

Biggles

TAKES CHARGE

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



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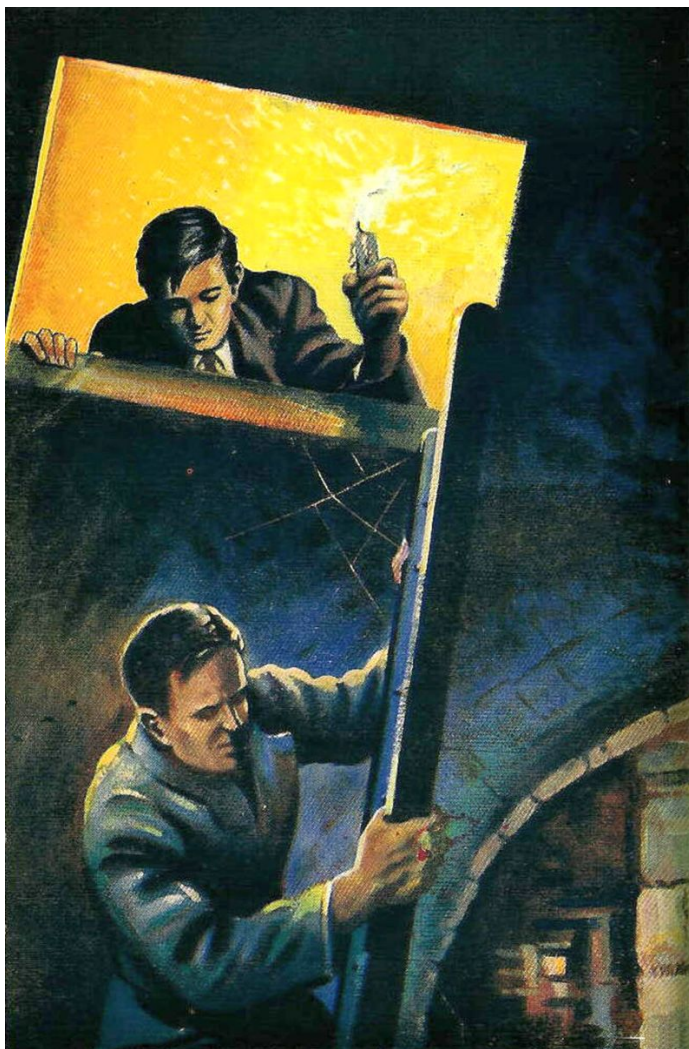
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Marcel held up the candle to show a narrow brick-lined tunnel

BIGGLES TAKES CHARGE

A 'Biggles of the Air Police' Adventure



CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Leslie Stead

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PREFACE

A few words about La Sologne

FRANCE is a country of many parts, each having little resemblance to the others. The terrain is different, the people are different and the conditions of life are different. Most of these districts, which carry a general name but have no visible boundaries, are well known to tourists, notably the ever popular Riviera. Nothing could be more unlike than the Ile de France, with its plains rolling away to the horizon, and the towering Pyrenees.

But unless the voyager has some specific reason for going there, or happens to find himself on the great highway known as Route Nationale 20, it is unlikely that he will hear of La Sologne. Even in that event he will little suspect what lies on either side of the road, for hundreds of square miles of forest, swamp and jungle, are not what he would expect to find in the heart of a country wherein agriculture is a basic industry.

To paint a pen portrait of this strange land of nearly a million and a half acres will not be easy, but we must try, for the reader should know something of it from the outset. Apart from being a land of moods, La Sologne takes care that you do not see all her face at one time. At every turn the scene is different, yet there is no particular view to remember. Indeed, from La Ferté St Aubin in the north (on the map you will find it about twenty-five miles south of Orleans) to Vierzon in the south, a matter of roughly forty miles, the traveller by road may think the countryside monotonous. Actually, it is one of the wildest, and for that reason for some people one of the most fascinating, stretches of country in Western Europe.

For the most part La Sologne is true forest, with stands of oak, chestnut, birch, fir and pine. The ground underfoot may be arid, supporting a tangle of heather, sometimes waist high, or it may be a reedy swamp extending for miles. There are jungles of scrub and undergrowth that are literally impenetrable. Everywhere trailing brambles drag on the feet. Scattered over the whole area are lakes, large and small, more than a thousand of them, dark, solitary, tranquil, fed by furtive-looking streams that glide mysterious courses through the labyrinth. Over all hangs a brooding silence that seems to fall from the sky, and at sunset creates a haunting, often sinister, atmosphere.

This is not to say that so vast a tract of land is uninhabited. On the main road that cuts through it like a knife from north to south there are one or two small towns and villages, and on either side of it you will find an occasional farmer scratching a living in a clearing; for the soil is poor, and in recent years a great many of these homesteads have been abandoned. Apart from the diehards fighting their losing battle with nature, the only man you might meet, except in the shooting season, would be a forester or a gamekeeper. The visitor might walk all day long, as has the writer, without seeing a living soul or hearing sound of one. A man seeking solitude will certainly find it here.

For the bird-watcher it is a paradise, but let him beware of snakes, one species of which is venomous. The lizards are harmless, as are most of the wild creatures that have here found a safe retreat; and that includes the great deer as well as the smaller roe. An exception can be the *sanglier*, the wild boar, an ugly beast that can weigh up to hundreds of pounds and has tusks that would rip a man to pieces should he fall foul of one in a nasty mood. But even the *sanglier*, left alone, is not to be feared. By day he retires to the thickest jungle, and there, unless disturbed, he is content to remain until nightfall, when he emerges to foray for food. Upset or wounded, like all his species, he can be a devil incarnate.

In the autumn hunting seasons La Sologne is the Mecca of sportsmen, for game abounds—pheasant, partridge, woodcock, snipe, wild duck, and the like. There are fish, too, in the lakes—enough to satisfy the most ambitious angler. Areas of ground are rented by those who can afford them, and this, in the 19th century (when men had money to spend) produced what at first seems a startling paradox in the form of hunting lodges of a size and splendour seldom found elsewhere—mansions of forty, fifty, or even eighty bedrooms. Some are still occupied; others are empty and have fallen into disrepair, with roses, long untended, fighting a hopeless battle with the weeds.

How did this wild place come into existence? Standing within the forest with the smell of rotting leaves in the nostrils, a buzzard circling overhead and a fox slinking across a glade, one has a feeling that this was how much of Europe must have looked ten thousand years ago. It is said that during the wars of the Middle Ages, and after, when the land was a prey for marauding gangs of disbanded soldiery, the people who dwelt here—those who had not been murdered—fled, leaving the ground to go back to swamp and forest; and since that time the huge sum of money that would be necessary to drain it and restore it to cultivation has not been available. So it remains as the

visitor will find it to-day, a land which Nature has won back from men in spite of their machines.

The men who lived in the region during the Dark Ages have left their marks, although these are fast disappearing. One comes upon crumbling, overgrown ruins; fortified, moated sites that once were castles, and even churches. Old foresters whisper darkly of underground passages, too. But the hand of death and decay has fallen heavily on these relics of a forgotten past, and sympathetic nature is fast burying them in a shroud of moss and ivy. Even the rabbits have gone, wiped out by the deadly myxomatosis; and how many there must have been may be judged from the fact that at one time the district exported three million a year. Now the burrows, like so many of the homes, are empty.

La Sologne has had more recent troubles, and if one other thing was needed to complete the atmosphere of tragedy and chill the heart of the visitor it is there. Graves. Graves, sometimes solitary, sometimes in long rows. Little white crosses, everywhere. Usually there is just a name, or names, and below, those significant words that speak for themselves: *Mort pour la Patrie: Marts pour la Liberté de leur Pays:* or, *Morts pour la Résistance*. The visitor will come upon this melancholy harvest of war everywhere, in the woods, the fields, or by the roadside. Under each cross lies a Maquisard, one of the boys or girls (many were students) who refused to be conscripted into Hitler's forces. As one enters La Ferté St Aubin in the north, by the roadside lie forty-five.

La Sologne, by reason of its nature, became a hiding-place, during the occupation of France by Germany, for the Maquis, as they were called, or the Résistance. When they were caught they were shot out of hand. The German method employed to find them was to infiltrate a collaborator into the forest. He would pretend to be a Maquisard, or an escaped prisoner, and having been received by the boys and girls in hiding would later slink away and betray them. To such base treachery can human beings sink. Did I say human? Inhuman would be a better word. So their victims were shot, peasant, priest and pupil, men, women and children whose only crime was patriotism. Many died shouting defiance at their murderers, and to-day, should you pass that way, you may see where they lie. There are British names among them. But times are changing, and perhaps these things are best forgotten.

One need not be too depressed by this, for as an old Maquisard told the author simply, but for this sacrifice how would we know of their courage?

Courage of the highest order was needed by these Davids to defy the invading Goliath.

These are not the only thought-provoking things the visitor may find in that strangely beautiful, sometimes gay and sometimes sad, often menacing, always lonely, usually silent area of France that is called La Sologne.

One final note. The events narrated in the following pages occurred some years ago, but for certain good reasons which the reader may guess it was thought desirable at the time to withhold them from publication.

W. E. JOHNS

At La Sologne,
1955

CHAPTER 1

CHATEAU GRANDBULON

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT THE HONOURABLE ALGERNON LACEY, D.F.C., R.A.F. (retired), stopped his car for the second time in five minutes and with a gloved hand wiped away the snow that clogged his windscreen wipers. The frown that furrowed his forehead deepened as he returned to his seat and peered into the whirling flakes which, under a darkening sky, reduced visibility to a few yards. Telling himself that he must have been mad to attempt the trip—for the weather forecast had been ominous—he switched on his headlights, but finding they did nothing to improve matters turned them off again.

As the car crawled on in first gear he found comfort in two redeeming factors. The road, N.20, like most French roads, cut across the countryside on a line as straight as the flight of an arrow; and with the little town of Salbris behind him he knew he must be nearing his destination. What he would find on reaching it was a question open to doubt, but he had no fears on that score. Even if he found the Chateau Grandbulon unoccupied the gamekeeper would be in his cottage nearby. At least, so he had been told. Failing that, he had a key.

The little village that was his next landmark emerged reluctantly from the gloom astride the road, the dilapidated houses looking even more poverty-stricken than is so commonly the case in remote rural France. Not a soul was in sight, although that, considering the weather, was no matter for wonder. Lowering the side window for a clearer view he went on, driving ever more slowly, watching for the second turning on the left which he had been told to take. The blizzard seemed to be getting worse with a rising wind lifting the snow already fallen to dance in swirling eddies with that which still fell. That such weather could occur, in early spring, so far south, astonished him. But he had come too far to turn back now.

The opening which he sought appeared as a narrow break between drooping firs standing shoulder to shoulder. Into it he swung the car to find himself on a track rather than road. But of that he had been warned. Only nine more kilometres, he told himself.

The trees now served a useful purpose, for the track being under snow which was beginning to pile into drifts he found it easier to keep straight by looking up and following the slightly less dark line between the inky silhouettes on either side. Night fell. The track seemed endless, the forest seemed endless and the snow inexhaustible. He saw no one, met no vehicle and encountered no animal. Only he, he told himself bitterly, had been fool enough to be caught out on such a night. One thing was certain. If he managed to reach the house, whether or not there was anyone there he would be benighted in it.

His fear now was that he might overshoot the accommodation drive that gave access to the building that was his objective. The third turning on the right had been his instructions.

So this, he mused, was La Sologne. He had chosen a fine moment to introduce himself. At least the car kept going, which was something to be thankful for. Half a dozen times he had to get out to clear jammed windscreen wipers.

He saw, and passed, the first turning. By the time he had reached the second, which was some distance on, he was becoming worried, for the snow was now some five or six inches deep and he wondered how long it would be before it brought him to a halt. Another anxiety was the narrowness of the tree-lined track, which would prevent him from turning should he go too far; and in such conditions there could be no question of travelling in reverse.

In point of fact he nearly did go too far, and it was only the solid black bulk of a cottage that caused him to step on his brake just in time. Getting out, car-torch in hand, he confirmed that the black object was a cottage, standing a few yards back from the road at the junction of a lane that came in at right angles. Groping about at the corner he found the signpost which he had been told was there. Sweeping it clear of snow, behind a pointing finger he picked out the words Chateau Grandbulon, which told him, to his great satisfaction, that he had arrived. The cottage could only be that of Pierre Sondray, the gamekeeper.

He advanced to the door, for should Pierre prove to be at home there would be no point in going on to the chateau. Not a glimmer of light showed anywhere from door or window which closer inspection revealed had been

shuttered. It looked as if no one was at home. However, he beat on the door with his fist. There was no answer. Clearly, the keeper was not within, and turning away, in front of what had been a few square yards of garden he stumbled over the reason.

It was a cross. A rough, home-made wooden cross, painted white. His heart missed a beat. A cross! What was it doing there? He guessed the answer even before he cleared it of snow and turned the light of his torch on the crossbar. 'Pierre Sondray—Marie Sondray' he read, his lips unconsciously forming the words. '1944. Morts Pour la Patrie.' *Mort Pour la Patrie?* A cold hand seemed to settle on his heart as he realized that this fateful epitaph could have only one meaning. Pierre and his wife Marie had died for their country. How? Why here? For a moment Algy's brain whirled as the significance of the date struck him. They had died together, and together they had been buried near their own front door.

He drew a deep breath. Then his lips came together in a hard line. So the enemy had been here—caught them hiding Maquis, or suspected them of it, which would be enough to seal their doom. Or perhaps they had been helping escaped prisoners, as many did, and so had paid the penalty.

For a moment Algy stood with bowed head, one hand resting on the simple monument which in few words said so much; stood while something seemed to stick in his throat, heedless of the snowflakes that settled on his eyelashes as if to veil the scene. Why he should be so strangely affected he did not know, for he had never known the gamekeeper or his wife. Perhaps the loneliness, or the snow that lay over the humble graves like a white sheet, helped to induce a feeling of personal loss.

Pulling himself together, deep in depressing thoughts he made his way slowly back to the car. Even as he reached it the headlights flickered and went out, presumably the result of a 'short' in the ignition caused by accumulated snow. Well, there was nothing he could do about it until daylight, he told himself resignedly.

The car stood foul of the road, so having at some risk moved it nearer to the side he prepared to walk the rest of the way, knowing he had not far to go. He had nothing to carry, not even a handbag, for his intention had been, after having achieved his purpose, to return to Paris forthwith. There was now no possibility of getting back.

The walk to the chateau was nothing much in the way of distance but it was one to make him glad it was not longer. Knee deep in drifted snow he blundered over fallen branches and often had to tear his legs from unseen briars or brambles. Without the torch, he perceived, he would have been

hopelessly lost. However, after a twenty minutes' struggle he collided with a structure that turned out to be a stone terrace, and this told him that he had arrived. Not without difficulty he found the steps leading to the top, and there before him loomed what was obviously the main entrance to the building. He could see little of it, but boarded-up windows told him what he really needed to know. There was no one in residence, not even a caretaker, or the boards would have been removed.

Finding the bell chain he pulled it, more as a matter of courtesy than in the expectation of a response. There was no response. He tried again, and heard the hollow jangle of a bell in the distance. There was no other sound. For a minute he waited, crouching against the doorpost to escape the broad white flakes that still fell in silent procession. When no one came he took from his pocket a large, old-fashioned iron key, inserted it, turned it with an effort, and with another effort pushed open the heavy door on protesting hinges. Removing the key he put it in the lock on the inside and closed the door. He did not trouble to lock it, seeing no reason to do so. There was no one inside to go out, and it seemed highly improbable that there was anyone outside who would wish to come in.

Standing there, just inside the door, having brushed the worst of the snow from his jacket, with the beam of the torch he explored his immediate surroundings. What he saw was what he expected, only rather more so. It was not the sort of place he would have chosen to pass the night; but there had been no choice, and he was in no case to be particular.

He had arrived, he perceived, in the entrance hall. For that he was prepared, but he had not anticipated anything on so grand a scale. It appeared to occupy half the front of the house. So far did it extend on either side of him that his torch only just succeeded in probing the distant shadows.

Facing him was a great fireplace, flanked by leather-covered arm-chairs of appropriate size. From above it the glazed eyes of an antlered head stared down at him unwinkingly in an expression of accusing reproach. As the circle of light thrown by the torch moved slowly along the wall it revealed more heads; deer, large and small; foxes, badgers, and last but not least, a mighty boar, long curving tusks gleaming, its lips parted in an eternal snarl of defiance. Nearby, a stuffed owl regarded it with startled wonder. There were pictures of the chase, too. A war-scarred *sanglier* led his family through a sunset-tinted glade in the forest; a fox stood astride the bloodstained remains of a pheasant, ears pricked, alert for danger; a mighty stag drank cautiously from a pool dappled with the light of a rising sun. Old guns, duelling pistols, swords and a hunting horn, had been arranged in a

pattern between the pictures. The skins and hides of long dead animals rugged the hearth. A broad flight of stone stairs swept up to the next floor.

But the most useful objects in the room Algy only discovered when he walked forward to the fireplace. These were a pair of candlesticks on the overmantel, each holding a few inches of candle. He lost no time in lighting them, and was grateful for the feeble yellow glow they provided. Taking one, he looked around for electric switches, but was neither surprised nor disappointed to find none. No matter. The candles would provide all the light he needed. He blew one out to conserve the meagre illumination.

The next thing, he told himself, was to start a fire. He was not particularly cold, but the room had the damp, musty smell of long disuse, and struck chill. There was a litter of paper in the hearth, and as he stuffed it between the iron bars he observed with mixed feelings of resentment and unreality that some of it was German military orders. So the Boches had been here too, he soliloquized. Well, they had gone, and it would be a pleasure to burn these reminders of their visit.

He found kindling sticks and logs in a small room towards the rear of the house. Well loaded, his footsteps echoing disconcertingly, he returned to the fireplace and dropped his collection on the hearth, startling himself with the crash they made in the eerie silence. However, he soon had a fire going, and with the dry sticks burning briskly, filling the room with flickering shadows, he prepared to make himself comfortable for the night. This called for little effort. He merely threw his cap and gloves on the table and pulled two chairs close together in front of the fire so that he could sit in one and put his feet in the other. He might have gone farther and fared worse, he told himself, as he sank back and lit a cigarette. He hoped the car would start all right in the morning. His only regret was that his journey had been in vain. But still, no harm had been done. When he departed in the morning things would be exactly the same as when he had left Paris: would be the same, in fact, as far as he was concerned, as they had been for nearly ten years. After all, he consoled himself, it had only been a whim, and perhaps a sense of duty prompted by a guilty conscience, that had brought him to the place.

Tossing the stub of his cigarette into the fire he closed his eyes to court sleep.

What is it about an empty house that plays on the nerves to prevent them from fully relaxing? In a small house this sense of wakeful tension may be hardly perceptible, but in a house of size most people are conscious of it. And the larger the house the more acute is this disconcerting feeling likely to be. Algy, to his annoyance, now became aware of it. He could not imagine

why, but he found himself listening. For what? Certainly he was afraid of nothing. What was there to be afraid of? The mouse that he could hear gnawing at some woodwork? The creak of shrinking or expanding furniture? Why do such sounds become magnified when one is alone?

‘Stop it, you little beast,’ shouted Algy, hurling a stick at where he judged the mouse to be. The noise stopped. But by the time he had rearranged himself the rodent was hard at work again. With a sigh of resignation he pulled the collar of his coat about his ears to muffle the irritating sound. But in spite of himself he remained alert, and as the sleep he sought became ever more elusive he abandoned the quest and opened his eyes.

A shadow flashing across the candle flame, the draught putting it out, half brought him to his feet, but he sank back again with a sigh when he saw it was only a bat, wheeling in erratic flight, presumably lured falsely from its lair by the unaccustomed light and warmth. Unable to do anything to discourage it, he watched it, and presently with satisfaction in the firelight saw it come to rest on the massive head above the mantelpiece. He did not trouble to relight the candle.

As so often happens in the dead of night when sleep refuses to be won, his mind began to run on thoughts which in the light of day can quickly be dismissed. He remembered Pierre the gamekeeper, under the snow by his own front door, and all unbidden the picture of that last grim scene took shape before his eyes to anger and dismay him. Questions for which he could find no answer perplexed his tired brain. What had the man done to deserve such a dismal fate? At the worst he could only have been guilty of what any man of courage would do. What purpose had been served by the cutting off of his simple life? The Germans had gone. Those whose hands had done the deed had probably forgotten the incident long ago. Perhaps everybody had forgotten the man who had given all he had to give—his life. His friends may have put the cross there lest they too should forget. And now, the futility of it all. The wicked, wanton, useless waste, the heartless cruelty. . . .

Telling himself that these morbid reflections were serving no good purpose, Algy got up, shook himself, and felt for another cigarette. But before the case was in his hand he had spun round, his purpose forgotten, as without warning the door burst open to admit a flurry of snow and a small slim figure which, having nearly fallen, returned swiftly to the door, closed it, and turned the key in the lock. This done the visitor turned, and back to door, breathing heavily, stared at Algy with wide, affrighted eyes.

Algy, his startled brain recovering with the speed necessary for an air pilot who has hopes of survival, stared back; and his nerves relaxed when in the ruby glow of the dying fire he saw that the newcomer was a boy of about fifteen or sixteen years of age.

‘*Excusez, monsieur,*’ gasped the boy, and would have fled had not Algy called him back.

‘Come in and make yourself at home,’ invited Algy, smiling, and speaking of course in French. ‘What are you doing out at this hour on a night like this?’

The boy advanced slowly, shedding snow from his head and shoulders. ‘I saw a car at the end of the drive,’ he explained. ‘Then I saw the light of your fire through the cracks between the boards. I had to find shelter. I am sorry. . . .’

‘Nothing to be sorry about,’ returned Algy cheerfully. ‘I’m glad to have company. Sit down and warm yourself. Sorry I can offer you no other hospitality, but the truth is I’m an intruder here myself.’

The boy shook the wet beret he wore and sank limply in the proffered chair. ‘May I ask the name of this house, monsieur?’ he requested.

‘This,’ answered Algy, ‘is the Chateau Grandbulon.’

CHAPTER 2

A FUGITIVE FROM FEAR

As the boy sat silent, staring into the last dying embers of the fire while he recovered his composure, Algy regarded him critically. He saw a pale, delicate-looking youth, with regular features that are sometimes called refined. His eyes were large and dark, his hair straight and black. A broad forehead with ears set well back suggested intelligence. Something, it may have been rather prominent cheekbones, gave Algy an impression that he was not French—anyway, by ancestry. He looked more as if he had come from farther East. His general expression was one of sadness, but that may have been induced by exhaustion, physical weakness resulting from undernourishment. His clothes were shabby, but made of good quality material.

Having concluded his inspection Algy leaned forward to put some more wood on the fire, a movement that brought a quick request from the boy not to do so.

‘Why not?’ asked Algy, in some surprise.

‘Because the light might be seen from outside.’

‘Is there any reason why the light shouldn’t be seen from outside?’

‘Yes, sir. And for the same reason I must ask you to modulate your voice so that we are not overheard.’

‘On a night like this there is surely little chance of that,’ returned Algy, in a voice that expressed astonishment.

‘You don’t understand.’

‘I certainly do not! Are you afraid of something—of somebody?’ Algy looked at the boy curiously.

‘Yes,’ was the frank answer. ‘Monsieur is, I think, an Englishman,’ added the boy, looking up.

Algy raised his eyebrows. ‘How did you guess that?’

‘Your clothes, your manner, and by your accent.’

‘From which I gather you have been to England.’

‘I was at school there for some time.’

‘In which case let us speak in English. It may be that I can express myself better in my own language.’

‘As monsieur wishes,’ returned the boy quietly, in perfect English.

‘You haven’t yet answered my question about what you were doing out in the forest on a night like this,’ reminded Algy, curiously, and perhaps a little suspiciously.

‘I came to escape from—the storm,’ asserted the boy. ‘I think you must be here for the same reason.’

‘Not exactly,’ replied Algy. ‘I had a purpose in coming here, but finding no one at home I took the liberty of inviting myself to spend the night here.’

‘Was the house not locked up?’

‘It was.’

‘Then how did you get in?’

‘I had a key to the front door.’

The boy frowned. ‘Forgive me if I seem impertinent, worrying you with these questions, but may I ask how you came to have a key? I have a reason for asking. To me it is a matter of great importance.’

‘The key,’ returned Algy slowly, looking hard at his questioner, ‘was given to me by the owner of the chateau.’

The boy looked up sharply. ‘Recently?’

‘No. A long time ago.’

‘Ah! I was afraid you would say that. But you must know him.’

‘Say, rather, I knew him.’

‘Would you care to tell me the name of the gentleman who gave you the key?’

Algy smiled whimsically. ‘You certainly are a lad for asking questions. They suggest to me that you did not arrive here quite by accident, either. Nor did you enter simply to escape from the storm.’

The boy looked embarrassed. 'I must confess that when I said that I told only half the truth,' he admitted. 'I came to La Sologne to find this house and I have been looking for it for three days. I knew the name of the chateau, and that it was somewhere south of Salbris, but no more. It is terrible country to find anything, even a house as large as this. To-night I found it by accident. First I came upon a car.'

'That must have been mine,' put in Algy.

'Stopping to look at it I found the signpost that points the way here. That is the truth. Now will you please tell me the name of the gentleman who gave you the key?'

'It was given to me by a gentleman named Monsieur Zarrill,' informed Algy.

'Did he give it to you here?'

'No.'

'Then it would probably be in Paris or Monte Carlo, for he spent most of his time in one or the other.'

'As a matter of fact it was in Monte Carlo. It is evident that you know this gentleman.'

'He is my cousin. Or perhaps I should say *was*.'

'You seem to be in some doubt about it.'

'I am. He may have been assassinated.'

Algy stared. He did not overlook the use of the word assassinated rather than murdered. 'The word assassinated has a political significance,' he murmured meaningly.

'That was why I used it,' admitted the boy, frankly. 'You see, sir,' he went on, 'Zarrill was not my cousin's only name. He was the Grand Duke Boris Nicolas Zarrill Detziner-Romanov, if that means anything to you.'

'It does not,' confessed Algy, who continued to stare. 'I found him a charming man. Who on earth would want to kill him?'

'The same men who will kill me if they catch me, and they are not far away,' answered the boy wearily. 'That was why I locked the door. Should anyone come I implore you not to open it, for if you do, and they find you with me, they will kill you too.'

'You may be quite sure, my disconcerting young friend, that I shall not tamely submit to execution,' asserted Algy grimly.

'They have pistols.'

‘It so happens that I, too, have a pistol.’

It was the boy’s turn to stare. ‘How remarkable. For what purpose?’

‘I sometimes need one in the course of my business.’

‘It must be a strange business.’

‘Not at all. You see, I happen to be a policeman.’

‘You don’t look like one, or behave like one,’ stated the boy naïvely.

‘I’m gratified to know it,’ returned Algy, smiling. ‘Perhaps it’s because I’m not an ordinary policeman. I don’t direct the traffic—at least, not on the ground.’

‘Where, then?’

‘In the air.’

‘A flying policeman!’

‘Exactly.’

‘That must be fun.’

‘I wouldn’t exactly call it fun,’ murmured Algy dryly. ‘It is sometimes quite uncomfortable. But let us forget that for the moment. As a sensible fellow you will, I am sure, forgive me if I say I find your story a little difficult to swallow.’

‘It is true.’

‘You take it very calmly.’

‘One soon becomes accustomed to the idea of expecting every day to be the last,’ averred the boy with studied nonchalance. ‘Now would you be so kind as to tell me all you know of my cousin? When did you last see him?’

‘I have not seen him since before the war, since 1939 to be precise,’ said Algy, seriously, for although the boy’s story strained his credulity he felt he was telling the truth. ‘It was at Monte Carlo. We found ourselves drawn as partners in the international tennis tournaments at the Country Club. We got on well, and later saw a lot of each other, swimming, playing golf and so on.’

‘Why did he give you the key of Chateau Grandbulon?’

‘We discovered we both liked shooting. He told me he had a hunting lodge at La Sologne. I told him I’d never heard of the place, whereupon he invited me to look at it, and perhaps join him there in October for the pheasant shooting. He said I might even get a chance at a *sangler*. However, it didn’t work out like that. The day before we had arranged to travel north together he came to me looking worried and said he was having to leave at

once on urgent and important business. But that needn't prevent me from going to La Sologne alone. As the gamekeeper and his wife might be away on their holidays when I got there he gave me the key of the Chateau, saying I could return it later to an address which he would send me. I never saw him or heard of him again. Nor did I see La Sologne at that time, for the war came suddenly and I had to rush straight home.'

The boy nodded lugubriously. 'It must have been secret intelligence of the war that called him away.'

