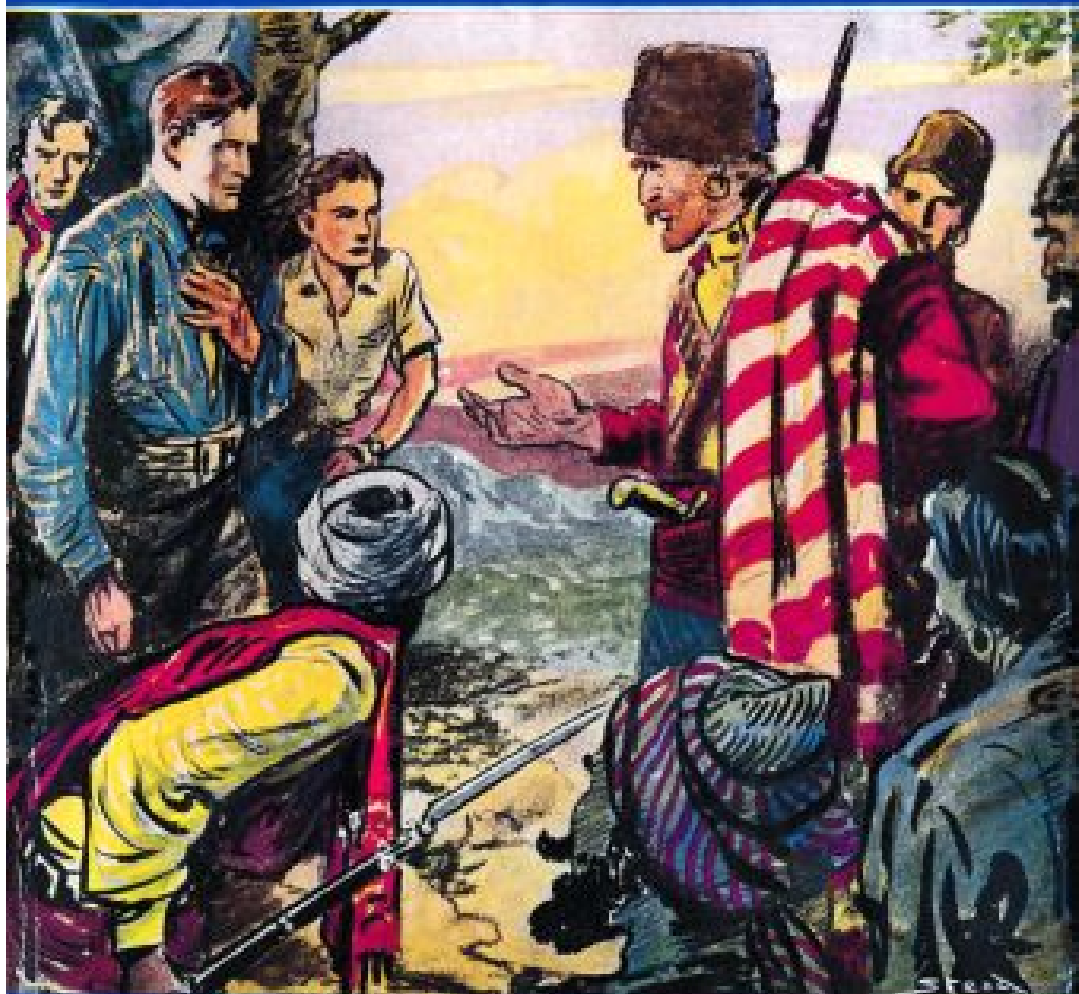


GIMLET BORES IN CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



A Brock-Book for older Boys

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Cub, having no bullets to waste, held his fire.

GIMLET BORES IN

A King of the Commandos Adventure

by

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated

by

LESLIE STEAD

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CHAPTER I

A FRIEND IN NEED

CAPTAIN LORRINGTON KING, D.S.O., M.C., (Retired) one time “Gimlet,” leader of the commando troop known as King’s “Kittens,” looked in turn at the faces of the three men who shared his luncheon table at the Ritz Hotel, London. They were Nigel, otherwise “Cub,” Peters; ex-corporal Albert, otherwise “Copper,” Colson (a Cockney and proud of it) and “Trapper” Troublay, the French-Canadian who spoke French—with a trans-Atlantic drawl—as well as he spoke English. All were looking older than in the days of the desperate events that had brought them together, and had welded them into a team that had more than once left its marks on the enemy.

Gimlet permitted his habitually austere expression to relax a little as he looked at them.

“I suppose you fellows are waiting for me to tell you why I asked you to meet me here today?” he remarked, in an easy voice that could, however, be as brittle as ice when occasion demanded.

“I ’oped it wouldn’t jest be ter tell me ter get me ’air cut, sir,” answered Copper, grinning.

The others laughed.

“No, but now you come to mention it, it wouldn’t be a bad idea if you had a little more off,” replied Gimlet. “That quoif you sport may, you may think, enhance your natural beauty, but to me it’s an excrescence that could well be dispensed with.”

Copper’s hand went to the tuft of hair referred to. “That’s a bit tough,” he growled indignantly. “I only ’ad it cut yesterday.”

There was more laughter.

“All right! that’s enough fun. Let’s get down to business,” announced Gimlet, suddenly becoming serious. “I had a reason for asking you to come here. The fact is, I’ve been asked by a certain government department to do a little job, and have promised to do it. It’s quite a special bit of business and may turn out to be exciting. I need hardly say that it’s very much under the hat. I’ve been working on the thing for some days, getting organised, thinking it might be better to go alone; but on second thoughts I decided to

ask you fellows if you'd care to come along. I can't give you very long to make up your minds because I shall be starting in the morning."

"You can reckon on me, sir, wherever you're going, if you want me," said Cub promptly.

"Same 'ere," put in Copper.

Trapper clicked his tongue, a trick he had learned from Indian friends in his boyhood in the backwoods. "Me too," he murmured.



Captain Lorrington King, D.S.O., M.C.

"Very well," resumed Gimlet, dropping his voice a tone. "In that case I'll give you the gen. This, briefly, is the proposition, and, as you will see, it really boils down to a matter of housebreaking in a biggish sort of way. In a rather backward corner of Eastern Europe there is a medieval fortress. It was built, the experts say, in the days of the Crusaders. How true that is I neither know nor care, but from all accounts it is a pretty formidable mass of stone. Who occupied it in the past I haven't troubled to enquire. I'm only interested in the present, and at the moment it is being used as a sort of political prison. Prisoners who go in are seldom seen again. It's that sort of prison. In it, if our information is correct, there is confined a gentleman whose crime consists of nothing more than he has for a long time favoured the Western democratic way of life, and is, therefore, well disposed towards the Western powers. Of this he has made no secret, with the result that he incurred the

severe displeasure of those who would, if they could, push us off the map. Our people want to get him out, and rightly so, for if no attempt is made to rescue him it is unlikely that he will be seen again. We do not abandon our friends. I am going to get him out. If I fail, I may find myself inside as well. Do you still want to come?"

"More than ever," asserted Cub.

"Too bloomin' true," swore Copper. "Am I right, Trapper?"

"*Zut*. Every time," agreed Trapper warmly.

"Very well, then; here are the details," continued Gimlet. "The name of the man in question is Muraz Ismit. His nationality is Turkish. Indeed, he was until recently a member of the Turkish government. Some years ago he was their representative in London, where he is still remembered as a very charming gentleman. As a matter of detail he was in business before he went into politics, being, among other things, head of the firm that makes the well-known Consolides brands of Turkish and Egyptian cigarettes, with offices in London. He speaks English well. We needn't go into politics, but you may be sure that his pro-Western sentiments automatically make him the enemy of Turkey's powerful neighbour in the East. Had he been a man of less importance no doubt he would by now have been liquidated by methods so often practised by totalitarian states; but in the case of Ismit Pasha this would not have been easy without risking a major sensation. It was by sheer bad luck that the Pasha fell into the hands of his enemies. This is how it came about.

"The Pasha has always been a keen yachtsman, and being a rich man was able to indulge in that rather expensive pastime. He had his own yacht, which was normally kept at moorings at Samsu, on the Turkish Black Sea coast. He rarely left the Black Sea. Some two months ago he went off on one of his trips. A westerly gale sprang up and the yacht was lost with all hands—or so it was supposed when it did not return. One of the crew was washed overboard and was later picked up by a fishing vessel. He was thought to be the only survivor. The yacht, he said, when he went overboard, was dismasted, and driving fast towards the rocky Caucasian coast that bounds the eastern end of the Black Sea. On the face of it there didn't seem much hope for the Pasha. Still, he was a good sailor and a strong swimmer, so for a time it was hoped that he might have got ashore. But as the weeks passed without word of him all such hopes were gradually abandoned.

"Now the Caucasus is a wild collection of states under the control of people who have no love for us—or the Pasha; and for that reason they would no doubt be delighted to have him fall into their hands. That, in fact,

unless we have been misinformed, is what did happen. We are not without friends in Eastern Europe, sometimes called the Near East, and presently a whisper reached us that Ismit Pasha was a prisoner in the hands of his enemies. Our Intelligence people got cracking and we are now in possession of information which makes it pretty sure that the Pasha is a prisoner in the ancient fortress of Kalashan, which stands in the mountains some distance back from the coast.”

“Wot sort of place is this Corkasus?” asked Copper. “I never ’eard tell of it.”

“For more reasons than one, very few Western Europeans have got far into it,” answered Gimlet. “As far as the actual terrain is concerned it’s mostly an area of mountains and valleys at the junction of the three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa. The place is divided into a number of small republics with names not easy to remember. We needn’t trouble about them. Strictly speaking, they are part of the Soviet Union, but how far the local chieftains take orders from Moscow is open to question. They may give the occupying Soviet officials lip-service, but it is probable that they play their own game behind their backs. The people of the country, having been overrun by powerful neighbours many times during the course of history, must be pretty good at what in France they called the Resistance. For them, freedom is everything, with the result that the land is overrun with bandits, malcontents, and refugees of one sort or another. To them, I understand, all visitors are enemies, and treated as such. Each petty chief rules his own roost and protects what he holds in the usual manner of such people. In other words, they’re a pretty rough lot.”

“I take it it would be no use asking for passports, to go in as tourists?” questioned Cub.

“If we asked the Soviet for passports they would be refused,” declared Gimlet. “On the other hand, if we go without passports we should be treated as enemy agents. We need have no doubt about that, so we do at least know how we stand from the start. The local people themselves are a queer lot, being a mixture of half the races on earth—white, brown, yellow and black, according to locality. As a result of isolation in their mountains they’re at least a century behind the times, and their methods are, shall we say, inclined to be old-fashioned.”

“Do you know who actually owns this fortress where the Pasha is reported to be a prisoner?” asked Cub.

“No. It stands in the Republic of Zabkatnitza, but no doubt it has been taken over by the governing authority. Apparently it is a place of some size.”

Copper grunted. “I reckon anything could ’appen in a joint with a name like that. Wot say you, Trapper ole pal?”

“Sure, and then some,” agreed Trapper.

“From our angle it doesn’t matter two hoots who the place belongs to,” asserted Gimlet. “We must assume that once we are in the territory every man will be our enemy. All I know is, the fortress is there, and if our man is in it we’ve got to get him out.”

“If these stiffes ’ate the sight of the Pasha why don’t they bump ’im off and ’ave done with it?” queried Copper.

“Once he has been forgotten no doubt they’ll do that, unless, of course, they decide that he may one day be a valuable hostage,” answered Gimlet. “Or maybe he will be used as a bargaining lever in some political argument. I don’t know, and it doesn’t really matter. We may learn something more about it when we get there. As I told you, I’m not interested in the political angle. I’m only concerned with getting the unfortunate fellow out and handing him back to his wife and family.”

“Does anyone live in this jail?” asked Copper, picking a tooth thoughtfully.

“If it is being used as a prison it can hardly be a residence—apart from the governor and his staff,” replied Gimlet. “There may be other prisoners. In fact, there are pretty certain to be. In that case there is bound to be a fairly strong garrison there. It wouldn’t surprise me if it turned out to be a barracks as well.”

“Soldiers, eh?” murmured Copper pensively. “Be interestin’ ter see wot they know about soldierin’. Maybe we could show ’em a thing or two. Wot do we do if they cut up rough?”

“Naturally we shall do our best to avoid contact with them,” returned Gimlet. “If that proves impossible, what we do will depend largely on what they do.”

“Hm. As far as I can see there won’t be no need ter do much talkin’,” muttered Copper. “They must be a lot of rats ter put a bloke in quod for ’avin’ an opinion of ’is own.”

Gimlet smiled bleakly. “Having an opinion of your own is a dangerous thing in more than one European country today,” he observed grimly. “Anyhow, that’s how it is.”

“Does the Turkish government know anything about this?” asked Cub.

“I don’t think so,” answered Gimlet slowly. “Our Intelligence people are pretty hot on security, and they didn’t tell even me more than was necessary.

Obviously, the fewer the people who know about it the less chance is there of a spy getting wind of it. I'm seeing our people again before we leave and they may tell me more then."

"How are we going to get to this place?" asked Cub.

"That's all been worked out," Gimlet told him. "We shall fly. It's the only way, and in that matter we've been lucky. The flying boat that takes us out will be under the command of a man who has had more experience at this sort of thing than anybody. You remember Bigglesworth—the man they call Biggles? He gave us a hand more than once during the war."

"Ha! I ain't likely ter ferget 'im," averred Copper. "Cool customer, if ever I see one. I remember you and 'is pal, Lord Bertie something-or-other, natterin' about fox 'untin' one night when 'ell was fairly poppin' all round us."

Gimlet smiled. "There was probably nothing better to talk about at the time. But let's not start talking about old times or we shall be here all night. Bigglesworth is going to take us out and put us down conveniently near the coast. We shall go ashore in a landing craft—probably a rubber dinghy. I've left that part of the operation, and the business of picking us up again later, to him. That's for his department."

"When you talk about being picked up later, how long do you reckon the job's going to take?" asked Cub.

"I've no idea," admitted Gimlet. "It might be only a day or two or it may be a month. It depends on how things pan out. Naturally, I shall make allowance for that in my arrangements with Bigglesworth. We shall have to take ashore with us everything we're likely to need. That includes food. I shall attend to that. As I see it now we shall have to work mostly in the dark, lying up in cover by day—at any rate, until we locate the objective. But here again, it's not easy to make a plan until we get to the country and see just what we have to do. There seems to be some doubt as to the actual spot where the fort stands, and as the country is all mountains and valleys, as I've told you, it may take us some time to find the place. And when we have found it it may take us even longer to get into it."

"How about asking Bigglesworth to locate the place and get us a photograph from the air?" suggested Cub.

Gimlet shook his head. "He would do that, no doubt, if I asked him; but the presence of an unknown aircraft over the district might do more harm than good, by warning the enemy that someone is interested in the place. At the moment the people holding the Pasha must be smiling, because officially everyone supposes that he is dead. I'd rather the enemy went on thinking

that he's got everyone fooled. Once he suspects that we know the truth our difficulties would be doubled. But I think I've said enough to go on with. We can discuss the matter further on the way out."

"Wot exactly is the drill, sir?" asked Copper.

"Go home, get a good night's rest, and meet me at eight o'clock tomorrow morning at Victoria Station, in front of the indicator board. I shall be there, with tickets for Southampton."

"Full marching order?"

"Yes, but don't make it too obvious. Imagine it's nineteen forty-five and we are detailed for a sortie on the French coast—without visible armament."

Copper rubbed his big hands together. "Battle dress and my ole green beret for me. That's the stuff. Strike ole Riley! This is goin' ter be like ole times. Wot say you, Trapper, ole partner?"

Trapper clicked his tongue. "*Tch!* You've said it, pal," he agreed.

CHAPTER II

THE COAST OF DOUBT

BLACK night had thrown its cloak over that part of the earth where East meets West, wherein lies the Sea which, appropriately as it seemed to Cub, is called Black. Below was an inky void, a vast, mysterious pool devoid of life, unmarked by a single spark of friendly light to prove that it was occupied by men. Overhead a few stars blinked mistily through a tattered curtain of alto-cirrus cloud that hung in space across the universe.

Cub, who by special request had been privileged to sit for a little while in the cockpit of the flying boat that was taking the party to its objective, had only the pilot's word for it that they were over water. He could not see it. In fact, he could see nothing beyond his immediate surroundings, illuminated faintly by an eerie reflected light from the instrument panel, where a bewildering array of dials glowed steadily, like a battery of railway signals at a busy junction. From these only occasionally did the pilot lift his eyes, to gaze ahead or into the surrounding gloom. How, after hours of boring through utter darkness, at a speed of three miles a minute, he still knew where he was, was a mystery Cub did not attempt to solve.

The only sound was the monotonous drone of engines, although this had been going on for so long as to become scarcely noticeable. When they died, as abruptly as a water tap turned off, giving way to a silence that was startling after so much noise, he looked at the pilot expectantly, and perhaps a trifle nervously, wondering if something had gone wrong.

Biggles returned the glance, smiling faintly at Cub's unspoken question. "I'm going down, although we shan't be on the water for some time yet," he said. "We've still a little way to go. You'd better go aft, now, and ask Ginger to come back to his seat."

"Right you are, sir," answered Cub, and went back to the cabin, where, having delivered his message, he found a seat near Copper and Trapper who were playing two-handed pontoon on rucksacks that had been piled to make a table.

Gimlet spoke from where he was studying a map. "All right, you fellows, pack up now," he ordered. "We must be getting close."

Copper stacked the cards, and ruefully handed over to Trapper nine cigarettes that apparently he had lost to him. This done, and the cards put

away, he began to sort the luggage.

“It seems a quiet sort of night,” remarked Gimlet. “A choppy sea would have given us a damp start.” He looked at his wrist-watch. “One o’clock,” he observed. “Nice time. The moon should be up in about an hour.”

They sat down to steady themselves while the machine landed. Presently, a sharp hiss announced that the keel had touched water. A moment later the sound came again, this time prolonged, while the aircraft lost way quickly. Another minute and it was at rest, rocking gently.

Copper and Trapper began at once to make ready the rubber dinghy that was to take them ashore.

Biggles came into the cabin. “Here we are,” he said, speaking to Gimlet. “There’s nothing in sight as far as I can see. No wind, sea calm and visibility good, although it’s still too dark to see much. From topsides I could just see the coast, straight ahead. I reckon it’s about three miles—maybe a trifle less. This is as near as I dare go without risk of being heard when I take off. I’m in no great hurry so you can take your time. As long as I’m at my moorings by daylight that’s all that matters as far as I’m concerned. I don’t want to be seen going back by anyone on either side of the Sea of Marmora.”

“Got far to go?” asked Gimlet.

“A fair way. Officially, I’m due to call at one of the Greek marine aircraft bases with a view to showing them some new equipment. They may guess that something’s going on, but they won’t ask questions.” Biggles laughed softly. “A lot of funny things are going on in this part of the world at the moment. But don’t worry about me. I shall be back to pick you up. You’ll find me here every third day between twelve midnight and one. If for any reason you get into trouble ashore, and can’t get out to me, make a signal and I’ll come in for you.”

“Good enough. Thanks, but I hope that won’t be necessary,” returned Gimlet.

By this time the dinghy had been inflated and launched. Like a bloated sea monster basking on the surface it floated on the softly lapping water by the open cabin door. Cub followed Copper and Trapper into it.

Gimlet came last. “All right. Let go,” he ordered.

Copper released his hold on the aircraft and at once the ill-assorted vehicles began to drift apart.

“Good luck, chaps,” came Biggles’ voice over the sullen water.

“Thanks. Same to you. See you later,” replied Gimlet.

The aircraft became a vague silhouette that faded slowly into the surrounding gloom, leaving the dinghy alone on the gently-heaving waters. Gimlet took his compass from its case and sat with it on his knee. Copper and Trapper picked up paddles and the little craft began to move sluggishly towards the still invisible shore.

Then for Cub began one of those queer interludes that are more in the nature of a dream than reality, with time passing imperceptibly in an unchanging scene, and eyes probing the darkness in vain for an object on which to focus.

This phase ended, however, when the moon heralded its approach by a pallid glow in the sky, which, reflected on the water, laid a track of shimmering ripples. Soon the moon itself, a silver crescent, came up over the edge of the world, to reveal, surprisingly near, Cub thought, the black mass of the land for which they were making. This appeared as no gently shelving foreshore, offering a friendly welcome to benighted mariners, but as a towering line of crags that marched from north to south like a rampart designed by nature to keep the sea in its place—as, in fact, it did. Not a light showed anywhere to indicate that the land was inhabited, although considering the hour this was not surprising. A short halt was made while every member of the party made a mental photograph of the outline of the coast to enable him to recognise the spot again.

Then the dinghy toiled on. The outline hardened, details emerging slowly from the gloom. No one spoke. The only sound was the hiss and splash of frustrated waves as they were flung back, and back again, from bulwarks of rock that yielded not an inch under their eternal onslaught.

Nearer and nearer in crept the dinghy, its crew, old at the game, knowing just what to do without having to be told. To Cub's nostrils came the curious reek, offensive yet exhilarating, of rotting seaweed. He made out a little cove between two outflung banks of rock. He touched Gimlet on the arm and pointed to it. Gimlet made a signal. Trapper's paddle dug deep and hard, and the dinghy floated in like a dead monster cast up by the ocean. Copper went over the side, and knee deep in water hauled the boat on to a narrow strip of shingle that had formed between the rocks. Again for a minute no one moved, as eyes and ears strained for sight or sound of danger. It was, all knew, the most dangerous moment of the landing operation, for had there been a watcher on the cliff above, or anywhere along the shore, it was now that he would make his presence known by sounding an alarm. Cub let out a deep breath of relief when nothing happened.

Gimlet stepped ashore. "Stand fast," he whispered, and walked on to the foot of the cliff that rose high above him. He was soon back. "All right," he

said shortly. "This will suit us fine. Bring the stuff up."

Picking up his rucksack Cub followed him and found that there was no dearth of hiding places. The cliff was almost honeycombed with small water-worn caves and cavities, any one of which would have been suitable for their purpose. Into the largest the gear was piled. The dinghy, deflated, was carried in, while Gimlet with his torch examined the recesses of the place. It was not deep, a matter of only a few yards, but the sand underfoot was dry, and the absence of seaweed suggested that it was above the normal water line.

"I think before we do anything else we'll have something to eat," decided Gimlet. "Food is easier to carry that way, and it may be some time before we are able to have another full meal. We shall have to travel light, anyway, so the bulk of the stuff can be left here for emergencies."

"D'you know just where we are, sir?" asked Copper, ripping the top off a can of bully with a dexterity born of long practice.

"No," admitted Gimlet frankly. "I know the position broadly speaking, but not in any detail. The only maps available were very small scale, and a bit vague, too. But the fortress should be somewhere behind us, certainly within, say, twenty miles. We may get a better idea of things in daylight. The only actual landmark that I have to work on is a river that runs through a deep valley, or gorge, and should reach the sea not far from here. According to my information the fortress stands on some high ground looking down the gorge."

"Are we going to stay here until morning?" asked Cub, smearing canned butter on a biscuit.

"I'd kept an open mind about that, but as we still have a few hours of darkness left I feel inclined to use it by getting up on the higher ground," answered Gimlet. "If we did that, when it gets light we could spy the land and get an idea of what's around us. We'll make a start as soon as everyone's ready. I'm afraid it'll be slow work."

This hastened the end of the meal. Kits were repacked, and stores not urgently required hidden under a cairn of loose rock. Gimlet then took the lead. Loads were picked up, and the party, in single file, moved off.

For some distance the way lay along the chaos of fallen rock that followed the base of the cliff. There was no alternative, for investigation soon made it evident that to scale the cliff at this point would be an extremely hazardous, if not impossible, operation. After about a mile, however, a landslide offered a reasonable method of ascent. In any case, it would not have been possible to proceed otherwise, for a great mass of rock

had fallen into the sea and the only way round it would have been by swimming. A stiffish climb followed, with Gimlet always a little ahead choosing the easiest route. It was hard work, but nothing more than that, and in a short time they were at the top, with the sea five hundred feet below them. Looking inland, as far as it was possible to see there was nothing but a succession of foothills behind which rose a line of jagged peaks. Gimlet said that these were part of the great Caucasian range that forms the spine of the land between the Black Sea and the Caspian.

The ground immediately in front of them did not look too bad. It was rough, with numerous outcrops of rock that arose above a sea of scrubby vegetation. There were a few small stands of what seemed to be natural forest. A strong scent of pine revealed that the trees were a species of conifer. There was no sign anywhere of cultivation. There was no road or track in sight; nor was there a light anywhere to suggest a human habitation.

Gimlet looked again at his wrist-watch. "Four o'clock," he observed. "We shall soon have to be looking for somewhere to lie up. When we've made a thorough survey of the place in daylight we shall know better just how the land lies. It's going to be hot tomorrow, so we shall have to find somewhere near water." He pointed half left to the outline of a hill, conical in shape, at no great distance. "If there is any water near, that would suit us for a temporary hide-out. We'll move in that direction. One way is as good as another at the moment."

As he finished speaking Gimlet started off towards the hill, the others automatically dropping into file behind him.

