Biggles

MAKES ENDS MEET

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS

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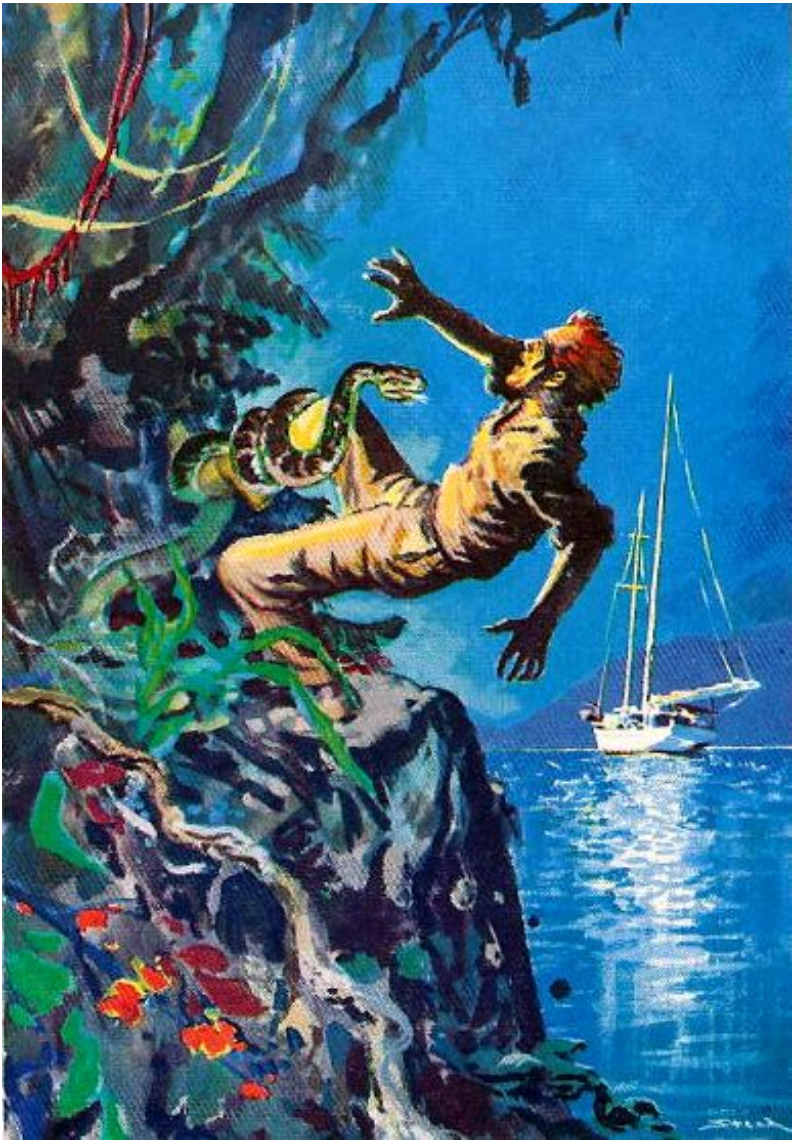
BIGGLES MAKES ENDS MEET

Biggles and his Air Police investigate an exciting case of piracy off the Nicobar Islands of the Indian Ocean —and uncover a much greater racket.



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“Forgetting the sea Ginger lost his balance.”

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By

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Stead

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ILLUSTRATIONS

BRIEF GEOGRAPHICAL NOTE

THE Indian Ocean, whereon the following story is laid, has an approximate area of twenty-seven million square miles. It is the only one of the three great oceans that does not reach from Pole to Pole. With its tropic waters washing the shores of man's earliest civilizations it is the true ocean of romance, lore and legend. Into it flow the rivers of biblical history. On it men first learned to use the wind as motive power, and on it still sail ships that have changed little through the ages. Thousands of years before men sailed westwards across the Atlantic from Europe, unwieldy-looking but seaworthy ships such as dhows and junks were making trading voyages with their fabulous cargoes of gold, spices, incense and Chinese silk.

Piracy is usually associated with the Spanish Main, perhaps because the names of some of the chief pirate captains have come down to us. Their reign was short. Pirates flourished on the Indian Ocean for thousands of years, almost to the present day. Indeed, one of the most successful pirates of all time, a Chinese woman who became known as Admiral Ching, operated between the East Indian Ocean and the China Sea as late as the first part of the nineteenth century. In 1813 she took three British ships and beheaded the captains with her own hands. In old age she retired to run a vast smuggling organization with spies everywhere. Another noted pirate of these waters was one Raga, who was finally run to earth by a frigate at Kuala Batu, on the west coast of Sumatra. Piracy and smuggling are not new occupations on the Indian Ocean.

One of the big centres of trade was the tropical island of Ceylon, known in the Golden Age as Taprobane, which hangs like one of the pearls for which it is famous on the southern tip of India. The old seaport and modern aerodrome of Jaffna, mentioned in the following pages, is an island off the north coast. Remains of the early Dutch fort, built for its protection, are still there.

On the same latitude, nine hundred miles to the east and just north of the equator, is the group of islands known as the Nicobars, twelve only of which are inhabited. Until not long ago they were the haunt of pirates lying in wait for the richly laden ships coming through the Malacca Strait from China.

Eastwards again, not far away, is the long coastline of the Malay Peninsula. Kuala Lumpur, an important air base, is the capital of the Malay State of Selangor.

South east of the Nicobars, and on the opposite side of the Malacca Strait from Malay, is the Indonesian island of Sumatra, more than a thousand

miles long, with the airport of Kutaradja at its northern tip.

To these places came Biggles in his search for the perpetrators of a modern act of piracy.

CHAPTER I

BIGGLES HAS DOUBTS

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND of the Special Air Police regarded his chief operational pilot with weary amiability. "You say I look tired, Bigglesworth," he observed lugubriously. "Can you wonder at it? There are now more police in the world than ever before, yet in spite of that, in spite of the efforts of the fifty-two countries that have joined forces to form the International Police Bureau, in spite of radio, radar, and other scientific devices, there is today more large-scale organized crime than ever. And I'm expected to stop it."

Biggles reached for a cigarette. "As the rewards of successful crime are also higher than ever before this state of affairs was inevitable. As for new devices, as they are made available to the police so also do they become available to the bad boys of this world. They have, moreover, produced a new type of law-breaker; the man with brains and organizing efficiency. Since taxation has made it almost impossible for a man to make a fortune honestly it's only to be expected that some would turn to other methods. The more laws you make the more people you invite to break them."

"I don't know about that," muttered the Air Commodore. "What I do know is, the running of contraband is becoming a major international industry. Some of these criminal organizations must be making millions a year. It's no longer a matter of nylons, cigars and brandy. It's diamonds, drugs, currency, forged travellers cheques, gold—all on a scale big enough to upset national economic arrangements."

"Why this sudden burst of pessimism?" inquired Biggles, tapping the ash from his cigarette.

"I've just been going through the report of the General Assembly of the Commission. To give you an idea of what's going on I read that last year forty thousand ounces of illicit gold, worth six million pounds, were intercepted and confiscated by Indian Customs officials alone. If the gangs can afford to lose that amount, and still carry on, one can imagine what the total turnover must be like."

Biggles nodded. "The demand for gold in India, where people prefer one genuine piece of jewellery to a hundred imitations, is insatiable. Set gold

free in the open market, as it was for thousands of years, and you stop the racket."

"We must find other ways to stop it."

"How?"

"You tell me."

Biggles looked pained. "Have a heart, sir. How do you expect me, with a few pilots and half a dozen planes, to get on terms with agents and operatives scattered from one end of the world to the other? While there are Customs dues there will always be smuggling. If you searched everyone crossing a frontier no one would get anywhere."

"I'm not talking about small-time stuff; the individual smuggler; I'm worried about these big gangs. And it isn't only smuggling. We are, it seems, to be faced with a return to piracy on the high seas."

Biggles smiled. "That, when they read about it, should delight the kids who have been fooled by story tellers into believing that piracy is a romantic occupation. Where has this rash broken out?"

"It isn't a rash—yet. So far there has been only one case. But if it has happened once it will happen again, and before we know where we are small craft will have to sail in convoys for self-protection."

"Where did it happen?"

"In the Indian Ocean."

Biggles' eyebrows went up. "Whereabouts?"

"In the region of the Nicobar Islands."

"Sounds like history repeating itself. I believe the Nicobars always were a hideout for the merry mariners who preferred the black flag to any other."

"The fact that the trouble has broken out there doesn't necessarily mean that it will be confined to that area. It could spread to the Pacific, and if it did, it would need more ships and planes for patrol work than any country could afford."

Biggles cocked an eyebrow. "You are not, I hope, going to suggest that I, with my little obsolete flotilla, should sweep the Jolly Roger from the Seven Seas?"

"We shall have to do something about it."

"Why?"

"Because the craft molested was sailing under our flag. That gives us a duty in the matter. The owner of the ship expects our protection."

"The deuce he does!"

"He is very angry, and he is, moreover, demanding compensation."

"Well—well. What does he want—an escort of the Grand Fleet? Who is this saucy sailor?"

"If you'll listen I'll tell you about it."

"I'm all set, sir. Go ahead. I've always had a yen for a spot of piracy. The briny has lost something of its glamour since they did away with Execution Dock."

"The craft concerned was a thoroughly seaworthy type known on the Indian Ocean as a sambuk. This particular vessel, of seventy tons, named *Shima*, is owned by a wealthy merchant in Ceylon, a Mr. Tidore. In their original form these ships travelled under sail and sweeps alone, but the modern versions, of which the *Shima* is an example, are fitted with an auxiliary engine. Since no sweeps are necessary this reduces the number of the crew required to man them. The *Shima* carried a crew of six. Its home port is Jaffna, on the northern tip of Ceylon. I must tell you that sambuks are used largely by the pearling industry, and the *Shima* was thus engaged when she was molested. Her owner was on board at the time."

"What nationality is Mr. Tidore?"

"He passes as an Indian but actually he's a Syrian, long resident on the island. His crews are mostly Tamil Indians although his divers are Arabs from the Persian Gulf. As you know, they are some of the best skin divers in the world."

Biggles nodded.

"As I've said," resumed the Air Commodore, "the *Shima* was on a pearling venture when she was interfered with. Tidore says they had been to the region of the Nicobar Islands and shortly after noon were on their way home with a rich catch when, surprisingly, for they were far from any air route, an aeroplane appeared. It came low, circled them twice, and then made off in the direction from which it had come."

"Did he get its registration marks?"

"Apparently not."

"Why not, if the aircraft flew low?"

"Presumably he saw no reason for taking them."

"Did he recognize the type?"

"No. You wouldn't expect him to. All he can say is it had two engines. There's no proof that this machine had any connection with that was to follow but it now looks as if it might have been acting as a spotter. At all events, the next day the *Shima* was overtaken by a fast launch, or motor

yacht, which fired a shot across her bows to make her heave to, which she did. The *Shima* was then boarded by two masked white men supported by some Chinese or Japanese types armed with sub-machine guns. The entire catch of pearl oysters was transferred to the yacht, which then cast off."

"Did Tidore recognize this ship—yacht, launch, or whatever it was?"

"He'd never seen it before."

"But he got its name?"

"The name, he says, both fore and aft, had been covered with canvas."

"So Mr. Tidore, having been robbed by a plane and a ship acting in consort, can give no worth-while description of either of them. Not a very observant man." Biggles' tone was thinly cynical.

"He was lucky to get home, for the yacht had opened fire on the *Shima* with the obvious intention of sinking her when a steamer appeared and it made off at full speed. The *Shima* was badly damaged. One member of the crew was killed and three wounded, two seriously."

"What was the name of the steamer?"

"Tidore didn't wait to see. He hurried on home."

"And that's how he lost his oysters. So what?"

"He was insured with Lloyd's and is now claiming ten thousand pounds compensation for his loss, his casualties, and the damage done to his ship. That's why we can't ignore the affair. If this sort of piracy is to continue it will have the effect of raising insurance premiums on all small craft in those waters, and that would be a serious matter for the local traders."

"Has the insurance money been paid?"

"Not yet."

"I should think not."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if ever I heard a tale that sounded phoney that one does."

"Are you suggesting that Tidore is not telling the truth?"

"I have a feeling that he isn't telling all of it."

"But why should he tell such a tale if it wasn't true?"

"With a shell-shot ship, a crewman dead and others wounded, he'd have to tell a tale of some sort—particularly if he decided to claim the insurance."

"But these are the very factors that confirm his story."

Biggles smiled faintly. "Of course. Naturally, the story would have to fit the conditions that would be plain for all the world to see when the ship reached port. Any other sort of story would invite gossip, possibly suspicion

that Tidore was a liar. The main factors might be true in substance. I'm prepared to concede that the *Shima* was overhauled and robbed; but I can't believe there was not more to it than that."

"Why not?"

"Because aside from Tidore being a singularly unobservant, dull-witted fellow, for a successful merchant, there are too many angles that strike me as unusual, not to say unnatural. When people behave unnaturally there's usually a reason."

"What's unnatural about this?"

"In the first place, why did Tidore go hundreds of miles to the Nicobar Islands when some of the finest pearls in the world are found right on his doorstep—in the Palk Strait, between Ceylon and India?"

"He may have decided to explore new ground."

"Would you go nine hundred miles or thereabouts to fetch some plums if you had plenty in your garden?"

"Er—probably not."

"All right. Why did Tidore make this trip in person? If I know anything about rich merchants they sit around where life is safe and easy, and pay others to take the risks for them. They'd be fools if they didn't."

"Maybe Tidore fancied a long sea trip."

Biggles' lip curled. "To fancy a long sea trip in a small craft on a dangerous ocean would be such unusual behaviour for an Oriental tycoon that if it were true one might suspect he was out of his mind. Oh, no. Tidore didn't make that trip for fun, not even for a few whiffs of ozone. But we'll let it pass. According to your story Tidore says he had made a rich catch."

"Correct."

"How did he know he had made a rich catch?"

"I imagine the man has eyes, and is able to recognize a pearl when he sees one."

"I believe there's some arrangement in Ceylon for pearl oysters to be brought in unopened. The shells are then counted into heaps, one of which is taken by the government by way of tax. No man knows what's inside an oyster until it has been opened."

"Tidore may have meant that he had a big load of oysters."

"Fair enough. Now tell me this. As only one oyster in thousands contains a pearl of any value, why should a pirate go to the risk, trouble and expense of laying on an aircraft, and a ship, in order to collect shells that might contain only a few seed pearls? That doesn't make sense to me. Even if

Tidore knew what he had under his hatches the pirate couldn't have known. Or could he?"

"What do you think?"

"I think the *Shima* was carrying a valuable cargo *of some* sort; and the pirate knew it."

"The value of the shell alone, without any pearls, would be fairly considerable."

"Chicken feed. Men don't commit piracy for shirt buttons. If this affair took place west of the Nicobar Group, as is alleged, if my geography is any good that plane must have been at least four hundred miles from the nearest official aerodrome; so unless Tidore is the luckiest pearl fisher alive the shells he'd collect on that trip wouldn't pay for the petrol that plane would burn. Wherefore I suspect Tidore had on board something more valuable than oysters, and the pirate knew it. At least that's how it looks to me."

"What else could he have had on board?"

"If I knew that I should know all the answers."

"It boils down to this. You don't believe Tidore's story."

"Not entirely. Much of it could be true; but I fancy Tidore has forgotten to mention the most important part—the real purpose of his trip. Naturally, my chief interest is in the air angle, and I agree with you that an air-sea piracy racket could become dangerous."

"I'm glad you agree with something," murmured the Air Commodore with gentle sarcasm. "Would you like to run out to Ceylon and check your opinion on the spot?"

"Not particularly. As far as Tidore's activities are concerned I couldn't care less."

"We shall have to do something about it for no other reason than no one could then accuse us of allowing the thing to slide. If you went out you'd be on the spot should there be a repetition of this skull-and-crossbones business."

"I doubt if there will be—not with Tidore, anyway. If he's telling the truth it'll be some time before he quits dry land again. But I'll take a look round, sir. You won't forget that the Indian Ocean embraces quite a lot of water, so I hope you won't be looking for quick results."

"Find out what Tidore's doing, and what's more important, try to get the low-down on this pirate."

Biggles got up. "I'll go and tell my boys the story and we'll have a look at the map."

Deep in thought Biggles made his way back to his own office where, to his team of pilots, he related the story narrated by the Air Commodore.

"This sounds like another little needle in a very large haystack," remarked Algy, when he had finished.

"It could be worse," returned Biggles. "We have at least two ends to what I suspect is a tangle of truths, half-truths and lies, so the first thing to decide is at which end do we start. One end is in Ceylon, the other on the far side of the Indian Ocean, exact position unknown."

"But why should Tidore lie about this, old boy?" put in Bertie. "I mean to say, when a bloke has been robbed he's usually flat out to help the police to swipe the blighter who pinched his purse."

"Not if he himself has something to hide."

"You think that's the way the wind blows?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. The obvious answer to your question is this. Tidore might lie, or withhold certain facts—which amounts to the same thing—if he was not on legitimate business, for in that case he would forfeit his right to insurance compensation."

"But you think there could be another reason," prompted Ginger.

"Yes. Call it fear. Fear that if he gave the pirates away they'd come and get him. Put it like this. He wants the insurance money without saying why he was robbed, and who robbed him. He knows, but he's afraid to tell. Remember, he would have to say *something* to account for his casualties and the state of his ship when it got back to port. He wouldn't be likely to damage his own ship. In fact, I don't see how he could have done, even if he had a gun. To me, the fact that he was on the ship at all implies that the trip was more than a mere pearling venture. Had he felt like a spot of pearling he could have done it nearer home."

"Could he have had a mutiny, or something of that sort?" suggested Bertie.

Biggles shook his head. "Mutineers wouldn't be so daft as to risk sinking the ship they were on. Besides, when they got home they would have talked. The crew must know the truth, but as they themselves must be involved they're not likely to squeal."

"The pirates also know the answers," put in Algy.

"Of course. The plane and the yacht weren't there by accident. They were there for a purpose, and that purpose was the direct result of knowing what Tidore was doing. How did they know? Through spies? If we're going to introduce spies this may turn out to be a bigger racket than the chief

suspects. Where did the plane come from? Where did it refuel? For by the time the pilot had flown out and back, a matter of nearly a thousand miles, he'd be looking at his petrol gauge."

Biggles went over to the big wall map. "The nearest official airfields would be Phuket, on the Malay Peninsula, or Kutaradja, on the northern tip of Sumatra. Without knowing the type of aircraft, and its endurance range, we can't say what other refuelling stations it might reach, but we might get a rough line on them. According to Tidore the plane appeared at noon. Giving it a speed of about two hundred miles an hour it would be somewhere around two o'clock when it made its landfall. So let us say that somewhere between two o'clock and three, on May the seventh last, the day when the machine appeared, an aircraft landed for fuel in Malaya or Sumatra. There should be a record of that, and as there aren't all that many aerodromes we might be able to trace it. That gives me an idea. I want to go first to Ceylon and have a look at Mr. Tidore to hear what he has to say."

"Just a minute," put in Algy. "Are we checking up on Tidore's story or are we looking for pirates?"

"Both, and either one should lead to the other. I was about to say that there's no need for us all to go to Ceylon. It might save time if we started working from both ends, and try to make ends meet, so to speak. So what I suggest is this. Algy, you take Bertie with you in the Otter and cover the airfields within reasonable range of the Nicobars to see if you can get a slant on this twin-engined pirate. I'll run down to Ceylon, in the Halifax, with Ginger, for a say-so with Tidore. When I've finished with him, which shouldn't take long, I'll cross over to see how you're getting on, meeting you, say, at Kuala Lumpur. We may as well keep on British territory as far as possible. We'll make that the rendezvous. Whoever finishes first will go there and wait for the others."

"Okay," agreed Algy. "That's quite clear."

"Say nothing about being police, or what you're doing, unless it's absolutely unavoidable," concluded Biggles. "For my part I shall ask the chief to arrange with the insurance people for me to be one of their representatives. We can work out the details while we're getting organized. Now let's get on with it."

CHAPTER II

MR. TIDORE

NINE days later, in fine but sultry weather, the Air Police Halifax, with civil registration markings but nothing to show its official purpose, landed on the island aerodrome of Jaffna, at the northern end of Ceylon. Having seen the tanks topped up and the machine parked in the shade, for the afternoon sun was grilling, Biggles and Ginger walked along to speak to the control officer, for it was here that Biggles had resolved to begin his enquiries.

To his satisfaction the airport official turned out to be an Englishman named Carwell, an ex-station officer of the R.A.F., who could be relied upon to hold his tongue; for should word of his mission leak out Biggles knew that his difficulties would be doubled. He began by revealing his identity and showing proof of it.

Carwell gave him a curious look. "It's time somebody had a look round," he remarked. "What goes on here is nobody's business."

"What does go on?" inquired Biggles quickly.

"I don't know, and I don't know that I want to know," replied Carwell. "All I know is, there's *something* going on. You know how it is in the East: you can smell something in the atmosphere but it's hard to put your finger on it. You get a feeling that everyone's lying, or is afraid to speak, and you don't know who to trust. But I must say that no one has interfered with me and I'm content to leave things that way."

"I think you're wise," agreed Biggles. "What I'm really looking for is a line on this alleged piracy reported by a merchant and shipowner named Tidore, who lives here. It seems that an aircraft was involved; a twin-engined job. Have you by any chance had here any such types, privately owned, or not engaged on regular runs?"

Carwell thought for a moment. "No, I can't say I have. All I get here are the regular services. Occasionally an R.A.F. type looks in. When I say regular you mustn't take that too literally. Things here aren't timed to a split-second schedule. For instance, that green Dakota on the tarmac now, with Chinese markings, belongs to a privately owned concern that operates between Macao and Madras, calling here on the way. But there's nothing regular about its arrivals and departures, although that, of course, would

probably be the result of irregular bookings. There'd obviously be no sense in making the run without a payload."

"If it comes from Macao it'd pass near the Nicobars," said Biggles thoughtfully.

"Bound to. It usually calls at Saigon, Phuket, sometimes with intermediate stops, and then comes right across."

"And refuels here."

"Of course. It's a long crossing."

"And then it runs up the Malabar Coast to Madras."

"That's how I understand it."

"Is this a passenger service?"

"Freight and occasionally an odd passenger. I don't know who the show belongs to because the original documents are in Chinese or Japanese—I'm not sure which; but the pilot is a nice little fellow, a Jap named Mitsubu. He's in the town at the moment."

Biggles nodded. "Have you ever had reason to suspect it's anything but what it appears to be?"

"That's a pretty pointed question."

"In my business I have to ask questions."

"The answer is no. Its papers are always in order; it complies with regulations; it pays its landing fees, and so on, and that's all I care."

"Fair enough," conceded Biggles.

"Are you staying long?"

"I have a date with a man in Malaya. I may be here for a day or two; on the other hand I may decide to leave at short notice, so if you see me push off at any odd time you'll know it's all right. I'm going now to have a word with Tidore."

Carwell gave Biggles a sideways glance. "Watch how you go with him," he advised, quietly.

"Why? Is there anything against him?"

"Not that I know of, but as I happen to live here I know he's one of the men it's better not to talk about."

"I see. So it's like that," said Biggles slowly. "Knowing who I am, and what I'm doing, could you be a little more explicit?"

"I don't like repeating rumours without a shred of evidence to support them."

"I appreciate that."

Carwell dropped his voice still lower. “It is said he makes a bit more on the side than he does by his regular business, which is, or was originally, buying and selling rice.”

“Smuggling?”

“That’s what such whispers usually mean.”

“Dope?”

“Half the East lives by fiddling with dope in one way or another.”

“Thanks, Carwell,” acknowledged Biggles. “I need hardly mention it, but I’d be obliged if you didn’t talk to any one about me.”

“You bet your life I won’t,” asserted Carwell. “Here, to be too friendly with the police can put you wrong in other quarters. And I have a wife and family to support.”

“Then we’ll have a bite in the buffet and get along. I can get a car outside, I suppose?”

“Sure. I’ll lay one on for you if you like.”

“Thanks. And thanks for being so frank. So long.”

“So long.”

As they walked towards the refreshment room Biggles remarked to Ginger; “In view of what Carwell has told us I don’t suppose we shall learn much from Tidore, or from anyone else here; but it’ll be something to see the sort of man we have to deal with. No one will say a word against a dope trafficker for fear of getting his own supplies cut off.”

They had a light lunch, very late, and then went outside to find that Carwell had kept his promise in the matter of a car. The driver, as was to be expected, was a coloured man who, when he was given their destination, gave them a second look before assuring them that they had not far to go.

“Apparently the gentleman lives in some style,” observed Biggles, softly, to Ginger, as the car turned into a broad, palm-lined avenue, with expensive-looking houses at intervals on either side.

The driver stopped at a pair of wrought iron gates. Beyond them a short drive curved through a garden of tropical luxuriance to a house of some size, even more imposing than its neighbours. The gates were closed. As they walked towards them having paid the driver, Ginger remarked: “With all this you’d wonder at a man taking chances by not going dead straight.”

“Some men acquire this sort of establishment—for a time—by not going straight,” returned Biggles, dryly. “But let’s not jump to conclusions,” he went on, “More than one honest fortune has been made from tea, spices, and the other nice things this little paradise produces.”

Reaching the gates he turned the handle. They remained closed. "Locked," he said laconically. He turned to Ginger. "It rather looks as if the gentleman is not at home. Or if he is at home we might suppose that he's afraid of something. I'll try the bell."

Before he could ring it two white-clad coloured men stepped from behind some shrubs just inside and advanced purposefully, yet with caution. Ginger could see another man watching.

"Well—well," murmured Biggles. "Whether Mr. Tidore is at home or not it's clear that he doesn't welcome unexpected visitors."

"Or even expected ones," opined Ginger.

Said one of the men inside, curtly, without unlocking the gates, "Yes, what is it?"

Biggles answered. "I'd like to see Mr. Tidore."

"Mr. Tidore not at home."

"Tell him I've come from London," returned Biggles, evenly. "If you'll take him one of my cards I think he'll see me." As he spoke he passed through the bars of the gates one of the cards he had prepared for the occasion. Under his own name it carried the title of the insurance agents.

The Indian servant who had spoken said, "Wait," and retired. The other watched them closely.

They had not long to wait. The gate was unlocked. They were admitted, and a short walk ended on a patio at the rear of the house where a man, presumably the man they sought, was reclining in a comfortable chair, near a softly-humming electric fan, within an area surrounded by palms and exotic shrubs.

As he rose to greet them Ginger considered him carefully, and with some curiosity, for there had been no indication of his appearance. He saw a man of about fifty years of age, going grey, inclined to stoutness, clean shaven, with a smooth skin the colour of pale coffee. His expression was bland, his manner one of quiet self-confidence, and his actions, when he moved, studiously graceful. He was dressed Indian fashion, immaculate, in a long dark jacket and white trousers.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said, in a voice as soft as silk. "I am happy to see you. Please be seated. May I offer you some refreshment?"

"No thanks, we've just had lunch," declined Biggles, accepting a chair.

"Some coffee perhaps?"

"That would be nice. Thank you."

Ginger noticed that the two men who had let them in remained close, watching. The coffee was brought and the conversation resumed.

"I am hoping you have come to settle my claim, Colonel Bigglesworth," said Tidore, with a shadow of a smile.

"It's Mr. Bigglesworth," corrected Biggles. "Unfortunately, no. I am not from the Claims department," he continued. "I have come for a first-hand account of your alarming adventure, for the possibility of a recurrence of piracy is a matter of great concern to the people I represent. It was thought you might help us to trace this pirate craft."

"I'm sorry to say I cannot," averred Tidore sadly. "Had I been able to do so it would have been done as soon as I reached port. The thing is as much a mystery to me as it is to you."

"I take it that nothing of the sort has ever happened to you before?"

"Never."

"Do you think it might happen again?"

Tidore hesitated. "It's unlikely that I shall ever go to sea again," he said slowly. "I am getting old for such adventures."

"Tell me this, Mr. Tidore," requested Biggles. "The pirates must have thought you had something valuable on board. Why should they presume that?"

Tidore held out his hands, palms upward. "I can't imagine—unless it was because I was myself on board."

"How would they know that?"

The lids of Tidore's dark eyes dropped a little as he turned them to Biggles' face. "I wish I knew," he answered in a hard voice.

"Could your crew have talked?"

"I do not think so."

"Did you actually land on any of the Nicobar Islands, or anywhere else?"

"My men landed once or twice for fruit and water, but the islands on which they landed were uninhabited. But what is the purpose of all these questions?"

"I'm trying to arrive at why the pirates should suppose you had a valuable cargo on board. You will agree that the attack could hardly have been a chance affair. If your men didn't talk, who did?"

Tidore's eyes glinted. "I should like very much to know that." He spoke as if he meant it, and Ginger thought he did.

"Is it usual for you to make such long trips?" went on Biggles.

"Not until recently, when I took delivery of my new ship, the *Shima*. But I repeat, what is the purpose of all these questions?" A note of irritation crept into Tidore's voice. "Do you doubt my story?"

"Why should I?"

"Then why have I not received my cheque from your company?"

"They are perhaps awaiting my report. After all, Mr. Tidore, you can't expect insurance companies to pay out large sums of money without first satisfying themselves that the claim is justified. I have merely been asked to try to trace the people who robbed you. Naturally, I came to you first."

"I have told you that I cannot help you."

"In that case, as a matter of routine, would you mind if I spoke to the members of your crew?"

"How do you think they could help you?"

"They may have noticed some detail of the plane, or the yacht, which you overlooked."

"There is a remote possibility of that but I'm afraid you cannot see them."

"Why not?"

"As there was nothing for them to do while the *Shima* was being repaired they have dispersed to their homes, some to India, the Arabs to the Persian Gulf."

"What about the man who is still in hospital?"

"He speaks only Tamil, a language which, I think, you would not know."

"There are such people as interpreters."

"The man was badly wounded and is still too seriously ill to be worried by visitors."

Biggles' face remained expressionless. "I see, Mr. Tidore. If that's how you feel about it there is no point in prolonging this interview. But I think I should warn you that unless I can obtain some corroborative evidence of your statement there may be a delay in settling your claim."

"What else can I tell you?"

"If you don't know I can't help you."

"I have nothing more to say."

Biggles got up. "Thank you, Mr. Tidore. In that case I won't take up any more of your time."