'The war ended and I still had the key,' continued Algy. 'No letter came, so I was forced to the conclusion that either he had been killed or had forgotten all about me. The other day, when I had occasion to come to Paris on business, I remembered the key and put it in my pocket. I made inquiries, but it seemed that no one had ever heard of Monsieur Zarrill.'

'That is understandable. He did not keep any name for long. He changed it as often as it seemed necessary.'

'I did all I could,' resumed Algy. 'I telephoned the Chateau but could get no reply. Then it struck me that as I had nothing in particular to do I would come down and give the key to the gamekeeper, and perhaps see something of La Sologne at the same time. So I hired a car and came, and you have seen the sort of weather I ran into. I found the keeper's house. There is—er—no one there, so leaving the car I walked on—and here I am. In the morning, weather permitting, I shall return to Paris. And now, as association with you appears to have put me in peril of my life, perhaps you will be good enough to furnish me with some details of your own affairs, so that should these assassins arrive I shall know what the fuss is about.' Algy's tone was half bantering, half sceptical.

'I will do that,' agreed the boy, with such a depth of feeling that the humour faded from Algy's eyes. 'You will understand why I am, and always have been, a fugitive, when I tell you that my cousin Boris is heir to the throne of the ancient kingdom of Moldavia, in Eastern Europe. While he lived, therefore, he would be a danger to the revolutionaries who have seized his palace and usurped his authority.'

'And where do you come in?' Algy wanted to know.

'In the event of my cousin's death, I, Prince Karl of Moldavia, would be next in line of succession.'

'I see,' said Algy, slowly, serious now. 'Moldavia is part of Russia, isn't it?'

‘Practically. Actually, my ancestral home is in Rumania, near the frontier, but as the whole territory is under the dominion of the Soviet Union it comes to the same thing. When the trouble burst upon us, Boris, fortunately for him, was abroad, and thus escaped death. His father was murdered, as was mine. My mother, with a faithful manservant named Yakoff, fled across the Black Sea to Turkey, but later went to Paris, where I was born. Our enemies never relaxed their efforts to find us, for what purpose you can guess. Their spies located us in Paris, but before they could strike we flew to friends in England, where we remained until my mother died. After a little while I returned with Yakoff to Paris, hoping to have news of Boris, for we had long been out of touch with each other. I had to know how matters stood. Letters would have been dangerous, even had I known where to send them, and although in France and England I was known simply as Charles Zarrill. I have a French passport and *carte d’identité* in that name. Yakoff hoped, through friends in secret contact with Moldavia, to find out if cousin Boris was dead or alive.’

‘How did you manage for money over this period?’

‘Mother had some jewels. Yakoff sold them one at a time as it became necessary. There is none left now.’

‘Have you any hope of recovering your throne?’

‘None whatever.’

‘Then why do your enemies continue to pursue you?’

‘There are two reasons. The first is obvious. While we live the Royalist Party in Moldavia will continue to exist. The other reason is less important—at any rate, to me. I am the bearer of a secret which the present rulers of Moldavia would give much to possess. We need not discuss it.’

‘How did it come about that you arrived here to-night, Charles,’ inquired Algy, sympathetically.

‘It came about like this,’ explained Charles. ‘In Paris Yakoff took a room for us in the Hotel Pont-Royal while he proceeded with his intelligence work, and, as I suspect, look for a job, for money was running low. It was a front room. One day, about a month ago, as we stood looking down into the street he turned very white and snatched me away. He then pointed out two men who stood watching. They were, he said, assassins. One, a short, thick-set, middle-aged man with a wide mouth and a tuft of beard on his chin, was a Moldavian named Prutski. He didn’t know the name of the other, a rather tall, grey-faced, military-looking man, but he knew him to be an important secret service agent from behind the Iron Curtain. He told me to remember

their faces in case anything happened to him. Why he said that I don't know, but in view of what happened I'm sure he suspected that he was in danger every time he went out.

'That night, after dark, we moved to the Hotel St James in the Rue St Honoré. A week later Yakoff was knocked down and killed by a car in the Place de la Concorde. It might have been an accident, but I don't think so. Poor old Yakoff was murdered. After that I was alone in the hotel. One day last week I stood looking down into the street, wondering what I should do, when I saw those two same dreadful men standing in a doorway on the other side of the road. I confess I fell into a panic.'

'Couldn't you have called the police?'

Charles shook his head sadly. 'Police can do little in cases of this sort. A crime must be committed before they can act, and as on this occasion the crime would be my death, I could see no object in calling on the police for help. Now, as you may, or may not, know, the Hotel St James stands back to back with the Hotel d'Albany, which has its entrance in the Rue de Rivoli. There is a connecting passage. Without stopping to pack, without paying my bill even, through this I ran into the Rue de Rivoli. There I made up my mind that there was only one thing to do, and that was risk all in a last attempt to find Boris. I knew of only two places where he might be, the Chateau Grandbulon in La Sologne or in his apartment in Monte Carlo. La Sologne was the nearer. I had just enough money to buy a second-hand bicycle—for I daren't go near the railway stations, where there were certain to be watchers. On the bicycle I set out for La Sologne. In Salbris I stopped at a café for a cup of coffee and some sandwiches. As I was coming out a car went past. In it were those two same awful men. They didn't see me. No need to wonder where they were going. My heart sank when I realized that they knew Boris had a property in La Sologne. But I went on. It was no use turning back. The trouble was, as I have told you, although I knew the name Chateau Grandbulon, I didn't know exactly where it was, and La Sologne covers a wide area. For three days I have wandered in the forest like a lost dog, not daring to use the roads. To-night, just as I had given up hope, I found the signpost. Now, sir, you know why I am here. Boris is not here. I am lost. If you are wise you will——'

'Run away and leave you to your fate?'

'That's what I was going to say.'

'Have you forgotten that I am a policeman?'

'No. But you are an Englishman and this is France.'

‘I have colleagues in France. Tell me this. Since you have been in La Sologne have you seen your pursuers?’

‘Twice. Once in a car on the road. Yesterday I saw them standing under a tree, watching the road, not far from here.’

‘Waiting for you to arrive.’

‘Or Boris. What other reason?’

‘What are you going to do next? You can’t go on like this.’

‘I must. What else can I do?’ Charles made a gesture of helplessness. ‘I have no money, not even for food. Which is all the more infuriating because really I’m very rich.’

‘What do you mean? You can’t be poor *and* rich.’

‘Just now I told you I possessed a secret. You may as well know what it is, and that will complete my story. When the invaders were on the point of entering Moldavia the most precious of our family jewels were carried away under cover of night and hidden. Of the three people concerned, two, my father and Boris’s father, are dead beyond all doubt. The third member of the party, our head groom, a man named Levescu, is also probably dead by now, even if he survived the revolution.’

‘How many people are there to-day who know where these jewels were hidden?’

‘Not counting Levescu, two; Boris and myself. Yakoff knew; it was he who told me; but he’s dead. Poor old Yakoff. He was faithful to the end.’

Algy nodded. ‘Now I understand why your enemies would like to get hold of you—alive. Do you think Boris may have attempted to recover the jewels?’

Charles considered the question. ‘It is possible, I don’t know. That would be like him. He always was fearless. I know he would like to have the jewels, not so much for himself as to provide money for our friends and supporters at home. But if he tried, he failed.’

‘How would you know that?’

‘Had he succeeded Yakoff would have heard of it through his intelligence channels. Boris too, I’m sure, would have found some way of letting me know. With money one can do anything.’

‘Quite a lot,’ conceded Algy. ‘You believe the jewels are still in the original hiding-place?’

‘I do. Had they been found the news would have leaked out, certainly in Moldavia, in which case, as I say, Yakoff would have heard of it. The jewels

would be sold, and I doubt if things of such value could be put on the market without some mention being made in the newspapers.’

‘Don’t you think it would be a good idea if you made a bargain with your enemies—the secret of the jewels in return for your life?’

‘Never! I’d rather die than they should soil them with their dirty hands.’ Charles uttered a low, scornful laugh. ‘It wouldn’t work, anyway. Evidently you don’t know these people. Their word is as fragile as a bubble, and their promises as easily broken. Having secured the jewels they would strive all the harder to kill me, to still my tongue for ever.’

‘Tell me this,’ requested Algy. ‘It is a point I don’t quite understand. You say you came here hoping to find Boris. Why has he made no attempt to find you?’

‘Perhaps he has, assuming that he is still alive. But as neither of us dare use our full names in any sort of advertisement, which would have betrayed us to our enemies, you will see how hard it was for us to get together after losing contact. I hoped, and Yakoff hoped, to find him in Paris. We failed. So I came here.’

‘Did he know you used the name Zarrill?’

‘I think my mother would let him know that when I was a small boy.’

‘Why did you, and he, choose a name that was part of your real name, if it was so dangerous?’

‘Because it happens to be a very common name in my country. With Russian secret agents always on the watch for me there was another difficulty I had to face, and from this there was no escape. In all the male members of my family there was always a strong likeness. Yakoff told me that I grew more and more like cousin Boris.’

‘He told the truth,’ confirmed Algy. ‘I can see the resemblance now. You speak alike, too. When you first came in you reminded me of somebody, but for the moment, strange to say, I couldn’t think who it was.’

‘That likeness may one day cost me my life,’ said Charles, sadly.

Silence fell. The boy, with unseeing eyes, contemplated the last expiring sparks on a smouldering log. Algy drew pensively on a cigarette as if turning over in his mind what he had heard.

In so profound a hush a gentle scraping noise fell harshly on their ears, to bring both heads round sharply to face the door.

The handle was slowly being turned.

Charles turned to Algy, eyes from which all hope had departed.

Algy raised a warning finger to his lips. 'Go very quietly up the stairs and wait till I call you down,' he whispered. 'Make no sound. Keep your head. Have no fear. Leave this to me.'

Charles obeyed, departing with no more noise than a cloud passing across the face of the moon.

The door creaked as if pressure was being applied.

Algy tiptoed softly to it and listened.

From outside came a low murmur of voices.

CHAPTER 3

ALGY MAKES A WAGER

ALGY returned to his chair. He moved slowly, but his brain was racing; and he quickly reached a decision that he would do nothing if the visitors retired, as, finding the door locked, he thought they might. But in case they should force an entrance it would be as well to have a plan of action ready. Had he known at this juncture what he was presently to learn this might have been different from what it was. But he did not know, or even suspect.

There was little time for thought, but it was clear that one of two courses were open to him. The first was to refuse admission and guard the door if necessary by force of arms. That would admit he had something to hide, and, in fact, be in the nature of a declaration of war. The alternative was to allow the people outside to enter and pretend ignorance of their purpose, relying for success on that useful ally, bluff. This was the course he resolved to take.

Meanwhile there was no need to do anything. The initiative could be left to the enemy. What they would do, he thought, would depend on how much they knew. Had they seen Charles enter, or tracked his footprints in the snow to the door, it would be futile to pretend that he was not there, or that he could have entered without him being aware of it. But any footprints would, he hoped, have been erased by the storm.

Of course, reasoned Algy, there was always the chance that the visit might turn out to be a routine call to ascertain if anyone was there, as might be expected if the callers knew that the chateau was the property of Charles's cousin Boris. If they knew that, and knew also that Charles had headed for La Sologne, they would be safe in assuming that sooner or later they would catch him there. They might have been there before. They would certainly reckon that in such weather the boy would have to find shelter somewhere.

Algy looked at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. The time was nearly eleven, so there was no question of the men outside being neighbours making a social call. It rather looked as if Charles had been right. His enemies had reason for thinking he was in the building. What Algy did not know was that the snow had stopped, and the sky had cleared for a fine night. Had he known that he might have thought on different lines.

The next thing that happened took him by surprise. He had thought the men at the door would either ring for admission or go away. One of the two. They had, he knew, already ascertained that the door was locked.

That they had another plan was revealed when the key fell out of the lock on to the floor. So that was it! They had pushed out the key so that they could let themselves in with another, presumably a skeleton key.

Algy moved quickly. He lay back in his chair, feet in another, closed his eyes—or almost closed his eyes—and began breathing deeply as if he were asleep. Through half-closed lids he saw the door opening an inch at a time. He did not move. When the door was ajar he saw, silhouetted against a moonlit sky, a dark figure. It glided inside. Another followed. He saw the area of moonlight shrink as the door was closed, heard the key replaced in the lock. The hall was now in darkness but he could hear the two men moving stealthily towards him. Still he did not move, but continued to feign sleep with steady breathing, although his muscles were tensed for instant action.

The beam of a torch suddenly stabbed the darkness. It struck him square in the face. Involuntarily he started. Having moved, revealing that he was awake, he went on moving. Scrambling to his feet, as if violently awakened, he cried: ‘What is it? Who are you? Phew! *Mon Dieu, messieurs*, but you gave me a fright. If this is your house please pardon my intrusion, but I sought shelter from the storm in which I was in some danger of losing my life.’ He spoke in French.

So saying he struck a match and lit the candle nearest to him. This done, he turned, to receive what was perhaps the most bewildering shock in a career that had known many surprises. Nothing that he could have imagined would have so struck him all of a heap, as the saying is. Of the two men one was Prutski, easily recognizable from Charles’s description of him. The other was the man with whom, in their counter-espionage work, the Air Police had more than once been in collision: Erich von Stalhein, one time Hitler’s crack Intelligence agent, but latterly in the service of the masters of Eastern Germany.

Algy's lips parted in a gasp of astonishment that was genuine. Such a development, he told himself, was not to be believed. For a brief moment he really wondered if he had fallen asleep and was dreaming. The expression on von Stalhein's face told him that the ex-Prussian officer was just as shaken.

'Bless my soul!' he managed to get out. 'Von Stalhein! What on earth are *you* doing here?' There was no need for Algy to dissemble. Amazement nearly caused his voice to crack.

Von Stalhein stared back at him stonily, his blue eyes as cold and hard as ice. 'I might ask what are *you* doing here,' he returned, in a voice that had not quite recovered its usual imperturbable smoothness.

Algy, steadying himself as he recovered from the initial shock, smiled bleakly. 'On this occasion, strange to relate, I can tell you the simple truth. An event as remarkable as that should be worth remembering. I came down here this evening from Paris looking for a chap with whom I used to play tennis before the war.'

'Indeed! What was his name?'

'It's unlikely that you'd know him. A fellow named Zarrill.'

'Is Bigglesworth here?'

'No. But I told him what I was going to do.'

'Did you expect to find this man Zarrill here?'

'I had an open mind about it. Some time ago he invited me to help him shoot his pheasants and gave me a key to the house to enable me to get in should he be out when I arrived. I've had it ever since. As I say, being in Paris this afternoon and having nothing in particular to do I thought I'd run down. If Zarrill wasn't here I might get news of him. In any case I felt it was time to return the key.'

'A long way to come on the off-chance. Why not telephone to see if he was here?'

'As a matter of fact I did, but could get no reply.'

'Then who did you expect to find?'

'A housekeeper, perhaps. She might have been out when I phoned, shopping or something. Failing finding anyone in the chateau I reckoned on leaving the key with Sondray the gamekeeper. My car stuck in the snow outside his cottage where it still is. I discovered that some of your countrymen had already called on Sondray.'

The German frowned. 'Let us leave that out of it.'

‘I can well understand your desire to gloss over it,’ replied Algy cuttingly. ‘I walked on here, found no one at home, so having a key I let myself in to wait for an improvement in the weather.’

‘You say there was no one in the house when you got here?’

‘That’s what I said. I haven’t been upstairs. If you’re looking for someone go ahead, but don’t make too much noise because I’m trying to snatch a spot of sleep. You haven’t told me yet what you’re doing here—but let it pass. I couldn’t care less.’

‘Like you, I’m trying to make contact with someone I haven’t seen for some time.’

‘You chose a queer time to call.’

‘So did you.’

Algy smiled. ‘True enough. But I didn’t reckon on a blizzard at this time of the year. I expected to be back in Paris by now. I’ve no kit with me, not even a toothbrush.’

‘I take it that blue Citroën at the end of the drive is yours?’

‘It is—for the moment, anyway. I hired it in Paris. Another reason why I left it where it is was because the lights packed up on me. Don’t worry. I shall be away as soon as it’s light enough to see and you can have the place to yourself—if that’s how you want it.’

Von Stalhein’s lips curled superciliously. ‘You tell a plausible story, Lacey. Do you seriously expect me to believe it?’

Algy shrugged. ‘I don’t care two hoots whether you believe it or not, but it happens to be the truth. I don’t know why I bothered to tell you, knowing that you, judging everyone by yourself, wouldn’t believe it. That’s okay with me.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Since about six o’clock. If you have any doubt about that go and feel the radiator of my car. It should be stone cold.’

‘I have already felt it,’ answered von Stalhein suavely. ‘Have you had any other visitors?’

‘Visitors! Have a heart! Who but a lunatic or a thief would be out in the forest on a night like this?’ Algy grinned. ‘Present company excluded, of course. Now I’ve said my piece, how about you answering a few questions? What strange gust of wind brought *you* here, anyway? Let’s have the truth this time.’

‘I’ve told you. I happened to have some business in the district,’ answered Von Stalhein stiffly. ‘Like you I was caught in the storm. Seeing smoke coming from the chimney, my friend and I sought shelter. However the snow has passed and it is now a fine night.’

‘I didn’t hear you knock on the door,’ answered Algy casually. ‘I must have been asleep. I must also have forgotten to lock the door.’ Actually, he was mentally kicking himself for not thinking of the smoke. But then, he hadn’t realized that it had stopped snowing.

Von Stalhein said something to his companion in a language Algy did not understand, and having received a reply turned back to Algy. ‘My friend thinks you’re not telling the truth.’

Algy looked pained. ‘Oh, come now. What a suspicious fellow you are. Actually, I don’t care what he thinks, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Just to see how far your friend is prepared to back his opinion, I’ll bet you five thousand francs that what I’ve said is true, and prove it.’

‘How can you prove it?’

Algy pointed to the telephone on a side table. ‘There’s the phone,’ he said. ‘It’s still in order.’

‘How do you know?’ put in von Stalhein quickly.

‘Well, I assume it is. It was all right this morning, anyway, because as I’ve already told you I put a call through from Paris. No one answered, but I could hear the bell ringing.’

‘I see. Well?’

‘All we have to do is call Bigglesworth in London. With no prompting from me I’ll ask him to tell you exactly what I said when I phoned him this afternoon from the Sûreté. That was when I told him I was coming down here.’

‘You’re bluffing.’

‘Bluffing! What have I to bluff about? If there’s any bluffing it’s on your side—unless you’re scared to speak to Bigglesworth.’ Algy made a gesture of resignation. ‘After all, how can I bluff?’ he protested. ‘To expect Bigglesworth to tell you anything but the absolute truth would presuppose some arrangement with him. That would imply that I knew you were here, which you know as well as I do I did not.’

Actually, Algy was not bluffing. What he was doing was seeking an opportunity to let his chief know where he was, and who was with him, in case things went wrong.

‘I’ll call your bluff,’ decided von Stalhein curtly.

Algy grinned. ‘Capital. Bertie Lissie will laugh himself into stitches when I tell him how I took a fiver off you.’ He laid a five thousand franc note on the table. ‘Cover that, please,’ he requested.

‘Don’t you trust me?’ asked von Stalhein frostily.

‘I should say no, but I’ll say yes, because even though your politics are cock-eyed you’ve still got enough of the gentleman in you to pay a debt of honour. All the same, when I make a bet I like to see the colour of the other man’s money.’

Von Stalhein took out his wallet, selected a five thousand franc note, and placed it deliberately on the one already on the table.

Algy went to the phone and put through the call. ‘There’s no delay,’ he told the others, who were watching closely. After a minute, speaking into the instrument, he went on: ‘That you, Biggles? Fine. Algy here. I’ve just run into von Stalhein. We’ve had a slight argument and he’s as good as called me a liar. He’s standing beside me now. To settle a little wager I want you to tell him where I was when I phoned you earlier in the day, where I said I was going, and for what purpose. That’s all. Here is von Stalhein. Carry on.’

Algy handed over the receiver. ‘Go ahead,’ he requested.

Von Stalhein took the instrument. His face was expressionless. ‘Please proceed,’ he said. ‘I’m listening.’

The only other words he said were, ‘Thank you,’ when, at the end of about half a minute, he hung up. ‘You win,’ he told Algy shortly.

Algy picked up the two notes, folded them, and put them in his case. ‘Well, that seems to be about all,’ he said easily. ‘What are you going to do, trot along or stay here? Either way I’d like to snatch a few minutes shut-eye before making an early start for Paris in the morning.’

Von Stalhein held a brief conversation with his companion, again in the language Algy did not understand. Then he said, briefly, ‘We’re going.’

‘That suits me,’ declared Algy. ‘Excuse me if I don’t see you to the door. You might close it behind you. Thanks.’

The two men strode out without another word or a backward glance.

Algy gave them a minute, then walking quickly to the door he opened it and looked out. The snow had stopped. The wind had fallen. Dead, utter silence reigned over an Arctic scene flooded with blue moonlight. Two figures, one slim and the other stout, trudged through the snow up the track towards the road.

Algy smiled faintly as he watched them out of sight and heard a car starter whirr. Then he closed the door, locked it on the inside leaving the key sideways so that it could not be pushed out again, and returning to his chair called Charles.

Presently, looking anxious, the boy came. 'Have they gone?' he asked in a hoarse whisper.

'They have,' Algy told him. 'I don't think they'll come back, not to-night, anyway. But I wouldn't reckon too much on that. You never know with that cunning type of adventurer. Whether they believed my story or not they would pretend to do so to throw me off my guard. And the more they doubted me the more would they try to create an impression that they were satisfied. That's all part of the technique. Where were you all the time?'

'On the stairs. I heard everything. You were wonderful. Who's Bigglesworth?'

'My chief, in London.'

'I had a feeling that you had another reason for ringing him on the telephone besides winning five thousand francs.'

'I had. I wanted him to know where I was, and that von Stalhein was here, too. I didn't think von Stalhein would fall for such a simple trick. I can only think his brain must have been shaken below its usual standard by the shock of finding me here. By now, realizing what he's done, he's probably kicking himself. Whatever else he may or may not suspect he now knows for certain that Biggles—that's my chief's nickname—knows where I was, and he was, at eleven o'clock to-night. That's a trick in our favour.'

'Is that important?'

'It could be, if for no other reason than the weather has turned to von Stalhein's advantage.'

'In what way?'

'It has stopped snowing. All round this house is an unbroken sheet of the confounded stuff, which means that no one can enter or leave without making the fact perfectly plain.'

'I might not have thought of that.'

'In my line of business you wouldn't last long if you overlooked factors so obvious,' announced Algy, cheerfully.

'You know this man von Stalhein?'

'Yes, I know him. I have good cause to know him. He used to be a professional German Intelligence expert, but he's had a bee in his bonnet

since the war ended the wrong way for Hitler so he now works from the other side of the Iron Curtain—more to hurt us, I think, than for any money he makes out of it. He's tough, but not as brutal as some of them. His trouble is, he was born a gentleman; by which I mean he comes from the class which many years ago provided Germany with some of her best officers. That being under his skin there are still times when he behaves like one—in spite of himself. Such a man can have no love for his new employers, but he never lets himself forget that he hates the British. I never let myself forget that, either.'

'Where do you suppose he's gone now?'

'I wish I knew. You say he came to La Sologne three days ago. That means, unless he's sleeping in his car, which seems unlikely, he must have found accommodation somewhere—either in another hunting lodge or in a hotel. The nearest, I imagine, would be in Salbris. He would have to go somewhere to eat. Which reminds me. How have you managed for food?'

'I bought bread and sandwiches in Salbris on my way here. I made them last.'

'You can't go on like that. We shall have to do something about it. How much money have you?'

'None.'

Algy grimaced. 'You *are* in a bad way. I think you'd better come to England with me.'

'That is very kind of you, but I can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'I must find out what has happened to Boris. Until I know whether he is alive or dead I shan't know where I stand.'

'You won't be standing at all, much longer, my lad, if you go on wandering about this part of the world. Where are you going to start looking for him?'

'Yakoff said he wasn't in Paris. The only other place I can think of is Monte Carlo.'

'Do you know the address?'

'I think he had an apartment, but exactly where I don't know. But Monaco is a small country, so if he is there it should be easy to find him.'

Algy considered the matter. 'All right, I'll run you down to Monte Carlo,' he decided. 'I'm in no great hurry.'

'I shall never be able to thank you.'

‘There’s no need to try.’ Algy grinned. ‘Princes in distress don’t come along every day.’

‘When will you start?’

‘I think we’d better start right away, and get clear of La Sologne before daylight. Then, if von Stalhein comes back to have another look at the chateau, as he certainly will, to see who has been in and out, it won’t matter what he sees. I’ll walk up, get the car and bring it here. When I arrive, lock up, bring the key, and step out carefully in my footsteps. We may fool von Stalhein yet. Anyway, we won’t tell him more than is unavoidable. Wait here.’

Algy went to the door and looked out. The moon was still riding high. All around lay the forest, dark, silent, menacing. Not a sound broke the solemn hush. The stillness was the stillness of death. The shroud was snow, unbroken, unmarked except for a double line of tracks up the middle of the overgrown drive. Algy followed them, nerves alert, eyes watchful.

Charles waited, aware of an awful feeling of loneliness now that he was again by himself. He strained his ears to catch the first purr of the car engine. He listened for what seemed a long time, and he listened in vain. When he could no longer bear the suspense he went quietly to the door and looked out. Algy, his footfalls muffled by the snow, was coming up the steps.

‘What has happened?’ asked Charles tersely.

‘The car has a flat tyre,’ announced Algy, briefly.

‘Isn’t there a spare wheel?’

‘There was,’ answered Algy grimly. ‘Someone was thoughtful enough to remove it.’

‘Von Stalhein!’

‘Who else? It was no use sticking a knife in the tyre and leaving the spare wheel.’

‘Can we mend the puncture?’

‘We might if we could get the tyre off. Without the levers, which have disappeared, it’s hardly worth trying,’ averred Algy bitterly. ‘Von Stalhein, you will observe, is very thorough.’

‘But why has he done this?’ Charles opened his eyes wide.

‘Obviously, to keep me here.’

‘But why should he want to keep you here? If he knows you’re a police officer, I would have thought he’d have been glad to get rid of you.’

‘No doubt he’d have been glad to get rid of *me*,’ assented Algy. ‘What he didn’t want was me to go, taking you with me.’

‘You mean—he knows I’m here! In this house!’

‘He can’t believe I’m here by pure chance. He thinks I came here to look for you, or act in your interests. As we both know, he’s wrong in that; but it doesn’t alter the fact. As I see the position now, he must believe I know where you are, otherwise he wouldn’t have tried to prevent me from leaving—taking you with me, of course. Short of staying out all night, watching, the easiest way of doing that was to immobilize the car.’

‘So what do you suggest we do now?’

‘Get away—somehow. It looks as if we shall have to walk.’

‘I have a bicycle, hidden——’

‘Forget it,’ broke in Algy. ‘A bicycle needs a road, and to use a road near here would be to risk being shot from an ambush. Von Stalhein and Prutski may not be alone. How far are we from the nearest main road?’

‘The Salbris-Vierzon road would be the nearest. It must be about seven miles.’

‘Hm! If we walk we shall leave a trail in the snow that a blind man could follow. Von Stalhein has set us a poser—as was, of course, his intention. When he returns he’ll know I’ve been to the car. He’ll also see that I returned here, and he’ll guess why. It will confirm his belief that you’re here with me. I still feel inclined to beat him and go by car. We have a telephone. I’ll call the operator at Salbris and ask if there is an all-night service garage there. Failing that, what time does the first one open in the morning. If we can’t get a mechanic to repair the damage we’ll hire a car.’

‘You think of everything,’ declared Charles admiringly.

Algy went over to the instrument and lifted the receiver. For half a minute he listened, toying with the call-arm. Then he hung up. ‘Von Stalhein doesn’t forget much, either,’ he asserted bitterly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The phone’s dead. The wire must have been cut.’ Algy turned to Charles, smiling wanly. ‘Now you see what sort of man we have to deal with, and why Hauptmann Erich von Stalhein was thought so highly of at the Wilhelmstrasse. But don’t worry. We can’t expect to have things all our own way. Let’s hope it’s a little warmer at Monte Carlo than it is here.’

CHAPTER 4

A MAQUISARD LOADS HIS GUN

FOR a little while silence took possession of the chateau while Algy sat, chin in hands, contemplating the situation.

‘Are you thinking of going with me to Monte Carlo?’ asked Charles tentatively.

