GIMLET LENDS A HAND

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS

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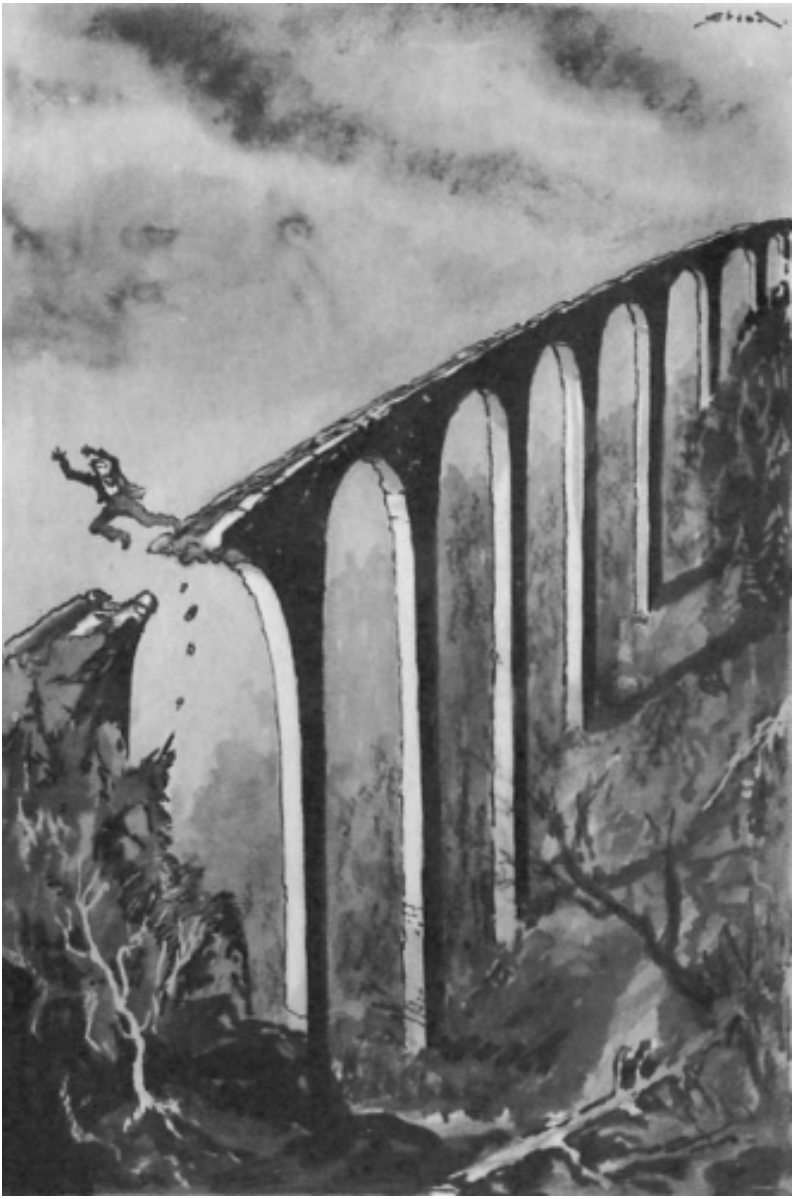

Taking a deep breath, he jumped across the gap

GIMLET LENDS A HAND

A "King of the Commandos" Adventure

By
Captain W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated
By
LESLIE STEAD

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The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
and have no relation to any living person.

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CHAPTER I

SOME OLD FRIENDS MEET

NIGEL NORMAN PETERS, commonly called "Cub" by his comrades of the commando unit known as "King's Kittens," walked briskly down the Old Kent Road, London S.E. He walked briskly, with a spring in his stride, for, appropriately, there was a smell of spring in the air in spite of the mixed odours normally to be encountered on the south side of the river. As he walked, dodging pedestrians, perambulators and piles of country produce being unloaded from their respective trucks, he scanned the names above the shops and business premises like a man who knows what he is looking for yet is doubtful of its precise location.

His quest did not take him far, and he came to a halt before a garage in the forefront of which a big, broad-shouldered, fresh-complexioned man, in oil-stained overalls, whistled softly through his teeth as from a battered can he filled the radiator of a Ford V8 that had seen better days. Cub watched him for a moment, a smile of recognition, and perhaps some slight amusement, lifting the corners of his mouth. Then he spoke. "Hello, Copper, you big stiff," he greeted with the easy familiarity of long-standing friendship.

The man addressed swung round, the exclamation of surprise that rose to his lips being drowned in a spontaneous shout of welcome that made several passers-by look round in mild alarm. Unconscious or unconcerned by this he tossed aside the can regardless of its splashing contents and with a good-natured grin lighting his face held out an enormous hand. "Blimy! What do yer know?" he cried, in a rich Cockney accent. "If this ain't a treat and a narf. How are yer, chum?"

"Fine," answered Cub, wincing as he disengaged the hand that engulfed his own. "Go easy on that handshake of yours or you'll break somebody's arm one day," he warned. "How's yourself?"

"Oh, not so dusty, mate," replied Copper cheerfully. Turning his face to the garage he shouted: "Hi! Trapper! Look who's 'ere."

A second man, looking puzzled, appeared from the rear of the building, a man as unlike the one who had called as could be imagined. He was dark and lean. A wisp of black moustache adorned his upper lip. A scar that seared his cheek broke into creases as he, too, flashed a smile of recognition, showing two rows of perfect teeth.

"*Tiens!*" he cried delightedly. "If it isn't our own Cub come to see us."[1]

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[1] These comrades, who will be known to many readers, are more fully described in *King of the Commandos*.

Cub looked around. "How's the business going?" he inquired.

Copper's face clouded. "How's it going?" he echoed. "If you ask me I'd say it's pretty well gone. You can't run a joint like this on free air and water. We were going to sell petrol, but we can't get no petrol to sell. Same with

tyres, same with spare parts, same with everything. I tell yer straight, old pal, if there comes another perishing war the government can fight it themselves as far as I'm concerned. It 'ud make yer sick. They dish yer out with medals but what's the use of 'em? I can't live on brass. When I ask fer a little drop of petrol what do they give me? Forms—forms—forms. I'm sick of forms. I never did 'ave any time for 'em. When they wanted us ter go out and do some dirty work they didn't dish out no forms then—no bloomin' fear. What say you Trapper, old pal?"

Trapper shrugged his shoulders. "I told you," he said simply.

"All right, all right, don't rub it in," growled Copper. To Cub, he went on: "We run this old car as a private hire job, but as I was a sayin' ter Trapper just now, the old cow drinks too much juice." He sighed. "Give me the old days. 'Ere terday and gone termorrer. That's the stuff. What say you, Trapper?"

"*Tch!* Every time."

"Let's go into the office and 'ave a chin-wag," suggested Copper.

"Don't tell me you've got an office?" scoffed Cub.

Copper frowned. "Of course we've got an office. This is a business. At least, that was the idea."

They went through into a little room littered with wrapping paper, forms, oily rags and accessories of the motor trade. "Watch where you're sittin', chum," warned Copper, "there may be a drop of oil about and I wouldn't like ter spoil that smart walkin'-out kit of yours. What are you doin' yourself? Last time you wrote you said you was helpin' your Dad run your place as a farm."

"Like you, we had an idea," returned Cub gloomily. "And like you, we were swamped with forms. We're giving up."

"I'll tell yer what's wrong with this country," announced Copper earnestly. "There's too many people tellin' too many people what ter do, and what they can't do."

"I think you've got something there," agreed Cub. "But let's not talk about that."

Copper selected a crushed cigarette from an oily packet. "And what brings you to Old Smoky?" he asked. "You didn't come special ter see us, I'll bet."

"I wouldn't come to London without coming to see you," protested Cub. "Look at me now. I've come straight from the station—couldn't get here fast enough."

“Good fer you, old pal,” said Copper warmly.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve had a letter from Gimlet,” stated Cub.

“What’s ’e got ter say? All huntin’ and shootin’, I’ll bet.”

Cub took an envelope from his pocket and extracted the single sheet of paper it contained. “No. He’s in town. He wrote from the Ritz.”

“What does ’e say?”

“He simply says, ‘What about it?’ ”

“Go on.”

“That’s all.”

“What d’you mean—that’s all?”

“What I say.”

“Wot’s ’e talkin’ about? Wot about it? Wot about wot?”

“I’ll tell you if you’ll give me a chance,” complained Cub. “Stuck on the letter was an advertisement cut out of a newspaper. I’ll read it to you. Listen to this.” He read aloud:

> “ ‘£10,000 is offered for the services of a man accustomed to living dangerously. Must be physically fit, prepared to go anywhere, possess a high degree of initiative and able to furnish highest references concerning moral character. Familiarity with lethal weapons and ability to speak colloquial French are essential qualifications. Apply in first instance to Box 4791.’ ”

“Blimy! ’E don’t want much,” snorted Copper.

“I reckon you’d expect something for ten thousand pounds,” returned Cub.

“Ten thousand quid would be better than a poke in the eye with a dirty oil can,” admitted Copper. “Still, I reckon the bloke who takes on that job can say goodbye ter mother.”

“I imagine Gimlet spotted the advertisement and thought it might interest me.”

“Meanin’ that ’e reckons you’re the bloke for the job, eh?”

“Either that, or it was his idea of a joke.”

“Ten thousand quid don’t sound like no joke ter me,” declared Copper. “Sounds more like a beautiful dream. If the queue fer that job don’t cause a traffic jam I don’t know wot will.”

“I don’t think so,” disputed Cub. “Remember the essential qualifications. The ability to speak French like a native will stump most people, I imagine.”

“ ’Ave you bin after the job?”

“I wrote to the box number.”

“Wot ’appened?”

“I had a reply. That’s what brought me to town.”

“Who is this guy with all the dough and where does ’e live?”

“I’ve no idea,” admitted Cub. “All I got was a typewritten note with no address. It simply says that if I wish to present myself as a candidate for the post I must go and sit alone on a seat on the west side of Leicester Square, today, at eleven-thirty precisely. A Daimler car, registered number VLX 4321, will draw up. I am to get in the back seat and shut my eyes. The driver will do the rest.”

“I’ll bet ’e will,” sneered Copper. “What ’ave yer got ter shut yer eyes for?”

“Presumably so that I can’t see where I’m going.”

“Don’t make me laugh. You won’t see, chum, but you’ll feel, I’ll bet my boots,” asserted Copper. “I’d say you’ve got ter shut yer peepers so that yer won’t see the bloke who beats yer over the dome with a short length of gas pipe before ’e picks yer pockets. Are you goin’ ter do it?”

“Of course.”

“You must be balmy,” declared Copper. “Never mind livin’ dangerously. You go fer this job, chum, and you’re liable ter die dangerously. Why not take a runnin’ jump in front of the next ’bus and save yerself the sweat of goin’ ter Leicester Square?”

“I think you’re wrong,” argued Cub.

“Well, you’ll see. I tell yer mate, the job stinks. Take my rip and ferget it. Let’s go round to the Cat and Sparrer and ’ave a nice friendly game of darts.”

Cub shook his head. “Not for me. I’m going to see this through. It’s the most interesting thing that’s happened to me since we went East.”[2]

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[2] See *Gimlet’s Oriental Quest*.

“Okay, ’ave it yer own way,” sighed Copper. “To me it looks like bein’ a sad endin’ to a bright young life. What say you, Trapper? Am I right?”

Trapper clicked his tongue. “*Tch.* Every time.”

"I've got an old friend in my pocket if anyone starts any rough stuff," said Cub meaningly.

Copper grinned. "That little Mauser?"

Cub nodded.

"You ain't fergotten 'ow ter use it?"

"Not likely. I've been practising on the stoats that raid our chickens. But I shall have to push along now or I shall be late."

"We're comin' with you," decided Copper suddenly.

"Oh no you're not."

"Why not?"

"Because if three men instead of one turned up that would be the end of it. The letter said I was to go alone."

Copper scratched his head. "All right. We'll run you up ter Leicester Square any old how."

"Fair enough," agreed Cub. "But when you've dropped me you keep out of the way. If the driver of the Daimler suspects that he's being followed that'll put paid to the whole show."

"You mean we've got ter sit and do nothin' while you go off on yer own and start playin' at livin' dangerously?"

"You're going to put me down where I tell you in Leicester Square," replied Cub firmly. "You stay there, and when I've had my interview I'll come back and tell you all about it."

"Do we get a share in the ten thousand?"

"I haven't got it yet."

"True enough," agreed Copper. "Is that okay with you, Trapper?"

"Okay with me."

"Then let's trundle along to Leicester Square," said Copper, returning to the Ford on which he had been working. He got in and took the wheel. Trapper got in behind with Cub.

It was a close thing, the result of a traffic jam, much to Cub's agitation; but in the end the vehicle pulled up at the rendezvous with a minute to spare. Cub got out just short of the actual meeting place and walked towards it without a backward glance. His eyes switched from the number plate of one passing car to another, and dead on time he saw the Daimler coming. It pulled into the kerb. He glanced at the driver, but little could be seen of him as his cap was pulled down and his collar turned up. Goggles covered his eyes.

Behaving as if the car belonged to him Cub got in, sat down and closed his eyes. Instantly the car began to move. Whatever the outcome, he thought, his strange adventure had begun. The temptation to open his eyes was almost unbearable, but he resisted it, for he had a feeling that the driver would be watching him closely in his reflector. He tried to follow from memory the direction of the car, but soon gave it up. It was one of those things, he decided, that might be possible in theory, but not in practice. He could only settle down to wait for the end of the journey.

It came sooner than he expected—after about ten minutes, as near as he could judge; but he realised of course that in that time the car might be anywhere between Marble Arch and the Mansion House. His pulses quickened as the car came slowly to a standstill. He heard the door being opened and knew that the driver was looking at him. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and it struck him that now, if Copper's warnings were justified, the blow would come. Instead, a voice said quietly, "Keep your eyes closed, please. You have done well so far—in fact, you are the first to survive the ordeal."

Cub made a mental note that he was not the first applicant.

"Take my arm," ordered the voice.

Cub felt an arm, and took it. He groped his way out of the Daimler. The arm drew him across what his feet told him was a pavement.

"Up three steps," said the voice.

Cub obeyed. A door was unlocked. He walked forward and it was closed behind him.

"All right. You can look now," said the voice.

With a sigh of relief Cub opened his eyes and saw that he was in a well-furnished hall—the hall, judging from its size and appointments, of a mansion. However, he thought quickly, there was nothing surprising about this, considering the sum of money offered by the advertiser. He looked at the man who had brought him in, and who was now divesting himself of his outdoor clothes. The scrutiny told him little. He judged the subject of his inspection to be about thirty years of age. Dressed in a dark lounge suit and wearing glasses the man might have been a clerk holding a responsible job.

Before Cub could notice details his companion said: "Put your cap on the stand and come this way."

Holding his cap, Cub was moving to obey, when the man turned in a flash and rapped out: "Stick 'em up!" A small revolver had appeared in his hand.

Now, to say that Cub expected this, or anything of the sort, would be going too far; but from the very nature of what he was doing he was prepared for anything to happen, and his nerves and muscles were braced in subconscious anticipation. He had been taught, in the most deadly school of all, to think fast and act at the same time. That he did both was largely automatic. Continuing without a moment's pause the movement he had started he slashed his cap in the face of his aggressor, side-stepped and jumped forward simultaneously. His left hand closed on the wrist that held the weapon, forcing it up. His left foot slipped between the man's legs so that as he threw his weight forward the man went over backwards. Cub fell on him. With scant ceremony he twisted the wrist, wringing a cry of pain from his adversary and causing his fingers to open. Another moment and Cub was on his feet, had kicked the gun clear, snatched it up, and holding the man covered, backed to the nearest wall, his eyes alert for fresh dangers. He began to edge towards the door.

His muscles tensed again when a voice, quite near, said quietly: "Very good."

Then a door opened and an old man walked into the hall. He seemed slightly amused. Looking at the one now picking himself up from the floor, speaking with a slight American drawl he went on: "I'm sorry, Linton, but it was your own idea you know. I hope he hasn't hurt you. Don't ever turn gangster—you're much too slow." To Cub, completely ignoring the revolver pointing at him, he continued: "Come this way, young man. Linton is my confidential secretary. He meant no harm. Give him back his gun. He was acting under my instructions."

"Is that so?" replied Cub slowly. "Well, if those are a sample of your orders I don't like them. I'll keep the gun."

"It isn't loaded," remarked the old man casually.

"This one is," returned Cub grimly, switching the weapon to his left hand and whipping out his Mauser.

"Splendid," complimented the old man calmly. "I guess you've used a gun before."

"This time you've guessed right," Cub told him.

"Have you a police permit to carry that one?"

"I have."

"For what purpose?"

"Killing vermin—and vermin covers a wide field."

"Quite so," was the response. "Come into the library. I'd like a word with you. You can come too, Linton." The old man turned back towards the door of the room from which he had emerged, and from which, apparently, he had been watching Cub's arrival.

Cub hesitated. "All right," he agreed. "But no more tricks. I warn you that if I have to pull this trigger, one of you, perhaps both, will need an ambulance. I don't like tricks—with guns. That's how accidents happen."

The old man looked round. He was smiling faintly. "Do you never miss?"

"Not very often."

"I'll take you up on that," said the old man sharply. He pointed to a full length painting of a man in old-fashioned clothes that occupied part of the wall at the far end of the hall. "See if you can hit that," he invited.

Cub's eyebrows went up. "Are you kidding?"

"No."

"I shall spoil the picture."

"It's of no great value."

Cub shrugged. "It's your property. Where would you like the holes?"

"Anywhere, as long as you hit the target."

"One through the head, say, and one through the heart?" suggested Cub.

"You can have as many shots as you like."

"I'm not *emptying* my gun while I'm in here, if that's your idea?" said Cub curtly. "Two shots should be enough."

He jerked up the Mauser. It spat twice, the shots following closely. A trail of tiny sparks leapt the length of the hall and a faint blue reek of cordite smoke marked the direction of the bullets. Then the muzzle of the gun returned to the old man as he walked the length of the hall to examine the target.

"Remarkable," said the old man. "Remarkable," he said again. "I thought from your letter that your age might be against you, but for one of your years you seem singularly well able to take care of yourself. Where did you learn to shoot like that, young man?"

"That," answered Cub, "is my business." He was still not quite satisfied that this strange business was straight and above-board.

The old man fired another question, this time speaking in French. "If you can speak French as well as you shoot you may be the man I'm looking for."

Cub answered in the same language. “Then the sooner you put up your proposition, monsieur, the sooner we shall know if we are wasting each other’s time.”

The old man smiled and nodded approvingly. “Better and better,” he murmured. “Come into the library, Mr. Peters.”

Cub followed his prospective employer into a room in which dignity was the dominant factor. He noticed that the blinds were drawn and the lights on.

“You can put your gun away; you won’t need it while you’re here,” said the old man.

Sincerity rang true in the voice, and this, with the old man’s air of calm assurance, dispersed such fears as Cub still entertained. Rather sheepishly he slipped into his pocket an instrument that seemed as out of place as a Bren gun in a nursery.

His host indicated a chair. “Sit down and make yourself comfortable,” he invited. “I shall have quite a lot to say. You’d better stay too, Linton, in case I need you.”

Cub sat down.

CHAPTER II

A TRAGEDY OF RICHES

IT was with respect and curiosity that Cub now had an opportunity of observing closely for the first time the man whom he felt sure had inserted the advertisement, for what purpose remained to be revealed.

He saw a man whom he judged to be about sixty years of age, of frail physique, with a long, thin, clean-shaven face on which ill health or worry had graven many lines. A high intelligent forehead ended in sparse white hair, neatly parted on one side. The chin was square, and the lips of a rather large mouth, pressed together, hinted at determination and strength of character. But these features were secondary to the eyes which, light grey in colour, held in them a penetrating quality which created in Cub an uneasy feeling that the man was looking into him rather than at him. Yet in some curious way, opposed to his general expression of hardness, was one of sadness, as if he had suffered some great grief. For the rest, he was simply but expensively dressed. A gold rimmed monocle depended from a black silk cord over a white silk shirt. Cub was well aware that history has proved over and over again that first impressions are deceptive, but he decided there and then that if this man was anything but entirely trustworthy he would never again rely on his own opinion.

During the period of this inspection he had himself, he knew, been closely scrutinised, and when the first question came, a perfectly natural one, he found it not easy to answer.

“What exactly brought you here?” inquired the old man. “Tell the truth. Be sure that if you don’t I shall know it.”

This Cub could well believe. “Your invitation,” he countered.

“Yes, of course. But why did you answer the advertisement?”

“I don’t know exactly,” replied Cub slowly.

“Was it that you hoped to make an easy ten thousand pounds?”

“Partly, I suppose, but not entirely. May I say curiosity, combined with the fact that I seemed to hold the qualifications demanded, which were somewhat unusual?”

“How did you come to see the advertisement? Were you looking for a job?”

“No. It was sent to me by a friend.”

“Who was this friend? Believe me, these questions are not without purpose.”

Cub hesitated.

“If you would rather not answer my questions you have only to say so and we will consider the interview closed.”

Cub made up his mind quickly. He had no secrets to hide. “The cutting was sent to me by my old commanding officer, Captain King, of the commandos.”

"Why did he send the clipping to you in particular?"

"I haven't seen him to ask him," replied Cub frankly. "During the war we had some pretty hectic adventures together so presumably he thought I would be interested."

"In the money?"

"No. I don't particularly need money. I have as much as I want and my father is quite well off."

"Who and what is your father?"

"Colonel Peters. A soldier. He commanded a battalion of the regular army during the war. He is now on the Retired List."

"Does he know about you coming here?"

"Yes. He promised to vouch for me should it be necessary. He knows I'm capable of taking care of myself."

"Where did you learn to shoot as you do? Surely that is an unusual accomplishment for a fellow of your age?"

"I learned to shoot in the same place where I learned French—in France during the war."

"You weren't old enough to be in the war."

"Officially I was not, in the early days. But the circumstances were unusual and my case was made a special enlistment."

The old man's eyebrows went up. "In a commando unit?"

"Yes."

"Disgraceful. What were these circumstances?"

"It involves a story, but I will tell it briefly," answered Cub. "At the time of the evacuation at Dunkirk I was at school. Hearing from a returning soldier that my father was on the beach, wounded, I stowed myself away on a boat to get to him. I didn't find him and eventually got left behind in enemy territory. I got in with some French boys and we did all the mischief we could. One day I got mixed up in a commando raid and was brought home. By that time I knew every inch of northern France, and the enemy's positions. That's why I was taken on. Afterwards I often went to France on special missions with Captain King and two particular friends. I was demobilised at the end of the war."

"Incredible," murmured the old man. "A boy of your age engaged in such work. You must know what it is to live dangerously!"

Cub smiled. "Looking back I suppose it was pretty dangerous."

"Are you quite fit?"

"Perfectly, as far as I know."

"You don't mind where you go?"

"I'd rather like to see France again."

"I said nothing about France."

"No. But you would hardly stipulate a knowledge of French if you were looking for someone to go to any other country."

The old man's face softened. "Quite right," he agreed. "What about your moral character?"

Cub looked uncomfortable. "To tell the truth, sir, I've never considered it," he admitted. "I wasn't too good at school, and then five years of war didn't give me much chance to find out what I really was. I've never been tempted to do anything underhand so I can't really say what I'd do if I was. You'd better ask my father or Captain King about that."

"I see. I imagine you've never really wanted anything you couldn't have?"

"That's about it."

"But you'd like ten thousand pounds?"

"I'd take it if it was offered to me, if I thought I'd earned it. Why not? You offered it. I didn't ask for it."

The old man nodded. "Quite right my boy, so I did. What I meant was, you've no desire to get rich quick?"

"I'm not panting to be a millionaire."

"Few would if they knew what it involved."

"You speak as if you know."

"I do."

"Are you a millionaire?"

"Many times over."

"It hasn't brought you happiness."

"Why do you say that?"

"You wouldn't be looking for a gunman if you had nothing on your mind," asserted Cub.

The old man looked at his secretary and smiled sadly. "He keeps pace with an argument very well, doesn't he?"

"Any more questions, sir?" asked Cub.

"Yes—one," was the answer. "Would you take the job I have to offer if I offered it to you?"

Cub shook his head. “Not without first knowing what you’d expect me to do.”

“Ten thousand pounds is a lot of money.”

“I set my liberty at a higher figure.”

“I see. You think I might want you to break the law?”

“I suspect it. Ten thousand is more than any straight job is worth.”

“It seemed a not unreasonable sum for a man to weigh in the balance against his life.”

Cub smiled. “I risked mine every day for nearly five years for a lot less.”

“Yes, but then you had a cause to fight for. Now you have none.”

“Why not let me be the judge of that?” suggested Cub.

The old man leaned back and put his finger tips together. He regarded Cub thoughtfully for a full minute. Then he said: “My instinct tells me that you are a fellow to be trusted. If my instinct, which has never yet let me down in my dealings with men, is no longer a factor on which I can rely, then what little life remains for me to live will be a sorry business indeed. I’m going to take you into my confidence. If you fail to respect it you will do an old man a grave injury, and cost a young one his life.”

“What you tell me, sir, will go no further without your permission,” declared Cub.

“What exactly do you mean by that? Can’t you keep a secret to yourself?”

“I could, if it were absolutely necessary. But in case there should be any doubt in what you are going to tell me I might wish to consult my father, or my old C.O., who are two of the bravest and straightest men I’ve ever met or am ever likely to meet.”

“That’s fair,” agreed the old man. “I will modify the word secret to include those in whose loyalty and integrity you have absolute faith. Now let us get on. Does the name Rudolf K. Vanderskell mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing.”

The old man glanced again at his secretary, this time with a twinkle in his eye. “Such is fame,” he murmured whimsically. Turning back to Cub he explained: “Rudolf Vanderskell is the richest man in the world today.”

“Where does he come into this?” inquired Cub.

“Right here. I’m Rudolf Vanderskell.”

“It doesn’t sound like a British name.”

“It isn’t. I’m an American citizen.”

"Couldn't you find the man you want in America?"

"Probably, but the difficulty was to find him without the matter being given publicity. It would have been impossible to advertise without the name of the advertiser becoming known, and once it was known to my enemies my object would have been defeated at the outset. Not only would my project have collapsed, but the result would have been disastrous. I'm too well-known in my own country. That's why I came here. But more of this presently. Now listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you, for it is the kernel of the very hard nut which you will have to crack if, having heard my story, you enter my service."

"I'm listening, sir," said Cub, wondering what was coming.

"It is our misfortune, yours and mine, to live in a tragic age," continued the millionaire. "Every country, every race, every creed, is striving for supremacy as never before in history. In this scramble for power individual members of every class are striving to outsmart their fellows. Some, by their ability and their industry, have achieved their ambition by fair means. Others, through lack of these qualities, have failed, and in their rage and envy of their more fortunate fellows now wage underground warfare against civilized society. Wherefore law and order has gone by the board. I am, let us admit, one of those who have been outstandingly successful, and for that reason alone am singled out for persecution. Now, one of the most brutal weapons employed by the failures is known as kidnapping. Everyone has heard of it, but few realise the mental anguish it inflicts on those against whom it is directed—which is, of course, why it is used. I know, for I have more than once been the victim. The first time was fifteen years ago when my small daughter Anne was taken. I, foolishly perhaps, informed the police, not supposing seriously that the kidnappers would resort to the extreme measures that were threatened should I take such a course. I was wrong. My child, a baby of two, was never seen again. No doubt she was murdered; but it is the uncertainty of not knowing her fate that has taken the joy out of my life. From this dreadful shock my wife never fully recovered. Before she died she gave me a son. He is now fourteen, and as you will readily imagine, has from birth been a constant anxiety, although everything in my power was done to protect him. Ten days ago he disappeared from the private school at which he was being educated. The following day I received a letter demanding a million dollars as the price of his release. I was given three weeks in which to pay."

"If you have so much money why not pay?" suggested Cub.

