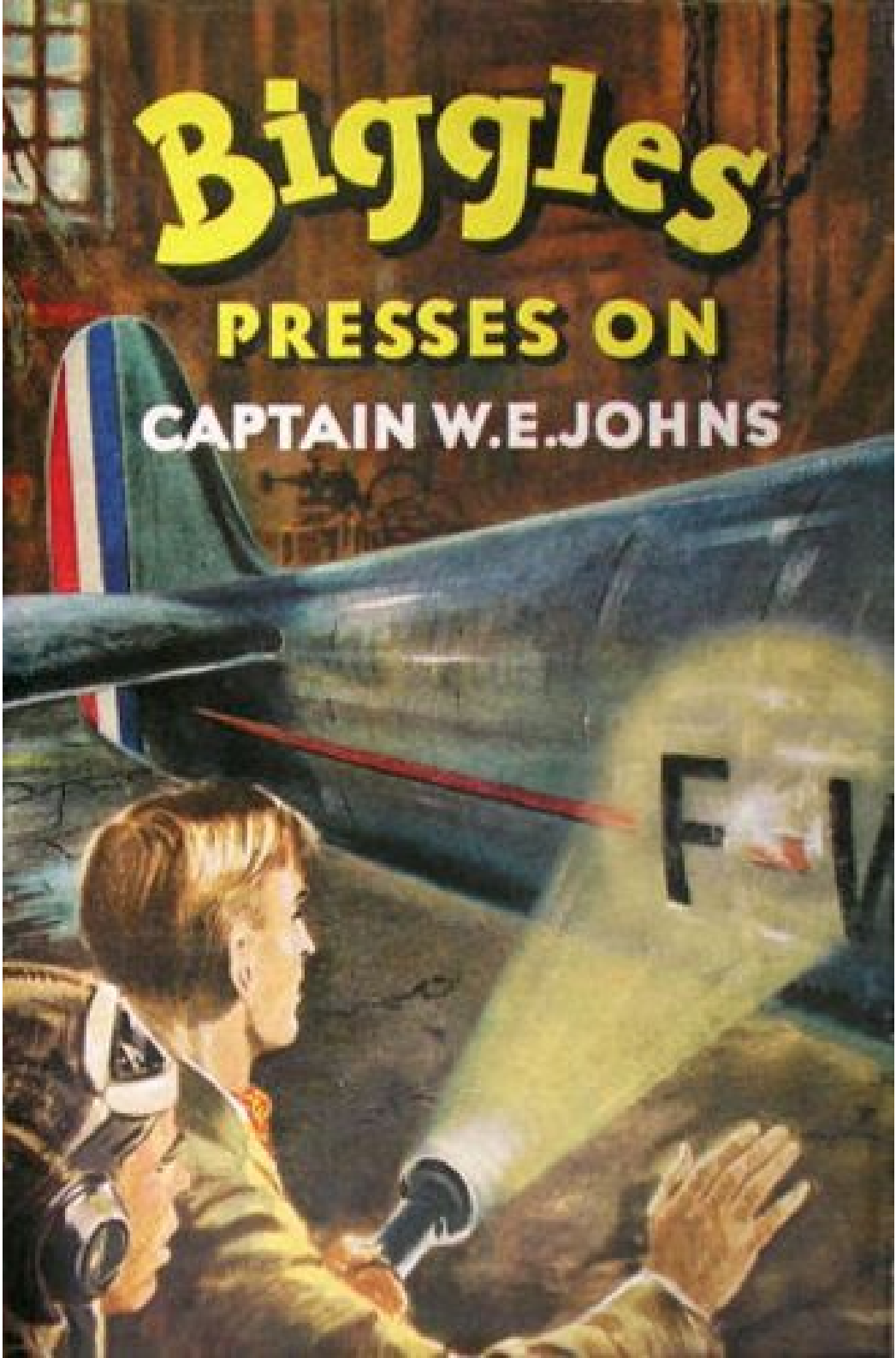
Biggles
PRESSES ON
CAPTAIN W.E.JOHNS

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Prince Chan (Page 80)

BIGGLES PRESSES ON

More adventures of Biggles and the Special Air Police

★

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Leslie Stead

Brockhampton Press
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The characters in this book are entirely imaginary
and bear no relation to any living person

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★

THE CASE OF THE MAN ON A SPOT

1

Biggles walked into the Air Police operations room, sat down at his desk and lit a cigarette. 'I've just been having a word with the C.O.,' he explained, in answer to questioning glances from his pilots. 'He's involved in some exceptionally dirty jiggery-pokery. Which means we're in it. And when I say involved I mean that hints have been dropped implying it was inefficiency in our department that allowed the business to come about.'

'In other words,' put in Algy, 'certain other departments, having failed to arrive at the right answer, would now like to lump the responsibility on us.'

'That's about the English of it,' agreed Biggles.

'What have we done, old boy?' queried Bertie.

'I gather it's a matter of what we haven't done, although the first I knew about the affair was what the Air Commodore has just told me,' returned Biggles. 'The thing hasn't got into the newspapers yet. They're keeping the soft pedal on it. If it does leak out questions will be asked in the House and someone will have to take the rap. It could be us. I suspect the political people are more concerned with their careers than with the wretched fellow who, unwittingly, has been the cause of the trouble.'

'How do we come into this?' inquired Ginger.

'It's being said that secret flights have been made between this country and the Continent.'

'Meaning we should have spotted it and stopped them?'

'Yes. The unfortunate thing about that is, it's true up to a point. There has been some unofficial night flying. We knew that. You may remember that last month the Control Room at London Airport was thrown into a flap by an aircraft blipping on a radar screen, crossing the course of one of their own machines. If it received signals to get out of the way it didn't acknowledge them. It could have been a club pupil who had lost his way but, even so, that sort of thing is enough to give the operators of legitimate aircraft the heeby-jeebies, not to mention the pilot of a liner carrying maybe fifty passengers. That wasn't the only case. It's all very well to tell us to stop it. How can you stop a plane in the air? If I wanted to snoop into this country after dark who could

stop me?' A slow smile spread over Biggles' face. 'In fact, we've done a bit of that sort of thing ourselves, and got away with it, in spite of guns and searchlights.'

'What's happened to cause the present fuss?' asked Algy.

'The case, as I understand it, is this,' answered Biggles. 'As you know, quite a number of political refugees from behind the Iron Curtain have in recent years found sanctuary in this country. Some have been granted British nationality. The people who plan this sort of escape are usually up against one big snag. If they have relatives, and they usually have, the country concerned takes it out of them. In effect, they say to the man who has bolted, unless you come back we shall send your parents, your wife, your brothers and sisters, to a concentration camp and you'll never see them or hear of them again.'

'What stinkers they must be,' growled Bertie.

'It's about the foulest form of blackmail imaginable,' agreed Biggles. 'But it goes on. It sometimes happens, however, that the man who has decided to seek freedom can protect himself. For this he needs to be in possession of information which the government concerned would not care to have revealed to the outside world. It might be a document, possibly detrimental to one of the men in power. Such a man can turn the tables by saying, if you leave me and my people alone I'll keep quiet; but if you start any rough stuff I'll tell all I know to the press.'

'That has actually been done,' stated Algy.

'Yes. And it's being done at this moment, apparently, by a Pole named Ludwig Steffans. He came here five years ago, was granted asylum and settled down. Later he obtained naturalization and married an English girl. Incidentally, he knew England, having served in the Free Polish Air Force during the war. It seems he knew some inside facts which he could support with documentary evidence. Actually, he had no relations to worry about; but he let it be known to the Communist bosses in Poland that he had written his story, although it would remain unpublished while they left him alone. That's a dangerous game, as Steffans has now discovered.' Biggles stubbed his cigarette.

'For a while his scheme worked and he was left in peace,' he continued. 'Then two things happened to alter the situation. Steffans married a local girl and there were changes in the Polish Communist Party. The documents Steffans holds reveal one of the new rulers to be a crook and a fraud. Naturally, this man could have no peace of mind while Steffans held such incriminating papers. It wouldn't help him to have Steffans bumped off because the papers had been disposed of in such a way that should Steffans die or disappear they would be handed by a friend of his, who knew where they were, to a British newspaper for publication. What the fellow in Poland has done is grab Steffans' wife. She is now in Poland, and Steffans has been told that unless he hands over the papers he can say good-bye to her. Question. What does Steffans do about it?'

'I'd say hand over the documents.'

'Steffans, knowing the type of man he's up against, says that would be fatal. If he parted with those papers he'd be bumped off within a week, and they wouldn't bring his wife back, anyway. That's how matters stand at the moment.'

‘I still don’t see what that has to do with us,’ said Ginger.

‘I’ve told you. How did these scoundrels get Helen Steffans out of the country? She didn’t travel by boat—she couldn’t have got to Poland in the time. She didn’t go by any of the regular air services. The official view is, she was smuggled out in a private plane.’

‘Do you believe that?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘I couldn’t disprove it. The abduction might have been worked that way.’

‘Are we sure Steffans’ wife is in Poland?’

‘Steffans has had a letter from her, posted in Warsaw. He swears it’s her handwriting. The object of the letter, of course, was to let Steffans know that his wife was beyond his reach. The wretched man is nearly out of his mind.’

‘Where does he live and what’s his job?’ asked Algy.

‘He’s a farm worker. He lives in a cottage near the farm, at a little place on the Suffolk coast called Hollesey. I don’t know the place but it’s all flat country so there’d be no difficulty in landing an aircraft. The ground would be studied beforehand by agents in this country, no doubt.’

‘How did they get hold of Mrs Steffans?’

‘We don’t know. Steffans says she went to the village to do some shopping. It would be dark before she came home. She didn’t come home. When it got late he went to the police. They couldn’t find her, for reasons which became evident when a visitor arrived at Steffans’ house to inform him that she was safe behind the Iron Curtain. He said, in effect, give me the papers and we’ll send her back.’

‘What did Steffans say to that?’

‘He said bring my wife back and I’ll give you the papers.’

‘But didn’t he report the matter officially?’

‘Of course he did. He had to do that to account for the disappearance of his wife. He might have been suspected of murdering her.’

Bertie broke in. ‘But look here, old boy. This lass is a British subject. Why doesn’t the government demand her return?’

‘They did, through diplomatic channels, with exactly the result you’d expect.’

‘What was that?’

‘They said they didn’t know what the British government was talking about. They had no knowledge of Mrs Steffans.’

‘The rats,’ grated Algy.

‘Calling them names won’t get Mrs Steffans back.’

‘Are we supposed to do something about this?’ asked Ginger.

‘Yes.’

‘And what are we expected to do? Fly to Poland and look for the lady?’

‘No. That’s the last thing the government would permit. I’ve been asked to check up on unidentified aircraft operating between the Continent and the Suffolk coast.’

Algy looked incredulous. ‘They’re out of their minds. How can we do that?’

‘We can’t,’ answered Biggles shortly. ‘That is, unless we can catch one on the ground.’

‘Then what *are* you going to do?’

‘I thought of running down to Suffolk and having a word with Steffans, and at the same time having a look round the district where he lives for likely landing grounds. Having been an airman he might be able to help us there. To-day being Sunday he won’t be at work so we should catch him at home.’ Biggles got up. ‘I must say,’ he remarked grimly, ‘that aside from getting Steffans’ wife back, I’d ask nothing more than to be able to pull a fast one on the unscrupulous devils who play this beastly game.’

‘Are you going to fly down?’ asked Ginger.

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he decided. ‘We’ll go by car. It should be handier for what we have to do. We shall have to find out exactly where Steffans lives, for a start, and we couldn’t do that from the air. A couple of hours or so should see us there. Let’s press on.’

It was a typically quiet Sunday afternoon in autumn when the police car, having stopped at Ipswich to allow those in it to have some lunch, cruised on via Woodbridge to Hollesey, the place nearest to the farm where Steffans worked. The day being what it was there were few people about, and Biggles had some difficulty in finding the house he sought. He made several inquiries without success, and it was, curiously enough, a trio of American service men, out for an afternoon stroll from a maintenance depot where they were stationed, who were able to direct him.

‘Steffans? Sure,’ answered the man to whom he spoke, tossing a popcorn into his mouth with the dexterity of long practice. ‘Half a mile on you’ll see a pond on the left. Right opposite there’s a track. That’ll take you to the house in a coupla minutes.’

Biggles thanked the soldier and went on along a secondary road which was itself little better than a lane and, according to the map, led to nowhere in particular, but merely served the occasional farm on the fringe of the wasteland that formed the foreshore a mile or two ahead.

Biggles and Ginger got out, leaving Algy and Bertie in the car.

‘There’s no need for us to descend on Steffans like an army,’ Biggles told Algy. ‘You two waffle along and have a look at the landscape for possible landing grounds. When you come back wait here for us to join you.’

The car went on. Biggles and Ginger walked down the track towards the cottage which could be seen at the end of it.

‘Queer that that American should know where the Steffans lived,’ remarked Ginger.

‘I thought that myself,’ returned Biggles. ‘But I suppose there aren’t many people to know near their camp.’

The door of the cottage was open, suggesting that the man they had come to see was at home. Indeed, passing the parlour window Ginger could see him, sitting at the table, his head in his hands, a picture of utter dejection. He must have heard them, for he started up and came to the door. He was a good-looking fellow but his face was pale and drawn with anxiety; and his eyes were heavy from lack of sleep.

‘Yes. What is it?’ he asked, speaking with a pronounced accent.

‘We’re police officers from Scotland Yard,’ announced Biggles, showing his police pass. ‘We know about your trouble. I’d like to have a word with you about it.’

‘Come in,’ answered Steffans, wearily, ‘Please to sit down. How did you manage to find me?’

‘Some American service men told us where you lived.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Steffans. ‘They would know.’

Biggles looked puzzled. ‘Why should they know?’

‘Before we were married, Helen—that’s my wife—used to work in their canteen.’

‘Oh, I see,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘That explains it.’

‘I have said all I know,’ went on Steffans. ‘But if you wish to ask questions I will answer to the best of my ability.’

‘First, tell me this,’ requested Biggles. ‘Have you any personal opinion as to how your wife was carried off?’

‘I think she was flown away.’

‘Have you any particular reason for thinking that?’

‘It would be the easiest way to get her to Poland. There is plenty of space here to land. And on the night my wife disappeared I heard a plane, although I thought nothing of it at the time.’

‘Did it sound to you, as an airman, as if it was landing or taking off?’

Steffans thought for a moment. ‘It could have been taking off.’

‘Then it must have been on the ground, waiting.’

‘Yes. That is what I think because I only heard it once. I wouldn’t hear it land on the marshes if it glided in from the sea.’

‘Quite so. What about the men who came to see you?’

‘They came by road. They left their car at the top of the track. I heard it go after they left. That is how they will come to-night, I imagine.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They are coming back to-night for my final answer. Either I give them what they want or it’s good-bye to my wife.’

‘Have you decided what you are going to do?’

‘Yes. I am going to shoot them.’ Steffans spoke quite calmly.

Biggles frowned. ‘What with?’

Steffans indicated a twelve-bore gun standing in a corner. ‘It’s loaded.’

‘Where did you get that gun?’

‘I borrowed it from my employer to shoot rabbits that were eating the turnips.’

‘Now you listen to me, Steffans,’ said Biggles seriously. ‘I know exactly how you must feel, but shooting these men isn’t going to help anybody—least of all your wife. Before you do anything desperate at least give me a chance to do something.’

‘What can you do? You can’t arrest them because being official agents they can claim diplomatic immunity. They told me so.’

‘That’s as may be,’ returned Biggles, grimly. ‘Where are these documents? Are they in the house?’

Steffans hesitated.

‘You’ll have to trust me if I’m to help you.’

‘The papers are here. They would cause the downfall of the Communist agent who, from behind the scenes, now virtually rules my country.’

‘Will you let me have these papers for a little while?’

Steffans looked astonished, startled. ‘Why do you want them?’

‘I have a plan. Having had photostat copies made of the papers I shall return them to you. You can then let these men have what they want in return for your wife, and still have the edge on them.’

‘But if I let them have the papers what guarantee have I that they’ll return my wife?’

‘Will you let me handle this?’

Steffans made a gesture of despair.

‘Whatever happens the position can’t be worse than it is now,’ prompted Biggles.

‘What shall I tell these men when they come to-night?’

‘Tell them nothing. Leave the talking to me. I intend to be here, and we’ll see how they like the arguments I put forward.’

Steffans looked relieved. ‘I’ll do it,’ he decided. ‘You don’t know what it means to have someone to help me in this awful dilemma.’

‘I think I do,’ replied Biggles, quietly.

Steffans went upstairs, soon to return with an envelope which he handed to Biggles, saying: ‘Now I and my wife are in your hands. What else can I do?’

‘Make a cup of tea while I go to the top of the track to speak to someone,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’ll be back.’ He went out, Ginger following.

They found Algy and Bertie waiting.

‘Well, what did you find?’ asked Biggles.

‘One could get down almost anywhere, but there’s one place ready-made, less than a mile from here,’ reported Algy.

‘Good.’

‘How did you get on?’

Biggles gave a brief outline of what had transpired. ‘I’m going to wait, which means you’ll have to wait for me,’ he concluded. ‘But you can’t stay here. Move back up the road a bit and I’ll give you a whistle when I’m ready. Meanwhile, in case of accidents, take care of this.’ He handed Algy the envelope. ‘See you later.’

With Ginger, Biggles returned to the house to find tea ready.

‘By the way, I take it these visitors of yours speak English?’ Biggles put the question to Steffans.

‘Oh yes. They’re from the London office.’

Biggles nodded and reached for his tea. ‘Fine. Then we’re all set.’

Slowly the pink and gold of sunset faded. Rooks that had spent the day on the stubbles cawed their way home. Softly through the still air, from the distant village, came the sound of church bells. Shadows lost themselves in the gloom as the day died and night took possession of the scene. In the lonely cottage on the edge of the marshes the man who had found freedom at the cost of his wife lit a table lamp. As he returned to his chair a car door slammed. ‘They come,’ he said quietly.

A few minutes later footsteps crunched on gravel. Voices muttered briefly. The door opened and two men appeared, to halt on the threshold when they saw that Steffans was not alone. Looking at him one said something in a foreign language.

‘Speak English,’ requested Biggles curtly.

‘Who are you?’ was the reply.

‘Never mind who I am,’ said Biggles. ‘I know who you are and why you’re here. That’s enough. You can take your hand out of your pocket. No one’s going to shoot you however much you deserve it. This shouldn’t take long.’

Frowning, the man spoke again to Steffans in his own language. He was heavily built, well dressed in a dark suit.

‘Talk to me,’ snapped Biggles. ‘I’m acting on behalf of Mr Steffans. Let’s get down to business. He’s willing to give you what you want if you bring back his wife.’

‘That is sensible.’ The man held out a hand. ‘Give me the papers.’

‘Not so fast. Where is Mrs Steffans?’

‘She shall be brought.’

‘You shall have the papers when you bring her here.’

‘Don’t you trust us?’

Biggles’ lips curled. ‘No. I’d no more trust you than I’d trust a rattlesnake. Now I’ve made that clear, produce Mrs Steffans and I’ll see you have the papers.’

‘It will take time to fetch her. She is not here.’

‘It’ll take time to fetch the papers. They’re not here, either. How long will it take to fetch Mrs Steffans?’

‘Twenty-four hours.’

‘All right. We’ll meet you here at this time to-morrow—say, nine o’clock. You bring Mrs Steffans. I’ll bring the papers.’

‘I’m not sure if that is possible.’

‘You’d better make it possible.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What I mean is, if Mrs Steffans isn’t here, in this room, by nine o’clock to-morrow night the contents of the papers will be on the front page of every London newspaper in the morning.’

‘You wouldn’t dare to do that!’

‘Wouldn’t I? You don’t know me.’

‘It would embarrass your government.’

‘Not so much as it would embarrass yours.’

‘Where are the papers?’

‘Where you can’t get your hands on them, and never will unless you accept my terms. Now get out. I’ve nothing more to say.’

The men went without another word. Boots crunched on the track. A car door slammed.

Steffans’ face was as white as chalk. ‘I would never have dared to talk to them like that,’ he said in a weak voice.

‘I don’t mince words with that sort of reptile.’

‘Do you think they’ll bring my wife here?’

‘They will. Don’t worry. We’ll be here. Now we’ll get along home. See you to-morrow. Good night.’

Biggles and Ginger made their way in silence to the road junction where, presently, after the signal, the car joined them.

‘What news?’ questioned Algy.

‘We’ve learnt one or two things,’ answered Biggles. ‘I have reason to hope that Mrs Steffans will be brought back at this time to-morrow. The fact that they needed twenty-four hours to get her here makes it pretty certain that she isn’t in this country. The time factor also suggests that an aircraft is being used for transport because by no other method could she be brought here in the time. On the other hand, if she was in this country they wouldn’t need twenty-four hours to bring her here. We shall be here, of course, to see that there’s no hanky-panky.’

‘And you say there’s nothing we can do to these rats, old boy?’ muttered Bertie disgustedly. ‘It goes against the grain to let ’em get off scot free.’

‘You’re telling me,’ said Biggles in a hard voice. ‘But while they have diplomatic immunity they’re untouchable. All the British government can do is ask for their withdrawal from England. That’s politics. Let’s get along. To-morrow we’ll make photostat copies of the documents and then come back.’

A mile along the road, as the car drew level with the entrance to the American camp around which some troops were lounging, Biggles put on the brake and stopped. ‘Just a minute,’ he told the others. ‘I have an idea.’ He got out, walked over to the Americans, and with them crowding round him spoke to them for some minutes. When he returned he offered no explanation beyond saying they might be useful allies in the event of his plan going wrong. And with that he drove on.

The following evening, at about half past eight, with dusk dimming the scene, the car came to a stop at the top of the track that gave access to Steffans’ cottage. Biggles and Ginger got out.

Biggles spoke earnestly to those still in the car. ‘You know exactly what you have to do?’

‘Yes,’ answered Algy. ‘We tuck the car away at a handy spot where it can’t be seen and wait for the plane to come. If there’s no plane by nine-thirty we come to the cottage. If the plane comes, bringing Mrs Steffans, we let her and her escort go through to the cottage. We then deal with the plane.’

‘That’s the scheme,’ confirmed Biggles. ‘Be careful. We don’t want any shooting unless it’s absolutely unavoidable. The more quietly this business is handled the better for everyone. It’s one of those things. Already I’m on the borderline of what some people would call my official duties. You know what that means. If my plan works out as I hope it will, okay. But if it goes wrong I shall be for the high jump. Not that I care two hoots about that as long as Steffans gets his wife back and we beat these kidnappers at their own game. All right. Off you go.’

The car went on. Biggles and Ginger walked down the track to the cottage to find Steffans, in a state of nervous agitation, waiting for them.

‘Take it easy,’ Biggles told him. ‘Everything’s going to be all right. I’ll leave the door open so that we can hear what goes on.’

They settled down to wait.

For half an hour nothing happened. Then a car could be heard on the road. It stopped at the top of the track. A door slammed and it went on again.

‘What are they doing?’ asked Steffans anxiously.

‘The car’s gone on, I hope, to meet your wife,’ answered Biggles. ‘It dropped somebody off at the top of the track. Here he comes.’

Into the room, as if the house belonged to him, walked one of the two men who had called the previous evening. ‘So!’ he said shortly. ‘We are all here.’

‘Not quite all,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘Mrs Steffans has still to come.’

‘She will soon be here. Give me the papers.’

‘You will have the papers,’ said Biggles succinctly, ‘when Mrs Steffans is in this room—not before. And don’t try any false moves with me. With people like you about I get an itch in my trigger finger.’

They waited. Ten minutes passed. Then, in the distance, could be heard the drone of an aircraft. The sound died as the engine was cut. No one remarked on it. Biggles lit a cigarette. Another ten minutes, brittle with tension, dragged past. Again came the sound of a car. It stopped. A door slammed. Came footsteps outside. Then, in the doorway, appeared a young woman with a man on either side of her. Seeing her husband she tore herself free and rushed to him.

'There is the woman,' said the man who had waited, in a harsh voice. 'Now give me the papers.'

Biggles took them from his breast pocket and handed them over.

The man made a signal to his companions and turned to go.

'Just a moment,' said Biggles, and Ginger stiffened in anticipation of what he knew was coming.

'In case you ever contemplate a repetition of this outrage there is one thing you ought to know,' went on Biggles, evenly. 'I have carried out my part of the bargain. You wanted certain papers. You have them. But in my office in London, at Scotland Yard, there are photographic copies. While you leave these people in peace you have my word for it that they will remain there. But should you ever again interfere with Mr Steffans or his wife I shall hand those copies to the press.'

Silence, brittle with tension, fell.

The hand of the man who had done the talking began to move slowly towards his pocket.

'Don't do anything silly,' warned Biggles. 'To shoot somebody would be the most certain way to defeat your object if you want the contents of those papers kept secret.'

The man swallowed. 'You have cheated,' he rasped furiously.

'That, coming from you, making your living by terrorism, would make a fox laugh,' stated Biggles coldly. 'All right, let's say I cheated,' he went on. 'What are you going to do about it? With those films in my hands Steffans is in a stronger position than ever he was, and for that your criminal trickery is responsible. You're now the man on the spot. I'll make a suggestion that may save your scalp. No one except the people in this room knows that those photographs exist. If you don't talk, we shan't. In a word, it might be as well if, when you give these papers to your boss, you forget to mention the photos.'

The three men stared.

'One final word,' said Biggles, looking at one of the last men to arrive. 'Are you the pilot of the plane that brought Mrs Steffans here?'

The man moistened his lips. 'Yes.'

'Then you'd better go to London with your accomplices. It's no use going back to the plane. You won't find it there.'

'But——' blurted the man.

Biggles cut in. 'You made an illegal entry into this country. It suited me to let you come in. But I've seen to it that you don't go out the same way. That's all.'

For a few seconds longer the men lingered, staring at Biggles as if there was something about him that fascinated them. Then they filed out. From the door Steffans watched them striding up the track. When he came back he said, 'There's a fire over on the marshes.'

'That'll be the plane,' said Biggles calmly. 'I didn't feel like letting them get away with it. I would have arrested it, but that would have meant explanations it were better to avoid. Burnt planes, like dead men, tell no tales.' Biggles glanced at Ginger. 'Bertie will have enjoyed doing that.'

Steffans, who had returned to his wife, sprang to his feet as from the top of the track came an uproar that sounded like a battle. 'What is that?' he cried.

Biggles grinned. 'Oh, I forgot to mention that on my way home last night I told some Americans about your wife being abducted by Communists, and why. Having some regard for her, since she served in their canteen, they took a dim view of it.'

Ginger looked at Biggles suspiciously. 'Did you tell them that the men responsible were coming back here to-night?'

Biggles' grin broadened. 'I believe I did mention it. It sounds like it, anyway. There was some suggestion of throwing them in the pond. We'd better keep out of the way, then no one can say we had a hand in it.'

Slowly the noise subsided. Biggles got up. 'Algy and Bertie should be back any time now,' he told Ginger. 'We'd better go and see what's happened. Good night, Steffans. Good night, Mrs Steffans. Glad to have been of service. I don't think you have anything to worry about now.'

'What if that man tells his boss about the photos?' questioned Steffans.

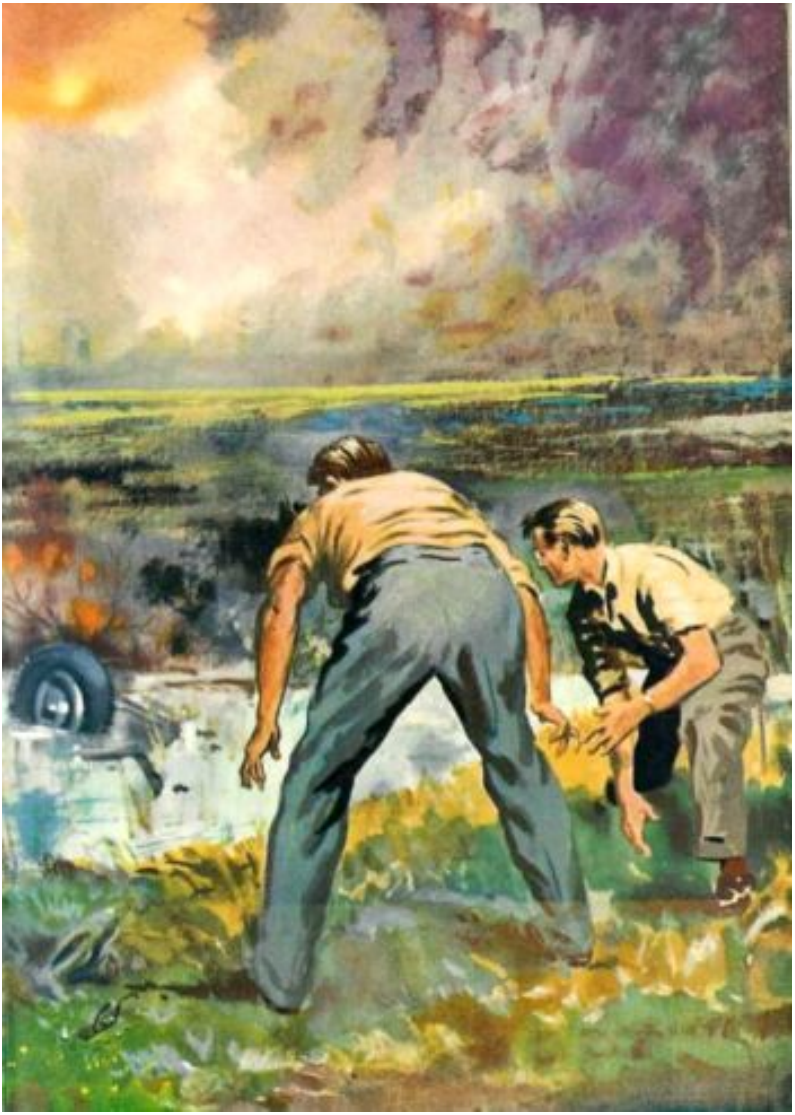
'He won't,' Biggles assured him. 'He knows as well as anyone that the men who hold the strings of the Iron Curtain are as merciless to their employees, when they bungle things, as they are to their enemies. As far as to-night is concerned, remember, mum's the word. You'll have to tell the local police that your wife's been found, but you needn't tell them how. Good night again. Come on, Ginger.'

Leaving the reunited couple arm in arm they went out and up the track to where by this time all was silent. Algy and Bertie were there, looking at the wreck of another car upside down on the edge of the pond.

'What's been going on here?' demanded Algy.

'It looks as if the United Nations have been taking it out of somebody,' answered Biggles vaguely, gazing at the car, a flattened hat and a broken pair of spectacles. 'Let's get out of this before someone comes along asking awkward questions. We've done our good deed for the day so I don't feel like giving a lift to a bunch of ruffians who appear to have lost their transport.'

'Absolutely, old boy,' agreed Bertie warmly. 'I'm with you there, every time. Let the blighters walk home.'



‘What’s been going on here?’ demanded Algy (Page 24)

THE CASE OF THE SUBMERGED AIRCRAFT

2

Biggles took a second glance at the expression on the face of his chief, Air Commodore Raymond of the Special Air Police at Scotland Yard, as, in response to an order, he walked into the headquarters office.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' inquired the Air Commodore.

Biggles smiled. 'I was wondering why *you* were looking like that.'

'Sit down and I'll tell you. What would you say if I told you there is reason to believe that an aeroplane is standing on the bottom of a Highland loch?'

'I hope the pilot finds it comfortable,' returned Biggles evenly. 'What is this? Has some crank designed an aircraft for underwater aviation?'

'It may not turn out to be funny,' said the Air Commodore, seriously. 'I want you to fly up to confirm the report.'

'Who told you about this, sir?'

'I've just had a phone call from an official of the Highland Hydro-Electric Board. He thought we'd like to know.'

'What type of machine is this—military or civil?'