‘After what has happened you would not expect me to leave you to make your own way there,’ answered Algy. ‘Nor do I see how you could get there without any money,’ he went on. ‘Not being prepared for anything of this sort I haven’t much myself; but no doubt, if we can get clear, I shall be able to get over that difficulty. I’m trying to work out the best way of getting out of this confounded forest without letting your enemies know which way we’ve gone.’

‘That’s very kind of you. But why should you inconvenience yourself with my affairs?’

‘Because, apart from any other reason, your affairs have become my affairs,’ rejoined Algy. ‘If, as it seems, the Iron Curtain supporters have something to gain by liquidating you, it is my duty, being on the other side of the Curtain, to see that doesn’t happen. The position, as I see it, is this. We can’t stay here, if for no other reason than we should slowly starve to death. As, obviously, no one has been here for some time we can assume there is no food in the house. Without a telephone we shall gain nothing by waiting. To-morrow, or the next day, the position will be the same as it is to-day. Wherefore we must go, so the sooner the better. The only question is how.’

‘Will you abandon the car?’

‘It’s no use as it is. We can forget it for the time being. You say you must find Boris. He isn’t in Paris. He isn’t here, so we will go to Monte Carlo to see if he is there. Knowing that his life is in danger we can suppose he has gone into hiding. That would be the sensible thing to do, I want to get away from here, if possible, without engaging in open hostilities with the enemy. I’m not afraid of them, but if somebody were killed it might embarrass the French government and perhaps start an international rumpus. If we can get to the main road all should be well. It means walking. Do you feel able to manage it?’

‘Don’t worry about me.’

‘Good. As we are east of the road we shall travel due west as far as that is possible. Having no compass we shall have to take our course from the stars. When we go we’ll leave by the back door, which is less likely than the front to be watched. I shall carry you on my back until we are under the trees, where there may not be much snow, to leave only one line of tracks.’

‘You’re not going to explore the house?’

‘For what purpose?’

‘There may be some clue to Boris’s whereabouts.’

Algy shook his head. ‘It isn’t worth the risk. To do it now would mean that the light of the torch would be seen from the upper windows should the house be under observation. To wait for daylight would lessen our chances of getting away unseen. If von Stalhein and his precious partner are not here now, I’m pretty sure they’ll be somewhere about as soon as it’s light enough for them to see what they’re doing. Let’s see if there’s any sign of them.’

So saying Algy went to the front door, opened it quietly and looked out. The scene was unchanged except that the moon, its night’s work nearly done, was lower in the sky. A deathly silence reigned.

As they stood there listening, with eyes probing the gloom for any sound or movement, from somewhere far away, rising and falling, came a long drawn-out animal cry so mournful, so sinister in the stilly night, that Algy turned startled questioning eyes to his companion’s face. ‘What on earth was that?’ he asked, in an awe-stricken voice.

‘It sounded like the baying of a hound, probably one of the big St Huberts which I know are used in the forest for wild boar hunting. Belongs to a gamekeeper, no doubt. It may have winded a *sanglier* on the prowl for food.’

‘It sounded more like the devil himself on the prowl,’ muttered Algy, closing the door, locking it and putting the key in his pocket. ‘Come on; if

we're going let's go,' he concluded.

They strode through cold, stone-flagged passages to the rear of the house and so to the back door. The key was in the lock. Algy opened the door to show the black mass of a fir forest standing stark against the sky only twenty paces distant. A little on the near side of it was a pile of logs. There was not a sound. Still nothing moved. He locked the door behind them and put the key in his pocket. 'I've a better idea than carrying you,' he announced. 'We'll make for the woodpile. I'll walk forwards and you walk backwards. That will leave a track going out and coming back, so should they see it they may think I simply went out for firewood. Not much of a trick but it may work. The longer they think we're inside the better. Come on.'

In a few minutes they were entering the forest, bending low under branches that drooped under their weight of snow. So close together stood the trees, their branches intermingling, that no ray of moonlight could enter, with the result that the darkness was that of a tomb. For which reason, having with difficulty groped forward a little way, Algy switched on his torch. 'No use poking our eyes out,' he remarked, as the beam cut a wedge of light in the darkness.

The going was now fairly easy, for the wide branches of the close-growing trees had caught most of the snow, and except for occasional patches the ground was fairly clear. Thus, they were able to make good time.

'Did you read fairy tales when you were a kid?' asked Algy, after a while.

'Yes. Why?'

'Now we know what the Babes in the Wood felt like.'

From time to time they stopped to listen for possible indications of pursuit, but the only sound to penetrate the forest's silent aisles was the occasional melancholy cry of the boar hound.

After a while, dawn, grey bleak and dreary, crept slowly up the glades behind them to confirm that they were still heading westwards. Then came the sun to turn the grey to sullen, misty crimson, and reveal the tracks of other nocturnal travellers in the forest—deer, boar, and an occasional rabbit that had escaped the deadly disease, myxomatosis, that had all but exterminated the species throughout Europe.

With a rising sun came a rise in temperature, and soon the snow was sliding from the overburdened branches, so that from all sides came the swish and slush of snow falling on snow. This turned to a steady drip as the sun set about its work in earnest. They came upon a brook winding a

serpentine course towards some distant lake. As they were already soaked to the knees they suffered no discomfort from wading across it.

The firs gave way to pines more sparsely placed. They in turn gave way to oaks. These ended abruptly at an area of open ground. Across this ran a track. Beside the track stood a small house that might have been a farm or a gamekeeper's establishment. Smoke drifted sluggishly from the chimney. From a wire kennel a battle-scarred boar hound regarded them steadfastly with large, calculating eyes.

Algy, on seeing the house, had come to a halt. 'I wonder would they give us a cup of coffee,' he murmured. 'I could do with one. They might let us dry our shoes and socks.'

'They could tell us the best way to the main road,' contributed Charles. 'In fact, they might give us a lift. I can see an old car there in the shed.'

Algy hesitated, a moment of hesitation which, as they presently observed, was to have consequences more important than they could have imagined.

Round a bend in the track, travelling fast, came a car, a new-looking Simca, painted grey. It stopped at the house. Two men got out. They were von Stalhein and Prutski. They went to the door, knocked, and engaged in conversation a burly, red-faced man who answered it.

Neither Algy nor Charles spoke a word. There was no need. After exchanging startled glances both backed slowly into gloom cast by the oaks. The hound threw up its head and bayed, but this, it must have been supposed, was on account of the men who had arrived by car—as, indeed, it might have been.

The conversation at the door of the house did not last long. At the end of it von Stalhein and Prutski, still talking, walked slowly to the car, the householder, who it could now be seen wore gamekeeper's uniform, going with them. For a few moments more the three of them lingered by the open door of the car. Then von Stalhein and Prutski got in and drove on down the track. The keeper watched them out of sight and then walked back to the house.

'I wonder what all that was about,' muttered Algy. 'From his manner the keeper didn't know them. It looked as if von Stalhein was asking the way. I think we might do the same thing. I'm sure we have nothing to fear from a local gamekeeper.'

They were almost to the house when the door opened and the keeper, now with his cap on, came out. On seeing them he halted, turned about,

went inside, to emerge a moment later with a gun into which he was putting cartridges. He waited until the visitors were at a distance of about ten paces; then, bringing the gun to his shoulder he cried, '*Halte-la!*'

Algy stopped, staring, taken aback by a greeting as unexpected as it was belligerent. 'What's the idea?' he inquired, speaking of course in French.

'Move an inch and I'll shoot the pair of you,' declared the keeper.

'Don't worry, I won't move,' said Algy. And he meant it. 'But you might at least tell us the meaning of this unusual reception,' he requested.

A buxom, motherly-looking woman appeared in the doorway. 'They don't look like criminals,' she remarked.

'Criminals!' cried Algy. 'What made you think we were criminals?'

'You don't speak like a Frenchman.'

'I'm English. Is there anything wrong with that?'

The man answered. 'Will you go with me to the police-station?'

'With pleasure,' said Algy warmly. 'I happen to be a policeman myself, as you can prove by ringing up police headquarters in Paris. Has this talk of criminals anything to do with the two men who just called on you?'

'They told me that two criminals were hiding in the forest, and warned me, if I saw them, to be careful. They are telling everyone.'

Then Algy understood. 'Do you like Germans?' he asked.

The keeper's expression provided the answer to this question.

'Don't you recognize a German when you see one?' went on Algy.

'I told you that man was a Boche, Robert,' said the woman from the door.

Algy continued. 'My car has a puncture and those two men have stolen the spare wheel; that's why we're walking,' he asserted.

The keeper lowered his gun. 'They were a queer-looking pair and I saw an extra spare wheel in the back of their car,' he admitted.

'Very well, then. That proves we're telling the truth,' declared Algy. 'We were coming to ask you for a cup of coffee and perhaps allow us to dry our shoes and socks before walking to the road for a lift to the nearest garage.'

'I am going to Salbris myself presently,' advised the man. 'Enter, messieurs.' He was looking hard at Charles. 'Haven't I seen you before, somewhere?' he inquired curiously.

'I don't think so,' replied Charles.

‘Very strange. If I haven’t seen you I have seen someone very much like you.’

Charles had a flash of inspiration. ‘I wonder, monsieur, could it by any chance be that you knew my cousin? His name was the same as mine, Zarrill, and he was tenant of the Chateau Grandbulon.’

The keeper’s eyes grew round. ‘But of course!’ he exclaimed. ‘Monsieur Zarrill. Yes, I heard that was his real name, after. . . .’ The keeper broke off, as if he thought he was saying too much. ‘The Chateau Grandbulon is the next estate to this one,’ he explained. ‘Pierre Sondray, the gamekeeper there, was a great friend of mine before . . . before . . .’

‘Before the Germans shot him,’ prompted Algy.

‘You know about that?’

‘Only that I saw his grave.’

‘He was shot,’ said Robert slowly, ‘by that black-hearted devil Karl Schlegel and his Gestapo. Poor Pierre. He took too many chances. I was afraid they would catch him one day.’

‘Was Monsieur Zarrill here when it happened?’ asked Algy.

‘No, but he came back soon afterwards.’

‘Then Monsieur Zarrill was here during the war?’

‘But of course! He was—’ Again the keeper broke off as if he found himself saying more than he intended.

Algy nodded. ‘So he was in the Maquis,’ he suggested.

The keeper made a gesture. ‘We do not talk of these things now, monsieur,’ he said, somewhat curtly.

‘Did the Germans catch him?’ persisted Algy. ‘This boy is trying to find his cousin.’

‘I only know that he left here suddenly about the time of the Liberation.’

‘And you haven’t seen him since?’ persisted Algy.

The keeper regarded Algy with smouldering eyes. ‘No,’ he said, deliberately. ‘There have been other people here looking for him,’ he added.

‘What sort of people?’

‘Foreigners. I don’t know what they were. I told them nothing. At least the war taught some of us how to hold our tongues.’

Algy looked at Charles. ‘It begins to look as if certain people did know about Boris living at the Chateau Grandbulon. Perhaps that was why he

went away.’

By this time they were sipping hot coffee made by Madame while their socks steamed by the fire.

‘I have been to the Chateau Grandbulon to see if I could get news of my cousin,’ explained Charles to the keeper. ‘It was there, where the drive joins the road, that we found our tyre had been punctured. While we were at the Chateau our spare wheel was stolen.’

‘Is the car still there?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what are you doing now?’

‘We are walking to the main road hoping to get a lift to the garage.’

‘I am going to Salbris now, for the groceries,’ stated the keeper. ‘I would be happy to take you with me. We shall pass your car on the way. If I see those Germans they shall hear the rough edge of my tongue.’

‘It would be of more service if I could get my spare wheel back, so that I could use my car again,’ put in Algy.

The keeper looked hard at him. ‘Why did these men steal your tyre?’ he asked shrewdly. ‘They didn’t need it. They must have had a purpose.’

Algy hesitated. It would, he saw, be difficult to tell the keeper anything without telling him the whole story, which he did not feel inclined to do. ‘They were going to the Chateau too, and were annoyed at finding us there first,’ he said carelessly, as if the matter was not really important.

But the gamekeeper was not so easily deceived. ‘Had this anything to do with the war?’ he inquired, critically.

‘Why should it have anything to do with the war?’ asked Algy, playing the old game of answering a question with a question.

It was the keeper’s turn to hesitate, as if he, too, was unwilling to say too much.

‘Please remember, monsieur, that it is important to me that I should find my cousin,’ pleaded Charles.

‘Perhaps, as you are a relative, it will do no harm to tell you, although even now we do not like to talk about these things,’ decided the keeper, whose name, apparently, was Robert. ‘The Chateau Grandbulon was the centre of the Résistance in these parts. We were all in it, of course. For such things as escaping prisoners no better place could be found, for the chateau was built on the site of an old castle and there are underground passages which only a few of us know.’

Memory furrowed Algy's forehead. 'Was this by any chance the headquarters of the famous *Réseau*^[1] Nicky? It took care of a pilot friend of mine who was shot down.'

[1] *Réseau*.—Network. French Resistance groups were known by such names.

Robert smiled. 'Exactly, monsieur. I see you have heard of us.'

'Nicky!' exclaimed Charles. 'Then I think my cousin was the leader of it, for his second name was Nicolas.'

'That is correct,' admitted Robert. 'For obvious reasons we did not use real names.'

'And you do not know what became of—Nicky, at the finish?'

'Monsieur must understand that at the Liberation it was difficult to keep track of people. Some fled, fearing vengeance. There were traitors as well as patriots. Many people came here—Americans, British, Russians—asking for information, and for a time all was confusion.' Robert sprang to his feet as if he had said enough. 'Now, if you are ready, let us be on our way, for I have much to do.'

Having replaced their footgear and thanked Madame for her hospitality, Algy and Charles followed Robert out to the car, an ancient Renault, which Charles had noticed in the shed. The sun was now well up, and under its rays the snow was fast disappearing. In a few minutes they were on their way.

'Be ready to duck your head should we pass our friends,' Algy told Charles softly, speaking in English. 'Let them go on looking for us in the forest.'

Ahead, the narrow road, walled on either side by sombre firs, ran as straight as a railway track for a mile or more, and as the old car rattled along, bringing the vanishing point nearer, the driver said, 'Where are you gentlemen thinking of going, if I may ask?'

'We are going to Salbris, are we not?'

'I meant after that. Is it your intention to stay in the district for a little while?'

'Possibly,' replied Algy cautiously. 'Why do you want to know?'

‘It struck me that if I should happen to see Monsieur Zarrill I could tell him where you were.’

‘Have you any reason to think you might see him?’

‘It is possible.’ Robert was staring straight ahead. ‘In La Sologne,’ he added pensively, ‘all things are possible.’

Algy looked hard at the man, but his face was expressionless and told him nothing.

A minute later Robert said: ‘*Voilà, messieurs*. There is your car, standing by the cottage of Pierre Sondray, where the road to the Chateau Grandbulon joins this one.’

‘That isn’t my car,’ answered Algy. ‘Mine’s a blue Citroën. That’s the grey Simca that called at your house this morning. Pull up behind it, please. If my spare wheel is still in it I will take it.’

‘*Bien entendu*.’

As they drew nearer they could see that the grey car was parked just behind the blue Citroën, which it had, up to that moment, hidden from view. As Robert slowly brought the old Renault to a stop level with the two cars Algy’s hand went into his pocket. But there was no one in either car. He got out, cautiously, eyes busy. ‘Wait one moment, monsieur,’ he requested quietly, and walked to the junction of the two roads.

Fresh tracks in the now slushy snow mingled with old ones leading towards the chateau. Spying round the corner of the dead keeper’s house he saw no fewer than four men. They were on the terrace, one kneeling by the door as if doing something to the keyhole, another moving stealthily towards the rear of the building.

Algy moved fast. ‘There are four men at the chateau looking as if they were trying to break in,’ he told Charles crisply. ‘Watch them and warn me if you see them coming back.’

Charles looked alarmed. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘You’ll see. Monsieur Robert, would you have the kindness to help me with my wheel?’

The gamekeeper jumped down and they went to work.

The operation was completed in ten minutes. By the end of that time Algy’s serviceable wheel, which he had taken out of the Simca, had replaced the damaged one, now on the rack. He had also collected his tyre levers. He then started the Citroën’s engine, and finding it in good order moved the car

into the middle of the road. Leaving the engine running he got out. 'What are they doing, Charles?' he inquired.

'They've all gone into the chateau.'

'Good. If they're going to search every room they should be there for some time. We may as well give them a dose of their own medicine.' With that Algy took out his knife and punctured both of the Simca's front tyres.

'Why two?' asked Charles curiously.

'To save lumbering ourselves up with their spare wheel. They can amuse themselves working out how to make one spare wheel serve two punctured tyres. We'll press on and leave them to it.'

He went to Robert and shook hands. 'Thanks to you, monsieur, we can now go on in our own car. Be careful of that German and those with him,' he warned seriously. 'They're dangerous. I haven't time to tell you what they're doing here, but they're up to no good. The war, for those men, is not yet over.'

'Could it be,' asked Robert shrewdly, 'that they are looking for Monsieur Zarrill, with intent to do him an injury?'

'With intent, my friend, to kill him, as they would have killed this young man with me had they caught him.'

'That is what I thought,' returned Robert. 'Don't worry. They'll have to be clever to catch Monsieur Zarrill. Others have tried, and I could tell you where some of them are. Will you still be going to Salbris?'

'No. If by any chance you should see Monsieur Zarrill please tell him that his cousin Karl came here looking for him and has now gone to Monte Carlo to see if he is there.'

'And if he isn't there?'

'We may come back here—and ask you where you think we might find him.'

'*Entendu, monsieur.*'

'*Au revoir, et merci,*' concluded Algy. He called Charles, and once more in their own car they sped down the long straight road.

'A nice man,' remarked Charles.

'A very nice man,' agreed Algy. 'And one who, I think, could have told us more than he did about Boris.'

'You mean in the war?'

‘Yes. And since. Friend Robert, I suspect, has been well trained. He knows how to keep his mouth shut. Maybe that’s why he isn’t under one of those little white crosses. He was not going to tell us more than he need until he’s quite sure of how we stand with your cousin. He’s right, of course.’

Charles looked at Algy. ‘You think he knows more about Boris’s movements than he pretends?’

‘I was never more sure of anything.’ Algy smiled. ‘Don’t forget I’ve had a certain amount of training, too.’

‘Was there anything in particular that gave you that impression?’

‘He was just a little bit too anxious to know where *we* were going, for a simple gamekeeper having no interest in the affair.’

‘I see,’ said Charles pensively.

The car raced on down the road.

CHAPTER 5

ALGY SPOILS SOME BREAKFASTS

WITH the snow fast melting on the road, in a few minutes the car had slowed down to make the turn into N.20 at the point where Algy had left it the previous evening. In the light of day under a clear sky it looked very different. Without hesitation he turned left, to the south, having two reasons for doing so. In the first place their destination was now Monte Carlo, on the Mediterranean. Secondly, he felt sure that while von Stalhein and Prutski had been in La Sologne they had slept and had their meals at Salbris to the north, that being the town nearest to the Chateau where accommodation was available. Vierzon, the next town to the south, was farther away. He hoped that von Stalhein, when he realized what had happened, would go to Salbris to collect his toilet things and pay his bill, afterwards going on to Paris in the belief that the Citroën would make for the Capital. Wherefore Algy turned south, his immediate objective being Vierzon. There were several things he wanted to do urgently, one of them being to try to make contact with Biggles on the telephone.

It was only about ten miles to Vierzon and on the fast open road they made good time. On the way, naturally, they discussed what had happened and what was going on at the Chateau. One important revelation, they agreed, was the fact that von Stalhein and Prutski were not alone. It was now known that they had at least two helpers which showed with what determination the quest for Charles, or Boris, or both of them, was being pursued.

Of the information which Robert the gamekeeper had given them the outstanding fact was that Boris had passed the war in the secret service, making La Sologne his base and using the Chateau as his headquarters. The question was, why had he so suddenly vanished? Algy inclined to the view

that Russian Intelligence agents, either through contact with the Western allies or by the infiltration of operatives, posing as escaping prisoners, into the French Resistance groups, had learned that the leader of *Réseau* Nicky was none other than the Grand Duke Boris of Moldavia. Should that be so then it seemed likely that one of two things had happened. Boris had either been murdered or, being warned by friends in the British or French service that his identity had become known, had faded out of the picture as soon as the end of the war was in sight. Algy thought the second alternative was the most likely, his reason for this being the curious cross-talk of Robert the gamekeeper, who, he was convinced, knew more than he had revealed.

That Boris had been in the Résistance Algy did not doubt. It was just the sort of part he would play, being well qualified for it. Indeed, a suspicion crept into his mind, and he conveyed it to Charles, that Boris had been engaged in counter-espionage all along, even before the war, probably for France, since it now looked as if the Chateau Grandbulon had been prepared for the purpose for which it had in fact been used. That would account for him having to keep in touch with Paris.

‘Yet why was he so much at Monte Carlo?’ asked Charles.

‘Possibly by reason of its international character. By keeping one’s ears open one can learn a lot in Monte Carlo,’ affirmed Algy. ‘But that’s only a guess. He wouldn’t want to spend his life tucked away in a place like La Sologne. He had a good time in Monte. I know. I was there with him.’

‘You believe he’s still alive?’ queried Charles.

‘I don’t know what to think, and that’s a fact,’ confessed Algy. ‘Frankly, I’m in a bit of a muddle about the whole thing. When you told me your story last night it all seemed perfectly clear. The men who had followed you from Paris to La Sologne were after *you*. It now seems that they might really have been after Boris. I’m thinking about these two extra men we saw just now at the Chateau. Where did they suddenly spring from? They must have been on the spot. Doing what?’

‘Watching the Chateau.’

‘For whom? Not you. Von Stalhein and Prutski knew you were in Paris. You saw them watching your apartment. If you were in Paris, why watch La Sologne? It seems to me that if the Chateau was being watched at the same time, then these enemies of yours had reason to think that Boris was there. They could hardly be after anyone else. If they were watching for Boris, then he must still be alive.’

‘I see what you mean,’ said Charles, slowly. ‘Of course, they’d like to kill us both.’

‘I realize that. The point I’m really trying to make is the possibility of Boris being somewhere in La Sologne after all, because if he is we’re wasting our time going to Monte Carlo. There was something in the manner of that gamekeeper, Robert, that I can’t understand. Oh yes, on the surface he seemed frank enough, and willing to be helpful; but he was holding something back. At least, that was the impression he gave me. What need had he to be secretive?’

‘Habit, having been in the Maquis.’

‘No—no. That’s all finished. There was another reason, and if it didn’t concern Boris then who did it concern?’

Charles shrugged. ‘Don’t ask me.’

‘I may learn something from a phone call I intend to make when we get to Vierzon,’ said Algy, hopefully.

‘You’ll learn nothing from the Intelligence people,’ declared Charles. ‘You might as well talk to a lot of oysters.’

Algy smiled. ‘There are ways and means of opening oysters. Don’t forget that through my chief I’m in close touch with the Intelligence Service myself.’

‘The British service isn’t likely to know anything about Boris.’

‘You’d be surprised. Anyway, I have friends in Paris. One of them is at the Sûreté. I’m going to have a word with him presently.’

‘To ask him about Boris?’

‘Possibly. My main purpose is to ask him for some money. Not coming prepared for anything of this sort I haven’t much left, and as we have to eat, and the car has to drink, we shall certainly need more than I have in my pocket.’

Running into Vierzon Algy brought the car to a stop outside a garage, gave orders for the damaged tyre to be repaired and the petrol tank to be topped up. The mechanic said this would take about half an hour, so Algy suggested to Charles that they should go into an adjacent hotel for coffee and something to eat while they were waiting. He pointed out that they had a long drive in front of them. While they were in the hotel, he said, he would make his telephone call. To save making two calls he would ask his friend in Paris to let his chief know that he might not be back for a day or two.

They went into the dining-room, where several people of both sexes were having breakfast, for it was still only a little after nine o'clock. Having ordered two complete breakfasts from the waitress, Algy left the room to make the phone call. When, ten minutes later, he returned, breakfast was on the table. 'I've asked my friend in Paris to arrange for me to collect the money from the cashier at the Hotel de Paris in Monte Carlo,' he said. 'I shall have enough to see us there. I've also asked him to tell the garage, from where I got the car, that I shall be keeping it for a bit.'

They had finished their meal, and Algy was paying the bill preparatory to leaving, when a car pulled up outside. He paid no attention to it, and it was not until he stood up to go that he glanced casually through the window. It was the grey Simca. Von Stalhein and Prutski were getting out.

Charles must have seen from Algy's expression that something was amiss, for he, too, looked, and of course saw the reason for Algy's change of face.

'Keep your head,' Algy told him softly. 'Believe it or not, but by outrageous bad luck we must have chosen the very hotel where they're staying. My fault, for being too confident that they were at Salbris. They couldn't have followed us here. In fact, I'm sure from the way they're behaving that they don't know we're here. They may not see us. They may go straight to their rooms to wash before coming in here for breakfast. If they do that we'll slip out. They weren't long mending those punctures. I should have taken their spare wheel and given them two tyres to mend.'

But the luck was still against them. A moment later the door was opened and the two men walked into the room. Von Stalhein saw them at once, as was inevitable, and it was clear from the way his jaw muscles stiffened as his eyes fell on them that, their car being in the garage, he had not known they were there. At first, by no other action did he reveal the shock their presence must have given him; but as he moved towards a vacant table a faint sardonic smile curved his lips.

Charles turned a startled face to Algy. 'They've found us,' he breathed.

'Sit still,' ordered Algy, reseating himself.

At this juncture he had no fear that the two men would attempt violence in front of so many witnesses; but he knew that having found them von Stalhein would not let them out of his sight. This would hamper their movements. If nothing worse they would be followed to Monte Carlo. And there might well be something worse should they be overtaken on a lonely stretch of road. Obviously, something would have to be done to throw the Simca off the trail.

‘Is there anything we can do?’ whispered Charles.

‘There’s always something one can do,’ replied Algy, softly.

By this time von Stalhein and Prutski had seated themselves and ordered breakfast.

Algy glanced round the room. Some of the customers looked like local people; others were commercial travellers. In any case they all looked French, and it was on the assumption that some were local that he played his first card.

‘Good morning, Hauptmann von Stalhein,’ he said loudly. ‘I trust your conscience allowed you to sleep comfortably last night.’

Von Stalhein did not answer. He must have been aware of the sudden hush that fell at the mention of the German name, as if everyone had stopped eating—which was, in fact, what had happened.

Algy proceeded to finish what he had started. ‘I wonder at you having the audacity, not to say bad taste, to come to La Sologne after what happened here not so long ago.’ He really meant this, although his real purpose in making the remark had an ulterior motive.

The atmosphere in the room was now so highly charged that it could be felt. A pin, falling, would have been heard. It was as if a train of high explosive had been laid and the fuse was ready to be lighted.

Algy lit it. ‘How is your friend Karl Schlegel of the Gestapo these days?’ he inquired coldly.

That did it. He knew that he might be hitting below the belt in that von Stalhein may never have heard of Schlegel, but he was in no mood to be particular. And if he had had any doubts about the local people remembering the name they were swiftly dispelled.

A woman sprang to her feet. ‘Boche,’ she spat.

Von Stalhein, pale as death, glared at Algy, but still said nothing—probably because, as Algy realized, there was little he could say.

But some of those present had something to say, and Algy discovered that he had struck a spark near very inflammable material. Some of the remarks made brought a flush to von Stalhein’s pale face. His companion looked alarmed, as well he might when a scowling Frenchman, a heavily built fellow, rose to his feet calling for the proprietor, saying he would not eat in the same room as assassins—a description that was nearer the truth than he may seriously have supposed. In the babble the agitated waitress did nothing to improve matters by dropping a tray of crockery.

In the middle of this the proprietor arrived, asking what the fuss was about. Several people told him, in no uncertain terms.

Von Stalhein took the only course open to him. He remained calm. In fact, with the possible exception of Algy, who was himself looking somewhat startled at what he had started, he was the most self-possessed man in the room. He said he was sorry he had caused trouble and would leave immediately.

The proprietor pointed a peremptory finger. 'Stay there!' he rapped out. 'You're not leaving without paying your bill. I will bring it.'

Von Stalhein bowed acknowledgment.

Algy touched Charles on the arm. 'Let's go,' he murmured.

All interest being focussed on the German, no one took any notice of them as they left the room. Once outside they hurried to the garage where, to Charles's relief, they found the car ready and waiting. Algy paid the account. Adding a thousand franc note to it, pointing to the grey car he said, 'That belongs to a German.'

'I know,' put in the mechanic, frowning. 'He's been staying here, and from the way he behaves one would think he owned the country.'

'Exactly. He is now having some trouble about his bill. You might see he doesn't get away too quickly.'

The mechanic winked. 'Leave it to me,' he said artfully.

