't know. After all, if his father served in the *Dresden* he must have helped to send six thousand British blue-jackets to the bottom at Coronel.'

'Aye. I'd think that way myself.'

'Is that all you can tell us?'

'Yes, except don't trust the weather for five minutes. A squall can come from anywhere. If you stay here you'll see what I mean.'

As there was nothing more to be said, having thanked the Scot for his assistance Biggles led the way out. 'So now we know why Gontermann didn't greet us with a smile,' he remarked, as they walked on. 'The fact that his father served in the *Dresden* is probably a coincidence. As far as I know it was the only German battleship that came here. At all events, it explains how Gontermann happens to be here. If he served in the *Luftwaffe* he'll know all there is to know about flying, so we'd better keep that in mind.'

On the way back to the hotel Biggles stopped at a garage and bought, very cheaply, a second-hand and rather dilapidated old Ford car which he said should be good enough to run them to and from the aerodrome.

'To-morrow,' he said, as he drove it home, 'we'll have a look round from topsides to see if things are as bad as they say they are.'

CHAPTER 4

A FLIMSY CLUE

THE following morning found the party at the aerodrome making ready for the first reconnaissance, Biggles going over the machine with meticulous care while the others attended to the topping up of the tanks. The morning air had a nip in it, but the weather was fair, or as fair as could be expected, with a sky mostly blue although some fleecy clouds were being hounded across it by a sharp easterly breeze. To the satisfaction of everyone Gontermann was not there, no regular machines being scheduled to arrive, but Vendez turned up before they had finished and was as helpful as he could be. He told them Gontermann had gone sailing; he had seen his orange-sailed, black-painted boat, *Der Wespe*, which being translated from the German meant the Wasp—rather appropriately, Ginger thought—making good time down the Strait.

As soon as the Gadfly was in the air, still climbing, Biggles also headed down the Strait, this being the one conspicuous landmark on which they could rely until such time as others could be fixed. There was not a ship of any size in sight, although a small sailing boat, which from its orange sails they took to be Gontermann's craft, was heading in the same direction as themselves, the course being almost due south. Some distance ahead the Strait took a sharp turn, running north-west to the Pacific.

Biggles took the Gadfly up to ten thousand feet to get a comprehensive view of the entire landscape, and from that altitude it presented a magnificent although somewhat alarming spectacle of a world untouched by human hands. They might, Ginger thought, have been flying over a new planet. Unfortunately the tops of most of the mountains were wreathed in mist—unfortunately because Ginger, who was sitting beside Biggles with the chart on his knees, was relying on these to get his bearings. He had hoped to be able to plot the two with which they were most concerned, Sarmiento and Italia, but that was obviously going to be difficult unless the breeze freshened sufficiently to tear away the curtains that hid them. Occasionally, here or there this did happen, to reveal a giant, glistening white under its blanket of eternal snow, a truly awe-inspiring sight, the more

so because he knew that none of these peaks had ever been climbed, and perhaps never would be. They usually occurred in regions marked on his chart *inesplorado*—unexplored.

He could not see one object to suggest they were still in the land of the living, but one landmark he thought he recognized was the largest of several glaciers that threaded their way through the mountains. This was the great white river of Vergera, composed of enormous masses of ice, ages old, which threw fascinating blue shadows. He could see the splash of the water when huge lumps broke off the moraine to fall into the water below. The bay at the mouth of the glacier was dotted with islands of blue and white ice. There could be no landing there. In fact, he was worried to see what Mr Scott had called 'growlers' on many stretches of otherwise open water.

'What do you think of it?' asked Biggles.

'Awful,' answered Ginger, grimly. 'We shall never make anything of this.'

'I must admit I'm inclined to agree with you,' returned Biggles, cutting the throttle and beginning to lose height.

'What are you going to do?'

'Go down to an altitude more in keeping with what we're supposed to be doing. I've lost sight of the *Wasp*, but at this height Gontermann will be able to see us and he may wonder what we're doing up here. I doubt if we could pick out St Paul's Cathedral if it was down there, much less two castaways.'

'Do you seriously expect to find those two plant hunters?'

'I'm keeping an open mind about it. Stranger things have happened. One thing you can rely on while we're here. I'm not taking any short cuts through clouds. Too many of 'em are solid in the middle. I suppose you couldn't pick out Sarmiento or Italia?'

'Not a hope. We shall only do that on an absolutely clear day—if such a thing ever happens here. What do you intend to do about it?'

'We shall have to work to some sort of plan.'

'How can you make a plan with this sort of stuff underneath you?'

'The only thing I can think of is to start combing the islands one by one from a low altitude. We'll start with one we can recognize from its shape. That should give us our bearings. As we finish each one you strike it off on the chart.'

Ginger looked aghast. 'That would take months, if not years. I can see nothing but islands. There must be thousands.'

‘You’re right. There *are* thousands. We might, with a little luck, strike the right one. Anyway, can you think of an alternative?’

‘No; unless it’s to locate some natives and ask them if they know anything.’

‘If we see any Indians I shall certainly do that, if we can find anywhere near to land.’

‘According to Mr Scott some usually hang about in their canoes in a stretch of open water called Indian Reach, to beg food from passing ships.’

‘That must be a slow business. I had a good look, in fact that’s why I went up to ten thousand, and I’m pretty sure that at the moment there isn’t a ship of any size in the Strait. That’s one thing we’ve established. I’ll send a cable to the Air Commodore to let him know that.’

‘Right away?’

‘No. Probably in a day or two. We’d better make certain. A ship, even a large one, lying tucked up in one of these narrow channels, would be hard to spot. You’ve got Indian Reach marked on your chart. We might as well go and have a look at it. If the sky should clear we’ll go up again and try to pick out those two mountains. If we can do that and bring them in line they should act as a pointer. If they could be seen looking south-east from the cache, lining them up from the north-west should give us the rough direction.’

‘The trouble is, there are too many confounded mountains,’ grumbled Ginger.

‘As a clue, a couple of mountains are pretty vague,’ conceded Biggles. ‘But there never was a treasure chart yet, that I’ve ever seen or heard of, that wasn’t vague. Where’s this Indian Reach place?’

Ginger studied the chart and gave the direction.

‘Keep your eyes open as we go,’ requested Biggles.

‘For what?’

‘Anything that looks as if it might be interesting. I’ll go down to about five hundred. I daren’t go any lower, but that should enable you to spot anything like the wreck of that ketch the plant hunters were using, or the smoke of a fire, for instance. Tell Algy and Bertie what we’re going to do. They can keep their eyes skinned, too.’

‘This looks like being a long business,’ muttered Ginger, when he returned.

‘I didn’t expect to do it in five minutes. When we’ve been here a month will be soon enough to grouse. We haven’t started yet. Is that straight piece

of water in front of us Indian Reach?'

'It should be, but I wouldn't swear to anything here. The place isn't exactly swarming with Indians, anyway. I can't see one.'

'Maybe they only show up when a steamer comes through. They'd see it a long way off from the high ground ashore. What's more important, can you see any growlers?'

'No, I can't see any ice at all in the water. As it's dead calm we should, I think, if there were any.'

'All right. Then let's try a landing and see what happens.'

Biggles lined up the aircraft for the longest approach possible and with Ginger holding his breath put it down without any difficulty on water which, protected by the high land around it, was as flat as the proverbial mill pond. He ran on a little way nearer to the rocky shore of the nearest island, switched off and took out his cigarette case.

'Now we've seen what it looks like we might as well relax for a few minutes and talk about it,' he remarked. 'Someone might get an idea.'

Bertie came forward. 'Not much use trying to think of ideas, old boy, when you're looking for a pin in a bally haystack.'

'We knew all about the pin and the haystack before we came here,' Biggles pointed out. 'So why bring that up? I wish you would all use your heads more and grumble less.'

'I see a canoe coming,' observed Ginger.

'From where?'

Ginger pointed. 'Over there. The people in it must have been picnicking on the rocks—don't ask me why.'

'Two men and a kid,' remarked Algy. 'What a place to bring a kid.'

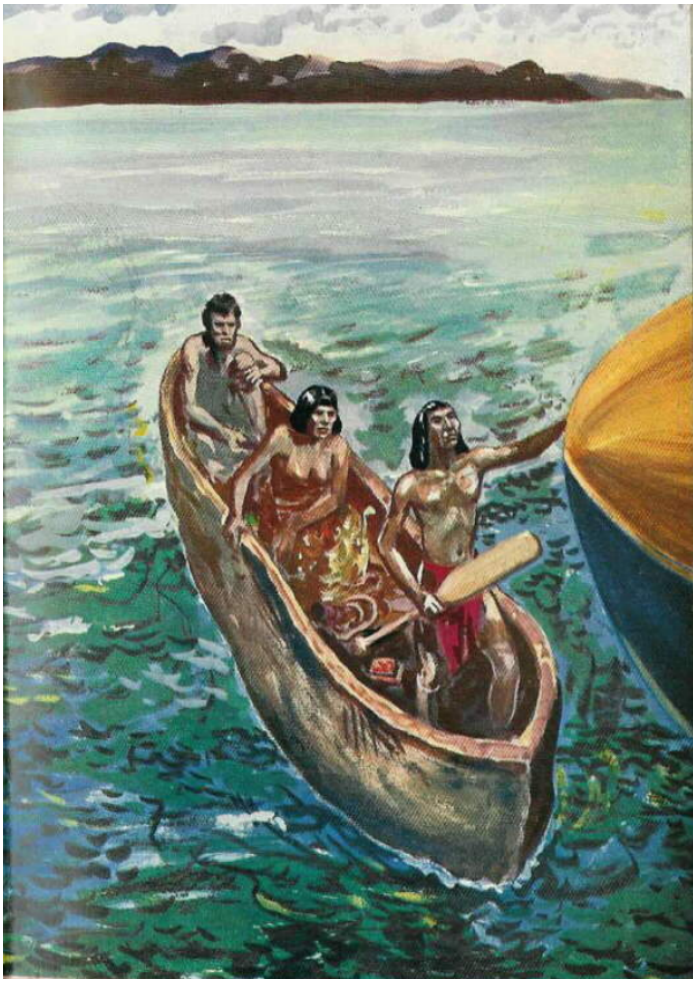
'Maybe it wasn't brought here,' returned Biggles. 'Maybe this is where it lives. I'd say it's father, mother and child.'

'People who live in places like this shouldn't have kids,' put in Algy.

'That's what these people might say if they saw some of our slums,' said Biggles. 'I'd wager if you took these people to London they'd be dead inside a month. They obviously know how to live here, but I doubt if they could stand up to the germs, bugs, microbes and what have you, that we have to endure. But here they are. Let's hope we can find a language we both speak. If they're in the habit of accosting passing ships that shouldn't be impossible.'

The canoe, as crazy a little craft as Ginger had ever seen in his life, came alongside. The lower part was a hollowed-out tree-trunk that must have been

rotten when it was found. The gunwales were old pieces of flattened tins and the remains of boxes and pieces of fabric thrown up by the sea. These were fastened in place with splinters, fish bones and pieces of wire, in a manner so haphazard that the thing looked as if one wave would knock it to bits.



The canoe came alongside (page 51)

In it was a man, a woman and a small boy, all filthy beyond description. The two adults wore some scraps of sacking tied round their loins. The boy was completely naked. He had no seat, so he simply squatted in three or four inches of icy water which, with a lot of mussel shells, slopped about in the bottom of the canoe. It made Ginger shiver to look at the child. He himself was well wrapped up, and dry, but he was by no means warm. ‘I didn’t know there was anything like this left in the world,’ he muttered.

‘You’ve heard of under-developed people; now you’re looking at some,’ answered Biggles.

‘Some prize specimens, too, I must say,’ put in Algy, disgustedly. ‘Instead of spending millions on rockets why doesn’t somebody do something for these miserable wretches?’

‘The chances are they’ll still be here when civilization has blown itself apart with those same rockets,’ remarked Biggles.

Bertie stepped in. ‘What beats me is how these johnnies manage to live where not even animals will so much as try.’

This conversation was cut short by the man standing up and resting his dirty hands on the side of the aircraft. ‘Tabac—tabac,’ he said, in a coarse voice.

Ginger could hardly believe his ears. It seemed to him that what they all needed was food; yet the man’s first thought was for tobacco—presumably for himself. He remembered what Mr Scott had said when some tins of food were handed out and were put at the feet of the man, not the woman.

Meanwhile Biggles was trying to get into conversation with the man, trying him both in English and in Spanish. It turned out that he knew only a few simple nouns in both languages, having picked them up, probably, from passing ships. But these were not enough to answer the questions Biggles put to him about two white men, alive or dead, who had been cast away. He tried for some time but without result.

‘It’s no use,’ he said at last. ‘We shan’t get anything out of them even if they know anything. All they can think about is food, tobacco and matches.’

‘That’s all I’d be thinking about, too, old boy, if I was paddling that perishing canoe in my pants.’

The Indian, having apparently decided that no more tins were forthcoming, pushed off without a word of thanks, and in so doing caused the canoe to swing so that for the first time the far gunwale was revealed.

Ginger caught Biggles by the arm. ‘Stop him,’ he said tersely. ‘Look! The gunwale.’

It was a strip of dark red canvas.

‘That was the colour of the *Seaspray’s* sails,’ he reminded.

Biggles shouted to the man to come back, but he took no notice, obviously not understanding.

‘Quick, someone, give me another tin,’ snapped Biggles.

Algy handed him one. He held it up. The man understood that readily enough, and paddled back to collect it. This done Biggles pointed at the

piece of red canvas. ‘Where come?’ he asked.

The Indian simply stared back at him with a blank animal face.

‘Where come?’ asked Biggles again. ‘Where find?’

The man looked at Biggles. He looked at the object at which he was pointing. Then at last what he thought was required seemed to penetrate his limited intelligence. Without the slightest hesitation he seized the rag, ripped it off and offered it. ‘Tabac,’ he said.

This of course was not what Biggles wanted. He wanted to know where it had come from. But he took it to save an argument that would obviously be futile. ‘Give him another tin of cigarettes,’ he told Algy.

No sooner had the man taken his reward than he snatched up the piece of wood that served as a paddle and started making for the shore.

‘Wait! Come back,’ shouted Biggles; but he might have saved his breath for all the notice that was taken. ‘Confound the fellow,’ he muttered. ‘Why did he have to be in such an infernal hurry?’ He looked up. ‘I wonder if that was the reason?’ he added.

Above them a dark cloud was racing down the channel, and within a minute it had answered his question when everything was blotted out by driving, slashing, icy rain that whipped the hull of the aircraft as with a thousand canes.

‘I begin to see what Mr Scott meant about the weather,’ shouted Biggles, above the noise. ‘We’ll sit where we are till this has passed.’

‘That Indian knew what was coming,’ said Algy. ‘He may come back when it’s over.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘I doubt it. He’ll make for home and scoff the grub we gave him.’

‘So would I, old boy, every time, if I was as peckish as he looked.’

Biggles picked up the strip of red canvas. ‘If this came from the *Seaspray* there must be more of it somewhere. I’ll show it to Mr Scott when we get back. He’ll know if it’s his.’

‘If he says it is,’ said Ginger, ‘we can say good-bye to any hope of finding Carter and Barlow.’

No one disputed this.

The squall did not last long. The wind abated. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun and it was fair again, the sun shining in a sky of palest eggshell blue. But the cold, which must have been near freezing point, persisted.

‘And to think this is summer here,’ remarked Ginger, rubbing his hands to warm them. ‘What must it be like in winter?’

‘I don’t know, and I don’t want to know,’ answered Biggles. ‘We shan’t be here—I hope. But I do know this,’ he went on. ‘If that rain had been hail, and from the temperature it must have been near it, we’d have had some dents knocked in our upper surfaces. In future I’ll be more careful where I stop. Had the wind come from the opposite quarter it could have blown us on the rocks, and without being able to see a blessed thing we wouldn’t have known which way to go to keep clear of ’em. It was a useful illustration of what can happen here. We might as well move on.’

‘What about that Indian?’ asked Algy.

‘While the storm was on I was thinking about him. I doubt if we shall see him again. I’m by no means sure he was as dumb as he appeared to be. I thought he looked scared for a moment when I pointed to this piece of canvas.’

‘You mean, he knew he had no business to have it?’

‘That would depend on how he came by it. What struck me was, if this is in fact a piece of the *Seaspray’s* canvas, where’s the rest of it? Even if the boat came to grief the sail would still be in one piece. I have a feeling that greasy-looking wretch in the canoe could tell us.’

Bertie spoke. ‘If he’d found the whole thing one would have thought he’d have made himself a decent pair of pants out of it, with enough over to make his missis a respectable skirt—if you see what I mean.’

‘Let’s see if he’s still about,’ suggested Biggles.

They looked, but the canoe had vanished. The only living creatures in sight were some steamboat ducks which had apparently arrived during the storm. On seeing Ginger’s head appear they raced away across the water at fantastic speed, wings whirling, leaving wakes that might have been made by miniature speedboats.

‘The canoe must have run for shelter,’ decided Biggles. ‘It won’t come back. We might as well press on.’

From the air a truly majestic vista was now presented to their gaze. The wind had torn from the peaks the clouds of mist that had previously concealed them, so that they stood, like sentinels, in all their frozen magnificence, gleaming in the sun.

‘That’s better,’ said Biggles, approvingly. ‘This is our chance to pick out Sarmiento and Italia.’

This now proved to be a simple matter, for looking south across Dawson Island the two mountains were outstanding. The nearer was Sarmiento. Flying on towards it the opportunity was taken to note the shape of the shore lines near it, so that its position could again be determined on future occasions even though it was hidden in cloud. The same procedure was followed with Mount Italia, Biggles flying round while Ginger made notes and sketches on a message pad.

This done, seeing more squalls approaching Biggles headed for home. Long before they were within sight of the airfield the two giants had retired behind their customary cloaks of cloud. On the way they kept a lookout for Gontermann's boat, but they saw nothing of it.

'I wonder what Gontermann's really up to,' murmured Biggles. 'I can't believe he gets any pleasure cruising about on his own in these uncomfortable conditions. But still, one never knows. Some people have queer tastes. I remember the famous Captain Slocum, who amused himself sailing round the world alone in a skiff, came through here, and thundering nearly stayed here. But for a change of wind he'd have had it.'

The Gadfly reached home and landed without incident. After a brief chat with Vendez the party returned to the town in the Ford. Biggles drove straight to the chandler's establishment where they found Mr Scott at work.

He showed the piece of canvas. 'Does this mean anything to you?' he asked.

The Scot did not hesitate. 'That's a bit of my canvas,' he declared. 'Where did you get it?'

Biggles told him.

'If that Indian hasn't got the rest he must know where it is,' asserted Mr Scott, confirming Biggles' opinion.

'Assuming he's got it, what would he use it for?'

'To make a portable tent, probably. It'd be the nearest thing to a home that Indian ever had. Usually the best they can do is chuck together a few bits of stick they pick up on the beach. It's no use them wasting time on anything permanent.'

'Why not?'

'Because they must always keep on the move looking for food, mussels on the rocks, or if they're lucky, a piece of rotten fish. Once the rocks have been cleared from one place they must move on to another, or starve. Queer nobody noticed that piece of canvas before.'

‘It would have meant nothing to anyone who might have seen it. You happened to mention to us that the *Seaspray’s* sails were dark red.’

‘Gontermann would know that.’

‘He may not have seen the canoe. Even if he did, knowing how he feels about Englishmen he wouldn’t be likely to bother about it.’

‘That’s right. How far does this help you?’

‘I’d say quite a long way,’ replied Biggles. ‘From now on I shall be looking for a red wigwam. There can’t be many about here, and one would show up against either black rock or white snow or ice.’

‘Aye. I’d think that,’ agreed Mr Scott.

As the party returned to the Ford, Biggles said: ‘We’ll go home for lunch. I don’t know about you but I’m ready for mine. I think we’ve done pretty well for our first sortie. At least we have something to look for.’

‘What exactly *are* we looking for?’ asked Ginger pointedly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are we looking for two lost plant hunters or a pile of metal jettisoned by the *Dresden*?’

‘Both,’ answered Biggles, evenly. ‘I know what we were sent here to find, but we should be a bunch of scabs if, while we’re here, we didn’t try to solve the mystery of the disappearance of two of our own countrymen. What’s a lump of gold, anyway, compared with how the relatives of the missing men must be feeling, waiting day after day for news, hoping against hope. The odds are a thousand to one the men are dead, but that has yet to be proved, and if it should happen that they’ve managed to hang on imagine what a state they must be in. This isn’t the sort of place I’d care to end up.’

Nobody answered.

CHAPTER 5

SMOKE

FOR the next fortnight, whenever weather conditions made it worth while, Biggles carried on with his task. There were long and short occasions when poor visibility would have made flying not only a waste of time, but dangerous, too. On such days the party stayed at home, Biggles refusing to take risks which he held were not justified by the circumstances.

He had sent a letter to the Air Commodore, by air mail, although he had no more to report than his safe arrival on the spot, the absence of shipping in the Strait except those loading meat at Punta Arenas, and the finding of the piece of red sailcloth which made it almost certain that the botanists' craft, the *Seaspray*, had been lost.