'He doesn't know. That's what I want you to find out. If it's an R.A.F. type the Air Ministry can take over. This is what I'm told. There is, in the north-west corner of the Cairngorms, a sheet of water called Lochnaglash. As a matter of detail, and this should help you to find it, it is the lowest of a string of three lochs deep in the mountains, each taking the spill-over of the one above it. Lochnaglash is the source of a small river called the Glash, which is a tributary of the Spey, twelve miles away. A rough track leads to a village called Balashlin. That's fourteen miles.'

'Sounds like pretty wild country,' remarked Biggles.

'It is. For some months of the year snow makes the place inaccessible. The land was once a deer forest. But deer-stalking is now out of fashion, and with the death of the laird the place came into the market. It was bought by the Forestry Commission who have made some experimental plantings but are no longer working there. Apparently the hydro-electric people have had an eye on the water. The lochs are fed

by snow melting on the high tops. Anyway, they sent a man up to check the height of the water at summer level. As a result of the recent drought he found the water exceptionally low. Showing above the surface is an object that looks like the top of an aeroplane rudder. There's no question of it being a tree because there are no trees near except the small stuff planted by the Forestry people and they're some distance away.'

'If it is a machine it must have been there for some time,' stated Biggles. 'It must be years since we had a record of an aircraft disappearing without trace.'

The Air Commodore nodded. 'It could be a relic of the war. But the easiest way to settle the matter is for you to fly up and have a look. I suggest you take the Otter and land on the loch; otherwise you'd have to get a boat from somewhere to reach the object. There isn't one on the spot, which is why the hydro-electric man could do nothing there.'

'Okay, sir.' Biggles looked at his watch. 'I'll get off right away while the weather's fine. The Cairngorms, with cloud about, are no place for low flying. It shouldn't take us long to get this sorted out.'

Biggles returned to his own office, where his police pilots were waiting.

'What's the drill?' asked Ginger.

Biggles grinned. 'The Loch Ness monster, sick of being ridiculed, has popped up in a place called Lochnaglash. It looks like an aircraft. We're flying up in the Otter to catch it by the tail. We shall need the large-scale map of Banffshire and, I suppose, our bathing costumes. And Ginger, you might bring along the file on post-war machines that have disappeared, for possible identification.'

'How long is this job going to take?' asked Algy.

'It shouldn't take long—why?'

'Hadn't we better take something to eat in case we get stuck there for the night?'

'Yes,' agreed Biggles. 'There's nothing to be had on the spot. Let's get mobile. I'll tell you what I know about this business on the way up.'

Four hours later, in clear weather, the Otter, an amphibious aircraft on the establishment of the Air Police, was losing height as it circled over the objective, which had not been difficult to find. But it was not such an easy matter to get down, on account of the towering hills which held the three lochs in a long narrow valley, with the result that while Lochnaglash had plenty of length it hadn't much width. In fact, it was only after three attempts to get down had failed that Biggles succeeded by flying through the only break, a narrow funnel through which the overflow of the lochs escaped during the spring thaw, to form a minor tributary of the Spey.

Even before the keel had kissed the water, dark and sinister even under a summer sky, Ginger could see the object that had brought them to the spot. It was the only mark to break the unruffled surface, on which the surrounding hills were reflected with the faithfulness of a mirror. Only a few inches of the object showed, some fifty yards or so from a strip of detritus, the only feature that bore any resemblance to a beach. For the rest, the heather-clad slopes of the hills, with forbidding outcrops of rock, fell sheer into the water. A white streak showed where a sunless corrie still held its snow. There was not a soul, or a living creature, in sight, except an eagle, high overhead. Nor was there a

tree, although a small clump of shrubby birch had managed to gain a foothold at one end of the beach. In a word, it was a typically remote Highland scene.

'A dismal sort of place to finish up,' remarked Bertie.

'About as wild a spot as you'd find,' returned Biggles, taxi-ing on slowly towards the mark which Ginger had pointed out. 'If it's like this in summer think what it must be like in the winter, with snow everywhere and the loch a sheet of ice.'

'That's an aircraft rudder all right,' asserted Algy, as they approached the object. 'Who on earth could have tried to get down here?'

'We should soon know,' answered Biggles as, with the Otter edging towards the mark, he switched off. 'Stand by with the anchor, Ginger, as we come alongside. The water can't be deep or nothing would show above the surface.'

'I'd say that rudder belongs to a Gipsy Moth,' said Algy.

'Then it has probably been here for a long time,' replied Biggles. 'De Havillands must have made hundreds of Gipsys, but you don't see so many about nowadays.'

The Otter drifted nearer and came silently to rest. When it was so close to the rudder that Ginger could have touched it he lowered the anchor, slowly, so as not to disturb the water.

They all leaned over the side to wait for the ripples to settle down, but even before this occurred the shape of an aircraft could be seen clearly through the crystal water. It appeared to be on even keel but slightly down by the nose, for which reason the tail unit was the only part to break the surface. The upper side of the top plane was about six feet down. The machine stood in a position parallel with the beach on a slightly shelving bottom of broken rock.

'It's a Gipsy,' said Biggles definitely. 'I fancy this is an old story.'

There was silence for a minute as they continued to stare down.

'There's no one in it,' said Ginger. 'I'm pretty sure both seats are empty.'

'Thank goodness for that,' muttered Bertie. 'Corpses give me the willies.'

'Can anyone make out the identification letters?' inquired Biggles.

Not even when the water was dead still could the letters be seen, this being due, apparently, to a slight coating of silt, or weed.

'The pilot, whoever he was, must have been out of his mind to try to get down here,' declared Bertie.

'Not necessarily,' returned Biggles.

'You think it was an accident?'

'One would assume that, but I'm by no means sure of it.'

'What do you mean?' queried Ginger.

'Let's look at it like this,' suggested Biggles. 'Had that machine gone in out of control surely it would have broken up when it hit the water. In such cases the wings are buckled, if not actually torn off at the roots; yet as you can see for yourselves, this aircraft is not only intact but is on even keel. Again, had the machine crashed there

would have been a body in at least one of the seats. There seems to be something unnatural about this.'

'The pilot, with engine trouble, might have been making for that bit of a beach and undershot,' offered Ginger.

'In which case the nose would be pointing to the beach. I doubt if he'd see that beach from up topsides, anyway. Put yourself in the pilot's position. You're in trouble. Which would you choose, to ditch yourself miles from anywhere or take a chance on dry land, even if that meant a crack-up?'

'I'd go for the heather.'

'So would I,' asserted Biggles. 'Remember the job I had to get down even with a machine in good order. The way I came was the only way in, but I wouldn't care to try it with a groggy engine.'

'But half a mo', old boy,' protested Bertie. 'The alternative to what you're saying is, the pilot put the machine here *deliberately*. Does that make sense?'

'No,' admitted Biggles. 'But neither do a lot of things that happen. I can't believe this machine crashed, by which I mean hit the water hard. The pilot could of course have done a belly-flop. But why here, knowing he'd have to swim for it? I have a feeling this machine came here for a definite purpose, although what that could be I haven't a clue. I can see only one possible alternative. This might have happened in the winter, when the loch was ice-bound. When the ice melted the machine would go down quietly in the position in which we now see it. There are two arguments against that. The pilot would have to know the loch was frozen over, and secondly, having got down, would he just walk away and abandon the machine without reporting it?'

'In winter conditions it wouldn't be possible to get a rescue party here,' put in Algy. 'He might have died from exposure trying to reach help.'

'In which case the body should have been found when the snow went. The Forestry people have been working about here, don't forget, testing the soil.'

'He might have been drowned,' put in Ginger.

'Even so the body would come to the surface. He wasn't trapped in the cockpit. But why are we wasting time guessing? How many Gipsy Moths have you in that file of missing machines, Ginger? I saw you going through it on the way up.'

'I can only recall three,' answered Ginger, producing the file. 'One went west on a flight to the Cape. Another, belonging to a planter flying back to Malaya, either went down in the Channel or disappeared somewhere in Europe.'

'Neither of those would come this way. Carry on.'

'The other was the case of that man whom the police wanted to interview in connection with a murder. A fellow named Alva Murray, an ex-commando, was thought to have shot his wife. He took off in a Gipsy and was never seen again. We helped in the search for him. You decided he'd found a hide-out on the Continent.'

Biggles frowned. 'I remember that business. It must have been seven or eight years ago. It was in June, so we can forget the ice theory should this turn out to be the machine. If ever there was a deliberately planned job that was it. Murray joined a flying

club to get his "A" licence—as he said. Even then he must have known what he was going to do because while he was under instruction he drew all his money from the bank, about four thousand pounds, a few hundreds at a time. Then he shot his wife, took off in a club machine and vanished. It turned out he was a jealous type and thought she'd been playing him up. At least, that was what it looked like. What were the registration letters?'

'GB-XKL.'

Biggles got up. 'This could be it. If it is, it's no wonder we never found it. But we'll soon settle that. A man planning to disappear could hardly find a better place, or devise a more cunning method. I'll go down. The sides of the fuselage, being vertical, should be clear of muck.'

He got into his bathing costume, lowered himself gently into the water and swam down. For half a minute the others could see him working his way along the side of the fuselage; then he shot to the surface.

'Brr. That water's cold!' he exclaimed, as he climbed back on board. 'No matter. At last we know where GB-XKL ended its career. But that's still a long way from knowing where Murray finished up. While I'm getting my togs on run the machine up on the beach. We'll stretch our legs and eat a sandwich while we think about this.'

In a few minutes they were sitting on dry stones, in warm sunshine.

'Are we going to try to haul the Gipsy ashore?' asked Ginger.

'Not for the moment,' decided Biggles. 'It's better where it is.'

'Why?'

'I'm assuming Murray is still alive. If this story gets out he'll hear about it and take fright. After all this time he must think he's sitting pretty. If he learns that the machine has been found he'll be more difficult to find than he may be at present. By thunder! He must have brains, and nerve, to work out a scheme like this.'

'Then you think he ditched the machine here deliberately?' questioned Bertie.

'If you remember, I suspected someone had done just that before we knew who it was,' returned Biggles. 'Everything pointed to that. But one or two things still puzzle me. Murray must have known exactly what he was going to do, in which case he would have made the necessary preparations. That implies that he knew all about this place—the beach, the depth of the water, and so on. Obviously, he had been here before. His name tells us he was a Scot so he may have come from these parts. The ambition of every Highlander who leaves home is to get back to his beloved heather. It's in the blood. Murray may have come home.'

'These preparations you talk about,' put in Ginger. 'I don't see that he would have to make any. Having ditched the machine all he had to do was swim ashore.'

'He had to get other things ashore beside himself. If he intended to lie low for a while he'd need food. He'd want to dry his clothes. He also had a little matter of four thousand pounds with him. He'd have more sense than to go straight to the village, knowing that in these parts the arrival of a stranger is a subject for conversation and conjecture.' Biggles got up and walked towards the clump of birch.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Algy.

‘I’m going to see if Murray left behind any signs of his arrival here. He wouldn’t leave anything on the beach and there aren’t many hiding places.’

They all walked to the bushes.

Almost at once they came upon a spot where, long ago, a fire had been lighted.

‘I’d say that’s where he dried his clothes,’ remarked Biggles. ‘Hello! What’s this?’ Stooping, he lifted from the tangle of encroaching heather a length of window cord. As he pulled on it more and more came to light until there must have been fifty yards of it. At the end was an object so strange that it produced ejaculations of astonishment from all except Biggles. It was the deflated remains of a pair of water-wings, sometimes used for swimming instruction.

‘So he couldn’t swim,’ said Ginger.

‘As a commando he’d have to be able to swim,’ reminded Biggles. ‘But he had other things to get ashore beside himself. A kit-bag, for instance. I’ve never tried swimming with one but I imagine it would be awkward. Don’t forget he had four thousand in notes. He wouldn’t want to get them soaking wet. I’d say these wings kept his luggage afloat while he hauled it ashore with the cord. I told you this chap had his scheme cut and dried. If he put the machine down carefully it wouldn’t sink at once. He’d have time to take off some of his clothes and put them in a bag brought for the purpose. All he had to do then was inflate the wings, tie them on, swim ashore with the cord and pull his luggage after him. Well, this answers one question. All we have to do now is follow his trail, but after all this time that won’t be easy. Let’s go back.’

Biggles thrust the cord into the heather where he had found it and led the way back to the machine.

‘You’ll never catch up with him now,’ asserted Algy. ‘This chap was too smart to leave a trail.’

‘Don’t you believe it,’ argued Biggles. ‘Even the smartest murderers usually make one slip. This chap has already made one by leaving that cord there. No doubt he was in a hurry to get away.’

‘It was thousands to one against anyone finding it,’ said Ginger.

‘That may be what he thought, but as you see, a thousand to one chance can come off. The trouble with these rural jobs is, there’s no one on the spot to question,’ concluded Biggles, as, seated on the stones, they finished their meal with biscuits and cheese and coffee from the thermos.

‘There’s someone coming now,’ observed Ginger.

They all looked up. Striding down a deer track from the hill behind them came a powerfully built man, black-bearded, wearing a kilt of Lovat tweed, carrying in his hand a Highland *cromach*—a long, strong, ash stick with a crook at the end, an instrument that serves many useful purposes in such country. On his head he wore a Laggan bonnet, sometimes called a deer-stalker. With the handle of a *skean-dhu*, the Highland name for a dagger, showing above the top of his stocking, where it is usually carried, he fitted into the scene perfectly.

‘I wonder what he’s doing here,’ said Biggles. ‘He doesn’t look like a Forestry worker. Might be a shepherd looking for lost sheep—no, if he was a shepherd he’d have a dog. So he would if he was a gamekeeper.’

The man came up. Biggles spoke. ‘Good morning, Mr——’

‘Macrae’s the name. I saw the plane circling and came to see what ye were at.’

‘What did you think we might be doing?’

‘I thought ye might be after the eagles’ eggs.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘I’d never have thought of that. Do people come after eagles’ eggs?’

‘Aye, they do that, with yon devils of collectors in London paying five pounds a time, and up to fifty pound for a clutch.’

‘So you take care of the eagles,’ prompted Biggles.

‘Aye. For the Scottish Bird Protection Society.’

‘An interesting job. How long have you been doing that?’

‘Five years.’

‘Do you live here all the year round?’

‘Aye.’

‘How do you manage in the winter?’

‘I manage fine.’

‘Then you have a house here?’

Macrae pointed with his stick. ‘I have a wee place doon the glen. In the old days it was the stalker’s hoose.’

‘It must be the only house this side of Balashlin.’

‘Aye. It is.’

‘What about the big place I noticed over there, standing in some trees, as I flew over?’ Biggles pointed.

‘Och, ye mean the old lodge. It’s a ruin. The laird didna do a thing about it, tho’ they say he should have done.’

‘Why, if there’s no more deer-stalking?’

‘He had money from the Government to put it right. They took it over in the war.’

‘For what purpose?’

‘They put some troops in, and they knocked the place to pieces like they always do.’

‘What troops did they put in?’

‘I couldna tell ye that. But you’re free with your questions, mon. What might ye be doing here?’

‘As you see, having a picnic. I imagine it’s the first time a plane has landed on the loch.’

‘Aye. I’d think that. Ah weel. I’ll awa’ an’ look to me nests. Good dee to ye.’

‘Good morning, Mr Macrae. We shan’t touch your eagles.’

‘I’ll be after ye if you do. They’re protected by law, ye ken.’

The man strode off at the long, ground-covering gait of a man born in the hills.

‘Well, old boy, there’s one man not likely to die in a road accident,’ remarked Bertie. Biggles lit a cigarette.

‘What do we do next—go home?’ queried Ginger.

‘No.’

‘But there’s nothing else we can do here.’

‘There’s one thing I’m going to do. I want to cast an eye over this empty lodge.’

‘Then let’s get on with it.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that chap on the hill will be watching us. I don’t want word to get around that we’re poking about here.’

‘You think Murray might still be in the district?’

‘He might.’

Algy stepped in. ‘But what are you expecting to find at the lodge?’

‘According to Macrae the Government requisitioned it during the war. They put troops in it. I want to know what troops they were.’

‘What troops have you in mind?’ inquired Ginger.

‘The place might have been a Commando Training School,’ returned Biggles. ‘I don’t say it was, but there were some in the Highlands in the war. If I’m right it would give us a line on how Murray knew about the loch. He was a commando. We’ll wander round presently. There’s no point in going home only to come back again to-morrow. Fetch the torch from the machine, Ginger. We may need it.’

They waited until the sun sank behind the hills, throwing the valley into gloom, and then set off at a brisk pace.

It was a long walk over hard going, and Ginger was thankful when the stand of Scots pines that hid the lodge loomed darkly against the sky.

The once smart lodge, now silent and dilapidated, with rotting hutments accompanying it to ruin, presented a depressing spectacle in an atmosphere of melancholy which the interior, when Biggles opened the door and went in, did nothing to dispel. All furniture had been removed. Some foolscap sheets of type-written matter hung from the wall in the empty hall.

Biggles walked over. ‘Number Seven Commando Training unit. Daily Routine Orders,’ he read aloud. Turning to face the others he went on. ‘So now we know. Murray was stationed here during the war. That’s how he knew of the place. What a hide-out! I’d say he came back here.’

Followed by the others Biggles went down a corridor to the kitchen. A cheap frying pan and kettle were rusting on the stove. An enamel plate, with a knife and fork on it, were in the sink. He opened the back door and went out. In a corner was a heap of brown, long-dead heather. He kicked away some of it to expose a pile of empty cans. 'These weren't army rations,' he said, picking up a sardine tin. 'Yes,' he went on. 'This was Murray's objective when he ditched his aircraft.'

'Is there any reason why he shouldn't still be here?' asked Ginger, looking slightly alarmed.

'Plenty of reasons, one of which being the Forestry Commission people have been here.' He pointed to a row of long-handled brushes: 'There is some of their fire-fighting equipment. No. Murray only came here while the hue and cry was on, long enough perhaps for him to change his appearance. He couldn't bring a lot of food. Enough to last him a week or two at the outside. Then he'd have to go where some was available, to lay in a fresh stock.'

'So it's a question of where did he go from here,' said Ginger.

'Exactly.'

'There might still be fingerprints on the handle of that frying pan,' observed Algy.

'Even if they turned out to be his they wouldn't help us to find him. We needn't bother with that at this juncture.'

'What are you going to do?'

'We'll go back to the machine and spend the night in the cabin. In the morning we'll have a look round. Murray might not be far away.'

The walk back to the loch, in the dark, was tiring work, and would have been dangerous had they not had the advantage of a moon, nearly full. As they trudged along the stony beach towards the machine suddenly Ginger stopped, gazing out across the star-reflecting water.

'Can you see what I can't see?' he exclaimed, in a puzzled voice.

'What can't you see?' asked Algy.

'The rudder.'

'Well, blow me down!' muttered Bertie. 'The water must be rising.'

'Either that or Biggles caused the machine to move when he went down to it,' opined Algy, casually.

'That could have happened,' agreed Biggles. He walked on towards the bushes.

'Where are you going?' asked Ginger.

'I want to have another look at that cord,' replied Biggles. 'Give me the torch.' He went on alone, but was soon back.

'That's enough for to-day,' he said. 'Let's turn in.'

The next day dawned with the weather still clear and fine.

'Where do we start looking for Murray?' asked Ginger.

Biggles, who had been somewhat preoccupied, answered: ‘For a start I’m going down the glen to have another word with Macrae. His cottage will be by the river so it shouldn’t be hard to find.’

Presently they set off, taking an old deer track that skirted the loch. This soon brought them to a rock shelf over which a trickle of water spilled to form the little river Glash. Following the stream, sparkling in the sunshine, a walk of twenty minutes revealed, a little way ahead, a stone cottage nestling in a stand of wind-warped pine and silver birch. Beyond it ran a cart track, following the river. Macrae, apparently having seen them coming, was waiting, hands on hips.

‘What can I do for ye?’ he greeted.

‘You can answer some questions,’ returned Biggles. ‘You say your name is Macrae?’

‘That’s richt.’

‘We are police officers,’ stated Biggles. ‘I have reason to believe you are the Alva Murray who we have been anxious to interview in connection with the murder of his wife seven years ago. I must warn you that anything you say——’

Biggles got no farther. Never did a man move faster than the one who called himself Macrae. In a flash he had whipped up his *skean-dhu*. With this in his hand he backed towards the house. ‘Don’t come near me,’ he growled. ‘Ye’ll no tak me alive.’

‘Don’t be a fool, Murray,’ said Biggles curtly. ‘That sort of talk won’t help you.’

Murray dashed into the house and slammed the door.

‘Watch out!’ cried Ginger urgently, as a window was opened and the barrels of a twelve-bore appeared.

They dashed to the nearest cover, a dilapidated venison larder.

The gun blazed, shot spattering against the wall of the building.

‘If we try to get to that house someone will be killed,’ said Biggles calmly. ‘I should have taken into account that we’re dealing with a man who has had commando training. He can’t get away and he must know it; but being guilty of murder he won’t care who else he kills. I was prepared for trouble, but not a twelve-bore.’

‘What are we going to do?’ asked Algy, anxiously. ‘It would be suicide to face that gun.’

‘He’s armed and resisting arrest,’ Bertie pointed out. ‘We should be justified in using our guns.’

‘I’d rather not,’ said Biggles. ‘There’s only one thing to do. We shall have to fetch help. Algy, go back to the machine. Fly south until you can contact the Yard on the high-frequency. Tell the chief what’s happened and ask him to notify the county police. Make it snappy.’

Algy ran off. The others settled down to wait, and watch.

The day wore on. The sun climbed over its zenith. High overhead an eagle soared on rigid wings. From time to time a cock grouse croaked a warning to his kind.

Late in the afternoon the gun crashed again, showing that Murray was still within.

‘Who’s he shooting at?’ queried Bertie.

‘Just letting us know he’s still about, I imagine,’ answered Biggles.

‘I can hear a vehicle coming up the track,’ said Ginger.

Presently it appeared. From a jeep stepped four police officers, one an inspector.

‘Watch your step,’ called Biggles.

The inspector ignored the warning. He walked straight to the door of the house. ‘Come out of that, Murray,’ he shouted. ‘Let’s have no nonsense.’

Finding the door locked he walked round the house and looked in a window. Then, turning, he beckoned.

Biggles and his party joined him at the window. Inside, on the floor, in a crumpled heap lay Murray, the gun beside him.

Biggles’ eyes opened wide. ‘We didn’t do that,’ he told the inspector. ‘He must have shot himself. We heard a shot.’

‘Aye, I’d think that,’ said the inspector, without emotion. ‘It’s the sort of thing I’d expect him to do when he realized he hadn’t a chance. He’d choose to die in the heather rather than be hanged in a city gaol.’

Biggles, rather pale, shook his head. ‘Well, there it is. I’ll leave this to you, now, Inspector, if you don’t mind,’ he said, glancing up as the Otter roared past on the way to the loch. ‘You’ll find an aeroplane in Lochnaglash, near the beach, the one Murray used to get here. It’s hardly worth salvaging but you may need it for evidence. We’ll get along. Thanks for your help.’

Biggles turned away, and followed by the others walked back to the loch to find the Otter on the beach.

‘Thanks,’ Biggles told Algy. ‘It’s all over. He shot himself. For him, probably, it was the best way out. We’ll get along home. I’m afraid I didn’t handle that too well.’

‘What beats me is how you knew Macrae was Murray,’ said Ginger.

‘You saw what I saw, and heard what I heard,’ stated Biggles. ‘I told you it needs a very smart murderer never to make a mistake. Murray made several. The first was coming near us, otherwise we might never have known he was there. He couldn’t keep away. He saw us coming down and a guilty conscience and anxiety to know what we were doing brought him along. Then he made the fatal blunder of lying. He said his was the only house between here and Balashlin. He only admitted the lodge was there when I said I’d seen it. Then he said he didn’t know what troops had been there. A regiment always leaves its mark, so that was asking me to believe that in the years he had lived here he had never been to the place. I was already suspicious when I noticed the black handle of the commando knife which he carried as a *skean-dhu*. That was silly. Maybe he had grown careless over the years.’

‘And I didn’t notice a thing,’ said Bertie, sadly.

‘There was more to it than that,’ went on Biggles. ‘I don’t think he had realized that the water had dropped so low. Did he hope we hadn’t noticed the rudder? He must have seen it as we stood here talking. Any man with nothing to fear would have called

attention to it. During the hours we were away at the lodge I fancy he swam out to it and either pushed it under or cut it off. I knew he'd been here.'

'How?'

'He was worried about us, and in his natural anxiety wondered if he had left anything about. He remembered that cord and the water-wings. When I went along there last night on our return from the lodge it was to see if they were still there. I wasn't surprised to find they'd gone. Only Murray could have known they were there. That was all I needed to know to confirm my suspicions. Maybe I was silly to confront him as I did but I hoped the shock would cause him to give himself away, as in fact it did. I should have guessed that having been a commando he'd show fight. But let's get home. We can just do it before dark.'

Subsequent inquiries revealed that Murray had served at Lochnaglash Lodge during the war. He must have lived there for some time, in hiding, for it was not until some months after his arrival that he had bought the cottage from the owner, paying for it in cash. In the interval he had grown a beard and taken to wearing Highland dress. Then, feeling safe from recognition, he had made periodical visits to the village for stores, making his excuse for living far up the glen that he was an eagle-watcher for the Bird Protection Society, as in fact he was, having offered his services in a voluntary capacity —presumably as a cover.

It was a clever scheme that might never have come to light had it not been for the drought which exposed the tail of the Gipsy. Weather conditions were outside the murderer's calculations, but, as Biggles remarked, on this occasion they proved the old saying that 'Murder will out.'

THE CASE OF THE SABOTAGED PARACHUTE

3

Biggles had barely settled at his desk in the operations room of the Special Air Police when the door was opened and Inspector Gaskin thrust his head inside. ‘Do you feel like a run down to the New Forest?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Not particularly,’ answered Biggles, frankly. ‘What’s it all about?’

‘We’ve just had a phone call. Bloke named Betts, dog breeder or something of the sort, says his son has found something he thinks we ought to see.’

‘Where do I come in?’

‘He says bring somebody who knows something about aviation.’

‘Sounds pretty vague. What’s this chap found?’

‘He wouldn’t say. But we can see it at his house—a place called Dell Farm, near Sway.’

‘Why all the mystery?’

‘I dunno. But he sounded the sort of feller who knew what he was talking about. I shall have to slip down, anyway, in case it really *is* something.’

Biggles got up. ‘Okay. I’ll come with you. You can come, Ginger, if you feel like a day in the country.’

‘Why didn’t this chap call in the local police?’ asked Ginger, as he reached for his hat.

‘That was the first thing I asked him,’ returned Gaskin. ‘He said he thought it was a specialist’s job,’ he added, grinning.

‘Ha! The County police wouldn’t think much of that,’ observed Biggles, smiling.

‘He could be right, at that, since apparently this thing he’s found is tied up with flying,’ stated Gaskin, as they got into the car and drove off.

‘Probably picked up something dropped off an aircraft,’ opined Ginger.

‘I dunno about that,’ replied Gaskin seriously. ‘It was the son who found the thing, whatever it turns out to be, and what some of these modern kids don’t know about planes ain’t worth knowing.’

‘Don’t let’s waste time guessing,’ suggested Biggles.

And, as it turned out, they might have made a lot of guesses without getting the right answer.

With a little difficulty they found Dell Farm, where they were greeted by much barking of dogs in kennels. Betts himself opened the door, and when he learned who they were invited them into the sitting room.

‘Now, what’s it all about?’ asked Gaskin, in his rather blunt way. ‘I hope you haven’t brought us all the way down here on a wild goose chase.’

‘I’ll show you, and you can judge for yourself,’ answered Betts.

‘Do you know anything about aviation?’ inquired Biggles.

‘I should, seeing as how I did twelve years in the R.A.F., finishing as flight sergeant. I was a dog handler part of the time,’ added Betts, ‘which is why I went in for dogs when I packed up. This is what I brought you to see.’

From a cupboard he took a bundle of white material which, being unfolded on the table, became a parachute—or part of one. Gathering the loose shrouds he pulled them to the ends and held them out for Biggles to see. ‘What do you make of that?’ he asked, a world of meaning in his voice.

Biggles stared, his forehead knitting in a frown.

‘See what I mean?’ murmured the ex-airman.

‘Yes, I see what you mean,’ replied Biggles, slowly. ‘Those lines were cut.’

‘Too true they were. Looks as if some poor blighter jumped not knowing that a kind friend had cut his cords. He must have gone down in the harness leaving the part that mattered most floating about above him.’

‘You haven’t found—anything else?’

‘No. The body would go straight down like a brick, but this piece might have been some time coming down, according to the height the machine was flying.’

Biggles nodded. ‘Have you heard any planes?’

‘We’re always hearing planes, day and night. All sorts, from jets to helicopters. I don’t look at ’em any more.’

Biggles examined the fabric, feeling it with his hands. ‘This wasn’t on the ground very long,’ he remarked.

‘Couldn’t have been. We had two showers yesterday, the last one about six. This was dry when my boy brought it in.’

‘What time was that?’

‘About eleven. That’s the time we usually turn in. But first, Len, that’s my boy, took his pup for a stroll in the yard. The little beggar ran off into the wood. He went after it, and found this.’

‘He knew what it was?’

‘Of course he did.’

‘Is he about?’

‘Yes. Want to see him?’

‘I’d like him to show me exactly where he found this.’

‘I doubt if you’ll find the body there.’

‘Unless the machine was flying very high it might not be far away. There wasn’t a lot of wind last night. We shall have to look for the rest of the parachute, anyway. Have you told anybody about this?’

‘No. As soon as I realized what had happened I rang up Scotland Yard.’

‘Did your boy find the pup?’

‘Not last night. Nor this morning, either. He turned up about half an hour ago, dead beat, looking as though he’d spent the night digging out rabbits.’

‘Then Len had been out to look for him again?’

‘He was out at the crack o’ daylight.’

‘Let’s have a word with him.’

‘I’ll fetch him. He’s doing the kennels.’ Betts went out.

Gaskin cocked an eye at Biggles. ‘Queer business. Looks as if it might be a new line in murder, but we’ve had no report of anyone missing.’

‘There would hardly be time. This only happened last night. But if an aircraft had crashed we should have heard of it by now. If the man who wore that useless brolly was flying solo the plane *would* have crashed out of control. As it hasn’t crashed we can assume someone was at the joystick. It’s the fact that this pilot hasn’t reported losing his passenger that makes the thing look ugly.’

‘If he was the murderer he wouldn’t be likely to talk about it. I mean, if he was the man who carved up the brolly.’

‘I don’t see how it could have been anyone else, or he’d have reported losing a passenger from his machine. The man who jumped, assuming a man did jump—and I can’t believe this is a joke—would hardly cut up his own parachute.’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Gaskin, thumbing tobacco into his pipe. ‘If the rest of that parachute, with the body in it, is in the forest, it may take a bit of finding. We’d better get out a search party and start to look for it.’

‘The boy may be able to help us there.’

‘How?’

‘He was in the forest first thing this morning. So, I’d wager, was someone else.’

‘Who?’

‘The man who cut those cords, which I take to be the man who was flying the aircraft. He might not know where the top part of the brolly came down but he’d know to within a little where the rest of it was likely to be, because the man who jumped would plummet straight into the ground. He’d also know that sooner or later someone would stumble on the body, when it would again be realized that the cords, at that end, had been cut. He wouldn’t want that to happen, so unless I’ve missed my guess he also would be in the forest early, in the hope of recovering the harness and perhaps hiding

the body. He might hope to recover the piece of brolly. The boy might have seen somebody in the forest.'

'There's a chance,' agreed Gaskin. 'But the New Forest covers a lot of ground. Still, if we could find the body, and identify it, we'd be half-way to the man who did this job.'

At this juncture Betts returned with his son, a bright-eyed, intelligent-looking lad of about sixteen. He looked at the police officers expectantly.

'I want you to show us where you found the parachute,' said Biggles.

'Yes, sir. It isn't far. Not more than ten minutes' walk.'

'You were out in the forest this morning, I understand.'

'Yes, sir. I was looking for Jim, my dog.'

'Did you see anyone?'

