Biggles

AND THE LEOPARDS OF ZINN

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS

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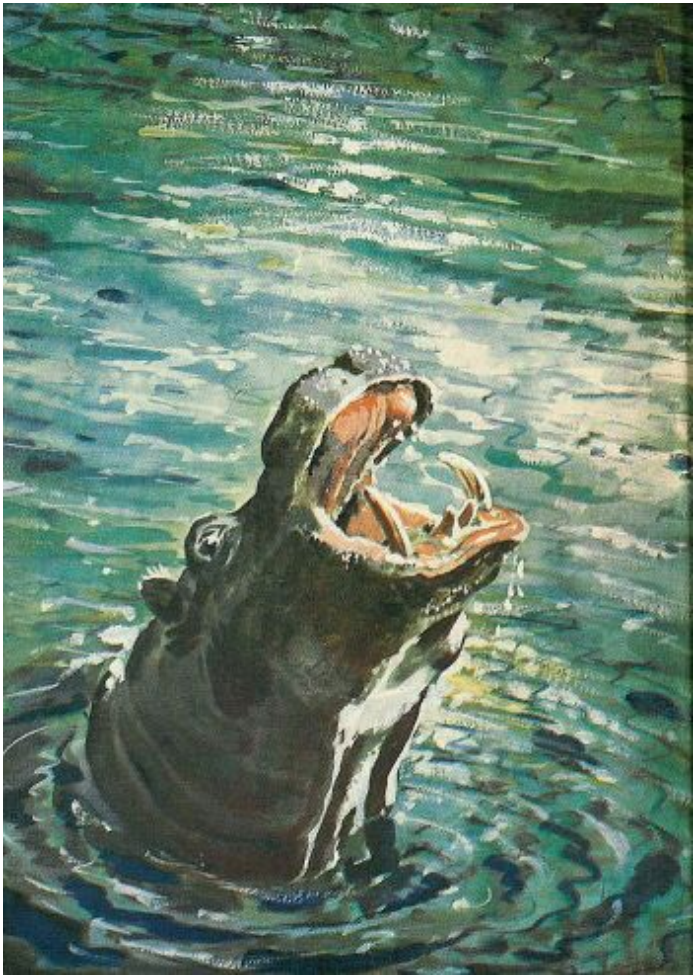
BIGGLES AND THE LEOPARDS OF ZINN

In his latest sortie into Central Africa Biggles reveals his two pet hates—the crocodile and trouble-making man. The four-footed enemy proved simpler to locate, but he needed all the luck he could get, aided by constant vigilance and iron nerves, before he freed the terrorized Zinns of the second and deadlier peril



The hippo looked at the aircraft, yawned, snorted and submerged (page 18)

BIGGLES AND THE LEOPARDS OF ZINN

In Central Africa Biggles & Co. free a primitive race from sinister influences and expose a plot

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CAPT. W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Leslie Stead

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

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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FOREWORD

SINCE the dawn of history men have marched from the land of their birth into another country and claimed it for their own. Usually there was little the victims of this aggression could do about it, as was the case when the Romans came to Britain, and later, the Normans. The Romans went away but the Normans stayed. These were wars of conquest.

Then came a time, and this not very long ago, when small parties of men, dissatisfied with conditions in their own country, or perhaps seeking wealth, would set out for some new land that took their fancy and establish themselves there regardless of how the native inhabitants might feel about it. As the new arrivals were usually aimed with guns, and the local people had only bows and arrows, argument was one-sided, and more often than not the invaders stayed.

Let us admit it. The conquerors generally came from Europe, and their victims were the coloured races that occupied most of the great land masses of the earth. This has sometimes been called The Age of Discovery.

This sort of thing, this casual seizure of other people's property, came to an end less than a century ago, and the coloured races, those that have managed to survive the disastrous habits and diseases introduced by the white men, are now reminding us of certain sinister facts that cannot be denied.

Whether or not the coloured races lost by these transactions is a matter of opinion. Let us be fair. It was not all one-sided. If the black man lost his right to govern himself there were compensations, for he gained many things he would otherwise not have had.

There are, of course, still a few native races which, by reason of their remoteness, an unhealthy climate or the sterile nature of the soil around them, have escaped molestation. Mostly they are to be found in the heart of the great continents, South America and Africa; and the heart of Africa is roughly the area where the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa rub frontiers with Northern Uganda and the Southern Sudan. Here there are still tribes, mostly small ones, that live their lives as they have for centuries, and it is now a point of honour on the part of those who lay official claim to the territory to leave them alone, interfering only to help them with, for instance, food and medicines, in times of need.

When, therefore, in this new adventure of Biggles and Co., word reached the ears of the Colonial Office in London that all was not well with a tiny inoffensive tribe called Zinns, steps had to be taken to ascertain exactly what was happening and who was responsible. Were the trouble-makers black or white? It could be either, for there are still unscrupulous white men; on the other hand there are coloured men who are not above preying on their less fortunate brethren. Who were they? What were they doing? Or were the culprits *really* animals?

Speed was necessary, for death was stalking the land, and that was why Biggles, by reason of his aircraft, was given the assignment. With very little reliable information available he went with an open mind, prepared for anything.

How he fared will be learned in the following pages.

CHAPTER 1

MURDER—OR WHAT?

THE GADFLY, the Air Police long-range amphibious aircraft, flying by dead reckoning at an altitude of ten thousand feet, thrust sun-tortured air behind it as it bored a course above the mighty land mass that is the continent of Africa. In all directions lay the flat, mostly arid plains of the north-central plateau, dull and monotonous, with hardly a feature to serve as a landmark to be remembered. The vast dome of the sky was not the soft, pleasing cornflower blue of the temperate zones, but the hard steely-grey that results from an almost complete absence of humidity. To Ginger, sitting in the cockpit beside Biggles, the atmosphere felt dry and thin, as in fact it was, and usually is near the equator far from any of the great oceans.

Below, the limitless panorama showed every sign of this, for it was some time since the equatorial rain-forests of the more westerly regions had slowly petered out in what appeared to be sterile earth with occasional scrub or a few solitary flat-topped acacia trees fighting a losing battle against their relentless master overhead. Without sign of life, animal or human, without anything to provide rest for the eyes, the colourless landscape was wearisome in its endless sameness. As Ginger remarked moodily to Biggles, one only begins to realize the size of what used to be the Dark Continent by flying over it for hours on end without getting anywhere. It was not so much dark as drab.

More time passed without change of scene. Ginger took a fresh piece of gum and chewed it stubbornly.

'I'll admit it's a bit trying on the nerves,' admitted Biggles. 'But,' he added cheerfully, 'there is this about it. Should anything go wrong there's plenty of room to get down. According to my reckoning another hour should see us there. That pale area of sky on the horizon a little to the right should be the reflection of Lake Albert. A large area of inland water can have that effect on the sky in the same way that a Pacific atoll can throw up a greenish tinge that's visible from a long way off. It's the same with an oasis in the desert.'

The Gadfly droned across the lonely waste.

'I'd have thought we'd be seeing some game by now,' remarked Ginger reflectively, after a while. 'It looks typical lion country.'

'Not without water-holes. Everything likes to be within reach of water. Where the grass-eaters go the meat-eaters follow. I doubt if you'll see anything until we get nearer the lake. Then the beasts we shall have to look out for will be hippos. I forgot to ask if there are any in Lake Jumu, but if there is a school of 'em, and there usually is in water of any size, they may get in our way landing and taking off. They're harmless enough,

but one might as well hit a rock as a hippo; and we couldn't blame one for taking exception to being rammed by an aircraft.'

'Jumu isn't all that big.'

'Maybe not, but hippos are one of the creatures that are on the increase, and as in some places the water is drying up one finds big concentrations of them. That's what I've been told. We shall soon know if we're likely to have any trouble in that direction.'

'I can see some ostriches,' observed Ginger presently.

'They like it dry, although even they have to drink. Is that a belt of timber I see ahead? If so it may be the spur of forest which we're told runs close to the western side of the lake.'

'It's either trees or scrub,' answered Ginger, squinting through the shimmering heat-haze.

Confirmation came a few minutes later when what appeared to be a long slither of glass came into view ahead.

'That's water,' declared Biggles. 'It could be either Jumu or Lake Albert, although if we're on course, and as I've seen no sign of drift we should be, I'd say it's our objective. Our E.T.A.[A] isn't far out.'

[A] E.T.A. Estimated Time of Arrival.

The drone of the engines faded a little as Biggles throttled back and began to lose height. 'Tell Bertie and Algy to stand by for landing. If the water's open I may go straight in.'

'Okay.' Ginger went aft to the cabin.

When a few minutes later he returned to the controls, with the machine down to two thousand feet and bumping rather badly in turbulent overheated air, the lake that was the objective lay in plain view. From the information that had been provided there was no mistaking it.

It was a long, narrow piece of water, shaped roughly like a crescent or a pair of buffalo horns. At the widest part, which was in the middle, it might have been three or four miles across, not more. In length, from the tip of one horn to the other, the distance could have been twenty miles, though this was not easy to judge because both ends petered out in extensive belts of reeds. In comparison with most African lakes it was therefore quite small. The water looked dark, lifeless, stagnant, but appeared to be free of surface weeds except near the tapering ends. For the most part the banks were flat open beaches of mud or sand.

Biggles, who had approached at right angles, cruised on, still losing height, across the widest part, midway between the tips of the horns.

'I can see the government rest-house, straight ahead,' said Ginger.

‘And there are the hippos,’ returned Biggles, indicating with a nod a number of black, shapeless objects, from which rolled out a succession of concentric ripples. ‘If that’s their usual position they shouldn’t be in our way, nor we in theirs. I can see crocs, too, on the flats, so we’d better think twice about bathing.’

There were plenty of birds, mostly long-legged waders, along the fringe of the water, but not enough, Biggles thought, to cause them any concern in landing or taking off.

‘Confound those stinking crocs,’ complained Ginger. ‘I was looking forward to a bathe.’

‘I imagine they’ll be fish-eaters. Apparently there are plenty of fish. I’m told Nile perch have been caught weighing up to fifty pounds. They’re the staple diet of the natives. Where are they, by the way? There should be some about. I can’t see a soul.’

‘What’s that towards the far end of the lake? I can see something moving. Antelope?’

‘Probably water buck.’

‘I can see what looks like a village, but there’s no one about,’ went on Ginger, his eyes still exploring the bank they were now approaching.

‘We’ll look for them later,’ decided Biggles. ‘I’m tired, so I shall go straight in.’ He held on towards a small, dilapidated-looking structure, forlorn and lonely, that stood back a short distance from the waveless edge of the black water. It stood on sandy soil near a solitary leafless tree that provided a perch for several hunchbacked vultures.

‘I thought someone was to be here to meet us,’ said Ginger.

‘That was the arrangement,’ answered Biggles, in a curious voice.

Ginger looked at him. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘I don’t see anyone.’

‘He may not have got here yet.’

‘Those vultures have got here,’ said Biggles, significantly. ‘I don’t like the look of things. There’s the spur of forest we were told about,’ he added, nodding towards a straggling belt of trees.

‘Not much of a forest, compared with what we flew over earlier in the day. Most of the trees look half dead.’

‘I suppose they called it forest to mark the difference between that area and the open ground round the lake.’

Broadly speaking, the ground round the lake was more or less open, although there were occasional clumps of scrub and one or two of the flat-topped trees that are a feature of central Africa.

An old dug-out canoe lying on the shore was still the only sign of human activity. Biggles made a trial run at a height of only a few feet over his proposed landing area, the water directly in front of the rest-house, to confirm there were no obstructions, dead or alive. This also served the purpose of clearing the bank of birds and crocodiles. This done he put the machine down without difficulty or mishap, although not, it appeared,

without a certain amount of risk; for as it finished its run and floated, rocking slightly on the placid surface of the lake, an enormous head with bulging eyes surfaced slowly thirty or forty yards away. The hippo, probably a solitary old bull, looked at the aircraft, yawned, snorted and submerged.

'That's the trouble with hippos,' muttered Biggles. 'You never know where and when one is going to pop up.'

'You could have landed on the shore,' Ginger pointed out, as Biggles brought the nose of the aircraft towards it.

'I was afraid it might turn out to be soft mud. To get bogged down seemed a bigger risk than bumping into a hippo. Besides, that old canoe is lying foul of the fairway. We'll shift it later for dry landings if the hippos look like getting in our way.'

A touch of throttle urged the machine gently towards the low shelving beach of what turned out to be dry sandy earth.

Bertie appeared, to regard the place with frank disfavour.

'I say, chaps, this isn't my idea of a tropical paradise,' he said in a disappointed voice.

'What did you expect?' inquired Biggles.

'I thought there might be a few bananas and what-have-you knocking about.'

'Had there been any bananas here the hippos would have had 'em.'

Bertie sighed. 'Pity. You know how I adore bananas.'

'So do hippos. Forget your fruity appetite for a bit and concentrate on what we're here for. This never looked like a luxury cruise to me. If I know anything these mud flats stink of mosquitoes, and mosquitoes mean malaria, so it's five grains of quinine a day for everyone while we're here. That stagnant water looks pretty poisonous, too. We shall have to boil every drop before we drink it.'

'Oh I say, have a heart,' protested Bertie. 'Why do you always think of the nasty things?'

'Maybe it's a good thing for you I do,' returned Biggles, lightly. Speaking more seriously he added, 'You might remember what has happened in that shanty which is politely called a rest-house.'

'I must admit the bally place isn't exactly bristling with hospitality,' conceded Bertie. 'Is that piece of rag hanging on the pole supposed to be a Union Jack?'

'What's left of one, I imagine. Don't worry. We'll soon brighten the place up.'

'With what?' inquired Algy, cynically. 'I don't notice any roses round the door.'

'It looks a sinister sort of dump to me,' asserted Ginger. 'Do we have to live in it?'

'You don't *have* to. You can sleep on the ground outside if you don't mind being torn to pieces by mosquitoes. Stop grousing. We're lucky to have a roof over our heads.'

'Where are these Africans we were told about?' queried Algy. 'I don't see any rushing to greet us.'

‘They’ll be around,’ replied Biggles confidently. ‘That’s why the government put a rest-house here, to provide a shake-down for the District Officer when he comes up once in a while to see how the local lads are getting along.’

‘Then why haven’t they shown up? There can’t be so many aircraft in these parts that they’re tired of looking at ’em.’

‘How would I know?’

‘And what about the bloke who was supposed to meet us here to act as interpreter?’ put in Bertie. ‘Why hasn’t he arrived?’

‘Maybe he’s on his way from the Resident Magistrate’s Headquarters at Nabula,’ returned Biggles, shortly. ‘Remember, it’s over two hundred miles away, and it would take a little while for him to cover the ground on foot. Now for goodness sake stop asking questions. Let’s get the place shipshape before we rattle our brains with too many whys and wherefores. Given time they’ll sort themselves out.’

While this conversation had been going on, the aircraft, its wheels lowered, had been moved to the shore and brought to rest conveniently near the rest-house.

‘There’s no sign of any wind so she should be all right there,’ said Biggles, after a glance round the sky. ‘Our time’s our own so I shan’t do any more flying to-day. By the time we’ve had a bite to eat, unloaded stores and kit, it’ll be getting on towards sundown. To-morrow morning it shouldn’t take more than an hour to make a close reconnaissance of the district. I’m not much for working on foot but we shall have to go light on fuel and oil. The first job will be to locate the Zinns, so as to be all ready for this interpreter chap when he arrives.’

After a quick, rather scratch meal, taken on the beach rather than in the rest-house, which was crawling with flies and other insects, the work of unloading began, Ginger taking on the task of spraying the inside of the building with an efficient insecticide which not only floored the uninvited occupants but gave the place a more healthy aroma.

The rest-house, put up for visiting officials, was a simple single-storied affair of light timber and palm thatch, the thatch in front overhanging a duckboard verandah that ran the full length of the main building. This comprised two compartments, a living room and sleeping accommodation divided by a light bamboo screen. This, of course, was for the white officer in charge of the visiting party. Adjacent to it was what might be called a compound for his escort and bearers. This was simply an extension of the walls: actually a fence of thorn scrub about eight feet high, open in front but roofed round the sides against inclement weather. Oblong in shape, it formed an enclosed area to which access could only be gained through a twelve-foot-wide opening in the front. On the far side, standing by itself, was a small, stable-like compartment, presumably for the use of the N.C.O. in charge of the coloured members of the party. In a word, it was typical of hundreds of the temporary quarters scattered throughout the length and breadth of Africa.

Into the house itself were carried camp kit and several boxes of stores—enough, Biggles had reckoned, to last a week even if they were unable to augment the pot with

fresh meat or fish procured on the spot. A dozen jerry-cans of aviation spirit and a drum of oil, an emergency measure, were stacked outside.

These were followed by a variety of weapons far in excess of what were normally carried in the aircraft even on distant assignations in 'off-the-map' parts of the world. There was a reason for this, as will be appreciated later. They included a double-barrelled Express rifle, an ex-service ·303, a double-barrelled ten-bore shotgun, and four forty-five revolvers. For all these there was a small supply of ammunition.

'I say, you know, anyone would think we were going to start a bally war,' observed Bertie, as the arsenal was carried under cover.

'It may come to that,' replied Biggles, dryly. 'It's unlikely that this battery of guns will ever be needed, and I hope it never will be; but on a job like this and in a place like this one never knows. I prefer to err on the safe side rather than be caught short of fire power miles from anywhere. We don't want to end up like that.' He jabbed a thumb towards two long low mounds of earth a short distance away, each with a rough wooden cross at the head. There was no need to guess what they were. They were obviously graves.

He looked up at the vultures still sitting hunched in the lone tree. 'What are they waiting for, I wonder,' he muttered. 'Those ugly brutes can smell death miles away.'

'How about giving 'em a rattle with the shotgun—to sort of discourage 'em, if you see what I mean,' suggested Bertie.

'There's no sense in wasting ammunition,' answered Biggles. 'But I think, before we settle in, it might be a good thing if we had a look round to make sure there's nothing with spots on lying in wait for us.'

'Oh come off it, old boy,' protested Bertie. 'I can't see a leopard taking us on.'

'Neither could they.' Biggles nodded towards the graves. 'I don't like those vultures hanging about,' he said again, frowning. He walked along to the entrance to the compound, stopping to survey the interior. This done, followed by the others, he began making a tour of the native covered sleeping quarters which, as already explained, were open in front. Nothing of interest was seen. Dry grass had been thrown down to serve as beds and in one place an overturned iron cooking pot lay on the ashes of a fire.

They walked on. Reaching the little enclosed compartment Biggles stopped. 'It's in here,' he said quietly.

'What is?' asked Ginger.

'I don't know. But I've had this feeling before. Those birds know. Stand still, everyone.' In dead silence Biggles advanced to the entrance of the hut. A glance inside and he stepped back quickly. His face had paled. 'I was right,' he said, shortly. 'So are those birds.'

'A man?' Ginger breathed the words.

'Yes.'

'Who?'

'I don't know. A coloured man. He wore some sort of uniform. It could be the chap who was to meet us here. Now I understand why the Zinns didn't break their necks

rushing to greet us.'

'What killed him?'

'I wouldn't care to say. It looked like the work of an animal; lion—or leopard. Ghastly mess. The poor fellow has been torn to ribbons.' Biggles lit a cigarette.

'This is a nice start,' muttered Algy. 'What are you going to do? Bury him?'

Biggles grimaced. 'Not me. He's been dead for two or three days, and in this climate you know what that means. Pile some of that dry grass round. We'll burn the whole thing. It's the only thing to do. But before we do that I shall have to check for identification.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' cried Ginger, aghast. 'Must you?'

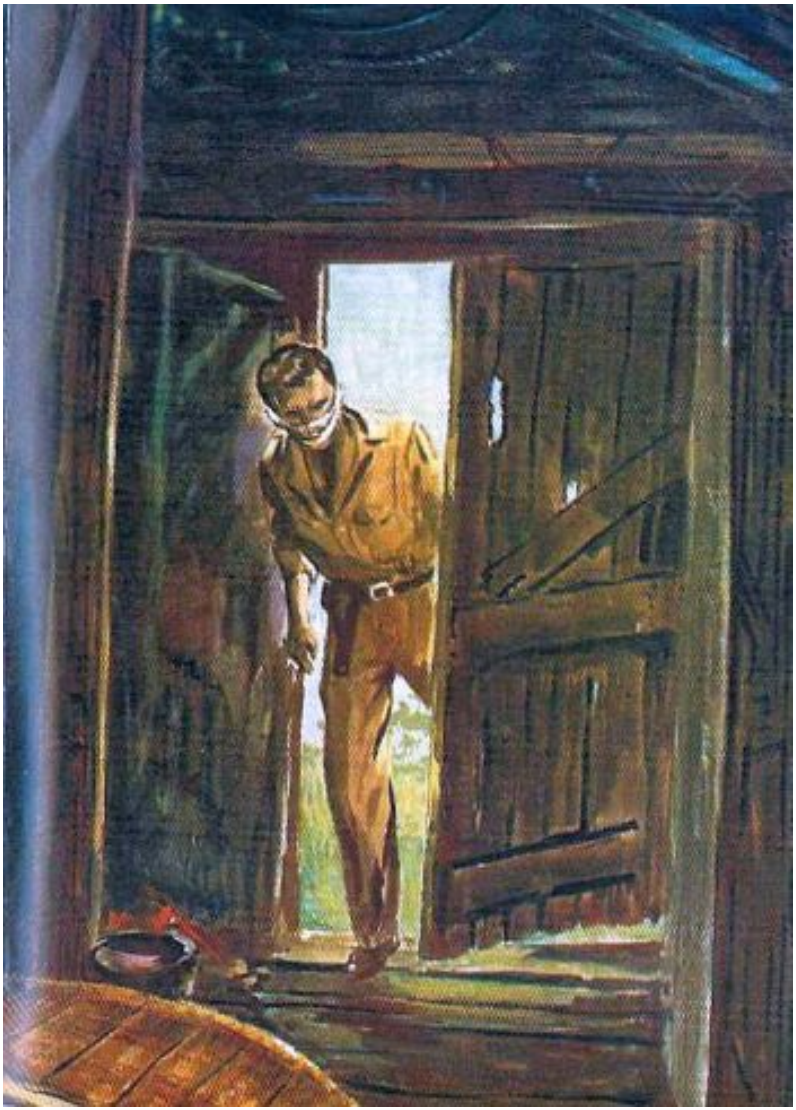
'Definitely. As a soldier he'll have an identity disc. I must get it for official records. We owe the poor chap that. He may have a family somewhere. The business won't take long. Ginger, slip into the house and fetch me a roll of bandage and a bottle of antiseptic from the medicine chest.'

Ginger hurried off and returned with the required articles.

Biggles poured some of the liquid on the bandage, wound it round his mouth and nose and walked into the death hut.

In five minutes he came out, a small round object dangling from a string in his hand. Without a word he closed the door. Then, flicking on his petrol lighter, he applied it to the sun-dried grass which the others had been piling round the flimsy structure. The flames leapt up, devouring the tinder-like material. For a few minutes, backing away from the heat, they stood watching the funeral pyre.

'There was nothing else for it,' muttered Biggles, having removed the bandage from his face. 'It was pretty nasty, but it had to be done.' Walking down to the water he washed his hands and the object they held. This done he read the name on the disc.



Biggles walked into the death hut (page 24)

‘Sergeant Abdullah I’Mobo,’ he murmured. ‘I’d say he was the man sent to meet us. He was either brave or a fool to stay here alone. He must have been warned of what had been going on. I’ll inquire about that when I report his death. He makes number three to die here.’

‘You say it really looked like the work of some wild beast?’ questioned Algy, as they returned slowly to the bungalow.

‘It did. The body, particularly the face and the clothes, had been torn to shreds by claws of some sort.’

‘In that case the killer could only have been a lion or a leopard.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t?’ Algy’s eyebrows went up. ‘Why not?’

‘If the killer had been a man-eater the body would at least have been partly consumed. As far as I could make out there were no signs of that. A man-eater kills for food.’

‘Maybe the beast wasn’t hungry.’

‘In that case it’s unlikely that it would have killed. In any case, a man-eater almost invariably returns to its kill. Why didn’t this one? That body had been there two or three days and nights. Those vultures knew it was there. Maybe they could smell it. But they daren’t go inside.’

‘I’d still say it was an animal,’ argued Algy.

‘All right. Then tell me this,’ requested Biggles. ‘The man was a soldier. As such he would have a rifle and cartridge belt. They weren’t in the hut. What happened to them? Even the most ferocious beast doesn’t bother itself with that sort of hardware.’

They all stopped, looking at Biggles.

But Algy still had one argument left. ‘That man wouldn’t come here alone,’ he declared. ‘There must have been a party of them. Right?’

Biggles agreed.

‘Then I’d say what happened was this. When the man was killed the others collected his gear and returned to their base.’

‘If they stopped to collect his gear why didn’t they take his identity disc?’ Biggles shook his head. ‘No. That won’t do. I allow it’s hardly likely the man would come here alone. But if I know anything, when that man was killed, any others who may have been here at the time would move off at the double, stopping for nothing. The African can be brave enough when he’s facing something he understands; but when it comes to superstition, which is something beyond his control, he goes to pieces. And that doesn’t only apply to Africans.’

No one answered.

‘Well,’ went on Biggles, ‘we shall have to see the same beast doesn’t maul us. I’m afraid that means double guards, day and night. I’m beginning to understand why we were sent here. With an aircraft we can move faster than people working on foot. Let’s get organized before the light goes.’

CHAPTER 2

AN UNUSUAL ASSIGNMENT

BIGGLES' participation in the affair of the Leopards of Zinn had begun exactly a week earlier when his chief, Air Commodore Raymond, had called him to his office, and, without preamble, greeted him with the words: 'I want you to make a sortie to Central Africa for me as quickly as possible.'

Biggles' face expressed no emotion. 'Do you mean you, personally, want me to go?'

'No. It's the Colonial Office. It has been suggested to me that we might be able to untangle a little problem that's worrying them there. Sit down.'

Biggles took a chair and reached for a cigarette. 'Why us?'

'Because an aircraft has a degree of mobility denied to people who have to travel on foot, and in this case there might be a lot of ground to cover fast.'

'I see. If it's only a little matter why the hurry?'

'It may turn out to be not so little.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'Now we're getting nearer the gristle.'

The Air Commodore sat back, fingers together, expression serious. 'In Africa at the moment, as you must know if you keep pace with the news, squibs have a habit of becoming rockets almost overnight. The whole continent is seething with unrest and it only needs a spark to start a fire. That, of course, is what certain trouble-makers hope to do. You've had a fair amount of experience flying over Africa.'

'I have, but Africa's a big place, and there are still large areas I've never seen. I doubt if one man in his lifetime could really get to grips with it.'

'Think what it must have been like for the early explorers who had to do their work on foot.'

'All I can say is, had I lived at that period I wouldn't have been among them,' stated Biggles, smiling. 'I'm nothing for wearing out shoe leather. Life's too short. I like to get quickly to where I'm going. Where exactly is the mischief brewing this time?'

'A north-central area called Zinda.'

'Never heard of it.'

'I'd have been surprised if you had. Few people have been there, probably because there's nothing to go for. It's mostly dry country, for which reason cultivation is difficult and there's no big game worth talking about. Again, for that reason, the district is sparsely populated. Here's a tracing of the area from a large-scale map supplied by

the Colonial Office.' The Air Commodore passed a sheet of transparent paper. 'As you see, the centre is Lake Jumu.'

'I've never heard of that, either.'

'Lake Jumu is one of the smaller lakes in the extreme north of Uganda, not a great distance from Lake Albert. You'll have heard of that one. The nearest permanent British post is at Nabula. There's a Resident Magistrate there, and a District Officer, with a small squad of Askaris—you know, King's African Rifles. Reliable lads. There's a rest-house of sorts on the shore of Lake Jumu. As you will see if you look at the map the lake is close to the border of the Belgian Congo. There's been trouble there, too. For that matter it's no great distance from Southern Sudan and the most easterly point of French Equatorial Africa. None of these boundaries are clearly defined, so be careful not to trespass. There's no actual landing-strip near Jumu so I'd advise you to operate from the lake itself. Your best way of getting there would be to fly down the Nile refuelling at Malakal. Kampala, also on the main air route, would, as a base, probably be a bit too far south. However, I leave that to you.'