Algy waited for no more. They got in and in a few seconds were racing down the road. Across the bridges of the Canal du Barry and the Cher they tore, still heading south, and leaving N.20 took the road to Mereau.

Not for some minutes did Algy speak. Then he said, sadly, 'I don't like tearing open old wounds, but in certain circumstances a reminder may be pardoned, particularly when it serves a useful purpose.'

'What you did was justified,' asserted Charles in a hard voice. 'I was in Paris during the war. France hasn't forgotten. Why should other people be allowed to do so?'

'Let's not talk about a subject so unpleasant,' requested Algy.

'Where are you making for now?'

'For the moment, anywhere, as long as we can get rid of von Stalhein and his ugly assistant. He'll follow us, if he can, now that he knows for certain what before this morning he only suspected—that we are together. The question is, does he know of Boris's association with Monte Carlo? If he does, he'll guess that's where we're heading for. Through the window he

must have seen us turn south, so he knows we haven't gone back to La Sologne. Now that he's searched the Chateau and found no one there, he'll work it out that you've no longer any reason for staying in the district. He must have seen that we didn't take the road to Paris, so, as I have said, if he knows of Boris's connection with Monte Carlo that's probably where he'll make for. On the assumption that he'll suppose we've gone the shortest way, rather than risk trouble with him on the road I feel inclined to go round by the Cevennes, via St Amand, Montlucon and Clermont-Ferrand. We're on the road to St Amand now. We'll stop at the Hotel de la Poste, have some coffee and check if the grey Simca comes this way. If it doesn't we can take things easy.'

'It goes against the grain to be chased about the country like this,' protested Charles.

'A bullet in your ribs would go even more against the grain,' retorted Algy. 'When dealing with rats like Prutski one is always at this disadvantage: he's prepared to commit cold-blooded murder. We're not.'

He put his foot down hard and the car raced on.

CHAPTER 6

THE ROAD SOUTH

SOME minutes passed. Then Charles said: 'I wonder what they've done with their reinforcements—those extra men we saw at the chateau this morning?'

'They weren't in the Simca so presumably they've been left there, to keep an eye on the place. Either that or they've rushed to Salbris in a car of their own hoping to overtake us or catch us there. The trouble about those particular thugs is, we shouldn't know them if we saw them; but they'd know us, or at any rate they'd know the number of this car, which I fear is becoming a dangerous conveyance. We shall have to keep our eyes skinned all the time for anyone behaving unusually, whether on foot or in another car. If there are enemy agents in the south, and it wouldn't surprise me if there were, von Stalhein will lose no time in getting in touch with them.'

'You mean, you think we might be held up?'

'Let us say it could happen. There are long, lonely stretches of road. Where we are now, for instance, would be an ideal spot for a hold-up—not a soul or a house in sight; nothing but wild country on both sides of the road. One could disappear here very easily. Don't think I'm trying to scare you. I'm merely pointing out a simple truth. It's up to us to keep our eyes open.'

It may have been auto-suggestion following his remark that caused Algy to glance in his reflector. There was, as he had said, nothing in front of them. They had overtaken several light cars and heavy vehicles, and one or two powerful cars had overtaken them, without comment being made, for this, after all, was normal touring experience on the road.

He now observed, in the reflector, that a car was coming up behind them at great speed. He identified it as a black Buick. A slight frown creased his forehead. He had seen such a car recently. Where was it? For a moment he couldn't remember. Then, suddenly, he knew. A black Buick had been

standing against the curb outside the hotel in Vierzon. It had not been there when they had gone in; but he had noticed it when speaking to the mechanic after they had left. It was standing close to von Stalhein's grey Simca. Did that mean anything? Was it the same car? He didn't know, for he hadn't looked at its number plate, having no reason to do so. Was it coincidence that the same make of car that had been standing by the Simca was now racing to overtake them? It could be. On the other hand it might not be, but as he had just said, they were in no case to take chances. Instinctively his foot pressed the accelerator level with the floor.

'Listen, Charles,' he said succinctly. 'There's a car coming up behind us and I don't like the look of it. It's a black Buick. When we left Vierzon there was a black Buick standing against the curb outside the hotel close to the Simca. If this isn't the same car it's its twin brother.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Charles, after a glance through the rear window.

'We can't go any faster,' answered Algy, switching his eyes for a moment from the long straight road ahead to the needle of the speed indicator, now quivering above the hundred mark. 'If there's any sort of turning I shall take it. If they follow we can reckon they're after us. If I stop, and they stop, go flat in case there's shooting.'

The car tore on, lines of poplars on either side flashing past to create an impression that the distant horizon was rushing towards them. On its whole length it so happened that there was not another vehicle of any sort.

'They're gaining,' said Charles, after another look behind.

'They'll catch us,' stated Algy grimly. 'In that car they're bound to catch us, unless we come to something——'

'Watch out!' shouted Charles, who had spotted a *Betteraves*^[2] warning sign on his side of the road.

^[2] *Betteraves*—beetroot or sugar beet. In certain areas of France where great quantities of sugar beet are grown one of the commonest official road signs is a graphic illustration of a skidding car. The roots, falling from collecting carts and lorries on to the road, will cause a car passing over one of them to skid. *Betteraves* have been the cause of many accidents—hence the warning.

‘We shall have to risk ’em,’ snapped Algy. ‘Rather betteraves than bullets.’

Ten seconds later he was skidding; but it was a dry skid, and it was not accidental, for seeing a turning on the left he had jammed on his brakes in order to reduce speed sufficiently to allow him to turn into it. The main purpose of the move was to settle the question of whether or not the Buick was pursuing them. When it turned in behind him the question was answered.

Algy now perceived that the turning was not a road but a private drive leading to a mansion that stood right across his front two hundred yards ahead. He also saw, from empty windows and roofless walls, that the place was a ruin, apparently, from certain indications, having been destroyed by fire. It looked as though he had made a tactical error of the first order. Indeed, he was quite sure that he had; but as nothing was to be gained by stopping he raced on. He now observed that just in front of the entrance to the house the drive split, one way going to the left and the other to the right. He took the one to the left, to find a few seconds later that, as so often happens with big establishments, it merely ran right round the house; so that he found himself tearing back towards the main road. The Buick, which had followed, was still in pursuit, but the Citroën, being a smaller, handier car, had taken the corners better and he had gained a little ground. If he had done nothing else, he told himself as he swung back on to the main road, he had at least ascertained the intentions of the driver of the Buick. With a lead of a little more than a hundred yards he put his foot down and sped on towards the south.

‘Watch out for betteraves,’ said Charles anxiously, noticing an occasional root lying on the road.

Algy was looking at the vehicles from which they may have fallen; two enormous trucks, loaded high with sugar beet, that had appeared on the road, presumably from a field, while he had been making his crazy detour round the mansion. They were well in on the side of the road and perhaps twenty yards apart. Seeing that he was certain to be overtaken on the long straight stretch ahead Algy braked hard and took up a position between them. There was no room for the Buick. The driver of it, no doubt taken by surprise by Algy’s sudden move, went on past, and slowing down took up a position ahead of the leading truck. In this order the four vehicles proceeded slowly along the road. What the drivers of the trucks thought of this extraordinary behaviour Algy neither knew nor cared. For the moment he felt reasonably safe and he had gained a little breathing space. His big worry was, how far

were the trucks going? For should they turn off the road he would find himself alone with the Buick.

‘Did you see who was in that car?’ he asked Charles.

‘Two men,’ answered Charles. ‘They had a good look, but they didn’t see much of me because I kept well down and held my handkerchief over my face. I wouldn’t be sure, but I fancy they were the two new men we saw at the Chateau as we passed it. They must have had the Buick hidden somewhere.’

Algy changed the subject. ‘What’s going on?’ he asked, braking, as the lorry in front of him slowed down.

Charles lowered his window and looked out, for the big vehicle obstructed his view forward. ‘Level-crossing,’ he said, laconically. ‘It’s closed.’

The four vehicles came slowly to a stop.

Algy thought fast and moved fast. ‘Tell me if they get out,’ he said shortly, taking his automatic from his pocket and at the same time making a swift survey of the landscape.

There was not much to see, for they were now in a vast area of flat, cultivated land, with hardly a hedge or a tree in sight. Across this, coming towards them, its whistle screaming, thundered the express for which the road had been closed. With the exception of a working party half a mile away, loading roots into more trucks, the only person in sight was the woman in charge of the level-crossing.

Now to follow Algy’s movements the position of the vehicles, and their drivers, must be clearly understood. They were, being in France, on the right hand side of the road. The driving seats were on the left. This meant that when Algy, taking his pistol, scrambled across Charles and got out of the right hand door, he could not be seen by the driver of the truck behind him. Nor could he, of course, be seen by the driver of the truck in front of him. Along the right hand side of this truck he now edged his way, crouching low so that he could not be seen from the Buick should the men in it be watching through the rear window. Reaching the front wheel of the truck he waited. As the train screamed over the crossing he took careful aim, put a bullet through the Buick’s rear right hand tyre, and had the satisfaction of seeing it slowly collapse. The noise of the train was such that he himself hardly heard the report of the pistol, so he was sure no one else had heard it. Pocketing the pistol he ran back to the Citroën and got into his seat as the gates were being opened. Accelerating in first gear he pulled out and was first over the

crossing, leaving the driver of the leading truck honking to the Buick to get out of its way.

Passing the Buick he had caught a glimpse of two scowling faces turned towards him. Both looked young, under thirty, and were clean-shaven. One, the driver, was bareheaded. His face was pale, his hair sleek and black. Cold blue eyes glinted under a low frowning forehead. The second man was swarthy, with dark eyes deeply set between high cheekbones. He wore a florid purple and yellow tie, and a black hat, the brim of which was snapped down sharply.

‘Did you see those men?’ Algy asked Charles, crisply.

‘Yes.’

‘Know either of them?’

‘No.’

‘Look back and tell me what they’re doing.’

Charles twisted round to look. ‘They’ve got out and are looking at the tyres,’ he reported. The driver of the front lorry has also got down and appears to be cursing them for holding him up. He’s got back in now, and is reversing to give himself enough room to pull out round them. What’s the matter with the Buick? Won’t it start?’

‘Not much use starting with a flat tyre.’

‘How did that happen?’

‘I put a bullet through it.’ Algy was grinning as he put his foot hard down.

Understanding dawned in Charles’s eyes. ‘So *that* was what you got out for!’

‘It seemed the easiest way of stopping them,’ explained Algy. ‘I’m only sorry there was no time to take their spare wheel. That’s what they did to us. As it is we should get a lead of a quarter of an hour, which I hope will mean fifteen miles. Our real trouble remains with us, I’m afraid. They know the number of this car, and for the moment there’s nothing we can do about that.’

He set the car on its long run south to the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER 7

MONTE CARLO RALLY

THERE is no need to narrate in detail the journey to the coast, for it was made without incident. Nothing more was seen of either the Buick or the Simca, this being due, probably, to the precautions taken by Algy to prevent it. Believing that if von Stalhein suspected they were making for Monte Carlo he would reckon on them taking the shortest route, Road N.7. down the left bank of the Rhône, Algy made a detour via Clermont-Ferrand and then over the mountainous Cevennes.

He decided that their best plan was to spend the night at Clermont-Ferrand, because, should they be followed, there was little chance of them being found in a city of that size. Moreover, there was shopping to be done, for neither he nor Charles had a single article of kit. In any case, there was no possibility of reaching their destination that day, so as they would have to spend the night somewhere, Clermont-Ferrand seemed the best place. So having bought two shirts—their own were looking the worse for wear—two pairs of pyjamas, some toilet things and a bag to carry them in, they slept comfortably in one of the smaller hotels in the Place de Jaude.

Early morning found them climbing the long hill to Puy de Dome, and so on via Villefort, Alés and Uzes to Avignon where they stopped for lunch. They had of course crossed the Rhône to reach Avignon, and were now back on the danger road N.7. Wherefore they proceeded warily, watching every approaching or overtaking car. However, nothing happened. Aix was soon behind them, so after going cautiously through Draguignan and Fréjus they struck the blue sea near Cannes. After a cup of tea at Nice they took the busy lower road to Monte Carlo, where they arrived, somewhat weary, shortly after five o'clock.

‘We’re here, anyway,’ said Algy, comfortingly.

His first concern was money, for after shopping, living and running costs, he was down to a few francs. Consequently it was with some anxiety that he went into the Hotel de Paris to see if the promised money had arrived. To his relief it had, and he returned to the car smiling. He drove on to the Riviera Garage and parked the car, glad to be rid of it with its tell-tale number plates. Opening the letter from Paris he found that Marcel Brissac, of the Sûreté, had sent him a hundred pounds in franc notes. With these was a message to say that should Algy need help he had only to let him know.

On the way down there had been plenty of opportunity for discussion, and Algy knew exactly what he was going to do. By this time, too, Charles knew about Biggles, Algy's chief in London, and Marcel Brissac, the air member of the International Police Commission in Paris.

The first thing was to find accommodation, and this they did at the Hotel Alexander, which was handy for their purpose without being too close to that centre of activities, the Casino. Should von Stalhein have a watcher in Monte Carlo, Algy said, he was almost certain to take up a position there. They themselves kept constant watch for the black Buick and von Stalhein's grey Simca. They knew the registration numbers of both cars, but they saw neither.

It is not to be supposed that Algy intended to parade the streets in the remote hope of coming face to face with Boris Zarrill—to give him the name by which he had known him. Apart from other objections he had no time for such a haphazard plan. Even as things were he was feeling uncomfortable, in taking time off without asking for leave of absence, or even letting Biggles know what he was doing. The circumstances had of course made that difficult. It is true that when he had telephoned Marcel Brissac in Paris he had asked him to call Biggles and tell him he was on the way to Monte Carlo; but to give the reason would have meant explaining the whole involved situation, and for that there had not been time. In any case he did not expect to be in Monte Carlo more than a couple of days. If, in that period, he had not picked up a clue to Boris's whereabouts, there would be little point in remaining on the Blue Coast.

His plan was simply this. There were, or had been, two men in Monte Carlo—or at any rate in the Principality of Monaco—who had known both he and Boris Zarrill at the time they were playing in the tennis tournaments at the Country Club. One was the head waiter at the Club, whom he knew by the name of Mario, and the other was Joseph, of the famous Victor's Bar in the Hotel de Paris. He felt that if Boris was in Monte Carlo, or had been there recently, they would know of it even if they hadn't seen him. Indeed,

he couldn't imagine Boris going to Monte Carlo without having a word with these old friends. The most disconcerting feature of the quest was the fact that neither he nor Charles knew for certain that Boris was still alive. But still, if he were dead, the news was almost certain to have reached Monte Carlo which, on account of its international character, is a centre for world news.

If neither Mario nor Joseph had seen or heard anything of Boris since the war, all that could then be done, Algy had resolved, was to return to Paris and ask Marcel if the police had any definite information. As a matter of detail, on the way down Algy had felt that this might have been the wisest course to take, but he had carried on because Charles had favoured Monte Carlo, and at Clermont-Ferrand, where the proposition had been discussed, they were already half-way to the Mediterranean. The dominating factor may have been the necessity for getting von Stalhein off their trail as quickly as possible.

After a wash, telling Charles to remain in his room—for it was still daylight and he thought it might be dangerous for him to go out—Algy boarded a local bus and went along to the Country Club, to learn, in five minutes, all he needed to know. Mario was no longer there. He had, in fact, been killed in the war. The new staff were all strangers. No one had heard the name Zarrill, so as far as Algy was concerned, that was that. He returned to the hotel. Charles's face fell when he learned that Algy had drawn blank.

He told Algy that watching the Boulevard from the window he had seen a black Buick and two grey Simcas, but from his angle on the first floor he couldn't get the numbers.

'There could easily be six black Buicks and a dozen grey Simcas in Monte Carlo at this moment,' answered Algy moodily. 'What I'd like to know, but have little hope of finding out, is this. Should von Stalhein and his gang turn up here, will they be looking for you or for Boris? Our weakness is, we don't know as much as the enemy may know about Boris. But as guessing won't help us, and we're not likely to learn anything sitting here, let's go to Victor's Bar in the Hotel de Paris and see if that will produce anything.'

As it was now dark Algy took Charles with him. As they turned down the hill towards the Place de Casino, in which the hotel stands, he said: 'If Boris is in the Principality, or has been here since the war, someone in the bar should know. It's the big rendezvous, and I can't imagine Boris being in Monte Carlo without dropping in. Of course, the real snag is, if Boris is in fear of assassination, and has been driven into hiding, he won't dare to show

himself anywhere where he is likely to be recognized. In that case he might not even be in Europe.’

With this Charles had reluctantly to agree.

There were only a few people in the bar when they arrived, for it was still too early for the usual cocktail crowd. The luck was good, for they found Joseph on duty, as upright and immaculate as ever. A smile wreathed his face when he saw Algy and he advanced with warm words of greeting, ‘Welcome once more to Monte Carlo, monsieur. Everyone returns to Monte Carlo.’

Algy came straight to the point. ‘Talking about returning, have you seen anything of Monsieur Zarrill, with whom, you remember, I used to play tennis?’

Joseph’s expression changed. He glanced round the room as if to make sure that no one was within earshot. ‘But surely you must know that Monsieur Zarrill is dead?’

Algy’s heart sank. ‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘I didn’t know. Where and when did it happen? Here, in Monte Carlo?’

‘No.’ Joseph dropped his voice still lower. ‘You know who Monsieur Zarrill really was?’

Algy’s eyes searched Joseph’s face. ‘Yes. I knew. How did you learn that he was. . . .’

‘The Grand Duke. . . .’

‘Yes.’

‘It was necessary for one or two of us to know. During the war . . . you understand. Sometimes he came here—and other people. We used to meet. . . .’ Joseph broke off.

‘You mean, you were in the Resistance, too?’

Joseph smiled faintly. ‘I speak five languages, and here I often overheard things . . . you understand.’

Algy nodded. ‘Yes, I understand. But you haven’t told me how Monsieur Zarrill met his death. The boy you see with me is his cousin. Was it in the war?’

Joseph raised his eyebrows. ‘No—no. It was quite recently.’

‘When did you last see him?’

‘About a month ago.’

‘Here, in Monte Carlo?’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened?’

Joseph hesitated, ‘Here, as you know, we are always discreet. Also, I have received official instructions not to talk about . . . certain things. But you were his friend, so I know you will not divulge the source of any information I may give you.’

‘You may rely on that.’

‘The day I last saw Monsieur Zarrill he looked ill. When I remarked on it he told me he was being hunted by certain enemies and he had recently been shot. This he told me as a war-time comrade whom he could trust. He said he was going away. About a week later there was a little piece in some newspapers about the body of a man being found on the railway line in the Simplon Tunnel, in Switzerland. Later, the body was alleged to have been that of the Grand Duke Boris of Moldavia. In a Rumanian newspaper—as you know, we have all the foreign newspapers here—it was said that certain papers in the pockets proved beyond doubt that the body was that of the Grand Duke Boris, who must by accident have fallen from the train.’

‘You don’t believe that?’

‘If it was the Grand Duke I would say it was not an accident.’

‘Why do you say *if* it was the Grand Duke? Have you reason to doubt it?’

‘Yes. But it is only my opinion.’

‘You have grounds for such an opinion. What were they?’

Joseph stared out of the window at the blue Mediterranean. ‘One must be careful what one says, monsieur, for even here the walls have ears, and I have no wish to die—by accident—for an affair that is not my business.’

‘I might say that, too. But I have a sense of justice.’

Joseph turned back to Algy. ‘It would suit some people, whom we need not name, to have it thought that—er—our mutual friend was dead.’

‘Very much so, considering who he was, and that he has supporters in his own country—who will now disband.’

Joseph drew a deep breath as if he had reached a decision. ‘In the first place, monsieur, having worked in the Resistance with our friend, I am sure he would not carry in his pocket *genuine* papers of identification.’

‘And in the second place?’

‘The last time I saw him, for purposes of disguise as I suppose, he had grown a beard. The man found on the line was clean-shaven, so unless he had removed the beard, which does not seem likely, he was not the same man.’

‘Thank you for your confidence, Joseph,’ acknowledged Algy. ‘You give us hope. I will ask you one more question. You must have known where our friend lived when he was in Monte Carlo.’

Again Joseph glanced round the spacious bar into which customers were now arriving.

‘It is vital that his cousin should find him if he is still alive,’ pressed Algy. ‘In his rooms we may find a clue, a personal link. . . .’

‘He lived in a very small house, the Villa Clement, which is on the left of the Escalier Brougard which descends from the Rue d’Italie to the Boulevard des Bas Moulins. It stands in a small garden, which is entered by a door in the wall.’

‘Did he live there alone?’ questioned Algy.

‘He lived alone. A woman, a widow named Madame Cavalli, went in daily to prepare his food and tidy the house.’

‘Does she still work there?’

‘That is something I do not know, monsieur, for I have not seen her lately. Excuse me.’ Joseph hurried off to attend to customers who were becoming impatient for service.

Algy waited for no more, but touching Charles on the arm led the way out. ‘That gives us something to think about,’ he remarked, as he set off up the hill towards the main boulevard. ‘But we still don’t know for certain whether Boris is dead or alive.’

‘Joseph obviously believes he is alive. Where are you going now?’

‘We’ll go and locate the Villa Clement. I’d prefer to do that in the dark, when there’s less chance of our being seen by anyone who happened to be watching.’

‘You think the place may be watched?’ Charles seemed surprised.

‘When you’ve been at this game as long as I have,’ answered Algy grimly, ‘you’ll learn to reckon that the enemy knows what you know. He, if he is wise, also reckons that you know what he knows.’

Reaching the Boulevard des Moulins Algy struck off to the right for the Rue d’Italie, which is a continuation of it. In ten minutes they were there,

checking the names of the many *escaliers*, the steep, narrow flights of stone steps that zig-zag down to the Bas Moulins which borders the sea.

‘Here we are,’ said Algy at last. ‘This is it.’ He started down the *escalier*, which was lighted at intervals by street lamps attached to the walls or villas.

They found the house they sought about half-way down. At least, they found the white wall, about ten feet high, into which had been inset a heavy wooden door. On this, in faded letters, appeared the name, Villa Clement.

‘I wonder if it’s open,’ murmured Algy, reaching for the iron ring handle. He took it, turned it, and the door opened without a sound.

‘That’s lucky,’ said Charles.

‘I don’t know about lucky, I’d say it is queer,’ returned Algy dubiously. ‘If no one is living here I’d expect it to be locked at this hour. The daily woman, whether she’s still working here or not, should have seen that it was locked. However, as it’s open we might as well see what sort of place it is.’ He looked up and down the *escalier*. There was not a soul in sight. The only sounds came from the traffic on the boulevard above them.

They entered. Algy closed the door quietly behind them, shutting out the light of the lamps that lighted the *escalier*.

Before them now was a garden, much overgrown with weeds and flowers that had run riot from lack of control. Several old orange and lemon trees painted their shadows on the ground with ink. A solitary palm thrust its feathery head high above them. A little to the left stood the villa, a square building and small as villas go. Moonlight filtering through the trees dappled weird patterns on those parts of its white walls not covered with trailing bougainvillea. A stone-flagged pathway curved an uncertain course to the front door as if in doubt as to which way it should go through the herbage. Above the door, and on either side of it, windows stared blankly, like sightless eyes. No light showed anywhere.

‘No one here, by the look of it,’ said Algy, softly. ‘Queer. Not that I expected to find anyone at this time of night after what Joseph told us.’ He led the way to the door.

Reaching it he hesitated, listening. No sound came. ‘The house is bound to be locked,’ he said confidently. He turned the handle and pushed. The door opened. He closed it again. ‘I don’t understand this,’ he muttered. ‘If the door’s open there should be someone at home, in which case we ought to knock. We don’t want to be taken for burglars.’

He knocked, gently. He waited. There was no answer. He knocked again, loudly this time. Still there was no answer. He opened the door and called: 'Anyone at home?' There was no reply. He half turned to Charles. 'Let's have a look inside,' he whispered. 'We shall have to, sooner or later, if you're going on looking for Boris, so it might as well be now. I should have asked Joseph for the address of the woman who looks after the place, but I didn't like to press him too hard, particularly as he was pretty frank with us.' So saying he pushed wide the door, entered, and struck a match to find the electric light switch which he thought would be there. It was. He clicked it on, and the place was flooded with light to reveal that they were in a tiny paved hall. There was a door on the left and another on the right. A narrow passage led to the back of the house. A straight flight of stairs gave access to the upper floor.

Algy opened the door on the left and switched on the light to reveal that it was a sitting-room, simply furnished. He went back to the door on the right. As he expected, it was a dining-room, again of the simplest possible character. Both rooms were clean and tidy, but in neither was there any sign of recent occupation.

'We might as well have a look upstairs while we're here,' said Algy, although what he expected to find, if anything, he did not say.

He led the way to the top of the stairs. Again there was a door on the left and another on the right. The room on the left was small and furnished with a single bed and a chest of drawers. There was nothing else. The room on the right was larger, rather better furnished, and fitted with twin beds. A door on the far side he supposed to be the entrance to the bathroom.

'It doesn't look as if we shall learn much here,' he remarked, seating himself on the foot of the nearer bed and taking out his cigarette case. 'I feel a bit of an intruder, too, coming in like this without by your leave. We'd better come back in the morning. The woman cleaner may be here. She may be able to tell us something.' He struck the match to light his cigarette: but the cigarette remained unlit.

The door of the inner room opened, and von Stalhein, followed by Prutski, walked into the room. Von Stalhein had his right hand in the side pocket of his jacket. Prutski, leering, openly carried a gun.

'I thought we might meet you here,' said von Stalhein, in his cold, dispassionate voice. 'It's time we had another chat, Lacey.'

CHAPTER 8

HARD WORDS AT VILLA CLEMENT

FOR several seconds Algy was speechless with shock, and sick with self-recrimination for making the very blunder which he himself had so recently condemned—failure to make allowances for the enemy being as fully informed as he himself. He had often been astonished, but never in all his experience had he been so violently shaken by an event for which he was not only unprepared but had not considered possible. It required an effort to steady his spinning faculties.

‘All right,’ he said harshly, for he was really angry. ‘So you’ve met us here. We’ve found you here if it comes to that. What of it?’ Actually, he was wondering why Prutski hadn’t used his pistol at once, and by liquidating Charles achieve his object.

This was soon explained.

Von Stalhein made a sign to Prutski, who, speaking directly to Charles, said something in a language Algy did not understand.

‘Just a minute,’ broke in Algy, caustically. ‘Let’s keep the talk above board.’ To Charles he went on: ‘What did he say?’

‘He asked me where the jewels are hidden.’

‘Ask him what jewels he’s talking about.’

Charles did so.

‘What has he to say to that?’

‘He says I know all about the jewels. If I’ll tell him where they’re hidden he’ll let me go.’

‘How very considerate of him,’ sneered Algy, who now perceived the reason for the delay. ‘If you answer that question he most certainly will kill

you, for he'll have no further use for you.'

'I know.'

'You're determined not to tell him what he wants to know?'

'Nothing would make me. I'd rather die first.'

'Good for you. Then tell him to go to the devil.' As he spoke, Algy's hand began to move slowly towards his pocket.

But von Stalhein saw, and produced his gun. 'I wouldn't try that, Lacey, if I were you,' he said icily.

'How do you know what you'd do if you were me?' rasped Algy, still furious with himself for stepping into such a trap. For he understood now why the doors had been unlocked.

Prutski spoke again to Charles.

'Now what?' demanded Algy belligerently.

'He says he will give me ten seconds to make up my mind,' answered Charles, helplessly.

'Tell him your mind is made up. You've nothing to lose because he'll shoot you anyway, if he can.' Algy, desperately seeking a way out of the trap, was inching backwards towards the wall, hoping to get within reach of the electric light switch.

'My mind *is* made up,' said Charles calmly. 'I would rather kill myself than give away the jewels. If I die the secret goes with me.'

Prutski raised his gun and took deliberate aim at Charles. If his expression was anything to go by his threat was no idle one.

Algy, having no intention of standing there and watching the boy shot without making an effort to save him, took a desperate chance. Bracing his muscles and moving with all the speed he could muster he gave Charles a violent shove, and in the same movement, with a sweep of his arm knocked up the electric light switch. Then, as the room was plunged into darkness he went flat, hand groping for his gun. Having drawn it he went rigid in the expectation of the shot he was sure would come.

It did not come, and he guessed why. The flash of the gun of the first person to shoot would betray his position and invite a return shot.

For several palpitating seconds there was not a movement in the room; or if there was it could not be heard. Algy, listening for the sound of breathing, hardly dare breathe himself. So tense was the silence that he began to wonder what he had gained, for in the same way that no one had dared to shoot, now no one dare risk moving a finger.