They saw Gontermann, always smoking his big bent pipe, at the airfield on days when the regular services were scheduled to arrive from the north, and on the whole his churlish attitude seemed to have relaxed somewhat. Which is not to say he was friendly. Far from it. But at least he did nothing to hinder them, and with that Biggles was satisfied. He told the manager about the piece of sailcloth he had found; indeed, he showed it to him; but this, as was expected, only convinced the German that the plant hunters were dead, drowned in all probability when their ketch had been capsized by one of the all too frequent squalls. He advised them to give up the search. In fact, so insistent was he about this that Biggles began to wonder if there was a reason behind it. Anyhow, he declined to abandon the hunt, arguing that even if the *Seaspray* had lost its sail, or had been dismasted, it would still have its little auxiliary engine to give it headway.

The sorties made by the Gadfly had all followed a similar pattern. Indian Reach had been visited several times in the hope of finding the canoe Indian there. Biggles was still of the opinion that the man knew more than he had acknowledged and would have questioned him further, if necessary offering bribes for information. However, the Indian must have moved, for nothing was seen of him.

The landings in Indian Reach were usually made on the way to the area dominated by the two mountains with which they were most concerned.

Here the plan devised by Biggles was followed. This was to survey each island in turn from a low altitude in the hope of finding the one that fitted the only clue they had. The trouble was, there were too many which might have been said to fit, for on clear days the mountains could be seen from a distance of fifty or sixty miles, and the islands in line with them were almost countless, if islets were to be included. Here again there had been no real indication of the size of the island on which the gold had been dumped. Each one, after being examined, was struck off on the chart to prevent duplication, which otherwise would have been easy, the islands, broadly speaking, being very much alike. Some were more heavily wooded than others and occasionally a glacier would facilitate identification; but apart from that the islands were merely masses of rock. Beaches did occur, but they were few and far between.

Biggles was chary of landing but he did so several times, always on water, after going to a great deal of trouble to confirm, as far as this was possible, that there were no obstructions, rocks or growlers, which too often choked what otherwise would have been sheltered anchorages. They had taken it in turn to go ashore. Some of the most promising hills had been climbed, always a cold and laborious business, but these efforts had led to nothing. Algy twisted an ankle in a fall and now walked with a limp. Constant watch was kept for smoke, signs of wreckage that might have been the remains of the *Seaspray*, and, of course, a red object that might be canvas from the missing ketch.

All this was to no purpose, and although nobody complained outright it was clear to everyone in the aircraft that an atmosphere of futility and dejection was present. Always with the knowledge of what an accident would mean Biggles himself admitted that the job was becoming ‘a bit of a bind.’

On the fifteenth day everything happened at once. It was, apparently, one of those days. First Biggles received a radiogram, in code, from the Air Commodore, instructing him to carry on and informing him that others might shortly be engaged in the same operation. Biggles knew this could only mean one thing. Gold was not mentioned, but the message could only refer to that since there was not the slightest chance of anyone else arriving to look for the missing botanists. In any case, in that event there would have been no point in making the signal in code.

The second incident occurred shortly afterwards. On their arrival at the aerodrome Vendez told them that Gontermann had been absent for three days although he should have been there to meet incoming machines. This was unusual behaviour. He couldn’t account for it. All he knew was that the

airport manager had gone sailing as he so often did. He had given no indication of where he was going. But then, he never did. Vendez, with whom they were now very friendly, concluded by saying that he only mentioned this because if they intended flying down the Strait they might keep an eye open for him in case he had run into trouble. However well a man might know his boat, and the waters, an accident was always a possibility.

Biggles said, rather grimly, that he was well aware of that. The sea bed must be littered with the bones of men and ships that had come to grief in those dangerous channels. He promised to keep a sharp lookout for the conspicuous black and orange *Wespe*.

It was about noon that Ginger spotted the smoke. Oddly enough, at the time his eyes were exploring some side channels for the *Wasp*, since so far they had seen nothing of it.

Biggles had decided to extend their range of operations. Holding more to the north than usual, where the Strait makes an elbow to turn sharply to the north-west, he was cruising at two thousand feet hoping the mist that enveloped the tops of the mountains would clear so that he could get them lined up, when Ginger let out a cry. 'I see smoke!'

'Where?'

At that moment a belt of mist, or rain, or sleet, it was impossible to say which, swept past below them effectually blotting out the ground.

'What a pest! What a climate!' muttered Biggles, bitterly.

He went into a tight turn in order not to lose the locality.

They were at this time flying over a veritable maze of islands, many of them quite small and of such irregular shapes that they might have been the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle thrown down haphazard. These were separated by a hundred winding channels of varying widths, some so narrow that it was questionable if a ship of any size could get through them. The only conspicuous landmark of any size that had caught Ginger's eye just before he had spotted the smoke was a glacier that swept down in the form of a letter S to what seemed to be open water. He had paid no particular attention to it. He had seen plenty of glaciers. In fact, what in warmer climates would have been rivers were nearly all glaciers. But now he remembered this particular one.

'Are you sure you saw smoke?' asked Biggles, as they waited for the storm to pass.

Ginger hesitated. 'Well, I *thought* I did.' As so often happens after a fleeting glimpse of something he was by no means sure of it.

‘You’re certain it wasn’t just a stray slant of mist?’

‘I suppose it could have been. All I can say is, when I first caught sight of it, it looked more like smoke than mist.’

‘We shall soon know,’ said Biggles, as the squall began to thin. ‘If it’s smoke it should still be there, in the same place. If it’s mist it will have gone.’

The tail of the storm drifted away and Ginger’s eyes turned down; but before he could mark his spot, although he had picked up the S-shaped glacier as a guide, another mass of grey storm-cloud had cut the scene from view as effectively as a blanket drawn across it. He groaned. ‘This would send anyone round the bend,’ he muttered, viciously.

Biggles said nothing. He banked, and the aircraft continued to circle.

Ginger champed with impatience. What he feared now was that the wind, the velocity of which was unknown, might be causing them to drift in spite of Biggles’ manœuvre.

The storm took about ten minutes to pass.

‘Get on with it,’ said Biggles shortly. ‘There you are,’ he added, as the last trailing shreds of vapour were dragged past below them by the restless breeze.

Ginger’s eyes worked feverishly. ‘I’ve got it,’ he cried, triumphantly. ‘It *is* smoke. And that’s not all. I can see a red thing! Look! Down there! Right at the point where the smoke starts.’ He jabbed with a finger.

‘By gosh! You’re right!’ exclaimed Biggles. ‘There’s no doubt about it being smoke.’ He cut the throttle and started down.

‘Buck up!’ urged Ginger. ‘I can see another storm coming.’

‘Yes, and if that’s rain or sleet sweeping the ground we shall have to go up again or risk hitting the carpet.’

Again the squall beat them.

Biggles steepened his dive in the hope of beating the storm and was down to a hundred feet or so when it caught up with them, and he had no alternative than to climb again. But this was not before Ginger had seen a man crawl out from under the red object. His eyes had never left it.

‘I saw a man,’ he declared.

‘So did I,’ answered Biggles. ‘To me it looked like an Indian.’

Bertie put his head into the cockpit. ‘I say, old boy, what’s going on?’

‘There’s somebody on the ground below us and we’re trying to make out who he is,’ answered Biggles. ‘These squalls keep beating us. We’ll get a clear run in a minute. The next one is a long way off and may just miss us.’

Bertie retired.

The Gadfly, dripping water, climbed out of the cloud and again had blue sky overhead. Half turning Biggles looked anxiously along the leading edge of the wing.

'What's wrong?' asked Ginger.

'Nothing. We're all right—so far. But we're too near icing conditions for my liking. I'm not taking on any more of those squalls. I'd rather wait till we can be sure of a longer clear run.'

'What a wizard it would be if this did turn out to be the lost men,' said Ginger, enthusiastically.

'I don't know about a wizard: it would make things dashed awkward for us,' replied Biggles, dubiously.

'But you were looking for them!'

'Of course I was. But, to be quite frank, I didn't expect to find them.'

'I don't understand.'

'Our excuse for being here is to look for these plant hunters, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. If we found them we'd no longer have an excuse for being here. Everyone would expect us to go home. If we didn't go home people would begin to wonder what we were *really* doing.'

'I see what you mean,' returned Ginger, slowly. 'I didn't think of that.'

'I've always had it in mind; but I hardly expected it to work out that way. I fancy Gontermann, for one, is already a bit suspicious of our purpose here. If we carried on flying up and down the Strait after having done what we came to do it would confirm those suspicions.'

'Even so, what could he do? He couldn't stop us.'

'He could make things deuced awkward. If he reported his suspicions to the Chilean Government they might tell us to go home. If they did we should have to go. By withholding petrol Gontermann could force us to go, anyway. But it hasn't come to that yet. We may be howling before we're hurt. Let's find Carter and Barlow before we get in a flap.'

The squall passed, and again Biggles went down quickly towards the source of the smoke, about which there was no longer any doubt, although the man they had seen was no longer in evidence. But when, presently, the Gadfly skimmed low over the place, a dark-coloured human being was seen to look out from under what was certainly a roughly made tent of dark red material. He didn't wave. He merely stared up at them.

‘I don’t understand this,’ said Biggles, as he pulled up after his swoop. ‘I’d swear that was the *Seaspray’s* sail. But if the lost men are there why don’t they come out and make signals for help? All I can think is, if that’s Carter and his friend down there they must either be pretty sick or scared stiff of something.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

Biggles studied the sky. ‘We seem to be in a clear patch so let’s find somewhere to land. Tell the others.’

A thorough search of the island revealed only one possible place, within walking distance of the tent, where the Gadfly could be put down. This was a beach, or, more correctly, an area of what presumably was black sand, below the outfall of the glacier. Biggles would have preferred going down on water, but this, everywhere, was speckled with floating ice. The sandy patch seemed reasonably clear of obstructions, and after flying up and down it a few times Biggles said he would try it. What he was most afraid of, he told Ginger, was sticking in the sand; and it was unlikely that he would have risked this but for the fact that other similar beaches they had seen at ground level had been firm.

Ginger looked for anything that might be the wreckage of the *Seaspray* but failed to see it.

‘Shut your eyes and hold your breath,’ advised Biggles, as he made his approach into a stiffish breeze which would at least be to their advantage since it would make for a slow ground speed at the vital moment.

The Gadfly went in. Ginger held his breath but did not close his eyes. The wheels touched and the machine trundled on, soon to pull up as Biggles gently applied the brakes. Ginger breathed again.

‘Easy,’ said Biggles, wiping imaginary perspiration from his forehead. ‘See what the ground’s like.’

Ginger got out and stamped. ‘Okay,’ he announced. ‘It feels firm enough.’

Biggles switched off and joined him, as did the others. They looked around. The tent could not be seen, being some way back with high ground intervening; but the direction of it was known. For the rest, the scene presented a picture of nature in its most savage form. It was in a way magnificent, but hardly one to gladden the eyes of an air pilot or navigator. To start with it was bitterly cold, although with the wind blowing over miles of ice and snow it could hardly be otherwise. Ginger wore a leather fleece-lined jacket over a thick sweater and woollen underwear, but he felt naked.

Behind the aircraft was water, black and still, being protected by the innumerable islands, many of them high. Dotting the water were growlers, their projecting tops often cut into the most fantastic shapes by the wind and rain. Men, animals and birds were represented. On both sides stretched the sandy beach, as black as ebony. Some little distance away a party of penguins regarded the intruders with surprise but without alarm. There were also a few grey gulls and black-necked swans.

But the most impressive picture was provided by the island itself, looking inland, particularly towards the moraine of the glacier. This had carved for itself a deep bed in the manner of a valley, one side of which, the side protected from the prevailing wind, was surprisingly well-wooded with larch, birch and pine. There were also patches of bracken and brush. The glacier itself was composed of great masses of ice, glistening in the insipid sunshine. Some of it was white, some blue, some green, and some as black as ink, apparently from being impregnated with black soil. In one place water cascaded in a little waterfall, waving in the breeze like a veil. The only sound, apart from the mournful moaning of the breeze round the aircraft, was the cracking, crunching and groaning of the ice under its own weight.

Said Bertie: 'I say, chaps, we've certainly come to the end of the world, and that's a fact. Not even a bally telegraph pole in sight. Fair gives me the creeps.'

'Let's press on before another squall blows up. We'll peg the machine down but someone will have to stay with it. Any volunteers?'

Algy held up a hand. 'I'll sit in the "office." I'd better not risk spraining my other ankle. If I did I'd be sunk.'

'That's all right with me.'

In a few minutes, having made the machine secure and leaving Algy in the cockpit, the others were on their way inland towards the red tent, or its position as nearly as it could be judged.

Said Ginger, as they picked a way through rocks, lumps of ice and sticky mud: 'That fellow we saw can't be a white man. He must have seen us come down, in which case surely he would have come to meet us. I can't imagine anyone, except possibly an Indian, being here from choice.'

'We should soon know the answer to that,' returned Biggles. 'What beats me is why I go on undertaking jobs which even a lunatic would have enough sense to decline.'

They struggled on.

CHAPTER 6

THE CASTAWAYS

It needed a stiff pull of nearly half an hour to bring the shore party within sight of the objective—the dark red tent with its smudge of smoke.

As they approached Biggles let out a hail. A man appeared with a rifle in his hands but he was still too far off to be recognized. All that could be seen was, he was a white man, bearded, and dressed in what looked like a lot of rags.

He raised a hand and shouted, in English: 'Don't come any closer or I'll shoot.'

'Well, blow me down! This is a rum do,' said Bertie, adjusting his monocle.

Biggles shouted: 'What's the idea? Are you Mr Carter?'

'Yes,' came the answer.

'We've come to rescue you,' called Biggles.

'Where have you come from?'

'England.'

There was no reply so Biggles walked on, the others following.

The man waited, his rifle at the ready.

'Is Mr Barlow with you?' asked Biggles, when he was within talking distance.

'Yes.'

'Where is he?'

'Inside. He's been shot.'

Said Biggles in a low voice: 'You're right, Bertie. This *is* a rum do.' He walked on to the tent. 'Glad we've found you, Mr Carter. What's this about Mr Barlow being shot? By the way, my name's Bigglesworth, and these are friends of mine. We flew out, and we've been looking for you for the past two weeks.'

‘Thank God you’ve come,’ said Carter. ‘You’re only just in time. We were about finished.’

This to Ginger was all too apparent. Mr Carter, bearded, ungroomed, emaciated, with his hair over his collar, showed all the signs one would expect from such an ordeal as the one he had suffered. His clothes were in rags, and his hands and face were so grimed with dirt and grease that it was no matter for wonder he had looked, from a distance, like an Indian. His canvas home was merely the mains’l of the *Seaspray*, or part of it, stretched over some boughs and held down all round with lumps of rock. A fire of peats and pieces of dead wood smouldered in front of the entrance.

‘Where is Mr Barlow wounded?’ asked Biggles.

‘In the thigh. I’ve done all I can for him, but without any proper bandages or antiseptic I’m afraid of the wound going septic. He lost some blood, and altogether he’s in a pretty bad way.’

‘Can he walk?’

‘I doubt it, now. He hasn’t tried lately. I made him lie still to give the wound a chance to heal. He could hobble along before it stiffened.’

‘Is the bullet still in his leg?’

‘No. Luckily it went right through, just scraping the bone, as far as I can make out, without breaking it.’

‘Let’s have a look at him.’

The flap of the tent was thrown aside to permit Biggles to enter.

At first Ginger could see nothing of the man, for bracken had been piled all over him presumably with the object of keeping him as warm as possible. When this was pulled away Ginger was shocked by what he saw, although, as he realized, he should have been prepared for something of the sort. If Carter looked all in, the sick man could hardly be better. But his eyes were open and he seemed fully conscious.

There was an anxious silence while Biggles examined the wound. When he straightened his back he smiled encouragement.

‘Not too bad,’ he announced. ‘We should be able to fix you up,’ he told the patient. ‘I’d say it was the cold that saved your life. It would stop the bleeding quickly and keep the bugs away. A germ would have to be hardy to survive in this climate. Anyway, I can’t find any infection so far.’

‘Can he be moved?’ asked Carter.

‘Presently. We’ll get the wound tidied up and put some food into him to give him strength to stand the journey.’ Biggles turned to Ginger and Bertie. ‘Go back to the machine. Bring me the medicine chest, a blanket and a few

cans of milk and soup. You might also bring some biscuits. Be as quick as you can.'

'Okay,' said Ginger, and with Bertie set off down the slope.

Biggles turned to Carter. 'Why did you threaten us when you saw us coming?'

'I thought you were somebody else.'

Biggles indicated the wounded man. 'The people responsible for this?'

'Yes.'

'How did it happen?'

'We were on an island not far from here when suddenly two men appeared. They opened fire on us.'

'What sort of men were they?'

'They were white men.'

'What were you doing at the time?'

'Looking for botanical specimens, hoping to find something new.'

'Why should these men attack you?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't it strike you as extraordinary behaviour—in a place like this?'

'I suppose it did.'

'You only suppose? Surely it was so extraordinary that they must have had a reason for it.'

'No doubt they had.'

'What did you do?'

'We ran away.'

'You didn't shoot back?'

'We had nothing to shoot with. We don't usually carry weapons. We had a rifle but it was in the boat.'

'So you ran back to the boat.'

'Yes.'

'Then what did you do?'

'Nothing. That is, we started the engine and got away as fast as we could. The men saw us and fired again as we went. That was when Barlow was hit, before we could get out of range.'

'How did these men get there?'

'I've no idea.'

'They could only have got there in a boat.'

‘Of course. I realize that.’

‘Didn’t you see one?’

‘No.’

‘That seems very odd. There aren’t many ships about here. I take it you landed at a beach?’

‘Yes.’

‘The only one on the island?’

‘I couldn’t say that. We landed at the only one we saw.’

‘Had you seen these men before?’

‘Never.’

‘Have you seen them since?’

‘No.’

‘And you have no idea of what they were doing on this particular island.’

‘Er—none at all.’ Carter’s brief hesitation was not lost on Biggles.

‘What brought you here?’

‘Naturally, not wanting to have any further trouble with these men we headed for Punta Arenas, but almost at once a blizzard blew up. We couldn’t see a thing, and to make a long story short we went on the rocks. We just had time to throw a few things ashore before she broke up. The mast snapped. That’s how we managed to save the sail which, as you see, we’ve used as a tent. Later, we moved here, to be out of the wind. It’s fairly well sheltered. That’s about all. There was nothing more we could do. Every morning I go up to the top of the hill to see if there’s a ship in sight—not that I expect to see one.’

‘How is it you haven’t starved to death?’

‘Well, we salvaged a little food from our stores. With the rifle I’ve managed to shoot a bird or two, and once I got a deer near the timber. That, I think, saved our lives.’

‘So you saved the rifle?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? I would have thought other things were more important.’

‘I was thinking of our protection, in case those two men found us again.’

‘You thought they might look for you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

Again there was a brief hesitation before Carter answered: 'How would I know? Actually, our greatest difficulty has been to keep the fire going. Without it we would have frozen. We had only a few matches between us when we got ashore and some of those were spoiled by the salt water. We used the last one some time ago, since when I daren't let the fire out. I spend most of my time collecting fuel and hunting. With only three cartridges left I daren't risk a miss.'

Biggles lit a cigarette. 'And in all the time you've been here you haven't seen anyone?'

'The only people we've seen were some Indians—five of them altogether. I think they must have seen the smoke of the fire. They were a nuisance. In fact, they became an absolute curse. They asked for food. With practically none for ourselves I couldn't give them any. I tried to tell them that but they wouldn't go away. They were such thieves that I daren't take my eyes off them. I wrote a note to Mr Scott, of Punta Arenas, from whom we hired the boat, and tried to explain that if they would deliver it they would be well rewarded. I don't think they could have understood. Anyway, I haven't had an answer. One day I caught one of them cutting a piece of canvas from the back of our tent. In fact, he had it in his hand. That was going too far. I drove them away with the rifle. I'm sure they were only waiting for us to die so that they could help themselves to everything. They've never been back. I followed them to the beach to make sure they'd gone and saw them go off in their canoes after scraping some shell-fish off the rocks. I tried eating mussels but they made me sick.'

Biggles nodded. 'We've seen that Indian who took the canvas. I showed it to Mr Scott and he confirmed that it had been part of the *Seaspray's* sail.'

'The Indian didn't say he'd seen us?'

'No. But I had an idea he knew more than he was prepared to admit.'

There was a short silence. Biggles drew heavily on his cigarette. Then he said, quietly: 'Now, Mr Carter, suppose you tell me the rest of the story.'

Carter stared. 'The rest? What do you mean?'

'I mean the details you omitted from the narrative of your misfortunes.'

'Why should you think there could be anything more?'

'One or two little things. I hate to question your integrity but parts of your story don't quite add up—anyway, not to my way of thinking.'

'I don't understand what you're getting at.'

'I think you do. You told me you didn't know what those two men who shot at you were doing on that particular island.'

‘That is so.’

‘Or why they should drive you off.’

‘Well?’

‘I suggest that if you don’t know for a fact what those men were doing you have a pretty good idea. It would also account for them driving you away.’

‘Why should you think that?’

‘Because neither your behaviour, in the circumstances you have described, nor theirs, makes sense. And when things don’t make sense, having been around a bit I get suspicious and look for flaws. I don’t think there’s any need for me to go into details. In London I happen to be a police officer. I was sent here not only to look for you but for something else, not as important from your point of view, perhaps, but still, more important to some people. Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I fancy you know to what I refer. If we put that into the picture the whole thing begins to look a bit more realistic. Don’t you agree?’

Carter moistened his lips. ‘Yes, I suppose it does. But you will understand why I didn’t want to discuss the matter with strangers.’

‘I understand that perfectly well, Mr Carter, and in your position I would probably be as careful as you have been not to say too much. We’re talking about a commodity that too often leads to trouble.’