The millionaire smiled wanly. "I would, willingly, if I thought the ransom would achieve its purpose. It would not. I have no guarantee that my

son would be released; and if he was, what is there to prevent a repetition of the crime? Be sure that the scoundrels who hold him would not abandon readily such a source of easy money. If I got him back it would not be practicable for us both to spend the rest of our lives in hiding. Others have tried and it doesn't work. Yet it is equally certain that if I do not pay my son will be murdered."

Cub stared, aghast. "Do you mean to say that this sort of thing goes on all the time?"

"It does."

"I haven't seen anything about it in the papers."

"You wouldn't. The thing is kept quiet for fear of further reprisals. For that same reason I dare not inform the police. In any case they would be powerless to do anything. The crooks would know at once, for they work in gangs; they use bribes, and their ramifications are extensive. To inform the police, or the press, would be simply to sign my son's death warrant."

"These villains must be worse than the devil himself," declared Cub.

"They are. Certainly they are not to be judged by our standards. Nothing is too mean, too low, too brutal for them. They know my lips are sealed. No one knows my miserable secret—except Linton here. I live in dread that it should become known, for that would be the end of my son. You may think that my method of bringing you here was unnecessarily melodramatic. Now, perhaps, you will understand. I may be watched even here, although I hope that I have succeeded in giving my persecutors the slip. I was in New York when the abduction occurred. To do anything there was out of the question. My only chance of saving my son lay, first of all, in escaping from enemy surveillance. With the details of how I achieved this I need not trouble you. Let it suffice that I slipped away like a thief in disguise and crossed the Atlantic in a specially chartered airplane."

"Why did you choose England?" asked Cub curiously.

"One reason was to be nearer to my son."

Cub looked surprised. "Then you know where he is?"

"Within a mile or two, I think."

"How on earth did you learn that?"

"As part of my precautions I had made provision for it. I was always aware of the danger and took every possible measure to be forearmed. I even went to the length of having myself and my family tattooed with a small identification mark for recognition purposes, for the guidance of the police should doubt arise—by which I mean should a body be found, or mutilation

be inflicted, as sometimes happens in this dastardly form of crime. The mark, by the way, is a small blue Maltese cross, which is part of the original coat of arms of my family, on the upper part of the left arm. My son has it. I mention it because circumstance might arise in which you would need some definite proof of identification."

Cub stared. "Am I to understand that this kidnapping is a regular racket? I mean, have other people lost their children too?"

"Certainly some have. Probably more than is generally supposed, because as I said just now, the lips of parents are sealed for fear of bringing the vengeance of the gangsters on their helpless children. But let me continue. As soon as my son was old enough to understand the cloud under which he lived I thought it expedient to explain the danger to him. We made a plan. I must tell you that part of the horrible technique of kidnapping is to persuade or force the victim to write to his parents imploring them in heartrending terms to secure his release from his unhappy condition by complying with his captor's orders. Such a letter in the victim's own handwriting also serves the purpose of confirming that he is still alive—otherwise the wretched parents would have no guarantee that he had not already been murdered. It is all part of the wicked plot and I knew it. My son has written such a letter to me, but because we made provision for it he was able by a simple code to convey to me a message which must have escaped observation. The letter, by the way, was directed to my home in New York, which suggests that my enemies suppose me still to be there. I was expecting it, and had made arrangements for it to be flown at once to me here. Unfortunately the code that we arranged had of necessity to be one that could be employed anywhere, easily, without a key, and without such signs or symbols as would betray it instantly; and for that reason only a word or two could be conveyed. Our code consisted of leaving certain letters in the words of the context disjointed. That is to say, in the continuous flow of writing certain letters would have an almost imperceptible gap between them. Thus, for instance, if one wanted to convey the letter H, and the word help occurred in the text, there would be a tiny break in the writing between the first letter and the last three. When all these letters are strung together they form a word, or a sequence of words. As it happened, the letter my son was invited or compelled to write was a very short one, so short that he was able to convey to me only a single word. That word was the name of a place, and you can imagine what it meant to me. It told me at least how hopeless without it would have been any search for my son."

"And this place," queried Cub, "is in France?"

"Perfectly correct."

“And you are looking for someone to try to rescue him?”

“Yes.”

“And you think that is worth ten thousand pounds?”

“Not necessarily. Success would be worth, to me, a great deal more, obviously. To have offered less might not have produced the sort of man I needed. To have offered more could hardly have failed to attract more attention than I considered advisable. The press might have picked on it. They have a way of ferreting things out. They would have traced it to me, and the resultant publicity would have destroyed my object and my boy as well.”

“If you know the name of the place where your boy is, a rescue shouldn’t be very difficult,” observed Cub. “With some loyal friends I’ve tackled bigger jobs.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but don’t make the initial mistake of supposing that this one is easy,” said Mr. Vanderskell. “The men to whom you will find yourself opposed are murderers by nature and killers by profession. During the war everyone who wore a Nazi uniform was your enemy. You could recognise him on sight. This is a very different proposition.” The millionaire looked hard at Cub. “Well, by now you will have a pretty good idea of what I have in mind, and the sort of man who will be needed to earn the reward—and come back alive to collect it. Do you wish me to continue? If you think the job is too dangerous you’re at liberty to withdraw.”

A ghost of a smile crossed Cub’s face. “I should be very disappointed if you stopped now,” he said.

“Very well,” agreed Mr. Vanderskell. “Before we go on suppose we have a little refreshment? Linton, order some coffee, please.”

CHAPTER III

CUB TAKES A JOB

"HAVE you any idea of who these kidnappers are?" inquired Cub presently.

"I have no proof," replied Mr. Vanderskell. "But since the most notorious gangster boss who has specialised in this sort of crime has recently disappeared from his usual hang-out, it might be assumed that he organised the abduction of my son. If that is so it is probable that he and his confederates are now this side of the Atlantic, because the place where I am instructed to pay over the ransom money is Paris—in an obscure little restaurant to be precise."

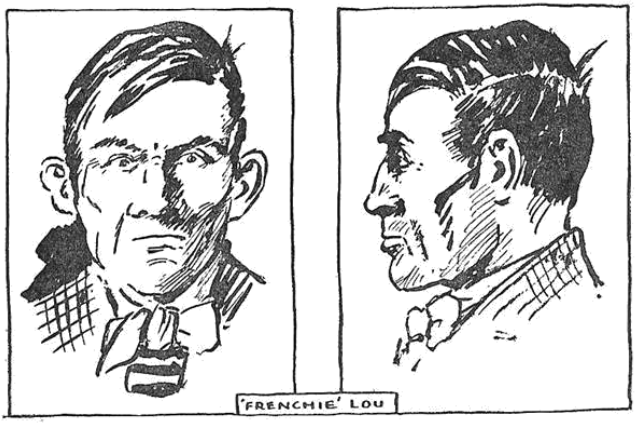
"Why Paris, I wonder?" murmured Cub.

"In the first place, I imagine, because the gangsters would not be so well-known there as in New York, where for all they know the police might be looking for them or setting a trap for them. Secondly, if they were caught in America they would go to the electric chair, because in an effort to stop this dreadful racket the death penalty is in force. I'm not a vindictive man, but I'm bound to say that no fate could be too bad for these villains."

"Do you know the names of any of them?" asked Cub.

"The most notorious gangster in the United States at the moment, America's Public Enemy Number One, rejoices in the unpleasant nickname of Joe the Snout. Why, nobody seems to know. Nor does anyone seem to know his proper name. He must be exceptionally cunning, for not even the police know him by sight. As far as they know he has never been in custody, —which is not to say that he has no criminal record under another name. His first lieutenant is a man long known to the police as Frenchie Lou. The police believe that his real name is Louis Zaban."

"Zaban doesn't sound very French to me."



"It isn't certain that he is French by birth; but he must have been in France in his youth, for he was convicted there on a charge of murder and sent to the penal settlement on Devil's Island. He escaped, got to South America, turned north and started a new life of crime in New Orleans. Since he must be able to speak French fluently no doubt he is back in France at the moment, with forged identification papers. Another star turn in this gang of crooks is known to the underworld as Slinky. They love nicknames, these people; and of course, they serve as camouflage for their real names."

"Have you any photographs of these men?" asked Cub.

"Only one of Frenchie Lou—an official police photo. The others, as I said, have never yet been caught. This is Frenchie Lou. You may care to have a look at him." Mr. Vanderskell took out a notebook, found a photograph and passed it over.

There were, as usual with police photographs, two portraits, one full face and the other profile. Cub found himself looking at a small, swarthy, crafty face, with narrow, furtive eyes and a cruel, thin-lipped mouth. The ears, he noted, stood out from the head—so often a bad sign. He would never have guessed the nationality of the man. He might have been a half-breed from the Levant, or one of the multiple breeds to be found on the waterfront of every Mediterranean port.

He handed back the photograph. "A nasty-looking piece of work," he observed.

"He is," asserted the millionaire.

"What is the Christian name of your son, sir?" asked Cub.

"John. I call him Johnny."

Cub stared at the carpet for a little while. Then he looked up. “If you think I am a suitable person, sir, I’d like to have a shot at finding Johnny and bringing him home. I don’t care about the reward, but I’d be glad if you’d pay my expenses.”

Mr. Vanderskell smiled. “No—no. If you enter my service you will accept the salary I offered. As far as I am concerned the amount is immaterial. The man who brings my son to me can have an open cheque. At a time like this money ceases to have any importance.”

“Then you are satisfied to take me on?”

“I wouldn’t have told you what I have had I decided otherwise,” answered Mr. Vanderskell drily. “You have eleven days in which to work.”

“And if I fail?” asked Cub nervously.

Mr. Vanderskell shrugged his shoulders. “Your failure would probably result in the death of my son, although that, of course, is likely to happen anyway, so there would be no need for you to reproach yourself on that account. If I hear nothing from you I shall go to Paris at the appointed time with the ransom money in my pocket, that being the one remaining hope of saving my son.”

“If I fail it won’t be for want of trying on my part,” stated Cub.

“I believe that,” said Mr. Vanderskell simply.

“What shall I do for money in France?” inquired Cub. “You know the currency regulations here.”

“That is all arranged. Once in France you can draw all the money you want from an address which I will give you. Any more questions?”

“There’s just one thing, sir,” said Cub dubiously. “In France, during the war, I worked in a team of four, which included Captain King. We had a rule, all or none, which meant that no one came back without the others. That in turn meant that the strings holding us together were pretty tight; and it was this team work which, looking back, I can see so often brought us through. Without any silly heroics, each knew that the others would give their lives without the slightest hesitation if by this a situation could be saved. The effect of this was something which would be hard to describe in so many words; but without talking about it we all knew it, and if I can use the expression, gloried in it. Such comradeship is a wonderful thing.”

The millionaire smiled at Cub’s enthusiasm. “Well?”

“Would you mind, if I thought it would make for success, if I brought these men into this?”

"You can do what you like as long as you keep silent about what you are doing. Quite apart from what the effect of careless talk would have on me your own safety would be put in jeopardy. The men you are up against, and there will be several of them in it, are playing for a big stake—a million dollars, plus their liberty. If once they suspect what you are doing your chances of life will be very small indeed."

"Believe me, sir, one of the things we learned during the war was to keep our mouths shut."

"Very well. Go ahead and do your best."

"One thing I shall have to know is the name of this place in France mentioned by your son in his letter."

"Of course. The word he gave me was Vallonceau."

Cub shook his head. "I've never heard of it."

"Few people have probably, apart from tourists and historians. Vallonceau is a dead little town, little more than a village, in the mountains of Provence, in the southeast corner of France. I'd never heard of it either, but as you may suppose, I wasted no time gathering all the information about it that books could provide. Naturally, I daren't risk being seen near the place myself."

"What do you mean by 'dead'?" asked Cub curiously. "Uninhabited?"

"Not altogether. Some of the old families still cling to the place, but it would hardly be the choice of people unaccustomed to living in such conditions. Vallonceau is one of those hilltop villages of old Provence that enjoyed their heyday in medieval times. There are quite a number of them in the region—Cagnes, Eze, Gorbio, among others. Although it is hard to believe today, at one time Vallonceau was a centre of art, poetry, and those wandering musicians known as troubadours. Since the late Middle Ages, when men found it was no longer necessary to perch themselves in mountains behind defensive walls, these places have all been in decline, slowly dying in the sun. Today they are grim reminders of another age, of something that has gone for ever. Originally, of course, they were really fortresses, with the houses of the poorer sorts clustering around the feet of a castle for protection from the vandals who century after century ravaged the Mediterranean coasts."

"How big is this place?" asked Cub.

"It has a population of only a few hundreds. According to the guide books, those who make a study of these things assert that the site of Vallonceau has been a human habitation ever since men left caves to live in buildings fashioned by themselves. The story is told by the old grey stones

of the buildings that remain. Inscriptions on them tell us that Vallonceau was there when the ancient Greeks occupied the land. Later, the Romans fortified the place as a garrison town. They built, as usual, an enormous open-air theatre for the entertainment of their troops and an aqueduct to ensure an ample supply of fresh water for their baths. Both are still there. You will see them. Although the village stands in a commanding position atop a hill it is girdled by a massive wall through which there is only one entrance."

"I hope it served its purpose," murmured Cub.

"Apparently it did not, for Vallonceau has been burnt, sacked, destroyed and rebuilt over and over again. In the fifth century it was taken by the Visigoths, and the eighth century by the Saracens. The Burgundians threw the place down and it was again torn to pieces in the religious wars of the Albigenses. From century to century its narrow streets have been slippery with blood, and echoed to the groans of the dying. Yet with all that, in the Middle Ages it was still a place of importance. Charles of Anjou built a château there, which still stands although it was sacked at the time of the French Revolution. It is now private property. But to us its history is only of interest on account of the buildings that remain, for in one of them, unless I am right off the track, my son is a prisoner. Today the place is quite poor and is visited only by tourists. There are two hotels. One, the Hostelrie du Château, dates from the thirteenth century. The other, much larger, is modern, comparatively speaking. That is to say, it is only two or three hundred years old. But it is given three stars in the guide book for the accommodation it provides, so it must be pretty comfortable. But there is no need for me to enlarge on these details. I have said enough to give you an idea of what to expect. Take one of these guide books with you when you go. It includes a plan of the place which should help you to find your way about when you get there."

"What strikes me as so extraordinary," said Cub thoughtfully, "is why the kidnappers should choose such a place as a hide-out. There must have been a reason for it."

"They are hoping to collect the ransom money in France," reminded Mr. Vanderskell.

"But why France in particular?"

"I imagine the reason for that was because there would be no risk of passing dollar bills—at least, there would be less risk than in America. Gangsters are well aware that their greatest peril lies in disposing of the money they acquire. The numbers of the notes may have been taken by the police, and so traced back to them. Everyone in Europe needs dollars, and in

the black market no questions would be asked about where they came from."

"Even so, why Vallonceau?" said Cub slowly. "Why not keep the boy in Paris? I feel there must have been a reason for taking him to Provence. There must be a hook-up there, somewhere. If I could put my finger on that . . . but I needn't go into that now, sir. Will you be here when I get back?"

"I hope so."

"Where am I, anyway?" inquired Cub, remembering suddenly that he did not know.

"You'll see when you go out," replied Mr. Vanderskell, smiling. "Linton will show you the way." He held out a hand. "Goodbye for now. See me again before you go and we will settle financial details, and so on. Once you get to France don't attempt to get in touch with me unless you have succeeded, or failed, in what you are going to do. The enemy is watchful, and he has eyes everywhere. Good luck. I shall pray for your success."

The secretary took Cub to the door.

Cub looked out and smiled to himself as he went down a short flight of steps into Park Lane. Hailing a cruising taxi he ordered, "Leicester Square."

He found Copper and Trapper still waiting, and somewhat out of patience at his long absence.

Copper eyed him almost belligerently. "Well," he demanded, "wot 'ave you bin up to?"

"Up to?" echoed Cub. "I've been getting myself a job."

"You mean—you've got it?"

"I have."

"For ten thousand . . . ?" Copper's voice cracked with incredulity.

"I've got the job," said Cub. "I still have to earn the money. Let's go somewhere and talk about it."

CHAPTER IV

A TOWN THAT TIME FORGOT

THE broad, fertile valley of the Rhone lay drowsing under a noonday sun that broadcast heat with a lavish hand from a sky that was sheer lapis lazuli —the sun which has ever drawn a stream of pilgrims from less favoured northern lands. The heavily-loaded Avignon-Vallonceau *autobus* wheezed and rattled as it made its daily run over the long white ribbon of road that meandered carelessly across the undulating landscape; for the nearest railway being over thirty miles away, the bus was the only regular transport that served its terminus and the scattered farms that lay along its route, a route devoid of shade except for an occasional sprawling olive tree or line of cypresses between endless fields of tawny loam in which *vignerons* were busy with their precious vines.

Those within the vehicle, mostly women with huge baskets returning from the market in Avignon, sweated profusely as they maintained a steady flow of cheerful conversation in an atmosphere heavy with the pungent reek of garlic. In one of the rear seats sat Cub, his eyes following without interest distant horizons, for he was busy with his thoughts.

Three days had passed since the memorable interview in Park Lane, three busy days, for time was the governing factor in the strange employment to which he was now committed.

It had not taken him long to satisfy the curiosity of his astonished comrades as to the purpose of the advertisement and its subsequent development. The project had there and then been discussed at some length, and it was obvious from the start that Copper and Trapper assumed they would be taking an active part in the operation. To this Cub raised no objection. Indeed, he was only too glad to have their support in a mission in which it seemed more than likely that he would need able and reliable assistance.

He had also confided in his old C.O., Captain “Gimlet” King, half hoping that he would take the lead. He did not like to suggest it, however, and as Gimlet did not offer, the question did not arise. Gimlet merely said that if he, Cub, found himself in difficulties, and would let him know, he would see what could be done about it. In any case, if he could spare the time he might run down later to see how things were going. With this somewhat vague promise Cub had to be content.

Following this, two days had been occupied in making arrangements and dealing with travel formalities in the matter of money, passports and

transport. For reasons of mobility, having regard to the isolated situation of their objective, it had been decided to travel by road. As Copper said, they had a car—the Ford, which he knew inside out; with it they would be able to move about freely as circumstances might demand. It was obvious that without their own transport they might find themselves severely handicapped; and so this was agreed.

The question then arose of the advisability of them all arriving in Vallonceau together; for as Cub pointed out, in that case, if the purpose of any one of them was suspected, they would all be suspect; whereas, if it was not realised that they were all in the same party, suspicion might fall on one without affecting the others. In the end it was decided that the party might travel together by road as far as Avignon. They would have to stay a night there, anyhow. Cub would then go on alone on the bus and take a room at the Hotel du Midi, the larger of the two hotels. Copper, who was under the disadvantage of not being able to speak French, would have to go on in the Ford with Trapper. They were to stay at the same hotel without appearing to have any connection with Cub, at any rate in the first instance. Later on it would not matter if they were seen about together, for being of the same nationality it would be only natural that they should get to know each other.

The details settled, the first part of the operation was put into practice. The journey to the South of France had been uneventful, and after a night in the old city of Avignon Cub had gone on alone by bus, having first rung up the hotel to confirm that a room was available. His luggage consisted of a small suitcase, and a haversack, but part of his equipment comprised a sketching outfit, the purpose of which was to provide an excuse for him to sit about and watch any particular building or person. This idea came to him as a result of reading in the guide book that Vallonceau was a popular centre for artists, and a society of poets who made a particular study of the lays sung by troubadours in days gone by. Knowing that the weather was likely to be hot he was lightly clad in an open-necked shirt, grey flannel trousers and tennis shoes. As he had discovered in the war, rubber-soled shoes could have more purposes than mere lightness and comfort.

Just how he was going to proceed when he reached his objective he did not know; it seemed impossible to make any sort of plan until he had at least made a reconnaissance of the place. For which reason he was still deep in thought when he became aware that the bus had left the rolling plains for country of a very different nature. On all sides the ground rose sharply to form hills that were all more or less rugged, with outcrops of grey stone showing through a mantle of thyme and rosemary, the aromatic scent of which was discernible sometimes even in the bus. More than once he

noticed a cluster of houses clinging precariously to a hilltop as a swallow's nest might cling to the side of a house; built of the same material as that on which they stood it was not always easy to determine where the rocks ended and where the houses began. From what he had read he judged Vallonceau to be a similar sort of place on a larger scale, a supposition which presently turned out to be correct.

The bus now entered a gorge, and with steam spurting from its radiator cap toiled noisily up a narrow *corniche* road that wound in a diminishing spiral to the summit of a hill of some size. Once he caught a glimpse of buildings far above him, on a rocky eminence so steep that he found it hard to believe that any vehicle could reach them. On the other side the hill fell away into a gorge so forbidding that he found it better for his peace of mind not to look too closely into it. Actually, as those who have travelled the region know, there was nothing remarkable about this; but only those accustomed to such roads from birth can regard them with equanimity.

Presently to Cub's relief a turn brought the bus to a less unnerving prospect, and at the same time drew into view two man-made structures that aroused his astonishment and admiration. One was obviously the Roman amphitheatre referred to in the guide books, an imposing saucer-shaped arena, entirely of stone, with tier upon tier of seats rising in concentric circles in the manner of a modern stadium. Around the top perimeter ran a gangway with a projecting bulwark to prevent spectators falling off the edge to the rocks below as they made their way to their seats. At the lowest level an arched portico was provided for the actors to make their entrances and exits. It all seemed to be in a state of perfect preservation.

The other piece of spectacular masonry was the aqueduct which sprang like a viaduct in a series of arches across an abyss, to carry fresh water to the garrison of the mighty empire that had built it.

The bus made another turn and the frowning portal of the ancient village, a tunnel-like gateway in the wall, came into sight. Through this the bus snorted triumphantly to emerge into the Place de la Republique—as a notice board proclaimed—a broad, flat, gravelled area, that was obviously the terminus of the route since the highway ended there. Beyond it, except for one narrow cobbled way, named, as Cub perceived, the Rue de la Château, no vehicle could pass; at any rate, nothing larger than a wheelbarrow.

The bus came to a stop beside several vehicles already parked in the *place*, and proceeded to disgorge its freight. Cub picked up his kit and dismounted leisurely; but his eyes were busy. They ran over the other vehicles—four cars, three of them in the last stages of dilapidation, a decrepit tradesman's van, a post office vehicle and a small truck which in

France is known as a *camionnette*. There was little else to see. In a corner some youths were playing the ever-popular Provençal game called *boules*. There was the usual café, with a sun-faded awning, giving shade to several small iron tables and chairs. The only clients were a postman, a policeman and a soldier, who, with shirt collars open and sleeves rolled up, sat together round a bottle of wine. The Hotel du Midi was on the opposite side of the square. Cub walked over to it. A rubicund, shirt-sleeved man met him at the door. "Monsieur Petaires?" he questioned cheerfully, reaching for Cub's suitcase.

Cub confirmed that he was Mr. Peters.

"This way, *monsieur*."

Cub followed the man and was shown to his room, a comfortably furnished chamber which he was glad to note was on the first floor.

"Lunch is ready," announced the man, who later turned out to be the proprietor, as he departed.

Cub had little to unpack. He disposed his small kit on the dressing table, washed, threw his pyjamas on the bed and went down to the dining room where he enjoyed a good lunch.

The meal gave him an opportunity to observe the other visitors staying at the hotel. There were very few. Apparently, as elsewhere, the petrol shortage had hit the tourist traffic. With mild disappointment he observed that it would not be easy to associate any of those present with his own grim business. There was a man who might have been a commercial traveller. He ate noisily with his napkin tucked into his collar. Two young priests sat together talking in subdued tones. There were two middle-aged women, also together, whose conversation told him they were English school teachers on holiday. There was a grey-haired, scholarly-looking old man, who ate with his eyes on a book propped up in front of him. From the familiar way he spoke to the waiter it was evident that he was either a resident or had been there for some time. Finally, there was a tall, cadaverous, long-haired young man who seemed to have gone out of his way to make himself conspicuous by wearing a bright pink shirt, blue corduroy trousers several sizes too large for him, and flimsy sandals. It was to be revealed very soon that he was, or claimed to be, a poet, engaged on a book of verses in the ancient minstrel style. For the moment he rather embarrassed Cub by the way he smiled at him every time their eyes met.

Presently, through the open window, Cub saw the Ford arrive and pull up in the front of the hotel. Copper and Trapper got out. Their luggage was taken in. Very soon they entered the dining room and sat down together. He took no notice of them.

Finishing his coffee quickly, for he was anxious to be doing something, he went out to make a preliminary inspection of the village, if only, at this stage, to get his bearings.

To his annoyance the pink-shirted young man overtook him at the door. “Excuse me, dear sir,” he said in lisping English, “but you are of the English I think, yes?”

Cub did not dispute it.

“I speak the English with perfection,” went on Pinkshirt.

“What about it?” asked Cub, trying not to show his irritation at this delay.

"I adore the English," gushed Pinkshirt.

Cub drew a deep breath. "I appreciate your sentiments, *monsieur*."

"If I can be of service to you I shall have the honour perhaps—yes?"

Cub nodded. "Thank you," he said, and would have moved on, but he was not to escape so easily.

"You into the air go out?" inquired Pinkshirt.

"I do," stated Cub.

"But the heat is formidable. You will suffer from a stroke of the sun."

"I'll risk it," said Cub.

"It would be better to sit now and drink perhaps a pressed lemon. Come, I will read you my verses," offered Pinkshirt eagerly.

"I am not," replied Cub shortly, "in the mood for poetry."

"But what I offer, *monsieur*, is my own work."

Cub sighed. He did not want to appear churlish. The fellow obviously meant well, but he had spoken the simple truth when he had stated that he was not in the mood for poetry. "Another time," he suggested.

"And you will allow me to present you with my book of verse?" questioned Pinkshirt. "It costs only fifty miserable francs," he added as an afterthought.

"I'll see you later, *monsieur*," said Cub, his patience exhausted.

"*Bon.* But do not call me *monsieur*. My name is Leon. Call me Leon."

"Okay—Leon," agreed Cub, and turning, walked quickly away. If the fellow persisted in his attentions, he thought, he was going to be a nuisance.

From the guide book Cub had gathered a broad impression of the old village; but even so, what he now saw in reality filled him with amazement. It bore no resemblance to any dwelling place he had ever seen before, or could have imagined. The great age of the place was apparent everywhere. In some strange way, while the rest of the world had moved on, Vallonceau had stood still. Whichever way he turned he was back in the age of men-at-arms, of halberdiers and archers. Enthralled, he walked on slowly, his quest forgotten, except that in a vague way he realised for the first time the difficulties confronting him. He understood now what Mr. Vanderskell had meant by "dead." It described the place in one word. And the houses, in dying, had leaned wearily against each other, as if weak from a struggle that had for too long been maintained. Not only did the place look dead, thought Cub; it smelt dead. In every narrow alley hung a strange indefinable smell of corruption and decay, of rotting vegetable matter, of goats and manure. It

was, decided Cub, the smell of centuries of human habitation. It appalled him, yet, at the same time fascinated him.

There was nothing extraordinary in these reactions. Indeed they were normal. At first sight, any stranger unaccustomed to the medieval villages of Old Provence is at once aware of a feeling of unreality that is at the same time curiously familiar, as if by some magic he has been transported back suddenly through the centuries to a life that he once knew, but had forgotten.

Vallonceau stands, or rather huddles, on a knoll that occurs on the flank of a hill of some size. The local legend is that this knoll was pushed up by a landslide during an earthquake in the distant past. However that may be, the top is not level, but slopes downwards from the château, which stands on a spur at the northern end, to the Place de la Republique, which must at some time have been flattened by hand. Even at first glance it is apparent that the site was chosen and developed with a single object in view—defence. The castle, by no means as large as some, dominates the humble dwellings that seem to cower round it for protection. The whole community is enclosed within a wall some five feet thick, with but a single gateway, so that whichever way one turns in the maze of narrow alleys one is sooner or later brought up by the wall. Approached from within this wall is never more than three or four feet high, so that those inside can loll against it—as they do—to gaze at the impressive scenery beyond. On one side the curious visitor looks down a hundred feet or more into a gorge, on the far lip of which is the amphitheatre. Appearing to connect this with the village is the aqueduct, which is no longer used, but in days gone by ensured an ample supply of water from a spring that gushes out of a neighbouring hill.