Eventually the silence was broken by a sound he least expected to hear. Footsteps grated on the stone path outside. With them came a low murmur of voices. The front door was opened and closed. The hall light switch clicked on. There was a brief pause. Then the footsteps came on, slowly, up the stairs. They reached the landing. A voice spoke, in French. 'This was the room where the light was on.' Came another step as if someone was approaching the door. The switch clicked. Darkness was banished by light.

On the threshold stood Biggles. Beside him was Marcel Brissac.

With a faint smile on his face Biggles surveyed the room.

'What's this, a prayer meeting?' he inquired evenly. 'You won't mind if we join the party?'

With a deep breath Algy rose slowly to his feet, as did Charles, who had been flat against the wall. Von Stalhein was crouching behind a bed. Prutski was on his knees in the opposite corner.

Said Algy, weakly, 'I was never so pleased to see anyone.'

'What exactly was the position when we interrupted the proceedings?' inquired Biggles.

'Prutski was on the point of shooting Charles.'

'Prutski being the name of the gent with the whiskers?'

'Yes.'

'So that was why you switched the light off?'

'Yes.'

'That had us puzzled.' Biggles looked at Prutski, then at von Stalhein who, still impassive, was returning his gun to his pocket. 'I must say, von Stalhein,' he observed, 'that for a man of your taste and education you do pick singularly unattractive companions. Where on earth did you collect this odious-looking specimen? No matter. Perhaps you had no choice. As I've told you before, if you insist on flying with carrion crows you can't complain if they stink a bit. Well, what are you waiting for? Do we proceed with the shooting match or shall we leave it till another day?'

Marcel stepped in, looking at Algy. 'Have you any charge against these men if I send for the Principality police?'

Algy shook his head. 'No. They didn't actually get beyond threats.'

'Then we needn't detain them?'

'No.'

Marcel waved a hand towards the door. 'Go, or I may change my mind.'

Without a word von Stalhein strode out of the room, followed by Prutski.

From the landing Biggles watched them down the stairs. Then, as the door closed behind them he went to the window and, in the moonlight, saw them leave the premises. 'They've gone,' he announced. Then, to Algy: 'Can't I trust you to go to Paris without getting into mischief?' Becoming serious he went on, 'How did this uncomfortable state of affairs come about?'

'That's a longish story,' answered Algy. 'For a start I'd rather you told me by what miracle you managed to turn up here at the crucial moment.'

Biggles raised his eyebrows. 'Miracle! There was nothing miraculous about it. You didn't suppose I'd leave you alone in France with a dangerous playmate like Erich von Stalhein?'

'No, I suppose not, since you put it like that.'

'What other way is there to put it? When you rang me up from La Sologne I realized you were on a spot. I couldn't imagine what you were doing with von Stalhein, so after a bit I called you back. The line was dead.'

'Von Stalhein had cut it. At least, so I assumed when I tried to get you again, after he had gone. As you say, the line was dead.'

'Naturally, that had me worried, and I thought I'd better see what you were up to,' resumed Biggles. 'It was all straightforward. You'd told me about the key of the Chateau in La Sologne and after you'd rung off I confirmed with the operator that the call had come from there. Not being able to get you again, and hearing nothing from you the following day, I flew to Paris to ask Marcel if he knew what you were doing. You'd just spoken to him from Vierzon, so he was already busy with certain documents concerning one Boris Zarrill, who, during the war, was the Resistance leader of *Réseau* Nicky. Marcel had got his record and his Monte Carlo address from Intelligence. You had told Marcel that you were on the way to Monte Carlo, so it wasn't hard to put two and two together. I sent Bertie and Ginger to La Sologne to keep an eye on things there while Marcel and I flew down here to see what the fuss was about. We landed at Nice this afternoon, went on to the Hotel de Paris in Monte and found you'd already collected the money Marcel sent. Not knowing where you'd parked yourselves we drifted along here to see if you'd managed to ferret out Boris Zarrill's address.'

Algy nodded. 'We had. So, as you saw, had von Stalhein.'

'Well, what's it all about? I mean, how do you come into this? Who's this boy?'

‘Boris Zarrill is the Grand Duke, heir to the throne of Moldavia—if he’s still alive. That’s what we’ve been trying to find out.’ Algy indicated Charles. ‘Allow me to present you to Prince Karl of Moldavia, who, should his cousin Boris be dead, is next in line of succession to the throne.’

The introduction over Algy went on. ‘I ran into Charles at the Chateau. He was having a spot of bother with certain stiffies who had been detailed by the Iron Curtain Brigade to find him and bump him off. Naturally, I had to take a hand to prevent that from happening.’ Then, sitting on one of the beds, Algy gave Biggles and Marcel a brief account of the events that had led to their present position, which, of course, took some time.

‘And so you still don’t know whether Boris is alive or dead,’ said Biggles when he had finished.

‘No.’

‘Then it seems to be a case of where do we go from here.’

‘Exactly. Frankly, I didn’t expect to find Boris here, but I thought there was just a chance we might strike a clue. We knew of nowhere else to look. There may be something. We haven’t been over the place yet, for we walked in to find dear Erich and his ugly pal waiting for us. There are at least four of them on the job and there may be others.’

Biggles tapped a cigarette thoughtfully on the back of his hand. ‘If Boris was determined to disappear without trace, it’s unlikely that he would leave an *accidental* clue to his whereabouts.’

‘His training and experience in the Resistance, where one slip would have meant certain death, would make him an expert in such matters,’ put in Marcel. ‘From the fact that he survived, in spite of all the Germans could do to catch him, is proof of how careful, and how clever, he was.’

‘All the same,’ went on Biggles, ‘it seems queer that he made no provision to let Charles know what he intended to do. After all, he had a family duty in that respect. Tell me, Marcel, did you find anything in the records to suggest that the Gestapo, or any other branch of the German Secret Service, knew who the leader of *Réseau* Nicky really was?’

‘No. But that isn’t to say they didn’t know. Someone may have given the secret away. I needn’t tell you of the methods used to extort information from prisoners.’

‘I was thinking that if the Gestapo knew we can assume that the countries behind the Iron Curtain would now have that information. Von Stalhein isn’t the only ex-Nazi to take service with Moscow, for instance. But it’s no use sitting here guessing. The important thing is, is Boris dead or

alive? And if he's dead, what is this boy Charles going to do about it? If he wanders about on his own it's only a question of time before his enemies catch up with him. They'll torture him if necessary to make him divulge where the jewels are hidden; then, on the principle of dead men tell no tales, they'll liquidate him. From what happened here to-night Prutski assumes that Charles knows where the jewels are hidden.'

'Those jewels are the real menace,' asserted Marcel. 'If they didn't exist it may be that the persecution of this boy would not be pressed with such vigour.'

'If the jewels could be got out of the country and sold the enemy would have to abandon hope of ever getting them,' said Algy. 'Then, as Marcel says, one of the main motives of hunting Charles would no longer exist.'

'You're not proposing to go and fetch them—I hope,' said Biggles.

'Er . . . no.'

As they sat gazing at each other, each waiting for someone else to speak, the door in the wall was distinctly heard to be opened and closed. There were quick footsteps on the path. The house door was flung open. Footsteps thumped on the stairs.

'Now what?' murmured Biggles. 'This is getting like one of those funny films with people rushing in and out.'

The footsteps stopped abruptly, as if Biggles's voice had been heard by the newcomer. A floorboard creaked. Inside the room no one moved. All eyes were on the door. A face appeared round the doorpost. A big, round, healthy face. A woman's face.

A step brought the woman into the room; and there she stood, arms akimbo, brow black with anger. 'What are you men doing here?' she rapped out trenchantly, speaking of course, in French.

Biggles smiled disarmingly. 'What are you doing here, madame, if it comes to that?'

'I work here, if you must know. I thought I'd left the light on. I was upstairs and saw it from my window. I came to put it out. What are you men doing in this house? Get out, before I call the police.' The woman was staring hard at Charles.

Charles answered. 'I think you must be Madame Cavalli, the *femme de ménage* of my cousin who owns this house. I came here hoping to find him. The gentlemen you see with me are police officers, who are helping me to find him.'

‘Ah!’ breathed the woman. ‘I thought it might be that as soon as I saw your face, for you are much like Monsieur Zarrill. *Oui, monsieur*, I am Madame Cavalli.’

‘Then I pray, madame, that you can give me some information about my cousin, for it is of the greatest importance that I should find him,’ said Charles frankly.

‘Perhaps I can,’ said Madame, cautiously. ‘Stand up.’

Charles stood.

‘Take off your jacket.’

Charles removed his jacket and laid it on the bed. ‘Come here.’

Charles advanced.

‘Turn up the left sleeve of your shirt to the shoulder.’

Again Charles obeyed.

Madame Cavalli took him by the wrist and pushed the shirt right up. ‘*Bon*,’ she said. ‘It is there.’

By this time Charles was smiling, for now he knew the meaning of this strange manœuvre. ‘I have a scar,’ he said, turning his head to face the others. ‘When I was born I had a little brown mole high up on my arm. The doctor told my mother, as she afterwards told me, that if he vaccinated me on the mole it would disappear; instead of which it ran and left a mark like a little brown snake.’

‘That is exactly what your cousin told me,’ continued the woman. ‘He thought you might one day come looking for him. Wait here, I shall not be long.’ So saying she turned about and left the room. They heard her leave the premises.

‘What do you suppose she’s doing?’ asked Charles.

‘My guess is that Boris did, after all, leave a message for you,’ answered Biggles. ‘If at first the lady was a bit curt that was our fault. This was not the proper time to call, and we had no right to walk in as if the place belonged to us.’

In two or three minutes Madame Cavalli was back, carrying in her hand a letter. This she handed to Charles. ‘*Voilà, monsieur*,’ was all she said.

Charles looked at the envelope. ‘This is from Boris,’ he said eagerly. ‘I know his writing. Shall I read it now?’ he asked, looking at Biggles.

Biggles glanced at the woman. ‘I think perhaps Madame is waiting to lock up,’ said he, rising. ‘As the letter may call for discussion it might be

better if we went to the hotel, where we can consider the contents at leisure.'

This being agreed, after thanking Madame Cavalli for her service, they left the house and walked up the *escalier* to the boulevard.

'Where are you staying?' Biggles asked Algy when they reached the top.

'At the Alexander.'

'It would be better, and safer for Charles, if you joined us at the Hotel de Paris,' decided Biggles. 'We'll collect your things on the way.'

CHAPTER 9

BACK TO LA SOLOGNE

IN half an hour they were all in the Hotel de Paris, with arrangements made for adjoining double rooms in order to keep in close touch with each other. It was also a safety precaution, for in the circumstances Biggles would not hear of Charles being left alone. The danger of his position was all too evident.

After a quick wash and brush up it was in Biggles's room that they foregathered to hear Charles read the letter, for it was of course in his own language which none of the others understood. Charles had to translate as he went along, and as he had sometimes to search for the right words to express exactly what his cousin had to say, it was a somewhat laborious process. But the substance of the letter, which was dated only three weeks earlier, was this.

The writer began by saying that he was penning the letter in the desperate hope that Charles, should he be seeking him, would learn of his residence at the Villa Clement. He, Boris, had no idea of Charles's whereabouts; but it was essential that they should make contact if for no other reason than to establish a rendezvous where from time to time they could meet and keep each other informed of current events. The letter was being put in the hands of Madame Cavalli who could be trusted implicitly. For purposes of identification she had been told of the scar on Charles's arm.

Boris went on to say that he had been hard pressed by enemy agents determined to kill him. Three attempts had been made on his life. One of these had so nearly succeeded that he had been in hospital, in Switzerland, for some time. From this hiding-place he had had to fly before he was really fit, because his enemies had located him there. The man who had shot him was Serge Prutski, an ex-gaol-bird of Bucharest and one of the leaders of the

revolution. It was this man who had assassinated Charles's father. Released by the Russians he was now in their secret service.

Boris continued. He would have left Europe had it been possible; but it was not, for two reasons. In the first place he was still weak from the wound that had nearly killed him. Secondly, he was short of money. He was also in some doubt about trying to get into America on his passport, which he feared might lead to press publicity and thus betray him. It was in the name of Zarrill, and on account of his war work he was known by that name to his enemies. He hoped, when he was fully recovered, to get over his financial difficulties by entering Moldavia in disguise and recovering certain valuable articles belonging to them which he thought Charles must know about. The enemy also knew of the existence of these things.

The letter concluded by giving Charles instructions for getting in touch with the writer, who was at present hiding in the forest of La Sologne, south of Orleans. There, as a result of his war-time experiences, Boris said he felt safe. Not only did he know every inch of the ground, but there he had friends whom he could trust. After noting the instructions Charles was to be sure to burn the letter, for should it fall into enemy hands it might be fatal for both of them.

The instructions were as follows. Charles was to go to the Chateau Grandbulon. Standing on the south side of the house he would see a woodland path running due west. At a distance of two hundred metres down this path there was a grave on the right hand side marked by a wooden Cross of Lorraine. The name on the cross was Andrew Gavan. Behind the grave, almost hidden by jungle, were some ruins. From these Charles was to take a stone and place it at the foot of the cross. This would tell Boris that he was there. Afterwards he was to wait at the Chateau, where Boris would come to him.

That was all.

'When that letter was written,' said Biggles, 'Boris could not have known that his enemies knew of his association with the Chateau. At least, that's how it looks to me.'

Replied Algy, 'But as this letter was written three weeks ago, surely he must have been in La Sologne when we were there?'

'That is assuming he was still alive,' put in Marcel. 'We have no proof of that.'

'If we go to La Sologne and carry out his instructions we shall soon know,' averred Charles moodily. 'If he's alive he'll come. If he doesn't

come we may be pretty sure that he is—dead. The body found on the line may have been his. He may have been on his way to Moldavia. He says in his letter that he intended to go there. What a hope he'd have of getting away with a crazy scheme like that!

'If he was murdered, the business would, of course, be made to look like an accident,' observed Marcel.

'Just a minute,' said Biggles shortly. 'Guessing will get us nowhere. Let's try to get the thing in line. In the first place I'm not overlooking the fact that as we're in France it isn't for me to give orders. That's up to Marcel, who will have to decide how far this business comes within the scope of his official duties.'

Marcel shrugged his expressive shoulders. 'Whose business is it? Officially, I question if it is anybody's business. I can only catch criminals *after* a crime has been committed, on French soil—not before.'

'Make the thing official and the whole world will know about it—and that'll be the end of Charles,' put in Algy. 'And to just walk out on him, leaving him here, would come to the same thing,' he added, grimly.

Marcel bit his lip. He looked at Biggles. 'You're the old fox of the party. What is the best thing to do?'

'If we're to give Charles a chance for his life the next move is plain enough,' rejoined Biggles. 'It shouldn't take long. Algy has a hired car. Someone will have to drive it back to Paris. Let's go via La Sologne. If Boris turns up, so well and good. He and Charles can then decide what they want to do. If he doesn't turn up—well. . . .'

'What *can* they do, when neither of them have any money?' inquired Algy.

'That is a bit awkward,' admitted Biggles. 'I'm afraid they'll have to work that out. We're not a philanthropic society. But let's do one thing at a time. Boris will either turn up or he will not. If he does, we'll hear what he has to say. If he doesn't, then I'll suggest to Charles that he comes to England with us, as the best way of giving his enemies the slip. We could probably find him a job of some sort.'

'That's very kind of you, but please don't feel under any obligation to help me,' said Charles. 'I mean, don't get yourselves into trouble for what is really my private affair. Nevertheless, if you would give me a lift as far as La Sologne I'd be very much obliged. I shall certainly go there, or try to go there, and riding would be quicker than walking.'

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Biggles. ‘Time is important, since we must catch Boris before he starts for Moldavia—assuming he hasn’t already started—so I suggest we get cracking for La Sologne early to-morrow morning. We can do the trip comfortably in the day. If that’s agreed let’s go down to the dining-room and have something to eat.’

‘Von Stalhein will probably be watching,’ murmured Algy.

‘Let him watch,’ answered Biggles. ‘Now that he knows he has four people to deal with instead of two he’ll think twice before he does anything rash.’

‘I only need one little excuse and that gentleman will see the inside of a French prison,’ stated Marcel, shortly.

So it was settled, and they dined without seeing anything of Von Stalhein or his associates. As Biggles remarked, if he was watching, he would, for the time being, have to be content with that.

Early the next morning, having breakfasted in their rooms, they were on their way, Biggles taking the main road, N.7, as the quickest route for the first part of the journey. Even if the hotel was being watched he thought their sudden departure should give them a good start, and although they might be followed they should arrive first at La Sologne. Nevertheless, a close watch was kept on all cars overtaking them; but nothing was seen of the enemy.

‘They probably reckoned on us going back to the Villa Clement,’ remarked Biggles when, leaving Avignon, he headed north.

Taking turns at the wheel, and stopping only to refuel and snatch a quick meal at a village *bistro*, they ran through Vierzon on the way to the Chateau while it was still early evening. There were several angles to discuss, but there had been plenty of time en route to deal with them.

First, there were now Bertie and Ginger to take into account. Biggles had, as he had said, sent his assistant police pilots to the Chateau in case Algy was still there and in need of help, as seemed more than likely in view of von Stalhein’s presence in the place at that time. They had received no other instructions for the simple reason that Biggles had no idea of what was going on; so whether they were still at the Chateau, or finding the place empty had taken accommodation in the district, was not known. They might have returned to London, calling at Paris on the way to see if there was any news there; but Biggles thought it more likely that, finding no one at the Chateau, they would stay for a couple of days at Salbris, that being the nearest town, from time to time calling their operation headquarters in London on the phone to ascertain if further orders had come in.

Another problem was what to do with the car. It was desirable to have it handy in case transport was needed; but on the other hand, if it were left where it could be seen, it would tell the enemy where they were. It was decided to find a hiding-place for it if one could be found. Algy recalled seeing what looked like an abandoned farm, when he was in the Renault with Robert the gamekeeper, about a quarter of a mile beyond the drive that led to the Chateau. It was agreed that the first thing must be to confirm this.

As they neared their destination Biggles summed up the situation and stated his plan. 'We'll go straight to this farm Algy talks about and whether there's anyone there or not arrange for the car to be parked there. To leave it in the open would mean mounting a guard over it to prevent it from being immobilized. That's no use. Having decided on the parking place we'll all get out except Algy. He'll go on to Salbris to see if he can locate, or get news of, Bertie and Ginger. They're not likely to be sitting in the Chateau twiddling their thumbs. Now, listen carefully, Algy. If you find them in Salbris they'll have a car. Park the Citroën in a garage and bring them both to the Chateau in *their* car, which should be a lot safer than the Citroën. If you can't find them then you'll have to use the Citroën. Either way, park the car at the farm if we find it's okay to do so. We'll meet you at the Chateau. Watch how you go.'

'What are you going to do after I've dropped you?' asked Algy.

'If there's nobody at the Chateau we shall go on to the grave and put the stone on it as arranged by Boris in his letter. That done we shall return to the Chateau and wait there for you. We shall have to wait there in any case to see if Boris shows up. Which reminds me. It may be some time—perhaps two or three days—before he does show up. He may never show up, if it comes to that. But having put the stone on the grave we shall have to stick around; so to save us from running to and fro for food you might bring a supply back with you. Just plain stuff with some coffee and sugar. And some cigarettes.'

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

'Keep your eyes skinned for the Buick or the Simca,' warned Biggles. 'This is likely to be a dangerous piece of country when they arrive, as I imagine they will, sooner or later.'

'I'll watch it,' promised Algy. 'Take the next turning on the right.'

Biggles, who was driving, turned down the narrow road which Algy had taken on the night of the storm. With the snow all gone, and the sun dropping in a clear sky towards the horizon, it looked a different world. But

the gloomy shadows under the closely packed trees still gave the forest an atmosphere of mystery and defiance.

The car ran on past the overgrown drive that led to the Chateau, with the murdered keeper's cottage and its boarded windows brooding at the corner, and a couple of minutes later came to a stop by a broken gate. A short track ended in a yard bounded by a house and some barns, all in the last stages of dilapidation.

'I can't imagine that anyone is living in that ruin,' observed Biggles, opening the door of the car. 'Wait here while I have a look round.'

He walked down the track, tried the door of the house, and looked into both barns. This done he walked back. 'No one there,' he announced. 'Both barns are empty, Algy, so you might as well use the nearer one when you come back.' So saying he turned the car, drove it back down the road as far as the drive that led to the Chateau, stopped again and got out. Marcel and Charles joined him on the road. 'Okay, Algy,' he said. 'Get back as soon as you can. Give me the key.'

Algy passed Biggles the keys of both front and back doors and slid into the driving seat. 'Shan't be long,' he said, and the car went on up the road.

The others walked briskly down the overgrown track towards the Chateau. 'What a place this must have been during the war!' remarked Biggles. 'How the Germans managed to comb this jungle I can't imagine.'

'The trouble was, the boys had to come out to find something to eat,' explained Marcel sadly. 'Any bush, any tree, might conceal a man with a rifle or machine-gun. It became more and more difficult as one by one the people who fed the boys were caught and shot. It was probably for that reason that Pierre Sondray and his wife were shot. Your people parachuted arms and food to help them—men too, some of whom never returned home.'

They walked up the steps to the front door of the mansion. Biggles opened it and they went in. 'What a place,' he muttered. 'Does it look any different from when you were last here, Charles?'

'It looks just the same. Nothing appears to have been touched,' answered Charles.

Biggles called. 'Anyone at home?' His voice echoed eerily round the building. 'Well, they're not here, apparently,' he went on, after a pause, referring of course to Bertie and Ginger.

'Could they have left a message about their proposed movements?' suggested Marcel.

Biggles shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t think so. There would be too great a risk of it falling into the wrong hands. Remember, they knew that when Algy was here von Stalhein was also here. For all they knew he might still be around. There’s just a chance that Boris left some sign of his occupation if he’s been here lately, so we might have a quick look round while there’s light enough for us to see what we’re doing. Tell me, Charles: did Boris actually own this estate?’

‘There’s always been some mystery about that. Mother told me the place was his property and that he took it over furnished; but from whom he bought it and how he paid for it I don’t know.’

‘I think he must have owned it,’ decided Biggles. ‘Had he only rented it surely the proprietor would have stepped in by now to find out what was going on. Let’s take a look.’

They began on the top floor. This took little time for none of the rooms was furnished. There was bedroom furniture in three rooms on the first floor—cheap, plain, old-fashioned stuff. No mark was found to indicate when these rooms were last used. A lot of time could have been spent on the ground floor, but they went through the rooms quickly without finding anything more interesting than a German steel helmet hanging on a nail in a cupboard.

‘Not a pretty souvenir,’ murmured Biggles. ‘Let’s have a look at the cellars. Bring a candle.’

The cellars—there were four, leading from one to the other—presented the usual dismal picture of such places when they are not used. There were plenty of empty bottles, some wine cases, also empty, but little else. Marcel picked up a scrap of dirty paper from the floor but it turned out to be nothing more exciting than a German propaganda leaflet—another relic of the war. In the three cellars most distant from the stairs the spiders had been so busy that close inspection was discouraged.

‘It is a long time since anyone was in *here*,’ declared Marcel, removing with difficulty some strands of cobweb from his face.

Biggles agreed, ‘I wonder why the spiders shunned the first cellar we entered,’ he said in a curious voice. ‘Usually they’re not so particular.’

Marcel caught his eye. ‘I see what you mean,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘You think it has been used.’

Biggles took a last look round before starting up the steps. ‘Can you think of any other reason why three cellars should be criss-crossed with cobwebs while the other appears to have none?’

‘No; unless it is because the cellar at the foot of the steps would be the one most likely to be used.’

‘For what purpose?’

Marcel shrugged. ‘Who knows?’

‘You haven’t altered my argument, which is that someone must have been in that cellar recently, to break the webs. No matter. It was just an idea. But I have learnt that it is often the little things that count.’

From the corridor into which they had emerged, near the big, stone-flagged kitchen, Biggles led the way back to the hall, which was at the far end of the same corridor. ‘Well, as there seems nothing we can do here we might as well get on with this stone-laying business,’ he suggested.

As they walked over to the door Marcel said, ‘It seems to me, *mon ami*, that if Boris tries to get here he stands a good chance of being shot on the way.’

‘That might happen to us, but not, I think, to him,’ returned Biggles. ‘He must know every inch of the ground. During the war he must often have approached the place in more dangerous circumstances than these. If he survived then he should survive now—always assuming that he hasn’t already been murdered.’ He pointed. ‘That must be the track, running west, he mentions in his letter.’

They stood for a moment listening, eyes making a reconnaissance of the scene. There was neither sound nor movement. The sun was now nearly touching the tree-tops; from them long shadows were beginning to creep. The solemn hush that precedes twilight had already taken possession of a scene that looked as lifeless as a picture. But just as they were about to move forward there came through the gathering gloaming a long, melancholy moan.

Biggles’s hand went to his pocket. ‘What in thunder’s that?’ he demanded, looking startled.

‘It’s the boar hound that belongs to Robert the keeper—the man we told you about,’ answered Charles.

Biggles smiled sheepishly. ‘I’d have thought this place, with its grim memories, was spooky enough without importing beasts to set up such blood-curdling wails. But let’s get on or it will be dark.’

CHAPTER 10

THE FOREST SHOWS ITS TEETH

THEY strode on towards the grassy path that ran west to find, when they reached it, that what Biggles had said about the time factor was true. Under the trees there was still enough light to see, but it was already becoming dim as the advance guards of night made a steady approach. The forest was full of stealthy rustlings.

‘There’s something about this place that gives me the creeps,’ remarked Biggles, as, their feet making no sound on the green herbage, they walked on up the glade. ‘I suppose it comes from knowing what went on here not so very long ago. What a place this must have been then, with Old Man Death lurking at every corner. It’s almost as if the atmosphere still lingers.’

They had not far to go, and presently they could see the double Cross of Lorraine standing sentinel over the lonely grave of the dead Maquisard.

Walking slowly up to it Biggles raised his hat, and the others did the same. ‘Andre Gavan,’ he read, softly. ‘*Mort pour la Patrie*. I wonder how many times those words have been written in France! Being so near the Chateau, Boris probably knew the man when he was alive, and chose the grave because it’s an unmistakable mark. Ah well. Let’s not talk about it. But this I will say. When Algy asked von Stalhein how he had the nerve to show his face here he gave him no less than he deserved. It’s all very well to talk about forgetting these things, but while these crosses stand they’ll be neither forgotten nor forgiven. But let’s see about finding these ruins.’

Finding the ruins presented no difficulty, but it was not so easy to reach them, for they were surrounded by a moat, fortunately dry, but filled with a tangle of undergrowth. However, Biggles pushed his way in and returned with a large piece of squared rock green with moss.

‘It would be interesting to know who last handled that stone and how long ago it was,’ he remarked in a curious voice as he placed it at the foot of the cross. ‘Whoever it was, he could little have guessed for what purpose it would——’ He spun round as from no great distance away came three shots, unevenly spaced, to shatter the solemn silence. *Bang . . . bang-bang.* As the reverberations died away Biggles looked at Marcel. ‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ he muttered.

‘Perhaps a sportsman out shooting duck; this is the hour they fly,’ suggested Marcel. ‘Or maybe a gamekeeper having a crack at a fox or a buzzard.’

‘It could be that foxes and buzzards are not the only vermin in the forest at this moment,’ returned Biggles meaningly. ‘Those shots weren’t fired by a sporting gun. It could have been a rifle, but to me they sounded more like pistol shots.’

‘They weren’t fired at us, anyway,’ said Charles.

‘I know, but that doesn’t make them no concern of ours,’ retorted Biggles, shortly. ‘There could be a lot of people in these woods beside ourselves. Algy, for one. After the time we spent looking over the house he could have got back from Salbris. Bertie and Ginger might be hanging about. Boris may be closer than we imagine. On the other side, the two men in the Buick may have come back here. We don’t know what others there may be. Von Stalhein and Prutski, finding that we’d left Monte Carlo, might well have come back here in the hope of picking up our trail. But I’m chiefly worried about Algy, who may still be driving that confounded Citroën. It’s too conspicuous, and the sooner we can get rid of it the better.’

‘Hark!’ put in Marcel, tersely. ‘I can hear someone, or something, running.’

‘So can I, and it’s coming this way,’ rapped out Biggles. ‘We’d better get where we can’t be seen.’ As he spoke he backed hurriedly into the undergrowth beside the path. The others did the same.

The noise, approaching rapidly, was now such as to suggest someone in panic flight. It came from the direction of the keeper’s cottage. Branches snapped. Bushes crashed. With these sounds came another not easily recognised—a sort of intermittent rumble punctuated with squeals.