Said Tidore. “You will excuse me if I don’t come to the gate with you myself but I’m still suffering from the after effects of shock.”

“I’m sure you must be,” said Biggles, blandly, as they turned to follow the men who had shown them in.

They heard the gates locked behind them.

Walking down the avenue Ginger said: “Well, what did you make of that?”

“Tidore succeeded in convincing me of one thing only.”

“What was that?”

“He’s a first class liar and as crooked as a corkscrew. He’d no intention of letting me talk to his crew. I only put the question to test him. I got the answer I expected. What did you make of it?”

“I had a feeling he was scared stiff of something.”

“Quite right. That’s why he’s guarded like a dictator. There were at least three men watching and they never took their eyes off us.”

“So I noticed.”

“I didn’t think we should get much change out of Tidore. He had the answers ready. He knows plenty. He knows who robbed him, and why. But he’s not going to tell us.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s scared that if he squeals the people who robbed him will bump him off. They may do that anyway if they think he knows too much. You can judge how scared he is by the fact that although I hinted he might not get the insurance money if he couldn’t find evidence to support his claim, he still refused to open up. He wants that money badly, but still more does he want to keep the breath in his body.”

“But if he helped us to pick up the pirates he’d be safe.”

“His trouble is, I fancy, to do that would mean revealing the game he himself was playing. In any case, if the pirates were caught and put in the box they’d give him away, and he’d find himself in the box with them. He’d not only lose the insurance money but his liberty as well. The English of it is, at the moment, Mr. Tidore is between the devil and the deep blue sea.”

“What’s the next move?”

“We might as well have a look at this ship, the *Shima*, and then move on. We’re not likely to get far here unless we are lucky enough to pick up some casual gossip, and I don’t think that’s likely. If Carwell is afraid to talk about Tidore you can bet the native population, those who know anything, keep guard on their tongues. We ourselves may be on thin ice. I wouldn’t put it

past Tidore to have us watched while we're here in case we tried to make contact with his crew."

Little guessing that the matter was about to take a turn which no stretch of the imagination could have foreseen they walked on to where the masts of sambuks, dhows, baggalas and other sea-going craft marked the position of the moorings. Some had been hauled up on the beach for repairs, and Biggles had paused to survey the scene in the hope of spotting the *Shima* when a voice, one of the most extraordinary voices Ginger had ever heard, spoke from behind them.

"I may be able to help you," it said, in such an exaggerated "Oxford" accent that in different circumstances Ginger could have laughed.

CHAPTER III

ORIENTAL TACTICS

LIKE BIGGLES, GINGER turned expecting to see a well-dressed Englishman, or at any rate a European, and his astonishment was great when he beheld a figure which was certainly not British. His skin, even allowing for sun tan, was too dark for that. Moreover, it had a suspicion of yellow in it. His eyes had a slight slant, although, incongruously, they were blue. He was dressed in a spotless white linen suit, with the trousers creased to a knife edge. On his head, at a rakish angle, he wore a panama. A black cheroot smouldered between his teeth.

Actually, in his general appearance he was a type of Eurasian of the well-to-do class not particularly uncommon in the Orient. It was his voice, so out of keeping, that made Ginger stare. As Biggles said later, with a smile, the man had certainly learned to speak English at the right school; for apart from being la-de-da to the point of absurdity it was perfect. A little too perfect. Both his voice and his manner were those of a stage comedian "taking off" a member of the aristocracy.

"Were you speaking to me?" inquired Biggles coldly, perhaps thinking, like Ginger, that the man was one of those unpleasant touts who, at all Eastern ports, prey on tourists.

"But of course, deah man," was the unabashed reply.

"What gives you the idea that you might be able to help us?"

The man smiled, showing gold-filled teeth. "Call it instinct," he suggested, with a flourish of the cheroot. "I can give you the—ah—best advice you ever had—ah—in your life."

"How much will it cost?" inquired Biggles, cynically.

The man looked pained. "I'm sorry you should take me for one of *those*, deah man. The advice I have to offer will cost you nothing—absolutely nothing."

"In that case I'm prepared to listen. But make it short."

"I shall be the soul of brevity. It is simply this. Go home, deah man, go home."

Biggles stared, his expression changing to one of curiosity. "Why should I go home?"

"You've been in dangerous company."

"Meaning whom?"

"Why, our deah Mistah Tidore, who else?"

"Of what interest is that to you?"

"That, deah man, depends on how much he told you."

"He told me nothing I didn't know when I came here."

"How extremely fortunate."

"For whom?"

"For you." The man was still smiling but his eyes were as hard and cold as ice.

Biggles took a cigarette from his case and lit it. "I find this conversation entertaining," he admitted.

"I thought you might."

"Would I be right in guessing that Mr. Tidore is not a friend of yours?"

"You would be more than right, my deah."

"And would I be right in supposing you know what I am doing here?"

"But of course. At the moment you are looking for the *Shima*."

"Would I also be right in supposing that you know why it was attacked?"

"The ease and pace with which you follow the conversation delights me."

"Then let us continue it. Will you go on or shall I?"

"Let us take it in turns."

"Very well. You go first."

"There is one little mattah we should settle, I think, to prevent any possibility of misunderstandings, now or latah."

"What is it?"

"Do we agree to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth?"

Biggles laughed.

"You find it amusing?"

"Let us say, rather, a little odd. My sense of humour may have become a trifle warped. Lead off."

"Why did you go to see Mr. Tidore?"

"To discuss his claim for insurance in respect of one of his ships."

"Was that the only reason?"

Biggles frowned. “You’re having this too much your own way. Why should I discuss my business with you?”

“Because, deah man, it will be to your advantage to do so. Your turn will come. You would like, I think to fill in the gaps in Mistah Tidore’s story of what happened in the region of the Nicobar Islands not long ago. Am I right?”

“You are. Do I understand you could supply the missing links?”

“I have come here for that very purpose.”

“I see,” said Biggles slowly, studying the man’s face. “And how much is this information going to cost?”

“I have told you, deah man, that this is not a matter of money. Do I look like a poor man?”

“No.”

“I should hope not. I am not here to sell, but to give.”

“Why should you give me anything? Come on. Out with it. We’ve wasted enough time in double talk.”

“Very well, deah man. Don’t be impatient. Here we have time to spare. I have already made it clear that Mistah Tidore is not a friend of mine.”

“Which means he is your enemy.”

“If you like to put it that way.”

“What has he done?”

“For a long time he was foolish. He then carried foolishness to folly.”

“And you took steps to cure him of that.”

“Exactly. In due course, deah man, we shall complete the cure.”

“Why the delay?”

“The gentleman concerned took precautionary measures that caused us to hold our hand. He made it known to us that there is in his house a document which sets out certain information which friends of mine would not like to see made public. You will perceive the point of that.”

“And you’re wondering how much of this information he has passed on to me?”

The question was ignored. “Should Mistah Tidore die abruptly, a fate which he has invited, the document would be found in his papers—unless, of course, it were to disappear in some mysterious way before being found, as is not impossible.”

“Suppose we drop the high-falutin’ stuff and get down to simple straightforward English,” suggested Biggles. “Tidore has the edge on you

and you have the edge on him. The edges are beginning to cut. You daren't cut Tidore too deep for fear a letter he has written to the police comes to light. Am I right so far?"

"Perfectly right, deah man."

"Now tell me, where do I come in?"

"We feel that if Mistah Tidore's reputation for truth and honest dealing were shattered the contents of the letter would carry no weight even if it were published."

"And you think the company I represent could do the shattering?"

"Exactly, deah man. If *we* exposed him nobody would believe us, but if you exposed him for the crook he is he would fall with such a crash that it wouldn't matter what he said afterwards. That is why I am prepared to put into your hands such information as would not only save your company the insurance money but cut the legs from under Mistah Tidore should he try to come back on us."

"He must be very much in your way."

"For the moment. Only for the moment."

"All right," said Biggles. "I'll listen to what you have to say but I leave myself open to act as I think best."

"Very well. Now we understand each other I will proceed. Mistah Tidore has for many years been a smuggler in a small way, yet on a scale large enough to enable him to live in the luxury you may have observed. Does that surprise you?"

"Not in the least."

"As you may know, the irregular transportation of dutiable articles, vulgarly called smuggling, is an ancient and honourable profession in the East, so no one could object to that."

Biggles smiled faintly. "Only the honest merchants who lose money by it."

"That is their fault for being honest," declared the man blandly. "If they chose to go through life giving their profits to the government that is their affair. But let us not quibble about that. Recently Tidore has extended his activities into widah fields, fields that were the monopoly of other people, and in doing so increased the risk for all engaged in the trade. That was a grave error of judgment. He was asked to desist. He ignored the warning. What happened to his new ship was the result."

"Very interesting," averred Biggles. "And what was the monopoly into which he had the presumption to intrude?"

"Gold, deah man. Gold. You may have heard of it. It's the stuff they used to make money of. When Mistah Tidore went on his now famous oyster fishing trip he was not looking for pearls. For oysters he went much farther than was necessary. Do you know where he went?"

"No."

"He went to that convenient little settlement on the China coast called Macao, where things not easily obtainable elsewhere can be bought without questions being asked. Gold is one of them. There, by bribery and corruption he acquired a thousand ounces that had been earmarked for someone else. Naturally, he could not be allowed to keep it."

"Naturally," murmured Biggles with biting sarcasm. "But if it was the gold you wanted why did you take his oysters?"

"A natural question. Because, deah man, it was in the oysters, which he had gathered on the way for the purpose, that the gold had been concealed, the shells having been opened and carefully resealed. What Customs man would think of looking for gold in an oyster? One expects a fish, and sometimes a pearl, but nevah gold. It was clevah, but not clevah enough."

"You knew the gold was in the oysters?"

"But of course. In our business we must have eyes everywhere."

With what astonishment Ginger listened to this fantastic story can be imagined. And it was because it was so fantastic that he did not doubt the truth of it.

Biggles lit another cigarette. "Thanks," he said, in a curious voice. "What you have told me will save me a lot of trouble."

"It should save your company a lot of money."

"And you want nothing in return?"

"Keep away from Tidore."

"And that's all?"

"It should be enough. Now that you know what you came here to learn take my advice and go home, deah man, for to those who know too much our climate is dangerous. The night air is full of mosquitoes, and their bite can be deadly. I wish you good day, and, I hope, a safe journey to London."

With that the man flashed a last smile, raised his hat and walked away.

Biggles looked at his retreating figure. He looked at Ginger. "That engaging masterpiece is one I shall remember for a long time," he said simply.

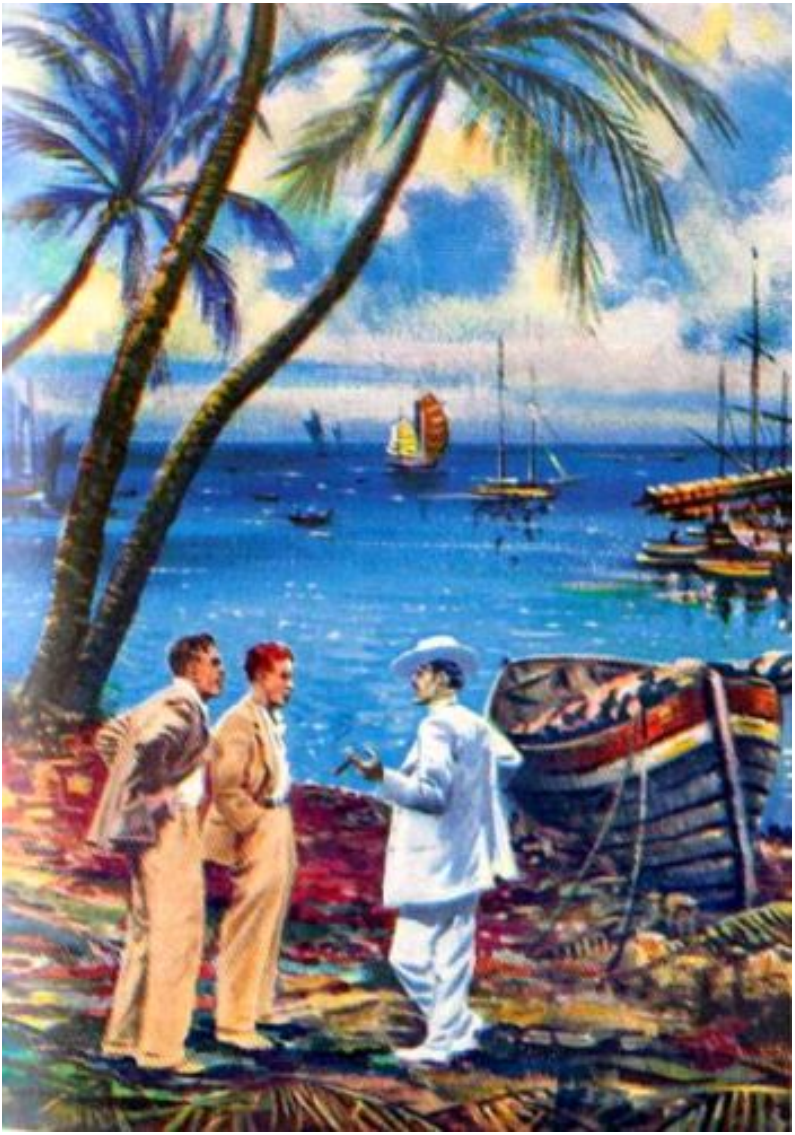
"Do you believe what he told us?"

“Every word of it. Or at least, that part that really matters. By thunder! He must be pretty sure of himself to squeal on Tidore like that. He daren’t kill Tidore while that document exists so he does the next best thing. By exposing Tidore for what he is he hopes to destroy any value it might have in court or elsewhere. He’s gambling that now we’ve got what we came for we’ll go home and spill Tidore’s beans in the newspapers. He had the situation well weighed up except in one respect.”

“What’s that?”

“He’s taken us for what we pretended to be—insurance agents. It hasn’t hit him that we might be police. Let’s go back to the airport and have a dish of tea.”

“What are you going to do about all this?” asked Ginger, as they set off.



See here

“Go home, deah man, go home”

“That will need some careful thought before we reach a decision. Our unknown friend was startlingly frank, and not the least frank of his remarks was the one about the climate. He wasn’t fooling. For us, from now on, should we stay here, it’s likely to be decidedly unhealthy—particularly if Tidore gets wind of what has happened. The set-up now sticks out like a bandaged finger. There are two gangs working smuggling rackets, obviously

in a big way. Tidore, by fiddling with gold, has poached on the preserves of the other lot. That's the best thing that could have happened because they'll now try to cut each other's throats. That, remember, is what started the gang warfare in America. If we can play one side off against the other. . . ."

"We, too, shall be in a fair way to get our throats cut," interposed Ginger. "We've got the gen we came for. I'm all for getting out while the going's good."

"Not *all* the gen," disputed Biggles. "I'd like to know a little more about the bunch represented by the slant-eyed gent in the panama hat. I feel that if we could enrage Mr. Tidore by letting him know that the other side has squealed, he might squeal even louder about them, and so present us with the whole box of tricks."

Ginger turned startled eyes to Biggles' face. "You're not seriously thinking of doing that!"

"It might be a short cut to the answer of our riddle."

"More likely a short cut to the churchyard," protested Ginger. "To get wrong with one gang would be asking for trouble. To get wrong with both, in a place like this, would be suicide. We shall be watched every moment that we stay here. I'd bet both sides are watching us at this minute."

Still discussing the matter they reached the airport, and in the glow of a tropical sunset had their tea. Having finished, still talking about what they had learned, they were strolling towards the Halifax, still in the heavy shadows where they had left it, when two men in native dress appeared suddenly beside them.

"Mr. Tidore wish to see you," announced one, curtly.

"I don't know if I have time," answered Biggles, frowning, for the man had spoken in the manner of an order.

"It would be better to see Mr. Tidore," said the man, and there was no mistaking the threat in his voice.

"I'll come along in the morning."

"No. Come now. The car is waiting." As he spoke the man's hand moved to his hip.

"Perhaps this would be as good a time as any," agreed Biggles, casually. "I was going to see him in any case."

They went to the car. An Indian sat motionless in the driving seat. Biggles got in. Ginger, feeling anything but comfortable, followed, and the car glided away into the darkness.

Nothing more was said until they were challenged at the gate.

The car was admitted. The gates were closed behind it.

“One day, if we go on playing this game of jumping from one lion’s den to another, we’re going to get mauled,” predicted Ginger, morosely.

CHAPTER IV

DEATH STRIKES IN THE DARK

THEY were taken to Tidore on the patio where they had seen him earlier in the day. This time he was not seated, but standing, with his hands clasped behind his back. His pose of smooth complacency had gone. In its place was an uneasy alertness which warned Ginger that the interview was likely to be a difficult one. The area within the tree-ferns and flowering shrubs was lighted on one side only, by a single pendant electric lantern. Ginger noted that it was to this side they were guided, Tidore pacing nervously on the dark side. He opened the conversation, and he lost no time in coming to the point.

"When you left me I understood you were going straight back to England," he said, looking at Biggles.

"I didn't say so," returned Biggles, evenly.

"On the sea front you had a long conversation with a man."

"It would be more correct to say I was accosted by a man who spoke to me for some time."

"Do you know who and what he is?"

"No. He was a complete stranger to me."

"Would it surprise you to know that he is one of the most dangerous men in Asia?"

"Nothing you could say about him would surprise me."

"What were you talking about?"

"As I had nothing to say to him he did most of the talking. As he said nothing about speaking in confidence I may tell you that his conversation was confined almost entirely to you."

"What did he say?"

"He told me a long rigmarole about you being concerned with smuggling."

"Did you believe that?"

"As I know enough of the East to be aware that smuggling is not regarded as a dishonourable profession I thought there might be some truth in his allegations."

"In other words, you believed him."

"Frankly, yes."

"Why do you suppose he gave you that information?"

"There could be only one reason. He has a grudge against you and was hoping to make mischief to your disadvantage. Forgive me if I am wrong, but I formed the opinion that he also is engaged in contraband and you had somehow butted in on his line of business. He knew I had been to see you, from which I gather you are being watched by him or his men. It could have been for no other reason that he approached me, a stranger."

"Did you tell him what we spoke about?"

"What was there to tell? When I left you I knew no more than when I arrived here, and that is public property."

"What did he tell you?"

"Do you really want me to tell you? If what he told me was true you don't need me to repeat it."

"Tell me. I must know."

"Very well. He told me that on the occasion when the *Shima* was stopped you had been to Macao where you had bought some gold which, rightly or wrongly, had been earmarked for him. The gold, he said, had been concealed in oysters. It was for that reason you had been stopped and your catch of oysters taken from you."

Tidore drew a deep breath. "Did you believe that?"

Biggles shrugged. "I have no means of proving or disproving it."

"Aren't you afraid to tell me this?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"If this story got abroad it would ruin me."

Biggles smiled sadly. "I imagine it wouldn't do your reputation any good."

"In that case, knowing what you know, do you suppose that I would allow you to leave this house alive?"

"That, Mr. Tidore is a threat. And I don't like threats. Aside from that, such a remark is not in accord with that degree of intelligence I had imagined you possessed."

"What do you mean by that? The time has come for plain speaking."

"Well, in the first place you are being watched. That is obvious. It can also be assumed that I am being watched. That means your enemies know I am here. If I am not seen to leave you will be playing into their hands, for

you may be sure that they will lose no time in informing the authorities of my disappearance, and the probable reason for it."

Tidore stared. He stared at Biggles for some seconds and then, going to his chair, dropped heavily into it.

Biggles continued. "And having been here a second time I do not lose sight of the possibility that I have jeopardized my life with your enemies, who will almost certainly do their utmost to prevent me from leaving this island alive."

"Why?"

"Because when I leave this house I shall, I hope, be in possession of certain facts which *they* would not like to have made public."

"But I have told you nothing about them."

"But if you are the sensible man I take you to be, you will."

"Why should I?"

"Because by telling me all you know you would be striking a blow at your enemies where it would hurt them most. True, you would not get your gold back, and you might not get your insurance money, but you would at least have a good chance of saving your life, which to you must be more valuable than either. To be blunt, Mr. Tidore, your enemies have you on a spot, and unless their organization is broken up you have even less chance of leaving this house alive than I have. Sooner or later they'll get you, particularly now that they know you have been talking to me."

"They daren't touch me. I have written a letter——"

"So I understand. Don't you realize that they must kill you in order to get that letter?"

That the force of Biggles' argument was not lost was revealed by Tidore's tone of voice when next he spoke.

"You talk of breaking them up," he said anxiously. "How can you do that?"

"Because I have on my side a force even stronger than theirs. You see, Mr. Tidore—I am not going to apologize for coming here as something else—but I am in fact a police officer, with an assignment to find this gang and wipe it out. If you side with me you stand to lose something. Let us admit that. But if you remain silent you stand to lose more. Now it's up to you. You wanted plain speaking and you've had it. Make up your mind."

Under the shock of this disclosure Tidore sat still in his chair, silent, for some time, staring at Biggles as if fascinated. "You may be right," he said at

last, as if he had reached a decision. “But you still have no evidence against me,” he argued, weakly.

“Let us not go into that at this juncture,” retorted Biggles. “Are you going to tell me what you know of the men who robbed you? If not there is no point in pursuing this discussion. I’ll get along and find the information elsewhere.”

Tidore took a deep breath. “I will tell you all I know,” he decided, in a thin voice.

“Please proceed,” invited Biggles.

“I have, I confess, engaged from time to time in carrying contraband to India,” began Tidore. “At first I had the field to myself and it was easy. But in recent years there has come into being an organization the ramifications of which have grown until they extend from the China coast to the whole of India, with which I include Ceylon. They are responsible, through lascar sailors, for most of the opium that is being smuggled into England. When the lascars are caught they pay the fines. They tried to freeze me out, but business was bad, so I was forced to carry a certain amount of contraband in order to keep going until trade improved.”

“What sort of contraband were you carrying at that time?”

Tidore hesitated.

“You spoke of China. Was it opium?”

“Er—yes. But, of course, only to India and in small quantities. It does no harm.”

“That’s a matter on which we need not argue,” returned Biggles coldly. “Please proceed.”

“This organization, which operates an aeroplane as well as other methods of transport, has advantages made possible by an oversight at the end of the war. As you probably know, the Nicobar group of islands, nineteen in all, several of which are uninhabited, was occupied by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945. It was from there that they bombed Ceylon. When they withdrew on the capitulation of Japan they left behind an airfield and a considerable amount of stores, well camouflaged against air attack. How my competitors learned of this ready-made base I do not know, but the possibilities it offered were obvious and they took it over. The Nicobars happen to lie, very conveniently, roughly midway between Macao, where gold can be bought in the open market, and India, where there is always a keen demand for that metal.”

“And you succumbed to the temptation of adding gold to your other illicit merchandise.”

"Exactly, for the reason that my enemies had entered the opium trade and were swamping my markets."

Biggles shook his head. "Two wrongs never did make a right, Mr. Tidore. What on earth made you go near your enemies stronghold?"

"The Nicobars lie across the entrance to the Malacca Strait. How else could I get to Macao?"

"I see that. And their aircraft spotted you?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It was a risk I had to take."

"Mention of Macao reminds me that there is on the aerodrome here a green-painted aircraft, with Chinese markings, registered in Macao. Would my guess be right if I said that was the machine that spotted you?"

"You would be right."

"It has followed you home to finish the job and now you daren't go out."

"You have the usual British way of being blunt to the point of brutality, but that, I must admit, is the case."

"Who is the head man of this opposition racket?"

"I don't know. I have never seen him. He is known to his employees as the Colonel."

"Does that mean he's British?"

"I have no idea. He is a man of mystery."

"It wouldn't by any chance be the man who spoke to me this afternoon?"

"No. He only controls operations here, in Ceylon. They call him the Count. He claims a university degree. He is efficient and ruthless."

"Two essential qualities for success in your line of business, Mr. Tidore. All I need to know is the name of this island base in the Nicobars, for if your enemies lost that they would have to come into the open for fuel and supplies."

"You would take it from them?"

"Definitely."

"Very well, then. The island is. . . ." Tidore broke off.

They waited.

Seconds passed, but still Tidore did not speak.

Ginger peered into the half-darkness in which the man sat. He seemed to be settling a little lower in his chair. There had been a slight sound as if Tidore had caught his breath sharply, and a rustle, but he did not connect these with the sudden break in the conversation.

The same, apparently, with Biggles, for he said, impatiently: "Go on."

Tidore did not answer.

One of the two white-clad servants who had been standing by muttered something to his companion and took a pace forward, also peering hard. He spoke sharply. He touched his master on the shoulder. Tidore slid forward and fell face downwards on the ground. Something projected from his back. With a shock that dried his lips Ginger perceived it was the haft of a knife.

In a flash the two servants had disappeared into the house.

Biggles moved nearly as fast. "Come on," he rapped out, and literally leapt into the inky shadows of the tree-ferns. He halted again instantly, tense, catching Ginger, who had followed him, by the arm.

"Keep still," he breathed.

Not a sound broke the heavy atmosphere, now brittle with drama. There was no one on the patio except Tidore, who lay where he had fallen. The only things that moved were big white moths wheeling round the light and fireflies waltzing among the palms. Ginger's eyes probed the darkness of the shrubs behind Tidore's chair. Not a leaf moved. His heart was pounding. Sweat that was not entirely due to heat trickled down his face. A minute passed, the hush persisting.

"I'm going into the house to get that letter," breathed Biggles.

"It's madness."

"It would give us all the evidence we need. *Ssh.*"

Two men had appeared like shadows on the patio. One of them bent over the body lying there. Metal chinked. Both figures glided into the house.

"They've taken Tidore's keys," whispered Biggles. "They're after that letter."

"You can't go in now. With at least four men inside the place is a death trap."

Biggles did not answer.

"Why not call the police to raid the house. They'll get the letter," suggested Ginger.

"It'll take us all our time to get out," said Biggles tersely. "Let's try it. They'll be watching. They'll all be after us now, Tidore's men as well as the others, knowing what we know. They'll be after each other, too, no doubt. Get your gun handy and shoot at anything that moves. Keep close."

A step at a time, with infinite caution, they began moving through the shrubs that filled the gaps between the palms, avoiding places where the brilliant moonlight, filtering through the fronds, cast a maze of trellis-like patterns over everything.

Ginger flinched as a scream split the silence somewhere behind them. It ended abruptly. Biggles did not stop. Gun in his right hand, parting twigs with his left, he groped his way forward. To Ginger, the problem of how to move quickly without making a noise was one not easily solved. They stopped sometimes to listen, but no sound came to indicate that they were not alone.

This expecting something to happen at any moment was, Ginger thought, like waiting for a bomb to explode. The drive that led to the avenue was somewhere on their left, but it could not be seen. Not that it mattered for he knew Biggles would not risk exposing himself on it, for that would be offering a target to anyone lurking in the bushes. The gates, he supposed, would still be locked, anyway. Even in the avenue they would not be out of danger. They knew too much, and they would therefore be in peril now every moment they remained on the island.

The unnerving part of this groping progress through the bushes was the silence. That they were not alone was certain. There were the men who had knifed Tidore. There were Tidore's servants. What were they doing? If only someone would make a noise, any sort of noise, somewhere, it would be an indication of what was going on.

They reached a wall, evidently the boundary of Tidore's garden. It was a high wall, festooned with a creeper of some sort. It was impossible to see what was beyond it.

"Let's go over," breathed Biggles. He started to pull himself up by the creeper, but it broke away and he fell back with a good deal of noise. For five minutes they stood motionless, listening; but the silence remained unbroken. Biggles gave Ginger a shoulder and hoisted him up. Below, on the other side, was a garden with open places splashed by moonlight. Nothing moved. Putting down a hand to Biggles, Ginger was able to help him up. They dropped on to soft ground, again to stand still, listening, eyes alert.

"They'll be watching the road," said Ginger softly.

"Of course. But these gardens are backed by jungle, and if we get into that we might blunder about for hours. We may have to fight our way out but I'm going to the road."

Keeping tight against the wall Biggles edged his way towards the avenue which, between gaps in palms and shrubs, could here and there be seen. Or rather, lighted windows of houses on the other side could be seen. The last few yards were breath-holding work, but nothing happened. Between them and the avenue, now, there was nothing but a low hedge of ferns with tall palms at intervals. One of these was immediately in front of Ginger and so

close that he could touch it. An inch at a time he edged his way towards the bole and leaned against it while he surveyed the road.

There was no one in sight, but a little further along, on the opposite side, a car showing no lights was parked on the dry grass strip of verge that occurred between the road and a narrow footpath. He regarded it with deep suspicion but he could see nobody in it. They had emerged, he observed, about twenty yards above Tidore's entrance gates, and he inclined his body forward a trifle in the hope of seeing whether they were open or shut. They were open. He was about to withdraw when a slight movement in the shrubs on one side of them caused his eyes to focus on the spot. He made out a small, light-coloured object. Was it a flower? It was not the shape of one. As he watched it moved again, seeming to come forward a little. It was enough. He perceived it was the moonlight catching the brim of a panama hat.

Slowly and with painstaking caution he backed to Biggles and raised a finger to his lips. Cupping his hands round his mouth he whispered: "The Count is standing just inside Tidore's gates, twenty yards along. They're open."

Biggles acknowledged the information with a nod, otherwise he did not move.

CHAPTER V

TIGHT CORNERS

In an atmosphere that is sometimes called electric Ginger waited, tense, for something to happen. Somebody must do something soon, he thought.

A twig cracked. It was only a slight sound, but in the state his nerves were in it made him jump. Then came a muttered conversation in the darkness not far away. These sounds needed no explanation. The Count and his men were waiting for them to show themselves on the moonlight-dappled road.

Turning his head he looked through the trees in the direction of Tidore's house. He could see the upper windows. They were lighted with an orange glow, dull but flickering. He touched Biggles on the arm. "The house is on fire," he breathed.

"They must have set it on fire. An easy way to dispose of Tidore's body and his papers at the same time."

"That should bring a crowd here."

"We should be in as much danger in a crowd as we are now. These boys use knives."

Biggles did not move. Apparently he had no intention of courting death by stepping on to the road.

So there they stood while the seconds ticked past with no change in the situation.

Ginger, finding the waiting intolerable, leaned forward again to see if the Count was still there. He drew back again instantly. The Count, with his back to the hedge, snatching quick glances up and down the road, was sidling towards them. He held an automatic half raised, ready for instant use. The panama left Ginger in no doubt as to who it was. He derived a crumb of comfort in the belief that the Count, from the way he was behaving, did not know they were there.