‘Had you told me at the beginning who you were, and that you were here in an official capacity, I would have been more frank with you,’ complained Carter.

‘Quite. But I also have reasons for not wanting strangers to know what I’m really doing here, and in view of what you tell me it seems a good thing I kept that under my hat. Now let’s get down to brass tacks. You know what those two men were after.’

‘Let’s say I suspect. I have no means of knowing for certain.’

‘You know, or suspect, they were looking for a quantity of gold that was lost here some time ago.’

‘Yes.’

‘How did you come to hear about this?’

‘Neither of us had heard a word about it when we came here.’

‘Then how do you know about it?’

‘Because,’ answered Carter simply, ‘we found it.’

Biggles blinked. ‘Do you mean you found it *by accident*?’ he asked incredulously.

‘As we knew nothing of it we couldn’t have come upon it any other way.’

‘But this is fantastic. I believe you, but how on earth could you have found it by accident? Were you digging up a plant or something?’

‘No.’

‘But surely it was under the ground!’

‘I think it had been. It was on the side of a rough sand-dune facing the channel. Originally, I imagine it had been buried, but either there had been a subsidence or else heavy rain had washed the soil away. At all events, there it lay, for all the world to see, a loose heap of gold bars and some white metal which I take to be platinum. We could hardly believe our eyes.’

‘I can believe that,’ murmured Biggles. ‘You still don’t know how it came to be there?’

‘I haven’t the foggiest notion.’

Biggles stubbed his cigarette on a rock. ‘I’ve heard some treasure hunting stories but this one caps the lot. It must be the first time someone has found a treasure of this size not only without looking for it but not even knowing of its existence. Have you any idea how much this stuff is worth?’

‘No. Have you?’

‘Not exactly, but it must be millions.’

Carter whistled.

‘Suppose you tell me the story again, all of it this time,’ suggested Biggles.

‘Very well,’ agreed Carter.

CHAPTER 7

MR CARTER TELLS HIS TALE

'TELL me this before you start,' said Biggles. 'In view of the presence on the island of these two men it's important. Did you touch the gold or did you leave it as you found it?'

'We didn't like the idea of leaving it lying there like that so we moved it. It was a bit of a job, but being excited, as you will imagine, we didn't mind. We dug a hole in the beach itself, about a hundred yards away, put the metal in it bar by bar and then covered it up.'

'Good. You could find the spot again?'

'I could go straight to it.'

'What about the place where you moved it from? Does it look like an excavation?'

'Naturally, we left it looking a bit rough, but there has been a lot of rain since then and that might have flattened the ground.'

'One other thing. How long ago did this happen?'

Carter pursed his lips. 'Well, I'm a bit hazy as to dates, but it must be a couple of months.'

Biggles nodded. 'I see. Now tell me exactly what happened. Take your time. My friends won't be back for a while yet. Have a cigarette?'

'I don't smoke, thanks.'

'As you wish.'

'It all came about like this,' began Carter. 'We were pottering about the islands without any fixed itinerary, taking notes and specimens, always on the lookout for something new, when suddenly Barlow called out: "What the dickens is all this?" I joined him, and there lay the gold. There was no mistaking what it was. We were flabbergasted. Naturally, having got over the shock we sat there and discussed the matter. With absolutely nothing to go on we didn't know what to make of it. There was no indication of how long the stuff had been there. It might have been weeks or it might have been hundreds of years. We knew of course that in the old days Spanish

galleons used the Magellan Strait to reach the Pacific, as did most of the well-known pirates and buccaneers at some time or other. I recalled that when Morgan had marched across the Isthmus of Panama to sack the city on the Pacific coast the Spaniards had loaded a lot of treasure in ships lying in the harbour and that these had escaped. We concluded that one of them must have been wrecked here. We knew nothing of any recent cargo of gold being lost. What puzzled us was the white metal. At first we thought it must be silver but we weren't sure. I don't profess to be a metallurgist. Anyway, after some discussion we decided to hide the stuff in case anyone else came along.'

'You didn't think of taking any of it away with you?'

'We thought of it but decided against it. We realized that there would be difficulties in getting it home. It would almost certainly be claimed either by Chile or Argentina. We were not sure who the island belonged to. As no doubt you know, some of the islands belong to one country and some to the other. Some are claimed by both countries, and if news of the gold had got out it might have started trouble between them. At the finish we resolved to hide the stuff, say nothing to anyone about it, and make inquiries when we got back to England.'

'I'd say that was a sensible decision,' put in Biggles. 'As the finders you would be entitled to a share.'

'That's what we thought. Well, we fetched from our boat the tools we used for digging out stubborn plants, made a hole in the sand nearer the water, and buried everything in a new place.'

'Did you make a chart showing the place?'

'I made a rough note but we really relied on our memories.'

'Carry on.'

'Well, we stayed there for two days, drying and pressing our plant specimens and talking about our extraordinary find. We were having a last look round before sailing to Punta Arenas prior to going home when we were not a little astonished to see two white men coming towards us. I say surprised because these were the first people we had seen since leaving Punta Arenas. They spoke to us and asked us what we were doing there. They seemed put out, suspicious, at finding us there. We told them the truth, that we had been sent out to collect specimens, plants and seeds of flowers and trees. In fact, we showed them our collection. That seemed to satisfy them and they went off.'

'They didn't attempt to interfere with you?'

'No.'

‘They said nothing about the gold?’

‘No. Neither did we. After they’d gone we decided that was what they were looking for. What else could it be? We wondered how they had got there because we hadn’t seen them arrive. The only craft we’d seen during our entire trip was a vessel named the *Wespe*, belonging, as we had been given to understand, to a man named Gontermann, whose hobby was sailing about the islands.’

‘You didn’t actually see the *Wespe* at the island?’

‘No, but we came to the conclusion that the men had been put ashore from it. We could think of no other way they could have got there.’

‘You suspected they were looking for the gold?’

‘Yes. What else could they have been looking for?’

‘Quite so.’

‘The rest happened much as I’ve already told you. We decided to push off rather than risk any trouble; but just as we were casting off the two men came running back. They shouted something but I didn’t catch what it was. We went on with what we were doing because I could see one of those confounded squalls coming up. When the men realized we weren’t going to stop one of them pulled out a pistol and fired at us. We weren’t prepared for anything quite as drastic as that. He fired three or four shots and the last one hit Barlow in the leg. That left only myself to handle the boat but I managed all right till the squall hit us. It was a particularly nasty one and I finished on the rocks. The *Seaspray* didn’t break up at once. She rolled about in the swell and that gave me a chance to get Barlow ashore, and what we had left of our stores. That’s about all. Those men were responsible for this. Had Barlow not been put out of action I think we could have managed. We had weathered such squalls before.’

‘As far as you know, the two men who attacked you remained on the island?’

‘Yes; but that was some time ago.’

‘I think you’re right about Gontermann being associated with them. It would account for a lot of things. He may be under the impression that the gold was in the *Seaspray*. He knows she didn’t return to port so he must think you perished in that squall. Maybe that’s why he told us he was sure you were dead. But that wouldn’t stop him from looking for the wreck of your boat, which might have been cast ashore. After all, the prize at stake is a big one.’

‘What about you? How do you come into this?’

Biggles told his side of the story, explaining how the gold had been dumped by the *Dresden*. 'I thought we might find you, and there was a chance we might find the gold; but that we should strike both together was a bit beyond my imagination.' He smiled. 'You must have been shaken when you saw that pile of gold staring you in the face!'

'Shaken! Of all the places in the world to find such a hoard! What do you suggest we do?'

'You'll want to get back to civilization. For a start we'll get you to hospital for treatment. You won't mind leaving us to deal with the gold?'

'Of course not. What will you do about it?'

'Send a signal home to say it has been found and wait here for a ship to arrive to pick it up. We shall have to show it the place. I take it you won't mind telling us exactly where you buried it.'

'Of course I'll tell you. Having lost my bearings in the squall I can't tell you exactly where the island is, but it isn't far from here and I can describe it to you. As far as I know it has no name.'

Biggles was looking more and more often down the hill. He looked at his watch. 'It's time those fellows of mine were back.'

'What's your opinion of this business?' asked Carter.

'Gontermann and those two men know about the gold, that's pretty certain. I'd say, although this is only guesswork, that Gontermann put the men on the island to locate the hoard. He might know the island the gold was left on, but that's not to say he knows the precise spot. The job of those two men was to find it, with Gontermann going to and fro to Punta Arenas to supply them with what they would need in the way of food. The search might take some time, as apparently it has. Meanwhile, Gontermann has a job to do. That's why he couldn't stay with the others on the island. He's the aerodrome manager.'

'So I understand. What do you think will happen now?'

Biggles shrugged. 'Your guess is as good as mine. It will probably depend on what Gontermann knows, or what he believes. Whether he thinks there's a chance you may be alive, or is really convinced you're dead. Again, whether he finds the place where the gold was hidden and realizes it has been moved. If he thinks you moved it, and it's unlikely that anyone else could have done that, he'll look for you or the wreck of the *Seaspray*. If you're alive you hold the secret. If you're dead he'll look for your boat, on the off-chance that the gold was in it. He knows we're looking for you, but he doesn't know that we know about the gold although he may suspect it. He must also know that in an aircraft we had a better chance of finding you, or

your boat, than he had from ground level. But it isn't much use guessing. Things will have to take their course. The first business must be to get you and Barlow where you can recover from what you've been through.'

'Here come your friends,' said Carter.

'Good.' Biggles looked at them, coming up the hill. 'They appear to be in a mighty hurry. I hope my machine's all right. If anything happened to that we should be in the same fix as you.'

Ginger ran up and dropped his load. 'Gontermann's on his way here,' he announced, breathlessly.

'*What!* Are you sure it's him?'

'There's no mistaking the *Wespe* with its black hull and orange sails. We've been watching it. That's why we've been so long. It came from behind the island opposite behaving as though it was looking for something. Then Gontermann must have spotted the aircraft on the beach and headed straight towards it.'

'You didn't wait to see what he wanted?'

'No. We thought we'd better let you know.'

Biggles nodded. 'Okay. Stir the fire up and get some water on the boil. Bertie, give me that medicine box. We'll attend to Mr Barlow, regardless. If Gontermann comes here leave me to deal with him.'

'He isn't alone,' said Ginger. 'There are at least two other men with him; I could see them.'

'I wonder how they found us?' said Mr Carter.

'That's an easy one to answer,' returned Biggles. 'They must have been watching the machine and saw it come down. That could only mean we'd seen something. They're coming to see what it is.'

'But I say, look here, old boy, why are they so interested in us?' inquired Bertie.

'They're not so interested in us as in these two gentlemen here.'

'All right. Put it that way if you like. Why are they so interested in them?'

'Because,' answered Biggles, succinctly, 'they happen to have found the gold. Only they know where it is. Gontermann would like to know. That, I suspect, has been the real reason for all this sailing time he's been putting in.'

Bertie stared. 'Well, chase me round the gas-works,' he gasped. 'That's a fair corker.'

Biggles threw the canvas aside for more light and went in to attend to the wounded man.

Ginger made coffee and heated some soup.

Mr Carter, munching biscuits ravenously, watched the hillside.

CHAPTER 8

GONTERMANN SHOWS HIS HAND

BIGGLES finished attending to Barlow's wound, and having seen him comfortable gave the others a quick account of what he had learned. Carter was sitting by the fire gulping hot soup with biscuits when Gontermann, with one companion, came into sight over the brow of the slope lower down. Seeing they were observed the two men halted, had a few words and then came on again.

'I say, old boy, this is going to be a bit awkward, isn't it?' remarked Bertie, sipping coffee from a plastic mug.

'I don't see why it should be. If it is, it will be just as awkward for them,' Biggles pointed out. 'Remember, we're not supposed to know anything about the gold, so they're going to find it difficult to argue without bringing that into the conversation. I shan't mention it. Be careful what you say, because should Gontermann get as much as an inkling that we know the whole story, the business is likely to wear a different complexion.'

The two men came on, Gontermann's companion, dirty and unshaven, looking as though he had been living rough for some time.

Biggles opened the conversation. 'Hello,' he greeted cheerfully, 'What brings you here?'

Gontermann ignored the question. Ginger thought he looked a trifle agitated when he saw Carter sitting there.

'So you've found them, I see,' said Gontermann haltingly, lighting his pipe.

'Yes. You seem to have found someone, too.'

'I've picked up a couple of unlucky castaways, shipwrecked sailors. I suppose I should really say lucky, since they have been rescued.'

'Where's the other?'

'I've left him to guard my boat in case Indians should come along and steal my belongings. Who is this you have here?'

'Mr Carter.'

‘Where is Mr Barlow? Is he alive, too?’

‘Yes. He’s in the tent.’

‘How wonderful.’

‘That’s what we think.’

‘How did they manage to live?’

‘They have a rifle and were able to shoot deer and birds. That helped.’

‘I suppose you’ve talked to them.’

‘I have.’

‘What happened to their boat?’

‘It ran on the rocks in a storm and went down.’

‘Where?’

‘I dunno. Somewhere on the coast. They managed to get ashore and they’ve been here ever since. Queer you should find them on the same day as we have.’

‘It isn’t queer, really. I was out in my boat. I could see your plane much of the time, and noticing you going down guessed what had happened. So I came along to help.’

‘Aren’t you rather a long way from home?’

‘I often go far. I like to sail my boat. Can I help?’

‘How?’

‘I could take these gentlemen home in my boat.’

‘No thanks. I intend to fly them out just as soon as we’ve finished our soup and have made a stretcher for Mr Barlow.’

‘Why a stretcher? Can’t he walk?’

‘No.’

‘Ah! He is too weak.’

‘As a matter of fact he’s been shot.’

‘So. An accident.’

‘No. He was shot at by two men.’

‘Who would shoot at them here?’

‘How would I know?’

From this conversation it seemed to Ginger that Gontermann either did not know about the shooting, or if he did, was taking a chance that his companion would not be recognized. If so, it failed. Apparently this pretence of ignorance was more than Barlow could stand. Crawling to the opening in

the tent and recognizing the man as one of those who had fired the shots he burst out: ‘That man with you shot me and he knows it.’

Gontermann looked astonished, feigned or otherwise. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure.’

‘But why should he do that?’

‘Ask him.’

Gontermann turned to his companion. ‘Did you shoot this man?’

‘If I did it was an accident. I did fire one or two shots to frighten him away.’

‘Frighten him away?’ repeated Biggles incredulously.

‘I thought he might take us for Indians and shoot at us.’

Biggles smiled ironically. ‘Sort of nervous, aren’t you?’

The man did not reply.

Biggles turned away. ‘Well, let’s get on before another squall hits us. Ginger, Bertie, go over to that timber and cut a couple of poles to serve as runners for a stretcher. We can tie some of this canvas on to complete it.’

Gontermann stepped in again. ‘Just a minute,’ he said. ‘Do you mind if I speak to Mr Carter and Mr Barlow.’

‘Go ahead. I’m not stopping you.’

‘I mean—alone.’

‘Alone? What an extraordinary request. Is there some secret?’

‘Not a secret. Purely a personal matter.’

‘That’s up to them. They are their own masters.’

Carter answered for himself. ‘I don’t know what he’s talking about,’ he said, looking at Biggles. ‘I hardly know him. There couldn’t be anything personal between us. If he has something to say he can say it in front of everyone.’

Gontermann hesitated, as if not knowing how to proceed. Then he made a sign to his companion and they walked away. They did not go far, but presently stopped, heads together, obviously discussing the situation.

‘What are they hatching now?’ murmured Ginger, who was still there. ‘Are they contemplating getting tough?’

‘I doubt it,’ replied Biggles. ‘Not here. There are too many of us. They’d like to get Mr Carter alone, to ask him some questions. We can guess what about. They’re not the sort of questions they could ask in front of us, not knowing how much we know.’

Said Carter: ‘Don’t you think it was a queer thing to do, to bring that man here knowing I’d recognize him as one of the two scoundrels who shot at us?’

‘On the face of it, yes,’ agreed Biggles. ‘But you must remember he didn’t know you were here—not alive, anyway. You can’t see the tent from the beach. Moreover, you were sitting behind the smoke. He didn’t see you until it was too late to go back. He stopped when he did see you—at least, I think that was the reason. Apparently he decided to take a chance that you wouldn’t recognize the man.’

‘That’s understandable,’ admitted Carter. ‘When I last saw him he didn’t look so much like a castaway.’

‘What I think has been happening is this,’ resumed Biggles. ‘Gontermann is associated with these two men. That’s obvious. They’re looking for the gold. We can assume they knew about it. How, doesn’t matter, although the fact that Gontermann’s father served in the *Dresden* may be the explanation. His method has been to put the two men on an island and leave them there, searching, while he kept them supplied with food. When one island failed they moved to another.’

‘Which means that Gontermann doesn’t know for certain on which island the gold was left.’

‘That’s how it seems. All he knows is the rough position of it. He’s been taking the islands in turn, which is what we’ve been doing from the air. It was purely by chance that you and Mr Barlow happened to be on the same one at the same time. Why they should attack you is not so clear, but it rather looks as if they saw something which indicated they were on the right island at last—as in fact they were. Tell me this. Did you happen to notice when you were there if it was possible to see the two mountains, Sarmiento and Italia?’

‘Yes, they were clear, and with one behind the other they made such a grand picture that I took a photo of them.’

Biggles nodded. ‘That’s it. That was the clue we had. Now let’s do a little more guessing. When Gontermann next called to see the two men he was told they were on the right island, but so far they’d been unable to locate the gold. He would be told about you and may have assumed you knew something about it. They’ve been looking for you ever since, or for the wreck of your boat, thinking the gold might be in it. Gontermann knows I also have been looking for you, and I have no doubt that he’s been watching me. When, earlier to-day, he saw me circling, and then go down, he hurried along to see what it was I’d found.’

Carter nodded agreement. That's about it.'

'If we're right, the gold island can't be far from here.'

'It isn't. It's in that direction.' Carter pointed. 'I'll give you a description of it.'

'They're coming back,' warned Ginger.

The two men returned. 'Are you sure we can't do anything?' said Gontermann.

'No, thanks all the same,' Biggles told him. 'We can manage.'

With a curt nod the German walked away, his associate following.

Biggles frowned as he watched them go.

'What's worrying you?' asked Ginger.

'With so much at stake I wouldn't trust that pair a yard. They've got a boat, don't forget. If they damaged our machine we'd be stuck here, and that I'm sure would suit them. They must know that if Carter and Barlow know where the gold is, and they go to England, they can say good-bye to it, whether or not we were told about it. Another thing that occurs to me is, in view of his job and the possibility that he served in the *Luftwaffe*, Gontermann may be able to fly. We'd look silly if he flew off in our machine. I'm not going to risk it. Let's see what they're doing. Bertie, you cut the poles. Ginger, you come with me. We can't leave Algy down there alone with those two dangerous customers about. Not knowing what we know he won't suspect any dirty work.'

They set off at a brisk pace down the hill with Gontermann perhaps two hundred yards in front of them. Talking to the man with him he did not once turn and so must have been unaware that he was being followed. The aircraft came into view and he made a slight turn that would take him to it. Or so it appeared. Certainly he was not going direct to his boat, for that was moored close in a good two hundred yards higher up the beach. A rowing boat had been pulled up clear of the water with the man who had put it there standing beside it. At first Algy could not be seen, presumably being in the machine to get out of the wind; but as the two men drew near he got out and stood as if waiting for them.

Biggles increased his pace. At the last moment Gontermann looked back up the hill, and seeing Biggles and Ginger coming, stopped.

'I thought you were on your way home,' said Biggles.

'So I am. I just stopped to have another look at your plane.'

'Why now?' inquired Biggles, carelessly. 'You've had plenty of opportunity on the aerodrome.'

‘My friend has never seen it.’

‘Is he an airman?’

‘No.’

‘Then he could hardly be interested in it. However, if he’d like to see inside I’d be pleased to show him round. We’ve no secrets to hide.’

‘Thanks.’

Then followed what Ginger took to be a farce as the man was shown the inside of the machine. This done, with a gruff word of thanks the two men walked away towards their boat.

‘What was all that nonsense?’ asked Ginger.

‘It might not have been nonsense.’

‘How so?’

‘Gontermann may have wished to satisfy himself that we had no gold on board. We’ll stay here till they’ve gone.’

‘What’s all this about, anyway?’ inquired Algy, looking puzzled.

In as few words as possible Biggles told him.

Algy grimaced. ‘So that’s how the wind blows!’

‘There they go,’ observed Ginger, as the *Wespe* set sail.

Said Biggles, looking serious: ‘That’s what I’d like to think. But I’d wager a month’s pay we haven’t seen the last of ’em. I know the types. They don’t give up easily—not when there’s a fortune hanging to it.’

‘What will they do?’

Biggles drew a deep breath. ‘I don’t know,’ he replied, slowly. ‘They know we haven’t got the gold. They could see it wasn’t at the tent. The probability is, therefore, that it’s still on the island where it was dumped. If you asked me to guess I’d say that’s where they’re making for now, to have another look round. The big question is, will they wait for us to go back there?’

‘Why should they?’

‘They will if they think we know where the stuff is.’

‘Why should they think that?’ questioned Algy.

‘They may surmise, correctly, that Carter and Barlow found it, in which case, as they’re going home, they will have told us where it is.’

‘Have they told you that?’

‘Not yet. But they will. We’d better be getting back to them, to get them away while the weather holds. One thing you can reckon on is, if we go

back to that island Gontermann will know why. There could be only one reason, a little word of four letters.'