‘If it were Algy he’d be making for the Chateau,’ whispered Charles.

‘*Ssh,*’ hissed Biggles, taking out his automatic.

The uproar came on with the speed of a vehicle, and such was its volume that it seemed impossible it could be made by one person. The explanation,

which appeared a moment later, revealed that it was not.

Two men burst from the bushes on to the path some fifty or sixty yards from where the spectators were crouching. They did not pause for an instant, but turning to the right raced for the Chateau.

Biggles breathed a sigh of relief. 'They're not Bertie and Ginger, and Algy would be alone,' he declared.

There was no time for more, for the cause of the pandemonium now arrived on the path, and like the men it arrived with a rush. It was a wild boar, a big brute that must have weighed some hundreds of pounds, looking in the half-light as black as coal. There was no hesitation about its movements, either. It saw the men, and with a thin squeal of rage went after them at a furious gallop.

That it would catch them was at once evident, for they still had a good hundred yards to go. Hearing the thud of hooves getting closer they must have realized this; and the slower of the two, who had dropped a little behind, must also have been aware that when the beast arrived he would be the one to feel its weight. He looked over his shoulder, his face strangely white in the gloom, and perceiving that all hope of escape by running had gone took the only course open to him.

At all events he took a weapon from his pocket and whirled round, shouting for help, with the obvious intention of defending himself, although he must have known his case was hopeless. He had left it too late, anyway. Before he could shoot the boar had knocked him flying head over heels, the weapon exploding harmlessly in the air before spinning away into the bushes. The animal now had the man where no doubt it wanted him, which was on the ground, and it lost no time in finishing what it had begun.

The man screamed.

Now the spectators of this horrid scene were too far away to do anything even if they had decided to take a hand, for the chase had gone away from them, not towards them, and they were some distance from where man and beast appeared to be rolling on the ground. The victim's companion was still close, and as the noise must have told him what had happened it could be supposed that he would go to the rescue. He did nothing of the sort. He ran on a little way, snatched a glance over his shoulder, and seeing that he was at a safe distance climbed up a tree.

With an exclamation of disgust at this exhibition of cowardice Biggles started forward, but stopped when a third man ran out of the forest almost in line with the one who had fallen. There was no mistaking the slim, limping

figure. It was von Stalhein. Without pause he ran to the beast and began emptying his pistol into the black body. At the third shot the animal turned on him and knocked him down. But the bullets must have done their work, for after walking a little way down the path it staggered, stopped, and fell dead.

Von Stalhein got to his feet and hurried to the man who lay groaning on the ground, to be joined a minute later by the one who had found refuge in the tree. They spoke for a moment. Then von Stalhein dropped on his knees beside the injured man and began to do something to him while the other went off at a run presumably to fetch help.

On the appearance of Von Stalhein Biggles had withdrawn again into cover, saying: 'We'd better leave them to manage their own affairs.' After a brief pause he went on, turning to Charles: 'Do you know either of those two men?'

Charles replied: 'I believe they were the fellows who chased us in the Buick.'

Biggles nodded. 'I thought that might be it. They're obviously von Stalhein's men, anyway, so he can take care of them. That was like him to do what he did. He doesn't lack physical courage, which is more than can be said for the rat who went up the tree. Here he comes back.'

'That's Prutski with him,' said Charles.

'So I see.'

The two men were carrying between them what appeared to be a gate, or a part of one. This they placed on the ground. The injured man was lifted on to it. Then all three picked up the improvised stretcher and walked away, soon to be lost to sight in the fast-deepening gloom. They stopped only to drag the dead boar into the forest, where they left it.

'That should keep them busy for a little while,' remarked Biggles. 'We'd better move along and find out what's happened to Algy. I only hope we shall find him wondering what we've been doing.'

'Why do you say that?' asked Charles, as they set off down the path.

'Because I have an uncomfortable feeling that in some way he was mixed up with this affair we've just witnessed. I fancy it was those first shots that started it.'

'He wouldn't shoot at the boar.'

'Neither would the others unless they're out of their minds.'

‘On the other hand,’ put in Marcel, ‘the *sanglier* would not have behaved as it did unless it had been molested. If it did it would be most unusual.’

As they strode on towards the Chateau Biggles observed: ‘The creature did us a good turn. But for it we might not have known that von Stalhein and his party were back in La Sologne. It’s as well we know that. Hello! Who’s this coming?’ he went on in a different tone of voice as a burly figure loomed darkly on the path in front of them.

‘It isn’t Algy, that is quite certain,’ said Marcel. ‘Observe, he carries a gun.’

CHAPTER 11

A VISITOR BY NIGHT

‘I KNOW who it is,’ said Charles, as they drew near the figure, which had stopped at the spot where the boar had got its man. ‘It’s Robert, the gamekeeper from the next estate. We’ve nothing to fear from him. He was kind to us when we called at his house. He was in the Maquis and knows Boris by sight.’

‘He must have heard the shooting and has come to see what it was about,’ guessed Marcel.

The gamekeeper, who carried a twelve-bore in the crook of his arm, regarded them critically as they walked up to him, but relaxed when he recognized Charles.

‘*Bon soir*, Monsieur Robert,’ greeted Charles.

‘*Bon soir, messieurs.*’ The keeper pointed at the ground, which was trampled and bloodstained. ‘Someone has been in trouble here?’

‘A man was attacked by a *sanglier*,’ explained Charles. ‘His friends have carried him away.’

‘*Hm*,’ murmured Robert, in a voice which suggested that he found this explanation somewhat difficult to swallow. ‘Who was this man?’

‘All I can tell you is, he was one of the party from whom my friend and I were running away when we came to your house after the snowstorm. These two gentlemen with me are police officers who have been kind enough to help me.’

‘I understand.’

‘I believe you work on the next estate,’ said Biggles.

‘That is correct, monsieur.’

‘Do you—usually—patrol Grandbulon as well?’

‘I heard the shooting and came to see what it was about.’

‘You must have been close to arrive so soon.’

‘As there is no gamekeeper now on Grandbulon I sometimes walk round to see that all is well,’ answered Robert, rather stiffly.

‘And to-night you happened to come this way.’

‘It is my duty to hunt poachers anywhere, monsieur,’ informed Robert. ‘And now if you’ll excuse me I’ll be on my way home.’

‘*Bon soir, monsieur,*’ said Biggles, in a curious voice.

‘*Bon soir, messieurs.*’ The keeper touched his cap and walked on.

Biggles watched him striding up the path. ‘I wonder what he was *really* doing here,’ he said softly. ‘Why should he go out of his way to protect someone else’s property?’

‘He heard the shots,’ protested Charles.

‘He couldn’t have been far from the Chateau when they were fired.’

‘Need that worry us?’ inquired Marcel.

‘The way he’s going he’ll pass Andre Gavan’s grave. He’s a gamekeeper. Gamekeepers are trained to use their eyes. Unless this one is blind he’ll see that stone at the foot of the cross. He’ll wonder who put it there, and why.’

‘What a suspicious old dog you are,’ bantered Marcel.

Biggles shrugged. ‘Robert was a Maquisard. The fact that the Germans never caught him means that he must have a nimble brain. He’ll know that stone didn’t get on the grave by accident. I only hope he doesn’t take it into his head to move it, that’s all.’

Said Charles: ‘If you feel like that about it we can easily confirm that the stone hasn’t been touched. It will only take two minutes.’

‘I should feel happier to know it’s still there, otherwise we’ve been wasting our time,’ said Biggles, retracing his steps towards the cross.

Marcel threw him a curious glance, but said nothing.

Neither did Biggles say anything when they reached the cross. He took a cigarette from his case and lit it. It was Charles who exclaimed, in a voice of disbelief: ‘It’s gone.’

Marcel looked at Biggles. ‘There are times,’ he said, slowly and deliberately, ‘when I suspect you have the gift of second sight, *mon ami.*’

‘No. It was just plain common sense. I asked myself a question. Now it has been answered. I had a feeling that Robert was not here by accident. If not an accident then he must have been here with a purpose. Our shrewd gamekeeper friend knows more than he pretends about certain happenings at Grandbulon.’

‘Is that proved?’

‘Yes. Had Robert been a disinterested party he would not have troubled to move the stone, even though he noticed it. Why should he bother to move it? Just where he comes into the picture I don’t know; but we shall know in due course.’

‘Are you going to put another stone on the grave?’

‘No. Not to-night, anyway. Possibly to-morrow, if nothing happens in the meantime. I have a feeling that the removal of that stone was part of the programme—our programme. But let’s get back to the Chateau. Algy will be wondering what the deuce has happened to us.’

The set off once more for the house.

They found Algy waiting for them. At least, he appeared from a clump of bushes when they arrived at the steps. And his first words indicated his frame of mind. ‘So you are still alive,’ he said, sarcastically.

‘As you perceive,’ returned Biggles.

‘What on earth have you been doing? I was getting worried.’

‘We’ve been doing several things, and we’ve been a bit worried, too,’ answered Biggles, ‘Let’s get inside and I’ll tell you about it.’

‘Just a minute. Let me get the grub.’

‘We can do with some,’ Biggles assured him, as Algy went into the bushes and came out carrying a heavy carton.

They went into the house and locked the door behind them.

‘Now tell us what happened to you,’ suggested Biggles, as they found seats. ‘Apparently you didn’t find Bertie or Ginger.’

‘I did not,’ retorted Algy. ‘So I had to come back here in that infernal Citroën.’

‘Why infernal?’

‘That blue car’s a death trap. I’d rather walk than ride in it in La Sologne, which must have been especially designed for ambushes.’

‘What happened?’

Algy told his story. ‘Bertie and Ginger have been staying at Salbris, but they’re no longer there. They left to-day. A garage man who filled their tank said they went north. I’d say they’ve gone to Paris for news, reckoning on finding Marcel there. So I collected some food and started back. It’s all very well to talk of being careful, but how can you be careful in a place like this? At first I went slowly, thinking I’d be more likely that way to see anybody, if there was anybody about. Then I realized it was futile and put my foot down; and a jolly good thing I did. I’d nearly got to the turning that leads to the Chateau when somebody shot at me from the trees. There were three shots. Don’t ask me who fired them, I haven’t a clue. I didn’t see a soul—nor a car. All three shots hit the car somewhere in the rear. One went through the window. Whoever did the shooting may have shot at the back of the car hoping to hit Charles, who might be with me. I stepped on it and tore on, watching the rear in the reflector to see if anyone showed himself. But all I saw was a beast of some sort, one of these wild hogs, I suppose. It charged across the road. By this time it was getting dark—too dark to see for any distance—so I stuck to the plan and parked the car in the barn. That’s all. Keeping under cover, hauling the box of grub with me, I came on here. Just before I got here there was more shooting.’

‘Did you see anyone?’ asked Biggles.

‘No. But I couldn’t have seen anyone anyway, because I was blundering about in the trees. It seems no sort of place to stroll about in the open.’

‘It isn’t,’ averred Biggles, grimly, and went on to tell Algy their side of the story. ‘It must have been the shots fired at the car that sent that old boar off on the rampage,’ he concluded. ‘He may have thought he was being hunted.’

‘I’m glad one of the skunks has got what was coming to him,’ growled Algy. ‘What’s the drill now?’

‘Let’s see what you’ve got in the carton,’ requested Biggles. ‘I’m getting peckish.’

‘Reckoning that we should be spending the night here I bought some candles, among other things,’ said Algy. ‘I finished the odd ends I found here.’

‘In the morning,’ said Marcel, as the box was unpacked, ‘I’ll go to Salbris and ring the office in Paris. If Bertie and Ginger are there, what shall I tell them to do?’

‘I shall be better able to answer that question to-morrow,’ replied Biggles. ‘Anything could happen to-night. In any case we must give Boris a

little time to show up—if he's in a position to do so.'

The food was spread out and by the light of a single candle they settled down to a substantial meal. By the time it was finished total darkness had long fallen. In the hall the only light came from the feeble yellow flame of the solitary candle by the fireplace. Even this had been shaded to prevent any possibility of the light being seen from outside, so that the more distant parts of the room were lost in vague shadows.

Biggles looked at his watch. 'Nine-thirty,' he announced. 'We'd better see about making ourselves comfortable—or as comfortable as possible. If anyone would like to go upstairs to bed he's welcome to it.'

No one accepted the invitation so the chairs were arranged to the best advantage.

Said Algy: 'The idea is we just sit here and wait for Boris to come?'

'I don't see what else we can do,' answered Biggles. He smiled. 'There's nothing to prevent you from passing the night in the forest if you'd rather have it that way.'

Algy glanced meaningly at the boar's head with its gleaming tusks. 'I think I'll stay where I am,' he decided.

Charles spoke. 'If Boris comes, how do you think he'll come?'

'To come in through either door he'll need a key,' said Algy.

'If he hasn't a key he'll have to knock,' stated Charles.

'I can't imagine him doing any knocking,' put in Biggles, dryly.

The subject was not pursued. Silence fell. Biggles smoked. Time passed. Marcel yawned. Algy dozed. Charles, deep in a chair with his feet in another, stared into space at nothing in particular, conscious of a growing feeling of unreality.

When after a long lapse of time Biggles clicked his lighter for another cigarette Charles came to with such a start that he realized he had been asleep in spite of his determination to keep awake. He had no idea of the time, but he noticed that the candle was down to its last inch, which told him that he had been asleep for some time. No sound came from outside. Inside, the heavy silence was broken only by the regular breathing of Marcel and Algy.

Whether he had gone to sleep again after this he never knew. If he had, he was unaware of it. What he did know was that he was suddenly wideawake, staring into the dim recesses of the hall. That something had been responsible for this alertness he felt sure; but he could not recall

hearing any sound. He switched his eyes to Biggles. He was still awake, staring into the empty fireplace. A cigarette smouldered between his fingers. Again his eyes explored the shadowy limits of the room, striving to probe the spots which even the candlelight did not reach. He thought he could see something tangible, solid. Had it been there all the time? If so, he couldn't remember what it was. The candle flickered. It was the second time the flame had inclined at a slight angle, as if disturbed by a draught. His eyes went to the door. It was closed. Was his imagination playing him tricks? He looked again at Biggles. He hadn't moved.

His eyes went back to the far end of the room, to the inner door that gave access to the corridor leading to the kitchen, and the cellars. He thought it was ajar. Had they left it open or had they closed it? He couldn't be sure, but he thought they had closed it. That solid object—the shape and size of a man. Had it moved? He shut his eyes for a second and looked again. Yes, it had. He was now practically certain of it.

By this time his pulses were racing, but he held himself in hand, still loath to start a false alarm. Biggles's back was towards the object so it would be impossible for him to see it unless he moved; he was still staring into the empty fireplace apparently lost in thought.

Very gently Charles lifted a leg from the chair and with his stockinged foot touched Biggles on the knee. It had the desired effect. Biggles turned his head and looked him full in the face. Charles signalled with his eyes towards the object, but to make sure Biggles grasped his meaning he lifted a finger and pointed.

Biggles must have understood, for his hand went slowly to a side pocket of his jacket. But before he could draw the pistol that he carried there a voice from the darkness said, quietly but very distinctly: 'Don't move. The first man who moves, dies.'

Under the impetus of the shock Charles's nerves vibrated like the strings of a dropped violin. Marcel and Algy awoke with starts of alarm.

Said Biggles, evenly: 'Sit still, everybody.' Then, raising his voice, 'Come in and tell us what's on your mind.' His hand, the gun in it, came slowly from his pocket.

Charles look the plunge. 'Is that you, Boris? It's me, Karl, here.'

The voice, which had first spoken in French, answered in a language understood by nobody except Charles, who cried excitedly: 'It's Boris! It's all right, Boris,' he went on, speaking again in French. 'You're among friends.'

Jumping up he went forward with a hand outstretched, and presently brought forward into the circle of candlelight a thin figure of a man, the lower part of whose face was hidden under the type of beard known as an imperial. From what could be seen of the rest of him he looked tired and ill, as was in fact the case, presently to be revealed.

Algy went to him, smiling. 'Hello, Boris,' he greeted. 'So we meet again. Do you remember me?'

'I thought I recognized you but I wasn't sure,' answered Boris, as they shook hands. 'You've changed with the years. So have I, I imagine. So you managed to get to La Sologne after all. What brought you here?'

'I wanted to return your key, and I couldn't find you anywhere else. I met Charles here. But let me introduce you to my friends.'

'Sit down,' invited Biggles, pulling forward a chair, after Algy had told Boris why he and Marcel were there.

Boris accepted. 'So you got my letter,' he said, speaking to Charles. 'The stone on the grave told me that, of course. My method of making contact must have seemed silly and dramatic, but it was the only way I could think of to get in touch with you with reasonable safety. I have been through a very difficult time, both during the war and since, and it may be that my nerves are beginning to suffer. Apart from that I have made a slow recovery from a wound that should have killed me. A bullet actually touched my heart. In a way I was lucky, for my enemies thought I was dead and left me lying where I fell. The effect of such a shock to the system lasts a long time. The doctor who operated on me warned me that only months of complete rest could put me properly on my feet again. Rest!' Boris laughed bitterly. 'How can one rest when one is hunted like a mad dog? I came here seeking refuge and fortunately I found it. Apart from a little weakness I am pretty well recovered now.'

'You know that you're supposed to be dead?' put in Charles.

'Yes, I heard about that affair. It was, of course, to fool my friends at home. My enemies know better. They're still after me and they have learned that I'm here in La Sologne. I understand that a new man has arrived on the scene to take charge of the hunting party—a German, I believe, who, having served in the Gestapo, knows his way about . . . and the tricks of his trade.'

'Yes; we know him,' said Biggles. 'And he knows me. We're always getting in each other's way.'

'Why don't you shoot him and have done with it?'

'Have you shot any of the people who are hunting you?'

Boris smiled wanly. 'I see you suffer from the same weakness as I do. I have never been able to bring myself to shoot a man who was at my mercy. The other side, having no such scruples, have an advantage over us. That scoundrel Prutski shot me in the back when I was drinking a cup of coffee. I saw him in a mirror just too late to save myself, I suppose it wasn't he who was nearly killed by a wild boar this evening?'

Charles answered. 'No. It was I think one of two men who were here in a Buick. I remember his bright blue and yellow tie.' He described them.

Boris nodded. 'I know them. They were about here during the war, and for that reason know the district well. Perhaps that was why they were given their present assignment. If they're the men I think they are they were responsible for some of the little white crosses you will see about La Sologne. I believe they are two Americans of Russian origin who, posing as escaped American soldiers, sought refuge with the Maquis for the purpose of betraying them.'

Marcel's expression hardened. 'If they come my way they'll find I have few scruples,' he said harshly. 'Do you happen to know the names of these men?'

'To us, in the Résistance, they were known as Merthe and Pindar. They were attached to the *Sicherheitspolizei* in Orleans.'

'How did you know about the man being injured by the boar?' inquired Biggles curiously, looking at Boris.

'I have friends who keep me in touch with things.'

'Robert?'

'Here we never mention names—another survival of the war when death hung on a careless word.'

'Sorry. I shouldn't have asked.'

'The man has been taken to hospital at Orleans. I hope he recovers.'

Biggles eyebrows went up. 'Why?'

'So that the French may shoot him when they learn that a man they have sought for years is at last in their hands.'

'Will they learn that?'

'France has a long memory,' answered Boris, vaguely.

Charles stepped in again. 'Do you know that I was here a few days ago?'

'Yes. But you were not here long enough for me to get in touch with you. My friends are cautious. By the time I was informed you were on your

way to Vierzon, which led me to hope that you were on your way to Monte Carlo. The German who I believe you called von Stalhein had a very uncomfortable ten minutes after you had left Vierzon.'

'So you heard about *that*?' cried Charles.

'In La Sologne, my dear cousin, ears are everywhere, although you wouldn't guess it.'

'How did you get in here to-night? Both doors were locked.'

Boris smiled again. 'I suppose I should apologize for my surreptitious entry. I expected to find you here, but even so I have learned from bitter experience never to take anything for granted. For years, now, every step I have taken could have been into a trap. I have my own ways of getting in and out of places otherwise I wouldn't be here to-day. I served France during the war, and although her enemies were at some pains to catch me they never did. Not quite. But on more than one occasion it was a close thing.'

'You can't endure this sort of thing indefinitely,' declared Biggles.

'I have no intention of doing so,' replied Boris, dispassionately. 'Now that I am reasonably fit again I propose ending the matter one way or the other. The situation is forced on me, for a man cannot live, much less dodge about the world, without money, and my funds are now exhausted.'

'So are mine,' said Charles, lugubriously.

'Precisely. For either of us to take a job means coming out into the open. To come into the open means certain death. Wherefore I intend to provide myself, at one stroke, with sufficient money to thwart my enemies by retiring to a place where they are never likely to find me.'

Charles's eyes sauced. 'You're not thinking—of—going—to . . .'

'I am going to Moldavia to fetch certain property that belongs to us,' stated Boris, calmly.

Replied Biggles: 'I admire your courage and the spirit that prompts it; but I am bound to say that both exceed your discretion.'

'If I die in the attempt it will only be anticipating what, sooner or later, will happen here. I would at least be where I belong, which is in my own country,' returned Boris, bitterly.

'The decision is up to you, but I must point out that if your enemies get you the hunt will at once be concentrated on Charles, as the last survivor of your dynasty.'

'If he goes to Moldavia I shall go with him,' declared Charles.

‘And so enable your enemies to kill their two birds with one stone,’ came back Biggles, a note of sarcasm creeping into his voice.

Boris was about to say something, but instead, he turned his head in a listening attitude and held up a hand for silence.

Somewhere in the forest, not far away, a fox was yapping.

As the sound died away Boris said quietly: ‘Four men are approaching the house. Two are creeping to the front door, and two are going to the back.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘The war-time methods of communication of *Réseau* Nicky are still proving useful, I think.’

‘They are indeed,’ assented Boris.

CHAPTER 12

BIGGLES TURNS THE TRICK

IN the hall silence fell. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. All may have been waiting for Biggles to say something, for by a sort of tacit understanding he had become leader of the party. It was the number of men reported by the watcher outside that was significant, pondered Algy. Had there been only two it might have been Bertie and Ginger returning for another check-up on the place; but four men could only mean enemies. Von Stalhein had, apparently, replaced the man in hospital.

Boris looked at Biggles. ‘Don’t you think this would be a good moment to go? We could leave by the way I came in. There is an underground passage.’

‘In that case there’s no need to hurry. In the first place we British react badly to the idea of being given the runaround. It makes us stick our toes in. Secondly, there’s a chance that my two assistants, finding no news in Paris, may return to their original assignment, which was here. They’ve just about had time to get back from Paris if that is where they have been, and I wouldn’t like them to walk into trouble. I’m not thinking so much of von Stalhein as that ugly rascal Prutski. We’ll go in our own time.’

There was a slight sound of the handle of the door being turned.

Biggles lit a cigarette.

Came a sharp rap on the door.

‘Who is it?’ called Biggles.

The voice that answered was von Stalhein’s. ‘I want to speak to you, Bigglesworth.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Open the door.’

‘It’s draughty. I might catch cold.’

‘I’m giving you a chance to leave the house.’

‘I’m quite comfortable where I am.’

‘You’ll be less comfortable presently. We’re going to set fire to this rat’s nest.’

‘Adding arson to your list of recreations, eh? Carry on, but mind you don’t burn your fingers. I’m sure the French Government will be delighted to have a reason for making you their guest for a long time to come.’

Boris whispered, ‘If they carry out their threat we shall be forced to leave, so surely we might as well go now?’

Biggles frowned. ‘But what about the Chateau? Are you prepared to have it destroyed?’

‘It has served its purpose. How could I live in it after this, with these assassins hiding in the forest waiting to shoot me if I went out?’

‘They won’t necessarily always be here,’ put in Marcel caustically. ‘I shall have something to say about that. Who do they think they are that they calmly talk about burning French property?’

Biggles resumed. ‘They may or may not burn the place; but they’ve got to try to get us out somehow so that they can shoot us as we go.’

‘But they won’t see us, the way we go,’ asserted Boris.

‘What about your friend outside—the one who gave the signal?’

‘He’s well able to take care of himself.’

‘Even if it comes to shooting?’

‘As he is an excellent shot that would probably suit him very well,’ declared Boris, grimly. ‘The Germans killed his son, for which reason I have more than once heard him say he would rather shoot a German than a *sanglier*, any day of the week.’

Biggles made a gesture of resignation. ‘I suppose it’s natural, but while people talk like that there will never be peace for anybody.’ He tossed the stub of his cigarette into the fireplace. ‘Have it your way. It’s your house and it’s you they’re really after so the decision should rest with you. What’s that?’ he concluded sharply, as again from the distance came the yapping of a fox.

‘Two more men are approaching the front door,’ reported Boris.

‘Two?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re sure of the number?’

‘Quite sure.’

Biggles turned to Algy. ‘Bertie and Ginger, for a cert. They *would* choose this moment to arrive! They’ll walk right into it.’

His fears were soon confirmed. Von Stalhein spoke again, and there was now a note of malicious triumph in his voice. ‘Two friends of yours have proved most opportunely. Aren’t you going to open the door and let them in? If they stay here they may catch something worse than a cold.’

Hard on this came Bertie’s voice. ‘Don’t open it, old boy. The dirty dogs have a machine-gun trained on it.’

‘Hold hard,’ called Biggles. ‘I’ll be with you presently.’ He spun round to Boris. ‘How long is this tunnel of yours?’

‘About two hundred metres.’

‘Where does it end?’

‘In the ruins from where you took the stone for the grave.’

Biggles turned to Algy. ‘Take Charles and Boris with you and go to the car. Give us half an hour. If we’re not with you by then go flat out to Paris and wait for us at the Sûreté. Tell Captain Joudrier what has happened. If we haven’t joined you in twelve hours he must act as he thinks best.’

‘Okay.’ With Biggles in that mood Algy knew better than to argue.

To Marcel Biggles went on: ‘Let Boris show you the entrance to the tunnel. Then come back. We’ll keep the enemy talking to give the others a chance to get clear. They mustn’t think the place has been evacuated or they may break in. I’ve kept you with me because I haven’t forgotten that we’re in France, and this is chiefly your affair.’

‘*Bon.*’

Everyone moved off, leaving Biggles alone for the moment.

‘Are you going to open this door?’ demanded von Stalhein, harshly.

‘Don’t be in such a hurry,’ snapped Biggles, keeping out of line with the door. ‘We’re talking about it.’

‘My friends are becoming impatient.’

‘They’ll have my answer in due course. I’ve told you before, you should choose your friends with more care.’

Marcel returned. 'You were right, *mon vieux*. We start in the cellar—where there are no cobwebs. How long do we wait?'

'Ten minutes should be enough.'

'Boris says he will speak to his friend outside—the signaller.'

'Keep clear of that door,' warned Biggles. 'These people are careless with machine-guns.'

Hardly had the words left his lips when the gun fired a short burst, sending splinters flying.

'That will cost you something more than a new door,' rapped out Marcel furiously. 'You've no Hitler with his thugs behind you now.'

Biggles smiled curiously as he lit another cigarette.

'For the last time, are you going to open this door?' snapped von Stalhein.

'All right, but turn that gun off it,' answered Biggles, curtly.

An instant later the gun chattered again.

Biggles turned to Marcel. 'They may think they've got us if we don't speak,' he breathed. 'It should take them a minute or two to decide what to do next. Let's go.'

'*Entendu*.' Taking a candle Marcel led the way to the cellar.

In a corner he pushed sideways a heavy wine barrel. In tilting it, it lifted a flag-stone with it, disclosing a square black hole.

'You'll feel a ladder inside,' said Marcel. 'There are eight rungs.'

Biggles descended. Marcel followed, pulling the barrel back into place over his head. 'It's all level and straightforward,' he said, holding up the candle to show a narrow brick-lined tunnel, little larger than a drain, vanishing into the darkness of the near distance. It was just possible to stand upright. Green slime formed a skin over much of the walls.

'Go ahead and let's get out of this dirty hole,' requested Biggles.

Marcel proceeded, setting a brisk pace, striding through mud and puddles that could not be avoided.

Five minutes saw them at the terminus—a short flight of stone steps that curved upwards and ended among some blocks of stone half smothered with tangled undergrowth. Trees entwined their branches overhead. Insidious moonlight, filtering through them, lay in pallid patches on the clearing round the grave of the Maquisard, Andre Gavan. Biggles pushed his way through to the path.

‘Now what?’ asked Marcel.

‘I’m going to collect Bertie and Ginger. What else? We can’t leave them here.’

‘Of course not,’ agreed Marcel, taking out his pistol. ‘They haven’t set the house on fire yet or we should see the light.’