On the opposite side of the village the drop is not so deep, a mere thirty feet into the River Gar, which, curling round the parent hill, is in winter a raging torrent, but in summer a bed of sun-bleached stones through which just enough water trickles for the women of the place to use it as a public laundry.

Within the village itself a number of narrow passages, with one exception too narrow for vehicular traffic, wander about in a bewildering fashion. The cobbled street that runs from the Place de la Republique to the castle can boast of only one building of importance, the Hostelrie du Château, outside which a stone bench serves as another reminder of the times in which it was placed there; for its edges are scored and scarred with grooves made by men-at-arms who once sat there to drink their wine and at the same time sharpen their weapons.

Such a brief description as this, however, can do no more than a little to help the reader to visualise what Cub saw as he sauntered along on his first

reconnaissance. No two streets are the same. No two houses are alike. The dwellings, all joined together, follow no conventional shape or size—nor, indeed, any shape known to architecture. The place gives the impression of having been thrown together anyhow rather than built—as in fact may well have been the case. Some of the houses form part of the outer wall, often carrying battlements, bastions and barbicans. Others are wedged in between them. Thus, while one window might overlook the gorge, another looks into its neighbour's midden. Chimneys project at all angles. On one side of a lane there may be a Gothic arch; on the other, a sinister hole leading apparently nowhere. The monotonous uniform grey is broken only by an occasional crimson splash of geranium or cactus.

Not above half of the houses are occupied. From the door of one a cow regarded Cub with bovine indifference. Another provided a home for some scrawny chickens. Cats were everywhere, emaciated, mangy, furtive-looking beasts that eyed the intruder with suspicion, and fitted well, thought Cub, with their surroundings.

There are no shops. The streets, which are streets in name only, wander aimlessly with no apparent purpose, often doubling back and crossing themselves at higher or lower levels. Some plunge down into darkness and are seen no more. At one point a street becomes a flight of steps that vanishes over the rooftops. There is no order in anything.

In every narrow alley hung a strange indefinable smell of corruption and decay

To Cub the place was a nightmare town, a village in delirium, a place that had died long ago in convulsions. In the days of roistering soldiers and swaggering cavaliers it may have been a bright spot, but now it was a veritable place of mystery and dark deeds.

Of the people who still dwelt in this whimsical conception of a village, the descendants of those who perhaps had helped to build it, little was to be seen. The few that were about were mostly old crones who wore nothing but black; but, as Cub realised, the younger men and women during the daytime would doubtless be working in the fields beyond the wall. Those he saw appeared not to see him; they had, he supposed, become accustomed to tourists gaping at their homes as if they were a race of freaks. They probably resented it, as would anyone, but over a period of time had come to accept it as part of their existence. Where, wondered Cub, in all this frantic medley, was he to start looking for Johnny Vanderskell? The thought depressed him.

After several times finding himself back at his starting place, although how he had got there he did not know, he at length emerged on to an open square in front of the château, a piece of rough, weedy ground, which a signboard, leaning askew, informed him was the Place d'Armes. The site commanded a wonderful view of the country around. On one side stood the castle. A little to the right of it was the last house in the village. It seemed a little better than the rest and boasted a small garden, gay with marigolds, and a vine-shaded terrace. To the left was the village, with the Rue de la Château wandering down to the hotel. Behind, that is to say facing the château, ran the village wall, at this point doubly protected by a hedge of ferocious-looking cacti, with leaves like elongated cabbages terminating in bayonet points.

Cub had a good look at the castle. It appeared to be older than any he had seen in Northern France. It reminded him of a war-scarred old veteran in the last stages of decrepitude, although on one side a sun-scorched growth of ivy did its best to conceal its wounds. At some period, apparently, an attempt had been made at modernisation, for a window in the square tower had been glazed and fitted with a sun blind. The glass was broken and the blind a tattered remnant. There were no windows at ground level. The door was a ponderous-looking affair set well back in a stone archway. On the remains of an iron fence a notice board informed Cub that the price of admission was fifty francs, and that tourists who wished to avail themselves of this privilege should apply to the custodian. A crude hand pointed to the house with the marigolds.

Cub was not yet ready for serious exploration, so he turned his steps homeward. On the way he passed the Hostelrie du Château, and just beyond it a high wall over which hung clusters of ripe oranges. There was a door in the wall, and had it been open he would have looked in. He tried it, but found it locked; and he was turning away when he was a little embarrassed to see an old woman knitting at her open door just opposite. To cover his

confusion, for he feared she might think he had designs on the oranges, he asked her if the garden was hers. She told him courteously that it belonged to the Hostelrie. He thanked her and walked on. Reaching the Place de la Republique he was making for his hotel when he saw Copper and Trapper sitting outside the café opposite. There was no one else there so he strolled over and sat at the next table to them.

CHAPTER V

A WHIFF OF SMOKE

COPPER greeted Cub's arrival with a peculiar smile. "Been 'avin' a look round the borough?" he inquired cynically.

Cub said that he had.

"So 'ave I," stated Copper, meaningly.

"What do you make of it?" asked Cub. "Queer old place isn't it?"

Copper half closed one eye and regarded Cub narrowly.

"Did you say queer?" He turned to Trapper. " 'Ark at 'im, chum. 'E calls it queer. It's queer all right, my oath it is, and not 'arf. If you asked me I'd say it's a loony-bin. Now I know where the army got the sayin', round the bend. If this billet ain't round the bend I'd like ter know wot is. Wot say you, Trapper? Am I right?"

Trapper clicked his tongue. "*Tch.* Every time."

Copper looked back at Cub. "Don't they 'ave no sanitary inspectors in these parts? Why, in London——"

"You're not in London—or in Paris if it comes to that," reminded Cub. "And I'm not concerned with public health officials." He dropped his voice. "What worries me is where we're going to start looking for what we came here to find."

Copper selected a bent cigarette from a crushed packet and straightened it carefully. "It ain't no use lookin'," he asserted. "They could put a circus in this rabbit warren and we'd never find it. Trapper and me walked in circles till I got dizzy and thought we'd met ourselves comin' back."

"Well, we've got to do something about it," asserted Cub with some asperity. "It's no use sitting here waiting for the boy to come to us."

"Listen, mate," said Copper earnestly, "if we start poking about in other folks' houses it's likely they'll want ter know wot we're lookin' for—and I wouldn't blame 'em for that. I should meself."

The truth of this was so apparent that Cub did not argue. He had been thinking the same thing. In his heart he knew that he had been hoping that they would find some sort of clue waiting for them, someone on whom to fasten suspicion. If there were American gangsters in Vallonceau, he had thought, it would not be difficult to pick them out, if only by their accent. But as far as he could judge from his short inspection the type of man he was looking for was simply not there. At all events, there were no suspicious characters in the hotel, and he could not imagine them residing anywhere

else in the district. “All we can do,” he decided, “is stick around keeping our eyes open. We may spot something.”

“And wot if we don’t?”

Cub shrugged. “Then we may have to do a spot of serious spying, starting at the most likely places.”

“To me,” observed Copper, “every house in this lopsided rookery looks a likely place for anythin’. Wot places were you thinkin’ of particular?”

“There’s the castle, for instance. There’s the old hostelry——”

“It’s shut. I tried ter get a drink there.”

“You mean, it’s shut altogether?”

“*Fini.* That’s wot a bloke told me.”

“There’s the amphitheatre.”

“You could see anyone there a mile off.”

“There might be rooms under it.” Cub spoke without conviction.

Copper shook his head. “It don’t make sense ter me.”

Cub fell silent. Copper’s argument was simple but not to be disputed. Now that they were on the spot the difficulties confronting them stood out much more clearly than they had from a distance.

“Well, we shall just have to sit around and watch,” he decided eventually. Looking up he saw Leon the poet walking across the *place* towards them, waving a piece of paper. “Oh, for goodness’ sake,” he muttered petulantly. “Look what’s coming.”

Copper looked. “Ha! Pinkshirt! Has ’e had a go at you, too?”

“He has,” answered Cub morosely.

“ ’E’s bin tryin’ ter palm ’is poetry off on us,” muttered Copper. “Wanted ter sell me a book of words fer twenty francs.”

“I’m afraid he’s going to try again,” said Cub.

“If ’e does I’ll chuck ’im over the wall,” stated Copper.

“Getting run in for murder isn’t going to help us,” averred Cub sarcastically. “Better be friendly with the chap,” he advised, as the poet, with a song on his lips, tossing his head to keep his hair out of his eyes, pranced up.

The stony stares that greeted him did not discourage him.

“*La, la!*” he cried. “What think you of our little town so droll?”

“Nothing,” answered Copper without hesitation.

“Ah, *mon ami*, that is because you do not comprehend its poetry,” declared Pinkshirt, pulling up a chair to face the tables. “Permit me to explain.”

“I know all the poetry I want,” stated Copper grimly.

“You know poetry! But this is entrancing! Now we are as brothers. What is your favourite poem?”

Copper drew heavily on his cigarette and exhaled slowly. “The boy stood on the burning deck,” he announced.

The poet looked puzzled. “But why?”

“Why wot?”

“Why does he stand on a deck that burns, *hein*?”

“Because,” answered Copper heavily, “I reckon it was too ’ot ter sit on.”

“Then why does he remain? Tell me that? There was a reason?”

Copper’s expression did not change. “Yes. The reason, accordin’ ter the poem, was because all but ’e ’ad fled.”

“Ha! They were cowards?”

By this time Cub was finding it difficult to keep a straight face.

Copper answered. “If you ask me, chum, they must ’ave bin a lot o’ skunks.”

“So. They drink too much?”

“No. I said skunks, not drunks.”

“What is this skunk? I do not know him.”

“A skunk, chum, is a dirty rat.”

“They were animals?”

“You’ve got it.”

“And there was no boat?”

“Not one.”

“No raft?”

“Not a sausage.”

“And he has hunger? *Malheureusement!* So on the deck he must stand.”

“Eggsactly.”

“With his feet hot?”

Copper sighed. “They were covered with blisters.”

“Did you see them?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know this sad story?”

Copper’s face was taking on a mottled hue. His eyes had a far-away look in them. His voice rose a tone. “Because a bloke wrote a poem about it.”

“A friend of yours perhaps?”

Copper swallowed hard. “No,” he said through his teeth. “ ’E wasn’t a friend o’ mine. If ’e was I’d ’ave knocked ’is block off. Now get yourself a lemon ter suck and let it go at that. Too much poetry makes me want ter cry.”

“Tell me one thing,” implored the poet. “Did he die of flames or of the watery deep?”

Copper’s eyes narrowed. His voice dropped an octave. “Listen, chum,” he said distinctly, “I’m a peaceable cove, see? I’m tryin’ ter be pally. I’ve told you my poetry. That’s enough. Pipe down before yer get my goat.”

“Ha! I adore goats. You have a goat?”

Copper rose up, his fingers working. “Yes,” he said with dreadful calm. “Come ’ere and I’ll show it to you.”

But apparently the poet did not like the expression on Copper’s face. He backed away hastily, and after knocking over a table fled towards the hotel.

Copper watched him go. “If that clueless clot comes at me with any more poetry talk I won’t answer fer no consequences,” he said thickly.

“Forget him,” protested Cub. “I may have a word with him later on. I’ve got an idea he’s been here for some time, and even if he’s off his rocker he may let something drop to put us on the track. All the same, as I walked round just now a feeling came over me that this town and what we’re looking for don’t add up.”

“That’s just how I feel about it,” asserted Copper.

“Then we’d better do something about it,” declared Cub.

“Okay. Wot do we do first? You tell me.”

“How about going to the château and giving it the once-over? I don’t think it matters now if we’re seen together.”

“Can we get in?”

“There’s a notice outside that says we can go over the place for a small fee.”

“Good enough,” agreed Copper. “Then we’ll come back ’ere and ’ave a cup o’ tea.”

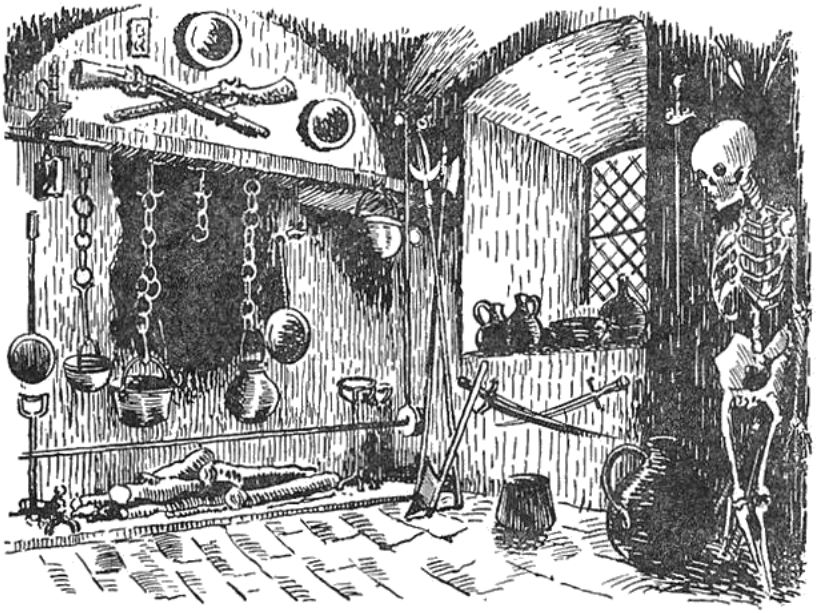
Cub assented and they set off.

As they walked up the slope there was no need for them to act the part of tourists because their interest in their surroundings was too genuine for anyone watching them to suppose that they were anything else. They gazed in passing at the ancient *hostelrie* and its sun-bleached sign that hung on an iron bracket over the locked door. Cub confirmed Copper's information that the establishment had been closed from a man who happened to be passing, although as the windows were boarded up there was little reason to doubt it. The man explained that the last landlord had given the place up some time ago on account of the falling off of tourists.

They strolled on to the château, grim, grey, deserted and silent except for the chirping of innumerable grasshoppers in the weeds that had found precarious footholds among the stones. Cub walked on to the house indicated by the sign to fetch the custodian.

He turned out to be a middle-aged man of untidy appearance, apparently a native of the village, for dark brooding eyes and a sallow skin revealed a mixed ancestry. His shirt was open at the neck and his feet thrust into shoes that had not been laced. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. For a fleeting moment Cub had an extraordinary feeling that he had seen the man before somewhere, but at once ruled out the possibility as being too grotesque for serious consideration. The man greeted him curtly without being actually uncivil, and then explained this by saying that he disliked being disturbed at that hour. He guessed what Cub wanted, for he took a heavy key from a nail and put on a black beret that was shiny with age and with oil. Thus equipped he led the way to the arched entrance in which a massive, nail-studded door was set. It swung open ponderously, and forthwith the fellow began a recital of the features of the building in a voice that had become a sing-song monotone from constant repetition.

They followed him round, Cub translating any interesting facts for Copper's benefit. There was, after all, little to see beyond a succession of bare, dreary rooms, from which all portable furnishings had long been removed. There was the usual spiral staircase in the tower, a *salle-de-gardes*, and a chapel which had been used by the Nazis as a billet during the war. Any objects that had been discovered on the premises were arranged in the manner of a museum in the main hall. Even here there was little to excite admiration or curiosity—a lot of old potsherds, iron cooking utensils, a collection of chains and fetters, spear and arrow heads, a few antique pikes and muskets, and a sword which, so the guide asserted, had been assigned to the Bronze Age. A skeleton hung limply from a bracket on the wall. There was the inevitable collection of fly-spotted postcards should the visitors require them.



“Ask him about the dungeons,” requested Copper, his professional interest apparently aroused. “There’s bound ter be some. I’d like ter ’ave a dekko at ’em.”

It seemed that the guide understood a certain amount of English, for he answered: “It is not permitted. The steps are dangerous. Once a man fell and was killed. The police say it must be sealed up, so now there is an iron gate. No one can enter. Besides, the passage is far under ground, and there is a coldness which would give *monsieur* a chill the most formidable.”

This sounded not unreasonable and Cub did not press the request.

The tour of inspection ended where it began, at the main entrance. Cub thanked the custodian, gave him a tip which was obviously expected, and turned away towards the street that led to the hotel.

“Well, we didn’t learn much there,” observed Copper as soon as they were out of earshot.

“I’m not so sure,” answered Cub slowly.

Copper looked at him sharply. “Did you spot something?”

“I don’t know,” replied Cub. “Maybe. You noticed that fellow was smoking a cigarette?”

"Wot about it?"

"Well, you'd expect it to be a French cigarette, wouldn't you?"

"Wasn't it?"

"No. It was an American. I noticed it at once. The aroma is unmistakable."

"Are you certain about this?"

"We'll soon see," returned Cub. "He threw the stub away and I collected it when he wasn't looking." He opened his hand, revealing the short end, and examined it closely. "I was right," he stated. "It's a Lucky Strike—which with Americans are what Players are to us."

Copper's voice took on a new note of interest. "That means there must be Americans about."

Cub shook his head. "It may suggest it, but it doesn't prove it," he demurred. "No doubt plenty of American tourists come here, in which case one of them might have given the fellow a packet. Remember, too, it isn't long ago since there were American troops in France. There was a black market in cigarettes. Some of them may have found their way here."

"They were all smoked long ago," asserted Copper. "No one keeps a packet of gaspers very long."

"That's true," agreed Cub. "Well, we didn't draw absolutely blank, anyway. We've something, if not much, to work on. What we've got to find out now is where our friend the custodian gets the American cigarettes he smokes."

"That shouldn't be hard," opined Copper as they reached the café and sat down under the awning.

The waitress, a pretty girl, appeared at the door. "*Messieurs?*" she inquired. Cub ordered tea.

CHAPTER VI

MONEY TALKS

CHIN in hands, Cub leaned across the town wall where it skirted the *place*, on sun-warmed stones polished smooth by countless others who through the centuries had chosen the same convenient spot from which to survey the vista of vineyards and silvery olives that roll on and away until at last they are lost in the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

The landscape, in the language of poetry, may have been a smiling one, but if so it found no response in Cub's thoughts. Indeed, he was hardly aware of it. His mind was so occupied with other things that he saw no beauty in a sky of unbroken turquoise, the fertile land or the distant sea.

Five days had passed since he had arrived in Vallonceau and in all that time he had not advanced one step towards the accomplishment of his mission. He had reached an impasse, and what to do next he did not know. His hopes that something would turn up, some clue, some sign, to give him a line on which to work, had not been fulfilled, and now he blamed his folly for putting his faith in the fickle goddess Chance.

He had not, of course, left everything to the whim of this uncertain lady. He had done all in his power, everything within the limits of his intelligence, to obtain the scrap of information that he needed, information that would lead him to his ultimate objective, with no more success than if he had tried to wring it from the stones on which he leaned.

The clue of the American cigarette had, as Copper put it, got them nowhere. They had explored everything there was to explore, or could be explored without trespass, such as the amphitheatre and the aqueduct. The former had a number of rooms, or rather, arched cavities, under it; they were open to the four winds, and from the stench, had been occupied only by generations of goats and cattle. The aqueduct was nothing more than a narrow stone bridge formed by three sets of arches built one upon the other; the top flight supported a stone trough about thirty inches wide, which was the actual conduit that had once carried the water from the main hill across the abyss to the town.

They had watched the château without result. Indeed, under the pretext of sketching Cub had scrutinised every building of any size, often pestered to distraction by the poet who sooner or later discovered him, and in spite of rebuffs, remained to bore him with his inane chatter.

Cub had spoken to the custodian of the château several times. In sheer desperation he had even gone so far as to remark to the man that he noticed

he smoked American cigarettes, which he lamented he could no longer get himself although he preferred them to all others. Could the custodian get him some—even at black market prices? The man said no. Occasionally, he said, he had one or two given him by an American tourist. Which may have been true. Cub did not know, for he had no means of confirming it. But he noticed that although he spoke to the man afterwards on several occasions, once standing him a drink at the café, never again did he see him smoking an American cigarette. Whether or not there was anything significant in this Cub could not decide. There seemed to be no way of settling the doubt short of asking questions that could hardly fail to arouse the suspicions of the man if, in fact, he had any connection with the kidnapped boy.

Copper and Trapper had mooched about, as they were doing now, more or less aimlessly, since they had no objective on which to concentrate their efforts.

There had not been a single American visitor in the hotel. Cub had talked long and often with the proprietor, with Pierette, the pretty waitress at the café, the bus driver and even the postman, cautiously introducing the subject of American tourists; but not one had dropped a single word to give him the slightest encouragement. It seemed that as far as Vallonceau was concerned Americans did not exist. Yet that all these people were in league with the gangsters to discourage enquiry by professing ignorance he could not believe. He had not seen a single vehicle that could not be accounted for, although several times after dark he had heard a motor cycle. He had never seen it. In daylight he had looked for the track of it, but the ground was either brick dry, or cobbled, and presented no mark to show him whence the motor-bike had come, or which way it had gone.

What to do next, where next to look, he did not know. To make a methodical search of the town was manifestly out of the question. To discourage him still more, although in the circumstances this was no matter for wonder, he had an increasing feeling that they were wasting their time; that the missing boy was not within a thousand miles of them. Stark failure, from standing at his shoulder, was now staring him in the face. In five days the only association with America that he'd been able to find was the stub of a cigarette. As a clue it was slim enough, but to save himself from sheer despair he had clung to it as the proverbial drowning man clings to a straw, hoping still that it might lead to something more concrete. Wherefore the engaging panorama before his eyes left him unmoved.

Subconsciously he became aware that two children were playing on the wall near him, at some risk, he thought, of falling into the watercourse beyond, and some thirty feet below. With the object of warning them he half

turned and saw that one was a boy of about seven or eight years of age. The other was a little girl of not more than five. Both were dark-eyed, smooth-skinned, swarthy little Provençals.

The boy, seeing that he was observed, spoke up with the frankness of his race and age. "*Bon jour, monsieur.* You amuse yourself well in Vallonceau, *n'es' pas*?"

Smiling, Cub assured him that he amused himself very well.

"*Bon*," returned the boy, climbing further on the wall.

Cub told him to be careful or there might be an accident.

"*Non—non*," disputed the boy. It was not possible for him to hurt himself, he declared. He was, he assured Cub with pious enthusiasm, under the protection of St. Teresa herself. "*Regardez, monsieur*," he concluded, holding out a little hand, the back upwards, for Cub to see.

Condescendingly Cub glanced. He looked. He stared. His face paled and his eyes became fixed, fixed on the back of the little hand thrust out at him. On it was a mark, clearly delineated in the purple-blue of an indelible pencil. It was a Maltese cross.

To say that this commonplace symbol struck a chord in Cub's memory would be understatement. It crashed into it with such a shock that for a moment or two, as the full significance dawned, he could only stare foolishly, while over him crept a strange sensation of unreality.

His first reaction, when he was able to think coherently, was that the thing must be a coincidence, for to suppose that this small boy could have any possible connection with an American millionaire was too fantastic for serious contemplation. But this impression did not last long. There must, he thought, be a limit to coincidence, even in a world in which it is for ever springing up to confound those who judge events by the Law of Probability. No, he told himself, still somewhat dazed. The appearance of this significant mark on the hand of this child of Vallonceau was not an accident. Somewhere, somehow, there was a connecting link between it and the child of Rudolf Vanderskell. If, in the end, it did turn out to be coincidence, decided Cub, then in future it would be possible to believe anything.

Trying to keep his voice casual, he asked the boy: "Who gave you this mark of—whom did you say?"

"Sainte Teresa. She is the patron of our church, you understand?" explained the child.

The little girl pushed forward, staring at Cub with big, innocent eyes. "*Regardez, monsieur. Ecoutez.* I have one too." She held up a tiny dimpled fist.

Cub drew a deep breath when he observed that it was decorated with the same device. To the boy he said: “Why do you have this mark?”

“It is to make me good,” was the reply.

“To make you good, eh?”

“*Mais oui, monsieur.* I can do no sin while I have it.”

“And I cannot catch the fever, or hurt myself,” chipped in the little girl. “I am under the protection of the Holy Mother.”

Said the boy: “I paid ten francs for mine. Suzette paid only a sou because she is a girl. Besides, she had no more money.”

“I see,” said Cub slowly. “And who did you pay?”

“M’selle Sara.”

“And who is Sara?”

“She is a holy woman. I think she is a saint, but the priest says no.”

“And why is she holy?”

“She was born with the mark of the cross on her arm. Only a holy woman would have it. Everyone knows that.” The boy was emphatic, and apparently slightly contemptuous of Cub’s ignorance.

Cub pondered. It began to look like coincidence after all. “Tell me, who is Sara?” he inquired curiously.

The boy climbed on the wall again and pointed down at the stream below. “*Voila! Monsieur. A la bas.* She is of the Romany’s. They come every year.”

Following the finger, Cub saw a girl washing clothes and putting them on the stones to dry. Beyond were half a dozen caravans, with horses tethered near at hand. A number of squalid if picturesque people were moving about. There were children and dogs everywhere. The ground was a litter of torn paper, orange peel and vegetable parings. Someone was twanging a guitar.

So that was it, thought Cub bitterly. The thing was just a cheap racket. Playing on the religious superstitions of these simple children the gypsies took their money in return for a meaningless fetish.

The boy called. “Ho-la! Sara!”

A face, the face of a girl of about seventeen, looked up. She waved and then went on with her task.

The boy’s face flushed with pleasure. “She saw me!” he cried. “It must be wonderful to be born under the Sign of the Cross,” he added seriously, probably repeating what he had heard someone say.

"It was a true miracle," remarked the little girl.

Born—under the Sign—of the Cross, mused Cub. Then held his breath as an idea struck him, an idea so bizarre that common sense demanded its instant dismissal. But the thought was not easily dismissed. "Have you seen this holy mark on Sara?" he asked.

"But yes, *monsieur*. Everyone has seen it."

"Where is it?"

The boy pointed to the upper part of his left arm. "There."

"And what colour would it be?"

"Blue," answered the boy. "Blue like the sky."

Cub's face showed no sign of the turmoil going on in his brain. It began to look as if the thing was, as the little girl had said, a true miracle, or something very like it. He gave the children the loose change he had in his pocket and told them to go to the café to buy some *berlingots*—the boiled sweets for which Provence is famous.

"There you are," said the boy to the girl in a whirl of excitement. "I told you. I told you the Cross would bring us good luck! Thank you, *monsieur*."

The children went off whooping, richer perhaps than they had ever been, and as Cub watched them go he could not help thinking that the boy was right. The Cross had, without a doubt, brought them good fortune. It might bring good fortune to others, too. He would soon see.

He walked through the town gate and made his way round to the common ground where the girl Sara was working. "*Bon jour, ma'moiselle*," he greeted.

The girl turned quickly at the sound of his voice so that he had a clear view of her face. For some unaccountable reason he found it disappointing. The girl, after all, looked exactly what she was—a gipsy. She was deeply sunburned, and would have been plain but for large, liquid, beautiful eyes. Her hair hung in untidy wisps over her neck. She wore silver rings in her ears. Her clothes were mostly rags.

"*Bon jour, monsieur*," she answered, regarding Cub boldly, hands on hips, head a little aslant.

Cub found a seat on a large boulder. "I've just been talking to some children," he explained. "They tell me you have miraculous powers."

She laughed. "The idea! They told you that?"

"Yes."

"And what else?" Her eyes danced with amusement.

“They told me you could put a mark on a person that is guaranteed to keep the wearer free from accident and sin. I am not as good as I might be, and—well, I thought you might do as much for me . . . for, shall we say, ten francs?”

“For twenty francs,” offered the girl calmly, “I would give you a special mark that would protect you for a year.”

Cub treated the offer seriously, for he was, in fact, in no mood for frivolity. He took two ten franc pieces from his pocket and put them beside him. “I am ready,” he said.