The foot of the immediate objective was reached without alarm, and without a living creature being seen. Another stiffish climb followed, up a rocky slope from which sprang a knee-high tangle of shrubs, and an occasional cedar tree. Each member of the party now chose the way that seemed easiest to him, without, of course, losing contact with his companions; and in doing this Cub was lucky, in that he struck what seemed to be a break in the herbage which, naturally, impeded progress. At first he took this to be a natural feature, due perhaps to a fault in the rock; but presently it dawned on him that it was in fact a faint track, although whether it had been made by men or animals he had no means of knowing. Looking ahead, he observed that it wound a meandering course towards a group of cedars that stood out darkly against the moon just below the summit. He lost no time in conveying this information to Gimlet, whereupon the others joined him on the path—if a path it could be called. Gimlet studied it for a minute or two, and surveyed thoughtfully the timber into which it ultimately disappeared. "It's certainly a track, but I don't think it's been used lately," he

remarked softly. “I was making for those trees, anyhow, so we may as well go on. Quiet, now. If there’s a house up there no doubt there will be dogs. If so, if they hear us, they’ll give us away.”

In twenty minutes or so the question was answered. There was a house, of sorts, in the trees. After a cautious approach it turned out to be an abandoned ruin, consisting of a single chamber, built of rough stones, about eighteen feet square, to which a doorless opening gave access. Ancient goat droppings made it clear that a long time had passed since the place had a human occupier. Gimlet, exploring, called attention to a rough cross over the doorway. “What I think we’ve struck is an ancient hermit’s cell,” he observed. “In the early days of Christian fervour there was hardly a hill of any size in Eastern Europe without its hermit. Heaven only knows how old this place is. It might even date back to biblical days. Queer things have happened in this country. Incidentally, it was somewhere near here that St. George was supposed to have slain the dragon. But never mind ancient history. The place should suit us admirably for the time being. Tidy up the floor a bit, Copper, and we’ll throw some grass on it. Cub, you might look around to see if you can find a spring. If someone once lived here there must be water handy.”

In the light of a waning moon Cub wandered around, and it was not long before he found what he sought—a little well into which trickled water from an underground supply. A crude potsherd beaker still lay beside it, and as he picked it up he couldn’t help wondering what hand had last held it. It was obviously very, very old. He went back and reported to Gimlet, who expressed his satisfaction.



Trapper, who with his jack-knife was cutting scrub for beds, made another discovery. This was a fruit of some sort. He had bumped his head against it while passing under a bushy tree. He held up a specimen, which was soon identified as a pomegranate.

“If the old buffer who lived ’ere lived on pomegranates ’e must ’ave ’ad the pip,” remarked Copper. “Ha! That’s a joke. I must remember that one.”

There were smiles as the work proceeded until a fairly comfortable bivouac had been made.

“All right, you fellows. Turn in now and get some sleep,” ordered Gimlet. “I’ll take first watch.”

CHAPTER III

INTO THE UNKNOWN

DAWN broke without a sound; at first with a glow that made the whole sky blush and turned the distant peaks to points of fire. Then, with majestic dignity, came the sun itself, to reveal a landscape that was inspiring in its wild magnificence, a scene in which the hand of man was nowhere visible. To the east, filling the horizon, rose the mighty backbone of the land, higher and yet higher until the topmost summits seemed to be holding up the dome of heaven.^[A] On the lower slopes, still shrouded in sombre shadows, one darker than the rest marked the limit of the timber line, while from the valleys rose billowing mist as white as bonfire smoke.

^[A] The Caucasus Range of mountains, 900 miles in length, is sometimes reckoned to be the boundary between Europe and Asia. The highest peak is Mount Elbruz (19,000 ft.), Mts. Koshtantau and Kazbek both rise about 17,000 ft. Eleven others are more than 10,000 ft.

The ground around the knoll on which Copper lay watching, with steady thoughtful eyes, was in plain view; and here the picture was as pleasant as nature in a rugged mood could make it. Wild flowers and shrubs of many sorts grew in profusion, with occasional groups of trees, or outcrops of rock, to lend variety. So slowly as to be almost imperceptible the hues of dawn drained from the sky to leave it an infinity of palest egg-shell blue, without a blemish to mar its pristine purity. There was not a movement anywhere. Even the air was still, giving promise of the heat of the day to come.



Cub followed Copper and Trapper into it.

Copper, whose turn it had been to mount guard, backed into the cell where the others lay, still sleeping. "Show a leg there—show a leg there," he requested curtly. "The sun's up. You're wastin' daylight."

The recumbent figures stirred, yawning.

Gimlet was first on his feet. "Trapper, lay on some breakfast," he ordered. "Cub, fetch some water. No tea this morning. I'm not risking lighting a fire." He joined Copper in the doorway. "Anything doing?" he asked, taking his binoculars from their case.

“Not a thing,” answered Copper. “Looks like we’ve got it all to ourselves.”

“It may look that way, but I doubt it,” returned Gimlet, subjecting the landscape to a thorough scrutiny.

“Looks safe enough ter make a move,” suggested Copper.

“I feel inclined to take a chance on it,” agreed Gimlet. “We should save a lot of time. Blundering about this sort of country in the dark is slow work. We’ll try it and see how things go.”

“Which way do you reckon to aim for, sir?” inquired Copper.

“I shall strike off south-east,” informed Gimlet. “That is, diagonally inland. In that way I think we’re bound to come on the river that is our guide to the fort. When I discussed the matter with Bigglesworth I told him to put us down a few miles north of the estimated position of the objective, and no doubt he did that. The river may be five, ten, or even twenty miles away. I don’t know. But by heading south we’re bound to strike it eventually. By working inland at the same time we shall get on higher ground, and so command a better view of the country. Stand fast. Don’t show yourself in the open in case there are eyes about. I’ll send you some breakfast.”

Gimlet went back into the cell, and over a meal of biscuit, bully and jam, informed the others of his decision.

In twenty minutes, with all signs of their brief occupation carefully removed, the party was ready to move off. Copper had nothing to report, so with Gimlet in the lead the expedition moved off down the hill. Reaching the plain below the positions were changed. Trapper, the most experienced scout, went on ahead to reconnoitre the ground, the rest following in silence.

Steady progress was made in this order, over gently rising ground, without incident of any sort, for upwards of an hour, by which time the sun was making its presence felt. The only living creature seen was an eagle that soared high in the blue. Then Gimlet raised a hand, bringing the party to a halt, as Trapper, bending low, came back, obviously with something to say.

“I think we are approaching a village, or a farm perhaps,” he reported. “There is a smell of goats. Also, there are some vines and apricot trees. They look wild, but some fruit has lately been picked. We had better go slowly now, till we see what this is.”

“Wait,” said Gimlet softly. “I heard something. Listen.”

This precaution was rewarded when, a minute later, a kid bleated, no great distance away. Following this came a sound as strange as in the circumstances could have been imagined. It was a mellow piping, as if

someone was playing on a tin whistle—a melancholy tune, in a queer minor key.

Beyond the fact that it announced the presence of a human being there was nothing particularly alarming about this. In fact, Cub found it rather pleasant, in that it gave life to what had begun to seem like a dead land. But the next development was disconcerting, to say the least of it. There came a sudden swishing, as if someone, or something, was advancing through the brushwood, and a moment later a ferocious-looking hound, a type of mastiff, appeared about a dozen yards away. Apparently it had caught their taint, for immediately on seeing the strangers it broke into a furious snarling, rolling back its lips to reveal formidable teeth.

The piping ended abruptly. A voice, the voice of a boy rather than a man, could be heard calling. The hound, still giving tongue to its anger, after a little while obeyed, backing away with obvious reluctance.

For some minutes no one moved. All stood still, listening intently. Then Trapper wormed his way forward, to return after a short absence to report that a youth was driving a herd of goats in the opposite direction. The hound was with him.

“He couldn’t have seen us, but the dog must have told him that someone was here, and he isn’t taking any chances of running into trouble,” murmured Gimlet. “He may go home and raise an alarm, so we’d better push on while we can. The district isn’t as depopulated as it would appear. We shall have to be careful. Go ahead, Trapper.”

The march continued in the same order as before, over ground that inclined steadily upwards towards the foothills of the main range. The charred ruins of a house were passed, with a tangle of overgrown vines, nut shrubs and orange trees, marking what had once been a garden.

“Looks like they’ve ’ad a fire ’ere,” remarked Copper, glancing at the blackened ruin. “No fire brigade ’andy, I reckon.”

The next feature was a ridge, with some awkward going, one leg up and the other down, on the far side. A valley was crossed, with a tiny brook of ice cold water from the high tops running through it. Here a halt was called for a rest and a drink, for the heat now being flung down by the still mounting sun was considerable, and everyone was perspiring.

“Lookin’ for a town, never mind a single building, in this joint, is a nice game played slow,” observed Copper, mopping his face with an already damp handkerchief. “Wot say you, Trapper ole chum?”

“You’ve said it, pal,” agreed Trapper.

Gimlet ignored the remark. "Let's push on," he ordered. "If we can strike the river before it gets dark we shall have made a good start. The higher we get the more likely are we to spot it, although against that, the more likely are we to be seen from the lower ground. We'll keep to cover as far as possible."

The march was resumed in a sultry silence. Gimlet striking diagonally across the brush-covered flank of a low hill. A variety of flies and mosquitoes did nothing to lessen the discomfort of the travellers, but apart from insects there was no sign of life anywhere. The country, for all its luxuriant vegetation, gave Cub a queer feeling of loneliness, of sadness, as if some blight had descended upon it to cause it to be deserted by the people who had once dwelt there. Occasional ruins supported this depressing aspect. It occurred to Cub that war must have swept over the land at no very distant date. The people had gone, and had never returned.

There was, however, an exception; or so it seemed, for Trapper presently brought the party to a halt while he examined a narrow track, not a yard wide, that wandered through the shrubs into the hills.

"This may be a goat track," said Trapper, "but it was used by a man not long ago. I see his footprint. We go slow till I see where it comes from."

Below the point where they stood the footpath disappeared into one of several growths of dwarf trees that dotted the hillside. What lay beyond this could not be seen, and it was with extreme caution that the party advanced until the view beyond came into sight. It was at once evident that Trapper's reading of the track had been correct, for there, about a hundred yards distant, stood a cottage, or at any rate, a human habitation, although it would hardly pass as a cottage by Western standards. It was a simple shack built of rough timber, roughly thatched with dry grass that was held down by numerous clods of earth from which weeds were sprouting. From a corner of this, apparently through a hole cut for the purpose, a thin wisp of pale blue smoke drifted into the still air.

As they crouched motionless, watching, a youngish woman came out followed by two children, and the three of them at once set to work, doing something in a pathetic little patch of cultivated ground adjacent to their home. It seemed to Cub that they were digging potatoes with their bare hands. The extreme poverty of the family was made obvious by the rags of clothing they wore. However, there was nothing unpleasant about a scene that fitted well into the general picture. It was, pondered Cub, one that might have been found in any rural district of Britain a hundred years ago.

Laying a finger on his lips Gimlet turned away, and Cub was about to follow when a hiss from Trapper sent them all flat. Peering through some stalks of long grass Cub saw the reason for the warning. A man was approaching the hut, striding down the hill from the opposite direction. He, too, was in rags, except for a fur bonnet that he wore on his head. Over his shoulder he carried a gun, and in the other hand he held a rabbit. He whistled, and as the woman turned he held up the dead animal. This evidently meant food, for the woman and her children at once dropped what they were doing and ran towards him, crying out joyfully. Having met, the four of them walked on towards the house, the man, by eloquent gestures, describing how he had stalked the rabbit and killed it.



Their joy was short-lived. Into the picture now entered tragedy, so dire, so grim, that Cub knew, no matter how long he lived, he would never forget it.

Round the shoulder of the hill, at a canter, appeared a party of about a dozen horsemen. That they were soldiers of some sort was apparent from the fact that they wore uniforms, and carried rifles, with bandoliers of cartridges across their chests.

Little guessing what was coming Cub looked at them curiously, and with no small alarm, for collision with such a party could only have results disastrous to their mission. The uniforms, grey, and buttoned high at the necks, told him nothing. Nor, for that matter, did the faces of the men, beyond the fact that the features, broad and flat, with high cheek bones, were not European, as

the term is generally understood. The eyes were narrow, and set with a suspicion of Oriental slant.

He had little time to consider the matter however, for the opening stages of the drama were already being enacted. The woman was the first of the

family to see the newcomers, and her behaviour left no one in doubt as to how she regarded them. She screamed. The children screamed at their mother's terror, and the three of them, crying loudly, fled towards the house.

The man must have known what was coming to him, but he stood his ground. Perhaps there was nothing else he could do. He dropped the rabbit and stood with his gun at the ready. Reaching him, the horsemen reined in. A brief altercation in high-pitched voices, between the leader of the horsemen and the lonely man, followed. It ended abruptly. Two horsemen dismounted. Seizing the man they tore the gun from his hands and flung it aside. They then dragged him to the wall of the house where, to Cub's unspeakable horror, before he realised what they were going to do, the wretched man was shot down by a ragged volley fired by the remainder of the troop who had by this time dismounted. Through the reverberation of the shots came the shrieks of those inside the house.

Just below Cub, Copper was muttering fiercely. "Are we goin' ter stand fer this?" he choked.

"Keep still," snapped Gimlet.

"But these murderin' swine——"

"Do as you're told."

The tragedy was now in its closing stages. The woman and her children were brought out, crying hysterically. The leader of the horsemen pointed in the direction they were to go. One of the men entered the house. Within a minute he was out again. Another minute and the flimsy hut was ablaze. As if they were throwing wood on a bonfire two of the soldiers picked up the body of the dead man and flung it in the flames. Sparks flew. Smoke rolled upwards. One of the troopers picked up the dead man's gun. All remounted, and rode away in the direction taken by the survivors of the ill-fated family.

Not until they were half a mile away did anyone speak. Then Copper broke the silence, and his voice was thick with savage disgust. "We're a bright lot, my oath we are," he rasped. "Sit 'ere and see a thing like that and not lift a finger. I'll never look a woman in the face again, s'welp me. Soldiers, eh? Pah! If this is wot it's come to, I'm finished."

"Stop yammering," grated Gimlet.

Cub looked at him. His face was as white as paper.

"We should 'ave done somethin'," persisted Copper.

"Any more insubordination from you, Corporal Colson, and I'll put you under arrest the moment we get home," rapped out Gimlet, in a voice as hard and brittle as glass. "I'm giving the orders here," he went on, "and I say that the domestic affairs of this unhappy country are no concern of ours."

Copper drew a deep breath.

Gimlet went on, very softly, now. "What would you have done?"

"I'd have done somethin'."

"What?"

"We could 'ave laid out some of those swine, anyway."

"To what purpose? It would have come to the same thing at the finish. We should now be on the bonfire with that wretched fellow, having failed, through our own folly, in the mission with which we have been entrusted. We were sent here to do a particular job and if it's humanly possible I'm going to do it. The private affairs of these people have no bearing on it. Do you think I enjoyed watching that ghastly business? What you have just seen has been going on here for years. No doubt it happens every day, and will go on happening. Now you know why the whole country is dead. That's all I have to say about it."

"Wot did they shoot the poor bloke for, anyhow?" demanded Copper. "Poaching one miserable rabbit?"

"I'd say they shot him for carrying a firearm," answered Gimlet. "The man must have known the risks he ran, and accepted them. He was unlucky. At least we know what to expect if we're caught. All right, that's enough about it. Let's get on."

Trapper, who had not said a word, spat out a stalk of grass that he had been chewing and rose to his feet.

"Wot troops d'you reckon they were?" asked Copper. "I'd like ter know in case I meet any of 'em again."

"I think they were Cossacks."

"Huh. Russians, eh?"

"Of a sort. The Cossacks are mostly nomadic tribesmen from Kirghiz."

"They looked a sour-faced crew ter me."

"They are sour-faced."

"Why?"

"Because they're always eating sour grapes."

"I don't get it."

"Listen," said Gimlet distinctly. "These men are Bolsheviks. How can they look anything but sour-faced when their minds are warped by envy—hatred of anyone better off than themselves? They go through life scheming how they can get by force, or by talking, what other people get by working."

That's how it is here. They boss the country. Now you know why it is as you see it. No country can thrive under a parcel of tyrants."

Copper sucked a tooth noisily. "Time somethin' was done about it, that's all I can say. Wot say you, Trapper, ole pal?"

Trapper clicked his tongue. "*Tch*. Same as you, and then some."

"Come on, that's enough talking," said Gimlet.

CHAPTER IV

A GRIM PROSPECT

AFTER a long, weary tramp, always uphill, a thick forest of pines brought relief, not only on account of the shade they provided, but the absence of undergrowth made the going much easier. Underfoot now was a bed of pine needles, from which sprang cushions of tough, emerald green moss, and orange fungi. The warm sweet smell of the pines was refreshing, too.

No one was prepared for what lay at the far side of this welcome interlude. It was a road, very rough, but still, considering the nature of the country, a road, although at home it would with greater accuracy be described as a farm track. At all events, it was wide enough for wheeled traffic. It ran across a fairly level strip of ground, a wide shoulder of the hill, which, on the far side, continued on under the usual tangle of shrubs. The party halted to regard it.

“As most roads serve the most important buildings it wouldn’t surprise me if this one led to the fort,” observed Gimlet.

“Why not ’ave a look?” suggested Copper. “Ain’t that a signpost down there—or do my eyes deceive me?” he pointed to where, some distance along, a white pyramid rose conspicuously from the side of the dusty track.

“No harm in looking,” agreed Gimlet, and the party went on, keeping, of course, in the shade of the trees.

As they drew nearer it became evident that Copper’s eyes had indeed deceived him. True, the monument might have been a landmark, but it was certainly not the sort he had in mind. Even until the last moment there was doubt about the material of which it was constructed, but when at last this became plain the party stopped. No one said a word. Each stood staring in varying degrees of amazement and disgust at as grim a warning as was ever set up beside a public thoroughfare. For the pyramid was composed entirely of human skulls—how many, Cub did not attempt to count, nor could he hazard a guess as to their age.

“Well, knock me purple,” breathed Copper at last. “If that ain’t a fair corker. I wonder who ’ad that bright idea for decorating the landscape?”

Gimlet shook his head. “Either there was a battle fought here at some time or other, or else some wretched tribe was rounded up and slaughtered. It isn’t unique. You’ll find this sort of thing all over the Balkans. Fighting

has been going on in these parts since history began. In the good old days—as people call them—it was the custom of the winning side to leave a mark to celebrate their victory; and as often as not the heads of unwanted captives provided a handy material.”

“Strewth! Wot a mob,” muttered Copper.

“I warned you that in this part of the world the people were rather behind the times,” said Gimlet casually. “After all, it wasn’t so long ago that we decorated our own cross-roads with the corpses of highwaymen and footpads, to say nothing of political prisoners. Along the banks of the Thames dangled in chains the bodies of pirates who were foolish enough to allow themselves to be captured.”

“True enough,” put in Copper. “Execution Dock they called it, down by Wappin’ High Stairs.”

“They must have been even more beastly than this unpleasant effort,” asserted Gimlet. “But don’t let’s stand here in the open or we may find our own heads topping up the pile. Hark! Under cover—quick!”

There was a general scramble to regain the trees as from the near distance came the sound of galloping horses; and a minute later, over the brow of the hill there burst into sight a small body of horsemen, riding as if their lives depended on it.

From the deep shadow of the wood Cub watched them tear past with a jangle of harness and a clatter of accoutrements, as wild yet picturesque a band of men as he had ever seen. All wore short grizzled beards, which gave them a certain similarity of appearance and suggested that they were of about the same age. The costumes they wore were alike in general design although not in colour, and in this respect the party created an impression of being theatrical to an almost absurd degree rather than real. In a vague sort of way the men reminded Cub of something, something, he thought, he had once seen on the screen in Technicolor, but he could not recall where or when. For clothes they wore what appeared to be a number of vests and jackets, brightly coloured but dirty. Below, held up by belts or sashes, were loose trousers half covered by a petticoat. For headgear one or two wore turbans; others, tall fur hats, mostly black. All bristled with weapons, from long-barrelled rifles, old-fashioned pistols, cutlasses and dirks, to a variety of daggers that were thrust in what seemed to be a most dangerous manner through their broad belts.

As the clatter and rattle died away, and the party disappeared round the next bend, Copper stared at Cub with saucering eyes. “Strike old Riley!” he

exclaimed. "Wot was all that—a circus on the move? I never saw a mob in a bigger 'urry ter get somewhere."

"That was no circus," asserted Gimlet. "Nor was it part of any procession. Make no mistake, those fellows are out on business. Whatever it is, our business is to keep out of it. This is a country of surprises, and it certainly isn't as dead as it looks. We'd better keep in cover. That doesn't mean we can't move. We can follow the road without walking on it. Come on—keep in the wood."

The party moved on, walking parallel with the track but keeping well inside the forest, eyes and ears now alert for danger. It was slowly dawning on Cub that in the apparent harmlessness of this pleasant countryside lay its greatest danger. It was clear enough now why there was no cultivation. Wise men did not advertise their whereabouts. The behaviour of the boy with the goats, the men on the road, and the sinister heap of skulls—which in any civilised community would have been removed—told a story not to be ignored. The purpose of the fortress, too, was explained.

It was well after midday when Gimlet again called a halt, this time of longer duration, for food and a rest. They were still in the forest, which seemed to run on interminably, covering the whole of the lower flank of a mountain. Everything was very still. Not a breath of air moved. Not an animal was to be seen. Not a bird twittered. The effect was a strange, sinister atmosphere, which without further warning caused everyone to speak in hushed whispers. Not that much was said as each member of the party got busy with his rations. There was no water, but some rather sour oranges that Cub had picked on the way served as thirst quenchers.

Half-way through the meal there occurred yet another incident, a minor one, but one which, nevertheless, conveyed the same furtive impression of hidden menace as the others. The party was, of course, still in the forest, but within sight of the road. On it now appeared a man, dressed in a fashion similar to that of the horsemen except that he was without weapons. His whole attitude spoke of fear, fear of something behind him. He moved with a limp, and with his left arm hanging uselessly by his side. Groaning, he hurried along, sometimes at a shuffle and sometimes breaking into a short run, keeping well to the side of the road as if prepared to dive into cover at an instant's notice. He looked constantly behind him as one who expects pursuit. He passed out of sight at the next bend and was seen no more.

"That poor blighter was in a bad way," declared Copper. "'E looked like 'e'd just fallen off a ladder. This is a rum show and no mistake. Wot's goin' on around 'ere? The place sort of gives you the creeps, don't it? Wot say you, Trapper, ole cock?"

“You’ve sure said it,” agreed Trapper warmly.

“It certainly isn’t the place for anyone suffering from a nervous breakdown,” observed Cub.

“If you go on talking like that we shall all have one,” averred Gimlet. “Pack up now. We’ll move on.”

“Off we go again,” breathed Copper.

“Not yet,” corrected Gimlet. “I’m beginning to think my original plan was best, and we ought to lie low until it’s dark. We’ve come a fair way and there’s no sense in trying to overdo it. Anyway, it’s time we had a look around to see where we are going. Trapper, you go ahead and see how far this forest stretches. Have a look to see if you can spot a river, or a valley which might hold one. We’re pretty high up now so you should get a wide view. There’s no great hurry.”

“Okay, sir,” agreed Trapper, rising. He moved off noiselessly and was soon lost to sight in the shadows.

He was away only for about twenty minutes, and when he returned, even before he spoke Cub knew that he had important information to impart.

Gimlet realised it, too, for he asked sharply: “What is it?”

“*Hélas!*” Trapper raised a beckoning finger. “Come. I show you something.”

Shouldering their loads the others fell in behind and followed him to the southern extremity of the forest, where further progress was barred by an obstacle that made Cub thank his lucky stars that they had not tried to make their way through the wood on a dark night. Without the slightest warning, the timber, and the ground, ended abruptly at the lip of a ravine so deep, and so dramatic in appearance, that at first sight of it he caught his breath. For a full five hundred feet the ground fell away, sometimes at a sharp angle, sometimes sheer, into a gloomy gorge, from the bottom of which, through a tangle of sub-tropical jungle, came faintly the splash and swirl of turbulent water. The cliff on the far side, distant about a hundred yards from the point where they stood, was of a similar nature.

At first Cub naturally supposed that it was this that Trapper had brought them to see; and to some extent it may have been; but it was not all. Rather more than a quarter of a mile above, the gorge widened considerably, and it was in this direction that Trapper now invited their attention. He did not speak. Words were unnecessary. His discovery was in full view.

At the place where the gorge widened, from the same side on which they stood, a blunt, flat-topped, sheer-sided promontory of rock projected with a downward slope into the void, in the manner of a spur. It was connected to

the mainland by an escarpment, a causeway perhaps twenty yards in width, so that the general effect was that of an arm with the fist clenched. But this Cub only noticed in an abstract sort of way. His eyes were held by a building that occupied almost the whole of the "fist"—that is, the outer end of the out-thrust arm of land. It was, he had no doubt, their ultimate objective. At all events, it was unmistakably a fortress, and it was of such dimensions that he could not imagine there could be another like it in the region. The size of it struck him speechless. He had expected something big, but nothing like the mighty grey pile that now rose up from the promontory below him. Built of the native rock it stood four-square to heaven, vast, grim, and, since it presented a flat face on every side, apparently impregnable. There were a few windows, but they were mere slits, so small in comparison with the rest as to be hardly noticeable. As his viewpoint was somewhat above, Cub could see that the actual building took the form of a hollow square. That is to say, it comprised nothing more than four great walls built round a central courtyard. These walls, fifty or sixty feet in thickness, were flat-topped except for a squat turret at each corner, and obviously provided enough accommodation within them to garrison a small army.