'No, sir. Oh yes, I did see one man for a moment. It was on the road. He was in a car. He stopped, got out, then got back in and drove on.'

'What were you doing at the time?'

'Looking for Jim.'

'Did this man see you?'

'Well, he must have heard me if he didn't see me, because I was whistling or calling all the time. I didn't pay much attention to him. I noticed he lit a cigarette and threw the packet away. I was half a mind to tell him to pick it up. We're always tidying up after these litter-bugs.'

Biggles smiled. 'You didn't take the number of the car?'

'No. Why should I?'

'Never mind. Come and show us where you found the parachute.'

They went out, and the boy set off across a paddock towards the line of timber that marked the fringe of the forest. Reaching it, they plunged into the deep shade of the ancient trees, often having to duck under low-spreading branches. With leaves and dry bracken rustling underfoot they reached a glade, and there the boy stopped. 'This is the place, sir. It's a wonder the parachute didn't get caught up in a tree.'

'Had there been any wind that would probably have happened,' opined Biggles.

For a minute they stood looking at the spot. Then Biggles said: 'Where's the road where you saw the car?'

'Over here.' Again the boy led the way, a mere hundred yards, to a secondary road that ran through the forest. He came to a halt, pointing to an empty cigarette carton that lay on the grass verge. 'This is the place,' he said. 'There's the cigarette packet I spoke about.'

Biggles walked up the road a little way, and then back, looking at the ground. 'I fancy that car came back,' he said, speaking to Gaskin. 'There's a drip of fresh oil here, anyway. It could, of course, have been another car.'

‘We’d better start a proper search for the body,’ advised Gaskin. ‘We shan’t get far like this.’

‘If we start a full-scale search the newspapers will get to hear of it, and so will the man who was flying that plane. It would be better if he didn’t know that piece of brolly has been found. If he hasn’t already been here looking for it, he’ll come. The temptation to cover up what has happened will be irresistible. But if he learns that the police are looking for a body he’ll keep out of the way.’

‘Does that mean you’re going to hang about here waiting for him to come? He may have been and gone.’

‘He won’t have gone. He can’t know the parachute has been found so the chances are he’ll go on looking for it. Why not? Just a minute. I have an idea.’ Biggles turned to the boy. ‘You seem to have a lot of dogs. Have you one with a good nose?’

‘We’ve a trained Alsatian. It isn’t ours. We’re boarding it for a gentleman while he’s abroad.’

‘Will you run home, Len, and ask your father if we can borrow it? And if so bring it here.’

‘Yes, sir.’ The boy dashed off.

‘What’s the idea?’ demanded Gaskin.

‘You’ll see. It may not work, but it might.’

They waited for about ten minutes, when the boy reappeared, running, with the dog on a leash.

‘Put him on that cigarette carton,’ requested Biggles.

Len obeyed. The dog nosed the carton, cast around once or twice, and then, seeming to be at fault, returned to the road.

‘That’s where the man got back into the car,’ said Biggles. ‘That’s why there’s no trail. Now bring him up here to where the car stopped again, or another car pulled in. If the scent isn’t cold he may tell us which.’

Again the boy obeyed, and this time there was no mistake. The dog struck the line instantly, and was off, nose to ground.

‘That’s it,’ cried Biggles.‘The car came back, and I don’t think we need wonder why.’

If confirmation of Biggles’ suspicion was needed it was soon provided, for the dog, after running straight for a little while was soon zigzagging among the trees.

‘Whether or not this was our man he was certainly looking for something,’ asserted Biggles, panting with the effort of keeping up with the dog.

Farther and farther into the timber it went, frequently changing direction in a way that suggested they were crossing and recrossing their trail. Then the boy stumbled over a root and fell. The dog, finding itself free, went on alone at a pace too fast for them to follow. The boy, picking himself up, tore on after it, shouting to it to stop. Ginger came next in the line of pursuit, followed by Biggles. Inspector Gaskin, who was a heavy man, brought up the rear, breathing heavily.

For all their efforts the dog disappeared from sight in the trees ahead of them, but that it had gone no great distance was revealed by barking, accompanied by shouts. Ginger and the boy, together, burst through some bushes to find the dog barking furiously at a man who, with his back against a tree was keeping the animal at bay with a stick. Seeing them he shouted: 'Is this your dog?'

'Yes,' answered Len, running up.

'Then call it off before I shoot it,' rasped the man, scarlet in the face with anger or exertion—perhaps both.

The boy called the dog to heel and it obeyed, growling in its throat.

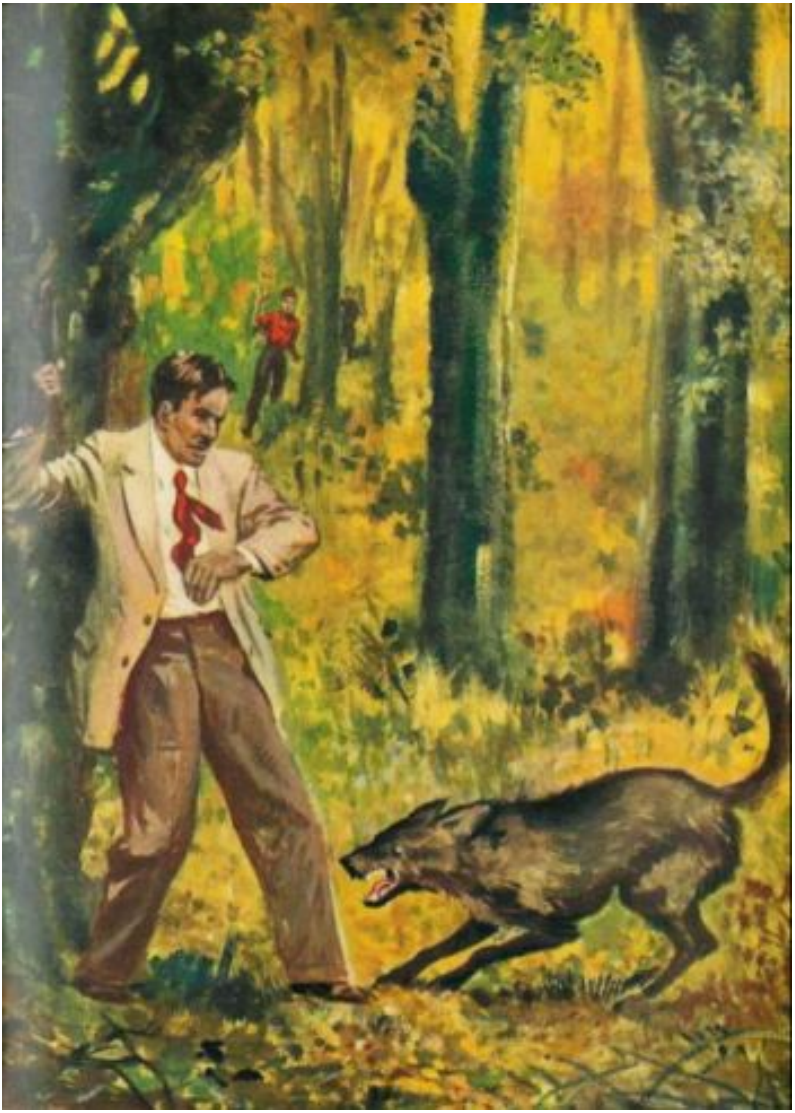
'Why don't you keep that hound under control?' demanded the man, malevolently, with some justification. He was dark, of medium height and build, with a small black moustache; his age might have been between thirty and forty. He was well, almost immaculately, dressed, in town clothes.

'I'm sorry,' said the boy, contritely.

At that moment Biggles arrived on the scene, and presently Inspector Gaskin.

'You ought to have more sense than to let a brute like that run loose on public ground,' grumbled the man. 'Hang on to it while I get out of the way,' he requested curtly, and strode off.

'I wonder if he was the man we were looking for?' said Biggles, softly, to Ginger, as they stood and watched him go.



The man was keeping the animal at bay with a stick (Page 54)

‘That was the man I saw get out of the car,’ volunteered the boy.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘Then the car may not be far away.’

‘He’s going towards the road,’ said Len, who, of course, knew the ground. ‘We aren’t far away from it here.’

‘You stay here and hold the dog,’ ordered Biggles. ‘We’ll see where he goes.’

Said Ginger, as they started off in the direction taken by the man: 'That fellow is either carrying a gun or he was trying to scare us. Before you arrived he threatened to shoot the dog. In his anger that may have slipped out, or he may have been bluffing.'

'I have an idea I've seen that face before, somewhere,' murmured Gaskin, looking puzzled.

They halted behind some shrubs when they came within sight of the road. There was no need to go any farther for the car stood on it, tight against the grass verge, the man beside it. For a moment or two he lingered, lighting a cigarette, as if uncertain what to do. Then he got in and drove off. Ginger read aloud the number of the car, grey in colour.

'Jaguar,' said Biggles. 'That gives us something to go on. I'd say he was the man we were looking for. What else could he have been doing here at dawn if he wasn't looking for something? He wasn't here for a picnic, and naturalists don't normally wear city clothes when they're bird-watching, or bug-hunting, or something of that sort.'

'What about this body we were looking for?' muttered Gaskin.

'I suggest we leave that for the time being,' answered Biggles. 'Let's go back to the Yard and check up on that car and its owner. That may be the quickest way to find out what all this is about.'

As the boy led them through the forest towards his home by a different route, saying it was a short cut, the dog turned suddenly at a tangent showing signs of excitement, straining at its lead.

'Just a minute,' said Biggles. 'What now?'

'We must have crossed that man's trail again,' declared the boy.

'Let the dog go,' ordered Biggles, although in fact Len was having a job to hold it. The dog leapt off; but it did not go far. Reaching a clump of bushes intertwined with brambles and bracken it pulled up short and then, with drooping tail began to back away, showing its teeth.

'I'm afraid there may be something nasty here,' said Biggles, with a meaning glance at Gaskin. 'Len, you run along home. Take the dog. We'll speak to your father later.'

They marked the direction taken by the boy so that they would know the way to the farm, and as soon as he was out of sight moved forward to the bushes. Signs of recent disturbance were evident, and presently Ginger stumbled over something soft that had been covered with bracken and dead leaves. Moving some of the debris with his foot he exposed a jacket.

'Here we are,' he said quietly, and in a few minutes a body had been carried to open ground. It was that of a youngish man, dark-skinned. There was no sign of parachute harness.

'Crickey!' exclaimed Gaskin. 'Don't say we've found *another* body.'

'No,' answered Biggles. 'This fellow hasn't been dead more than a few hours. He's the chap who jumped. He's all broken up.'

'But where's the parachute harness, the rest of the piece we've got?'

‘It must have been taken away by the man who put him here, and covered him up. Either he couldn’t carry the corpse or wouldn’t risk being seen with it. He found the body, but he didn’t find the top half of the brolly for the simple reason it wasn’t here. Len had found it and taken it home. He was still looking for it a few minutes ago, when we ran into him. That’s how it looks to me.’

Gaskin, on his knees, was going through the dead man’s pockets for something that might identify him. ‘This feller’s a foreigner, whoever he is,’ he stated. ‘This suit was never made here. We don’t make this sort of material and we don’t cut our coats like this. There’s nothing here. The chap who covered him up must have taken everything out of his pockets.’

‘You’d expect that.’

‘If he came from abroad we may have a job to identify him,’ muttered Gaskin. ‘That little scar over the right eye may help. Hello! What’s this.’ In moving a sleeve the inspector had revealed a tattoo mark low on the left forearm. It was blurred as if an attempt had been made to erase it, but the one word of which it consisted could still be read. The word, in blue ink, was Destin.

‘That tells us something, anyway,’ said Biggles. ‘He’s French. At least, *destin* is French for destiny, or fate.’

‘That’s appropriate, anyhow,’ stated Gaskin, as he got up. ‘Well, we can’t keep this business dark any longer. The body will have to go to the mortuary and the local police will have to know about it. Ginger had better slip along to the house and call the police on Betts’ phone. Tell ’em we shall want an ambulance and a stretcher. It had better come to the farm. Wait for it, Ginger, and bring the stretcher party here.’

‘Okay,’ agreed Ginger, and went off.

Biggles and Inspector Gaskin waited for an hour, discussing the case. Then the ambulance came and removed the body of the unknown man, Gaskin explaining to the sergeant in charge how it had been found. He also, at Biggles’ request, asked him to withhold issuing a description of the dead man for twenty-four hours, to give them a chance to make certain inquiries before the man who had hidden the body learned from the newspapers that it had been found. They then returned to London, Gaskin to check up on the ownership of the car and Biggles to put through a call to his opposite number in Paris, Marcel Brissac of the French section of the International Police Bureau.

As Biggles told his staff when, back in his office, he called Marcel at the Sûreté, he was doubtful if his inquiry would produce results; so he was more than a little surprised when the information Marcel gave him exceeded anything for which he could have hoped. And he was not the only one surprised. Marcel was astonished by what Biggles could tell him.

Biggles hadn’t even finished describing the dead man when Marcel cut in with: ‘He has a scar over the right eyebrow?’

‘That’s right,’ confirmed Biggles. ‘Do you know him?’

‘Know him? *Tiens!* We are looking for him. And you have him. *La-la.*’

And this, in brief, was what Marcel had to say about him.

His name was Raoul Dubroc, born in Tangier of a French father and an Arab woman. He had been a criminal all his life. He had joined the Foreign Legion to dodge the police, and it was during his period of service that, in a fit of depression, he had made the silly mistake of branding himself with the tattoo mark, which nothing would remove. Later he had deserted, gone to Paris and become involved with a gang suspected of smuggling arms through Tangier to the terrorists in Algeria. It was on this charge that he had been arrested, but on a promise to reveal the name of the leader of the gang, who he had said owed him money, he had been given certain liberties under which he had taken the opportunity to escape. The French police had been hunting high and low for him.

'You didn't hunt high enough,' said Biggles. 'It looks as if his pals picked him up and dropped him overboard on our side of the Ditch. You'd better come over and identify him officially.' Marcel said he would come.

Biggles had only just hung up when Gaskin came in. Biggles passed on the information he had just acquired.

The inspector pulled a face. 'This begins to look like something more than simple murder. Gun-running, eh. Well—well.'

'What about the car?'

'That's got me guessing, too. It belongs to a feller named Louis Brand. He runs a fishy night club in Soho, but we've never been able to pin anything on him. That's where I must have seen him. I didn't know he had a place in the country, but he must have, because the car is registered in Hampshire, the address being Dawfield Manor.'

'Dawfield Manor,' echoed Biggles. 'That name rings a bell. Yes, I've got it. That's where Sir Roy Wilton used to live. Used to own a plane, so that place must have an airstrip. He was killed in a crash in Africa about two years ago, on a big-game hunting trip.'

'Looks as if Brand must have bought the place. He always had plenty of money and we could never work out where it came from.'

'Gun-running can be profitable when it comes off,' said Biggles pointedly. 'I take it you've nothing on him?'

'Not a thing.'

'If we act fast you may get something.'

'How?'

'He may have taken the bottom half of that brolly home. If it fitted the top half we could ask him to explain how he came to have it.'

'Is this feller Brand a pilot?'

'Not to my knowledge. Ginger, you might check up on that.'

'How do you figure this out?' asked Gaskin, blowing through his pipe.

'It's pretty plain. According to Marcel, Dubroc fell out with his boss over money. He was going to squeal and the gang either knew that or suspected it. On the pretence

of getting him out of France they picked him up in an aircraft and dropped him overboard.'

'I can't see how the parachute comes into it. Why give him one at all?'

'You've got me guessing there,' admitted Biggles. 'Obviously there was a reason, and we shan't learn what it was sitting here.'

'You're thinking of giving this country house, Dawfield Manor, the once over?'

'Yes, and the sooner the better. If nothing else I fancy we have a case of illegal flying.'

'Why the hurry?'

'The plane that brought Dubroc here may still be in the country, but it may not be after to-night. If Brand is involved in this parachute affair he'll want that aircraft out of the way. If it came in at night it'll probably go out by night. If we start now we should get there by dark.'

'Okay,' agreed Gaskin. 'Let's go.'

Biggles looked at Ginger. 'Any luck?'

'No. He's neither in the Air Force List nor on the Register of Civil Pilots—not under the name of Brand, anyway.'

'No matter. There's a pilot in the picture somewhere, that's certain,' asserted Biggles. 'Dubroc wasn't flying the machine himself or it would have crashed after he baled out, and there's no report of a crash. Let's get organized. We shall need a torch. Algy, Bertie, I think you'd better come along. We may have more than one man to deal with, in which case there could be trouble. Put the skeleton keys in your pocket, Ginger. There may be doors to deal with. Okay. Let's get mobile.'

'We're going to be a bit of a squash in one car,' said Gaskin. 'I'll follow you in my own, with a spare man.'

'Just as you like,' agreed Biggles.

It was dark by the time the police cars found Dawfield Manor, in which matter there had been a little difficulty, for it was well out in the country, as was to be expected if it was provided with a private landing ground.

Biggles, who was driving the leading car, did not stop at the gates at the entrance to the drive, but went on a little way and, parking it under some trees well back from the road, switched off the lights. 'We'll walk,' he said.

Taking advantage of the ample cover provided first by a wood and later by a hedge, they made their way silently to the objective, which turned out to be a typical old Georgian manor house standing in grounds that had long been neglected. A light was showing in one room. Approaching it from the side they came upon the large open field that was obviously the landing ground used by the original owner. Several outbuildings, one large, loomed against the sky at the end of the field nearest the house. Biggles led the way towards it, and reaching it tried the small accommodation door. No one was surprised when it was found to be locked. He held out a hand for the skeleton keys.

After some failures one was found to fit. Biggles pushed the door open, and leaving Gaskin's man on guard outside they went in, to be greeted by the unmistakable reek of an aircraft, of oil and doped fabric. The torch sliced a wedge of light in the darkness. The beam struck an aircraft and moved down the fuselage to the French registration letter F.

'Hm. So that's it,' murmured Biggles.

'An Aubert Cigale—Major,' said Ginger, recognizing the type. 'Four-seater. Upward hinged doors on both sides. Dubroc would have no difficulty in getting out.'

'You mean, there'd be no difficulty in pushing him out,' said Gaskin.

'We don't know that he was pushed out,' reminded Biggles. 'He may have got scared and jumped, thinking he was going to be bumped off, although obviously he wouldn't do that if he knew his brolly had been tampered with. Since speaking to Marcel I've been thinking. There had been a row over money and Dubroc was threatening to squeal. Maybe he refused to fly without a brolly. So he was given one that was worse than nothing, because it fooled him into the belief that he was safe. I don't know. That's merely an alternative theory. One thing is certain. The pilot of this machine is still in the country, probably in the house.'

They spent a little while looking for the sabotaged parachute harness, but failing to find it went out and moved on to the garage. This, too, was locked, but it was soon opened. Inside was the Jaguar. There was nothing on the seats. Biggles opened the boot, and there, in a heap, lay the bottom half of the fatal parachute. As he pulled it out and held up the ends of the lines to show they had been clean cut, some articles fell out; among other things a French identity card in the name of Dubroc, and a notecase containing money.

'That's about all we want to know,' said Gaskin, grimly. 'Brand's going to find it hard to explain how these things got here. Let's go and hear what sort of lies he can dish up at short notice. He's in for an awful shock. We'll try the back way first.'

Gaskin's man went round to cover the front door. Algy and Bertie remained on guard outside the back door. It was not locked, so the others, moving quietly, went in.

A foreign-looking man was in the kitchen, washing dishes. The door was wide open, but he had his back towards them and did not see them until a slight sound made him look round. He dropped the plate he was holding. His hand flashed to his pocket; but Biggles was first, and the man stopped, staring at the automatic that covered him.

'Take his gun, Ginger,' ordered Biggles, briefly.

'And you keep your trap shut,' Gaskin warned the man, as he clicked handcuffs on his wrists.

'I no understand,' stammered the man.

'You will,' growled Gaskin. 'Take him out, Ginger. My man'll take care of him.'

They waited for Ginger to come back and went on down a long corridor until they came to a door behind which voices were speaking. Biggles opened the door. The conversation ended abruptly. They walked in.

There were two men in the room, seated near the fireplace, one on either side of a coffee table on which stood bottles and glasses. One was the man they had seen in the forest. The other was younger, a short, slim, swarthy type, black-haired, dark-eyed. Taken by surprise, for a moment they could only stare. Then Brand half rose and sank down again. 'What's this?' he demanded loudly. 'Who are you?'

Gaskin answered. 'We're police officers from Scotland Yard,' he announced evenly.

'What do you want?'

'We're making inquiries about a body found in the New Forest. We think you may be able to help us.'

'Why do you think I should know anything about it?' inquired Brand, with asperity. He tried to speak naturally, but without success.

'The body had fallen from a plane. Half a parachute was found near it.'

'Well?'

'The other half is in your car. There's a plane in your hangar. We saw you in the forest this morning. We thought you might know something about it.'

Brand must have known he was cornered, but even so, it is unlikely that any of them were prepared for his explanation. Ginger could only conclude that it was calculated to clear him of murder, although it would leave him open to a less serious charge.

'All right,' he said, as if reaching a decision. 'I'll tell you the truth. I admit I was in the plane, but Dubroc, who must be the man you found, jumped of his own accord.'

'Having first cut the ropes, I suppose,' put in Biggles, cynically.

'Yes.'

Biggles looked incredulous. 'Are you asking us seriously to believe that this man cut up a parachute and then tried to use it?'

'Well—er—not exactly that. He cut the cords. I saw him do it. I can only think the one he cut was intended for me, but Leroux here, in handing them out, must have got them mixed up.'

The man named leapt to his feet. 'That's a lie. I never touched the parachute. Don't you try to blame this on me.'

'Were you the pilot of the plane?' inquired Biggles.

'Yes. But I had nothing to do with the parachutes. I never wear one. Brand changed them over. I saw him. But I didn't know then that one had been damaged.'

'When did you know?'

'After we had landed.'

'Did Brand tell you?'

'Yes. He wanted me to go with him to find——'

'You shut up,' broke in Brand. 'I suggested going back to make sure Dubroc had landed safely, and to pick him up.'

It was now evident that Leroux was concerned only with himself. Looking at Brand he said: 'If you didn't know Raoul's parachute was no use why did you ask me to pretend the plane was out of control and then shout to Raoul to jump?'

'Was Brand sitting next to you?' queried Biggles.

'Yes. Raoul was behind.'

'Did you rock the plane?'

'Yes.'

'Did you know why Brand wanted you to do that?'

'Not then. I did when I heard him tell Raoul to jump. I remembered him changing the parachutes, and I guessed——'

'Lies. All lies,' broke in Brand.

'Do you normally wear a parachute in the air,' questioned Biggles.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because I like jumping. I was in the Parachute Regiment.'

'He was a German paratrooper,' sneered Leroux.

'Okay. That's enough,' put in Gaskin, crisply. 'We'll get this sorted out at the Yard, where I'll take your statements. Don't try any tricks. I've men outside.'

Brand, glowering, hesitated, as if contemplating a break. If so he thought better of it and allowed himself to be handcuffed to his protesting accomplice. They were taken to Gaskin's car. Gaskin then went through the house in case there should be anyone else there. Finding no one he locked up pending a thorough search of the premises and the cars returned to London, where Marcel was waiting for them.

'*Voila!*' he said, when his eyes fell on Leroux. 'You too?'

'You know him?' asked Biggles.

'Too well,' answered Marcel.

The truth of what happened on the fatal night was never proved, for Dubroc was dead and the statements of Brand and Leroux conflicted, as each laid the blame on the other. They agreed on one point. It was Dubroc who had cut the parachute, so as it could be argued that he died by his own hand the charge of murder was dropped. The question was, why had he done it? Leroux's explanation may have been correct.

According to him, Brand, in his trips to England, always by night, feared that a mishap would leave a foreign plane stranded on his ground, wherefore he sometimes went down by parachute, leaving the plane to return to France without having landed. The men who worked for him were expected to do the same, and were chosen for that purpose. This had been the intention on the night in question: hence the parachutes. Dubroc was being brought to England ostensibly to escape from the French police, but actually to prevent him from talking. Brand was carrying a large sum of money, payment for an arms shipment. Dubroc knew that. (This apparently was true, for the money, in French notes, was later found in the house).

Leroux believed that Dubroc planned to murder Brand for this money. He cut Brand's parachute so that when he baled out he would fall to his death. Dubroc would follow, find him and get the money. But Brand saw Dubroc cut the parachute and switched them over. He was then faced with the task of finding Dubroc's body to avoid police investigation. Leroux swore that he realized this only when Brand ordered him to land. This, certainly, would clear up the mystery.

Other charges against Brand were provided by documents found in the house. The illegal traffic in arms was not his only activity. He dealt also in drugs and foreign currency, improperly using an aircraft for the purpose. He went to prison for fourteen years. Leroux was taken to France under an extradition warrant to face a charge of treason. He broke down under questioning and the rest of the gang was picked up.

'What I do not understand,' said Marcel, when it was all over, 'is how this affair started.'

'It started,' answered Biggles, 'when a boy found half a parachute in a wood and had the good sense to take it home to his father.'

'Ah!' breathed Marcel. 'And the father could—how do you say—smell the rat.'

'As it happened, several rats,' returned Biggles, smiling.

MISSION ORIENTAL

4

There were two men as well as Air Commodore Raymond in the Air Police headquarters office when Biggles, in response to a call from his chief on the inter-com. telephone, walked in. One was obviously British, a senior civil service type; the other was a small, brown-skinned man with slightly slanting eyes who, although dressed in European clothes, was equally obviously an Asiatic. Biggles thought Burmese, although in this he was wrong.

'Come in, Bigglesworth,' invited the Air Commodore, quietly. 'Let me introduce you to Mr Preston, of the Colonial Office, and Mr Ong, a secretary on the personal staff of the Sultan of Kulang, in Malaya.'

The British official nodded. The Asian bowed from the waist.

'As I shall want you to fly out to Kulang I thought it might be a good thing if I explained the purpose of the trip to you while these gentlemen are here,' went on the Air Commodore. 'You could then ask them any questions that may occur to you, a detail, perhaps, that I might have overlooked.'

'Very good, sir.' Biggles' expression did not change. He saw nothing unusual in being asked to fly half-way across the world on a special mission, for long-distance mobility was the particular purpose of his department at Scotland Yard.

'I don't think there should be any great difficulty about this,' went on the Air Commodore. 'All you have to do is land at a spot that will be pointed out to you by Mr Ong, who will travel with you, pick up two passengers and fly them home. For the purpose of the operation I will ask the Air Ministry for the loan of a Hastings aircraft and see that you are provided with diplomatic papers that should facilitate your passage out and home.'

'I understand, sir,' acknowledged Biggles.

'In case things should not work out according to plan, I had better give you a general outline of the situation, so that you will know how you stand and so be in a position to make any adjustments that may be necessary,' resumed the Air Commodore. 'Kulang, as you probably know, is one of the smaller sovereign states at the north-eastern extremity of the territory administered by us, a geographical position which, at the moment, is anything but a comfortable one. The jungles to the south are the retreats of the terrorist bands that still plague the Malay Peninsula. From the north, from

Burma, and from the north-east across the South China Sea, are now being infiltrated by Communist agents, their purpose being, we may suppose, at a given signal to start the usual agitation with the object of overthrowing the government. We should be sorry to see that happen if for no other reason than that the Sultan is our friend, as was his father before him.' The Air Commodore looked at Mr Ong. 'May I speak freely?'

'Please do.'

The Air Commodore proceeded. 'As if these conditions were not difficult enough for the Sultan to cope with he has an enemy within his gates; an uncle; his father's younger brother; a prince named Chan, who sees in this uneasy state of affairs an opportunity to seize power.'

'Which I take to mean he has been got at by the Communists,' put in Biggles.

'Exactly. He opposed the Sultan's accession but was thwarted by the loyalty of his subjects. Since then the Sultan has married, and as he now has a son, a boy of ten named Prince Suba, the chances of the uncle to succeed in his ambition—by fair means—become more and more remote. It is with the Sultana and her son that we are now concerned. The Sultan has no fears for himself, but he sees in the present situation a threat to his family and has asked us to help him. Should he fall, his son, were he in Kulang, would not long survive him. The uncle would see to that. On the other hand, if Prince Suba was in this country his assassination would not be so easily achieved; and while the boy was alive the uncle would have no legal claim to the throne. Suba was due to come here to school, anyway. You follow me?'

'Perfectly, sir. Why hasn't the boy come here?'

'That brings us to the point,' stated the Air Commodore. 'The difficulty has been to get him out of the country. In order to get to Penang, Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, from where he could fly out on one of the regular services, he would have to pass through the terrorist-infested jungle. Quite aside from the uncle these men would kill him if they could capture him, if for no other reason than that the Sultan has co-operated with us against them by refusing them sanctuary in his country. Prince Suba is in danger in Kulang, but he would be in even greater danger should he attempt to leave by an overland route.'

Biggles nodded. 'I understand.'

'We have been asked by the Sultan, through Mr Ong, to bring the boy and his mother here. They will be in danger from the moment they leave the palace, but that is a risk that will have to be taken, since it is the lesser of two evils. Certain arrangements have already been made. The Sultana and the boy, disguised as servants, will leave the palace by a back exit and proceed to the rendezvous where you will pick them up. Alternative dates and times have been settled to meet local meteorological conditions. Mr Ong knows these. But here we are faced with a difficulty. Kulang is hilly and mostly covered with forest, for which reason no aerodrome has ever been laid down.'

'If there is no cultivated land how do the people manage for food? Surely there must be some level country.'

Mr Ong explained. 'Certainly there are some paddy fields where the essential rice is grown, but at this season of the year, immediately following the monsoon, they will be

swamps, if not actually under water.'

Frowning, Biggles turned to the Air Commodore. 'How am I going to get down?'

'There is one place only, Mr Ong tells me, where a landing is possible,' answered the Air Commodore. 'It is a stretch of sandy beach running for some miles along the coast. The northern end is no great distance from the palace.'

'What sort of sand is this?'

'Mr Ong assures me that it is hard. We can accept that as correct because during the war Japanese troop-carrying aircraft frequently used the beach to fly in reinforcements.'

Biggles looked dubious. 'Firm sand must mean that it is subject to inundation by the tide.'

'Mr Ong says the times of the tides have been taken into account. You will arrive at low tide, but except at flood tide there should still be room for you to get down. Prince Suba and his mother will be waiting. All you have to do is pick them up and make your way home by the route on which you decide. A point arises there. There will be no need for you to risk such a landing on full tanks, the weight of which might put your wheels in. You'd need only enough fuel to see you to, say, Kuala Lumpur or Penang, where you could top up and then carry on home. Well, there it is. How do you feel about it?'

'I see no difficulty, sir, as long as things pan out as arranged.' Biggles smiled faintly. 'They don't always do that when one has to take certain factors on trust. However, we'll deal with the snags if and when they arise.'

'Any questions for Mr Ong?'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'I don't think so. It all seems straightforward. The only thing we have to decide is when do we start? What is the first date on your list, Mr Ong?'

'Twelve midnight on the seventeenth—a fortnight to-day. There will be a full moon and the tide will be at its lowest ebb at that hour.'

'Then we'll aim for that,' decided Biggles. 'The fewer the number of times the Sultana has to risk leaving the palace the better.'

Mr Ong agreed.

'All right, Bigglesworth, I'll leave the matter in your hands,' concluded the Air Commodore. 'I'll see about the Hastings, and the documents to see you through intermediate airports. Mr Ong will give you his hotel in London so that you can contact him at any time on any point that might arise.'

'Very good, sir.'

'I suppose you'll take your usual crew with you?'

'I think it would be advisable to have them with me just in case we run into trouble. I'll report progress to you in the usual code, on the high frequency, as often as possible.'

Biggles turned to Mr Ong. ‘I’ll be getting in touch with you, sir,’ he said, and returned to his operations room to tell his pilots of the assignment and to make preparations for the flight.