By swift signals he indicated to Biggles what was happening.

Biggles laid a finger on his lips.

Soft footfalls announced the Count's approach.

A few seconds later, with his back towards them, still looking up and down the road, he appeared. Ginger held his breath as he drew level, a bare

yard away.

Biggles took a swift half pace forward. The muzzle of his gun pushed into the Count's spine. "Don't move," he said softly, but succinctly.

The Count, after one convulsive start which betrayed taut nerves, did not move.

"One sound and you've had it," warned Biggles, grimly. "If you think I'm fooling, try it. Take his gun, Ginger."

"There's no need to be so dramatic, deah man," sneered the Count, as Ginger took his wrist in one hand and with the other removed the automatic.

"Don't talk," snapped Biggles.

"You promised you'd go home."

"I promised nothing."

"I told you everything. Why did you come back here?"

"I didn't come. I was fetched," rasped Biggles. "Listen, and listen hard. One man has died tonight. If there's to be another it'll be you. I mean that. You're going to do exactly as I tell you—or else. I'm not particular which way it is. Keep your hands clear of your sides. Now walk into the middle of the road."

The Count, very deliberately, advanced into the road. They went with him.

"Now turn left and keep walking," ordered Biggles. To Ginger, he added, "Watch the rear."

In this fashion the three-man procession advanced down the avenue, keeping in the middle of the road, with Ginger guarding against an attack from the rear or from the flanks.

"Let us go somewhere and talk, like men, instead of playing cowboy games like children," suggested the Count.

"This isn't a game," answered Biggles, sternly.

"Then why not talk it over, deah man?"

"There's nothing to talk about."

"So deah Mistah Tidore talked, did he?"

"You know he did."

"And now he will talk no more. Deah—deah. What a foolish man."

"Save your breath."

"There's no need to push that gun so hard, deah man. It hurts."

"It'll hurt more if it goes off. It has a hair trigger and my finger's on it, so walk carefully."

As they passed Tidore's gates two men ran out, but they pulled up short when they saw what was happening. Presently another appeared. Remaining on the path these three kept pace with the procession like boys marching beside a band. Behind, a fourth man, who had got out of the stationary car, followed on the other side of the road.

"I see we're getting quite a party," remarked Biggles. "But don't worry. While the spectators keep their places you'll come to no harm."

"How long does this nonsense go on?"

"Until we get to where we're going."

Ginger himself was wondering how long this state of affairs was to continue. He suspected Biggles was making for the next cross-roads, where a main thoroughfare, with street lamps and a certain amount of traffic might have an effect on the situation, and perhaps allow them to get clear without interference.

It never came to that.

They had nearly reached the cross-roads when a car, its headlights blazing, swung round the corner and accelerated up the avenue. There was no reason to suppose it was anything to do with the Count: nor, in fact, was it; but it might, thought Ginger, interrupt the proceedings, since, as both parties were in the middle of the road, one or the other would have to give way. And so it fell out.

The driver of the car sounded his horn, slowed down, and altered course a little to avoid running into the pedestrians who occupied the position that should have been his, on the crown of the road. All this was perfectly natural and to be expected.

"Watch where you're going," Biggles told the prisoner sharply, for the Count was still walking straight on regardless of the car.

The Count did not answer, and a second or two later Ginger realized that he must already have made up his mind what he was going to do.

As the car drew nearly level, and would have passed, he jumped sideways like a cat into the headlights, causing the driver to swerve, brakes screeching, tyres biting the road in a dry-skid stop. In a flash he had darted round it, putting the car between him and Biggles, so that what he did after that could not be seen. All this had happened in less time than it takes to tell.

The situation became more confusing when the driver of the car, a white man in spotless ducks—who had good cause to be furious—flung open the door and leapt out presumably to demand an explanation from the man who had apparently done his best to cause an accident. At all events, voicing his displeasure in no uncertain terms he left the car on the offside. As he did so,

with his attention no doubt fully occupied with the Count, Biggles opened the door on the near side and slid into the seat he had vacated. “In you get,” he snapped at Ginger.

Ginger obeyed with alacrity. The engine had of course been left running. Biggles let in the clutch and away they went, leaving the unlucky driver shouting and gesticulating.

“What a crazy business,” muttered Biggles. “But we needed the car more than he did.”

“I hope we never have to explain that to him,” returned Ginger, cogently.

“He’ll soon get it back. The police will find it.”

Looking back through the rear window Ginger could see the driver standing alone in the middle of the road, the Count and his men having decided, evidently, not to waste time in explanations.

Biggles did not go far. As soon as they were within comfortable walking distance of the airfield he pulled in to the side of the road, and leaving the car there, hurried on. “We’re well out of that,” he said grimly.

“Are you telling me,” rejoined Ginger.

“It was as tight a spot as we were ever in,” averred Biggles. “Not that we’re out of the wood yet. With two gangs hunting us, and the police looking for us for pinching that car, I have a feeling we’ve outstayed our welcome on this particular island and the sooner we’re off it the better.”

“You mean, you’re going to pull out?”

“I am. We now have what we came for; more, in fact. To stay here would involve us in explanations with the powers that be that could keep us here for weeks. Besides, there’s no point in letting Algy and Bertie waste time and petrol looking for what we know. We’ll get across to the rendezvous.”

“Aren’t you going to say anything about the murder of Tidore?”

“Of course I am. We can’t gloss over that. But not in person. I shan’t shed any tears for Tidore. He was as crooked as the rest of ’em. He got what he’d been asking for, for a long time. They’ll all come to that eventually.”

“We certainly started something.”

“Not all of it. The Count’s gang had Tidore on the spot when we arrived. Admittedly, we sort of expedited matters. When the Count realized that Tidore was going to squeal, and give us the lot, he had to act fast. But he wasn’t quite quick enough.”

“What will you do about Tidore?”

“I’ll scribble a note to the Chief of Police here and leave it with Carwell to be delivered as soon as possible. I’ll tell him I’ll make a full report later.

That's the easiest way out. I don't want to stay here now Tidore's end is buttoned up. We'll get cracking on the other side, the Count's end."

They reached the Halifax without further trouble. Ginger kept watch while Biggles went inside to write the note. When it was done it was handed to one of the airport attendants for delivery.

"Phew!" breathed Biggles. "What a lot of work we give ourselves." He looked at his watch. "After eleven, by gosh! How time flies when you're busy."

"I see the headlights of a car coming up the road," observed Ginger. "With no machines due in or out it seems to be in a hurry."

"Then let's get airborne. We've a long way to go. Keep an eye on that car while I start up."

The car came on. It turned into the airport. It did not stop in the car park, but running on, turned towards the Halifax. Ginger waited for no more. He got in, closed the door, and as he dropped into his seat beside Biggles told him what was happening.

"I don't think we'll wait to see what they want," said Biggles, his hand going to the throttle.

The airscrews responded and the machine moved forward.

Ginger watched the airfield dropping away behind them, "The car's gone over to the green Dakota," he reported.

"Looks as if we're to have company over the rolling deep."

"That Dakota could carry a gun," said Ginger anxiously.

"I'd bet on it," returned Biggles. "Don't worry. Before it can use it on us, if that's the idea, it'll have to find us, and I don't think it'll do that. Give me the count for Kutaradja. We'll call there to top up and maybe send a signal to Kuala to let Algy know we're on our way. You might as well try to get some sleep."

"How about you?"

"I shall be all right till we're across the drink. We ought to make our landfall about dawn. There'll be time for dreaming then."

Ginger looked out. Behind them the lights of Ceylon were fading. Above, the sky was ablaze with stars. Before them stretched the Indian Ocean, rolling on and on for nearly a thousand miles without a break.

CHAPTER VI

BIGGLES TAKES A CHANCE

For a while Ginger watched the sky behind them in case the Dakota picked them up, but seeing nothing of it he relaxed, and presently dozed, on and off. Each time he opened his eyes Biggles was sitting there beside him as motionless as a statue. With the ghastly glow of the luminous instruments reflected on his face he looked hardly human. What was he thinking about? Ginger wondered. What do pilots think about on long over-water flights when, with nothing to look at but vague, mysterious distances, they can only sit still, hour after hour, pondering? Only they know.

The weather remained fine. The cool night air through which the aircraft, on three-quarters throttle, was thrust by its ceaselessly-droning engines, was as soft as milk. Below and on all sides rolled the ocean, to the ends of the world, as it seemed, and beyond.

At last, seeing the stars ahead begin to pale, the first sign of approaching dawn, he roused himself and looked at the time. Four o'clock. He checked with the route map on his knees and then turned his eyes to the north-eastern quadrant. Far away, perhaps fifty miles or more, a spark of light which he knew could not be a star hung low over the horizon. He was glad to see it, knowing it could only be Great Nicobar, the most southerly of that group of Islands, rising two thousand feet from the tropic sea. It told him they were on course, and only a little more than a hundred miles from their first objective on Sumatra.

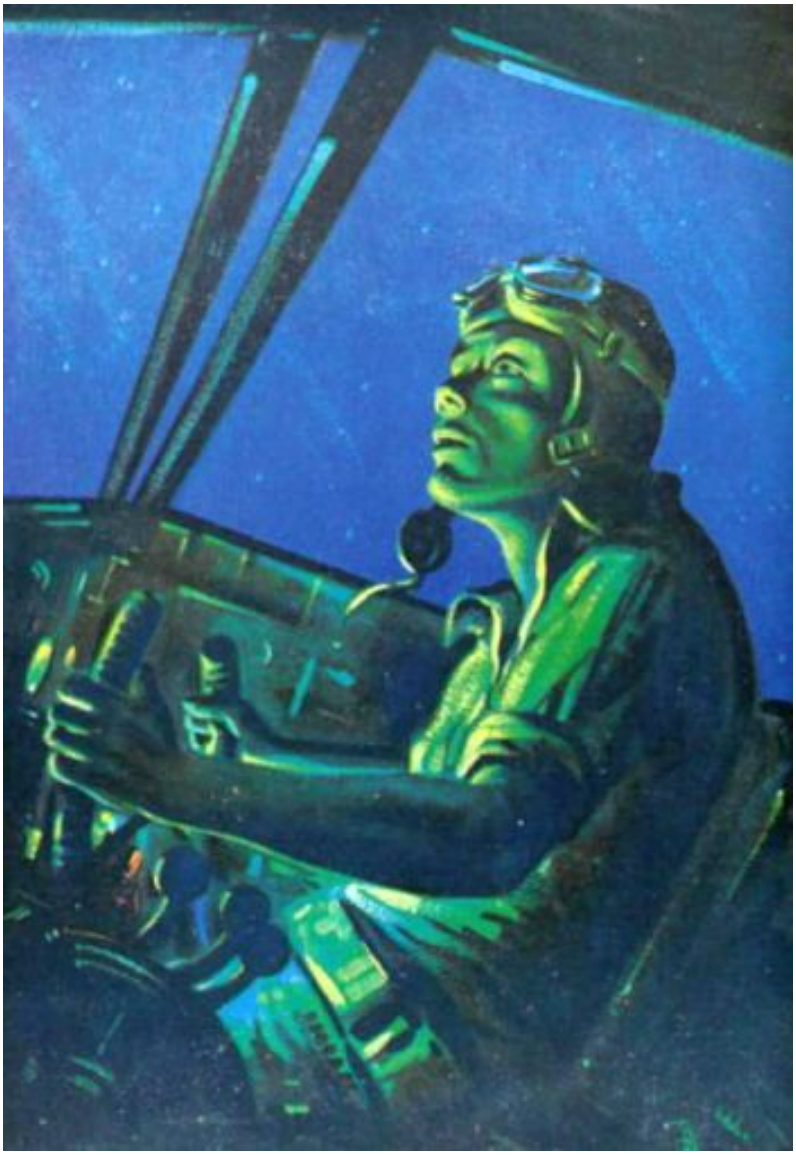
He went aft, made coffee and took a cup to Biggles. "Like me to take over for a bit?" he suggested.

"Don't bother. Not much farther to go. She's flying herself, anyway."

They sipped their coffee.

"Be careful what you say when we're on the ground," warned Biggles. "At an airfield so near their headquarters the gang are almost certain to have a spy to report who comes and goes. Tidore, for that matter, probably had a bigger organization than we've been led to believe, or the other people wouldn't have bothered about him."

"What are you going to say to the Traffic Manager, or whoever's in charge at Kutaradja?"



See here

"With the ghastly glow of the instruments in his face Biggles looked hardly human"

"That will depend on the man. If he's a European, and strikes me as being trustworthy, I shall ask him a few discreet questions. Otherwise I shall say no more than is necessary. His manner should tell us. The enemy has the use of radio as well as us, and may have put through a signal. Keep an eye open for that Dakota. It'll probably make for its island base, but it may come

here, and now several cats are out of their bags we can't afford to take chances."

"I wonder how much they overheard of your conversation with Tidore."

"Enough to know he was squealing; and that was enough to settle his account. They'd have got him anyway. Pity we couldn't have had another five minutes. But we can't complain. We learned more than I expected."

"Things certainly moved fast."

"They had to once we stuck our fingers in the pie."

Twenty minutes later, with the grey streak of the fake dawn showing above the Eastern horizon, a cluster of lights appeared ahead to mark the end of the first leg of the journey; and soon afterwards, after a low circuit to confirm that the Dakota was not there, at any rate on the tarmac, where it would be had it recently landed, Biggles put the Halifax down on the airfield of Kutaradja which, as to be expected at that hour, was deserted. Two Indonesian maintenance men appeared as the aircraft taxied to the fuel pumps, and while they were topping up the tanks Biggles and Ginger stretched their limbs, stiff from the long journey. The Traffic Manager came out of his office and walked along to them. He turned out to be a Dutchman named Vandershon, as was ascertained after Biggles had introduced himself.

"I've just picked up a radio signal about you," he announced.

Biggles threw a sidelong glance at Ginger. "Really! Not by any chance from a man named Lacey?"

"No. I haven't seen or heard anything of a man of that name. He hasn't been here. The message was sent out by a machine coming over from Ceylon."

"Ah! A Dakota, perhaps."

"That's right. How did you know?"

"We saw one at Jaffna making ready to take off. What did it want to know?"

"If you'd arrived here."

"Did you answer?"

"Yes. I said you weren't here. You weren't, at the time."

Biggles saw the work of refuelling completed to his satisfaction and then accompanied the Dutchman to the office to comply with the customary regulations. On the way he said softly to Ginger: "He's all right. Otherwise he wouldn't have mentioned that signal." Arriving at the office, speaking to Vandershon, he went on: "By the way, if that message is repeated I'd be obliged if you'd ignore it."

It was the Dutchman's turn to look surprised. "Why?"

"Because I'd rather that Dakota didn't know I was here. It isn't a friend of mine."

"What do you mean?"

Biggles indicated an inner door that had been opened an inch or two. "Who's in there?"

"My duty clerk."

Biggles walked over to the door and pushed it open. A native who had been standing just inside backed away, looking startled. Biggles closed the door and said, shortly, to Vandershon: "Let's go outside."

They went back to the tarmac, beyond the hearing of possible eavesdroppers.

"To satisfy your natural curiosity, Mr. Vandershon, and because I would like to ask you one or two questions I'm going to take you into my confidence, trusting you to respect it," said Biggles, seriously. "We're detectives from London investigating a case of alleged piracy on the high seas not far from here. You may have heard about it."

"Of course."

"In doing so we've put ourselves in a position of some danger. But that's only by the way. Have you any ideas of your own about this piracy?"

"None whatever."

"You know that an aircraft was involved?"

"So I believe." Vandershon started and looked hard at Biggles' face. "Not the Dakota!"

Biggles' expression softened. "You're good at guessing, Mr. Vandershon, but as you value your life keep your lips shut tight. Now you know why the Dakota is anxious to know where we are. Last night the gang that owns it murdered a man at Jaffna because he knew too much. We were present when it happened, which means that we, too, know more than is good for our health. Watch your step, or the same may apply to you."

"I understand," answered the Dutchman, slowly.

A man appeared with a slip of paper in his hand. Vandershon said it was his radio operator. He took the slip, dismissed the man, and read it. Looking up at Biggles he said: "The Dakota is on its way here. It's only fifty miles out. But why is it coming here? I said you weren't here."

"It looks as if somebody has said we are." Biggles took a cigarette from his case and tapped it on a thumbnail. "Be careful of that clerk of yours, Mr.

Vandershon. I brought you outside because he was a little too anxious to overhear our conversation."

For a moment the Dutchman looked alarmed. "What shall I say?"

"Tell the truth. When the Dakota lands say we've been here and gone. You can't say where because I shan't tell you. It's better you didn't know. What do you know about this green Dakota with Chinese markings?"

"Practically nothing. It's called here occasionally. It's owned by a private company. I know the pilot, a Jap named Mitsubu, and occasionally there has been a passenger. But the machine mostly carries freight. It doesn't drop it off here, although it sometimes picks up a parcel."

Biggles nodded. "I see. Well, we'd better not stand here talking. Can you lend me an old suit of overalls?"

"What on earth for?"

"Because then I shall look like part of the aerodrome staff when the Dakota lands here. I'm anxious to know who's in it, for which reason I shall stay here when my machine takes off. It would also be useful to me to know which way the Dakota goes when it leaves here. I fancy it won't stay long when it finds my Halifax has left."

"You're crazy," protested Ginger, in a shocked voice. "If the Count's in that machine he'll spot you and shoot you."

"All right. Don't get hysterical about it," replied Biggles calmly. "He may not be on board. In any case, while he may think he's hunting us, remember we're hunting him. Mitsubu hasn't seen me—as far as we know. But let's not waste time. Get off and fly south for twenty minutes. Then turn and come back to pick me up. Obviously you won't land if the Dakota is still here. In that case make for the rendezvous with Algy and come back for me tomorrow."

"But suppose——"

"Stop rolling your brain round in your skull and get mobile."

"Okay."

"I'll come with you to the machine and make a pretence of getting in should anyone be watching."

They strode off, and within a minute or two Ginger was in the air, heading south. Biggles backed into a hangar where presently Vandershon brought him an oil-stained suit of overalls. The manager smiled and returned to his office. Biggles smeared some oil on his hands and face and began tidying up the hangar, for the Dakota could be heard approaching. Two

Indonesians of the servicing staff glanced at him as they came on duty but their interest was perfunctory.

Without appearing to take too much interest Biggles watched the Dakota land. It did not run on to the pumps for fuel but taxied to the tarmac in front of the main building. There it stopped, with the engines ticking over. Three men got out; first two, then another, whom Biggles took to be Mitsubu, the pilot, for he remained by the machine, stretching, exactly as Biggles had done on landing. Of the other two one was a well-dressed, powerfully built man, a white man Biggles thought, whom he had never seen before. The doubt about the actual colour of his skin arose because long residence in the tropics can produce a misleading sun tan. He had the brisk, purposeful walk of a European, or an American, anyway, decided Biggles. The last man was the Count, still wearing his panama. These two disappeared into the main building, leaving Biggles with some difficult questions to answer.

The first was, why had the Count crossed to this side of the ocean? Was it to make a report to headquarters on what had happened in Ceylon? Was it because the Count, having been face to face with him, was perhaps the only member of the gang who was able to recognize him? Where had this new white man come from? Had he been in Ceylon with the Count? Biggles thought not. In that case the Dakota must have landed somewhere before coming to Sumatra. From the time it had taken for the crossing it could have landed somewhere.

It rather looked, reasoned Biggles, as if the Dakota had called at the Nicobars. The circumstances would fit the case. When the Count had learned by radio that the Halifax was not at Kutaradja it had dropped in at its base to report. Then a radio signal had been sent by someone to say the machine *was* there, whereupon it had taken off and come on, bringing somebody with it. Who was the somebody? Was it the head man—the Colonel of whom Tidore had spoken?

Biggles moved a little nearer for a closer look at the stranger when he left the buildings.

He had not long to wait. The man came out, the Count and Vandershon with him. They stood talking. Biggles watched. The stranger, he observed, did most of the talking. His face was lean, his expression hard and his manner decisive, like one accustomed to command. A clipped moustache supported a general military appearance. Biggles was still too far away for details but he could see enough to be able to recognize the man again.

Still talking they walked slowly to the Dakota. The pilot took his place. The two passengers got in. The machine took off. Biggles lit a cigarette.

Vandershon looked round, saw him and came over. His expression was serious. “You are right about their interest in you,” he announced. “I’m now more or less on their pay-roll.”

“How so?”

“They left a thousand rupees on my desk for me to send a radio signal immediately should you return here.”

“To what address?”

“No address. A private wavelength. They said their operator would pick up the message.”

“You accepted the money?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“For what reason could I refuse without arousing their suspicions? I thought by accepting I could be of more help to you.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your co-operation. What did you make of that man who did most of the talking? Have you ever seen him before?”

“No. He speaks like an American—a tough one. What I don’t understand is why, after crossing from Ceylon, they didn’t need petrol.”

“I think I can answer that one. That lot have a private dump, one that was left by the Japs, or the Americans, on one of the Nicobars. It called there on the way here to fill up, and to collect the man we’ve been talking about.”

“No wonder they can afford to be independent if they have an unlimited supply of petrol and oil.”

“It’s that, I fancy, which makes their racket possible, in that it saves them from landing at intermediate Customs airports. I’ll shed these togs you lent me and we’ll go to the buffet for a drink while we’re waiting for my assistant to come back. I’d rather that clerk of yours didn’t see us too much together.”

They were still talking when the Halifax returned, made a circuit and came in.

Biggles got up. “Well, I’ll push along. I’m much obliged to you for your help and in due course I’ll see it’s reported to the right quarter. If ever I can do anything for you call me at Scotland Yard. Bigglesworth’s the name. Be careful. To this bunch murder is all in the day’s work.”

“I’ll watch it.”

“Good-bye.” They shook hands. Biggles went to the machine, got in, took off and turned north-east.

“Where are you going?” asked Ginger, surprised.

“Kuala Lumpur.”

“But you’re going the wrong way.”

“I know. It’s for the benefit of that station clerk who will, I fancy, be watching us.”

“Ah-huh! How did you get on?”

“What I’ve learned was worth waiting for even though the Count did turn up, with a man who might be the boss—the man they call the Colonel.”

Not until the dark coastline of Sumatra was a blur behind them did Biggles turn south-east. Then, with the sun well up, and a blue sky above, the aircraft headed down the Malacca Strait on the four hundred mile run to the rendezvous with Algy and Bertie. As they travelled, Biggles passed on the information he had gathered.

Said Ginger: “Now that we know the gang has its own fuel dump Algy’s wasting his time asking questions at official airports.”

“As things have turned out, yes.”

“Kutaradja was on his list. What if he goes there asking questions about us?”

“I’ve thought of that. I was on the point of asking that friendly Dutchman to say, if Algy looked in, that we’d gone on. But I decided against it. The airfield we’ve just left is dangerous ground and I thought it better if no one there knew we had another card up our sleeves—the Otter. Already Vandershon knows more than is good for him, since at least one member of his staff is on the gang’s pay-roll.”

“How about sending out a signal to all the airports along the coast telling Algy to keep clear of Kutaradja—that we’re on our way to Kuala?”

“Too dangerous. The message might be picked up by the wrong people. So far no one knows of our connection with the Otter and I’d rather leave it that way. Algy will probably do the airfields in Malaya before he crosses to Sumatra, anyway. It’s less risky to chance that than use radio.”

Two hours later they landed on the busy aerodrome of Kuala Lumpur, in Malaya, to find that Algy had not yet arrived. This did not surprise them, for, as Biggles pointed out, he would hardly expect them across so soon.

“No matter,” he said. “We shall have to wait. There’s no desperate hurry. Let’s have some lunch.”

CHAPTER VII

THE COLONEL DROPS IN

THE OTTER arrived the next day, from Penang, having of course, learned nothing en route, for reasons which became apparent to Algy and Bertie when Biggles told them about the secret petrol dump which, except for odd occasions, made it unnecessary for the Dakota to buy fuel.

Sitting in the shade on the terrace of the airport restaurant, overlooking the landing ground, with iced drinks at hand, Biggles told all that he and Ginger had learned in Ceylon and at Kutaradja, which took some little time.

"That brings us up to date," he concluded.

"I say, old boy, you have had a time," remarked Bertie.

"What's more to the point, what happens next and where do we go from here?" questioned Algy.

"That," replied Biggles, "is a question not easy to answer; and as you can imagine, we've done a lot of talking, and I've done a lot of thinking about it, while we were waiting for you. If we can bring the whole thing into focus maybe someone will get an idea." He sipped his drink.

"What we're faced with now," he resumed, "is not so much piracy, which may not happen again now Tidore is scuppered, as smuggling in a really big way. Moreover, unless it's scotched it'll get bigger. These rackets always do if they're successful. Until recently there were two gangs working the same ground, and as always happens they got in each other's way. Tidore got the dirty end of the stick, and we can now regard his lot as being out of the picture unless they can find another leader."

"All that remains, therefore, is to bust the other ring," put in Algy.

"That's plenty to go on with," asserted Biggles. "According to Tidore it has world-wide ramifications, and while that may be an exaggeration it must cover much of the Orient. It would obviously be futile to try to round up a mob of agents, spies, spivs and operatives, scattered in every port and airport from China to India. You can't kill an octopus by lopping off the tips of its tentacles. You must go for the brain, which in this case, if our information is correct, is on one of the uninhabited Nicobar islands. This dump may have given birth to the racket in the first place, and, with almost unlimited stores, simplifies its operations if it doesn't actually keep it going.

The loss of this base would certainly make things more difficult for the organizing brain behind it, if for no other reason than its transport would be forced to use official ports and airports for petrol and oil. There's at least one ship in this, don't forget, as well as an aircraft."

"How are you going to bump off a bally island, old boy—if you see what I mean?" inquired Bertie, polishing his eyeglass.

"We haven't quite come to that," returned Biggles. "The big snag is, while we've learned a lot, so far we've no actual proof of anything. What are this lot smuggling? How? Where? Apart from the gold that was pinched in transit we haven't a clue. That's hardly enough to justify an official raid on the island even if we knew which one it was. At present we don't even know that."

"It shouldn't take us long to find out," put in Algy.

"Unofficial action, by which I mean taking the law into our own hands, might well lay us open to criticism, and possibly start an international rumpus. Again, to go off at half cock would simply put the enemy on his guard. We've got to be sure of our ground before we do anything drastic. Really, I ought to go home and put the matter to the Air Commodore."

"That would merely tie our hands. He'd do nothing without proof," argued Algy. "If the story became official it would leak out, and that'd make things even harder for us."

"The insurance people ought to know about Tidore, anyway," stated Biggles. "There's no question now of an insurance claim. He was smuggling gold—in oysters. Imagine it. What customs officer would open an oyster straight out of the sea to check it for contraband?"

"Yet it came unstuck, laddie," reminded Bertie.

"It came unstuck, not through any official action, but because one of Tidore's men tipped off the rival gang. That's the only explanation of that. The Count as good as admitted it. It's the risk any master crook must always take."

"Forgive me, old warrior, but it seems to me that you're losing your nerve," said Bertie, sadly.

"What gave you that idea?" demanded Biggles.

"In the old days you'd have pushed this beastly island off the map and left people to argue about it afterwards."

"These are not the old days," returned Biggles coldly. "What are you suggesting I do? Start a war? There are enough already."

"We could totter round, landing here and there, until we dropped on the right one—you know the sort of thing," proposed Bertie.

"We should soon be tottering if we tried that," returned Biggles sarcastically. "Get this in your head. These islands now belong to India, and they wouldn't thank us for poking our nose in."

"Not even if we pointed out that they're the chief sufferers from this illicit gold traffic?" queried Ginger.

"No. All the gen we have at present is hearsay, from a man who was a self-confessed smuggler. That wouldn't be worth much in any court. We've got to catch this Colonel chap with the goods on him, so to speak."

"We shan't do that sitting here."

"We shan't do it anywhere if we step off with the wrong foot."

"The island's the place to go," declared Bertie. "I'm all for roaring over in a cloud of steam to find out what's going on."

"Which island? We don't know yet which one it is."

"That is a bit of a bore I must admit," conceded Bertie. "But there aren't all that many. According to that nice big Admiralty chart the chief produced for us there are only seven or eight uninhabited. It wouldn't take us long to give them all the once over. I still think that's the drill, old boy."

"How are we to spot the right one? Tidore said the place is camouflaged, and war-time camouflage isn't easy to see through. If it was it'd be no use putting it up. I'm not sitting here trying to make difficulties. I'm merely pointing them out. A night flight might reveal something. If the enemy thinks he is sitting pretty he may become careless enough to show lights. But the less flying we do there the better. The islands are off any regular route. There's no airport. So if an aircraft takes to flying up and down it won't take the Colonel long to work out why. With no refuelling facilities there we shall have to operate from Malaya or Sumatra, which means a run of four or five hundred miles out and back every time. Another detail we'd do well to bear in mind is, the Nicobars happen to be in the middle of the Indian Ocean cyclone area."

"Think of some more snags," suggested Algy.

"No. I think that's about the lot. As we shan't get anywhere sitting here, as Ginger has so smartly pointed out, what I'll do is this. Call it a compromise. It'd be an awful sweat to go all the way home, and I can't see that it'd do much good if I did. I'll slip down to Singapore and ask the Governor's secretary if I may send a report to the Air Commodore in the Diplomatic Bag. That should produce an answer in a week or ten days. Having done that I'll come straight back. Tonight—or rather, early

tomorrow morning before it gets light—we'll do a round tour of the islands in the Otter to get the general lay-out. We may see something. If we can locate the island, while we're waiting for the Air Commodore's reply we might have a closer look at it. He's bound to want to know more about it. How is that?"

Everyone agreed that the plan was sound.

Ginger started. "Take a look at what's coming in," he invited, in a curious voice.

Aircraft had been coming and going constantly, military as well as civil, but no notice had been taken of them. Biggles turned in his chair. Everyone looked. The green Dakota was making an approach run with the obvious intention of landing.

Biggles smiled faintly. "Well—well. They seem to be as busy as we are."

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

"Do? Nothing. By this time they'll have seen the Halifax so they know we're here. In fact, I'd bet my boots they knew we were here within minutes of our landing."

"You don't think their arrival is accidental—a coincidence?"