Gimlet drew a deep breath. "Well, I'd say that's it," said he, in a queer tone of voice which made it plain to Cub that even he was impressed.

"Then we might as well go 'ome and ferget about it," remarked Copper moodily. "Gettin' in and out of Dartmoor would be kids' work beside tryin' ter crack open *that* little crib."

Gimlet withdrew a little into the trees, and sitting down, studied the place through his binoculars. "There seems to be only one entrance, and that, as one would expect, faces the causeway affair. That, I imagine, is the only way the place can be reached at all. I wouldn't care to try to climb up to it from below. I can see a sentry, or a guard of some sort, on duty at the gate."

"Only one?" asked Copper, more hopefully.

Cub could see the man, dwarfed to insignificance by the immensity of the building against which he stood.



"I can see a sentry on duty at the gate."

"I can only see one," replied Gimlet. "But there seems to be a sort of guardhouse at the place where the causeway joins the mainland, and no doubt there will be troops in it. There seems to be a sort of gate there, too, although I can't see it very well from here. I think we should see more if we moved our position to somewhere in line with the place. We shall have to get nearer, anyway." He encased his glasses and got up. "Let's try it. Keep well back. We mustn't be seen."

He led the way towards the position he had indicated, which meant a walk of some minutes. This brought them back, as Cub thought it would

from the direction, to the road, which confirmed what Gimlet had suspected, that it served the fort. They struck it at a point some distance from the place where they had originally found it. Here the aspect was entirely different, for, like all mountain roads, it did not run straight but was forced by the configuration of the ground to rise and fall, and at the same time wind a sinuous course to avoid numerous obstructions. A little distance above where they stood it met the gorge at an acute angle, and then ran along the edge of it. At the same time it climbed a little hill where it disappeared from sight. At the brow of this hill a side turning to the right dived down rather sharply to the fort. Beyond this the road continued. Where it finally ended was a matter for conjecture.

At the top of the hill, which overlooked the fort, beside the road, a position that must have been conspicuous for many miles around, there had been erected a short line of rough timber tripods, which at first Cub supposed to be—without giving the matter any serious thought—the crude equipment of a gang of road menders, or possibly a device for lowering heavy loads to the fort below. Someone had apparently been at work there recently, for he had left some garments hanging on a pulley. All this Cub took in at a glance. He did not comment on it; nor did the others. There was at this juncture no reason to suppose that these erections were to play a vital part in their affairs.

Gimlet pointed to the opposite side of the road, where the ground, rising towards a ridge several hundred feet above, was covered with a dense growth of hazel, juniper and other shrubs, a jungle that ran parallel with the road for as far as it could be seen. “I think that’s the place for us,” he observed. “We’ll cross over and work our way along. From the top of that rise we shall have a good view of the road, even if we can’t actually see the fort. There’s no great hurry about that. From the behaviour of the people we’ve seen on the road there seems to be something going on, so I think we ought to lie low for a bit, rather than risk being seen by trying to do too much in one day. We should be snug in that thick stuff. Let’s go over.”

After a quick glance up and down the road to make sure it was clear, the party moved over and with some difficulty forced a passage into the thicket. Then, turning to the right, keeping well back from the road, they carried on until they were in a position that overlooked the top of the rise, and the side road that turned off to the fort. This disappeared over the brow of the hill, so that they could not actually see the building itself, which lay some way below. The main road could be seen in both directions for some distance.

“All right. You can sit down and make yourselves comfortable,” said Gimlet. “We’ll keep an eye on the road for a bit. Presently, if things are

quiet, we'll move forward and have a dekkko at the fort. We know where it is; that's the great thing. We've done pretty well for one day."

Cub needed no second invitation. He found a spot from which he could see a good section of the road and sat down to await events. Immediately in front of him now were the derrick-like erections that he had previously observed. Having nothing better to do he regarded them with greater attention to detail, trying to make out exactly what they were. His eyes wandered to what he had taken to be some garments left by a workman. They hung, motionless in the still air, from a rope. His eyes rested on them, at first uncomprehendingly; but as, quite slowly, he realised what he was in fact looking at, the colour drained from his face and his mouth went dry. The clothes it is true, were there. So was the man to whom they belonged. He was inside them, hanging by the neck.

A long, slowly expelled breath, came from Copper, who was looking in the same direction. "Strike me pink," he whispered hoarsely. "We've chosen a bright spot ter sit, my oath we 'ave—right next ter the blinkin' gallows."

Gimlet spoke, and his voice was curt. "Don't talk so much, or we shall be the next to decorate them."

CHAPTER V

FALLEN AMONG THIEVES

TIME passed slowly. Physically, Cub was comfortable enough, but mentally he felt sick. Try as he would, he could not prevent his eyes from returning constantly to the horrid object that dangled below him—fortunately at some distance. Otherwise the position would have been intolerable. They could, he thought morosely, hardly have chosen a more depressing spot to sit. The country, Gimlet had said, was behind the times. To what extent was fast becoming evident. Yet, he reflected, this very thing had been going on over most of Europe during the war. It was one thing to read about it, but a different matter altogether to see it in reality. More clearly than ever before he began to appreciate the advantages of living in a free country.

It must have been about an hour later that his attention was directed into a different channel. The first indication of this was a sound as if the others were whispering together. At first he ignored it, but when, presently, it was repeated, he looked round as a matter of interest to where the others were sitting, or reclining, to ascertain what was going on. He became slightly puzzled when he saw that they were not, in fact, in conversation. Gimlet was sitting a little apart, gazing at the road. Copper was reclining on an elbow, thoughtfully chewing a match stick. Trapper was whittling a hazel twig that he had cut from the undergrowth.

Cub stared at them, suddenly aware of an uncomfortable feeling of insecurity. He was sure that someone had spoken. Who was it? Even as he pondered the problem the sound came again, from somewhere to his right—a fleeting whisper like the rustle of corn in a breeze. It was, unmistakably, a human voice. Gimlet, he perceived, had also heard it, for turning his head sharply to where Copper and Trapper were sitting close together, he hissed: “Stop chattering, you fellows.”

Copper looked indignant. “Me? I never said a word, sir,” he whispered.

Cub could sympathise with him, for he knew from the direction of the sound that whoever had spoken it was not Copper. Who was it? Moving his position slightly he parted some twigs with his hands and peered through a tangle of interlaced branches at a small open space that occurred a little way beyond. His heart seemed to take a dive when he caught a glimpse of an uncouth figure creeping from one bush to another. In a moment the man was

out of sight, but Cub retained a clear impression of a brown face with a short beard, a dirty red blouse, and a cartridge-studded belt through which had been thrust a long-barrelled pistol. His lips were dry from shock as, after allowing the branches to return noiselessly to their places, he crawled swiftly to Gimlet, putting a finger to his lips to prevent anyone from speaking. Not until all heads were together did he whisper: "We are not alone in these bushes."

Gimlet frowned in surprise and concern.

Cub went on, his lips no more than forming the words. "I saw a man. There must be more, because I heard whispering."

"Don't move a muscle," returned Gimlet, his eyes roving round the bushes that hemmed them in.

Minutes passed, long, silent, sultry minutes, each one a period of suspense that vibrated on the nerves. Then, somewhere not far away, a twig cracked. In the ordinary way the sound was so slight that it might have passed unnoticed; but in the circumstances it was as brittle with meaning as a pistol shot. No one moved. No one spoke. All sat motionless, hands on weapons, eyes trying to probe the lattice-work of twigs.

It was a situation as disturbing as any Cub could remember. The strain brought beads of sweat to his forehead. How many men were there in these bushes beside themselves? What were they doing? Had Gimlet and his party, for all their caution, been seen, and followed? Were these wild men of the woods seeking them, in their own stealthy manner? It rather looked like it.

All these conjectures were brought to an end in a way that no amount of foresight could have envisaged. It started with a scrape of marching feet, approaching, although as yet the marchers were unseen—a weird effect that did nothing to lessen the tension. Curiously mingled with the sound was a jangling, as if of chains. A voice barked an order, and while this was at least real enough, after the long silence it was startling in the extreme. Then, over the dusty brow of the hill, from the direction of the fort, appeared a cavalcade consisting of a dozen men in dark grey uniforms, much the worse for wear, with rifles at the slope. Beside them, a drawn sword in his hand, marched one who was evidently an officer. The squad was obviously an escort, for in the centre of it strode a remarkable figure so heavily manacled that it could only keep the pace with difficulty.

It was on this figure that Cub's eyes became focused, for it was as picturesque as anything he had ever seen on the stage or a cinema screen. It was that of a tall, gaunt man, whose age was not easy to determine as the lower part of his face was buried in a beard the colour of brass. From the

upper part of this sprang a nose as proud and aggressive as an eagle's beak. The clothes he wore were for the most part those of the traditional operatic bandit—yellow waistcoat, buttoned high at the throat, short crimson jacket of a silky material, with loose sleeves caught in at the wrists. Under this was a broad blue cummerbund wrapped round and round the stomach, holding up, strangely enough, a tartan kilt. The legs were bare above the tops of black riding boots.

So much Cub had time to note before the party, at a word of command, came to a stop in front of the scaffold, which made its purpose plain. One of the escort stepped forward. In his hands he carried a looped rope, a rope with a noose at one end. This, with a deft flick, he tossed over the derrick. The man in shackles was pushed forward.

Cub's first thought, as soon as he realised what was afoot, was that they had arrived too late. That the prisoner was the man they had come to rescue he felt sure, because, for one thing, the clothes he wore might have been Turkish in design, if out of date according to modern standards—not that Cub knew much about such things. Fear was, perhaps, father to the thought. What Gimlet would do, if anything, he could not imagine. It would go against the grain to sit there and watch a man hanged, yet to take on the escort would be equivalent to committing suicide. He glanced at Gimlet in the hope of getting an indication of how he was feeling about the situation.

Gimlet's face wore the expression of a very worried man, and Cub could well understand why. In the first place, the prisoner might, or might not, be the man they had come to rescue. Even if he had been positively identified as the Pasha, nothing could, within reason, be done about it now. It would be pointless to throw away their own lives to no useful purpose. Yet a decision in the matter had to be reached instantly. A



delay even of a minute would be fatal, for the noose was being lifted over the prisoner's head.

What Gimlet's decision would have been Cub never knew. It was never demanded, for at this stage the matter passed out of his hands into others which Cub had forgotten, but which, as he realised a moment later, must have assembled for the purpose.

The presence of the other men in the thicket was explained when from it arose such a volume of sound that Cub flinched under the shock. First came a yell that was evidently a signal for attack, for immediately upon it came the thunder of musket shots. More yells, more shots, and the whole hillside sprang to life. Clouds of gunpowder smoke rolled into an atmosphere that was now all noise and confusion.

For a minute Cub was dazed by the clamour. At any rate, he was unable to think coherently. Beyond the obvious fact that the troops had been attacked in force nothing was clear. Smoke obscured the view. Men crashed past him, yelling like madmen. Bullets and small shot whistled in all directions, and it was instinct rather than reason that made him throw himself flat to lessen the chances of being hit. And there, for a little while he was content to remain. In a vague sort of way he hoped that the newcomers would get their man and depart. And this, no doubt, they would have done, had they been allowed to do so. But, as the smoke cleared somewhat, Cub perceived that this was still some way from being achieved. The escort was not giving up its prisoner readily, for hand to hand fighting was now going on around him; one reason for this being, of course, that the prisoner, in his shackles, was in no state to run over open ground, much less through a jungle. Two wild-looking men, on hands and knees, regardless of swords that flashed and pistols that spat, were trying to remove them. Into the middle of all this, reinforcements arrived for the escort in the shape of a troop of Cossacks who came galloping up the slope from the fort into the fray.

Close to Cub's ear, above the din, came Copper's voice, strident with excitement. "Crikey! Wot a picnic! I'm fer gettin' outer this. Wot about it?"

With this suggestion Cub was in full agreement, but it was soon plain that it was easier said than done. The question was, which way to go? The choking powder smoke made things more difficult in that it sometimes reduced visibility to a few yards. From the sounds, the rescuers were now retreating up the slope. Whether or not they had got their man Cub did not know, but they were certainly being pursued.

“Blimey! If we ain’t careful we’re a goin’ ter find ourselves the meat in the sandwich,” declared Copper.

Gimlet suddenly appeared. “Up the slope,” he ordered briskly. “It’s the only way.”

That was the last Cub saw of him for some time, for he lost no time in obeying. It seemed the only thing to do. To remain where they were would be to invite being shot, or taken prisoner by the troops, which would probably come to the same thing in the end. Up the slope Cub went, and in trying to find the easiest way through the tangle of undergrowth he soon lost sight of his companions. This did not worry him overmuch at the time for he expected they would be able to rally at the top. The thing was, he decided, to get out of the reach of the grey-coated troops.

In this endeavour he was not alone. Men on both sides of him were doing the same thing—men of the rescuing party. Once he was nearly cut off when some of the troops appeared on his flank. Shots were fired on both sides, and in this he joined, for the business had clearly become a matter of life or death. Actually, this may have saved him trouble later on, for it did at least show the rescuers, with whom he was now travelling, which side he was on. When he produced his automatic and began blazing into the shrubs from which danger threatened, a wild-looking ruffian close at hand cheered him on with shouts of encouragement.

The retreat lasted for the best part of half an hour, and it was a rearguard action, although with diminishing force, all the way. Being uphill and through thick cover, before the end Cub was getting exhausted. Panting, soaked with perspiration, his face scratched and his clothes torn, he struggled on in the company of a set of men as barbaric as he had ever seen. Sometimes they looked at him and laughed, as if it was all good fun. Cub grinned back, although to him the situation was anything but funny. Even at that critical moment he found time to wonder who or what these fellows took him to be. Perhaps, as the battle was a “free for all”, it didn’t matter. What began to worry him was how he was going to find Gimlet at the end of all this.

Slowly the noise subsided. The shooting, which had for some time been sporadic, fizzled out altogether. Gasping, wiping sweat from his eyes, Cub struggled on up the slope with his rough but romantic-looking companions. He remained with them as the lesser of two evils. It was plain now that they regarded him as being one of themselves, but it would be a different story if he fell into the hands of the troops. He could only hope that none of the others had been caught. There was not much risk of that while they were on their feet, he thought. What he feared was that one of them might have been

hit by a stray bullet, for in that case, if the others were near, they would not leave the wounded man.

At length the ridge was reached. Cub shouted, but getting no reply, went on down into the valley beyond. The going was still difficult. Instead of climbing up, it was now a matter of scrambling down, hanging on to any handhold that offered. In the middle of this he suddenly found himself next to Copper.

“Wotcher, chum, ’ow do yer go?” enquired Copper breezily.

“Not so good,” panted Cub. “Where are the others?”

“Search me, mate,” returned Copper. “We’ll look for ’em when we get clear of the shindy. Wot a party we dropped into, and not ’alf. Gimlet chose a nice spot fer a sit-down, my oath ’e did. First time in me life I didn’t know which side I was fightin’ for.”

“I chose the wild boys,” Cub told him.

“Same as you, mate,” asserted Copper. “I didn’t like the look of them greycloths. From wot I see with me own eyes they’re a sight too ’andy hangin’ people. The hangman got ’is block knocked off, any old how.”

“Did he?”

“Too true. A bloke fetched ’im a beauty on the napper with the thick end of a pistol that should put ’im outer business for a bit.”

“Haven’t you seen Gimlet at all?” asked Cub.

“Once, just before we got to the top. He was going up the ’ill like a lamplighter with another bloke—I believe, the one they were goin’ ter ’ang.”

“I hope we soon find him,” said Cub. “Goodness only knows where we’re going.”

“It’s all the same ter me, mate,” returned Copper cheerfully.

Deep down in the valley they came upon some men drinking at a brook. Not far, away a horn began a discordant hooting.

“I’d say that’s the rallying signal,” remarked Copper looking in the direction of the sound.

They turned towards it, and it was soon seen that he was right. In an open glade a number of men had already collected, and others were coming in.

“Strewth! Wot a mob,” muttered Copper. “If my ole Ma could see wot sort o’ company ’er little boy was in she’d throw a fit. Hello, there’s the bloke they were goin’ ter ’ang. There ’e is, over there, ’avin’ a wash.”

Now that the battle was over Cub noticed that they were being regarded with a good deal of curiosity. Some men, talking earnestly, obviously discussing them, came towards them. Then, to Cub's great relief, out of the undergrowth came Gimlet, with Trapper, both looking more than somewhat dishevelled. Seeing Cub and Copper they came over to them, voicing their satisfaction that they had survived the conflict. What they had escaped into, however, was a matter of some doubt, for the party was soon surrounded by a curious crowd—which, in the circumstances, was not surprising.

The ranks parted to admit into the circle the man who was to have been hanged. He, too, regarded them with a puzzled expression. Twice he half opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something but did not know how to begin. Actually, his trouble was, as he explained later, he did not know what language to use. Finally he asked what was obviously a question in a language unknown to any of them.

Gimlet shook his head.

The man tried another, with like result, upon which he shook his head and looked at his companions helplessly.

Gimlet took a chance as the only way out of the difficulty. Tapping himself on the chest with a finger, he said: "British."

The look of amazement that came over the man's face was almost comical. "You are—*British?*" he questioned incredulously, slowly, but without a trace of accent.

"We are," answered Gimlet.

"How very extraordinary," said the man in a voice of wonder. "So am I."

It was Gimlet's turn to stare. "You're British!" he exclaimed.

"Alexander McAlister is my name," said the man, smiling. "Alexander Gregorovitch McAlister was the name I was christened. Gregorovitch was my mother's maiden name." He touched his kilt. "Didn't you recognise the tartan?" he enquired, a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

Gimlet admitted that he hadn't. He might have added that the garment was so worn and faded with age that a Scot might well have failed to name it.

"The kilt belonged to my father," explained the man simply. "Of course, I'm not called McAlister here. The word would come strangely to Eastern lips. Here I am Gregorovitch, Greggo to my band, Greggo the Scourge to certain other people. For, you see, I am the most renowned bandit chief between Persia and the Ukraine."

This seemed to tickle Copper's sense of humour. He laughed raucously. "Well, if that ain't a fair coughdrop," he chuckled. "This will be somethin' ter talk about when I get 'ome."

The Scot's eyes twinkled. "First, you will have to get home," he reminded. He looked at Gimlet. "For that matter, what are you doing here?"

"That," answered Gimlet cautiously, "is a long story."

"Come over here and tell me about it while my men brew some tea," invited the bandit.

"That's good news anyway," said Copper. "A cup o' tea is just wot I could do with."

"We like our tea even here," said the Scot. "It is wonderful to hear my father's language spoken again after so many years."

"What about the people who were going to hang you?" asked Gimlet. "Have you come far enough to be safe from them?"

Greggo smiled contemptuously. "That Kalmuck riff-raff wouldn't dare to follow me here," he said confidently. "They know where to stop. You see, I am the real ruler here. The occupying troops may patrol the roads and the cities, but that is all. Come over here where we shall be quiet. Then we can talk."

CHAPTER VI

A STRANGE SAD STORY

NOTHING more was said until they were seated in a quiet corner of the glade, where big mugs of sweet black tea, and a wooden dish of oatcakes, were soon set before them. A box of long, yellow, Russian cigarettes, was also produced, and the lone Scot put it where all could reach.

“Now tell me what you are doing in this beautiful but savage country,” he requested. “You must know that if you are caught by its self-appointed rulers you will never leave it?”

“Yes, we knew that before we came; for we came here with a purpose, not by accident,” answered Gimlet. “But first, will you tell me something that I am most anxious to know?”

The bandit assented.

“Were you a prisoner in the fort near the place where you were to be hanged?”

“Yes.”

“Is the fort called Kalashan?”

“It is.”

“Were there any other prisoners there besides yourself?”

“Many.”

“Did you see them?”

“No.” The bandit smiled grimly. “But I sometimes heard them calling for mercy. Mercy! What do those ruffians of the garrison know of mercy?”

“Mercy from what?” asked Gimlet curiously.

“Whippings, and horrors better left unsaid.”

“By whose orders?”

“The governor of the fort. It is to me an extraordinary thing that a creature that looks like a man, and speaks like a man, can have instincts more debased than those of any wild beast. I simply cannot understand it.”

“What’s his name?”

“Vladimir Karzoff. He wears the uniform of a Russian general, although where at first he saw the light of day I couldn’t guess. He is certainly more Asiatic than European. I am told that he was at one time a driller at the

Anglo-Persian oil fields, which probably accounts for the fact that he speaks English and Persian with equal fluency. His brutal treatment of the men under him caused so many strikes that he was sacked. He retaliated, so it is said, by murdering the white manager. Then he bolted with three cronies who are still with him. They act as a sort of personal bodyguard. The Revolution gave him a chance to show just what sort of foul brute he is. No doubt he would be a revolutionary in any country. He is a big man with a broad flat face and a straggling black beard. You will know him if you see him, which I sincerely hope, for your sakes, you will not.”

“Big bad wolf, eh?” put in Copper.

“A wolf, cruel though it is by nature, would be a lamb in comparison,” said the Scot bitterly.



Governor Vladimir Karzoff

“Did you by any chance learn the names of any of the prisoners?” asked Gimlet.

“I was never in a position to speak to them. I knew of only one. He was a merchant of Baku who had a country house not far away. He was denounced for making a remark against the government. He was hanged. His body is still on the scaffold—you may have noticed it?”

Gimlet nodded. “We did. We saw something of the behaviour of the occupying troops as we came here.” In a few words he described what had happened at the cottage.

“That sort of thing is an everyday occurrence here,” said the bandit. “The country is practically depopulated. The few people who remain live in terror, slowly starving to death. All food belongs to the government. No one may possess a firearm to shoot a bird or a rabbit. Through my spies I shall learn the names of those who murdered that man and burnt his house. For that they shall pay. I, Greggo the Scourge, swear that.” The speaker looked at Gimlet critically. “From your questions I think there is someone in the fort in whom you are interested?”

Gimlet agreed.

“And you hope to get him out?”

“That is our purpose here.”

The bandit king shook his head. “I wouldn’t say that it is impossible because, as I have seen, anything in this strange country is possible. But your task is one which no man in his right mind would undertake. I could not get out; nor could my men, who are brave, and know every inch of the country, get me out.”

“But you did get out,” reminded Gimlet.

“That was not the same thing,” argued the bandit. “I was brought out.”

“To be hanged.”

“Yes.”

“Why were you brought out?”

“Partly through the folly and incompetence of the Governor-General in Baku, who wanted a public hanging to make an example of me, and partly through the vanity of Karzoff and his Kalmuck soldiers who would let everyone see how well they did their work. Of course, the date and time of the hanging was a secret, or supposed to be, for fear of what actually did happen. But I have spies everywhere, and my men, learning the secret, did what was necessary. The wretched country is now so corrupt that money will buy anything or anybody. I think it is because everyone needs money to get away from a place that has become accursed. Tell me; who is it you seek—or would you rather not tell?”

Gimlet smiled. "As from what you tell me nothing here is secret you may as well know at once. I hope to rescue a Turkish gentleman of importance who had the misfortune to be shipwrecked on the coast. We received information that he is a prisoner in Fort Kalashan. I thought perhaps you would be able to confirm that, because if he is not there we should be taking useless risks in going on with our mission."

The bandit drew long and thoughtfully at his cigarette. "I may be able to find out for you because I have friends inside the place as well as outside. There again is where our enemies are so foolish. The Kalmuck soldiers will not do menial work—woodcutting, water carrying, and so on—so people of the country are taken in and forced to do it. Officially they are paid servants, but, of course, they never see the money. Karzoff puts it all into his own pocket. That is how everything here is done. The workers are really prisoners, and slaves at that; but because of the duties they have to perform, which sometimes take them outside the fort—under guard, of course—they have a certain amount of licence. It was through one of them, that my men knew where I was, and the hour fixed for my execution. Naturally, they are on our side, knowing that their only hope of ultimate freedom is through us. Through them I may be able to help you; be sure that I will do all in my power; but it is a dangerous game that you play."

There was a short silence while the bandit chief considered the matter. Then he went on. "For the time being you could not do better than stay here while I put my spies to work. Here you will be safe. While you wait I will tell you all I know about the fort. By the way, how did you come to this country?"

"By aeroplane."

"And how do you intend to go home?"

"By the same method."

"You may be here for some time. The thing you hope to do could not be arranged in a day."

"The man who brought me here will wait."

"Very well. The first thing I must do is find out if this man of yours is in the fort. What is his name?"

"Ismit Pasha."

"I will remember it," said the bandit. "You must understand that I would, if I could, release every prisoner in the place, particularly some who are there under suspicion of having befriended me or my men, or sent me information. No man deserves such a fate as to be shut up for life in that

dreadful place, for that is what imprisonment there means. The only release is death.”

“Do you intend to stay here yourself?” asked Gimlet.

“For a little while, yes, while I make fresh plans. My scouts will warn me if there is danger. The Kalmucks do not venture far from the road, for they know the fate that awaits them should they meet my men. Sometimes there is a big attack on us. When that happens we retire to a place in the mountains where not all the armies of Europe could find us. This is a strange, strange land, where strange things happen.”