On the night of the fourteenth day following the conversation in London a Hastings aircraft of Transport Command, of the type used for carrying Important Persons, having crossed the Malay Peninsula from Penang, nosed its way northward at ten thousand feet towards its objective, the Sultanate of Kulang. At the controls was Biggles. Beside him at the dual installation sat Ginger. Also in the flight compartment were Mr Ong, Algy, at the navigation table, and Bertie, prepared to act if necessary as radio operator.

Below and to starboard lay the China Sea, dark and mysterious, not a light showing anywhere. On the port side the sombre mass of the mainland could just be discerned in the gloom, for the moon had not yet risen although a grey streak low over the horizon gave promise of its early arrival.

So far the trip had been routine flying, without incident.

After a silence that had lasted for some time Mr Ong spoke. ‘I see the island I spoke to you about, Captain. Now we have only about fifty miles to go.’

‘Thank you,’ acknowledged Biggles. He did not alter course.

A few minutes later the moon, looking like a great silver balloon, soared up to cast a path of shimmering ripples across the sullen sea.

‘That’s better,’ said Biggles, retarding the throttle and, as the machine lost height, he began to edge towards the land. A cluster of lights appeared.

‘That is the town of Kulang,’ said Mr Ong.

‘I’d have thought most people would have been in bed at this hour,’ remarked Biggles. ‘It is within a few minutes of midnight.’

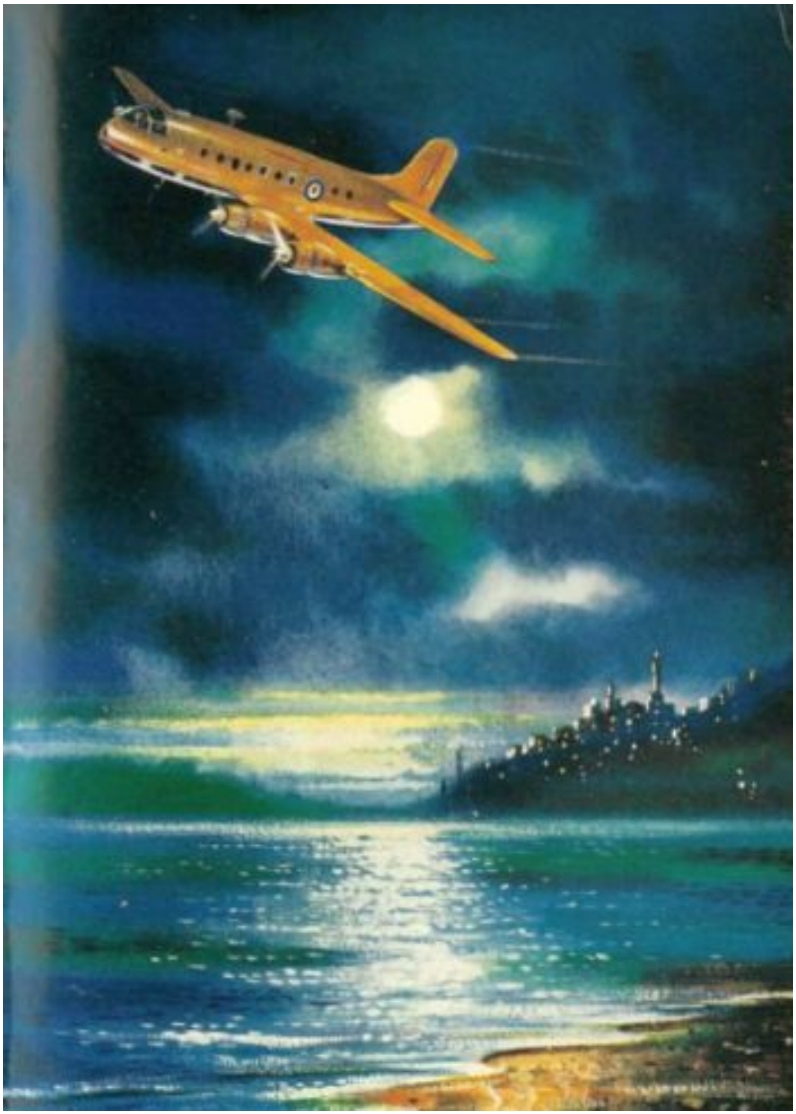
Ong did not answer, and it struck Ginger, who was looking at him, that he himself seemed somewhat puzzled. However, after a few more minutes had passed, with the machine still losing height, Ong observed: ‘Now you can see the beach.’

Ginger could see it plainly in the now bright moonlight, a long pale stripe bordering the black mass of the hinterland.

‘Check for drift,’ ordered Biggles. ‘I don’t think there’s any wind to speak of but we’d better make sure.’

Ginger reported no drift, whereupon Biggles cut his engines and in a shallow glide began a series of S turns to drop off height as he approached the landing area. No one spoke. It was as if everyone realized that the crucial moment was at hand; that the next few minutes would decide the success or failure of the operation. They were now in the hands of Mr Ong. If his information regarding local conditions proved to be correct, all should be well. If it was at fault in any respect, particularly in the matter of the hardness of the sand or the state of the tide, there could be trouble ahead. It had not been possible, of course, to check these things. For which reason a certain amount of tension was perceptible in the compartment as Biggles straightened out for his approach.

As far as the length of the landing area was concerned, thought Ginger, Ong had been right. It ran on for miles and, as far as could be seen from the air, the beach was free from obstructions. Apparently Biggles was satisfied for he went straight in, as he had hoped would be possible, without touching his engines. Thus, it was with the minimum amount of noise that the big machine touched down and ran on to a stop without any dragging of the wheels to suggest that the sand was anything but firm.



The next few minutes would decide the success or failure of the operation (Page 74)

Mr Ong's face, normally expressionless, broke into a smile. 'Very good, Captain,' he said, 'I will fetch them. They will not be far away.'

It occurred to Ginger that had the fugitives been there, waiting, they must have seen the machine land, in which case they might have been expected to show themselves. But as far as he could see, between the palms that fringed the beach and the line of surf that marked the position of the sea, there was not a soul in sight.

Mr Ong got down. He paced the beach, looking up and down. He whistled. He called. The beach remained deserted.

'Apparently they aren't here yet,' said Biggles. 'We might as well get out and stretch our legs.'

They joined Ong on the beach. Biggles lit a cigarette. 'Well, where are they?' he asked. 'It's after twelve.'

'I am sorry,' replied Ong. 'I impressed upon them the necessity for punctuality. Something must have detained them.'

No one answered. Biggles drew heavily on his cigarette, doing his best not to show his irritation at the delay. Twenty minutes dragged by.

'I think you should do something about this,' Biggles told Ong, heeling the stub of his cigarette into the sand. 'I have a feeling they aren't coming or they would have been here by now. And if they aren't coming we're wasting our time.'

'I'll go and find out what has happened,' said Ong.

'How far is it to the palace?'

'From this spot between two and three miles.'

'Which means you'll be away for more than an hour.'

'Yes.'

'All right. We'll wait. What shall I do if they come while you're away?'

'Go. Don't wait for me. I did not intend returning with you.'

'Very well. Be as quick as you can.'

Ong strode off, soon to disappear from sight in the inky shadows of the palms.

'This is a bit of a bore, old boy,' remarked Bertie.

Biggles lit another cigarette. 'It's annoying, but I can't say it surprises me. If time-tables go wrong at home, and they do, what are we to expect in the East?'

'What if Ong doesn't come back?' asked Algy.

Biggles shrugged. 'That's his worry. We've done what he asked us to do.'

'How long are you going to wait?' inquired Ginger.

'I shan't stay after daylight, which will be about six o'clock,' answered Biggles. 'There'd be no point in it. Someone would spot us and we'd soon have a crowd on the beach. That would make it difficult to get off. Aside from that, this crooked uncle would hear about us being here, and guess why. That would knock the scheme on the head. He'd probably have the beach watched in case we came back. No. We've done

our part. We can't do more. If the Sultana doesn't turn up, she, not us, will have let the party down.'

'Here's somebody coming now, and in a hurry,' observed Algy, as a running figure detached itself from the palms.

'Looks like Ong,' said Ginger.

'If it is he couldn't have been to the palace,' said Biggles. 'I smell trouble.'

It was Ong.

'We are too late,' he announced.

'What do you mean?' rapped out Biggles.

'The worst has happened. Chan and his Communist friends have struck. There are riots, and the town is in an uproar. That accounts for the lights we saw.'

'How did you learn this?'

'I met a man I know, a merchant. He had fled and was hiding in the jungle. He saw me and spoke.'

'Where is the Sultan and his family?'

'They will be in the palace. They wouldn't dare to come out while the place is in this state.'

'What are the police doing?'

'Nothing. What can they do? They would hesitate to fire on their own people without orders; and the blow was so sudden there was no time to issue orders. That is what I am told.'

'Would the police be loyal to the Sultan if he could issue orders?'

'Without a doubt. At present all is confusion.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'Do you know a back way into the palace—I mean, a route clear of the crowd?'

'Yes. Through the gardens. The jungle comes close to them.'

'All right. Let's go and get this sorted out,' said Biggles, calmly.

'There may be danger.'

'For you or for me?'

'For all of us, if your purpose here is suspected.'

'Mr Ong,' said Biggles curtly, 'I haven't flown all this way to go home with an empty machine. Algy, stay here and take care of things. Ginger, Bertie, you'll come with me. Lead on, Mr Ong.'

They set off at a brisk pace, keeping to the beach for as far as possible, but after a while striking off along a well-used path through a jungle where fireflies waltzed in the sticky heat. Sweat poured down Ginger's face to soak his shirt, for he had not come prepared for a march of this sort.

'Does the Sultan speak English?' was the only question Biggles put to their guide.

'Perfectly. He went to school in England.'

‘Good. Keep going.’

Soon they were within earshot of trouble which, to Ginger’s relief, consisted mostly of shouting. He heard no shots fired.

The last part of the walk was the worst, for Ong left the path and plunged into the jungle of bamboo and tree-ferns. After two or three hundred yards of this it was with no small satisfaction that Ginger saw moonlight ahead. A bamboo fence barred their way, but they broke through it without any great difficulty to emerge in what Ong said were the palace gardens, although had it not been for a large building shining whitely in the brilliant moonlight a little way ahead Ginger would not have guessed it.

‘What you see is the back of the palace,’ said their guide. ‘The front faces on the main street of the town, and that I think is where the people will be.’

Actually, this was no matter for surmise, as the noise of shouting and the banging of drums made it abundantly clear. Apparently, so far, the insurgents had not invaded the gardens, for no one was seen on the short walk to the palace. There, however, at the entrance to which Ong took them, they were confronted by half a dozen armed men in uniform, police or troops, it was not clear which. They looked at Ong, who was obviously known to them, with surprise and indecision, confirming what had been said about an absence of direct orders. Ong started to say something, presumably offering some sort of explanation; but Biggles cut in.

‘Let’s not stand here arguing,’ he told Ong crisply. ‘You know your way about this place. We don’t. Take us to the room where you think the Sultan is most likely to be found.’

‘Certainly,’ said Ong, who appeared to be somewhat carried off his feet by Biggles’ brusque orders.

They filed in, the guard making no attempt to stop them.

Having traversed several corridors they came to a door where two more guards stood on duty.

‘That is where the Sultan will be,’ said Ong. He spoke to the guards in their own language. On receiving a reply, turning back to Biggles he said: ‘Prince Chan is with the Sultan. They are not to be disturbed.’

‘Who says they are not to be disturbed?’

‘Prince Chan.’

‘Does he give the orders here?’

Ong hesitated. ‘Perhaps. I don’t know what has happened.’

‘Then it’s time we found out,’ stated Biggles, pushing aside the guards and opening the door.

For a moment it looked as if the guards might try to stop him entering, but in the end they did nothing, again giving Ginger the impression that they did not know whom to obey.

The room into which, with Bertie and Ong, he followed Biggles, was a magnificent apartment, spacious and furnished in a somewhat incongruous mixture of Oriental and Western styles, the East predominating. It was lighted by several ornate lamps, both

standard and pendant. From a long narrow table that occupied the centre, on which lay some papers, it was evidently a council chamber. But after a cursory glance Ginger ceased to take any interest in the appointments, his attention switching to the several people who were there.

They were in two groups, by the table. On the one side stood a man in early middle age who, from the richness of his dress, was clearly the Sultan. A man less finely clad stood at his elbow. Both men looked upset, worried. Behind them, a few paces distant, were a woman and a boy who, Ginger did not doubt, particularly as they were dressed in outdoor clothes, were the Sultana and her son.

Facing them, in attitudes that might be described as threatening, was a party of five men, four in native dress and the other wearing European clothes. He had the pale complexion and high cheek bones of a Slav. One of the Orientals, who stood slightly in advance of the rest, was a man of about sixty years of age, and from the richness of his attire, which included a jewelled turban, was evidently a person of importance. Ginger judged him, correctly, as it presently transpired, to be the wicked uncle of the play, Prince Chan.

As might be imagined, on Biggles' entry all heads had turned to ascertain the nature of the interruption. For a few seconds, while Biggles advanced slowly to the table, no one spoke. Then it was he who broke the silence.

Looking at the man whom Ginger had judged to be the Sultan he said: 'Have I the honour of addressing the Sultan of Kulang?'

'Yes,' came the answer, after a brief hesitation.

'Then I crave your indulgence, sir, if my intrusion turns out to be unwarranted,' went on Biggles. 'But I came to Kulang at your request, and as things seem to have gone awry I await your instructions. I am at your disposal.'

'Who are you and what are you doing here?' burst out the man Ginger supposed to be the scheming uncle.

'That is a matter between the Sultan and myself,' answered Biggles calmly.

'Then get out. Can't you see we are busy? How dare you come in here?'

Biggles looked at Ong. 'From whom am I to take orders?'

The Sultan answered. 'I give the orders here.'

'That won't be for much longer,' came harshly from the other speaker.

Biggles looked again at Ong. 'I take it this gentleman is Prince Chan?'

'Yes.'

'I think you had better ask him what he means by the statement he has just made.'

'I will answer that question,' said the Sultan. 'My uncle demands my abdication.'

'On what grounds?'

'My inability to rule the country without disorders, such as those now going on outside.'

'Do you wish to abdicate, sir?'

‘I have no intention of doing so.’

‘We shall see about that,’ declared Chan.

Biggles ignored him. Speaking to the Sultan he said: ‘Do you wish me to proceed with the plan?’

‘Yes. I am sorry there was a hitch. You will by this time have guessed the reason.’

‘What plan is this?’ demanded Chan, furiously.

The Sultan answered. ‘I am sending my son to England.’

Chan stared. ‘For what purpose?’

‘For his education, and, I might add, for his safety.’

‘He shall not go,’ swore Chan.

Biggles stepped in again. ‘If the Sultan wishes him to go he will go.’

‘Who says so?’

‘I do.’ Biggles spoke quite calmly.

‘And if I say he shall not go. What have you to say to that?’

Biggles’ expression hardened. ‘All I have to say to you is this. It is a lucky thing for you I’m not the Sultan of Kulang, for if I were I’d hang you on the nearest tree for treason. Since his Highness wishes it the boy will go, and I’d advise you to make no attempt to prevent him leaving.’

Chan looked at Biggles as if he could not believe his ears. It is unlikely that he had ever been so spoken to in his life. He glared, but words failed him. His hand went to his hip.

‘We are ready, sir, when you are,’ said Biggles to the Sultan, who beckoned to his family, in so doing turning his back to the man who would usurp him.

For what followed, Ginger was convinced, the man in European dress was responsible. He must have been in the conspiracy even if it had not actually been inspired by him. He said something in a low tone to Chan, who must have perceived that his opportunity to seize the throne was slipping away from him, and for that reason would need little urging to make a last desperate bid for what he wanted. Had what he attempted succeeded it would certainly have left him master of the situation.

Before anyone could have suspected his intention he had whipped out a dagger and leapt like a tiger at the Sultan who, hearing the movement turned quickly, and in so doing, stumbled. In a flash Chan was over him, arm raised for the fatal thrust.

A gun crashed, causing the lights to jump. Chan rose slowly to his full height. He swayed to the table, rested a hand on it for a moment and then, like a coat falling from a peg, crumpled to the ground. The dagger fell from his hand to clatter on the marble floor. A shocked silence seemed to fall from the ceiling, towards which rose a reek of cordite smoke.

This should, and might well have been, the end. But it was not. As Biggles stood looking at the would-be assassin, pistol in hand, as if startled by what he had done, Ginger caught a movement out of the tail of his eye. Turning sharply he saw that the European also had a gun in his hand and was taking deliberate aim at Biggles. There

was no time to pull his own gun. All he could do was hurl himself against Biggles, and this he did with such force that they both sprawled against the table. Almost simultaneously two shots rang out, within a split second of each other, one of the bullets striking the floor and screaming across the room. By the time Ginger had recovered the man who had fired it was sinking to the ground, with Bertie, his automatic in his hand, regarding him without emotion.

Bertie adjusted his monocle and looked at Biggles. 'I had to do it, old boy, otherwise he would have got you,' he said apologetically.

Biggles looked at the Sultan. 'I'm sorry about all this, Your Highness, but we were left with no alternative if murder was to be prevented.'

'Thank you,' said the Sultan, who looked shaken by the speed of events, not without cause. 'I always knew Prince Chan was a dangerous man but I did not think he would go as far as that,' he added, simply. 'You saved my life and I am deeply grateful.'

The door guards, who had rushed in at the sound of the shots, stood staring at the scene as if they did not know what to make of it.

'It's not for me to give you advice, sir,' Biggles told the Sultan, 'but in view of what has happened, and what we propose to do, it might be a good thing if these remaining conspirators were put where they can do no further mischief.'

The Sultan evidently thought so too, for he gave an order and the three men were led out by the guards.

The man who had been with the Sultan on the arrival of Biggles' party rose from his knees beside Chan. 'He is dead,' he announced.

'That may make things easier for you,' Biggles told the Sultan. 'Do you still want your son to go to England? Because if so there is no time to lose. The tide will be coming in.'

'It is too early to say what the end of this will be,' replied the Sultan. 'I shall of course stay here,' he added, 'but I would rather my family went with you to England. I should then know that they at least were safe.'

'Would you like me to remain with you for a little while, sir, until the trouble has been brought under control? There is still a lot of noise outside. Do you know what the shouting is about?'

'No. It only started just before your arrival, and as you saw, I was unable to leave here.'

Biggles turned to Ong. 'Don't you think it's time someone found out what the people are shouting about?'

'I will go,' said Ong, and went out.

He was back within five minutes. 'I am told the rioting started when a rumour spread through the town that the Sultan had abdicated in favour of Prince Chan,' he reported. 'That story, without doubt, was given out by Chan's agents.'

Biggles turned again to the Sultan. 'Surely the answer to that is simple. It should only be necessary for you to show yourself to the people to squash the rumour.

Apparently it's you they want.'

The Sultan appeared to take a fresh interest in the proceedings. He strode to a long window and throwing it open stepped out on to a balcony. Almost at once the shouting began to subside, soon to be replaced with cheers. The Sultan raised a hand and spoke to the crowd. What he said Ginger never knew but it had the effect of raising a storm of cheers.

When the Sultan came back into the room he was smiling. 'All is well,' he said. 'I shall stay, but until I can deal with the troublemakers I would prefer my family to go with you to England.'

'Then the sooner we move off the better,' replied Biggles. 'Already we have been longer than we anticipated and the guard on the plane will be getting anxious. Perhaps Mr Ong will be good enough to show us the way back to the beach.'

That was all. The Sultan said good-bye to his family and brought them forward to Biggles. 'I can never thank you enough for what you have done to-night, yet still I don't know your name.'

Biggles smiled. 'It isn't important, sir.' He held out a hand to the boy. 'Come on, Your Highness. We're going for a long ride.'

Prince Suba looked up at Biggles with dark serious eyes. 'I shan't know what to call you,' he said.

'You can call me Biggles,' said Biggles confidentially.

'Biggles,' repeated the Prince. 'What a funny name.'

'That's what I think,' agreed Biggles, to broad smiles all round. 'Lead on, please, Mr Ong.'

That was the end of the affair as far as the palace was concerned. There was no trouble on the return journey to the beach, but there were some anxious moments just before the party reached the rendezvous when they heard the Hastings' engines start up. The reason became apparent when they stepped from the trees to the open beach. Algy was moving the machine farther from an advancing line of surf that was the incoming tide. However, there was no immediate danger, although they found a very worried Algy who, with what concern can be imagined, had watched the waves galloping towards him.

They were soon aboard, and in a few minutes, with Mr Ong waving good-bye on the beach, the little country where a Communist revolution had failed was dropping away astern as the Hastings took up its course for home.

THE CASE OF THE HAUNTED ISLAND

5

In considering the world-wide nature of the investigations which Biggles was called upon to undertake it might well be expected that strange stories would come his way; as, indeed, they did. But none was more remarkable than the one that went down in the Air Police records as the Haunted Atoll. It was started (as dramatic events so often are) by a rumour; a mere whisper. At the outset nothing could have been more vague. No ending could have been more conclusive, although to reach it Biggles and his crew had to cover many thousands of sea miles.

The inquiry was opened by a note from the French Colonial Office to its British counterpart, and from its tone was intended more for information than in expectation of direct action. In due course the note reached Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Air Police, for a check through his file of Missing Aircraft. He passed it on to Biggles.

It stated that for some years there had been reports in French Oceania, notably in Papeete, Tahiti, the administrative headquarters of the Islands, of a 'mad Englishman' being resident on Oto-Via, a remote atoll east of the Paumotu Archipelago. As far as was known this man, mad or sane, had done nothing wrong, so his alleged existence was ignored by the authorities. But now, suddenly, for no apparent reason, the small native population of the island had vanished. This had been reported by the captain of an island trading schooner who, at long intervals, had called to pick up copra and pearl shell. It was now being rumoured that the atoll was haunted, but by whom or by what could not be ascertained, since no one could be found with first-hand experience. In view of possible developments, as it appeared that a British subject was involved, it was thought that the British Government would wish to be informed.

'In other words,' said Biggles, when he went to discuss the matter with the Air Commodore, 'they're playing the old game of passing us the buck.'

'I wouldn't say that,' replied the Air Commodore. 'I'd call that the action of a friendly nation. If they suspect that a British subject is involved, possibly up to something on their property, they're quite right to give us warning in case there should be trouble.'

'Why don't they get to the bottom of this rumour themselves?'

‘Why should they put themselves to a lot of trouble and expense over some fool Englishman who may or may not exist? Have we any record of an aircraft missing in that part of the world?’

‘No.’

‘Well, apparently the French Government are not going to do anything about it. No doubt there are difficulties.’

‘I can believe that,’ stated Biggles. ‘I’ve looked up the place in Findlay’s South Pacific Directory and in Admiralty Sailing Directions. Not only is the place right off the map but it’s one of those rare formations, an atoll without a passage through the reef. It’s a fair size, too, for an atoll. Circumference about forty miles, but nowhere more than a quarter of a mile wide.’

‘That’s not as big as some. Christmas Island has a circumference of a hundred miles.’

‘Yes, but that claims to be the largest atoll in the world. But to come back to this place, Oto-Via. It can be no more than a lagoon, twelve or thirteen miles across, surrounded by a narrow, unbroken strip of coral. If there’s no opening a ship couldn’t get into the lagoon. It would have to moor on the outside, so to speak, and that could be dangerous. That, I imagine, is why the French Government haven’t done anything about it.’

‘Either that or they don’t consider the matter sufficiently important.’

‘Frankly, I don’t see anything myself to get in a flap about.’

The Air Commodore looked thoughtful. ‘I wonder could there be a castaway there? If so we can’t leave him there.’

‘But surely a castaway would make his way round the reef to the village and live with the natives until he was picked up. There would be nothing ghostly about him; certainly nothing to cause the natives to bolt. They must have seen plenty of white men.’

‘The man is reported to be mad. He may have gone off his rocker and knocked the natives about with the result that they’ve pushed off to another island.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘I suppose that is a possibility. In the tropics a white man can do daft things, particularly if he finds himself alone.’

‘Well, what do you suggest we do about it?’

Biggles reached for a cigarette. ‘I could ring up Marcel Brissac in Paris and ask him to try to dig out some further particulars—something more concrete. He knows the islands. I remember him telling me he did his overseas tour in Tahiti. When we’ve heard what he has to say we could decide whether to go on with the thing or let it drop.’

The Air Commodore nodded. ‘All right. Do that. There’s nothing urgent about it.’

He picked up his pen to resume work, leaving Biggles to return to his own office to call Paris and to tell his pilots the result of his interview with the chief.

It was three days before anything was heard from Marcel and then he turned up in person.

‘Well, what news?’ greeted Biggles.

‘Nothing to get the excitements about, old dog,’ answered the French police pilot, dropping into a chair. ‘I speak to the Colonial Office and we make a long radio message to the government office in Tahiti. But all we get back is this. For a long time there has been strange native stories about Oto-Via. First it is a mad Englishman there. Then the place is haunted by a spirit—perhaps many spirits. I don’t know. It is hard to get a Polynesian to talk of spirits.’

‘Has any white man seen this madman, or these spirits?’

‘There is only one white man who could have seen anything, for no one else goes there for years. This is Captain Dupreve, of the schooner *Tarivo*. He used to call for copra and pearl shell, but the place was so far and the cargo so small that often he says he will go there no more. The business was slow, too, for he must stay outside the reef while the natives bring their copra in canoes. It is he who says there is no one there now. The last time he goes no canoes come. He goes ashore, and the village it is empty. Even the Chinese man, Ah Song, who kept the little store has gone.’

‘What sort of population had the island?’

‘Perhaps a hundred. Not more.’

‘This Captain Dupreve. What sort of reputation has he?’

‘The best. The natives did not leave on his account. Had he done something bad he would have kept his mouth shut about the people going.’

Biggles nodded. ‘That’s true. Does he believe this story of a mad Englishman? He must have heard the story.’

‘But of course. No, he does not believe. He looks, but he does not see him. That was the last time he was there. If a white man is there, he says, surely he will come to him.’

‘Captain Dupreve wouldn’t see much from outside the reef, and I can’t see him walking forty miles round it, chasing a rumour. It’d be rough going if I know anything about reefs. It’s a queer affair. I feel there must have been some foundation for this rumour. Not even natives start rumours for no reason at all.’

‘And I will tell you this, *mon ami*,’ stated Marcel. ‘A Polynesian does not leave the island where he is born unless he is much afraid of something.’

‘He believes in ghosts?’

‘Very much. He calls them *tupapaku*.’

‘It takes more than a ghost to frighten a Chinaman.’

‘But if the people go he must go, for there is no trade,’ Marcel pointed out.

‘He might give us the answer if we could find him.’

‘My dear Beegles; there are more than a thousand islands in the Paumotus alone. At Tahiti we might find the captain of a trading schooner who has seen him somewhere. That is the only chance. If there is a white man on Oto-Via, now that Captain Dupreve goes no more he will stay there till he dies. It is seven hundred miles from Tahiti. No ship passes near. Never. Ships do not like these waters, full of reefs and little islands.’

Biggles looked pensive. ‘It’s a deuce of a long way to go. Do you feel like going there?’

Marcel shrugged. ‘It would be an adventure. But it would be no use asking my government, with trouble in Africa, to spend much money looking for one lost Englishman in the Pacific.’

‘I’m not so sure that mine would jump at the idea, either. Yet I can’t help feeling that there is somebody there. What impresses me is this talk of an Englishman. It isn’t just any white man. No. He’s English. That can only mean that somebody, at some time, heard him speak.’ Biggles got up. ‘I’ll go and have a word with the Air Commodore about it. You wait here, Marcel. I shan’t be long.’

Biggles went to the Air Commodore’s office and gave him the gist of Marcel’s report.

The Air Commodore sat back with the tips of his fingers together. ‘I’m not happy about this,’ he admitted. ‘My inclination is to ignore the thing, but there’s a snag about that. Let us suppose there is an Englishman on Oto-Via. Whether he’s mad or sane, the French Government would take a poor view of it if later on it was learned that he had driven the natives, who are French subjects, out of their homes—off the island, in fact. They’d point out that they’d advised us he was there, and want to know, quite properly, why we’d done nothing about it.’

‘Why don’t *they* do something about it?’

‘If we start that sort of argument we shall get nowhere. Nothing will be done. In that case the thing will either fizzle out or it will explode in a row if these displaced Polynesians make a complaint. It might be better to play safe. Will you run out and get to the bottom of this if I can get authority for the trip?’

‘Of course. I’d get Marcel to come with me. Being a police official from Paris he could smooth out any difficulties that might arise with the authorities on the spot and, as I say, he knows the local gen. It will mean landing on the lagoon. There isn’t likely to be anywhere else.’

‘The Sunderland you used to go around those islands in the Indian Ocean would have the range.’

‘Just the job.’

‘All right. Give me an hour or so and I’ll let you know what has been decided at a higher level.’

‘Okay, sir.’ Biggles returned to his office, and Marcel.

They were still talking over a cup of tea two hours later when the inter-com. buzzed. It was the Air Commodore.

‘I’ve spoken to the minister concerned,’ he said. ‘We’re to proceed. I’ll get you papers to see you through intermediate airports and clearance at the other end. You make your own arrangements.’

‘Very good, sir.’ Biggles hung up. ‘We’re on our way,’ he told the others. ‘Are you coming with us, Marcel?’

Marcel grinned, ‘I never refuse a *pique-nique*.’

‘Good, I’ll let you know when we’re ready,’ concluded Biggles.

Bertie rubbed his hands. ‘Jolly good. I’m all for a spot of the rolling deep. Coral islands, and what have you, thrown in. That’s me; every time a coconut.’

Three weeks later Bertie was having his wish. He was out over the rolling deep. Very far out.

For three hours, flying by dead reckoning, the Sunderland had been kicking the air behind it as it bored into the blue towards Oto-Via. The Paumotus, the ‘Cloud of Islands’ as the name signifies, a labyrinth of isles and reefs of every shape and size, had faded astern, and to Ginger, looking at the empty ocean, Oto-Via began to seem uncomfortably remote. Only a few fleecy white clouds climbed up over the horizon to give assurance that the world was round. It was with relief that he saw, presently, a smudge appear on the skyline ahead of them.

‘That must be it,’ said Biggles.

‘We’re dead on course,’ stated Algy, who was acting navigator.

The smudge hardened and took shape, and presently it could be seen for what it was; a vast circle of coral rock set in the eternal ocean, a wonderful example of what may be the most extraordinary phenomenon on earth, a coral atoll, even though there may be some truth in the saying that ‘when you’ve seen one you’ve seen the lot’.

As the Sunderland lost height as it glided towards the objective the details could be more plainly seen through the crystal atmosphere. The reef, a strange picture of lonely beauty, was unbroken, although in a few places, in the ceaseless war of land and water, the surf broke over it. For the most part the multi-coloured rock was bare, but spots of brilliant green showed where self-sown coconuts had secured a hold. Rarely was the coral as much as a hundred yards wide: in many places it was much less. But there were two places, some distance apart, where it widened, one bulge being perhaps a quarter of a mile across, the other less. On the larger bulge the palms grew thickly, and it was obviously here, under them, that the abandoned village was situated.

Presently it could be seen that the smaller bulge was in fact an islet, since it was separated, or almost separated, from the reef by a narrow channel. Nowhere was the land more than a few feet above sea level. The entire circumference was marked on the seaward side by a welter of pure white foam, as the ocean maintained its everlasting battering of this presumptuous invader of its realm. Outside the surf the sea was a deep, uniform blue, but within the lagoon, where the water lay tranquil, a variety of colours splotched the bottom in a wonderful pattern to show where the water deepened and shoaled.

Said Biggles, as he went on down: ‘This whole place could be swept by a big hurricane.’

‘That goes for most coral islands, certainly the Paumotus,’ answered Marcel. ‘Let’s hope it doesn’t happen while we’re here. It must have happened in the past more than once.’

‘Is that why the people have gone?’ queried Ginger.

‘No. When the big wind comes, and the surf starts to break across the reef, the Polynesian climbs a palm, cuts off the crown, and ties himself to the top of the stump. I see the village over there, on the wide part.’