"I do not. They have radio as well as us. Somebody has told them we're here. If, as I now suspect, they have a spy at every airport between the China coast and India, they'll always know where we are. That machine went home. I saw it go. It hasn't waffled all the way back here merely to put in flying time. This promises to be interesting."

"You think it has come here deliberately to have a word with us?" said Algy.

"With me. They don't know anything about you—at least I hope not. It would be as well they didn't know. Move to another seat. And you, Bertie. Stay close if you like, but pretend you're nothing to do with us. Wait a minute! You might make yourselves useful. There's a boy over there taking photographs of planes. Offer him some dollars for a photo of anyone who gets out of that Dakota. Better still, borrow the camera. If they come over here try to get a photo of the group. You might manage it from the palms behind us. Be careful, though—very careful."

Algy and Bertie moved off.

The Dakota landed and taxied in. Two men stepped out.

"That's the Colonel himself, with the Count," murmured Biggles. "This surprises me. It must be something important to bring him out."

The two men went into the reception hall. They were soon back, looking around.

"The Count has spotted us," said Biggles. "They're coming over. Play casual, as if we don't care two hoots about 'em. Leave the talking to me."

The two men made no excuses. They strode straight to the table where Biggles and Ginger were sitting. The Colonel put a hand on the back of the chair Algy had just vacated.

"Mind if I sit down?" he inquired, curtly, with an accent that caused Ginger to place him as an American.

"Why should I? The chairs don't belong to me," answered Biggles, coolly.

The two men sat. The Count tilted back his panama and lit a cheroot. He offered his case to Biggles. "Cigar, deah man?"

"No thanks." Biggles lit a cigarette.

The Colonel turned a pair of cold grey eyes to Biggles' face. "I understand your name is Bigglesworth."

"Correct. Sorry I can't return the compliment,"

"I'm Colonel Black."

"Of what—er—army? United States?"

The question was ignored. "It has been brought to my notice that you're interested in my business."

"It seems to me that you're interested in mine. I didn't invite the confidence of your friend, the Count, in Jaffna. Nor did I invite you to join me at my table here. If you have something more to say, I'm listening. But don't take too much time over it."

"Very well. Why did you go to Tidore?"

"To check a claim he made on a London insurance company for ten thousand pounds. It's no secret. I told your friend that in Jaffna."

"Ten thousand! He had a nerve."

"Not enough, apparently, for the dangerous game he was playing."

"My friend here gave you all the information you needed. Why didn't you go straight home with it. Why did you come here?"

"He told me a wild tale about some oysters but he gave me no proof."

"Didn't you believe him?"

"I'd say it's a question as to who was the biggest liar, Tidore or your friend."

The Count smiled, flashing his white, gold-filled teeth.

"Why have you come here?" demanded the Colonel.

Biggles hesitated, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "My answer to such an impertinent question should be, that's no business of yours. But that would not be strictly true—would it?"

"What do you think my business is?"

"Smuggling. Possibly with a little gun-running and slave traffic thrown in."

"That's blunt."

"I'm a blunt man. A bird that flies with rooks can't grumble if it's mistaken for a rook. And what goes for rooks goes for crooks. But suppose we quit tossing bouquets to each other. We're both grown up. You came here to say something to me. Out with it."

The Colonel considered the question. "I'm not a man who likes violence for the sake of it."

"I had an opportunity of observing that in Tidore's garden," returned Biggles, with biting sarcasm.

"I only resort to such methods when all others fail. Tidore had been warned."

"About what?"

"To keep out of my way."

"Since he was first in the field he would be justified in thinking you were getting in *his* way."

"He got in my way. He ignored the warning. He has paid the penalty."

"And now you're warning me. Is that it?"

"Put it that way if you like. I am giving you the same opportunity as I gave him. I suggest it would be to the advantage of both of us if each forgot the other existed."

"Since you have more to gain from that than I have, I'd call it a one-sided arrangement."

"It may look like that to you, and to save time I'll acknowledge it. For that reason to balance the account, I'm prepared to pay—shall we say, a thousand pounds."

Biggles shook his head.

"Two thousand. And there's more where that comes from. I could use a pilot like you."

Biggles raised an eyebrow. "Getting scared Mitsubu might sell you out?"

"Why should he? He knows which side his bread's buttered."

“For the moment he may be satisfied with bread and butter, but as an enemy war pilot on the losing side he must still hate the sight of you.”

The Colonel frowned. “You needn’t concern yourself with that. I can take care of myself. Do you, or do you not, accept my offer? I’m trying to save us both trouble.”

“Why should you want to save me trouble? What you’re trying to do, Colonel, is save yourself trouble. You know I’m not so easily to be disposed of as Tidore. The answer is no. I happen to be one of those awkward people who are interested more in other things than in money.”

“You realize that by your refusal I shall have to ensure your silence by other methods?”

“You mean, you’ll try.”

“I never fail.”

“I’d call that a dangerous boast. If I thought it I wouldn’t care to say it. But no matter. There’s one thing about this meeting that puzzles me. Would you answer a question to satisfy my curiosity?”

“What is it?”

“Why did you come on this errand yourself instead of sending your entertaining lieutenant in the panama?”

“I wanted to have a look at you, to form my own opinion.”

“Even though that allowed me to have a look at you?”

“You have already seen me.”

“Where?”

“At Kutaradja.”

“Who told you that?”

“Never mind who told me. You were there yesterday when I was there. It was unwise of Vandershon to allow that to happen.” The Colonel spoke quietly, but there was something in his voice Ginger did not like.

“He had no say in the matter,” asserted Biggles. “It’s a public airport. He’d no reason to order me off.”

The Colonel got up. “I’m sorry my trip has been a failure, but no harm has been done. If you should change your mind let me know.”

Said the Count, softly, as they turned away: “But don’t be too long about it, deah man.”

Biggles sat still, watching the two men as they entered the restaurant, evidently for a meal.

Bertie strolled along and sat at an unoccupied table within speaking distance of Biggles. He said that Algy had obtained several photographs from different angles behind the palms. He had taken the spool into the town to get it developed. He hoped to get it done right away.

"Good work," complimented Biggles. "If the photos are any good I'll send prints home to the Air Commodore by air-mail. He may be able to get this Colonel chap identified. I'm going to push along to Singapore. You can do a useful job while I'm away. Get in the Otter, take her up to the ceiling and shadow the Dakota when it leaves here. It may lead you to the island where it lives. If you don't go all the way with it the track should give you a line on it, which comes to the same thing. Mitsubu will fly a compass course if he's going home. Keep well clear. Don't be seen. On the way back here you might look in at Kutaradja to see if Vandershon's all right. I'm afraid he's in wrong with the Colonel for what he did yesterday. Warn him to be extra careful what he says and does. I'd be very upset if anything happened to him as a result of what he did for me."

"I get it," said Bertie.

"What about me?" asked Ginger.

"You'll have to wait here for Algy to come back, to tell him what's cooking, or with everyone gone he'll be in a flap wondering what's happened. Keep out of dark corners. Remember what they did to Tidore."

"I'm not likely to forget that," promised Ginger.

"Then let's get on with it," concluded Biggles.

CHAPTER VIII

BERTIE HAS SOME FUN

THE short tropical twilight was fast dimming the landscape when Biggles returned from Singapore to find Algy and Ginger waiting for him. Bertie, they reported, had not yet returned, a piece of information that brought a frown to his forehead.

"How did you get on?" Ginger asked him.

"All right. I did what I went to do, thanks to a most helpful secretary in the government building. How about you?"

"No trouble at all, although I'm pretty certain I'm being watched by a shifty-eyed type who's never far away. I don't see how we can go on here without the enemy realizing we're all in the same party."

Biggles agreed. "I imagine we should be faced with the same difficulty on any airfield within reach of the Nicobars so there's nothing we can do about it. We're bound to talk, and if the place is stiff with spies they'll see us wherever we go. How about the photos, Algy?"

Algy produced them. Biggles pronounced them excellent—better than he had expected. Two in particular showed the Colonel clearly, full face and profile.

"I'll air-mail these to the chief right away," said Biggles. "If the Colonel is wanted for anything, either in England or America—which wouldn't surprise me—it could save us a heap of trouble."

"You think he might be a professional crook, with a police record?"

"I wouldn't go as far as that. But it isn't often that a man of the Colonel's age and stamp goes suddenly off the rails. It's more likely he was caught out in something discreditable, at some time or other, and having a black mark put up against him turned into a rogue. In that case there should be a file about him somewhere. It wouldn't surprise me if what he's doing is all part of a scheme for keeping out of sight. For that the Nicobars would be as good as anywhere. But what on earth is Bertie doing? He should have been back before now. You might order a pot of tea in the restaurant. I'll join you there as soon as I've mailed these snapshots to the chief with a covering note."

When he rejoined them twenty minutes later there was still no sign of Bertie.

“I didn’t have to post those photos after all,” he announced. “I happened to run into Jack Elton of B.O.A.C. He’s rushing on home with a V.I.P. and he said he’d deliver ’em. The Air Commodore should have them inside forty-eight hours. But what the deuce can Bertie be doing? I’m getting worried. Something must have gone wrong. He couldn’t have been in the air all this time without refuelling.”

“He may have dropped in at Kutaradja, as you suggested, and stayed on there, nattering with Vandershon,” offered Ginger.

“I can’t think he’d stay out after dark from choice,” muttered Biggles. “If he busts the Otter duffing a night landing I shall have something to say about it. It’s our trump card. I hope he’s up to no nonsense. You know the outrageous risks he takes when the mood’s on him. I suppose I shouldn’t have let him go off on his own.”

It was as well for Biggles’ peace of mind that he didn’t know the answers to his questions as, having pointed out that there was nothing they could do, he drank his half-cold tea and smoked a cigarette.

Actually, Bertie had started the afternoon in good form. What had happened was this.

From a high altitude he had picked up the Dakota heading up the Malacca Strait. Keeping well away, and putting himself between it and the westering sun, he settled down to follow. For some time there was a doubt about its probable destination, for a course either for Kutaradja or the Nicobars would, in the early stages, have been practically the same. But when the Dakota edged towards the northern tip of Sumatra he felt sure that its first objective, at all events, was going to be Kutaradja. When this supposition turned out to be correct he found himself in a quandary.

In the first place, of course, remembering Biggles’ anxiety for Vandershon following the Colonel’s veiled threat, he was concerned for the Dutchman’s safety. Secondly, there was the question of how long the Dakota would remain on the ground. If it stayed there for any length of time, and he remained in the air waiting for it, he would not have enough petrol left to track it to its base in the Nicobars if that was its destination.

The thought that Vandershon might be in trouble decided him. There was only one way of settling that. He went down, landed, taxied to the control building, switched off and got out. Telling some of the servicing staff who were standing there to top up his tanks, he made his way to the Traffic Manager’s office, knocked smartly and entered.

There were three men in the room: the Colonel, the Count, and, seated at his desk and looking rather pale, the man he assumed to be Vandershon. It

was clear that he had interrupted a private conversation, for they broke off, looking at him enquiringly, and as far as the Colonel was concerned, with disfavour.

"What cheer," greeted Bertie, screwing his monocle in his eye the better to survey the little group. "Sort of warmish, what?"

There was a brief silence. Then the Colonel said, irritably: "What do you want?"

Bertie grinned foolishly. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Just pottering, you know, just pottering. Seeing the world, and all that sort of rot. Do you mind?"

"We're busy," snapped the Colonel.

"That's all right," returned Bertie cheerfully. "Go right ahead. Don't mind me."

"We do mind you," said the Colonel harshly. "Are you looking for something?"

"No. Yes. By jove I—That reminds me. If you fellers happen to live here you might help me to find some."

"Some what?"

"Sharks' teeth."

"*Sharks' teeth.*"

"Yes. You know. The things they bite with."

The Colonel and the Count exchanged glances. Said the Colonel, speaking very distinctly: "We have no sharks' teeth."

"Too bad," murmured Bertie, dropping into a chair. "I don't want the beastly things for myself, you know. After all, what would a feller do with sharks' teeth? A girl friend of mine fancies some for a necklace, or some other piece of nonsense. You won't believe this, but I once knew a feller who collected——"

"We don't want to know what he collected," broke in the Count, coldly.

"I was told I might find some on a place called the Nicotine Islands—no, half a mo'—the Nickerbocker Islands."

"Find *what*," rasped the Colonel, whose patience was obviously running short.

"Sharks' teeth, of course."

The Colonel swallowed hard, and even Vandershon smiled.

"Nuts," breathed the Count.

"No—no, not nuts. You can buy those at home—all sorts of nuts," explained Bertie. "It's some jolly old sharks' teeth I'm after. Queer taste, I know, but——"

At this juncture the door opened and two Dutch pilots came in.

The Colonel rose. "Come on," he said, to the Count. Then to Vandershon, "What's the answer, yes or no?"

"No."

"Have it your way." The Colonel, followed by the Count, went out.

"Rude fellers," opined Bertie. He took a pace nearer to Vandershon, and, very deliberately, winked. "Don't worry," he said softly. "Bigglesworth is keeping an eye on things. So long."

Leaving the manager staring Bertie went out. He waited for the Dakota to take off, watched it take up a course north-west, and then, in the Otter, took off and headed west. But this course he held only until he was well in the eye of the fast-sinking sun. Not until he was satisfied that those in the Dakota would not be able to see him in the glare did he turn to follow it.

Both machines were now flying towards the Nicobars, although as the Archipelago covers a considerable area from north to south this was not yet enough to indicate the actual island for which the Dakota was bound. It was the best part of an hour before, by checking its course with the map, Bertie could get an idea of it. But still he held on to make quite sure.

In this, he was presently to realize, he went too far. He also suspected that in spite of his efforts to remain unobserved he had been seen. This was brought to his notice in a way as unexpected as it was startling. The Dakota had turned sharply and was side-slipping steeply towards one of the several small islands that had crept up over the horizon a few minutes earlier. This told Bertie all he wanted to know, and after a good look at its general shape, in order to be able to recognize it again, he began to turn away with the intention of retiring when a shadow flashing across him caused him to look up sharply; for he knew that such a shadow could only be cast by another aircraft passing between him and the sun, and the Dakota was now far below him.

His war-trained eyes picked up the machine instantly, and he identified it as a Nakajima single-seat Japanese fighter. It was coming straight towards him in a manner that told him it could only mean business. And even though the Jap was a war-time model he knew that in the matter of performance he hadn't a hope of escape if an attack was intended.

He could think of no other reason why it should be there. Whether it was there as a normal precaution, or whether the Dakota, having seen him, had called it up by radio, was of no importance. It was there: and since to wait for it to reveal its purpose might be fatal he lost no time in taking the only course open to him. Putting the Otter in a slow turn, he, too, began side-slipping towards the island on which the Dakota was now landing, the only one on which he could expect to find room to get down. He could, of course, have landed on the sea, but not knowing what the surface was like he did not feel inclined to risk it. It looked smooth enough; but for all he knew there might be a heavy swell. In any case, even if he did get down on the water he would offer himself as a sitting target should the fighter really mean business. In a word, the island seemed the lesser risk.

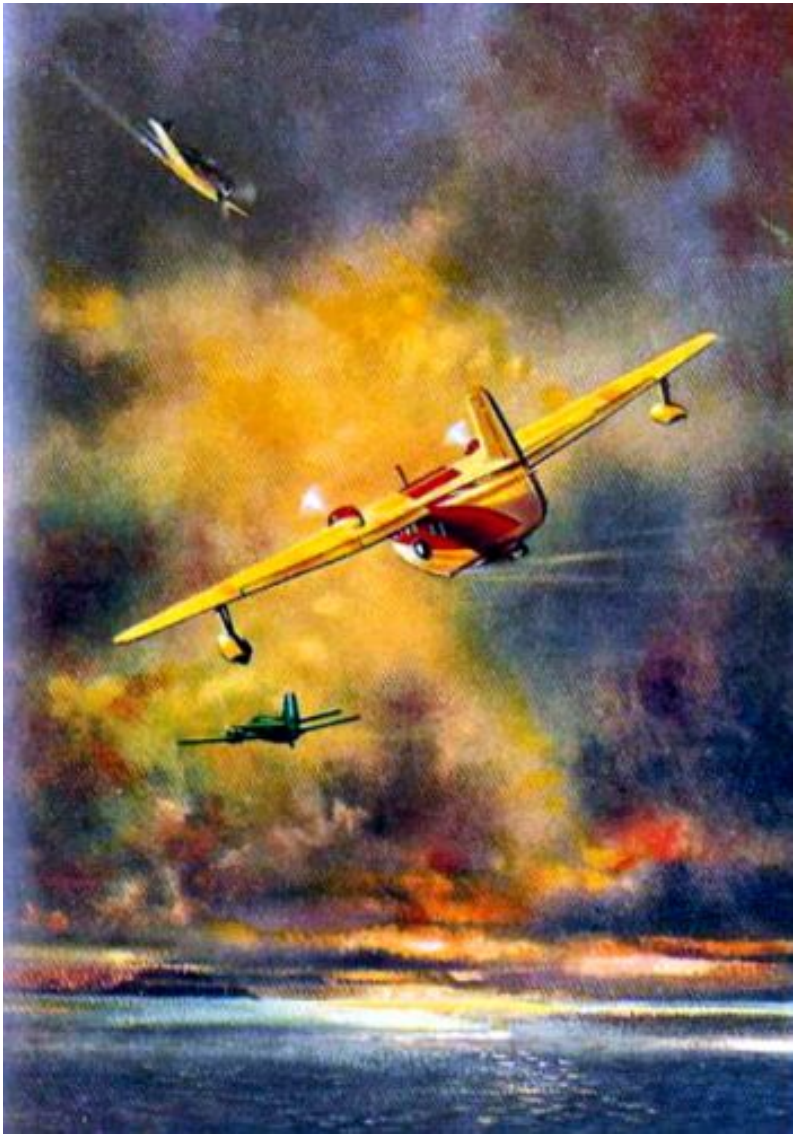
As he lost height his eyes were busy surveying the ground, particularly the coastline. Not that there was much of it, for the island, he judged, was less than two miles long by half a mile wide at the broadest point. He noticed a yacht moored by a rock shelf in a snug little cove. A Chinese junk, under sail, the only other vessel in sight, was beating up slowly towards the same spot. In his reflector he could see the Nakajima following him down, as a dog might bring home a stray sheep. That alone made it clear that its presence there was not a matter of chance.

With a faint smile on his face Bertie lowered his wheels, landed, and taxied on to where the Dakota had come to a stop, with the Colonel, the Count and the pilot, standing beside it. He switched off, jumped down, and adjusting his eyeglass walked up to them. “What ho again,” he greeted them brightly. “Where the deuce are we? I mean to say, what’s the name of this jolly little island?”

The Colonel’s face was expressionless, “Do you mean—you don’t know?”

Bertie feigned astonishment. “How would I know? With the whole bally sea absolutely littered with islands how would anyone know? There are too many islands if you asked me.”

“I didn’t ask you,” said the Colonel, shortly. “Have you been following us?”



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“The Jap fighter was coming straight towards Bertie in a manner that meant business”

“Rather.”

“What’s the idea?”

“To make sure of getting to Penang. My navigation gets a bit cock-eye at times. Never was any good at figures.”

“What are you yammering about—Penang.”

"Well, that's where you said you were going so I thought you could give me a lead."

"I didn't say anything about Penang!"

Bertie looked puzzled. "Didn't you? Now what could have given me that idea? I must be going queer in the topknot."

"Going?" sneered the Count. "You've gone."

"But good lor'! If we aren't at Penang where are we?"

The Count tilted back his panama and lit a cigar. "You're on one of the South Sea islands and this is a private aerodrome, deah man."

Bertie affected embarrassment. "Oh I say! I am most awfully sorry, and all that. But how was I to know? But now I'm here, would you mind most awfully if I had a look round for some?"

"Some what?" barked the Colonel.

"Sharks' teeth—what else?"

The Colonel spoke slowly, with an awful patience. "The only teeth you'll find here, my dumb friend, are the sort that bite."

Bertie laughed. "Jolly good. I must remember that one." He turned to the pilot of the Nakajima, a Japanese, who, having landed, now joined the party. "Hello, laddie. Where have you suddenly popped up from? Are you by any chance on your way to Penang?"

The man stared at him, then at the Colonel, but said nothing.

From a low building on the edge of the airstrip, topped by a wireless aerial, now appeared another man. In his hand he carried a slip of paper, and from the urgency with which he advanced it was clear that he was the bearer of a message. Feeling that it might concern him, or the Otter, Bertie decided it was time to go.

"I'm sorry to have been such a beastly nuisance, chaps. If you'll give me a rough idea of the direction of Penang I'll toddle along."

The Count pointed to the west, where lay eight hundred miles of Indian Ocean without a landfall. "That's the nearest way, deah man."

"Thanks a lot." Bertie pointed vaguely to the north. "Funny. I thought the bally place was somewhere in that direction. Not that it really matters. Bound to hit land somewhere, eh? One place is as good as another. That's what I always say, so why worry. Ah well. Thanks a lot. I'll press on." He took a pace or two towards the Otter, then looked back—really to see how near was the messenger. "If you hear of any you might let me know," he called.

"Any what?" snarled the Colonel.

"Sharks' teeth."

The Colonel appeared to choke.

Without quickening his pace Bertie went on to the Otter. As he climbed into his seat he could see the messenger running, waving the paper, so realizing that the sooner he was in the air the better, he started up, turned his tail to the group watching him, smothering them with a cloud of dust, and took off.

Looking down as he swung round towards the west he laughed at a scene of confusion which confirmed his impression and told him he was away just in time. The Colonel was brandishing his arms, and both pilots were running towards their machines. This did not alarm him, for he had a good start, and with the sun already dropping into the sea, like an enormous red bubble, it would, he knew, be dark in two or three minutes. Keeping the aircraft low he raced on, on full throttle.

He did not hold his westerly course for long, knowing perfectly well what lay in that direction. In giving it to him the Count had, he knew, hoped to dispose of him for good. As soon as darkness began to take possession of the ocean he swung round to the south-east and was soon on a course for Kuala Lumpur, laughing from time to time at the success of his ridiculous bluff.

Declining to call at Kutaradja for fear his arrival there should be reported to the enemy he carried on down the Malacca Strait and, on his reserve tank, reached home to find the others in a state of acute anxiety.

"What the deuce have you been doing?" demanded Biggles crisply. "You've had us all in a flap."

"I nearly had myself in a bit of a flap, old boy, if it comes to that," answered Bertie. "How about some tuck? I'm distinctly peckish."

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Fasten your safety belts, chaps. I've been to the island."

"What island?"

"There's only one island that matters at the moment, old warrior. The Colonel's island. What other?"

Biggles blinked. "Do you mean you—landed on it?"

"Absolutely. Nearly scared myself rigid, too, doing it. The Colonel's flat patch looks anything but flat. A really natty spot of camouflage."

"What reason did you give for landing?"

"I said I was collecting sharks' teeth. They thought I was nuts, completely crackers."

"I'm not sure they weren't right," rejoined Biggles, slowly.

"They believed me. Witness the fact that they let me fly away, having given me a course due *west* for Penang."

"By thunder! They must have taken you for a fool."

"That, laddie, is just what they did take me for, I'm glad to say. I didn't really intend to land but I was persuaded to do so by a Nakajima fighter which apparently keeps watch for stray birds over the Colonel's roosting place."

"Did you get a good look at the place?"

"Too true. The whole works."

"Wonderful. Let's have some fodder. While we're eating you can tell us all about it."

Before the meal was over Bertie had them all in stitches with the story of his fantastic quest for sharks' teeth. Later in a more serious mood, he narrated in detail the result of his reconnaissance, for while his visit to the island had been brief his eyes had made the most of their opportunity.

CHAPTER IX

BIGGLES GETS TOUGH

BERTIE, over coffee, described the island; how at one end for three quarters of its length it was low and flat, not much above sea level, with the other end rising to some rough, jungle-covered hills, a few hundred feet high at the highest point. He said he thought the whole place must have been under jungle in the not very distant past, and the Japs had cleared only enough to make a landing strip. What herbage had grown since the war was brown, dead, as if it had been sprayed with weed-killer. That was what it looked like. The rough surface appeared in places to have been treated with colouring matter to make it look uneven from the air.

"The job has been done by someone who knows all the tricks of camouflage, I can tell you that," Bertie assured his interested listeners. "If I hadn't seen the Dakota go down, showing that the ground was really flat, I wouldn't have taken a chance of bending my undercart even with the Nakajima on my tail. I'd have ditched in the drink first."

He went on to explain that there were several buildings at the end where the ground ran into the jungle and began to rise. These, too, had been camouflaged, and would not be noticed from an altitude. They were obviously relics of the war and seemed to be in pretty bad shape. Two canvas hangars were still standing, and near them a row of wooden hutments with palm-thatched roofs. In fact, from ground level the placed looked what it was, an abandoned war-time temporary airfield.

"Very interesting," said Biggles. "So Tidore told the truth. That Nakajima, possibly unserviceable at the time, may have been left behind when the Japs packed up. The fact that the Colonel employs Jap pilots suggests that they may have been stationed there."

"They look about the right age," said Bertie.

"The Colonel, as a United States officer, could have met them as prisoners of war, and so learned about the dump. Or he may have been the officer detailed to take over the place, and seeing the possibilities, kept quiet about it, intending to cut in on the surplus war materials racket when the fuss died down. That's only surmise, but this association of an American with Jap pilots begins to add up."

"If that junk I saw had come from farther east, from China or Macao, for instance, it could have been bringing in a load of contraband."

"A load of anything," opined Biggles. "With American forces in Formosa there's some funny business going on in the China Sea at the moment. No one would have any legal right to stop and search a Chinese craft on the high seas. Anyway, all this goes to show that the Colonel's island is what Tidore said it was, a general distribution centre. Did you notice any beaches, Bertie?"

"Plenty. There are some jolly little coves. The yacht was in one. I doubt if any are big enough to land the Otter on, though, if that's what you're contemplating."

"What was the sea like when you were there?"

"Calm. But I didn't know that until I was low on my run in. Are you thinking of dropping in for a look round?"

"I have a feeling it may come to that. If we're going to try anything like that it'll have to be soon, if for no other reason that this is the end of May and the south-west monsoon is due to arrive in June. We don't want to be caught out in that. Another thing. If that message you saw delivered when you were on the island was about you it means that the Colonel is now wise about the Otter. Good thing we know about that or we might have slipped up." Biggles laughed. "By thunder! The Colonel, who brags he never makes a mistake, must have been mad when he realized how you'd fooled him with that line of guff about sharks' teeth. You won't get away with that again."

"I hope I shall never have to try, laddie."

"Well, what are we going to do?" put in Ginger. "The longer we sit here the bigger will be the risk of the Colonel having a smack at us first."

Biggles admitted the truth of this, but pointed out that he couldn't go on indefinitely without some sleep. Moreover, he would prefer to await instructions from the Air Commodore before taking matters into his own hands.

"If I know the Air Commodore," said Algy, "all you'll get from him will be a request for further details, and proofs of your allegations. How are you going to get those without going to the island?"

"You can't blame him for being cautious," defended Biggles. "With half the world on the boil anyone who turns the gas up is likely to get his front hair singed. That goes for us, even if we are policemen. Don't forget there are several touchy nationalities tied up in this—Americans, Japanese, Chinese, and what have you."

“So what?” protested Ginger. “We were sent out to investigate a case of piracy. Does it matter who the pirates are?”

“We know now that it wasn’t just a matter of common piracy. The chief wasn’t to know that we’d find ourselves mixed up in gang warfare, with smuggling the main issue. Things have become more complicated than he had any reason to expect. That’s why I think he should know how things stand before we start letting off fireworks.”

“It’ll come to that at the finish,” declared Ginger.

“Come to what?”

“Our going to the island for evidence. You won’t get warrants for arrest as things stand. All you’ll do if you ask for them is start an international rumpus in which the Colonel will quietly remove all traces of his dirty work. You haven’t even got Tidore as a witness.”

Biggles did not answer.

“I’m all for going to the island and having a bash at this Colonel chap before he has a crack at us,” declared Bertie.

“What are you going to bash with?” inquired Biggles, coldly. “We’re not equipped for a commando operation, if that’s what you have in mind.”

“Too true . . . too true,” murmured Bertie. “Pity. I was thinking that if we burnt their planes and scuppered their yacht we could keep the blighters marooned until orders came through from the chief. The weather’s just right for the job. No use waiting for the bally monsoon to blow along—if you see what I mean.”

“Yes, I see what you mean,” returned Biggles, with gentle sarcasm. “I also see that if we step off with the wrong foot at this stage we’re likely to start something that’ll take a bit of stopping. I’d like to think a little more about this before biting off more than I can chew. The Colonel must have a lot of men at his headquarters doing one job or another, to say nothing of the crews of that junk, and the yacht.”

At this point of the discussion two young men came in and sat at the next table.

Said Bertie: “Those are the two Dutch lads who blew into Vandershon’s office this afternoon when we were having our pow-wow about sharks’ teeth.”

The Dutch pilots must have recognized him, for one of them called over; “Have you been back to Kutaradja?”

“No,” answered Bertie.

“Then you won’t have heard about Vandershon.”

There was a brief, strained silence. Then Bertie said: “No. What about him.”

“Someone threw a knife at him as he was going off duty.”

“What! Do you mean—he’s dead?”

“No. But he’s in a pretty bad way. They’ve taken him to hospital. Who would do a thing like that to a decent chap like Van. He’s never hurt anybody.”

Biggles had turned pale. His lips came together in a straight line. “The swine!” he breathed. “The murdering hounds! I’ll get those devils if it’s the last thing I do.”

The Dutchmen ordered their meal.

Algy looked at Biggles. “Well, there you are,” he muttered. “They’ll be throwing knives at us, presently, if we don’t do something.”

“I think you’re right,” answered Biggles, in a brittle voice. “I told Vandershon to watch that clerk of his. If he didn’t do this himself he’ll know who did.”

“And I told Vandershon not to worry; we were keeping an eye on things,” said Bertie, in a melancholy voice.

Biggles made up his mind suddenly. “Okay,” he said, through his teeth. “If that’s how they want it that’s how they can have it. Let’s get nearer to ’em. We’re too far away here. We’ll go over to Kutaradja in the Otter.”

“That’s more like Biggles talking,” said Bertie approvingly. “It just needed that spur in his ribs to make him kick.”

“Keep clear of my hoofs, because I’m liable to kick hard,” returned Biggles grimly. “If you’ll do the aviating I’ll snatch all the sleep I need on the way.”