The girl advanced, taking from her hair a pencil which evidently she kept there for chance customers. She knelt, and taking Cub’s hand in her own, after moistening the point of the pencil with her lips, set to work. Cub watched her closely as in a few strokes, with the dexterity of long practice she outlined a Maltese cross. “Do not tell my father of this,” she requested in a low voice as she filled in the hollow cross.

“Why not?”

“Because he will demand the money and I have a use for it. Besides, he would beat me for not telling him. What else did the children tell you?”

“That you were born with the mark of the Cross on your arm.”

“Yes.”

“Then it is true?”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“You expect me to believe this?”

“Why not?”

“It would be a miracle.”

“You don’t believe in miracles, then?”

“I would wager,” said Cub slowly, “that you have no such mark.”

The girl looked up at him with dark serious eyes. “How much would you wager?”

“Fifty francs.”

“Then give me the money,” she said quickly. “*Voila! monsieur!*” In a flash she had rolled up her sleeve, revealing on a white upper arm a blue Maltese cross. It was no rough sketch made by an indelible pencil. The mark was under the skin—tattooed.

Cub’s disgust at what had seemed a brazen display of cheap trickery faded. For the first time it struck him that she really believed the story of her birthmark to be true. With his brain racing he paid his bet. He had seen

enough. He was convinced now that this was no coincidence. How it had come to pass he could not imagine, but unless a miracle had really happened, this girl was no gipsy. Incredible though it seemed, she must—he told himself—be the long lost daughter of his employer. And to make the thing still more amazing, here she was at Vallonceau. The whole thing was fantastic. But of one thing he was certain. Coincidence was out of the picture. There was a reason, a natural sequence of events, to account for the unbelievable thing that had happened.

She was looking at him curiously, as if his expression betrayed something of the state of mind into which his discovery had thrown him.

He pulled himself together. "Who put you up to this way of earning money, Sara?" he asked quietly.

She flushed a little and did not answer.

"Your father?"

"Yes, *monsieur*."

"Do you believe it yourself?"

She shrugged. "It does no harm. The children believe in it. It keeps them out of mischief. Their parents know it. They give naughty children money to come to me. I make them good. Is there any wrong in that?"

Cub did not reply, for the simple reason he did not know what to say. There was much to be said for her argument, he thought.

"Where is your father?" he asked.

She was looking past his shoulder, fear in her eyes. "He comes," she gasped. "*Adieu, monsieur.*" Springing to her feet she fled in a panic.

CHAPTER VII

MONEY TALKS AGAIN

CUB did not move. At that moment he wanted, more than anything, to be alone, to think. He was still slightly dazed by the enormity of his dramatic discovery. However, when a shadow fell across him he looked up, to find standing behind him a heavily-built man, not too clean, dressed gipsy fashion, who stroked a black moustache thoughtfully as he looked down with eyes that were darkly suspicious. A red handkerchief was knotted round his head. Gold earrings swung from his ears. Outlined against a sky of implacable blue he made a picture not quickly to be forgotten. He advanced slowly.

Cub did not speak; but he was thinking fast.

"What were you saying?" said the man at last.

"Sara is your daughter then?"

"She is."

"Is it forbidden to speak to her?"

"It depends," answered the man, "on who speaks—and what he has to speak about."

"I see," said Cub slowly.

"I take care of her reputation, you understand?"

"And even more, I imagine, you take care of the money she earns for you?"

The man did not answer.

“I will tell you what we were talking about,” went on Cub. “But only on the understanding that you do not scold her for talking to me. Would you give that promise, for, let us say, a little matter of a hundred francs?”

“It could be arranged,” answered the man cautiously.

“Good.” Cub peeled a hundred franc note from his wad and passed it over. “I heard of your daughter’s reputation in the village,” he explained. “The children pointed her out to me. I came down to see if she would give me protection, too.” Cub held out his hand so that the cross could be seen. “For her services I paid her seventy francs, which you will allow her to keep, for she implored me not to tell you. Nor would I, had you not observed us together. But since you are her father you have every right to know what we were talking about, and I am under the obligation to tell you. But let me tell you this also. If you beat her you will be a fool.”

“A fool, eh? And why?”

“Because,” said Cub, “she is worth far more to you than the few miserable francs she earns for you by this trick you play.”

The gipsy’s eyes narrowed. “Have you put ideas in her head?” he demanded harshly.

“No,” denied Cub. “But if you will sit down I will put some into yours that should be of great benefit to us both.”

The man sat down. “What do we talk about?”

“Sara.”

“I have nothing to say about her.”

“There, my friend, is where you make a big mistake,” said Cub evenly. “You have much to say. You can say it to me, in which case ten thousand francs should recompense you for changing your mind; or you can say it to the police, who will probably throw you into prison when they hear what I could tell them.”

The gipsy stared hard into Cub’s face. “What is Sara to you?” he asked slowly in a curious voice.

“Let us say that I am just a traveller who is interested in miracles,” suggested Cub blandly. As he spoke he counted ten one thousand franc notes and put them under a stone within easy reach.

The man reached for the money, but Cub put his hand over it. “You haven’t earned it yet,” he reminded. “Tell me this. How often are you at Vallonceau?”

“We come every year.”

“And the rest of the time?”

"We go from town to town in Provence where there is a fête."

"I see. And you have been coming here for a good many years?"

"Yes."

"Fifteen at least?"

"As you say, at least."

"And where did you find Sara?"

Cub gave the man time to answer for he knew that his question would shake him.

The gipsy stroked his moustache, staring into the stream.

"Sara is my daughter," he said. "She was born here."

"But not in your caravan, I think?"

No answer.

"Nor of your wife, eh?"

Again no answer.

"It was a lucky day for you, my friend, when you found a girl with the mark of the Cross on her arm?" prompted Cub.

"It was a lucky day for her too," asserted the gipsy. "But for it she would have died long ago."

"How much would you say she earns for you in a year?"

"A thousand francs, perhaps."

"Suppose I told you that I could put you in the way of earning a million francs—what would you say to that?"

The man's eyes glowed with an avarice he could not conceal. "Is it possible?"

"Easily." Cub chose his words carefully. "You see, I happen to know a man who is looking for a child with just such a mark on her arm. He lives far from here, but he is very, very rich."

The man gazed at the sky, still stroking his moustache. "He would perhaps care for her as much as if she were his—own daughter?"

"She *is* his daughter," answered Cub softly. He threw a sideways glance at the man and saw that his face had paled.

"He would pay a large sum for his daughter—you think?" questioned the gipsy.

"A very large sum."

"*Figurez vous*—a million francs perhaps?"

"At least."

The face of the gipsy was now white. “Would you swear to that?”

“I would.”

“And this between ourselves? I mean, there would be no talk of . . . ?”

“Telling the police? No.”

“How much of this money would be for you?”

“None of it,” answered Cub. “You can have it all—but only if the girl is unharmed, and well cared for, until I can make arrangements for her.”

“And this would be a secret between us?”

“Yes.”

“On your oath?”

“On my oath. When do you leave here?”

“Tomorrow. It is the law of France that my people cannot stay in one place for long without permission. Tomorrow we depart for Vence.”

“Then take her with you, but guard her carefully.”

“With my life,” assured the gipsy fervently, reaching for the money.

This time Cub allowed him to take it. “I haven’t finished yet,” he said, putting a similar sum under the stone.

“What else would *monsieur* like to know?” inquired the gipsy, with a new respect in his voice.

“Monsieur would like to know how you got the girl,” replied Cub drily.

The man looked again at the sky. He looked at the money, then at Cub. “She fell from heaven,” he asserted. “After all, she has the Cross on her arm. It protected her from harm.”

“A pretty story,” complimented Cub. “Now suppose you tell me just how and where you got her?”

The gipsy’s manner became really agitated. He glanced around furtively. “If I tell you will you swear to tell no one?” he breathed hoarsely.

“Not to anyone who can harm you.”

“Then this was the way of it,” said the gipsy tersely, in a low voice. “It happened one day when I was here, many years ago. There was a tempest. Much rain fell, with such thunder and lightning that no man saw the like of it. The river, this river, is a flood, you comprehend?”

Cub nodded.

“I am sitting on the other bank watching the water rush past. I had drunk a little wine in the village, and being tired fell asleep—you understand? I was awakened by the river roaring as if flying from the devil. I cannot cross. I am in a fever of fear. I pray. I wait for the river to drown me.” The gipsy

shuddered at the recollection. “As I sit there a woman comes down those steps in the wall.” He pointed to the rear of a tall house that rose above, and was in fact partly built upon, the town wall. Composed of stones of a thousand shapes and sizes it was blank except for a single window that seemed to stare like an unwinking eye across the landscape. From the side of it Cub could just discern some precarious projections—they could hardly be called steps—leading down to the river.

“This woman has under her arm a box,” continued the gipsy. “Her face is terrible. She weeps. I think, ah! she is weary of life. She comes to destroy herself. But no. Not seeing me sitting there she pushes the box away from her on the water. I am below. I see it coming. It seems a pity to waste a box so useful. I reach out and pull it in. It is heavy. I open it. What is inside? *Nom de Dieu!* A little child. I am devastated. Then I think, here is a woman throwing away a child when we, my wife and I, have no children, for which we are jeered at by our friends. I decide to keep this child and have the laugh of them. But wait! The woman has seen me. She sees I have the child. She comes stumbling over the rocks like one who is insane. I ask her why she does this to a little child? *Monsieur*, you would never guess what she told me, this woman.”

“No,” admitted Cub.

“She told me that her husband hated the child and it must be got rid of. He himself will kill it. But she shows him the mark of the Cross on the child’s arm and says if this is done they will go to hell. He looks at the Cross and sees that it is true. But what to do with the child? It must go. He will not have it. So the woman puts it in a box and throws it on the water hoping it will be found far away. This, she thinks, poor fool, will save her soul. Now me, I am a man of business. Besides, I needed a child. A child with a Cross on its arm is not born every day. I say I will keep it. It shall be a secret between us. Her husband shall never know—and never was he told by me. After this she goes back to her house. The water falls. I go home, taking the child with me. Next day we moved on, and what I have told you, *monsieur*, as God is my witness, is the truth.” The gipsy crossed himself.

“And you told no one of this?”

“Only my wife, and she is dead, now.”

“And this woman who would have killed the child—what of her?”

“She is dead, too. One evening, a few days later, when she has drunk too much cognac, she falls from the window yonder, and is killed. So it was said, and so, doubtless, it was believed. But me, I know the truth. Her husband killed her, perhaps because she did not destroy the child. I don’t

know. But I am here giving water to my horse when I see the body of a woman falling from that window. She is already dead. Then she falls on the brutal rocks. A face looks out. It is the face of Cristiano Zabani, and I know that he has killed his wife. He rushes into the town shouting that his wife has fallen. I have gone back to my caravan. I say nothing. If a man wants to kill his wife it is no affair of mine. Perhaps she deserved death. Who can tell?"

Cub gazed with morbid curiosity at the scene of the tragedy, at the back of the house which the gipsy had indicated. "What house is that?" he asked.

"That house, *monsieur*, is the Hostelrie du Château," answered the gipsy. "I had been there myself, drinking too much, the day I found a daughter," he confessed frankly.

This information shook Cub more than a little. Not a muscle of his face had moved, but every nerve in his body was tingling. Zabani! He remembered the name of one of the gangsters Mr. Vanderskell had mentioned—Frenchie Lou, whose real name was said to be Zaban—Louis Zaban. So the gipsy had told the truth. The name glued his story together.

Cub moistened his lips. “The husband’s name,” he said, trying to keep his voice natural, “was surely Louis Zabani?”

“But no. Her husband was Cristiano Zabani. Louis was a brother. He had trouble with the police and disappeared from Vallonceau long ago.”

“And this Cristiano Zabani? Does he still live at the Hostelrie?”

“No. He gave up business. The hotel is shut.”

“Do you know where he has gone?”

“I have not had the curiosity to inquire. I never did like the man, and I never go in the village now so that I cannot drink too much.”

Cub plucked a sprig of rosemary and chewed the end reflectively as he strove to grasp the full purport of all that he had heard.

“And that is all the story?” he questioned.

“It is all,” said the gipsy. “You will tell no one of this?”

“You have nothing to fear from me,” Cub assured him. “What you have told me is perhaps of greater importance than you imagine. Sara, of course, knows nothing of this?”

“Nothing. She believes me to be her father.”

“Then let it stay like that until you hear from me again,” ordered Cub.

“It shall be as you say, *monsieur*.”

“Treat her well,” advised Cub, “for if she comes to harm you may find yourself in trouble. Take care of her and you will never need to work again. What is your name, so that when the time comes for me to find you I shall know who to ask for?”

“Sebastian Angelo,” informed the gipsy. “Everyone knows Sebastian Angelo. Now I must go to feed my horse. *Bon jour, monsieur.*”

“*Bon jour.*”

The gipsy walked away up the bank.

Cub sat still, staring with unseeing eyes at the river, marvelling at the story he had just heard, the truth of which he did not question. Thus, he thought, did Fate make sport of the puny schemes of men. He had come to find a boy, and had found a long lost girl. He was, he realised, the only person in the world who knew that Rudolf Vanderskell’s daughter was still alive. Not even the gipsy knew who she was. Even Cristiano Zabani, wherever he might be, must suppose that the child had died on the night of the storm fifteen years ago. The only person beside Sebastian Angelo who knew what had happened on the river bank that night was Cristiano’s wife, and she was dead. It looked as if both Louis and Cristiano Zabani were in the kidnapping racket, and this, at least, provided him with something

tangible on which to work. Above all, one thing was now certain. Mr. Vanderskell had not been mistaken. If his kidnapped daughter had been brought to Vallonceau, then it was almost certain that the boy had been brought there too. To suppose otherwise would be stretching coincidence beyond credulity. One man who must know all the answers was Cristiano Zabani. He was not, Cub felt sure, very far away. Obviously, the first thing to do now was find him, and that, he thought, should not be difficult. Someone in the village ought to be able to tell him where the man had gone —probably the woman who looked after the little post office.

He was tempted to let Mr. Vanderskell know forthwith the remarkable news that he had to tell, but decided against it as being too dangerous at that juncture. He had waited for fifteen years, so a few more days could inflict no hardship on him. Sara, or Anne, to give the girl her real name, was in safe hands. It looked as if the old belief that lost children found their way to gipsy encampments had something in it after all.

Getting up he made his way back to the gate, and so into the town.

There was a new spring in his stride as he crossed the *place* to the terrace of the café, his usual rendezvous with Copper and Trapper. They were not there. There was no one there, so he pulled up a chair under the awning with the intention of settling down to some intensive thinking, for now, at last, he had plenty of material on which to exercise his mind.

Hardly had he seated himself when into his thoughts intruded the voice of a man speaking—speaking, curiously enough, in English; and at the words he spoke, or as their significance penetrated Cub's still slightly bewildered faculties, he stiffened. The hand that was reaching for the bell to summon the waitress remained poised in mid-air.

"Sure," drawled the voice. Then again, "Sure." A brief pause. Then, "Okay boss." Came a click, then silence.

Cub looked round. Not a soul was in sight. He realised that the voice must have come from the inside room of the café, the door and window of which were wide open. He got up, and trying not to hurry, walked down the tile-paved terrace to the door. He looked in. There were two people in the room. One was Pierette, the waitress. Hand on hip she was leaning against the little bar apparently gossiping with the custodian of the château, who sat at a table stirring a cup of coffee. They looked up when he entered. He passed the time of day, in a manner which he hoped looked natural, for his brain was working at high speed. Where was the man who had been speaking? And to whom had he been speaking? From the conversation he had expected to see two men. Then his eyes noted an antiquated telephone

on the wall. He remembered the click that had terminated the conversation, and he understood. A man had been speaking on the telephone. But what man? Where had he gone? Cub went to the window and looked out. He could see no one.

The custodian spoke. “Is *monsieur* looking for someone?”

“I was expecting to find here my two friends from the hotel,” answered Cub—which was as near the truth as made no difference.

“I haven’t seen them since early this morning,” put in Pierette.

A thought struck Cub, and he made what a minute later he felt to be a blunder of the first magnitude. It was one of those mistakes which are easy to perceive afterwards. “By the way,” he said, “I see that the Hostelrie du Château is shut. What became of the man who used to keep it? I believe his name was Zabani—Cristiano Zabani?”

Pierette let out a peal of laughter.

Cub stared. “Have I said something funny?” he inquired.

The girl’s merriment increased. “But it is so droll.”

Cub looked at the custodian, eyebrows raised. “What is she laughing at?”

The man tapped a cigarette on his thumb nail. “It is possible,” he opined, “that she thinks it is comic that you should ask me where is Cristiano Zabani.”

“But why?” questioned Cub, still not understanding.

“Because my name is Cristiano Zabani,” was the shattering reply.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SCENT WARMS UP

CUB stared, for once taken completely by surprise, and so caught off his guard; and to aggravate his momentary confusion, at that moment it came to him with a rush why, at his first meeting with the man, he had had that fleeting impression that he had seen him before. Cristiano bore a slight resemblance to his brother Louis, whose photograph Mr. Vanderskell had shown him. It seemed extraordinary that he had never asked the man his name, or heard it mentioned; yet against that, there had never been any reason why he should. It was an unfortunate omission; a small one, certainly, yet it could have meant so much. That such an outstanding clue had for days been staring him in the face, without being noticed, filled him with so much chagrin that he could have kicked himself. What was even more unfortunate, he had intended asking Pierette if she knew what had become of Cristiano Zabani, and it was sheer bad luck that the man himself should be there at that moment. Naturally he would much rather Zabani had not known that he was making enquiries about him. The telephone conversation he had overheard, he thought bitterly, should have warned him that he was on dangerous ground. Too late he realised who the speaker was, and all that it implied.

The custodian was still stirring his coffee; but his eyes were on Cub's face. "Did you want something?" he asked smoothly.

"Only this," answered Cub. "I'd like to see the inside of the old Hostelrie."

It was the first excuse that came into his mind, but he could have bitten his tongue with vexation the instant the words had passed his lips. A cloud had seemed to darken Zabani's eyes, and he sensed, rather than knew, that he had slipped into deeper water.

The man continued to stir his coffee with his eyes on Cub's face. "And why do you come to me?"

"I was told that the Hostelrie belonged to you. Never having heard your name, you understand, I did not realise that you were the man I was told to find to ask permission."

"Who told you this?"

"A gipsy."

"Why?"

“I was sketching the back of an old house from near the gipsy encampment. I asked a man whose house it was, as from where I sat I couldn’t see the front. He told me it was the Hostelrie du Château.”

The man went on stirring his coffee. “And he told you that the property was mine?”

“He told me it belonged to Cristiano Zabani, but at the time I didn’t realise you were he. The man said he had often been in, drinking.”

“And why do you want to go inside?”

“I thought there might be some interesting features that would be worth sketching.”

Zabani went on stirring his coffee with a mechanical movement that frayed Cub’s nerves.

“There is nothing in the place worth a second glance,” he said casually. “Otherwise, of course, *monsieur* would be welcome to enter at any time, although as the licence has expired the place has to be kept locked.”

Cub tried to smile off a situation which he felt was becoming rather difficult. “Oh, well, it was just an idea.”

“At your service, *monsieur*,” murmured Zabani courteously, and drinking his coffee at a gulp, got up. “Since you stay so long I think you like our old town, yes?”

“It’s the most fascinating place I was ever in,” asserted Cub.

“It is a pity, then, that you cannot stay longer, but the money you are permitted to bring out of your country must be nearly at an end, one would guess?”

Cub’s expression did not change, although he did not overlook the hint that it was time for him to go. “I shall stay while I have any money left,” he said. “It is as cheap to live here as anywhere, and I know of nowhere better to go.”

“Most people go to the seaside,” observed Zabani. “The sea is good for the health, they say.”

Cub nodded. “I may go to it for a day.”

Zabani walked to the door. “*Adieu*, Pierette. *Adieu, m’sieur.*” He went out and took the road to the château.

Pierette looked at Cub with eyes that still smiled.

“*Pardon, m’sieur*, but it was *tres comique*. You ask *Monsieur* Zabani where is *Monsieur* Zabani!” She laughed again. “You would care for something, perhaps?”

"Yes," answered Cub. "I'd like a nice big cup of tea." And he meant it. He felt that he needed something to pull him together.

The girl picked up a cigarette that lay on the counter and put it between her lips. "*Monsieur* would have a match, perhaps?"

Cub flicked his lighter and held out the flame. The girl lit the cigarette. The smoke drifted into his face. "You are lucky to have American cigarettes," he observed, as he recognised the unmistakable aroma.

"They are good," she agreed.

"But very expensive, no doubt?"

"I would think that."

"I didn't know one could get them here."

She shook her head. "But no. It is not possible."

"Then how do you get them?"

"Monsieur Zabani is a friend of mine," explained Pierette. "He smokes them always."

Cub saw the girl blow a perfect smoke ring.

"I wonder where he gets them?" he asked.

"I do not know, but I think perhaps in Nice. He goes often to Nice," said the girl, and went off to the kitchen.

Nice, breathed Cub as he watched her go. The popular seaside resort on the coast was, he reckoned, not more than forty miles away. So Zabani went to Nice. How, he wondered, did he get there? There was no public service either by bus or by train. It was a long way to bicycle. Then he remembered the motor-bike which he had heard but not seen. Was that the answer? Deep in thought he went back to the terrace. So the American cigarettes did come into the picture after all, he thought, as he sat down.

Pierette brought the tea. He was tempted to question her further; to ask her about the motor-bike, and if the 'phone call Zabani had just made was to someone in Nice. But he decided that it was too risky, at any rate just now. He did not for a moment believe that Pierette was associated with the gangsters, but the girl had said that she was a friend of Zabani's, which meant that probably they met every day; and if she should let it slip that the Englishman had been asking questions it might lead to serious consequences. If Zabani's suspicions were not already aroused, and he was afraid they were, they certainly would be then. He decided that before asking any more questions it would be better to digest what he already knew.

So deep in reverie was he that he did not notice the arrival of Copper and Trapper, in their rubber-soled shoes. The first thing he knew about it was

when Copper inquired: “What’s cookin’? You look as though you’ve just slipped on a bit of orange peel and . . .”

Cub looked up, and as their eyes met Copper’s expression changed. “What is it?” he breathed. “What’s happened?”

“Plenty,” replied Cub grimly. “Sit down and have a cup of tea—for the look of it. I daren’t talk here. We’ll find somewhere else presently—where that crazy poet isn’t likely to interrupt us.”

“Hit the scent at last, eh?” breathed Copper, with deep satisfaction.

“It might be more correct to say that it’s hit me,” answered Cub. “Where have you been?” he went on, changing the subject.

“Oh, just mooching round.”

“Spot anything?”

“We know where the motor-bike lives,” answered Copper in a low voice.

“How did you discover that?”

“We heard it being run up. Sounded like there was something wrong with the ignition.”

“How long ago was this?”

“About a quarter of an hour. You wouldn’t guess where the bike is.”

“I would.”

“Where?”

“At the house by the Château.”

“You’ve got it. How did you guess?”

“Never mind that now,” replied Cub. “Finish your tea and let’s move. We’ll get in the open where there’s no risk of being overheard.”

As they walked across the *place* towards the town gate, Copper remarked: “It must ’ave bin the bloke who looks after the castle who was workin’ on the motor-bike.”

“It was not.”

“Why not?”

“Because a quarter of an hour ago he was talking to me, in the café.”

“So what?”

“Obviously there’s someone else there besides the fellow who shows people over the castle.”

Copper looked at Cub sideways. “D’you know who it is?”

“No, but I’ve got an idea.” Cub stopped at the end of the aqueduct. “We shall be all right here,” he decided. “Now sit down and listen. Take it easy. I

mean, get ready for a shock, so don't behave as if we were a bunch of conspirators, in case anyone happens to be watching us."

"You think somebody might be watchin' us?"

"I don't know, but more unlikely things have happened. Get this for a start. You remember that one of the men who Mr. Vanderskell thought might have had a hand in the kidnapping of his son, was Frenchie Lou, otherwise Louis Zaban? His real name, I suspect, is Louis Zabani. The man who looks after the Castle is Cristiano Zabani—his brother."

Copper whistled softly. Trapper clicked his tongue.

Then, in as few words as possible, while Copper lay on his back, smoking, and Trapper sat staring into the distance, Cub narrated the astonishing adventures that had occupied most of his day. The others did not speak until he had finished, and then it was a full minute before Copper gave expression to his thoughts.

"Well, swipe me with a wet blanket!" he breathed. "If that don't beat cock fightin'. What say you, Trapper?"

Trapper grunted. "*Mot de Cambronne!* If anyone else had told me this I wouldn't believe it. So now we can get cracking?" Which, for the taciturn French-Canadian, was saying a lot.

Copper sat up, and taking a stalk of grass, picked his teeth reflectively. "Wot does all this add up to, d'you reckon, Cub?" he asked seriously.

"As I see it at the moment it amounts to this," answered Cub. "There were born in this village two brothers named Zabani, Louis and Cristiano. Louis got into trouble early on and pushed off to America where, being a crook by nature, he muscled into the kidnapping racket. To his gangster pals he was known as Frenchie Lou. Cristiano, who stayed here, was also a bad hat—bad enough to murder his wife. They are now in the same racket, but neither is the head man of it because I overheard Cristiano having a 'phone conversation with a man he called the boss, who, there is reason to believe, at the moment hangs out in Nice. This kidnapping racket must have been going on for a long time. One of the first victims was Mr. Vanderskell's little girl Anne. She was brought here, so we may assume that others have been brought here, including the latest, young John Vanderskell. Why they were brought here we don't know, but one could think of several reasons. No doubt Vallonceau was suggested in the first place by Frenchie Lou, when America got too hot for him and his pals. The place is off the map. Frenchie had a brother here who at one time had a wife who could look after small children. When Mr. Vanderskell's daughter was kidnapped, as we know he went to the police, whereupon the gangsters proceeded to carry out their

threat to murder the child. But there was a snag. Madame Zabani had discovered that the child had a cross on its arm. She was a superstitious woman—and that goes, no doubt, for most of the people here. At any rate, she was not prepared to send her soul to eternal damnation by killing, or seeing killed, a child with the Sign of the Cross on its arm. She decided to compromise by doing the Moses in the bulrushes act. By one of those flukes that so often come off to upset the best plans, the child was rescued by a gipsy, with what result we know. For the time being we can leave Anne where she is. Very well. The gangsters now go for Mr. Vanderskell's son. Like the girl, he was brought here. Cristiano, having made money out of the racket, has given up the pub—that is, the Hostelrie—and buys the Château in order to live in the house that goes with it, which happens to be one of the best in the town and is conveniently isolated from the rest. The gang is now after really big money, a million dollars, so the boss comes over, too. Naturally, he wouldn't think much of a cock-eyed town like this. He's got plenty of money and he likes the high spots, so he parks himself where he can enjoy life and at the same time be close enough to keep an eye on things. He may be in Nice. At any rate, that's where the American cigarettes come from. He keeps out of the way, but he is kept in touch by either Cristiano or Louis on a motor-bike. I suspect Louis is here, with his brother. It must have been Louis you heard running up the motor-bike. To sum up. Cristiano is certainly here. He's in the racket. Louis is probably here, with his brother. Johnny Vanderskell is here somewhere, otherwise there would be no need for Cristiano to be in the racket. Our job now is to find where the boy is being kept."

"Knowin' wot we know now it shouldn't be too 'ard," opined Copper. "Let's raid the château."

"Before we do anything like that we shall have to make sure that he's there," argued Cub. "If it turned out that he wasn't, we should have shown our hand to no purpose. All we should get for our trouble would be a ride with a bullet at the end of it—unless the gang, knowing that it had been located, pulled out to a new hiding place."

Trapper chipped in. "I don't see how the boy can be in the château. We went all over it."

"What about the dungeons?" growled Copper. "We didn't see them."

"How can we say we went all over the castle?" put in Cub. "We may only think we went all over it. We'll go over it again—this time without Zabani."

“Orlright. Now let’s get down ter brass tacks,” suggested Copper. “Wot’s the first thing ter do, Cub?”