'You say the country round Jumu is no use for anything. If so, what's the fuss about?'

'Apparently the ground is sterile, no use either for grazing or cultivation. The only people there are a small tribe called Zinns. They live on the shore of the lake.'

'With no cultivation and practically no game what do they use for food?'

'Fish. Oddly enough, there are plenty of fish in the lake. That's their staple diet. They don't get very fat on it. They've been invited to move to a better region but they prefer to stay where they are. Of all native Africans the Zinns are probably the least touched by civilization.'

'I take it they come under our administration?'

'Yes, although in practice we have little to do. As I've said, our nearest regular post is at Nabula, nearly two hundred miles away. There would be no point in keeping a district officer at Lake Jumu; there would be nothing for him to do. There isn't enough game to attract professional poachers and it's too far from anywhere to make prospecting worth while. It would be an expensive business to take a safari there. Such an expedition would only be justified were there reliable reports of something worth investigating. Even if anything was found it would have to be rich to make the cost of development worth while. Anyhow, now you understand why, with a lake available for landing, it was thought to be, apart from speed, more economical to send an aircraft.'

'I take it the country has been thoroughly explored?'

'Oh yes. It's visited at intervals by an officer sent up from Nabula. He really goes to have a word with the Zinns to make sure they're all right and do what he can for any sick among them. So far they've always seemed content. We've never had any trouble with them. Apparently all they want is to be left alone. They're not even interested in what we are pleased to call modern conveniences.'

'They're not a warrior tribe?'

'Nothing like that. There would be nobody for them to fight if they were. They just live quietly by fishing. They've been given corn and vegetable seeds in an effort to get

cultivation going on the bank of the lake but they simply eat the stuff as soon as the visiting officer has gone. They've even been given fishing tackle, but they still go on the old way, driving fish into the shallows and then spearing them, regardless of crocodiles which cause a good many casualties. The Zinns accept the risk as a matter of course, in the same way that we ignore the likelihood of being knocked down by traffic every time we step on the road.'

Biggles nodded. 'Okay, sir. So much for the Zinns. I gather something has happened to upset this happy state of things.'

'I'm coming to that now; but I wanted you in the first place to get a general idea of the set-up. The first indication of trouble occurred some weeks ago when the chief at Nabula sent up a young fellow named James, fresh out from Home, to make the periodic visit and have a look round. He had with him an escort of a sergeant and two native police, and six bearers—all coloured men. It seems that whereas the visiting officer was usually made welcome, on this occasion his reception was—well, not exactly hostile, but chilly. The Zinns seemed surly, unwilling to talk, as if they were afraid of something. The officer would, we may suppose, have attempted to discover the reason for this, had he been given the opportunity. He had an interpreter with him. But he was given no chance. That same night, sleeping in the government rest-house, he was killed by a leopard.'

Biggles looked astonished. 'A leopard!'

'Yes. Presumably a man-eater.'

'That's a bit unusual, isn't it—I mean, for a leopard to go inside a building?'

The Air Commodore nodded. 'I'd say most unusual.'

'It's known that there are leopards in the district?'

'I suppose there could be leopards anywhere in Africa but there had been no earlier reports of a man-eater in the vicinity. In spite of being hunted for their skins they're still fairly common. Normally, as you probably know, they prefer open, hilly, rocky ground, with some shade to lie up in during the heat of the day. I'm told there's a fringe of forest not far from the rest-house; otherwise the country is open.'

'Is it known exactly how this happened?'

'It was a hot, moonless night. James was sleeping with the door open. His men, sleeping in the compound, heard him cry out, but in the pitch dark there was nothing they could do. They say they saw nothing. When daylight came they found the body of poor James, horribly mutilated, with signs indicating that he had been mauled by a wild beast. They buried the body and spoke to the Zinns, but could get nothing out of them. Naturally, they then started back for their base to report what had happened.'

'Then what?'

'A professional white hunter, a man named Major Wilson, was sent up to get the man-eater. In his time he must have killed scores of lions and leopards. That was his job. He took his own safari of twenty bearers, yet within twenty-four hours of arrival he had suffered the same fate as James.'

'Killed by a leopard?'

‘According to his bearers, who were pretty badly shaken, that was what it looked like.’

‘Why were these men so shaken? A white hunter doesn’t take out men unless they have been tried and proved reliable. They must have faced tooth and claw often enough.’

‘I don’t know. That’s something we’d like to know.’

Biggles stubbed his cigarette and lit another. ‘I see, sir. Now suppose we get down to brass tacks. You’re not asking me to go to Africa to look for a leopard, not even a man-eater. That’s not my line of country. Would I be right in guessing that there’s a suspicion there may be more behind this than appears on the surface?’

‘You would.’

‘Ah. It’s thought these two white men may have been murdered, and a four-footed beast had nothing to do with it, even if the signs pointed that way?’

The Air Commodore smiled bleakly. ‘As usual you’ve kept up with the story. You may have heard of the secret societies of West Africa known as leopard-men, snake-men, and so on?’

‘Of course, but thank goodness they’ve never come my way.’

‘Well, the Resident Magistrate at Nabula has an idea that they may have muscled into our territory to start their racket there. These so-called secret societies are of course rackets, pure and simple. Like the gangsterism in America they work by blackmail. They say to selected victims, give us money, or you’ll die.’

‘But you say the Zinns have no money, or anything else.’

‘That’s what’s puzzling us. These half-educated hoodlums can terrorize an entire district. Even the chiefs of tribes have to pay tribute in order to stay alive. They’re an absolute curse, and cause untold trouble. Murder can never be proved. No one will give evidence against them. The method is for the killers to go out at night dressed in the skins of the beasts the society is supposed to represent and do their dirty work using teeth and claws for weapons. The death then looks like the work of a man-eater. That’s how they get away with it.’

Biggles pursed his lips. ‘I see,’ he murmured, pensively.

‘If these devils have set up business near Lake Jumu we can say good-bye to the wretched Zinns. They’d be helpless. Even now they’re obviously scared stiff of something yet they’re afraid to talk. They’re not cowards. They have to face up to crocodiles to get their daily fish. Why should they be so scared of a leopard?’

‘You tell me.’

‘I’ve already told you. We can think of only one reason. The leopard-men, or maybe lion-men, have stepped in.’

‘But why? What are they after in the Zinn territory?’

‘That’s what we’d like to know. There must be something there. The Zinns couldn’t raise half a crown between them. They have no use for money. But I repeat, unless a real man-eater has arrived on the scene there must be *something* worth having. If we knew what that was I wouldn’t be asking you to go to Africa.’

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette with thoughtful deliberation. ‘So it all boils down to this. The Colonial Office suspects these killings are really murders with a practical purpose behind them, and they want to know what it is. Fair enough. But why choose me? Surely they’d do better to send an officer of their own service who knows the way of Africans, can speak their language, and would therefore be better equipped for such an investigation?’

‘One would think so, and I put forward the same argument. But it seems that these very qualifications would prove a handicap. Such a man would have to rely on native intelligence, which would apply to his own bearers as well as the Zinns; but if they were scared he’d get nothing out of them. What could he do single-handed? Then there’s the question of mobility. The actions of a badly frightened African, when fear is based on superstition, are unpredictable. He’s as helpless as a rabbit hypnotized by a stoat. You, with an aircraft and stores, would be able to keep the whole district under your eye.’

Again Biggles nodded. ‘True enough.’

‘But I must make this clear,’ went on the Air Commodore. ‘Up to the present there isn’t a shred of evidence to show, much less prove, that these killings were not the work of a genuine leopard. It’s only the behaviour of the Zinns that suggests they were not. They wouldn’t be stricken dumb by the appearance of a common-or-garden leopard. If the killer was a leopard we’ve nothing to worry about. It could be hunted down and killed, and that would be that. But if someone from outside was infiltrating into the district, with Africa as it is, that could be a much more serious matter. We’ve never had any trouble in the Zinn country and we don’t want any. It would be a tragedy if they were frightened into turning against us, as has happened in other parts of the continent.’

Biggles stubbed the end of his cigarette in the ash-tray. ‘All right, sir. You’ve explained the position clearly except in one respect.’

‘What’s that?’

‘If the killer turns out to be a real leopard what am I to do?’

‘Kill it if you can.’

‘And if it should so happen that the beast has only two legs instead of the usual four—what then?’

The Air Commodore hesitated.

‘Come on, sir. It’s up to you to give the orders.’

‘Find out what the game is.’

‘And leave the killers there to carry on?’

Again the Air Commodore hesitated. ‘I’d rather leave that to your own initiative.’

Biggles smiled mirthlessly. ‘In other words I carry the can?’

‘You don’t expect me to order you to kill a native?’

‘Then what do I do with him—if he happens to have spots on and carries claws?’

‘That’s up to you.’

‘Then let’s put it like this. I’m nothing for half measures, or lily-fingered tactics. If I take on this job, when I pack up I shall leave everything clean and tidy.’

‘Don’t be difficult, Bigglesworth,’ protested the Air Commodore. ‘You’re an old hand when it comes to tricky business. As far as I’m concerned you can do anything you think would be in the best interests of everyone concerned. Any action you take will have my full support. You can rely on that.’

‘Fair enough, sir,’ agreed Biggles cheerfully. ‘I’ll take my lads along and we’ll see what we can do. What about the Resident Magistrate at Nabula? Will you let him know I’m on my way out to Lake Jumu?’

‘I shall have to do that. He’s entitled to know.’

‘Then how about asking him to send me up a man who speaks the Zinn language to act as an interpreter? I could meet him at the rest-house on the shore of the lake.’

‘That sounds a sensible arrangement.’

‘Then let’s leave it like that.’ Biggles got up. ‘I’ll start getting organized right away. I’ll see you again before I go. Meanwhile, you might let me know if any further news comes in.’

‘I will.’

Biggles went out.

It will now be understood why he had flown to the seldom-visited Lake Jumu, what he hoped to achieve, and why he was taking precautions more elaborate than usual.

CHAPTER 3

UNWELCOME VISITORS

AFTER the shock of finding yet a third tragedy at the rest-house half an hour was sufficient time for the temporary base to be established. Actually there was little to do. The flies and mosquitoes having been exterminated, and some small lizards that had taken up residence removed, the stores and sundries were stowed away. The aeroplane was brought nearer to the verandah in a position from which it could not be approached by anyone without being observed. Biggles made a simple but practical filter, to remove solids from the water, by burning black some slices of bread. Through this all water for drinking would be passed before being boiled.

'To drink that water as it is would be asking for dysentery,' he remarked, looking suspiciously at the stagnant liquid. 'A little trouble now may save bigger trouble later. I think that's as much as we can do,' he went on, gazing along the glassy surface of the lake to where the school of hippos lay like half-submerged logs. 'It looks as if the Zinns intend to keep clear of us, in which case we shall have to look for them. They must have seen or heard the machine arrive, so had things been normal we would have had visitors by now. No matter. The local lads will have to show themselves sooner or later.'

'Why so?' asked Algy.

'Well, if they live on fish they'll have to see about catching some, and they can hardly do that without going into the water, in which case we're bound to see them. Judging from that old dug-out on the beach they use canoes and we could hardly fail to notice a canoe on the water. Their village is on this side of the lake but it must be some way along. I imagine it'll be a ramshackle affair, anyway.'

'How about walking along?' suggested Algy.

'Not to-day. There isn't time. We're in no hurry. It might be better not to give them the idea we came here specially to see them.'

'You seem to have ruled out the possibility that the Zinns themselves might have been responsible for the deaths here,' said Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. 'I haven't ruled out anything, for the simple reason all I know about these people is what I've been told. All the same, I'm bound to be guided by the people who do know them. They say that in the fifty years we've been taking care of this region there's never been the slightest trouble until now. Far from taking anything from the Zinns we've given them plenty in the hope of raising their standard of living. We've also protected them from outside interference. Why should they suddenly change? According to my information they're a simple people leading a communal life without even a chief. Their affairs are run by a few old men. Apparently all they do is

eat, sleep and catch fish. Now it seems there's a monkey in the woodpile and our job is to winkle it out.' Biggles' voice took on a harder note as he concluded. 'And I shan't be too particular about how I do it. I loathe these people, civilized or otherwise, who go about making trouble. They're a curse on the face of the earth.'

Bertie chipped in. 'Oh, I say, look what's arrived; coming up the slipway, too, to have a dekko at us. He might cause a spot of bother if you stepped on his tail fetching a can of water—if you see what I mean.'

They all turned to follow the direction of his eyes and saw a crocodile coming out of the water. It was an enormous, repulsive-looking brute not less than fifteen feet long. Rising on straightened legs, with its back arched, it looked like a prehistoric monster. Reaching dry ground it sank down flat on the sandy soil, its big mouth agape to show rows of discoloured teeth. It appeared to have no fear of the men standing not far away.

'He's got a nerve,' growled Biggles. 'I'd bet he's a man-eater when he gets a chance or he wouldn't be so cocksure of himself. It'd take more than a native spear to go through his hide and he knows it. But he's made a mistake this time. We can do without him on our doorstep. Ginger, fetch me the Express and some bullets. We'll discourage the ugly devil if nothing more.'

'You're going to shoot it?'

'I'm going to try. I don't like saying I hate anything; even less do I enjoy killing things; but let's face it. Of all creatures on the face of the earth the one I must confess I hate is the crocodile. He's an ugly, foul, loathsome brute that will kill anything, anywhere, man or beast, at any time; and the way they kill is as horrible as they are. The mere sight of them makes my flesh creep. I hate them, and I'm not alone in that. That monster is quite capable of coming ashore at night and dragging one of us out of bed. They've been known to do that. Every year hundreds of natives are killed by them. I wouldn't sleep if I knew that old devil was around. No doubt there are others, but I'll deal with this one right here and now. He'll be one less, anyway.'

'And to think I was just going to have a sponge down where that nasty piece of work came out,' said Bertie, in a shocked voice, as Ginger went off.

'I said we'd better look hard and think twice before we put our feet in that water,' reminded Biggles. 'These crocs have been unmolested for so long they think they can do as they like. We'll soon alter that.'

Ginger returned with the rifle. 'It's loaded,' he said. 'If you're going to shoot, the report will tell everyone within miles that somebody is here.'

'Anyone within miles must know that already,' Biggles pointed out, as he brought the rifle to his shoulder.

The weapon crashed. At the report, and the smack of the bullet, which could be heard distinctly, the great lizard sprang into the air, and then, snapping its terrible jaws, flung itself about in a frenzy hard to reconcile with a creature which normally appears sluggish in its movements. Clouds of birds rose into the air.

Biggles ran forward, jerking another cartridge into the breech. At point-blank range he fired again, and that more or less finished the business. The creature's convulsive struggles slowed down and stopped. It twitched once or twice, quivered and lay still.

Biggles handed the rifle back to Ginger who, with the others, had followed him.

'I'll bet that old villain has chewed up a few piccaninnies in his time,' remarked Bertie, regarding the monster through his eye-glass. He stepped closer.

'Watch your step, Bertie, there may be a last kick left in him. If he fetches you a swipe with that tail of his he'll cut the legs from under you.'

Hardly had the words left Biggles' mouth than Bertie had to jump sideways like a cat as the heavily armoured tail lashed out in a final nerve spasm, the tip almost touching the creature's nose. His expression of alarm and indignation, and his remarks as he looked for his monocle, which had become detached from his face, raised a laugh.

'Why didn't you kill him while you were at it?' he complained, lugubriously, as he picked up his glass and replaced it.

'What are you going to do with the brute?' asked Algy, practically. 'You can't leave it lying there. It'll stink to high heaven.'

Biggles grinned. 'I haven't thought of that. He can stay where he is for the moment. In the morning we'll tow him out and sink him in deep water—unless you're thinking of having him stuffed for a souvenir.'

'Not me, laddie, no bally fear,' denied Bertie, warmly.

'Just a minute,' put in Ginger sharply, on a serious note. 'Don't look now, but I think we have company.' He was staring towards the lengthening shadows on the plain beyond the bungalow.

'What can you see?' asked Biggles, tersely, casually turning in that direction.

'I saw something move in that clump of tamarisk near the leaning acacia with the flat top.'

'What did it look like?'

'It could have been an animal, or a man creeping on all fours. I only caught a glimpse of it as it slid into the bushes.'

'What colour was it?'

'It looked black against the sun.'

'Are you sure it wasn't a buck of some sort? I noticed some reed-buck farther along coming down to drink.'

'It was too low on the ground for that. It looked more like a leopard in size and shape. It could have been a man crawling.'

Biggles frowned. 'I don't like the idea of either a man or a leopard prowling about the place so near sundown.'

Algy reached for the rifle Ginger was still carrying.

'What are you going to do?' asked Biggles, shortly.

'Have a shot at it.'

'Leave it alone. We don't want to start trouble by shooting a native; if it is a leopard, and you hit it without killing it, you might find yourself in trouble.'

'Just as you like.'

‘Let’s keep an eye on the place without making it obvious what we’re doing. If it’s a native he’s up to no good or he wouldn’t go to so much trouble to hide himself.’

Some minutes passed, with the light beginning quickly to fade. Then Ginger spoke. ‘I can see it. If it isn’t a leopard it could be a cheetah. It’s wearing spots, anyway.’

‘Where did you see it?’

‘At about a hundred yards, between that group of three tall ant-hills.’

Algy spoke. ‘There are two of ’em. I just saw something moving away, fast, beyond that patch of tamarisk.’

‘I think we’d better see what’s going on,’ decided Biggles. ‘If it’s only a leopard it doesn’t matter, but I don’t like the idea of someone watching us so near bedtime. We’ll soon settle it. Give me the rifle.’

Algy handed him the weapon. He loaded it, and with it under his arm he strolled nonchalantly towards the bungalow until it came between him and the tamarisk. On reaching it he walked quickly to the end, and then, with the ant-hills in plain view, he strode briskly, without any attempt at concealment, towards them. Nothing happened. There was not a movement. At a distance of perhaps thirty yards from the objective, slightly in advance of the others, he stopped, eyes questing for the object that had aroused their curiosity. This matter of distance may appear to be a mere detail, but in view of what was soon to happen it was of vital importance. The hush that precedes nightfall had closed over the land. There was not a sound of any sort, so that when Biggles spoke his voice cut clear and sharp.

‘Hey, you feller there!’ he called.

The response was immediate.

What appeared to be a black ball detached itself from some scrub and came bowling towards him at extraordinary speed. It was this speed which rooted Ginger to the ground, spellbound; and the thing had covered half the distance towards them before he observed that it was in fact an animal. A second later he made it out to be a leopard. It is true he had never before seen a charging leopard, and if he had thought about it at all he would have imagined it advancing in giant leaps, not rolling over the ground like a ball.

Biggles must have realized what it was at the same time, for he threw up the rifle and fired. To Ginger’s horror the shot missed. He saw a feather of earth spurt up a few inches to one side. Before Biggles could fire again the leopard was almost on him. It rose up on its hind legs and this brief pause may have saved his life. He fired straight into the beast from the hip. At such a range a miss was hardly possible. With a growling roar the animal fell, and struck the ground in a somersault. But that is not to say it was dead. Far from it. Growling horribly in its throat it regained its feet. Biggles jumped sideways, letting the rifle slide through his hands to use the butt. There was no time to reload. By then Algy and Bertie were busy with their revolvers.

A revolver is not the ideal weapon for killing dangerous game, but in this case it may have been the weight of lead that counted. Both guns blazed as fast as the triggers could be pulled. The shots coming from two directions seemed to confuse the beast, for in a fearful noise of snarling it whirled about, tearing up the earth, clawing and biting at

the places where the bullets were striking it. These in the end had the desired effect and the animal fell, twitching convulsively. By this time Biggles had reloaded. Going in close he put a ball into the creature's head and that finished it.

It was some seconds before anyone spoke. Biggles, his face pale from shock, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

Then Bertie, with a little high-pitched laugh which revealed his nervous tension, said: 'I say, by jingo, that was kind of warmish, wasn't it, what?'

For a moment nobody answered. They all stood there, breathing heavily, staring down at the spotted cat.

'Warm's the word,' panted Biggles. 'It was the rate it came at us that I can't get over. I wasn't prepared for anything like that. It was not as though the beast had been wounded. That attack was entirely unprovoked.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Algy. He reached down, and seizing what appeared to be a piece of stick projecting from the animal's side, pulled out the head of a narrow spear.

'Ah! That explains it,' said Biggles. 'So it had been wounded. Well, there it is. We know now that there *are* leopards here. One wouldn't be likely to be here alone. It's almost certain to have a mate. You realize this puts a different complexion on the whole business here. Is this coincidence, I wonder? I mean, is this the animal that has been killing people here, or is it, as I say, coincidence? Of course, leopards are fairly common over most of Africa; but only a very small proportion of them are man-eaters.'

'It looks to me as if this one was stalking us, or the bungalow, when Ginger first spotted it,' put in Algy. 'It might have been on the way to make a meal off the remains of Sergeant Abdullah.'

'Could be. But it's no use standing here guessing. I wonder what happened to the other thing Ginger saw. I don't fancy trying to find it in this light. I still doubt if this was a man-eater. The Zinns must have seen plenty of leopards. I can't see one so putting the wind up them that they'd turn against a District Officer. I'd have thought they'd be all the more pleased to see him if leopards were troubling them.'

'What are you going to do with this one?' asked Ginger.

'Leave it where it is. We've no use for it. The vultures, and the hyenas and jackals if there are any about, will soon clean it up.' Biggles smiled whimsically. 'We seem to have made a bright start, first the croc and then this. Anyone would think we were on a big-game hunting expedition. We'll stick around for a minute or two to see if those shots bring anyone along. If they don't we'll have something to eat and presently see about turning in.'

They waited for ten minutes or so, but although several animals had appeared—zebra, deer and antelope, making their way to water—there was no sign of a human being. The birds that had taken wing at the shots returned to their positions, the vultures to the tree and the waders to the rim of the lake, and once more all lay quiet. The hippos had hardly moved their position although they were a little nearer to the bank, presumably preparing for their nightly excursion ashore. As the tip of the great African

moon appeared above the horizon Biggles walked back to the bungalow and switched on the portable electric lamp.

'We'd better fix watches,' he said, as he sat in one of the flimsy cane chairs with which the place had been provided. 'I don't think the order matters much. I suggest two watches taken turn and turn about. I haven't a clue as to how long we shall be here, but it may be some time, so that will be the fairest way. Being near the water, which must serve a wide area, I'm afraid there'll be a certain amount of disturbance during the night by animals coming down to drink, so we'd better be prepared for that. None of them is likely to worry us—unless another killer-leopard comes along.'

'What about to-morrow?' asked Ginger.

'One of the first things we must do is fly down to Nabula and report the death of the sergeant they sent here. They'll learn about that in due course from the escort that brought him here and must be on the way back; but the sooner the Resident Magistrate knows the better. I shall have to ask him for another interpreter or we shan't get far with the Zinns.'

'We shall have to find them before there's any question of talking to them,' reminded Algy.

'Obviously. I was thinking it might be a good thing if we did that before flying down to Nabula. The R.M. will want to know what's happened to them. That shouldn't take many minutes. One trip round the lake should be enough. As they rely on it for their food they're not likely to be far away from it. The run down to Nabula shouldn't take more than two to three hours, so if we make an early start we should be pretty well organized to tackle our job seriously by lunch-time.'

'Is there a landing-strip at Nabula?' inquired Ginger.

'The chief thought not. I should be able to get down somewhere handy, anyway. A bigger worry is likely to be fuel. We shall have to go light. We've only what we brought with us and we shall have to keep enough in hand to get back to where there is some. But let's not jump our fences till we get to 'em.'

While this conversation had been going on the table had been laid with the canned rations on which the party would have to subsist. Not that there was any risk of starvation, with venison about on the hoof, and fish in the lake. But, as Biggles said, they didn't want to waste time hunting for food. In any case, butchering meat was a messy business that would only be resorted to in case of emergency.

During the meal the two watches were arranged, the first from sundown to two a.m. and the second from two until six, when it would start to get light. At other times they would all be more or less on duty. On this, the first occasion, Ginger and Bertie were to take the first watch. The following night the order would be reversed.

They sat talking for some time, Ginger and Bertie taking turns to have a look round outside; then Biggles announced that he was going to bed. This would allow the light to be put out. It was attracting too many bugs, beetles and mosquitoes.

Ginger and Bertie went out to take up their positions.

They found the scene nearly as bright as daylight under a moon nearly full. All was quiet and there was not much to see. Some hippos had come ashore farther down the

lake. Small parties of zebra, wildebeest and various deer, having had their drink, were drifting back across the wilderness to wherever they had come from. They moved without showing any sign of alarm, which suggested there were no predators near.

Somewhere, a great distance away, but from which direction it was impossible to say, a drum began tapping a monotonous *tomatom-tomtom, tomatom-tomtom*. But that, too, was as much a part of Africa as the animals.

'That drum could have something to do with us, telling everyone within earshot that we're here,' remarked Ginger.

'That's okay with me, old boy, as long as they don't start rockin' an' rollin' outside our front door,' answered Bertie, cheerfully, smearing on his face some insect repellent. 'These bally mosquitoes are going to be a bit of a bind.'

'Are you telling me!' replied Ginger. 'After you with that bottle.'

CHAPTER 4

AN ADDITION TO THE PARTY

DAY broke softly over the lonely lake after an uneventful night. It came silently and mistily, with no promise of the blazing heat that would come at noon. The dominant colour-tone was mauve-grey, a tint that gave the scene the quality of a picture forming slowly on a television screen. The unruffled surface of the lake took on an opalescent sheen, like mother-o'-pearl. The only spot of colour was provided by a colony of pink flamingoes, huddled together, each standing motionless on a long, stilt-like leg. The crocodile, looking uncomfortably life-like, still lay where it had died. Near it, watching as if suspicious that it might be feigning death, stood a semi-circle of scrawny, hunchbacked vultures, as evil as a brood of witches, patient, watchful. More sat on the dead branches of the leafless tree, ready to descend should the feast begin.

Biggles yawned and rose stiffly from the canvas camp-stool on which he had been seated near the verandah of the bungalow. He unloaded the rifle that had rested across his knees and propped it against the end post. The sound awoke Algy who since the first streak of dawn had been sleeping with his back to the wall. He, too, yawned, stirred, and sat up.

'What's the time?' he asked drowsily.

'Nearly six.'

'Anything doing?'

'Not a thing. We have the place to ourselves.'

'I heard a lion in the night.'

'So did I. It was miles away. You might have a look round the back while I put the kettle on for a pot of tea. My brain doesn't work till I've had a cuppa.' Biggles lit a cigarette.

Algy rose, and rifle in hand walked along to the end of the compound.

A vulture croaked and the ungainly birds on the ground flapped heavily to join those in the tree.

'I'd have thought those stinking brutes would have been tearing the leopard to pieces,' remarked Algy, inconsequently, as he reached the far end of the compound. There, suddenly, he stopped, staring.

'Hi, Biggles,' he called, in a curious voice. 'Come here.'

Biggles, who was just going into the house, turned. 'What is it?'

'Come here,' repeated Algy.

Biggles joined him. 'What are you looking at?'

‘What am I *not* looking at.’

‘Well?’

‘The leopard. It’s gone.’

Biggles looked. A frown creased his forehead. Without a word he strode on quickly to the place where the spotted beast had torn up the ground in its death struggles. There was nothing there. Not even a bone. He extended his gaze to the surrounding area.

‘What do you make of it?’ asked Algy.

‘I don’t make anything of it.’

‘Are you sure the brute was dead?’

‘With a hole blown through its head how could it be anything but dead?’ returned Biggles, sarcastically.

‘Could the vultures have cleaned it up?’

‘They couldn’t have eaten the bones. There would have been a mess of dry blood and stuff had they been here.’

‘Could a lion, or hyenas, have dragged it away?’

‘It wasn’t dragged away or we’d see the marks, the trail.’

‘So what?’