“That clerk will report our arrival on the radio,” warned Ginger.

“He will—if he gets the chance,” retorted Biggles. “Let’s be moving.”

In half an hour, under a cloudless, moonlit sky, the Otter was cruising up the Malacca Strait with Biggles stretched out on the floor of the cabin. Algy and Bertie were at the controls, while Ginger sat at the radio questing the air for signals in case news of their departure should be broadcast. During the four and a half hour flight, however, he picked up nothing of interest. As ordered, he saw to it that Biggles was awakened when they were within ten minutes of the objective. The time was just after eleven.

Algy and Bertie knew what they were to do, for this had been planned at the start. The machine was to glide in and touch down clear of the lights of

the airport buildings, drop Biggles and Ginger, and give them a few minutes before taxi-ing to the refuelling station in the ordinary way.

Just what Biggles intended to do, apart from the necessity of topping up the tank before proceeding to the island, Ginger did not know. He suspected that Biggles himself did not know. It would probably depend on who and what they found when they landed at the airport. The somewhat unorthodox landing was to give them a chance to check who was on duty, and if possible prevent their arrival from being put out over the air; for, should that happen, their danger, in being so near the enemy's headquarters, would certainly be increased. To prevent any possible interference with the aircraft it was not to be left unattended for a moment.

With Vandershon no longer in charge there was also a risk of trouble with the authorities, who might demand an explanation of a certain infringement of international regulations which Biggles purposed putting into practice. In a word, he had told Algy not to signal their approach or ask for the customary permission to land. They could manage without landing lights. He didn't like doing this, for, as he said, they of all people should observe regulations strictly; but, as he pointed out, the circumstances were exceptional. To tell the radio operator who they were before they landed might render useless the precautions they were taking. The Colonel might know they were here even before they were on the ground. If the breach of regulations were questioned the blame was to be put on faulty radio equipment. The circumstances would justify the deception should it arise, Biggles contended.

The plan worked without a hitch. Except for the beacon the airfield was in darkness, sufficient proof that there was no other air traffic in the area at that moment. Algy switched off some distance away and glided in to a perfect landing with hardly a sound. There were no machines on the tarmac. Biggles and Ginger stepped down, made their way to the shadows cast by the hangars and walked quickly towards the control building. As they hoped, and as might have been expected at such an hour, there was not a soul about.

Some maintenance men who were lolling in the hall, gossiping, looked round in astonishment when Biggles wafted in. "Get my tanks filled," ordered Biggles curtly, and went on to the Traffic Manager's office. He knocked, and without waiting for a reply, entered.

There were two men in the room. Sitting in Vandershon's chair was the Indonesian duty clerk of whom Biggles had reason to be suspicious. Standing talking to him was the radio operator, also a dark-skinned man, who had brought the signal to Vandershon when Biggles had had his conversation with him on the tarmac.

Both men looked startled when Biggles walked in, the clerk more so than the other. This was to some extent understandable as, not having heard a machine land, they could hardly have been expecting visitors.

Said the radio operator frowning, "Have you just landed?"

"I have."

"You made no signal to say that you were coming in!"

"Apparently my radio is out of order."

The duty clerk reached for a slip of paper with studied nonchalance. "This is the message I wanted you to send," he told his companion, casually. He began to write.

"You're wasting your time," said Biggles, curtly.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You're not sending that signal."

"I'm in charge here."

Biggles took a swift step forward, snatched up the message and read it. "Just as I thought," he said coldly. He glanced at the radio man. "Don't go away. I hear Mr. Vandershon has met with an accident."

"Yes. Somebody stabbed him."

"Who did it?"

The radio operator looked horrified. "How would I know? I wish I did know the name of the villain who would do a thing like that."

Biggles turned to the clerk. Advancing slowly he said: "Here's a man who knows who did it."

The clerk, alarmed perhaps by Biggles' expression, sprang up, knocking over his chair. "Keep away from me," he cried shrilly.

Biggles continued to advance. "Who did it?" he rasped.

"It wasn't me—it wasn't me."

"How much did they pay you to do it?"

The man's hand flew to his belt. A knife appeared in his hand. But Biggles was first with his gun. He poked it into the man's stomach. "Drop that knife, you rat," he said, with iron in his voice.

The knife clattered on the floor.

Biggles' gun jabbed again. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me."

"No!" The man's voice rose nearly to a scream. "If you kill me they'll get you."

"If they do you'll know nothing about it," grated Biggles, smiling mirthlessly. "Confess you did it or I'll fill you as full of holes as I have shots in this gun." Biggles looked as if he really meant it.

"I had orders to do it. It would have been death to disobey," cried the man, in a voice near to hysteria.

Biggles looked at the radio operator. "You heard that!" He pointed to the telephone. "Call the police and tell them that the man who stabbed Mr. Vandershon is here."

The man moved to the instrument. But before he could pick it up the door opened and Bertie came in, a white man with him.

"Who's this?" Biggles asked Bertie, clearly not too pleased at the interruption.

"Mr. Jurgens, Vandershon's half-section," explained Bertie. "He was just coming on duty when I met him outside."

"Are you a friend of Vandershon, Mr. Jurgens?" asked Biggles.

"Yes. We work together for long time."

"You know what has happened to him?"

"But of course. I have been to see him in hospital. Zat is why I am late."

"How is he?"

Jurgens shook his head sadly. "He vos very ill."

"Would you like to know the man who knifed him?"

"Very much."

Biggles pointed to the clerk. "There he is. He has just confessed. The radio operator will bear witness."

Jurgens looked bewildered, as he had reason to be. "But I do not understand! Why should he do this thing?"

"He did it on the orders of his real master, the biggest crook, smuggler and murderer in South-East Asia. I was about to send for the police when you arrived."

Jurgens still looked puzzled. "And who are you? What is your business here?"

"I'm a police officer from London. This attempt to kill Vandershon is not really my affair, but I liked him because he refused to take orders from a parcel of criminals. That's why they tried to kill him. He knew that such an attempt might be made. I was in Kuala Lumpur when I heard about it and

flew straight over. Now, if you take my advice you'll call the police. After that, carry a gun and keep out of dark lanes. It won't be for long. I have other work to do and must move on."

"I will call the police certainly," said Jurgens, moving towards the telephone.

"There's one thing I'd like you to do for me," went on Biggles. "See that no radio signals are sent out reporting my arrival here."

"If you wish it." Jurgens looked at the radio operator. "You hear that?"

"Yes," acknowledged the man.

"If the police here want to know more about me, and what I'm doing here, tell them to call my chief, Air Commodore Raymond, at Scotland Yard, London. I may be back here shortly."

"I understand."

"Good. Then we'll get along. Good night, Mr. Jurgens—and from now on mind how you go."

Biggles, Bertie and Ginger with him, walked back to the Otter.

"Where next?" asked Ginger.

"The island. Having made a start we might as well finish the job while we're at it, for when the Colonel hears what has happened here the hive will start buzzing. There's not a breath of wind so the sea should be as flat as a puddle."

Biggles took off, set a course for the island, and climbed steadily to ten thousand feet. "If they're not to hear us coming we shall need a long glide in," he explained.

The Otter roared on over the open ocean. Overhead a full moon and a million stars gleamed, unmindful of the affairs of men.

CHAPTER X

NATURE TAKES A HAND

BERTIE took the Otter to its objective, completing the journey as silently as it is possible for an aeroplane to fly. That is to say, having glided the last few miles he finished by cutting the ignition and made his final approach at little more than stalling speed, touching down not at the flat end, but off the hilly northern end, at the greatest distance from the actual landing strip. The absence of surf round a rocky islet, as they passed low over it, indicated calm water, as indeed it turned out to be.

As the keel kissed the water—its wheels raised, of course—the ripples gleamed like blue fire with the phosphorescence for which certain areas of the Indian Ocean are famous, although the phenomenon can, on occasion, occur anywhere. As the aircraft surged to a halt some two hundred yards or so from the shore, Ginger could see the fiery trails of fish as they darted through the water. Having seen this sort if thing before, however, he did not comment on it.

"Nice work, Bertie," complimented Biggles. "We'll sit here for a bit to see which way the breeze or the tide takes us. At the same time we'll watch the shore for signs of anyone moving. If we were seen or heard coming in someone will soon be along to investigate."

Ten minutes passed. No challenge came. No light showed. The Otter was appreciably nearer the island.

"That's fine," observed Biggles. "It saves us putting out the dinghy."

As the Otter continued slowly to drift in Ginger watched the land, although as yet it was no more than a vague silhouette, revealing no details except on the skyline, where an irregular line of palms, their fronds motionless, stood like watchful sentinels. The moon was bright, and the ripples round the hull danced like disturbed quicksilver. Where tiny wavelets were dying on the sandy beach the phosphorescence made a fascinating pattern of living fire. From time to time the usual strange, spicy aromas, thrown off by aromatic shrubs, were wafted on the almost imperceptible breeze. In short, it was one of those still, perfect tropic nights, when the whole world seems at peace.

The broad plan of the operation had been discussed on the way out. It was to be no more than a close reconnaissance for the purpose of obtaining

as much information as possible. Should it be successful the Otter would return to its base there to await instructions from the Air Commodore. That he would request further particulars was almost certain. Biggles would, he hoped, be in a position to provide them.

Ginger saw a shadow detach itself from the island nearer the south end, and from the shape of its huge lateen sails, of which two were being raised, recognized it for what it was. He touched Biggles on the arm and pointed.

"A dhow," murmured Biggles. "Heading west—with a load of contraband on board, I'd bet. That must have been lying in close when Bertie was here, but being dark in colour he probably wouldn't see it."

They watched the dhow, one if the oldest types of deep sea craft in the world, moving slowly across the face of the moonlit waters.

"Anxious to get away before the monsoon comes along, no doubt," said Biggles. "Get out of these waters, anyway, which are famous, or infamous, for a particularly nasty blow locally known as a sumatran." He thought for a minute and went on. "This business begins to take shape. Junks bring stuff from farther east, opium mostly, I imagine. Dhows from the Indian side, or maybe from the Middle East, call here and collect it for general distribution. The game has been going on for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Now renegade whites like the Colonel have barged in to make easy fortunes, regardless of the mischief they do and the lives they wreck with their infernal drugs. But we're close enough in to be doing something."

The Otter had in fact drifted into an attractive little cove, and was now no more than a cable's length from the sandy beach.

"I'll swim ashore with a line and haul her in," offered Ginger.

Biggles hesitated, looking hard at the water.

"What are you looking for?" asked Ginger.

"Crocodiles. There's a general idea that crocodiles live only in rivers, but it's wrong. Crocodiles hang about nearly all the islands in this part of the world. But I think in shallow water you should be safe."

Ginger took a line and went overboard. He hadn't far to swim. Touching bottom almost at once he waded ashore through a sea of blue fire and pulled the aircraft into shallow water where, under Biggles' instructions, it was turned with its bows pointing to the open sea ready for a quick take-off should it be necessary. The anchor was dropped to hold it in that position—to the indignant chattering of a number of monkeys that had come to the beach for their evening meal of crabs and limpets.

Biggles considered the close-growing shrubs, mostly bamboos, with an occasional casuarina tree, that backed the beach. "It'd be a job to get through

that stuff in the dark," he opined. "We'd better stick to the beach, for as far as it will take us, anyway. Bertie, as you know more about the lay-out of the place than we do, you'd better lead. How far are we from the cove where you saw the yacht?"

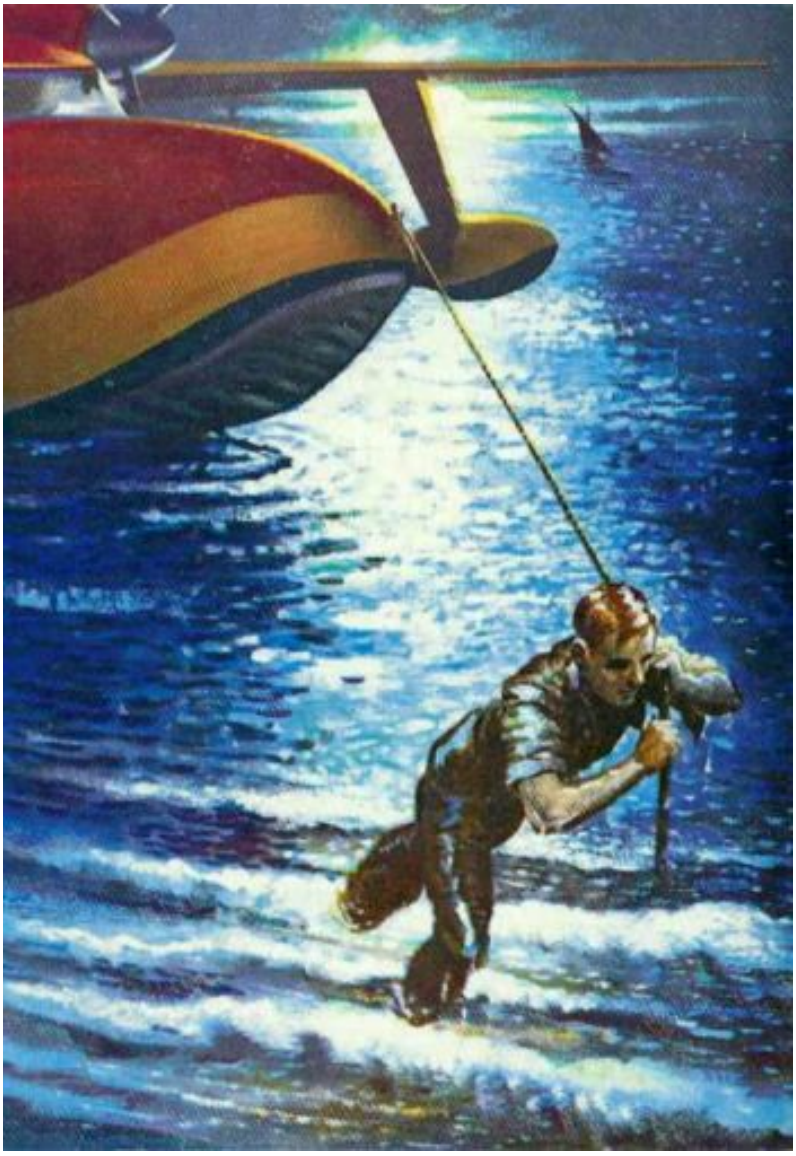
"Roughly three-quarters of a mile, I'd say."

"Okay. Algy, you'd better stay with the machine to cover our retreat in case we come back in a hurry. If we're not back here by half an hour before sunrise you'll know something has gone wrong. You obviously won't be able to stay here in daylight, so in that case you'd better go back to Kutaradja, or perhaps to one of the other islands, returning at your discretion to look for us, and perhaps pick us up. But we shall get back in an hour or so if we can. That's my intention, anyhow."

As Biggles finished speaking a little wave, larger than the rest, splashed on the beach in a cloud of glittering gems. He looked at it. He looked at the Otter. It was rocking slightly, uneasily. He looked at the line of palms. Their fronds were stirring gently, rustling. He turned his eyes to the sky. A small solitary white cloud had appeared, very high, and was moving slowly westwards. He looked at the others.

"I have a feeling," he said slowly, "that the skipper of that dhow knew what he was doing in pulling out. He knows these waters better than we do. Everything is telling us that there's something on the way. It's full early for the monsoon, but my common sense tells me to go home while the going's good. If the monsoon did break it could go on for months. We might lose the Otter, and this is no place to be marooned."

"The monsoon comes from the south-west," said Algy. "That cloud is coming from the east."



See here

"Ginger pulled the aircraft into shallow water"

"I know," muttered Biggles uneasily. "I also know from Sailing Directions, which I looked up before we started, that the wind can change direction in a matter of minutes. Look at that!" He pointed to a faint flicker of light that had shown for a moment over the rim of the world in the south-westerly quadrant. "That's lightning!" There was a moment of indecision and he went on: "Maybe we can find out all we want to know in an hour. It's

either now, or it may mean waiting for months. Lead on, Bertie. We'll risk it."

It was, perhaps, a justifiable risk, although before long he was the first to say that he must have been out of his mind. But the indications had so far been slight. He hoped to be away from the aircraft in no more than an hour. And, as he said, if the monsoon did break they might have to wait for months before the operation could be repeated. It was for this reason in particular that he succumbed to the temptation to proceed, although his every instinct was against it. It was a risk, and he took it with his eyes wide open. But it is easy to be wise after the event[1].

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[1] The word monsoon actually means season, and is not to be confused with those storms of extraordinary violence which, although much the same thing in different parts of the world, are variously named cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons. Some monsoons bring fine weather, others bad. In the Indian Ocean the north-east monsoon brings good sailing weather. But when, usually in June, it swings through an angle of ninety degrees to the south-west, and this it can do almost in a matter of minutes, it brings storms of thunder and lightning, wind and rain, of sufficient violence to cause shipping to run for shelter. The lowering skies and heavy rain, with resultant loss of visibility, can last for forty or fifty days before passing the climax.

Leaving Algy standing guard over the machine they set off along the beach towards the low-lying end of the island, where the real objectives lay.

It turned out to be easy going, beach following beach, sometimes deeply indented with rocky headlands intervening: but to use an old saying, what they gained on the swings was lost on the roundabouts, for the winding coastline greatly increased the distance that had to be covered, and it was the best part of half an hour before they came within sight of the cove that sheltered the yacht, with the Chinese junk now moored beside it. There were lights on the junk, and sounds of activity suggested that like the dhow it was making preparations for departure rather than risk being caught on the windward side of the island, even though it had a snug mooring, should the monsoon break.

However, this was not Biggles' objective. As he said, what he wanted to see was the accommodation ashore, and, perhaps a forlorn hope, the merchandise that was being handled. This, if contraband, would provide the

evidence he needed to bring the matter to the notice of the authorities. The fact that he was satisfied in his own mind that the whole set-up was a smuggling organization was not enough. Nor was the Count's disclosure, that gold was being smuggled into India in oyster shells, enough. He wanted proof.

On their left now was a gently sloping bank on the top of which, Bertie said, was the landing ground. On the point of starting up Biggles stopped as if an idea had struck him.

"That yacht might pull out if it started to blow, in which case we should not only lose sight of it but have no means of identifying it if we saw it again anywhere except here. We ought to know its name, and this is an opportunity to get it. It's lying close in, and it should be possible to read the name from that scrub, or the rocks, that come within a few yards of it. I'm not sure, but I fancy it's moored fore and aft to those rocks."

"I'll go down and get her name," offered Ginger.

"Okay. Don't be longer than you can help but take no chances of being seen. We'll wait here."

Ginger set off on what had every appearance of being a minor expedition, for which reason, no doubt, Biggles had raised no objection to him going alone. But as is so often the case when a project looks easy, there were difficulties, and these were the more exasperating because not by any reasonable amount of foresight could they have been anticipated.

The area between the place where the party had stopped and the nearest point to the yacht, a matter of sixty or seventy yards, was filled with rough scrub between outcrops of rock. These rocks, he soon discovered, were larger than he had supposed, and the vegetation that flourished between them was therefore taller than he had reason to believe. The cavities between the rocks were deep enough to cause him some concern for his limbs. For a time, then, he blundered about without making much progress, becoming more and more worried because he knew that Biggles had reason to be impatient. An occasional gust of wind set the palm fronds waving and feathers of surf were appearing round projecting rocks.

In these circumstances he was not a little relieved when a stroke of luck, or what he had reason to think was luck, came his way. He came upon a narrow path leading down into the cove. Telling himself he was a fool for not seeking at the outset what he should have guessed was there, he set off along it at a good pace, for as the scrub on either hand was higher than his head there was no chance of him being seen. The only danger might be someone else using the path; but he guarded against such an encounter by

frequent short pauses to listen. He was now close enough to the junk to hear voices although he did not know what was being said. Not being concerned with them he paid no particular heed.

Well satisfied with the turn events had taken in his favour he pressed on to make up for lost time and was soon on the edge of the sea—not the beach, but a flat shelf of rock with a vertical drop of ten feet or so on one side into the water. He was crossing this, with his eyes on the yacht, which was the nearer of the two vessels, when he stumbled and nearly fell over a bulky object that lay across his path. It felt soft. It also felt alive; at least, he thought it had moved when his foot struck it. Before he had time to look down he knew what it was, for he could feel coils gliding round his legs.

At that dreadful moment, thinking of all snakes as venomous, he gave himself up for lost.

In moments of desperate emergency the human brain is capable of its best efforts. Under the impulse of self-preservation it can act with the speed of light. Thus with Ginger. In a flash he guessed, from the size of the beast and the fact that it had not bitten him instantly, that it was a python, or a snake of the boa type, which kills by constriction.

To kill such a reptile in the dark with a pistol was out of the question. No such thought entered his head. One leg only was held, and what he did was to try to throw himself clear. In this he succeeded after a fashion. Forgetting the sea was so near he lost his balance and fell in, dragging the snake with him.

For a few frightful seconds the two bodies splashed together in the water, Ginger colliding with coils whichever way he turned. Then the snake must have swum away for he found himself clear. In a frenzy he struck out for the rock from which he had fallen, but finding himself confronted by a sheer face he turned and made for the stern of the yacht, which was only a short distance away. Reaching it he clung to the rudder, gasping, his brain whirling, yet wondering vaguely if he had been seen or heard by the men on the junk. He looked round for the snake, but to his unspeakable relief could see no sign of it. It occurred to him that it may have been as startled as he was.

When, after a lapse of some minutes, during which he brought himself more or less under control, nothing had happened, he remembered his mission. He swam on his back a little way, looked up, and in the clear moonlight was able to read the name of the yacht. It was *Floridia*. That being all he wanted to know he swam to the nearest rocks, pulled himself up, and backing a little way into the scrub squatted while he recovered his

breath and his composure; for under the reaction of the shock he was trembling in every limb. His opinion of tropic isles at that moment was not very high.

Where was the path? He had only a vague idea. He decided that he would have to find it, and take it, snake or no snake, for to push a passage through the scrub would take much too long. As it was, Biggles would be fuming at the delay, and with good reason. The surf was beginning to murmur on the beaches. The palms were beginning to brandish their fronds in gusts of wind of increasing strength. More clouds were piling up in the sky, although they now appeared to be stationary. All these were clear signs that weather was brewing.

Voices from the direction in which he believed the path to be brought him to his feet. At first he thought it was the others coming to look for him, but a chatter of foreign language soon warned him that this was not so.

The silhouettes of a line of men, dressed native fashion, with parcels on their heads, appeared against the sky. From the speed at which they walked he knew they must be on the path. This gave him the position of it, but, obviously, while they were on it he could not use it. He could only crouch and watch. They walked quickly, making it plain that their errand was urgent, and he had an uncomfortable feeling he knew why. The wind was freshening, and the lightning, while still beyond the horizon, was brighter. That a storm was on the way was no longer to be doubted.

He saw the men go to some rocks on the edge of the water. From there, using a flimsy bamboo gangway that he had not previously noticed, they went on board the junk. Lights appeared, reflecting on the yacht and the nearby rocks. He noticed some drums of oil there. He could smell oil, and made a mental note that the yacht was oil-burning. The men did not return. From the junk came chanting as if an anchor was being weighed, or a heavy sail hoisted.

Satisfied that it was now safe to use the path Ginger forced a difficult passage towards it, and was nearly there when two more men appeared, sending him diving for cover. They spoke in English, one with an American accent. This one he had never heard before, but he recognized the voice of the Count. They stopped at the gangway.

Said the Count: “Sure you’ve got everything clear?”

“Sure,” was the reply.

“Then get going. You’ve no time to lose if you want to get clear of the islands. I’ll make the arrangements over the other side.”

“When do we aim to leave?”

"Right away."

"It's going to blow."

"It may not be much."

"You'll be flying right into it the way it's coming."

"Mitsubu says he can make it," said the Count. "If I don't get away tonight, and the rains start, I may be stuck here for weeks," he added, almost using Biggles' exact words.

"Okay. See you over there." The unknown man went aboard the yacht.

The Count turned and hurried back the way he had come.

Ginger decided to give him a minute or two to get clear, in case he collided with him returning for some reason.

It was fairly clear from the conversation what was about to happen. The other side, he thought, could only mean Ceylon. The yacht, as well as the junk, was about to set sail. The Count was also leaving at once, presumably by air, since as far as Ginger knew there was no other means of transportation.

A thought struck him. The yacht had not yet cast off, nor had the gangway been withdrawn. It was straining under the rising wind on its two mooring cables. If the cables parted it would drift on the beach or on the rocks. That would prevent it from going anywhere, with the contraband cargo Ginger suspected it had on board. Why let it go? Time was precious, but here, he decided, was an opportunity not to be lost.

He hurried to the cable holding the bows. It was hemp. Out came his knife. He sawed at the rope. It parted. At once the vessel began to swing. Throwing discretion to the winds he scrambled to the stern cable. A minute and his knife was through it. Still no sound came from the yacht to indicate that those on board were aware of their danger. Serves them right for keeping such a rotten watch, was his thought, as he closed his knife and returned it to his pocket.

He waited for no more but set off up the path at the best possible speed for the place where he had left the others. He met them coming to look for him.

"What the deuce have you been up to?" demanded Biggles, with marked asperity. "Can't you see what the weather's doing?"

"Yes and these bally mosquitoes bite like dogs," complained Bertie.

"If you've had nothing worse than mosquitoes to bite you you've nothing to moan about," retorted Ginger, hotly. "I've had an affair with a python. It threw me into the drink. Look at me! I'm wet through."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you one quiet night when we're sitting at home by the fire; it may sound funny then," answered Ginger, in a disgruntled voice.

"For heaven's sake quit arguing," broke in Biggles. "We've no time to waste. After all that did you get the name of the yacht?"

"Yes. It's the *Floridia*. Oil-burning, I think. Flies the American flag."

"Good." Biggles stared out to sea—or rather, at the lightning now flashing incessantly along the western horizon. "I'm afraid we're in for a snorter," he muttered. "We shall have to drop the plan and get back to Algy. He'll be in a flap with this weather coming up. Come on. Did you see those men, Ginger?"

"Of course. I nearly barged into 'em."

"What were they doing?"

"Loading the junk. The Count came down, too, with a man who I think must be the skipper of the yacht. It's going over to Ceylon. The Count is going to fly over and meet it there."

"When?"

"Right away, I gather. That's what I understood from the conversation. But the yacht may not be able to get away."

"Why not?"

"I cut the mooring ropes. If the engineer wasn't ready to start, with the wind on its beam it should drift ashore."

"What was the idea of that?"

"I was just being awkward. The junk was hoisting sail at the time. They may get tangled up."

Reaching the open ground at the top of the bank they stopped and stared down into the cove. But clouds had now covered the moon and it was impossible to see anything clearly. The lightning merely dazzled them. Thunder boomed ominously.

When Biggles spoke again it was clear from his tone of voice that only now for the first time did the thought strike him that they might not be able to take off. "Hark at that sea," he muttered. "Unless we're soon back we're going to lose the Otter. If——" He broke off, as to their ears came the bellow of aero engines.

"That'll be the Count, in the Dakota, taking off," explained Ginger.

A few seconds later it passed low over them, heading westwards. They could not see it, only hear it intermittently between rolls of thunder.

“Mitsubu must be as crazy as we are,” stated Biggles. “If the wind swings round he’ll never get across unless he has a big reserve of petrol. Come on. No more talking.”

They set off at as fast a walk as conditions permitted.

CHAPTER XI

THE SUMATRAN

GREAT masses of cloud now piling up in the sky settled any last lingering light the moon or stars might have given. The intense darkness made anything like fast travel impossible. The wind, still in the north-east, came fitfully, but in gusts of increasing force. The air felt hot, heavy, clammy.

"Let's get out on the airstrip," said Biggles irritably, after they had blundered about in some bushes. "We shan't get anywhere at this rate. We're not likely to meet anyone now." He fought his way clear of the scrub, and reaching open ground broke into a trot.

A minute later they were nearly swept off their feet by a shrieking blast of wind that filled the air with flying debris that brought them to a halt with their hands over their faces to protect their eyes.

"Keep together," shouted Biggles. "If we lose each other in this we'll never get together again." In a lull he went on. "This is it. She's swung right round to the south-west. I must have been raving mad not to start back earlier. But who could have imagined anything like this?"

"What about Algy?" said Ginger, as they moved on again.

"With the sea this wind will blow up, if he stays on the ground all we shall find of the machine will be a heap of splinters and torn fabric," answered Biggles, bitterly. "It's time I glued myself to an office desk at the Yard."

"No use blaming yourself, old boy," consoled Bertie. "These things happen."

"There's Algy now," cried Ginger, as the drone of engines was borne to their ears on the turbulent air. "He's getting out of it."

Biggles listened for a few seconds. "That isn't Algy. That's either the Dakota coming back or another of the Colonel's machines coming in. I'd say it's Mitsubu, having thought better of it when he saw what was in front of him. He'd never have got across in the teeth of this gale."

Lights suddenly outlined the airstrip.

"He must have radioed for lights to see to get in," said Ginger.

They hurried on, buffeted by the wind, only to pull up again as engines roared almost on their heads.

“What’s the fool doing?” cried Biggles, staring up into the darkness. “Don’t say he’s coming in down wind. My gosh! I believe he is. He can’t have realized that the wind has swung right round. Unless he spots it before his wheels are on the ground he’s had it.”

No one answered. As pilots they all knew what was bound to happen if the aircraft tried to get down on the front of a wind travelling at a rate of knots.

“Why doesn’t the fool radio operator tell him!” exclaimed Ginger.

“He may not have realized it, either,” answered Biggles. “There’s going to be a nasty mess here in a minute, if I know anything.”

What followed was the sort of accident which, in similar freak conditions, has happened many times, and will, no doubt, happen again. Experienced pilots have made the same mistake: the mistake of supposing that the wind is blowing from the same quarter as it was five minutes earlier when the aircraft took off. No mistake can be easier to make; none more natural, and usually, fatal—at least, as far as the aircraft is concerned. It is all very well to say a pilot should check the wind direction before coming in. So he should. And after a lapse of time, so most certainly he would. The trap lies in the brief time factor. A pilot takes off into the wind. He makes a circuit and comes in to land; and as it is hard to imagine any great change in the wind direction in so short a time he *assumes* it is still blowing the same way. Should he discover his error in time he may get away with it; but if he does not, unless he has far more room than would be required for a normal landing, a crash, a collision with the first obstacle that gets in his way, is inevitable. There is no way of stopping a machine with its wheels on the ground when it has a wind under its tail. Even air brakes can serve no useful purpose if the aircraft is travelling at the same speed as the wind.