“First of all,” answered Cub slowly, “I’d like to confirm that it is one of the Zabanis who goes out on a motor-bike, and that he goes to Nice. I’d like to know why he goes there. We’ve got a car so it shouldn’t be difficult to follow him.”

“That means sittin’ around night after night until ’e ’as ter go agin, and time’s gettin’ on,” Copper pointed out.

“I’ve got an idea he’ll go tonight,” contended Cub.

“Wot makes you think that?”

“Because today, for the first time since we came here, Cristiano Zabani is suspicious of us—at any rate, of me. At least, he gave me that impression just now. It was my own fault. I was in too much of a hurry to talk and I may have said too much. I didn’t like the look in his eyes when he was talking to me. I’m not saying that he’s got us weighed up, or anything like that; but when he left me he was thinking, and thinking hard, as if something had just dawned on him. In fact, he as good as gave me a tip to clear out—but there, he might have done that if he thought I was just a blundering young fool. Obviously, they can’t suspect that we know John Vanderskell is here, but for reasons that we can well understand the Zabani brothers don’t hike inquisitive people about the place. From now on they’ll keep an eye on us to try to find out just what it is we’re after. If I’m right in this, Cristiano will probably slip into Nice tonight to tell his boss about us. I shall work on that assumption. Tonight we’ll take the car out on the Nice road, wait for the motor-bike to come along and follow it. I don’t think there’s any need for us all to go. I suggest that you drive me to Nice, Copper, while Trapper stays here to keep an eye on the castle and Zabani’s house. There’s a chance that he may see something. How does that sound to you?”

Copper agreed. Trapper nodded assent.

Cub got up. “All right then. We’d better see about getting an early supper.”

CHAPTER IX

CUB GETS A SHOCK

THE same evening, a few minutes past seven o'clock, after an early meal Cub rose from the table at which he had sat alone and strolled out into the gathering twilight. In place of the grey flannel slacks and sports shirt which normally he wore during the day, he had put on a navy blue suit, a clean white shirt and dark tie; and instead of being hatless he now wore a beret. This was not intended to be a disguise, but he hoped that it would enable him to pass as a Frenchman should the occasion arise, and at the same time permit him to enter public buildings where, at that time of the evening, slovenly dress might make him conspicuous.

Following the conversation by the aqueduct he had done some serious thinking, with the result that he had decided to follow up his clue without loss of time. Their next step, as he had told Copper, must be to ascertain definitely who was using the motor-bike, where the rider was going, and for what purpose. In view of what he knew it seemed safe to assume that the rider was one of the Zabani brothers, and his destination, Nice. But he was anxious to confirm this.

His plan was simple. Ostensibly he would go out for a walk. Copper was to follow in the Ford and pick him up some distance along the road. They would go on as far as seemed advisable and pull into a convenient side turning or gateway from which the main road could be watched. There they would wait for the motor cyclist, and when he arrived, shadow him. In order not to leave Vallonceau without someone to keep an eye on things Trapper was to remain and watch the château.

Hands in his pockets Cub strolled out through the gate in a manner calculated to create in the mind of anyone watching him that he was only taking a short after-dinner promenade. This pose he maintained until the coming of darkness made further pretence unnecessary.

He had walked the best part of a mile across the deserted countryside when he heard the Ford coming. At least, he assumed—correctly as it turned out—that it was Copper. He struck a match and held it as if lighting a cigarette, which was the pre-arranged signal. The car stopped. Cub got in. The car went on.

Copper had no news to impart so the drive proceeded in silence until the road swung round towards the old town of Cagnes, which lies some seven miles to the west of Nice and a short distance back from the coast. Here, just before reaching the town, Cub, who was on the lookout, spotted an olive-girt

farm track which he thought would suit his purpose, so he told Copper to stop the car and back into it. This done the lights were switched off.

There was one drawback to Cub's scheme, and he knew it. There might be more than one motor cycle on the road, in which case they might not discover until too late that they had followed a perfectly innocent traveller. This, however, was a chance that had to be taken, for the simple reason that in the darkness there was no means by which the rider of the motor cycle could be identified. Still, Cub felt fairly confident that only bad luck would prevent them from picking up the right man, because as far as he knew there was only one motor cycle in Vallonceau, from where the road they were watching ran direct. He settled down to wait, prepared for a tedious vigil; and he was, therefore, both surprised and relieved when within ten minutes he heard a motor cycle coming from the right direction, and presently saw its headlamp. The machine was travelling at high speed, with the result that by the time Copper could get the Ford started and on to the road, the rider was a blur against the halo of his headlamp a quarter of a mile ahead.

"Step on it or we'll lose him," ordered Cub impatiently.

Copper obeyed and the powerful car leapt forward. "The blighter was earlier tonight than usual," he muttered.

"So I noticed," answered Cub. "There's probably a reason for it."

"Such as?"

"My guess is, the chap on that machine has an urgent report to make to the boss."

"You mean, he might want ter tell 'im about you hangin' about and askin' questions?"

"Exactly. There was something about Cristiano's behaviour that made me feel that it had just occurred to him that I was no ordinary tourist—that I had a definite purpose for being at Vallonceau."

"I only got a glimpse of the bloke as 'e dashed past, but he didn't look like Cristiano ter me," observed Copper. " 'E looked too big, too fat."

Cub had thought the same thing, but had not commented on it. Nor did he now, although in his heart there grew a fear that they might be following the wrong man. It was too late now, though, to do anything about it. They could only carry on and hope for the best.

Copper said no more, but putting in some fast work closed the gap between car and cycle to not more than two hundred yards. "You're close enough until we get in the traffic," said Cub. So far they seemed to be the only vehicles on the road.

The motor cyclist took a left hand turn. Copper followed, and there before them was the sea, with moonlight glinting on it in long ripples of quicksilver. Ahead now ran the main arterial coast road, which, after sweeping round the district known as La Californie, becomes that superb esplanade, occupying the sea front of Nice, that is the famous Promenade des Anglais.

There was now no difficulty in keeping the motor cyclist in sight, for arc lamps, concealed in palm trees down the middle of the thoroughfare, illuminated the road, and, to some extent, the broad pavement on either side. There was very little traffic—one or two private cars and the little single-decker omnibuses that ply along the French Mediterranean littoral. In these circumstances there was practically no risk of losing sight of the motor cyclist, and under Cub's instructions Copper allowed it to draw ahead rather than give the rider reason to suspect that he was being followed. All the same, Cub did not take his eyes from his quarry. To the right lay the sea; on the left, an imposing succession of fine buildings, many of them luxury hotels and restaurants where diners were taking coffee and liqueurs in open-air, palm flanked terraces, sometimes to the soft strains of string music.

The motor cycle slowed down and presently pulled up before one of the least pretentious of these, a small but expensive-looking establishment that stood a little way back so that between it and the pavement there was an open area where, between decorative palms and flowering shrubs, a few clients took their ease in long cane chairs by small tables lighted by rose-tinted lamps. Unfortunately for Cub the motor cycle had come to a stop just outside the radius of any light, so that although he heard the machine put on its stand he did not get a clear view of the rider. The matter was made even more difficult by the fact that at that moment several pedestrians happened to be passing. Cub did not like to call attention to the car by bringing it to a skidding stop; instead, he told Copper to run on some forty or fifty yards before bringing it into the kerb in front of a block of buildings which turned out to be the offices of an international tourist agency.

Said Copper, as Cub opened the door of the car: "Wot are you goin' ter do?"

Cub replied: "I don't know exactly, but first of all I'm going to stroll along to try to spot the fellow who came on the motor-bike. If necessary I shall wait until he comes back to it. Stand by."

"Okay."

Cub walked back along the pavement trying to look like a casual, sight-seeing tourist, of which there was a number about, gazing into the big hotels

and reading the menu cards which in France must be exposed for public view. As already remarked, the hotel with which Cub was concerned stood a little way back from the road, and being midway between two arc lamps he was able to approach in comparative darkness. Hands in pockets he sauntered slowly past the terrace, his manner inconsequential but his eyes alert. The reconnaissance did not tell him much, but he was able to eliminate a number of couples or parties who, having women or children with them, were not likely to include the man he sought.

His chief difficulty lay in the fact that he had no means of knowing whether the motor cyclist had found a seat on the terrace, or had gone inside the building. However, after going on a little way he retraced his steps, and this time he noticed two features of the place, one of which he put to use. The first was a narrow passage, or alley, possibly a staff or tradesmen's entrance to the establishment. It ran flush along the side of the palm terrace, from which it was separated only by a trellis covered by a thick growth of convolvulus. He merely noticed this in passing. The second feature was the customary stand to which was affixed the card showing the price of food and drinks served in the hotel. Several people had stopped to look at it, and to all appearances he now did the same, for this enabled him to make a more detailed scrutiny of the clientèle beyond.

This occupied only about a minute, by the end of which time his interest had become concentrated on three men who sat together in an isolated position right at the back, in the corner bounded on one side by the passage already noted. These men sat with their heads together in earnest conversation, but more than that he could not see, because not only was the table, by accident or design, drawn clear of the light that streamed through the glass doors of the building, but the table lamp had also been extinguished. Cub observed that one of the men had a mackintosh or dust jacket thrown over the back of his chair, as if he might have just joined the party from outside. The only person near the trio was a man who sat alone, on a bench, smoking a cigarette as he read the evening paper. On the spur of the moment Cub decided to join him, for from such a position he would be able to get a much closer view of those in whom he was interested. The man he wanted to see was either in that party or had gone inside, decided Cub. The others on the terrace, all in plain view, he was able to dismiss.

He strolled in, and after a pause as if to determine where he should sit, walked on to the bench. His surprise was genuine when the sole occupant lowered his paper and said quietly, in French but with an accent: "Sorry, *monsieur*, but the seat is engaged."

"*Pardon, monsieur*," returned Cub instantly, and turned away to one of the small tables. But his heart was beating faster because he had caught the whiff of American tobacco. At the same time he realised that the man was not in fact reading, for the simple reason there was not sufficient light to enable him to read the small print.

A waiter appeared at Cub's elbow. "*Monsieur?*"

Cub ordered coffee.

To his chagrin he still could not see the faces of the men in the corner, and to make matters more difficult, by an unfortunate chance a party of six people, men and women, now arrived and selected a large table that happened to be directly between him and the corner. They had obviously dined well and what with their laughing and loud conversation Cub could hear nothing else.

It did not take him long to perceive that he could serve no useful purpose by remaining where he was, so after waiting a few minutes for the look of the thing he called the waiter, got his check, paid it and departed. In the interval he had conceived a new idea. It struck him that if he went up the passage he would be able to get within a yard or two of the party in the corner, so that even if the creeper should prove too thick for him to see them, he ought to be able to hear their voices. Should the actual conversation be inaudible, from the language they employed he would at least be able to judge their nationality.

Returning to the pavement he walked on a little way, turned back and entered the passage with easy confidence—a confidence which, however, did not persist. He had taken only half a dozen steps, and was slowing down to proceed with more caution, when a cigarette glowed in the darkness close to the trellis in front of him. It could only mean that a man was standing there. For a moment he hesitated, again baulked by a circumstance which he had not foreseen; and when, an instant later, the familiar smell of an American cigarette reached his nostrils, he knew that the man was not standing there by accident. The party in the corner, whoever the men might be, had apparently no intention of being overlooked or overheard. Two guards at least were on duty.

All this flashed through Cub's head in a moment, during which he had not actually stopped, for realising that it would look more suspicious to turn back than carry on, he continued his walk as if nothing unusual was happening.

The man was standing with his back against the trellis. He did not move. He did not speak. Cub passed within a yard of him, but all that he could see

was the glowing end of the cigarette and a faint blur behind it. But he could feel the man's eyes on him. Without having the slightest idea of where he was going he maintained his unhurried gait, uncomfortably aware that he seemed to be making a mess of things. The passage turned sharp right. Taking the opportunity to glance over his shoulder he saw the cigarette close behind. The next moment he was blundering about amongst empty bottles and ash cans in the back premises of the hotel. For a little while, during which he was prepared for anything to happen, he thought he would have to go back the way he had come; but eventually he discovered a gate which, to his relief, gave access to a narrow street. From its direction he knew that it ran parallel with the promenade, so taking the first turning on the right he found himself close to the car in which Copper sat waiting.

He did not speak to him, although he noticed that Copper started violently as he passed, puzzled, no doubt, by his sudden appearance from the direction opposite from the one he had taken. Nettled by what he told himself was amateurish bungling Cub strode on towards the hotel determined to achieve his object, which primarily was to find the rider of the motor cycle. It was still where it had been parked, which told him that the man was still there. He was afraid that it might have disappeared while he was in the back street. He had a closer look at it and saw that it was a French built "Chasseur." His inspection was of short duration, but its immediate consequences were considerable. Indeed, they were almost devastating. For in turning away to walk on he nearly collided with three men who were just coming out of the palm terrace to the pavement. A fourth man, with one hand in the pocket of his jacket, followed close behind.

Cub had only a brief glimpse of the faces of the men as he side-stepped quickly and walked on, but this told him so much that for a few seconds his brain seemed unable to cope with it. Indeed, he nearly lost his life, for stepping unthinkingly into the road he almost walked into a bus coming the other way. Heedless of the irate driver's remarks he hurried on, not caring in the least where he went as long as he could get somewhere to think.

Of the three leading men, one had been short and stout. His thumbs were hooked in the armpits of his waistcoat and he held a cigar in his teeth. His face carried one conspicuous feature. The nose was so large as to appear to be out of proportion with the rest. Cub had never seen him before. One of his companions was Louis Zabani, alias Frenchie Lou. Cub recognised him instantly from the photograph. But it was the third man, or rather his presence there, that shook Cub to the very roots of his nerves. It was Leon, the crazy poet of Vallonceau. The fourth man, the one who had been

following, was he, who, sitting on the bench, had told Cub that the seat was reserved. Now Cub understood why.

For a hundred yards he walked on blindly, his brain in a whirl. He had succeeded beyond all expectation, but at no small cost to his peace of mind. Had the men seen him? He did not know. If the poet had seen him he must have recognised him; if he had he gave no sign of it. Perhaps his unusual dress had prevented recognition. Cub could only hope so, or the consequences of his trip were likely to be tragic in more ways than one. For Louis Zabani he had been prepared, although he had really expected to see Cristiano. But the poet . . . Even now Cub found it hard to believe that this inane creature, this clown who had been the subject of their ridicule, was in reality a member of a cold-blooded gang of kidnappers.

Cub leaned against a wall to recover his composure and bring the facts into focus. The man with the big nose had been the boss, the head man of the party. His very manner was proof of that. Then inspiration took Cub in its grip and he knew that he was right. The nose! It was The Snout himself—Joe the Snout. Such an outstanding feature would be just the sort of thing the underworld would seize upon for a nickname.

Three men sat with their heads together in earnest conversation

The sound of the motor cycle being started up made him look along the pavement. He saw that Zabani was now astride it. The Poet was getting on the pillon bracket. So that was it, thought Cub. They had come in together. No wonder the rider had looked stout in the brief glimpse they had had of him. Poet, eh? thought Cub grimly. No wonder the fellow was always hanging about and turning up at unexpected moments. Throwing his mind

back he wondered how much the fellow had overheard of his conversations with Copper and Trapper. There was this about it, though. Even if he, Cub, was suspect, it seemed unlikely that Copper would be. His Cockney slang and peculiar wit might well create in the mind of anyone not knowing the type that he was a big, simple fool.

Cub crossed the road, and walking back saw the motor cycle start off, leaving the two remaining men to return to the hotel. Zabani, he noted, did not turn the machine as if he intended returning home forthwith; instead he carried on down the promenade.

With his brain still racing Cub walked back to the Ford, opened the door and sank into the seat next to Copper.

Copper tossed a cigarette stub out of the window and yawned. "You've bin a long time," he grumbled. "Wot's it all about? Did yer spot anything?"

"Did I spot anything?" echoed Cub. "You'd never guess. Get back to Vallonceau as fast as you can make it."

"What's the 'urry?" inquired Copper, starting the engine.

"I want this car to be in its usual place by the time that motor-bike gets back to Vallonceau," replied Cub.

"Wot's the gen?" demanded Copper, as he swung the Ford round and set it on a course for home.

As they sped down the moonlit highway Cub told him.

For some minutes after he had finished Copper did not speak. As in Cub's case, it seemed to take him some time to absorb the information.

"Well!" he muttered at last in a voice of wonder. "If that don't take the blinkin' coughdrop. S'welp me. Poet, eh? I know a verse that'd just about suit that prancing cissy. I'll tell it to 'im some day, too, my oath I will."

As if to relieve his feelings he put his foot down on the accelerator. The car raced on.

CHAPTER X

AN EERIE RECONNAISSANCE

OF all the information Cub had gathered none seemed to stick in Copper's mind as the revelation concerning The Poet. He referred to it again and again as the Ford climbed the hill that ended at the village.

"Mind you, it was a smart lay," he admitted grudgingly. "Took me in orlright, any old how. Don't make no mistake though, chum; a bloke who can put on an act like that is one ter keep an eye on."

"He took me in, too," stated Cub. "But now we know where he belongs we can handle him and his poetry when the time comes. The thing is not to let him know we know. Of course, the whole set-up is plain enough to see now. John Vanderskell is kidnapped and brought here by The Snout and his gang. Cristiano Zabani lives here all the time. Louis brings him the victims and he looks after them. They have a scout posted in the hotel to keep an eye on visitors. That's The Poet. He's okay there because there's nowhere else for tourists, genuine or otherwise, to stay. The Snout, by the look of him, likes more luxury than Vallonceau can offer, so he stays handy in Nice, which is out of the picture anyway, should there be trouble. Two gunmen prevent anyone from getting too close to him. That means there are at least half a dozen in the gang. There may be more. I'm not trying to guess who they are. After this poetic eye-opener I'm ready to believe anything."

"And wot's the next move?" inquired Copper, as he drove into the village.

"We've got to act fast," stated Cub. "Time's getting short. But we'll wait to hear if Trapper has anything to report before we decide on a definite plan."

"If there are only three of the gang in Vallonceau we ought ter be able to handle 'em," opined Copper reflectively.

"Maybe, but if we start a gun fight here the French police are likely to handle us, too. I'm not starting anything like that—yet. If the other side start the rough stuff—well, that would be a different matter."

Copper brought the car to a standstill, parked in its usual place. The time, Cub noticed, was a quarter to ten.

There was no need for them to look for Trapper. He appeared almost at once. "I saw your headlights coming up the road so I thought I'd walk along to get the news," he explained.

“Has anything happened here?” asked Cub, leading the way to the shadow cast by the wall.

“Not a lot,” replied Trapper. “I saw the motor-bike go off. It passed me in the Rue de la Château as I was going up to the castle. I couldn’t see much of the guy because he was muffled up and it was dark.”

“Was there only one man on it?”

“Only one when it passed me.”

“Hm. I suppose Zabani picked up The Poet near the gate. Go on, Trapper. Anything else?”

“I went up to the castle and tucked myself under the cactus hedge,” continued Trapper. “For a long time nothing happened. All I see is rats. *Mon Dieu!* There are more rats in this village than people. I reckon the cats stay home for fear of being chewed up by them. After a time, about nine o’clock, there’s a light in Zabani’s cottage and out he comes. I mean the guy who showed us round the château. He stands by his gate for a minute or two like he’s making sure there’s no one about. Then he goes over to the château. He carries a basket. He goes in. I wait. In twenty minutes he comes back.”

“Still carrying the basket?”

“Sure.”

“Then what?”

Trapper shrugged. “Nothing. He goes in. That’s the last I see of him. I haven’t seen the motor-bike come back.”

“It was still in Nice when we left,” Cub informed him.

“What’s your news?” asked Trapper.

“ ’Old yer ’at, chum; you’re due fer a shock,” put in Copper.

Briefly, Cub ran over the story of what had happened in Nice.

At the conclusion Trapper clicked his tongue. “*Tch.* Name of a dog!” he exclaimed. “Poet! What an animal!”

“I thought that’d rock yer on yer ’eels,” declared Copper. “Don’t you worry, though. We’ll get that cove sewn up.” He turned to Cub. “Wot’s the programme? Do we do any more tonight, or do we go bye-byes?”

“There’s one thing I’d like to do if I thought it could be managed,” answered Cub thoughtfully. “I’d like to get inside that castle. The boy must be there—why else would Cristiano take a basket over? I imagine it had food in it. When Cristiano brought it back I’d say it was empty.”

“There must be somebody inside lookin’ after the kid, anyway,” averred Copper. “They wouldn’t be such skunks as ter leave ’im in that ’ole alone.”

"They're capable of anything or they wouldn't be in such a racket," observed Cub.

"Okay. Well, wot's ter stop us breakin' in?"

"For one thing, an iron-studded door four inches thick," returned Cub sarcastically. "That place was built to stand a siege. It would take a charge of high explosive to shift that door without the key."

"Wot's wrong with the winders? They're open ter the wide world."

"Apparently you haven't noticed that the lowest one is about fourteen feet from the ground," said Cub. "How could the place stand a siege if it had windows at ground level?"

"We haven't seen the back of it."

"I have. It's a sheer drop into the gorge."

"Wot about the ivy? Ivy can be useful stuff."

"Not this, I'm afraid. I've looked at it. It doesn't look big enough or old enough to carry any weight. If it let you down you wouldn't stop till you bounced on the rocks at the bottom of the gorge."

Trapper clicked his fingers. "I've got it!" he asserted. "The builder's yard, half way along the street. There are ladders. I saw them."

"Now you're talkin'," said Copper enthusiastically. "Come on. Wot are we waitin' for?"

"Take it easy," requested Cub. "Don't make a noise. Goodness knows what eyes are watching us."

"Bah! Everyone's in bed," declared Copper. " 'Ave you got yer torch, Cub?"

"Of course. All right, let's go." Walking quickly and silently Cub led the way towards the builder's yard.

If in the broad light of day the ancient village transported him back to the Middle Ages, at this hour of night, he discovered, the sensation was even more pronounced. There was no street lighting, so the moon had a free hand with the old gabled roofs in the manufacture of fantastic shadows, shadows that were dead black against the luminous blue of reflected moonlight. One, cast by a projecting gargoyle, took the form of a monstrous beast about to spring, and tough though he was Cub felt a creepy feeling at the nape of his neck as he approached it. Another, thrown by he knew not what, was a snake across his path. Everywhere scuttled the rats; some, bolder than the rest, watched the intruders with twin points of fire that were unwinking eyes catching the serene light that glowed in the sky. However, the yard was reached, and a flash of his torch showed him that Trapper's memory had not

been at fault. Three ladders hung horizontally from iron spikes on a wall, but only one was long enough for their purpose. By mutual effort they lifted it down, cautiously, because a lighted window revealed that the owner had not yet retired to bed. However, all remained quiet, so at a signal from Cub they moved out of the yard carrying their burden with them. Five minutes later, reaching the Place d'Armes, they lowered it in the bristling shadow of the cactus hedge.

Cub now perceived that they were faced with a difficulty which until that moment he had not taken into account. He had intended taking Copper into the castle with him, if only for company; but he now saw that this was not possible, because it would take two of them to lift the ladder into position, and—this was the point—lower it again after entry had been effected. Not knowing how long the reconnaissance would take he dare not risk leaving the ladder standing against the building where the black shadow it would cast on the wall would certainly be seen by anyone who happened to pass. Cristiano might come out. Apparently he was at home, for a light showed at the window in his house. Again, Louis could be expected back from Nice at any moment, and he would not overlook an object so conspicuous and significant.

Cub explained his predicament. "There's only one thing for it," he decided. "I shall have to go in alone. Put the ladder up. As soon as I'm inside take it down and bring it back here where it can't be seen. When I'm ready to come down I'll flash my torch."

"Okay," agreed Copper. "Wot 'appens if Zabani comes along while we've got the ladder up?"

"We'll deal with that should the occasion arise," answered Cub. "It's a risk we shall have to take. If it means a show-down, then we'll have one. Actually, you should hear the motor-bike coming a mile away; that should give you time to get the ladder out of sight. Listen." They stood still for a few seconds, but the only sounds were the squeals of fighting rats, and, incongruously, the voice of an opera singer coming over a distant radio.

"All clear," said Cub. "Get her up."

The ladder was carried quickly across the gravelled area where more than once in days gone by men-at-arms had mustered to repel an attack on the village. Reaching the wall below the window Trapper stood on the bottom rung while Copper put his brawn to use in the elevation of the smaller end. As soon as it was secure Cub went up, swung a leg across the stone cornice that formed the window sill, and climbed inside. Looking

around, he waved, and the ladder receded as Copper reversed the process. In a matter of seconds it had been hurried back to the cactus hedge.

Holding the beam down Cub switched on his torch, to be confronted instantly by an object which, because it was unexpected, gave him a nasty turn. It was the grinning skull of the skeleton, all the more gruesome because the bones swung slightly from side to side, the result, as he realised, either of a draught or vibration which he himself had caused. His fright was only momentary, and as it passed off he was glad to see the pathetic remains of what had once been a man because they told him where he was. He recognised the chamber as the one that had been used as a museum. There was nothing there he wanted so he walked over to the door. In doing so he brushed against some fetters that hung on the wall and set them jangling. He knew at once what had happened, and although he turned instantly to steady the chains the incident did nothing to ease the nervous tension induced by the atmosphere of death and decay. Taking more care he went on, and set about the serious exploration of the place.

It did not take him long to discover that, for all his self-assurance, he had little enthusiasm for the task which he had set himself. The enterprise had seemed straightforward enough when he had been outside with the others; but inside, alone, with silent reminders of the past at every turn, it was a different matter. The exploration of ancient monuments was not, he decided, a job to be undertaken alone on the night of a full moon. There were too many shadows, and the silence was too profound. The trouble was, the shadows would not always remain still. They had a trick of moving unaccountably. Once one came suddenly towards him, and although he knew that it was his own, caused by his body passing across moonlight that poured in through a gaping window, it gave him an uneasy feeling that he was not alone; that unseen eyes were watching him. Bats, too, were there, to keep his nerves on the jump. The tiny creatures flitted on silent wings in and out of every aperture, casting distorted shadows out of all proportion to their size. One collided with him, striking him between the shoulders and causing him in his agitation to drop his torch, much to his irritation—not to say alarm. However, he stuck to his work, even though there were moments when his every impulse was to rush to a window and yell for the ladder.

He was mounting the spiral staircase that gave access to the upper part of the tower when he heard the motor cycle coming. Looking out through a narrow slit of a window he saw the headlamp speeding up the distant road. Some way behind it were the twin lights of a car, although to this he paid little attention. He watched the cycle, saw it stop outside the village presumably to allow The Poet to alight, and then came on to the area below

him. It carried only one rider. He recognised the figure of Louis Zabani, and noted with interest that the machine was housed in a wooden shed at the back of the house. Louis went in. Silence returned. Cub went on to the top of the tower, found only empty rooms, so returned to the ground floor from where he had started his search, having discovered, as he told himself bitterly, precisely nothing.

He made his way to the iron gate which, according to the custodian, barred the entrance to the dungeons. As far as appearances went Cristiano's explanation might well have been true, for the iron-work was modern and had obviously not been there for any great length of time. Putting the beam of his torch through the bars he saw a flight of stone steps leading downwards. The silence was that of a tomb. There was nothing more the steps could tell him—not that he had expected anything. He recalled Copper's remark about a boy being left alone in such a place, and agreed with him. There seemed no point in causing such unnecessary suffering. Yet, because he was sure that the boy was in the castle, and he had now been all over it, he was forced to the conclusion that Johnny must be in the dungeons. For what other reason than to carry food would Cristiano take a basket there? he reasoned.

He had, of course, no means of removing the barrier, or he would have gone down and settled the matter there and then; and he lamented his lack of foresight in not providing himself with proper equipment at the outset, although in his heart he knew that there had been no reason to suppose that he would have to deal with stone walls and iron bars. He had assumed, naturally, that the boy would be held in an ordinary house. However, the oversight could be remedied. Tomorrow he would return with the proper tools for the job. It would, he knew, be taking a desperate chance, for if they failed to find the boy they would have shown their hand for nothing. Cristiano would soon discover that the place had been broken into, whereupon the gangsters would either kill the boy or move him to some other place.