Gimlet smiled. “I can believe that.”

“For instance, you would not expect to find a Scotsman living here?”

“I would have been less surprised to find an Eskimo or a Hottentot,” stated Gimlet. “Not that I should have taken you for a Scot in that colourful rigout.”

A ghost of a smile softened the Scotsman’s face. “In this land a bandit chief must dress for the part. No man would get a following were he to take to the hills in a blue serge suit. What I wear, except for my kilt, is the old-time dress of the country. Here, fashions have changed little, except in the towns, in a thousand years or more. But you must be wondering how I came to be here in the first place, and why I stay.”

Gimlet confessed to some curiosity in the matter.

“Sometimes I myself wonder why I stay,” said the Scot with a sigh. “For I am getting old, and would see my native heather before I die. Besides, I am weary of this silly game of piling up riches which I shall never spend.”

“Then why do you go on doing it?” asked Cub.

“Because, my boy, it is one way I can hurt the people I hate, and have good cause to hate. There are other ways, but robbing them is one. Still, one gets tired even of hating.”

“Do you really mean that you don’t spend what you steal?” enquired Cub curiously.

“Sometimes I give money away. My men use some; not much, for they have no more use for money than I have. I have a big treasure hidden away in the hills. It must sound silly to you, so much money and nothing to do with it.”

“Why not give it ter the poor people?” suggested Copper.

The Scot shook his head. “That would only do them an injury. If they were seen spending money they would be asked where it came from. If they told the truth they would be punished. If they lied it would still do them no

good, because the money would be taken away from them by the local commissars and I should have the trouble of stealing it all over again.”

“Why not give it to the hospitals?” suggested Cub.

“Hospitals? There are none. No. Think of a way to spend money usefully here and you will do me a service. Some goes for bribes, for services rendered, but I still have much more than I need.”

“Who are these men of yours?” was Cub’s next question.

“Outcasts, like me.”

“Are there no Britishers among them?”

“No. I am alone. There are Russians, Armenians, Persians, Syrians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Circassians, and many tribesmen of mixed breed, all waifs and strays of society because they prefer freedom to a yoke. I haven’t seen a Britisher in thirty years. They all went, all were killed, long ago, when I took to the hills.”

“I’d say it’s time *you* went ’ome,” said Copper bluntly.

“That’s just it,” said the Scot sadly. “You see, this is my home. I have never had another. Scotland to me is only a name, but one that moves me strangely, because something inside me tells me that it is to that country I really belong. I would like to see it. Often I have thought of going, but there are difficulties. Perhaps I have left it too late, and now lack the initiative to make the effort.”

“*Tch*. A man who stops to smooth out difficulties gets no place,” declared Trapper.

Looking at the Scot, Gimlet went on. “What freak of fate put you here in the first instance?”

“I will tell you,” answered the bandit. “This is how it came about. To tell all the story would take too long, but there will be enough time, while my men are broiling some meat, to run over the plain facts.” Reaching for another cigarette he lighted it, and began.

“Rather more than thirty years ago I was a respectable young man living happily with his family in Baku, which is the great oil port on the Caspian Sea, on the other side of the Isthmus, in the Republic of Azerbaijan. A lot of British money had been invested there, for most of the development of the place had been done by British engineers. One of those who came in the early days was a Scotsman named Angus McAlister. He was my father. In Baku he met one of the beautiful, blue-eyed, golden-haired girls, for which the Circassian Republic is—or was—famous. Her parents had fled from Circassia when that country was overrun by the Russians in the last century.

My father and the girl were married. I was one of their two children. My father prospered, and just before the first Great War was the owner of some of the most important petroleum undertakings. With my sister we were a united family, and lived in a fine big house. Little did we guess in those happy days what disasters were to fall upon us.

“The Kaiser’s war broke out. We stayed in Baku, my father busy with his oil projects and my sister and me at our studies under an English tutor. English was the language used in our house. Then, in 1918, came the calamity that destroyed us and everything we possessed. The collapse of Russia in the war, was, as you know, followed by the Bolshevik Revolution. Crazed with success and seeking plunder, into Baku poured the Bolsheviks with their Mongolian supporters. For us began a reign of terror. We were helpless. It was too late to leave the country. Britain, still busy with the war against the Germans, could do nothing for us. My sister was abducted and never seen again. My father, who protested, was shot dead on his own doorstep. Our house was set on fire. Our oil wells were already blazing, set on fire for no reason by these power-mad vandals. I fled with my mother to the mountains, where, unable to stand the rigours of the winter, she died. I buried her myself. Her grave is not far from here. I was left alone in the world. In my grief and misery, I, too, would have died, but there was something, perhaps it was my Scottish ancestry, that would not allow such an easy way of escape. So I lived. I lived for one thing—revenge. In me was born such a hatred as few men know, hatred of the barbaric murderers and everything they stood for. I became a wild beast of the mountains, taking revenge on the invaders when opportunity offered.

“I was not alone in the mountains. There were others like me, men who had lost all and lived for no other purpose than to redress their wrongs by the only way open to them. It was a story as old as the hills themselves, the story of Hereward the Wake, of Robin Hood, and many others. After a time, perhaps because it was known that I came of a good family, or because I could plan forays and carry them out, I became the leader of as desperate a band of outlaws as ever lived and fought under the banner of freedom. They called me The Scourge, and a scourge I was.

“Having started there was no going back. Not that I wanted to go back. What was there for me to go back to? The only satisfaction I could get was by injuring those who had wantonly destroyed everything I loved. The country settled down, more or less. But not me. I played havoc with the enemy, to the secret delight of those people of the country who were forced to work for him. As the oil refineries were repaired I set fire to them. I tore up the pipe lines. I blew up roads and tore down telegraph wires. I raided the

coffers of the tax collectors and the houses of the upstart commissars appointed to hunt me down. The treasures they had stolen from their rightful owners, most of whom were dead, I seized. A price was put on my head. Today it stands at a million roubles. Traps were set for me, but the people, hating their new masters, sent me warning. And so it has gone on, year after year, for thirty years—a lifetime.”

“But they caught you in the end?” prompted Cub.

“That came about this way,” said the bandit. “A week ago I went to Baku in disguise to fetch medicines for one of my men who was sick. It was a long journey and I travelled on horseback. Returning, a bear crossing the road unexpectedly made my horse shy. Taken unawares I was thrown, and falling on my head was knocked unconscious. Had I been found by people of the country all would have been well, but by an evil chance the first people to come along was a patrol of Cossacks from the fort. When I recovered consciousness—for I was only stunned—it was to discover that I was at last inside the fort. The governor, in great glee, informed his masters, who sent back word that I was to be hanged forthwith. I do not know the details yet, but it seems that spies informed my band, with what result you know. At the time, my men had already gathered in force for an attack on the fort. As things fell out this was not necessary.”

“And it so happened that we chose that very spot from which to reconnoitre the fort,” said Gimlet.

The bandit smiled wanly. “And still we live to be thorns in the flesh of our enemies.”

There was silence for a few minutes while purple twilight dimmed the scene.

“That is the end of my story,” concluded the lonely Scot, so heavily that Cub felt a sudden surge of sympathy for him. “I must go now and speak with my men,” he went on. “Do I understand that you would like me to set inquiries afoot about the man you have come to rescue?”

“I’d be very grateful if you would,” answered Gimlet.

“Very well. And you will stay with us meantime?”

“If we may.”

“It will be a pleasure,” stated the bandit chief. “You cannot imagine what a joy it is to me to hear my own tongue spoken again after so many long years,” he added, as he went off.

Taking his soap and towel Cub walked through a shadowy, unreal world, towards the brook, marvelling at the extraordinary turn their adventure had taken. Were all these things a matter of luck, he mused, or was there some

purpose, some guiding hand, in them? He found the question not easy to answer.

CHAPTER VII

USEFUL ALLIES

THE next two days passed pleasantly enough while the brigand leader waited for his scouts to report. In the meantime, Gimlet and his party enjoyed the hospitality offered them. The bandits were a rough but cheerful lot who looked what they were, lounging about, doing nothing in particular—smoking, telling stories, or listening to weird, haunting music, played by one of their number on a three-cornered string instrument. Cub came to know several of them by sight, but their names were not easy to remember. The colour of their faces varied from white, through browns to nearly black. Some were Christians, some Mahometans, and others professed queer tribal religions of their own. One or two of the older ones remembered a few words of the English they had picked up in the old days at the oil wells.



A lot of time was spent talking to Macgreggo, as Copper had aptly named the outlawed Scot. He told more of his history, and in describing the

fort gave the rescue party an idea of the difficulties of the task to which they had pledged themselves. Indeed, Cub formed the secret opinion that without the inside information which their new friends were able to provide, the business would have been almost hopeless from the outset.

The fort, it seemed, covered even more ground than they had at first supposed—a matter of three or four acres, in English measurement. It was built in the form of a square with a parade ground in the middle. In this area, too, certain prisoners were sometimes exercised. There was only one approach, and this was along the causeway, which had a double guard. There was a drawbridge at the outer end, although as a guard was always stationed there it was no longer used. At the inner end of the causeway was the one portal that gave access to the fort, a gloomy arch that carried a massive iron-studded door, which was closed and locked every evening at sundown. In the rooms adjacent to this the garrison was quartered, and Cub was shocked to learn that this comprised at least a hundred men, horse and foot. The prisoners were confined in semi-basement dungeons, with iron-barred windows at ground level facing inwards across the parade ground. They occupied three sides of the square but were not all in use. It would be in one of these, Macgreggo thought, that the Pasha would be locked, if he were there. Sentries paraded the flat top of the walls that surrounded the open square by day and by night. A machine-gun was mounted on the parade ground to cover the prisoners should they revolt while at exercise.

One point of great interest was this. Although the cliff on which the fort was built appeared to be unscalable, it was not—if an old legend was to be believed. According to this there was one way up by which it was possible to climb to the top; that is, to the foot of the fortress wall. Macgreggo did not know where it was for he had never had occasion to use it; but that it existed was fairly certain, for up it the notorious sixteenth century corsair, Barbarossa, had led his men to take the place by a ruse. According to the story, one of the garrison had been bribed to open the door at a certain time, and Barbarossa, reaching it without crossing the causeway, had taken the place by surprise. The weapons of those days, great muzzle-loading cannon, with pyramids of cannon balls beside them, were still there, although of course the defence now relied on modern machine-guns.

The fact that it had once been possible to scale the cliff interested Gimlet tremendously, for should the governor of the fort be unaware of it, it was obviously a weakness in his defences. The question arose, was the path still there? Had it collapsed under the hand of time, or perhaps been destroyed by a new garrison subsequent to Barbarossa's attack? Legends, said Macgreggo, lingered long in the Caucasus, and the story would certainly

have been passed down from father to son through the ages. He would, he promised, take steps at once to ascertain if anyone was still alive who knew the way up the cliff. If so, it should not be a difficult matter to find out if it were still in a condition to be used.

On the evening of the third day there was a stir in the camp when Macgreggo's most daring spy, and incidentally his second in command, an old Georgian named Sienco, returned. It was soon clear that he had brought important news, and this was confirmed by Macgreggo when, after a good deal of excited conversation, he returned to Gimlet. The information received was, it turned out, both good and bad.

First, and most important, the British Intelligence Service had been correct. Ismit Pasha was a prisoner in the fort, but an escort was being sent for his removal forthwith. According to rumour this escort consisted of three armoured cars. When these were due to arrive was not known, but they were expected shortly. Another item of news was, the garrison was soon to be changed. Precisely in which cell the Pasha was confined had not yet been ascertained.

"That means we've no time to lose," said Gimlet.

Macgreggo agreed.

Asked by Gimlet how such inside information had been secured, Macgreggo explained that it had come from a disgruntled Cossack named Yakoff, who had been flogged for some trifling offence. He had told one of the native labourers, who had passed on the information to Macgreggo's spy.

"How did he manage to do that?" asked Gimlet curiously. "I mean, did this labourer come out, or did your spy get into the fort?"

"The labourer came out," answered Macgreggo. "Every day a labour squad is brought out, under guard, to cut firewood and carry it into the fort. Of course, these men are watched, but, after all, they have work to do, and in the forest it is usually possible for one of my men to mix with them for a little while. My scout, Sienco, thinks it would be possible to bribe this Cossack, Yakoff, to tell all he knows, and keep us in touch with what is happening. In fact, he has hinted that he is ready to desert and join my band."

"I should think such a man would be useful to you," suggested Gimlet.

"Certainly he would, if I dare trust him," agreed Macgreggo. "But this sort of thing has happened before and I have to be careful. It might be a trick of the governor to get a spy into my camp."

Gimlet admitted the truth of this. "What it really boils down to," he went on, "am I to understand that you can make contact with the inside of the fort

through these woodcutters when they come out?"

"Yes. It is a line of communication that I have used before. That was how my men received information about me when I was in the fort myself."

"From what you tell me, this man Yakoff might be prepared, for a consideration, to help us to get inside the place ourselves?" suggested Gimlet. "Of course, such a plan would depend largely on whether or not the old cliff path is still in a condition to be used. What we really need is a guide."

"I will certainly make enquiries about that," promised Macgreggo. "If a guide can be found, how would you proceed?"

"If we had a man inside the fort willing to work with us, supposing the track up the cliff to be there, the order of things would be this. We would go up the cliff to the wall of the fort. The man inside would then lower a rope to us. Thus, we should get inside the fort, rescue our man, and return by the same method. The question is, would the man inside be able to lay hands on a rope long enough for the purpose?"

"I think it is very unlikely."

"Have you got a rope?"

"Yes."

"Very well. All the man inside needs is a ball of string, which should not be difficult to conceal about his person. He lowers the string. We tie the rope to it. He pulls the rope up and makes it fast at the top. We go up the rope. There may be some difficulty in finding the Pasha, but we should at least be inside the fort. If it could be ascertained beforehand which dungeon the Pasha is in, so much the better."

"Yes," said Macgreggo slowly. "But this man Yakoff would have no occasion to be on the wall unless it was his turn for sentry-go there."

"We should have to wait until his turn came round."

"The sentries are posted in pairs. What about his companion?"

"It shouldn't be difficult for Yakoff to find some way of disposing of his partner should he threaten to give the alarm."

"Very well," agreed Macgreggo. "The next step is to send men round the villages to find a man, if there is one, who knows the way up the cliff. It would be a difficult and dangerous business to find it ourselves, for it would have to be done in the dark. In daylight a man trying to get up the cliff would certainly be seen by the sentry at the top. That's one thing. The other is to make contact with Yakoff the Cossack and find out how far he is prepared to go. I will offer him a reward of a thousand gold roubles and

promise a safe conduct to anywhere in the country he cares to go. That should do the trick.”

“How will you convey that message to him—by one of the woodcutters?”

“Yes. We can use the same man as I have used before. His name is Abuk. He is a charcoal burner. Wait. I have a better idea. I will replace Abuk with one of my own men, who will be able to explain exactly to Yakoff what we want him to do. He will also be able to give him the string. By doing this I shall have one of my own men inside the fort.”

“But could you get away with that?” queried Gimlet.

“I think so. We will try it, otherwise it would mean passing a rather complicated story to Yakoff through Abuk, who is not very intelligent. I do not think such a substitution would be noticed. The squad of workmen is counted when it leaves the fort, and counted again when it returns. As long as the number tallies the guard would not pay much attention to faces.”

“Well, if you think it can be done, so well and good,” agreed Gimlet.

“If the woodcutters are working as usual, and that is something Sienco can tell us, the substitution could be made tomorrow morning,” said Macgreggo. “The sooner it is done the better. If Yakoff the Cossack refuses to co-operate with us there would be no point in climbing the cliff.”

“Unless your own man could find a way to lower the string and haul the rope up.”

“That would be difficult, because he would have no business on the wall; but we will bear it in mind as an alternative,” said Macgreggo.

“You’re going to a lot of trouble on our account,” murmured Gimlet.

“Not at all,” disputed Macgreggo. “After all, my life is devoted to making things difficult for these people, and this way is as good as any. Wait here while I go and discuss the matter with my men. We will soon know if Yakoff is willing to work with us.”

“But just a minute,” said Gimlet. “Your spy will be inside the fort. When he has got the information how is he going to get out?”

“By the same way as he will go in,” replied Macgreggo. “We will substitute Abuk for him when the woodcutters return to the forest the next day.”

Macgreggo went off and was away for some time. In fact, he did not return until after darkness had fallen, when he brought encouraging news. One of his men knew an old Turk who once told him that he knew the way up the cliff. He had once actually climbed it, although that was in the days of

his youth. This man lived in a village at no great distance. Steps were now being taken to bring the old man to the camp in order to discuss the matter. In the business of making contact with Yakoff the Cossack, Sienco himself had offered to change places with Abuk in the morning when the woodcutters were out doing their usual work. This being a somewhat dangerous operation Macgreggo had decided to go with him, taking a small force of men, so that should the scheme go wrong it would be possible to rescue Sienco before he was taken into the fort. A start would soon have to be made in order that the bandits could take up positions from which they would be able to watch what happened.

Upon this, Gimlet offered to add his men to those who were to watch Sienco, pointing out that as the whole business was for their benefit it was only fair that they should share the risks.

Macgreggo said it was not really necessary, but agreed that if it would give them any satisfaction they could go with him.

And so, just before midnight, the party of about a dozen men all told moved off. Macgreggo, who knew every inch of the ground, led the way, with Gimlet and his contingent bringing up the rear. All they had to do was follow, but even this was enough to keep their minds and muscles well occupied.

It was a long march through the silent forest, seldom over level ground. Either they were climbing to the top of a steep escarpment or plunging down into a valley that followed inevitably on the other side. Cub saw plainly enough now why the troops had not attempted to follow the bandits into their stronghold. They would have been outmanœuvred at every turn by men who knew the ground. Yet this, he reflected, was only the foothills. It gave him an idea of what conditions would be like among the high tops that still towered ten thousand feet or more above them. It was hard to believe that less than a week ago he had been strolling about the busy streets of London. Now, here he was, not only in some of the wildest country left in the world, but marching through it with a band of brigands for companions. He had made many strange journeys, but this, he decided, broke all previous records.

The dawn of another day was staining the eastern sky with its pallid glow when the long trail reached its terminus. At least, so Cub hoped when they came to a stop, for his muscles were beginning to feel the strain. In a wan light that grew stronger every minute he saw that they stood on the slope of a hill the lower part of which had been cleared of trees; at any rate, the trunks and main branches had been carried away, although the smaller stuff still lay strewn about where it had been lopped off. Fresh chips were

everywhere, making it plain that this was the site of the timber felling operations. The hillside lay stark and silent in the chill early morning air. A short distance below was a track, the same one, Cub supposed that they had already seen.

Macgreggo was now posting his men inside the uncut forest, in positions that overlooked the area where the previous day's work had been discontinued, and where, presumably, it would begin again. Sienco was buried by his companions under a pile of fir branches. This done Macgreggo came over to Gimlet and pointed out an area of rocks, half buried under shrubs, from where it would be possible to watch without being seen. It was obviously a good place and Gimlet took his party to it, each member then selecting the position he thought best. The others had already vanished, and as Cub sank into his den the hillside appeared to be as deserted as when they had arrived.

The period of waiting that followed was not of long duration. As the sun rose it lifted some mist that still hung in a valley, and there, before Cub's eyes, appeared the fort. It was less than half a mile away, and he observed that he was now looking at it from a different angle. As he stared at the forbidding pile the big door swung slowly open and a column of men appeared. The fact that they carried axes on their shoulders, and were escorted by a number of grey-coated troops, made it reasonable to suppose that these were the woodmen being marched to the scene of their task.

This soon proved to be the case. The labourers, a ragged, motley crowd, looking like the serfs they really were, came straight on to the cleared ground and forthwith set to work, while their military overseers, with rifles under their arms, took up positions on the outskirts of the gang. Judging from their general manner, which was one of bored indifference, they did not expect trouble; but that they were wide awake was demonstrated when a bird, with a startled cry, sped out of a bush. The soldier nearest to it turned in a flash, his rifle at the ready. He even went over to the bush and peered into it, a proceeding that caused Cub to hold his breath, fearing that it might conceal one of Macgreggo's men. He breathed again when the man straightened his back and returned to his original position.

The workers were now pretty well scattered, as they were bound to be, considering what they were doing. Some felled trees, usually slender pines, which came down with a crash, forcing other workers to run clear. Some lopped off the branches. When this had been done others picked up the logs and stacked them near the track ready for transportation to the fort.

Just when the substitution trick was worked Cub did not know. Indeed, he was afraid that it had failed, although as he did not know the old man,

Abuk, by sight, he was not really in a position to judge. Moreover, the labourers, all being oldish men, unkempt and bearded, looked very much alike, and were constantly on the move. Their taskmasters saw to that.

There was another reason why Cub could not watch the proceedings as closely as he would have liked. About half-way through the morning there occurred an incident which, from then on, distracted his attention from the main issue. Lying motionless he had naturally become cramped, and was about to stretch his limbs when a slight movement near his left shoulder took his eyes in that direction. To his horror he saw a snake sliding from a hole in the rocks. Slowly the creature withdrew its five feet of length from its retreat and curled up on a ledge where the rays of the sun fell full on it. As this was only about a yard from Cub's head his sensations can be better imagined than described. That the snake might not be venomous was a detail he never once took into consideration. He was a firm believer in the sound policy of treating all snakes as poisonous. He dare not move for fear of being seen, although he would have done so, no doubt, had the reptile shown signs of hostility. Fortunately it did not. It seemed content to bask in the sunshine, and Cub was quite willing for it to do so. But the result of this was, he spent more time with his eyes on his unpleasant neighbour than on those whom he had really come to watch.

It was getting on for noon when a blast on a whistle put an end to his suspense. A glance showed him that it was knocking off time. The workmen at once stopped what they were doing and mustered near the wood pile, where they were counted by the N.C.O. in charge of the escort squad. Presently this man, apparently satisfied, shouted an order, whereupon the workers each picked up a log, shouldered it, and in a straggling line started off in the direction of the fort.

Not until they had been out of sight for some minutes did any of the watchers stir. Then Macgreggo whistled, and Cub lost no time in vacating his uncomfortable couch. With the others he walked on to where Macgreggo's men were getting together.

As soon as Gimlet had joined the bandit leader he asked: "How did it go off?"

Macgreggo pointed to a rough-looking old fellow who was standing near. "That is Abuk," he said. "Sienco is on his way to the fort. There is nothing more for us to do here so let us get back to camp."

Cub knew then that the outing had been successful.

CHAPTER VIII

OPERATION MIDNIGHT

THINGS were quiet in camp the following day while those who were in it awaited the return of the scouts who had again gone to the scene of the woodcutting operations where the impersonation trick was to be repeated. The business now was to return Abuk to the fort and bring back Sienco, who would, it was hoped, have made contact with Yakoff the Cossack. The man had been described to him in detail by Abuk—not that there was much chance of mistake for he was the tallest man in his troop, and still bore on his face the marks of the harsh treatment that had caused him to hate the governor of the fort. In that part of the world, Macgreggo pointed out, to hate a man was to do him as much injury as possible. Hate was, in fact, the moving spirit of the community, a state of affairs which depressed Cub to such an extent that he hoped he would be soon out of it.

Abuk raised no objection about going back to the fort. He appeared to think it was a high honour to be allowed to work for a man like Greggo the Scourge, whose name was a household word in the country. It was clear, too, that although he knew Macgreggo to be a bandit, this was a thing to be proud of rather than ashamed. He addressed him with the greatest respect, which gave Cub an idea of how their new friend was regarded by the common people of the country. In any case, Macgreggo promised the man that the day was not far distant when he would see to it that all the impressed men were freed from their miserable bondage.

On this occasion, as the substitution trick appeared to entail no great risk, Gimlet and his party stayed at home, and Macgreggo with them. His men knew exactly what to do, he averred, so there was no reason why, in view of the dangerous task ahead of them, they should tire themselves by exertions that were not really necessary.

During the forenoon the old villager, whose name it turned out was Yousouf, and who was to show them the way up the cliff, was brought in. Even in a land of remarkable men he was an amazing figure—a wizened snipe of a creature with dark fanatical eyes and a long white beard stained round the mouth with nicotine. His coat was in the nature of a dirty patchwork quilt, with wide sleeves. On his head he wore a conical hat decorated with gilt stars and cabalistic signs. Under his coat he wore a short

pleated skirt. His spindly legs were bare down to the feet, which were protected with obviously home-made sandals.

“Strike ole Riley! If it ain’t Santa Claus ’imself,” muttered Copper in an awe stricken whisper, when his eyes first fell on this strange creature.

“He’s the man who’s going to take us up the cliff to the fort,” said Cub.

“You mean, we’re goin’ ter trust ourselves ter that old son of a witch, all got up like a dog’s breakfast?”

“That’s the idea,” confirmed Cub.

“Then I might as well write a goodbye note ter my ole Ma,” groaned Copper. “Wot a country! This is where soldierin’ lands yer at the finish.”

“As long as he knows the way that’s all that matters,” asserted Cub.