'I don't like this,' muttered Algy, looking worried.

'What don't you like?'

'The idea of leaving the machine on that airfield, where Gontermann, if he's that sort of skunk, could tinker with it.'

'I wouldn't put anything past him,' asserted Biggles. The answer is, we mustn't leave the machine unguarded while he's about, although that may present difficulties. But let's get back to the tent. We can talk about that later.'

They reached the camp to find that Bertie had cut two saplings, and with the help of Carter was busy lashing sailcloth to them with pieces of the same material.

'Here, take this,' said Carter, rising, and handing Biggles a small piece of paper, which turned out to be a sketch map of the gold island. 'It's a bit rough, but treasure charts usually are. It should be good enough. The island is somewhere in that direction.' He pointed. 'Being more or less the shape of a horseshoe I don't think you can make a mistake. It lies north and south. It's small, not more than half a mile long and a quarter wide at the widest part, which is the middle. That's also the highest part, as you'd expect. As I've marked, in the bay that forms the inside of the shoe there's a beach. Originally the gold was at the northern end, in a fairly steep sand-bank. We moved it to the southern end, where the sand meets the rock. There's a big, square, isolated boulder, and the gold is near the foot of the side that faces the sea.'

'Thanks,' said Biggles. 'That seems clear enough. While we're at it you might tell me this. Where were you wrecked?'

Again Carter pointed. 'Down there. After several storms I doubt if you'll see much of what's left of our ship except at low water. Have those men gone?'

'Yes. We'd better be going, too. Which way did you come here, via Chile or Argentina?'

'Argentina. Why?'

'You'd prefer to go home that way?'

'I don't really mind which way as long as I get there.'

'I asked because, if it's all the same to you, I'm thinking of flying you direct to Rio Gallegos instead of to Punta Arenas. It's not much farther by air.'

‘What’s the idea of that?’

‘If I leave you in Punta Arenas you may have Gontermann worrying you. Rio Gallegos would be on your way home. Being in Argentina Gontermann would not find it so easy to get to you.’

‘I see what you mean. But what about the stuff we left in our hotel at Punta?’

‘I could pick that up on the way. We shall be there long before Gontermann. I strongly advise you to go to Gallegos. You’d be safer there.’

‘What about seeing Mr Scott about compensation for losing his boat?’

‘I could attend to that for you. I’m sure he’d appreciate reasons for wanting to get home as quickly as possible.’

‘Very well. I accept your advice. You’re being very kind. But you talk about my safety. What about you? If you stay in Punta Arenas after we’ve gone home Gontermann will know why.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Of course he will. But that will be our worry. I shall have to stay here, anyway, to await orders from my chief in London. I shall let him know the position as quickly as possible.’

So it was settled. Mr Barlow was lifted on to the improvised stretcher. The rifle and a few odds and ends which Carter wanted to keep were put on the stretcher with him and the party set off for the beach.

CHAPTER 9

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

WITH the weather remaining reasonably fair, although there was plenty of room for improvement, the flight back to Punta Arenas was merely routine.

As soon as the aircraft was in the air Carter was able to point out the island where he had found the gold, for with the land and water spread out below in the manner of a map, its shape, and the position of its beach, made it unmistakable. It was also possible to see the *Wespe* heading homeward up the Strait under both sail and power.

'He must have decided to get back to Punta, imagining he'll be able to make contact with Carter, assuming I'm taking him and Barlow there,' observed Biggles.

'He'll be sick when he finds they aren't there,' opined Ginger.

'That won't worry me. Were we in his position we should be working just as hard.'

'What do you mean by that? He has no right to the gold.'

'That's what we think. But I always try to see the other man's point of view. Gontermann probably thinks he has as much right to the gold as we have—perhaps more. And on the principle of findings keepings there could be something in that argument.'

'Dash that for a tale,' protested Ginger. 'The gold was taken from a British ship and that makes it ours.'

'Gontermann could argue that as our countries were at war at the time the gold would come under the heading of the spoils of war. I'm not saying that is so. It's a matter of how you look at it; in other words, which side you're on. I'm merely trying to point out how Gontermann may regard the business.'

The Gadfly of course arrived at Punta Arenas hours ahead of the *Wespe* but Biggles wasted no time. Leaving the others to attend to the refuelling of the machine he went in the car to the town, collected his passengers' suitcases, at the same time paying the hotel bill, and then went on to Mr Scott to tell him that his search had been successful but that the *Seaspray*

had been lost. He said he was flying Carter and Barlow straight on to Rio Gallegos, giving the same reason that he had given to Vendez at the airfield, namely, that they would be more likely to get a passage home from there without the long delay that might occur at Punta Arenas. He would be coming back, however, to settle the financial position of the lost boat. This done he returned to the aerodrome to find everything ready for departure.

The Gadfly was soon in the air again and arrived at Rio Gallegos a little before sundown. Having checked in, leaving the others to make arrangements for the two plant collectors, who with their suitcases now had a change of clothes, he went to the post-office where he sent a carefully worded cablegram to the Air Commodore saying that he had been successful on both counts and now awaited instructions. He knew the Air Commodore would understand from that he meant the lost botanists and the gold. He was, he said, returning to Punta Arenas and all communications should be addressed to him at his lodgings there. A full report was on the way by air mail. Having written and posted the letter he rejoined the others, and as there was nothing more to be done they had a good meal at the aerodrome hotel and then sought their beds in the same establishment. It was dark by the time everything had been done and Biggles saw no reason why they should do any night flying.

Dawn came with the weather deteriorating, so they lost no time in getting off, and in less than an hour later were back on the airfield at Punta Arenas to find that Gontermann had not yet returned. Having nothing in particular to do, for a drizzle had set in and looked like continuing, they talked to Vendez, who was in charge during the absence of his boss, Gontermann, the airport manager. The amiable Chilean was pardonably curious about why, having found the lost men, they had returned. Biggles had excuses ready. There was the business of the boat to settle up with Mr Scott. To account for further flights down the Strait he said some interesting botanical specimens had been left there by the plant collectors and when the weather cleared he intended to fetch them. Vendez accepted this explanation but Ginger could see he was still a little puzzled by so much trouble and fuss about what to him were matters of trifling importance.

When, later, they were alone, Vendez having gone about his duties, Biggles said: ‘Things here are going to be a bit difficult when Gontermann gets back. It was all right to tell Vendez we were going back down the Strait to look for a few dried leaves and flowers although even he thought that a bit odd. Gontermann of course will know the real reason, so let’s not fool ourselves about that. But somehow or other we’ve got to hang on here until I hear from the chief what we’re to do next.’

‘I understood the idea was, should we find the gold he’d arrange for a ship to pick it up,’ said Algy.

‘That’s right. But how long is the ship going to be getting here? It might be weeks, in which case the people here will think we’re out of our minds or realize we have other fish to fry.’

‘Wouldn’t it have been better to stay at Rio Gallegos?’

‘No. I considered that but I could see difficulties. Gallegos is in Argentina. This is Chile. So is the area in which we have to operate. Every time we went to and fro it would mean going through Customs, at both ends. That *would* look suspicious. It might play right into Gontermann’s hands. It would be easy for him to keep us grounded on some real or imaginary regulation.’

‘Why come here at all?’ queried Ginger. ‘Why not fly direct between Rio Gallegos and the gold island?’

Biggles frowned. ‘You should know better than that. Flying from one country to another without permission would certainly land us in trouble. If we were based in Argentina and Gontermann saw us over Chilean territory —as he would, from his boat—he’d only have to report to the Chilean government to bring along a flight of fighters to shoot us down. No. We should be the last people to break international regulations in a friendly country and I’m not going to do it. That’s why I came back here. Everything so far has been open and above board and I aim to keep things that way.’

‘I don’t like the idea of leaving the machine here for Gontermann to sabotage if he feels like it.’

‘Neither do I, but there’s nothing we can do about it. He may not go as far as that. A permanent guard on the machine is out of the question. We could be about by day, possibly under the pretence of giving the machine an overhaul; but there could be no excuse for doing that at night.’

‘Are we going to do any flying?’ asked Ginger.

‘There’s one trip we should do, and that may be enough.’

‘What’s that, old boy?’ inquired Bertie, polishing his monocle.

‘We haven’t yet seen the colour of this gold.’

‘But we know where it is.’

‘We think we do, and that isn’t quite the same thing. When the Navy arrives, or whatever ship the Air Commodore sends, we shall be expected to show them the bullion. We would look a bunch of fools if we couldn’t find it. I’m going to make certain I know exactly where to put my hands on it when the time comes. We’ll do that as soon as the weather clears up and we

get some reasonable visibility. There's no future in blundering about in this murk. What I'd like to do is make a sketch map, from the air, of the islands round the objective, marking the one where the gold is buried.'

'And the exact spot?'

'No. That wouldn't be necessary. It might also be dangerous should the map fall into wrong hands. The idea of the map is to give it to the captain of the ship, when it comes, so that we can arrange to meet there. Unfortunately the island appears not to have a name, or that would have been sufficient.'

'I wonder why it hasn't been given a name,' put in Ginger.

'I can only suppose there are so many islands they ran out of names and they didn't bother about the little ones.'

'Hold your hats, chaps,' said Bertie sharply. 'Here comes Gontermann now. At least, that looks like his car coming up the road.'

'It'll be interesting to see how he shapes, and hear what he has to say,' remarked Biggles, dryly.

To Ginger's astonishment Gontermann's manner was more friendly than it had ever been. 'So you got back,' he said cheerily.

'As you see.'

'What have you done with your castaways?'

'What have you done with yours?' parried Biggles.

'Oh, I put them ashore at a place where they wanted to go,' answered the German, casually. 'Where are Carter and Barlow?'

'I've taken them a bit nearer home.'

Gontermann's expression changed. 'Where?'

'To Rio Gallegos.'

That this did not please the airport manager was evident from his expression. 'Why there?' he asked, in a hard voice.

'For one thing it's nearer home for them, and for another, I thought they'd have a better chance of getting a passage on a ship bound for England. Naturally, they're anxious to see their people.'

'So. I wonder why you didn't fly them all the way home?' There was a suspicion of sarcasm in the way Gontermann said this.

'I couldn't do that.'

'Why not?'

'I had some business here to clear up.'

'What business?'

‘There’s the matter of Mr Scott’s boat to settle for one thing. How far it’s covered by insurance, and so on. I promised Carter I’d attend to that for him.’

‘So. That is why you came back.’

‘Among other reasons.’

‘How long you stay here?’

‘I can’t say exactly. That will depend largely on the weather.’

‘Ah,’ breathed the German. ‘Well, I have work to do.’ Turning abruptly he walked to his office.

‘I fancy he wasn’t expecting that,’ said Ginger, softly.

‘No. Neither was I expecting to see him arrive here without those two men of his. I wonder where he’s left them.’

‘He could have dropped them in the town.’

‘I don’t think so. Had he done that he would have said so. It would have been the natural thing to say. No. He was deliberately evasive. You’ll have noticed he didn’t say *where* he put them ashore.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘It might matter a lot. I only hope he didn’t leave them on gold island.’

‘Could he have done that? We saw him sailing up the Strait.’

‘He would have had plenty of time to go to the island before that. It must have been a good two hours after he left us before we got off.’

‘If he left them on the island it’s going to make things awkward for us. But why would he do that?’

‘One good reason. Because he’s convinced the gold is still there. He knows we didn’t bring it away in the aircraft. Well, there’s nothing we can do about it. We can’t ask the men to go and we can’t evict them by force. They have as much right there as we have—perhaps more. They may be Chileans. I have a feeling this game is still only half played out. Let’s get the machine under cover and go back to town. It doesn’t look like clearing up to-day.’

‘You think the machine will be all right?’ queried Algy, anxiously.

‘I don’t think he’d dare to mess about with it while the staff are around.’

‘Unless one of the mechanics happens to be a pal of his.’

‘I’m afraid that’s a chance we shall have to take. Don’t think of any more snags or I shall be having a nervous breakdown.’

They walked towards the machine.

CHAPTER 10

THWARTED

BIGGLES had to wait for two days before the weather cleared sufficiently to make worth while his sortie to gold island to confirm that the hoard was still where it was said to be. He was too old a hand at reconnaissance to accept a report from anyone without making sure 'with his own eyes', as he put it. He was a believer in the old adage, 'Seeing is believing'.

All that happened in the interval was the receipt of a signal from the Air Commodore ordering him to stand by for a letter of instructions which was on its way by air mail. The reasons why such instructions could not be sent openly by cablegram or radiogram were obvious. What they were really doing there would have been exposed, not only to the people around them but to the whole world, for such an item of news would have become a newspaper story. A gold hunt is always 'news', anywhere. This inevitably would have led to complications Biggles was anxious to avoid. As he said to the others over breakfast at the hotel: 'One whisper of the word treasure and we've had it.'

'I suppose all we can do is stick around and wait for the letter to arrive,' said Algy.

'Or the ship. Meanwhile we'll carry on as we intended. We'll make one trip down the Strait to have a look at the stuff as soon as the weather takes up. Then we come back here and wait.'

'Do you suppose the captain of the ship that's coming knows what this is all about?' Ginger asked the question.

'He'll have to know. It wouldn't be left to us to tell him. The annoying thing is, we haven't a clue as to when he's due to arrive here.'

'Will he call here, at Punta Arenas?'

'Presumably, although we don't even know that for sure. No doubt we shall get all the gen in the Air Commodore's letter when it comes.'

'Things would be in a nice mess if we ran into trouble down the Strait and weren't here to meet the ship when it arrived.'

‘That, I admit, would throw the spanner in the works,’ said Biggles, frowning. ‘In the sort of weather they get here we might be grounded for a week or more by sleet, snow, fog—anything. Wind could blow up a sea that would make it impossible for us to get off. We can only operate from water. At least, there are few beaches, or flat ground, large enough to land on or take off from. But there’s an easy way over that snag. I mean, about meeting the ship should we be stuck somewhere.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Algy.

‘How’s your ankle?’

‘Not too bad. It’s still a bit painful if I put any weight on it.’

‘The quickest way to get it right is to rest it.’

Algy smiled. ‘I see. In other words you leave me here to meet the ship should she arrive before you get back from your trip to the island.’

‘You’ve got it. That seems to be a sane precaution. If we didn’t come back at all, and that’s always a possibility when operating in such conditions as we have here, you would be able to guide the skipper to the gold. What is even more important from my point of view you’d know roughly where we were and could lead a search party to rescue us. I hope it won’t come to that but I wouldn’t trust this weather for ten minutes together.’

‘That’s all right with me,’ agreed Algy. ‘I’d only have to twist my other ankle and you’d have to carry me.’

‘Another thing. If that letter comes from the chief before I’m back you’d better open it and see what it’s about. It should contain the whole plan of operation—the name of the ship, where it’s coming from and its estimated time of arrival.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Algy.

‘Very well. As the weather looks as if it might take up the rest of us will press on to the airfield,’ decided Biggles. ‘The sooner this part of the job is over the better I shall sleep at nights. This weather gives me the willies.’

With those who were going on the trip he went out to the car and so to the airfield. The rain had stopped, but there was still a lot of low, misty cloud about, although it appeared to be lifting. However, as Biggles was anxious to go over the machine thoroughly there was no immediate urgency, and the next hour was spent looking for possible signs of sabotage. They found none, much to their relief, and just as they had satisfied themselves on this Gontermann walked in.

‘Are you thinking of flying?’ he asked.

‘We are.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Down the Strait.’

Are you thinking of flying? Gontermann asked (page 110)

‘For what purpose? Looking for more castaways?’ Gontermann couldn’t keep a slight sneer out of his voice.

‘No,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘I’m going to try to locate the wreck of the *Seaspray* and perhaps bring some stuff Carter left behind.’

‘What sort of stuff?’

‘Botanical specimens and equipment.’

‘You’re using a lot of petrol.’

Biggles grinned. ‘Fortunately I don’t have to pay for it. Would you care to come with us?’

Gontermann failed to hide an expression of surprise at this invitation. ‘No thanks. I have work to do here.’ He walked away.

‘That was taking a chance, wasn’t it?’ murmured Ginger. ‘Suppose he’d said yes?’

‘I knew he wouldn’t. I fancy he has other ideas. A little bluff at the right time does no harm.’

They still waited for a while with the weather slowly improving; for without good visibility anything in the nature of a sortie would have been a waste of time.

‘The two things I’m most afraid of,’ said Biggles as they stood by the machine, ‘is fog and ice. Ice could put us down wherever we happened to be and that could only mean a crack-up. Fog would make it impossible to find the airfield, and there’s nowhere else I’d care to risk a landing.’

‘There goes Gontermann,’ observed Ginger, noticing the manager’s car going down the road.

‘I wonder where he’s off to,’ said Biggles, thoughtfully. ‘He’s doing nearly as much running about as we are.’

‘Probably with the same object in view, old boy,’ put in Bertie. ‘There’s nothing like gold to set people on the trot.’

‘How right you are,’ returned Biggles. ‘Well, let’s get airborne. By the time we’re down the Strait we should be able to see what we’re doing.’

‘What exactly are you going to do?’ asked Ginger.

‘Perfectly simple. Fly down to gold island, confirm that the bullion is there and come back home. I shall grab plenty of altitude to make sure we don’t bump into anything solid. As long as there are no growlers in the bay by the beach where we shall have to land there should be no difficulty.’

‘Okay.’

Biggles took off, and climbing steeply for height flew down the Strait, an unmistakable landmark. There was still a certain amount of low cloud or mist about, particularly in the valleys, but with a watery sun beginning to break through this was slowly being dispersed. With the machine up to eight thousand, the two islands they knew, gold island and the one from which the botanists had been rescued, were picked up without difficulty. With engines throttled back Biggles had begun a long glide towards the former when Ginger suddenly leaned forward to stare through the windscreen.

‘What is it?’ asked Biggles.

‘There’s somebody there.’

‘You mean—on the island?’

‘Yes. I can see smoke. Look! A little to the left of the knoll.’

‘You’re right,’ agreed Biggles, after a good look.

‘And I can see something else,’ went on Ginger. ‘Isn’t that a small boat, a rowing boat, pulled up on the beach?’

‘I’m afraid you’re right again,’ muttered Biggles. ‘What a nuisance. This knocks our scheme on the head.’

‘What do you make of it?’

‘Quite obviously Gontermann has left those two toughs of his on the island. With the possible exception of a party of Indians it couldn’t very well be anyone else.’

‘It could be Indians.’

‘No. That craft on the beach isn’t a canoe. It isn’t long enough. It’s a ship’s boat. I’d say it’s the *Wespe*’s dinghy.’

‘What was the idea of leaving the men there?’

‘Surely that’s pretty obvious.’

‘To carry on trying to find the gold.’

‘That would be one reason, no doubt. What could be more important, to prevent us from landing there and looking for the gold ourselves.’

‘They couldn’t stop us.’

‘No, but they could watch us. What it boils down to is, we can’t go near that gold while they’re there.’

‘They may not stay there.’

‘They’ll have to stay there until Gontermann comes to fetch them in the *Wespe*. They’re not likely to try to row to Punta Arenas in a dinghy.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘I don’t know. This needs thinking about.’ By this time, still without using his engines, Biggles had turned away from the island.

‘They may not have seen us,’ suggested Ginger, hopefully.

‘It doesn’t matter whether they have or not. They’ll hear us when I open up, as I shall have to, presently. One thing’s certain. There’s no point in landing on that island while they’re there. We wouldn’t be able to do anything and it might lead to argument, possibly fighting. That won’t get us anywhere except perhaps in a Chilean gaol.’

‘Then what *are* we going to do?’

‘I can think of only one thing. If we go near that island Gontermann will know for certain that we’re here to look for the gold. He suspects that already, but he’s had no proof of it so there still may be a doubt in his mind. I’d prefer to leave him in doubt, because once he’s convinced he could make things difficult for us at the airfield. We said we were going to collect some stuff Carter and Barlow left behind. That could be on the island from which we picked them up, so that’s where I’m going. We know we can get down there. If we’ve been seen that would tie up with the story we’ve told, the reason for our coming back here. If nothing else it’ll give us an opportunity to work out a new scheme.’

‘Do you think Gontermann is playing his own hand in this business or has he got someone behind him?’

‘It’s impossible to say. No doubt he’ll have a financial interest; but in view of the hint the Air Commodore gave us in that radiogram, that we might have visitors, there’s a chance that Russia or East Germany may have a finger in the pie. However, let’s not worry about that yet. We’ve plenty on our plate as it is, without getting in a flap about things that *might* happen. Tell Bertie we’ve had to change the plan and where I’m making for.’

Ginger went aft to the cabin.

The Gadfly, still gliding, was now circling over the place where it had landed to pick up Carter and his companion, easily recognizable by the snake-shaped glacier. After flying low over the water two or three times to make sure there were no growlers Biggles made a safe landing, and having taxied on to the beach, the same spot they had used on the previous occasion, switched off. They all got out. Biggles lit a cigarette.

‘Now what?’ inquired Bertie. ‘Bit of a bind, those blighters being there —if you see what I mean.’

For a minute or two Biggles didn’t answer. Then he said: ‘Instead of standing here twiddling our thumbs let’s see if we can locate the remains of the *Seaspray*. Carter pointed out to me the place where she went aground.’

‘Suppose we did find her? What use would that be?’ asked Ginger, somewhat disconsolately.

‘If we took something home with us it would prove to Gontermann that we really came here to look for some stuff Carter and his pal had left behind. Anyhow, it could do no harm. Even if we found no more than a few pieces of wreckage it would prove to Mr Scott’s insurance people that the *Seaspray* has been lost. Moreover, if those two stiffs on gold island did spot us, and watched us come down, they’ll suppose they’ll know what we’re doing.