To the watchers, it seemed that Mitsubu, or whoever was flying the Dakota, did not discover his mistake until it was much too late to do anything about it. All held their breath, rigid with horror, as the machine, wheels on the ground, raced on, tail up, without the slightest sign of slackening speed. With the weight of full tanks, as must have been the case for the proposed ocean crossing, it might have run for miles had nothing intervened. All told, the airstrip was less than half a mile long. The Dakota which had had a job to get its wheels on the ground at all, had covered a third of this distance before it touched—and then it merely bounced slightly, to be airborne again for at least a hundred yards before the wheels touched again, to stay down. But still it ran on at a speed which seemed hardly to have diminished at all.

One of three things was now certain to happen. The machine, left alone, would run into the hangars at the far end of the strip. The pilot, discovering his mistake, might open his throttle in the hope of getting off again; or he might try to turn the machine on the ground to avoid head-on collision with what was in front of him. This was the course he took, although it was probably a matter of Hobson's choice and the result would have been the same anyway. Even if he opened up, the pilot could not hope to clear the rising ground in front of him. Lightning, now incessant, revealed the scene plainly.

The spellbound watchers, being pilots, prayed for a miracle. Ginger, dry-lipped, could only be thankful that he was not at the controls of the doomed machine. As the aircraft started to swerve he bit his lip with strain as he waited for the undercarriage to collapse. Whether or not it would have done was a question never answered, for the Nakajima, which had been left outside its hangar, now came into the picture. In an instant it was all over. The Dakota merely touched it with a wing tip, but it was enough. The big machine spun round, cartwheeled, and in a flash was enveloped in flames.

Biggles started to run towards them, but pulled up with a gesture of helplessness. "That's it," he said, in a curiously calm voice. "Neither we nor anyone else can do anything with that so let's push on."

Again they broke into a run.

To Ginger, feeling sick, the whole business was beginning to take on the character of a nightmare. It was not yet over.

Biggles suddenly pulled up, saying: "We shan't get much farther this way so we might as well make for the beach. Great heavens! Look at that." He pointed.

Actually, there was no need for him to point, for what he could see was plain to them all. Not only were the Dakota and the unlucky Nakajima blazing but the airfield itself was on fire. It was natural that the petrol tanks should burst, spilling their contents, and so spread the fire for some distance round the machines. But it was now evident from the radius of the flames that the dry grass was alight. Fanned by the wind the fire was racing before it, and there appeared to be nothing to prevent it from sweeping the entire airstrip, or, for that matter, the whole island.

"Lucky for us it isn't coming this way," remarked Ginger. "What a mess."

"I'm glad they did it, and not us," remarked Biggles, as they began fighting their way through the scrub to the nearest beach.

They reached it at a point still some distance from the place where they had left Algy, and after one look at the sea as the lightning forked and flashed over it Ginger felt his stomach go down like a lift. Great waves were sweeping right up the beaches and pounding the rocks in clouds of spray. It seemed incredible that such a change could occur in a matter of two hours, which was, he estimated, roughly the time they had been away. The Otter must, quite obviously, have been wrecked. Even if by some miracle it had escaped there could be no question of it taking off in such conditions.

Biggles said nothing. There was really nothing he could say. They must all have been thinking the same thoughts, except that Biggles would be blaming himself for the error of judgment that had brought them to this predicament. They hurried on in silence.

Then it started to rain. At first a few big drops splashed down, but very soon the heavens were unloading water at a rate which only tropical monsoons know, and that, fortunately, is something which does not occur in temperate zones. The rain blotted out everything. Visibility became a memory. It no longer existed. The blinding flashes of lightning did more harm than good. When they occurred they merely dazzled, leaving the darkness more intense than before. Thunder boomed, rolled and crashed. What with the thunder and the rain the noise was deafening.

Yelled Bertie above the uproar, trying perhaps to strike a cheerful note: "This little shower should put the fire out."

"It's likely to put us out, too," shouted Biggles.

They groped their way forward, making so little progress that it seemed hardly worth-while moving at all. At least, so thought Ginger. The only thing that kept them going was the urgent necessity of finding out what had happened to Algy. Anything might have happened to him, brooded Ginger. He might have crashed trying to take the machine off. He could have been drowned trying to save it. Knowing what depended on it he would spare no effort to do that.

With water pouring down his body Ginger trudged on. He was not in the least tired. His anxiety for Algy was too acute for physical discomfort to worry him. How they were going to recognize the right beach when they came to it he could not imagine. That could be left to Biggles. He had lost all count of time. He seemed to have been walking for hours. His dominant feeling was one of unreality. Dawn, he thought, could not be far off. He hoped it would soon come. It would be a relief to be able to see what they were doing.

It so happened that the first grey promise of another day came as they were clambering over the rocks of the last little promontory, although none of them realized it until they were on the right side of it, when the murky silhouette of the background told them the truth. There was practically no beach. It was a place of swirling foam as big seas crashed in and raced out again. Miserably, in silence, they skirted the inner fringe, through lacy patterns of sea-foam, behind which the spray-lashed vegetation reeled before the onslaught of the tempest. They watched the surf for wreckage. None was seen.

Not until they reached the far extremity of the little bay did Biggles speak. Then he said, simply: "He's gone." He took out his cigarette case automatically, but finding its contents wet, returned it to his pocket.

"Had he stayed here the machine would have been wrecked, in which case we should see the bits and pieces, old boy," opined Bertie optimistically.

"One would think so," agreed Biggles. "What I'm afraid of is he might have capsized trying to take off, in which case the wreckage wouldn't be here. It might be anywhere. He'd wait as long as he dare, expecting us back at any moment. He was left with a brutal decision to make. I can imagine how he must have felt when he saw the storm worsening. The question is, did he wait too long? After all, if we didn't realize how severe the storm was going to be, why should he? I knew something was coming, but I wasn't expecting anything like this."

"It's no use blaming yourself," asserted Ginger. "You couldn't make allowance for the monsoon coming three weeks before its time. If you made allowances for every possibility we'd never get anywhere."

Biggles nodded. "Well, there's no point in talking about what we might have done. We're in a mess, so we'd better start thinking about how we're going to get out of it."

"We're not the only people on the island in a mess," declared Ginger. "The Dakota's gone. The yacht may be on the beach, and that goes for the junk, too."

"That doesn't help us," returned Biggles, practically, walking to a long slab of rock and seating himself on its dripping surface.

The others joined him. The rain was not so heavy as it had been. The light was improving. For a little while they stared out at the white, storm-tossed waters, each busy with his own thoughts.

Ginger spoke. He may have tried to strike an optimistic note, but his voice lacked conviction. "There is this about it. If Algy did manage to get

off it's only a question of time before he comes back for us."

"He'll know jolly well it won't be any use coming back while the sea is in this state," Bertie pointed out. "Now this disgusting business has started it can go on for weeks."

"It can," agreed Biggles. "But that doesn't necessarily mean that it will. This is exceptionally early for the true monsoon. There's a chance that it may be only a flash in the pan, a sort of advance guard to the real thing. That can happen. Should that be the case this stuff will blow itself out and there could be a fine spell before the monsoon really gets going."

"What about the sea? Would that go down?"

"If the wind drops the sea will probably go down as quickly as it got up. There's nothing we can do about it. We shall just have to wait and see."

"What do we use for food while we're waiting?" inquired Ginger.

"Some people are for ever thinking of their stomachs," sighed Biggles. "Here's something to fill the cavity." He waded a little way into the surf and kicked ashore a floating coconut, the outer covering of which had been washed off, or knocked off by the rocks. Taking out his penknife he punctured the eyes, drank a little of the "milk" and passed it on. "There's your breakfast," he said shortly. "When you've finished we might as well stroll back to the cove to see what's happened there. There's no sense in sitting here just staring at the confounded sea. I keep thinking about that awful business last night. I'd no reason to have any regard for the Count. I know he was a crook, and all that. But even in the war it used to give me a sick feeling to see a machine going up in flames."

"Same here. Absolutely," murmured Bertie. "Bad show."

Ginger cracked the shell of the nut by the simple expedient of hurling it against the rock. As they all gnawed a piece of the kernel Ginger asked: "When Algy comes back how are we going to show him where we are? He may come looking for us even if he doesn't land. With everything soaking wet it'd be a bit of a job to start a fire."

"I think the weather's improving," said Biggles, looking up. "It's getting lighter, anyway, and the rain isn't much more than a drizzle, which is a good sign. A blink of sun will soon dry things up. There's no hurry. I don't think there's the slightest chance of Algy coming back here yet. What's that in the water?" He took a pace or two forward, staring at something in the surf. "Give me a hand, one of you," he rapped out suddenly, and ran on.

They all went and helped him to drag a brown body clear of the water. As they all stood looking down at it Biggles went on sombrely: "A lot of people, unprepared for that storm, must have died last night, apart from

those we know about. This poor chap looks like an Indian, or an Arab. He must have been drowned close to the island to have been washed ashore so quickly. If he wasn't knocked overboard then that dhow we saw must have foundered. We shall soon know. Other things will come ashore."

"What about the junk?" suggested Ginger.

Biggles shook his head. "One would expect that to have a Chinese crew. But let's get along. We shall learn more than by staying here guessing, and by keeping on the move we shall give our togs a chance to dry. Thank goodness it isn't cold. We'll have a look at the cove first."

As they walked along Ginger remarked: "I suppose this island has a name, but if it has we still don't know what it is."

"Maybe there are so many islands in the Indian Ocean that they ran out of names," said Biggles.

Put in Bertie: "It sounds a bit far-fetched but I read somewhere that there are about ten thousand."

"Don't let's bother to count 'em," returned Biggles.

"How about Crook Island?" suggested Ginger.

"That might be as good a name as any," replied Biggles. "These islands always did have a bad name. Keep your eyes on the high-water mark for anything being washed up."

They had not gone far and were rounding a little beach when they came upon more victims of the storm in the bodies of two coloured seamen, one mutilated, presumably by sharks. There were also several small bundles of merchandise sewn in sacking. Saying "I wonder what's in this?" Biggles picked one up and carried it clear. Taking out his knife he cut it open to expose a mass of brown, tarry-looking substance. After a meaning glance at the others he raised it to his nose.

"Opium," he said succinctly. "Well—well. This didn't come from the junk, supposing it got away. A junk would hardly be carrying opium to China. This must have been aboard the dhow. If it was, it looks as if the dhow has had it. No doubt the junk brought it here. The dhow picked it up and was probably on its way to the Middle East. That's the big market. Some of it might have found its way to England. According to Tidore that has been happening. It might be worth making a cache of this little lot. It could be produced as evidence to show the sort of traffic that was going on here. These dead men must have been some of the crew of the dhow. They're either Indians or Arabs. Give me a hand."

The narcotic was soon collected and thrust into a cavity between some rocks, after which the party proceeded on its way.

The sun now broke through the clouds. It had lost nothing of its power. In a few minutes the heat was stifling. Everything steamed, including the clothes of the travellers. Flies, mosquitoes, and innumerable other insects, appeared like magic. Visibility improved rapidly. The wind moderated, but the sea still ran high, as was inevitable after a gale.

"It begins to look as if you were right about the storm being only an advance taste of the real thing, old boy," remarked Bertie.

Biggles said he was now sure of it. He took out his sodden cigarettes and very carefully laid them on a flat slab of rock. He put his matches, with the box, beside them.

"That's an idea," said Ginger. He, too, laid out his matches to dry, as did Bertie.

"They shouldn't take long to dry," said Biggles. "We can collect them on the way back."

"You mean, you'll go back to our own beach?"

"Yes. After we've had a look at the cove to see if the yacht's still there. We'd better go back because that's the first place Algy will make for when he comes over." Biggles spoke carelessly, as if Algy's return was a foregone conclusion, but the others were not deceived. They knew what he was really looking for. The wreckage of the Otter.

Watching the surf, and the high-water mark, keeping close to the fringe of the jungle ready to take cover at any sign of danger, they strode on. Everywhere lay debris cast up by the storm—broken ships' timbers, a battered canoe, trees, and a great deal of smaller stuff. They saw no more bodies.

As they approached the last small headland Biggles went down to the sea and continued on wet sand within reach of the waves. "It would be better not to leave footprints," he said. "Here the water will wash them out as fast as we make them. Someone may come this way. There's no sense in showing that we're here, although as a matter of fact they may know that already."

"How so?" asked Ginger.

"They may suppose the yacht broke her cables under the pressure of the wind; but if they happen to look at the loose ends, and see they were cut, they'll know someone's here. And it won't take them long to work out who it is."

"I didn't think of that," admitted Ginger. "They may be looking for us now."

“I think it’s more than likely,” replied Biggles. “Anyway, we should be wise to reckon on it. If we had any means of getting away it wouldn’t matter so much. But we’re stuck here with them, and the possibility that they may be stuck here too isn’t likely to make things any easier for us. Keep your eyes skinned. We’re getting close.”

With increasing caution they began to make their way over the jungle-covered rocks of the little promontory that formed one arm of the cove wherein the yacht had been moored.

CHAPTER XII

A RECONNAISSANCE AND A BLOW

FROM the ridge of the little headland they looked down into the cove, and most of their questions were immediately answered. The junk had gone, but the yacht was still there, aground on the sandy part of the beach with a list of forty-five degrees. She appeared to be undamaged. A number of men were busy erecting a tackle apparently with the intention of hauling her on to an even keel. A coloured man was in charge of the operation. The Colonel did not appear to be there.

"Do you think they'll be able to refloat her?" asked Ginger, softly.

"Yes. It may take a little time but it shouldn't be difficult, particularly as she went ashore at low water. High tide, with a little help, should see her off. They used to do this sort of thing deliberately in the old days to clean the bottoms of their ships."

"The junk must have got away after all. I wonder how it stood up to the storm."

"All right, probably. Going east it would be running before it, with plenty of sea-room. Might even have run out of it. It would be different for the dhow, heading west or north-west. She'd find herself in the centre of it, with the whole string of islands to clear. It was as black as pitch, remember."

"I don't think they can have realized yet that their cables were cut or they'd surely be looking for who did it."

"There's a chance that the water frayed out the ends. From the stuff lying about, and those oil drums over there on the rocks, this place must be in regular use as a loading and unloading depot. And the refuelling station for the yacht. Ideal for the job, of course, particularly with unlimited supplies available. Well, that seems to be all."

"What's the drill now?" queried Bertie.

Biggles considered the question. "If I was sure Algy had got away I'd do nothing. Just wait. But as we're by no means certain of that it might be a good thing to act as if he wasn't coming back. Otherwise we might be fiddling about here for days, or weeks, and at the end find ourselves in the same position we are in now. We shall have to think about food and fresh water, anyway. Assuming Algy did get away what we shall have to bear in

mind is this: he won't know the Nakajima was burnt out last night. He'll imagine it's still here, on guard, and act accordingly. I mean, I doubt if he'll come over in daylight. If he comes it will more likely be at night. Let's have a look round. As most of the Colonel's staff must be here on this job this should be as good a time as any. Keep your heads down."

They pushed their way up the jungle-covered bank, and reaching the top, taking care not to expose themselves, surveyed the airfield. It was clear at once that the rain had come just in time to save the whole place from being burnt out. At the far end, what had been herbage was now a coal-black waste. On this, close together, were the metal skeletons of the two aircraft that had gone up in flames. Three men were doing something in the wreck of the Dakota, recognizable by its two engines. One of the men was the Colonel. The hangars had been burnt out, but some of the smaller buildings, which stood at right angles to them on the leeward side, had escaped. Among these was the radio room, with its aerial.

"I was hoping the fuel dump would blow up," said Biggles.

"Why didn't it?"

"It could be clear of the airfield, underground. It might be under the concrete apron. There wouldn't be any inflammable stuff on that. When we came here, the most important thing I had in mind was to locate it. What's the Colonel doing? He seems to be scraping about looking for something. The bodies must have been removed some time ago."

"Whatever it is he's looking for he seems to be finding it," observed Bertie. "He seems to be collecting things and putting 'em in a heap."

"He must be trying to salvage something that was in the plane," opined Ginger.

"The only thing that could have survived the heat would be a metal object," said Biggles. "Even that might melt, but it could still be here. Let's get nearer to those buildings. There may be nobody there."

"What are you hoping to find? Anything in particular?"

"Food, for one thing. Crabs and coconuts are not my idea of a diet."

"Absolutely, old boy. How right you are," murmured Bertie.

They began to wind their way through the jungle of scrub and small trees that fringed the airstrip, completely covering the bank that ran down to the beaches, the distance to the hutments being about three hundred yards. Between the trees it was sometimes possible to see the ocean. It had gone down a lot, but the waves were still running high, too high to permit the landing of a marine aircraft. Nor were any of the beaches long enough for a wheel landing. As Biggles remarked, in such conditions they need not look

for Algy. With the Nakajima about, as he would suppose, he would think twice about making a reconnaissance in broad daylight. As he would not be able to pick them up even if he saw them there was no point in it. The Colonel would guess the machine was looking for somebody. Algy knew they were there. That was the important thing. To show himself prematurely would be taking an unnecessary risk. A landing on the actual airstrip was only to be contemplated in case of the most desperate emergency.

By the time they were within striking distance of the nearest hut, an ordinary wooden frame building, they were also considerably nearer the burnt-out aircraft. The Colonel was still scraping about among the ashes. The pile of salvage was larger, but it was still impossible to see what it was. It might have been a heap of coke.

"I fancy I know what the Colonel's after," said Biggles, as he stood watching from well inside the jungle. "There's only one thing that I can think of for which he would go to so much trouble. If that machine was going to Ceylon it wouldn't be going for the fun of it. It would be taking something. Something important, too, since the Count was in charge of it. Naturally, it would be contraband of some sort."

Ginger got it. "You mean—gold."

"That's my guess. It would melt, and running through the airframe finish up with the ashes on the ground."

"That's terrific," declared Bertie. "What an awful time the poor blighter's having, one way and another. You know, chaps, the odd thought strikes me that the storm has hit these stinkers harder than it has hit us. In fact, it has hit 'em harder than we have—if you see what I mean."

"I'm not so sure that you're right there," answered Biggles. "They've had a nasty wallop, although it may not have knocked 'em out, and for that we were mainly responsible, in that their programme for the past forty-eight hours was the direct result of knowing we were on their trail. For instance, we stumped their radio contact at Kutaradja, and they may have relied on him to give them warning of bad weather. When they saw what was coming they tried to rush things; but it was too late, with the result they're in a worse mess than we are. As far as we know they've no aircraft, and thanks to Ginger's brilliant stroke in cutting the yacht adrift, they are, temporarily, at any rate, without surface transport. Let's move on and see what's in these huts."

As they moved on they saw the Colonel supervising the transfer of the heap into two sacks, held by his assistants. This done he strode off in the

direction of the cove, while the two men, with their loads slung over their backs, made for the huts.

"I think you're right about the gold," said Ginger. "At all events, whatever it is they have in those sacks is heavy."

Advancing slowly and with great caution they reached the first hut, a long one, approaching it from the rear. The door faced the airstrip but a window—several windows, in fact—offered a view of the interior. One glance was enough to show that the building was what might have been expected. A workshop, with benches and tools about. Oil drums and jerry-cans were stacked at one end. There was no one there.

"This must have been a busy place in the war when the Japs were here," remarked Biggles. "Let's go on."

Looking down the gap between the workshop and the next hut Biggles paused, contemplating the entrance to an underground room that still bore on the lintel a notice in Japanese.

"Could that be the petrol dump?" questioned Ginger.

"Looks more like an air raid shelter. There's another farther along. Don't forget this was a war-time set-up, and they could expect our boys along to give 'em a taste of their own medicine."

They went on, ducking under a line of washing—native pantaloons, blouses and the like.

From the bedding on the floor the next hut was obviously a dormitory. There was no one in it. Proceeding, the next hut turned out to be a mess-room, with benches and forms. There were kitchen arrangements at one end. Here a short fat Chinaman, stripped to the waist, was stirring what appeared to be a large pot of rice.

Observed Biggles: "From the quantity of food that chap's preparing most of that bunch working on the yacht will be coming back here presently to eat. They couldn't all be members of the crew."

The next hut was the radio room. A man, wearing earphones, was sitting at the instrument reading a magazine with a lurid cover. Between this hut, and the next, the last one, lay a heap of oyster shells. Biggles smiled faintly as he pointed to them. "I'd say those are the shells that Tidore lost and so started the ball rolling. I wonder where the gold that was in them went."

The end hut was divided into two parts, one furnished in the manner of an office and the other as a bed-sitting room. Clearly, it was the Colonel's quarters. Looking through the office window Biggles called attention to two sacks, apparently those which they had seen carried in from the scene of the crash.

"There's one more thing I'd like to locate and that's the petrol store." He pointed. "The most likely place is beside that pump, out in front. I don't think we dare risk walking out into the open to check it. The Colonel or some of his boys are likely to show up at any minute. We know the general set-up of the place, anyway. I fancy the grub store must be that little place tacked on to the end of the kitchen. Where I'd like to get is in the Colonel's office. Some of those papers should make interesting reading."

"You're not thinking of going in there!" cried Ginger, aghast.

"It seems a good opportunity," returned Biggles, calmly. "I doubt if we shall ever have a better one."

"How are you going to get in?"

Biggles tried the window. It was fastened on the inside.

"Bash a hole through the glass," suggested Bertie.

"That won't do. He'd guess why it had been broken. I'd rather not give him reason to suspect that there were strangers about, if he doesn't know it already. I'll slip round and in through the front door, if it isn't locked. I can unfasten the window from the inside and leave that way. That'll be about all we can do here."

"But what about something to eat?" protested Ginger.

"Short of holding up that coolie with a gun, which would start everyone on the island looking for us, there's no way of getting at it that I can see. For the moment it looks like being coconuts. You can't eat dry rice, and to cook it would mean lighting a fire. This is no time to make smoke. Wait a minute. Kick the wall if you see anyone coming." So saying Biggles walked quickly to the front of the hut.

Minutes passed. Ginger and Bertie watched the airfield. No one appeared. Ginger took a quick peep through the window. Biggles was folding some papers and putting them in his pocket. He then walked over to the sacks. The radio started buzzing Morse. Ginger listened, but unable to make sense of the signal decided it must be in code. He returned to Bertie. "I wish he'd buck up," he muttered impatiently. "He's taking an awful risk."

Biggles appeared at the window. He opened it, dropped out and closed it behind him. "Okay," he said. "Look at this!" He held out a small, flat piece of yellow metal. It had rough edges and was studded with cinders. "Gold," he went on. "Tidore's gold, maybe. It was on its way to India in the machine that crashed. No wonder the Colonel was raking the ashes. There are a couple of sackfuls of this stuff inside. But let's get out of this before the crowd comes back. There's nothing more we can do here. I think we've seen the lot."

“Which way?” queried Ginger, after they had pushed a few yards into the jungle.

“We’ll go back to our beach and wait there,” decided Biggles. “It’s as good as anywhere. But first of all I want to collect those cigarettes and matches I laid out to dry.”

Picking their way just inside the fringe of the jungle they hastened in that direction. “I hoped to find some cigarettes in the Colonel’s room, but I couldn’t see any,” Biggles told them. “I think we should be about opposite the place where I left mine,” he added. “Let’s go down.”

They had been walking along the top of the scrub-covered bank below which lay the beaches; but Biggles now changed direction, and going downhill made straight, as near as he could judge, for the rock on which he had left the cigarettes. Actually, he was more anxious to get the matches, in case it became necessary to make a smoke signal to show Algy where they were. As a matter of detail he had a petrol lighter, but this, he had discovered, was out of action, either the result of water getting into it during the rainstorm or through some other fault.

When they were all about thirty or forty yards from the rock, and could see the cigarettes as they had been left except that they had become somewhat scattered by the breeze, Biggles said: “We’ll go back to our beach along the top; it’ll be easier than following the foreshore. You might as well wait here. I’ll collect your matches with mine.”

Ginger and Bertie stopped. Biggles went on down. Ginger watched him, although not with any particular interest, for there appeared to be no danger —no immediate danger, at all events. He saw Biggles reach the rock, examine one or two of the cigarettes, and apparently satisfied with them start putting them in his case. He collected one or two that had been blown off the rock by the breeze, put one in his mouth and lit it.

A movement just beyond him caught Ginger’s eye and jerked him from casual observation to tense attention. A yellow face was rising slowly from the bushes. For a moment it remained. Then it had gone, leaving him wondering if his imagination was playing tricks, so quickly had it happened. It took him a couple of seconds to recover from the shock, and by the end of that time the face had appeared again, nearer to Biggles, who obviously had no idea that he was being stalked.

By now Ginger had grasped the situation and he moved fast. He whipped out his pistol and at the same time shouted: “Look out, Biggles!” The stalker heard him too, as he was bound to. He sprang upright, an arm held back over his shoulder as if to throw something. Ginger’s gun crashed.

He missed, but the shot served its purpose. With extraordinary agility the man darted away through the scrub, so that by the time Biggles had turned, pistol in hand, he was out of sight, over the top of the rise, going in the direction of the cove.

"There he goes, the blighter," muttered Bertie.

Biggles hurried up. Ginger told him what had happened.

"I'm afraid that's torn it," was Biggles' comment. "Even if the people in the cove didn't hear the shot they'll soon know about it. Thanks, Ginger. That was careless of me. Good thing you happened to be watching. Here, take your matches, you two."

"I fancy that little yellow swipe had seen the cigarettes and was lying there waiting for someone to collect 'em," surmised Ginger.

"This isn't going to make things easier," answered Biggles. "Let's get along to our beach. There's more cover at that end of the island."

They had reached the top of the bank, and were moving along as quickly as the shrubs allowed, when Biggles, who was leading, pulled up short. "Hark!" he exclaimed.

There was little need to listen, for with a slant of wind the drone of an approaching aircraft could be heard distinctly.

"Algy!" said Ginger.

With one accord they hurried on in the hope of reaching the beach before the aircraft flew low over it, as there was every reason to suppose it would. The only doubt in Ginger's mind, and his only worry, was the state of the sea. It had gone down considerably, but it was still rough—too rough, he thought, for a landing. There was a chance, however, that the water might be less agitated in the little bay whereon the Otter had made its original landing.

It was Biggles who put an end to this sort of speculation. He pulled up, a puzzled expression on his face. "They don't sound to me like the Otter's engines," he said, looking a little bewildered.

They moved on to where the ground was a little more open. Their eyes searched the sky in the direction from which the sound came. For a few seconds no one spoke. Then Biggles said, in a voice which, in the circumstances, was strangely calm: "By thunder! If it isn't another Dakota. This is something I did *not* reckon on."

"Well, blow me down and pick me up," muttered Bertie. "The blighters aren't playing the game."

“Let’s watch this,” suggested Biggles. “There’s no need for us to break our necks rushing back to the beach.”

As for Ginger, he had never been more bitterly disappointed in his life. He felt it was too much. His hopes, which had soared so high, had crashed to the lowest point possible.

“No wonder the Colonel was in a hurry to salvage his gold,” said Biggles, reflectively. “Whether this was all arranged, or whether he has called this new Dakota by radio, we can now believe what Tidore said about the gang being in business in a big way. I’m beginning to wonder how big it really is, and how many more machines they have at their disposal.”

The Dakota landed. It taxied in. The Colonel appeared, walking fast to meet it. Behind him straggled a small mob; the men who had been working in the cove. The Dakota pilot switched off. A man got out. Another. Then a third.

Said Bertie, screwing his monocle into his eye: “Tell me. Am I going nutty or does that feller look uncommonly like Algy?”

Said Ginger: “If I wasn’t sure it couldn’t be I’d say it was him.”

Said Biggles, calmly: “Don’t let’s fool ourselves. It is Algy.”

In silence they watched the four men walk to the Colonel’s quarters, into which, presently, they disappeared.

“Just now,” said Biggles, slowly, “we were patting ourselves on the back for having hit the Colonel a smack in the eye. He’s now fetched us a crack which has made me, for one, rock on my heels. But there is this about it. We do at least know that Algy did manage to get away, and why he wasn’t washed up on the beach. That’s a relief.”

“We also know where he is, although I don’t see much cause for jubilation in that,” said Ginger wearily.

CHAPTER XIII

HARD GOING FOR ALGY

It is not difficult to imagine how Algy felt when, standing guard over the machine, on the beach, he realized that bad weather was not only on the way but coming fast. His every instinct as an airman was to get away while departure was possible; yet, as he told himself as he paced up and down in a fever of impatience, how could he go and leave the others there, with no hope of ever getting off the island without the machine?

The crux of the matter was, even before an hour had passed he expected them back at any moment. Should he leave, they might within a minute arrive on the beach, perhaps pursued, only to find him gone. Once off, there could be no return in such conditions. Already the aircraft was pitching as the breakers rolled in ever farther up the beach. It could only be a question of time before the Otter dragged her anchor to be pounded in the surf. The next headland did provide a little shelter, with an area of reasonably calm water, and this he watched with the most acute anxiety, for already there could be no question of taking the aircraft on to the open sea.

Another quarter of an hour passed. What on earth were they doing? he pondered desperately. What could be keeping them? Couldn't they see what was happening? To go or to stay? To stay would probably mean seeing the machine smashed to pieces on the beach. Yet how could he go and leave them there? Never in his experience had he been forced to make such a decision. The worst of the storm, he suspected, was yet to come. Clouds were piling up. The moonlight was intermittent. The gusts of wind were increasing in violence.

For a minute or two more he stood staring up the beach, torn by indecision; then he made up his mind, prompted by the certain knowledge that unless he got off now he never would get off, and they would all be marooned. Not that he was by any means certain that he would be able to get off. He could only judge from where he stood the state of what he thought the only area of reasonable water left. It might turn out to be rougher than he supposed. And there was not very much room. Unless the machine lifted before she stuck her nose into the first big roller she would be swamped when she met it head on.

He waded out to the machine and, not without difficulty, for it was bucking like an unbroken horse, got on board. At imminent risk of being tossed overboard he got the anchor in and rushed back to his seat, afraid they would be blown ashore before he could start up and get the Otter's nose into the wind. There was no question of getting off the short, shelving, curving beach itself. It would have been cross-wind, anyway.