As the old man drew near he brought with him a heavy, sickly fragrance. Copper’s nostrils twitched. “Did you get that?” he asked Cub hoarsely. “Takes me straight back ter Wappin’,” he went on. “I used ter know a gel who smelt like that—a barmaid, she was, at the King’s Head. Married a pal o’ mine, poor blighter.”

Macgreggo must have overheard this, for he smiled and explained: “Yousouf is the village chemist, which means that he’s also a maker and purveyor of perfumes. Practises a bit of wizardry in his spare time, too, no doubt. Most of them do. He’ll sell you a lucky charm if you want one.”

“We shall want a bagful if we’re ter get out of this joint,” said Copper warmly. “Wot say you, Trapper, ole pal?”

“*Tch.* Three bags full,” opined Trapper.

The object of this criticism, who, knowing no English, must have taken the remarks for compliments, bowed gravely, and in his own language entered into a conversation with Macgreggo which the others were of course unable to follow. At the finish Macgreggo informed them that Yousouf would lead them up the ancient path, provided it was still there. It was many years since he had seen it so it might have been carried away by a landslide. Yousouf, it seemed, like the rest of the native population, had no love for Governor Vladimir Karzoff.

For his peace of mind, considering the hazards of the undertaking, Cub would have preferred a guide of more normal character and appearance. The old man’s statement that he had studied the stars, which favoured brave enterprises, did nothing to increase his confidence. He preferred to put his trust into something more substantial than the positions of certain constellations on that particular night. However, he saw that they were in no case to be particular.

Yousouf accepted a cup of tea, and after dropping into it something that sent off a cloud of blue smoke, swallowed it at a gulp.

“Did yer see that?” breathed Copper. “’E’s a conjurer as well. Blimey! It’s come ter a nice thing when commandos ’ave ter fall in behind a bloke with a magic wand.”

“As long as he can conjure us up that cliff, how he does it doesn’t matter,” said Gimlet curtly.

Sienco returned later, with the men who had gone out to watch the substitution, which, it was now observed, had been carried through without mishap.

Sienco made his report to Macgreggo, who translated for the benefit of Gimlet and his party. Everything had gone well. Yakoff the Cossack had agreed to lower the string and haul up the rope for the bribe offered. As it happened, he was on duty that same night, which simplified matters. He would dispose of his companion, and knowing roughly where the cliff path was reported to end, would be there at midnight. He would wait. If he was in the wrong place a whistle would bring him to the right one.

“That’s capital,” declared Gimlet. “Now we’re all set for the show. Bring all the tools you’re likely to want, Copper. There may be locks to pick or bars to cut.”

“I’ll provide the rope,” promised Macgreggo. “We shall have to start fairly soon, not only on account of the distance to be covered but because the going will be rough, particularly at the finish. That means it will be slow. Moreover, as we get near the fort there must be no noise.”

“Are you taking the whole gang?” asked Copper.

“What I shall do is this,” replied Macgreggo. “I shall muster as many men as possible. Some will take up positions on the bank above the fort ready to lend a hand should things become awkward. Taking twenty selected men with me I shall then move to the lip of the gorge and post them. They will stay there to cover our retreat should we be discovered and pursued. The rest of us will go on.”

“Does that mean that you are coming into the fort with us?” asked Gimlet.

“Most certainly. I am anxious to make an examination of the place. But don’t worry! I shall do nothing to jeopardise the escape of the man you want.”

“That sounds all right to me,” answered Gimlet.

Preparations for departure were made forthwith, and it was clear from the sober behaviour of the brigands that this was a serious operation, even for them.

The march began under a sky that had clouded over, and long before the track leading to the fort was reached the long file of men was moving through a steady drizzle that made everything uncomfortable, although fortunately it was not cold. The moon was not yet up, but here and there a star showed through a break in the clouds. Even so, the darkness in the forest was of Stygian quality. Actually, the darkness was a help as well as a hindrance. It reduced the risk of discovery when the party had reached the vicinity of the fort, but on the other hand it could not fail to retard progress, particularly over the difficult places. Such was the case when it came to crossing the gorge, where a slip might have had fatal results.

But before the final assault party came to the gorge itself, Macgreggo had posted the majority of his men on the hill that overlooked the road with its grisly scaffold. The corpse, Cub was glad to note, was no longer there. Later he learned that it had been removed by the bandit leader's orders, and given a decent burial.

There was another delay while Macgreggo posted his covering party on the near lip of the gorge, beyond which, unseen in the darkness, was the fort. Not a light showed to mark its position. This done, the most difficult part of the journey began. The descent to the bottom of the gorge was not too bad, because the slope was not very acute at the point selected, and there was a certain amount of rough herbage to offer a handhold should anyone slip.

The actual party had now been reduced to eight, namely, Yousouf, who led the way, Macgreggo, two bandits carrying the rope, Gimlet, Copper, Trapper and Cub, in that order. In daylight they would have been in full view of the fort, which stood at the top of the cliff they had yet to climb, and for that reason there could be no question of using a torch.

The bottom was reached without mishap, and Cub found himself groping through a tangle of coarse vegetation that fringed the stream that rushed through the gorge. There was inevitably a certain amount of noise, and several delays owing to the difficulty of keeping the party together. However, these difficulties were overcome, and in due course the rock face on the far side was reached. Here there was a long delay, the result, Cub was told, of the guide's inability to find a particular stone that marked the beginning of the secret path. Cub sat down hoping that the man would soon find it, for the mosquitoes were both numerous and voracious. What with insects, the overpowering darkness, the stagnant heat in the bottom of the gorge, and the stench of rotting vegetation, he found his enthusiasm for the

whole affair wearing thin. The freedom of an unknown man seemed a poor reward for such discomfort. However, at long last the guide found the right stone, and the ascent began.

This was of such a nature that anything that had gone before became trivial in comparison. It was impossible to see anything, so all Cub could do was follow close behind Trapper, sometimes taking his instructions at the most dangerous places. Somewhere above, although he still could not see it, was the fort. Below yawned a black void, the depth of which could be roughly gauged when a displaced stone went hurtling down. There were places where the track became a mere shelf less than a foot wide, with an overhanging bulge of rock above. Such places were passed by linking hands, and Cub was glad he could not see how far he had to fall should he slip. Perspiration mixed with rain on his face. The whole business became a nightmare, but he derived a crumb of comfort from the knowledge that Barbarossa and his Corsairs had been through it and survived the ordeal. If they could do it, he told himself, so could Gimlet and his Kittens. What filled him with increasing wonder was the fact that somewhere ahead was Yousouf, all skin and bones, finding the way. Of the return journey he dare not think. There would be time for that when they came to it.

Towards the finish the rain cleared off and a wide break in the clouds allowed some watery moonlight to glimmer on the scene. Just above, now, he could make out the mighty pile of the fort. With a final effort he reached it, to find himself on a cornice of rock that varied in width from one yard to perhaps a dozen. On this the others were resting, with the exception of Macgreggo, who was groping his way along the wall of the fort with arms outstretched. Cub realised that he was feeling for the string which Yakoff the Cossack was to lower in order to pull up the rope.

There was some difficulty in finding it, but at length Macgreggo announced that he had got it. This at once created a feeling of optimism, for it proved that Yakoff had, so far, at any rate, been as good as his word. The way to the inside of the fort would soon be open. The whole party moved along to where Macgreggo was standing. He had, he said, already tugged at the string, and had received an answering tug from above. This produced more quiet exclamations of satisfaction. The rope was made fast to the string. Another tug, and it began to creep up the wall, with Macgreggo paying it out from the coil.

During the wait that followed, to give Yakoff time to make the rope fast, there began a discussion as to who should go up first, for this was a point that had not so far been raised. Gimlet and Macgreggo were both anxious to take what was obviously a risk. The rope might slip, or break. The man on it

might lose his grip, in which case he would not stop falling until he crashed to his death in the bottom of the gorge.

Looking up, Cub judged the distance to the top of the wall to be not less than fifty feet. This, he knew from experience, was a long climb for any man; and it would certainly tax the strength of the man above should he try to pull one of them up by simply hauling on the rope. When two were at the top the thing would be less difficult, because both could take the strain. And so on. The more people there were at the top the easier the scaling operation would become. Cub therefore put forward the suggestion that the ascent should be made in order of weight, the lightest man going first, and the heaviest, last. As Yousouf was not going up, this meant that he, Cub, should go first. He would help the Cossack to pull up Trapper, and the rest would be easy.

This suggestion was not at first well received; but as the common sense of it became evident to everyone Macgreggo and Gimlet agreed, with reluctance. As they were all going up, argued Cub, it really didn't matter in the least who went first. So saying he settled the matter by taking the rope in his hands, and after giving it a pull to make sure it was secure, got a grip on it, commando fashion. No longer tired, he was full of enthusiasm. The idea of getting into a fort regarded as impregnable was a job after his heart. It had a medieval flavour about it, too. The days of romantic escapes were not done, after all.

A tug and a soft whistle and up he went at a pace that surprised him. There was, he discovered, no need for him to climb. Yakoff, on top, could do all that was necessary. It struck him that the Cossack must be a man of no ordinary strength to pull him up with such ease.

The top of the wall came into view, hard against the sky. It appeared to be dropping down to meet him. Reaching it, he discovered what he took to be the reason for the easy ascent. A sheepskin rested on the edge, and over it the rope ran smoothly, with no risk of fraying. Throwing an arm across it he pulled himself up and rolled clear before rising to his feet to look for Yakoff.

He saw, not one, but four tall figures silhouetted against the sky; and even then the truth, so unprepared was he for it, did not strike him. It was only when the men made a rush at him that he realised, with a shock almost paralysing in its severity, what was happening. As the men closed on him he dodged. One caught him by the arm. Another tried to put a hand over his mouth. He got the thumb between his teeth and closed his jaws on it with all the rage that now possessed him. With a cry of agony the man snatched his hand away and that gave Cub the one chance he needed. His voice rose clear in the heavy silence. "Go back!" he yelled. "It's a trap!"

Then a fist struck him below the ear and sent him, half stunned, rolling and sliding, along the smooth stonework, to finish only a matter of inches from the sheer drop into the abyss.

That was the end of his resistance, for the men now laid rough hands on him, and in their grip he was powerless to do anything. A rag of some sort was clapped over his face so that he couldn't make a sound—not that he wanted to, for he knew that those below must have heard his warning cry. That was the main thing. A man who had taken no part in the scuffle was rasping orders in a voice of vicious anger. This was understandable, for he would have to be content with one prisoner, whereas it had been his intention no doubt to take them all. Thus thought Cub, still in a daze.

His first sensation, when he could think clearly, was anger—rage at the Cossack who had betrayed them. What fools they had been to trust such a man, he thought bitterly. Which of the four men was Yakoff he did not know, nor did he particularly care. He assumed that he was there. The fellow had betrayed them, and nothing he could do now could make any difference to the result. He was sick, too, sick at the failure of their mission, for now that their presence was revealed all seemed lost. The others would be lucky to



get out of the country alive without any further attempt to rescue the Pasha, who in a few hours would be far beyond their reach, anyway.

These thoughts did not of course pass through Cub's head calmly, or coherently. Naturally, he still suffered from shock from the suddenness of the disaster, and through his whirling brain thoughts rushed in chaotic succession. Dimly he saw the rope being pulled in, now that there was no likelihood of anyone else coming up.

As he was led away he was not thinking about his own fate, for that seemed already settled. He wondered what the others would do. That they would not leave the country without him he was sure. He was equally certain that, in view of what had happened, they no longer had the slightest chance of getting into the fort. If that was difficult before, it was impossible now that the alarm had been raised. How right Macgreggo had been! Hate was the governing factor in this vile country. Cub hated everything about it — Yakoff in particular.

Thus ran his thoughts as he was taken along the top of the fort, passing antiquated cannon on the way, to a stone stairway that ran down the inner side into the yard. All was silent and in darkness. The air was chill and dank, and smelt of decay. The only sound was the scrape of boots and the heavy breathing of the men who held him. Even they had a sour smell about them.

Across the courtyard and through an arched entrance he was hurried in a manner which made him wonder if he was to be executed there and then. More stone steps now spiralled upwards into a musty-smelling passage, at the end of which a door was opened. Yellow lamplight flooded out with the warm reek of paraffin, half blinding him after his many hours of almost total darkness. Into the room, a vaulted chamber, he was taken. Behind him and his escort a heavy door swung shut with a thud that had about it an unpleasant suggestion of finality.

Actually, Cub was not as unnerved by these proceedings as might be supposed. He was in the fort. The governor was, he knew, a man utterly devoid of normal human instincts. There was no hope of escape. That he would be put to death he had no doubt whatever. Thus, there was in the situation nothing in the nature of suspense, which can be a greater strain on the nervous system. He had nothing more to lose. In short, he had had it.

He looked about him without emotion. The chamber was, he saw, furnished in a manner which suggested that it was both a living-room and an office. Massive old-fashioned furniture stood side by side with modern steel filing cabinets. Occupying one side of the room was a great table, black with

age, littered with papers. Behind it was a chair of similar character. In it one of his captors was now seating himself.

Two of the men were now holding Cub while the other emptied his pockets, carrying the contents to the man seated at the table. On this man Cub's eyes now rested, and he saw at once that he was an officer of high rank. Silver stars studded his upright collar and several rings of braid adorned his cuffs. Cub's eyes moved to his face, and then, and only then, did he realise, with a flurry of astonishment, that it was the governor himself. He was surprised because it had not occurred to him—indeed he could hardly have imagined such a thing—that an officer of senior rank would take a personal part in such an affair as had just occurred. He could only think that Karzoff suffered from the same handicap as everyone else in the district; he dare trust no one. However, there could be no mistake. The description that Macgreggo had given of him, his size, his flat, slab-like features, his slanting eyes, the beard, all tallied; apart from which there was about him an air of authority that is only derived from power. From time to time he spoke in a low, hard voice, but this of course meant nothing to Cub who did not even know what language was being used. But he remembered that Macgreggo had said that Karzoff spoke English. Cub wondered what the man intended to say to him, for that he was going to say something was certain, otherwise he would not have had him brought to his office. Cub had expected, at the best, to be thrown into a dungeon.



He was hurried in a manner which made him wonder if he was to be executed there and then.

The explanation was soon forthcoming; and as it was revealed, in a night of many surprises this was to Cub the most staggering of them all.

One of the men now stood behind his master. The other two retired to the door and stood with their backs against it. Karzoff leaned forward, elbows on the table, and regarded the prisoner with eyes as coldly inscrutable as those of a reptile. Yet, oddly enough, it struck Cub that there was nothing particularly hostile about his expression.

Karzoff's first words, spoken slowly, with a curious accent, were: "You know who I am?"

Cub answered, "Yes."

"I am master here," went on Karzoff. "You know what that means?"

Again Cub answered, "Yes." Indeed, he knew only too well.

"We will talk," said Vladimir Karzoff.

"As you will," returned Cub, not knowing what else to say.

Karzoff treated him to a long, calculating stare. "You will be told I am a wicked man," he said in a thick, flat voice.

"That seems to be the general impression," Cub told him frankly.

"Men who say that are liars," declared Karzoff. "I can be very good man."

Cub smiled faintly. "I should be happy to deny reports to the contrary if you will give me a demonstration of your goodness."

"You shall see," said Karzoff. "We will talk. You shall be surprised."

CHAPTER IX

KARZOFF RUNS TRUE TO TYPE

WHAT there was to talk about Cub could not imagine, but as he had nothing more to lose he was at least prepared to listen. Of course, he expected to be questioned—or rather, interrogated—as to his purpose there, his companions, and the like; and he was prepared to deny Karzoff the information that he would naturally be anxious to obtain. But this seemed to be a queer approach to what is usually a harsh ordeal. What, he wondered vaguely, did the man mean by his statement about surprising him? Cub put this down to a silly sort of boasting, a bluff. But in this he was mistaken. The surprise was coming—slowly. For the moment the conversation ran on orthodox lines.

“You are English man?” said Karzoff, his eyes still on Cub’s face.

“I am,” answered Cub.

“You work for government?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why you come here?”

Cub met his eyes. “You know why I came here,” he asserted, feeling sure from what had happened that the man must know. In this he was right.

“Yes, I know,” admitted Karzoff. “You come here for the Turk, Ismit?”

“That was my intention,” admitted Cub, seeing that no purpose was to be served by denying it. At the same time it struck him that Karzoff, who must know that he was not alone, took him to be the leader of the rescue party. As he had been first up the rope he would naturally think that. This might, thought Cub, be to Gimlet’s advantage, so he decided to allow Karzoff to retain that impression.

“You think my Cossack Yakoff will be waiting for you?” continued Karzoff.

Cub did not answer.

“Instead, you find me.”

Again Cub admitted what he could not deny. Obviously the governor knew about Yakoff’s part in the affair or he wouldn’t have known about the rope.

“Yakoff was a fool,” said Karzoff with a sneer.

“Yakoff was a liar,” declared Cub, also with a sneer. For so sure was he that the Cossack had betrayed them that no other explanation occurred to him. It had been his first and instantaneous impression when he perceived that the scheme had failed, and he still held it.

“What you think is wrong,” said Karzoff. “Yakoff would be your friend, but he has bad luck, and behaves without wisdom.”

“Oh,” said Cub. In the circumstances he was no longer interested in the Cossack. It struck him, however, that the conversation was taking a curious turn. He still could not imagine what Karzoff was getting at—unless he was merely playing cat and mouse with him. The governor’s next words puzzled him still more.

“Shall I tell you what happens?” offered Karzoff.

Cub stared at the man in front of him, sure now that there was a sinister purpose behind all this. At all events, he could think of no sane reason why Karzoff should take him into his confidence over such a matter. Still, he thought, if this was how Karzoff wanted it, it was all right with him; but knowing that he was dealing with a crafty rogue he decided to answer questions more carefully. “Where is Yakoff now?” he asked, for something to say, not expecting to be answered.

“Yakoff is now suffering for his foolishness,” said Karzoff sadly. “His trouble is, you understand, his head is all bone. There are in it no brains.”

“Why do you call him foolish when he betrayed me to you?” challenged Cub.

“That was not his wish,” said Karzoff. “No. Now I tell you what happened. By bad luck for him his guard is changed, because new men have come and he must go away. What can he do? He does a strange thing, a thing which no man here has done before. He offers to do the work for the new sentry who is to stay on the wall all night. Yakoff hates this work. Last week he sleeps when he should be watching. For that he is punished. Now suddenly he likes watching. To myself I say, what is the reason for this strange thing? I tell the corporal of the guard that I agree to this. Yakoff shall be the sentry. But as he goes to the wall he is searched. What is found? Much string. What is this? I say. He will not speak. But here we have ways to make a man speak. He is put to the question. Then, in his pain, he tells me all.”

“So you tortured him?” said Cub sombrely, with a mental apology to Yakoff for misjudging him.

“But of course,” answered Karzoff. “It is the only way to make a stubborn man speak. It saves much time.”

“I see,” murmured Cub softly, still marvelling at this extraordinary conversation, which bore no resemblance to what he had expected. “And what did Yakoff tell you?” he prompted.

“Yakoff told me of the arrival of English men to take away from the fort the Turk Ismit. He told me of the meeting of the English men with Greggo the robber, who promised to help them. He told me of his part in this. He told me all.”

Cub said nothing.

Karzoff’s eyes were still on his face. “You have been with this man they call Greggo?” he challenged.

“I have,” answered Cub.

“He is a rich man after all his robberies, ha?”

“So I have been told.”

There was a short pause; and when Karzoff spoke again there was a curious inflection in his voice although it was now so low as to be almost a whisper. “When I asked Yakoff for how much money he betrays me to Greggo, he tells me—a thousand gold roubles. Is that the truth?”

“No doubt he would have been rewarded,” replied Cub carelessly. He still did not see the drift of the conversation. All that struck him about Karzoff’s remark was the way he took it for granted that Yakoff had been bribed.

The governor’s face twisted into a smile that reminded Cub of a cat about to be fed. “Money is the key that opens all doors,” he almost purred.

“In this part of the world, apparently,” acknowledged Cub, a hint of contempt in his voice.

“Greggo has much money.”

“I think so.”

“Have you seen it?”

“No. Why should he show it to me?”

“He has gold.”

“You should know more about that than I do.”

Karzoff hesitated. A frown knitted his forehead. “Are you a fool or do you play fool with me?”

The surprise Cub’s face registered was genuine. “What do you mean?”

There was a suspicion of irritation in Karzoff’s voice when he was forced to speak plainly and to the point. “If Greggo would give a common

Cossack a thousand roubles for this Turk, how much would he give an officer of high rank . . . like me?"

Then Cub got it. To say that he was astonished would be to say nothing. The idea of a general officer betraying his trust for money was something beyond his understanding. It was something that just did not happen. As if a curtain had been drawn he perceived now the meaning of the whole conversation. His memory recalled certain words that Macgreggo had said. This was the Orient, where bribery and corruption were part of the daily life, affecting the highest as well as the lowest. Here, bribery was not a thing to be ashamed of, but rather, something to boast about. He could have kicked himself for not grasping the implications earlier. Even so, he found himself tongue-tied before such a revelation.

Karzoff was still watching his face. "You understand now—yes?" he said softly.

Cub drew a deep breath. "Yes, I understand."

"Could we say, you think, five thousand gold roubles?"

Cub thought fast. He was in no position to pledge Macgreggo's money, even though the bandit chief, on his own statement, had more than he knew what to do with; but if this man was ready to make a deal the cash could be produced from somewhere. As it was a matter of saving the Pasha's life, he had no doubt that the Pasha himself would be prepared to pay for his release. When Cub spoke, his voice sounded far away. "Why didn't you suggest this to Ismit Pasha? He has plenty of money."

"But not here. He could only get it by going to Turkey. Then he might have changed his mind."

Cub nodded. So that was the way Karzoff's brain worked, he thought. Crooked himself, he assumed everyone else was crooked.

"Greggo has the money here, in the country," went on Karzoff.

"The money is his, not mine."

"But he would give it to you because you would promise to pay it back," said Karzoff. "Your government has much money," he added, revealing a shrewd grasp of the political angle.

Cub shook his head. "Greggo would not lend the money unless Ismit Pasha was first freed. He would say he could not trust you."

"The Turk shall be free. He shall go with you."

Again Cub was amazed. "You mean, I can go, and take him with me?" He had fully expected to be held as a hostage.

"Yes."

“But I may not come back. If you cannot trust the Turk why do you trust me?”

“Because you are different. Even here we say ‘word of an English man,’ which we know is something he cannot break without dishonour. Of course,” added Karzoff, with engaging frankness, “that is not our way here, where honour is a millstone round the neck of a man.”

Cub was just beginning to realise it. “Very well,” he said.

“Five thousand roubles for me, and a thousand each for my three friends as the price of their silence. You see, if they take money they cannot speak, for that makes them in the bargain with us. One other thing. Greggo must give us safety to the frontier of Persia.”

“I think he will do that if I ask him,” answered Cub, shortly, for he was beginning to hate the whole sickening business; but putting the success of the mission first he had no alternative. A thought struck him. “You intend to leave the country then?”

“I must.”

“Why?”

“It is necessary.”

“Why is it necessary?”

“Don’t you understand that I must go?”

“No.”

Karzoff shrugged his shoulders as if such a lack of comprehension was pathetic. “A day or two ago Greggo was a prisoner here. You know that?”

“Yes.”

“So. That was good. I have been clever. I shall get promotion.”

Cub nodded.

“But Greggo escapes. That is not good. For my misfortune, when it is known, I shall go to prison in Siberia. That is the way of the government for which I work.”

Four words lingered in Cub’s memory. “When it is known.” That could only mean that Karzoff had not yet reported the escape of his prisoner. The whole thing was now as plain as daylight. Any mystery surrounding Karzoff’s behaviour was swept aside. In allowing Greggo to slip through his fingers he had made a blunder fatal to his career. Disgrace and punishment awaited him when it became known to his government. To escape this he himself would have to flee. Being a crook by nature he would probably have accepted a bribe, anyway; but now he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by filling his pockets with money before he departed. Yakoff’s

confession must have come as a godsend to him. The possibilities must have occurred to him instantly. That was why he had gone to the wall himself, taking no one but his three confederates. That was why he had brought Cub to his private office instead of throwing him into a dungeon. That was why he was willing for him, and Ismit Pasha, to go together, instead of holding one of them as a hostage until the money was forthcoming. The time factor ruled that out. It was all plain enough now. So thought Cub, and the rest of the conversation confirmed his reasoning.

Having at last got a grip of the entire situation he played up to it. "How is this to be managed?" he inquired, for he could see difficulties. "Tomorrow the cars will come to take Ismit Pasha away—if they are not already here."

"Oh, so you know that?"

"Greggo knows everything. I don't see how I could get the gold to you before the officer with the cars comes asking for his prisoner. How will you explain to him that Ismit Pasha is no longer here?"

"I shall not tell him that."

"But I don't understand. You'll have to tell him."

"He can go with you, tonight."

"But what will you tell the officer with the cars?"

Karzoff looked at Cub as if he might have been looking at a freak. "What a strange country yours must be," he said wonderingly. "Here there is no difficulty about such things. Must I explain again? Ismit Pasha shall go with you. When the cars come they will take away a man who I shall *say* is Ismit Pasha."

Cub blinked, thunderstruck. Here was the Orient again with a vengeance. He found it difficult to adjust his Western ideas to such intrigues. "But will this man be willing to take the Pasha's place?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he is a criminal who tomorrow would be hanged. This he knows. If he goes in the cars he will live a little longer. While he has life he has hope. So, he will go."