‘There’s only one answer. The carcase was carried away bodily. It must have happened during the night or the vultures would have been here at the crack of dawn.’ Biggles dropped the stub of his cigarette and put a foot on it, grinding it into the sand. ‘Somebody either saw us shoot that leopard or stumbled on it by accident after dark. I doubt if one man could carry it.’

‘Why would anyone carry it away?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe somebody wanted a leopard skin.’

‘It’s a shattering thought that anyone could come as close without our hearing him.’

‘Are you telling me! Of course, there’d be no need to make a noise about it. What we want now is a native tracker. There must be tracks, but on this sort of ground only an expert could follow them.’

‘What about bloodstains? The beast was bleeding when we left it.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘No. Blood congeals very quickly. We shan’t find any except what we can see here.’ He looked at the straggling fringe of forest not far away. ‘I don’t like that being so close. It could hide anything. We might be watched even at this moment. But there’s nothing we can do about that. Let’s ask the others if they heard any sounds in this direction while they were on guard.’

Biggles led the way back to the bungalow. ‘Come on, you chaps, show a leg,’ he called sharply from the door.

‘Oh I say, have a heart,’ complained Bertie, who had half fallen out of his bed. ‘What are you trying to do—give me a nervous breakdown, waking me up like that.’ He looked about. ‘Dropped my bally glass eye, too. Did you see where it went?’

‘It’s still in your face,’ Biggles informed him. ‘Get cracking. You’re wasting daylight. Tell me; did you hear any sort of noise during the night?’

‘Not a bally thing. Why? Has the old leopard been trying on his stuff again?’

‘On the contrary, the leopard we shot has gone.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘I do say.’

‘Where did it go?’

‘Don’t be a fool. How would I know?’

‘What’s this about the leopard?’ asked Ginger, getting out of bed.

‘It’s no longer where we left it.’

‘Don’t say it walked off after what we gave it!’

‘It was too dead to do any walking. Someone or something must have carried it off. I wondered if you heard any sort of noise while you were on duty.’

‘Only the usual grunts and squeaks. What about the croc? Has he gone, too?’

‘No, he’s still there. I don’t think we need bother with him. The vultures are waiting for a chance to tidy him up.’ Biggles lit the spirit stove and put the kettle on.

‘What’s the drill? Have you decided?’ asked Ginger when, after a quick toilet, they sat down to a breakfast of biscuits, tinned butter and jam.

‘I shan’t waste time looking for that leopard although I must admit I’m a bit concerned at the idea of the thing being spirited away under our noses. Let’s forget it for the time being. I want to go to Nabula and I want to locate the Zinns, but as the machine can’t be in two places at once the question is which to do first. I think I’ll start with the Zinns. That shouldn’t take many minutes. The R.M. at Nabula is bound to ask where they are and what they’re doing and I’d look a fool if I had to say I didn’t know.’

‘If you find them, without an interpreter it’s unlikely you’ll get anything out of ’em,’ Algy pointed out.

‘It would be something to know where they are. I’ll make a quick trip round the lake. We needn’t all go. I don’t like leaving the house unguarded. We’d look silly if we came back to find the place and all our kit burnt out. I have a feeling anything could happen here. I’ll take Ginger with me. Algy, you stay here with Bertie and keep an eye on things. If you can drag that croc a bit farther away so much the better. The vultures won’t come down while we’re here. Come on, Ginger. You might bring the gun, just in case. . . .’

The engines were started and the machine taxied on to the water. In another minute it was in the air, keeping low as it headed down the wide, flat, curving bank of the lake. Almost at once, as a new vista was brought into view, Ginger exclaimed: ‘There they are! Or there’s the village, anyway.’

In an open space not far from the water, where the sparse fringe of the forest came close to the lake, was a collection of typical kaffir beehive-shaped huts; but it seemed to Ginger, looking, that whereas these are usually well constructed, those he was now

looking at were a ramshackle lot. There was not a soul in sight. Three canoes lay on the beach.

'No one at home by the look of it,' he remarked, as the aircraft flashed past at the height of a few feet.

'Maybe we scared them,' surmised Biggles.

Bringing the machine round he put it down on the sullen water and took it as far in as it would go without lowering the landing wheels. Still no one appeared.

'Unless they're hiding inside their huts the place has been abandoned,' remarked Biggles. Leaving the engines ticking over he stood up and hailed: but there was no response. 'Queer business,' he murmured.

'This could be an old village,' suggested Ginger. 'There might be another, a new one, farther on round the bend.' He stared down the long, narrowing, horn-shaped piece of water towards its extremity.

'Could be, but I doubt it,' answered Biggles. 'It takes something unusual to make this sort of people leave their homes.' He switched off and jumped down into a few inches of water. 'Keep that gun handy,' he told Ginger, who followed him. 'I'm not expecting trouble but one never knows.'

He walked to the nearest hut and looked inside. 'They must have gone. They've taken their gear with them. The cooking fires are cold.' Biggles looked at two heaps of mud that lay a little distance apart. 'What the deuce have they been doing here?'

'Digging, apparently.'

'I can see that. But for what?'

Ginger shrugged. Suddenly he was alert. 'There's one of 'em, peeping out of that hut at the back. He's coming out.'

A little wizened creature emerged cautiously, waving his hands in signals that might have meant anything. Clad only in a scrap of rag, tiny, thin to emaciation, bent nearly double, he looked more like a monkey than a man. And, for that matter, bobbing about, chattering with rage or excitement, he behaved like one. With only a semblance of a nose flat on his face, an enormous mouth showing toothless gums, he looked a hundred years old but was probably a good deal less.

'What's he doing here by himself?' queried Ginger, softly.

'Who knows? Maybe he refused to leave with the others. Keep quiet or he may take fright, although he must often have seen a white man—the District Officer. Give him a chance to calm down. He's all steamed up about something.'

This turned out to be less difficult than might have been expected, and it was a handful of biscuits, which Ginger fetched from the machine, that had the desired result. The old man was quick to recognize what they were. Chattering non-stop and gesticulating as if in a frenzy he bounded over, snatched them, and stuffed them into his mouth. He was obviously trying to tell them something but what this was could not be guessed. Sometimes the little old creature would beat the ground as with a club; then he would thrust with an invisible spear, or claw at the air helplessly, as if to say: 'I could do nothing about it.'

‘Fetch him some more biscuits,’ said Biggles. ‘He looks more than half starved. At all events, there’s nothing wrong with his appetite.’

Using both hands the old man stuffed more biscuits into his big slobbering mouth.

‘This is where we need an interpreter,’ said Biggles. ‘He’ll quieten down when he sees we’re not going to hurt him and he’s let off a little more steam.’

This prophecy proved correct. The old man became less violent in his actions, although his eyes, as bright and active as those of the animal he resembled, kept suspicious watch on every move made by the visitors. Seen at close quarters he was even more unprepossessing than he had been at a distance. His ears, twice the normal size, stood out at right angles from an almost hairless head.

‘He wouldn’t win a prize at a beauty contest,’ remarked Ginger, disgustedly.

‘He must be a Zinn,’ averred Biggles. ‘I was warned they were a pretty low lot, but quite harmless.’

‘What are you going to do about him?’

‘What can we do? What’s he up to now?’

The old man, again bursting out with what sounded like a stream of invective, was now hopping away, looking back over his shoulder.

‘I think he wanted to show us something,’ opined Ginger. ‘He’s looking at us as if he expects us to follow him.’

This turned out to be a good guess, for when he saw that he was being followed the old man increased his speed. He did not go far. Running on ahead with many a backward glance he made for an open space a little to the side of the village. There he stopped, and pointing to the ground, let out a torrent of words which clearly meant: ‘What do you think of that?’

As far as Ginger could see there was nothing remarkable about the object that seemed to excite him. It was simply a hole in the ground about two feet square and a yard deep. There was nothing in it, as Ginger ascertained by looking into it.

The old man, squatting on his haunches, looked from one to the other of them, his bright little eyes still asking the question: ‘What about that, eh?’

Ginger saw nothing to it, but Biggles considered the hole thoughtfully. ‘I’ll tell you something,’ he said. ‘This hole was dug by a man, and it wasn’t just scratched out. It was dug with a tool. Look at the square sides, cut clean. That could only have been done with a square blade, like a spade. A steel spade. You can see the sharp edges as the cuts were made. I can’t imagine the Zinns having such a tool. Nor can I see them digging such a hole just for the fun of it. It serves no useful purpose.’

‘You think there’s been a stranger here?’

‘I’m pretty sure of it.’

‘A white man?’

‘Probably. Let’s say a man who has a spade and knows how to use it.’

‘What do you suppose he was digging for?’

‘If I knew that I should know the answer to what’s been going on here.’ Stooping, Biggles picked up a handful of dirt, studied it closely, squeezed it and opened his hand. The earth, reddish in colour, trickled through his fingers.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘Traces of oil. I thought someone might have been prospecting for it. Just an idea. When there’s oil under the ground some of it can work its way to the surface and give the soil a greasy feeling. Squeeze it and it sticks together in a lump.’

‘Nothing like that here?’

‘No. The stuff’s as dry as dust. You saw it run through my fingers like sand. Somebody’s after something. It may be oil. But there are no signs of it here.’

‘Well, what are we going to do? The others will be wondering what we’re up to.’

‘Yes. We had better be getting back.’

‘What are you going to do with the old man? Leave him here to run wild?’

Biggles considered the question. ‘He might starve to death. I’d say he’s either been abandoned or he refused to leave the village with the others. He seems to have plenty to say, but without an interpreter it would be a waste of time to try to get at what he’s yammering about. If we could get him into the machine I’d take him back to the bungalow and keep him there until someone comes up from Nabula able to talk his lingo. That’s the only way we shall get anything out of him.’

Ginger looked startled at the idea of putting the old creature into the aircraft, but agreed it was the thing to do if it could be managed. ‘He stinks like a load of herrings that has been left lying in the sun for a month,’ he said, wrinkling his nostrils. ‘I doubt if you’ll get him in, anyway.’

‘We haven’t time to walk him home. Let’s see if we can get him aboard.’

Actually, they had no difficulty at all. The old native was enticed into the cabin by a handful of biscuits, following Ginger inside with no more concern than a well-trained dog. As with most primitive people an object like an aeroplane was so far beyond his ability to cope with it that it made no impression. A box of matches, the purpose of which would have been understood, would doubtless have been more in the nature of a miracle. Anyhow, once in the cabin he crouched in a corner apparently quite happy to catch the biscuits Ginger threw to him from time to time. Even when the aircraft took off the noise of the engines only disconcerted him for a moment. He may not have realized that he had left the ground.

In a couple of minutes Biggles was back at the rest-house, where Algy and Bertie, having dragged the dead crocodile some distance away, were watching it disappear at fantastic speed into the capacious beaks of those vigilant and efficient scavengers, the vultures.

Bertie started violently, took a quick pace back and adjusted his monocle when the old native bounced out of the cabin. ‘Oh, here, I say chaps, I wish you wouldn’t do things like that,’ he protested. ‘Where did you find Grandpa?’

‘In the village. He was on his own, lost or abandoned, so we decided to bring him along.’

‘And what are you going to do with him now you’ve got him here?’ inquired Algy cynically. ‘Keep him as a pet?’

‘For the time being, until I can find someone able to talk his gibberish.’

‘Will he stay?’

‘Feed him with bully beef and canned salmon and we may have a job to get rid of him. That hole in his face isn’t a mouth. It’s a human incinerator.’

‘Did you find anything else?’

‘Nothing of much interest. The Zinns have gone. The village has been evacuated.’

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Slip down to Nabula to report the death of Sergeant I’Mobo, and, if possible, bring back someone who can talk Zinnish.’

‘Going by yourself?’

‘I might as well, unless you’d care to come.’

‘I’d rather do that than sit here twiddling my thumbs.’

‘All right. Let’s go. The sooner we’re there the sooner we shall be back.’

‘What do you want us to do while you’re away?’ asked Ginger.

‘I don’t think there’s anything you can do except keep an eye on things and see that Grandpa doesn’t give you the slip. I fancy he knows a thing or two if we can get him to talk.’

‘Okay.’

Biggles and Algy took their places in the machine, which was soon on its way, heading for the nearest point of local administration, the government post at Nabula.

CHAPTER 5

GINGER TAKES A WALK

GINGER and Bertie, from force of habit watching the aircraft on its way, were surprised to see it suddenly bank steeply and circle something on the ground. This done it went on, only to repeat the manœuvre a few seconds later.

'What on earth's he doing?' muttered Ginger, looking puzzled.

'He must have spotted something on the ground—something with spots on, perhaps—if you twig what I mean. Ha! Joke!'

'I doubt it. I can't see him bothering to go down to look at a leopard, alive or dead. It must have been something, though. He seems to be going on now, anyway.'

They turned to where the ancient African was squatting, apparently quite content, near the entrance to the compound.

'The old boy seems to have made himself at home,' observed Bertie. 'How about tossing him a tin of bully to worry?'

'Go ahead. You'll have to open it for him.' Ginger smiled. 'I doubt if he carries a can opener.'

This was done, and they watched, fascinated, the speed with which the old man scooped out the meat and stuffed it down his throat.

'His mother forgot to teach him table manners,' remarked Bertie, sadly. 'Shall I carry on to see how many cans he can pack inside himself?'

'Are you crazy? You'd be trying to fill a bottomless pit. If we don't watch it he'll eat us out of house and home.'

'If the worst comes to the worst we could shoot him a hippo, or a brace of ostriches. Getting on the outside of a bally hippo should steady him up a bit.'

'What we might do is catch him some fish. I'd bet he'd scoff the lot, head, tail, bones and all. They say there are plenty of fish in the lake.'

'No bally fear. I'm not paddling in that puddle. That croc we bumped off wasn't the only one.'

'There's no need to paddle. What's wrong with that?' Ginger nodded towards the dilapidated canoe.

'Not for me. I like my boats without holes in 'em. I wouldn't take chances on this duckpond unless one had a copper bottom—I mean boat.'

This casual banter ended abruptly when a distant explosion, quite a heavy one, sent a shudder across the placid surface of the lake. The hippos must have felt it for they

submerged instantly. Bertie stared at Ginger. Ginger stared at Bertie. ‘What the dickens was that?’ he asked wonderingly.

Hard on the words came a second, similar explosion.

‘Could it be thunder?’ suggested Bertie.

‘Nothing like it,’ declared Ginger. ‘Hey! Look at Grandpa. He knows.’

The old native certainly seemed to know what the explosions meant, for he had jumped to his feet and with wild cries went bounding into the water. Going in nearly up to the waist he leapt about striking at imaginary objects.

‘The old boy’s nuts,’ said Bertie, simply.

‘He may be nuts but he knows what he’s doing,’ asserted Ginger. ‘Look at him. That pantomime means something.’

The old man was now going through the motions of throwing something ashore, whooping with delight.

‘What *is* he doing?’ asked Bertie. ‘You tell me. I haven’t a clue.’

‘Obviously, he’s throwing things out of the water.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘What else is there in the water except fish? He’s catching fish, or kidding himself he is.’

‘Imaginary fish.’

‘They’re imaginary fish here, but they’ll be real enough where those explosions occurred.’

Enlightenment dawned in Bertie’s eyes. ‘I’m with you, laddie.’

‘I’d say someone has just lobbed in a couple of grenades, or sticks of dynamite, somewhere down at the far end of the lake.’

Bertie whistled softly. ‘So that’s it!’

‘In the ordinary way such an idea would never have occurred to me, but from the way Grandpa’s behaving I don’t see how it can mean anything else.’

The old man had come ashore and was going through the motions of beating to death something that lay on the ground. Not one object, but several.

‘But where would these lads get dynamite?’ queried Bertie.

‘I can’t imagine ’em getting any from anywhere. They wouldn’t know how to handle it if they did get some. But somebody’s got some sort of explosive; there’s no argument about that. There we go again,’ added Ginger tersely, as another sullen rumble reverberated. ‘That’s the direction.’ He pointed down the lake. ‘Pity we can’t see what’s going on, but the bend in the bank blocks the view. This is where we need the machine.’

‘How far away do you think this business is going on?’

‘It’s hard to say. Some miles. Sound carries far over water in still air. It must be near the far extremity of the lake. From the bend one should be able to see the smoke through binoculars.’

‘What’s the idea of bombing the poor bally fish?’

‘Food. Probably grub for the Zinns. That could be why they’ve left the village. That’s my guess, anyway. Grandpa knows all about it. Maybe he’s a bit old-fashioned and doesn’t approve this modern way of fishing. That could be why he kept out of it. We might be able to answer all these questions by walking as far as the bend. How far is it?’

‘Two or three miles. Biggles said we were not to leave camp.’

‘We needn’t both go. I could slip along and be back inside an hour. You could stay and take care of things and keep an eye on Grandpa—not that he seems to want to leave us.’

‘Biggles would be peeved if we lost him,’ said Bertie, dubiously. ‘And you might have to go farther than you think to get a clear view beyond the bend. However, that’s up to you, laddie.’

‘I wouldn’t go out of sight. You could watch me.’ Another idea occurred to Ginger. ‘I wonder if I could see round the bend if I pushed out a little way in that canoe?’

Bertie looked shocked. ‘Oh I say, hold hard, old boy. That’s no craft for playing tag with crocs. One would only have to give it a tap and you’d be in the drink. Take my tip and forget it.’

Ginger returned to his original plan. ‘Look. You stay here while I slip along. I’ll keep in sight. Whether I see anything or not I’ll come straight back. I think it’s worth trying.’

‘Fair enough, old boy, if that’s how you feel about it. But watch your step and don’t take any chances,’ said Bertie, seriously. ‘This is no place to have an argument with a hungry lion.’

They returned to the house. Ginger slung the binoculars over his shoulder and with the Express rifle under his arm set off at a brisk pace along the flat, sandy shore of the lake. ‘Be seeing you in about an hour,’ he called back.

For the first three-quarters of a mile he made good progress, for the going was open and easy. An occasional crocodile basking in the sun, slid into the water at his approach and the wildfowl moved out of his track. Otherwise he saw no sign of life. Passing the forest he kept a wary eye on it, but there was little undergrowth and he could see well into it. Here again he saw nothing to cause anxiety and he strode on purposefully.

The ground underfoot now began to get boggy, which forced him a little farther from the water; but this was only a slight inconvenience and did no more than slow his progress somewhat. From time to time he looked back and saw Bertie standing in front of the rest-house watching him.

This taking his eyes off the track might have cost him his life, for he nearly put his foot on one of the most deadly of all African snakes, a puff adder. He saw it just in time. Unable to stop he made a wild leap straight over the top of the fat, loathsome creature, and rushed on for some paces before stopping, with his heart palpitating, to recover from the shock. He looked back, but the snake had gone. Wiping the sweat of fright from his forehead he went on more cautiously, his confidence considerably shaken.

In another quarter of an hour he judged he was half-way to his objective, which was of course the point where the bank that obstructed his view began to swing away. Everything was still quiet, almost uncannily so; and he could still see Bertie standing in front of the rest-house. After the incident of the snake he derived some comfort from it. He discovered, as others have, that it is one thing to have a partner on such an excursion, but a different matter to be alone in such conditions. However, he had no regrets.

It was the noisy argument of feeding vultures that attracted his attention to something that lay ahead, slightly off his track, just beyond where the spur of the forest broke down to give way again to drier, more open country, dotted with tall ant-hills. The unsightly birds flopped away at his approach, some of them so gorged with food that they had difficulty in getting off the ground. They settled a short distance away to await his passing.

Pausing in his stride to look at the carrion on which they had been feeding, he was about to move on when something about the gory mess of bones—there was little else—brought him to a halt. He had been so little interested in the dead beast that he had not even wondered what it was. But now he observed that it had no head. At least, he couldn't see it. The rest of the bones were there, mostly picked clean; but where was the skull? The birds would hardly be able to eat that, he ruminated. Then it struck him as odd that there was not a shred of hair or hide by which the dead animal might be identified. He pondered the mystery. At first he thought the creature might have been a lion, but soon decided it was not large enough for that. The beast was more the size of a leopard, or a cheetah. But he could see no claws. A leopard! Could this be the one they had shot, the one that had so mysteriously disappeared? It seemed possible. After all, he reasoned, the vultures, carrion-eaters, hadn't killed the creature, whatever it might be. Who had? It was unlikely that it had died a natural death. Their leopard had disappeared. Was this the carcase, or what was left of it? Who had moved it? For what reason? And what had happened to the head, and the claws?

The more Ginger thought about it the more convinced he became that the leopard was the answer. He could think of nothing else. Had the animal been a deer or antelope of any sort there would have been horns, or antlers. Here the leopard had been carried, skinned, its head and feet cut off and the rest left to the vultures, hyenas, or jackals, should these equally efficient scavengers be in the district. Deciding there was nothing more to be learned by looking at the grisly remains he went on his way, the vultures crowding down again to finish their horrid repast before he had gone a dozen yards. Through his glasses he could see Bertie still gazing down the lake side.

He walked on as fast as possible to make up for lost time. To his disappointment he had to go rather farther than he had expected to get the view he wanted. However, soon after passing the abandoned village, where he saw not a soul, the bank began to bend round at a more acute angle and he decided it was time to make a reconnaissance. This he did from the top of a ten-foot-high ant-hill, and there before him stretched the view he wanted, the lake, ever narrowing, sweeping on to its long pointed end.

Sitting on his elevated perch, glasses to eyes, he saw at a distance of two to three miles just such a scene for which the antics of Grandpa had prepared him. Out in the

water, from knee to waist deep, was a line of dark spots that could only be Africans, presumably the Zinns. With a great deal of splashing they seemed to be driving unseen objects before them, from time to time lunging with their spears. The ends of the human line swung round to form a rough semi-circle. These had already reached dry land and were picking up burdens which Ginger could only suppose were fish. Standing on the shore as if directing operations was a figure in a suit of lightish material and wearing a hat.

So this was it, thought Ginger. This was where the new style of fishing was going on. This was where the Zinns had gone.

It needed no great mental effort to work out what was happening. Under the direction of the European the water was being bombed for the wholesale production of fish, the Zinns' favourite food. The fish, stunned by the explosions, were floating about and the natives were securing them. So much was plain. What was not so easy to understand was why the European—Ginger assumed him to be a European—was doing this. Obviously he had a purpose. At least, it seemed highly improbable that he was going to this trouble and expense from sheer good nature. Why provide the Zinns with what for centuries they had been able to obtain for themselves? Certainly this new way of fishing would produce a greater bulk of fish than would have been possible by the old method, although in the end it would defeat its object by killing all the fish in the lake, large and small alike, or driving them into deeper water. No, pondered Ginger, the purpose behind this wholesale slaughter was not affection for the Zinns. It seemed more likely that the object was to provide them with food so that their energy could be employed in another direction.

Apart from anything else, he mused, this sort of fishing would in the long run turn out to be a false economy, and he was sure the British Government would not approve of it; for should the Zinns lose their fish diet on what else would they be able to subsist? They were not equipped for any other sort of life.

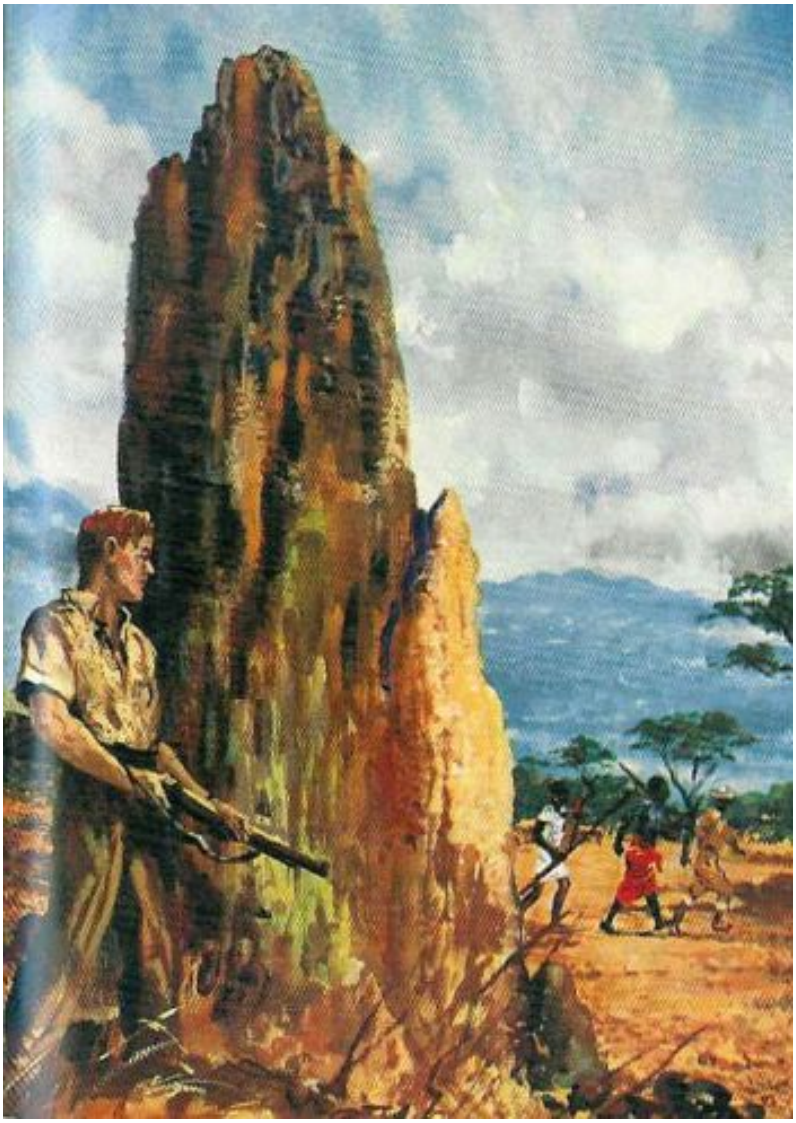
Satisfied that he had succeeded in his mission, that he would have something to tell Biggles on his return, and thinking he had nothing more to learn, Ginger slid off his perch and was brushing the red dust off his clothes when a pair of waterbuck went tearing past in a manner that could only mean acute alarm. He stopped what he was doing. That the animals had been disturbed was evident. But by what? Naturally, his first thought was lions, or some other predator. True, he hadn't seen any lions but he had heard distant roaring during the night so he knew there were some not far away.

Alert, he listened, eyes active. Sliding the rifle forward ready for instant use he took a cautious peep round the side of the ant-hill to get sight of the ground from which the buck had come. This was merely a precaution. He wanted no trouble with lions, or anything else for that matter. He was now concerned only with getting back to Bertie. He was not really afraid of being attacked even if a lion was on the prowl. It would probably be either after the buck or on its way to water for a drink. But he was taking no chances.

At first he saw nothing, but knowing with what remarkable ability a stalking lion can merge into the background, or slink into dry grass practically the same colour as himself, he did not hurry. Standing motionless himself, with his back to the ant-hill, he

watched, quite certain that the bucks would not have behaved as they had without good cause.

When this cause was revealed it was one he hadn't even considered. Suddenly through the still air came the sound of human voices, and a few moments later, from behind a clump of thorn, a little way inland, came the owners of them. It was a party of four men.



Suddenly through the still air came the sound of human voices (page 72)

CHAPTER 6

TROUBLE BREWING

GINGER sank slowly to a squatting position as the men came on.

He saw that the leader was a dark-skinned man although nothing like dark enough to be a negro or a native of those parts. He was dressed European fashion; that is, open-necked khaki tunic-shirt, shorts, and slouch hat of similar colour. Behind him walked a stalwart negro, rifle on shoulder, presumably his gun-bearer. Next behind came another well-built native carrying a spear. Ginger had seen only one Zinn, Grandpa, but from what he had heard of them these coloured men were not of that tribe. The Zinns were small people.

The fourth member of the party was certainly small, although little could be seen of him as he was dressed in what appeared to be odd pieces of hide or fur, decorated with sundry ornaments which, seen from a distance, might have been anything. He carried a short stabbing spear. The party was walking briskly on a straight line as if bound for a definite objective.