‘I’ll land close to it,’ returned Biggles. ‘I don’t see a movement. There can still be no one here or the people would have run on the beach to look at us. It’s doubtful if they ever saw a plane. Well, we should soon know what all this is about.’

He went on down, engines idling. He flattened out, and to Ginger’s ears came the measured beat of the surf, filling the air with a noise like the confused roar of a great city. The keel kissed the water, two smooth waves leaping outwards from the bow, and a snow-white scar behind it. For a little way the big machine surged on, and then came quietly to rest near the strip of coral sand behind which huddled a village of palm-thatched huts. So clear was the water that the flying boat appeared to be floating on air. Biggles took the machine in a little closer and switched off. Its way carried it on until the keel scraped gently on the sand. Ginger threw the anchor overboard.

‘Well, here we are,’ said Biggles. ‘If there’s nothing here we’ve wasted our time. If there is something, man or beast, we should be able to find it. Let’s get ashore and stretch our legs.’

One by one they stepped down into the lukewarm water and waded to the dry ground. No one appeared. Not a sound came from the primitive dwellings under the palms. Only a broken canoe, some coconut shells, and a few rags of old fishing net, lay about to show that the place had been occupied in the not very distant past. They strolled up to the houses. They whistled. They hailed. There was no answer. Not that one was expected.

‘Captain Dupreve told the truth, anyway,’ said Biggles, lighting a cigarette. ‘The people have gone. Bring some grub ashore, Ginger. We might as well have something to eat while we’re thinking about this.’

‘Do we search the reef?’ asked Marcel.

‘I don’t feel inclined to walk round it; that’d be a long job,’ replied Biggles. ‘It’s getting late so I suggest we do nothing to-day beyond having a look round this piece of ground. If anyone’s here surely this is where he should be. To-morrow morning we’ll taxi round the inside of the reef. If that produces nothing we’ll fly low over it. I can’t think of anything else we could do. We can at least say we’ve been here.’

Sitting on the beach overlooking the lagoon they made a meal from the canned provisions they had brought with them, for a beverage using the milk of coconuts, plenty of which lay on the ground, proof that no one had been there for some time. They then thoroughly explored that part of the atoll that had been most used by the islanders, but without finding anything to cast light on the mystery. The little store of Ah Song looked pathetic with its empty shelves. In fact, an atmosphere of melancholy seemed to hang over the whole place, as it must around homes that have been abandoned. The only sounds were the rustle of the palms in the breeze and the incessant rumble of the great Pacific combers on the windward side of the reef. The only signs of life were the gulls that drifted about like wind-blown paper and the occasional splash of a big fish in the lagoon.

At sundown the breeze departed, leaving the weary palms at rest. The day died as the sun sank into the horizon, and with the coming of night the lagoon became a mirror for a million stars hanging from the sombre vault of heaven like fairy lights. A little later the disc of the moon appeared to spread a path of gleaming silver across the restless ocean and paint with ink the shadows of the palms upon the beach.

'One would think,' said Biggles, soberly, as they sat on the still-warm sand, having divided the night into watches, 'that if there was one place on earth beyond the reach of trouble it would be here. But no, the people go, and since they have taken their few belongings with them it looks as if they aren't coming back. There must have been a reason for that, but what it was defeats my imagination.'

'The only danger here,' said Marcel, 'would be a hurricane. But that has always existed, and one has only to live with a peril long enough to cease to be afraid. One accepts it. It was not the fear of storm that drove the people away.'

'Let's sleep on it,' suggested Biggles, yawning. 'We may find something in the morning to give us a clue. I hope we do, because I hate mysteries, and here we certainly have one.'

They lay down on the sand, leaving Ginger, who was on first watch, to marvel at the beauty and the strangeness of the scene.

Dawn brought a cloudless day, but still the rollers growled and thundered on the reef, flinging showers of diamond-drops and wreaths of misty spray high into the air. A little breeze awoke and the palms began their secret whisperings overhead. The gulls once more took wing on their eternal quest for food. But the mystery was still unsolved. Ginger awoke to find Algy making coffee on the Primus, and to learn that no one had anything to report.

When, half an hour later, Biggles got up, he said: 'Let's get on. We'll finish this job to-day. If we find nothing there can be no point in staying here.'

They walked down to the machine. Ginger pulled in the anchor. Biggles started the engines, and the aircraft began to taxi slowly round the inside of the reef, keeping as close to it as was compatible with safety. Everyone watched the reef, although, as Biggles pointed out, if there was anyone there in need of rescue he would hear them and show himself. Eventually, rather more than an hour later, the flying-boat was back at its starting point, having discovered nothing.

'Well, there it is,' said Biggles. 'Now we'll fly round. That'll give us a bird's-eye view. Keep watch on the bottom of the lagoon for anything unusual.' The engines roared as he took off, drowning even the turmoil of the surf.

Five minutes later Ginger let out a yell. The machine was flying over the smaller of the two bulges, and looking down on it he saw something which, by the regularity of its shape, puzzled him. Then he realized with a shock that he was looking at the deck of a ship, and, moreover, a vessel of some size. It appeared to be wedged, on even keel, in a deep split in the coral, the deck level with it, which would account for it not having been seen before. The others spotted it too, of course, as soon as Ginger shouted 'a wreck', and in a moment Biggles had cut his engines and was coming round to land.

When he was down he taxied to a shelf on which they could step ashore on the rough coral, and having switched off, the aircraft was made fast.

'You wouldn't think it possible for a thing that size to hide itself, even though it's wedged deep in the coral and the weather has done its best to camouflage it,' muttered Biggles, as they picked their way carefully towards it.

'With the masts down and the funnel flat I'd say she was a wreck before she arrived here,' observed Algy.

'But look here, old boy, how on earth could it have got over the bally reef?' asked Bertie, wonderingly.

Marcel answered. 'A Pacific hurricane, with waves forty or fifty feet high, would toss it over like a matchbox. I have seen a ship, brought in by a tidal wave, a long way from the sea.'

'So this is where the mad Englishman, poor blighter, tucked himself away,' said Bertie, lightly.

'I don't know about that, but we can be pretty sure that this was the source of the rumours,' returned Biggles. 'If at one time there was a man on board, I'd wager he isn't here now, or he'd have been out to have a look at us.'

When they came up to the ship with one accord they came to a halt, staring at what was before them. It would have been hard to imagine a vessel in such a state. A typical small deep-sea tramp, she was still in the water, but resting on the bottom on even keel, having apparently crushed the brittle coral by her weight so that the deck was more or less level with the rock on each side.

The masts were down, and covered the smashed upper works, including the funnel, with a tangle of rigging from which hung pieces of wind-blown seaweed, palm fronds and other debris. The davits were outboard but the lifeboats had gone. Seams in the hull gaped wide open. Plates had crumpled like tissue paper. The paint, blistered and peeling, was all colours. Streams of red rust ran down her sides.

'No wonder Captain Dupreve didn't see it,' said Marcel.

'We only saw it because we were above it,' stated Ginger.

'What a sight to give a sailor the horrors,' murmured Biggles. 'She must have been close on a thousand tons. It's hard to believe that anyone could have survived in that mess. There's certainly no one here now.'

He hailed. When no answer came he walked along until, not without difficulty, he could make out the name of the stern. '*Belinda*, London,' he read aloud. 'Poor old *Belinda*. What a spot she found for a graveyard. Well, we might as well go aboard and get the gen—if there is any. Let's try what's left of the bridge for a start.'

They made their way to it through the litter on the deck—cordage, broken planks, a tangle of rusty standing gear and the like. Reaching it Biggles peered in. Then he clambered inside. First he looked at the floor as if expecting to find a body. 'No one here,' he said. Then he raised his eyes, and his forehead puckered in a puzzled frown. 'Hello! What's been going on here?' he exclaimed. 'This is a queer do.'

'What is it?' asked Algy.

‘The instruments, everything, even the fittings, have gone. We’re not the first people here. Those screws didn’t unscrew themselves. Is this the work of natives, Marcel? Is this why they bolted?’

‘No,’ answered Marcel emphatically. ‘In the first place these people are not thieves. Secondly, they couldn’t have unscrewed those screws. And lastly, those instruments would be no use to them. They wouldn’t know how to use them. No, old cabbage. This is the work of a white man.’

‘The mad Englishman, I suppose. It looks more and more as if there was something in that rumour. A British ship would have British officers, anyway. But why they should dismantle the ship is beyond me. We may find the answer in the skipper’s cabin. Let’s have a look.’

As they picked their way through the debris towards the companion Ginger happened to look down into the narrow strip of water alongside. The bottom appeared to be covered with silver objects, but he soon realized what they were. ‘Here, take a look at this,’ he called.

The others joined him.

‘Cans,’ said Biggles. ‘We’re getting on. Somebody must have lived on this ship for some time after she was here. He lived on canned food and threw the tins overboard. Where is he? Where did he go?’

‘Maybe he fell into the hold, old boy,’ offered Bertie, pointing to a hatch, the cover of which had been removed.

‘That must have been done, too, since the ship came here,’ asserted Biggles. ‘She wouldn’t try to ride out a hurricane with her hatches off.’

They went below, finding nothing of interest until they came to what was obviously the captain’s cabin. In fact, he was there. On the floor. Dead. And he had been dead for some time. He was a grey-haired man of about sixty. His uniform was grey with salt stains and the gold braid tarnished. But it was not this that changed the expression on every face. There was a dark stain on the grey hair and another on the floor under the dead man’s head. Near an outstretched hand lay a revolver. Biggles picked it up and ‘broke’ it. ‘This hasn’t been fired,’ he said quietly, showing the caps of the cartridges.

He dropped on his knees beside the corpse. When he looked up his expression was grim. ‘This man was murdered. It looks as if he died defending his ship, but was clouted from behind with something heavy before he could use his gun.’

‘With that,’ said Ginger, pointing to a short length of iron piping that lay near.

Biggles picked it up with a hand wrapped in a handkerchief. ‘We’ll keep this,’ he said. ‘There’s a chance there may still be fingerprints.’ He looked around. Some empty gin bottles lay about but there was nothing of value. ‘Would the natives do this, Marcel?’ he asked.

‘No. Absolutely no. But this might be why they ran away.’

‘Why should they run away?’

‘Perhaps they would be afraid of his ghost. Perhaps, if they knew what had happened here, they were afraid they might be accused of murder.’ Marcel shook his

head. ‘I don’t know. I only know that the people who lived here would not do this. The Polynesian is not a murderer.’

Biggles mopped his face with his handkerchief, for the day was hot, and the atmosphere in the cabin stuffy. ‘Was this the mad Englishman, or was the madman the one who killed him?’ he said, softly. ‘We’re still a long way from getting this sorted out. In fact, it’s more of a mystery than it was. We could ask ourselves a hundred questions without guessing the right answer. Was this the only man on board when the ship came over the reef? What happened to the crew? The boats have gone so it looks as if they abandoned the ship before she struck. They must have been lost. Had any survived they’d have reported to the owners. Or are we looking at the last chapter of a mutiny?’

‘What about the ship’s log?’ queried Ginger. ‘That should tell us something.’

A search was made, but no log could be found.

Biggles shook his head. ‘The murderer wouldn’t leave that behind. I can’t find the Bill of Lading, either. He must have taken that, too. I wonder what she was carrying. The matter of insurance comes into this, don’t forget. Let’s have a look in the hold. We noticed the hatches were off. That’s queer, come to think of it.’

They explored the holds. They were empty.

‘She wasn’t in ballast, so she must have been carrying cargo,’ said Biggles, when they were back on the deck. ‘Where’s it gone? It looks as if someone has lifted the lot. Which means that it must have been something that could be manhandled, and easily disposed of. Now what about your Polynesians, Marcel?’

Marcel was emphatic that they would not have touched it. Had they done so, he argued with some force, there would have been signs of it in the village, for they could hardly have transported hundreds of tons of stuff in canoes. He conceded that they might know what had become of it. That could be tied up with their reason for evacuating the island.

‘We’ve got to find ’em,’ decided Biggles. ‘We can’t drop the case now. Ah Song, the Chinaman, is the man we want. He’ll know what happened. At least he’ll know why the people fled. Let’s get back to Tahiti. I’ll cable the Air Commodore for particulars of the *Belinda*, and while we’re waiting for a reply Marcel can make inquiries on the waterfront. A ship has been here since the *Belinda* was wrecked, and that means more than one man. We’ll leave everything here just as it is. Let’s get airborne. We can still make it in daylight.’

They returned to the aircraft, took off, and by sunset were moored in the harbour of Papeete, the capital of Tahiti. Marcel went ashore to send the cable Biggles had written, and to start inquiries on the waterfront for Ah Song or the missing islanders.

For three days there was no news. Then it arrived together—the reply from London and a report from Marcel that he had met the skipper of a trading schooner who had seen Ah Song recently at Atuona, on one of the Marquesas Islands.

‘Where are they?’ asked Biggles.

‘About eight hundred miles from here. Two hundred miles north of Oto-Via.’

‘We’re going to be sick of the sight of water before we’ve finished this job,’ stated Biggles.

The cable from the Air Commodore read as follows:

‘*S.S. Belinda, 1,200 tons. Captain Macdonald, master. Lost with all hands in big hurricane of Jan 1952 outward bound London to Wellington, N.Z., via Panama. Mixed cargo, canned goods and cereals. Insurance paid.*’

‘At last we seem to be getting somewhere,’ said Biggles. ‘But we’ve still some questions to answer. The most important is, who killed Captain Macdonald? Obviously he stuck to his ship after the crew had taken to the boats and were subsequently lost. The next question is, who lifted the cargo? It would be worth money. It would be reasonable to assume it was the man who killed the captain. He must have had a vessel of some size to shift all that cargo, but, of course, he may have gone back several times. Foodstuffs would have a ready market up and down the islands. Let’s go to Atuona and hear what Ah Song has to say about it. Get busy on the course, Algy.’

‘The Marquesas are volcanic mountains, not atolls,’ volunteered Marcel. ‘There are eleven. Not all are inhabited. Not many people go there. Mostly traders. I’ll show you Atuona on the chart.’

The following afternoon found the Sunderland nosing its way to the beach at Atuona, watched by a curious little crowd of spectators. From one of them Marcel learned that Ah Song had taken charge of a store while its Chinese owner was away at Tahiti on business. They had no difficulty in finding him, and at once explained the purpose of their visit.

At first he was reluctant to speak, but when Marcel told him sternly that he might find himself accused of complicity in a murder, he recovered the use of his tongue. And this, in his quaint pidgin English, is the story he told.

The ship, the *Belinda*, came over the reef in a hurricane and was thrown into the position in which it remained. When the storm had abated and the canoes had gone over to it from the village, only one man was seen on board. He behaved as if out of his mind. He refused to leave his ship, and, brandishing a revolver, threatened to shoot anyone who tried to come on board. This state of affairs persisted for some time—Ah Song could not say how long, but it was many months. Anyway, the islanders soon learned to keep away from the ship and its belligerent captain. They decided that he was mad.

‘Did you believe that?’ asked Biggles.

‘No. I tlink he dlunk,’ answered the Chinese blandly. ‘Dlink, dlink, all time dlink. I tlink bimeby he die.’

Ah Song continued. One day another trading schooner, the *Mahina*, called to see if there was any copra. Captain Clark, the owner, who sailed with a native crew, was told of the wreck. He took his schooner close and landed. It remained there for some days.

One night, hearing a noise, an islander had paddled across in his canoe to see what was happening. He saw the crew of the *Mahina* carrying heavy loads from the *Belinda*.

'Were these boys Polynesians?' put in Marcel.

Ah Song said no. They were too dark. He thought they might be from Malaita, in the Solomon Islands.

'What happened next?' asked Biggles.

Ah Song said Captain Clark came back and told them there was no one on the ship. The mad Englishman had killed himself and so the lagoon would be haunted by his ghost. They would be wise to leave the place, which would now have nothing but bad luck. He would take the women and children and the men could follow in their canoes. He also said that if ever they spoke of this they would die.

'Did you believe that?' asked Biggles.

'P'laps.'

Biggles looked surprised.

Ah Song explained that he thought they would die because Captain Clark would kill them. He was a savage man.

'Did you ever go back to the ship?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I tlink if I do Captain Tlark kill me.'

'Did you suspect he had killed the man on the ship?'

'I not know. I not want to know.'

'So you went along with the others?'

'No good me stay alone.'

Ah Song concluded by saying that he had gone to the Paumotus with Captain Clark but had later moved to Atuona.

'Do you know if Captain Clark ever went back to Oto-Via?' asked Marcel.

The Chinaman said he did not know. But, he added, significantly, it was well known that there was now a glut of trade goods about the islands which had caused prices to drop. There was much canned salmon, corned beef, rice and beans. No one knew where these came from.

'But you have a pretty good idea,' challenged Biggles.

Ah Song did not answer.

With that they left him, Marcel saying that there was no ghost on Oto-Via and the islanders would be told they could go back to their homes if they wished.

'That man was telling the truth,' he went on, when they were outside.

Biggles was also of that opinion. 'Had he been lying, or had he any cause to lie, he wouldn't have opened his mouth,' he affirmed. 'The picture begins to take shape. The next thing is to find Captain Clark and the *Mahina*.'

‘That should be easy,’ declared Marcel. ‘If he isn’t at Tahiti he’ll turn up there sooner or later. Tahiti is the centre of everything in this part of the Pacific.’

‘Let’s get back,’ said Biggles. ‘I’d feel happier with my tanks topped up.’

But back at Tahiti the following afternoon a shock and a surprise awaited them. Marcel was only ashore for an hour and then returned with the news, given to him by a trader in the Hotel du Port, which flanks the waterfront, that Captain Nat Clark had sold his schooner, the *Mahina*, and had sailed for England ten days ago, in a freighter named *Esperence*, due to dock at Southampton in about forty days from the time of departure from Tahiti. This latter information Marcel had obtained from the booking agent.

‘That’s all right,’ said Biggles, after a moment’s reflection. ‘We can beat him to it. Who bought the schooner?’

‘Captain Hay.’

‘Is he here?’

‘No. He sailed for Tongariva five days ago.’

‘What about the crew?’

‘He took over Clark’s boys.’

‘Where’s Tongariva?’

‘It’s one of the nearest of the Paumotus—about three hundred miles.’

‘Good,’ returned Biggles. ‘We’ve time to have a word with Captain Hay and still get home before the *Esperence*. We’ll do that to-morrow.’

‘You know, old boy, somebody’s going to get a kick in the pants when your bills for petrol come in,’ remarked Bertie cheerfully, polishing his eyeglass.

‘That’s his worry,’ returned Biggles, evenly. ‘I’m not aviating round the Pacific for the fun of it, or for the sake of looking at a lot of water. I was sent to do a job and I’m doing it. This aircraft won’t fly without fuel and oil. That’s why I was given an official *carnet* for as much as I needed. Forget it. I’m going to get statements before witnesses from the crew of the *Mahina* about what happened at Oto-Via. I take it there’s a lagoon at Tongariva, Marcel?’

‘Yes. Plenty of room to get down.’

‘Okay,’ said Biggles. ‘We’ll get some sleep and be off at sparrow-chirp in the morning.’

When, in the forenoon of the following day, the Sunderland touched down on the lagoon at Tongariva the *Mahina* was already there, at anchor. Biggles taxied alongside and hailed. ‘May I come aboard, Captain?’

‘Aye, if ye’ll no scratch my paint,’ came the reply, in broad Scots.

Only Biggles and Marcel went aboard. When they said they were police officers Captain Hay took them to his cabin. ‘What’s the bother?’ he inquired.

‘You bought this schooner from Captain Nat Clark?’

‘Aye. That’s richt.’

‘You got a Bill of Sale?’

‘Surely.’

‘What do you know of Captain Clark?’

‘Only what everybody knows. The islands’ll be glad to see the back of him. Why do you want him?’

‘We’ve reason to believe he murdered a man, a white man, on one of the outer islands.’

Captain Hay looked at Biggles so hard, and for so long, his eyes narrowing, that it brought from Biggles the question: ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Would the name of this man by any chance be David Macdonald?’

‘His name was Macdonald.’

‘So that was it.’

‘What was what?’

The Scot shook his head, slowly, sadly, in self-reproach. ‘Knowing Clark’s reputation I should have had more sense than to listen to him. But I’d been looking for a new schooner for some time and no doubt he heard of it. He came to me with a proposition. Said he’d made his pile and was going home. He’d had enough of the islands.’

‘He didn’t tell you *how* he’d made his pile, I’ll bet,’ observed Biggles, sarcastically. ‘What’s your angle?’

‘I’ll show you.’

From his locker Captain Hay produced a small mahogany case. Neatly carved on the lid were the initials D.M. He opened the case to reveal a sextant. ‘I bought that off Clark when I bought his schooner. It was part of the bargain. I also bought a chronometer. Same initials. He had a compass and some other stuff I didn’t buy. He sold it to Jules Boulenger, the ship’s chandler on the wharf at Tahiti. I saw nothing suspicious in that. After all, a man who spends his life around the islands picks up all sorts of junk.’

‘But where did you get the name Macdonald?’ asked Biggles. ‘I see only initials on this case.’

‘He offered me a gold watch—a beauty, too. I didn’t buy it because I saw it was a presentation piece and I reckoned it might be unlucky. On the back of the watch it said: To Captain David Macdonald, from the Company, on completion of forty years’ service.’

‘Did you ask him how he got the watch?’

‘Aye. He said he’d had it for years. Bought it off a pawnbroker in Sydney, one time, he said.’

‘Didn’t it occur to you that all these things might have belonged to the same man?’

‘Afterwards. Not at the time. I was more concerned with the schooner.’

‘I’m sorry, Captain Hay,’ said Biggles, ‘but I shall have to take these things for evidence. I’ll give you a receipt, of course, and see that you’re refunded the money you paid for them.’

‘You’re not going to drag me into this, I hope?’

‘No. I don’t think that will be necessary. Now may we have a word with your head boy?’

‘What’s he got to do with it?’

‘You took the crew over from Captain Clark, didn’t you?’

‘Aye.’

‘Some hundreds of tons of freight were stolen from Captain Macdonald’s ship. Clark didn’t transfer that to his schooner single-handed. His boys must have done it.’

Again Captain Hay stared. ‘The lying dog. I bought forty tons of that stuff off him, at valuation, with the ship. It’s aboard now.’

‘What sort of stuff?’

‘Canned goods—salmon and meat. Biscuits, beans, rice. What are you going to do about that? Ye’ll no be taking that with you.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘No. You’d better sell it. Keep an account. It would have gone for salvage, anyway, so the insurance people should give you an ample discount. Now let’s hear what your boy has to say.’

The native was brought in and questioned. He described how he and the crew had carried the cargo of the *Belinda* to the *Mahina*. They had been back several times after the first load. It had been sold to traders on the islands. It was obvious that he saw nothing wrong in this. He was paid to obey orders and to him it was just another job. In fact, he thought it was rather a joke. He said he knew nothing of the captain of the *Belinda* being killed, and Biggles was inclined to believe that.

At the finish Biggles prepared a statement for Captain Hay’s signature. He signed it with Marcel and Algy as witnesses, Algy being brought aboard for that purpose.

‘Clark must have been a fool,’ growled the Scot. ‘He could have bought the *Belinda*, lock stock and barrel, as salvage, for next to nothing.’

‘I’d say his real trouble was greed,’ returned Biggles. ‘He wanted the lot, for nothing. Well, that seems to be all,’ he went on, putting the folded paper in his pocket. ‘You’ll get compensation for these instruments in due course. I’m much obliged for your help.’

They returned to the Sunderland.

‘What did you find?’ asked Ginger.

‘Enough, I fancy, to put a rope round the neck of a scoundrel,’ Biggles told him, in a hard voice.

‘What’s the drill now, old boy?’ queried Bertie.

‘We’re going back to Tahiti, then home.’

In a few minutes the flying boat was on its way.

With nine thousand miles of ocean between him and the scene of his crime it is unlikely that any criminal received a more devastating shock than did Captain

Nathaniel Clark when, after his ship had docked at Southampton, he stepped off the gangway to find regular police officers from Scotland Yard waiting to take him into custody.

Biggles had then been home for a week, and his report, with the appropriate exhibits, were in the hands of the Public Prosecutor. With such an array of evidence against him Clark's case was really hopeless from the outset. If further proof of guilt had been needed it was provided by Captain Macdonald's gold watch, which was found in his luggage, and fingerprints, traces of which still remained on the murder weapon which had been found on the floor of the cabin of the *Belinda*.

This, incidentally, was one of the few cases in which Biggles and Marcel had to go to Court to give evidence. The prisoner must have listened aghast as surely and inexorably Biggles put the rope round his neck as he told of the long trail across the Pacific in search of evidence and posed questions to which there could be only one answer, the truth. And it must have been with justifiable satisfaction that Biggles heard the judge say, at the conclusion of his summing up: 'The arm of the law has always had the reputation of being long, but to-day, as we see, aviation enables it to reach out half-way across the globe.'

The charge was murder, and the verdict, guilty.

THE CASE OF THE AMBITIOUS FISHMONGER

6

It is natural to associate crime with such obvious objects of value as money, jewels, gold and silver plate, rare furs and the like; and it is on these of course that the professional thief concentrates his attention. But there are exceptions, and one case that came Biggles' way provides an example. It illustrates also that while not all crooks carry guns there is a type as formidable as those who do.

Air Commodore Raymond's instructions were brief and almost casual. Handing a letter to Biggles he said: 'You'd better have a look at this. It's from an official of the Scottish Fisheries Board at present at Elgin. He says he believes some night flying is going on that we may know nothing about. The letter was addressed to the Air Ministry. They say they know nothing about it so they've passed it on to me.'

'Elgin,' murmured Biggles. 'With several aerodromes in that part of Scotland there's bound to be a fair amount of aviation.'

'Well, slip up and have a word with this Mr Sinclair who wrote the letter. There may be nothing to it, but as he's been to the trouble of writing the least we can do is investigate. The airfield at Lossiemouth is only a mile or two from Elgin so the job shouldn't take long.'

'Okay, sir. I'll run up right away.'

So Biggles, without enthusiasm, for he supposed this to be one of those cases for which a simple explanation would soon be forthcoming, took off in a Police Proctor with only Ginger for company, Bertie having the day off and Algy being busy on other work. From Lossiemouth a hired car took them to the office of Mr Sinclair, in High Street, Elgin.

Biggles, having introduced himself, came straight to the purpose of his visit. 'You wrote this letter, sir. I've come to ask you if you had anything particular in mind when you wrote it? You say you've heard some night flying. Why should you suppose there was anything irregular about it?'

'I have two reasons,' answered Mr Sinclair, a shrewd-eyed, sandy-haired Scot of about forty. 'In the first place, this isn't a service machine. We see and hear plenty of those. Nor is it a passenger liner. It's a light plane, and shows no navigational lights.'

‘You’ve actually seen the machine?’

‘No.’

‘You’ve heard it more than once?’

‘I’ve heard it twice, myself. But my water bailiffs have been hearing it steady since last April, always when the moon is full or nearly full. It usually flies the same course, which leads to nowhere—unless you’d call the North Sea an objective.’

‘Do you know anything about aviation, Mr Sinclair?’ asked Biggles.

‘No. But what I’ve told you would have struck me as peculiar even if it hadn’t occurred to me, as it did the day I wrote that letter, that it might have some connection with a little mystery of my own.’

‘Does that mean you have an idea of what might be the motive of this night flying?’

‘Aye.’

‘What do you think it’s doing?’

‘Taking into account certain circumstances of which I am aware, a suspicion has dawned on me that it might be transporting fish to London.’

Biggles looked incredulous. Then he smiled tolerantly. ‘Do you seriously believe that it would be a sane proposition to transport by air inexpensive consumer goods that could more easily, and much more cheaply, be carried by road or rail? And why do it at night, anyway?’

Sinclair answered with a touch of asperity. ‘Aviation is your business. Fish is mine. Your remark makes it clear that while you may be an expert in your own line, there are aspects of mine that you do not understand. It’s likely that there has never been any reason why you should.’

‘I’m sorry,’ returned Biggles, contritely. ‘Every man to his trade. I admit that my knowledge of fish is confined to a dish on the table. Please correct me.’

Said Sinclair, a trifle bitterly: ‘If you had a gang of thieves in London who were getting away regularly with hauls worth two or three thousand pounds there’d be a fine old how-do-you-do. The Press would want to know what Scotland Yard was doing and you’d have thousands of police out to find the answer. Here we have no such facilities. Here we must manage with a few village constables and such watchers as my Board can afford to hire.’

‘Perfectly true,’ conceded Biggles. ‘But we were talking of fish.’

‘Very well,’ said Sinclair. ‘Let us talk of fish. In north-east Scotland, except perhaps on the coast, the word fish is synonymous with salmon. Broadly speaking a salmon can weigh anything between six and forty pounds. Let us put the average at ten pounds. The current price of salmon in the London market is fifteen shillings a pound taking the whole fish. A ten-pound fish, therefore, is worth, in round figures, £7. Five hundred salmon would be worth £3,500. At certain seasons of the year there might be thousands of fish on one spawning bed. Would you still call salmon inexpensive consumer goods?’

Biggles looked startled. ‘You astonish me. I never realized that.’

‘Of course not. But here we do, because the salmon rivers of Scotland are an important part of our economy. We haven’t polluted our rivers as you have in England. At this time of the year you might say that our rivers have as many five pound notes in them as in any London bank. A bank can put its fivers in a safe. Ours are swimming free, and their protection is much more difficult. Notes can be identified by their numbers, but one salmon is like another. A stolen jewel can be spotted, but not a stolen fish.’

‘I see what you mean,’ said Biggles, looking interested.

‘My job is to see that the stock of fish is maintained,’ went on Sinclair. ‘Remember, it isn’t just one river. In this area alone we have the Spey, the Dee, the Don, the Deveron, the Findhorn, the Ness, and their tributaries. The fishing right of any one of those rivers would be worth a fortune. They are, of course, strictly preserved.’

‘But a man can’t steal a river, Mr Sinclair.’

‘He can steal what’s in it. And he can destroy it.’

‘Destroy it? How.’

‘I’ll tell you. Fish that reach the markets are caught officially in two ways. By syndicates that pay large sums for the right to net the estuaries and anglers who with rod and line fish the upper reaches. They, too, pay dearly for the privilege, the rents helping to pay the rates. There have, of course, always been poachers, local men whose methods were so rough and ready that they did little harm. But the rising price of salmon has introduced a new and much more deadly menace, professional poachers who work in highly organized gangs using expensive equipment. They’re not satisfied with snatching a few fish and making off before the river watcher arrives. Their method is to poison the water. That not only kills the adult fish. It kills everything in the river. By destroying the parr and the smolts, as the young salmon are called, the entire stock is wiped out and the river may remain dead for years.’

‘What a despicable thing to do,’ muttered Biggles. ‘But doesn’t the poison make the fish unfit for human consumption?’

‘No. The flesh is not affected. Only the gills. The fish dies in agony. In a human being it would be like having acid poured into the lungs.’

Biggles looked horrified. ‘For heaven’s sake! What sort of men are these?’

‘They’re men who know the ways of salmon; Scots, I’m sorry to say, rough elements from the cities. They don’t carry weapons. They don’t need them. They’re big, rough brutes. It needs muscle to haul in a net of fish from a fast-flowing river.’

‘It must take a lot of poison to affect a river,’ put in Ginger.

‘Naturally, it is most effective just below the point where it is introduced, but thousands of fish die lower down. Unfortunately the poison is available in almost any quantity. Many insecticides are death to fish. The cyanide products used to destroy rabbits in their burrows are just as fatal to fish.’

‘Can’t you stop this brutal slaughter?’

‘We do our best. We have watchers on the rivers and on the roads, and what few police we have co-operate. But imagine how many men would be needed to patrol one

river fifty or sixty miles long! One man is helpless against a gang. We've had men beaten up, kicked nearly to death and thrown into the river. We watch the roads because transport is needed to carry a load of fish to a railway-station for shipment to London, or perhaps Glasgow. We know they arrive. But what can we do? Such stolen property as jewellery or furs can be identified, but with thousands of salmon pouring into the market you can't point to any particular one and say it was poached. At least, you'd have a job to prove it. Well, there it is. I hope I've made you see that there is big money in this racket, enough to make the employment of an aircraft worth while.'