He breathed a prayer of relief when the engines started without protest, and giving them enough throttle to hold the machine head to wind snatched a last glance over his shoulder. A brief glimpse showed the beach still deserted. Then the rain started, instantly to reduce visibility to a matter of yards.

The next few minutes were sheer horror. The aircraft wallowed. It plunged about in a cloud of spray and rain. Things were a little better when it reached the lee of the headland, but even so, when Algy opened up to take off it was an act of desperation. He could only judge his position by the behaviour of the flying-boat. Half-dazed by noise of thunder, and rain and spray lashing the airframe, blinded by lightning and water streaming down the windscreen, he was now prepared to risk anything to get out of it. To the noise of the storm was now added that of his engines. He knew that he was racing forward, but into what he did not know. He felt the machine kicked into the air by a wave and braced himself for the crash that would come when it fell back. For a few seconds the aircraft seemed to wallow as gravity and lift fought for supremacy. His engines won, and he was airborne. Never was he more grateful to power units for doing, in the face of every difficulty, the work for which they had been designed.

For a little while longer, as the airscrews clawed their way up the face of the storm, the Otter was tossed and buffeted about like a piece of paper. He wanted altitude as a sailor prays for sea-room. When he felt that he had enough to turn in safety he brought the machine round and raced away on the breast of the gale. For the first time in what had seemed hours he relaxed a little, realizing that apart from anything else he had come near to being seasick. There is a limit to what the toughest stomach will stand.

The rain stopped. Or it would be more correct to say he ran out of it; which revealed how local it was. He was staring down, unable to see anything clearly, when a flash of lightning for a split second showed a black stain that could only be an island, although whether or not it was the piece of land that he had just left he was unable to determine.

Conditions improved quickly as he roared on out of the storm area, and while he was thankful to be alive he could not help reflecting what monstrous bad luck it was that the island should have lain directly in its

path. At any other time, an hour earlier or an hour later, it would not have mattered. What Biggles and the others would think when they returned to the rendezvous and found him gone was something on which he did not dwell. They would understand why he had gone, but his survival would be a matter for conjecture. They would soon know the answer to that, however, for it was a foregone conclusion in his mind that as soon as daylight came, and weather conditions made it possible, he would return. The first thing now was to find Kutaradja, his nearest haven of refuge.

He made a rough computation, with allowances for the direction of the storm, and with plenty of southerly so that whatever happened he would not miss the thousand-mile long island of Sumatra, he held on his way. What to do next was the problem that exercised his mind. There seemed little point in going back to the island even if the weather cleared, while the sea ran high. Using the Otter as a landplane he could get down on the airstrip, but what was the use of that? It would amount to delivering himself, and the aircraft, into the hands of the enemy. He toyed with the idea of sending an urgent signal to the Air Commodore in the hope that he would organize a police or military rescue party from Singapore or some other British base within striking distance.

He reached Sumatra without coming to a decision. A strong wind was blowing but visibility was fair. Lights showed where people were on the move. Actually, he made his landfall too far south, but he merely had to turn north, following the coast, to bring the airport in sight.

He landed, and as dust was swirling, arranged for hangar accommodation until such time as he would again require the machine. Formalities completed he went to the airport hotel for a room, feeling that as he could do nothing while the gale persisted he might as well get some sleep. He thought the reception clerk on duty gave him a curious look when he signed the visitors' book but he paid no attention to it, supposing that the hour of his arrival had aroused the man's curiosity. He was to remember this later on, however.

A stiffish breeze was blowing, but the sun was shining, when he awoke, so after a quick bath and a light breakfast he went along to the control building for the latest weather report and also to see about getting the Otter refuelled. Moreover, he wanted to have a good look at the machine in daylight to confirm that it was no worse for the rough handling it had received overnight. These things he did. The meteorological report was not too bad. A short period of fine weather between the advance storm and the arrival of the monsoon was forecast. While the Otter's tanks were being

filled he made a top inspection of the hull and the wings and could find nothing wrong.

By now he knew what he was going to do. He would wait until the afternoon, by which time the state of the sea should have fallen to 'moderate', and then return to the island to pick up the others. He did not think there should be any difficulty in finding them. They would in all probability be waiting at the rendezvous; or if they were not, they would make their way to it when the Otter appeared.

Having nothing better to do he hung about the tarmac. One or two passenger liners came in from the north and the south and went on their way. Between such visits the airport was more or less deserted.

In view of what was presently to happen it must be remembered that Algy had no cause to feel insecure or apprehensive of danger. On the occasion of his one previous visit he had remained with the machine while the others went to the control building. He learned from them what had happened there, but he himself had never seen any of the staff other than the aircraft hands who worked in the hangars and on the tarmac. He knew all about Vandershon being stabbed, and was under the impression that due to Biggles' interference the man responsible, the Colonel's spy, had been arrested. He assumed, therefore, that the place had been cleaned up and there was no need for any extraordinary precautions. In that he may have been a little too complacent; but there was some justification for his attitude. After all, he was on an official airport, in broad daylight, with people moving about from time to time.

He saw nothing in the least odd about it when, just before noon, a Dakota, carrying Indian registration marks, came in from the east. Thousands of Dakotas, some with modifications for special work, were built during the war. Indeed, in the matter of numbers turned out the type might hold the record. The war over, those that were still serviceable, relieved of their war equipment and converted to freight or passenger machines, were to be found in nearly every country in the world. These facts, of which Algy was well aware, are mentioned to account for his lack of interest in the new arrival. He certainly did not associate it with the Colonel, and there was really no reason why he should.

It came to a stop near the Otter, close to which Algy was standing. Four men got out. He took them to be the two pilots, the radio operator and the navigator. One of the pilots was a white man. The others he assumed to be Indians. They nodded to him cheerfully in passing and went on to the control building. Algy, slightly bored, hands in his pockets, strolled over for

a closer look at the aircraft, wondering, without any real interest, why it carried no passengers.

He was still standing there ten minutes later when the party returned, presumably with the intention of resuming their journey to wherever they happened to be bound for. And let it be admitted that Algy would have made a great many guesses at its destination without hitting the right one.

Three of the men stopped near him. The other went on and opened the cabin door.

Said the white man, in a tone of apologetic curiosity, with an accent that revealed he had learned his English in America: "Is your name by any chance Bigglesworth?"

"No," answered Algy, slightly taken aback.

"Do you happen to know him?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do," replied Algy, frankly, thinking the man was the bearer of a message from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, or some other airport in the region.

"You'd be a friend of his, I guess."

"Yes, I think I could say that."

"Get in."

For some seconds Algy gazed uncomprehending at the automatic that was nearly touching his ribs. He raised his eyes and considered in turn three expressionless faces. By now he knew what he had done; but the whole thing had happened so suddenly, and so completely was he taken off guard, that his brain, reeling under the shock, was a little slow in recovering. He wanted time to think. No time was allowed. His eyes flashed round the airfield. There was not a soul in sight. With a gun pressing into his back he was literally pushed into the machine. The door slammed. The engines roared.

Still dazed he sank into a seat.

"That's right. Make yourself comfortable," said one of the Indians smoothly.

See here

“Get in”

CHAPTER XIV

GINGER TAKES A TURN

WHEN GINGER had recovered from the shock of seeing Algy step out of the Dakota and disappear into the Colonel's quarters he turned a perplexed face to Biggles. Shaking his head he muttered: "I still don't understand how this could have happened."

"I can," returned Biggles, bitterly. "When I was discussing this matter with the Air Commodore before the start I pointed out that the big criminal organizations enjoyed the same technical facilities as ourselves. Why not? Except that they operate on the wrong side of the law they're in the same position as the big business houses that go straight. Well, now we've seen one in action. What has happened is plain enough. The Colonel has aircraft —war-time stuff, it's true, but still serviceable. He has radio. What more does he need? When the Count's Dakota crashed he simply called up another of his machines. I'm beginning to wonder how many more he has."

"But how about Algy?" broke in Ginger.

"Poor old Algy, realizing that the Otter had had it if he stayed here, quite rightly took off and went to Kutaradja. I say Kutaradja because there was nowhere nearer he could land, and he'd naturally stay as close to us as possible ready to come back as soon as the sea made it reasonable for him to get down. The Colonel, who must have been tipped off that he was in my party, probably as the result of our being seen together, is told by one of his spies that Algy is at Kutaradja. What does he do? Here was a chance to get the low-down on us. He sends a signal to the Dakota that was on its way here and gives orders for Algy to be brought here for interrogation. He may have supposed that I was there—or, for that matter we were all there. The Dakota pilot wouldn't know us by sight, but any of my party would do. That's how it looks to me. The hard truth is, in spite of Tidore's warning I've made the mistake of underestimating both the efficiency of the enemy and the equipment he has at his disposal."

"This Colonel bloke, or whatever he is, certainly runs his racket like a military operation," asserted Bertie.

"It's my guess that if he hasn't actually been a senior officer he's had military experience," opined Biggles.

"And by now, thanks to that little swipe who spotted you collecting your cigarettes, he must know that the rest of us are on the island."

"Not necessarily all of us, but he knows someone is here. There can't be any doubt about that," admitted Biggles. "Wherefore the sooner we get busy the better. At the moment I imagine the Colonel's too occupied with Algy to bother with us. He knows we can't get away."

"I don't see there's much we can do while they have their claws on Algy," muttered Ginger.

"There's always something one can do," returned Biggles evenly. "We haven't much choice. There are two ways of leaving the island. One is by air and the other by sea. As we're not sailors, and the yacht is still probably out of action anyway, we can forget about that. Which means we shall have to borrow the Dakota."

"But we can't go leaving Algy here?" protested Ginger.

"I didn't say anything about us all going."

"But I say, old boy, look here," said Bertie soberly. "While we're standing here nattering these yellow rascals may be putting the thumb-screws on poor old Algy."

"I don't think so," answered Biggles. "If, as we suppose, the Colonel is a military type he'll try the velvet glove method first. Only when he finds that doesn't work will he try the iron fist. He'll want to know all Algy knows; but that's no reason for us going off at half cock and making matters worse."

"I'm all for having a crack——"

Biggles raised a hand. "There's no need to get hysterical. We'll come to the cracking later, maybe. Meanwhile I have a plan."

Ginger looked expectant. "What is it?"

"I'm going in to have a word with the Colonel."

"Have a word with—are you crazy?"

"Not at all—I hope. Don't talk as if the Colonel was a sabre-toothed tiger."

"But what good will that do?"

"As that's the last thing he'll be expecting it will, I trust, cause a diversion and so give you an opportunity to move off in the Dakota."

"Jolly good! That's me, every time," cried Bertie.

"That sounds a pretty wild scheme to me," stated Ginger.

"It's time you knew that the wilder the scheme the more likely it is to click," said Biggles, calmly. "Now listen. At the moment the Colonel must

be all taken up with Algy or he wouldn't be so careless as to leave the Dakota where it is, without a guard and even without chocks under the wheels. Maybe he thinks that because it's right under his nose it's safe." Biggles smiled. "Maybe he's making the mistake that I've admitted making—underestimating the enemy."

"But wouldn't it be better to tackle the job after dark?"

"No. By then he'll have had time to think things over. That's when he'll expect us to try something. But not now, in broad daylight. Besides, the Dakota may not be here tonight. It may push off at any time."

"Do you mean I'm to be the only one to get away, if this comes off?" inquired Ginger.

"I'm not thinking so much of you getting away as keeping the Colonel here. Without an aircraft, unless they get the yacht afloat he'll be stuck here just as we are. That should cause him to think twice before he starts on murder."

"Okay," said Ginger. "What exactly is the drill?"

"First we'll move along to the rear of the huts. From the nearest point we should be less than forty yards from the machine. When I walk round and go into the Colonel's office you walk out and take the machine away. I said walk. Don't run. If you do they'll be more likely to notice you. Stroll—anyway until you're spotted. Bertie will give you covering fire from the rear if they open up on you. If that washing is still on the line you might borrow one of those blue blouses—give you a chance of being taken for a Chinaman interested in aviation. Having got away you'll have to use your discretion, but try to get a signal through to the Air Commodore telling him how we're fixed. Kuala Lumpur might be the best place for that. Which reminds me. Take these with you." Biggles passed a wad of papers. "I took these from the Colonel's office. List of agents, and that sort of thing. They should provide the chief with enough evidence for a complete round-up."

"How am I going to get back to you?" asked Ginger.

"Switch from the Dakota to the Otter if you can find it. I'm pretty sure it must be at Kutaradja. Be careful if you land there. The Colonel evidently still has friends there so don't trust a soul. Remember, it's more important that you should get the gen through to the Air Commodore than to come back for us, although you'll do that, of course, if you can manage it."

"Okay."

"What about me?" asked Bertie plaintively. "Do I just have to sit and watch all this fun?"

"You watch Ginger," ordered Biggles. "If he's caught you have a go at it. That way we have a double chance. If he gets away you stick around and make yourself useful as opportunities occur. But don't do anything silly and get yourself caught if you can prevent it. You'll probably see what happens to me and Algy. Now let's get weaving before Ginger thinks of more questions to ask."

They moved off, keeping under cover of course, and five minutes' sharp walk brought them as near to the Dakota as they could get without going into the open. The machine was still standing exactly as the pilot had left it when he had switched off. This, Ginger realized, was understandable, for it was right in front of the Colonel's quarters and therefore in full view of anyone looking in that direction from any one of the huts. There was not a soul about, the reason being, as they could hear, food was now being served in the mess hut.

The washing was still on the line. Ginger pulled off a bright blue blouse and put it on. From the Colonel's quarters a little farther along came the sound of a voice raised in anger.

"Sounds as if Algy is being awkward," murmured Biggles.

"What fun he's going to have in a minute when the balloon goes up," chuckled Bertie.

The balloon nearly went up in a way very different from what was anticipated when, without warning, a door in the end of the hut opened and the Chinese cook, carrying an iron pot, literally walked into them. The wretched man was given no time to speak. Biggles' fist landed in his stomach. Bertie, with admirable presence of mind, wrenched the pot from his hand and clapped it on his head. The cook, with an unpleasant-looking mess pouring over him, sank down. Bertie sat on him. "Go ahead, chaps," he said brightly.

"Here we go. Good luck, Ginger," said Biggles, and walking through the opening between the huts turned left towards the door of the Colonel's office.

Ginger gave him a few seconds and then, with a brief "So long" to Bertie, walked not directly towards the Dakota but on a line that would take him past it as if on his way to the cove. He did not hurry. His bearing was casual. But every nerve was, of course, at full stretch, for he did not really believe that he would be allowed to get away with this. Rather was it a question of how far he would be allowed to go before he was challenged and stopped.

But his hopes rose with every step. Resisting the temptation to look round he began to edge towards the machine. Fifteen yards, ten, and still the warning cry that he expected did not come. It struck him as quite incredible. All he could think was, the sheer brazen effrontery of what he was doing was seeing him through. And that was what Biggles, who favoured such methods, had relied on.

Drawing level with the Dakota he turned towards it, a move that gave him sight, out of the corner of his eye, of the huts. Bertie, still sitting on the cook, threw him a wave. Two men, standing in front of the hut, were looking in his direction. They may have wondered what he was doing or they may not have been looking at him at all. Ginger didn't know and didn't care as long as they didn't move. He imagined with what satisfaction Bertie was watching this fantastic performance.

Trembling with excitement, still unable to believe this was happening, he entered the machine, closed the door and made a rush for the controls. His exultation was such that he could have shouted, for all he needed now was a few more seconds . . . just five more. He knew the engines must still be warm so could reckon on them starting easily. They did. Simultaneously, as if they had touched an alarm bell, which in a way no doubt they had, men poured out of every hut. Some stopped to stare. Others urged on by the Colonel, raced towards the machine.

Ginger eased the throttle open and the aircraft began to move. The only thing that could stop him now, he told himself, was a bullet, should he be shot at; and there was a real risk of that because as the Dakota had been left with its nose pointing to the huts he would have to turn completely round before he could get off; and the first part of the turn would take him nearer to the men streaming toward him, not away from them.

For a few desperate seconds while he was swinging his tail round the thing became pandemonium. Some of those who sought to stop him did actually reach the machine and made futile grabs at tail and wing-tips; futile because by this time the engines were roaring and they were thrown off. Those who tried to hang on to the rudder were hurled off in a cloud of dust by the slipstream. Ginger flinched as pistol shots sounded distantly above the noise of engines and he felt the impact of bullets hitting the machine. Then it was all over. The Dakota, swiftly gathering speed, raced tail-up down the half-blackened airstrip.

Of all the people who must have been surprised by this exhibition none could have been more so than the chief actor himself. That the scheme had succeeded, and he was airborne, was not easy to believe. How right Biggles had been in estimating his chances, he told himself.

Making a circuit of the airfield at a safe altitude to see what was happening below his grin of satisfaction faded when an anti-aircraft shell burst uncomfortably close. Recalling that the place had been a military base and telling himself that he should have been prepared for this he promptly took evasive action and did not breathe comfortably again until he was out of range.

Now that he was able to think coherently his eyes went over the instrument panel, and as he feared, yet expected, for the machine had not been refuelled since it had landed, the tanks were more than half empty. This gave him ample petrol to reach Kutaradja, which he would have preferred to avoid; for if Biggles' summing up of the situation regarding Algy had been correct it seemed that the Colonel still had an agent there. If so, he would soon be in touch with him by radio, knowing that the Dakota would need fuel and Kutaradja the most likely place for it to land.

One thing was certain. There could be no question of flying non-stop to Kuala Lumpur. He might reach Penang, and for a little while he considered going there. But then he realized that the Colonel probably had agents everywhere within reach, so nothing was to be gained by that. Rather than risk running out of petrol and piling up trying to get down in some out of the way place he might as well go to Kutaradja. All he needed there was fuel. Having topped up his tanks he would go straight on to his ultimate objective, the British aerodrome at Kuala Lumpur. From there he would have no difficulty in sending a signal to the Air Commodore. There might even be a message there from him, for Biggles, but he did not think so. It was too soon to expect a reply to the reports Biggles had sent.

In the end he set a course for Kutaradja.

It is not to be supposed that having succeeded in getting away he was entirely happy. Far from it. The plight of those on the island could not be anything but serious, to say the least of it. The Colonel had had some severe set-backs and, blaming them for it, would be in a revengeful mood. There was this about it, however. The knowledge that one of Biggles' party was away, knowing the purpose for which the island was being used, might cause him to hesitate before employing methods which, should they be brought home to him, would put a noose round his neck. One thing Ginger did realize was this: that with the Colonel's spies and agents everywhere he would be constantly in peril while he remained in South-East Asia.

He wondered what had been the ultimate result of Biggles' bold stroke in jumping into the lion's den, so to speak. He wondered about many things. He wondered what Bertie had done about the cook. He had clapped the pot on the unlucky man's head pretty hard. Perhaps the soup, or whatever the

pot had contained, had softened the blow. He hoped so. He also hoped that the miserable fellow would be able to get the pot off, for it appeared to have been a tight fit. Strange how often slap-stick comedy went hand in hand with tragedy, he reflected.

He saw neither ship nor plane on the short run to Kutaradja, which he reached inside an hour late in the afternoon, although not without anxiety; for before he was half way over a splutter of oil spots on his windscreen caused his eyes to switch to the dials on the instrument panel. A falling oil pressure gauge and a certain roughness in one of the engines, slight as yet, told their own story. The starboard motor was not getting its proper lubricant and was beginning to complain. He decided that the oil tank that fed it must have been holed by a bullet, or perhaps a shell splinter. At all events, it wasn't functioning. The other was all right.

This was worrying, but he was not unduly alarmed, for with the aircraft so lightly loaded he anticipated no difficulty in holding his height on one engine. This proved to be the case. As soon as the starboard engine began to vibrate, as a result of heating up, he switched it off and, at reduced speed, of course, carried on with the other. This saw him to his first objective, but it raised a complication in that to get the trouble put right would take time, and he had hoped that his visit to Kutaradja would be brief. But he had no intention of trying to carry on to Kuala Lumpur with one engine. There was now all the more reason for changing over to the Otter, provided it was there.

Surveying the aerodrome before landing he was delighted to see the Otter standing on the tarmac. A frown creased his forehead, however, when he thought he could make out dust swirling behind it. That could only mean the engines were running. Why? Who had been responsible for that?

As he went in to land an uncomfortable feeling grew on him that his real troubles were about to begin. In vain he told himself that this was a public airport. With people about what could the enemy do to him there?

Feeling that the only way to tackle the matter was to take the bull by the horns, he taxied straight up to the Otter and jumped down. There could be no question of trying to hide, anyway. If he landed at all he was bound to be seen, and he had to come down for petrol.

Two men, Eurasians or Indonesians, were standing by the Otter when he strode up to it. They looked at him curiously. They also looked at each other.

"Who told you to start this plane?" he asked.

One of the men shrugged. "No spik Engleesh," said he.

Ginger thought the man might be lying, but having no proof he had to take his word. He couldn't make the fellow talk if he had decided not to. No matter. He'd get the facts from the control office. With this object in view he was about to walk on when a hail made him turn. A man, a white man, was approaching him with a purposeful stride; and he started speaking even before he arrived.

"Say! What's the idea the old man sending this kite back so soon?" he demanded, in the lowest kind of American English, pointing to the Dakota.

Ginger realized that this was where he would have to keep his head if he was to keep pace with the conversation. That this was one of the Colonel's spies he did not doubt. The question practically told him that. It also suggested that the man took him to be one of the gang.

"Search me," drawled Ginger. "Who am I to ask questions?"

"I was dropped off here to bring this crate along." The man pointed to the Otter.

"Why didn't you? Maybe that's what the old man's a' wondering."

"Did he tell you to find me?"

"I was to come back here and find out what was wrong. What is wrong?"

"Nothin's wrong except I have to eat some time. I was just gettin' going. Had to have a drink, didn't I?"

"Sure," murmured Ginger, suspecting the man had had several. "Let's get along." Jerking a thumb at the Otter he went on. "You ever flown one of these ships?"

"Never."

"They're a bit tricky. I'd better take her. You take the Dakota."

"Suits me, brother."

"How does she go for gas?"

"I just seen her filled up."

"Okay." Ginger climbed into the Otter. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the two coloured men talking volubly to the American and knew he had no time to lose. His hand went to the throttle. As the engines roared the American started forward, but he was too late to do anything. The Otter sped away across the darkening airfield.

Ginger's eyes went to the petrol gauges to confirm that the American had told the truth about petrol. He had. Ginger smiled. He had no fear of being followed. The faulty engine would soon be discovered and that would

take some time to repair. The fact that the Dakota was grounded was all to the good, he decided.

Climbing for height he turned his nose down the Malacca Strait for Kuala Lumpur.

It was late when he arrived and there were not many people about. Having put the Otter to bed he walked to the signals office to see if there were any messages. There he was informed that there was a radiogram for Bigglesworth.

Having explained who he was, and that Biggles had sent him to collect any messages, he was allowed to take it. Opening it he found, as he expected, that it was from the Air Commodore. It was brief and explicit, but not very encouraging. It merely said: “Stand by for General Cotter, United States Air Force, and co-operate to fullest extent.”

Folding the flimsy sheet he put it in his pocket. “Do any of you chaps know of an American general named Cotter?” he asked the clerks on duty.

“Never heard of him,” was the unsatisfactory reply.

Ginger made further enquiries outside, from which only one thing became clear. Whoever General Cotter might be he was certainly not on the aerodrome.

As there was nothing more he could do he went off to have a meal and find a bed for the night.

CHAPTER XV

BIGGLES WALKS IN

WHAT happened when Biggles walked into the Colonel's office followed the lines that might have been expected. Before he crossed the threshold he could hear Algy being threatened with dire punishments if he refused to answer questions put to him.

At Biggles' entrance the talk broke off abruptly. An incredulous silence took possession of the room, in which, as a glance revealed, there were seven men.

There was the Colonel, sitting behind his desk as if he might have been conducting a court-martial. By his side stood another white man. On his left were two Japanese—one, from the cap and goggles he carried in his hand, the pilot of the Dakota. In front of the desk was the prisoner, Algy, closely attended, held, in fact, on either side, by a Chinese in a nondescript uniform with a rifle.

"What's going on here?" demanded Biggles, curtly, although he knew well enough the answer to his question. "Take your hands off that man!" he rapped out at the guards in such an authoritative tone of voice that automatically they obeyed.

"I give the orders here," rasped the Colonel.

"You mean you did," came back Biggles. "I'm giving them now. You're under arrest."

For two or three seconds the Colonel looked puzzled. Then his face twisted into a curious smile. "You don't say!"

"I do say."

"Who's arresting us?"

"I am."

Again the Colonel looked puzzled. "Are you kidding?"

"I certainly am not."

"I don't get it."

"You will."

"Who are you to talk about arresting people?"

"I happen to be a British representative of the International Police Commission. You're entitled to see my papers if you wish."

From the quick frown that furrowed the Colonel's forehead Biggles thought this was new to him. He must have known they were in some official capacity but he had not realized they were actually police officers.

"Waal—waal," drawled the Colonel. "Mighty interesting. I always heard you English were crazy. Now I know it. You're talking out of your turn, brother. Cops, eh. If it wasn't that I admire sass I'd settle with you here and now. Okay. So we're arrested. What are you going to do with us?"

"Nothing, until transport arrives to take you away."

"You sure are an optimist. How are you going to fetch transport here?"

The answer, in a fashion, came from outside as, with a splutter and a roar the Dakota's engines sprang to life.

"One of my assistants is going to fetch it," stated Biggles.

It is unlikely that the Colonel heard him, for with an oath he leapt to his feet, knocking over his chair, and rushed to the door—as did the men with him except the Chinese guards.

During the noise and babble that followed Biggles looked at Algy and smiled. "That's Ginger," he said softly.

"Great work," answered Algy. "Where's Bertie?"

"He's around."

"You've put yourself in a hot spot."

"We've been in hotter. There was no other way."

The drone of engines began to recede. "He's clear," breathed Algy.

Biggles frowned as an anti-aircraft gun began to bark. "I hope you're right," he said quietly. "This gang seems to have everything."

The Colonel, white with passion, came back. For a moment, as he glared, Biggles thought he was going to strike him.

"Smart guy," he grated.

"Not particularly," returned Biggles, evenly.

The Colonel drew a deep breath. He tapped Biggles' pockets, and finding his gun, removed it and put it in a drawer of his desk.

Biggles made no protest, aware that it would serve no useful purpose. Resistance at that juncture, he felt, might be the last straw to break the Colonel's patience. So he merely said, "That won't help you." Actually, from the expression on the man's face he half expected to be shot then and there. He had been prepared for that at the outset. The great thing was,

Ginger was away, and provided he got through to British territory, the island, as a smuggling base, was finished.

The Colonel, breathing heavily, considered him with calculating malice. "Smart guy, eh," he said again. "Going to keep me here. You haven't forgotten I've got a ship."

"No. And I haven't forgotten it's aground."

"It won't be for long."

"You'd better make haste and get her off, because when my assistant comes back he won't be alone."

The Colonel flared up. He banged his fist on the table. "I don't care if he brings the whole British army with him."

Biggles shrugged. "Then why get rattled about it? As far as I'm concerned, all that matters is, this racket of yours is about buttoned up."

"That's what you think," sneered the Colonel. "By the time your lot get here they'll be welcome to all the evidence they can find. They'll also be welcome to what's left of you."

"For a man who never makes a mistake, threats of that sort are small-time talk," said Biggles contemptuously.

The Colonel gave some orders in a language unknown to either Biggles or Algy. Their purpose was plain, however, when, covered by guns they were taken outside and marched a short distance to a flight of moss-covered concrete steps leading into the ground and pushed down them.

"If you're wise you'll stay there," shouted the Colonel. "The guards have orders to shoot anyone trying to get out."

In the wan light that filtered in from the entrance, for there were fewer than a dozen steps, Biggles looked around. There were some empty packing cases lined up against the concrete walls, looking as if they had been there for years, and what looked like mouldy bedding.

"I'd say this hole was a war-time air raid shelter," he opined, testing a packing case before sitting on it. "It stinks a bit, but we might have done worse. The Colonel wasn't fooling when he said the guards had orders to shoot if we went out so we'd better behave ourselves until somebody does something."

"The first person to do something is likely to be the Colonel," stated Algy. "You've got him really mad."

"He isn't only mad, he's sick. Everything's suddenly going wrong for him and he can't understand why. His vanity won't let him see the truth."

"What on earth made you give yourself up?"

“Three things. I wanted to make contact with you, in case the Colonel decided to be spiteful. I wanted to create the impression that we were in a stronger position than we are, and I thought by causing a bit of a sensation it would give Ginger a better chance to get away in the Dakota. I think I succeeded on all three. Ginger’s away, that’s the main thing. Queer how what often looks like a hopeless proposition turns out to be a slice of cake. How did they get hold of you?”

Algy narrated his adventures from the time he realized the storm was going to upset their plan to his capture at Kutaradja.

“I shouldn’t have left you alone with that storm in the offing,” declared Biggles. “I must have been crazy. But there, who would have expected anything as violent as that at this time of the year? Admittedly I was away longer than I reckoned to be. There were several reasons. But there’s no point in discussing that now. You did right in taking the machine off. Had we lost it the position would be worse than it is.”

“Does the Colonel know about Bertie being here?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. He won’t have forgiven him for taking him in with that sharks’ teeth nonsense.” Biggles glanced at the shadow of one of the guards at the top of the steps. “The Colonel’s taking no more chances. It’s just beginning to dawn on him, I fancy, that we’re not as dumb as we look.”

“What are our chances?”

“I wouldn’t like to guess. They depend on too many factors. On what Ginger does, on how long it takes the Colonel to get his yacht afloat, and, last but not least, on what Bertie gets up to. It’s in these conditions that he’s usually at his brightest. Much depends on the yacht, I imagine. If the Colonel finds himself stuck here he may behave reasonably. But if he’s able to get away, and decides to pack up, he’s not likely to leave us here to talk when someone arrives to pick us up. We shall see.”

After that they fell silent.

CHAPTER XVI

BERTIE GETS BUSY

BERTIE had watched the first part of Ginger's getaway from a seat which, while soft, he would not have taken from choice; but it was obviously essential to keep the Chinaman quiet until Ginger's success was assured.

The man, finding that at such a disadvantage it was futile to struggle, soon gave up. It must have taken him all his time to breathe, for the pot came nearly down to his shoulders, and acting as an effective gag prevented him from making any sound beyond a muffled gurgling. The fact that the pot had contained some sort of thin porridge could not have made things any easier for him; nor for Bertie, for that matter, for the stuff had splashed about and to his disgust he had come in for a share of it.