Ginger's first feeling was one of relief that the disturbers of the bucks had been men and not a dangerous animal. Not that he would have been afraid had it turned out to be a lion; but a lion would have been a complication, and at that moment he didn't want to be bothered with anything of that sort. As far as the men were concerned he assumed, not unnaturally, that although this was not considered to be good game country he had fallen in with a hunting party. The type of negro suggested they might have come from across the border, from the Congo. Were they poachers?

The possibility caused him to remain motionless, and as he squatted there, watching, another doubt crept into his mind. The line taken by the party suggested it had come from the far end of the lake, although it was now cutting directly across the arc caused by the curve in the waterside. The men must have heard, if not seen, the fish being bombed. Why didn't they stay there to watch? Or were they in fact members of the fish-bombing outfit? That seemed more likely. Where were they going in such a hurry? Raising his glasses and studying the man who brought up the rear of the party he decided he looked more like a witch-doctor than a hunter. Nothing had been said about the Zinns having witch-doctors. Where had he come from?

With these doubts in his mind Ginger refrained from making his presence known, as had been his first, natural inclination. It was really the fact that the party had come from the far end of the lake that made him hesitate. It would, he decided, be prudent to watch for a little while to ascertain where the men were going, and what they intended to do, before he showed himself.

The party strode on, not leaving its course and taking no notice of anything. If it kept on as it was going, Ginger observed, it would arrive at the rest-house. He allowed

the men to get a little way ahead and then followed, moving from cover to cover and always keeping them in sight.

The first halt came at the abandoned village. While the others stood still the witch-doctor type began a curious performance of running from hut to hut waving his arms and uttering cries which of course meant nothing to Ginger who, standing behind some scrub fifty or sixty yards away, had stopped to watch. He got an impression that this was some sort of ceremony, with incantations, perhaps to drive out evil spirits that were believed to have taken possession of the place. Was that why it had been abandoned?

If this was in fact the case it was soon clear that something had gone wrong. Apparently the incantations hadn't worked, for the witch-doctor rejoined his companions and a conference ensued. This lasted for some minutes, the witch-doctor, with much arm waving, either offering explanations or making suggestions. Some conclusions having been reached the march was resumed, and there was no longer any doubt about the objective. There was only one. The rest-house. There was, however, a diversion, and this came when the witch-doctor ran to one side and with his spear pointed to the now well-stripped carcase Ginger had stopped to look at on his way out. The vultures, having finished their grisly repast, had gone, and the thought occurred to Ginger that the witch-doctor, from his behaviour, must have known the beast, whatever it was, had been left there.

This put a different complexion on the affair, and to Ginger a more sinister one. He was glad he had not been in a hurry to show himself. His trip was turning out to be more fruitful than he had hoped. Even so, the real purpose of the four-man expedition did not occur to him, and in the event it would have been remarkable if it had.

The party went on, walking more quickly now, with Ginger still following at a fair distance. He could see Bertie moving about on the muddy beach in front of the rest-house, doing nothing in particular and obviously awaiting his return. Grandpa, evidently well fed, was squatting against the wall of the bungalow. The strangers must have seen all this, too, for after a brief halt and an exchange of words they went on, making no attempt at concealment, which here, in any case, the ground being more or less open, would have been difficult. It seemed to Ginger that the visitors, from the way they approached, were very sure of themselves. But that, perhaps in the circumstances, was not surprising.

What did surprise him was the way Grandpa behaved when he saw the strangers approaching, although, as he realized later, there was no reason why he should have been surprised. As it happened the old man saw them before Bertie. Like a jack-in-the-box he had leapt to his feet and had shot into the rest-house with the alacrity of a rabbit bolting into its burrow on the sudden appearance of a dog. This exhibition of alarm, or fear, did not of course escape Ginger's notice, and he wondered at the reason for it. It still did not occur to him that the old Zinn was the object of the visit first to the village, and now the bungalow. However, this was soon to be revealed.

Meanwhile, Bertie had seen the strangers, and greeted them with a breezy: 'Hello, there. Come in. What can I do for you? Like a drink?'

The only answer was a surly nod.

Ginger went closer, but still did not show himself. A feeling began to creep over him that all was not well; that there was something odd about the way the strangers were behaving. Caution prompted him to wait for them to show their hand before he joined the company. All he did was move a little nearer, well within earshot, and take up a position just inside the compound from which he could listen and watch without being seen. So far none of the strangers had looked round, but now the leader did so, taking in the scene. The reason for this was disclosed by his first words.

'You here alone?' he inquired, in a tone of voice that did not fit with a pose of nonchalance. At least, so Ginger thought. He was now able to have a good look at the man for the first time. He had the features of a European, but his skin was dark, although only to the extent that the colour might have been produced by long exposure to the African sun. He had spoken with a slight accent, but this was not enough to convey a hint of what his nationality might be. However, it was sufficiently pronounced to suggest he had not been born in the United Kingdom.

Bertie smiled and answered the question frankly. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm on my own at the moment. My pals are away, but I'm expecting them back. Were you looking for something?'

'We've come for the old man.'

Bertie's expression changed. 'What old man?'

'The old nigger I saw run into the house.'

Bertie looked puzzled. 'You say you want him?'

'That's right,'

'What do you want him for?'

'To take him home.'

'Where's home?'

'His village. With his people. That's where he belongs.'

'He's all right here.'

'He'll be happier with us.'

'Who says so?'

'I do.'

'That hardly lines up with the way he bolted when he saw you coming.'

'Let's not argue about that. I want him.'

Bertie was still smiling but his voice had hardened. 'I'm afraid you can't have him.'

'Why not?'

'He's ours.'

'What do you want him for?'

'We like him. We're keeping him for a house-pet.'

The stranger glared. 'Are you fooling?'

'No. Nothing like that. Grandpa belongs to us.'

‘How can he belong to you?’

‘Because I say so.’

‘Because *you* say so.’

‘That’s right,’ confirmed Bertie, brightly.

The stranger looked puzzled. ‘You’re new to Africa, I guess.’

‘More or less.’

‘Don’t you know you’re not allowed to hold a native against his will?’

‘He likes it here.’

‘He belongs to us.’

‘Then you should have taken better care of him and not allowed him to slip his collar. He can go where he likes. As he seems to like it here, here he stays. That’s all there is to it.’ Bertie gave his monocle a brisk rub.

The visitor began to lose patience, or else he must have decided Bertie was a complete fool. ‘Come on, hand him over,’ he ordered, harshly.

‘Don’t you talk to me like that,’ replied Bertie, calmly, but with an edge on his voice.

Apparently the stranger was not prepared to waste any more time. He spoke sharply to his attendant who carried the spear. The man stepped forward towards the door of the bungalow.

Bertie barred his way. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ he inquired, coldly.

The black side-stepped to pass him, but again Bertie moved in front of him. ‘Keep out,’ he said quietly, but firmly.

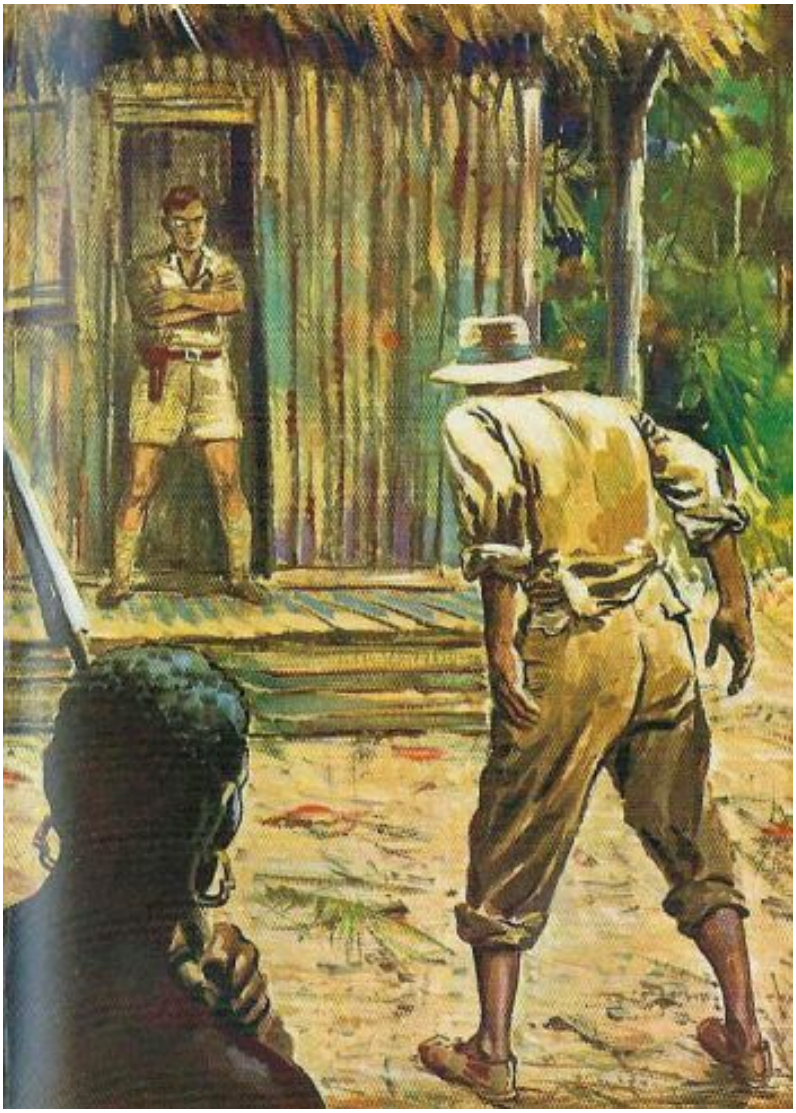
The negro, to give the man his due, did not attempt to force a passage. He looked back at his employer for instructions.

‘Get him,’ snapped the man, himself stepping forward.

‘This is British Government property,’ said Bertie. ‘You realize what you’re telling this man to do?’

Without looking round the man to whom he spoke put out his right hand. The gun-bearer knew what to do. He put the rifle in it. The man brought the rifle to the ‘ready’ position. The safety catch snicked as it was slipped off. ‘Get out of my way,’ he rasped.

Bertie did not move.



‘Don’t you talk to me like that,’ replied Bertie (page 79)

‘You’re asking for it.’ The man raised the rifle a little higher.

This may or may not have been bluff. Ginger didn’t know. But he decided it was time to interfere. Walking forward he said sharply: ‘All right. That’s enough.’

At the sound of his voice the hostile party spun round, all eyes staring. ‘Where the hell have you come from?’ growled the leader.

Ginger answered: ‘What does it matter? Clear out. And while you’re at it you’d better get back to where you came from.’

Bertie smiled whimsically, and took the opportunity to take his revolver from his pocket. He did not threaten with it, but allowed it to hang by his side at the length of his arm.

Nobody spoke. The situation remained tense for a few seconds, presumably while the leader of the opposition turned things over in his mind. In the end apparently he decided it was not the moment to try force, for he called off the black spearman, handed the rifle to his bearer, and turning about walked away in the direction from which he had come. The others followed. None of them looked round.

Bertie and Ginger watched the party without a word until it was at a safe distance. Then Bertie said: 'That fellow's a stinker.'

'Are you telling me!' agreed Ginger.

'Did you see what happened?'

'Everything. I'd been following that lot for half an hour.'

'I was wondering where you'd got to. They wanted to snaffle poor old Grandpa.'

'I know. They searched the village for him.'

'What do you make of it?'

'Not much. I'm pretty sure they're part of the gang operating at the far end of the lake. They came from that direction. That half-caste, that's what he looked like to me, knew we were here. He must have seen the plane come in. I'd say Grandpa knows something and they don't want him to talk. Before we came it didn't matter about him being alone in the village, but seeing us come they were afraid we might find him. That's why they decided to collect him.'

Bertie nodded. 'That's about the English of it, laddie. What are they doing down the end of the lake?'

'As we guessed, fishing.'

'They must want a lot of fish.'

'It'd take a lot to feed the whole tribe of Zinns. But they didn't come here just to fish, that's certain.'

Bertie cocked an ear as from the distance came the purr of aero engines. 'Sounds like Biggles coming back.'

Ginger frowned. 'Then he can't have been to Nabula. He couldn't have got there and back in the time.' He listened. 'Engines sound all right, so that can't be the trouble.'

'Well, here he is, any old how,' asserted Bertie as the Gadfly swung into sight.

They watched the machine land, taxi to the shore, and, dropping its wheels, run on to its previous parking place. The engines died. Biggles jumped down. His eyes went from Ginger's rifle to Bertie's revolver.

'What's going on here?' he asked sharply.

'We had a spot of bother with a nasty-looking piece of work who arrived from the far end of the lake,' replied Ginger.

‘What did he want?’

‘He came to collect Grandpa. There was a party of ’em.’

‘Did you let them take him?’

‘Not on your life. The thing fizzled out when it came to a showdown. I’ll tell you all about it presently.’

By this time Algy had got out of the aircraft and had turned to watch another man jump down.

Ginger stared, for he was as strange an individual as he had ever seen emerge from an aircraft, except, possibly, Grandpa.

CHAPTER 7

BIGGLES DECIDES

THE man who stepped down from the aircraft was a native African. Of that there was no doubt. And from a fuzz of sparse grey hair on his chin, and the many wrinkles graven on his face, one of advanced age. There was nothing remarkable about that. It was the clothes he wore and the way he carried himself that fascinated Ginger.

On his head, at a jaunty angle, he carried the remains of what had once been a fez. Originally red, it was now almost black from long usage. The jacket and shorts he wore had clearly been a uniform of sorts; but that was long ago. They were shrunken from years of wear in all weathers, threadbare from continual washing, patched and mended in a score of places. For footwear he sported what in their early days had been a pair of brown and white golf shoes.

That the old man saw nothing odd in this was evident from the way he carried himself. He moved briskly and with the serious deportment of a guardsman on parade. After marching for a few paces he halted facing the remains of the flag hanging limply on its staff. There he jumped to attention, saluted, and then stood 'at ease'.

Bertie adjusted his monocle. 'Jolly good,' he murmured. Looking at Biggles he went on: 'Where did you pick him up?'

'On the way to Nabula.'

'He's been a soldier.'

'Obviously. And, I'd say, a good one.'

'What's his name?'

'Charlie.'

'Charlie what?'

'Just Charlie. That's what he told me, and as far as I'm concerned it's enough.'

'How did you collect him? You can't have been to Nabula.' Ginger asked the question.

'No. I didn't get that far. About half-way there I overtook a safari. From its line of march I took it to be the one that had brought Sergeant Abdullah here, now on its way back to headquarters. It was. As there was plenty of open ground I took a chance and landed to ask a few questions. As you see, I've brought one of them back because he can talk the Zinn language. He's not employed regularly at Nabula but goes out with safaris as an odd-job man because he likes it.'

'Where did he do his soldiering?'

‘Served his time in the K.A.R.[B] When he retired he was for years gun-bearer to Colonel Black, who you may remember was killed some time ago by a wounded buffalo near Lake Chad. Since then, as I say, he’s done odd jobs as guide and interpreter. He speaks pretty good English and goodness knows how many native dialects. I thought he’d be useful in many ways so I brought him along. He’s now on our pay roll.’

[B] King’s African Rifles

‘Good enough.’ Ginger went on: ‘What were you circling over just after you’d taken off?’

Biggles helped himself to a cup of water. ‘You remember that hole Grandpa showed us this morning?’

‘Of course.’

‘It was another one of those I was looking at. There are several dotted about the landscape. They show up clearly—as if someone had been making holes for a post and rail fence. But where’s Grandpa now?’

‘There he is. Peeping out of the bungalow.’

‘Tell me what happened here.’

Ginger told his story, starting with the explosions that he had gone down the lake to investigate, and ending with the arrival of the strangers at the rest-house demanding Grandpa.

‘This begins to look ugly,’ said Biggles, thoughtfully. ‘These people must be looking for something. It might be anything so it’s no use trying to guess what it is. If it isn’t that then someone is deliberately trying to unsettle the Zinns and so cause trouble. The same sort of thing is going on all over Africa. Well, if I catch them at it here they’ll get no change out of me. I hate these smart-alecs who go about doing nothing but harm.’

Bertie chipped in. ‘It’s a thundering shame people can’t be left alone to live as they like and do what they like. From what we’ve been told these Zinns have always been a decent enough folk. After all, they don’t ask much from life—a few miserable fish. I’ll bet that stinking witch-doctor who came here is behind the trouble. He’d find a way of making the Zinns do what he wants them to. Why do these coloured people put up with this superstitious skulduggery?’

Biggles smiled cynically. ‘For the same reason that a good many white people are slaves to superstition. It’s been in their bones for thousands of years and they can’t get rid of it. It’s bad luck they say, to do this or that. You see people who have spilt the salt throw a pinch over their shoulder. Others won’t sit down thirteen to a meal. Some throw up their hands in alarm if they see a new moon through glass. Don’t ask me why. Even a tough ship’s captain will jib at sailing on a Friday the thirteenth—and so on. At home fortune-tellers still do a brisk business. Bunk. Sheer unadulterated superstition. If

people who call themselves civilized can behave like that who are we to criticize backward races?'

'Absolutely, old boy,' confirmed Bertie. 'I couldn't agree more. I once read that Julius Cæsar used to consult the oracle before he did anything, but that didn't save him from having daggers slipped into his ribs. An iron shirt would have done him more good than all the bally soothsayers—if you get my meaning.'

'Never mind superstition, let's get down to facts,' said Ginger, impatiently. 'Did the safari that brought Sergeant Abdullah here know he had been murdered?'

'No. When I told them they looked as if they'd been stricken with paralysis—that is, all except Charlie, which was one of the reasons why I cottoned on to him. There were seven of 'em apart from him, all coloured men, of course; an Askari corporal with two others and four bearers. They told me they stayed the night at the rest-house. Nothing happened, so in the morning the sergeant told them, as there was nothing for them to do, they might as well get back to Nabula. They started right away, and had been on the march for three days when I overtook them crossing some open country. I asked if anyone would come back with me to the lake and the first man to volunteer was Charlie. As his heart seemed to be in the right place I brought him. I gave the corporal an account of what we had found here, with Abdullah's identity disc. I also wrote a short note to the R.M. telling him that I intended to investigate and had borrowed Charlie primarily to act as interpreter with the Zinns when I located them. It didn't seem worth while using precious petrol going on to Nabula myself That's all.'

'And now what are you going to do?' asked Ginger.

'I shall go down the lake and ask these bomb-throwers who they are, where they've come from, and what they're doing here. I don't feel like wasting time on long-distance spying. But for a start we'll get Charlie to have a word with Grandpa, who I'm hoping will be able to tell us something. What's he doing in the rest-house?'

'He shot in like a scalded cat when those men appeared.'

'That means he was scared of them.'

'That was obvious. He wouldn't come out while they were here.'

'What did the fellow in charge of this party look like?'

Ginger described him: 'He wasn't British—at all events not British born. He spoke English with an accent but I couldn't place it. Not a bad-looking chap. He certainly wasn't a hundred per cent white. He looked half Indian, or maybe Arab, to me.'

'Okay. I'll be seeing him myself presently. Fetch Grandpa and let's hear what he has to say.'

The old native was brought out. He looked thoroughly frightened, his little eyes glancing furtively up and down the beach. In fact, it was evident that his whole manner had changed in the last hour or two. Far from being garrulous he was now subdued, and it was some time before Charlie could get anything out of him.

At the finish, the total sum of the information obtained was this: two white men had arrived at the village from the west (indicated by pointing) with some black men and a powerful witch-doctor. These were of an unknown tribe. They killed many fish by

making a great noise. They gave the fish to the Zinns, who, in return, were made to dig holes in the ground. Then the white men wanted to go to a different place. The Zinns didn't want to leave their village, but they had to go because at night the witch-doctor called up leopards from the forest to kill and eat them. He, Grandpa, had refused to go, and had run away to hide in the forest. When the strangers had gone, with all the people, he had returned to the village.

This, translated from Grandpa's native idiom into Charlie's halting English, spoken in the high-pitched, sing-song voice so common with coloured Africans, took some time, and really did not convey much news that was not already known or surmised. But, as Biggles said, the picture of what was happening was beginning to take shape. That the strangers were engaged in a search for something, using the Zinns, was clear, but for what they were seeking there was still no indication. The only other factor to emerge was, at the talk of the witch-doctor and leopards, Charlie looked nearly as scared as Grandpa. His eyes rolled.

'This terror of black magic mumbo-jumbo is in their blood. They can't help it,' said Biggles, sympathetically.

'The question is, what can we do about it?' murmured Bertie, breathing on his eye-glass and polishing it.

'You won't cure the mumbo-jumbo stuff, if that's what you mean.'

'How about tossing this witch-doctor exponent to the crocs to see if his magic works with them?'

'It's no joking matter,' returned Biggles, moodily. 'We have no authority to take the law into our own hands and throw these confounded invaders out, even if we were able to do that. I suppose what we should do is to report what we know, or suspect, and leave it to a higher authority to straighten things out. The only thing about that is, they'd say we should have found out exactly what was going on here. That was why we were sent. Until the facts are known definitely the government will be loath to take action for fear of making matters worse. You know how it is. Actually, I foresaw this situation; but the chief was chary of giving me firm orders to act on my own account. That, of course, is what he, or the Colonial Office, would like me to do, because then, if there was serious trouble, they could disclaim any responsibility. In other words, if things went wrong, we should be left to take the rap.'

'But these perishing intruders have already brought hostility into our camp,' argued Bertie. 'If Ginger hadn't turned up when he did I might have been shot. Surely we have a right to defend ourselves?'

'Not to the extent that would warrant us declaring war on them.'

'How about the murders here?'

'We can't prove they were murders.'

Ginger stepped in. 'You should have seen the way that fellow behaved this morning,' he said hotly. 'We were within an inch of shooting it out. They would have taken Grandpa by force if we hadn't prevented it. They'll get him yet if they can. They're afraid he'll talk.'

Biggles lit a cigarette and pondered the problem. ‘I’ve reach the age when I don’t go looking for trouble, but as I see it there’s only one thing we can do to get to the bottom of this, and that is go down and see what these people are doing. Find out what it is they’re after.’

‘They’re not likely to tell you,’ contended Algy, sarcastically. ‘Nor are they likely to continue operations while they know we’re here watching them. Their main concern now will be to get us out of the way so that they can carry on. They’ll be after Grandpa’s blood, too, for fear he talks.’

‘I shall go and ask them point-blank what they’re doing here,’ decided Biggles. ‘If their business is straightforward . . .’

‘It isn’t. That’s pretty evident.’

‘Then let us say, if it was straightforward in the first instance they should have papers to prove it. They may hold prospectors’ licences, in which case they’d be in order in digging up the whole landscape if they felt like it.’

‘Oh come off it; let’s not fool ourselves by trying to find excuses for them,’ said Algy, impatiently. ‘They’ve no business here. The way they behaved this morning, barging into our camp as they did, is proof of that. They don’t want anyone here. They’ve got the wretched Zinns where they want them by importing this leopard wizardry. Whatever it is they’re after must be valuable since they’re prepared to commit murder to get it.’

‘I’ve told you before, we’ve no proof . . .’

‘I know. We can’t prove the deaths here *were* murders.’

‘All the evidence points to death by leopards. Don’t forget we’ve shot one ourselves. From the way it came for me it might well have been a man-eater.’

‘Rot! That beast had been wounded, and in the state it was in would have attacked anybody. You don’t seriously believe the deaths here were caused by leopards?’

‘Of course I don’t. That we ourselves were attacked by one was pure coincidence. But I’m considering, if we started a first-class row, how it would look to other people. The natives know the truth, of course, but you won’t get one of them to give evidence against that witch-doctor because it would be tantamount to suicide. The fellow would die of fright if nothing else.’

‘We might discredit him.’

‘Who?’

‘The witch-doctor.’

‘You’d have a job to do that.’

‘But listen here, old boy,’ broke in Bertie. ‘Don’t say we’re going to be stumped by a bally trickster. He doesn’t scare me, no jolly fear. I’m all against seeing these wretched Zinns given the run-around by a sharper armed with a few old bones and what-have-you.’

‘Wait a minute,’ protested Biggles. ‘I haven’t said anything about going home, have I? I’ve been trying to think out the best way to go to work without causing trouble for anyone. What would you do?’

‘As you said. Go down and have it out with ’em, and then wait for ’em to show their hand.’

‘How?’

‘They’ll try to do to us, or Grandpa, what they’ve done to other people here.’

‘Are you suggesting they’d try to bump off all four of us?’

‘They might try it, one at a time. They’ll certainly try to get Grandpa, and Charlie when they know he’s here to act as an interpreter.’

Ginger gave his views. ‘I say we owe some protection to the Zinns who were as right as rain until this bunch of blackguards interfered with them.’

‘They’re providing them with plenty of fish.’

‘Fish! Pah! If they’re using them to dig holes they can’t let them starve.’

‘All right,’ agreed Biggles. ‘That’s enough. It’s too late to do anything to-day but to-morrow morning we’ll go down the lake and ask a few questions. In a couple of days the R.M. should have got my note telling him what I suspect. He may take some action. Meanwhile the enemy may try to pull a trick—get Grandpa, for instance. I’d rather *they* kicked off.’

‘You really think they may try to grab Grandpa?’ queried Ginger.

‘It wouldn’t surprise me. The poor old man doesn’t realize it but he’s evidently regarded as an important pawn in this dirty business, presumably because he knows more than is good for him. Anyway, we’d better keep our eyes skinned, particularly after dark. The leopard we shot may not be the only one about. Now let’s see about something to eat.’

CHAPTER 8

THE NIGHT WATCH

FOR the remainder of the day all was quiet. The hippos made rings well out in the lake. Long-legged birds stood or walked up and down in the shallows. A few crocodiles crawled out of the water and lay on the bank, but none as large as the one Biggles had shot. Grandpa sat with his back to the wall of the compound watching Charlie, who found odd jobs to do, tidying up, collecting firewood and the like. No more bombing was heard. No one from the far end of the lake was seen. The Gadfly's tanks were topped up from the extra fuel and the cans discarded—all this while strict watch was kept, but, as Ginger remarked, they might have had the lake to themselves.

At length the sun sank into the horizon, bringing a welcome relief after the heat of the day, and after a brief equatorial twilight the curtain of night was drawn across the land.

After supper Grandpa and Charlie retired into the compound and for the others began the wearisome business of night watches. As it was their turn Biggles and Algy took the first spell, and when in due course Ginger and Bertie were roused from their beds to take over, there was nothing to report except that the mosquitoes seemed particularly voracious, wherefore Ginger and Bertie anointed themselves thoroughly with insect repellent before going on duty. When they went out they found the glowing African moon well past its zenith, but still giving enough light to flood the lonely scene with its pale serenity.

After a brief discussion they took up their positions, Bertie near the door of the bungalow, which had been left open to permit the entrance of the cool night air. He found an empty petrol can for a seat. From this position it would be impossible for anyone to approach the verandah, or the aircraft, without being seen. To guard the aircraft was vital. It was their only link with civilization. The enemy, Biggles reasoned, would know that, and might attempt to interfere with it, so he insisted that it should not be left for a moment. Bertie sat with the Express rifle, loaded, across his knees.

There had been some talk of calling on Charlie to take a turn at guard, but Biggles had dismissed the idea, saying that whereas in the ordinary way he would be prepared to trust the man, in the present peculiar circumstances, in which the superstitious fear of a witch-doctor was involved, it might be asking too much to expect the man to keep his nerve in the darkness that would follow the setting of the moon.

Ginger, also using an empty petrol can for a seat, chose a position a little farther along, near the open entrance to the compound which no one would then be able to enter without being seen, and giving a fair view of the open ground along the edge of the lake in the direction of the abandoned Zinn village. For a weapon, in case one should be needed, he had taken the ten-bore shotgun, its wide spread of shot making it

ideal for close work in a bad light. He was not more than twenty yards from Bertie, and therefore in close touch should trouble occur. He could in fact just discern Bertie's silhouette, although as he himself sat with his back to the high brushwood fence, a dark background, he thought it unlikely that Bertie would be able to see him. However, they were well within call of each other.