'You've certainly opened my eyes,' admitted Biggles. 'And it was hearing this aircraft that gave you the idea that it might be working with the poachers?'

'That and other factors. The fish haven't travelled by road. We've had every road and every railway-station watched, but fish have got through. There isn't much traffic in the early hours of the morning. We've stopped cars and trucks, but found no fish. We may even have stopped the culprit, but the law is such that in order to get a conviction we've got to catch the poachers with salmon in their possession.'

'You say you know of occasions when, with the roads watched, fish have got through,' said Biggles. 'How do you know that?'

'The price in London, at Billingsgate fish market, tells us. For what reason should the price slump suddenly perhaps three or four shillings a pound? That could only be the result of a big quantity of fish being thrown on the market. Where did they come from? Not from normal official sources. We can check on those. We also know that these fish have arrived within a few hours of a river being poisoned. How could that happen unless an aircraft was being used?'

'You make a point there,' agreed Biggles.

'When my watchers first reported hearing an aircraft flying low on nights when the poachers had been active, I paid no attention. I could no more associate flying with fish than could you when you first walked into my office. Then I began to think. Why did this plane show no lights? Where could it be going? North-east Scotland is lonely country and not many services operate over it. Then a suspicion dawned in my mind and I decided to write to the Air Ministry.'

Biggles fingered his chin reflectively. 'Now I realize that salmon are, as you say, five pound notes, I think you may be right. Frankly, I had no idea fish were so valuable. The problem now is how to confirm your suspicions. There's no point in my sitting about on some lonely moor night after night hoping to hear the plane. Even if I heard it I could do nothing about it. I couldn't follow it. I couldn't stop it. No. We shall have to tackle this from the London end. Let's leave it like this for the moment. The next time this plane is heard ring my office at Scotland Yard. It's up to no good, anyway, or it would be showing the regulation lights. Or if you even suspect the poachers are out, ring me. I'll then watch the fish market at Billingsgate to see what happens.'

'You can expect that to be around the night of the next full moon,' said Mr Sinclair. 'Thanks for coming up.'

'Thank you for letting us know about this,' returned Biggles. 'Something's going on. We'll find out what it is. By the way, I take it the poachers know about the

measures you take to keep tabs on them?'

'Of course, they have observers watching every move we make. This year we tightened our precautions considerably. We had every road covered. They soon knew about that. It may or may not have been coincidence that this night flying started about the same time.'

'You think it was their answer to your extra precautions?'

'Possibly.'

'One last question. What is the procedure if you catch them?'

'They'd be taken before the sheriff and charged. Until recently a poacher could only be fined, but under a new Scottish law poachers can be sent to prison. Furthermore, we can confiscate their gear, and that costs money. The new nylon nets they use to haul in the fish cost a hundred pounds or more apiece. We can seize the vehicle used for transport provided they are caught with salmon in their possession.'

'I'm glad you told me that,' said Biggles. 'It could be important, because it seems that poachers caught in Scotland can be dealt with more severely than in England. When you say vehicle would that include an aeroplane?'

'Presumably. Such a case has never arisen.'

'It might. You see, Mr Sinclair,' went on Biggles, 'if a man owns an aeroplane, as long as he observes regulations there is nothing to prevent him from using it. He can fly where he likes when he likes. There would be nothing to prevent him from flying salmon, or anything else, from Scotland to England. How could we, in London, prove that the fish had been poached? Assuming your suspicions are correct, the only charge that I could bring against the pilot of the aircraft would be the technical one of night flying without lights—and how could I prove that? Even if I could, the pilot could say it was due to a failure of the ignition system, and as such things do happen he would probably get away with it.'

'What you're really saying is, it would be better to catch the rogue in Scotland than in England.'

'Exactly—provided he had fish on board, and his association with poachers could be proved.'

'Aye. I see that,' said Sinclair.

'One final question,' concluded Biggles. 'How do salmon, properly caught, arrive in the wholesale market?'

'In wooden boxes, the number of fish in a box depending on the size of the fish.'

Biggles got up. 'Thank you, Mr Sinclair. I think we know enough to go on with. I shall look forward to hearing from you the next time this plane is in your district.'

With that they left the office.

Said Ginger, smiling, as they returned to the aerodrome: 'Life is full of surprises. Who'd have thought we'd get mixed up in the fish business.'

'To-morrow morning we'll have a look at Billingsgate to get our bearings and check the price of fish; then we shall really be in it,' replied Biggles. 'We live and

learn,' he added, tritely. 'I've learned quite a lot to-day.'

For nearly three weeks no word came from Scotland, and Ginger was beginning to think the case had fizzled out when, one night, just as he was going to bed, the long-expected call came through from Mr Sinclair. Actually, he phoned the Yard, but in accordance with Biggles' instructions the message was passed on to him. It was brief. The gist of it was, the plane had been, and was last heard heading south.

'There's no hurry,' Biggles told Ginger. 'If the machine has only just left Scotland it'll be some time before its load reaches London. We shall soon know if it was fish. Make a cup of tea.'

In due course, travelling in an apparently standard model police car, they reached the famous fish market near London Bridge. It was not their first visit. Already they had watched how business was conducted and noted those dealers who dealt largely in salmon.

It was just after 6 a.m. when the expected happened. They were standing in a position from which they could watch a number of stalls when a rough-looking man arrived at one of them, with a sack marked Bikstein Brothers on his back. As he tipped it, a pile of salmon slithered on to a slab. Some men who had been waiting, presumably fishmongers, moved in to examine them.

'Watch where he goes,' Biggles ordered, indicating the man who had carried the sack, now striding away.

Ginger, following, saw him go to a station wagon and collect another load. There was no one in the driving seat. He noted the number of the car and returned to Biggles. 'The fish are loose in a Ford station wagon,' he reported. 'I've got its number.'

'Good,' said Biggles. 'That's what we wanted to know. The price of salmon has already dropped a shilling a pound, which suggests that Bikstein's are anxious to clear their stock.'

The carrier shot another load. 'That's the lot,' he called. 'I'll be in with another load in the morning.'

'That fellow doesn't look like a pilot,' observed Ginger.

'He isn't,' returned Biggles. 'The pilot is probably asleep in his bed, as I should be if I'd just flown down from Morayshire.'

'Are you going to follow the car?'

'No. We'll check on it at the Yard. It'll be interesting to see who it belongs to. Let's get out of this stink of fish.'

They went straight to the Yard, where it was ascertained that the car was in the name of Hugo Bikstein, of Bardswell House, Essex.

'All in the family,' murmured Biggles, dryly. 'Let's see if one of them is a pilot.'

Ginger went to the register and ran a finger down the letter B. 'Here we are,' he exclaimed. 'Bikstein, Hugo, ex F/O R.A.F. Bardswell House, Essex. Holds a B

Licence. Bought an Auster B.4 just over twelve months ago. Member of several flying clubs, English and Scottish.'

'What reason did he give for wanting an aircraft like the B.4, classified as Light Transport?'

'He's an antique dealer. Makes frequent visits to the continent. Flies home the antiques he buys as a matter of economy.'

'Well—well,' murmured Biggles. 'That could be true. But there was nothing antique about those fish. This time yesterday they were swimming. Where does he keep the Auster?'

'At home. He has a private landing ground. Why all the clubs, I wonder?'

'To enable him to top up his tanks at any time without question. He couldn't do the double journey without refuelling. I'd say he flies to Scotland in daylight, refuels, collects the fish and then flies them straight home. It looks as if Sinclair was right. This is his bird.'

'How are we going to catch him?'

Biggles grimaced. 'Now you're asking me something. We've no charge against him at this end. There's no law against transporting fish by air. But the first thing to do is confirm that's what he's doing. One sniff in the machine should be enough.'

'We might do that to-morrow night.'

'The machine won't be there. You heard what the car driver said. He's bringing another load in to-morrow. We've got to catch this fellow in Scotland, with the fish on board, and to do that we've got to know where he lands.'

'That's impossible.'

'Difficult, but not impossible. I can think of two or three ways to do that. We'll try the easy one first. There should be a route map in that aircraft, and I have yet to see a map used regularly by a pilot that doesn't show marks indicating the objective.' Biggles looked at his watch. 'It won't be light for another hour and a half. We might just do it. Put a torch and the skeleton keys in your pocket and let's get cracking.'

It was grey dawn when the car reached Bardswell House and having overshot the entrance a little way pulled in on the grass verge. They jumped out. There was not a soul about. From the top of a gate Biggles surveyed the scene. 'I can see the hangar to the right of the house,' he announced. 'It's some distance from it.' He jumped down. 'Come on. If anyone stops us we're looking for mushrooms.'

Nobody did stop them, and within ten minutes they had reached the objective. The keys were not needed, for the door was open. Inside stood the plane. There was nobody there. 'Keep watch,' said Biggles, and went in.

Ginger watched the footpath leading towards the house with some anxiety, for he realized they were taking a chance. He could hear Biggles moving about inside the hangar. Nobody came near.

When, a few minutes later, Biggles joined him, he was smiling. 'Okay,' he said softly. 'I've got the gen. The engine's still warm. Tanks nearly empty. The hold stinks like a fishmonger's shop. Antiques, eh! Let's get away.'

‘What’s the drill now?’ asked Ginger, when they were back at the car.

‘I’m going to Elgin to see Sinclair. I shall send Algy down here to watch this place and phone me at Sinclair’s office when the plane takes off. Once we know it’s on its way we can make the necessary arrangements.’

‘Do you know the landing ground?’

‘I think so. I found the map I expected to find and a compass course is still pinned to the instrument panel. Amazing how careless people get when they think they’re so smart that there’s no danger.’ Biggles started the car and drove off.

It was just after lunch when they walked into the Scottish Fisheries office at Elgin to find Mr Sinclair at his desk talking to a man whom he introduced as Captain Mackenzie, factor of a big estate through which flowed the River Findhorn.

‘Well, did you catch them?’ asked Sinclair, a trifle cynically.

‘Not yet,’ answered Biggles. ‘But we will. That’s what I’ve come to see you about.’

‘The devils must have made a big haul last night,’ said Sinclair bitterly. ‘Captain Mackenzie tells me that when anglers arrived on their beats this morning there were dead and dying fish all over the place.’

‘So they raided the Findhorn?’

‘Yes.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I saw the fish arrive in the market. You were right about the plane. I’ve seen it. Apparently there were more fish than could be carried in one load so it’s coming back to-night for the rest. The gang must have got them hidden somewhere.’

‘We saw no car on the road,’ said Sinclair. ‘We were watching the Spey. We can’t be everywhere. There was a rumour the gang was going to work the Spey.’

‘I told you to ignore these rumours,’ said Mackenzie. ‘They’re started by the poachers to put you off the track.’ He turned to Biggles. ‘If you saw the plane why didn’t you seize it?’

‘Because there was nothing I could do about it in England. In any case, I’d rather you dealt with the whole bunch under Scottish law. It seems to be more effective than in England, where I’m afraid poaching is still regarded as a trivial offence. The ideal thing would be to catch the plane with the fish on board and confiscate it. Aircraft being the price they are that would hit the ringleader where it hurts most.’

‘Who’s the ringleader?’

‘The man who owns the plane, I imagine. He’s also the pilot. He has relations who are wholesalers at Billingsgate.’

‘Are you sure the plane is coming back to-night?’

‘I have reason to think it is. I shall know for certain before the day is out. I have a man watching it, and if it leaves the ground he’ll ring me here. Can you lay on enough men to grab the whole gang?’

‘I could if I knew where the plane was going to land to collect the fish.’

‘Do you know of a place called the Culbin Sands?’ asked Biggles.

‘Of course. Everyone here knows them. We’ve good reason to know them.’

Biggles looked mildly surprised. ‘Why?’

‘That sand, millions of tons of it, was thrown up by a storm, years ago, to cover some of the finest wheat-growing ground in the United Kingdom. The land has never been reclaimed.’

‘Then there’s plenty of it?’

‘Miles of it.’

‘Does it happen to be near the Findhorn?’

‘That’s where the Findhorn flows into the sea.’

‘Ah! Is this an open expanse of sand?’

‘More or less. Couch-grass has been planted to hold down the sand to prevent it from encroaching inland. Back from the foreshore the Forestry Commission have planted trees for the same purpose.’

‘Could a plane land there?’

‘I’m not a pilot, but I’d say without difficulty,’ answered Sinclair. ‘Is that where the plane lands?’

‘That’s where it landed last night, and where, I think, it will land again to-night, to pick up the remainder of the fish killed last night. How many men are there likely to be in the gang?’

‘Five or six at least. Probably more.’

‘Can you lay on enough men to deal with them? I mean, I can’t do anything although I hope to be there. You’ll have to handle the arrests, and the subsequent procedure, yourself.’

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ said Sinclair, grimly. ‘Some of my bailiffs who have been beaten up have been waiting for this moment for a long time.’

‘So have some of my gamekeepers and ghillies,’ put in Mackenzie.

‘All right,’ said Biggles, smiling. ‘I’ll leave it to you. Give the gang a chance to get the fish in the plane. Then I’ll have a look at it and so be available for evidence should you need it.’

The telephone rang. Sinclair picked up the receiver, listened, and handed it to Biggles. ‘For you,’ he said shortly.

‘Biggles here,’ announced Biggles. ‘Okay, Algy. Good work. See you sometime to-morrow.’ He hung up. ‘The plane has just left the ground,’ he told the others.

‘Why so early?’ asked Sinclair.

‘Because it can’t do the two-way journey without refuelling. I imagine the pilot will get within easy distance and then, having filled his tanks, sit down on some club airfield until it’s time to move in. Well, there we are, gentlemen. All you have to do now is get your men in position and bide your time until the plane lands and the gang rolls up with the fish. Don’t be in a hurry. Remember, you want that plane and I want

you to keep it, so give it a chance to get some fish on board before you make your grab. What time do you reckon to leave here?'

'About six. That should give us time to get everything lined up before the plane arrives. We haven't far to go.'

'Can you find room for me?'

'Of course.'

'Fine. Meantime we'll go and have something to eat. See you later.'

'If this comes off,' said Ginger, as they went out into the street, 'these fish poisoners are going to have an awful shock.'

'Don't fool yourself that it's going to be easy,' replied Biggles, seriously. 'Have you ever seen Highlanders fighting?'

'No.'

'You will,' promised Biggles. 'And when you have you won't forget it.'

Ginger squatted on a tuft of rough grass in a slight hollow and gazed across a cold expanse of sombre sand to a lonely sea beyond. Nearby sat Biggles, Mr Sinclair, and a police sergeant and a constable with the uniform Scottish check bands round their caps. They had all been sitting there for some time, since seven o'clock, in fact, when they had put the car that had brought them to the Sands out of sight in a firebreak in the Forestry plantation. Somewhere near at hand, waiting in the dunes, were other groups —gamekeepers, ghillies, water bailiffs and the like.

Ginger was beginning to get anxious. He hoped that there had been no mistake, for after laying such a trap they would look silly if it failed to work. A slight breeze had sprung up and it was getting chilly, too. The long stretch of sand, without a soul in sight, without a light, looked a picture of utter desolation. The only sounds were the murmur of an ebbing tide and the occasional cry of a seabird.

In spite of the discomfort he must have dozed, for he came to with a start when Biggles said quietly, 'I hear a car.' Then, 'Here they come.'

At first Ginger could see nothing, the reason being, as he presently discovered, because he was looking in the wrong direction. Then he made out a vehicle, which he presently recognized as a Land Rover, creeping cautiously along the inner fringe of the hard sand straight towards them. For a minute this had him worried, for if the car held to its course they would be seen whether they moved or not.

'Now you know why you didn't catch the car on the road,' Biggles told Mr Sinclair softly. 'That Rover doesn't need a road.'

Then above the slight noise made by the progress of the car came the purr of a light aero engine on half throttle. The car stopped at once. Men got out of it. There was a mutter of conversation. A torch, with the beam upturned, was waved. The aircraft engine died to an occasional splutter. For a few minutes this was the only sound. Then came the soft whine of a gliding plane. Its bulk loomed like a great bird over the pallid sand. Its four wheels touched gently and it came to a stop. Again the torch flashed and a

touch of the Auster's throttle took it alongside the car. The ignition was cut and the airscrew came to rest. The pilot jumped out. Dark figures moved between the car and the plane. The big rear loading door of the aircraft was opened.

For a minute Biggles did not move. Then he got up. 'Okay,' he said quietly. 'That's long enough. Let's see what they're doing. Don't blow your whistle until they spot us.'

They walked briskly towards the two vehicles, and, oddly enough, they were not seen until the last moment. There was a sudden cry of alarm, and an instant afterwards Sinclair's whistle split the silence. Men rose up from the dunes and closed in at a run.

'Make for the plane,' Biggles told Ginger, crisply. 'We mustn't let it get away.' He dashed forward to the near side of the cockpit.

Ginger was making for the other side with the object of getting in front of the machine, but hearing the engine start he jumped in through the rear loading door, which was open, to skid and fall flat on a mass of fish. As he slithered about on the slippery mess trying to get on his feet a fist struck him squarely in the face and knocked him backwards out of the machine on to the sand. Before he could pick himself up somebody tripped over him, and falling on him crushed most of the breath out of his body.

He was never clear about what happened during the next few minutes. He managed to get to his feet to find himself in a cursing, snarling, struggling mass of humanity, arms and legs whirling. Finding it impossible to distinguish friend from foe he decided to get out of it, but was knocked down twice more before he succeeded, and then only with the help of Biggles, who dragged him clear with a curt; 'What are you trying to do —get your teeth kicked in? Keep out of it. This isn't our party.'

'Where's the pilot?' panted Ginger, holding a handkerchief to his nose, which was bleeding.

'The constable's got him. The fool started up, so I threw him out of the cockpit and switched off before someone got his skull sliced open with a metal airscrew. What a scramble! You keep clear. Sinclair has plenty of men without us.'

A fist struck Ginger squarely in the face (Page 132)

This in the long run proved to be the case. The poachers fought hard, but the odds against them, with men as tough as themselves, were too great, and when they saw they were beaten they packed up.

‘Well, that’s that,’ said Sinclair, with great satisfaction, coming over.

‘And what now?’ asked Biggles.

‘We’ll take the whole bunch into Elgin. You can leave the rest of this to me.’

‘There are fish in the plane,’ put in Ginger. ‘I nearly broke my neck on ’em.’

‘We’ll take care of that, too,’ declared Sinclair. ‘If you’re ready we’ll get along in my car. The rest can follow.’

That, as far as the Air Police were concerned, was the end of an inquiry as unusual as it was unexpected. It was also the end of as ambitious a gang of poachers as ever invaded the Scottish Highlands. Not only did they all go to prison, but Bikstein, with relatives in the fish business, who had worked out a plan for making what must have seemed like easy money, also lost some valuable property, which included an aeroplane and a motor-car.

All Ginger got out of it, apart from a new respect for salmon, was a black eye which, when he returned to the office, provided an object for mirth for some days.

‘How’s the fishing to-day, old boy?’ Bertie would ask.

‘How about a nice salmon steak for lunch?’ Algy would inquire, with an air of innocence. ‘Or shall we make it sardines? They’re easier to handle.’

THE CASE OF THE FATAL RUBY

7

Biggles was working at his desk when Ginger placed on it the current issue of a daily newspaper folded to show a picture of a man in flying kit standing beside an aeroplane.

'Does that chap remind you of anyone?' inquired Ginger, pointing.

Biggles studied the photograph. 'Yes,' he answered. 'But for the moment I can't place him.'

Picking up a pencil Ginger sketched a moustache. 'Does that help?'

'I've got him,' returned Biggles. 'Hubert Gestner, alias Lancelot Seymour, the fellow we picked up flying stolen treasury notes to France. Although he already had a commercial ticket in Canada, he got the bright idea of joining a club over here as a pupil. Then, while apparently doing solo night flying practice, he was slipping across the Channel. He had a bad record, I remember.'

'That's who I thought it was,' went on Ginger. 'He had me foxed at first because he's shaved off his moustache. He's also changed his name. As you'll see from the caption he now calls himself Captain Carson.'

'I thought he was doing time.'

'He's out. I've just looked him up. He came out six months ago after doing three years—less good conduct marks. He's back in circulation; moreover, in the flying business, running an independent air-charter company called Zonal Aircom.'

Biggles' eyebrows went up. 'The deuce he is!'

'I wonder how he got the money to start it,' said Ginger, suspiciously.

'I'd wager it wasn't his own,' returned Biggles. 'He's the plausible, good-looking type, and that sort can usually find someone mug enough to provide the cash. He doesn't stand to lose anything you may be sure—even if he had anything to lose. Wonderful how these crooks get away with it. What sort of a fleet has he?'

'He hasn't a fleet. Just the one machine you see in the picture. It looks like one of the pre-war Rapides.'

'He'd get that pretty cheaply, anyway,' commented Biggles. 'Well, he's a fully qualified pilot so maybe he's going straight now. What's brought him into the news?'

A slow smile, full of meaning, spread over Ginger's face. 'He happens to be the pilot who has undertaken to fly that notorious ruby, the Blood of Asia, to India.'

Biggles sat back, eyes saucering. 'For Pete's sake,' he breathed. 'How on earth did that come about?'

'You can read all about it in the paper. According to the man who wrote this article the big companies preferred not to handle the stone.'

Biggles looked astonished. 'Don't tell me they're afraid of it!'

'Maybe not, but in view of its record they're afraid some of the passengers might jib at flying in the same plane with it, and you couldn't blame them for that. The last time, which was the one and only time, that stone travelled by air, the machine's undercarriage folded up on landing. Had that happened at the take-off, with a full load of petrol on board, it might have been a nasty business. Anyway, it seems that the big companies are not prepared to risk their reputations by taking chances with a jewel that has left a trail of death and disaster half-way across the world. If anything went wrong they'd be blamed. So the job was put out to private charter and Zonal Aircom have got it.'

Biggles stared at the photo. 'There's a saying, once a crook always a crook. Gestner, or Carson as he now calls himself, couldn't go straight if he tried. I know the type. If he starts with that stone, no one will ever see it, or him, again.'

'That's what I was thinking. Hadn't you better warn the people responsible for the ruby?'

'We can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Gestner has served his time. If, while he's on the level, we say anything derogatory about him, or his past, we lay ourselves open to an action for slander. The fact that what we say is true makes no difference. An ex-criminal ranks as any other citizen while he goes straight. That's the law.'

Bertie, who had been listening, stepped into the conversation. 'So the police have to wait until Gestner pinches the stone before they can do anything. Is that the idea, old boy?'

'That's what it boils down to.'

Algy spoke. 'If you tipped off the insurance company they'd cancel the trip.'

'And Gestner could come on us for damages.'

'How much is this pink pebble worth?' asked Bertie.

Ginger answered, 'According to the paper it's insured for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, which I take to mean that that is what the new owner has paid for it.'

'He must be nuts,' sneered Algy.

'Not necessarily,' argued Ginger. 'It has been bought by an Indian rajah, who probably has more money than he knows what to do with, in order that it can go back to where it started from.'

'Fair enough,' agreed Bertie. 'Where did it start from?'

‘It was, originally, the eye of an Indian god. The whole story is here in the paper and I must say it has had a grim career—not to say queer.’

Biggles smiled, cynically. ‘Superstition dies hard. People love these creepy-creepy stories.’

‘Then you don’t believe this tale that the stone carries a curse?’ queried Ginger.

‘Not a word of it. What has happened was either coincidence or perhaps a natural sequence of events. It stands to reason that in a world crawling with thieves a jewel worth a king’s ransom should lay a trail of trouble.’

‘What about the way it arrived in this country from America?’ challenged Ginger. ‘What made the undercart of the plane collapse when it landed?’

‘A flaw in one of the components, or maybe metal fatigue. It certainly wasn’t the stone. Don’t ask me to believe that a red rock crystal wrapped up inside the plane could have any effect on a length of steel tube outside it.’

‘Plenty of people said “I told you so” when it happened.’

‘Of course. That’s what they like to think. The undercarriage was due to crack. As the machine turned at the end of its run, and the weight fell on the weak member, it cracked. That’s all there was to it.’

‘That stone has caused a score of deaths,’ asserted Ginger, not to be put off.

‘With the possible exception of the first they would have occurred anyway. The ruby had nothing to do with them. I know the story. Two white men pinched the eye of the god. One then murdered the other to get sole possession of it. Louis the Sixteenth bought it and gave it to Marie Antoinette. Both went to the guillotine. The stone then went to Austria and was put in the Hapsburg regalia. The Crown Prince shot himself and the Empire collapsed. It was next heard of in the Russian Crown jewels, and you know what happened to the Czar and his family. After the revolution the ruby was bought by an American millionaire. His only son was killed in a motor accident. Then he lost all his money, so he jumped out of a top storey hotel window and killed himself. His widow died in a lunatic asylum. The ruby has now been bought by a wealthy Indian who intends to put it back in the eye socket of the god from which it was stolen, and that’s about the best thing that could happen to it. I believe the stone is at the moment in the possession of the rajah’s agent in London.’

‘And I’d say he’ll be jolly glad to be rid of it,’ declared Ginger.

‘Is that why he’s having the stone flown to India, instead of sending it by sea?’ asked Biggles.

‘No. The rajah wants the stone in a hurry in order to replace it before a religious ceremony in about a week’s time.’

Biggles lit a cigarette. ‘If Gestner gets his hands on it the rajah will be lucky to see it at all.’

‘And are you going to let that crook get away with this?’ demanded Ginger.

‘Why should I risk a lot of unpleasant publicity by interfering? We’ve no *proof* that Gestner intends to steal the stone. There would be plenty of people ready to start a scream that we were doing the poor man an injustice. No. This is one of the cases

where I mind my own business. However, I'll tell the Air Commodore what's cooking and leave it to him. Maybe he can think of a way to tip off the insurance people without becoming directly involved.' Biggles got up. 'I'll be back,' he said, and left the office.

He was away about twenty minutes.

'Well, what does the chief think about it?' inquired Algy, when he returned.

'It's got him worried,' replied Biggles. 'Like me, he's against doing anything officially. He's rung up the insurance company and asked them to send round a senior representative, from which I gather he intends to tip him off . . . in confidence. He's putting nothing in writing. I hope that lets us out.'

This hope did not materialize. An hour later Biggles was called on the inter-com. telephone to the Air Commodore's office, and there he was introduced to two senior members of the company that stood to lose a quarter of a million should the ruby disappear.

'These gentlemen are very disturbed by what I have just told them,' said the Air Commodore.

'Why should that be?' inquired Biggles. 'They've been warned in time. The stone hasn't yet left the country. Can't they cancel the transaction?'

'Not without a scandal, I'm afraid,' said one of the insurance men. 'This stone is news. Already it has had too much publicity of an undesirable kind. The insurance policy is signed and the premium paid. If we try to back out of it now we shall be accused of being afraid to take the risk, possibly on account of the stone's reputation. That wouldn't do *our* reputation any good.'

'But you have a very good reason for backing out,' asserted Biggles.

'True, but to make that public might well be ruled as slander in a court of law. Gestner, being the sort of man he is, would know all about that, and go for us. The result might be heavy damages against us.'

'That would be cheaper than losing the stone.'

'It would lead to a lot of distasteful publicity, the sort that a firm of our standing tries to avoid.'

Biggles shrugged. 'That, gentlemen, is up to you. We have at least told you to what sort of man you have arranged to entrust the ruby. What more can we do? We've no case against Gestner as matters stand.'

'You can tell us this. Suppose it is his intention to abscond with the jewel, how do you, as a pilot, think he might do it?'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'There are, of course, many things he might do. He can't fly the Atlantic, and I doubt if he'd go to Asia, where he'd soon be a marked man if he tried to sell the stone. In fact, I doubt if he'd leave Europe, because, with the police on the watch for him at every port of entry, he'd have a job to get back without being spotted. His biggest problem might be to get rid of the plane. He'd probably do that to give the impression that he'd crashed in some inaccessible spot or perhaps gone

down in the sea—a fate to which the reputation of the stone would certainly lend colour.'

'But if he did that he'd lose a valuable plane.'

Biggles shook his head. 'It's an old machine. It can't be worth much. It may not even be his own property. The ruby would buy him a fleet of new planes should he decide to go on flying. Do you know the route he intends to take?'

'Marseilles, Rome, Athens, Alexandria . . . the usual route to the Far East.'

Biggles stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'Somebody might keep an eye on him in the early stages. If he gets as far as Alex, it'd look as though he intended going through with the job. If his purpose is to disappear I'd say he'll show signs of it before he gets to Marseilles, where his arrival would be reported.'

'Could you follow him?'

'Possibly.'

'Why possibly? You're a police officer, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'If an officer on the ground saw a man, whom he knew to be a criminal, behaving in a manner which gave him reason to think that a felony was contemplated, he'd do something about it.'

Biggles smiled wryly. 'It's one thing to follow a man on the ground but a different matter to follow a plane in the air. Again, you can arrest a man on the ground the moment he makes the first move to commit a crime. You can't arrest a man in the air.'

'I wasn't talking of arresting Gestner,' said the insurance official. 'If you followed him you would know where he went should he leave the route. Steps could then be taken to apprehend him, no matter where he went in Western Europe—and he's hardly likely to cross the Iron Curtain.'

The Air Commodore put in his opinion. 'I think there's something in that, Bigglesworth. You say you think he'll turn off before he reaches Marseilles. Very well. Follow him as far as Marseilles. If, then, he turns east, as if making for Rome, you could turn back. I agree it's out of the question for you to follow him as far as Bombay. Should you need help in France you could rely on the co-operation of Marcel Brissac, of the Sûreté.'

Biggles looked resigned. 'Very well, sir. If you'd like me to do that I'll do it. There should be no great difficulty provided the weather remains fair. But I'd like your instructions about what I'm to do should Gestner leave his course and make a landing.'

'I shall have to leave that to your discretion, bearing in mind that pilots do get off course by accident and that there are such things as genuine forced landings.'

'As you say, sir. Is that all?'

'All for the moment. You stand by in the Operations Room and I'll make arrangements to let you know from where and at what time Gestner leaves the ground.'

'Very good, sir,'

Biggles returned to his own office. ‘We’ve bought it,’ he announced ruefully. ‘We’re to shadow Gestner and check his movements. We’d better get organized.’

Two days later, shortly after dawn, the Air Police Proctor aircraft was in the air, heading south across the Channel on the same course as Gestner’s Rapide, which appeared as a speck in the clear sky about a mile in front.

‘He’s still climbing,’ observed Ginger, his eyes switching for a moment from the Rapide to the altimeter on the Proctor’s instrument panel, the needle of which was quivering on the twelve thousand mark. ‘What’s his idea, flying so high in weather like this?’

‘I’d say his reason for that is to avoid being spotted from the ground,’ answered Biggles. ‘If I’m right, that in itself looks suspicious.’

‘So is the fact that according to the Air Commodore he’s flying solo,’ remarked Ginger. ‘One would have thought he’d have taken a number two pilot if only to keep him company.’

Biggles and Ginger were alone in the Proctor, Biggles having decided that the two of them should be able to handle any situation that might arise.

Two hours passed with no change in the respective positions of the two machines, although they had put on another two thousand feet of altitude.

‘He’s still on course for Marseilles, anyway,’ remarked Ginger, as they headed down the Rhône Valley.

‘We should soon know what he intends to do,’ replied Biggles. ‘If his plan is to lose that machine he’ll soon have the right sort of country on both sides of him—the Plaine de la Crau to the east and the Cevennes or the Pyrenees to the west.’

After another hour had passed, with the Rapide holding its height and course for Marseilles, it became evident that Gestner had no intention of landing at any of these sparsely populated areas of France, and Ginger was beginning to feel that they were wasting their time when the Rapide began to edge towards the west.

‘Ah! There he goes,’ said Biggles.

‘I thought it was going to be Marseilles after all,’ opined Ginger.

‘No. Had he intended landing there he would have started to lose height before this. Why burn petrol unnecessarily?’