After all, for all they know to the contrary the gold, or some of it, might have been aboard the *Seaspray* when she broke up.'

So saying Biggles strode along the beach. It was no great distance to the rocks; a matter of a few hundred yards, which was why Biggles had not thought it necessary to leave anyone with the aircraft. The water was calm, with hardly a ripple.

There was no difficulty in finding the spot where the *Seaspray* had met her end for small pieces of wreckage still lay about with odds and ends of her equipment and stores, although these objects would hardly have been noticed by anyone on the water. They lay between the rocks, or in pools between them, and may have been washed ashore by heavy seas after the survivors had made their way to higher ground. The actual spot where the vessel had struck was within a few feet of where the rocks gave way to sand, so that with a little luck she might have been thrown high and dry on the beach. Advancing to the edge of the rocks they could just see the hull lying on its side, in two pieces, in about fifteen or twenty feet of water. Biggles remarked that had the water not been so cold they might have dived down to her to salvage anything worth while. As it was, all they could do, as they were there, was cast about for anything the survivors might be glad to have.

Almost at once Ginger picked up a small notebook that turned out to be a diary with Carter's name on the first page. It was in a bad state, but the notes, having been written with a pencil, had not blurred, as would have been the case with ink, which would have run on coming in contact with water.

'We'll take care of that,' said Biggles. 'It can be dried, and Carter will probably be delighted to have it. What may be more important from our angle, I'll show it to Gontermann so that he can see we really have looked for the wreck, and found it.'

They continued the search for some time, but the only other object of interest they found was some sheets of paper between stiff cardboard covers held together by rubber bands. The whole thing had evidently been in a press, for it was stuck together in a mass. Examination revealed that between the papers were botanical specimens, leaves, moss and flowers. It was put with the notebook to be taken home.

'That seems to be about the lot,' decided Biggles. 'We might as well be getting back.'

'Just a minute,' said Ginger, in a queer voice. 'We're being watched. Don't look. Just go on pottering about.'

'Tell us about it, anyway,' requested Biggles.

‘I was looking round to see what the weather was doing and as my eyes passed over the ridge of the island opposite I saw a movement. I could swear it was a man. He’s lying down now so you can’t see him. Or he may have come over the skyline. I’m not sure which.’

‘That must be our friends from gold island—or one of them,’ answered Biggles. ‘They must have spotted us in the air, and seeing us come down decided to have a look at what we’re doing. It can’t be more than two or three miles from gold island to that island opposite. We know they have a boat, so it would be a simple matter to row across. When you think about it that’s what you’d expect them to do. No doubt they landed on the far side of the island and climbed to the highest point. How far away is it as the crow flies? Not much more than a quarter of a mile, if that. They’d be able to see us plainly from where they are. You’re quite sure you saw somebody, Ginger?’

‘Absolutely certain.’

‘What about Indians?’ queried Bertie.

‘No, definitely,’ replied Biggles. ‘In the first place, as they get their food on the seashore they could have no possible reason for climbing that hill opposite. Secondly, if they saw us, they’d be over here as fast as they could paddle to try to cadge some grub. That’s their reputation, and we know from our own experience they make a practice of it.’

‘What are you going to do?’ inquired Ginger.

Biggles lit a cigarette. As he tossed the match aside a slow smile spread over his face. ‘How about giving them something to look at, something to think about? I see possibilities here.’

‘Out with it, old boy; don’t keep us in suspense,’ complained Bertie.

‘I think this is where we could usefully trail a red herring; one which would alter their ideas and perhaps bring them over here instead of getting in our way on gold island.’

‘I still don’t get it.’

‘Well, Gontermann knows the *Seaspray* went ashore on this island. That means his pals would know that. They haven’t been able to find the gold so there must be a lingering thought in their minds that Carter and Barlow lifted it, in which case it might well have been in the *Seaspray* when she went down. Do you follow me so far?’

‘Yes,’ answered Ginger and Bertie together.

‘Very well. If that was so, Carter would be almost certain to tell us about it when we rescued them. They wouldn’t just go home, saying nothing about

it, leaving a few million quid lying on the sea floor to sink into the mud and be lost for ever. Right?'

'Correct,' agreed Ginger.

'If those fellows opposite see us poking about here they'll jump to the conclusion this is where the *Seaspray* went down, as in fact it did. They're bound to wonder why we should be so interested in a wreck.'

'They may think we really are looking for Carter's botanical specimens.'

'Not on your life! They don't think on those lines. As they'd see it, anyone who took chances to save a few pressed leaves would need his head examining. All they've got on their minds is gold. They'll think it's here, either in the wreck or on shore. If they see us digging, or probing about with a crow-bar, they'll think—well, what would you think?'

Ginger answered: 'I'd think the *Seaspray* held together long enough for the gold to be carried ashore and buried in the nearest convenient place, which is this sand next to the rocks.'

'Fine. Now you're keeping pace with me. If we throw some sand about and then head for home what will the boys on the island opposite do—bearing in mind that we couldn't carry all that gold in the aircraft?'

'They'll come over, flat out, to have a look at the yellow metal.'

'Which would leave the way open for us to slip across to gold island and have a look at the real thing.'

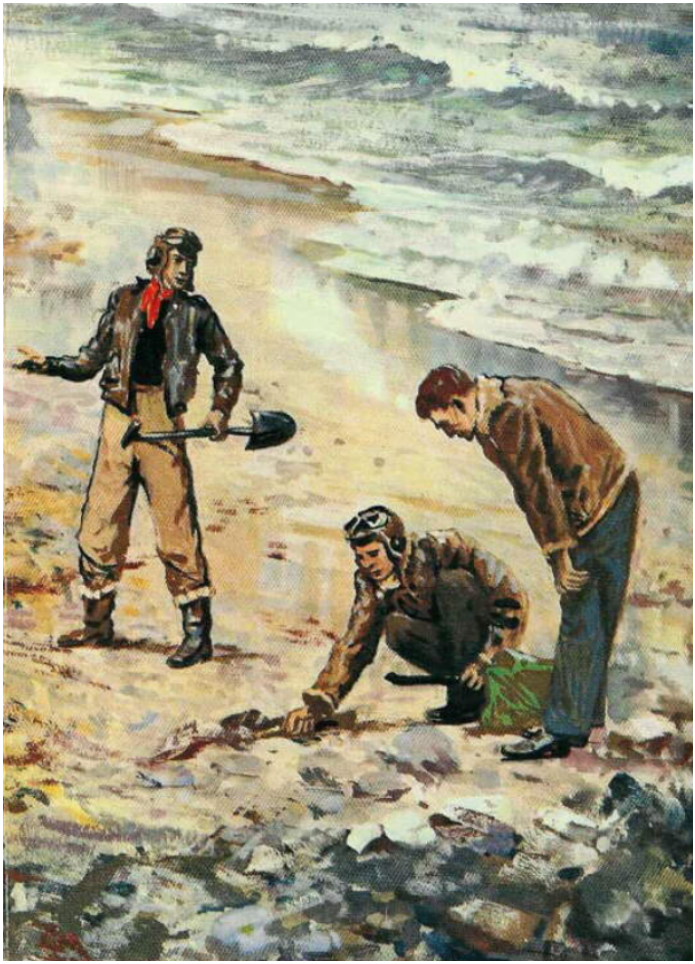
Bertie grinned. 'Top hole, old boy. What a lad you are for bright ideas. How you think of 'em beats me—absolutely.'

'All right,' said Biggles, briskly. 'Let's get busy. Ginger, slip along to the machine and fetch the spade and the crow-bar. We might as well do the job properly.'

CHAPTER 11

RISKY WORK

THE business of making a pretence to look for the gold was soon in full swing, Biggles probing the sand with the light crow-bar and one of the others digging at places suggested by him. For the benefit of the watchers on the opposite side of the channel some pieces of wreckage were collected from among the adjacent rocks, examined and then thrown down again, the purpose of which was to indicate that this was where the *Seaspray* ended her career. From time to time, without making it obvious what he was doing, Ginger surveyed the island opposite, concentrating on the spot where he had seen the figure move; but he saw no more of it. This, however, was not surprising, Biggles pointing out that the man, or men, should they both be there, would take good care not to be seen. The spot where this would be most difficult was on the skyline, where the movement had caught Ginger's eye.



Biggles probed the sand with the light crow-bar (page 120)

After about a quarter of an hour Biggles said: ‘We mustn’t spend too long at this or the light will be going. In fact, we’ve done enough. We’d better be moving. Smooth out the sand as if we’re trying to cover any traces of our having been here.’

This was done, and the party, carrying the tools, returned to the aircraft, Biggles casting anxious glances at the sky and observing that the wind had veered a point or two which might mean a change of weather, although for better or worse was a matter for surmise. There were no indications, except that the wind seemed to be freshening.

‘You both know the drill,’ said Biggles, as they got into the machine. ‘I shall act as if we’re going straight home, grabbing a fair bit of altitude. When we’re at what I consider a safe distance away, that is, too far away for

them to see us, I shall cut the engines and swing back, making a wide detour to come on the gold island from the far side.'

'Isn't there a chance they may see us?' put in Ginger.

'Yes, I'm afraid there is, but we shall have to risk that. I'm hoping that having seen us heading up the Strait they'll assume we've gone home, in which case, being busy with what they're doing, they won't bother to watch the sky. They certainly won't hear us. The wind's in the wrong direction. If they come over here we should be able to see them on the beach. That will be all I want to know. We'll creep in, go down, satisfy ourselves that the bullion is there and then beat it for home. If there's no hitch this should put an end to the daft game of in and out these perishing islands. I've had about enough of it, as would any pilot in his right mind. Let's go.'

'I'm with you, old boy, every time,' agreed Bertie, fervently. 'Never mind the snow on the tops of the bally mountains; I shall have snow on my top if this goes on much longer. I haven't been warm since we got here. Give me islands where the bananas and coconuts grow.'

'So say I,' returned Ginger, with feeling.

Biggles took off, and for the next twenty minutes followed the procedure he had outlined. This brought the machine to a point from which the islands with which they were concerned could be observed at a distance of between two and three miles. It was ironical, for now they knew where the gold lay it was no longer a factor of importance, that one of the first things Ginger noticed was that the two mountains which were to act as pointers were now in line. With the binoculars to his eyes, what interested him more was what he could see on the beach of the island they had just vacated.

'You were dead right the way you worked it out,' he told Biggles. 'They've gone across. I can see their boat on the beach, at the spot where we did the digging. They're both there, busy as beavers. That means I was right, too. They must have been watching us.'

Biggles did not answer. The machine was now fairly low and still losing height, and Ginger saw he was staring down at something below them. 'What's wrong?' he asked, quickly. 'The rowing boat has gone, hasn't it?'

'Yes,' said Biggles, grimly. 'The boat's gone, but there's something else down there I don't like the look of. There's a growler smack in the middle of the fairway. And I can see more not far away that look as if they might drift in. It's the change of wind that's done it.'

'What a pest! Does that mean we can't get down?'

'No, but it means taking a chance; and an even bigger chance that we may not be able to get off again. It would depend on which way that

confounded lump of ice drifts.'

'Go on down and have a closer look at it.'

'I can't make a trial run without using the engines, and if I do that it'll give the game away. Those men will hear us and come tearing back.'

'They've some way to come. They couldn't get here before we'd done what we want to do.'

'That may be, but I'd rather they didn't know we'd been here.'

'They'd hear us take off in any case.'

'Not necessarily. It was my intention to taxi quietly away for some distance, into another channel, before taking off. The light isn't too good, either.'

'Well, you'll soon have to make up your mind,' advised Ginger.

'I'll chance it,' decided Biggles. 'I'm sick of this messing about. We could go on doing this sort of thing for weeks. In fact, with the weather getting slowly worse we might be stuck here for months. Tighten your belt. I'm going in.'

Still without touching the throttle Biggles nosed his way down to what Ginger could see was a narrow channel between the beach and the floating mass of ice. Ginger moistened his lips. He did not need telling that the real danger lay not in what they could see but in what could not be seen: how far the ice floe spread under the water, only just submerged. He knew that for all that was visible there would be nine times as much below the surface. He also noticed with some dismay that there was a heavier sea running than he had supposed. Waves were breaking against the growler and on the beach. The urge to say 'don't risk it' was great, but he knew better than to speak at such a vital moment.

The Gadfly went in, Biggles tense, Ginger watching, silent. With one hand on the throttle ready to open up the instant danger threatened Biggles held the machine off as long as possible. She shuddered as a wave snatched at her keel, but Biggles steadied her and she settled down in a cloud of spray on the turbulent water. A gust of wind catching her on the quarter caused her to yaw rather badly, but a touch of the throttle straightened her and sent her on towards that end of the beach where, according to Carter, the treasure lay.

Still Ginger did not speak although it was evident that the risks they were taking were becoming desperate. The growler, under the pressure of wind and water, was moving fast, and he could see others in the distance threatening to block the entrance to the channel. But it was not until Biggles had run the Gadfly on to the beach and he opened the door to get out that he

realized with what velocity the wind was now blowing; and the bitter cold of it. It cut through his heavy clothes as though they had been muslin.

Biggles jumped out and had to clutch at the hull to steady himself. He looked at the sky, at the water, at the ice, and at the spot only a few yards away where the gold was reported to be buried. He shook from his eyes the tears the icy blast had brought to them. Then he made up his mind. 'It's no use,' he shouted. 'Let's get out of this.'

'It'll only take five minutes to——'

'Five minutes may be too long. The sea's rising every second. And look at that ice!'

Bertie put his head out. 'What's wrong, old boy?'

'Everything,' snapped Biggles. 'Get back, we're not staying.'

Nobody argued. It was plain they may have left it too late already.

They all bundled back into the aircraft. With spray torn from the tops of the waves lashing the windscreen Biggles put the machine back on the water and with engines roaring turned his nose into the wind.

The next minute was one of those a pilot never forgets. In a way the wind helped in that it shortened the take-off run, which became series of bumps until a wave literally kicked the machine into the air. Even then, with high ground all around them she was not safe, and to make matters more difficult, as if they were not difficult enough, at that moment a flurry of sleet or snow, Ginger was not sure which, blotted out everything. Fortunately it was only a small isolated shower, and the Gadfly soon burst through to the clear sky above it.

'Any ice?' asked Biggles tersely, as he swung round to take up his course for home.

Ginger's eyes were already studying the leading edge of the wing. 'Don't see any.'

'That's something to be thankful for, anyway. What a climate. Save me from ever coming here again.'

'That was a bit grisly, old boy,' said Bertie, putting his head in. 'Pity having to push off like that after having got so near to the jolly old golden bricks.'

'Another five minutes would have done it,' muttered Ginger, disconsolately.

'Another five minutes could have seen us all in Davy Jones's locker,' declared Biggles, shortly. 'I must have been off my rocker to attempt it. I could see what was happening, and what was likely to happen, but it's the

speed at which the weather here can change that makes the place such a devil's kitchen. I know we were warned, but this sort of thing has to be seen to be believed.'

'There is this about it,' contributed Ginger. 'With the sea in this state those fellows who crossed over to where they saw us digging won't be able to get back to gold island. I wonder if they heard us take off.'

'I doubt it, with that gale raging,' answered Biggles. 'They're a nuisance.'

'Things would have been difficult enough without them poking their noses in,' grumbled Ginger.

'That's probably what they're saying about us. Which reminds me. What about Gontermann? It wouldn't surprise me if he came this way to see how his two little men are getting on. I don't care how good a sailor he may be he can't be happy sailing solo in these conditions. Well, here we are. I shan't be sorry to get my feet on the ground.'

Biggles did a circuit of the airfield and landed as the last of the twilight was fading out. Never, thought Ginger, had he seen an aerodrome look so gloomy or so depressing in its bleak loneliness.

Vendez was there. He came to meet them. 'So you managed to get back.'

'Just about,' returned Biggles.

'I was thinking about you. According to the glass there's dirty weather on the way.'

'I'd say it's already here.'

'Did you find anything?'

'Yes. Not much. We've seen what's left of the *Seaspray*, lying in about three fathoms. One or two things had been washed ashore. We've picked up a diary and a book of specimens. When they've been dried they may be worth something to Carter.'

'Did you see anything of Gontermann?'

'No. Don't tell me he's gone for a sail in this weather.'

'He told me he was going, and might be away for two or three days.'

'He seems to take plenty of time off.'

'He knows I can take care of things during his absence—not that there's likely to be anything to do while this weather lasts.'

'Well, we'll get along home,' said Biggles. 'I could do with a bath and something hot inside me.' He fetched the two documents they had found and showed them.

‘What are you going to do with them?’ asked Vendez.

‘Take them to the hotel and try to get them dry.’

‘You can leave them here if you like. There’s always a fire in my office. I can dry them for you.’

‘That’s very kind of you. Take them by all means.’ Biggles handed them over. ‘We’ll be seeing you,’ he concluded, turning away.

‘Why did you do that?’ asked Ginger, as they walked over to the car.

‘Why not? You heard what he said. Besides, we could always use those books as evidence as to our intentions. I’m thinking of Gontermann. No doubt Vendez will show them to him when he comes back.’

‘I wouldn’t shed any tears if he didn’t come back,’ said Ginger, as they got in the car.

‘Don’t be ungenerous,’ reproved Biggles. ‘He hasn’t hurt us—yet. I wonder if Algy has any news. Let’s see.’

They arrived back at the hotel to find Algy just beginning to get anxious about them, for he had of course seen the weather deteriorating. He had news. Important news. The information for which they had been waiting. A letter had arrived by air mail from the Air Commodore, and in accordance with Biggles’ instructions he had opened it.

The gist of it was, the Royal Navy frigate *Petrel*, Captain Anderson, had been detached from Port Stanley, Falkland Islands Station, officially on a training exercise, to collect the ‘property’. It would leave its base on or about April 23, and would call at Punta Arenas to pick Biggles up.

‘That seems all straightforward,’ observed Algy. ‘You will presumably go on board and act as a guide to the property, as they so cautiously put it.’

‘I suppose it’s all right,’ replied Biggles, dubiously.

‘Why, what’s wrong about it?’

‘In the first place I wouldn’t swear that I could find my way, at water level, through that maze of channels to the island. We know the place well enough from the air, but from the carpet it might be a different matter. However, I can get over that by having another look at it and maybe making a sketch map of the best way to go.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes. I’m not happy about the date. You’ll notice the chief says on *or about* the twenty-third. The operative word is *about*. To-morrow will be the twenty-third, so the *Petrel* could have left already. On the other hand she might not leave for another two or three days. I would have preferred something more definite. I suppose there were reasons why a date couldn’t

be given. But perhaps it doesn't matter. I shall be here when the ship arrives, anyway.'

'How long will it take her to get here?' Ginger asked the question.

'That's bound to depend on the weather. Speaking from memory the Falklands are roughly three hundred miles from the Magellan Strait. Punta is, say, another hundred miles on. With a clear run the *Petrel* shouldn't take long to get here, but fog or heavy seas would delay her. There must be a heavy sea running now. It was rough even in the shelter of the islands, as we jolly well know. We nearly bought it trying to get off. All we can say is, the *Petrel* should be here within the next week. That's a bit vague, but neither the Air Commodore nor the Admiralty can have any idea that the operation is anything but straightforward. From our angle, with Gontermann and his pals in the offing it's anything but that.'

'Will you still do another trip to locate the exact position of the bullion?' asked Ginger.

'Definitely. A few hours should be enough for that and we have plenty of time. All the evidence we have at present is hearsay, and I've learned not to rely too much on that. I'd like to see the stuff with my own eyes, as the saying is; then there can be no mistake about it.'

'But look here, I say, old boy, Carter and Barlow struck me as being reliable types, and all that,' protested Bertie.

'I don't question their honesty, but even people with the best intentions in the world have been known to make a mistake. And, for some reason, that seems to happen more often when a lot of money is involved. That may be why treasures known to exist are seldom found. Well, there's nothing more we can do about it. Given a fair day to-morrow we should be able to get our part of the business buttoned up. After that all we have to do is sit here and wait for the *Petrel* to show up.'

CHAPTER 12

GONTERMANN PULLS A FAST ONE

ONE glance out of the window the following morning was enough to dash any hopes of settling the business that day—at least, as far as a trip to gold island was concerned. A gale was raging, with an unbroken blanket of indigo cloud sweeping low over the storm-tossed water. A mixture of rain and sleet, driven horizontally on the face of the wind, reduced visibility down to a few yards.

'That decides any possible argument about doing any flying to-day,' said Biggles philosophically, lighting a cigarette. 'If it lets up this side of sundown I shall be surprised. I'm not aviating in that for all the gold in the Bank of England.'

'It looks as if this might go on for a week,' remarked Ginger, moodily.

'According to the book it might easily do that—or longer,' replied Biggles. 'This is where we kick our heels.'

Evening came without a break in the cloud, or even a promise of one. The wind howled. Rain and sleet slashed the window, sliding down the glass like half-cooked tapioca.

'If Gontermann's out in that I wish him joy,' said Algy, looking at it.

They stayed at home.

The next day was a little better, but not much. It was clear that the storm was still far from blowing itself out. After lunch, fretting with impatience, really for the sake of something to do Biggles said he would take the car as far as the mole to see if by any chance the *Petrel* had arrived earlier than expected. The others, just as bored from having nothing to do, decided to go with him.