‘Let’s go and see what they’re doing.’ Biggles, too, drew his pistol, and keeping to the side of the path set off at the double in the direction of the Chateau. He slowed down to a walk when they came to the point where the path broadened into the open area in front of the house, and at a convenient spot, with Marcel beside him, stopped to reconnoitre the position. Moonlight made this a fairly simple operation, and it was at once clear that the situation was as Biggles had every reason to hope it would be.

Four men could be seen by the front door, facing it, which was to be expected since their interest was in the room beyond. Their backs, therefore, were turned towards the forest, from which they had no reason to anticipate interference. Two of the figures, with their hands raised above their heads, were obviously Bertie and Ginger. The easily recognizable form of von Stalhein was standing near them, holding them covered with either a revolver or an automatic pistol. The fourth man was crouching in a listening posture nearer the door, holding in his hands a sub-machine-gun which was directed at it.

‘Good,’ whispered Biggles. ‘This should be fairly easy. They think we’re still inside.’

‘The other two must still be watching the back door.’

‘Keep an eye open for them in case they come round. I take it you’re prepared to use your gun if necessary?’

‘In France the police use them only in self-defence.’

‘What would you call this?’

‘Self-defence.’

‘Then let’s get on with it. I shall keep in the shadow of the terrace wall until we’re close enough to jump them.’

‘*Avance.*’

With Marcel keeping close, moving with no more noise than a fish passing through water, Biggles advanced to the first objective—the terrace wall. Along this he moved swiftly to the steps that led to the terrace itself, a flagged area in front of the door. Moving more slowly now he mounted them one by one to the top, which brought him within a few paces of von Stalhein

who, at that moment, speaking to Prutski, said irritably: 'We've waited long enough. Shoot the lock out.'

Biggles's voice, as brittle as ice, cut in. 'Hold it! Don't move!'

Von Stalhein stiffened, but made no other movement. Prutski, with a snarling intake of breath, looked over his shoulder—and into the muzzle of Marcel's pistol.

Marcel spoke crisply. 'Drop that gun! Move it an inch and I shoot.'

Two or three tense seconds dripped slowly into the sea of time. Then, Prutski apparently deciding that Marcel meant what he said, the gun fell with a crash on the stone slabs.

'Put your hands up and keep them up,' ordered Marcel sternly.

Prutski, with obvious reluctance, slowly raised his hands.

Biggles spoke. 'Better drop your gun, too, von Stalhein, in case it tempts you into folly. I'm serious, and at this range I shan't miss.'

The gun clattered.

'Now get your hands where I can see them.'

Von Stalhein complied.

'Pick those guns up, Bertie, and give one to Ginger.'

Bertie obeyed.

'Now back out, both of you.'

Bertie and Ginger joined Biggles and Marcel at the top of the steps.

'There are two more of them round at the back so watch the flanks,' Biggles told them quietly. Then, to Marcel: 'Do you want to say something?'

Said Marcel, with iron in his voice, addressing von Stalhein: 'Get out of this country and take your thugs with you. Police from Orleans will be here within an hour. Mind how you go. There are foxes in these woods—you may have heard them—and foxes have long memories. That's all.' He made a sign to Biggles.

Biggles stepped forward. 'You've been anxious to have this door opened, von Stalhein,' he said evenly, as he unlocked the door and pushed it open. 'Here you are. Get inside, both of you. If you attempt to leave within the next quarter of an hour I won't be answerable for the consequences. Remember the foxes. Those of La Sologne not only have long memories—they have long teeth.'

The two men went in.

Biggles closed the door, and beckoning to the others to follow walked briskly to the drive as the shortest way to their objective. 'We shall have to hurry,' he said. 'The half-hour I gave Algy is nearly up. How did you get here, Bertie?'

'By car.'

'Where is it?'

'On the road, near the cottage at the corner.'

'Good. We shall need it.'

A minute later they found it there, and a quick examination revealed—somewhat to Biggles's surprise—that it had not been interfered with. 'I imagine they were all too busy at the Chateau,' he remarked.

Getting into the car they drove down the road to the abandoned farm and were just in time to meet Algy driving out. He stopped when Biggles hailed him.

'I was afraid you weren't going to make it,' said Algy. 'I didn't like the sound of that machine-gun. What's the drill?'

'We'll push along to Paris, keeping together.'

As they were arranging the seating there was a gunshot not far away. 'I wonder what that's about?' said Biggles. 'It sounded more like a twelve-bore than a pistol.'

'It might have been one of the foxes we spoke about, saying good-bye,' said Marcel, with a meaning glance at Boris.

'Let's get along,' said Biggles. 'This isn't the season for fox-hunting.'

'Fox-hunting!' exclaimed Bertie, taking a sudden interest. 'How could a horse get through this bally jungle?'

'You'd be surprised,' murmured Biggles, dryly.

In another minute both cars were racing up the road, Biggles leading in the one that had brought Bertie and Ginger to La Sologne. With him were Marcel, Ginger and Charles. Behind, with Algy in the blue Citroën, were Boris and Bertie. Presently, without incident, they were on the main road, leading north.

'We'd better top up our tanks,' said Biggles when, some time later, they ran into Orleans.

'I want to make a call here, anyway,' said Marcel.

When he returned, as Biggles was paying the bill for petrol for both cars, he volunteered no information about his errand until Biggles, who had a

shrewd idea, remarked: 'Have you been arranging for someone to do a little tidying up round the Chateau Grandbulon?'

'There were too many weeds, and they were getting out of hand,' returned Marcel, carelessly.

The cars continued their journey north.

Rather more than two hours later they cruised quietly into Paris.

CHAPTER 13

INTERLUDE FOR DISCUSSION

THE following morning, after some much-needed sleep, they forgathered for a late breakfast in the apartment which Marcel had found for them in the same building in which he himself lived. Biggles had just returned from the telephone, having explained the reason for their absence to Air Commodore Raymond in London, when Marcel, who had been to his office, walked in. He looked at Algy. ‘When did you take that blue Citroën back to the garage?’

‘About an hour ago—why?’

‘It has just crashed—or been crashed—in the Bois de Boulogne. The police have been called in to investigate an affair which makes sense to nobody except me. The car was cleaned and taken for a trial run by a mechanic to make sure it was in good order before being hired out again. This wretched fellow, who is now in hospital, says he was returning down the Bois on his way back to the garage when he was overtaken by a big car that forced him into the gutter. Somebody in it then fired three shots at him, fortunately without hitting him. Taken completely by surprise he did what anyone would do. He swerved. The car struck a tree and overturned. By the time he had crawled out of the wreck the other car was out of sight. It all happened in a flash. There was no time to identify the type of car much less get its number.’

‘Is the chap badly hurt?’ asked Biggles, anxiously. ‘We’re bound to feel morally responsible for this.’

‘No. He was lucky to get away with shock, cuts and bruises. It will be a long time before the car is on the road again, if it ever is; which is just as well.’

‘I said that car was a death trap,’ remarked Algy tritely. ‘The enemy knew about it even in Paris. The place must be swarming with agents.’

‘There are not as many as there were,’ said Marcel. ‘I was about to leave the office to tell you what had happened at La Sologne when this business cropped up.’ He looked at Boris. ‘I have news that may have an effect on your plans.’

‘I haven’t any definite plans—yet,’ said Boris, who looked far from well, probably as a result of the strain of the previous day.

‘You said you were going to Moldavia.’

‘So I shall, in due course; but I don’t feel quite up to it yet. I tire too easily. I shall need my full strength for a project that will call for a lot of endurance.’

‘Here is my news for what it’s worth,’ resumed Marcel. ‘After I spoke to the Chief of Police in Orleans last night he wasted no time in launching a raid on the Chateau and the district round it. It so happened that he had already alerted his men, for the man who was in the hospital as a result of being mauled by the wild boar had died; and before he died, knowing he was dying, he made a confession. You were right about his name, Boris. He was Pindar, the spy, the traitor. You didn’t tell us that after the Liberation you had made a report about him, and his companion, Merthe, to my Government.’

Boris shrugged. ‘It did not seem relevant to my own affair.’

‘Well, Pindar died, and the Chief was all set to pick up Merthe, who is wanted for war crimes. The man is now, in fact, under arrest.’^[3]

^[3] Conrad Merthe was later tried as a war criminal, sentenced to death and shot.

‘What about the others?’ asked Biggles.

‘Prutski is dead.’

‘The deuce he is. How did that happen?’

‘There seems to be some mystery about it. He was found lying dead just outside the front door. Inside—against the panelling, there was a heap of waste paper and broken furniture. This looked as if it had been set on fire and stamped out. A curious business. It would appear even more curious did we not know that threats had been made to burn the house down.’

‘Obviously they intended doing that, and were stopped in the act,’ said Biggles. ‘What about von Stalhein?’

‘I’m coming to that. He managed to slip away in the darkness, but there is still a chance that he will be picked up. He may have gone before the police arrived; at any rate they didn’t see him. We know something about it from the extra man who was at the back of the house with Merthe and was caught with him. He seems to be an amateur at the game and being scared was ready to talk. According to him, after we had gone there was a first-class row on the terrace, everyone blaming everyone else for what had happened. Von Stalhein was for leaving at once because he was sure I’d send the police along. Prutski, who was in a flaming temper, said he’d burn the house down first, police or no police. Upon this von Stalhein went off. Merthe and the other man stayed with Prutski for a while, still arguing, but when he started smashing the furniture, they, too, departed, in case von Stalhein took the car and went without them. It seems he did that, for when they got to the glade where the car had been hidden it had gone. Whereupon they went back to Prutski to tell him what had happened and to prevent him from starting the fire, which they realized would bring police and firemen to the spot. Without a car they might find it difficult to get away. They found Prutski on the ground, on the point of expiring. He muttered something about foxes and died. They set off on foot for Salbris and were picked up on the way.’

‘I’d say that’s a fairly accurate account of what did happen,’ said Biggles pensively. ‘It’s plausible, anyhow. We heard a gunshot as we were leaving, you remember, a reasonable assumption would be that the man who killed Prutski saved the house from being burnt down.’

‘There is no doubt about that,’ said Boris gravely. ‘I think I shall have to tell you something, if it can remain within these four walls.’

They all looked at him expectantly.

‘Who actually owns the Grandbulon estate I don’t know,’ he went on. ‘But I do know that early in the war it was equipped for the purpose for which it was used. It was in fact a link in the famous Buckmaster organization, which operated from London. Hence the graves you see about with British names on them. Since the war a certain gamekeeper—an ex-Maquisard—we needn’t mention names—has acted as caretaker. In the course of his duties he would naturally take any steps he considered necessary to prevent the place from being destroyed.’

‘I see,’ said Biggles slowly. ‘And the *Réseau* Nicky, of which you were leader, was—’

‘At one time a sub-réseau of the *Réseau* Buckmaster.’

‘That lets in the daylight,’ averred Biggles. ‘With the exception of von Stalhein, La Sologne, if not Paris, seems to have been tidied up for the time being; and I imagine von Stalhein will be too busy getting out of France to play any more tricks for a little while.’

‘That is the point about Boris and his plans,’ said Marcel. ‘If he really intends to go to Moldavia surely now is the time, while the enemy is in a state of disorganization, and perhaps before word can reach the Iron Curtain of what has happened at La Sologne.’

‘If Boris takes my advice he’ll forget about an enterprise which, however you look at it, sounds crazy,’ stated Biggles. ‘With good health, and plenty of money, the trip would be dangerous enough, in all conscience: with neither, as he himself has told us, it would be suicidal. He might get into Moldavia, but I can’t see him, or anyone else, getting through half a dozen Iron Curtain frontiers with a load of jewellery. It boils down to staking your life against—what? Wealth?’

‘There’s more to it than that!’ declared Boris. ‘Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not afraid of working for my living, and neither, I’m sure, is Charles. The problem is how to do it without our identities becoming known. You should know how such things leak out and get into the newspapers. I don’t want to spend my life playing cat and mouse; and anyway, I hate the idea of our most treasured possessions falling into the hands of a gang of crooks masquerading as world saviours. They’ve got away with enough as it is, strutting in our homes preening their dirty feathers. If they get their hands on the jewels our treasures will vanish for ever. Should that happen I’d never forgive myself.’ Anger, bitterness and resolution were in Boris’s voice.

‘I can understand that,’ consoled Biggles. ‘In your position I’d feel the same. What do these baubles actually consist of? I’m thinking of size and weight.’

‘I don’t know exactly, but they would certainly consist of the most notable pieces collected by and presented to our families over a long period. That they were carried in two canvas fishing bags suggests that they do not weigh a great deal. Coronets, rings, bracelets, strings of pearls, ear-rings, and the like, would probably form the major part.’

‘Have you any idea of the total value?’ asked Marcel.

‘Getting on for a million pounds, I’d think.’

Bertie whistled softly. ‘Stiffen the crows! That’s worth having a crack at—if you see what I mean.’

Boris smiled. 'I'd better tell you exactly what happened, then you'll get a clearer view of the situation,' he said. 'You know so much it's only fair that you should know the rest. When our powerful eastern neighbours advanced almost to our frontier it was obvious that, pursuing their customary methods, they would soon infiltrate across it. The usual agitators appeared to cause disunity and civil strife. It was realized that the loyalty of the people to my father could only put them, and him, in a position of mortal danger. The last thing he wanted was that horror, civil war, which has been going on all over the world in the name of Peace. So my father and his brother—Charles's father—decided to leave the country, which would be better for everyone. The ladies were sent off in charge of a trusted retainer. The brothers were to follow. They stayed behind to save the family treasures, for they had very little money outside the country.

'With the treasure in two canvas bags, with a manservant, named Karol Levescu, the brothers set off on horseback after dark for one of the royal hunting lodges about twenty miles distant, the idea being to prevent our belongings from falling into the hands of the revolutionaries who, having been armed by the enemy, were now coming into the open. Prutski, a professional thief, was one of the leaders, his purpose, no doubt, being to fill his pockets with loot when the palace fell. Anyway, the jewels were taken to the lodge and hidden. On the return journey the brothers were murdered. There was some organized rioting and, foolishly as it transpired, they showed themselves in the hope of restoring order. They were at once shot down by enemy agents in the crowd. The servant escaped, and it was through him that my mother, and Charles's mother, heard the dreadful news, and later learned where the treasure had been hidden. That was a long time ago, but we have every reason to think the jewels are still there. That, briefly, is the story.'

'I don't want to press your confidence, but is the hiding-place easily accessible?'

'Yes and no. There was no time for digging holes, or anything like that. At Zogoreb—that's the name of the lodge—there are, or were, some disused stables that had fallen into a state of disrepair. These buildings were surmounted, as stables so often are, by a square, pointed tower carrying a weathercock. There was a small room at the top, reached by a ladder fixed vertically against the wall—you know the sort of thing. This room, which was never used, had long been a nesting place for jackdaws, the accumulated sticks that formed their nests covering the floor for a depth of two or three feet. Under these sticks the two bags were temporarily hidden, for the intention was to return at a later date and find a more permanent

home for them. For reasons which I have told you the occasion never arose, and so as far as we know the jewels are still there.'

'Have you had any information about this place Zogoreb since that time?' inquired Biggles.

'Oh yes; scraps of information have reached us from friends in the country. The house itself was looted and left in ruins.'

'When the palace was searched it would be realized that the jewels had been removed. Was it known where your father had been the night he was killed?'

'I can't answer that. There would be guesswork, no doubt, and someone might get the right answer—and suspect the purpose. But no one could know definitely.'

'Where exactly is Zogoreb?'

'Our estate was on the side of a lake a few miles north of the small town of Ronkav. The house overlooked the lake.'

'What sort of country is it?'

'Pretty wild. Most of the hunting ground was heavily wooded. But is there any point in discussing this? I'm not yet well enough to go, and Charles is too young to tackle such a job.'

'I understand Charles was born in France, in which case I imagine he has never seen Zogoreb.'

'He has never seen Moldavia. Why?'

'I was thinking. There is one way you might get in and out of the country. Can you by any chance fly an aeroplane?'

'Unfortunately, no. But I see what you mean. Would it be possible to hire a pilot and plane to take me there?'

'Possibly. Indeed, very probably, if the job was made worth while.'

'I have no money, but I could offer a share of the treasure—if we get it. Say, ten per cent of the value. The only thing about that is it would mean divulging the secret, and what guarantee would I have that the pilot didn't double-cross me. The temptation would be great. I'm sorry if my experiences have made me suspicious of everybody.'

'Does that include us?'

'After what has happened—what you have already done for me! Of course not. Don't be ridiculous.'

'Thank you.'

‘The trouble is, I’m afraid there’s nowhere within miles where a plane could land,’ stated Boris, hopelessly.

‘What about the lake? How big is it? There are such things as marine aircraft.’

‘The lake is a big one. It must be ten miles long and a good mile wide.’

‘That should be big enough to find even in the dark.’

Boris turned an eye to Biggles. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t care to have a go at this yourself—for, say, a half share in the treasure?’

Biggles shook his head. ‘It isn’t a matter of money.’

‘You think it’s too dangerous?’

‘It would certainly be dangerous. Radar would track the aircraft right across Europe.’ Biggles smiled. ‘But there are tricks to deal even with radar. It isn’t that. In the first place I don’t own an aircraft with an endurance range of anything like the distance that would have to be covered. The machines we fly are government property, so there could be no question of using those for a private venture. Again, I have a job to do, although in that respect I’ve just spoken to my chief and he says that as there’s nothing important on at the moment I needn’t break my neck rushing back.’

‘What about the old *Scud* you used for private charter work at one time?’ suggested Bertie. ‘It’s still serviceable.’

‘It’s too slow. The job would have to be done during the hours of darkness. No one in his right mind would fly over the Iron Curtain in broad daylight.’

Boris looked at Marcel. ‘I suppose you don’t own a suitable machine?’

Marcel smiled sadly. ‘On *my* pay?’ His expression changed. ‘Just a minute though. I have an idea. Were you serious just now, Boris, when you said you’d be prepared to hand over half the profits if the jewels could be collected?’

‘Of course. Why?’

‘I know someone who owns the perfect machine for the raid. But big aeroplanes cost big money, and I could hardly ask him to lend it to me knowing he’d be lucky ever to see it again. But this man is something of a gambler, and if I said to him I will give you twice the value of the machine if I win, but you will lose it and get nothing if I lose, he would probably accept.’

‘This begins to sound like a suicide pact,’ declared Biggles. ‘Who is this man, what is the machine and where is it?’

‘The man,’ answered Marcel, ‘runs a big business importing fruit and vegetables—mostly when they’re out of season, for which reason he uses planes to fetch them from abroad, and by beating the normal market gets high prices. He operates flying boats to Africa, Cyprus, Israel and as far as Madagascar, where he has estates. His machines are based near Marseilles. He has, among others, two Nord Noroits which he bought from the French government and converted to his own requirements. Officially the type is a Reconnaissance and Rescue Amphibian Flying-Boat. With twin Jumo engines and auxiliary tanks it has a range of rather more than two thousand miles, it carries a crew of seven. It isn’t very fast—cruises around two hundred and thirty miles an hour—but can keep that up for eighteen hours. There’s a side door six feet wide on the port side for rescue operations.’

There was a brief silence. Then Biggles said: ‘It certainly sounds just the job. The question is, will this chap risk losing one of his aircraft? You’d have to explain the nature of the operation.’

Marcel made a gesture. ‘I could but ask him, and he could only say no. Will you organize the affair if he says yes?’

‘I’m getting too old to dive into water until I know how deep it is,’ replied Biggles seriously. ‘Give me a little while to go into the details. Meanwhile, you find out if you can get the machine. There’s no object in going ahead with preparations until we know that we can have it. How long will it take you to find out?’

‘A matter of hours. The gentleman will be either in Paris or Marseilles. If he’s in Marseilles I’ll fly straight down and see him. He’ll help me if he can because I’ve more than once helped him by cutting some of the official red tape that can entangle civil aviation.’

‘All right. Let’s leave it like that,’ decided Biggles. ‘I’ll dash back to London to see my chief. The urgent problem is what to do with Boris and Charles. With von Stalhein loose it won’t be safe for them to stay in Paris—witness what happened in the Bois de Boulogne this morning.’

‘What do you suggest?’ inquired Marcel.

‘I think they’d both better come with us to London and have a good rest until we know what we’re going to do.’

‘You realize I have no money—that I can’t pay for this hospitality,’ protested Boris.

A broad smile spread slowly over Biggles’s face. ‘I wouldn’t worry about that. You can give me a diamond tiara out of the swag-bag for a souvenir, if we get it.’

‘And if we don’t?’

‘In that case we shall probably all be where money isn’t any use to anybody,’ said Biggles cheerfully.

CHAPTER 14

GAMBLER'S CHOICE

BIGGLES and his party had hardly arrived at their lodgings in London when Marcel was on the phone to say that his friend was willing to lend one of his machines for the expedition on the terms agreed. That is to say, if the aircraft was lost, or failed to achieve its object, he would get nothing. If it did succeed he would receive £20,000, his estimated value of the machine, as it stood, being half that sum. But there was more to it than that. They could have their choice of two machines, one on the water at Marseilles and the other at Cyprus, whither it had flown empty to pick up a load of fruit. There was yet another facility. The Marseilles machine was under orders for Beirut in the Lebanon, and if so desired could drop them off at Cyprus on the way. There would be plenty of room as the plane was going out empty, and for commercial purposes carried only a crew of three. In either case there was a stipulation that the offer was open for one week only, as the aircraft would then be needed.

It may have been the alacrity with which Marcel had acted that decided Biggles to undertake the mission, although he may to some extent have been influenced by the fact that the operation could start from the Eastern Mediterranean, which was a good deal nearer to the objective than Marseilles. Moreover, as he pointed out to the others in the map room, it had other advantages. A good portion of the journey would be over water. They could enter Moldavia from the East, via the Black Sea, where there would be fewer observation posts than in the West, with its several prohibited frontiers. Again, by travelling in planes well known in Mediterranean ports they could hope to escape notice.

Wherefore he lost no time in advising Marcel to accept the offer of the machine at Cyprus, and the free lift from Marseilles to that island. He would, he said, join Marcel at Marseilles at the earliest possible moment. In

the meantime he might make himself acquainted with the aircraft, and borrow or buy a collapsible rubber dinghy, for one would be needed for getting ashore.

This done he set about the organization of the flight down to the last detail, for, as he told Boris, in aviation as in other walks of life it is the little things that count; and it was one of his maxims that the success or failure of a long-distance flight was more often than not determined on the ground before the start. Failure in this case could only have dire consequences.

First of all he had a long session with his chief, Air Commodore Raymond, telling him the entire story and of what was proposed, in order to obtain his permission, as in duty bound. He made much of the fact that having had the offer of the Nord, government property would not be involved, the whole thing being a purely private venture—which, of course, it was.

Actually, he expected opposition to the scheme, if not downright refusal, and was agreeably surprised when, after some delay, there was none; the reason being, he could only surmise, a willingness at high level to turn a blind eye to the enterprise, possibly on account of Boris's war-time record of service with the Allies. The Air Commodore could not officially sanction the raid. Indeed, he was emphatic that should things go wrong it would be no use looking to him for help. The political tension between Eastern and Western Europe was already embarrassing enough.

'Which way are you thinking of going?' he asked, walking over to the map of Europe that covered a wall of his office.

'I *could* get to the objective by making a dog's-leg round the Aegean Sea, but that would run me uncomfortably close to the limit of my endurance range,' answered Biggles.

'You're not contemplating flying across Turkey—I hope,' came back the Air Commodore, sharply.

'It would save me a lot of time and trouble if I could,' replied Biggles.

'But——'

'Please let me finish, sir. I'm the last person to break international regulations by flying over other people's territory outside the permitted zones; but the Turks are reasonable people and I thought you might get a permit for me from their London office.'

'What reason could I give?'

'You could say the Interpol Police were making a long-distance check of navigational aids for liaison purposes.'

The Air Commodore smiled faintly. 'You always have the answer ready. All right, I'll see what I can do.'

The only other question that arose was about leaving someone in charge of the office; but when Biggles said that the operation should be completed within twenty-four hours from zero the Air Commodore did not press the point. The upshot was, they were all given forty-eight hours' leave of absence starting from the time they left London.

In the matter of personnel the only argument that arose in the course of preparations concerned Boris and Charles. Boris, obviously, would have to be in the party, for he was the only one who was familiar with the ground round the objective. Moreover, it was desirable to have someone on board, preferably an adult, able to speak the local language should the need arise. Biggles argued that to take Charles would mean, in the event of failure, losing the last two people in the world with hereditary rights to take over the government of their country should the revolutionary régime fail. In a word, it was an unnecessary risk. The royalist party in the country still hoped that one day one of them would return. But at the idea of being left behind Charles was so bitterly disappointed that when Boris urged that he should be allowed to come, Biggles relented and agreed, although not without demur.

The preparations proceeded. Maps, distances, alternative routes, compass courses, probable weather conditions, landmarks, all were discussed, discarded or accepted. So the plan took shape. Moonlight would be desirable at the Estimated Time of Arrival. That could be judged provided the sky was not covered with cloud. Radio silence would be maintained. No armament would be carried beyond personal weapons which would only be used in extreme emergency. Boris said he thought half an hour should be sufficient for their purpose once they set foot on land provided there were no complications, for the lodge, or what remained of it, was not far from the lake.

The plan, as finally outlined, appeared like this. Biggles and Marcel would occupy the cockpit with Boris standing by as observer to pin-point the objective and take them down to it when they arrived. In the event of poor visibility this would certainly be necessary, for it now transpired that the lake was dotted with islands, some fairly large, others mere islets. One such island, a small one, occurred less than a quarter of a mile from the shore immediately in front of the lodge. The machine would be put down as close to this as possible and remain moored in its shadow while the shore party went about their work. Much might depend, Biggles opined, on how

near to this island the ship could be put down. If they could avoid using their engines once they were on the water so much the better.

Algy was to act as navigator. Bertie would occupy the radio cabin and listen for enemy signals. Ginger and Charles would watch the sky for possible interceptors, and prepare the dinghy by the unloading hatch ready for the water when ordered to do so.

On arrival Algy would take over the flying-boat, ready for instant action, with Ginger still acting as look-out. In particular he was to watch the shore for light signals, a series of which were to be memorized by everyone. Bertie would paddle the dinghy to the shore and remain on guard over it. The others would proceed to the stables, returning with all possible speed. Speed would, Biggles asserted, play a vital part in the business, for they could assume that the aircraft would be tracked by radar—as would any unidentified plane refusing to answer ground signals—so it could only be a question of time before searchers arrived, by land, air or water.

What Biggles feared most, although not wishing to be an alarmist he did not dwell on it, was the likelihood of the place being kept permanently under observation, as would undoubtedly be the case should there be the slightest suspicion of the treasure being there. Such precautions would, moreover, be redoubled should word have reached the country about the happenings in France. Von Stalhein was still at large. He knew that they had engaged themselves in the royalist cause and his nimble brain would anticipate their next move. However, there was nothing they could do about that. Or as Biggles put it, it was no use jumping their fences until they came to them. Whether the plan would work smoothly, or come to pieces on unexpected obstacles, only the event would show.

Thus it came about that on the evening of the third day after they had left France they were back, flying straight to Marignane, the airport for Marseilles, where they found Marcel, who had been advised of their coming, waiting for them. In his car he took them to the slipway where the Nord was moored and introduced them to the crew.

‘They’d like to get off at dawn—it’s a long run to Cyprus,’ Marcel told Biggles. ‘Does that suit you?’

‘They can start in five minutes as far as we’re concerned,’ Biggles assured him. ‘We’re all ready.’

‘Dawn it is, then,’ returned Marcel.

The next few hours passed without incident, as did the flight to Cyprus the following day, during which Biggles and Marcel took a turn at the

controls to get the feel of the big flying-boat. Both expressed themselves well satisfied with its behaviour, Biggles going as far as to say that had he designed a machine specially for the project he could not have done better.

Final details were settled during the eastward flight, and it was decided that should the aircraft they were to use be ready when they arrived—as Marcel was confident it would be—they would make nightfall zero hour for the start of the main operation. Marcel agreed with Biggles that nothing was to be gained by delay, and there might be something to lose.

It was still broad daylight when they reached the island base to find their own machine ready and waiting, so thanking the crew that had brought them so far, and were now to continue their journey to the Lebanon, they sought somewhere to rest and have some refreshment before proceeding on their own desperate errand.

CHAPTER 15

MORE WORK IN THE DARK

TEN o'clock that night found the Nord nosing its way at twelve thousand feet between slowly moving piled-up masses of cumulus cloud which, as had been learned from meteorological reports, at that moment hung over much of the Near East. They did not worry Biggles overmuch; indeed, in one respect they were an advantage; but he could only hope that they did not close up as he neared the objective, which might make the lake difficult to find, or, worse still, precipitate their contents when they encountered the Transylvanian Alps—the clouds were coming from the north-west—thus destroying visibility altogether.