"But he will be asked questions. He will talk. It will soon be realised that he is not the Turk."

"He will not talk."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because," answered Karzoff imperturbably, "he has no tongue. He lost it years ago for talking too much. That is one reason why I choose him."

Cub felt like giving up. He could not keep pace with this sort of thing. “Does this man look anything like the Pasha?” he queried.

“No, but he will.”

“And how will you arrange that?”

Karzoff smiled knowingly, as if he was enjoying the whole business. “Ismit Pasha is dressed like a sailor,” he said smoothly. “This will be expected. He will change clothes with this criminal. The officer of the cars will suspect nothing—why should he? It is so easy.”

“I see,” said Cub, feeling that he was getting farther and farther out of his depth. The story of Ali Baba and his forty thieves took on a new realism. He remembered how easily even Macgreggo had worked this substitution trick on Karzoff, replacing Abuk with Sienco. Apparently it was an everyday affair.

“There is still one difficulty,” went on Cub. “How shall I get the gold to you?”

“That, too, is simple,” answered Karzoff.

Here comes more juggling, thought Cub. And he was right.

“Soon you shall go, taking this Turk with you,” said Karzoff. “He is nothing to me. Take him. Go to Greggo and tell him of your promise to me. He will lend you the money for he has more than he needs. Tomorrow, with my friends here, on horseback we shall make a sortie from the fort, saying that we will catch this thief Greggo. Instead, Greggo will capture us, and then let it be known that we were killed in the battle. Thus will it be thought by my government that we are dead. No one will care. No one will talk. No one will look for us. All shall soon be forgotten. Then, when all is quiet, we go swiftly to the frontier.”

“You’ve got it all worked out,” congratulated Cub cynically.

“Here one must have brains for such things if one would live,” asserted Karzoff casually.

To Cub, who had expected nothing short of death at dawn, it sounded a very good plan indeed, if more than a trifle fantastic. After all, he thought, with lives at stake what did money matter? Actually, although he was beginning to adjust himself to local methods, the whole thing still seemed unreal, and he would have preferred something more straightforward had it been possible. Here was a man, he pondered with wonder, hated by everybody, now suggesting that for safety he should put himself into the hands of Greggo the Scourge, the very man who, a couple of days ago, he would have hanged without a scruple. Cub gave it up. If this was the Eastern idea of stratagem it needed an Eastern mind to appreciate it.

“What about Yakoff?” he queried. “He knows a lot.”

“Too much,” averred Karzoff. “I will have him put to death.”

“Oh no you won’t,” said Cub emphatically. “I’m not having that.”

Karzoff looked surprised. “Why not? He is better out of the way.”

“Nothing of the sort,” argued Cub. “He’s our man. He earned his reward. If he didn’t do what he said he would do it was not his fault. He will be paid what he was promised.”

Karzoff looked puzzled. “But if I kill him it will save you a thousand roubles,” he pointed out.

“That may be how you see it,” returned Cub coldly, amazed at the utter callousness of the man. “We do these things in a different way. Yakoff leaves the fort tomorrow to be captured and collect his money, the same as you.”

Karzoff made a gesture as if the matter was of slight importance. “It shall be as you say,” he sighed. “After all, it is your money. Afterwards, Yakoff shall ride with us to the frontier.”

“If he takes my advice he’ll go the other way,” said Cub grimly. “If he goes with you he’s likely to lose his money and his life as well.”

Karzoff laughed, not in the least put out by Cub’s sneer. “How quick you begin to understand us,” said he. Then his manner became brisk. “Is all agreed?”

“All is agreed,” confirmed Cub.

“Then let us go,” said Karzoff, rising.

“I’ll see the Turk here, first, if you don’t mind,” said Cub.

“Why this?”

“Because,” said Cub slowly, “outside it is dark, and I might find that I had taken away the wrong man.”

Karzoff laughed again. “So soon you see our little tricks, eh? I did think of that,” he admitted shamelessly, “but it is better the Turk should go with you. He shall be brought here.” Karzoff turned and spoke swiftly to his bodyguard, two of whom went off, leaving the other standing by the door.

Cub collected his belongings from the table. “Now we see eye to eye I might as well have these,” he said calmly. “I may need my pistol.”

Karzoff did not demur.

CHAPTER X

HEAVY GOING

CUB was glad enough to rest, for what with the tension of the last few hours, and having had no sleep, he was beginning to feel the strain. Dawn, he knew, could not be far off.

“Is there any reason why we shouldn’t go out through the gate?” he asked Karzoff, while they were waiting.

The governor was definite. “That would not do. There are sentries, and you could not pass without my permission, which I dare not give. By night the gate is locked. If I say it must be opened the guards will talk about it afterwards. You must go out as you came in.”

As this sounded reasonable Cub did not press the point.

There was an interval of about twenty minutes. Then the two men who had gone out came back, bringing Ismit Pasha with them. At least, they brought a man, but so filthy and disreputable was his appearance that Cub’s doubts returned with a rush. Was Karzoff at his tricks again? He was good enough—or bad enough—for anything, even at that stage, thought Cub. He determined to take no chances.

Said Karzoff, briefly: “This is the Turk, the man you seek.”

Looking at the man, Cub addressed him. Speaking slowly, in English, he said: “I am an Englishman. I came here looking for a friend of my country. What is your name?”

“My name is Muraz Ismit,” was the reply, in good English.

“Can you give me proof of that?” asked Cub, for never having seen even a photograph of the Turk he had no means of identification.

“No,” was the disconcerting reply.

“If you are Ismit Pasha you have been in London, and also Paris,” went on Cub. “You would know both cities well?”

“Yes.”

“How long were you in London?”

“For three years.”

“Right. In that case you would know the Ritz Hotel?”

“Yes.”

“In what street is it?”

“In Piccadilly.”

“And the Savoy?”

“In the Strand.”

“In what street are the most famous tailors?”

“In Saville Row.”

“The Doctors?”

“Harley Street.”

“How long were you in Paris?”

“Two years.”

“Where is Maxim’s?”

“Rue Royale.”

Cub smiled, satisfied. At any rate this man had a tongue, and the fact that he could speak English so well belied his appearance. “I have come to take you away,” he said. “Are you willing to come with me?”

“I shall be glad to go.”

“There may be risks in getting you to a safe place.”

“Any risk would be better than staying here,” asserted the man, emphatically.

“Good. All right.” Cub looked at Karzoff. “We are ready. Let us go.” He spoke with a confidence that he certainly did not feel. So little did he trust the crafty governor that he would not have been in the least surprised had he suddenly called the whole thing off and then boasted that it was all a trick to get Cub to convict himself beyond redemption as a spy. This did not happen, but Cub held his breath, as the saying is, all the way to that part of the wall where he had made his dramatic entry into the fort. With nerves tingling he watched the rope, carried by one of Karzoff’s men, lowered into the void.

“You go first,” he told the Pasha. “Wait for me at the bottom. Don’t move, because you will be standing on the edge of a precipice.”

The Pasha wound the rope round his body, climbed over the edge, and was lowered until the slackness of the rope showed that he had reached the bottom. The rope was drawn up and Cub followed, feeling somewhat reassured in the belief that Karzoff would not have gone as far as this unless he was serious. Three more minutes, three anxious minutes, and he was standing on the ledge beside the Pasha, watching the rope disappear as it was drawn up.

Wondering if all this was really happening he looked about him. It was still dark. Above, the sky was mostly black with cloud, but with here and there a break through which dim moonlight filtered mistily. Below was a well of inky shadow. He tried to probe it with his eyes, but could see nothing clearly. He had managed to get up, he mused. The question was, could he find his way down?

So anxious had he been to get outside the prison walls that it was not until this moment that he realised fully the difficulties and dangers that still had to be faced. Without giving the matter any serious thought, he had hoped, vaguely and without much confidence, that the others might have remained within earshot. If that were so, they would come to his assistance. He whistled—their own private signal—several times, as loudly as he dare; but when there was no reply he knew that they had gone. This did not surprise him, for they would naturally suppose that there was no purpose in remaining. Moreover, should daylight find them there they would be exposed to the risk of discovery. That was how they would think, reasoned Cub. Not by the widest stretch of imagination could they have foreseen that he would leave the building at the spot, and by the same method, that he had entered it. With Yakoff a traitor to their cause, as they would assume, Cub could have no chance whatever of getting out of the fort—anyway, without outside assistance.

That Gimlet would try to devise some plan to get him out of the fort he did not doubt. That, probably, was what he was doing now. Yet here he was, with the Pasha, already outside. No, he decided. It was no use thinking about Gimlet for the moment. He had shouted to him to go, and he had gone. With what consternation Gimlet and the others had heard his yell of warning he could well imagine. He explained the position to his companion.

After that he tried to find the path down the cliff; and he did, by trial and error, get some distance. The trouble was, there was no actual path, and having more than once come to a dead end, with a sheer drop in front, he perceived that it was only a question of time before one of them took a false step with results that could only be fatal. Even if that did not happen, in trying to go on he might well do more harm than good by getting the pair of them stranded on a ledge from which it was impossible to move in any direction. Having made the ascent in the dark it had been impossible to note any mark that might serve as a guide—not that there had been any need for this with Yousouf to show them the way up, and, as they had hoped, down.

He discussed the situation with the Pasha, who, although he did not complain, being an old man and weak from confinement, was obviously finding the going even more difficult than Cub. It was soon agreed that the

only sensible thing to do was to wait for daylight, when they would be better able to see what they were doing. The risk of being spotted from the fort would involve them in dangers no greater than those they were taking in trying to get down the cliff in the dark.

So there they sat, huddled together, getting colder as the chill breath of the dawn wind came funnelling through the gorge. Cub occupied the time by telling the whole story of the expedition, from their arrival in the country up to the situation as it stood at that moment.

When the first cold grey light of early morning came creeping over the mountains they stretched cramped limbs and resumed the descent. As the light grew stronger Cub could see occasional marks made by the others who had been over the ground twice, first up and then down, and this enabled him to make fair progress. Once or twice they strayed from the track, but always managed to find it again. There was, of course, no actual track. A fault in the rock had caused the stratum to split, making a wide scar up which an agile man with a clear head would be able to climb. Several times he paused to look up, aware that daylight was likely to prove a curse as well as a blessing, for there were many places where a sentry who was wide awake, happening to look down, could not fail to see them.

What would happen in such an event was open to question. Considering the matter, it seemed to Cub that Karzoff would not be able to withdraw the customary sentries without causing comment in the garrison. It was equally certain that if they were spotted by a sentry he would raise an alarm that would be followed by a pursuit which might well end in shooting; for this also was something Karzoff would be unable to prevent without bringing suspicion of complicity upon himself.

Cub was not really surprised, therefore, when a rifle cracked and a bullet flattened itself on the rocks not far from where he stood. The Pasha realised at once what had happened, and following Cub's example, drew back against the face of the rock, where, if they could be seen at all, they offered a smaller target than if they had been in the open. Two or three more shots were fired, but without effect.

Cub spoke tersely. "Look, sir. We can't stay here. Troops will be sent out to cut us off. Karzoff won't dare to stop them because if he did his men would probably guess why. In any case, he won't know definitely that it is us who are being shot at. He'll suppose that we're miles away by this time. We've got to get to the top of that far slope before the troops get there or we shall have had it. I'm afraid it means making a bolt for it and taking the risk of being hit."

“You are quite right,” said the Pasha calmly. “I would die rather than be taken back into that horrible fort. Shall I go first, or will you?”

“I’ll go,” decided Cub, realising that as he was the lighter on his feet there would be less chance of losing the way. Although he did not say so he hoped that Gimlet, or some of Macgreggo’s scouts, would hear the shooting, and coming to see what it was about, give them a hand.

The next ten minutes were grim, even for Cub, who was not without experience of being under fire. Progress consisted of making short rushes from rock to rock, from shelf to shelf, from cover to cover, and then, from the new position, spying out the next move. Fortunately there were places where they were safe, because the bulge in the rocks above prevented them from being seen by those on the fort; but against that there were moments when they were exposed to a brisk fire, yet had to move slowly for fear of a fall that would be as fatal as a bullet. To be under fire at any time is an unpleasant sensation, but in such circumstances as these it was nerve shattering, and the fugitives went on with faces pale and set, sometimes slipping, sometimes sliding down a scree, grabbing for handholds regardless of torn finger nails. The worst moment was when a near bullet splashed a chip of stone into the Pasha’s face; in moving quickly he dislodged a fair sized rock which overtook Cub, who was below, and catching him in the back, nearly sent him over a thirty foot drop, for he was making his way along a narrow shelf at the time. A warning shout from the Pasha saved him, for looking up he saw the rock coming, and was able to brace himself for the shock before it struck him.

In a last desperate rush they reached the bottom together and flung themselves into the boggy jungle that fringed the brook. Bullets still came spattering through the bushes, but the shooting was now guesswork, and Cub ignored it as he snatched a drink and splashed cold water on his face. He looked at his companion and smiled. “Now for the last lap,” he said cheerfully.

On the far side of the gorge there was more cover. The slope was not so steep, with the result that it supported a fair growth of scrub and an occasional group of dwarf conifers. Trees, too, had fallen from above, and lodged against these, making a tangle of branches through which it was possible to force a passage and at the same time remain hidden from sight. Had it not been for this Cub would have given little for their chance of reaching the top, for the angle between them and the troops on the fort was much broader, and the possibilities of more accurate marksmanship improved accordingly. There were now quite a number of men on the wall of the fort.

The Pasha must have been well aware of the danger but he made light of it. "Let us go on and get it over," he said coolly.

The race for the top began, for that is really what it amounted to. The same tactics as before were employed—that is to say, short rushes from cover to cover. In actual practice it turned out to be not so bad as Cub expected, for they were able to move forward under cover of the trees for long periods. The open spaces between the trees were narrow, too, and as the enemy had no means of judging where the fugitives would break out, these were sometimes crossed before a shot could be fired. Again, there was no longer any serious risk of falling, as there had been on the cliff.

In a quarter of an hour the worst was over, and Cub, blinded by sweat and gasping for breath, ran into the forest that began at the lip of the gorge. The Pasha, being well past his prime, was just about able to totter, and as soon as he was in the trees he collapsed in a manner that caused Cub to fear that a heart attack had been brought on by the strain. However, after a minute or two he was able to sit up, although he still looked very groggy. He went up in Cub's estimation when, as soon as he could speak, he apologised for being a hindrance, and suggested that Cub should leave him and save himself.

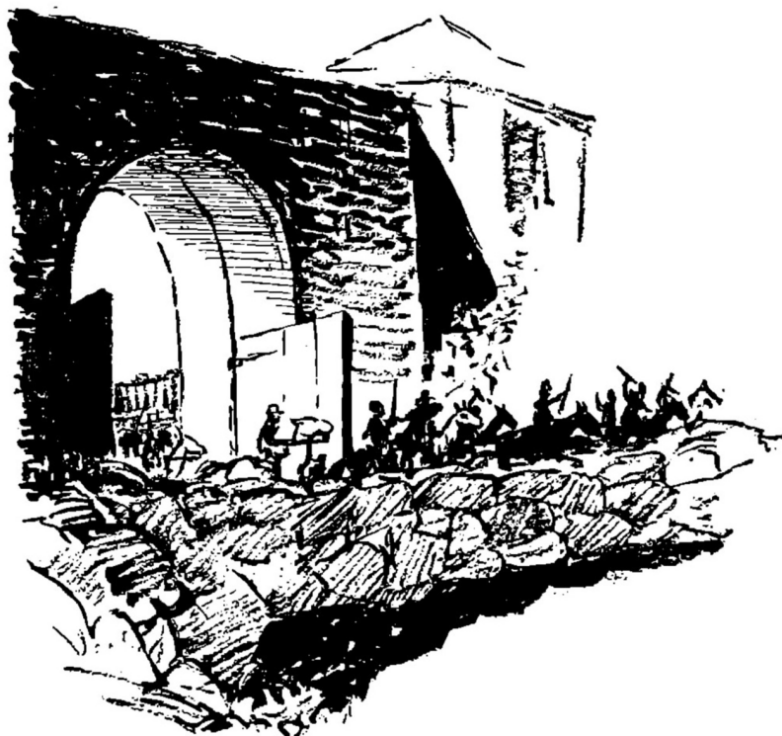
Cub smiled lugubriously. "I haven't come all this way to fetch you and then let you go," he dissented firmly. "There's no hurry. Take time and get your breath. We are doing fine."

The Pasha supported his own argument by pointing to the causeway, which was now in view. Horsemen were galloping across it in a way that left no doubt as to their purpose.

"Oh, we'll deal with them in due course," said Cub, with a jauntiness he certainly did not feel.

The Pasha looked dubious, as well he might. But he said no more.

While they rested Cub wondered again what Karzoff was thinking about all this commotion, which seemed certain to affect his plans. Not that Cub was in the least concerned with Karzoff's predicament, except where it affected his own.



He knew roughly where they were, for he recognised the spot as being no great distance from the place where Trapper had first spied the fort; but he saw with some anxiety that unless they could reach the track, and cross it into the thicket beyond before the troops got there, they would be cut off. Once in the thicket above the scaffolds they would be reasonably safe. It was unlikely that the troops would follow, fearing that some of Macgreggo's men might be posted there. Moreover, there seemed a good chance that Gimlet and the others might be, if not actually there, somewhere not far away. That they would not retire to any great distance while they supposed he was in the fort, he was confident.

This belief he conveyed to the Pasha, who at once scrambled to his feet, somewhat shakily, and declared that he was good for another ten miles if necessary.

"If you can manage five hundred yards we should be okay," Cub told him, as he set off at a brisk pace, realising that it was going to be a close thing. Once across the road they would be able to rest indefinitely.

They beat the troops to it by about a hundred yards. In this they may have been lucky, for it is unlikely that they would have done so had not the

Cossacks halted near the gallows to speak to a sentry stationed there. For a moment it looked as if Cub and his companion would get across the road unseen; but at the last moment one of the mounted men, happening to look up, let out a yell of warning. Whereupon the whole troop clapped home their spurs and came on at full gallop.

Having crossed the road Cub paused long enough to fire a couple of quick shots, first to let the enemy know that he was armed, and secondly, to give the Pasha time to get well inside the thicket. This done, he dived into the undergrowth and joined him, where he was clawing his way uphill through the tangle. He fully expected to be challenged by one of Macgreggo's men, but to his disappointment this did not happen. The thicket was deserted, he concluded, otherwise the noise would by now have brought some response from any bandits stationed there.

If there was a pursuit Cub heard nothing of it, so reaching what he considered to be a safe spot about a third of the way up the slope, a spot which commanded a good view of the road, he halted with a sigh of thankfulness and sank down to rest. It was high time, too, he saw, for the Pasha was at the end of his strength. Still, Cub thought he had done very well. Seldom had an old man put up such a good show, even though the prize was freedom.

"I think we'll stay here for a while," he decided. "We're fairly safe now. My friends may come along. If not, after we've had a rest, we'll walk on and try to find them. One thing we can rely on, they won't be far away."

In this, as events were soon to show, he was right. But his final observation was very wide of the mark. Making himself comfortable he sighed wearily. "Thank goodness there's nothing more we can do. I've had about enough."

CHAPTER XI

NO REST FOR THE WEARY

THE day was still young, but broad daylight had come with a leaden sky and a promise of more rain. The air was muggy with a sticky heat that brought out the mosquitoes and midges in swarms to make anything like real rest impossible. Troops were everywhere, mostly in small formations, although what they were doing was not easy to discern. They behaved like men without any centralised command. An occasional shot or shout suggested that either they were actively engaged in some operation or else their nerves were jumpy.

Now that he had leisure to think, Cub was content with his decision that they should remain where they were for the time being. When the general activity had died down they could think about moving. Meanwhile there was always a chance of Gimlet arriving on the scene. Cub was hungry and thirsty, but what he needed most of all was sleep. His eyes were hot and heavy from lack of it.

Presently he asked the Pasha if he would care to snatch a nap while he kept watch. The Pasha declined the offer saying that he was not in the least tired; but no doubt observing Cub's condition he insisted that he should rest. He himself would keep watch. Cub had no intention of sleeping, but he lay back with his head on his hands; and, as there is a limit to human endurance, in five minutes he was fast asleep.

He awoke with a start to find the Pasha nudging him. He sat up with a jerk, alert for danger. Seeing none, he asked how long he had been asleep.

"About an hour," was the answer. "I woke you up because I thought you ought to see that," said the Pasha, pointing.

Following the direction Cub needed no further explanation. Crossing the causeway towards the mainland, travelling slowly, were three armoured cars.

What was happening was at once fairly clear. Either the cars were already there when he was speaking with Karzoff, or they had arrived early in the morning. They were now leaving with their prisoner—or rather, since the genuine prisoner was no longer in the fort, they were taking the fake one. So Karzoff was going through with his scheme, thought Cub. Not that he had an alternative. Failure to produce his important prisoner could not fail to

lead to embarrassing questions by the officer in charge of the cars. In his mind's eye Cub could visualise the infamous governor of the fort going through with his bluff. Doubtless the man in charge of the cars would know from the shooting that something was going on, but he would not be concerned with Karzoff's local worries. All he would be concerned with was his prisoner, and as soon as he had collected him he would start off for wherever he was taking him. By the time it was discovered that the prisoner was not the Pasha, Karzoff would be many miles away. This suited Cub well enough. Indeed, now that the alarm caused by the sentry had subsided, everything seemed to be going according to plan. All that remained now, he thought with satisfaction, was to make contact with Gimlet, which should not be difficult, and then see about getting home. Taking it all round everything had been for the best; had, in fact, gone off better than he could have hoped. It looked as if the mission was as good as buttoned up. The worst was over, anyway.

How far he was at fault in this pleasant preoccupation was soon to be demonstrated.

The cars carried on over the causeway. They reached the bridge where the promontory ran into the mainland, crossed it, came up the slope, turned to the right and proceeded on their way. Cub watched them until they were out of sight. Then, and only then, did an awful thought occur to him. There was one factor he had left out of his calculations, one possibility—nay, probability—he had overlooked. Now he saw it plainly, so plainly that a chilly hand seemed to fall on his heart. Gimlet! Gimlet would naturally suppose that the real Pasha was in one of the cars, and was now being taken away beyond all hope of rescue. Gimlet knew the cars were coming, and for what purpose. He would be on the watch to see them arrive—and leave. Cub knew Gimlet. He did not know exactly what he would do, but he knew beyond all shadow of doubt that he would do something, something to prevent the Pasha from slipping through his fingers, which would mean the failure of his mission.

Cub strove to force his racing brain to steady its pace in order to think clearly. He saw that he had one hope, and that was that Gimlet would be unaware of the departure of the cars. He did not set much store by it. He knew Gimlet too well. Knowing that the cars were due he would never take his eyes off the road. He might even suppose that he, Cub, having been captured, was in one of the cars, being taken away at the same time. Which meant that however hopeless an attack on the cars might appear, he would attempt it.

Thinking it over it seemed to Cub that there was nothing he could do about it now. Bitterly he blamed himself for resting, wasting time when he might have carried on and made contact with Gimlet. It was obviously no use running after the cars in the hope of overtaking them. In fact, it was no use trying to run anywhere except on the road, and that was now well posted with sentries. Squads of troops were still moving about.

Sitting hunched up, elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, he waited in miserable suspense for what he was sure would happen.

The Pasha, after glancing at him several times, asked: "Is something the matter?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I've made a terrible boob," confessed Cub morosely.

"In what way?" asked the Pasha.

Before Cub could answer the ground shook, and the mountains echoed a tremendous explosion. Hard on this came a volley of distant rifle shots accompanied by much shouting.

"What on earth was that?" demanded the Pasha, in a tense voice.

It is likely that he asked the question automatically, not expecting an answer. But the answer was forthcoming.

"That," replied Cub, "is my friends, attacking the cars. They think you are in one of them. Judging from the shouting I suspect that the bandits are out in full force, too, to lend a hand."

"Ah, yes, of course. What a pity," murmured the Pasha.

Cub pointed at the causeway. The door of the fort had been thrown open. Horsemen were pouring out. "Here come reinforcements for the cars," he announced.

There was silence for a minute. Then: "Is there anything we can do?" queried the Pasha.

"I'm afraid we've left it too late," returned Cub wearily. "Still, we might try," he added quickly. "Anything is better than sitting here doing nothing. We'll push along and try to get to the battle before there are too many casualties. If I can get to my chief and let him know we're all right he could call off the attack."

"You'll never get along the road," asserted the Pasha. "To try would be suicide. Look, there are more men coming from the fort. At this rate there will soon be no one left in it."

Cub looked at a little knot of horsemen galloping at breakneck speed across the causeway. He recognised Karzoff in the lead.

The Pasha also saw him, for he exclaimed: "It's the governor himself! What is he doing? I should have thought his place was in the fort."

Cub laughed mirthlessly, for he knew the answer. "Karzoff has had enough of the fort," he said grimly. "He's coming out to give himself up. In that way he hopes to save his life and collect a bagful of gold. He's going to get a shock in a minute."

The horsemen appeared on the brow of the slope that led down to the fort. There they checked for a moment, but then went on in the direction taken by the cars, whence still came the din of the onset.