A surprise awaited them. The meat-loading refrigerator ships had gone, but another was there; a long, dark-hulled vessel that looked a real salt-water craft.

'A whaler,' remarked Biggles, without any particular interest, only to come to a sudden stop as if something had caught his eye, as in fact it had. 'Look at the flag she's flying,' he went on, in a different tone of voice.

Ginger looked, and saw the Hammer and Sickle. ‘Russian,’ was all he said.

‘Yes,’ returned Biggles, frowning. ‘While we’re here we might as well have a word with Mr Scott to see if he has any news.’

They went on to the ship’s chandler’s establishment. ‘Do you happen to know if Gontermann has come back?’ he asked, after greetings had been exchanged. ‘I believe he was out in his boat when this dirty weather rolled up.’

‘I haven’t seen him,’ was the reply. ‘The *Wespe* isn’t at its usual mooring. He’d probably run for shelter when he saw what was coming. I doubt if he’d try to fight his way home in the teeth of the wind.’ Then, indicating the whaler, he added as an afterthought: ‘They’re waiting for him.’

Biggles stared: ‘Who’s waiting?’

‘It seems that somebody on yon Russki whaler wants to speak to him.’

‘To Gontermann?’

‘Aye.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘There’s a mon been along two or three times asking for him. I said he was out, sailing down the Strait. He wanted to know how long it would be before he came back.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘I told him I didn’t know. Then he wanted to know where he could find him. I said he might find him somewhere down the Strait. That was as much as I knew. His boat wasn’t at its usual mooring so he hadn’t come back.’

‘This man must have had urgent business with him.’

‘Aye. I’d think that.’

‘What’s that craft doing here, anyway?’

‘I couldna tell ye that, either. They don’t talk much. Having engine trouble, mebbe. They’ve as much right here as anyone. Na doot she’ll be on her way south, to the whaling grounds.’

‘How long has she been here?’

‘Came in yesterday, to lie snug out of the weather, as I thought, till they came asking for Gontermann.’

‘What could they want with him—the airport manager?’

‘He may be a friend of the skipper, who reckoned on taking him aboard as a pilot to see the ship through the Strait. He could do that as well as

anyone.'

'That could be the answer,' acknowledged Biggles, turning away, 'Thanks, Mr Scott.' He went out.

When they were all outside he said: 'I don't like this. Even as a whaler that craft has a particularly fishy smell about it. What on earth could the skipper possibly want with Gontermann? But that's a silly question. We might make one guess and be right.'

'What you mean is, that ship may be acting in the same way for him as the *Petrel* is for us,' put in Algy.

'That's what I'm afraid of. I can't think of any other reason why they should have an interest in a man who, as we believe, has the low-down on what the *Dresden* did with her loot. If I'm right this show looks like developing into a race, and a race that's likely to have a close finish. I'd feel happier if the *Petrel* was here. Should Gontermann come back and go aboard that ship it'll have a start on us.'

'Don't forget the Air Commodore dropped us a hint that unwelcome visitors might be on the way,' reminded Ginger. 'Intelligence may have got wind of something. If so, why didn't the chief give us the complete gen to set our clocks right?'

'He wouldn't dare, for fear other people rumbled what we were doing. Russia has spies everywhere, and that includes telegraph and radio services. Any communist, and Gontermann might well be one, automatically becomes a spy, as we know to our cost.'

'What are we going to do about it?'

'As far as I can see there's nothing we can do about it. This is a free port. One thing's certain, it's no use trying to do anything in this filthy weather so we shall just have to wait to see what happens.'

'Meanwhile, if Gontermann comes back and that whaler pulls out with him on board we look like missing the boat after all,' observed Algy, gloomily.

'We still hold one trump card,' returned Biggles, cheerfully. 'As far as we know Gontermann hasn't succeeded in locating the gold. He may have worked out which island it's on, but that's not the same thing. Even if he knew where it was originally he isn't to know that it has been moved. If he did know or suspect that, he couldn't possibly know where it is now. It'd be a long job to dig up the whole blooming island, so we still have the edge on him there.'

'Tell me this, old boy,' requested Bertie. 'What's going to happen if that whaler and the *Petrel* find themselves lying off the island together—if you

see what I mean?'

'I'd rather not think about, that,' returned Biggles. 'Your guess is as good as mine. We might as well go home and get out of this perishing wind.'

'I shall soon be climbing up the wall if I have to stay in that room much longer,' declared Ginger. 'Why not run over to the airfield to ask Vendez if he's heard any news of Gontermann? No machines are likely to come in while this weather lasts, but I imagine Vendez will be there if only to receive signals in Gontermann's absence.'

'Yes, we could do that,' agreed Biggles. 'It would make a break from staring out of the window.'

He turned the car towards the aerodrome, keeping a lookout, as far as the weather made this possible, for the conspicuous orange sails of the *Wespe*. But they saw nothing of it.

They found Vendez in his office. He greeted them in his usual friendly manner, but Ginger detected, or thought he detected, a certain embarrassment in the way he looked at them.

After a few words about the weather Biggles asked: 'Have you heard anything of Gontermann? It's time he was back, isn't it?'

'No, I have heard nothing,' replied the Chilean assistant manager. 'I imagine he's lying up in a sheltered cove waiting for a change in the weather. He will come to no harm while he does that. He's a good sailor, as you know. But to change the subject, I'm glad you've come. I was about to send a message to you.'

'Oh, really,' said Biggles, casually, little guessing what was coming.

'Yes, I am afraid I have bad news for you.'

Biggles' eyebrows went up. 'Bad news?'

'You may think it so. You may not do any more flying from here.'

Biggles looked amazed. 'Do you mean that—literally?' he asked, incredulously.

'Those are the orders, and in the absence of the manager they become my responsibility. I am very sorry if this puts you to any inconvenience by interfering with your plans in any way.'

'But—but how did this come about?'

Vendez shrugged.

'Have we done something wrong?'

'Not so far as I know.'

'We have scrupulously observed every regulation.'

‘That is true.’

‘Then what’s the trouble?’

‘I am not supposed to tell you this but I will. Gontermann sent a report about you to headquarters in Santiago.’

‘Saying what?’

‘He suspected from your behaviour that you were foreign secret agents engaged in spying.’

‘But that’s ridiculous!’ cried Biggles. ‘What is there to spy on here? As far as I know there’s nothing of a military nature within hundreds of miles.’

‘That is so, but Gontermann thought you were up to something. He was suspicious and thought it his duty to make a report. It may still be all right. No doubt you will be able to explain everything.’

‘To whom?’

‘To the officers who are on their way from Santiago to ask you questions.’

‘When do you expect them?’

Vendez held out his hands, palms upwards. ‘Who knows?’

‘Are they flying down?’

‘But of course. In the ordinary way they would have been here by now, on the regular service. But with the weather as it is the plane will have stopped somewhere on the route until conditions make continuation here quite safe. Did you intend to do any more flying?’

‘One more trip, for a last look round. A matter of only a few hours. It would have been done by now, before your signal came in, had the weather held.’

‘A pity.’

‘What would have happened had we been in the air when the signal came in?’

‘I would have informed you when you landed that you had been grounded.’

‘Gontermann knows nothing about us being grounded?’

‘How could he? He hasn’t been here.’

‘How long is it since this signal came in?’

‘Half an hour.’

‘By radio.’

‘Yes.’

‘Has anyone else seen it?’

‘Only the operator.’

Biggles looked at the others. ‘So Gontermann’s managed to pull a fast one on us,’ he said, softly. He turned back to Vendez. ‘Had we been down the Strait when that signal came through you could have done nothing about it.’

‘Not till you came back.’

‘Had we been caught out by this weather it might have been some time before we came back.’

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘Now listen, Vendez,’ continued Biggles, seriously. ‘I don’t like asking a man to break orders, but there’s such a thing as looking the other way, or turning a blind eye, as we say, as a result of our Admiral Lord Nelson putting a telescope to his blind eye when he received a signal which he knew was wrong. You know we’re not spies. This is all a trick on the part of Gontermann to keep us grounded because he doesn’t like us. You know that, too. Had the weather been reasonable we would have been in the air at this moment. I want to make one more short trip. Suppose you look the other way for a few minutes. We wouldn’t be away more than a couple of hours, and I promise that when we come back I won’t leave the ground again until I’ve been interviewed by these gentlemen from Santiago.’

‘You wouldn’t have taken off in this weather.’

‘That’s true. Because my last trip was not urgent I would have waited for it to improve. It’s doing that now, which is why I’ve come here. It’s no longer raining and the cloud is breaking up. We’ll be back before the gentlemen from Santiago get here so they need know nothing about it. Not that I think it would worry them if they did, as long as we were still here to be questioned about what we’re doing.’

‘If it was known I had allowed you to fly I might get into trouble.’

‘I’m not asking you to allow us to fly. I’m asking you to look the other way. You could then say, quite truthfully, that you hadn’t seen us take off. That might well have happened had we not looked into your office to see you.’

Vendez hesitated.

‘If you prefer it,’ pressed Biggles, ‘I’ll confess that I took off against your instructions and accept the consequences.’

‘You give me the word of an Englishman that you’ll come back?’

‘I will come back.’

Vendez sat at his desk and closed his eyes. ‘I know nothing. I see nothing.’

‘Thanks, Vendez. I hope to be able to do as much for you one day.’ Biggles beckoned to the others.

‘To fly in this weather you must be mad,’ said Vendez, as they walked to the door.

‘I’ll let you into a secret,’ returned Biggles, confidentially. ‘We are.’

As soon as they were outside he turned briskly to Algy. ‘You take the car home and wait for us. Keep watch in case the *Petrel* should come in before we’re back. If that happens see Captain Anderson and explain the position. Say the business is now urgent because security officers are on their way here from the capital. Should the weather pin us down so that we can’t get back take him along to the gold dump. Are you sure you can find the island?’

‘I think so. I know roughly where it is.’

‘All right. Do your best. Don’t forget to warn Anderson that the whaler may be here on the same job as he is.’

‘Fair enough.’ Algy limped off towards the car. He was still troubled by his ankle.

‘Come on,’ said Biggles to the others. ‘Let’s get weaving.’

Ginger looked at the sky. As Biggles had said, it was no longer raining or sleeting, or doing anything violent, but it was still far from fair. With the lifting of the clouds visibility had improved to about a quarter of a mile. There was still a fair amount of wind.

‘You really are going to get topsides?’ he questioned, a trifle anxiously, to Biggles.

‘It’s now or never. Visibility isn’t too bad and it seems to be getting better.’

‘You’ll fly over the top of the stuff?’

‘Not me. In these conditions I’d rather trust my eyes than instruments. I’ll keep in touch with the floor. Once you lose sight of it the snag is to find it again without bumping into something solid.’

‘The sea’s still rough.’

‘It won’t be so bad in the channels between the islands.’

‘What if you find the bay at gold island choked with ice?’

‘If we do I’ll come back home. I may be crazy, but not so crazy as to try to land on an iceberg.’

‘What if those two toughs are on gold island?’ Bertie asked the question.

‘That’ll be just too bad,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘I’ll deal with that if it happens. I’m reckoning that the weather has kept them stuck on the island where we last saw them, by the wreck of the *Seaspray*, digging for gold that isn’t there.’

‘How about Gontermann?’ queried Ginger. ‘He’s probably down there somewhere.’

‘If he gets in our way it may come to a showdown.’

‘This all sounds pretty loony to me, old boy,’ remarked Bertie.

Biggles smiled. ‘So it does to me. But I’m not going to be beaten at the post if I can prevent it. Let’s go before you think of any more unpleasant possibilities. What are you trying to do—give me the jitters?’

‘Okay,’ agreed Ginger, in a tone of resignation.

‘Would you rather stay here?’ asked Biggles, sharply.

‘No.’

‘Well for goodness sake quit moaning and let’s get to work.’

They took their places in the aircraft.

CHAPTER 13

THE WEATHER TAKES A HAND

'SORRY if I appeared to take a dim view of this sortie,' said Ginger, contritely, when they were in the air, flying down the Strait.

'You were quite right,' answered Biggles. 'It's always a good thing in any undertaking to consider the possible obstacles that may lie ahead. Only a fool would deliberately shut his eyes to them. But what you must remember is this, and if you read your history book you'll see how often it happens. It isn't so much the obvious snags that upset the apple cart. More often it's the one thing you didn't expect, didn't think of, and therefore failed to allow for: and the man has yet to be born who was smart enough to think of everything. On this jaunt I could see the snags; they stuck out like a sore thumb; but my hand was forced by this trick of Gontermann to keep us on the ground. It illustrates the point I just made. In spite of all the hard thinking I've done since we came here it just didn't occur to me that we might be grounded on official orders from Santiago. But this isn't the moment for philosophy. Keep your eyes skinned for the *Wespe*'s orange sails. It would be a relief to know where Gontermann is, and what he's doing.'

'He must imagine he's got us on the carpet. If he sees us he'll wonder how we managed to get into the air.'

'Let him guess. He'll probably come to the conclusion that we were in the air before orders came through to stop us; although bear in mind that he can't know that those orders have actually come in.'

Ginger said no more. He was straining his eyes trying to probe the misty world around them. In one small circle below that moved at the same speed as themselves the restless water could be seen plainly; but there was little else. Occasionally on one side or the other the dark shadow of a cliff, or a towering island, loomed ominously; or the white streak of a glacier would appear like a ghost, quickly to fade into the colourless background. That was all.

It was true that the rain and sleet had stopped, but waterlogged clouds still threatened, and looked as if they might again at any moment spill their contents. In short, it was the kind of weather that every pilot hates, for he knows better than anyone the risks involved. Although he did not mention it Ginger's greatest fear was that bugbear, ice; for he knew that if the temperature was not actually ice-forming it was close to it; wherefore he kept an anxious eye on those parts of the aircraft where it was most likely to appear.

He perceived that Biggles was flying down the middle of the Strait, or as near the middle as could be judged, watching for landmarks he would have memorized—rocks, islets, ice-packs and the like. What would happen when they reached the group of islands that were the objective was something about which he preferred not to think. He was glad Biggles, and not he, was holding the control column. The one unmistakable feature was the serpentine glacier that curled round the island from which Carter and Barlow had been rescued. If, and it was a big if, they could find that it would simplify matters considerably, because from it the direction of, and the distance to, gold island, was known. The danger then would be to grope a way down without coming into collision with one of the peaked or hogbacked islands in the vicinity.

In the event this did not arise, for suddenly, as if raised by a giant invisible hand, the cloud-layer lifted, to give a fairly wide field of view.

'That's better,' said Biggles.

'What a slice of cake,' returned Ginger.

'It was time we had a bit of luck,' asserted Biggles. 'At this time of the year we might have expected better weather than we've had.'

Ginger spotted the big glacier instantly. His eyes went to the beach, and on it he saw several things at once. Three men were there, looking up at them. Drawn up well clear of the water was the dinghy. Lying a little offshore was the *Wespe*. The beach itself was pitted with holes.

Ginger grinned. 'There they are. By gosh! They've been busy. They must have been digging ever since we were last here.'

'By this time they must realize they've been fooled.' So saying Biggles started to climb, swinging round towards the objective.

'What happened to shift those clouds like that?' asked Ginger.

'Only a change of wind or a rising temperature could have done it.'

'You saw who was on the beach?'

'Of course.'

‘They’ll guess where we’re going and come over.’

‘No doubt.’

‘When they see us land we shall have told them on which island the gold really is.’

‘I’m not worried about that—now. By the time they get across we shall have done what we wanted to do and pushed off again. Anyway, if the wind is freshening Gontermann may think twice about trying to get across through those growlers.’

‘Growlers! I didn’t notice any.’

‘I did. Either the wind or the rain must have loosened a lot of ice on the moraine of the glacier and it’s falling into the water. All we want now is for these conditions to last half an hour. That should see us through; and I don’t mind telling you I shan’t be sorry to see the last of this abominable place.’

Ginger looked inquiringly at Biggles. ‘You speak as if you had doubts about the weather holding?’

‘I have a feeling it was a rising temperature that caused those clouds to lift. It doesn’t feel to me as cold as it was the last time we were here.’

‘It’d be a relief to have it a bit warmer.’

‘I’m not so sure of that,’ replied Biggles, vaguely.

Nothing more was said, for the Gadfly was now low, and still nosing its way down to the bay where they had made their previous landing on gold island. There was a lot of ice in it, but it appeared to have been piled up against the rocks that formed the far arm of the horseshoe.

‘Good,’ said Biggles. ‘I think it’s clear for us to get down.’

‘The water’s a bit choppy.’

‘Nothing to hurt us. We may bump a bit.’

After a trial run Biggles took the machine in. There was a rather nasty splash as it touched down and a lot of spray as it taxied on to the beach. Lowering the wheels Biggles ran on up the sand, clear of the water, and switched off a few yards from where the gold was alleged to have been buried.

‘Come on,’ he said, briskly. ‘Let’s get to work. We’ve no time to waste.’ To Bertie he shouted: ‘Let’s have the spade and the crow-bar.’

Ginger jumped down and stood looking at the black sand and the rocks behind it. ‘Something’s happened since we were here last,’ he averred. ‘It looks as if there’s been a bit of a landslide. You can see the tracks where the rocks rolled down.’

Biggles looked. ‘You’re right,’ he agreed. ‘But there aren’t so many isolated lumps of rock that we should have any trouble in finding the right one. I think this must be it.’

A few minutes work probing with the crow-bar made it clear that he had been mistaken.

‘With more rock coming down, the one that was isolated may not be isolated now,’ suggested Ginger.

‘Oh, here, I say, old boy, have a heart,’ protested Bertie. ‘Don’t tell me we’ve got to shift all this bally stuff.’

Biggles looked grim. ‘Remember what I told you. It’s always the same with this infernal business of treasure hunting. The stuff is never where it’s supposed to be. Well, it’s no use standing here goofing at it. Let’s carry on.’

They carried on, working feverishly, probing and digging. Once Ginger, using the crow-bar, thought he had found what they were looking for, but the spade soon showed that it was only a rock under the sand.

Biggles fumed. ‘This is the last time I’m having anything to do with this sort of nonsense,’ he swore.

‘It certainly is a sweat,’ muttered Bertie.

‘That’s what I don’t like about it.’

‘What don’t you like about it, old boy?’

‘Sweat. It’s getting warmer, and if you don’t know what that’s likely to produce it’s time you did.’

‘Had it turned colder we should have had ice on the wings before now,’ argued Ginger.

‘Not with salt water. Try this one.’ He pointed to a rock somewhat nearer to the landslide.

Ginger drove in the crow-bar. It struck a solid object a few inches under the sand. ‘There’s something here,’ he said, without any great enthusiasm, having done the same thing before to find only rock.

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Biggles shortly. ‘We shall have Gontermann along presently and when he sees what we’re doing that *will* start something. Give me that spade, Bertie.’

He drove the edge into the sand, forced it right in with the heel of his shoe and turned it over. There was a gleam of yellow. Stooping, he pulled out a bar of gold. ‘Thank goodness,’ he muttered, throwing it back and beginning to fill in the hole.

‘Are you going to cover it up?’ asked Ginger.

‘I am.’

‘Aren’t you going to keep a piece for luck?’

‘Not a sausage. I never want to see the stuff again.’

‘But wait a minute, old boy,’ protested Bertie. ‘Can’t I have a piece?’

‘No.’

‘But I’ve always wanted a bar of gold.’

‘You’re better without it. This doesn’t belong to us, anyway.’

‘Not one little piece?’ Bertie’s voice took on a hurt, plaintive note.

‘Not one. Now help to smooth this sand over to leave no trace of what we’ve been doing. Then we’ll get away.’

This operation was still in progress, with everyone working fast, when, without the slightest warning, the fog came. It did not come from anywhere in particular. It was one of those fogs, or ground mists, that form in the air, everywhere, simultaneously, usually as the result of a sudden change of temperature.

Biggles started for the aircraft but stopped half-way. ‘No use,’ he said. ‘This is what I was afraid of.’

‘We might just do it,’ urged Ginger.

‘No. This is no place for blind flying. We’d only have to run into a growler and that would be that. Better to play safe. It may not last. In any case it would be crazy to go leaving signs that we’d been digging. Let’s finish tidying up.’

This did not take long, but by the end of that short time the fog, far from dispersing, had become a cold, white, opaque mass of vapour, reducing visibility to a few feet.

‘This is lovely,’ growled Bertie, wiping moisture from his eyebrows. ‘Gets my bally glass all steamed up.’

Biggles walked to the machine.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ginger, looking surprised.

‘Move it over the gold so that it’ll look as if any marks on the sand were made by the wheels, or by us, getting in and out.’

‘For Gontermann’s benefit, should he come?’

‘Correct.’

Bertie chuckled. ‘Jolly good. I’ve heard of the goose that laid golden eggs but I’d bet my last bob this is the first aircraft to lay gold bricks.’

Biggles smiled. ‘We’ll leave the old hen to sit on ’em.’ He became serious. ‘Really, there’s nothing funny about this. What upsets me more than

anything is, if we don't go back to-day Vendez will think we've let him down. I'd hate him to think that, after his decent behaviour to us.'

'You think we might be here all night?' queried Ginger.

'You can see what I can see.'

'That's a nice prospect. What do we want to shift this muck?'

'Wind would do it. Which reminds me, we'd better peg the machine down in case of accidents.'

This was done. There was still no sign of the *Wespe*. Biggles said he thought Gontermann might have difficulty in finding the bay. He, too, would be affected by the fog.