With such sombre thoughts Cub returned to his window, and after a close survey of the ground below to make sure that all was clear, flashed his signal.

Copper and Trapper must have been on the watch, for they appeared instantly with the ladder. Working briskly they put it up. Cub went down.

"Any luck?" greeted Copper.

"None," returned Cub. "Come on, let's get out of this. We'll talk afterwards."

With Cub scouting ahead for danger the ladder was returned to its place on the wall without alarm, after which, as they walked on together towards the hotel, he told the others of his lack of success, and his resolve to explore the dungeons the next day.

With the hotel in sight Cub stopped. “I’ll go in first,” he announced. “It would be better, I think, if we were not seen together at this hour of night. Give me, say, ten minutes. When you come in slip up to my room and we’ll have a final word about things. Watch how you go. The Poet will be home by now and he may be watching for us to come in. If he didn’t spot me in Nice he may try to find out where we passed the evening.”

Copper drew a deep breath. “If ’e does,” he threatened, “I’ll tell ’im another piece of poetry, a piece ’e won’t ferget in a ’urry.”

“You go easy,” warned Cub. “If he asks questions you can tell him you’ve been for a run in the car to see the country by moonlight.”

“Wot about you? Where are you supposed to ’ave bin?”

“I’ve been studying moonlight effects for a picture,” decided Cub. “See you later.”

Walking across the *place* towards the hotel his eyes went automatically to the car park, and he noted, with no more than mild curiosity, that another car, a big limousine, now stood next to the Ford. A chauffeur was lifting out some suitcases. It was evident that some new visitors had arrived. He remembered the headlights that he had seen from the castle.

When he entered the vestibule of the hotel the new arrivals were there, two of them, with the proprietor, in an aroma of American tobacco, carrying on a conversation in a mixture of English and schoolboy French. One was a man Cub had never seen before. The other was the fat man he had seen in Nice, the man with the big nose, the man he believed to be Joe the Snout.

Cub, entirely unprepared, stared.

The Snout’s eyes switched to him.

Cub recovered. He forced the muscles of his face, which had stiffened, to relax. “Excuse me,” he said, “but are you in some difficulty? I speak both French and English. If I can be of assistance I should be only too happy.”

The Snout replied. “Now that’s what I’d call real kind of you,” he drawled. “I’m trying to make this guy understand that I shall want three single rooms for a coupla days. We shall want to eat here.”

Cub conveyed the information to the proprietor.

“Tell *monsieur* it shall be arranged instantly,” was the reply.

Cub translated, said goodnight, and went on up the stairs. At the top he paused to look back. The third member of the party was just coming in with the suitcases. He was the man who, in Nice, had told him that the seat was reserved.

With his heart beating fast Cub went on to his room. Now indeed, he had something to think about, he told himself, as he closed the door and sank, slightly breathless, into a chair. He wondered why The Poet hadn't been in the hall to meet his boss; but a moment later he realised that it wouldn't do for the fellow, if he intended to continue in the part he was playing, to know the newcomers.

Presently Copper and Trapper slipped in. Copper looked at Cub inquiringly. "I see we've got some new customers just arrived."

"You're telling me," returned Cub grimly.

"You know who they are?" queried Copper, looking surprised.

"Do I not!" Cub told him who the new customers were.

Copper whistled softly. "Wot d'yer know about that?" he muttered.

"All I know is, the enemy is now here in force. One slip now and we've had it."

"Wot do you make of it?" asked Copper. "Wot's made the Snout shift 'is billet d'yer think?"

"The answer to that sticks out like a sore finger," replied Cub. "Louis, Cristiano, or The Poet, has done some talking, probably about me being here, so the boss has come along to keep a personal eye on things. In two days he'll be off to Paris to collect the ransom money; in the meantime he's going to make sure that nothing upsets his plans. Nice was a bit too far away. Of course, he may have intended coming here anyway, but I doubt it, because if he *had* been coming Louis would have known it, and it wouldn't have been necessary for him to go to Nice tonight."

"You reckon they've worked out wot we're doin' 'ere?"

"No. I fancy you're in the clear. It's me they suspect, chiefly on account of my conversation with Cristiano in the café. True, I didn't say much, but people in the Snout's line of business can't afford to take the slightest chance; and he must be pretty shrewd to have kept out of jail for so long. So far, fortunately, he's only a trifle suspicious, or steps would have been taken to bump me off. He wants to know more. That's why he's come here. Naturally, he'd be anxious to know how, after his carefully made plans, I got on the track. That, maybe, is what really worries him. He may suspect he has an informer in the gang."

“But listen, chum,” said Copper with unusual earnestness, “if they reckon you know more than’s good for yer it’s only a matter of hours before they take you for a ride. I couldn’t think of an easier place than this ter get rid of a bloke who was in my way. An accident could ’appen so easy. You might fall into the gorge—or——”

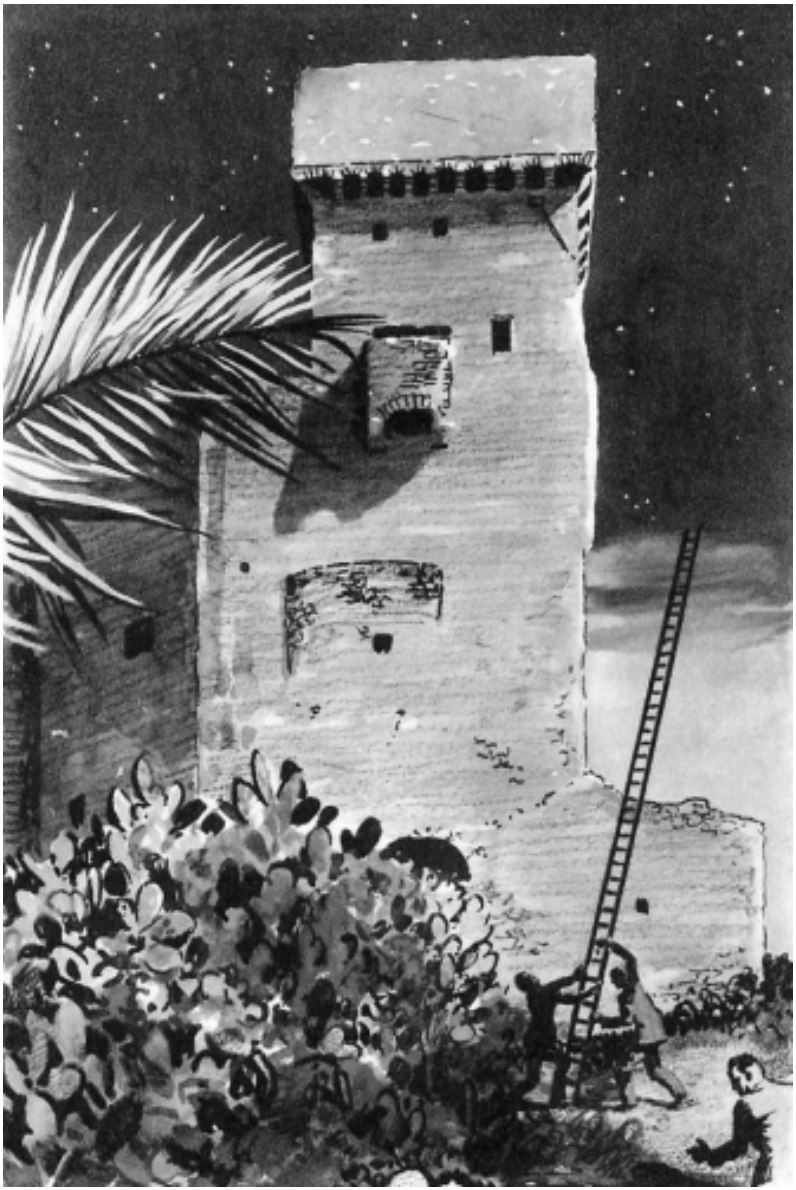
“Okay,—okay,” broke in Cub. “What am I supposed to do—bolt? That would simply confirm their suspicions. They’d be after me right away.”

“You’ll soon ’ave ter do something or our party looks like bein’ one short,” stated Copper warmly.

“I’ll think about it,” decided Cub. “We’ll talk it over in the morning. It won’t do for us to be seen too much together, but you might keep an eye on me, so as to speak, and be ready to take a cue at short notice. I’ll meet you, as if by accident, at the end of the aqueduct, after breakfast. I don’t think we can do anything more for the moment, so we might as well see about getting some sleep.”

Copper nodded. “See you in the mornin’ then. Watch your step.” He went out. Trapper went with him.

Cub locked his bedroom door and wedged it with a chair before getting into bed.



“All clear,” said Cub. “Get her up.”

CHAPTER XI

MONEY FOR NOTHING

CUB'S fears that he might be disturbed during the night proved groundless. He did not think seriously that he would be, although there seemed to be a chance of it, sufficient to warrant precautions being taken. He was up early, conscious of a feeling of slight excitement, for there was every probability that the day would bring further developments. But he little guessed what they were to be.

The first surprise came when, going into breakfast rather earlier than usual, he found that the only other occupant of the dining room was Joe the Snout—at least, he was convinced that the big-nosed man could be no other. By him he was given such a breezy "good morning" that his forebodings faded like smoke in a wind. Surely he must be mistaken, he thought, as he sat down. It seemed impossible that this jovial, well-fed-looking man, could have the personality and qualities without which a big-shot gangster would not last five minutes. That the man was an American was beyond all doubt; his unmistakable twang revealed that clearly; but this in itself did not make him a crook. He knew that American tourists were to be found in every picturesque town in France, and Vallonceau was no exception.

"Another fine day," observed Joe cheerfully, plastering jam on his bread.

Cub agreed that it was.

"Queer old place, this."

Again Cub agreed.

"Interesting to look at, but I guess I'd hate like hell to live in it," drawled Joe.

Cub admitted that there were places where the sanitary arrangements were more up-to-date.

And so the conversation ran on easily for some while, about the place, the weather, and the state of the world generally.

"They tell me you've been here for some time," remarked Joe.

Cub wondered who he meant by "they," but did not inquire. He said he'd been there for some days.

"I guess you must like the place?" suggested Joe. "A coupla days would be enough for most people."

Cub thought he caught a glimpse of the red light, and began to choose his answers more cautiously. He said that the place interested him, but realising that this would hardly account for a prolonged stay where most

tourists found one day sufficient, he went on to point out that money regulations set a limit to how much British people could spend on foreign travel. Which he thought sounded reasonable enough, and in accord with his pose of being an ordinary tourist. “You’re an American, I think, so you’re lucky not to be troubled by that sort of thing,” he concluded.

“Sure I’m American,” agreed Joe. “Ever been to the States?”

Cub answered truthfully that he had not, but hoped to go one day.

“Great country,” asserted Joe. “All the ham and eggs you want for breakfast. These breakfasts they give you over here make me tired. Maybe all right for kids, but no use to a man.”

“Just a matter of what you’re used to,” murmured Cub, wondering where this apparently pointless conversation was leading, for that there was a purpose behind it he was sure. He was soon to know.

“Bring your coffee over here to my table,” Joe then startled him by suggesting. “There’s something I’d like to say and I don’t want all the world to hear.”

Here we go, thought Cub, as he filled his cup and moved to the place indicated.

“Y’know kid, I’ve taken a sorta liking to you,” went on Joe, selecting a cigar from a fat case.

“That’s very kind of you,” replied Cub, feeling a little embarrassed and not knowing what else to say. The fact was, he found it difficult to keep pace with this totally unexpected line of approach.

At this juncture Copper and Trapper came into the room, and at their expressions, when they saw where he was sitting, Cub was hard put to keep a straight face.

“It sure is tough, you Britishers being kept so short of money,” went on Joe sympathetically.

“Oh, we manage to get along, you know,” returned Cub.

“Maybe, but I’d hate like hell to have to look twice at every cent before I parted with it,” asserted Joe. “A guy can’t get far like that. Me, I’ve been around. I guess there’s nothing I ain’t seen between the Yukon and the Mexican border.”

“And now you’re giving Europe the once-over?” suggested Cub.

“You’ve said it, kid. Nothing like travel to broaden a man’s mind.”

Vaguely, Cub began to get the drift.

“As I was saying just now, I like you,” went on Joe, blowing smoke rings. “I took a liking to you last night, the way you came across to help a

stranger who was stuck in the local lingo."

Cub shrugged. "But there was nothing to that."

"But I'd say there was," argued Joe. "Most folks wouldn't have cared a dime whether I got a room or slept on the sidewalk. I sure did appreciate that, and when I appreciate a thing I like to show it. Now, you're bound to be short of money. I'm not. Between you and me I've got more than's good for a man. You'd like to get around? Okay, so you shall. And there's no need for you to be squeamish about it—I know what stuffed-shirts you Britishers can be about taking something for nothing. Here you are, kid. Take this and go see the sights."

While Joe had been speaking he had taken from his pocket a roll of dollar notes of high denominations. He tossed the roll across the table with no more concern than if it had been an empty cigarette carton.

Even through his astonishment Cub saw the trap into which he had stepped. So this was the way Joe had decided to handle the situation? It was shrewd; in fact, clever enough to put Cub on a spot. If he refused the money, the reason he had given for staying in Vallonceau, that it was a matter of economy, would be exposed as false, and Joe's suspicions—and obviously he was suspicious—would be confirmed. Yet if he took the money he would have to go, although by going he would justify his story and perhaps set Joe's suspicions at rest.

He demurred as a matter of principle, as would, he thought, be expected of a Britisher. "But really, I can't——"

"Shucks! Think nothing of it, my boy," broke in Joe carelessly. "Go have a good time."

Cub forced a smile. "Well, sir——"

"Don't call me sir. I was a poor man myself once."

"Well, all I can say is, this is most generous of you. Thank you very much. I thought this sort of thing only happened in books." Cub put the money in his pocket.

"Funnier things happen in real life than ever happened in books," declared Joe.

"You're telling me," murmured Cub.

"Not that I'm much for books," asserted Joe airily.

Cub hoped the matter would end there. He had an uneasy feeling that Joe had neatly spiked his guns, so to speak, and he wanted to think it over. But in this he was disappointed.

Joe picked a tooth noisily. “Where are you going to make for first?” he inquired, with his eyes on Cub’s face.

Cub found them hard to meet. There was a cold, penetrating quality about them that made evasion difficult. “I think I’ll try Nice,” he decided. “I’ve heard a lot about the place.”

“ ’Tain’t bad,” conceded Joe. “You can have anything you want—by paying for it. I’ll run you down in my car.”

This, of course, did not suit Cub at all. Again he felt that the man was being too smart for him, that all the time he was getting him just where he wanted him. Cub’s difficulty was how to handle the situation without letting the Snout think that he suspected anything, much less betray that he knew who he was. “I can’t allow you to do that,” he protested as vehemently as he dare. “In fact, there’s no need.” He nodded to where Copper and Trapper were making a pretence of eating breakfast. “We’ve got friendly since we met here,” he explained. “They’ve got a car. Last night they were talking of running down to Nice today. I’m sure they’ll take me.” Raising his voice, and speaking to Copper, he went on: “Do you still intend to go to Nice today?”

“Yes, we’re going right away,” answered Copper, taking the cue. “I’ve got ter get petrol for the car, and a dip in the briny won’t do us any harm. Are you comin’ along?”

“Thanks. I will if it’s all the same to you. I’ve decided to move on to Nice.”

“We’ll be startin’ as soon as we’ve finished breakfast.”

“Good enough,” returned Cub.

It was now Joe’s turn to hesitate, and Cub derived some satisfaction from the thought that he had scored at least one point. It was obvious that Joe would rather have taken him to Nice himself, but in view of Copper’s offer, and its acceptance, he could not very well insist without providing a sound reason, a reason which, it seemed, he was unable to produce at such short notice.

“Okay, son,” he agreed, somewhat reluctantly. “Naturally, you’d like to be with your own folks. So would I. Good luck. Have a good time.”

Cub got up, taking this to be the signal that the conversation was at an end. “I’m just going to put my things together and settle my bill,” he told Copper. “I’ll be with you in ten minutes.”

“That’s all right, we’ll wait for you,” promised Copper.

When, ten minutes later, Cub came down carrying his suitcase and haversack, Joe was not in sight. Copper joined him in the hall, and with an expressive jerk of his head indicated that the man responsible for Cub's sudden departure had gone up to his room. Trapper appeared, and together they walked across the *place* to the car. Before they could get in however, The Poet appeared, and wearing his usual inane grin, overtook them.

"Is it that to Nice you go?" he gushed.

"It is," growled Copper.

"Ha! *Bon chance.*"

"Wot's bon about it?" demanded Copper.

"I myself to Nice must go for my hairdresser to see," stated The Poet.

"It's about time you 'ad an 'air cut, chum," replied Copper frankly, "but you ain't goin' ter Nice with me."

The Poet looked hurt. "But why?"

"Because you make me tired, that's why," rasped Copper.

The Poet's expression became one of sadness as he looked at Cub and Trapper in turn. He held out his hands, palms upwards. "Because he loves not my poetry he will not take me," he sighed. "He is a beast, this one."

"Beast, am I?" grated Copper. "Now let me give you a little poem ter remember."

"Proceed."

Copper cleared his throat. "There was a little man."

"Yes?"

"And 'e 'ad a little gun."

"Yes?"

"And 'is bullets were made of lead—see?"

"Then what?"

"He met a clot with a mug like yours and shot 'im through the brainbox—which is English for 'ead. Now push off, because that's likely ter come true any minute." Copper pushed The Poet aside and got into his seat. "Come on, boys, let's go."

Cub and Trapper took their places and the car shot forward, smothering The Poet in a cloud of dust.

But Cub had seen the expression in The Poet's eyes. "You shouldn't have said that," he told Copper curtly.

"Why not?"

"Because he might think you meant it."

"I did," declared Copper grimly.

The car went on. Cub did not look back because there was no need. He was quite sure that his departure was being watched from a hotel window; and he was equally sure that The Poet had been sent by the Snout to accompany him to Nice. "Keep going," he told Copper.

Not until they were ten miles on the road to Nice did Cub tell Copper to stop and back into a convenient disused quarry. "We can pretend to be changing a wheel," he said. "If anyone is following us we shall soon see him." He got out and sat on a rock that commanded a view in both directions.

Copper took off his spare wheel, leaned it against the car, found a crushed cigarette in his pocket, lit it and flicked the match away. "Well, so you've got yerself chucked out of Vallonceau on yer ear?" he observed.

"There was no way out of it," asserted Cub.

"Why did yer take 'is dirty dough?"

"I had to. What reason could I give for refusing? Had I refused it would have told the Snout just what he wanted to know—that I had a good reason for staying in the village . . . that I wasn't just a tourist. Once he was wise to that I should have had to clear out anyway, or risk being bumped off. One thing's certain; I couldn't have got on with the job in those conditions. I shouldn't have been allowed to. If they think I've cleared out I've still got a chance. So have you. Apparently they don't suspect you—yet."

"But what can you do in Nice?"

"I'm not going to Nice," replied Cub. "At least, I'm not going to stay there. I might as well go home as go to Nice."

"Then where are you goin'?"

"Back to Vallonceau, of course."

"Are you off yer rocker?"

"I didn't say I was going back to the hotel."

Copper shook his head. "I don't get it."

"Listen," requested Cub. "I'm going to take up residence in one of those shelters under the amphitheatre. I hope it won't be for long. You'll have to provide me with food. As I see it, we've got one chance to get this thing buttoned up. It means taking a big risk. The risk lies in assuming that Johnny Vanderskell is in the castle. If he is, we'll get him out—somehow. If it turns out that he isn't there, we're sunk, because the gang will then know beyond all shadow of doubt what we're here for, in which case they'll either kill the boy, or move him—or remove us from the landscape. If Johnny is in the

castle there's only one place where he can be, and that's in the dungeons. We've got to get into them, and quickly. If we fail there'll be no second chance. To get in we shall need tools."

"When's this raid comin' off?" asked Copper.

"Tonight. This is the plan. We'll go on to Nice presently. We shall have to do that in any case because I'm quite certain the Snout won't just take my word for it that I'm going there. He'll check up. Just how, I don't know, but if he has one of his gang still in Nice it would be a simple matter to ring him up and tell him to watch for the Ford to arrive. He wouldn't overlook an elementary precaution like taking the index number of it. We shall have to go to Nice to get tools, anyhow. When we get there you'll drop me and go for a swim, as you suggested, in case you're watched, too. I shall find an hotel. After you've had a swim go to an ironmonger and buy a file, a hacksaw, and about forty feet of good rope. In fact, buy what you think we shall need for the job. Stay in Nice until dusk, then pick me up at the fork where the Vallonceau road leaves the main road. Whoever is there first will wait. We'll then go back to the village. You'll drop me off before we get there. At ten o'clock, taking the equipment with you, go to the Place d'Armes, collecting the ladder on the way. Hide it under the cactus hedge."

"But 'old 'ard," interrupted Copper. "If you try gettin' through the village you'll be spotted for a cert."

"I've no intention of walking through the village," replied Cub. "What do you suppose the rope is for? I shall be waiting at the bottom of the wall behind the cactus hedge. You'll drop the rope and pull me up. Then, using the ladder, I'll get in the castle as before. When I'm up, you'll put the ladder back under the hedge. I shall take the rope with me and drop it to you. That will get you in. Then we tackle the dungeons. Trapper will keep watch outside."

Copper stared. "Blimy! When did yer work all this out?"

"What did you think I was doing on the way here—admiring the scenery?" inquired Cub sarcastically. "Well, how does it sound to you?"

"Pretty good. Gimlet couldn't 'ave lined it up better."

"Okay, then. What you've got to do is watch your step when you get back to the hotel," warned Cub. "If I know anything, the Snout will be all over you, to pump out of you anything you know about me. You may be watched. The gang is in the village in force, and very much on the alert. You've got to get out tonight without being spotted; try to do it as if you are just going for a stroll—I mean, don't make it obvious that you're up to something."

“I get it,” agreed Copper. “It ought ter work orlright.”

“There’s only one thing we’re short of,” observed Cub.

“Wot’s that?”

“Gimlet. I wish he was here to take charge. I never realised before what it means to take responsibility for a show. Yet when Gimlet had to do it I never gave it a thought. He said he might run down.”

“Well, he hasn’t, and wishin’ won’t get ’im ’ere,” averred Copper.

Cub got up. “All right. Let’s move on.”

Copper returned the spare wheel to its place. They got in. Half an hour later the car was cruising along the Promenade des Anglais. Cub got out in the Place Massena, the big square at the far end. Copper turned the car and disappeared into the traffic.

CHAPTER XII

THE PASSAGE OF THE STYX

CUB did not see the car again until it picked him up at the rendezvous. He had spent a pleasant, uneventful day—at least it would have been pleasant had he not had so much on his mind. For appearance sake he took a room at one of the many small hotels near the station, paid a week in advance, and dumped his suitcase, having put his small kit in the haversack. He had a bathe, took lunch at a small restaurant and then explored the town. In fact, he behaved as he would had his acceptance of the Snout's offer been genuine. At four-thirty he had tea at a café in the crowded Avenue de la Victoire, bought some pastries for his haversack, and then, resorting for the first time to anti-shadow precautions, dodged into the maze of narrow streets of the Old Town. Satisfied that he had shaken off anyone who might be following him, as the sun sank behind Cap d'Antibes he hired a car to take him to the far end of the promenade, from where he walked on to the rendezvous. Five minutes later the Ford pulled in and picked him up almost without stopping.

"Get the tools?" he asked Copper.

"Enough to break Dartmoor wide open."

"Rope?"

"Yes."

"Good work. See anybody watching you?"

"No—did you?"

"No—but that isn't to say I wasn't watched. If I was, I led the chap a dance at the finish. I did enough dodging to lose my own shadow."

"Okay. Better keep yer 'ead down in case we should 'appen ter meet the Snout, comin' this way."

The car went on, and did not stop until, showing no lights, it pulled up for a moment about a mile short of the village to let Cub get out.

"Ten o'clock," he reminded, as he shouldered his haversack.

"We'll be there," promised Copper, and the car went on.

Cub stood and watched until it was out of sight and hearing, and then started to make his way cross-country, over rocks and aromatic verdure, towards the Roman ruins.

The moon was up, full and serene in a cloudless sky, extinguishing the stars with its magic torch and flooding the earth with clear blue light.

Beneath its spell the scene lay silent, peopled by shadows, hard and black, created it seemed to haunt the pallid monuments of the past. Below, at no great distance, was the broad round bowl of the amphitheatre, its hewn-stone benches empty, its stage floodlit by nature for players who had said their piece and gone, never to return. Beyond it, like a silver chain, the dust-dry aqueduct spanned the gorge to commemorate a mighty age, but nothing more. Above them both, the dying township crouched behind its wall, its grimness tamed, its scars and blemishes smoothed out by the sympathetic hand of night.

Cub regarded it with some concern, for now that he was here he perceived that in order to reach his destination he would have to pass across the flank of a hill that faced the village; and while the hill provided a wild and rugged background, it was evident that a person looking towards it from the wall would see his shadow move. Not that it really mattered, unless the Snout had posted one of his men to watch the landscape, which seemed unlikely. But the risk was there, and since it could not be avoided it had to be met. He was determined if possible not to make the mistake of underestimating his opponents, who his common sense told him must be men of exceptional cunning, otherwise they could not for so long have evaded the police in their own country.

Moving slowly, stopping occasionally to stare across the intervening valley towards the Place de la Republique, he went on, wondering how many times from that same spot, in the same uncanny silence, an enemy scout had surveyed the same objective—the château, with its crenellated battlements and tower upthrust like an illustration in a book of fairy tales. Nothing moved except himself—or if it did he saw no sign of it—as he made his way down and across the slope to the circular wall beneath which yawned the arches that gave access to the one-time dressing rooms. Selecting the cleanest, after turning out an indignant goat, he settled down to wait. The time, he ascertained, was eight-thirty, which meant that he still had rather more than an hour to wait before starting on the last stage of his journey to the wall beneath the cactus hedge. To pass the time he made a palatable if somewhat sticky meal of the pastries he had bought in Nice.

It was a little before ten, and he was just thinking of moving off, when for the first time since his arrival he heard a sound, one that jerked him from the mood of complaisant meditation into which he had fallen, to the world of realities. A stone had rattled on another. Clearly, he was not alone. Then he remembered the goat, and upon it placed responsibility for the incident. But within a minute came another sound, one for which no goat could be held guilty. It was a human voice. Still, he was not alarmed. He thought it might

be a goatherd calling in his straying beast. It might even be Copper and Trapper, come to acquaint him with some piece of information that would necessitate a change of plan.

Another dislodged stone clattered, and soon afterwards came the tread of footsteps. Getting up from the rock on which he had been seated Cub walked quickly to the arched entrance and looked out. Fifty yards away two men had stopped; silhouetted against the sky they stood out in bold relief. One was slim and the other stout, so he knew at once that they were not his friends. There was something familiar about the stout one, and when a moment later a voice spoke he knew the worst. It was the Snout.

Cub was appalled. It seemed absurd to suppose that sheer chance had brought him to such a spot at such an hour. The alternative was that he had come with a definite object, and what that could be, other than himself, he could not imagine. Nor could he guess how the man had learned of his return. But as he stood there, thinking fast, he heard the answer from the men themselves. They told him all he needed to know.

Said one—it was the voice of Louis Zabani: "He can't be far away."

Answered the Snout: "Slinky couldn't have mistaken the place?"

"Not a chance. He said straight behind the circus. Lucky he was in the tower, watching."

"That wasn't luck," corrected the Snout crisply. "I guessed the young hound would try to get back. I told you so. When Jeff rang up to say that he'd never been back to his room in Nice, and that he'd got his razor and toothbrush with him, it wasn't hard to figger out the rest."