The important factor about double guards, as any soldier who has been on active service knows, is the moral support each gives to the other. To anyone who has never undertaken such duties a night guard may seem a simple operation. It is never that. In dangerous or hostile country it is always a period of strain. Tough and experienced though the guard may be, nerves inevitably become tightened in a manner that does not occur in broad daylight. Perhaps this fear of what darkness may hold is something we have inherited from our remote ancestors. However, there it is, and sounds, however slight, which would mean nothing, or even pass unnoticed in broad daylight, take on a sinister quality.

Inanimate objects, too, have a strange way of moving, of altering their shape, of appearing and disappearing. A flower or seedhead on a long stalk needs only a breath of air to cause it to nod. It becomes an eye. The result of this sort of thing is, doubts arise. One stares, blinks, peers, and stares again into the gloom in an effort to get a clear picture and so identify the object for what it really is. But more often than not the object which has attracted attention, and on which one has focused, becomes more confused.

Again, when nothing happens the desire to sleep must be fought. In spite of all one can do to keep awake it is the easiest thing in the world to fall asleep. One nod and the watcher is no longer watching. He is asleep. It is even possible to fall asleep for a few seconds without being aware of it. Only a fleeting memory of a dream may warn the watcher, with a shock, that he had for a little while failed in his duty. Time seems interminable. More and more often one looks at the time to see how much longer the night can last. These are facts which no one who has undertaken such duties will deny.

Ginger, to whom a night guard was no new experience, was well aware of this. He knew that at the first suspicion of a nod there is only one thing to do, and that is get up and move about. As time wore on Ginger did this more than once. He deliberately refrained from making himself comfortable, for this can be fatal. Only when he was sure he was wide-awake did he return to his seat. He could still see Bertie, sometimes seated, sometimes standing.

There were, of course, occasional sounds. Once, the distant roaring of a lion. Frequently a splash in the lake, made most likely by a hippo or a crocodile coming ashore. Generally, however, as the moon sank, silence reigned.

It was about four a.m., the hour when vitality is at its lowest ebb, that Ginger's roving eyes settled on a small dark patch, low on the ground, inside the compound, near the far side. It was intangible, no more than a blur. He couldn't remember seeing it before. Had it been there all the time? A prey to doubt and indecision he stared, but could make nothing of it. He closed his eyes for a moment to rest them and stared again. The object was still there. But was it in exactly the same place? He hadn't seen

the thing move, but he had a feeling it was farther inside the compound than it had been when first he had noticed it.

He was well aware of the tricks the imagination can play in such conditions and for that reason he hesitated to call Bertie; but he found his heart beating faster and instinctively slid the gun forward a trifle, his right hand round the trigger guard. For a second or two he contemplated investigating and so settling all doubt; and the reason why he did not do this was because he could not imagine anything getting past him into the compound without his seeing it. He was sure he hadn't been asleep.

He watched, his entire attention riveted on the object. It seemed longer than it had been—or was that imagination? Had the thing moved again? He couldn't decide. The trouble was, with the moon fast dying the eerie light it gave was weak and deceptive. The hard shadows it had thrown when it was riding high had gone, leaving everything blurred, indistinct, uncertain. Again he considered calling Bertie, but naturally he was loath to arouse everyone for what might turn out to be a false alarm.

He continued to watch. He stared until his eyes ached, but still he could not make up his mind about the thing. The only movement he made was to curl his fingers gently round the triggers of the gun. Again the feeling crept over him that the thing had moved. It was extraordinary. He could not have sworn that he had actually seen it move but he became convinced that it was nearer to the long covered place where the two Africans were sleeping. He was almost certain that it was longer than it had been. Could it be a crocodile that had crept in through a gap in the brushwood fence that surrounded the compound? Biggles had spoken of crocodiles coming ashore at night and dragging natives out of their huts. It was certainly not a prowling jackal or hyena, which would have made more definite movements. Anyway, he reasoned, if it was a wild beast of some sort, why hadn't it stalked *him*?

Unable to stand the strain any longer he had just made up his mind to walk forward and so put an end to doubt when to his ears came a sound the like of which he had not previously heard. It reminded him of the faint whimpering of a frightened child. It came from somewhere close at hand, and presently his ears tracked it to the open shelter under which Grandpa and Charlie were sleeping. The sound continued, unbroken, increasing slightly in volume, causing Ginger's nerves to tingle and his mouth to go dry. What was it? He could think of no animal that made such a noise. In it he detected a blood-chilling quality of terror.

Convinced now that something was wrong, but still unable to determine what it was, he rose slowly, very slowly, to his feet, pursing his lips to whistle Bertie to the spot. The whistle died before it was born, for with his eyes still on the thing he distinctly saw it move. Without a sound it had slid forward over the ground in the manner of a snake; and its direction was towards the shelter under which the two natives were sleeping.

He waited no longer. Bringing the gun to his shoulder he took aim. For a second he waited, trying in the poor light to align the barrels on what was no more than an indefinite streak on the ground, a little darker than the rest. Then he squeezed the trigger of the right barrel.

The report of the heavy weapon shattered the silence like the end of the world. Blended with it came a wild scream. At first, momentarily blinded by the flash, Ginger could see nothing. Then he made out the figure of a man leaping about in convulsions. Then, appearing to recover, it raced towards the far side of the compound where against the dark background it was lost to sight. Ginger blazed the second barrel at the spot where it had disappeared and quickly slipped in two more cartridges. As it happened he did not need them, although it was only by the merest fluke that he did not shoot Charlie who burst out of the near end of the shelter. He recognized him just in time by his clothes.

Bertie came running up, saying: 'What is it?' Hard on his heels came Biggles and Algy, both in pyjamas, revolvers in hand.

'What goes on?' snapped Biggles, probing the compound with an electric torch.

'I shot a man,' answered Ginger. 'I hit him but didn't kill him, although he may die later. I plastered him pretty hard but the range was a bit wide. I gave him the left barrel as he seemed to dive at the far fence.'

'How did it happen?'

'I saw a movement inside the compound. I couldn't make out what it was but it was creeping towards the shelter. Somebody was crying. I think it must have been Grandpa, who had seen the thing, so I let drive.'

'Is Grandpa all right?'

'I don't know. I haven't been to see. Charlie's here.'

'We'd better have a look at Grandpa.' Biggles strode to the shelter.

They found the old man unharmed as far as actual injuries went, but he appeared to be in a coma, lying on his back, panting, eyes showing the whites.

'He'll be all right presently,' decided Biggles. 'Here you see what superstitious terror can do. He saw death creeping up on him but was no more able to help himself than a rabbit fixed by a stoat. That foul witch-doctor, or one of his men, was after him. Let's have a look round. Where was the man when you shot him?'

'Here, flat on the ground.' Ginger pointed.

The torch revealed a spatter of blood, a crude native slim-bladed knife, and what at first sight appeared to be a leopard's paw. Biggles held it up between a finger and thumb. 'So it was a leopard-man,' he muttered. 'Now we know. He would have used the knife, then the claws to hide the wound and make it look like the work of a leopard. See how the paw has been made to fit the hand like a glove. The devil probably wore two, but dropped this one in his hurry to get away. This is a fresh piece of hide. I'd wager it's one of the feet of the beast we shot. If I'm right we know now why it was carried away and skinned. We were being watched when we shot the animal.'

'We saw something else moving on the edge of the forest,' reminded Algy.

'That must have been someone spying on us. Where did the man disappear, Ginger?'

'Over here.' Ginger led the way to the spot.

The mystery of the man's entrance into the compound, without passing through the gateway, was at once explained. At ground level a small hole, just large enough to permit the introduction of a human body, had been cut neatly through the brushwood.

'Are you going round to see if he's outside?' asked Ginger.

'Not me,' answered Biggles, emphatically. 'I'm not asking for a spear in my back. If he's still there he can stay there until it's light enough for us to see what we're doing, although I imagine he'd have friends handy to help him away. Good thing you kept your eyes open, Ginger, or Grandpa would have had this knife in his ribs. Let's see how he is. You see how deadly this mumbo-jumbo stuff can be.'

They found Grandpa sitting up, shivering as though he had been stricken with ague. They took him, Charlie helping him to walk, to the bungalow, where a tot of brandy from the medicine chest speeded his recovery. But his teeth so chattered that he was unable to talk. Not that he could have said much that was not already known.

'Are you going back to bed?' Ginger asked Biggles.

'It isn't worth it. It'll be daylight in an hour. I've had all the sleep I need. Put on the kettle for a pot of coffee. I don't think our leopard-fancying friends will try anything more to-night, but you might finish your guard, Bertie, in case. . . .'

CHAPTER 9

FACE TO FACE

As soon as it was daylight a search was made for the man Ginger had wounded but he could not be found. A few dry spots of blood where he had left the compound, and a spot here and there beyond, showed that he had managed to get away and which way he had gone. Biggles said he was not surprised. The range was too long for the pellets of the shotgun to kill. They might penetrate the skin but not much more than that. The shot would have spread, too, and even if Ginger's aim had been accurate not many would have struck the man. Still, they would sting viciously, which was no doubt why the man had flung himself about on being struck.

After an early breakfast they returned to the spot and Charlie did his best to follow the trail. But it soon petered out and he had to admit he was beaten. All he could say was, there had been more than one man. There had been at least two. So it seemed the intruder had an accomplice who had waited outside.

'Which means the business had been properly organized,' muttered Biggles. 'Good thing we kept guard, wasn't it?' he added with a wry smile.

'You still intend to go down the lake and ask these thugs what their game is?' questioned Ginger.

'After what happened last night I'm more than ever determined to find out what they're doing,' declared Biggles, grimly.

They had started to walk back to the bungalow when a distant rifle shot cracked through the thin air. It was followed instantly by a shout from Algy who had stayed in camp to tidy up after breakfast. Biggles broke into a run, for they were still behind the compound; but before he had turned the corner there was another shot and another shout. Algy was climbing into the aircraft. They're shooting at the machine,' he yelled. That first shot hit it.'

'Get it away,' shouted Biggles. 'Go anywhere, but take it away—round the bend where they can't see it.'

There was another shot as the engines sprang to life, throwing up a cloud of dust as the Gadfly swung round to the water. Another minute and it was off, heading down the side of the lake to get out of danger. The others heard the engines cut and knew that it had landed out of sight.

Biggles' face was pale with anger as he stared along the shore of the lake.

'I can't see anybody,' said Ginger.

'He must be just inside the forest.'

'What's the idea?'

Trying to scare us off. They know we can't afford to lose the machine.'

'But suppose they did put it out of action? What good would that do them?'

'We should be stuck here. Instead of taking us an hour to get to Nabula, on our feet we'd be lucky to do it in a week. Maybe they think that in that time they could liquidate us, either here or on the way to Nabula.'

'The point is, what do we do about it, old boy?' put in Bertie.

'Obviously I'm not standing for this. If they want to play the rough way that's how they can have it. Here comes Algy. I'd better wait to hear what he has to say.'

'Then you still intend to go down the lake?'

'Definitely.'

They waited until Algy ran up.

Biggles' first question was: 'What have you done with the machine?'

'I've run it on to a bit of a beach. I think it should be all right there.'

'Are you sure they were shooting at it?'

'The first shot hit it. I heard it smack into the engine cowling. It doesn't seem to have done any harm.'

'I see. Well, I'm going down to ask them what they're doing. I'll take Ginger with me. Charlie had better come, too, in case we see the Zinns. He'll be able to talk to them. When you see us reach the forest, after which I doubt if they'll do any more shooting, you can bring the machine back here. Park it on the far side of the bungalow. They won't be able to see it then from where they are. After that stand guard until I come back. Bertie will be with you.'

'Do you mean you're going to walk down?'

'I am.'

'That's asking for trouble. What if you don't come back?'

'If we're not back by four o'clock fly straight to Nabula and report what's happened. Come on, Ginger. Charlie, come with me. I want you.' Biggles turned away.

'Aren't you going to take a rifle?'

'I've a gun in my pocket.'

'That won't be much good if you run foul of a lion.'

'True enough. I'd better take the Express. Charlie can carry it. He knows the drill.'

'Suppose we're attacked here while you're away?'

'Do what you like. Don't on any account allow anyone near the machine, or the house. Shoot if necessary. You can reckon anyone you see will be an enemy. I don't think that's likely to happen because we should meet anyone coming this way.'

Bertie looked worried. 'You're taking a chance.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'When we jib at taking chances it'll be time for us to retire.'

'Too true, old boy, too true.'

Biggles turned away. ‘Come on, Ginger. Let’s get mobile. We’ll settle this business one way or the other.’ He set off along the side of the lake, Charlie close behind him with the rifle on his shoulder, and Ginger bringing up the rear. There was no shooting, nor any sign of a human being, but as they neared the belt of timber Ginger regarded it askance. However, nothing happened, and the little party strode on towards its objective.

‘ ’Ware snakes,’ warned Ginger, when they came to the softer ground. ‘This is where I nearly put my foot on a puff adder.’

They saw no snakes. The Zinn village was still silent, deserted.

When they reached the central point of the bank, where it curved inwards like a bow and a new vista opened before them, they saw, some distance ahead of them and walking in the same direction, three men, one dressed in European clothes and two natives.

‘They saw us coming and decided to go back to their camp,’ remarked Biggles, without pausing in his stride.

‘You notice they’ve been working all along here, digging holes,’ observed Ginger.

‘When we know what they’re digging for we shall know the lot,’ returned Biggles.

The scene ahead now began to take shape. It could be seen that the end of the lake, still some way ahead, tailed off in a long narrowing point of reeds behind which the ground began to rise towards true equatorial forest, dark and menacing. The ground at this end of the lake appeared to be more fertile, for there was a good deal of scrub.

Biggles strode on.

As they drew nearer, perspiring in the heat of the sun as it gathered strength, details could be observed. Conspicuous a little way back from the water was a large white object that could only be a tent. Moving about, apparently working under the directions of a man in a slouch hat, were several natives, presumably Zinns since they were the only tribe in the region.

‘Well, there they are,’ said Biggles, without stopping.

Presently they saw the three men who had been walking in front of them reach the encampment. The leader joined the man in the slouch hat, whereupon they stood together looking back along the lake-side, a position that was maintained until Biggles walked up—that is, the two Europeans standing together, a small group of tall, spear-armed negroes close behind them, and still farther behind, crowded together, a much larger group of natives which Ginger thought must be the whole tribe of Zinns. There, too, conspicuous in a leopard skin draped round him, squatting in front of the tall negroes, was the witch-doctor. They all waited in silence.

Ginger now saw the second European for the first time. He really was a white man. He judged his age to be between fifty and sixty. Stockily built, broad-shouldered, a bushy untrimmed beard, turning grey, hiding the lower part of a weather-beaten face, he looked a strong character. He stood with his legs apart and his bare arms folded across his chest. His expression was hard and calculating. His nationality might have been anything, although presently, when he spoke, his English was fluent.

Near him stood his darker-skinned companion, the man who had walked in front of Biggles' party down the side of the lake. His expression was frankly hostile. Ginger had of course seen him before, as this was the one who had tried to take Grandpa from the rest-house.

Biggles walked straight up to them and opened the conversation. 'What do you mean by shooting at my camp?' he demanded, curtly.

The white man turned to his companion. 'Did you shoot at them?'

'Me? No. Why should I? I fired a couple o' shots at a running waterbuck, which is what I went out to get. If the shots went near the bungalow it was an accident.'

'I don't believe you,' said Biggles, succinctly.

'You callin' me a liar?'

'I am.'

The half-caste started forward but his companion held him back.

'Now let's get down to facts,' went on Biggles. 'What are you two doing here?'

The white man answered. 'Who the hell do you think you are to come here asking questions?'

'I'm a British police officer if that's of interest to you.'

'It isn't.'

'All right. Let it pass, but I've warned you. Who are you?'

'Mind your own business.'

'This happens to be my business. What are your names and where have you come from?'

The white man scowled. 'Look, mister, I don't care who you are or what you are, but I'll tell you this. You're asking too many questions. My advice to you is to get back to where you came from.'

'And that's my advice to you.' Biggles pointed at the Zinns, who were standing watching, wearing those flat blank expressions natives can assume when faced with something beyond their understanding. 'Did you bring those people here? Force them out of their village?'

'We ain't forced 'em to do anything.'

'Then why are they here?'

The white man grinned sourly, 'I reckon because they like it.'

'Why should they like it?'

'They get more fish than they ever had in their lives before.'

'They can manage without your help. They're going back to their village.'

'Who says so?'

'I do. And you'd better get back to where *you* came from.'

'And what if I don't?'

'I'll have to put you out.'

‘You and who else?’

‘A troop of African Rifles.’

The man modified his tone. ‘We’ve as much right here as anyone.’

‘Not the way you’re acting. You’re prospecting.’

‘What of it?’

‘Where are your licences?’

‘We don’t need any.’

Biggles’ expression hardened. ‘I’m not going to waste time arguing with you. I’m giving you twenty-four hours to get back across the frontier taking your gang with you. Stay here and I’ll have you in court on a charge of attempted murder.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You know what I’m talking about.’

‘You’re a nice one to talk of murder,’ sneered the man. ‘Last night you shot one of my men. He’s like to die. If he does it’ll be you up for murder.’

‘You sent him into my camp to kill a man. What he got anyone else who comes near will get. Your leopard-killing racket may work with blacks but it cuts no ice with me.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘The man you sent into my camp left one of his gloves behind. I’m keeping it for evidence.’ Biggles turned to Charlie and pointed to the Zinns who, sensing trouble between the white men, had huddled closer together, looking frightened. ‘Go and tell those people to go back to their village. They’ve nothing to be afraid of. We’ll deal with any more leopards that come sneaking around.’

Charlie saluted and walked over to face the Zinns. He began speaking in his sing-song voice, and it was soon clear that his words were making a good impression. No one else moved. No one said anything while Charlie continued his speech.

The witch-doctor must have thought this had gone on long enough and decided to take a hand. With his short stabbing spear in his hand he began creeping towards the old soldier, who had his back to him.

Biggles, his lips pressed together in a straight line, strode forward. Coming up behind the witch-doctor he put his foot against him and sent him sprawling on his face. This done he seized the leopard skin and dragged it off him.

The man scrambled to his feet screaming like a wild animal. He turned on Biggles, mouthing, but stopped when he saw Biggles hadn’t moved, but stood there looking at him. He half raised his spear, whereupon Biggles stepped in and lashed him with the leopard skin, beating him with it until he half ran and half stumbled away. Then, throwing the skin on the ground, Biggles said to Charlie: Tell the Zinns that’s what I think of leopard-men.’

‘That skin’s fresh,’ said Ginger.

‘I’d say it’s the beast I shot,’ returned Biggles.

All this had happened so quickly that the two Europeans, evidently taken by surprise, had not moved. The dark-skinned one now lowered the muzzle of the rifle he still carried.

'I wouldn't try anything like that,' grated Ginger, whose revolver was now in his hand.

'I'll report you for this,' stormed the white man.

'I shall report it if you don't,' Biggles told him.

'You can't come into my camp and beat up one of my . . .'

Biggles cut in. 'Why did you bring that dirty cut-throat here? No, you needn't tell me. I know. Get him away before I lose my temper and shoot him like the snake he is.'

'You'll be sorry you laid hands on him. He'll get you for that.'

'Pah! Let him try. If I catch him near my camp I'll string him up on the nearest tree. My last word to you is, pack up and get out. If you're not off British territory in twenty-four hours I shall be along with a platoon of troops.'

Charlie was still talking to the Zinns, pointing in the direction of the village. He seemed to speak with more confidence now that he saw the strong line Biggles was taking. Or the way he had dealt with the witch-doctor may have had something to do with it. Anyway, it was obvious his words were having an effect, and this was confirmed when the Zinns began collecting their few primitive possessions—spears, baskets, nets and the like. Very soon they were moving in a body towards their village.

Ginger watched this standing tense, muscles braced, prepared for violence. The two Europeans stood together, speechless, as if unable to make up their minds what to do. The spear-carrying negroes watched their masters, waiting for a lead. The atmosphere was brittle, but nothing happened. It could be that the two Europeans knew that Biggles and Ginger were not alone at the bungalow. There were others there, with an aircraft available to fetch help. Any shooting would be heard by them.

Biggles prepared to follow Charlie and the Zinns, now making good time towards the village. Before leaving he had a last word. 'Remember what I've told you. Get out while the going's good and take your thugs with you. Any leopards seen prowling near the government rest-house will be shot on sight, without warning.' He turned to the negroes, still watching. 'Do you understand that?' He waved a hand towards the west. 'Go home or you'll find yourselves in big trouble.'

With that he beckoned to Ginger, turned away and set off after the Zinns.

Ginger had an uncomfortable minute as he turned his back on the white men and their black supporters, quite expecting to feel a shot, or a spear, in his back. However, this did not happen. He followed Biggles' lead in the matter of moral superiority and refrained from looking over his shoulder. Still, he breathed more freely as the distance lengthened between him and the danger.

'Phew!' he exclaimed, when they had gone some way. 'That was touch and go.'

'I've given them something to think about, anyway,' asserted Biggles.

'For sheer brass-faced bluff you're the limit.'

'What do you mean, bluff?'

‘Had they come for us we wouldn’t have had a hope. They were ten to two against us.’

‘I reckoned they’d behave as they did.’

‘They’re a bad lot.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. Not altogether. That half-caste, yes. He’s a liar, anyway. I’d say he’s a real bad hat. But the boss, I think, is the chap with the beard. He’s no stranger to Africa. In spite of his wild talk he knows he’s in the wrong in bringing in that witch-doctor. He knows I meant what I said and he’ll think about it. He has intelligence, which is more than can be said for the others.’

‘I only hope you’re right,’ returned Ginger, lugubriously.

‘He had his chance,’ Biggles pointed out. ‘He had only to make a signal, give the word, and there would have been fireworks. But he didn’t do it.’

‘Do you think he’s British?’

‘No. Western Europe, yes. Anyhow, he had the wit to realize that if he killed us he’d have to bolt. There could be no question of staying here after that.’

‘We still don’t know what it is they’re after.’

‘Not a clue. The two irresistible lures for prospectors are of course gold and diamonds, but from what I’ve seen of the terrain they won’t find either here.’

‘What about uranium?’

‘They wouldn’t be able to handle it if they found it. Moreover, they wouldn’t have gone about digging holes. They’d have used a geiger counter.’

‘Oil.’

‘I’d wager there’s no oil here. Oil would need plant to handle it. As foreigners they wouldn’t be likely to get a concession from the government. They’ve come in across the border, from the Congo. After to-day’s showdown I think they’ll go back.’

‘Charlie may be able to find out from the Zinns what they’re looking for.’

‘I doubt it. The Zinns have been digging holes but I’d bet they don’t know why.’

‘I take it you’ll stay here to see if the gang pulls out?’

‘Of course.’

‘What about the Zinns?’

‘We’ll put a guard on them. It shouldn’t be for long. But here we are at the village. We’ll leave Charlie here for the time being, with the rifle. I’ll tell him that in the event of trouble he has only to fire it to bring us along. I don’t think he’s afraid of that witch-doctor after what I gave him. If there is trouble he’ll be the cause of it. Did you see his face when I booted him?’

‘Did I? I’ve never in my life seen such an expression of hate. It was so horrible it gave me quite a turn.’

‘Forget it,’ advised Biggles.

CHAPTER 10

BIGGLES GOES HUNTING

AN hour later, having left Charlie with the Zinns, Biggles and Ginger were back at the bungalow telling the others what had happened in the enemy camp. It was early afternoon. The Gadfly had been brought in and parked as Biggles had directed. Grandpa was still there.

It should be said that before leaving the village Biggles had a conversation with Charlie to find out how much he had learned from the Zinns during the walk up the side of the lake. Biggles had noticed him talking to them. Charlie had little to tell. The white men—the half-caste to him apparently came into that category—had made them dig holes in the ground, at first near the village but later in other places. They had given them fish for food. As Biggles had suspected, the Zinns had not the remotest idea of why they were digging. They hadn't even thought about it. It was something the white men wanted. At first they had refused to leave the village, but did so when the witch-doctor threatened to send man-eating leopards after them. They were glad to be back in their own homes.

Charlie had obviously not been enthusiastic about remaining in the village, but like a good soldier he did not object. In leaving the rifle with him Biggles had promised that any time, day or night, one shot would be enough to bring them along. They would visit him as often as possible. This arrangement would only be for a day or two. So Biggles and Ginger had gone on, leaving him there as a temporary arrangement—actually, only until Biggles had made up his own mind what he was going to do. He wanted to think about the position in the light of what they now knew.

'We've got a certain amount of information, but not enough, I think, to warrant our pulling out,' he told the others when they were together at the bungalow. 'I like to finish a job while I'm at it. What we still don't know, and what we should know, is why these men came here in the first place. That's really the crux of the whole business. Our best plan may be to stay here until we see if these fellows accept my ultimatum and push off home, wherever that may be. I'm pretty sure they came in from across the border. From the type of negro they have with them I'd say they came from the Belgian Congo, where, as you know, there's been a spot of bother lately. If they go, so well and good. If they stay, I'll report to Nabula, when no doubt some troops will be sent up to chuck 'em out.'

'Why chuck 'em out?' questioned Algy. 'Why not arrest them on a charge of murder?'

'That would be for the R.M. to decide. With what little evidence we have I don't think there'd be much chance of a conviction. They'd say if there had been murders

they knew nothing about it. They'd claim, probably with success, that they couldn't be held responsible for what had been done by natives.'

'Well, obviously they haven't found what they've been looking for or they'd have gone home anyway,' opined Algy. 'Look at the area they've covered with their digging! What *can* they be after?'

Biggles shook his head. 'I haven't a clue. It has me completely foxed. It's evidently something in the ground. From these piles of mud we see on the bank they've even tried dredging the lake. I'd say the lake was once the crater of an extinct volcano. It filled with water. Now it's drying up. All that's left is part of the outer rim. Anyhow, that's how it looks to me. I suppose there could be diamonds here but the place doesn't look like a diamond field. Not that I'm an expert on such matters.'

'These men didn't come here on a casual prospecting trip,' declared Ginger. 'They wouldn't have stayed in one place so long, or done as much digging as they have, had that been the case. They came here *expecting* to find something. In other words, they had information. So far they haven't struck the gold, diamonds, or whatever the stuff might be.'

'That makes sense,' agreed Biggles.

'How about doing a spot of digging ourselves?' suggested Bertie, brightly. 'I could do with a bucket of diamonds.'

'Don't fool yourself,' said Biggles. 'If we found diamonds, and kept them, we'd all land in gaol. Prospecting for diamonds is forbidden by law.'

'Okay,' said Algy impatiently. 'So what do we do? I can't see much sense in staying here just to feed the mosquitoes.'

'Don't be in a hurry,' requested Biggles. 'The men may go. If they try to hang on sooner or later they'll give themselves away. They wanted the place to themselves. That's why they introduced these leopard-men, to scare everyone else away. Our arrival here has upset their routine. Seeing we intend to stay they'll get desperate, in which case they may show their hand. We'll wait—and watch.'

'Which means carrying on with night guards, I suppose.'

'More than ever.'

'They're an awful bind.'

'Not such a bind as having your face torn off by a bunch of leopard claws. Now let's have something to eat. Which reminds me. Now we've put the Zinns back in their village they may need food. I reckon there's about a hundred of them, men, women and children, and they won't be able to catch enough fish this afternoon to feed that lot. I don't think they brought any food back with them.'

'We shall have to do something about it or they may drift back to those blighters at the end of the lake,' said Bertie. 'And I'll tell you something else. I don't feel very happy about leaving Charlie there on his own all night. It's asking a lot of him.'

'He didn't object. Anyway, I had to arrange something, and there wasn't much time to think about it. I left him the rifle, and told him he has only to fire a shot to bring us

along. But we can talk about that while we're having lunch, which my stomach tells me is overdue.'

'It's a pity you didn't arrest those two toughs while you were at it,' remarked Algy, as they sat at the table. 'That might have saved a lot of time and trouble.'

'What you mean is, it would have caused a lot of trouble,' answered Biggles, with some asperity. 'Don't imagine I didn't consider it.'

'Then why didn't you do it?'