Darkness began to close in. All they could do was pace up and down, partly to keep warm, for the clammy mist was bitterly cold, and partly to cover their impatience. A sullen silence seemed to settle over the island, for now the wind had dropped altogether the water had gone dead calm. The only sound was the wheezing, cracking and crunching of ice at the far end of the bay.

'It begins to look as if Gontermann isn't coming after all,' said Biggles at last. 'We may as well go inside and brew some coffee. It may not be quite as cold in the cabin as it is outside.'

They trooped into the machine and closed the door.

Darkness fell, cold, dark, and menacing with unseen dangers.

That night went on Ginger's mental calendar as one of those never to be forgotten. He had passed nights in greater danger, but never in such acute physical discomfort. It was the cold, the cold and the inky blackness. The fog seeped in through every cranny so that it was soon as thick inside the machine as it was outside. It had a penetrating quality, as fog sometimes has, that seemed to eat into his very bones. The only relief came when the Primus stove was lighted to make coffee; but this could only be done at long intervals because there was a limit to the amount of fuel they carried. Then they crouched round the hissing burner to make the most of the heat it gave, looking, as Bertie once remarked, like witches round a devil's cauldron.

For the rest they could only sit huddled together for mutual warmth waiting for the dawn. In these circumstances the night seemed eternal. Nothing could be done. Absolutely nothing. Ginger dozed uneasily, but anything like real sleep was out of the question. Once in a while he nodded from sheer weariness, but the very act of falling asleep seemed to wake him up with a start. Then the knowledge of where he was and what was happening would banish sleep for another long spell of misery.

There were one or two desultory attempts at conversation but they soon died from lack of enthusiasm. The only things that really mattered were warmth and daylight.

‘How is it,’ asked Bertie on one occasion, ‘that we always seem to click for these outlandish places?’

‘Because nobody else would be daft enough to go to ’em,’ muttered Ginger.

‘The real reason is,’ Biggles pointed out, ‘this sort of thing—I mean this gold hunt—could only happen at an outlandish place. Had the gold been dumped anywhere near civilization it would have been recovered long ago.’

‘Had this lot been shoved overboard on a silver strand in a sunny clime we wouldn’t have been asked to fetch it,’ grumbled Ginger.

‘That’s what I mean,’ replied Biggles.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ said Bertie. ‘How about loading up some of those lumps of metal, flying off somewhere, selling ’em and then settling down for the rest of our days in a nice warm climate?’

‘You’re letting your imagination run away with you,’ asserted Biggles, coldly.

After that the conversation lapsed.

CHAPTER 14

BATTLE OF WITS

At long last another day announced its approach by filling the windows of the Gadfly with a wan grey light. Slowly it crept into the cabin until there was enough to enable those inside it to see what they were doing. No one spoke. Unwashed, unshaven, hair tousled, clothes rumpled, no one was in the mood for conversation. Bertie lit the Primus and produced the coffee pot. Biggles opened the door, and Ginger looked with dismay at the wet, colourless vapour, that drifted in.

'So the fog's still with us,' observed Biggles, unnecessarily.

'Why let the bally stuff in here?' said Bertie. 'Have a heart. We've enough already.'

Biggles closed the door.

'What are we going to do about the beastly stuff?' inquired Bertie.

'Nothing,' answered Biggles. 'I mean, there's nothing we can do about leaving, if that's what's on your mind. One thing we might do is collect some driftwood and make a fire outside to get the chill out of our bones. The place would look a little more cheerful.'

Ginger moved towards the door.

'Don't leave the beach or you may not be able to find your way back to the machine,' warned Biggles.

Half an hour later they were all sitting on the beach round a wood fire making the best of a not very appetizing breakfast from the emergency rations, the main item of which was biscuits, damped and toasted, and then smeared with canned butter and jam.

Gradually the fog had turned from grey to white, and while it was still thick it was a little less dense than it had been. The sea had settled to an oily calm but the ice could be heard growling at the opposite end of the bay. None could be seen, and it may have been this that brought from Bertie a suggestion about trying to get off.

But Biggles would not have it. 'We don't know what ice may have drifted into the fairway during the night. One small growler would be

enough to tear the machine wide open. Nor have we any idea how high this muck goes. Nor, if it comes to that, do we know how far it extends. I imagine it's general over the whole area, in which case there could be no landing at the aerodrome even if we could find it. I'm staying here. I can think of better ways of dying than barging head-on into a lump of ice at a hundred miles an hour. Without a breath of wind and not a ripple on the water to help us we should need a long run to unstick. Don't be impatient. This can't last for ever. We could hold out for a fortnight if necessary before having to resort to cockles and mussels.'

The mist continued to thin a little, but very slowly.

It was about an hour later that a sound, one as eerie as Ginger had ever heard, came to them through the all-enveloping fog. It was the distant murmur of human voices, muffled as if coming through walls.

'That must be Gontermann, trying to find the island,' said Biggles. 'Keep your voices down. There's no need to tell him we're here, or give him a guide to the beach.'

'He's bound to find us eventually.'

'He probably will. Which reminds me. We needn't advertise the fact that we've been digging by leaving the tools about. We shan't want them again. Ginger, you might take them and dump them in one of those pools between the rocks.'

Ginger complied. By the time he had done this and returned there was no longer any doubt about a boat being in the offing. An engine had been started, and the throb of it, although muffled by fog, came plainly to their ears.

'That couldn't be anyone but Gontermann,' declared Ginger. 'The *Wespe* is the only craft within miles.'

Biggles smiled. 'He's determined to get here; but I'd say he's far from happy, groping about in this pea-soup.'

The sounds came nearer, then for a while receded. The engine was stopped.

'He's afraid of getting tangled up in that ice at the far end of the bay,' went on Biggles, shaking drops of water from his eyelashes. 'He must be able to hear it so he'll know it's there.'

They listened.

'He's coming back this way,' remarked Ginger, as the voices, accompanied by a certain amount of splashing, increased in volume.

‘It sounds as if they’re in the dinghy, towing the *Wespe*,’ guessed Biggles. ‘They’ll find the beach presently.’

‘If they know we’re here why don’t the silly blighters give a hail?’ queried Bertie.

‘Maybe their idea is to take us by surprise. Having seen us come down and not having heard us take off they must know we’re still here.’

‘What are we going to do, old boy, when they roll up—if you see what I mean?’

Biggles shrugged and lit a cigarette. ‘We’ll see how they shape. They may not necessarily be hostile. If they act friendly so will we.’

‘What excuse are you going to make for coming back here?’ Ginger wanted to know.

‘We’re under no compulsion to make excuses for anything. As far as I know we haven’t broken any regulation.’

‘Suppose they get tough?’

‘If that’s how they want it that’s all right with me.’

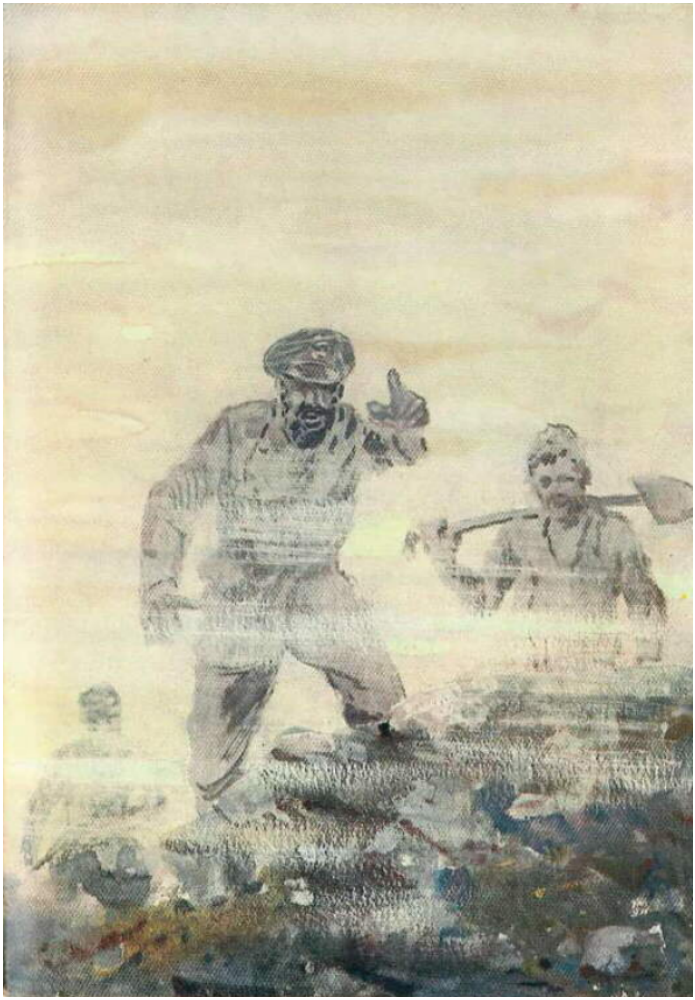
‘It sounds as if they’ve found the beach and are dragging the dinghy up on it,’ put in Ginger.

‘Which means they must have dropped the *Wespe*’s anchor. No doubt they’ll take a line ashore to hold her fast and enable them to find her again. They could easily lose her in this murk.’

For a little while there was silence. Then, suddenly, a voice spoke, close at hand. Three figures loomed darkly in the fog. They emerged, stopped when they saw the party sitting on the sand, and then came on again. They were, as expected, Gontermann and his two associates, one of whom carried a spade, and the other an iron rod.

‘Good morning,’ greeted Biggles, pleasantly. ‘Lost your way?’

Gontermann advanced, his expression non-committal. ‘What are you doing here?’



What are you doing here? (Page 154)

‘I might ask you the same question. What do you think I’m doing?’

Gontermann walked right up, face impassive. ‘Why do you stay here?’

‘Isn’t that rather a silly question, coming from an airport manager? I’m waiting for this infernal fog to clear so that I can get airborne. When that happens you won’t see me for spray. Like a cup of coffee?’

‘No—thank you. You came here yesterday.’

‘Quite right. But that wasn’t entirely a matter of choice. What else could I do with this stuff about; and, as I imagine, the airfield blacked out.’

‘You say you came here to look for Carter and Barlow. You find them. So. Why do you come back?’

‘To pick up some stuff they left behind.’

‘Did you find it?’

‘We have found one or two things I’m sure they’ll be glad to have.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Books. Botanical specimens.’

‘You think I believe that?’ A sneer crept into Gontermann’s voice.

‘Please yourself.’

‘Show me.’

‘You can see them when you get back. They’re in Vendez’ office. They were wet, and he very kindly offered to dry them.’

Ginger stiffened as Gontermann’s hand went in a side pocket; but it was only to produce his pipe. Having lighted it he went on: ‘Suppose we stop beating about the bushes, as you English say. Where is it?’

Biggles’ eyebrows went up in feigned surprise. ‘Where is what?’

‘You know what I speak about.’

‘I’m no good at riddles.’

Gontermann hesitated. Then, under pressure, out it came. ‘The gold.’

‘Gold! What gold?’

‘So you pretend you not know.’

‘Tell me about it,’ invited Biggles. ‘I like stories about gold, and we’ve time on our hands. Go ahead.’

Gontermann’s face set in harder lines. ‘You come here to look for gold,’ he challenged.

‘When I go prospecting I’ll choose a place with a more comfortable climate than this one.’

Actually, Biggles knew this was mere procrastination. Sooner or later the cards would have to be put on the table, but he hoped to delay this until the weather cleared and a take-off became possible. Gontermann went on: ‘Carter and Barlow found gold.’

‘That must have been nice for them. Is that why your friends tried to kill them?’

There was no answer.

‘Carter and Barlow were genuine plant collectors,’ asserted Biggles. ‘The last thing they had in their minds was gold.’

‘That may be. But they find it.’

‘How do you know? Did they tell you?’

‘We find the place where they dig it up. They leave one piece behind so we know.’

‘That was careless of them. I can tell you this; they had no gold when I found them.’

‘They tell you where they put it. That is why you come back.’

‘How much of this alleged gold is there?’

‘A great much.’

‘And you think I’ve come here to fetch it?’

‘So.’

‘Then you know less about aviation than I would have supposed, considering the position you hold. This craft of mine is an aeroplane, not a battleship. Would I be such a fool as to knock a hole in the bottom by overloading it?’

‘Perhaps you make many journeys,’ countered Gontermann, shrewdly. ‘Is the gold in your plane?’

‘Go and look. You’re welcome to all the gold you can find in it.’

Gontermann strode to the machine.

The thought that struck Ginger was how right Biggles had been in refusing to allow Bertie to have one of the gold bars. Had he done so it would now be found and that would have told its own story. He could barely repress a smile when he saw Gontermann standing on the spot where the gold was buried. It was, in fact, only a few inches under his feet, had he but known it. He soon came back.

‘Now are you satisfied?’ inquired Biggles, evenly.

‘No.’

‘Dear me! What an awkward fellow you are.’ Remembering something Biggles went on: ‘Oh, by the way, there are some people in Punta Arenas asking for you.’

‘What people?’

‘A Russian whaler has put in. Someone came ashore looking for you.’

‘How you know this?’

‘When I was in the town yesterday I called on Mr Scott, the chandler. The *Seaspray* belonged to him, as you know. There is a question of compensation for its loss. When I mentioned the Russian ship Mr Scott volunteered the information that a man had come ashore asking for you. Mr Scott may have thought I’d seen you somewhere. The ship was still there when I took off so I presume it’s waiting for you.’

This seemed to give Gontermann food for thought, and for a minute or two Ginger hoped he would go, and so put an end to a situation that was becoming more and more difficult. Apparently Gontermann considered this, for he studied the weather thoughtfully. But, of course, travelling conditions were nearly as dangerous for the *Wespe* as they were for the aircraft and if it was departure that he had in mind he dismissed it. He came back into the argument, now on a different tack.

Speaking in a false or genuine confidential tone he said: 'A long time ago much gold was buried on this island.'

'But I saw you digging on the island where I found Carter!'

'I think the gold might have been moved to there.'

'By Carter and Barlow?'

'So.'

'You couldn't find it, I gather.'

'No.'

'So you've decided it must still be here.'

'So.'

'Well, go ahead and look for it. You won't find it standing here talking to me. Would you like us to help you?'

'No. I think you know all about this.'

'What makes you think that?'

'Because when you come here you have tools for digging.'

'I told you why I had brought them. I declared them. I didn't try to hide them.'

'Where are they? They are not in the plane now.'

'I decided I wouldn't be likely to need them after all, so seeing no reason to carry unnecessary weight I got rid of them. We certainly won't need them now because, as I've told you, as soon as this fog lifts we're going home.'

'You go because you have found the gold.'

Biggles made a gesture of impatience. 'Have it that way if you like. Does the gold belong to you?'

'That is not the thing.'

'It seems to me to have a lot to do with it. If it isn't yours you've no right to touch it. However, you do what you like. Go ahead and dig.'

'There is much gold; enough for both of us,' suggested Gontermann, slyly.

‘I don’t want the stuff. My only concern is for the weather to clear so that I can get to a more salubrious climate.’

Gontermann’s manner changed. ‘You do not leave here till you show me where you put the gold.’

‘Are you telling me what I can do?’

‘Yes.’ In a flash Gontermann had whipped out a revolver. ‘Anyone who goes near that plane will be shot.’

The other men also produced revolvers.

Biggles smiled cynically. ‘It’s time you had your head examined, Gontermann. Where do you think this sort of behaviour will get you?’

‘Many people come down this Strait but not all go back,’ was the threatening reply.

‘Okay. Have it that way if you like. I can’t leave while this fog holds us down, anyway. When I’m ready to go I shall go, and you’d be foolish to try to stop me.’

‘Give me your guns,’

‘I will not.’

‘You realize I can shoot all of you and sink your plane and nobody knows?’

‘Try it,’ invited Biggles. ‘You may find I can shoot faster and straighter than you.’

Gontermann may have believed this. At all events he hesitated, perhaps wondering if Biggles really meant what he said or whether he was bluffing. In any case it is one thing to shoot a man in the heat of a fight, but another matter to shoot one in cold blood, sitting on the ground smoking a cigarette. And while the position remained as static as if they had all been statues, Ginger thought he heard, somewhere out in the fog, a curious sound. Gontermann half-turned his head as if he had heard it, too. It was certainly not the crunching of ice.

‘Don’t do in a hurry something you might regret,’ said Biggles. ‘What good would shooting us do you, anyhow? Would it help you to find the gold?’

Still Gontermann did nothing, and for this, as much as anything, Ginger thought, Biggles’ casual offhand manner was responsible.

Again came the sound out of the fog. It was rather like the chattering of a monkey.

Still nobody stirred, Gontermann apparently unable to make up his mind what to do, and Biggles refraining from precipitating conflict by any sort of

movement. Ginger was well aware that it needed only one threatening action to set guns blazing; and while he waited, tense, there came from somewhere in the bay a curious medley of noises, bumps, scrapes and a cry. He didn't know what to make of these.

Biggles guessed. 'Instead of wasting your ammunition on us I fancy you'd better save it to prevent those Indians from looting your boat. I'd say they've just bumped into it. Finding it empty they'll help themselves.'

Gontermann swore luridly in German. Then he spoke rapidly to his companions in the same language. They turned about and disappeared at a run into the mist.

'Put that gun away,' said Biggles curtly. 'You couldn't shoot the three of us without being shot yourself.' He got up and brushed sand from his trousers. While he was doing this there came from the direction the two men had taken a shot, shouts and a splash.

'Those friends of yours are too handy with their guns,' remarked Biggles, coldly. 'If they've killed an Indian there's likely to be trouble.'

Gontermann glared, and without a word strode away down the beach to vanish in the murk.

Biggles lit another cigarette. 'That was touch and go,' he said. 'He lost his nerve when it came to the pinch.'

Ginger breathed a deep breath of relief. 'Now what?' he inquired. 'What happens next?'

'Ask me something easier,' replied Biggles. 'As we can't get off yet we might as well stay where we are. I'm not leaving the machine, that's definite.'

CHAPTER 15

STALEMATE

SOME minutes passed. There was a certain amount of confused noise in the direction taken by Gontermann, then silence.

'Hadn't we better be doing something while we have the opportunity?' inquired Ginger, anxiously.

'If you can think of something to serve a useful purpose you're cleverer than I am,' answered Biggles, lugubriously.

'But look here, old boy,' requested Bertie. 'If we sit here and do nothing, and they come back, we shall be on the same spot as we were just now.'

'Not quite. The cards are now on the table for everyone to see. They've seen our hand and we've seen theirs. Gontermann is pretty sure we know where the gold is. He's equally sure it's on this island. We know he's prepared to resort to force to get it. He's bogged down by this fog just as much as we are. I don't care how well he knows these waters—he'll think twice before he tries to get back to Punta Arenas in these conditions, although I have a feeling he'd like to go.'

'Why?'

'Because that Russian ship has come in. He looked worried for a moment when I told him it was there, which leads me to think it's part of the set-up. It's my guess that when Gontermann was in Europe he spoke to someone, either in Germany or Russia, about the gold, and the possibilities of getting it. Gold is gold in any language. Now they're after it. At first I thought Gontermann's angle was purely personal, but what with those two men he has with him, who might be anything, and the arrival of that whaler, I've changed my mind. He's got someone behind him. No doubt he'll get a share of the treasure if it's found. He was expecting that whaler. As you may have noticed, he wasn't in the least surprised when I told him it was there.'

'But dash it all, old boy, the gold's British,' protested Bertie.

'Chile could claim it as it's on her territory. Germany could claim it as the spoils of war. We know it's ours, but how are we going to prove it? This looks like a case of possession being nine parts of the law. Who finds it will

keep it. You certainly won't make Russia or Eastern Germany cough it up, if they get their hands on it, without starting a war. Gold and trouble go hand in hand, for which reason I'm beginning to loathe the stuff.'

'While we sit here nattering they may come back and settle the matter by sniping at us,' said Ginger, practically.

'They may try that,' conceded Biggles. 'All we can do to prevent it is keep our eyes and ears wide open. One thing is definite. I'm not leaving this machine for them to sabotage, as given the opportunity I'm pretty sure they would, to make quite certain of keeping us here.'

'You don't feel like trying to get away while we have the chance?'

'No. Only in the most desperate circumstances would I attempt anything so crazy. To take off blind, knowing that in front of us there might be ice, the *Wespe*, and Indians in their canoes? Oh no. That would be asking for it. Things haven't reached that state yet.'

'They're getting mighty close to it,' said Ginger, moodily.

Twenty minutes passed with no change in the position. Then he got up, saying: 'I'm going to get some wood before the fire burns out. I'd rather be shot than slowly freeze to death.'

'Be careful what you do,' warned Biggles. 'I doubt if Gontermann would shoot you if you met him but I wouldn't put it past him in the mood he's in. His two pals are more dangerous. I can't work out who they are. There hasn't even been a line on their nationality.'

'They speak German, and one of 'em at least speaks English,' reminded Ginger.

'I'd say they're both seamen, and most sailors pick up a smattering of the languages of the countries they visit.'

Ginger moved off.

'If the fog starts to disperse hurry back,' ordered Biggles.

'Okay.'

Ginger was away nearly half an hour, and the others were getting worried when he returned with a load of driftwood under his arms. He threw some on the fire.

'Did you see anything of them?' asked Biggles.

'I've been watching them.'

'What are they doing?'

'Trying to find the gold. At least, they're prodding the beach with that rod, and they seem to be doing it systematically.'

‘Could you hear what they were talking about?’

‘No. I could hear them but it meant nothing to me. I think they were speaking in Russian. Anyhow, I couldn’t understand it.’