‘Where the dickens can he be making for?’

‘My guess is the Camargue. Come to think of it that would be an ideal spot for anyone to lose himself. It’s flat, only just above sea level; it stretches for miles and is practically uninhabited. Or a good deal of it is. It’s a queer place altogether—shallow lagoons, marshes, salt wastes, rushes, dry cracked sand, snakes and what have you. But you’ve seen the place, so you’ll know all about it.’

‘Yes, I believe they call it Africa in France. It’s the only place in Europe where the pink flamingoes breed.’

‘Quite right. And that reminds me. Most of it is a bird sanctuary and planes have been forbidden to fly over it since a German pilot zoomed the flamingoes and killed scores of them. They graze a lot of sheep there in the spring, but the chief industry, I believe, is breeding bulls for the Spanish bull-fighting arenas. That’s Arles below us, on the northern fringe of the Camargue.’

‘If the Camargue is his objective, isn’t it about time he was going down? I can see the sea ahead.’

Biggles frowned. ‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘He’s heading straight out to sea.’

‘He can’t get to North Africa without refuelling, that’s certain—not even if he’s fitted an extra tank,’ declared Biggles. ‘He can’t have much petrol left even now. We’re getting low, too, if it comes to that.’

‘He may have a confederate waiting for him with a boat.’

‘If he has, we’ve had it. I’m not going much farther.’

The Rapide, now a speck in the sky, was still heading out to sea. ‘We’ve lost him,’ stated Ginger.

Biggles was watching the fading speck. ‘Not yet. He’s coming back, losing height. I think I know what he’s doing. He’s still trying not to be seen from the ground as a precaution against the time when inquiries about the machine start buzzing. I’d better get out of the way. We don’t want him to see us.’

Applying war-time tactics Biggles turned the Proctor into the eye of the sun, and from that position they watched the Rapide, with its engines idling, pass below them, going down at a steep angle. Still watching, they took up position in its blind spot and followed it down.

‘What are you going to do when he lands?’ asked Ginger, for it was now certain that this was Gestner’s intention.

‘We’ll watch to see what he does,’ decided Biggles. ‘If he abandons the machine we’ll land near him and ask him what he’s doing. We shall have to be careful. He hasn’t stolen the ruby yet. He may say he’s lost his way, or run out of petrol, or was having engine trouble. We should know better, but it might be difficult to prove he was lying.’

The Rapide was still going down, ‘S’ turning to lose height.

‘He knows what he’s doing,’ observed Biggles. ‘He’s making for the Bois de Riège, which is about the wildest part of the territory.’

The Proctor was now low enough for Ginger to see in detail the peculiar features of the terrain below. It consisted of miles of more or less flat plain, never more than a few feet above sea level, that followed the coast for as far as the eye could reach in the dry, glittering sunshine. Lagoons shimmered between areas of parched, fissured sand, scrub or broad belts of giant reeds. The only signs of life were birds, one or two small herds of black cattle, and, in the far distance, a horseman, raising a small cloud of dust as he cantered along a winding track. Far away to the north rose the towering peaks of the Pyrenees.

Looking back at the Rapide Ginger saw it make a somewhat bumpy landing near a lake completely encircled by reeds, although he did not realize how tall these were until Gestner, at the end of his run, suddenly turned towards them and, apparently opening his throttle, charged tail-up into them, to completely disappear from view.

'There goes the machine,' said Biggles, tersely. 'That was no accident. I'm going down to challenge him. He'll have switched off by now so he'll see us, anyway.'

He made a quick circuit to go in on the same track as the Rapide, and while he was doing this Gestner appeared from the fringe of the rushes to stand staring up at them. But not for long. No doubt the Proctor's British registration letters told him the truth, that he had been followed, for he set off at a run, heading inland towards some rising ground well covered with scrub. He had some distance to go, however. He had also to make a detour round some cattle that had been grazing, but now stood staring at him. One, its head held high, stamped a forefoot.

'Watch out! That's a bull,' cried Ginger. 'My gosh! It's going for him.'

Biggles, who had been concentrating on his landing, had not noticed this, but at Ginger's sudden warning he snatched a glance. In an instant he had jerked the throttle open, and turning on a wing tip headed for the animals with the intention, as he afterwards told Ginger, of trying to scare them into a stampede.

This, in fact, he did, but he was too late to save Gestner, who may have made a fatal mistake in running away; for he could not have hoped to outstrip the charging bull to the lake, the only refuge within half a mile. Helpless, they saw the bull overtake him and toss him high into the air. It tossed him again, and then, kneeling, gored him. Biggles, tight-lipped, zoomed low over the animal, whereupon it galloped away after the running cows. Gestner lay still.

Biggles took a chance, for the ground was by no means as level as he would have wished, and landed. With his wheels on the ground he swung round and taxied quickly to where the luckless pilot was lying in a crumpled heap.

'Be careful,' urged Ginger, noting that the bull had stopped, turned, and was watching them. 'He may come back.'

'Stand by to pick me up and take off if he does. Watch him.' So saying, leaving the engine running, Biggles jumped down and ran to the motionless figure on the sand. He knelt beside him for a minute and then, with an eye on the bull, carrying a small packet in his hand, came back.

'He's dead,' he told Ginger. 'He was terribly injured. He hadn't a hope. He couldn't have lived after that first toss whatever we'd done.' He drew a deep breath. 'Well, that's that. All we can do is notify the local police and get home.'

Helpless, they saw the bull overtake him (Page 146)

‘What’s that you’ve got in your hand—the ruby?’

‘I imagine so. I found it in his pocket. It’s addressed to the rajah.’

‘Now what about it?’ inquired Ginger grimly.

‘What about what?’

‘The curse. This is another death for the record. That infernal stone cost Gestner his life.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘It may look that way to you, but I still say it was a natural consequence of Gestner’s own behaviour. Had he been straight he would by now have

been well on his way to Rome.'

'But he didn't go to Rome. He came here.'

'That was not the fault of the ruby. But let's not argue about it.'

'Are you going to fly home with that thing in your pocket?'

'I am.'

'Then you can fly alone,' announced Ginger curtly. 'I'm going to walk.'

'Please yourself. I'm nothing for walking. I'll go on to Marseilles and top up.'

'You're asking for trouble.'

'I'm not prepared to admit that I'm scared of a piece of coloured carbon, which is all the ruby is, if that's what you mean,' asserted Biggles, shortly.

'Here's a man coming,' stated Ginger, abruptly.

A horseman galloped up. In his hand he carried a stave tipped with a trident, and from his dress Ginger recognized him for one of the men called *gardiens* who have charge of the cattle.

He looked at the body on the ground. He looked at Biggles with cold disfavour. Speaking in French he said: 'Don't you know it is forbidden to fly over here?'

'Yes, I did know,' answered Biggles, and went on to explain who they were and why they were there, but without mentioning the ruby. 'I shall report the matter fully in Paris when I get there,' he concluded. 'In the meantime would *monsieur* please inform the nearest police officer so that arrangements can be made for the disposal of the body?'

The *gardien* said, somewhat curtly, that he would telephone the police bureau at Arles, and with that he went off at a gallop.

'We'll get some petrol and push on home,' Biggles told Ginger. 'I'll phone Marcel from the airport and ask him to meet me in Paris. If you'd rather take the train you'd better start walking. You've a long way to go, and there may be more bulls about.'

'I'll come with you, but I shall keep my fingers crossed,' muttered Ginger, 'Whatever you say, that stone is a killer. I've just seen it work. Let's get off before I lose my nerve. For goodness' sake mind how you go.'

Biggles smiled. 'Okay,' he promised.

The Proctor returned to London without trouble of any sort.

'Phew!' murmured Ginger, as he jumped down. 'Am I glad to be out of that? I nearly swooned at every bump. I hardly dared to breathe.'

'Rot,' snapped Biggles. 'Be yourself. I told you the thing was harmless.'

Two days later Biggles returned from the Air Commodore's office to his own with a curious smile on his face. 'Fasten your safety belt,' he told Ginger. 'I'm going to give you the shock of your life.'

'Go ahead,' invited Ginger. 'I'm holding on.'

‘Apparently the insurance people passed on the information we gave them about Gestner to the rajah’s agent in London. He went into a flap. At all events, without saying a word to anyone, not even to Gestner, he put the ruby in his pocket and caught the next B.O.A.C. plane to India.’

Ginger stared. ‘Do—d’you mean that Gestner *wasn’t carrying the ruby*?’

Biggles’ smile broadened. ‘That’s what I said.’

‘But—but the packet,’ stammered Ginger.

‘That was a dummy.’

‘What was in it?’

‘A piece of coal.’

At the expression on Ginger’s face Biggles sat down at his desk and laughed and laughed and laughed.

FISHY BUSINESS

8

In the office of the Special Air Police at Scotland Yard the inter-com. phone buzzed. Biggles picked up the receiver, listened for a moment, said 'Okay' and hung up. 'That was Inspector Gaskin,' he told his police pilots. 'He's sending a man along to us. A Pole, named Lutenski.'

'What's his trouble?' asked Ginger.

'Gaskin didn't say. He seemed amused about something.'

Presently the door was opened by a uniformed messenger to admit a short, stout, dark-eyed, black-coated little man who gripped a bowler hat and umbrella with fierce indignation.

'I have been robbed,' declared the visitor, his eyes making a swift reconnaissance of the faces before him.

'A lot of people have had that experience,' answered Biggles evenly. 'Take a seat and tell us about it. Please be concise.'

'I am a British subject and I demand justice,' asserted Lutenski.

'You're in the right country to get it,' returned Biggles briefly. 'Where were you born?'

'In Poland. But now I am naturalized.'

'Quite so. Continue.'

'I am in the fur trade, and so much respected that I am allowed to go with the British Trade Mission to Russia to buy the best skins.'

'For the Government?'

'For myself. I am in the business.'

'That's what I thought,' murmured Biggles dryly. 'Proceed.'

'Six months ago, in Leningrad, I buy a parcel of eight matching mink skins that were like no others I ever saw. The colour was cream. Beautiful. I pay much money for them. I may not bring them home with me, you understand. They must come through official channels, which takes time. Three months ago my parcel arrives. The Customs stamp says eight mink. Inside are eight mink. But they are not the skins I buy. They are common stuff, of poor quality. Someone has changed my parcel and I am ruined.'

‘Your label was put on the wrong parcel by accident?’

‘Not by accident. I have been robbed.’

‘You’ve already told us that, Mr Lutenski,’ said Biggles. ‘I’m sorry, but you must take this up with the Customs office and the forwarding agents.’

‘I have done that. Nothing is known of my skins. Nothing. Yet here in London the other day I see them being worn by Lady Branding.’

‘Are you sure they were yours?’

‘There could be no mistake. Furs have been the business of my family for generations. I know skins like you know faces.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I am so upset I go to this lady and say, please, where do you get these exquisite skins. She is flattered and makes no secret. She tells me she buys them from Marius Kindus, who has the so expensive shop in Mayfair. I know Marius, so I go to him and say, how do you get these skins which I buy in Leningrad? He denies they are my skins.’

‘Was he with you on the Trade Mission to Russia?’

‘No. He buys the skins, he says, from a private trader who makes a special show at a flat in Park Lane. I say this man is a crook. He has stolen my parcel. I rush to see him. He is not there. The flat is empty. The thief has gone.’

‘Then what did you do?’

‘I go to the Chief Customs officer and ask the name of the man who imports my skins. He must know because high duty would be paid on skins so exceptional. What does he tell me? He says his records show no such skins have been imported. I make a mistake. Me—a mistake!’ Lutenski snorted.

‘Customs would know if the skins had passed through their hands.’

‘Of course. They say they did not. How, then, did the skins get into this country?’

‘You mean—they were smuggled?’

‘I mean more. If skins can come into this country without paying duty, honest traders will be ruined. Not only do I lose my beautiful skins but I see now I am faced with bankruptcy.’

‘It boils down to this,’ said Biggles. ‘You think your skins were stolen on the Continent, smuggled into this country and disposed off at a private show?’

‘Yes.’

‘To this show would be invited dealers in expensive furs?’

‘Yes. Marius says several were invited.’

‘Why weren’t you invited?’

‘Because the thief knew that as my label was on the parcel I would recognize the skins.’

‘But if this man Marius Kindus didn’t go on the Trade Mission to Russia he would never have seen the skins until the day he bought them.’

‘Not unless he has a private door through the Iron Curtain.’

‘Are you suggesting that he smuggled them?’

Lutenski hesitated. ‘It must have been the man who gave the show in Park Lane. Flat 17, Greenwood Mansions.’

Biggles stood up. ‘Very well, Mr Lutenski. I’ll go into this and see if I can solve your problem.’

‘If furs are being smuggled it is as much in your interest as mine,’ was Lutenski’s last word, as he went out.

‘Is he on the level?’ asked Algy, as the door closed behind him.

‘I’d say yes. If he hadn’t lost the skins he wouldn’t be chasing them. And if he hadn’t acquired them honestly he wouldn’t have dared to go to Customs—or come to us. It certainly looks as if the skins were smuggled in. If it was done once it will be done again. The question is, how is it being done? For a start, let’s check the statements of this man Kindus. Algy, ring the leading furriers and ask them if they attended a private show in Greenwood Mansions, Park Lane, recently.’

In half an hour Algy gave Biggles the answers. Not one furrier had any knowledge of such a show.

‘It begins to look as if Kindus is a liar, anyway,’ observed Biggles. ‘I suspect he fixed this show to account for the skins should he be questioned. But a point arises here. In selling the skins as made-up furs to Lady Branding he must have known that sooner or later Lutenski would spot them, either in reality or in a photograph in a Society paper. Ladies buy furs to show, not to hide. Would he have taken that risk had he known the skins had been stolen? I doubt it. I shall assume, therefore, that however Kindus got the skins he didn’t know they’d been seen, and bought, in Russia, by Lutenski. Now let’s turn the spotlight on the flat in Park Lane. Ginger, ring up the hall porter and ask if the flat is still empty, and when it was last occupied.’

Ginger soon had the answer. The flat was unoccupied, and hadn’t been let for more than a year.

Biggles smiled cynically. ‘Now we *know* Kindus is a liar, if nothing worse. Our drill now is to find out how Lutenski’s skins got into his hands.’

‘But just a minute, old boy,’ interposed Bertie. ‘Why did he have to lie about the best furriers attending a show in Park Lane?’

‘Obviously he couldn’t say that only he was invited; that wouldn’t have made sense. He had to say something. Imagine his position when—assuming he hadn’t come by the skins honestly—Lutenski burst in on him and accused him of pinching his furs. Had he got the skins in the open market there would have been no need to lie. But he hadn’t. So he had to think fast and invent something. Hence the flat in Park Lane. Whether or not he knew the skins had been stolen is another matter. I’d say he didn’t know, or he wouldn’t have risked them being seen in London. He’d have sent them to Paris or New York. In a word, he knew they hadn’t come into this country openly. That was why he had to lie.’

‘Which means that if he didn’t smuggle them himself he knows who did?’

‘That’s about the English of it. I’ll ask Gaskin to get us the low-down on him. He’s got special men for that sort of job. I’ll go down and have a word with him.’

In two days Biggles had full particulars, and a photograph of Kindus, on his desk. The first and most important thing about it was, the man had no police record. Forty-seven years of age, married but with no children, he had been born in London of Latvian parents. He was a furrier of repute, patronized by wealthy clients. He lived in a flat over his shop, but often spent week-ends at a country house he maintained at Wivenhoe, in Essex. There, at moorings, he kept a launch named *Scandik*, in order to indulge in his recreation of deep sea fishing. He was a member of the Tunny Fishers Club and had made some good catches. A newspaper clipping showed him standing on the deck of the *Scandik*, a vessel of about fifty tons, with a tunny weighing six-hundred-and-fifty pounds.

Said Bertie looking at the picture: ‘What would a bloke do with a tiddler that size? It’s a bit on the big side for breakfast—if you see what I mean.’

‘I imagine the catches of these ardent anglers go to the fishmongers,’ answered Biggles. ‘We’ll go into that presently. Looking at the man in his town suit I’d never have guessed that his hobby was messing about in a little boat with big fish. The North Sea can be rough, and sailing, as far as my experience goes, a dirty, tiring game.’

‘You think he has another purpose besides fishing when he goes to sea?’ suggested Ginger, shrewdly.

‘I wouldn’t like to say that of a man with a clean record.’

‘He’s a liar on his own showing,’ reminded Algy.

‘If lying made a man a crook there wouldn’t be enough gaols to hold ’em,’ replied Biggles sadly. ‘But let’s get on. One of you might step round to the head office of Customs and Excise and find out what happens when a small craft like the *Scandik* returns to port. Is it checked for contraband or do the people just tie up and go home? I’ll get the gen on this tunny business.’

Ginger went off and was away for some time. ‘All craft landing are checked,’ he reported, when he returned. ‘At least a Customs officer is there. How far he searches depends on how well he knows the owner of the craft, and its crew. He may satisfy himself by simply asking questions. The *Scandik* has a crew of two. If we want to speak to the local officer his name is Mr Bright. He wears uniform and probably knows the *Scandik* quite well.’

‘I see,’ said Biggles thoughtfully. ‘Just as a matter of curiosity the next time the *Scandik* puts to sea we’ll watch what happens. If Mr Bright knows Kindus well, and knows him to be a genuine fisherman, he, naturally, might gloss over anything like a serious search. If Lutenski’s tale is true, and I see no reason to doubt it, Kindus is importing furs under the canvas; and as he has a boat, that *may* be the way the racket is being worked.’

‘Even with a Customs officer watching?’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘Even with a Customs officer watching.’

A fortnight elapsed before, on a Friday evening, Biggles was informed by Inspector Gaskin that Kindus had gone to Wivenhoe for the week-end. The next morning he

received a message to say that the *Scandik* had put to sea on a fishing cruise and was expected back on Sunday evening.

'This is what we've been waiting for,' said Biggles. 'Algy, take Bertie with you in the Auster, and without looking as if you were spying, see if you can pick up the *Scandik*. You know from the picture what it looks like. The tunny fishing game, as I understand it, is played like this. The regular fishing boats, boats of all nationalities as well as our own, follow the herring shoals. So do the tunny, which live mostly on herring. The result is, the tunny and the herring boats are found in the same area. The tunny fishers know that, so they, naturally, make for the place where the smacks are shooting their nets. I'm told that some of these netsmen are helpful to the rod fishermen, telling them if they've seen any tunny. But some are not, because they, too, want to catch the tunny, which are worth quite a lot of money.' Biggles smiled. 'There are rod fishermen who are not above *buying* a tunny from a fishing boat rather than return home without one. What I want you to do, Algy, is see if the *Scandik* makes contact with a larger vessel. And if that vessel is flying a flag try to make out its nationality. Report the position on the high-frequency. We'll stand by for signals. As soon as the *Scandik* starts for home you can pack up. Until then carry on, refuelling as it becomes necessary.'

'Okay.' Algy and Bertie went off.

The first message came through during the evening. Bertie reported sighting the *Scandik* fifty miles off shore, fishing, about half a mile from a drifter flying the Latvian flag.

'Ah-ha,' murmured Ginger. 'And Kindus a Latvian by birth. That's no coincidence.'

Biggles conceded that the proximity of the two vessels had a fishy aroma.

At dusk Bertie reported that they were still in the same position, and as he would be unable to see much longer he was returning to base.

'If contact is made between the two craft it will be after dark,' asserted Biggles. 'There's no need for them to take chances in daylight.'

Dawn found the Auster in the air again. Almost at once, Bertie, still acting as radio operator while Algy did the flying, reported the *Scandik* on a course for home. The drifter had disappeared.

'Okay,' said Biggles. 'That's all. You can pack up.' To Ginger he went on. 'Get the car out. We'll run down to Wivenhoe and see what sort of luck Kindus has had at his fishing.'

'I'd bet a week's pay that he's got a tunny on board,' said Ginger pointedly.

'I shall be surprised if he hasn't got a fish of some sort,' returned Biggles.

It was late on the quiet Sunday afternoon when they saw the *Scandik* come chugging in to its mooring. Several idlers gathered to watch. A man in dark blue uniform arrived on a bicycle.

'That must be Mr Bright,' surmised Biggles.

Even before the *Scandik* made fast interest quickened when it could be seen that on its deck lay a magnificent tunny of about six-hundred pounds. A tackle was necessary to hoist it ashore, Kindus superintending the operation. Unshaven and tousle-headed, in his fisherman's get-up he bore little resemblance to the immaculate business man of Mayfair. The Customs officer spoke to him. One of Kindus' men fetched a motor truck, obviously for the transportation of the fish.

Biggles moved nearer. To Ginger he said in a low voice, 'Take a look at its eyes. I'd wager that fish has been dead for a week. Kindus didn't catch it. It was caught by the Latvians whom I'd say he met by appointment.' He went to the head of the fish and pulled open the jaws.

'What are you doing?' demanded Kindus curtly.

'I was wondering what sort of hook would be needed to hold a fish that size,' answered Biggles evenly. 'I don't see a hook mark,' he added casually.

Kindus gave him a queer look. 'Leave my fish alone,' he snapped, and hastened the proceedings.

'Just a minute,' said Biggles. 'I want to examine this fish.' He showed his police badge. 'Mr Bright, I'd like you to come here. I may need a witness.'

A hush fell. Bright, staring, stepped forward. Kindus, his face suddenly pale, stood irresolute. 'What—what's the idea?' he stammered. 'What do you expect to find?'

'You should know,' answered Biggles, quietly, taking a heavy knife from his pocket.

Kindus, his face ashen now, hesitated. 'All right,' he said in a shaky voice. 'I give in. But don't let's have a scene here.'

'As you wish,' agreed Biggles. 'Where would you have it?'

'At my house.'

'Very well.'

The fish, now in charge of the Customs officer—who was looking more than somewhat shaken—was taken to the house. There, in an outbuilding, it was opened, and a collection of expensive furs, each one tightly rolled in oiled silk, removed.

'Well, there you are, Mr Bright,' said Biggles. 'I'll leave the rest to you.'

'What beats me,' said Kindus miserably, 'is how you got on to this.'

'If your Latvian friends who sold you the fish had stuck to common mink, bought in the open market, you might have got away with it for a long time,' answered Biggles. 'It was the eight cream skins you sold to Lady Branding that gave you away. They were stolen, and the rightful owner, Mr Lutenski, quite naturally, complained.'

'I didn't know they were stolen,' protested Kindus.

'You'd better save your explanations for the Court,' Biggles told him.

BIGGLES
LAYS A GHOST

9

Biggles walked into his office at Scotland Yard, tossed a sheaf of papers on his desk, dropped into his chair and stared moodily at the spiral of smoke rising from his cigarette.

'Now what's the trouble?' asked Ginger, who knew the signs.

'The chief wants to know when we're going to do something about this ghost plane that's giving pilots on the Paris run the heeby-jeebies.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I told him I didn't believe in ghosts.'

'What did he say to that?'

'He said in that case quite a number of perfectly good air line pilots were all liars.'

'It is a queer business,' put in Algy. 'The thing's been seen five or six times.'

'Tommy Thomson of B.E.A. saw it again last night, just after midnight, from the cockpit of a Viscount. I must admit that with ten thousand hours logged he's not the sort of chap to invent such a yarn.'

'What did he do?'

'He radioed control and told them that a machine showing no lights was crossing his course at the same altitude; which, as you can imagine, didn't please him at all. They told him not to be silly. He was on the radar screen and there wasn't another machine for miles. Had there been they must have seen it.'

'Of course they must have seen it. If it didn't register then obviously it wasn't there. Radar can't lie.'

'Tommy swears it was there. He saw it. He says he doesn't imagine things and there's nothing wrong with his eyes.'

'What was the machine he saw?' asked Ginger.

'A Boeing B-17. The Flying Fortress. It carried American war-time markings.'

'But that's fantastic!'

'He even took its name and number.'

‘Has that been checked?’

‘Yes,’ Biggles spoke slowly and deliberately. ‘American records show that that particular machine crashed in 1945, taking off with a load of bombs, killing its crew.’

Ginger stared. ‘That’s pretty grim.’

‘Now you can understand how this talk about a ghost plane started. We’ve tackled some funny jobs, but this is the first time we’ve been asked to look for an aircraft which doesn’t exist.’

‘But if Tommy saw it, it *must* exist—unless there’s a mistake somewhere; in the American records, for instance.’

Bertie stepped in. ‘This, I must say, is a bit of a corker.’

‘Such a corker that Tommy refuses to talk about it, taking the view that he’s made a fool of himself. The same with Marston, his co-pilot, who also saw the apparition.’

‘Did any of the passengers see it?’

‘Yes, but naturally they took it to be merely another aircraft. They wouldn’t suspect anything queer, and needless to say the company didn’t enlighten them.’ Biggles shrugged. ‘Well, there’s been a ghost ship—the famous Flying Dutchman—and a ghost train, so I suppose it was only a question of time before we had a ghost plane beetling about the sky.’

‘Has anything been said about this in the newspapers?’ asked Algy.

‘Not a word. You know how superstitious some people are. None of the operating companies wants to start a scare that might empty their machines, so they’ve clamped the lid on the story.’

‘I remember,’ said Algy thoughtfully, ‘there were rumours about ghost planes in the first World War. There was the R.E.8. that landed itself on the airfield at Cambrai.’

‘It had two dead men in it. They’d been shot. It was merely a fluke that the machine sat itself down.’

‘What about the machine Boelcke saw—one of ours. He could see no one in it. He followed it for miles, shooting until he had no ammo left. Finally, still flying straight, it disappeared in some clouds.’

‘That is, I believe, authentic,’ stated Biggles. ‘But I’d say the answer was the same. The crew had already been killed when Boelcke saw it. It happened that the machine was trimmed for level flight, so the chances are it would fly on until it ran out of juice. But let’s stick to the present.’

‘What about this?’ interposed Ginger, who had been glancing through the papers Biggles had brought in. ‘This French pilot, Varlac, says the machine turned suddenly and came straight at him. He put his hands over his face and waited for the crash; it never came; when he looked up there was nothing in sight. When he landed he had to be treated for shock.’

‘So would I.’

‘But that doesn’t sound as if the ghost is solid.’

‘No self-respecting ghost is solid,’ sneered Biggles.

‘Could this be some sort of reflection, old boy? Mirage, if you see what I mean,’ suggested Bertie.

Biggles’ lips parted in a mirthless smile. ‘When machines that don’t exist start reflecting themselves in the sky I quit flying.’

‘But have you no theory at all about this?’ queried Algy.

‘Not a clue. Apparently the conditions have always been the same when the ghost showed up. It must be a very particular ghost. It requires a dark night, a low ceiling and a sky about half covered. Then, if it’s in the mood, it appears in the same area at the same time—just after midnight.’ Biggles’ tone of voice was still slightly cynical.

‘The right time for all ghosts that have been well brought up to appear,’ said Ginger, smiling.

‘If you can fly through this ghost without breaking anything I can’t see what all the flap’s about,’ observed Algy.

‘Maybe if you saw it bearing down on you, you would,’ returned Biggles. ‘Pilots don’t like this sort of fun and games so we shall have to do something about it—or pretend to. It’s going to be an awful bind drifting round the sky looking for something that isn’t there.’

‘What I want to know is this,’ resumed Bertie. ‘Do the engines of this winged spook make a noise or are they silent—if you see what I mean?’

‘I wouldn’t know, but the answer is probably yes, they make a noise,’ replied Biggles. ‘I say that because when someone produces a silent aero engine I shall know either I’m deaf or off my rocker. But the Air Commodore doesn’t see anything funny in this, so let’s press on. For a start I suggest you all sweat through these reports, combing out anything that strikes you as being worth following up. Muster the facts. Then we’ll look at them, and maybe someone will get an inspiration.’

Nightly for a week the Air Police Auster had hunted the haunted area above the Weald of Kent without catching sight of the ghost, although, to be sure, the conditions had not been identical with those prevailing on the occasions of the manifestations. It was disappointing but, as Biggles remarked dryly, not surprising, for it was a fact well known that spooks never appeared when people were waiting to greet them. It was some consolation that the regular air line pilots hadn’t seen it either, which implied that the conditions had not been ideal.

The vigil was becoming tiresome, even though Biggles had divided his force so that they could fly turn and turn about, for it was necessary to maintain constant radio contact with the control tower in order to prevent any risk of collision with air liners working over the route. The Control officers, knowing what the Auster was doing, had promised to warn its pilots the moment another aircraft appeared on their radar screen.

On this, the seventh night, with Biggles and Ginger on the watch, weather conditions were the most perfect yet, judging from those reported by pilots who had seen the uncanny visitor. The air was clear, and almost still, with an occasional big cumulus cloud floating in from the west.

Time passed, and at half past midnight it seemed that the Auster would again draw blank. Tired of the whole business, Biggles had in fact announced his intention of

returning to base, and had cut his engine to glide away, losing height, when Ginger let out a yell.

'There it is! Behind you!'

Biggles slammed on the throttle and in the same movement spun the machine round almost in its own length. In a flash his nose was down and he was racing towards a big aircraft climbing across the face of a cloud a quarter of a mile away. In a matter of seconds he was on the spot, only to let out a startled cry as the machine, reaching the extremity of the cloud, disappeared as utterly as a pebble dropped in a bowl of ink. In vain he flew round and round the cloud, causing Ginger to say, with marked anxiety, 'Watch out you don't collide with it.'

For some time Biggles did not answer. Then he said, in a strange tone of voice: 'Well, at least we've seen the thing. What did you make of it?'

'It was an American Fortress.'

'So I saw. Anything else?'

'There was something queer about it, something unreal. It didn't look—solid.'

'You're not trying to fool yourself it was a ghost?'

'Er—no. But it did look ghastly. I'll tell you something else. It sounds ridiculous I know, but I thought I caught a fleeting glimpse of a ground scene below the machine, the tops of hangars or some other buildings, as if it had just taken off. And as it left the cloud it seemed to bend, or crack, across the fuselage.'

'Bend!' Biggles' voice nearly cracked with incredulity. 'How could it bend? Did you ever see an aircraft *bend*?'

'No.'

'Nor I. And the ground. How could there be ground at this height? It doesn't make sense to me.'

'Nor me. But there's nothing about this that does make sense.'

'Ask the airport if they've had a blip other than ours.'

Ginger complied. 'Nothing,' he announced presently. 'We're on our own. There isn't another machine in the air at the moment this side of the coast.'

'Now I *know* I'm nuts,' muttered Biggles, bitterly.

He began to circle. 'You keep watch below in case it passes underneath us,' he ordered.

'Here comes another cloud. Maybe it's hiding in that.' Ginger indicated another cloud-mass that was drifting sluggishly across the sky at their own altitude, a newly risen moon outlining its edges in soft silver.

The Auster glided towards it.

'I can see it,' snapped Biggles suddenly, turning on a wing tip and putting his nose down for speed. 'It's gone again,' he muttered savagely. 'It seemed to burst out of the cloud and come straight for us; then, as if the pilot had spotted us, it turned away and vanished as if it had dissolved into thin air. Am I going crazy? Did you see anything?'

‘Only a light on the ground. A queer blue light, brilliant. I was looking down, as you told me. It caught my eye and I was wondering what it was, when, just as you said “It’s gone” it went out. Could it have been a signal of some sort?’

‘Did you mark the spot?’

‘More or less.’

‘All right. You watch while I do a long glide, hoping the operator won’t hear me. If the light comes on again pin-point it.’

‘Okay!’

For some minutes the Auster glided on, making a wide flat circuit. Then Ginger said tersely: ‘There it is! No, it’s gone. But I’ve got the spot.’

‘Good,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘I have a feeling that we’re more likely to find the answer to this riddle on the ground than in the sky. I’ve had enough for one night, anyway. I’m going home.’

The following morning saw a police car cruising along one of the many quiet roads that cross the Weald of Kent.

Presently Ginger, who was surveying the landscape, said: ‘This is about the spot. I marked the junction of this S bend with the lane that cuts across it from north to south. There’s a pond in the corner.’

‘In that case, if the light was being shown from a house, it can only be this one we’re coming to, on the left. There isn’t another.’