'What could we have done with them? We've nowhere to put them. We couldn't keep them tied up. No, I decided that was a job for the District Magistrate. If you like you can say I took the easy course. After all, we weren't sent here to arrest anyone. Our job was to find out what was going on. We still don't know what—at least, not all of it. I doubt if we had a case against them.'

'They interfered with the Zinns.'

'In court they could claim they'd found the Zinns starving so they'd got them some fish—provided them with more fish than they'd ever seen in their lives. We couldn't deny that. I think it's better as it is. We'll give them a couple of days and see what happens. We can keep an eye on them from the machine.'

Over a quick lunch, although it was nearer tea-time, Bertie volunteered to go along to the village and spend the night with Charlie. He'd go down about dusk. Biggles told him he thought it was a good idea if he was prepared to do that.

'I'll try to get them some grub to go on with until they get back to their fishing routine,' he said. 'I don't feel much like fishing myself so I'll take a walk along the bank and try for a buck. It shouldn't be too difficult. Presently they'll be drifting towards the lake for a drink. If I get one Grandpa can tell the Zinns where it is and they can collect it. He might as well go back to the village now. He should be safe enough with his own people.'

'Here comes Charlie,' said Ginger from the door. 'I wonder what he wants?'

Curiosity was soon relieved. Charlie said he had been talking to the Zinns. They had told him that some moons ago a white man had come to the lake from the west. He had dug holes, washing the mud in a pan. Then he had put some of the red dust in the pan and cooked it. Then he had gone away. He had never been back. That was all. Charlie said he thought they would like to know about it.

'*Cooked* it!' exclaimed Algy, frowning. 'They can't mean that literally.'

Biggles, too, had knitted his brows. 'I'm not so sure of that,' he said slowly, thoughtfully. 'That operation, cooking red dust, rings a bell. It'll come to me presently.' He turned to Charlie. 'What are those bad men doing now? You can see them from the village.'

'They just stand about, bwana. Do nothing.'

'No more digging?'

'No, bwana.'

'Are the Zinns glad to be back?'

‘Yes, bwana.’

‘How do they go for food?’

‘Bad. Too many mouths. To-morrow they fish.’

‘I was afraid of that. Would they eat meat if I could get some?’

‘Better than fish, bwana. Only eat fish because can’t catch meat.’

‘Will you come with me if I try to shoot something for them?’

‘Yes, bwana.’ From Charlie’s expression a hunting trip met with his entire approval. He had brought the Express rifle with him.

‘All right. Then let’s go.’ Biggles turned to the others. ‘I shall walk down this side of the lake,’ he advised them, indicating the direction away from their enemies. ‘Whether I get anything or not I shall be back before dark. Keep an eye on things while I’m away although I doubt very much if you’ll have any trouble. Bertie, if you’re really going to spend the night in the village you might try to get a nap now. You’ll probably be up most of the night.’

Biggles set off, with Charlie, rifle on his shoulder, walking close behind him.

The landscape on this side of the lake was typical ‘bush’ country: that is, perfectly flat with frequent patches of scrub about six feet high. There was an occasional thorn tree, spaced in the manner of an orchard. These trees were all exactly alike, about thirty feet high. The scrub was all the same sort. Generally speaking it was possible to see a hundred yards. This meant that it was easy stalking country. Biggles also perceived it was easy country in which to get lost, and he was glad he had Charlie with him, since he intended taking a line a little way back from the lake, which would therefore be out of sight.

He did not have far to go, less than a mile, ‘still-hunting’ all the way: that is, moving slowly and quietly from cover to cover. Charlie, having been a gun-bearer, understood the business, and made no more noise than a cloud floating in the sky. It was he who spotted the roan antelope. Taking a quick pace forward he touched Biggles on the arm and pointed to a pair of curved horns rising above the rough grass. The animal was lying down, perhaps waiting for dusk to go to the lake.

The shape of the horns, and the white markings round the eyes, which he could just see, told Biggles the creature was a roan, an animal which, standing about five feet tall at the shoulder and carrying plenty of meat, would suit his purpose admirably. Lying down it did not offer a clear shot, but it promised an easy stalk.

Suddenly, although he had not moved, the roan sprang to its feet and stood staring, not in the direction of Biggles as would have been the case had it caught the human taint, but at something at an angle. It gathered its hind legs under it ready to bolt. It was now or never, for once started the animal would be out of sight in a moment. Broadside on it was an easy shot.

Biggles put out a hand for the rifle. Charlie was ready. A quick aim and Biggles fired. To his great satisfaction the roan dropped as if stone dead. The sound of the report had hardly died away when there arose from the grass, in the direction in which the antelope had been staring, a lion. This at once explained the roan’s behaviour. The

lion had obviously been stalking it. Biggles of course had no idea the lion was there. Nor had Charlie.

The lion, a magnificent beast but without much of a mane, stared fixedly at the two men for some seconds, flicking its tail. Then, after a low growl, it started walking towards the spot where the antelope had fallen.

Biggles slipped in a fresh cartridge, then hesitated. He had no wish to interfere with, much less kill, a lion, an animal for which he had no use. On the other hand he was not prepared to see the king of beasts take possession of the roan. There would be no chance of another. All game in the area would have been disturbed by the sound of the shot. The lion, taking no notice of the two men, although it must have seen them clearly, walked on towards the kill. Charlie stood like a rock.

Biggles shouted. The lion stopped, growled, and sank into the dry grass, almost disappearing from sight. That it was still looking at them was revealed by the angle of its ears, the dark tips of which could just be seen. At this juncture it was not more than fifty yards away.

Biggles decided there was only one thing to do if he was not to lose the roan. With his eyes on the lion and rifle at the ready in case the beast should charge he started walking towards the antelope, which hadn't moved after it had fallen. The lion did not stir. It was still watching. Biggles reached the roan. It was dead. He sat on its haunches and lit a cigarette to consider the situation; for the question that now arose was what to do next. The roan was too heavy for the two of them to carry. That was out of the question. To leave it lying there would mean the lion would have it; perhaps drag it away; perhaps start devouring it on the spot. The alternative seemed to be to try to drive the lion away, a course that certainly did not appeal to him. The lion had not moved. Charlie stood by, watching, impassive.

Without taking his eyes off the lion Biggles said to him: 'What's the best thing to do?'

The old soldier had no doubt about it. 'Shoot lion.'

It seemed to Biggles this might be more easily said than done. 'I don't want to shoot the lion.'

'Give me rifle. I shoot.'

This proposal appealed to Biggles even less. Wherefore he said: 'You run to the Zinns and tell them the meat is here. If they want it they must fetch it. Tell them to make a great noise as they come. Then the lion will go away. I'll stay here and guard the meat. Make haste or it will be dark before you get back.'

This, to Biggles, seemed a reasonable scheme. The Zinns would have to fetch the meat anyway. He had no intention of butchering the antelope where it lay. He felt confident the lion would not attack him. Had it intended doing that it would have done so already, he thought.

That the plan did not work out as anticipated was probably due to the fact that Charlie took his orders literally. He went off at a run.

The temptation to chase something running away was evidently more than the lion could resist. In a flash it was on its feet and after him. Charlie saw it coming and

swerved towards the nearest tree shouting: ‘Shoot, bwana, shoot.’

The choice of action no longer rested with Biggles. The nearest tree was some distance away and Charlie had no real hope of reaching it before he was pulled down. The lion offered a close shot, but it was running, which meant that the chance of hitting it in a vital spot was small. To wound the beast, unless the bullet had the luck to break a bone, would only make matters worse. As a last resort Biggles ran towards the lion shouting, hoping it would stop. It did, its tail flicking viciously, apparently unable to make up its mind which of the two men to go for. This was Biggles’ chance. He fired. The lion spun round biting at its shoulder. Biggles fired again. The lion fell, still struggling. Reloading, Biggles made a cautious approach and fired two more shots. That did it. The lion lay still.

Charlie turned back from the tree, beaming. ‘Good, bwana, good.’

Biggles wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. ‘Go and fetch the Zinns,’ he ordered, a trifle shakily. ‘I’ll wait by the meat or the vultures will have it.’ The ever-ready scavengers were already circling overhead.

Charlie ran off. Biggles returned to the roan. He didn’t go near the lion but for a while kept a watchful eye on it. Sitting on the dead antelope he lit a cigarette and prepared to wait.

Relief came sooner than he expected. There was a shout. He answered it. Ginger and Algy, both armed, appeared round a clump of thorn.

‘Where’s the lion?’ called Ginger. ‘Charlie told us about it.’

Biggles pointed.

Half an hour later, with a great noise of shouting, an excited crowd of Zinns appeared. While some of them amused themselves spearing the dead lion, their hereditary enemy, others quickly disembowelled and cut up the antelope. With gory loads on their shoulders the procession set off back to the village.

Biggles followed with the others. ‘I hope we don’t have to make a practice of this sort of thing,’ he remarked. Grinning, he went on: ‘I may not always be as lucky as I have been to-day. The Zinns have got their supper, but I don’t mind telling you there was a moment when I thought the lion was going to have his—off me.’

Bertie was waiting at the bungalow. He took Biggles’ rifle, and joining Charlie went on with the Zinns to their village. ‘See you to-morrow, chaps,’ he called back over his shoulder.

‘Fetch us if you need us,’ said Biggles. ‘One shot will bring us along. Three quick shots if it’s urgent.’

‘Fair enough,’ Bertie agreed, and went on his way.

‘You don’t think those toughs will have another try to get Grandpa?’ queried Ginger, dubiously, as they stood watching the retreating column.

‘I wouldn’t think so,’ answered Biggles. ‘What purpose could there be in that now? I imagine the original idea was to prevent him from talking to us. To kill him now wouldn’t prevent the others from talking. Well, that seems to be about all for to-day. Let’s go inside.’

CHAPTER 11

SHOTS AT DAWN

THE absence of Bertie from the rest-house made it necessary to reorganize the night guards, which Biggles insisted had to be maintained. Not that there was any argument about what was a common sense precaution against a surprise attack. The new arrangement was three single guards of three hours each, the man on duty to remain at, or near, the door of the bungalow, a position from which he would be able to keep an eye on the aircraft. With no one now in the compound there seemed no point in watching it.

Ginger took the first period, Biggles the second, and Algy the third. In this way everyone would get a fair spell of sleep.

When Biggles awoke Algy for his turn nothing had happened, except of course, the usual strange noises made by the various nocturnal creatures as they went about their business of hunting or drinking.

It was about five a.m., with everything silent and grey dawn just breaking through the mist which at that hour hung over the lake, when the shots, somewhat muffled by the murk, came from the direction of the village. Three shots. Fired in quick succession.

Ginger did not need Algy's shout to awaken him. It so happened that he was already awake after a night made uncomfortable by mosquitoes, and was considering getting up to make tea as an excuse to warm himself, for the air at that time could be surprisingly chilly. By the third shot he was scrambling into his clothes.

'I'll go down,' he told Biggles, who was doing the same thing.

'You can't go alone,' rapped out Biggles, tersely. 'We'd better both go in case it's something serious. Algy, you stay and take care of things here. Get the machine on the water and start up. We may need it.'

Nothing more was said. Within two minutes of the shots being fired Biggles and Ginger were making the best time they could down the shore of the lake, sometimes walking quickly, and at others, where the going was good, breaking into a trot. Biggles carried a rifle and Ginger the shotgun.

Ginger was astonished by the amount of game about—animals which presumably had come to the water to drink their fill before the heat of the day. It was clear that the lake served a wide area. For the crocodiles that slithered into the water at their approach he was prepared, although he was shocked by the number of them, large and small. He wondered how any fish could survive. Dimly through the tenuous mist which still hung over the lake and its surroundings he saw parties of zebra, wildebeest and various deer and antelopes, scampering away. There was a pair of ostriches, but,

fortunately perhaps, no dangerous game except a solitary old rhinoceros which, with a squeal and a snort, stuck up his tail and charged, luckily in the wrong direction, a common occurrence since the big beast has poor sight.

When the village came into sight, and by reason of the poor visibility they were then close to it, they saw Bertie on his knees by someone lying on the ground. This turned out to be Charlie. Behind them stood a group of Zinns holding their spears.

'What's happened?' asked Biggles, crisply, running up.

By this time Charlie was trying to rise with Bertie holding him back.

'Someone tried to get Charlie,' explained Bertie. 'A leopard-man, I think.'

'Is he badly hurt?'

'Not too badly, as far as I can make out. He's a knife wound in the shoulder and what looks like a bunch of claw scratches on his chest.'

'They'll need antiseptic,' decided Biggles quickly. 'Claw wounds are rank poison. Ginger, run back and get the medicine chest. Bring it along in the machine. That'll be the quickest way. I heard Algy start up as we came here.'

'Okay.' Ginger went off at a run.

'What happened?' Biggles asked Bertie, who, having made a wad of his handkerchief, was pressing it on the knife wound to stop the bleeding.

'To tell the truth, old boy, I'm not altogether clear about it myself,' answered Bertie. 'All I can tell you is this. I was sitting on the old tree stump over there, thinking that as it was beginning to get light there was nothing to worry about, when I heard a shout. Coming round the huts at the double I saw two blokes rolling on the ground. At first I thought it was a man and a leopard. Before I could get to 'em they'd broken apart, and one of 'em, dragging a leopard skin which must have been torn off him in the struggle, was hoofing it down the lake. It was a native, one of the black lads from lower down I imagine. I let drive at him just as he was disappearing into the mist. I fired three times.'

'We heard you. Did you hit him?'

'Not with the first shot. I don't know about the others. I was shooting blind into the fog.'

'You haven't been to see?'

'No. I was too taken up with Charlie lying here. I was afraid he was a goner.'

'He may be able to tell us more about it. As long as the knife didn't reach a lung I don't think the wounds are serious. Stand by. I'll be back.' So saying Biggles strode off down the lake.

He hadn't far to go. Inside a hundred yards he came upon the body of a negro lying on his face. He was dead. A trickle of blood oozing from a spot in line with his heart showed why. Beside him lay a piece of leopard skin. On his right hand was a glove that had once been a leopard's paw.

Biggles walked back. 'You got him,' he told Bertie.

'Dead?'

'As mutton.'

Charlie was sitting up. Biggles beckoned to Grandpa, who he saw sitting near. 'Charlie, ask him to tell some of the men to bring in the body. And the leopard skin. I've a camera in the machine,' he went on, speaking to Bertie. 'I'll take a photo of him. It may be useful for evidence should anything be said about this nasty business.'

Charlie conveyed the message, and some Zinns went off, presently to return with the body of the dead negro. Biggles showed them where to put it. 'They can bury it when I've got the photo,' he told Bertie. 'What happened, Charlie?'

Charlie hadn't much to tell. The story was simple. Watching the village he had seen the leopard-man coming, creeping towards the huts. He had stalked him and jumped on him hoping to take him prisoner; but in the struggle the man had knifed him. That was when he had shouted—the shout that had brought Bertie along. That was all. Charlie said he was sorry he hadn't caught the man alive.

'You should have shot him,' said Biggles, grimly. 'He was out for murder. You might have known he'd be armed.'

'What was the feller's idea, do you think?' asked Bertie.

Biggles shrugged. 'I wouldn't know—unless that gang of crooks are still trying to scare the daylights out of the Zinns in the hope that they'll leave the district.'

Here the low roar of engines announced the arrival of the Gadfly. Ginger hadn't bothered to take off, but appeared taxi-ing, skimming the tranquil water. Having run the machine to the muddy bank he got out carrying the Red Cross box that held the first-aid kit.

Biggles went to work, first dabbing the wounds with strong antiseptic and then bandaging them. The lotion must have stung but Charlie didn't flinch. The knife wound, being a straight thrust, did not require stitches.

'That's about all we can do,' said Biggles, when he had finished. 'You'll have to lie still for a bit, Charlie, to give the bleeding a chance to stop. Then we'll take you along to the bungalow in the plane. You'll be all right. Just a matter of keeping quiet for a day or two.'

'Yes, bwana. Thank you, bwana.'

'For Pete's sake!' exclaimed Ginger. 'Look who's here!'

Biggles looked up and saw the bearded white man from the enemy camp coming towards them. In the crook of his arm he carried a rifle. He was alone and walked without any attempt at concealment.

Nobody spoke as he walked up. The man looked at the dead negro, then at Charlie, bandaged, still sitting on the ground. 'What's been going on here?' he inquired.

'You should know,' sneered Biggles. 'Don't try handing me that innocent stuff; it won't work.'

'I knew nothing about this. I was out after some meat, and hearing the shooting came along to see what was going on. I thought I might find you here.'

Biggles regarded the speaker with calculating eyes. 'Do you seriously expect me to believe this?'

'It's the truth. Please yourself whether or not you believe it.'

‘I should arrest you for attempted murder.’

The man jerked a thumb at Charlie. ‘If you mean this I was a mile away when it happened.’

‘You may have been, but you sent this leopard-man here.’

‘I did not. I tell you I knew nothing about it.’

Ginger was puzzled. The man seemed to be speaking with earnest conviction. Biggles must have thought the same, for he looked hard at the man’s face.

‘As a matter of fact,’ went on the man casually, ‘I was coming along this morning to see you, anyhow.’

Biggles stared. ‘You were coming to see *me*?’

‘That’s right.’

‘For what reason?’

‘To tell you I was getting out.’

‘When?’

‘As soon as I can get packed up.’

‘Is that why you sent one of your cut-throats into the village?’

‘I didn’t send him. I’ve already told you that.’

‘Then who did?’

‘That’s not for me to say.’

‘Your partner?’

‘Could be.’

‘It must have been one of you.’

‘It might have been N’Bulu, on his own account.’

‘Who’s N’Bulu?’

‘That witch-doctor you kicked. He won’t forgive you for that.’

‘You brought him here and that makes you responsible for his actions.’

‘I didn’t bring him.’

‘Then who did?’

‘Batoun.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘My partner.’

‘You must have agreed.’

‘I was all against it. Batoun seems to get on with witch-doctors, but I don’t. They’re dangerous, I wouldn’t trust one a yard. But Batoun has a way with natives.’

The furrows in Biggles’ forehead deepened. ‘You’ve changed your tune since the last time I saw you.’

‘I’ve had time to think about things. Besides, I’m fed up with Batoun and his methods. I told him what would happen if he had things his way.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, bringing that witch-doctor along with us, for a start.’

‘Why bring such a creature?’

‘We had a job to get porters for the trip. Batoun got N’Bulu to fix it and he came along with the men. Batoun claimed it was a good thing. N’Bulu more or less ran the village where we picked up the men. They’d have to do as he told ’em. They wouldn’t dare do otherwise.’

‘Who’s the boss of your party, you or this half-breed you call Batoun?’

‘I thought I was when we started but since then he’s taken over.’

‘Why let him get away with that?’

‘Because through the witch-doctor he has control of the men. They’ll do nothing for me. If I’d kicked they’d have walked out on me. I only realized that when it was too late to go back. Not till I got here did I know I was travelling with a bunch of leopard-men.’

‘If you felt like this why did you behave as you did when I called on you in your camp?’

‘To keep right with Batoun. He has one hell of a temper.’

‘From which I gather you’re scared of him.’

‘I couldn’t afford to be stuck here on my own without stores or anything. Besides, Batoun was working himself into a rage at not finding what we came for. He might have turned his leopard-men on me when I was asleep. He’s bad enough for anything.’

‘You *have* changed your tune,’ said Biggles, with bitter sarcasm.

‘This is the first chance I’ve had to see you alone.’

‘Anyhow, you’re not denying that this dead man was one of your outfit?’

‘No, I wouldn’t deny that. He’s one of ours. But I didn’t send him here. The first I knew he was here was when I walked in and saw him lying there.’

‘I’m glad you admit to something,’ returned Biggles, with iron in his voice. ‘You can see for yourself what happened. This man of yours came into the village to kill somebody. He nearly succeeded. There happened to be a guard here so it was he who was killed.’

‘I’m sorry about it.’

‘*You’re* sorry!’ Biggles was incredulous. ‘Why should you be sorry. You’ve been the cause of all the trouble here.’

‘I didn’t come to make trouble, but things didn’t work out as we expected.’

‘If you’re on the level what’s your name?’

‘Ducard. Otto Ducard. You may have heard of me.’

‘I haven’t.’

‘I’ve spent my life in Africa.’

‘What did you come here for, anyway?’

‘Diamonds. You see, I’m coming straight.’

‘I gather you didn’t find any.’

‘You’re right. It never did look like diamond country to me.’

‘What led you to think there might be diamonds here?’

‘A man I met in Nigeria. He said there was a fortune to be picked up. Millions.’

‘Why should he tell you that? Why didn’t he come himself and pick up this easy fortune?’ Biggles was frankly sceptical.

‘He was near dead with blackwater fever when I came on him. Past saying much. I did what I could for him but it was no use. Just before he died he told me about this place.’

‘He’d been here?’

‘So he said.’

‘The Zinns said a man had been here, months ago,’ put in Ginger.

Biggles resumed. ‘Had this man any diamonds on him?’

‘I didn’t find any in his pack.’

‘Did he actually mention diamonds?’

‘Not in so many words. He didn’t have much time to say anything. But I’d known him as a diamond prospector, with a bit of smuggling thrown in, mebbe, for years. When he talked of a fortune to be picked up what else was I to think? He was crazy about diamonds. I knew that.’

‘Well, it’s a good story,’ said Biggles, obviously only half convinced. ‘Not that it matters much now, if you’re pulling out.’

‘I’ve wasted enough time here.’

‘And you’ll take your thugs with you?’

‘Of course.’

‘And you won’t be coming back?’

‘Not me. I’ve had enough.’ The man was emphatic.

‘How long will it take you to get packed up?’

‘Coupla days, at most. We’ve been here some time and we’ve a fair amount of stuff. We had some way to come, too.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I see. All right. You’d better start packing. I shall stay here till you’ve gone. What if your partner refuses to go?’

‘He’ll go if I put my foot down.’

‘I’ll wait and see if he goes.’

‘Do what you like. I’ve finished.’ Ducard turned about and started to walk away, but Biggles called him back.

‘Just a minute. Haven’t you forgotten something?’

‘Forgot what?’

Biggles pointed at the body of the native. ‘This is your property. You’d better take it with you.’

‘You don’t expect me to hump him on my back, do you?’

‘We don’t want him. You can send some of your porters to fetch him.’

Ducard looked at Biggles grimly. ‘Listen, mister. I’ll do that if you want it that way, but if I was you I’d leave well alone. If N’Bulu and his men learn you’ve killed one of ’em you’re likely to be in for bad trouble. They’re a strong tribe. They’ll hang about and never leave you till they get you. Take my tip, bury him yourself and keep your mouth shut about it. I shan’t say nothing if you don’t.’

Biggles pondered the matter for a moment. ‘All right. Maybe it’d be better that way. I’m not looking for trouble.’

‘You’re wise.’ The man turned again and walked away.

‘We’ll get the Zinns to dispose of the body,’ decided Biggles.

As Ducard faded into the now-thinning mist Ginger said: ‘What do you make of all that?’

Biggles lit a cigarette and drew on it heavily before he answered. ‘I think he was telling the truth—or the greater part of it was true.’

‘Why should he tell the truth?’

‘Why shouldn’t he? I don’t see that he’s anything to gain now by lying. He says he’s going.’

‘How do we know he means that?’

‘I can believe he’s decided there’s no point in staying. He knows we’re here and that we intend to stay. He also knows we have an aircraft so he wouldn’t be able to do a thing without our spotting it. Again, he hasn’t found what he came for, and he’s been a long time looking. He hasn’t many bearers so he couldn’t have brought much in the way of stores. They’re probably running low. Taking it by and large he has every reason to be fed up with the whole thing. Unless he’s a smarter liar than I give him credit for, he meant what he said about pulling out.’

‘But what about this ugly business last night, old boy?’ protested Bertie.

‘He said he, personally, knew nothing about it, and from the expression on his face—unless he’s a good actor as well as a liar—that was true.’

‘I got that impression,’ put in Ginger.

‘To cap all, ask yourself this. Would he have come here this morning had he sent a murderer into the village?’

‘True enough, old boy, true enough,’ conceded Bertie.

‘No,’ concluded Biggles. ‘There was no point that I can see in saying he was going if he wasn’t, knowing perfectly well that we should know if he stayed.’

‘Why should the man who died of fever send him here on a wild goose chase to look for diamonds that weren’t here?’ Ginger asked the question.

‘I have my own ideas about that.’

‘You mean the story wasn’t true?’

‘No, I think that might well have happened. Why invent such a tale? We decided some time ago that it could only have been information that sent Ducard and his friend to an out-of-the-way place like this. I’d say Ducard got the story wrong. Remember, he said the man was dying and couldn’t say much. Ducard *assumed* it was diamonds because the man was known to him as a diamond prospector and smuggler. It wasn’t diamonds at all. It was something else.’

‘If it wasn’t diamonds or gold what else could it have been?’

‘With a little patience we may learn that. I have a vague notion in the back of my mind. But we’ll talk about that presently. Let’s get back to the bungalow. I think Charlie’s well enough to be moved.’

‘You’re not going to leave anyone here?’

‘Not for the moment. Nothing is likely to happen in daylight. One of us might come down to-night. I’ll think about it—see how things go.’

That was all. Charlie was helped into the Gadfly which Biggles then taxied back to the rest-house where Algy was brought up-to-date with events.

Algy put a finger on what Ginger thought was a weak spot in Ducard’s advice about the disposal of the leopard-man who had been shot. ‘When this fellow doesn’t go back to camp the others will know something happened to him,’ he pointed out.

‘A lot of things can happen to a man in this part of the world,’ answered Biggles. ‘I see no reason why they should jump to the conclusion that we’d shot him. He might have stepped on a snake, run into a lion, or been taken by a crocodile.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ conceded Algy. ‘Always provided Ducard keeps his mouth shut,’ he added, significantly.

‘If he’s as anxious to go as he says he is he’s not likely to do anything, or say anything, to cause his porters to hang about here indefinitely merely to get even with us. We shall have to take that on trust. We shall see. Let’s leave it at that.’

CHAPTER 12

BIGGLES COOKS SOME DIRT

THE rest of the day passed quietly.

Towards noon Biggles and Ginger walked down to the village to find the Zinns busy fishing. Their method was simple. Using three dug-out canoes a long net was carried out some distance, stretched in a line with the ends curved round towards the bank, and dropped. With much splashing to scare the fish the whole thing was then dragged towards the bank and the catch brought in, the larger fish being speared in shallow water. There was a surprisingly good catch; at least, Ginger thought so. Most of the fish were small but there were some good ones, weighing up to twenty pounds, he estimated. They were ugly brutes, with scales the size of half-crowns. No sooner were they brought ashore than the Zinns began to eat them raw. As Ginger remarked, it was not a pretty picture.

'Nature in the raw seldom is pretty,' returned Biggles, philosophically. He was looking around.

Ginger asked him why.

'I was looking to see where they'd buried that negro. You heard me ask Charlie to tell them to bury the body. I don't see anything like a grave.' Biggles made a signal to Grandpa, who was following them around like a well-trained dog probably in the hope of getting some biscuits, and pointing to the spot where the body had lain raised his eyebrows.

Grandpa made a grimace, showing that he understood the question, and pointed to the lake.