Cub laughed again, although there was no humour in it.

"What amuses you?" asked the Pasha.

"Karzoff doesn't know what he's doing," explained Cub.

"I don't understand."

"He supposes that we've made contact with my friends, and told them of my arrangement with him. He thinks he's on safe ground, instead of which, when he tries to give himself up, he'll probably be shot."

"I don't think we need worry about that," said the Pasha.

"I'm not worrying about it," Cub told him. "All the same, it's time we tried to straighten things out. Come on."

He had just started off when, from somewhere close at hand, there came a sudden burst of shooting. He stopped at once, looking down at the near end of the causeway. The shots had come from somewhere near it, he fancied. In this, he now observed, he was correct, for two sentries who had been standing there had moved. One lay face downward on the road. The other was crawling away.

Before Cub could express an opinion on this event, indeed, before he could even think about it, the explanation was revealed in a manner that caused his lips to part in dismay.

From out of the rocks and bushes just above the drawbridge sprang a score or more of men dressed in garments which told Cub at once that they were members of Macgreggo's band. In fact, he recognised Sienco. They converged on the drawbridge, crossed it with a yell of triumph, and then rushed on across the causeway towards the open door of the fort. As Cub stared in startled bewilderment he recognised another figure, one that was unmistakable, racing ahead with Sienco. It was Copper.

"Now what is happening?" asked the Pasha, casually.

“It’s our people attacking the fort,” replied Cub dully.

“But why are they doing that?” questioned the Pasha.

“Heaven only knows,” muttered Cub. Then, suddenly, the truth hit him like a blow. “Of course I know,” he went on in a high-pitched voice. “They’re after *me*! They think I’m in there.”

“Ah. Quite so. Of course,” murmured the Pasha.

Cub could only stand and stare as he tried to muster his wits, for this development was quite outside his reckoning. Yet, he mused, it was just the sort of crazy thing Gimlet would do. Having created a diversion on the road he would aim straight at the heart of the whole business by launching a frontal attack on the fort itself. Cub noted that it did not seem to be putting up much resistance—but then, he remembered that most of the garrison was outside. Gimlet, who must have been watching, would take that into account, no doubt. The governor himself was outside, if it came to that.

Macgreggo’s men poured through the open door and were lost to sight.

What to do for the best Cub did not know. Should he stick to his original plan and try to make contact with Gimlet, or should he go after Copper to let him know that he was wasting his time? He feared that Copper, having got into the fort, would not leave it without him. For a few seconds he tarried in distraught indecision. Then, as he made up his mind, action returned to his limbs. He was no longer tired. Turning to the Pasha he spoke crisply. “Stay here,” he ordered. “I’m going over to the fort. Don’t move. If you do I may have difficulty in finding you again. I’ll be back.” Then, without waiting for the protests which he knew would come, he crashed his way through the bushes and tore down the slope towards the causeway, determined at all costs to get Copper out of what might well prove a trap.

Pistol in hand, in case he should meet a sentry, he raced on. Approaching the drawbridge, which he now saw clearly for the first time, he steadied his pace, prepared for opposition. None came. A grey-coated man lay in the middle of it. One of Macgreggo’s men sat near him, tying some dirty rags round a bloodstained leg. He grinned at Cub, who did not stop, but carried on towards his objective.

There was not as much noise inside the fort as he had expected. There was an occasional shot, or a shout. Soon after this there was a curious rising murmur, as of many voices. Cub did not even try to guess what was going on. His mind was running on a single track, and that was to get to Copper. It should not be difficult now, he thought, for judging from the absence of any sounds of actual conflict all resistance had been overcome. As he neared the great iron-studded door the thought did occur to him that Karzoff might

have evacuated the place deliberately, have thrown it wide open to the bandits in order to curry favour with their leader. It was just the sort of thing he would do.

He was within a dozen paces of the door when it suddenly swung to. He heard bolts being shot home. He flung himself against it, shouting in his fury at this unexpected and maddening frustration. He beat on the door with his fists, shouting: "Open up—open up!" Whether he was heard or not he did not know. The door remained shut. He groaned aloud in his vexation. To be so near! And yet, for all the good he could do, he might as well have been a mile away.

So angry and so sick with disappointment was he that he paid no attention to anything but the door, at which he could only stare in raging impotence. It had been shut, he imagined, on Copper's orders. From his training, with an eye always on his rear, Copper would think of that. Cub leaned against it wearily. All he could do now was wait for it to open. How long that would be, he pondered, would depend on how long it took Copper to satisfy himself that he, Cub, was not inside. It might be some time.

So engrossed was he in these conflicting thoughts that he had paid little attention to the causeway and the road beyond it. It was a clatter of hoofs on hard ground that called his attention to it. What he saw brought home to him in a single glance the fatal position into which he had so carelessly put himself. Galloping along the road, strung out as if they were retiring in disorder, came a troop of Cossacks, obviously making for the fort. Staring, Cub thought he could make out two of Karzoff's bodyguard with them. The governor himself he could not see. Not that it mattered. By now he must have realised that the plan had miscarried.

The point was, the Cossacks were now obviously retiring on the fort. They would see him. No doubt they had already seen him. Should he fall into their angry hands he had no doubt as to what his fate would be. Apart from the Cossacks, Karzoff's bodyguard would naturally think that he had played them false.

Cub looked about him in something like a panic, but could see no way out of the trap. The closed door barred any retreat. The sides of the causeway was sheer, so there could be no going that way either. In fact, there was only one way he could go, and that was forward—towards the horsemen.

CHAPTER XII

ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

IN his desperation Cub remembered the drawbridge. Did it still work? It struck him that if he could reach it first, and pull it up, his problem would be solved. The Cossacks would be unable to get to him, and when Copper emerged from the fort he and his force would drive them away. But the immediate question was, could he get to the drawbridge first? He thought he had a chance. If he failed—well, it would come to the same thing as if he stayed where he was. He thought he might as well try. He snatched a last look at the door. It was still shut, so, turning he ran back across the causeway even faster than he had come. Before he had gone far he heard shouts behind him, but he was now in too much of a hurry to pay much attention. He snatched a glance over his shoulder, but his interest was centred on the door, and as it was still closed he did not stop. He caught a vague glimpse of some unkempt-looking figures on the top of the wall, gesticulating, but he took these signals to be directed against the approaching Cossacks. Anyway, having started he dare not risk going back. He was relieved to note that the troops, having reached the top of the slope, were now walking their horses. This was understandable, as to gallop them down a track so steep would be asking for a fall.

He reached the drawbridge when the men were about half-way down, which meant that he had two or three minutes in hand. Actually, he did not need them. One minute was sufficient to tell him as much about the bridge as he needed to know. He found the big iron wheel that operated the device, but the chains were rusty from disuse, and it was beyond his strength to move the thing an inch. One of the chains was broken, anyway. So obvious was it that his effort had been in vain that he turned away in disgust. The only thing left for it, it seemed, was to put up the best fight he could. He was pretty sure that the Cossacks would be in no mood to take prisoners even if he were inclined to give himself up, which he was not.

The guardhouse was, he noted, well adapted for defence, as was only to be expected since it had been designed for that purpose. He took up his position in one of the unglazed slits that served as windows, choosing one that commanded the road. And there he waited, wondering if the Cossacks knew he was there. Not that it made much difference whether they did or not, for they would certainly discover him when they got to the bridge.

A movement made him turn with a start of alarm, but he relaxed as into the room came hopping the wounded bandit he had last seen tying up his leg. He had forgotten all about him. The man, he supposed, had also seen the Cossacks coming, and knowing what his fate would be if he fell into their hands, had evidently resolved to postpone this for as long as possible. One thing at least was clear. The fellow was not in the least afraid of losing his life, for he grinned cheerfully at Cub as he proceeded to load the one firearm he possessed. This was an antiquated, muzzle-loading, flint-lock gun, or rifle—Cub was not sure which. It fascinated him to see the man ram home a handful of black powder. For a wad he used a piece of his shirt. This was followed by a load of what looked like home-made slugs. At any rate, they were of several sizes, and some were by no means round. Cub shuddered at the thought of meeting such a fearful charge, and understood why the troops seldom sustained their attacks on the bandits.

Cub now returned his attention to the road; and it was high time, for the Cossacks were now within fifty yards of the place; and from the way they were coming on imagined the bridge either to be abandoned, or held by their own men. He dare not let them get any nearer, and disliking the idea of shooting a man in cold blood sent a warning shot whistling over their heads. This, he thought, might cause them to retire. At all events they would know the bridge was held, and this should give him a respite.

This was the case. The troops wheeled about, galloped a short distance, and with the exception of two, dismounted. These took over the reins of the others, and retired with the horses to a safe distance. Those who had dismounted now took up positions from which they hoped, apparently, to silence the defenders of the bridge.

They went about this without enthusiasm; certainly without any sort of ordered effort. They opened a desultory fire, the bullets smacking against the stone building in a manner which suggested that they knew neither the strength of the opposition nor how it was disposed.

Thus things remained for about five minutes. Cub, having no bullets to waste, held his fire, content to gain as much time as possible. It seemed that the bandit felt the same way about it, for, with his musket resting in the loophole he rolled some tobacco leaves into a villainous-looking cigar, which, when lighted, filled the little room with a reek that set Cub coughing—much to the bandit's amusement.

But this could not go on. Taking a peep Cub saw that the Cossacks, encouraged possibly by the silence, were getting into a position for a charge. He braced himself for the assault, which in his heart he feared would end the matter. He was not prepared for what happened when it came. No sooner

had the troops broken from cover than there was a deafening explosion, and visibility was reduced to zero by a mighty cloud of smoke. Cub realised that the bandit had at last pulled his trigger. He waited for the troops to appear through the smoke. They did not come. Instead, there came the grand finale of the day's spectacular events.

From Cub's rear came a surging roar that sounded like big waves breaking on a shingle beach. Running to one of the windows overlooking the causeway he saw that the door of the fort had at last been opened, to let loose such a mob that the size and character of it took his breath away. He had no idea that there were so many people inside the fort. There were even women in the crowd. Gaunt, bearded, filthy, in rags beyond description, brandishing weapons that varied from axes to logs of wood, yelling like dervishes, the tide swept towards the drawbridge in a flood of hysterical humanity.

It did not take Cub long to realise what had happened. Copper or Sienco had released the prisoners, who, mad with excitement at their unexpected freedom, were rushing to get clear of the fort while the opportunity offered. Copper did not appear to be amongst them—at least, Cub could not see him; so he ran back to see what was happening on the road.

The smoke had cleared. The Cossacks were no longer there, not counting two wounded men who were dragging themselves to the side of the track. Clearly, the Cossacks had also realised what had happened, and knowing what would happen to them if they were caught, were seeking safety in flight.

Cub ran into the open, waving on the crowd to let the human avalanche know that he was on their side. Should they take him for one of the enemy, he thought, he was likely to be torn limb from limb. The bandit also hopped to the door, but they both had to back inside as the demented crowd stampeded past, for there seemed to be a good chance of their being knocked into the gorge by the sheer weight of numbers. Cub mopped his brow with a hand that shook, for what with the strain and the general pandemonium he felt that the thing was getting beyond him.

After the main throng had gone past—where it was heading for he neither knew nor cared—he looked eagerly for Copper. Some of Sienco's men were there, bringing up the rear, but of Sienco and Copper there was no sign. Then he guessed why, from the interior of the fort a cloud of smoke rose sluggishly into the humid atmosphere. So that was it, he thought. Copper or Sienco, or both of them, had decided to make a job of the place while they were in it. Anyway, that part of the fort that would burn, was on

fire. He observed this without emotion. He felt he had reached a stage where nothing could surprise him.

Then he saw Copper and Sienco coming. They came walking across the causeway with no more concern than if they were out for an afternoon stroll. Cub went to meet them, and as he drew near he saw there was nothing restful about their appearance. Copper was in a fearful state. His jacket was in rags, his hands were black, and his face streaked with dust and sweat. His beret hung over one ear.

He stopped dead when he saw Cub and pointed an accusing finger at him. "So *there* you are!" he shouted indignantly. "Wot 'ave you bin up to I'd like ter know? I've bin 'untin' all over the bloomin' place for you; 'alf pulled the perishin' fort down I did, s'welp me."

"I got out early this morning," Cub told him simply.

"An 'ow did yer work that blinkin' miracle?"

"The governor let me out."

"'Ere, come orf it. This ain't no time fer kiddin'."

"It's a fact," asserted Cub. "How else do you think I got here? I'll tell you all about it later. Where's Gimlet—that's what I want to know? What's he doing?"

"Still tryin' ter winkle the Pasha outer those tin cars I reckon. I started with 'im this mornin', but seein' as 'ow most of the garrison was outside the fort 'e sent me along with orders ter get you out. Nice game I 'ad, too, huntin' through all those lousy dungeons."

Cub thanked him for his effort. "The Pasha's all right, too," he said.

Copper stared. "Wot do you mean—the Pasha's all right? 'Ow can 'e be all right? Wot are you talkin' about?"

"He's outside," answered Cub. "He came with me. He should be up on the hill, waiting. That's where I left him."

"Well, strike me pink!" muttered Copper. "If that ain't a fair coughdrop. An' 'ere's me and Gimlet tearin' the country apart. . . ." He shook his head. "Everybody must be goin' loony—me included."

"Were those the prisoners you let out?" asked Cub.

"I didn't let 'em out, I was too busy lookin' fer you. But Macgreggo wanted 'em out, so 'e sent some of 'is boys with Sienco ter see about it. Nice little lot, weren't they?"

Cub nodded. "Are you telling me? Who set the place on fire?"

"Not me. Reckon it was about time though, all the same. The place stinks."

“There may be a row about that,” said Cub seriously. “We weren’t sent to start a war.”

“A fat lot I care,” sneered Copper. “Who started this, any old how? ’Ave you seen the big boss, Karzoff, anywhere? I couldn’t find ’im inside.”

“He’s up on the road somewhere. I saw him go out and I haven’t seen him come back.”

“Good enough. Well, instead of natterin’ ’ere we’d better push along and see if we can give Gimlet a ’and.”

“We’ll collect the Pasha on the way,” said Cub. “As a matter of fact I was going along to tell Gimlet that I’d got him when I saw you charging the fort. Tell Sienco to get his gang together and we’ll move off.”

“We shall need ’im, too, if I know anythin’,” said Copper earnestly. “The whole place is fairly crawlin’ with troops. This picnic ain’t finished yet, not by a long chalk.”

“Then let’s get on with it,” suggested Cub.

With Sienco bringing up the rear with his wounded they set off up the slope.

CHAPTER XIII

EXPLANATIONS

CUB found the Pasha waiting obediently where he had left him, not a little worried by the commotion, and his long absence. Cub introduced Copper, and afterwards, Sienco and his vagabonds, who were all in high spirits as a result of the day's doings. Time and time again the bandits feasted their eyes, with jubilant exclamations, on the smoking fort.

Cub explained briefly to the Pasha what had happened, and said they must now make their way along to Gimlet without the loss of any more time.

Copper told Cub that for the attack on the cars Macgreggo had mustered every available man, to the number of nearly fifty. Exactly how they were to be deployed he did not know, for he had been detailed to attack the fort before the general plan had been put into operation. All Copper knew was that Gimlet had asked Macgreggo if he had any dynamite or other explosive.

"Apparently he had," put in Cub. "I heard a rattling good bang."

"I reckon Gimlet 'ad some scheme for blockin' the road to 'old up the cars and stop 'em gettin' the Pasha away," opined Copper.

"Well, whatever he did, I've an uncomfortable feeling that it hasn't gone off too well," returned Cub. "The shooting is still going on. If Gimlet had captured the cars it would have been all over by now."

"True enough, chum," commented Copper. "It's one thing ter stop armoured cars, but a different cup o' tea altergether ter get the crews out of 'em. Don't I know it. Gimlet'll keep 'ammerin' at 'em. He'd made up 'is mind ter get the Pasha."

"I think Karzoff must be along there somewhere, too," said Cub. "At least, I saw him go out and I haven't seen him come back." He looked around. "What's become of that mob of prisoners?"

"Tucked themselves into the woods, I reckon, in case the Cossacks won the battle and started ter round 'em up again. They've managed ter get out of sight, any old how, and I don't blame 'em."

By this time the whole party, which included Sienco and his men, was making its way along the slope of the hill half-way between the road and the ridge, a high level from which it was possible to see a fair distance ahead. There were a number of troops still on the road, walking without any sort of

order, but most of them returning to the fort, presumably to deal with the fire. From somewhere in front, beyond the next bend, there still came sporadic outbreaks of musketry, from which it could be assumed that the battle of the cars had not yet been decided.

This became still more evident, and at the same time suggested that things were not going well for the government troops, when round the bend appeared a considerable number of them, clearly retiring in disorder. Hard upon these came one of the armoured cars, travelling backwards. There was also a good deal of shouting.

Copper slapped his thigh. "Get an eye full o' that," he invited. "D'you know what, Cub? Shall I tell yer wot's 'appened? Gimlet's blocked the road ter stop the cars gettin' away. Wouldn't surprise me if 'e's blown the blinkin' road clean off the side of the mountain. That'd be wot 'e wanted the dynamite for. The cars can't go forward. The road ain't wide enough for 'em ter turn, so they're tryin' ter get back ter the fort stern first. Now ain't that jest lovely?"

This appraisal of the situation was correct, as was presently confirmed.

Cub did not stop to consider the matter. He pushed on as fast as conditions allowed, for he realised more than ever the urgency of letting Gimlet know that as the Pasha was with him there was no need to sustain an attack that might well result in serious casualties. He noticed that the car now in sight was not returning the fire directed against it, which gave reason to think that it had run out of ammunition.

That Gimlet and the bandits were persisting in their attack became plain when a number of tree trunks suddenly rolled across the road behind the car. They came, Cub observed, from the site of the timber-cutting operations, which he now recognised; and their purpose was clear. They were intended to block the road behind the car to prevent it from making further progress towards the fort. This manœuvre appeared to achieve its object, for while some of the logs rolled right across the road to vanish over the lip of the steep slope on the opposite side, others stopped. Soon there were several, lying at all angles. Some of the retiring troops went back to try to clear these, but a brisk fire from the hill above discouraged them and they soon gave it up.

"Trust Gimlet," said Copper enthusiastically. "'E's blocked the road both ways. Blow me if this ain't beginnin' ter look like a full-sized war!"

Cub was thinking the same thing, and he was by no means happy about it. He was wondering what the outcome of it all would be. The affair was certainly developing into something far bigger than had originally been

intended, and he felt that the sooner it was over the better. He pushed on, saying nothing, determined to get through to Gimlet, who would, he was sure, when he realised the Pasha was safe, call off the attack.

There now came another alarming incident, although it had little effect on the situation as a whole. It was, Cub thought, something for which Gimlet was in a way responsible, although it was something that he had not intended. This is what happened. The driver of the backing car, finding further progress barred by obstructions, was trying to find a way between them and the edge of the road. Apparently perceiving that this was not possible by backing, he tried to turn, knowing that if he could get round he would be able to see more clearly what he was doing.

Copper stopped to look. "You know, chum," he said earnestly, "if the bloke drivin' that go-cart ain't careful 'e's agoin' ter 'urt 'imself presently." His voice rose to a shout as he went on. "There you are! Wot did I tell yer?"

Cub did not answer. He, too, had stopped to watch the car, now in a dangerous position. The two off-side wheels had gone over the edge of the road so that the vehicle now hung balanced precariously at a terrifying angle. The occupants must have been well aware of this, for the side door was thrown open and a man jumped out. It was as if this movement was just sufficient to upset the balance of the car, for although the driver had stopped his engine it began to move. Quite slowly it turned over and in another moment had disappeared from sight. Cub could hear it bumping and thumping as it rolled over and over down the slope.

The remaining two cars now came into sight, but seeing what had happened to the other, stopped. There was, in fact, nothing else for them to do.

Cub had little interest in them. He ran on, leaving the others to follow, determined to put an end to this futile engagement. Thrusting his way through the bushes he went on until he reached some open ground. This was the area that had been cleared by the woodcutters. Here he saw some of Macgreggo's men, who had been keeping up a running fight with the cars. He passed behind them and reached the forest on the far side, calling Gimlet by name, knowing that he could not be far away.

Trapper appeared through the trees. "Howdy, kid," he greeted cheerfully. "So you made it? *Bon!*"

"Where's Gimlet?" asked Cub tersely.

Trapper jerked a thumb. "Over there, somewhere."

Cub went on, and presently came upon Gimlet standing behind a tree in earnest conversation with Macgreggo.

Gimlet stopped talking when he saw who was approaching. “Where the deuce have you sprung from?” he cried.

Cub told him. “I’ve been trying to make contact with you all morning to let you know I was okay,” he explained. “So many things happened, though, that I couldn’t get here any earlier. I’ve got the Pasha with me.”

Gimlet stared. “You’ve got who?”

“The Pasha.”

“But I thought he was in one of the cars.”

“So I realised. But he got out with me some time ago. That’s why I’ve been trying to get through to you. I’ll tell you all about it when you’ve got time to listen.”

Macgreggo who had of course overheard this conversation, turned away. “I’ll call my men together,” he said. “There’s no sense in going on with this any longer.”

“The Pasha is over here—Copper, too,” Cub told Gimlet.

“Then let’s go over to them,” said Gimlet.

Cub retraced his steps, and a few minutes later met the rest of the party.

“Which one is the Pasha?” asked Gimlet, looking at the mixed crowd, for more of Macgreggo’s men, seeing Sienco, had joined him.

Cub introduced the Pasha, whereupon the entire party retired to safe distance up the hillside and there sat down to wait for Macgreggo and the rest.

“I don’t think there’s much risk of a counterattack,” opined Gimlet. “I fancy the enemy has had about enough.”

“I have, anyway,” Cub admitted frankly.

“Copper winkled you out of the fort, I suppose?” said Gimlet.

“No, I was already out,” asserted Cub.

Gimlet frowned incredulously. “How in thunder did you manage that?”

“Karzoff let me go—and the Pasha, too,” stated Cub, smiling at the expression on Gimlet’s face. Then, realising how ridiculous this must sound, he told Gimlet in as few words as possible what had happened.

Gimlet listened with growing amazement. When Cub had finished he remarked: “So that was it? You’ve solved a mystery that has puzzled me for some time.”

Cub looked up. “What was that?”

“Karzoff’s behaviour,” explained Gimlet. “He hasn’t the reputation of being a brave man, yet in the middle of the affair he arrived on the scene and

surprised everyone by making a single-handed charge against our position. I realise fully now that he was trying to give himself up. He expected to be taken prisoner.”

“Was he?” asked Cub.

“No. It’s a wonder he wasn’t shot. Several shots were fired at him, whereupon he lost his nerve, turned round and bolted back to the road. Finding that his horse had gone he made a dash for the cars. The crew of one of them let him in.”

Cub looked Gimlet in the face. “Which car did he get in?”

“The rear one,” answered Gimlet slowly.

“It went over the edge and rolled down the hill.”

“I know,” said Gimlet quietly. “I saw it. I was very upset at the time because I was afraid the Pasha might be in it.”

“Well, well,” breathed Cub. He didn’t know what else to say. So that, he thought, was where Karzoff’s scheming had landed him.

Macgreggo appeared, a long line of his men behind him, some carrying wounded on improvised stretchers made of fir branches. “Let us go back to camp and have something to eat,” he suggested. “It’s been an exciting day, even for here, and excitement always makes me hungry.”

“Same as you, Mac,” said Copper warmly.

CHAPTER XIV

MACGREGGO MAKES A DECISION

SUNDOWN found the bandits, with Gimlet and his party—which now included the Pasha—back at the forest rendezvous, resting after the day's strenuous exertions. Not that the camp was quiet. The place buzzed like a saw-mill as experiences were exchanged, individual stories told, and explanations offered. Cub had as much to tell as anyone, and after he had finished he learned from Gimlet what action had been taken under the wall of the fort after his warning cry of betrayal.

Gimlet had done what Cub expected he would do. As no useful purpose could be served by remaining at the top of the secret path, a position that had become more perilous than ever, the entire party had retreated to the forest to discuss without fear of interruption what could be attempted to save both Cub and the Pasha. The outcome of this was Gimlet's plan to save the Pasha by attacking the cars as they were taking him away. The road was surveyed and the best place selected. Here, as the cars approached, a section of the road was blown away making further progress impossible. Retreat was prevented by men detailed to roll logs across the road. With the cars thus immobilised the attack was launched, and was still proceeding when Cub appeared with the information that he and the Pasha were already free. Just before this, observing that most of the garrison had left the fort to save the cars, Gimlet had sent Copper, with Sienco and a force of bandits, to cause a diversion by attacking the fort itself. If they could break in and find Cub so well and good. Actually, he doubted if this would prove possible; and it was unlikely that it would have been, he said, had the governor remained at his post to direct operations. Copper said that he had met with practically no opposition at the fort. With Karzoff absent, the few men who remained inside knew nothing of what was happening. No defensive precautions had been taken, perhaps because a frontal attack on the fort in broad daylight was something beyond imagination.

That, really, was all there was to say. There were a few comments on Karzoff's behaviour, which, however remarkable it may have been to Gimlet and his men, caused no surprise to Macgreggo. It merely confirmed what he had told them about bribery and corruption being normal behaviour in that part of the world. Anyway, no one shed any tears for the man whose crooked schemes had inevitably at the finish resulted in his undoing. What finally

happened to him, if he was not killed in the fall, was never known; and the same with the three members of his bodyguard.