As soon as the machine had turned he lost no time in removing himself to a spot less conspicuous, for the huts were disgorging their occupants, although these, naturally, looked only at what was going on in front of them, on the aerodrome. None had eyes for anything that might be going on behind.

Bertie was standing back in the jungle by the time the cook had managed to free himself from his smoke-blackened, porridge-streaked visor, and then the man was far more concerned with himself than with the general uproar. Puffing and blowing he removed most of the gruel from his person, and not until he had wiped the sticky mess from his face with his blouse did he take any interest in the vanishing Dakota. Then, from his general behaviour, and the way he shook a fist at it, Bertie formed the opinion that the cook supposed all the men responsible for the attack on him were escaping. At any rate, he took no steps to find his assailant. Which, of course, suited Bertie; for had the man started a hue and cry he would not have been able to remain in a position to watch developments. From a safe position under cover, therefore, he was able to see what went on.

Following Ginger's departure by air there was an interval when the Colonel returned to his office. Shortly afterwards Biggles and Algy were brought out, under guard. Prepared for the worst it was with some relief that he saw them put into the air raid shelter, and the guards take up a position at the entrance.

Now while affairs appeared to be going reasonably well he was not altogether happy. He felt that he should be doing something; that he had been left out of proceedings in which he should have had some part. To be a mere spectator was not his idea of a fair proportion of the risks; wherefore he retired a little deeper into the jungle to give the matter his earnest consideration, polishing his eyeglass with great industry to assist his concentration on the problem before him.

During this period there was such a general move towards the cove where the yacht was moored that it became evident something was going to happen there. The fact that no search was being made for him was reassuring, for it suggested his presence was not suspected.

A wary reconnaissance revealed only three men: the two guarding the prisoner and the cook, who came out to throw away some garbage. His first inclination was to attempt a rescue forthwith, but on secondary consideration he decided it might be better to first find out what was happening at the cove. He suspected that the yacht was about to be refloated. This, he told himself, should be prevented, for more reasons than one. The Colonel must not be allowed to escape, if that was his intention. For should he go he would hardly be likely to leave the prisoners to witness against him at some future date.

His mind made up he set off for the cove, keeping just inside the fringe of scrub as before.

What he saw when he reached a position from which he could look down into the cove did not surprise him. The yacht was still aground, but in deeper water, this obviously being the result of the incoming tide. Preparations were being made to refloat her when the tide was at full flood. A heavy object, probably an anchor, had been carried out for some distance. To this was fastened a line which, brought back and passed round the winch, would haul her off when the moment was right.

Bertie considered the scene. Nearby, on the rocks and on the sand, were piles of stuff that had been put ashore to lighten the ship as much as possible. Among other things were a number of oil drums, apparently the yacht's reserve stock of fuel oil. These, on account of their weight, no doubt, had not been carried farther than was necessary. As a matter of detail they had been put on the flat rock near those already there, a distance of only a few yards from the ship.

Looking at these an idea was born in Bertie's mind. At first it was no more than this. If the oil was lost, even if more was available there would be a delay in bringing it over from the main dump before the yacht could set

sail. Contemplating ways and means of bringing this about it occurred to him that if the oil was set on fire it was close enough to the yacht to do it some mischief. If it did nothing else it would hold up the work and cause it to miss the tide. This thought pleased him. But the problem was, how to set the oil on fire.

Petrol would do the trick. Where could he get petrol? There was plenty on the island if he could find it. If he could find it how could he carry it? He remembered the jerry-cans he had seen in the workshop. They would do. They might already contain petrol. For what other purpose would they be there? If they contained anything it was most likely to be petrol. It would not take long to find out.

As he started back for the huts he glanced at the sun and saw it was well down. No matter. Darkness would be all to the good.

The only people he could see when he reached the huts were the two Chinese still standing on guard at the entrance to the place being used to hold the prisoners. Hurrying to the rear window of the workshop he looked inside. There was no one there. The window, he found, was fastened on the inside. Taking a chance, speed being important, for he was afraid the yacht might be hauled off the sand in his absence, he tapped out a pane of glass with the butt of his pistol, put in a hand and turned the fastener. Within a minute the window was open and he was inside.

He went straight to the cans. The weight told him they were full, and having lifted the cap of one the reek of spirit told him all he needed to know. Petrol. Taking two cans, which he thought should be ample for his purpose, he put them through the window, and having helped himself to a heavy chisel, followed them out. With a can in each hand he set off back for the cove, mildly surprised that the operation should have been carried out without any difficulty whatever. But this, he realized, was due to his presence being unsuspected. In any case the Colonel couldn't have men everywhere. He would need every hand to get the yacht afloat.

The luck held. Dusk was closing in by the time he was in the scrub above the oil drums. The descent between rocks, as Ginger had discovered in the dark, was not easy, but he blundered on with his burden, hastened by sounds which told him that the yacht might be off at any moment. Waves were surging far up the beach. The time had come. Men shouted. The winch rattled. The hawser became taut as it took the strain. All eyes were on the yacht.

The descent to the drums was not easy. Thrusting his way through the bushes, stumbling and sometimes falling over the rocks, Bertie made his

way down, noting with satisfaction when he arrived that the place, having often been used for refuelling, already reeked of loose oil. He resolved to make sure. Using the chisel, which he had brought for the purpose, he unscrewed the cap of the nearest drum. Oil poured out in a turgid stream, across the rock and into the water. Off came the caps of the cans and petrol gushed down over it.

Bertie saved a few drops from the second can to lay a train, and presently he was very glad that he had done so, for accustomed as he was to handling aviation spirit, the result, when he struck a match, startled him. The explosion singed his hair and eyebrows, as presently he discovered by the smell.

The fire was greeted by the men below with a great noise of yelling. Looking back as he hastened away Bertie was delighted to see flames dancing on the water. He could not see very clearly, for smoke from burning shrubs, as well as the oil, obscured his view. He was glad to have the smoke screen to cover his retreat.

Looking back as he retraced his steps along the edge of the airfield he was gratified to see a great cloud of black smoke, of a volume much greater than he had expected, coiling sluggishly into the sunset, while through the deepening twilight began to spread a lurid glow. “That should cramp their style for a bit,” he told himself, as he hurried on, for his work was not yet finished.

From the rear of the huts he saw the Chinese guards, who had been joined by the cook, staring at the fire, apparently speculating as to its cause. Gun in hand he came up behind them, and so engrossed were they in the spectacle in the direction of the cove, as was understandable, that they neither saw nor heard him until he proclaimed his presence with a ferocious snarl intended to convey the impression that he only needed an excuse to shoot them. This, from their expressions, they believed. By eloquent gestures he made signs that they were to drop their rifles. Menaced by the muzzle of his gun they obeyed with alacrity. What Bertie did not know was in wiping sweat from his face in his recent labours he had streaked it with black oil in such a way as to give him a singularly bestial appearance.

Feeling that he was doing well, as indeed he was, he shouted: “Are you there, chaps?”

Biggles and Algy replied by popping out of the shelter in the manner of rabbits bolted by a ferret.

“Help yourself to some rifles,” invited Bertie. “I’ve been having fun. What had we better do with this brace of yellow-hammers?”

“As we can’t very well shoot them, and we don’t want them with us, we’d better get rid of ’em,” decided Biggles, waving away the men in the direction of the cove.

They backed a little way, then turned and ran for their lives.

“Well, here we are, all bright and breezy, if you see what I mean,” announced Bertie, cheerfully. “Where’s all this bally oil coming from? I keep getting it on my glass eye.”

“It’s all over your face,” Algy told him. “You look simply ravishing.”

Biggles pointed at the fire, now a conflagration. “Were you responsible for that?”

“Too true I was, old boy. I don’t mind telling you I’ve been pretty busy.”

“So I realize. Have you set fire to the yacht?”

“Well, not that I know of, but it could have happened. I set fire to the oil stores by way of a diversion, really to discourage them from getting the yacht afloat. Jolly good effort, don’t you think?”

“Very good indeed,” admitted Biggles, smiling. “What was the next item on your programme?”

“How about snaffling some tuck from the cookhouse? I’m getting kind of peckish.”

“So are we all,” assented Biggles. “Starvation isn’t my idea of a pleasant death. It takes too long. But before we attend to that I’d feel more comfortable with my gun in my pocket. The Colonel put mine in a drawer of his desk.”

“And mine,” said Algy.

“Okay. Let’s get ’em.”

They went into the office. There was no one there. The guns were still in the drawer. Biggles collected his and passed Algy’s to him. “Now for the grub stakes,” he proposed. “We’d better get a move on. The gang will be back hot foot when those guards tell their boss that we’re on the loose here. If the Colonel was peeved before this, by now he’ll be hopping mad. He only refrained from shooting us, I fancy, because he wanted to make quite sure he could get away. But he won’t have any qualms about that if he cops us again. Come on.”

They walked briskly to the kitchen. There was plenty of rice but nothing else. The door to an ante room, which Biggles thought might be the general store, was locked. He shot the lock out with a rifle bullet, when it was revealed that his supposition had been correct. There was not much choice

in the matter of food, but they weren't particular, and it was mostly with a good supply of biscuits that they retired to the jungle.

"Let's get back to the beach where we landed in case Ginger comes back," decided Biggles. "He'll do that as soon as he can, of course. It will be a matter of how soon he can get hold of the Otter, or whether he can get hold of it at all. Meantime, our big job will be to keep clear of the gang. It's unlikely they'll try to find us in the dark, but they'll be out in force as soon as it gets light, if I know anything."

Night had fallen by the time they were on the beach to find a fair sea still running. A search produced a few coconuts so finding a rock for a seat they sat down to a satisfying, if not very palatable, long-delayed meal. The mosquitoes rose in swarms and they, too, made a meal, which nothing could be done to prevent.

"I was afraid this business would develop into a sort of private war," said Biggles, chewing steadily on a piece of coconut. "The chief won't be too happy about it, but I don't see what else we could have done. One can arrest an individual, but it would need a small army to round up a gang of this size."

"The Colonel is the head lad, and if we can pull him in it should cause the rest of the outfit to go to pieces," opined Algy.

"How can we pull him in while he's surrounded by a mob of toughs? It isn't as though we're on our own ground. There must have been pickings in this racket for minor officials from one side of the Indian Ocean to the other, and some of 'em may be powerful enough to raise a stink if they learn of our invasion tactics."

"The thing is, old boy, to get out of this bug-ridden climate, tell the Air Commodore what we know, and leave him to clean up the mess," asserted Bertie. "After all, we've been to quite a lot of trouble to get things sorted out —if you get my meaning."

"You're not forgetting that we're still in quite a bit of trouble, or we shall be, tomorrow morning," said Biggles sarcastically. "With the crew of the yacht I reckon the Colonel has forty or fifty stiffs here, and there are only three of us."

"We should have reduced those numbers somewhat by tomorrow night," declared Bertie, confidently.

"I'm not thinking so much about the shooting match we're in for as the political row that'll blow up when it gets out that we, supposed to be civilized policemen, have landed on an island and murdered the inhabitants. That's how they'll put it. The Colonel has in his mob Americans, Chinese,

Indians, Japanese and maybe Indonesians, all with governments to scream if we hurt their precious nationals."

"They can scream their blooming heads off as long as mine's still on my shoulders," stated Bertie, nonchalantly. "And you can bet your sweet little life, old boy, that I shall do my best to keep it there. It's scallywags like this Colonel bloke who start wars, not us. But for him we shouldn't be sitting here, being torn to pieces by these bally mosquitoes. You chaps get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on things for a bit."

"Wake me in a couple of hours," said Biggles, wrapping his jacket round his head and settling down on the sand.

Dawn broke fine and clear to find them all refreshed but showing signs of the wear and tear of the last few days. Their chins were unshaven, their hair dishevelled and their tropical drill suits torn and filthy. Mosquito bites spotted their faces, hands and arms, as though with a rash. They were trying to improve matters with sea water, not very successfully, when a distant shout informed them that the hunt was up.

"I know what an old fox feels like when he hears hounds give tongue on a fine November morning," said Bertie. "He probably thinks as I do."

"And how's that?" inquired Algy, morosely.

"We'll give the blighters a run for their money."

Biggles was looking at the sea. "It's going down, but not very fast," he observed. "Even if Ginger has managed to get hold of the Otter I doubt if he'd dare to risk getting down as it is, knowing that if he cracked up that'd be our last hope gone."

"He'll fix something, don't worry," declared Algy.

"I'm not worrying," came back Biggles shortly. "I'm merely trying to look the thing in the face. It's all very well for you to pretend you couldn't care less but I happen to be in charge of this crazy operation and I carry my responsibilities with less lighthearted abandon than I did when I had only my life to lose. I'd hate the Air Commodore to lose his job through me. But instead of arguing let's have a look round for the best position to meet the fuss when things start humming. There's so little cover at the other end of the island that the Colonel will guess we're up here somewhere."

"Why doesn't he push off instead of bothering with us," said Algy.

"The answer to that, I imagine, is because he can't," replied Biggles. "The yacht has either been damaged by the fire or it's still aground. Either way he won't feel like dealing with it while we're on the loose to upset more of his applecarts. Another thing. He knows that whoever went off in his Dakota will come back to pick us up, and we have enough evidence to make

life uncomfortable for him wherever he went. Not only would he lose this base but he would be asked to explain why he kept the stores for his own use instead of reporting them to the United States government. Oh, yes, he has plenty of reasons for preventing us from talking, even if we found it difficult to prove smuggling or piracy."

While Biggles had been talking the three of them had been pushing their way through a mass of undergrowth that flourished between a rising formation of rocks, mostly huge boulders. Nearing the highest point Algy climbed a tree for an all round survey, and coming down reported that the whole northern end of the island was the same, a chaos of rocks that had either been thrown up by a volcanic eruption, or a mountain that had been split by one. The highest point might be a couple of hundred feet above sea level, no more. Smoke was still rising from the cove. He could see the heads of the Colonel's coolies as they beat through the rough stuff that fringed the airstrip, coming towards them.

"How about putting in a little target practice to let 'em know we're about?" suggested Bertie. "Discourage them from getting too enthusiastic about the job, and all that sort of thing."

"There's no point in telling them exactly where we are," answered Biggles. "They'll find us soon enough."

"All the same, I hate the idea of being beaten out of cover like an old cock pheasant at a shooting party," protested Bertie, frowning as he wiped oil and perspiration from his monocle.

"You should know that an old cock pheasant, in his wisdom, sits tight as long as possible," reminded Biggles.

"True enough—true enough," conceded Bertie.

Biggles stopped in a slight depression, from the rim of which it was possible to look down on the beach. "I don't see any point in blundering about in this stuff indefinitely," he remarked. "Let's make ourselves comfortable till the band strikes up."

They sat down. Biggles produced a much discoloured cigarette and lit it. "I should have asked the Colonel if he had any gaspers to spare," he murmured, smiling faintly.

CHAPTER XVII

TOTAL WAR

THE day wore on. The sun, climbing to its zenith, flayed sea and land with sultry heat, as if determined to have one last fling before being banished by the approaching monsoon. The jungle steamed. The flies and mosquitoes swarmed, biting and stinging. Sweat poured down the faces of the refugees, making little white channels through the grime. The pursuit drew steadily nearer.

"There are times," observed Algy with sarcastic venom, "when I feel we earn our pay. This is one of them."

"There are people," said Biggles, nibbling a biscuit, "who pine for a tropic island."

"And sing songs about 'em," added Bertie.

"They can have them all—every one," decided Algy.

"I have an idea," remarked Bertie, "that the lads who are supposed to be hunting us are not infatuated with plunging about in this stinking, bug-ridden jungle. They're a long time coming."

"The possibility of bumping into a lump of lead can't exactly add zest to the fun," asserted Algy.

"Quit moaning, or you'll have me in tears in a minute," requested Biggles. "The sea's going down. It's still a bit choppy outside, but close in it should soon be all right for a landing in a robust job like the Otter."

They all knew that their survival depended on Ginger getting the amphibian.

Presently Biggles went on. "I'd say that bonfire you started, Bertie, has made a mess of the yacht, or the Colonel would be pulling out."

"I can't think why he's going to all this trouble over us," said Algy, wearily.

"Revenge, old boy, revenge," surmised Bertie.

"What's the use of revenge if you get scuppered at the end of it?"

"Don't ask me, laddie; I'm not a television wizard. The trouble with me in these tropic climes is my eyeglass keeps getting steamed up."

Biggles smiled. “Not so steamed up as the Colonel. I wonder who he really is. He’s no ordinary thug. I’m pretty sure he’s been a soldier.”

“That doesn’t make him any less a crook.”

“How about having a pop at some of these yellow birds of his?” suggested Bertie. “Keep the party going, if you see what I mean.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that presently,” advised Biggles.

Shouts not far away proclaimed that the time was fast coming.

Biggles stretched, yawning. Suddenly he started, alert in a listening posture. “Can you hear what I hear?” he asked tersely.

“Ginger!” cried Algy.

“Good old goldilocks,” exclaimed Bertie. “I’ve had about enough of being a boiled egg in a saucepan.”

“Let’s get down to the beach and make ready a smudge fire to show him where we are,” said Biggles, crisply.

Buoyant with hope they started down towards the beach. They did not go far. All stopped dead as the aircraft, now low, swung into view. It was not the Otter. It was a Dakota. From their expressions they were all equally taken aback.

Biggles was the first to speak. “I don’t get this,” he said wonderingly. “That’s the machine Ginger took from here.”

“If he’s come back in it, it means he can’t find the Otter,” said Algy.

“But he wouldn’t be such a fool as to come back here in the Dakota!”

“If he couldn’t make it any other way he’d paddle here in a dugout canoe —you know that, old boy,” stated Bertie.

“But what can he hope to do! Land on the airstrip when he doesn’t even know where we are?” cried Algy.

“It looks as if that’s where he’s going to land,” said Bertie. “Hadn’t we better get a bit closer? He knows we’re bound to see him, and maybe he thinks we’ll make a run for it.”

By this time the Dakota was making its approach with the obvious intention of landing.

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Biggles, with a change of tone. “We’ve got this all wrong. Ginger isn’t flying that machine. It wouldn’t make sense.”

“But it’s the same aircraft.”

“True. But I doubt if it has the same pilot.”

“But that means—that something—went wrong—with Ginger,” said Algy, haltingly.

"Of course it does," acquiesced Biggles. "He must have run into trouble at Kutaradja. I warned him to be careful there. But there's still something wrong about that. If Ginger went to Kutaradja it would only be for petrol. Having got it he'd press on. He wouldn't stay there. He must have got there before dark. If he lost the machine why has it been so long coming back? But what's the use of guessing? I'll make just one more. Ginger's in that machine, but he isn't flying it."

"You think they've got him?"

"Yes."

"In that case we've about had it."

"Let's get to where we can see who gets out."

They scrambled back to the highest point, a mass of rock, the summit of which commanded a view of the airfield. By the time they were there the Dakota had landed and was taxi-ing to the tarmac where the Colonel stood waiting for it.

"That settles any questions about Ginger being at the stick," said Algy. "He wouldn't go *there*."

No one answered.

The Dakota stopped. The engines were switched off. The airscrews came to rest. The door opened. One man stepped down. He walked towards the Colonel. The Colonel walked forward to meet him. They met, and stood talking.

"So Ginger isn't there at all," observed Algy.

"Can't be. That pilot must have been flying solo. Anyone else there would be out by now." Biggles shook his head. "I must say this is a queer business, although there's probably a simple explanation if we knew it."

"We're never likely to know it unless we get cracking on something."

"On what?"

"Well, the machine, for instance."

Biggles smiled lugubriously. "What a hope! You can get away with that sort of thing once, but the Colonel will take jolly good care it doesn't happen twice. There you are. You see what I mean?"

The Colonel had called over some men, four, to be precise. Armed with rifles they took up positions round the Dakota.

"That seems to settle that," admitted Algy, in a resigned voice.

"Perhaps the Colonel will push off now he has the means," suggested Bertie hopefully.

"And leave us here? Not on your life. He needn't do anything in a hurry. That confounded Dakota has strengthened his position. He can go when it suits him."

It was soon apparent that Biggles' prediction was correct. With the Dakota heavily guarded the hunt was resumed.

"What on earth can Ginger be doing," muttered Algy.

"I may be wrong, but I don't think we can reckon on help from Ginger at this stage," said Biggles. "At least, we should be silly to rely on it. If they've got the Dakota back from him, as obviously they have, they'd hardly be likely to make him a present of the Otter."

"True enough—true enough," murmured Bertie, toying with his monocle.

"Of course, if he's still alive, he'll be doing *something*, or trying to," averred Biggles.

"I don't like that word if," said Algy, frowning.

"It boils down to this," declared Biggles. "We're as we were an hour ago, no better no worse. The beaters sound as if they're coming on. If they corner us here, with our backs to the sea, we've had it. I suggest we try to outflank their line and get to the other end of the island. By the time they've discovered that we're not at this end it'll be dark. They'll have to call off the search then, so we shall at least have gained time."

"Fair enough, laddie," agreed Bertie. "Anything you say."

They began making their way towards the beach, and thus, from lower ground, lost sight of the airfield. Indeed, hemmed in by rocks and jungle they could see nothing beyond a few yards.

"Get your guns handy," advised Biggles. "We might bump into a prowler in advance of the general line."

However, they saw no one, and a quarter of an hour later, filthy and dishevelled, they arrived at the beach, although they did not show themselves in the open.

"We're beginning to look a bit scruffy," observed Algy.

"Disgusting. Positively disgusting," growled Bertie. "I absolutely stink. If I don't soon get a bath it'll need a curry-comb to scrape the muck off me."

"Now what?" said Biggles sharply, as to their ears came the sound of aero engines.

"I suppose that couldn't be Ginger, by any chance," said Algy.

Biggles shook his head. "No. That isn't a machine in the air. It's the Dakota's engines being run up."

"That could mean the Colonel's decided to push off, after all."

"It could, but I don't think so. It's more likely he's going to use the Dakota to help find us. Why not? He'd be a fool if he didn't—and he's no fool."

"That won't make things any easier for us," remarked Algy.

"It will not," agreed Biggles. "No matter. The tougher the going the more satisfaction shall we get out of nailing up this bunch of renegades." He ducked low as the Dakota swung suddenly and unexpectedly into view, skimming the tree tops. It was gone in a flash.

They waited.

"Here he comes again," said Algy. "We shan't get far at this——"

He broke off, diving for the ground as above the roar of engines came an unmistakable scream. An instant later the earth shook and the air was filled with flying debris as a stick of bombs fell across the jungle-covered hill.

"Here I say, that's a bit steep!" complained Bertie.

"Good thing we didn't stay on top," said Biggles calmly. "The Colonel certainly has got the lot. More war stores, I suppose. Tidore was right when he said his enemies had enough stuff to fight a war."

"Did that chap spot us, do you think?"

"No. He was travelling too fast. He's going to plaster the hill haphazard hoping either to get us or drive us out. Here he comes again."

Algy half raised his gun.

"Don't waste your bullets," advised Biggles. "You may need 'em presently."

Another stick of bombs thundered, flinging high mutilated trees and rocks.

"There is this about it," observed Biggles, after the debris had rained down. "While they keep up this racket the beaters will have to stay where they are. Let's start working our way along a bit. If that pilot's wise he'll realize we'll try to get off the hill, so he may try a stick or two round the beaches presently."

They began a cautious approach to the low headland which, running across the beach and into the sea, separated the beach they were on from the next one.

"Just a minute," said Biggles, as they neared the top.

He peeped over, through the tangle of tropical vegetation that all but blanketed the rocks. He dropped back. "No use," he reported. "The Colonel

is still doing his soldier stuff. He's posted a couple of men on the far side to see we don't slip along that way."

"Let's rush 'em," suggested Bertie. "I'd sooner bullets than bombs."

"They'd see us as soon as we showed ourselves over the top," answered Biggles. "This is no place to get hit. We're better where we are as long as we can keep in one piece. The Dakota is giving us a rest, anyway."

"Gone back for another load of cookies," suggested Algy.

"Probably. We'll dig in where we are and let them come for us. It'll be dark in an hour. If we can hold out till then we shall have a better chance. Anything might happen tomorrow."

Biggles spoke confidently, but it must have been clear to all of them that the situation was critical. Against the bombing there could be no defence.

"Oh for an old Spit, with some lead in its pencils, to show this cocky blighter a thing or two," lamented Bertie, as bellowing engines announced that the Dakota was about to make another run.

They all ducked instinctively as a bullet whanged against a rock not far away.

"Where did that come from?" muttered Biggles as, gun in hand, his eyes scanned the higher ground around them.

"They've got the edge on us. We'd better shift to another position," said Algy.

They moved on a little, and crouching against a mass of rock awaited the next onslaught from the air.

When it did not come they risked a peep, and saw the Dakota turning out to sea, climbing steeply.

"What's the big idea now?" queried Algy.

"Trying to fool us into showing ourselves, or else give the other end of the island a crack," conjectured Biggles.

The behaviour of the Dakota became still harder to understand when, still heading out to sea, it unloaded its bombs, which fell harmlessly in the water.

"I don't get it," said Bertie.

For a minute nobody spoke. Then Biggles remarked, in a puzzled voice, "That Dakota is making a lot of noise for one machine."

"Sounds as if there's another one somewhere," was Bertie's opinion.

"Sounds more like half a dozen," asserted Algy.

“It isn’t Ginger. The Otter couldn’t make all that din,” declared Biggles. “Something’s happening. We’d better get to the top and see what it is. Watch how you go. That sniper may still be on the job.”

Panting from exertion, with sweat pouring down their faces, they forced a passage through interlacing palms and bamboos to the top of the bank. There they stopped, speechless, staring unbelievingly at two four-engined aircraft, displaying United States military markings, that were coming in with the obvious intention of landing on the airstrip.

At last Biggles said, in a voice pitched high with wonder: “American Globemasters! What in the name of all that’s fantastic are they doing here?”

“Must be on some sort of exercise,” guessed Algy, looking slightly dazed.

“What ho! The Colonel’s bright boys don’t like the look of ’em, anyway,” put in Bertie. This was apparent, for men were running in all directions.

“We’d better stay where we are until we see what this is all about,” decided Biggles. “If there’s going to be a fuss we’re liable to be shot.”

They waited. The big machines landed side by side. Before they had stopped running the doors had opened. From these sprang out troops in full war kit, to form line and advance swiftly on the huts.

“I don’t believe it,” said Biggles simply. “It isn’t true.”

“There’s Ginger,” suddenly shouted Algy.

“This gets crazier and crazier,” muttered Biggles.

“Blow me down!” breathed Bertie. “How could he have got mixed up with that lot?”

“Ask me something easier,” requested Biggles.

By this time, Ginger, taking no part in what was obviously a military operation, was sprinting towards the beach.

“He’s going to look for us,” snapped Biggles. “Come on.”

They broke out of the jungle, shouting.

Ginger saw them at once, threw a wave of greeting, and still running, altered course towards them. Grinning, he came up. “How about that for a surprise packet?” he cried.

“How did you work that miracle?” inquired Biggles.

“Nothing miraculous about it,” stated Ginger.

“Where, and when, did you join the U.S. Air Force?”

“At Kuala Lumpur, this morning.”

“You arrived in what they call the nick of time, old boy,” declared Bertie.

“Who are these people?” Biggles wanted to know.

“United States marines, under General Cotter.”

“Did you find them or did they find you?”

“They found me.”

“What are they going to do?”

“Collect the Colonel. Apparently they want him badly.”

Biggles sat down. “Tell us about it,” he requested, weakly.

There, on the edge of the airfield, while the troops went about their business, Ginger explained. He told of his landing at Kutaradja, and how, leaving the damaged Dakota, he had gone on to Kuala Lumpur in the Otter, to find there the signal from the Air Commodore.

“I hadn’t a clue as to who this General Cotter was, how he came into the picture or what he intended to do. I suppose there was no need for the Chief to go into all that. I just obeyed orders and waited. He arrived this morning, with these machines and a small army. I introduced myself and he put me wise. It was all really straightforward. Your guess wasn’t far out.”

“What guess?”

“About the Colonel being a soldier. He was a major in the U.S. Army in the Pacific War against the Japs. Later, he became a paymaster in the Korean War. It seems he got in some sort of mess over money and skipped with the regimental pay. After a while, when he couldn’t be found, it was thought he must have slipped through the Iron Curtain. But they hadn’t forgotten him, and when the Air Commodore sent those snapshots round to the American Embassy, in London, they must have really got cracking. Apparently a radio signal was sent to American Headquarters in Formosa to pick up the Colonel, collecting one of us at Kuala Lumpur to act as guide. I happened to be there and that was that. The General pushed me in with his lot and we came straight on. Is the Colonel still here? I know he didn’t get away in the yacht because as we came in I could see it had been burnt out. Was that you?”

“Bertie.” Biggles pointed. “There’s the Colonel now. They’ve got him. They’re taking him over to the General. Where did you leave the Otter?”

“Kuala.”

“In that case we’d better ask the General to give us a lift out of this and drop us off there. Let’s go over.”

Together they walked across the blackened airstrip to where the General was giving orders.

* * * * *

That, as far as Biggles and his party were concerned, was the end of the story.

Leaving a party on the island to check up on the stores and equipment which by an oversight had been left there, the Globemasters returned to their base, taking the Colonel with them and dropping Biggles at Kuala Lumpur on the way. After a clean up, some food and a night's rest, it only remained to fly home and report.

The Colonel was sent home for trial, and now has ample time to reflect on mistakes which, it was his boast, he never made. With his removal from the scene, the gang, as Biggles had predicted, broke up and dispersed its several ways. The stores were removed from the island, which soon reverted to its original state, the only indications of its sinister occupations being some mouldering hutments, two metal airframes fast becoming overgrown, and the rusty skeleton of a yacht in the cove.

As the matter had passed out of the hands of the Air Police, and the true monsoon set in shortly after their departure, Biggles was not called upon to return to the island for evidence, so the opium he had been at pains to hide was allowed to rot. Nothing more was heard of the junk which presumably brought the drug to the island.

Some time later it was learned that Mr. Vandershon had recovered from his knife wound, so, as Biggles remarked, they had managed to make ends meet without any cause for self reproach.

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.

Cover and illustrations by Leslie Stead.

[The end of *Biggles Makes Ends Meet* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]