So that was it? thought Cub bitterly. He *had* been watched. He had been shadowed when he had booked his room. It was quite true that he had not been back. It was also true that he had taken away the things which, had he intended to use the room, he would have left there. He could have kicked himself for his folly. In spite of his determination not to do so he had underestimated the extraordinary thoroughness of the gangster boss. He must have gauged his character so well that he guessed he'd return to Vallonceau. In fact, so sure of it had he been that he had gone to the trouble of putting a man in the tower to watch a landscape which, in the bright moonlight, anyone moving would be seen—Slinky the man Mr. Vanderskell had mentioned. So he *was* in the racket. He wondered why he hadn't seen him.

"Let's move on a bit," said the Snout. "We'll get him if he's here. The sooner the better. These goldarned stones are hell on my feet."

“You oughta taken my advice and bumped ’im off last night,” muttered Louis.

“When I want your advice I’ll ask for it,” snapped the Snout, in a voice very different from that which Cub had heard at breakfast time.

“Sure—sure boss,” murmured Louis.

“No sense in having the cops looking for a missing Britisher when there might have been no need,” went on the Snout. “Don’t worry. We’ll get him—or Jeff will. If he’s here. . . .” The two men went into the end alcove. Cub could see the reflection of a torch.

Now it was at once evident to him that if he stayed where he was it would only be a matter of minutes before the Snout’s prediction came to pass. He thanked his lucky stars that he was in the shelter farthest from the one where the men had begun their search. He would slip out the other way. It was time he was moving, anyhow.

He waited until they entered the second alcove, and then, moving silently, keeping within the solid black shadow of the wall, crept along it, which was in any case the way he would have taken. Once he was out of the danger area the men could spend all night in their search as far as he was concerned. In fact, he hoped they would remain there, because it was to his advantage to have them out of the village.

But he had another shock awaiting him, one which, he thought, he should have expected in view of what the Snout had said about a man named Jeff being in the picture. He had paid no attention to the words at the time, but he remembered them when, a short distance ahead, a man suddenly appeared on some fallen masonry to bar his path. For one horrid moment Cub thought that he must have been seen, but when the man called out, “Don’t shoot me by mistake, boss,” he knew that he had at least a brief respite.

Cub’s problem now was which way to go, how to get out of the trap in which he found himself, a trap which those seeking him were as yet ignorant. There was an enemy in front of him and two behind. Both ways were closed. On his right the broken ground rose steeply, and while there was a certain amount of cover provided by the coarse herbage, in the full light of the moon he could hardly hope to cross the skyline without being spotted, or without making some slight noise, which, in the stillness of the night, would give him away. Moreover, even if his luck was in, and he did succeed in getting out over the ridge, he would be going in the wrong direction and so unable to keep his appointment. The effect of this, he did

not doubt, would be to bring Copper and Trapper out to look for him, with disastrous results to themselves.

On his left the side of the amphitheatre rose sheer. There could be no question of climbing it. But he remembered the opening that gave admission to the arena and decided that this was his best chance. It meant retracing his steps a little way, which would bring him uncomfortably close to the Snout and Louis, who were still proceeding with their search. Crouching, he waited in the shadow for them to enter the next alcove, and then tip-toed back to his only bolt hole. Breathing more freely he went on towards the circle of moonlight that marked the end of the passage, a matter of some thirty paces.

Before him now, bathed in the soft light from heaven, extended the tiers of stone seats, rising in concentric rings to the balustrade that circumscribed the topmost circle. To cross the structure, whichever route he took, either direct or round by the seats, would mean exposing himself; but since he could not go back it had to be either one or the other. As long as his hunters remained where they were all would be well, for being on the wrong side of the outer wall they would be unable to see him; but should Jeff climb the hill, or—and this is what he feared most—should the Snout and Louis take it into their heads to walk through the tunnel, his shadow would at once be noticed. However, having no choice in the matter he started off, taking the direct route, which was of course the shortest and therefore the quickest.

His hopes of making the crossing without being seen were running high when, climbing over the seats at the far side, a shout from behind told him that what he feared had happened. It was, he thought, bad luck, because one more minute would have seen him out of view: still, perhaps he had been lucky to get such a good start. Reaching the stone footwalk that encircled the entire structure at its highest level he looked over the bulwark that prevented those from using it from falling over, and saw with relief that there were places where the masonry had partly collapsed, offering a somewhat precarious way to the ground some thirty feet below. So far so good. But what then? he thought desperately, as he observed that his difficulties, far from being over, had only just begun.

Beneath him—that is, at the outside base of the amphitheatre—the ground was more or less flat for a width of a few yards; it then dropped sheer into the gorge on the far side of which rose the wall of the village. Unfortunately, too, he seemed to have struck the gorge at its deepest point. He had looked down into it often enough from the village, but now for the first time he perceived what a wonderful natural protection it afforded those defending it. No doubt that was why the site had been selected in the old

days. Farther along to the left the gorge became less formidable as it neared the point where the road entered the Place de la Republique; and this was the way he decided to go, until some lurid cursing revealed that the Snout and his partner, now on the same circular track as himself, were also making for the spot with the obvious intention of cutting him off. And as they were nearer to it than he was it was apparent that they would succeed.

Looking the other way he saw that the man Jeff was also running round the top of the structure to head him off in that direction. This way, Cub saw, would have suited him even better, because it would have brought him nearer to that point of the village wall where, behind the cactus hedge at the top, Copper and Trapper would by now be waiting for him. However, it was no use thinking about that now, because as a line of retreat it had already been sealed off by Jeff. In short, Cub observed with mounting alarm that he was between two devils and the deep black gorge.

Seeking a way out, now in something approaching a panic, he saw that there was still one escape route left; but it was one which, far from making any appeal to him, he could only regard with horror and dismay. This was the aqueduct which bridged the chasm less than a score of paces from where he stood. He hastened to it, for his pursuers on either side were now getting dangerously near; and the closer view did nothing to lessen his abhorrence. In length, the flimsy viaduct—as it now seemed—was not more than sixty or seventy yards. But it was not the distance across that worried him. It was the width, which, while actually about three feet, looked to Cub's horrified eyes a mere matter of inches. Now, a path three feet wide on level ground is broad enough for any ordinary purpose. A man on a bicycle or a woman with a perambulator would have no difficulty in passing over it. A child would take it with a hop, skip and a jump. But the same path with an abyss on either side, and no hand hold of any sort, becomes a very different proposition. As if this were not enough, to make the venture still more repellent, Cub observed that the top course of stonework was not level. It was hollow. That is to say, it had been shaped, rounded in the manner of a half-pipe, for the conveyance of the water it had been constructed to provide. And to complete the horror, in the same way that railway lines appear to meet in the distance, so did the sides of the aqueduct come close together until, in the moonlight, the conduit looked no more substantial than a silver thread suspended in space. This, of course, was an optical illusion, but its effect was the same as if it had been true.

To remain where he was could have only one ending. If he failed in his attempt to cross the dreadful bridge the result would only be the same. Nor would the contemplation of it make the undertaking less distasteful. In any

case he dare not tarry, for his pursuers were fast closing in on either side. Steeling himself for the ordeal, telling himself with a confidence which he certainly did not feel that it was only a matter of nerve, he started off. And if he was fearful of what he saw in front of him he was equally afraid of what he knew was behind. As he was only too well aware, he now offered a conspicuous target, and once his enemies came within easy range they would not hesitate to shoot rather than allow him to slip through their fingers. For which reason he had to proceed a good deal faster than a madman, making the crossing for a boast or a wager, would have done.

He was about halfway across when a confused murmur of voices behind told him that the Snout and Louis had arrived at the place from which he had started. He dare not look back for fear of losing his balance, but knowing that it was now that the shooting was most likely to start, he dropped on his knees and began to crawl, for in this way, owing to the depth of the channel, he would present a much smaller, and therefore more difficult, mark to hit. Sweat was running down his face, but he clenched his teeth and told himself that he was over the worst, that he would beat them yet. Of one thing he was quite certain. His enemies would not follow him.

Then came the climax—or so it seemed. On account of his almost prone position he could not see clearly ahead, and when his hand plunged suddenly into space he nearly followed it. Rising to his knees he looked, and his stomach seemed to freeze when he saw that there was no longer a bridge. A section of the masonry had fallen, leaving a gap about a yard wide. Beyond it the stonework continued on to the far side.

Cub wiped sweat from his eyes with a hand that trembled from both physical and nervous strain. Subconsciously he heard a noise of shouting and clattering rocks. Panting, he risked a glance over his shoulder. Two figures only were standing at the spot where the aqueduct ran into the lip of the chasm. The noise of falling stones told him where Jeff had gone, and what he was doing. Either the man had been quick to see what was happening, or had been given orders by his boss—not that it mattered which. He was crossing the gorge higher up, and was already scrambling up the bank on the village side with the obvious intention of being at the far end of the aqueduct when Cub arrived.

The effect of this on Cub, far from reducing him to despair, was to make him angry. His dominant sensation was no longer fear, but a surging wave of determination to outwit these crooks who thought they could hunt him as if he were a rabbit. Taking a deep breath he stood erect, measured his distance and jumped across the gap. The crack of a pistol and the whistle of a bullet sent him to his knees again, scrambling on to get to the end before the man

who was now running along the bank below the wall. It was a race which, even then, he knew he must lose, for Jeff, pistol in hand, was less than forty yards away with no obstacle between him and his objective.

Cub still had some six yards to go when the man arrived, stopped, and turned to what must have appeared a helpless victim.

"Fly-cop, eh?" sneered Jeff, evidently unable to resist the temptation to gloat over the success of his plan. "Well, hold this, brother." He raised the pistol and took aim.

Cub was groping wildly for his automatic, but squeezed in the channel as he was he had difficulty in getting it out of his pocket. He kept his eyes on the man, and as he stared at him a curious thing seemed to happen. A shadow appeared behind him. For a split second Cub thought it must be the man's own shadow; but then he saw that he was mistaken. Jeff was standing still. The shadow moved, and moved swiftly. The two merged into one, and thus, for perhaps five seconds they remained, almost motionless. Then came a gasp. Jeff's pistol dropped with a rattle on the rocks. A foot kicked it into the gorge. The two figures broke apart. An arm swung viciously. There was a crisp *smack*, and the man called Jeff crashed backwards, to come to rest, motionless, on the brink of the gorge.

Cub got up and tottered on to the end of the channel. Then he stopped. He started. He shook his head and passed a hand over his face as if he could not believe what he saw. "Gimlet!" he gulped. "How—how——?"

"Never mind that now," was the curt reply. "You're late on parade. You've kept everybody waiting. Let's get out of this."

"I had a spot of trouble on the way," explained Cub.

"That's no reason for being late. Come on." Gimlet set off along the foot of the wall.

"Yes, sir," said Cub sadly.

CHAPTER XIII

GIMLET TAKES OVER

CUB glanced at the fallen Jeff. "What about this chap?" he asked.

"Leave him where he is."

"He may fall into the gorge."

"What of it? That's where he would have put you in another minute."

Cub looked across the abyss but the Snout and Louis were no longer to be seen. Turning, he followed Gimlet in silence, conscious only of a feeling of overwhelming relief.

After a little while he said: "Have you seen Copper?"

"I've been with him all the evening," was the surprising reply. "I was here looking for you when he got back from Nice. Not having heard from you my curiosity got the better of me so I ran down in my Bentley to see what was going on."

"Has Copper told you how things stand?"

"He's told me the whole story. I went up to the cactus hedge with him."

"Did you know I was in a mess?"

"Of course. I'm not deaf. We could see everything from the top of the wall. When I saw you staggering across that catwalk I thought it time to come down and take a hand."

"How did you get down?"

"Not having wings, by the rope. Here it is. Let's go up. You go first."

Looking up Cub saw Copper and Trapper looking down on him. He took a turn of the rope round his waist and whistled softly.

The rope tightened and he was hauled up.

A minute later Gimlet followed. "We shall have to work fast," he observed, brushing dust from his hands.

"You know what we intended to do?" queried Cub.

"Yes. Copper told me. It's the obvious thing so we'll proceed with it. The ladder's here."

"The situation has changed somewhat since I made the plan," Cub pointed out. "I mean, the gang is no longer in any doubt about me. They'll probably come looking for me."

"The chances are they'll look everywhere but in the castle," asserted Gimlet. "By the way, I'm not clear as to how many there are of them

altogether."

"Six, at least. There's the Snout, the two brothers Zabani, the chap we call The Poet, who I think must be a gangster named Slinky. There's Jeff, the fellow you just knocked out, and another man in Nice."

"I see. We should be able to deal with them if they become tiresome."

Cub looked at Copper. "Have you seen anything of The Poet or Cristiano? I imagine they'll all be mobilised when the Snout gets back to the village."

"I'd say they're mobilised already," replied Copper. "I ain't seen The Poet. 'E wasn't in ter supper. I reckon Cristiano's in 'is 'ouse." Copper jerked a thumb in the direction of the cottage, where a lighted window gave support to his assumption.

"Why not beat him up and take the key of the castle?" suggested Trapper.

"Because if we did the Snout would know where we were, and I'd rather he didn't," replied Gimlet. "He'll know soon enough. I'd like to get the boy away quietly, if it's possible, rather than start a gunfight in the village."

"I was going in with Copper," stated Cub. "Does that arrangement still stand?"

"Why not? The only difference is, I shall be with you—that is, if you want me."

Cub's eyes opened wide. "Want you?"

"Yes. It's your show. I won't butt in if you'd rather handle it yourself."

Cub smiled wanly. "I've been praying for you to come," he confessed. "It would be a load off my mind if you'd take charge. I was getting a feeling that I'd bitten off more than I could swallow."

"All right," agreed Gimlet. "One man outside, to watch things, should be enough. Trapper can take care of that. But don't start anything, Trapper, unless you have to, in self-defence."

"I get it, sir," confirmed Trapper.

"In that case we're all set," went on Gimlet. "But let everyone get this clear. Once we start we shall be fully committed, which means that this business must be cleared up tonight or young Vanderskell will vanish, never to be seen again—at any rate not alive."

"Do you really think they'd kill the boy in cold blood?" asked Cub, aghast.

"I do," returned Gimlet. "After all, to the Snout it doesn't matter whether he's alive or dead. He'd go to Paris to collect the ransom just the same, and I

have no doubt whatever that if we don't return the boy to his father Mr. Vanderskell will be there with the money. He'd have to take the Snout's word for it that Johnny was still alive, even though, in fact, he might be dead."

"This gang must be a tough lot to do a thing like that," observed Copper in a hard voice.

"Rubbish. A dirty lot if you like, but how tough they are remains to be seen. They flatter themselves they're tough, no doubt, because they have the reputation of being killers. Killers is the word. Murderers would be a better one. Who have they killed? Unarmed men and kids, and policemen who had their backs turned. Take it from me, men who will do that sort of thing are at heart just craven cowards. Tonight, if they start something, it'll be interesting to see how they behave when they find the stuff they're so fond of dishing out, coming back at them." Gimlet's lips curled. "Pah! They're just a lot of rats with septic teeth. Come on. Bring the ladder—no, wait. What's this? Keep back."

Softly through the still air had come the hum of an approaching car. Presently it appeared, coming up the Rue de la Château. It showed no lights, but Cub recognised the Snout's Buick, and passed the information on to Gimlet. They watched in silence while the vehicle slowed down and came to rest outside Cristiano's cottage. The engine stopped. Some men got out—exactly how many could not be ascertained because they got out on the far side of the car and went quickly into the house.

"What's the idea, I wonder?" murmured Cub.

"I should say the Snout brought his car to Vallonceau for one of two reasons—possibly both," answered Gimlet slowly. "He wanted it handy to move the boy, should he decide that it was advisable, and also, perhaps, to shift the gang in a hurry if things looked like going wrong. I'd say he's worried, chiefly about you, Cub. He wonders how you got on the track, how much you know, and how much you've told other people. He'd be still more worried if he knew the answers. He's ready to skip. If he goes he'll either kill the boy first or take him with him. We've no time to lose. The sooner we're inside the better. Get the ladder up and make it snappy. And Trapper: when we've gone in keep a close eye on that house. If you can get a slant on what they're doing, or look like doing, it may be helpful. One other thing. If we should get split up, if anyone is in urgent need of help, he'd better give the old signal whistle. That's all."

Copper and Trapper lifted the ladder and went across the gravelled square at the double. As soon as it was hoisted, Cub, taking the rope, ran up.

Gimlet followed. The ladder was run back to the hedge. Copper returned alone. The rope was dropped. He partly swarmed up and was partly hauled up by Gimlet and Cub. As he climbed over the sill the rope was pulled in.

"I imagine you know where we are, Cub? Lead the way," requested Gimlet.

Cub complied, making for the door.

"What's all this?" inquired Gimlet, as they passed the skeleton.

"This is the chamber of 'orrors," answered Copper.

They went on, Cub leading the way down the stone steps to the large gloomy chamber at the end of which was the vault, guarded by an iron gate, which, according to Cristiano, had been erected to seal off the dungeons in the interest of public safety. There was, Cub told Gimlet, no point in looking anywhere else as he had explored the place from top to bottom.

Having reached the spot, in the light of Cub's torch Gimlet examined the iron-work while Copper produced from under his jacket the equipment he had brought to force an entrance.

"We'll soon have this rat-trap open," asserted Copper confidently. "Show me a light, Cub."

But before he could start work there came a sound from above—a rattle followed by a curious scraping sound. Copper looked round. "Wot's that?" he breathed.

Before anyone could answer the question the explanation was forthcoming. Cub, at least, realised that it was the main door being unlocked and opened. It was closed with a thud. Again the key scraped in the lock. Footsteps grated on the stone-flagged floor.

That someone had entered the place was evident, and Cub, not knowing what to do, looked at Gimlet for a lead.

Gimlet laid a finger on his lips and moved swiftly on tip-toe towards a doorway at the far end of the chamber. It gave access to a small room that looked as if it had once been a private chapel. At any rate, there was a font. The others had, of course, followed Gimlet, and all now stood silent, in darkness, while the reflected light of a lamp or torch appeared on the opposite wall. Footsteps drew nearer. They came on into the chamber that had just been vacated and then stopped. The glow of reflected light vanished, as if it had been put out or turned in another direction.

It was a peculiar situation, one for which no provision had been made. At first Cub thought the reflection of his own torch must have been seen from outside—although he had taken every precaution to prevent this—and

someone, probably one of the Zabani's, had come to investigate. It was not until the gate clanged that the purpose of the visit became apparent. The visitor was going into the dungeons. As Cub realised a moment later, this possibility had not occurred to him owing to the lateness of the hour. Had it been three hours earlier he would have been prepared for Cristiano to enter with the prisoner's food, as this, it could be presumed, was the normal procedure. In silence so profound that every sound however slight was amplified, he dare not move—at least, not until the man himself was making a noise sufficient to drown any that he was likely to make. He had a good idea of what was happening, but by the time he dare risk a peep the man was on the other side of the gate, turning a key in a lock. He saw instantly that nothing could then be done, at all events for the time being. So he simply stood still until the circle of light went down the steps and disappeared. It was a full minute before the footsteps died away. Then came a curious hollow boom, followed by silence utter and complete.

"Well?" breathed Gimlet, looking at Cub.

"It was one of the Zabani brothers," said Cub. "I only saw the figure so I don't know which one it was."

"He's gone down?"

"Yes."

"What was that jangling noise?"

"I think he was carrying a bunch of keys. He seemed to be in a hurry. I'm afraid we lost a chance there. We ought to have collared him. That would have saved Copper having to——"

"I'm not so sure that you're right, there," interposed Gimlet. "It would be better to have him out of the way without knowing that we were in here. I mean, to have cluttered ourselves up with a prisoner at this stage would have been a nuisance. Funny time of night to visit the boy, if that's what he's doing."

"I was thinking the same thing," agreed Cub.

"No matter. He won't be down there long I imagine."

"Did you 'ear that boomin' noise?" put in Copper. "Sounded something like a big 'eavy door bein' shut."

"Yes, I heard it," answered Gimlet. "I think our best plan is to stay quiet for a bit, and let him get out before we carry on."

To Cub, at the time, this sounded reasonable; but as the minutes passed and there was no sign of the man's return an uneasy feeling grew on him

that something outside their calculations was happening. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. All ears were listening for the returning footsteps.

Waiting at any time with nothing to do is tedious, but to Cub the next twenty minutes seemed an eternity. Consequently it was with no small satisfaction that he heard Gimlet say: “I can’t think what’s going on, but I don’t feel inclined to wait any longer. Get that gate open, Copper. You’ll have to pause occasionally so that we can hear if that fellow comes back. Go ahead.”

Copper set to work, and soon did what was expected of him. After filing for a minute or two he slipped a cold chisel behind the lock, and giving it a wrench, snapped it. He opened the gate.

With the way now clear there was another pause while everyone listened intently; but not a sound came to suggest that anyone but themselves was in the building.

“I don’t think it would be wise for us all to go down—and in fact, it shouldn’t be necessary,” averred Gimlet. “I mean, that fellow must know his way about, and if he managed to slip past us and get to the head of these steps first we should be in a very devil of a jam. I’d hate to come up these steps with a fellow standing at the top with a gun in his hand. Copper, I think you’d better stay, and watch that doesn’t happen.”

“Aye, aye, sir. Watch where your puttin’ your feet. There might be something in what the bloke said about the steps bein’ dangerous.”

Leaving Copper where he was, Gimlet and Cub descended the steps, Gimlet, having taken Cub’s torch, leading the way. There were no broken or dangerous steps—or if there were, Cub did not notice them. He counted twenty. They curved slightly as they went down and ended in a wide corridor that appeared to have been hewn out of the living rock. At intervals along one side great iron staples had been driven in, and the remnants of chains and fetters hanging on one revealed their purpose. Of the wretched captives who had once been chained to the wall Cub preferred not to think. On the opposite side there was a series of cells. Apparently there had once been doors, for the rough iron spigots on which they had hung were still there, although of the doors not a vestige remained. In the circumstances there seemed little need for caution, for had anyone been there he must have seen them; or, conversely, they would have seen him.

The cells were empty and showed no indication of having been used since medieval times. A few scraps of old newspaper in one, a rotting sack in another, was the sum total of their contents. In one respect the custodian

had told the truth. The atmosphere, dank and musty, struck a chill like a douche of ice water.

Reaching the end Gimlet stopped and looked at Cub. “Queer,” he muttered.

Cub didn’t answer. He didn’t know what to say. He had been all keyed up for action. This was sheer anticlimax. His paramount sensation was one of intense disappointment. He had been so sure the boy would be there. Now it was evident that he was not, and as everything was in plain view it seemed futile to continue the search. In fact, there was nowhere else to search. But where was Zabani? He had certainly come down. That he had not gone back up was equally certain, for in that case there would have been some noise when he reached the top of the steps and encountered Copper.

Cub could only look helplessly at Gimlet. “I don’t get it,” he said.

“Zabani came down here and he hasn’t gone back. Where is he?”

Cub shrugged. “There must be another way out of this hole, that’s the only answer.”

“Quite right,” agreed Gimlet. “It *is* the only answer. We’d better get busy and find it.” He walked back to the bottom of the steps. “Are you all right up there, Copper?” he called.

“I’m okay,” came the reply.

“You haven’t seen anyone come out?”

“No one’s come out of this end,” declared Copper emphatically.

“That settles that,” Gimlet told Cub. “Let’s see if we can get a little more light on the scene.” He took some letters from his pocket and made a little heap of the envelopes on the floor. Cub added some of his own and Gimlet put a match to them. As they flared up, filling the gloomy place with light, Cub looked around eagerly. His eyes covered the walls.

It was Gimlet who spotted an iron ring in the floor. “Here’s the answer!” he exclaimed, pointing. “It explains that booming noise we heard. That was Zabani letting this trap-door down behind him. Now we’re getting somewhere. Hold the torch.”

CHAPTER XIV

INTO THE DEPTHS

AS GIMLET stooped and put two fingers through the ring all Cub's earlier optimism returned. That this was the way Zabani had gone he did not doubt, although what lay under the stone flag was beyond his imagination to guess. As things turned out he might have made a great number of guesses and been wrong every time. At the moment he was horrified by the thought of anyone being kept a prisoner in a place so dismal, not to say terrifying.

The stone, which was not so thick as might have been expected, came up easily. Gimlet lifted it aside to disclose a black hole some thirty inches square. The beam of the torch cut into it to reveal a short flight of steps, wooden ones this time, and apparently almost new.

"Just a minute," said Gimlet, as Cub moved forward. "We'd better tell Copper about this, or should he happen to come down he's liable to break his neck. Go and tell him what we've discovered and say we're going down. If we don't come back he will at least know where we went."

Cub obeyed, and returned in a minute to report that Copper was *au fait* with the situation.

Gimlet knelt and listened. Not a sound came from the hole. "Very odd," he murmured. "If anyone was down there I should have thought we would have heard him moving about. It's going to be an awkward business if we run into Zabani down there, particularly as he has the advantage of knowing his way about. However, let's go down." He descended the steps and waited at the bottom for Cub to join him. "I'd say Zabani made those steps, or had them made, recently. Now, where do we go from here?"

The torch answered the question. There was only one way, and that was a narrow passage just high enough for a man to stand erect. The sides were rough and the floor sloped slightly downwards; and, much to Cub's surprise, went on for as far as the torch could penetrate the darkness.

"This passage wasn't made yesterday, at any rate," observed Gimlet. "Very strange. It looks as if it's going to take us into what are commonly called the bowels of the earth—beastly expression; I hate bowels of any sort." He listened again, and as nothing could be heard he set off down the passage.

Cub found the experience definitely unpleasant. There were no side turnings, so there was no risk of getting lost, but he felt that they were uncomfortably vulnerable. To explore such a burrow would have been an adventure at the best of times, he thought. With enemies both in front and

behind them, their predicament, should they be discovered, would be a miserable one indeed. What Gimlet thought of it he did not know, for he made no further comment. He walked on slowly, stopping occasionally to listen, at the same time switching off the light, much to Cub's disapproval, for the narrow space in utter darkness induced an unpleasant feeling that he had been buried alive.

After a time, during one of these halts, Gimlet remarked, in a puzzled voice: "Where the deuce does this thing end? We must have travelled a hundred yards. If the thing goes much farther we look like ending up outside the village. This tunnel must be as old as the castle. I imagine it was a bolt hole. They adored secret holes and corners in the days before castles could be knocked over by cannon balls."

"They probably needed them," returned Cub grimly.

"One would have thought the air would have been foul, so far underground," said Gimlet. He went on.

Cub followed blindly, in growing wonder. He had long ago lost all sense of direction. As far as he was concerned they might have been travelling towards any point of the compass. He was prepared for the tunnel to end anywhere except, curiously enough, where actually it did.

Another fifty yards and Gimlet stopped suddenly. "We're there—wherever that is," he breathed, holding the light so that Cub could see a door not far ahead of them. There was nothing modern about it, either. It was a small, massive-looking affair bound with iron, with a great iron ring for a handle, so that for a moment Cub was convinced that they had done a circular tour and arrived back at the castle. He found it hard to understand why such a door should be there at all, for he was quite sure from the downward slope of the tunnel that they were far under the ground. He was fully prepared to find the door locked, in which case their further progress would be barred; but this, to his great satisfaction, proved not to be the case. In fact, it was not even latched. Gimlet put out a hand and it opened easily. Cub held his breath. Then he relaxed. Beyond was a cellar, occupied only by dirt, old casks, and many empty bottles thrown in a heap.

Cub's reaction to this was astonishment. For what possible purpose such a place could exist so far under the ground, even in medieval times, was beyond his powers of conjecture. Why, he wondered, why cut a tunnel a hundred and fifty yards long in order to store what every house in the country kept openly—wine casks and bottles? However, he had little time to ponder the mystery for the explanation, had he but known it, was at hand.

It now seemed as if the fact of their opening the door of the cellar had an effect, probably by a draught created, on another. At any rate, a door, quite a flimsy one, at the head of a short flight of steps immediately opposite, swung open slightly, as was revealed by the sudden appearance of a narrow yellow line from a lighted room beyond. Simultaneously, the noise of someone moving about in the room provided the information that it was not only lighted, but occupied.