The house to which Biggles had referred was one of those pretty old-fashioned cottages, or perhaps two cottages knocked into one, which, restored and installed with modern conveniences, are no longer occupied by the farm labourers for which they were originally intended. A fairly extensive garden was separated from the road only by a well-trimmed thick-set hedge, beside which Biggles brought the car to a halt. Getting out, with Ginger beside him, he walked back a little way to a wicket gate and looked over. This is what they saw.

Beside the house was a lawn, badly in need of a mower. Beyond it, the ground fell away to offer a clear view for miles over the peaceful countryside. On the far side of the lawn a young man, untidily dressed, was doing something with a tarpaulin which obviously covered a thing of some size.

‘That’s it,’ murmured Ginger. ‘I’d say he’s got a searchlight under that cover.’

‘Let’s see,’ said Biggles, opening the gate.

The young man looked up with a smile as they approached. ‘Good morning,’ he greeted cheerfully. ‘Can I help you? You’ve lost your way, I expect. That’s very easy about here.’

‘No,’ answered Biggles smoothly. ‘We haven’t lost our way.’ He pointed to the tarpaulin. ‘What on earth have you got under there—a gun or something?’

The young man laughed. ‘Nothing so hideous. It’s my latest toy, one which, I hope, will revolutionize the film industry.’

‘I see,’ said Biggles slowly. ‘I take it you’re an inventor?’

‘Of sorts,’ agreed the young man lightly.

‘And what’s the latest device?’

‘A long range 3-D projector for open-air cinemas. People will be able to sit in their cars quite a distance away and see the show. Like the modern searchlight my projector throws no beam—just the picture. Of course, it can only work at night,’ the young man went on, with the enthusiasm of one who is pleased with himself.

A curious expression crept over Biggles’ face. ‘And at the moment you’re experimenting with it?’

‘Yes. When the weather is co-operative.’

‘Don’t you use a screen?’

‘I shall eventually. Just now I’m having to be economical, so I’m using something that costs nothing—the clouds. If you care to run down to-night I’ll show you.’

‘And the film you’re using just now shows an aeroplane?’

‘Of course. An old piece of newsreel some friends in the industry let me have.’

‘Why do you say, of course?’

The young man looked pained. ‘My dear sir, what else would you expect to see in the sky but aeroplanes? I only work after most people have gone to bed, but even so, someone might happen to glance up. He wouldn’t be surprised to see an aeroplane, but if he saw men on horses charging about on the clouds it might frighten him to death. With all this talk of space flight he’d think the Martians were on the way here.’

Biggles looked at Ginger, a smile spreading over his face. Turning back to the young man he went on: ‘Has it never occurred to you that you might be frightening people in the clouds to death? I mean air pilots.’

The young man stared. ‘No. Why should an aeroplane frighten them? They see plenty.’

‘But not the one you’re showing. You see, it doesn’t exist in reality. It was destroyed years ago. Its crew perished with it, which gives its reappearance a somewhat sinister aspect.’

‘How dreadful. Do you know,’ said the young man seriously, ‘I never thought of that possibility.’ He frowned. ‘Who are you?’

‘We’re police officers investigating the phenomenon.’

Understanding dawned in the young man’s eyes. ‘I am most frightfully sorry. Have I broken the law?’

‘No, I don’t think you have,’ admitted Biggles. ‘Laws are not made to stop something that never happens, and as far as I know what you’re doing has never happened before. But to prevent the possibility of an accident, due to a pilot losing control trying to avoid collision with another aircraft which may or may not be there, I think you should either buy yourself a screen or notify aerodromes of the nights you propose to launch your ghost plane in the sky.’

‘I’ll certainly do that,’ agreed the young man. ‘Sorry to have caused trouble. Come in and have a cup of coffee.’

‘Thanks,’ accepted Biggles. ‘Ghost hunting is dry work.’

MISCHIEF BY MOONLIGHT

10

'Listen to this.' Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth glanced up from his desk in the Operations Room where he was opening the morning mail. Then, from a sheet of notepaper, he began to read.

' "*Five Elms Farm, Shingleton, Suffolk.*
"*Dear Sir:*

"*You may remember me—Corporal Norden, Driver Petrol, who served in your squadron during the War. I am now back at the family business of farming, at the above address.*

"*Seeing in the paper the other day that you are now head of the Air Police, I thought I'd drop you a line to let you know that something queer in the flying line is going on here, on my land. As it's rather a long story I think you'd better run down and see for yourself. Fly down if you like; there's plenty of room to land, as someone else has discovered. I'd come to see you, but at the moment I'm single-handed and am busy with the lambs.*

"*Yours respectfully,*
"*John Norden, ex-R.A.F.*

"*P.S. I attach sketch map showing my place and the landing ground.*" '

'I remember Norden,' said Ginger. 'Nice chap. Intelligent type.'

Biggles nodded. 'His flying experience might put him on the track of something an ordinary man might miss. It's a fine day. Let's waffle along and see what it's all about. Get the Auster out.'

In a little over half an hour the Police Auster, after circling the conspicuous group of tall elms from which the farm obviously derived its name, touched down on the big pasture that had been marked on Norden's sketch map; and by the time the occupants were out the ex-airman was striding across the short turf to meet them.

After greetings had been exchanged Biggles inquired: 'What's going on?'

'Come over here,' requested Norden, and led the way to the far side of the field. In front, now, looking towards the east, the land lay flat for perhaps three-quarters of a

mile. For half that distance the ground was well-cropped pasture; it then gave way to coarse grass, marsh and reeds. Beyond this the North Sea sparkled in the clear spring sunshine. The only building in sight was a derelict windmill, one tattered arm pointing at the sky.

Said Norden: 'You see that stick in line with the old mill, near the edge of the rushes. I put it there a couple of days ago to mark the spot where a plane landed during the night. It wasn't the first time, either. But I'd better start at the beginning. One day in February, about daylight, I took my gun and walked down to the marshes hoping to get a duck for the pot. The ground was white from a sharp frost, so every track, rabbits and so on, showed up plainly. What do I find but the wheel marks of a plane.'

'You're sure it was a plane?' put in Biggles.

'It couldn't have been anything else,' declared Norden. 'The tracks began and ended in the field, so whatever it was must have dropped out of the sky. Well, I didn't think much about it. After all, the air is stiff with planes nowadays. I thought a plane had landed with engine trouble, or maybe an instructor had been giving a pupil forced-landing practice. There are plenty of aerodromes in the county.'

'You've never actually seen a plane land on your ground?' queried Biggles.

'No. They come pretty low at times but, as you see, this is a lonely spot, and the only harm they can do is scare my stock. Well, as I was saying, I thought nothing of it; but a month later the same thing happened. As before, it was the frost on the ground that showed up the marks.'

'Do you mean it was *exactly* a month?' asked Biggles.

'Yes. I know because the moon was full. But the plane could have landed at other times without me knowing anything about it.'

'You didn't sit up to watch for it?'

'Not me. I've something better to do. But two nights ago, again when the moon was full, I *heard* the plane land. I got up hoping to get a glimpse of it, but by the time I got here it had gone. As soon as it was light I had a look round, but all I could find was a little patch of oil that must have seeped from the engine. I stuck my stick in it—where you can see it now. I'm getting fed up with people using my ground for an aerodrome without paying landing fees, so I thought I'd drop you a line.'

Biggles nodded. 'Quite right. It's pretty obvious that dirty work is going on. Aircraft still occasionally make forced landings; but for that to happen three times at the same place doesn't sound like an accident to me.'

'Nor me,' rejoined Norden. 'I thought of stretching a wire across the field to trip the blighter up, but then I realized I might kill a chap making a genuine forced landing.'

'I suppose it didn't occur to you to measure the width of the landing track? That might identify the type of plane.'

'No. I was slow, there,' admitted Norden ruefully.

They walked on to where the stick stood erect in the ground. The oil stain could still be seen, but wind and rain had obliterated any other marks there might have been.

‘What do you make of it, sir?’ asked Norden, as Biggles surveyed the surrounding landscape thoughtfully.

‘Not much. If landings are being made here it means that someone, or something, is being put down, or picked up. It might be anything from enemy agents to contraband. We know it goes on. That’s why there’s an Air Police force.’

While Biggles spoke Ginger had been circling the spot with his eyes on the grass. Suddenly he stooped and picked up an object so small that Biggles had to ask what it was.

‘You’d never guess,’ replied Ginger, with astonishment in his voice. ‘It’s a postage stamp—a used early Australian. Been in an album, too. It’s still got the mount on it. How on earth did *that* get here?’

‘It’s hardly the place to bring an album,’ answered Biggles, a curious expression on his face. ‘Maybe a schoolboy dropped it from an approval sheet.’ He took the stamp, looked at it, and put it carefully in his wallet. Then, turning to Norden, he went on: ‘Do you ever use the old mill over there?’

‘No. It’s falling to pieces. I haven’t been in it since I was a kid. I believe the Home Guard used it during the war for a look-out post in bad weather—so my mother told me.’

‘Let’s have a look at it,’ suggested Biggles.

They walked on, to find the old building in an even worse state of dilapidation than was apparent from a distance. A track, much overgrown, gave access to it from the far side. Entering it, Biggles looked askance at the crumbling steps that led to the upper part; then, treading warily, he led the way up to a small octagonal chamber well festooned with cobwebs.

Ginger looked around. There was not much to see. Anyway, he could see nothing of particular interest. There were two windows. Over one, facing inland, hung a piece of black material which he took to be a war-time blackout curtain. The other overlooked the sea. The glass was filthy. The middle pane was missing. ‘Nothing much here,’ he observed.

‘I didn’t expect to find anything very exciting,’ returned Biggles. ‘A modern smuggler would have more sense than to leave his visiting card,’ he murmured whimsically. ‘As there’s nothing more we can do here we might as well be getting back to headquarters. Should there be any more landings before you hear from me again, Norden, you might ring me up at Scotland Yard.’

‘I will,’ promised the farmer, as they descended.

‘By the way,’ concluded Biggles, pointing to the track, ‘do you ever use this?’

‘No. It hasn’t been used since the mill was closed, as far as I know,’ replied Norden, as they walked on towards the Auster.

‘What’s the next move?’ asked Ginger, when, shortly after lunch, they returned to Biggles’ office.

‘The next move, I think, is to find out how much this stamp you found is worth.’ Biggles laid the stamp on his blotter.

‘That shouldn’t take long,’ averred Ginger, reaching for a well-known catalogue and quickly thumbing the pages. He whistled softly. ‘Well-well-well . . . I *did* find something,’ he announced, wide-eyed. ‘The book value is seven hundred pounds. Only a few examples are known to exist.’

‘That’s *very* interesting,’ acknowledged Biggles, dryly. ‘Now you might call Inspector Gaskin and ask him if he would be so good as to step up here for a minute.’

Presently the burly Inspector strode in. ‘What’s on your mind?’ he demanded.

‘Have you any record of valuable postage stamps going astray recently?’ inquired Biggles.

‘Too true I have. Nice little lot worth five thousand quid disappeared with the family silver and jewels from Nutsford Grange a week or two ago. Neat job. Not a trace. Can’t get a line on the stuff at all. Colonel Rushby, who owns the Grange, is kicking up about it, too.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘I’ve been down there on the job.’

‘You might ring him up and ask him if his collection included an early olive green Australian catalogued at seven hundred pounds and, if so, would he describe the mounts he uses for his albums?’

The Inspector threw Biggles a queer look, but knowing him he put through the call.

The others waited. Biggles lit a cigarette, watching the Inspector’s face while he spoke.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the Inspector at last, and hung up. He looked round. ‘Yes, he had one of those stamps,’ he announced, ‘and he uses a thin oval mount that he cuts himself.’

Biggles pointed to the stamp on his desk. ‘Then that must belong to him.’

Gaskin sprang to his feet. ‘Where the deuce did you get that?’

Biggles grinned. ‘Believe it or not, Ginger picked it up this morning in a field in Suffolk.’

‘Where’s the rest of the collection?’

Biggles shook his head sadly. ‘Ah! There you have me. But I have reason to suppose that it’s somewhere in Europe, probably broken up.’

‘But how came that stamp in the field?’

‘Sit down and I’ll tell you,’ answered Biggles, and related the events of the morning. ‘What I suspect is this,’ he concluded. ‘You’ve got a new kind of “fence” to deal with; one who has realized the possibilities of an aeroplane for moving stuff abroad without irritating Customs formalities. In a word, there’s a shuttle service working across the North Sea. The end of it over this side is on Norden’s farm in Suffolk. It’s perfect for the job. As far as this particular stamp is concerned, I can only

imagine that it came unstuck and somehow worked its way out of the bag, or whatever the swag was being carried in.'

'How are you going to get this racket buttoned up?' inquired the Inspector.

'Obviously we shall have to be on the spot next time the plane lands.'

'And when will that be?'

Biggles walked over to the calendar. 'May the seventh, I fancy. Would you like to come along with us, bringing one or two of your strong men? I don't know how many we shall have to deal with. Probably not more than one or two, but maybe more. We could all go to the farm together.'

'You lay it on, I'll provide the men,' promised the Inspector, as he left the room.

After he had gone Ginger looked at Biggles in amazement. 'How did you work all that out?'

Biggles shrugged. 'You saw what I saw, and heard what I heard.'

'And what was that?'

'According to Norden the first time the plane came was the night of a full moon. The second time it happened was *exactly* a month later. You may remember I confirmed that. Obviously the moon was again full. The last time, two nights ago, the moon was also full. From that it seemed that the plane came once a month, always on the night of the full moon. Such a fixed arrangement would be understandable. It would save letters, telegrams or telephoning, which might be dangerous.'

Ginger nodded. 'I get it. And the next full moon will be May the seventh.'

Biggles grinned. 'Exactly.'

'And what about the mill?' asked Ginger, suspiciously.

'The first thing that struck me as we stood by the oil stain was that it was dead in line between the mill and the five elms near the farm, both ready-made landmarks for a pilot making his approach from the sea. The elms stand on the skyline.'

'But not the mill.'

'The pilot has a confederate there to show a light and possibly signal all clear. To do that, as the glass was almost opaque with dirt, he had knocked out the middle pane, as you must have noticed. The other window, which could be seen from the farm, had for obvious reasons been blacked out. Wartime blackout material wouldn't have lasted for ten years in a place like that. And finally, the track leading to the mill had been used recently by a vehicle, presumably a car. Some of the briars had been dragged, and the leaves torn off. Norden doesn't use the track. He said so.'

'His sheep might drag the briars.'

'In which case we should have seen wool on the thorns.'

'You know all the answers,' said Ginger sadly.

'We're paid to try to find them,' Biggles pointed out, smiling.

There is little more to be said, except that events were to prove that Biggles' deductions had been correct.

The night of May seventh, with its full moon, came fine and clear, to find Biggles, with Ginger and Inspector Gaskin, waiting in a convenient 'hide', and the Inspector's men posted at strategical points.

At eleven o'clock a car, showing no lights, came slowly down the track, to stop close by the old mill. The driver, who was alone, having turned the car, lifted out a heavy suitcase and took it with him into the mill. Silence fell. The only sounds were the occasional cries of wildfowl on the marsh.

'I think he must be the only one,' whispered Biggles, after half an hour had passed. 'It'll be interesting to see the contents of that suitcase.'

Presently came the sound for which they were waiting—the distant drone of a low-flying aircraft. The man in the mill must have heard it, too, for almost at once the beam of a torch started winking from the upper seaward-facing window. The aircraft came on. It showed no lights so it couldn't be seen, but the sound of its engine made it plain that it was heading for its usual landing ground. The torch in the window was switched off. Footsteps could be heard in the mill, descending, soon to be drowned by the noise of the aircraft as, with its engine throttled back, it passed over.

'Sounds like a helicopter,' murmured Ginger.

When the man in the mill emerged Biggles and the Inspector were waiting. Biggles, from behind, clapped a hand over his mouth, and before the smuggler could have realized what was happening the handcuffs were on his wrists.

'Don't let's have any fuss,' growled the Inspector. Then turning his torch on the prisoner's face he exclaimed: 'Hello, Charlie, fancy meeting you here. After your last stretch I'd have thought you'd have learnt sense.'

Charlie swore. 'Why can't you keep out o' my way?' he said plaintively.

Biggles, with Ginger beside him, walked briskly towards the aircraft which by this time was on the ground. The pilot, with his back towards them, was in the act of climbing down when they arrived. 'Guess I'll just snatch a minute for a cigarette——' he began; then, turning, he saw Biggles standing there. His hand flashed to a pocket, but Biggles' gun was out first. 'I wouldn't try anything like that,' warned Biggles grimly.

Several of the Inspector's men arrived, running. The pilot looked at them and shrugged his shoulders. 'Okay,' he said quietly. 'I know when I'm beat.'

Inspector Gaskin bustled up. 'All right,' he told his men. 'Take 'em away.' Turning to Biggles he added: 'What about the plane?'

'It can stay where it is until the morning when we can see what we've caught,' decided Biggles, climbing up to the cockpit and cutting the engine, which had been left running.

Norden arrived at the double, crying: 'So you caught 'em?'

'We have—thanks to you,' acknowledged Biggles.

So ended the affair at Five Elms Farm. There was only one surprising outcome of it. ‘Charlie’, the man whom Inspector Gaskin had recognized, was a professional ‘fence’ well known to the police. His suitcase contained the spoils of several burglaries, which he must have thought could be more safely disposed of on the Continent than in England. But the pilot turned out to be a deserter from the United States Air Force who, with the help of two members of his squadron, stationed in Germany, actually had the audacity to use a service machine for his criminal purposes. But for the odd chance of selecting for his landing ground the property of an ex-airman, his scheme might have succeeded for a long time. He went to prison.

As Biggles remarked to his old corporal after it was all over, it might be a good thing if more farmers did a spell in the Royal Air Force.

THE CASE OF THE STOLEN TRUCK

11

It was purely by chance that Biggles ran into Inspector Gaskin in one of the corridors near his office.

'Hello, Inspector,' greeted Biggles, cheerfully. 'Why so glum? Are you off to dig your grave, or something?'

'I might as well,' growled the detective.

'What's biting you now?'

'Oh, it's these truck bandits at it again.'

'That's not my line of country,' said Biggles. 'What goes on?'

'Quite simple. One of the heavy truck drivers on the long-distance all-night hauls between London and the North stops at a pull-in café for a cup o' coffee and mebbe a sandwich. When he comes out, no truck. One of the wide boys who work the road has pushed off with it.'

'But I thought the law required that there should be two drivers on these long runs, taking turn and turn about in case one should get overtired and drop off to sleep at the wheel.'

'Quite right. But it doesn't always work out like that. Take the case of a contractor working between Scotland and London. A truck starts off with two drivers. Number one takes it as far as, say, Doncaster. There he gets out for a sleep while Number two takes over. Number Two goes on to London and sleeps there. Next morning he loads up and drives as far as Doncaster where Number One is waiting to take over again.'

'I see. So that's how it's done.'

'Working that way there's only one driver actually on the truck.'

'Does the truck thief know what the load consists of?'

'He may or he may not. A spy may listen to the drivers nattering at one of the regular halts and so learn what they have on board. That isn't really important because everything has a market these days. Take the case of the truck that was pinched last night. What do you think it was carrying?'

'I haven't a clue.'

‘Ten tons of potatoes.’

‘You mean—just common or garden spuds?’

‘Yes.’

Biggles burst out laughing.

‘What’s funny about that?’ demanded Gaskin.

‘I was thinking in terms of something valuable.’

‘Even if the crooks only get ten pound a ton for ’em that’s a hundred quid—not to be sniffed at for a night’s work if you can get away with it. And don’t forget, one spud being like another you can’t trace ’em.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I see that. Where do these crooks sell their stuff?’

‘They have a market for everything.’

‘What happens to the truck?’

‘Maybe it’s just abandoned somewhere—empty, of course—or it can end up at one of these shady scrap yards where it’s broken up for spare parts. That’s the last of it.’

‘Well—well!’ murmured Biggles. ‘Sorry I can’t help.’ He had turned to walk on but stopped suddenly. ‘Just a minute,’ he said sharply. ‘I said I couldn’t help, but on second thoughts I don’t see why not.’

‘What can you do?’

‘I have a good pair of eyes.’

‘So have I.’

‘Yours can only operate from ground level. I can see more than you can, at a glance, from up topsides.’

‘Maybe you’ve got something there,’ agreed the Inspector.

‘Where exactly did these spuds disappear?’

‘Come into my office and I’ll show you.’

Biggles followed the Inspector into his department, the walls covered with maps dotted with the tops of drawing pins of many colours.

‘Here we are,’ said Gaskin, picking up a long pointer and taking a stand in front of a large-scale map of the Great North Road. ‘Here’s A.1., otherwise the main road north.’

‘I get it.’

‘Here’s Stamford.’ The Inspector pointed. ‘Here, twenty-one miles north, is Grantham.’

‘So the job was done between the two towns?’

‘The truck vanished somewhere in that sector. The driver had dropped his mate off at Doncaster, having arranged to pick him up there on his way home to their depot at Aberdeen. At three in the morning the driver pulled into one of the roadside cafés that keep open all night for long-distance traffic. He had a cup o’ coffee and a couple o’ sausages. He was away from his truck not more than a quarter of an hour. Other trucks

were drawing in and pulling out all the time, which explains why he didn't notice his own truck being started. When he went out it had gone. He had no means of knowing whether it had gone north or south, of course, so he phoned the police at both Grantham and Stamford. That blocked both ends of the sector while the truck must still have been on it. What happens?'

'The truck didn't arrive either at Grantham or Stamford.'

'You're too smart,' growled Gaskin. 'Somewhere on that stretch of road the truck must have turned off.'

'Of course.'

'Why of course?'

'The thief must have known what the driver would do as soon as he missed his truck, so unless he was an utter fool he'd take thundering good care to keep clear of the two towns where the police would be watching for him.'

'Okay. So he turned off. The question is, which way did he go, east or west? Not knowing the answer means a lot of country to search. There are side roads both ways.'

'On the east side you have Lincolnshire. To the west, Rutland and Leicestershire.'

'That's it. And that's where we're stuck. Motor cycle police were working both areas inside an hour but they found no sign of the truck. What does that suggest to you?'

'It suggests that the thief who pinched the truck had more sense than to stay on the road. He went to earth with his haul.'

'Talk sense. You can't go to earth with a ten ton truck piled high with sacks of potatoes.'

Biggles smiled. 'I wasn't speaking literally. Let's say he went into hiding. If he did that he must have known just where he was going when he pinched the truck. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that the existence of a good hide-out might well have determined the café from which a truck should be stolen. I mean, the theft was made within easy reach of the hide-out.'

'You could be right, at that,' conceded Gaskin. 'Anyway, the truck hasn't been found.'

'I imagine these thefts aren't one man jobs?'

'No. It's gang stuff. Two or three men at least.'

'Can your mobile police hope to find the truck while they merely race round the roads?'

'What else can they do? You can't drive a car or a motor bike across ploughed fields. With so much traffic on the roads it's no use looking for wheel tracks. The road surfaces are too hard for that, anyway.'

'It doesn't matter to me what's under my wheels when I'm in an aircraft,' said Biggles, meaningly.

'Are you suggesting you might have a look round from the air?'

'No harm would be done. What's the colour of the truck?'

‘Dark red, with a black tarpaulin over the load. The number is XKZ 969. The name of the company that owns the truck, Long Loco Ltd., is painted on the bonnet.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Biggles. ‘I’ll take some of my boys with me and we’ll have a look round. I’ll keep in touch with you on the high-frequency radio. You know my call signal. Now I’d better get cracking or I may be too late.’

‘Thanks a lot. Lunch is on me if you find that lorry.’

Biggles grinned. ‘Sounds as if you don’t expect me to find it.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Don’t spend all your money and tell your Radio Ops. Room to keep an ear open for my call.’ Biggles went out and walked briskly to his own office. ‘Anyone feel like a flip this fine morning?’ he questioned, breezily.

‘What’s the drill, old boy,’ inquired Bertie, folding the press cutting book on which he had been working.

‘The drill is to find a lost load of spuds.’

‘Are you kidding?’

‘No.’

‘Who lost these spuds, and where?’

‘They disappeared, with the truck hauling them to London, on the Great North Road.’

Said Algy, with cutting sarcasm, ‘With several thousand trucks whistling up and down that road, how are you going to spot the one you’re looking for?’

‘For being so pessimistic about it you can stay here and hold the fort till I come back,’ answered Biggles. ‘Ring the Ops. Room and tell them to pull out the Auster, top up the tanks and get her warmed up. Bertie, Ginger, grab your caps. This is urgent.’

‘Why all this fuss about a few spuds?’ demanded Algy.

‘If we can find ’em Gaskin pays for lunch.’

Inside five minutes the Air Police car was on its way to the airport. As they travelled Biggles told Ginger and Bertie what had happened and what he intended to do.

‘We can forget about the roads,’ he said. ‘If that truck is on a road we haven’t a hope of spotting it. I don’t think it is or it would have been found. No, it’s been tucked away somewhere and I’m reckoning on it being in the open. We’ll quarter the whole area within forty or fifty miles of where it disappeared, looking for anything that looks like a black tarpaulin.’

‘What if it’s camouflaged?’ queried Ginger.

‘If it is it will only be at the sides, against ground level observation,’ asserted Biggles, confidently. ‘I can’t credit these crooks with enough foresight to anticipate an air search for a load of potatoes. It’s never been done before so that’s where they may slip.’

‘Do you think they’ll still be with the truck?’ asked Ginger.

‘I don’t know. Probably not. It’s more likely that having parked it they’ll clear off and lie low until the police activity has fizzled out. That’s how I figure it, anyway. Again, having examined the load the truck was carrying they might have to take time to find a market. I doubt if they’d have taken that particular truck had they known it was only carrying potatoes. Cigarettes, whisky, and that sort of thing is their usual line. But having got the spuds I’d say they’ll try to sell ’em.’

They arrived at the airfield to find the Auster ready and waiting. Ginger got out the appropriate map and sitting next to Biggles opened it on his knees. Bertie sat behind prepared to do some spotting.

Biggles took off and headed for the Great North Road with its teeming traffic. He picked it up just south of Hatfield and followed it to Stamford.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘This is where we start. I’ll take the east side first. There’s more open country and that should make it easier.’

Then began one of those tedious flights known to air survey units and photographic pilots. Up and down, turn, and down again parallel. This went on for an hour and yielded nothing more than an occasional false alarm when, Biggles having taken the machine low, the object turned out to be a farm vehicle.

‘Now we’ll try the other side,’ said Biggles, cheerfully.

‘There are more turnings off the main road,’ observed Ginger.

‘There’s more cover, too; woods and things,’ put in Bertie.

The same procedure was followed, up and down, round, down and up, with an occasional low turn over a wood or a track.

It was over a wooded lane that dived at an angle from a secondary road that Ginger let out a cry. ‘Steady! Take her back over that piece you’ve just covered.’

Biggles complied. ‘Did you think you saw something?’

‘There’s a gravel pit just off that lane. I saw something black in it. There it is!’

‘I see what you mean,’ said Biggles, retarding the throttle and losing height.

‘It could be another tractor,’ remarked Bertie.

‘Too big for that,’ disputed Biggles. ‘I can’t see anybody moving near it. I think we shall have to go right down to have a close look at this.’

‘There’s a field straight in front of you.’

‘So I see.’ Biggles slipped off some height with a couple of S turns, landed, and taxied on to as near the gravel pit as the field allowed. They got out and walked the last few yards. This brought them to the lip of the pit, on the side farthest from the short, tree-shaded piece of track, much overgrown, that linked the open pit with the lane. It was clear from the state of the track that it had not been in regular use for some time.

‘That’s certainly a lorry,’ said Biggles. ‘Loaded, too. Let’s go down.’

They made their way to a slope and so down into the pit. Even before they reached the truck they could see it was the one they were seeking. The name on the bonnet and the registration number confirmed it. There was no one there. The rope holding down a corner of the tarpaulin cover had been untied but the load was still intact.

‘This’ll kill Gaskin,’ said Biggles, grinning. ‘I don’t think he took me seriously. I thought there was just a chance we might spot it but I wouldn’t have bet on it. Well—well!’

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

‘Let Gaskin know it’s here. We’d better not take our eyes off it in case it disappears again before he arrives. This is the drill. I’ll stay here with Ginger. Bertie, you take the machine home. As soon as you’re in the air call the Yard and give Gaskin the pin-point. Tell him to get here as quickly as he can. I don’t want to fiddle about here all night.’

‘Fair enough, chaps.’ Bertie departed, and presently could be heard taking off.

Biggles and Ginger found a seat in some bushes close at hand and, making themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted, prepared for a long wait. Biggles lit a cigarette.

The day wore on. Occasionally a car passed up the road and once a shepherd went by with some sheep; but no one came to the gravel pit. Ginger counted the hours. Five o’clock. Six. ‘If Gaskin doesn’t get here before dark things are likely to be difficult,’ he said, impatiently.

‘Give him a chance. He has some way to come. I can hear a car coming now. It’s slowing down. It has stopped. This should be him.’

This time, as was presently revealed, Biggles was wrong. A young man, roughly dressed, appeared, moving with caution at the point where the track ran into the pit. He surveyed the scene. Then, turning, he called, ‘Okay. Come on.’

A car nosed its way in first gear from the track to the pit. Two men got out. One carried spare registration number plates. The other, a pot of paint, which turned out to be dark green, and some brushes.

‘Sit still,’ breathed Biggles in Ginger’s ear. ‘This is how it’s done. In half an hour you won’t recognize that truck.’

‘It’ll be dark in half an hour,’ Ginger pointed out.

‘I’d rather wait than rush things and have a fist-fight with those three toughs who may have coshes in their pockets.’

Biggles and Ginger watched while the three men went to work, slapping on the new colour with more haste than accuracy. Finally, as dusk was closing in, the paint pot was thrown aside and one of the men made for the driving seat.

‘They’re going to pull out,’ said Ginger. ‘Hark!’

‘That should be Gaskin, looking for the track to the gravel pit,’ returned Biggles. ‘I shall take a chance on it. You go to the road and stop him in case he goes past. I’ll take charge of things here. Stick to the bushes and you may get away without being seen.’

In this Ginger must have succeeded, for the men with the truck showed no signs of alarm. Biggles got up and walked towards them, and, in fact, was almost on them before they noticed him. When they did they stiffened, staring aggressively.

‘This your truck?’ asked Biggles, casually.

After a brief pause one of the men answered ‘Yes.’

‘Funny place to choose to paint it.’

‘What’s that got to do with you?’ rasped one of the men.

‘This is private ground,’ announced Biggles.

‘So what? We’re just going, anyway.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘You’re going, but not where you think.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m a police officer and you’re under arrest for taking this truck without asking the owner’s permission,’ stated Biggles, imperturbably.

For perhaps five seconds nobody moved. Then the picture sprang to life. One of the men whipped out a short length of lead pipe. Another gasped, ‘Look out! Cops!’ He darted off, but Biggles put out a foot and he fell heavily.

Biggles himself then had to retire, fighting off the other two as they tried to reach their car.

Then, suddenly, it was all over. Dark figures materialized in the gloom. There were some blows, a scuffle, some heavy breathing, then a lull.

‘Nice work, Bigglesworth,’ said the voice of Inspector Gaskin. ‘I must hand it to you for this.’

‘Mind your clothes if you go near the truck,’ returned Biggles. ‘It’s just had a new coat of paint.’

‘So that’s it, eh?’ Gaskin gave an order and the truck thieves were marched to the police cars.

‘Is this the car these fellers arrived in?’ went on Gaskin, walking up to it and peering at the number plate.

‘That’s it.’

‘It was pinched this morning, at Hendon. It’ll have to go back.’

‘That’s fine,’ rejoined Biggles. ‘I was wondering how I was going to get home. I’ll take this car and follow you. We have a lunch date to-morrow—remember?’

‘You’re not likely to allow me to forget,’ answered Gaskin, sadly.

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.

Illustrations by Leslie Stead (1899-1966).

[The end of *Biggles Presses On* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]