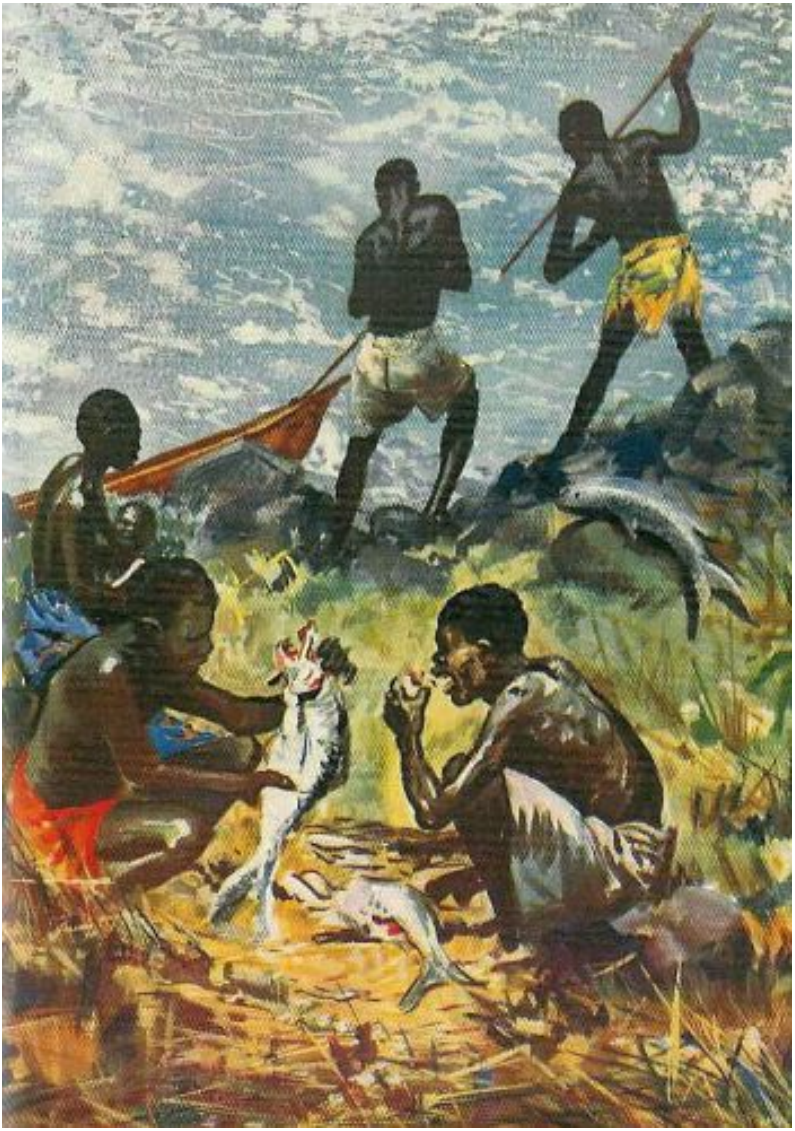
Neither Biggles nor Ginger understood what he meant until he worked his arms in a fair imitation of a crocodile's jaws.

Biggles turned a horrified face to Ginger. 'For heaven's sake! They must have thrown the body in the lake . . . to the crocodiles.'

Ginger shrugged. 'Maybe they'd nothing to dig a hole with.'

'It shows what they think of leopard-men. We'd better forget it. Things seem all right here so we might as well walk back.'

They returned to the bungalow.



No sooner were they brought ashore than the Zinns began to eat them raw (page 141)

Towards evening Biggles said he thought someone should spend at least one more night with the Zinns, just in case there was a repetition of the attack. He offered to go himself, but Ginger volunteered for the job and after a brief argument his offer was accepted. So, starting in good time and taking the shotgun and the binoculars, he returned to the village to find the Zinns sitting around, or going about their tasks, not having been molested. As there was a little daylight left he walked on as far as the ant-hill from which he had made his first reconnaissance. Through the glasses he could still see the tent in the same position. There seemed to be a certain amount of activity going

on, which led him to think the camp might have started to pack up, but apart from that he learned nothing of interest.

Returning to the village he found himself a seat and settled down to pass a night which he did not expect to be comfortable. Nor was it, although, and this was the important thing as far as he was concerned, there was no sign of the enemy. He did a lot of thinking, as one usually does when one is awake in the long night hours.

As soon as it began to get light he walked back to the bungalow. By the time he arrived the others were already astir.

'Nothing to report,' he said.

'Good. It looks as if Ducard intends to keep his word.'

'What on earth are you doing?' asked Ginger.

His curiosity was pardonable. Biggles was sitting on an empty petrol can. On another can in front of him was the spirit stove. Beside it lay a black object which Ginger made out to be a piece of charcoal evidently brought from the ashes of the fire in the compound. In the charcoal a small round cavity had been carved, or scraped. Close to this was a metal tube. This Ginger recognized as a length of spare petrol lead. One end had been squeezed up to form a point.

Biggles grinned. 'You're just in time to see an experiment that may alter the face of Africa—this part of it, anyway.'

'I don't get it.'

Still smiling Biggles went on. 'You know, it's a funny thing how you remember the things you learned at school. Another queer thing is how often they pop up to be useful. When I saw this experiment done in the lab. at school it seemed a complete waste of time. Not in my wildest imagination could I see myself doing it, so many years later—certainly not in a place like this.'

'Would you mind telling me just what you're doing?' requested Ginger, curtly.

'You recall Charlie telling us that the Zinns said a man had been here cooking earth?'

'Perfectly well.'

'And I said, strange as it may seem, that rang a bell somewhere far back in my memory?'

'I remember.'

'Last night, just as I was going off to sleep, the bell rang so loudly that it woke me up with a start. In plain English I remembered where and how I had seen a pinch of earth cooked.'

'In the lab. at school.'

'Right. I'm now about to do a spot of cooking.'

'Don't be so long-winded about it. Why?'

Biggles was obviously enjoying himself. 'Don't be in a hurry. I'm by no means sure I'm right. But if I am it should put us one jump ahead of the fellows at the far end of the lake. Maybe they didn't go to school. But of this I'm pretty certain. Like the

majority of prospectors, which is what they are, they can't think far beyond gold and precious stones. In fact, Ducard is so crazy about diamonds that he thought the man who sent him here was talking of diamonds. That man, too, as Ducard told us, had diamonds on the brain. But I suspect he knew about some other things as well.'

'He spoke of millions.'

'If I'm not barking up the wrong tree we're sitting on billions. Now watch the professor do his stuff.'

Biggles lit the stove. From his pocket he took a screw of paper. Unfolding it he poured into the cavity in the charcoal a little red-coloured dust. The paper he then threw away.

'What's that?' asked Ginger.

'Frankly, I don't know,' admitted Biggles. 'All the ground here is full of this stuff. It could be bauxite. It might be cinnabar. Anyway, I'm pretty sure it's a metallic oxide of some sort.'

'What's bauxite?'

'Aluminium oxide, mixed perhaps with iron oxide. It's the stuff that yields the metal. Aluminium may not be a precious metal but the world to-day uses an awful lot of it. Cinnabar is ore of that stuff they put in thermometers. Mercury. The metal that runs about. When you bake the ore the sulphur in it is given off in the form of sulphur dioxide, leaving the metal. That's what they told me at school, anyhow, and I've never had any reason to question it. We will now see what the luck's like. Is anybody about?'

Ginger looked up and down. 'Not a soul.'

'Good. I wouldn't like Ducard to see me doing this. It might give him ideas.'

Biggles picked up the length of tubing and using it as a blowpipe directed a point of flame at the dust in the charcoal crucible. The charcoal began to glow, the dust in it shrinking. Very soon the dust had almost entirely disappeared, leaving in its place a tiny bead of silvery metal.

Biggles stopped blowing to get his breath. A broad smile of triumph spread over his face. 'Well, there it is,' he said. 'Now we know something Ducard doesn't know, and apparently never suspected, although he's dug enough holes in the stuff.'

'Jolly good, old boy. You're a wizard,' congratulated Bertie. 'I'd rather you had produced some gold. I could do with a few bucketfuls. What is it, do you think?'

'I may be able to tell you when it gets cold enough to handle. At all events it's metal of some sort, and any metal in workable quantity, even iron, is worth money. It could be beryllium, another white metal which, because it's light, is used a lot in aircraft. I wouldn't know about that. I'm not a metallurgist. All that matters is, there's a metal here of some sort, thousands of tons of it, and no doubt the government will be pleased to know about it.'

Biggles picked up the little white bead and examined it closely. 'It looks mighty like aluminium to me, but with such a small piece I wouldn't be sure. I've no intention of sitting here all day blowing my inside out to get a larger piece. I'll take this morsel home.' He wrapped the piece in an old envelope and put it in his note-case. 'That's all,'

he said, cheerfully. ‘The show’s over. Sorry if it was a bit of an anticlimax but aluminium was the best I could do to-day. Maybe we’ll dig some gold another time.’ He turned out the lamp and stood up.

‘You don’t think the man who told Ducard about this place was exaggerating when he talked of millions?’ asked Ginger.

‘No, although that was a mistake in that it fooled Ducard into thinking only of diamonds. Maybe the fellow thought it wasn’t necessary to mention bauxite, supposing Ducard would recognize the stuff when he saw it. But what’s the use of guessing? We shall never know the truth of that. Not that it matters.’

‘Would bauxite have been any use to Ducard? I mean, could he have handled it?’

‘Not himself. But he could have applied for a concession which, had it been granted, he could have sold to an operating company for a fortune. Either through ignorance or from being too greedy he missed the boat. But it’s time we had something to eat. I’m getting a bit tired of bully, biscuit and rice, so unless these trouble-makers do clear out we’ll shoot one of these ducks or geese, or whatever they are, to see if they’re worth eating. The Zinns seemed tickled to death with that roan antelope I got for ’em so we might keep them happy by getting some more meat. No doubt they’d be glad to have anything in that line. If I know anything they won’t be particular about what it is.’

‘What beats me,’ said Bertie, ‘is how the old hippos float about in water fairly crawling with crocs—whoppers, too, some of ’em.’

‘A croc of any size would be a fool to take on a hippo, and if you look at a hippo’s mouth when he yawns you can see why,’ answered Biggles. ‘With a mouth full of teeth such as he has a hippo could bite a croc clean in halves. They’ve been known to do that to a canoe.’

‘Let’s hope they don’t try any games of that sort with the machine when we’re in it,’ said Bertie, anxiously.

‘Let’s hope they don’t try it whether we’re in it or not,’ returned Biggles. ‘They’ll have an opportunity presently, if that’s how they feel. When I’ve had a bite to eat I’ll fly down to the far end of the lake to see what goes on. I don’t feel like walking it. We might as well let them see we’re still here. They should be gone by to-morrow. When I’m satisfied they have really gone we can fly Charlie down to Nabula and then go home.’

After a quick meal Biggles took the machine out, and with Ginger beside him in the cockpit made the short trip, flying very low, to the enemy camp.

‘They’re still there, anyway,’ observed Ginger.

There was not much to see. The tent was still standing, but as Biggles pointed out, unless they intended moving off that day they would need it to sleep in that night. It would be the last thing to be packed up. Lying in front of it were a number of bundles, camp equipment and the like, made up as loads for porterage, so it did look as if Ducard intended to depart. A small group of coloured porters could be seen near at hand. The witch-doctor sat on the ground in front of them.

‘What are they doing?’ said Biggles, in a puzzled voice. ‘I should have thought those bearers would have something to do instead of loafing there, doing nothing.’

‘I think they’re watching Ducard and his pal. They appear to be having an argument.’

The two leaders had emerged from the tent. For a few moments they stood looking up at the aircraft, now circling, and then resumed a conversation, as it seemed from their actions, with some heat.

‘They can argue their heads off as far as I’m concerned,’ declared Biggles, as he turned for home. ‘As long as they clear out I don’t care what they do. To be on the safe side I’ll spend the night with the Zinns. It’s my turn.’

CHAPTER 13

MURDER MOST FOUL

THE night passed quietly.

In accordance with his declared intention Biggles spent the hours of darkness in the Zinn village, although as a matter of detail Algy insisted on going with him. If this was to be their last watch, he argued, it didn't matter if they didn't get any sleep. This, of course, was assuming the enemy retired across the border.

Nothing happened.

Biggles surprised Algy by saying he was not entirely happy about this. He admitted that he had fully expected the invaders to make a last effort to get them out of the way. The fact that nothing had been done made him suspicious.

Algy asked him why.

'Because having seen that lot, and they looked tough to me, it amazes me that after all their trouble here they should just walk away like a lot of lambs.'

'Ducard said he was fed up. He said he was going.'

'I know he did. But remember, he was speaking for himself. It doesn't follow that his nasty-looking partner would take kindly to the idea. That goes for the witch-doctor and his leopard-men. Ducard practically admitted that his partner, who was responsible for the introduction of the black gang, was boss of the show.'

This conversation took place just as the first grey streak of dawn was showing through the usual mist, and they were about to move off in the direction of the bungalow when from far off down the lake, in the direction of the enemy camp, came what was unmistakably a rifle shot.

'What are they doing?' said Algy.

'Probably shooting some fresh meat for the journey,' surmised Biggles. He went on: 'While I'm here I feel inclined to walk along as far as the bend and from the top of one of those ant-hills that Ginger used see if they go.'

'They may not go until later.'

'That would be unusual. Most safaris start early to cover as much ground as possible before the heat of the day. I shall know if they're gone—that is, as soon as the mist lifts.'

'How?'

'They won't leave the tent behind. It's a conspicuous mark. If it's still there I shall know they're still there, too.'

'Okay. I'm with you. Let's go.'

They set off down the side of the lake, followed at a respectful distance by Grandpa, who seemed to have formed an affection for them. He moved in closer when the party encountered the usual game that had been to the water to drink.

'How about some meat for the Zinns?' suggested Algy.

'I won't shoot anything now,' said Biggles. 'If Ducard hears shooting he may wonder what's going on. I may get a chance for a shot on the way back.'

The party proceeded, watchful for big game of a dangerous nature, but none was seen. On arriving at the ant-hills they had to wait for a little while for the mist to rise. When it did they learned what they wanted to know. The tent was no longer there.

'They've gone,' said Algy.

'Good,' returned Biggles. 'That saves us a lot of trouble. We might as well get back to the bungalow.'

On the way back, as Biggles had hoped, he got a shot at a belated waterbuck, and, to Grandpa's delight, killed it. The old man raced on ahead presumably to give the tribe the good news. They were at their daily task of fishing. From this some of them broke away to bring in the more desirable meat. Biggles and Algy did not stop, but pressed on home to find Ginger and Bertie beginning to get anxious at their delay in returning.

'They've gone,' Biggles told them, cheerfully.

'So what do we do?' asked Ginger.

'Fly Charlie down to Nabula, then see about getting home. I shall probably fly down to the far end of the lake to make sure those people really have gone, and are not hiding somewhere near in the hope of fooling us.'

'Okay,' replied Ginger. 'Let's get cracking before these infernal mosquitoes tear the last flesh from my bones.'

'Let's have some breakfast first,' requested Biggles. 'There's no hurry.'

It was an hour before Biggles, taking Ginger with him, climbed into the aircraft, and keeping well clear of the hippos took off for the short run to the end of the lake, leaving Algy and Bertie to start packing their things at the rest-house ready for departure. As the Air Commodore had anticipated at the outset, the great advantage of having a plane on the job, as opposed to having to work on foot, was now demonstrated, for the aircraft would be able to cover as much ground in half an hour as would occupy a safari for a week. In fact, the entire area, with the exception of the forests, could be surveyed almost at a glance.

And at a glance, even before the site of the camp was reached, it could be observed that it had been abandoned. The tent had gone. There was not a soul in sight. No smoke arose from the black ashes of the camp fire. There was not a movement of any sort. Even the few vultures that had taken possession sat motionless.

'Well, that seems to be it,' said Biggles, after making two circuits. 'Apparently Ducard meant what he said. If they've taken a course west through the forest we shan't be able to see them, of course; but I'll climb a bit for a general look round before we go back.'

Ginger was staring down. ‘Just a minute,’ he requested. ‘I can see something down there, but I can’t quite make out what it is.’

‘Where are you looking?’

‘Close to where the tent was pitched. Near where those vultures are standing.’

‘You’re right,’ said Biggles in a curious tone of voice, after inspecting the spot Ginger had indicated. ‘It might be a bundle of rubbish, rags, or something of that sort, but from its shape it looks mightily like a body.’

‘In European clothes.’

‘Yes. If it is a body it must be either Ducard or his partner. Is that why those vultures are standing there, I wonder? Are they waiting . . .’

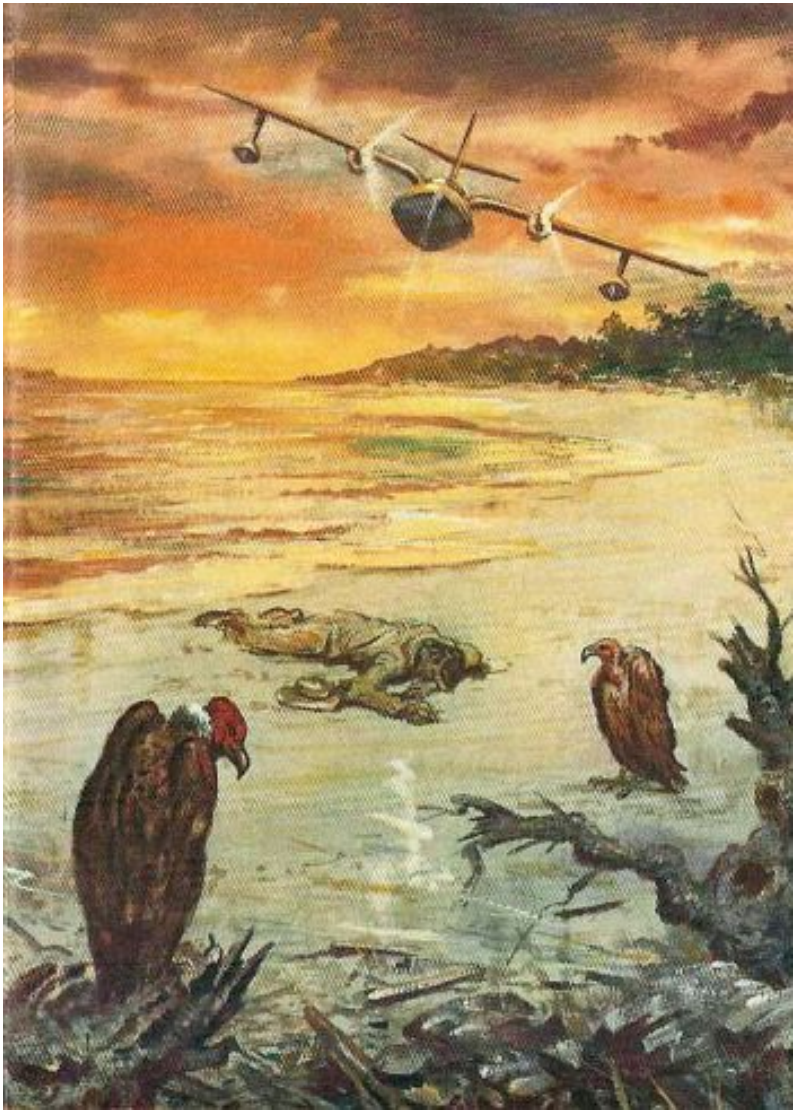
‘Waiting for what?’

‘The person—if it is somebody—to die. If that is a body the man must still be alive or the vultures would be working on it. I don’t understand this. I think we’d better go down and have a look.’

So saying Biggles cut the engines, sideslipped off some height, landed on the water and ran on to the bank as close as possible to the object of their interest. Having made the machine secure in shallow water, nose pointing towards the open lake ready for departure, they walked the short distance to where the tent had been pitched.

‘It’s a man,’ said Biggles, even before they reached the spot. He quickened his stride. ‘It’s Ducard!’ The vultures, seeing themselves deprived of a meal, squawked their protests as they moved farther away.

The body was lying face downwards, forehead resting on an arm.



‘It looks mightily like a body,’ said Biggles (page 152)

‘You watch the forest in case this is a trap,’ Biggles told Ginger, cogently, nodding towards the dark belt of primeval forest that ran in a long line no great distance away. He turned the body over to reveal on the front of the shirt an ugly stain.

‘He was shot all right,’ he went on. ‘In the chest.’ He lay down and put an ear on the man’s heart. After listening for a moment he rose quickly. ‘He isn’t dead. Fetch the brandy flask. I doubt if we shall be able to save his life but we may bring him round long enough for him to tell us who did it.’

‘That must have been the shot we heard,’ said Ginger. ‘You said you thought they were out after meat for the journey.’

‘That was it. Get the brandy.’

Ginger ran to the machine and returned with the flask kept for an emergency.

With some difficulty they managed to get a little of the spirit between the man’s lips and teeth.

‘That’s enough,’ said Biggles. ‘Give him too much and we may drown him.’

Ducard’s eyelids fluttered. Presently the eyes opened. At first they were vague, glassy; but as the potent spirit did its work life slowly returned to them.

‘Who did it?’ asked Biggles, in a thin, distinct voice.

At first, although he seemed to have understood the question, Ducard had difficulty in answering. His lips moved but no sound came. But as life flickered more strongly he managed to get out the one word: ‘Partner.’

‘Batoun?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did he do it?’

‘Had a row. He wanted—to stay. I said—go. Not enough—food—get back—to coast.’

‘And he wanted it all?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘Gone.’

‘Which way?’

‘West. Through forest. Way we—came. He will—come back—for the diamonds.’

‘Although you told him there were no diamonds.’

‘Yes. He not believe. I had—a little gold—in belt. He took it.’

There was a trickle of blood from Ducard’s lips.

Biggles stood up and spoke quietly to Ginger. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ he said helplessly. ‘He’s got it in the lungs. Hasn’t a hope. He’ll die whatever we do.’

‘No chance of getting him to Nabula?’

‘Not an earthly. I doubt if there’s a doctor there, anyway.’

‘Bad business.’

Biggles nodded.

Ducard coughed, bringing up more blood. Suddenly speaking in a clear voice he said: ‘Get out. That witch-doctor will come back with a crowd to kill you. You kicked him.’

That was all. The dying man’s eyes closed again in unconsciousness. A little while later he ceased to breathe.

‘He’s gone,’ said Biggles, in a sombre voice. ‘That’s where diamonds have got him.’

‘What are we going to do? We can’t leave him lying here.’

‘No. We can’t do that. There isn’t much point in taking the body to the rest-house.’

‘We haven’t even a spade . . .’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ broke in Biggles. ‘I’ll stay here to see the vultures don’t get him. You take the machine back to the bungalow and fetch one of the others with some empty cans that might do for digging. The ground is mostly soft sand so we should be able to dig a grave of sorts. Some stones or branches piled on top should keep the hyenas from digging him up—if there are any about. I haven’t seen any. I can’t think of anything else we can do.’

‘Okay. You watch the forest. Ducard seemed to think that stinking witch-doctor will come back.’ Instinctively as he spoke Ginger glanced towards the forest. His body stiffened and a hand went to his revolver. ‘Look what’s coming,’ he jerked out.

Biggles spun round. He stared unbelievingly.

Marching briskly towards them in single file from the direction of the forest, and not more than a hundred yards away came a party of seven men, six coloured men led by a white officer. All wore uniforms. All carried rifles except the officer, a man of middle age with a military cut about him.

‘Who the deuce are they?’ muttered Ginger. ‘They’re not our troops.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘Search me.’

They waited for the party to arrive.

Looking hard at Biggles the officer saluted. ‘*Bonjour, monsieur.*’

‘*Bonjour, monsieur*,’ returned Biggles politely.

The officer looked at the dead man on the ground. He looked at the aircraft, then back at Biggles. Pointing to the dead man he said: ‘Did you do this?’

‘No. We found him here. He died only a few minutes ago.’

‘You *found* him.’ The officer, pardonably perhaps, looked incredulous.

‘That is what I said. To whom have I the honour of speaking?’

‘Capitaine Bourgon, of the Belgian Colonial Service. And you, monsieur?’

‘Inspector Bigglesworth, of the British Police.’

‘May I ask what you are doing on Belgian territory?’

‘*Belgian* territory!’ Biggles looked astonished, as indeed he was.

‘Yes.’

‘But this is British territory, monsieur.’

‘There you make the mistake, monsieur. You are in the Belgian Congo.’ The officer was coldly polite.

‘Let us say one of us is mistaken, monsieur,’ returned Biggles. ‘There are no frontier posts. I suggest that here a few kilometres one way or the other are not of importance. According to the map with which I was provided for this mission we stand on British property, otherwise you may be sure I would not be here.’

‘The boundary is perhaps vague,’ conceded the officer. ‘What was your mission?’

‘To investigate certain murders that have occurred at the British post higher up the lake and to find out what had become of a tribe called Zinns, which are, and always have been, our responsibility.’

‘Yes, the Zinns are on your ground,’ admitted the officer. ‘Our boundaries run close.’

‘And may I ask why you have come here?’

‘I was looking for this gentleman.’ The Belgian glanced down at Ducard. ‘We have searched for him for a long time. Do you know who killed him?’

‘Yes. He told us. His partner. A man named, apparently, Akmet Batoun.’

‘Ah! That one. So he is here.’

‘He was. He appears to have gone.’

‘They were not alone, of course. What men had they with them?’

‘A witch-doctor and some tribesmen from the Congo. They came from the Congo.’

‘Why did they come here? Do you know that?’

‘Yes. Ducard told me they came looking for diamonds. They didn’t find any. I ordered them to go because they were interfering with the Zinns.’

‘How?’

‘By forcing them to work for them, by terrorizing them with leopard-men.’

‘Ah. Batoun has done that before. That was one reason why I was looking for him.’

‘What were the other reasons?’

‘He is a thief and a smuggler of diamonds from our territory. Batoun is a dangerous man. Ducard, for some reason, seemed to be under his influence. We have hunted for them for a long time, but they were not easy to find. We heard a rumour they had come this way so I followed.’

‘You seem to know a lot about them. What was Ducard’s nationality?’

‘I’m not sure. He might have been British. He was born in Cape Town. His father, we think, was Dutch, and his mother English. When he was young he went to prison for illicit diamond buying. When he came out he wandered all over Africa. A clever man. He spoke many languages, and very many native dialects.’

‘And what about Batoun?’

‘I don’t think he had a nationality. Certainly not an official one. His father served for a time in the French Foreign Legion but ran away. His mother was an Arab woman. Batoun himself was born in the *Kasbah* at Algiers. He was always a thief and a scoundrel. He met Ducard in the international zone in Tangier, where both had fled to escape arrest. They came under our notice when they caused trouble with the natives in Leopoldville. Those two would cause trouble anywhere, monsieur.’

‘I can believe that,’ answered Biggles. ‘They certainly caused trouble here. That was why I was sent out.’

‘What do you intend to do now?’

‘Having buried this man, who we discovered lying here when we flew over to make sure they had gone, go home. And you?’

‘I shall follow Batoun.’

‘Before he died Ducard told us that Batoun thought he might come back with a stronger party of natives. He was convinced there were diamonds here.’

‘You say they found none?’

‘So Ducard told me, and I see no reason to doubt it. As you have some men with you perhaps you would be good enough to bury him.’

‘Yes. We will do that.’

‘In that case we’ll be moving off.’

‘Before you go, perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me exactly what has been happening here. I shall have to make a report.’

‘With pleasure, monsieur.’ Biggles lit a cigarette, and then, standing on the lonely shore, told the Belgian officer all that had happened since his arrival at the lake, including, of course, the story of the suspected murders at the rest-house which had been the original cause of the investigation.

‘*Merci, monsieur.* That is as much as I need to know,’ acknowledged the officer. ‘It has been a pleasure to meet you.’

‘As there is nothing more for us to do here we’ll get along home,’ concluded Biggles.

‘Wait!’ cried Ginger, in a voice pitched high with alarm. He pointed.

The fringe of the forest was suddenly alive with spear-armed natives.

‘It looks as if Batoun *has* come back,’ said Biggles.

‘If they will not listen to reason we shall have to fight,’ exclaimed the Belgian. He rapped out an order to his men, who lined up to receive the attack.

Biggles’ eyes made a swift reconnaissance of the forest. ‘You can’t do it,’ he declared, tersely. ‘There are too many of them. If we stay here we shall all be massacred. I see that devil of a witch-doctor is with them.’

‘There is nothing we can do but fight,’ said the Belgian, grimly, drawing the revolver he carried on his hip.

‘Oh yes there is,’ returned Biggles.

‘What?’

‘We can run away.’

‘Run where? How?’

Biggles pointed to the aircraft. ‘I suggest you tell your men to get on board. We could get out on the lake for a start, to consider the position. If we decide there are too many of them for us to handle we could move on to our rest-house . . .’

‘I will talk to them.’

‘Talking won’t do any good. Look at them! They’re fighting mad. If we’re going we’d better move or we shall be cut off, I don’t want to lose my plane.’