Cub ceased to breathe as Gimlet held up a warning finger. He took out his automatic and went quietly up the steps. Reaching the top he put out his left hand and touched the door. The line of yellow light widened as very slowly the door swung open to disclose a picture for which Cub was so little prepared that he blinked, not only from the sudden flood of light, but from sheer bewilderment.

He found himself gazing into a room that might have been the sitting room of any house in the village. From it surged the warm smell of an apartment that has been lived in. There was a bed on one side, and on the other, an arm chair across which had been thrown a suit of pyjamas. Used crockery littered a centre table. A pile of old magazines lay on the floor. A jacket hung from a hook on the back of another door. But if Cub hoped to see John Vanderskell—and he did—he was doomed to disappointment. There was only one person in the room and it was not he. It was Cristiano Zabani.

He was moving about as if he might have been a housemaid clearing up after an untidy visitor; and from the way he hummed a tune to himself as he went about the work he was not displeased that the guest had gone. In general he gave the impression of a man who has had a load taken off his mind. Suddenly, for some reason not apparent, he seemed to become aware that the door had opened. He spun round. The tune died on his lips as he drew in his breath sharply when he saw Gimlet and Cub standing there.

“Don’t move and you won’t get hurt. Act silly and you certainly will,” said Gimlet crisply, speaking in French and holding his pistol where it could be seen.

Cristiano’s eyes saucered. It was clear that an interruption from the direction of the tunnel was the very last thing he expected. He stood still, staring, his lower jaw sagging foolishly in his surprise.

Gimlet went on into the room and Cub followed.

“Where is he?” asked Gimlet succinctly, his eyes on Zabani’s face.

Cristiano’s lips parted in a mirthless smile. A sort of smug complacency triumphed over fear in his eyes when he realised that he was not to be shot

out of hand. “Where is who?” he asked insolently.

Gimlet took a pace nearer. “The boy,” he answered, in a voice so frigid that it should have warned Cristiano to be careful.

But Cristiano’s manner became flippant. “Boy? What boy? I don’t see one.”

In one movement Gimlet thrust the pistol in his pocket, took a swift step forward, seized the man by the front of his shirt and forced him backwards across the table. “You know what boy,” he said softly, but there was acid in his voice. Further and further back across the table Gimlet forced the man until it seemed to Cub that his back must be near to breaking. “Do you remember him now?” asked Gimlet.

“Yes—yes,” gasped the writhing man, fear springing again into his eyes.

“Where is he?”

“Gone. He’s gone . . . on my oath, *monsieur* . . . .”

Something inside Cub seemed to go down like a lift. Somehow he knew the man was telling the truth. They were too late.

“Which way did he go?” asked Gimlet, in a voice as relentless as death itself.

The man squirmed.

“Which way—quick!” Gimlet applied more pressure.

Cristiano’s eyes went to the door behind which hung the jacket. “That way,” he almost screamed.

“How long ago?”

“Just.”

“See what he’s got in his pockets, Cub,” ordered Gimlet tersely.

Cub complied, and extracted from Zabani’s pockets a small French automatic pistol and a bunch of keys.

Gimlet flung the now terrified man from him so that he fell backwards on the bed. “Stay there,” he warned, trenchantly.

Now while this had been going on Cub’s eyes had been roving round the room, and one of the first things he noticed was a barred window, shuttered on the outside. A window! He was conscious of another shock when he realised what this implied. If there was a window it meant they must be at ground level. He was still trying to work the thing out when Gimlet held out a hand. “Give me those keys,” he demanded.

Cub passed them over.

Gimlet unlocked the door that Zabani had indicated and flung it open. Outside, clear moonlight was pouring into a small walled garden. The wall, which was about ten feet high, cut off any further view, so Cub still did not know where he was; but a door in the wall, with cross-members on the inside, offered possibilities. He climbed up, looked over the top, and the mystery was at once explained. Below was the Rue de la Château. They were in the old Hostelrie du Château. But his amazement at this discovery found no time for expression. A movement caught his eye and his attention flashed to it. Outside the hotel, about a hundred yards away, stood the Buick. Its doors were open. Two men were standing by one of them. Another was putting luggage in the boot. Even as he watched the doors were slammed.

He dropped off the door and dashed back to Gimlet. "They're outside the hotel!" he blurted. "They're just off. They've put the luggage in."

Gimlet answered curtly. "All right. Don't panic. Go and get Copper and Trapper. You'll have to go the way we came to get Copper. Get them to the Buick as fast as you can. If it's gone, look for my car. If that's gone too, you'll have to wait until I come back, because if the Buick goes I shall go after it. Get cracking." He spoke swiftly, in English of course, possibly, in view of what happened next, for Cristiano to understand. At any rate, at this juncture, Cristiano, jumping like a cat, hurled himself across the room to the cellar. He took the steps in one desperate jump and raced on.

The cry of dismay that rose to Cub's lips was cut short by Gimlet. "It doesn't matter. He's lost his sting and he'll find Copper waiting for him at the far end. Off you go."

Cub ran on in the wake of the fleeing gangster whose footsteps came back to him in curious waves of sound. Towards the end of the tunnel he let out a shout to warn Copper that something was happening. Copper must have heard it, for when, panting, Cub reached the trap-door he found Copper sitting on the wretched Zabani.

"This bloke seemed in a bit of a 'urry so I thought I'd better give 'im a chance ter cool off," remarked Copper.

"So you heard us coming?"

" 'Eard you! Blimy! This 'ole acts like a loud-speaker. I thought it was a football crowd lost its way. D'you want this bloke?"

"No, I don't want him," answered Cub. "But we can't let him run loose. Tie him up for the time being. Here, tie him to this." Cub pointed to one of the iron staples in the wall. "Buck up," he urged. "Things are buzzing."

Copper produced a piece of cord from his pocket and with commando efficiency secured the prisoner's hands behind him, which in turn were

fastened to the staple. “You behave yerself, chum,” he admonished the man. “If I ’ave ter come back I shan’t be so friendly.”

Cub was already on his way up to the window by which they had entered. Using the rope, which was still there, they went hand over hand down to the Place d’Armes. Cub was down first, and as he raced across the square to the cactus hedge he called Trapper by name.

There was no answer.

Cub called again, urgently.

The reply came, but not from the cactus hedge. Clearly through the cool night air from somewhere in the direction of the town gate, it seemed, came a shrill whistle.

“That’s ’im,” said Copper tersely. “ ’E must ’ave run into something. Come on.”

As they started off at a run a klaxon blared, the sound coming from the same direction as the whistle.

“That’s the Buick,” declared Copper. “Strike Old Riley! What a blinkin’ shemozzle!”

CHAPTER XV

TRAPPER PULLS HIS WEIGHT

MEANWHILE, the interlude of boredom for which Trapper was prepared never so much as started.

Hardly had he taken up his position, and made himself comfortable within the inky shadow of the hedge, than the door of the house opened and a man came out. For a minute he stood just outside talking to someone whom Trapper thought was the Snout. The door was then shut, and the man, whom Trapper now perceived to be Cristiano Zabani, walked over to the château. He did not carry a basket. In fact, as far as Trapper could make out, he carried nothing; which provided Trapper with mental exercise trying to work out what his purpose could be at that late hour. He wondered, too, how the arrival of the unexpected visitor would affect those who were already inside. Not that he was worried on their account. They would, he felt sure, be able to take care of themselves, provided they heard the man coming; and it seemed extremely unlikely that, in the tomb-like silence of the castle, they would fail to hear a mouse squeak, much less the footsteps of a man who would suppose that he was alone in the building.

For some time Trapper waited in the tense expectancy of hearing noises in the château, noises which would indicate how events were moving behind the old grey walls. No sound came. Cristiano did not reappear, so he could only suppose that he had been intercepted and dealt with in a manner satisfactory to everyone except himself.

Trapper then turned over in his mind how, without departing from his orders, he could employ himself usefully instead of sitting doing nothing; and it struck him that a closer inspection of Cristiano's house might yield information worth having. He would not, he told himself, take the slightest risk of discovery. There was no need for that. He would at any rate move nearer, and still be within sight and sound of the castle window at which the exploring party might be expected to appear on the completion of their tour.

Moving with the silent stealth that he had learned from his Indian friends in childhood, and taking advantage of every shadow, he made his way towards the curtained window through which the yellow glow of a lamp inside was able to penetrate.

Reaching the little garden he stood in the dappled shadow of a vine and regarded the Buick, a mere dozen paces away, with thoughtful interest, wondering if he should immobilise it while the opportunity offered. To a mechanic like himself the putting of the car out of action would present no

difficulty. However, before he could make up his mind he was startled to hear the handle of the cottage door being turned. An instant later it was opened. Five men, moving slowly, came out, and a buzz of conversation sent Trapper flat against the wall.

"He ought to be ready by now. Let's get him and get out," said a voice, which he recognised as the Snout's, as the party moved on towards the Buick.

It was only necessary for Trapper to move his eyes to recognise the Snout, Louis Zabani and The Poet. The other two he did not know, but as one of them got into the driver's seat he assumed that he was the boss's chauffeur. Moving unhurriedly they all got in. The engine started, and the car glided away without having had its lights switched on, leaving Trapper in some perplexity, for the words he had overheard had a significance not to be ignored. "Let's get him," the Snout had said. Get who, and where? wondered Trapper as he moved his position to one from which he could watch the car after it had entered the Rue de la Château, towards which it was heading. In his mind, without thinking seriously about it, he was quite sure that the Buick was going to the hotel, in the first instance, anyhow; for there was no other reasonable destination between the house where he stood watching and the Place de la Republique. He was more than a little surprised therefore, when the vehicle came to a halt outside the Hostelrie du Château. In fact, even then, so little did the old tavern come into his calculations, he did not at once grasp the truth. What on earth was it going to do there, was the question that he asked himself, without guessing what the answer was to be. However, he decided that it was his business to find out. Keeping clear of the unbroken moonlight he made a quick detour of the gravelled area and turned into the narrow street. His curiosity rose high when he saw that one of the car doors was now open. Only then did the first glimmerings of the truth strike him, for not once had the dilapidated tavern come into his deliberations with the others. He had often looked the place over from idle curiosity, and would have sworn that neither door nor windows had been opened for months—which, indeed, was the case.

He was soon as near to the car as he dare go without a good chance of being seen, for a slight change in the direction of the street enabled the moon from this point on to shine directly into it. He had, however, been in the village long enough to learn his way about, and this knowledge he now turned to practical use. He knew that if he retraced his steps a little way and took a turning on the right, the alley in which he would find himself would bring him out below the car; that is to say, between it and the Place de la

Republique. From this position he would be able to see more clearly what was happening.

Backing a little way, as soon as he was out of sight he sprinted down the alley—to the no small alarm of the rat population—his rubber-soled shoes making little noise on the cobbles. His fear was that the car would achieve its purpose and move on before he could take up his new position. This, in fact, did nearly happen. At all events, by the time he had reached his objective things were definitely happening. Two men were standing near the car, one on each side of a door which he remembered vaguely Cub had told him was the door of the garden belonging to the Hostelrie. Through it now came a man leading a boy by the arm. There seemed to be something wrong with the boy's face. It looked as if it had been bandaged. Then, with a stiffening of the muscles, he perceived that it was not a bandage, but a cloth wrapped round the boy's head.

To what extent this spectacle shook Trapper can be better imagined than described. Here, then, was the answer to everything. That the boy was Johnny Vanderskell he did not for a moment doubt. And they were taking him away.

If a full appreciation of the situation called for no great mental effort, what to do about it did. Intuitively Trapper's hand went to his hip pocket, but the arguments against a direct attack in the hopes of rescuing the boy were too obvious to be ignored. With only one or two men to deal with it would have been a different matter; but there seemed to be quite a crowd, and any attempt to hold them up would almost certainly end in shooting, in which the boy might be injured if not killed.

Thinking at feverish speed, for it was clear that only seconds remained for him in which to act, he decided on a different plan, one which would at least give him a little more of the time which he so urgently needed. If the Snout intended taking the boy out of the village, there was only one way in which this could be prevented, or at least one way to hold him up for a time sufficient for reinforcements to be brought in. As he turned down the street to put his plan into action his only fear was that he would be too late, for he could not run fast down the moonlit street without making himself conspicuous. He had to slouch along, shoulders hunched, trying to look like a native of the place. But once he had reached the Place de la Republique, and turned the corner, he was out of sight; then, casting aside all pretence, he sprinted like a madman for the Ford. Even as he grabbed the door handle he thought he would be too late, for to his consternation he saw the Buick cruise into the *place*. But to his unbounded satisfaction it stopped outside the

hotel. This caused him to hesitate. Could it be possible, he thought, that they were going to take the boy *there*?

It was soon evident that they were not. At any rate, only two of the men got out. The boy remained inside. The two who had alighted went into the vestibule and returned carrying suitcases.

That told Trapper all he needed to know. The gang was pulling out, taking the boy with them.

He started the car, turned, and knowing that he was in front of the Buick, was able to cruise quietly out of the village. He ran on for nearly a quarter of a mile, to a point that he remembered where the *corniche* road, never very wide, was too narrow for two cars to pass. This is usual with *corniche* roads in mountain districts, as the labour involved in cutting into the rock is enormous. To overcome the difficulty of vehicles coming face to face and being unable to pass, there are cut at intervals short pull-ins, into which one vehicle can draw while the other goes on. There were such places available for Trapper, but he had no intention of using them. On the contrary, he stopped the Ford in the middle of the road at its narrowest point. On the one hand rose the steeply sloping face of the hill on which the village stood. On the other, without any protection, the road dropped almost sheer for a hundred feet into a gorge—the same gorge, in fact, that Cub had crossed higher up by means of the aqueduct.

Satisfied with his position Trapper took the jack from the toolbox, put it under one of the rear wheels, and threw a lever beside it. He then put two fingers into his mouth and shattered the silence with a piercing whistle—their old commando rallying signal. Taking his automatic from his pocket he stuck it through his belt and then sat down on the running board to await events.

He had not long to wait. As soon as he heard the Buick coming he stood up and made a pretence of operating the jack.

As a matter of detail, his plan nearly brought the whole business to an abrupt conclusion, for the Buick was travelling faster than was safe on such a dangerous highway, and although its headlights were now on it had to come to a skidding stop in order to avoid collision. Its klaxon blared.

Trapper, full in its headlights, waved to show that he had heard, and then calmly went on with what he was doing. He was prepared for trouble and it was soon forthcoming. A head was thrust out of a side window of the Buick and a voice shouted: “What the hell are you doing there?”

Trapper took no notice.

“You’re blocking the road, you fool,” came the voice.

Trapper continued to take no notice.

A door of the Buick was flung open and the Snout himself stepped out. “Are you deaf?” he raged. “I can’t get past.”

Trapper looked up. “What do you expect me to do about it—throw my car into the gorge?”

“Pull in and let me through!”

“A car can’t travel on three wheels. What’s the hurry? Do you think I burst my tyres for fun?” Actually, while Trapper remained outwardly calm his state of mind was by no means placid, for he knew that this sort of argument could not go on for long. He had played for time and his trick was succeeding, but there was obviously a limit to the length of time he could maintain it. If reinforcements did not soon arrive his effort would have been in vain, for it would not take the Snout long to discover that the Ford was in fact still on four wheels.

The Snout fumed, for short of pushing the Ford into the gorge there was for the moment nothing he could do. “How long are you going to be?” he demanded.

“Shan’t keep you long,” replied Trapper. “Fine night?”

“I’m not interested in the weather,” snarled the Snout. “I want to get on.” He looked around as if a sudden thought had struck him. “Where’s your buddy?” There was a hint of suspicion in his voice.

“He’ll be coming along presently with some tools, I hope,” answered Trapper, truthfully enough. “I’ll see if I can hurry him up,” he added, and repeated his two finger whistle.

“There’s no need to make such a blasted row about it,” blazed the Snout.

“Okay—okay,” replied Trapper smoothly. “I was only trying to be obliging.”

“How much longer are you going to be?”

“Not more than a minute or two.”

The Snout looked down to see how the work was going. “Why, your wheel’s on!” he cried. “What’s the idea?”

“Of course it’s on,” agreed Trapper. “What do you think I’ve been doing? I’m just about through.”

He removed the jack, picked up the lever, and got into the car. But he still had a card to play. The self-starter whirred, whirred again, and then stopped suddenly. Trapper got out. “Would you believe it? If my starter ain’t jammed,” he said contritely.

The Snout nearly choked as his patience snapped. “Listen, brother,” he said through his teeth, “are you goin’ to move this junk heap which you call an automobile or am I?”

Trapper shrugged. “That’s just it. It won’t move.”

The Snout laughed unpleasantly. “Is that so?” he drawled. “Well, you watch me show you how to make a car move.” Turning and raising his voice he called: “Louis! Jeff! Slinky! Come help me push this gridiron off the road!”

“What’s the idea?” demanded Trapper belligerently.

“You’ll see.”

“You keep your hands off my car,” warned Trapper.

“And what’ll you do about it?” sneered the Snout.

“You’d be surprised,” flashed Trapper, and backed quickly to a big rock that partly overhung the road.

Apparently the Snout did not take this threat seriously, for he said: “Come on, boys. Get busy. Over with it.”

Trapper’s voice came out of the darkness. It now had an ominous ring. “The first guy who lays a hand on my truck gets it.”

The Snout laughed. “Go ahead, boys. He’s only kidding.”

Louis and Jeff and The Poet advanced to carry out their instructions, but the crack of Trapper’s pistol sent them diving for cover.

“I can shoot straighter than that,” announced Trapper, who had fired over their heads, hoping that the sound of the shot would bring someone along.

It did, although help must have been already on the way. The headlights of a car, travelling at speed, appeared behind the Buick. Like the Buick the driver had to stand on his brakes to avoid collision. A door slammed. “What’s going on here?” inquired a voice. It was Gimlet who spoke. He joined the party.

The Snout, who had of course no idea of who Gimlet was, explained, trying not very successfully to keep his temper in hand for the benefit of the new arrival. “This fool’s got the road blocked. I’m in a hurry and he won’t move.”

“Nonsense,” returned Gimlet casually. “I’ll have a word with him and see what’s wrong.” He walked on past the Ford looking for the driver.

“They’ve got the boy in that car,” breathed Trapper.

“So I believe. Is your car okay?” Gimlet spoke in an undertone.

“Yes. I’ve faked a jammed starter.”

"Good. When I give the signal get the boy into it and make flat out for Monte Carlo. It's just past Nice. Put up at the Majestic. I'll join you." Without waiting for Trapper to reply Gimlet walked back to where the gangsters were muttering among themselves.

"Well?" demanded the Snout.

"Apparently his starter is out of action," said Gimlet evenly. "If you'll all put a shoulder to the back of the car no doubt it'll unstick."

The Snout, it seemed, was willing to do anything as long as he could get a clear road. "Come on, boys, give a hand," he ordered. He himself put his hands against the back of the car, which, as Trapper had left his hand-brake on, did not budge. Louis Zabani, Jeff, and The Poet, lined up beside the Snout behind the Ford.

"Now! All together!" cried the Snout.

"I think you'll do nicely there," said Gimlet suavely. "Stay just as you are. Go ahead, Trapper."

For a second nobody moved. The men in line seemed to freeze. Then the Snout's face spun round, to gaze into the muzzle of Gimlet's automatic. "What's the idea?" he rapped out in a startled voice.

"The idea is," answered Gimlet, "you will all stand still until I say you can move. And if you think I'm bluffing you can easily put the matter to test. Try moving."

Nobody moved, except Trapper. The brief interval had been sufficient for him to slip past the Ford to the Buick. But the driver must have had his wits about him and had already grasped what was happening, for shuffling across the seat, as Trapper ran to the near side he jumped out on the off side. What happened after that was not clear. His haste may have been his undoing. He may have forgotten his proximity to the gorge. He may have seen two figures that now came racing down the road and decided that his best policy was flight. He may merely have stumbled. Whatever the reason, the result was fatal. There was a crash as a rock broke away, and a yell of mortal fear. Then came a succession of crashes as man and rocks went down the precipitous slope in a minor landslide.

"That's one of 'em out of the way any old how," came Copper's voice without emotion.

By this time Trapper was helping Johnny Vanderskell out of the Buick. He got him clear just as Copper and Cub ran up. Trapper did not stop to explain. He hurried the boy to the Ford. They got in. The car moved forward, leaving the four gangsters standing in line across the road with Gimlet still behind them.

The Snout, judging from the noises he made, was near apoplexy. “I’ll get you for this,” he swore venomously.

Copper found and lit a dilapidated cigarette. “Why, if it ain’t our tame Poet!” he exclaimed. “Remember that poem I told yer, chum, about——”

“All right. This is no time for fooling,” said Gimlet curtly. “Go through their pockets and take their weapons. Don’t overlook shoulder holsters.”

Whistling softly between his teeth Copper went through the gangsters’ pockets and collected three automatics and two revolvers, which he handed to Cub who moved up to receive them.

“What shall I do with them?” asked Cub.

“Throw them into the gorge,” ordered Gimlet.

One by one the five guns bumped and bounced down the slope to the rocks below.

“What next?” inquired Copper.

“That’s all,” answered Gimlet. He went on: “All right, you rats. Start walking.”

“Walking?” foamed the Snout.

“You heard what I said,” snapped Gimlet.

“Where am I supposed to walk?” choked the Snout.

“You can walk down the road or you can take a running jump into the gorge. Please yourself.”

“What about my car?”

“I’ll take care of that,” promised Gimlet.

The Snout, cursing under his breath, started to walk down the road. His companions went with him. Gimlet sent a shot whistling over their heads and they broke into a run.

“I told you they were rats,” sneered Gimlet. “They haven’t even the guts of a decent rat.” He went to the Buick, turned the steering wheel hard over and then took off the brake. The car moved forward, slowly, but with gathering speed, getting closer and closer to the lip of the gorge. One wheel went over. The car tilted. Another wheel went. With awful deliberation the vehicle turned over to go crashing and banging to the bottom of the abyss.

“That clears the air a bit,” observed Gimlet.

“I could have done with that car,” said Copper in a pained voice.

“Pah! It stinks,” muttered Gimlet. “Get yourself a new one. Get your hair cut at the same time. I’ve told you about that before.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” sighed Copper.

“Did you have to let those crooks go?” asked Cub, in a disappointed voice.

“What else could we do with them?” inquired Gimlet. “Not being thugs we couldn’t shoot them in cold blood, and not being police officers we couldn’t arrest them. My main concern was to get rid of them. I’ve plenty to do.”

“What’s the first thing?” Cub wanted to know.

“The first thing is to go back to the village, pay our bills, collect our bags, and tell the local policeman that a man has fallen in the gorge. He can work out for himself how he got there. Then I’m going to take you for a nice ride.”

“Ride? Where to?”

“Monte Carlo,” answered Gimlet. “It’s rather more civilised than Vallonceau, and I’ve got to make some telephone calls before I go to bed.”

CHAPTER XVI

BUTTONED UP

TWO days later a party of four were taking breakfast at a table laid for five on the terrace of the Majestic Hotel, Monte Carlo. It consisted of Cub, Copper, Trapper and Johnny Vanderskell, who looked little the worse for his nasty experience.

He had had little to say about it. He had been, it seemed, under the influence of a drug during the first part of the period of his captivity, which included his transportation to Europe. Only then, by overhearing a conversation, did he learn that he was in France, where he had been guarded in turn by the men who had become known to his rescuers as the Zabani brothers and The Poet.

"What's Gimlet doing?" inquired Copper. "It ain't like 'im ter be late on parade."

"I don't know, but I fancy there's something going on," answered Cub. "He had a telegram a while ago. He said something about getting a newspaper."

At that moment Gimlet appeared. He was smiling and held up a journal. "You'll find some interesting news in the paper this morning," he remarked, as he handed the one he carried to Cub and sat down at the vacant place.

"Anything to do with us?" asked Cub.

"Quite a lot to do with us," returned Gimlet.

"Don't make me hunt for the item in the middle of breakfast," complained Cub. "What's it about?"

"Call it the wind-up of the business that brought you here. Did you think it was all over?"

"Well—er—yes, more or less."

"Oh dear no," murmured Gimlet, reaching for the coffee. "It would have been a tame ending to the story to leave those crooks loose on a public highway."

"That's what I thought," agreed Cub. "What happened to them? Where did they go?"

"Where I expected them to go—to Paris."

"What happened to them there?"

"That," answered Gimlet, "is what the paragraph in the paper is about."

"Did they bump into the police or something?"

"Bumped is the word," asserted Gimlet. "You see," he went on, "I worked it out like this. As I told you at the time, there was really nothing we could do with those rogues in Vallonceau. We couldn't shoot them; we couldn't arrest them; had I called in the local police officer anything could have happened. It would have been unfair to expect him to handle a gang of that sort by himself, even if he'd believed our story, which would have sounded a bit tall. It struck me that if I let them go, the Snout, who must have spent a heap of money on the business, would strive to the finish to get the cash. It was still on the boards that he might get the ransom money out of Johnny's father in Paris. After all, Paris is hundreds of miles from Vallonceau, and there was always the possibility that Mr. Vanderskell might not hear at once of Johnny's rescue. Presumably the Snout caught the night train north from Avignon. At any rate, the gang got to Paris, and the Snout behaved as I suspected he would. He needed money badly." Gimlet poured himself more coffee.

"Naturally," he resumed, "I had taken steps to see that he didn't get any out of Mr. Vanderskell. As soon as I reached here I got on the telephone, and I spent some time on it. First, I rang up Mr. Vanderskell and told him that Johnny was safe. I suggested that he got in touch with Scotland Yard. I knew you'd sent him a telegram, Cub, but you can't say much in a telegram. I had a lot to say. I also had a word with Scotland Yard, told them what had happened here, and suggested that the New York police might like to know about it. Apparently everyone took my advice and the result was a pretty little drama in Paris yesterday. Mr. Vanderskell, taking the ransom money, kept the appointment at the restaurant. The Snout, supported by his gang, arrived. He demanded the money—or else. Mr. Vanderskell handed it over. But it happened that there were several other people interested in the transaction and they watched it from a prepared hiding place. Among others there were two senior officers of the French Sureté, and two American detectives who had been hoping to catch sight of the Snout for a long time. They flew over in a special plane in order to be on the spot. In short, the Snout and his precious pals stepped into as neat a trap as was ever set for a bunch of crooks. They hadn't the guts to fight it out—not that they were given much chance I imagine. Anyhow, they were taken with the money on them, so they haven't a hope. They are now in Paris, waiting for extradition papers that will secure their transfer to America, where, unless a miracle saves them, they'll end their miserable careers in the electric chair. Cristiano is in custody, too. Paris spoke to Avignon and a police car went out to collect him from his uncomfortable position in the château. That's about all. You can read the details in the paper at your leisure."

“What about my father?” asked Johnny anxiously.

“He’s on his way here,” answered Gimlet. “I had a wire from him early this morning to say that he left Paris last night on the *Rapide*. It gets in about half past ten, so it won’t be long before you see him.”

“What about Johnny’s sister?” inquired Cub.

“Mr. Vanderskell knows all about that. There should be no difficulty in finding her.” Gimlet looked at Johnny and smiled. “You’ll be quite a family after this.”

“We shall,” agreed Johnny.

“I’ve several things to do at home so I shan’t be able to stay,” went on Gimlet, “but I gather Mr. Vanderskell has made plans for a reunion celebration, so you’ll all be staying here to enjoy yourselves. You couldn’t find a better place.” Gimlet looked at Cub. “I imagine Mr. Vanderskell will have a slip of paper in his pocket for you, too, so none of you should be short of pocket money for a long time.”

“I couldn’t take the money,” asserted Cub.

“Fiddlesticks! The reward was agreed at the start. You’ve earned it.”

“Of course,” put in Johnny.

Cub shrugged his shoulders. “Oh well, we’ll see,” he conceded.

“What about you all going down to the station to meet the train?” suggested Gimlet.

“That’s a fine idea,” agreed Johnny. “Come on, everybody.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Gimlet Lends A Hand* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]