The fate of Yakoff was for some time in doubt. No one had seen anything of him. Later in the evening a scout came in with the news that his body was hanging on the gibbet. It seemed that he had made his escape from the fort with the rest of the prisoners, and had for some time been unnoticed. But when things had settled down somewhat he was recognised, and as his treatment of the prisoners in the fort had been no more humane than that of his fellow Cossacks he was promptly seized and hanged on the very gallows where in his time he must have seen many men die. So, as Gimlet remarked, his graft had got him nowhere, either.

“What a mob,” grunted Copper. “Strike ole Riley! Wot a mob. Wot a country. The whole joint stinks. Let’s get out of it. Give me Ole Smokey—wot say you, Trapper, ole cock?”

“Sure, pal, every time,” agreed Trapper.

“I think you’d be wise to make a move fairly soon,” put in Macgreggo, who had joined the party in time to hear the end of this conversation. “This has been no ordinary raid. Burning the fort and blasting the road are likely to have serious repercussions in high quarters. They’ll be mad when they hear about it. It wouldn’t surprise me if an army is sent down, with tanks and aeroplanes, to make a big attempt to wipe us out.”

“I’m sorry we’ve brought all this trouble on you,” said Gimlet gloomily.

“Oh, that won’t worry us,” declared Macgreggo. “It has happened before, more than once. By the time the troops get here my men will be sitting tight in the mountains at the other end of the peninsular.”

Gimlet looked at the speaker. “Are you going with them?”

Macgreggo hesitated. “I was wondering if . . . er . . .”

“You could come with us?” suggested Gimlet. “You needn’t wonder about that. Of course you can come with us. We shall be only too pleased to have you. There will be plenty of room in the aircraft. If you asked my opinion I’d say this may be your golden opportunity to get out.”

“I didn’t necessarily mean leave the country for good,” returned Macgreggo quickly. “But I would like to see Scotland, and, as you say, this may be an opportunity that will never occur again. With the country here overrun with soldiers, it will be impossible for me to do anything for some time. Sienco could take charge, meanwhile. He knows where our money is hidden, so the men will not go short of anything.”

“Well, all I can say is, we shall be happy to have you. Apart from that I will say no more. The decision must rest with you.”

"I'll come," announced Macgreggo suddenly; and from that moment his face wore a different expression. "Sienco and one or two of my best men shall see us to the coast. I will tell the rest to go to the mountains, where Sienco will know where to look for them after he returns."

"That's the stuff," put in Copper enthusiastically. "With you as well as the Pasha this is goin' ter be a beano."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Macgreggo seriously. "The whole area, not to mention the coast, will be under constant patrol within a few hours of the time today's business becomes known. The sooner we start and the faster we travel the easier the journey to the coast will be."

"You make your plans, which I imagine will take a little while, and we'll be ready to start when you are," Gimlet told him. "Meanwhile, we may as well get some rest. I think we're all in need of it."

"Very well. I shall try to be ready to start by dawn. I haven't much to do."

"That suits me," agreed Gimlet.

"And me," murmured Cub drowsily, for he was only keeping himself awake with difficulty.

He was fast asleep as soon as he had closed his eyes.

When he was awakened by Copper shaking him, and was told that he had been asleep for eight hours, he found it hard to believe. But paling stars in the east confirmed Copper's words, and he rose stiffly to his feet.

"Get this inside you, chum, and you'll feel better," said Copper, holding out a big mug of steaming tea.

Cub looked bleary-eyed at his big Cockney comrade. "If I look anything like you I must be a pretty sight," he observed.

"Wot's looks got ter do with it, mate?" returned Copper brightly. "There'll be plenty of time for a wash and brush up when we get back to a free country. Come on, put a jerk in it. Most of the gang 'as gone off ter the mountains and we shall be movin' off in a brace o' shakes."

Cub gulped the tea, munched a jammy biscuit, had a wash at the brook and returned to find the party getting in order for the march. Gimlet was there, washed and shaved and his clothes brushed—in fact, looking little different from when he had started. Nothing seemed to make any difference to him, thought Cub, as he set about packing his rucksack. Macgreggo arrived, a plaid over his shoulders and a blackcock tail sticking jauntily out of his bonnet. With him came Sienco and four stalwart brigands, bags strapped on their backs. The Pasha, who had cut himself a rough walking

stick, in his rags looked like the lowest sort of tramp. But he was ready, and stood talking to Copper and Trapper.

Gimlet looked round. "All right. Fall in. We're ready to move off."

Macgreggo's men, under Sienco, who were to act as scouts, moved forward. The others followed, and the march back to the coast had begun.

How far they had to go Cub did not know and he didn't like to ask. It seemed unlikely that they would cover the same ground as on the outward journey, which had been by no means a direct route. The risk of meeting enemy troops would force them to keep under cover, anyway. He knew that Gimlet must have described to Greggo the point at which they landed, for as the dinghy was there they would have to go to it. Perhaps Macgreggo, knowing the country so well, would be able to take a short cut, thought Cub. He hoped so, although his early stiffness soon wore off once he was on the move.

The march continued, with occasional short halts, which were chiefly for the Pasha's benefit, particularly after a steep hill had been climbed. For the rest, the going was much the same as it had been on previous occasions—up hill and down dale, through forests of pine, and across the flanks of stony landslides where only scrubby birch and juniper grew. The clouds had rolled away; once more the sky was blue, leaving the way open for a torrid sun to soak the shirts of the travellers with perspiration.

At noon a halt was made for lunch. It was taken quickly, and the march resumed. Cub realised that Gimlet had a particular reason for haste, apart from the ones Macgreggo had given. That night Biggles would be at the rendezvous. If they failed to reach it in time they would have to wait, and the longer the delay the more dangerous would their position become.

About three o'clock the first aeroplane was seen, proving that Macgreggo had been right in his estimation of what the enemy would do. The machine, a dark-painted, low-wing monoplane, was some way off, so little attention was paid to it. But half an hour later another swung round a hill towards them so low that everyone went flat, face downwards, until it had passed. After the first glimpse Cub saw it no more, for he knew from experience that an upturned face is a conspicuous mark easily seen from the air.

At five o'clock they topped a rise, and there before them was the sea, deep blue, tranquil, sparkling in the bright sunshine. But it was still some way off, and another hour of labour was necessary to bring them to within striking distance of the cliff that overlooked it.

Looking about him Cub saw that their guide had not made a mistake. Some little distance to the left rose the conical hill that carried the little hermit's cell in which they had passed their first night ashore. Everyone now sat down to rest while Gimlet and Macgreggo had a quiet conversation. Presently Macgreggo went over to Sienco. Watching, Cub saw that they were making their farewells, possibly for ever. Both were visibly moved, which was understandable after their long association in a life of peril. Cub turned away and stared at the sea. When he looked again, Sienco and his bandit comrades had disappeared.

Copper broke the spell. Lying on his side, smoking a crumpled cigarette, he remarked: "I reckon we were lucky not ter see anyone the whole blinkin' way. Macgreggo was dead right, I reckon, makin' us get a move on when 'e did."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when a movement in the distance caught Cub's eye. Focusing his eyes on it he saw a squad of about a dozen grey-coated men coming along the top of the cliff. A word of warning and the whole party lay flat while the troops came on, and after a time passed within fifty yards without seeing them. After they had gone by Gimlet watched them through his glasses, and not until they had disappeared into the hazy distance did he say it was safe to move.

"We shall have to be careful," was all he had to say about the incident.

It was not really necessary to say any more. It must have been obvious to everyone that if patrols were on the move, as seemed to be the case—and as Macgreggo had predicted—they would have to move warily.

Not until he was sure that there were no more troops in sight did Gimlet lead the party to the edge of the cliff, and so down to the sea. Nothing had been touched in the cave where the dinghy had been hidden.

"All right. We can take it easy now," said Gimlet. "That doesn't mean you can wander about, you fellows. Keep well back. I have a feeling that we may not have seen the last of the enemy yet."

In this he was right. About an hour later, as the sun neared the distant rim of the sea, a destroyer appeared out of the north, steaming slowly southward along the coast.

"If that swipe spots us we're in fer trouble," said Copper in a husky whisper to Cub.

"Keep well back and sit still or he will spot us," said Gimlet. "I'll warrant someone is on the bridge of that destroyer with a telescope in his hand—and he won't be interested in the sea. This is the way he'll be looking."

No one moved. No one spoke. The party sat, or lay, quite still, watching the sinister-looking craft steam slowly past, while the sun, looking like a monstrous toy balloon, sank into a sea of molten brass. The colours in the sky faded. Indigo shadows embraced the land and crept slowly out across the gently-heaving water. A solitary star appeared. The only sound was the gentle lapping of little waves dying on the beach.

“If anyone wants to eat, now’s the time,” said Gimlet softly. “I reckon to move off at ten o’clock. We shall dump everything when we go. You’d better look over the dinghy, Copper, to make sure it’s okay. No smoking, and no more talking than is necessary.”

Copper rolled over on his side and whispered in Cub’s ear. “Jest like ole times, ain’t it?”

Cub nodded. As far as he was concerned it was too much like old times.

CHAPTER XV

THROUGH THE NET

THE time passed slowly, as always appears to be the case when there is nothing to do but wait for it to pass. A desultory meal was made, more as a matter of course than because anyone was really hungry. This finished, Copper and Trapper prepared the dinghy for sea. This did not take long, either, and afterwards, for an hour or more, there was nothing to do but count the minutes.

After a while, Trapper, who was near the entrance of the cave, turned to those inside and said: "Is there a lighthouse farther along the coast, to the south?"

Macgreggo answered. "There is no lighthouse for fifty miles or more, unless it is a new one."

"What made you ask?" queried Gimlet.

"I can see a beam in the distance," replied Trapper. "It isn't there all the time. It comes and goes. That's why I think of a lighthouse."

"It might be that destroyer we saw, using its searchlight," suggested Gimlet uneasily. "If so, I hope it stays where it is," he added.

Another ten minutes passed, and then, somewhere above, a voice spoke, spoke in a sharp clear tone as if giving an order. This was followed by a clatter as if metal, or machinery of some sort, was being dumped.

In the cave nobody said a word, but attitudes became tense as everyone listened.

Then came more sounds, curious sounds, of a nature to invite speculation. Still no one spoke. All those in the cave could do was listen, with mounting apprehension, to the murmur of several voices, intermingled with the scraping of metal on metal, and intermittent hammering. Once in a while a commanding voice spoke sharply.

Said Gimlet, at last, in a low voice to Macgreggo: "What do you make of it? Can you hear what they're talking about?"

"No. Only an occasional word. They seem to be putting something together," was the whispered answer.

Another five minutes passed, and then, to add to the mystery, a small engine of some sort was started up; and the noise this made allowed those in

the cave to speak with less risk of discovery.

“What on earth are they doing?” breathed Cub.

“I don’t know,” answered Gimlet. “I only know that it’s ten past nine, and if those fellows stay there it won’t be possible for us to get away tonight without being seen. They’re right on the edge of the cliff.”

“If they remain there it’s unlikely that we shall be able to get away at all,” put in Macgreggo calmly. “Depend upon it, what they’re doing has some connection with us. When it gets daylight they’ll probably come down to the beach, and if we’re still here they are bound to see us.”

“We shan’t be here,” asserted Gimlet. “It’s tonight or never as far as we’re concerned.”

As he finished speaking the mystery was explained, explained in a manner as startling as it was unexpected. Cub’s heart went down into his boots as the white beam of a searchlight leapt out across the water.

“So that’s it,” said Gimlet evenly. “They’re fixing up portable searchlights along the coast, and by sheer bad luck for us they’ve decided on one right over our heads. That must have been one you saw farther to the south some time ago, Trapper. Well, I’m afraid it definitely knocks on the head any chance of getting away unseen.”

“I told you we had stirred things up,” murmured Macgreggo. “It’s plain enough to see what has happened. Word has got back to headquarters in Baku of today’s doing at the fort. No doubt they have learned there that the trouble was caused by foreigners entering the country. They will know by now why they came, and that they have the man they came to fetch. Supposing them to have come by sea, they will expect them to leave the same way, and are doing everything in their power to prevent them from getting out. Obviously, the coast is now being patrolled by day and night, by land, sea and air.”

“Then let’s do somethin’ about it,” said Copper bluntly. “I’ll go and put that perishin’ light out fer a start.”

“Just a minute,” Gimlet told him curtly. “We had better know what we are taking on before we do anything. Trapper, go and find out how many men are up there. I have an idea there are not as many as there were. Now the searchlight is working the men who fixed it up may have gone on.”

At this juncture, the searchlight, which had been sweeping the sea, was doused. But the engine continued running.

Trapper disappeared, and it was twenty anxious minutes before he came back. “There is a tent,” he reported. “The searchlight is in front of it. I could see only four men. Three are working the light. One sits by the tent. There is

also a wire, a field telegraph, I think. I have cut it in a way that will make them think, when they find the place, that it was broken by accident in the rocks.”

“Good,” answered Gimlet. “Only four. We should be able to manage them. We’ve no time to lose so let’s get on with it.” He got up. “We shall have to do this quietly,” he went on. “No doubt there are mobile patrols moving up and down the coast, but if we can get twenty minutes clear start we ought to be all right. That should see us out of sight of anyone on the cliff—I mean, without the searchlight. At any cost we’ve got to put that light out of action.”

Cub had started to get up, but Gimlet checked him. “You’ll stay and take charge here,” he ordered. “It’ll take us a little while to get back, and we’ve none to waste, so as soon as you hear my okay whistle get the dinghy on the water and stand by to move fast.” With that, followed by Copper and Trapper, he crept out into the night.

If Cub had found the waiting irksome before this, and he had, he now found it almost intolerable. Not a sound came from outside to indicate what was happening—not that he expected to hear anything. Once, the searchlight came on, stabbing the darkness like a white-hot dagger. It swept the sea, near and far, and then swung round in a fiery arc to explore the land. Cub could see the reflection of it on the water, from which, again, the reflection was cast on their pallid faces. Macgreggo, with his plaid round his shoulders, sat gazing moodily at the sea. The Pasha rested his face in his hands.

Cub’s nerves jangled like broken banjo strings as the silence was suddenly shattered by a medley of noises that spoke of violence. There was a cry, a shot, a shout that ended abruptly, and then a fearful clatter of metal on metal. The engine stopped. Then came a tremendous crash in which could be heard the tinkle of breaking glass. Following this there was a minute of palpitating silence in which Cub forgot to breathe. Then, clear and unmistakable, came Gimlet’s okay signal.

Cub sprang to his feet as if he had been propelled by a spring. “Come on!” he cried, in a voice fervent with thankfulness that there was something to do at last. “The boat! Lay hold! Lift!”

Staggering over the uneven ground they carried the dinghy to the water and launched it. “In you get,” Cub told the others. “Grab a paddle, Macgreggo.” He got in himself, picked up a paddle, and sat ready to use it.

Rocks rattling down the landslide told him that the raiding party was on its way back in a hurry; but it was some time before it appeared. When it

did, he noted that there were three figures. He could hear Copper muttering. They came straight to the dinghy and scrambled in. Gimlet was last. "Dig water," he snapped. "Dig deep and dig hard, but watch your blades."

Cub dug deep. The unwieldy craft surged forward, but Copper was not satisfied. He snatched the paddle from Cub's hands and his great shoulders bent as he picked up the stroke. "Watch me tear water," he grunted.

Nothing was said for some time. Cub had no questions to ask, for it was evident from the absence of the light that the sortie had been successful. It was Gimlet who at last broke the silence. "Ten past ten," he announced. "We're all right for time, but drive on until we're clear of the coast. We spotted another patrol coming along just as we left."

Then Cub understood the urgency.

Luck, on the whole, was about even, he thought, now that he had time to look around. Conditions were as perfect as could have been wished for the business on hand. The air was still. The sea was calm except for a long sleek swell which did not worry them, and there was just enough light, with a short-range visibility, to enable them to see what they were doing. Too much light would have been dangerous, and absolute darkness inconvenient. A light of some sort was moving along the cliff. Apart from that there was nothing to suggest that enemy troops were on the move.

"What happened to the searchlight?" asked Cub, although he had a pretty good idea.

"Copper pushed it off its platform," answered Gimlet. "It'll take a little time to get it working again, so we needn't worry any more about that."

"What happened to the men?" inquired Cub. "Did they give you any trouble?"

"They didn't get much chance," informed Copper grimly. "One of 'em'll 'ave a bit of a skullache when 'e wakes up, I reckon—but there, 'is pals'll see to 'im when they come along."

Cub was not interested in the details so he let it go at that.

On the whole, he thought, they had reason to be well satisfied with the state of affairs. The only disconcerting note came from the Pasha, who, after a long look at the sky, remarked that he didn't trust the weather. The fact that the water was now placid was no proof that it would remain so. Storms could come suddenly and be severe, such as the one that had wrecked his yacht and cast him on a hostile shore. As he knew the sea better than anyone else, having spent so much time on it, his words were not to be ignored. Cub wished he had kept his opinion to himself. However, as the weather was

something beyond their control nothing more was said about it. Cub was content to see the start made in such favourable conditions.

The dinghy was urged on, through the dark water, with its blunt nose pointing seaward, by Copper and Trapper, who now had the paddles. All they needed now, opined Gimlet, was a couple of hours without interference.

By the end of half an hour it was estimated that a quarter of the distance to the rendezvous had been covered. The high coast line was beginning to fade, and Gimlet held the course by his pocket compass. Around, all was gloom, and a silence broken only by the monotonous swirl of paddles as they dipped into the water.

It was soon after this that Cub's attention was drawn to a star low down over the southern horizon. At least, at first he took it to be a star; but looking at it again after a time he thought it had moved its position in relation to what was certainly a star above it. There was a yellowish look about it, too, that raised a doubt in his mind. He called Gimlet's attention to it. "Is that a star or a light?" he asked.

There was a long silence. Then Gimlet answered: "I don't know. It's hard to say."

"I had an idea that it moved," remarked Cub.

Nothing more was said about it, but when, some time later, a ghostly ray of light appeared far to the south, Cub observed: "They've got another of their searchlights going."

More time passed. Cub's attention remained focussed on the south. He had a suspicion, but was not prepared to voice it until he was sure. At length he stated, quietly but positively: "That thing we thought might be a star is a light. It's on a vessel of some sort, and the vessel is using a searchlight. I've been watching it for some time. It's moving."

"In that case it must be the destroyer we saw, coming back," answered Gimlet.

"It's bound to see us."

"Not necessarily. That will depend on how fast it's travelling, and even then, to some extent, how close to us it passes."

There the matter ended, although the danger was evident to everyone. Cub watched the light, and any slight doubt that remained was banished. The light was moving. Also, it was brighter. The ship was heading north, and if it held its course it would certainly pass at no great distance from the dinghy. The time was still a little short of eleven o'clock, which meant that the flying boat could not be expected at the rendezvous for another hour.

The paddles rose and fell. The clumsy craft, deep laden, surged heavily through the water, appearing to make little progress. The yellow light low down in the southern sky grew slowly brighter, and, like an evil eye, ever more menacing. The pale flickering searchlight beam became a rigid finger of white light probing deep into the darkness, sometimes towards the land, sometimes seaward. Cub's eyes never left it. There was nothing else to look at, anyway. One thing was now plain. The factor governing the situation was time, and to Cub, in his anxiety, it seemed to stand still.

On one occasion the questing beam swung low over the dinghy, so that for a moment he could see the faces of his companions, ash-grey in the ghostly luminosity. Not a sound came from the sky.

At long last Gimlet spoke again. "Okay. Easy all," he said softly. "This is about it. All we can do now is wait. I make it ten minutes to go."

Cub was still staring at the hateful light. To form anything like an accurate estimate of its distance away was not possible, but he judged it to be something between two and three miles. Then, for the first time since they had put to sea, a little breeze played on his cheek. Ripples slapped the dinghy, breaking into wisps of spray. Stars that had been shining in the north were no longer there.

"There is weather coming," said the Pasha. "I was afraid of it. I could smell it in the air."

"By the time it gets here we shall either be in the aircraft or in that destroyer," returned Gimlet, without emotion.

"I hope this pilot of yours is on time," remarked Macgreggo, with a hint of anxiety in his voice. "Much depends on it."

"He said twelve o'clock, and at twelve he'll be here if it's humanly possible. You can rely on that," asserted Gimlet. "There are still five minutes to go, and an aircraft can travel a long way in that time."

Two minutes passed, and then, from some indefinable point overhead, came the sound that all ears had been straining to catch—the whisper of a gliding aeroplane.

Gimlet moved quickly. "Make a shield with your jackets," he ordered crisply. And when this had been done, his torch, held upright, sent its silent message to the sky.

Cub's heart sank as the murmur of the aircraft, instead of coming nearer, began to fade. He stared upward, but, of course, could see nothing. Then he looked at the lights of the destroyer, now desperately close, and still coming on.

“What’s Biggles doing?” he muttered. “He must have seen the signal. Why doesn’t he come down?”

“’E must be able ter see that perishin’ ship, too,” growled Copper.

“Maybe that’s why he hasn’t come straight in,” replied Gimlet. “Don’t get in a flap. He knows what he’s doing.”

Cub’s voice cut in sharply. “Look! There he is! He’s down—miles away.” He could have groaned in his consternation and despair as he pointed at a light that had now appeared on the water some distance to seaward of the destroyer. The vessel had obviously seen it too, for it had already begun to turn, its searchlight swinging like a flail to cover the spot.

“It looks as if your man has mistaken the location,” said Macgreggo, a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“I don’t think so,” returned Gimlet. “He must have seen my signal. There is this about it,” he went on after a short pause, “whatever has happened he’s taking that confounded ship to a safer distance from us.”

This was clearly the case. The destroyer’s lights were now moving fast, but no longer towards the dinghy. Then a gun flashed, and a split second later the air vibrated with the explosion.

Cub saw a feather of spray leap into the air. In the glaring white beam of the searchlight, now resting on the water, the spray looked like snow. Again the destroyer’s gun flashed.

“Not much sense taking the ship out of the way if he gets himself sunk doing it,” remarked the Pasha.

Two or three minutes passed. The destroyer raced on, its guns hammering. The light at which it had first fired was no longer there. Cub thought it had been hit, for shells had burst very close to it. Then, above the gunfire, came a sound that sent his heart leaping. It was the deep purr of aero engines.

A light began dotting and dashing in the darkness not far away. Gimlet’s torch flashed back. The noise of aero engines swelled to a crescendo. And then, out of the darkness, appeared a great shape darker than the rest, water feathering from its bows.

The noise died abruptly to a gentle swishing. The aircraft lost way and came slowly to rest. Copper drove in his paddle and sent the dinghy towards it. Gimlet stood up, grabbed a wing-tip and drew the two vehicles together.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said a voice, curiously dispassionate considering the circumstances. “How’s things?” it added.

“Oh, so-so,” answered Gimlet.

“Get your man?”

“Yes.”

“Good show. Come aboard. Better step lively. It won’t take that gunboat long to discover that it has been fooled, and we’re still in range.”

Those in the dinghy needed no encouragement to vacate it. One by one they stepped through the gaping door into the cabin of the aircraft. Gimlet came last. He pushed the now useless dinghy clear with his foot and closed the door. “Okay!” he called. “All aboard.”

The machine vibrated as the engines roared. Ripples smacked against the keel. Then all vibration ceased. For a minute or two no one spoke. Then a switch clicked and the cabin was full of light. Cub saw the slim form of Ginger leaning against the forward bulkhead.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” invited Ginger. “You’ll find some grub in that hamper, and tea in the Thermos. Biggles thought you might do with a snack so we brought it along. Have a good trip?”

“Not too bad,” answered Gimlet.

“We thought you were being hard pressed when we spotted that gunboat, or whatever it is,” stated Ginger. “We saw its beam when we were twenty miles away and guessed what it was looking for.”

“What was it shooting at?” asked Cub.

“Oh, that.” Ginger laughed lightly. “Biggles was a bit worried about the ship being so near so he decided to use a red herring to draw it away. We abandoned our spare dinghy with a light on it, that was all.”

“It did the trick,” said Gimlet. “We were getting worried, too, believe me. That destroyer was getting too close to be comfortable. We thought they’d seen your lights and were shooting at you.”

“We weren’t carrying a light,” answered Ginger. “That’s why we launched one—to give the destroyer something to shoot at. Ah well. We’re clear away now. You chaps won’t be sorry, if the state you’re in is anything to go by. You look as if you’ve spent most of your time crawling up and down the mountains.”

“We have,” confirmed Gimlet, drily.

“Well, I must get back to my seat,” said Ginger. “Relax and make yourselves at home. We’ll soon have you where there’s plenty of hot water and clean linen. See you later.” He went forward.

Copper grinned as he opened the hamper. “Free an’ easy lot, these air types, ain’t they? That’s wot I like about ’em. Wot’s this? Cold chicken an’

'am, s'welp me. If there's one thing I like after a 'ard days work it's a nice bit of cold chicken an' 'am. Wot say you, Trapper, me ole cock linnet?"

"Brother, you've said it," answered Trapper warmly.

The aircraft roared on, its nose to the West, homeward bound.

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 Bores In* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]