More natives had appeared, racing along the shore of the lake. One, ahead of the others, hurled a spear.

'Yes, we had better go,' agreed the Belgian. 'We shall not be able to stop them here.'

The entire party started retiring on the plane. They had to finish at a run. To anyone watching it would have looked like a rout. The officer saw his men into the cabin and then got in himself. Biggles and Ginger fired one or two shots from their revolvers to steady the rush and then made a bolt for the cockpit. They were only just in time. The engines came to life and the machine surged out on to the lake with two spears sticking in it, one in the fuselage and the other through the tail.

Biggles did not take the machine far; a little more than a hundred yards; then he throttled back and allowed the aircraft to float quietly on the placid water.

'They won't come out after us,' he told Ginger. 'They must know all about the crocs. I'll go aft and have a word with Captain Bourgon. He seems to have bitten off a bit more than he can chew.'

'So have we, if it comes to that,' returned Ginger, lugubriously.

CHAPTER 14

A GRIM DILEMMA

BIGGLES found Captain Bourgon looking through a side window at some forty or fifty natives crowding along the shore brandishing their spears.

'Well, what do you think of them?' asked Biggles.

'I do not understand their behaviour.'

'They're your people from the Congo?'

'Yes. Without a doubt.'

'In which case they've invaded British territory.'

'Boundaries mean nothing to them.'

'Of course not.'

'They would not have come all this way from their village but for some powerful influence.'

'There's the influence.' Biggles pointed to a small figure robed in a leopard skin that was dancing about in front of the natives.

'The witch-doctor.'

'Yes.'

'He would not have come here, where there is nothing to be gained, on his own account. He's working for Batoun.'

'I know he is.'

'I don't see the scoundrel.'

'I imagine he's lurking in the background, afraid we might take a shot at him. Having shot Ducard he went off and fetched reinforcements.'

'But why?'

'To drive us out. He didn't want to go. He still believes there are diamonds here. When I say us I mean my party. Until he returned and saw you he couldn't have known you were on his track. It was a lucky thing for you you didn't run into him in the forest. You wouldn't have had much chance against that lot.'

The Belgian officer admitted it. 'Now I've found the man I can't arrest him,' he added, with a wry smile.

'As things are you'd be silly to try. Well, monsieur, they're your people. What are you going to do?'

'What do you suggest?'

‘Strictly speaking I should ask you to get your tribesmen off British property, but I realize that would not be reasonable, or practicable, at the moment.’

‘If we shot one or two the others may withdraw; but we must, if possible, avoid bloodshed.’

‘Of course. But I’m afraid you’ll have a job to get back to your base without it.’

‘This villain Batoun. If I could see him I wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him. He’s the one behind all this mischief.’

‘Apparently he knows that, which is why he’s keeping in the background. How about shooting the witch-doctor? When the men see he’s not invulnerable they may lose their confidence and go home.’

‘I would prefer not to have shooting until we are forced to it for self protection.’

‘Please yourself, monsieur, but I would have thought that time had already come. I have nothing to fear because I can fly away any time it suits me; but for you it is a different matter. How are you going to get home?’

‘I don’t know. Naturally I did not come out prepared for anything like this.’

‘Well, there doesn’t seem much point in sitting here. Your friends ashore obviously intend to stay there. May I make a suggestion?’

‘Certainly.’

‘It is that we go to the rest-house and have some lunch. That will give those silly blacks time to think over what they’re doing. Later, when they’ve let off a little steam, we could come back, and you might be able to talk some sense into them.’

‘I think that is a good plan. As things are I could not get away without shooting, which could have serious repercussions elsewhere.’

‘I would say that is exactly what Batoun is reckoning on. He knows you’ll be reluctant to take strong action. He has no such qualms. That’s where he has the edge on you. I’ll tell my friend in the cockpit to start taxi-ing towards the rest-house. It’s not really necessary to take off. We’re a bit overloaded anyway, and the machine might not unstick on this flat surface.’

Biggles went forward, gave Ginger the order and returned to the cabin. The volume of noise from the engines increased and the aircraft began to move in a direct line towards the rest-house.

What followed was something neither Biggles nor his new acquaintance had taken into consideration. It had been assumed that the blacks would remain where they were, content with having driven Biggles and the Belgians away. It came as something of a shock, therefore, when the tribesmen started racing along the shore trying to keep pace with the machine presumably with the intention of preventing the men in it from coming ashore.

Biggles frowned. This is going to be more difficult than I expected,’ he muttered.

‘What will you do?’

‘I’m thinking about it.’

‘What is the difficulty? If we go on to the rest-house, should these people attack you there you would be justified in defending yourself. With the men you have there we should be able to hold the place.’

‘I wasn’t thinking about that. We’re in no particular danger. Neither are you for that matter. If necessary I could take you and your troops to the opposite side of the lake and put you off there.’

‘What is the difficulty, then? All these foolish people could do would be to burn the rest-house, which would be no great loss.’

‘I’m afraid you’ve forgotten something, *monsieur le capitaine*.’

‘What have I forgotten?’

‘There are some more people for whose safety I must hold myself responsible. The Zinns. I couldn’t evacuate all of them. When these crazy devils on the bank get to the village, in the mood they’re in they’re likely to kill everyone in it and burn the place to the ground. Not that the village itself matters overmuch. No doubt the Zinns could soon build another. It’s the people I’m thinking of.’

‘I do not see how you can do anything about that.’

‘I shall have to do something. I can’t leave the wretched people to perish. Armed only with fish spears they couldn’t even put up a fight. As I see it we have two courses open to us. The first is to land at the village, which we could reach before the enemy, and make a stand there.’

‘That would mean shooting.’

‘Very much so. The second plan would be to land at the village and tell the Zinns to run to the rest-house. If a fight is forced on us we shouldn’t have much difficulty in holding the place. I have two friends there. We have weapons and ammunition, enough to hold out for some time, anyway.’

‘They could keep you penned in for a long time.’

‘I could send the machine to Nabula for help.’

‘Very well, monsieur. We are on your ground. It is for you to decide. If we can end this matter without serious casualties I shall be glad. When these people who are causing the trouble are at home they are not really bad. A little wild perhaps. Even now without Batoun and the witch-doctor they would probably listen to reason.’

‘Then the sooner we shoot that pair of ruffians the better,’ said Biggles, grimly, and went forward to the cockpit.

‘The blacks are following us along the bank,’ he told Ginger.

‘So I see. What are you going to do about it?’

‘Tell the Zinns to make flat out for the rest-house. We can make a stand there should these idiots on the bank be determined to start a rough house. If the Zinns stay where they are they’re all likely to get their throats cut.’

While speaking Biggles had taken over the controls, and turning the bows towards the village, where the Zinns could be seen about to start more fishing, opened the throttle until the keel of the Gadfly was no more than grazing the water. Actually, he

did for a moment leave the water as an object surfaced in front of him. It turned out to be a crocodile, which disappeared with a swirl as the machine flashed over it at a height of about three feet.

Biggles did not comment on the incident. 'This is where we need Charlie,' he said, as he raced on. 'We may have a job to make the Zinns understand what's happening.'

In the event, two minutes later, this did not turn out to be too difficult, chiefly owing to the unexpected intelligence of Grandpa coupled with the frantic signals of Biggles, who jumped out of the machine as soon as it was in shallow water and splashed his way ashore shouting and waving his arms. This alone was enough to start a general alarm. When he pointed in the direction of the approaching danger it caused a stampede. After that the difficulty was to get the harassed natives to run in the right direction. But Grandpa, shrieking like an ape in a passion, soon grasped the situation, and presently Ginger, watching from the machine, had the satisfaction of seeing the whole tribe streaming along the shore in the direction of the bungalow.

'What a life,' panted Biggles, as he scrambled back into his seat.

In a matter of seconds the aircraft was again cutting a groove in the mirror-like face of the lake as it sped on towards the bungalow, where Algy and Bertie could be seen standing on the beach wondering no doubt what all the fuss was about, since from where they stood the danger could not be seen. Charlie was there too, bandaged, sitting near the verandah on an empty oil drum.

Biggles did not wait for questions. 'There's a small army of Congo negroes coming up the side of the lake and they're bent on mischief,' he said trenchantly. 'The Zinns are coming this way to escape.' He turned to Charlie. 'How are you feeling? Are you able to walk?'

'Yes, bwana.'

'Then go to meet the Zinns and tell them what's happening. They don't know. I couldn't explain. Tell them to hurry. We haven't too much time.'

'Yes, bwana.' Charlie tottered off.

Biggles walked back to Algy and Bertie who with astonishment were watching the Belgians come ashore. He introduced the officer and in as few words as possible explained the situation. 'We should be able to hold our own but I'm worried about the machine,' he went on. 'We daren't risk losing it, as probably we should if we left it standing in the open. It won't go through the gateway into the compound. Even if it would we'd lose it if these lunatics set fire to the place. There's only one thing to do. Algy, take it out on the lake. A couple of hundred yards will be enough. Watch what happens. If the flare-up seems to be getting really serious fly flat out to Nabula and fetch help if there's any available. Tell the R.M. what is happening.'

'Okay.'

'Take a rifle with you. If there's a pitched battle you may be able to take a hand by picking off one or two of them. I'm still hoping it won't come to that. If they'll stop long enough to listen Captain Bourgon may be able to do something about it.'

'Right.' Having collected the ·303 rifle Algy walked briskly to the aircraft.

‘Where are you going to put all the Zinns, old boy?’ Bertie asked Biggles.

‘In the compound. There’s nowhere else. We couldn’t get them all in the bungalow. Even if we packed the women and kids in they’d only be in the way. Here they come now.’

‘True enough—true enough.’

Biggles turned to Captain Bourgon. ‘Here we are, monsieur. You understand the position as well as I do. These people who look like attacking us are your subjects so you must do as you think fit.’

‘I understand you perfectly, monsieur. I will place my men in a position of defence. When the enemy arrives I shall do my best to point out the folly of what they are doing.’

‘Thank you. I shall leave that to you.’

‘We’d better be doing something ourselves,’ suggested Ginger.

‘You take the ten-bore and stand by. I’ll see about getting the Zinns under cover.’

The wretched natives were now arriving, strung out in a long line, Charlie making the best of his way with them. Biggles turned them into the compound. When they were all in, and no more in sight, he turned a worried face to Ginger. ‘This is a nice how-do-you-do,’ he growled. ‘I was hoping to be away by now. But there was nothing else for it. We couldn’t just abandon the Zinns—nor Bourgon, if it comes to that. I see the advance guard of the enemy coming so we’d better take up our positions. Bertie, you take the left. Ginger, on my right. Keep close, both of you. Charlie, you take charge of the Zinns and prevent anything like a panic if there’s shooting. Here’s a revolver for you. Shoot anyone who tries to get into the compound.’

The Congo tribesmen advanced in a mob, shouting and raising the dust as they came, and certainly presenting an alarming spectacle.

Captain Bourgon walked forward slowly to meet them. Biggles shouted to him to come back but the words were ignored.

‘My gosh! He’s asking for it,’ called Ginger.

‘He’s not short of pluck, anyway,’ said Biggles. ‘It’s the right thing to do, for, after all, they’re his responsibility, not ours; but I’m afraid it’s a wasted effort. It’s that infernal witch-doctor who’s egging them on.’

Captain Bourgon stopped, legs braced, facing the enemy. He raised a hand. He carried a revolver in a holster, of course, but nothing more.

A few of the men in front hesitated, but then, at a howl from the witch-doctor, came on again. A spear was thrown but it landed short. Captain Bourgon, seeing that he was likely to throw his life away uselessly, began backing towards the bungalow.

‘They’ll kill him,’ snarled Biggles. ‘Here, take this rifle, Ginger, and lend me that gun.’ He snatched the weapon, and running out to Bourgon ‘browned’ the enemy with both barrels. The range was too long for the pellets to kill outright, but from the cries they must have stung pretty hard. Apart from that the shots caused a pause which gave Biggles and Bourgon a chance to get back to the bungalow.

‘You gave them every chance,’ declared Biggles. ‘You couldn’t do more.’

‘It’s that witch-doctor,’ said Bourgon. ‘I shall have to shoot him. Have you seen anything of that half-breed, Batoun?’

‘No. I’ve been watching for him. If I see him I shall shoot him.’

Captain Bourgon took a rifle from one of his men. He half raised it in the direction of the witch-doctor, prancing some sixty or seventy yards away. He waited. A minute passed. Then he got his chance. The witch-doctor stood still to look at the bungalow. The rifle cracked. He spun and sprawled headlong. He lay where he had fallen. Bourgon calmly handed back the rifle to the man from whom he had taken it. He then ordered his men to fire over the heads of the attackers.

The rifles crashed in a ragged volley.

This produced a scramble for cover, the negroes diving behind scrub, trees, ant-hills, or anything that happened to be handy.

Silence fell, a curious hush after the noise that had preceded it. After a little while it was broken by a single shot fired from the aircraft.

‘I wonder what Algy’s shooting at?’ said Biggles, turning in the direction of the sound.

The lull persisted.

‘What do you think they’re doing?’ Biggles asked Bourgon.

‘Probably getting ready to charge,’ was the disconcerting reply.

CHAPTER 15

HOW IT ENDED

HALF an hour passed.

Little was seen of the attacking force after the body of the witch-doctor had been carried out of sight behind some scrub, and had it not been for an inquisitive head which showed itself from time to time it might have been thought that the tribesmen had withdrawn altogether. A great cloud of smoke rising into the air lower down the lake showed that, as Biggles had predicted, the village had been set on fire.

Ginger looked at his watch. 'If they're coming why don't they come?' he muttered irritably. 'What are they waiting for?'

'Could be the silly blighters are thinking of a night attack,' suggested Bertie, breathing on his monocle and giving it an extra polish. 'They know what they'll get if they charge in broad daylight.'

'It is not usual for such people to attack by night,' said Captain Bourgon. 'As they are armed only with spears they like to see what they are doing. It is more likely they are holding a council of war, to decide from which direction to attack us. Knowing we are all inside and cannot get away they may have decided to starve us out. Time to them is no object.'

'They're not hoping we're such fools as to go out to look for them?' said Biggles.

'No. It is more likely they are wondering how long we could endure a siege.'

'We're not short of food,' stated Ginger.

'We soon shall be with all those Zinns to feed,' returned Biggles. 'One good meal all round would about finish what we have.'

'Oh Lord! I'd forgotten about the Zinns,' confessed Ginger.

'The enemy won't have forgotten them, you can bet your life on that. Certainly not Batoun, if he's in charge of operations. If he can keep us shut up in here there's nothing to prevent him from continuing his search for diamonds. That's what caused the friction between him and Ducard. Ducard wanted to go. Batoun wanted to stay. They had a row about it and it ended with Ducard being shot.'

'Have you seen any diamonds?' questioned Captain Bourgon.

'Not one, nor a sign of one. In this sort of ground I wouldn't expect to. I haven't see any gravel that looks as if it might be diamondiferous. Had the soil or subsoil been blue clay instead of red earth it would be a different matter. Batoun can't have had much experience of diamond-mining or he wouldn't be wasting his time here. Ducard knew better. Having tested the ground over the whole area he realized he was on a wild goose chase.'

Another hour passed.

'It looks as if we're in for a siege or a night attack,' opined Biggles.

'Poor old Algy will be getting browned off sitting out there with only the bally crocs and hippos for company,' averred Bertie.

'If this goes on much longer I shall tell him to fly down to Nabula and let the R.M. know how we're fixed,' said Biggles.

'How are you going to tell him? You can't swim out to him and if he comes closer in spears will make the machine look like a bally porcupine—if you see what I mean, old boy.'

'My voice should reach him if I shouted. Sound carries well over water and he's switched off. I suppose I should have made allowances for this situation but to tell the truth it didn't come into my calculations.'

'If we opened up on them we might drive them back,' suggested Ginger. 'There are ten of us not counting Algy. They're only hiding behind bushes and bushes won't stop bullets.'

'We can't afford to waste cartridges shooting blind.'

Captain Bourgon shook his head. 'We must avoid casualties for as long as possible. If we killed some of them you can imagine what a fuss there would be at home, made by people sitting comfortably by their fires not understanding such a situation as this. They are in no danger so they would say we were wrong: bad, wicked people, to shoot poor helpless natives.'

'How right you are,' answered Biggles, moodily. 'All the same, I don't feel like sitting here waiting for those misguided fools to creep up on us under cover of darkness. Leopard-men are experts at that sort of thing. It wouldn't be very difficult for them to set fire to the fence of the compound. That flimsy brushwood would blaze up in no time. If that happened we'd be in a nice mess. The Zinns would panic and we wouldn't dare to shoot for fear of hitting them.'

'Well, for goodness sake, let's do something,' pleaded Ginger. 'This sitting here doing nothing is getting on my nerves.'

Biggles got up. 'I'll go and tell Algy to fly down to Nabula for advice. That would make the business their responsibility.'

'I don't see how they could help us. A safari would be days getting here.'

'Algy might fly some troops up—if there are any available. I'll tell him to fly down and ask for orders.'

'Mind how you go. They'll be watching.'

'Give me covering fire if they try a rush.'

'Okay.'

Biggles walked down to the edge of the water. One or two tribesmen broke cover, hesitated, and at the end did nothing. Cupping his hands round his mouth Biggles shouted: 'Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' came the answer from Algy, standing up in the cockpit.

‘Fly to Nabula. Explain position and ask R.M. what we are to do.’

Algy waved to show he understood and sat down.

With an eye on the enemy position Biggles walked back to the bungalow.

The Gadfly’s engines sprang to life. All eyes were on the machine as it raced across the water, lifted almost at once being so lightly loaded, and swung away to the southward.

As the roar of the engines receded Biggles said: ‘I think that was the right thing to do. We couldn’t do anything here with the plane and we couldn’t leave Algy sitting out there indefinitely. I feel better now that’s off my mind.’

‘Listen!’ said Ginger, raising his head. ‘It sounds to me as if he’s coming back.’

‘You’re right,’ agreed Biggles, frowning. ‘He must be in trouble.’

Within a minute there was no doubt about it. The engine noise came nearer and presently the aircraft reappeared. It made a tight circuit, landed, and taxied back to its original position—perhaps a little closer in. The engines died as they were switched off.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Ginger.

‘The engines sounded all right to me,’ asserted Bertie.

Algy appeared, standing up in the cockpit. He beckoned urgently.

‘He has something to tell us—explain why he came back,’ said Biggles. ‘I’ll go and hear what he has to say.’ Again he walked down to the edge of the water. ‘What’s wrong?’ he yelled.

Algy shouted: ‘Stand fast . . .’ and that was as far as he got, for at this moment, with wild shouts that drowned all other sounds the mob of tribesmen rose up from their hiding places to begin a slow advance, in a long line, stamping their feet and brandishing their spears.

Algy, realizing he could not be heard, made signals with his arms; but they might have meant anything. Biggles had no alternative but to run back to the bungalow. ‘They must have thought we were up to some trick,’ he panted on arrival.

‘Well, chaps, this looks like it,’ said Bertie, cheerfully, as the blacks came stamping on, singing some sort of war song.

‘Yes, I’m afraid it has come to shooting after all,’ said Captain Bourgon, bitterly.

‘We’d better give them a chance to come to their senses,’ suggested Biggles. ‘A volley close over their heads might stop them.’

Before the order to fire could be given a curious thing happened. The natives stopped. The shouting died as if it had been a sound radio switched off. They seemed all to be staring in the same direction.

‘I can see Batoun in the rear,’ said Ginger, sharply. ‘He’s going back. He’s running away.’

‘I can see the rascal,’ rapped out Biggles. ‘Give me that rifle.’

Bertie passed him the Express.

Biggles brought it to his shoulder and took aim. He fired. Batoun stumbled and fell.

‘That settles his hash, the stinker,’ observed Bertie, approvingly.

The attack had fizzled out. Some of the invaders were retiring, looking back over their shoulders. The Gadfly’s engines were started and the machine began taxi-ing towards the shore.

‘What the deuce is happening?’ cried Biggles in an exasperated tone of voice. ‘Is Algy out of his mind?’

The machine came on.

Charlie appeared, grinning all over his face, as the saying is. ‘Bwana come,’ he announced.

‘Bwana! What bwana?’

‘Soldiers.’

No further explanation was necessary, for round the corner of the bungalow, at the double, came a white officer at the head of a double line of men of the King’s African Rifles. Behind them were twenty or more porters carrying loads.

‘What the devil’s going on here?’ demanded the officer.

‘I shall be happy to tell you,’ replied Biggles, warmly, realizing now why Algy had turned back. From the air he would of course have seen the relief force coming.

‘Who are all these blacks I see running?’ asked the officer.

‘Raiders from the Congo.’

‘I knew nothing about that.’

‘I hadn’t time to let you know.’

The officer looked at Captain Bourgon. Apparently he recognized the uniform, for he said, rather sharply: ‘What are you doing here?’

Biggles answered. ‘Give me time and I’ll tell you all about it. My name’s . . .’

‘Yes, I know. The R.M. at Nabula was warned you were coming out. He got your note.’

‘These are my friends and assistants,’ went on Biggles, introducing them. ‘And this is Captain Bourgon. He came to the frontier in pursuit of the two men who were causing trouble here. When we were attacked, as we stood talking, we joined forces for mutual assistance.’

‘My name’s Lieutenant Lomax,’ said the new arrival as the two officers saluted. ‘Where are these two men, who caused the trouble, now?’

‘One is certainly dead and I think the other one is, too,’ replied Biggles.

‘Have you any casualties?’

‘No—not counting Sergeant Abdullah I’Mobo, whom we found dead when we arrived here. But I’m afraid there would have been casualties on both sides if you hadn’t turned up when you did. We were on the point of being attacked in some strength.’

‘I heard the shouting. As I’ve told you, we got your note and I was detailed to start right away in case you needed help. We had trucks for part of the way. What about the

Zinns?'

'They're all right. We've got them in the compound. I think they've lost their village. We saw smoke. The raiders must have set fire to it.'

'Yes. We saw that smoke. I was afraid it was the bungalow and we should be too late. It caused us to put on an extra spurt.'

'Much obliged. Things were getting difficult. Come inside and have a drink and I'll tell you all about it.'

With drinks and a snack on the table Biggles related the story of the events since his arrival. He did not mention his belief that the ground under their feet was heavy with bauxite. 'That's about the lot,' he concluded.

'So the trouble was leopard-men, and not real leopards,' murmured Lieutenant Lomax thoughtfully. 'We thought as much. What are you going to do now?'

'There's nothing more we can do so I might as well hand over to you and get along home. I imagine Captain Bourgon will do the same. It's rather late for me to start to-day so if it's okay with you we'll stay the night and make an early start to-morrow. Nabula will get a copy of my report in due course.'

'That suits me. I can give Captain Bourgon an escort as far as the frontier in case any of these raiders are hanging about. Meanwhile, let's see what's happening outside.'

They found all was quiet, with no sign of the raiders. The body of the witch-doctor could not be found so apparently it had been carried away or hidden. They found the half-breed, Batoun. He was dead. His corpse had been mutilated by spear thrusts, from which it was clear that the men he had led far from their homes had lost their respect for him, if they ever had any.

'Ducard's body is lying at his old camp at the far end of the lake. If it's still there you might see about burying it,' requested Biggles.

'Is there any reason why it shouldn't still be there?'

Biggles grimaced. 'The raiders will pass it on their way home; and even if they leave it alone the lake is crawling with crocodiles.'

'I see. Well, let's get back to the rest-house. To-morrow I'll get my fellows to help the Zinns to build a new village, probably nearer the compound. They can stay there for the time being.'

In the glow of sunset the party returned to the bungalow.

* * *

There is little more to tell. Four days later after an uneventful trip home the Gadfly was in its hangar, and the following morning found Biggles in his office writing his report for the Air Commodore.

'What are you going to say about the bauxite, since we know now that's what it is?' asked Ginger.

Biggles had had the metal tested at Marseilles on the way home. 'I shan't mention it,' he answered.

The others looked astonished. ‘Do you really mean that?’ questioned Algy.

‘I do. Anyway, that’s how I feel at the moment.’

‘But there must be thousands of tons of aluminium there waiting to be picked up!’

‘More like tens of thousands. That’s the trouble.’

‘Then what’s the idea?’

A smile spread slowly over Biggles’ face. ‘Do you realize what our knowledge would be worth to certain people?’

Ginger chipped in. ‘But the stuff’s no use to us! We can’t go and dig it.’

‘I hadn’t contemplated doing anything so daft. But one day, if I live, I shall be an old man, and it would be nice to have a nest-egg tucked away.’

‘How? I don’t get it. Sooner or later someone else will discover the stuff.’

‘That may be, but if I held a mining concession on the Lake Jumu area they wouldn’t be able to touch it. If anyone wanted the mining rights they’d have to come to me and either buy the concession outright or pay me a royalty on every ton of aluminium raised. That means that such a concession would be worth an awful lot of money.’

‘Do you seriously mean you’re thinking of applying for a concession?’

‘Why not?’

Algy came back. ‘It wouldn’t work.’

‘Why wouldn’t it?’

‘Because it would be said you’d made the discovery in the course of your official duties, while you were being paid by the government.’

‘The bauxite has nothing whatever to do with the purpose for which we were sent to Africa. Apart from that angle there’s nothing to prevent me from resigning this job if I felt like it. An alternative would be for me to get a friend, someone I could trust, to take out the concession—what is called a nominee—and hand it to me later on.’

Bertie was looking suspicious. ‘Well, blow me down! This is the first time I’ve heard you take an interest in money. Are you sure that’s the real reason why you’re keeping this information up your sleeve?’

Biggles’ smile broadened. ‘No, I’m not sure. At least, it isn’t the whole reason.’

‘Then come clean,’ requested Ginger. ‘What are you trying to give us?’

Biggles became serious. ‘We were sent to Africa to help the Zinns. I like them. They’ve never done anyone any harm. I wouldn’t like it on my conscience that we’d let them down.’

‘Let them down! How? Go on.’

‘Do you realize what would happen if one of the big metal operating companies knew what we know? Armies of workmen and engineers would arrive at Lake Jumu. The place would become a maze of factories and chimneys covered in red dust. The bowels would be torn out of the ground. Engines and cranes would thump and thunder day and night. A railway would appear. The lake would be polluted. The fish would

die, and so would the poor old hippos. The Zinns, instead of living quiet, peaceful lives in a little world of their own, far from the scares of hydrogen bombs and other horrors civilization is producing, would be wiped out, or what would be even worse, find themselves slaves, digging holes in the ground for stuff that's no use to them for purposes they couldn't begin to understand. Why should we inflict that on them? I say let's leave 'em alone, happy and content with their fishing.'

The others stared.

Then Bertie spoke. 'Hear—hear! Absolutely, old boy. You're dead right. I'm with you all the way.'

'Yes, there's something in that,' agreed Algy.

Ginger nodded. 'Okay with me. Then you won't take out a concession?'

'Ha! You bet your life I will. While I hold it no one will be able to dig one shovelful of the red earth of Lake Jumu without first coming to me. Why do you suppose I said nothing about the bauxite to Captain Bourgon or that officer, Lomax, who came up from Nabula? I kept that under my hat until I'd given it some thought.'

'You're an artful old fox,' said Bertie with a chuckle.

'I wondered why you'd kept the soft pedal on that,' declared Algy.

'Well, now you know. I've decided it would be a shame to upset the lives of the Zinns simply because of an experiment I'd done at school. Not a word to a soul about aluminium. What I've just said is between these four walls. Mum's the word. Is that understood?'

'Of course. But aren't you going to tell the Air Commodore?'

'I shan't say a word about it in my report. Why should I? Prospecting for metals didn't come into our assignment. I may tell him later on, on the quiet, when I've got my concession.'

'Suppose he asks you what Ducard and Batoun were looking for?'

A broad grin spread over Biggles' face. 'I shall tell him the truth. They were looking for diamonds. Ducard told us so.'

'That's true enough,' said Algy.

'Absolutely gospel,' declared Bertie.

'Fine,' concluded Biggles, reaching for a cigarette. 'Now if you're all satisfied I'll get on with my report.'

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 and the Leopards of Zinn* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]