‘If the blighters go on prodding long enough they’ll come to it,’ said Bertie. ‘If we refused to let ’em prod under the machine it would be as good as telling ’em it was there.’

‘They’re working this way,’ informed Ginger.

Presently the voices of the men could be heard through the fog. After a while the vague figure of Gontermann loomed up. Visibility had improved to about twenty yards. He looked towards them.

‘Don’t come any closer,’ called Biggles.

‘So you are afraid—huh?’

‘After your big talk just now I’m not having you near this aeroplane.’ As he finished speaking Biggles catapulted himself sideways, shouting: ‘Watch out!’

He was just in time. There was a red flash and a crash, and a bullet spurted sand from the spot where he had been seated.

There was a general scramble as Bertie and Ginger, following Biggles, dived for the rocks just beyond the machine. Each chose his own for cover and each held a gun at the ready. Ginger found himself close to Biggles, on his left. Bertie was a few yards to the right.

‘This looks like the showdown,’ said Biggles, staring into the murk. ‘Can you see any of ’em?’

‘No. Gontermann jumped back after he had fired.’

Silence fell.

To Ginger, unable to see anything but fog and the outline of the machine, the suspense was unnerving. In such conditions ears were of more service than eyes, but he could hear nothing. Were the three men still in front of them? Were they creeping up from a flank? Or from behind? He didn’t know, all he could do was try to watch every direction.

‘Watch the front,’ ordered Biggles. ‘I’ll keep an eye on the rear. Bertie, make sure they don’t try a rush from the sea. I doubt if they could get to us over the rocks without making a noise.’

For some time nothing happened. To Ginger the strain of staring into a blank wall of white vapour became almost intolerable.

The uncanny silence was at last broken by the clatter of a piece of rock. It came from behind. Biggles instantly fired a shot in the direction of the

sound. Immediately there came a volley from the front. Ginger heard a shot smack against some part of the aircraft.

'They're all in front of us,' he told Biggles, tersely. 'I saw flashes in three different places.'

'Then they must have tried the old trick of throwing a stone to mislead us and make us divulge our position. They can't see us. If they could we'd be able to see them. They're shooting blind. Shoot at anything you see move.'

'Okay. I think the fog's thinning a bit.'

'Yes. The air's moving, as if there's a breeze on the way.'

At this juncture there was another volley of shots, five or six, but while the bullets made a lot of noise as they ricocheted off the rocks they did no harm.

'We'd better not talk,' said Biggles softly. 'They can hear us. Don't waste ammunition. Shoot only if you see something.'

'They'll run out if they go on shooting at this rate.'

'No doubt they have plenty more cartridges on the *Wespe*. If this is tricky work for us it's just as bad for them.'

Silence returned. Ginger glanced at his watch and saw that it was now mid-afternoon. He wondered what would happen when night came. The position was tiring enough in daylight. It would be worse after dark.

Half an hour passed. Visibility had improved slightly, but against that the light was beginning to fail. Not that it would be dark for some hours.

Bertie spoke. 'I can hear something moving.'

'What does it sound like?'

'Rowlocks. There's a boat on the water.'

'It must be them, in their dinghy, making for the beach on your side. No matter. They can't get to the machine without us seeing them.'

'Shall I put a shot across to let 'em know we've rumbled their little game?'

'Please yourself, if you can get a line on the direction.'

A minute later Bertie's automatic spat. The report was followed by some splashing.

'Did I get one of 'em?' he asked.

'You'd be lucky if you did. But I think you made 'em move in a hurry. That was the splashing we heard.'

At this juncture, from some distance away, came a sound for which no one was prepared, one that immediately put the whole business in a different light. There was no mistaking it. It was the hoarse bellow of a ship's siren. The volume was such that it could only have been made by a vessel of some size.

'The *Petrel*!' exclaimed Ginger, excitedly. 'It must be the *Petrel*.'

'Don't jump to conclusions,' said Biggles. 'Don't forget there's a Russian whaler on this job, and other ships use the Strait as well.'

'Ships going through wouldn't use their sirens. Why should they? There's supposed to be nobody here.'

'The whaler might, if it was trying to find Gontermann. It could have got tired of waiting for him and decided to come to meet him.'

'How could it know he was down this way?'

'I remember Mr Scott telling us he told the man who went to him that Gontermann was somewhere down the Strait in his boat. He hadn't seen it come back. He told us the same thing.'

'I'd forgotten that,' admitted Ginger, his hopes sinking. 'Why are they hooting?'

'They must have heard that shot Bertie fired and acknowledged it. There is this about it,' went on Biggles cheerfully. 'Whether it's the *Petrel* or the whaler it's going to settle this business one way or the other. Of course, Gontermann knowing nothing about the frigate will think only of the whaler, so he'll do his best to bring it here.'

As if to confirm this surmise there now came three shots, fired at regular intervals, from some little way down the beach.

'There you are. That must be him signalling now,' said Biggles.

The shots were answered by three quick toots of the siren.

'What will you do if it is the Russian?' inquired Ginger.

'Make a bolt and risk a crack-up, fog or no fog. I'd rather perish that way than spend the rest of my life in the salt mines of Siberia.'

'Same as you, laddie, same as you—every time,' agreed Bertie.

Ginger continued to be optimistic. 'If the frigate arrived at Punta Algy might bring it along to save time. He'd realize we had been grounded by fog.'

'There's a chance of that,' conceded Biggles. 'If the *Petrel* left its base on time, or a little earlier, it could be here by now. The date we were given was only approximate. It wasn't definite. The chief used the word 'about', and I commented on it when I read his letter. But here comes Gontermann,

looking all cock-a-hoop now he thinks he's won the game. He's sure it's his pals in the offing. After all, why should he think otherwise?'

Gontermann strode up. He was alone. 'Now you'll have to tell us where you have put the gold,' he announced, with triumphant satisfaction which he did not attempt to conceal.

'Why shall I?'

'I have friends coming.'

'It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that I might have friends.'

Gontermann's expression changed, but quickly changed again. 'You make the bluff,' he sneered.

'We shall see.' Biggles lit a cigarette and strolled nearer to the aircraft.

Gontermann drew his gun. 'Stand still,' he rasped. 'You not run away in that plane—unless. . . .'

'Unless what?'

'Unless you tell me where Carter puts the gold.'

'And if I tell you?'

'I let you go.'

'I've told you you may be crowing too soon.'

'I don't believe. You lose the game, Englander.'

Biggles considered the man in front of him, and as he did so a ghost of a smile crept slowly over his face. He was thinking swiftly, and as he told the others a few minutes later his thoughts ran on these lines. If the approaching ship turned out to be the *Petrel* Gontermann would not get the gold even if he knew where it was. If in fact it was the whaler, sooner or later the gold would be found anyway, even if it meant digging up the entire beach. With plenty of labour available there would be no difficulty about that. Wherefore, it seemed, nothing was to be lost by revealing the *cache*.

'If I tell you where the gold is you'll let us go?' questioned Biggles, calmly, to the astonishment of Ginger, who could only stare aghast.

'I will not stop you if you wish to go,' promised Gontermann, quickly, unable to conceal his eagerness to learn the secret.

'You're standing on it,' stated Biggles, without a trace of emotion.

Gontermann's jaw fell. Surprise throwing him off his guard he stared stupidly at his feet, his revolver hanging limply at his side.

Biggles moved like lightning, whipping out his automatic he shouted: 'Drop that gun! I said drop it!'

Gontermann looked hard at Biggles' face. The revolver fell with a thud on the black sand. 'Why you do this?' he complained. 'I say I let you go.'

'I prefer to make sure of it,' answered Biggles, curtly. 'I'll go in my own time. Bertie, get in the machine and stand by to start up. Ginger, pick up that revolver and watch the beach in case the other two come along. Keep close to the aircraft.' He himself moved nearer to it. 'Be ready to move fast if we have to,' he murmured in a quiet aside to Ginger as he passed him.

The positions taken, nobody moved. In the minute that followed, a breeze, gentle but perceptible, set the fog swirling. It became thin in patches.

By this time Ginger had realized why Biggles was waiting. The next two or three minutes would resolve the situation. The ship, as its frequent hooting announced, was coming nearer. If, when it came into view, it turned out to be the whaler, there would be a scramble to get off, and Gontermann, unarmed, would be unable to do anything to prevent it.

'Why do you do this? Why do you wait?' asked Gontermann, looking puzzled.

'We're in no hurry,' Biggles told him. 'Visibility is improving every minute.' Which was perfectly true.

The ship, obviously moving slowly on account of the fog, sounding its siren from time to time, came nearer. It was now close enough for its engine, and other sounds on board, to be heard; but still it could not be seen. Then for a short while the sounds seemed to recede. Gontermann, cupping his hands round his mouth, let out a yell. This may have caused the ship to turn, for now it came back, hooting so loudly that Ginger was amazed that it couldn't be seen. As visibility was now in the order of a hundred yards he could only conclude that it was still farther away than the sounds suggested.

It was a sharp gust of wind that finally settled all doubts. It tore the fog to shreds, revealing the scene as clearly as if a curtain had been dragged aside. At the same time it became lighter. In the channel, a quarter of a mile away, broadside on, steaming slowly, was the ship that had been making the noise. It could still only be seen as a dark shape, but that was enough for identification.

It was the whaler.

Ginger's stomach seemed to drop into his boots.

The ship began to turn towards the beach.

Gontermann gave a bellow of joy and waving his arms raced towards his two companions who could be seen, some two hundred yards farther along the beach, standing by the dinghy.

Biggles made no attempt to stop him. He spoke crisply. ‘That’s it. Let’s go.’

CHAPTER 16

HOW IT ENDED

BIGGLES had turned to the aircraft, but spun round again to look at the whaler as from it came a shrill cry. The engine-room bell clanged. Water at the stern was being churned into foam.

'What goes on?' muttered Ginger, as he stopped to watch.

The ship itself provided the answer. Slowly but deliberately its bows rose a little from the water. At the same time she took on a slight list. The propeller continued to thresh foam but she did not move.

'By thunder, she's aground!' cried Biggles. 'I noticed a pale streak running across the bay as we came in and thought it might be a shoal.'

Bertie joined them. 'She's stuck all right. What fun.'

'She was going dead slow. She'll get off,' declared Ginger.

Biggles answered. 'With the tide on the ebb? Not a hope. She'll have to wait for high water. She may not be able to get off then without help. The tide had only just turned when she stuck her nose into that sand-bank so she'll be there for some time, anyway.'

'I can't see how that's going to help us,' said Ginger, disconsolately. 'Hadn't we better push off while we can?'

'There's no hurry now. I shall be interested to see what happens.'

'Well, don't leave it too long.'

'We're still sitting on the golden eggs.'

'That won't be for long. There's Gontermann going out now, in the dinghy. He'll tell 'em how things stand. All they'll have to do is lower a boat to fetch the gold.'

Biggles lit a cigarette. 'I'd wager the skipper of that ship is thinking more about what he can unload to lighten her than taking on more cargo to sink her deeper into the sand.'

'They'll come here, anyway, to kick us off the island.'

'When they lower a boat will be the time for us to think about moving. We'd still have plenty of time.'

Bertie chipped in: ‘You know, chaps, this gets more like a funny film every minute. Everyone knows where the beastly gold is; but we can’t take it with us and the blokes over there can’t do with it at the moment—if you get my meaning.’

‘It won’t be so funny if they start shooting at us and put a hole through our main tank,’ growled Ginger.

‘You may be right,’ agreed Biggles. ‘We’d better be on our way. There’s a chance the *Petrel* has arrived at Punta, in which case if our friends over the way remain stuck we might still be able to do something about this.’

Again they had turned to the machine, but again they stopped, looking seaward, as from no great distance away came the boom of a heavy gun.

‘What the devil’s that?’ muttered Biggles.

‘The bang seemed to come from behind that island opposite,’ opined Bertie, polishing his monocle, briskly. ‘Who’s shooting at what?’

‘It’s nobody shooting at anything,’ declared Ginger, excitedly. ‘It was a signal. It must be the *Petrel* looking for us. Let’s get off and find her.’

‘Hold your horses,’ ordered Biggles. ‘We can do better than that. I hate leaving this metal we’re sitting on. Fetch me the Very pistol and a red cartridge.’

Ginger dashed to the machine, took from the locker what was wanted and ran back. Biggles loaded, and a moment later the signal light was rocketing, leaving a trail of smoke. At the culminating point a little ball of red fire appeared, to sink slowly earthward.

‘If it is the *Petrel* looking for us that should tell ’em where we are,’ said Biggles.

‘What ho! Look at that!’ exclaimed Bertie, as from behind the island a rocket soared to burst in a shower of green sparks.

‘That’s the answer,’ asserted Biggles. ‘They saw our signal.’

‘Hooray, jolly good, and all that,’ said Bertie.

They waited, Ginger almost breathless.

Five minutes later, round the end of the island, moving slowly, appeared a vessel painted battleship grey. A small flag, which could just be discerned as the White Ensign, fluttered in the fitful breeze.

‘I wonder what Gontermann’s thinking now,’ said Biggles, softly.

‘What about the whaler?’ asked Ginger.

‘It’s not likely to argue with a frigate bristling with guns.’

‘I hope to goodness she doesn’t run on the sand-bank, too.’

‘She’ll see what’s happened to the whaler and keep clear.’

The frigate came on, dead slow, feeling her way into the bay. When she was about a hundred yards offshore the anchor chain rattled.

‘There goes her mudhook,’ said Biggles, waving.

In a few minutes a boat was lowered. It sped towards the beach. Algy could be seen sitting with an officer in the stern. It ran in with naval precision close to the Gadfly. Algy and the officer stepped out and walked up to it.

‘Everything all right?’ inquired Algy.

‘It is now.’

‘We heard shooting.’

‘We’ve had a spot of bother. But there’s nothing unusual in that when gold is involved.’

‘This is Lieutenant Mason.’

As Biggles shook hands with the naval officer Algy went on: ‘The *Petrel* came in soon after you’d left, so I explained the position to Captain Anderson and he decided to press on right away. He was kind enough to bring me along.’ He jerked a thumb towards the grounded whaler. ‘So she really was after the brass.’

‘She was. Gontermann is aboard her now. She might have got it, too, if she hadn’t been in such a hurry and stuck her nose in the bottom.’

The naval officer stepped in. ‘She has other matters to worry about at the moment. Where’s this gold I’ve heard about?’

‘We’re sitting on it.’

‘You’re sure it’s here?’

‘I’ve seen it.’

‘Then the sooner we get it out the better.’

‘That suits me. I want to get away before dark if possible. We’ve spent one night here and that’s enough.’

‘All right. You get along. We’ll attend to it. Do I understand you’ve had trouble here?’

‘There’s been a certain amount of shooting, if you call that trouble.’

Lieutenant Mason smiled. ‘I don’t think we shall have any more.’

‘Then I can leave everything to you?’

‘You may.’

‘In that case I’ll move off. Are you coming with us, Algy?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then let’s get airborne.’

In a few minutes the Gadfly was in the air, flying flat out up the Strait.

‘Where are you making for?’ asked Ginger.

‘Rio Gallegos.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

‘I’ll drop you off there and come back.’

Ginger’s eyebrows went up. ‘You mean back to Punta?’

‘Yes.’

‘But for goodness sake why? I thought we’d finished with the place.’

‘Not quite. You seem to forget I told Vendez I’d go back, so back I go. There are one or two other things to do, too.’

‘You may run into trouble if those security officers are there.’

‘Could be. That’s why I’m dropping you at Gallegos. I’ll fly back alone.’

‘Vendez will understand the reason if you don’t go back.’

‘That isn’t the point. I gave him my word, and that stands.’

‘Okay.’

The Gadfly raced on into the darkening sky.

The sun had disappeared but the long southern twilight still lingered when Biggles, having dropped the others off at Rio Gallegos with orders to see how the two plant hunters were getting on, glided down to the dank, depressing airfield of Punta Arenas. He landed, taxied in, switched off, jumped down and walked briskly towards the manager’s office. Before reaching it the door was opened and he could see three men waiting for him.

Vendez was one of them. ‘So you’ve come back,’ he greeted, in a curious tone of voice.

‘That’s what I said I’d do, isn’t it? Sorry I’m late, but we were pinned down by fog.’

‘You were reported having arrived at Rio Gallegos.’

‘That’s right. I took my friends there.’

‘Then why have you come back?’

‘To face the music. I hope the tune played won’t be too discordant.’

‘Come in,’ invited Vendez. ‘These are the gentlemen from Santiago who wanted to speak to you.’

‘Well, here I am.’

The two security officers were introduced and everyone sat down.

‘I’m ready, gentlemen,’ said Biggles. ‘Fire away.’

Said one of the Chilean officers: ‘To save time I suggest we arrive at the point.’

‘Very well,’ agreed Biggles, little guessing what was coming.

‘The questions we came to ask are no longer necessary. We know the answers.’

‘Indeed?’

‘We know you are not a spy.’

‘That’s good news, anyway.’

‘In fact, we know what you have been doing.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

‘Quite sure. Did you find the gold?’

Had a bomb burst in the room Biggles could hardly have been more shaken. ‘So you know about that?’

‘We do.’

‘How did you find out?’

‘You were kind enough to tell us—or at least provide the information.’

Biggles stared, puzzled. ‘I don’t understand.’

The officer smiled. ‘Tell him, Señor Vendez.’

Vendez explained. ‘You will remember you gave me some papers to dry, and among them was a diary of Señor Carter.’

‘Yes. I intended to collect them.’

‘Turning over the pages to separate them it was natural I should see some of the writing.’

‘Of course.’

‘Judge my surprise when I find myself reading of the discovery of a treasure of gold, how it was moved and reburied in another place. There was even a little map to show the spot. Then, of course, I understood everything.’

Biggles shook his head sadly. ‘I knew about the gold, but Carter didn’t tell me he’d written the story in his diary. All I can say is, I’m glad I didn’t give those papers to Gontermann to dry.’

‘Carter must have forgotten to mention it. In his unhappy condition that would be understandable. In any case, he must have supposed the diary had

gone down in the *Seaspray* to be lost for ever.'

'That's probably the answer,' agreed Biggles. He turned to the Chilean officers. 'Well, gentlemen, now you know, what are you going to do about it?'

'Did you find the gold?'

'Yes.'

'Where is it?'

'By this time it should be on board a British naval frigate named the *Petrel*.'

'So it was not a coincidence that ship happened to call here?'

'It was not. It was ordered here to pick up the gold, which belongs to Great Britain.' Biggles went on to tell, briefly, the story of how the gold came to be there.

'This will of course have to be reported to my government,' said one of the Chileans. 'Why weren't we invited to find it for you?'

'I don't make such decisions, señor. I receive orders and do my best to carry them out.'

'Then you didn't come here as a private treasure hunter, to find the gold for yourself?'

'Certainly not. I was sent here by the chief of my department.'

'What is your official position?'

'I am a police officer on the London staff of the International Police Commission.'

'That makes a big difference. No doubt the matter will come before a higher authority.'

'I imagine so. Meanwhile, what do you want me to do? I am at your disposal.'

'What do you want to do?'

'Having finished my work here, go home. But first I must go into the town, collect the things left at our hotel and pay the bill. That will mean staying the night. With your permission I shall fly north in the morning, in daylight.'

'Answer me this, Señor Bigglesworth. Did Señor Gontermann know about this gold?'

'He did, which is why he tried to make things difficult for us. I think he must have known about it for some time.'

‘Which may account for his love of sailing. He should have reported the matter to us.’

Biggles accepted a cigarette offered to him. ‘I’m not making any complaint against Gontermann who, by the way, has had two men helping him. He knew about the gold but didn’t know exactly where it was. It wouldn’t surprise me if he came here with the sole intention of looking for it.’

‘He certainly applied for the post here, although this climate is one few people would choose.’

‘He had the backing of a foreign government. The whaler that put in came to help him. He’s aboard her now, or he was a little while ago.’

The officer frowned. ‘If he’s wise he’ll stay on her. Where is she?’

‘The last I saw of her she was stuck on a sand-bank near the island where the gold was buried.’

‘Very well, señor. We need not detain you any longer. You will make a report of this when you return home, no doubt. Will you, if necessary, come back to Chile to give evidence if there is an official inquiry?’

‘With pleasure.’

‘Good. Then that is all.’

Biggles offered his hand. ‘*Mucha gracias, señores.* In my report I shall not forget to mention your courtesy.’ He turned to Vendez. ‘I shall also see to it that your good services are not overlooked. We remember our friends. Should any of you find yourselves in London I hope you will look me up and give me the pleasure of returning your hospitality.’

Well content with the way the affair had terminated, Biggles went out, found the car and drove into the town, looking forward to a bath, a good meal and a change of clothes.

There is little more to relate. The following morning, having settled his affairs, said good-bye to Mr Scott and made a present of the car which he would no longer need to the helpful Vendez, Biggles took off in fair weather and returned to Rio Gallegos. There he found Mr Barlow well on the way to recovery and handed over the documents that had been salvaged, much to Mr Carter’s delight. One night was spent in the town, after which began the long cruise home.

In due course the gold arrived in England and the business was settled amicably with the Chilean government. Biggles kept his word about Vendez who received a present for his assistance, as of course did the plant hunters for the part they had played; although, to be sure, had it not been for the

quest for the gold which they had found by accident they would probably have perished on the desolate island on which they had been cast away.

What happened to Gontermann and his friends was never learned; but long afterwards Biggles heard through Admiralty sources that the whaler had been abandoned and looked like becoming a total wreck. It is hardly necessary to say that he lost no sleep over that.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Biggles at World's End* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]