Level with the aircraft the broad sickle of a newly risen moon hung low over the horizon, but already had sufficient strength to outline the towering cloud masses with narrow lines of silver. Below lay the Black Sea, well named, for not a light showed anywhere. Somewhere in the darkness on the port side lay the coast of Bulgaria.

For more than two hours the Nord had been airborne, which meant that by dead reckoning it was rather more than half-way to Zogoreb, the objective. So far there had been no challenges from the ground, not that these had been expected—yet; for in cutting across Western Turkey, for which permission had been obtained by the Air Commodore, the ship had shown its navigation lights in accordance with International Air Regulations. As the aircraft was now clear of all known air routes Biggles had had no qualms about switching them off.

The danger still lay ahead, when the machine would have to cross the coastline of Southern Rumania preparatory to setting a more northerly course for Moldavia. The coast was the worry for Algy, in the combined

navigation and radio compartment aft of the cockpit, for should he take the machine too far north he would find himself over the southern tip of Soviet territory, which for obvious reasons Biggles was anxious to avoid.

The machine droned on for another hour and then, under Algy's instructions, began edging a little to the west to give him a chance to spot the lights of Constanta and so check his position. He had had hopes of seeing the sky-glow from the lights of the capital, Bucharest, rather more than a hundred miles away, but he now suspected the cloud masses would prevent this, as in fact they did. However, he was able to pick out Constanta, by reason of its size, from the scattered lights of the foreshore when they appeared.

The course was now north-north-west as they stood towards Galatz and the outstanding landmark, the Danube, the delta of the great river, the second longest in Europe, being only a short distance to the north. At Galatz the river swings from south-east to north-east, so as a landmark it was invaluable, the more particularly as the lake for which they were bound lay, according to Boris, on the north-western edge of the Dobrudja Marshes, that vast expanse of reedy swamp which embraces the several mouths of the Danube. Once he could see the river, Boris had declared, there should be no difficulty, for he would know exactly where they were.

It was at this juncture that Bertie reported radio signals asking, in International Code, who they were and where they were going. In accordance with Biggles's instructions he ignored them. There was no alternative.

'I imagine they've picked us up on radar, but I was prepared for that,' said Biggles.

'They're getting a bit hot and bothered because we don't reply,' stated Bertie.

'They can boil over if they like,' returned Biggles.

No one was surprised when a few minutes later a searchlight punched a hole in the night and began exploring the sky uncomfortably close, proving that their position was known. Biggles side-slipped gently into the nearest cloud, reaching it just as another beam cut a section of light in the darkness.

'They're going to be difficult,' said Boris.

'Nothing like as difficult as if we had tried to get in from the east,' averred Biggles. 'We should have had this sort of thing all the way. Tell Ginger to start dropping anti-radar strips and ask all hands to keep a sharp look-out for interceptors when we emerge on the far side of this lump of

murk. If we're to find the objective we shall have to keep in the clear most of the time.'

A minute later they were out of the cloud. Almost at once an anti-aircraft shell flamed, but it was some distance away.

'They're getting annoyed with us,' said Marcel.

'I fancy that was merely a warning. We can expect worse unless we do something about it.' As he spoke Biggles cut the motors and went into a shallow glide.

'You're going down?' said Marcel.

'I'm going to try to get below their radar beam,' returned Biggles. 'We can see the river. Do you know where you are, Boris?'

'Perfectly well.'

'You're sure we can rely on you for visual observation and direction?'

'Quite sure.'

'No mountains in the way?'

'None. While you keep to the east of the river you'll be over low plain and flat marshy ground.'

'That's nice to know.' Biggles put the aircraft into a steep side-slip to lose height quickly.

There were three searchlights groping for them now, but they were all well behind and to the east of them.

'They'll probably think we're trying to get into Russia, to put down a secret agent, or pick one up,' opined Biggles.

'Let's hope you're right,' said Boris. 'I can see Ronkav,' he went on, his voice rising with excitement. 'It must be Ronkav. There's no other town in that region. Yes, there's the lake. You can see the moonlight shining on the water.'

'That's lovely,' replied Biggles. 'You've no doubt about it? I'm sorry if I sound a bit particular, but I don't want to have to open up again near the carpet.'

'It's the lake,' declared Boris. 'I recognize some of the islands by their shape.'

'Fair enough. It's your funeral if you're wrong.' Biggles put the Nord in an even steeper slip, for he still had plenty of height and the lake was no great distance away.

In the cabin Ginger was smiling at Charles. ‘Funny way to come into your own country for the first time.’

‘I don’t know that I quite like it,’ muttered Charles. ‘Why should I enter like a thief in the night?’

‘Because from what you’ve told us, my lad, if you entered any other way you’d be likely to stay for a long, long time,’ answered Bertie cheerfully.

‘I can’t think why you should take these awful risks for us.’

‘As a matter of fact, Charlie my boy, neither can I,’ returned Bertie. ‘It’s Biggles, you know. He’s all for this St George and the jolly Old Dragon stuff. Between you and me he was born about five hundred years too late—you know, an iron suit and a jolly old charger—and all that sort of thing. Battle axes and what have you. Instead of which he has to go to work on an oil-can with wings.’

Charles turned a perplexed face to Ginger. ‘What a funny man he is.’

‘Who?’

‘Bertie.’

‘What’s funny about him?’

‘The things he says, and the way he says them; not a bit like a policeman. I never know whether he’s serious or making fun.’

‘Don’t let that fool you,’ warned Ginger. ‘That rot he sometimes talks comes from an inborn horror of being taken for a line-shooter, as we call a braggart. When you meet that sort of Britisher be careful. They’re dangerous. They may talk in circles but they act straight, ride straight and shoot straight. It may surprise you to know that during the war Bertie managed to knock down thirty-two enemy aircraft. He didn’t keep count, but I did.’

‘Here, half a mo’,’ protested Bertie. ‘What is this—a radio quiz?’

‘Sorry,’ said Charles, a new respect in his voice.

In the cockpit no one spoke. All eyes were on the lake which, as Biggles brought the machine to even keel, appeared to float up to meet them.

‘That’s the island,’ said Boris, pointing. ‘The long narrow one with a hump at the far end. I remember there used to be a fishing hut and a boat-house at the bottom of that hill. If you go over it don’t fly too low. There are trees.’

‘I saw a light on the mainland opposite to it. It’s gone now. What could that signify?’

‘I don’t know. A peasant, perhaps.’

‘What would he be doing there at this time of night?’

‘Poaching, possibly.’

‘The best poachers don’t show lights.’

Boris was staring. ‘Something seems to have happened down there. Something has changed,’ he said slowly. ‘I’m sure that’s the island, but the lakeside opposite is not as it used to be. It’s—more open. I’ve got it. The trees have gone. All that area was thickly wooded with big firs. They’ve been cleared.’

Biggles switched off the motors and glided on at little more than stalling speed, so that the only sound was the soft hum of air over the plane surfaces. ‘We must get down, if we can, without being heard,’ he averred. ‘I’m taking a chance, but having come so far we’ll finish the job. What do you make of it now, Boris?’

Boris’s voice, when he answered, was strained, puzzled. ‘I don’t understand this. It’s the right place yet it’s different. I can see what look like long buildings. The bank has been cut straight, too.’

‘It’s a wharf,’ said Marcel, shortly. ‘And if my eyes are not fooling me there are barges alongside.’

‘For loading timber, for a guess,’ resumed Biggles. ‘I’m afraid someone has built a saw-mill on the site of your hunting lodge, Boris.’

‘That’s what it looks like,’ agreed Boris. ‘The timber would be valuable. But it never occurred to me——’

‘It wouldn’t,’ interposed Biggles. ‘If the site was abandoned after the timber had been cut and sawn up so well and good. If not, things are likely to be difficult. From the fact that there are barges there I’m afraid the work is still going on, even though the trees being cut down may be some distance away.’

‘I should have expected changes after all this time,’ muttered Boris, bitterly. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about,’ rejoined Biggles. ‘In jaunts of this sort things seldom go according to plan; which is why, on military operations, wise commanders make a reconnaissance beforehand instead of taking things for granted. Not that we were in a position to do that. Keep quiet, now, while I go in.’

In dead silence the flying-boat glided on some hundreds of yards from the shore, heading into a slight breeze that stirred moonlit ripples on the

sullen surface of the water. This, as everyone on board must have been aware, was the vital moment. A mistake now. . . .

Biggles made no mistake, but the nervous strain of the landing could be judged by the breath he released as the keel, after kissing the water twice, settled quietly in it, bringing the ship to rest some two hundred yards farther out than the island, which lay like a grotesque black silhouette between it and the mainland.

‘*Bon. Très bon,*’ murmured Marcel. ‘My heart was going pit-a-pat. Now what?’

‘We’ll sit where we are for a little while. We’ve plenty of time, so there’s no need to rush things. If we were spotted coming down, which I don’t think we could have been at this distance from the mainland, we shall soon know about it. Meanwhile the breeze is wafting us nearer to the island. I allowed for that. Only someone passing really close would notice the ship in that inky shadow. How are you feeling, Boris?’

‘Agog with excitement, but upset that I should have misled you about conditions ashore.’

‘Forget it. Little snags like that arise in the best-planned flights. Keep quiet, now. We should hear if anyone’s moving about.’

They sat still for some time, hearing nothing except the gentle lap of wavelets against the hull, seeing nothing except moonbeams dancing on the water. The ship was now so close to the island that Algy was standing ready to make fast when they touched. Biggles gave orders for the collapsible dinghy to be inflated and put on the water. ‘I think it’s safe to move off,’ he decided.

Boris spoke. ‘If you like, while they’re getting the dinghy out, I’ll walk up to the ridge of the island. I know my way about and I should get a good view of the shore from there. At least I’d see if there are lights.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ said Biggles. ‘Don’t be long.’

In ten minutes Boris was back to report that he could neither see nor hear any signs of movement, and by that time the dinghy was afloat.

‘Okay,’ muttered Biggles quietly. ‘Let’s go. Take over, Algy. There’s only one thing about this position that I don’t like. You can’t see the shore should we have reason to signal. Nor could we see you. I think it would be a good thing for Ginger to do what Boris has just done—go up to the ridge of the island. He’ll see both ways from there, and could act as a contact between you and Bertie on the beach—or whatever we find when we go

ashore. There's more than a chance that we may have to come back in a hurry, and if you were warned it would give you a chance to start up.'

'Fair enough. You heard that, Ginger?'

'I did.'

'Don't show yourself on the skyline.'

'I know better than that.'

'Good,' said Biggles. 'Let's get cracking.' He got into the dinghy and held it against the ship while the others stepped aboard.

There were two paddles. Bertie took one and Marcel the other, and under their power the unwieldy craft moved on to the end of the island where, finding the light brighter than he liked, Biggles gave the order to wait for the next cloud to draw a veil over the moon. The little craft then surged on, Biggles staring fixedly at the dark shore-line for anything that indicated danger. Actually, he did not expect to see anything. If they had not been observed it was unlikely that there would be anyone about at such an hour. If they had been observed, or were expected, then the watchers on the bank would almost certainly wait for them to land before they struck. So, of the whole operation, the actual moment of landing on the hostile shore was the one of greatest peril.

Biggles waited for it, tense, with every nerve at full stretch. No one spoke. No one moved except the paddlers, digging deep with the least possible noise. Everyone in the deeply laden craft must have sensed the acute anxiety of the moment, aware that any instant might be his last.

They were within a dozen yards from the bank when the moon sailed out from behind the cloud to flood the scene with light.

Biggles knew that if trouble was coming it would be now. Nothing happened. A last thrust of the paddles and the dinghy bumped gently against a long low stretch of wharfing. Beyond it the ground was bare, with torn and rutted earth between the stumps of the trees that had been felled to suggest the employment of mechanical transport. Indeed, a mud-plastered tractor stood awry on a corduroy track not far away. On level ground some distance back was one of the long, low, wooden hutments that had been observed from the air.

Biggles stepped ashore. The others, with the exception of Bertie, who was to remain on guard over the dinghy, followed. And there for a moment or two they stood, looking about them. There was no cover of any sort unless they wormed their way, literally, through the mud.

At last Biggles turned to Boris. ‘Well? Do you know where you are?’ he breathed.

‘Yes. The trees have gone, but the shape of the ground remains.’ There was almost a sob in Boris’s voice when he added: ‘Forgive me, but it breaks my heart to see in this condition the place where I spent such happy hours as a boy.’

‘Then if you know where you are you’ll know where the stables are—if they’re still there,’ said Biggles, a note of urgency in his tone.

‘Yes.’ Boris gazed half-right. ‘I can’t see the tower. If my memory is not at fault I should be able to, from here.’

‘Then let’s settle the matter,’ requested Biggles. ‘Lead on.’

Boris complied. For a little way he followed the wharf—in fact, to where it ended in a fringe of rushes; then he set off inland at right angles, moving with the caution and slow deliberation demanded by the circumstances. It was easy to understand why he had at first been taken aback by what he had seen, for the tree-felling and haulage work had left the place looking like nothing so much as a modern battlefield.

With the hutments to their left—as a matter of precaution they were assumed to be occupied as sleeping quarters—they topped some gently rising ground, and this brought into view the area beyond. Boris took one or two uncertain steps, then stopped. He said nothing, but there was something about his attitude that prepared the others for what was coming.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Biggles.

Boris raised a hand and pointed to a long rambling ruin a little way ahead and slightly to the right. ‘Those were the stables,’ he said, in a voice that was not quite steady.

‘Then what are we waiting for?’ demanded Biggles.

‘The tower,’ returned Boris in a shocked voice, ‘has gone.’

‘That,’ averred Biggles evenly, ‘is just too bad.’

CHAPTER 16

AN OLD MAN REMEMBERS

AFTER BORIS'S staggering announcement there was a pause to allow it, and all that it implied, to sink in. Then Boris said despondently: 'I must have been mad to think the place would still be standing. I'm sorry to have dragged you here. We might as well go home.'

'Not so fast,' replied Biggles. 'We'd better have a look round while we're here. If the place has been destroyed by fire, or demolished for some purpose, then we're obviously wasting our time. But even if the tower has been pulled down the whole building hasn't gone. There's still a piece left with a roof on it.'

'I think we should find out exactly what has happened,' put in Marcel. 'The tower may merely have collapsed, in which case it's possible that the jewels lie buried under the debris.'

'Even so, we've no means of digging them out,' averred Boris. 'Think of the time it would take.'

'Talking of time,' said Biggles shortly, 'we seem to be wasting plenty. We'd better get the business settled one way or the other. Come on.' With that he strode forward, picking his way through the mire and broken branches that littered the ground.

The others went with him, and in two or three minutes they were close enough to see, in the soft blue moonlight, all that remained of the stables. It was not much. The whole of one end, where the tower had been, was a heap of charred beams and twisted girders. Of the masonry, only the shell remained. The question was answered beyond any shadow of doubt. The building had been destroyed by fire; and as precious stones will not endure such heat it could be assumed that the jewels had perished in the flames. At the end farthest from where the tower had stood a remnant of the structure

remained, and that was in the final stages of dilapidation. The door stood ajar.

‘What was this place?’ inquired Biggles. ‘You’re sure that the tower couldn’t have stood at this end?’

‘Quite sure. This, I remember clearly, was the harness room.’

Biggles pushed the door wide open; or rather, he started to, but he desisted when it protested noisily on rusty hinges. He was turning away when a voice inside, speaking sharply, said something in a language he did not understand. The effect can be more easily imagined than described. Charles started to run, slipped and fell. Boris took a quick pace backward. Biggles and Marcel had their pistols out in a flash; and there for two or three brittle seconds they all stood, taken completely by surprise, waiting for events to shape themselves. Then Boris spoke as if answering the man inside in his own language.

A figure loomed darkly in the doorway of the harness room. Again it spoke. Again Boris answered, the situation becoming ever more tense with expectancy. Then the weak beam of a small torch stabbed the moonlight to strike Boris fair and square. He did not move. In the silence it was possible to hear the man in the doorway catch his breath.

For what followed no one could have been prepared, except possibly Boris. The man came out. He knelt, bowing his head. Then he rose erect at the same time saying something in a low, tense voice.

Boris turned to Biggles, and in a voice that sounded as if he himself found it hard to believe what he was saying, announced: ‘It’s all right. This man is Karol Levescu, who was with my father the night he was murdered. He wants us to go inside. He has something to say. It is not safe to stand here, he says.’

The old servant led the way into the building, the others following; and there, in darkness relieved only by feeble moonlight that managed to find a way through the cobwebs that festooned the window, they stood, wondering what was going to happen next.

The old man began to speak. He spoke swiftly, almost fiercely, but he kept his voice low. He spoke for some time, while Biggles and Marcel had to control their impatience, for as he spoke in his own language they understood not a word of what he was saying. They were more than a little relieved, therefore, when finally he stopped, and Boris was able to translate.

‘Karol is now working at the saw-mill,’ began Boris. ‘Some time ago, when the work here was started, it was decided to pull down these buildings

and use the materials for a house for the manager. Karol, learning of this, and knowing what was under the jackdaws' nests in the tower, came by night and removed the jewels. That was before he worked here. During the demolition, he doesn't know how, the place caught fire, with what result we can see. He says he knew I would come back one day; that was why he took employment here. It gave him an excuse for being close. Until two days ago he lived in the hut with the others; then something happened to cause him to spend his nights here. Soldiers and police arrived suddenly, and from their behaviour he suspected I was in the country and it was thought I might come here.'

'Which is what happened,' put in Biggles. 'Von Stalhein wasted no time in reporting what he knew. Go on. Where are these troops now?'

'They're still here. They patrol the area constantly. Moreover, a police launch, perhaps more than one, armed with machine-guns, now patrols the lake. One calls here from time to time.'

'What about the jewels?'

'He has them—or he hopes he has, for he hasn't dared to touch them since he moved them from the tower.'

'Where are they?'

'In the lake. He bound the two bags together with wire, and with another piece of wire attached them to a branch of an overhanging tree. The water is deep. He chose the place because he keeps a fish trap under it, so if he was seen he'd have an excuse for being there.'

'Where is this tree?'

'Along the lakeside, about half a mile from here. A path runs beside the lake.'

'With watchers on the prow it isn't going to be easy to get at them. Has Karol any suggestion to make about that?'

'Yes. We can wait here while he fetches them, or, knowing we have a plane, he will come with us to it and take us to the spot.'

'To use the plane for that purpose would mean starting the engines.'

'He understands that, but he thinks if we acted with speed the thing might be finished before anyone arrived.'

'It would have to be,' answered Biggles grimly. 'As things seem quiet I think the better plan would be for him to fetch them, although as that would take time we should have to let Bertie and Algy know what was going on, otherwise they might come to look for us.'

‘Well, which is it to be?’ asked Boris.

Biggles went to the door to reconnoitre the scene outside. ‘Hark,’ he said.

From no great distance away across the water came the *chug-chug-chug* of a marine engine.

‘That’s the patrol boat,’ said Boris. He listened for a moment. ‘It sounds to be coming this way.’

‘It must be the far side of the island or we should see its lights,’ stated Biggles. ‘If it’s coming this way it would be madness to try to reach the island in the dinghy; we should run right into it.’

‘They might see the dinghy if they intend making fast to the same wharf,’ said Charles.

‘They might see the plane if it comes to that, although I don’t think that’s likely unless they happen to pass very close to the island,’ replied Biggles. ‘Until we can see the confounded thing and get an idea of what it intends to do it’s difficult for us to do anything, Algy and Ginger must have heard it. In fact, they must be able to see it, although of course they don’t know what its purpose is. They’ll reckon we can hear it, too, which is probably why they haven’t risked making the danger signal.’

At that moment the lights of the launch appeared round the top end of the island.

‘If they hold that course they’re bound to see Bertie and the dinghy,’ snapped Biggles. ‘That mustn’t happen.’ He made up his mind suddenly. ‘Marcel, Boris, Charles, go with Karol to the tree. Fish out the bags and wait for either the dinghy or the aircraft to pick you up.’ He thrust his torch into Marcel’s hands. ‘If I can’t find you I may have to whistle. Show a green light if all’s well—otherwise red. Get cracking.’ Without waiting for an answer he set off at a run for the wharf.

He hadn’t far to go, for which he was thankful, for he had to look where he was putting his feet and at the same time keep an eye on the launch as well as the huts. He spotted two men walking from the huts towards the wharf, fortunately some distance above where the dinghy had been left. He found Bertie a little below that point, for perceiving his danger Bertie was hauling his way along the wharf, hand over hand, to widen the gap between him and the danger area.

‘By Jove, old boy, am I glad to see you,’ muttered Bertie, as Biggles slid into the dinghy beside him.

‘Keep going for a bit then pull her into the reeds,’ panted Biggles. ‘Okay, you’ll do,’ he went on a moment later. ‘They’re more likely to see us if we move than if we keep still.’

Bertie pulled the dinghy into the reeds by hauling on them, and there they sat, watching the launch approach the wharf higher up. ‘Shook me, when I heard the bally thing coming,’ whispered Bertie. ‘Didn’t know what to do for the best. Deuce of a flap. Where are the others?’

‘Gone to fetch the jewellery. It’s about half a mile lower down,’ Biggles told him.

‘Are they coming back here?’

‘No. We’ve got to fetch them, somehow.’ In a few words Biggles explained what had happened. By the time he had done that the launch had made fast to the wharf opposite the huts, some distance above them. Voices could be heard talking loudly.

‘What’s the drill now, old boy?’ inquired Bertie.

‘It should be fairly safe for us to work our way along to the tree. The problem then is how to get back to the aircraft. While that confounded launch remains where it is the dinghy would certainly be seen if it attempted it. Algy must be all steamed up as it is, and he’s likely to blow his lid off if we don’t soon show up. The launch may stay here for hours. It might still be here at daylight.’

‘How about making a signal to Ginger to bring the plane across? He’ll be watching.’

‘To show a light from this position would be asking for trouble. In any case, with people moving about he wouldn’t dare to answer, so we wouldn’t know if he’d received our signal. That’s no use. It would be leaving too much to chance.’

‘How about me swimming across to Algy?’

‘*Swimming!*’

‘Absolutely. I’m no Channel swimmer but I should be able to manage a couple of hundred yards—or whatever it is. The blighters wouldn’t notice my little skull bobbing up and down among the jolly old moonbeams—if you get my meaning.’

‘I get your meaning,’ answered Biggles slowly. ‘But I can’t say I’m infatuated with the idea. That water’s cold.’

‘I’m not exactly dripping with sweat as it is,’ argued Bertie.

‘All right, if you think you can do it,’ agreed Biggles, with some reluctance. ‘It might be the answer. In fact, I’m sure it would be if you could make contact with Algy. The job could be finished with a rush that should see us in the air before the enemy realized what was afoot.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Bertie cheerfully, beginning to remove his clothes. ‘Try to keep my beastly togs dry. I shall need ’em.’

‘This is the scheme,’ resumed Biggles. ‘As soon as you get across tell Ginger to watch the shore-line for signals—about half a mile below this spot. A red light will mean stay where you are. Green flashes will mean okay. If you get the green come to it as fast as you can—but not so fast that you ram the bank.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m going to take the dinghy along and join the others. I’ve made arrangements for that.’

‘Jolly good.’ Bertie, clad only in his vest and trunks, stepped overboard and made his way to deep water.

‘What’s it like?’ asked Biggles anxiously.

‘Not too bad.’

‘If you get into difficulties, yell, and I’ll come for you,’

‘If I can’t swim a couple of hundred yards, old boy, I deserve to drown,’ was Bertie’s last remark as, at a long, smooth, steady breast stroke he set off.

For a minute Biggles watched him. He knew Bertie was a strong swimmer, and the distance he had to go was not great. In the ordinary way he would make nothing of such a swim; what worried him was the temperature of the water. He knew, in spite of what Bertie had said, that it was cold.

At last, seeing that Bertie was well on his way, he pushed the dinghy clear of the rushes, and keeping as close to the bank as possible set off on his own journey. At first he tried the hand over hand method, but finding the awkward craft did not respond well to this mode of progression along an irregular course fringed with weeds, he picked up the paddle and made better time. Even then the alleged half mile seemed a long way. Twice he stood up to see if Bertie’s head was as inconspicuous as he had said it would be; apparently it was, for he failed to find it.

He had no difficulty in locating the rendezvous, for the tree, a willow, hung far over the water, and the appearance of the dinghy was greeted by a low whistle. He at once drove the craft into the black shade beneath the

branches. Holding one of them to steady the dinghy he said: ‘Well, how goes the fishing?’

Marcel answered. ‘Well, we have two bags and two pike. We were washing the mud off the bags when you came along, but they’re still pretty heavy.’

‘Great work,’ complimented Biggles.

‘Where’s Bertie?’

‘On his way to the island—swimming. He should be there by now.’

‘Did you say *swimming*?’

‘I did. But get aboard. We may have to move fast, and I need the torch to signal.’

‘Here, take the bags,’ said Boris.

‘What about Karol? Is he coming with us or does he want to stay here?’

‘He will stay here. He has a wife to look after.’

‘Then tell him to move off. There’s nothing more he can do and I’d be sorry if he got caught with us.’

Biggles was making the bags snug in the bottom of the dinghy, trying to keep them clear of Bertie’s clothes, for they were, of course, soaking wet, when Charles said: ‘Be careful. There goes the launch.’

Biggles turned to look. The launch, represented by a fast moving cluster of lights, had cast off and was again moving towards the island. ‘Confound that infernal thing,’ he muttered. ‘If Bertie hasn’t reached the island it’ll see him. But I think he must have got there by now. What a pest.’

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

‘There’s nothing we can do for the moment except stay here. Algy won’t expect a signal from me with that boat in the offing. For the same reason it would be lunacy to show ourselves on the open water with the moon on it. Get in, all of you, in case we have to move fast. Be careful. One hole in these air-filled tubs and they’ve had it.’

The others had just got into the dinghy and settled down when to everyone’s consternation the launch, still on the same course, switched on a spotlight. Its brilliant beam, dimming the moonlight, cut a broad swathe across the water to the near side of the island, which it began to explore.

‘If they do that on the far side Algy’s had it,’ grated Biggles through his teeth.

Hardly had the words left his lips when the beam swung round to the mill, and from there began to work along the shore.

‘Heads down and keep still,’ said Biggles quickly. ‘Don’t show a face anyone.’

The beam swept over them without stopping; but before they could congratulate themselves on this Marcel said: ‘Someone’s coming.’

‘Where?’

‘Along the path. I can hear footsteps, and voices.’

Presently these sounds could be heard distinctly, coming from the direction of the mill.

‘Listen, everyone,’ breathed Biggles. ‘We’re between the devil and the sea. Our only chance is to keep dead still. They may pass. Lie flat. Quiet, now.’

The footsteps came on noisily, crunching twigs, and it became evident that there were several persons in the party. Voices spoke. Someone laughed. Nearer came the footsteps.

To Charles, in the bottom of the dinghy, the suspense became agonizing; but he didn’t move a muscle. Words, spoken in German in a cold incisive voice, came clearly to his ears to strike a jangling chord on his quivering sensibilities and set him searching his memory for the owner of it.

Said the speaker: ‘You may laugh, Herr Kommandant, but I tell you you don’t know this man Bigglesworth. He’s as cunning as the devil himself. I would wager that the hand on the control column of that unidentified aircraft that came this way was his. I know his methods.’

‘If he comes here, Hauptmann von Stalhein, you need have no fear that we shall not catch him,’ answered another voice, stiffly, as the footsteps came level with the dinghy.

They stopped.

Charles ceased to breathe.

The same speaker went on. ‘The sentry was right. He did see a man. There he is, over there, walking towards the huts. Not exactly the behaviour of a spy. In fact I recognize him. It’s old Levescu. He spends all his spare time fishing. I think he’s carrying some fish now. They help the rations. We may as well go back.’

The footsteps moved away in the direction from which they had come.

‘Had I known you were on the boat and intended to stay here I would have. . . .’ The voice, as it drew away, was lost in the trampling of twigs.

For a few minutes nobody in the dinghy moved. Then Biggles slowly raised his head, chiefly to mark the position of the launch. It was now rounding the end of the island.

‘Listen, everyone,’ he whispered. ‘If the launch turns its light on the far side of the island it’s bound to see the plane, which means Algy will have to move fast if he’s to get away. Risk or no risk I must let him know that it’s okay here. Ginger will be watching from the island, and unless he gets back to the machine now he’s likely to be left on it.’

‘What about Bertie?’ asked Marcel.

‘He must have got there or the launch would have picked him up. Neither he nor Ginger would dare to make a signal with the launch so close. Hold your coats to shield me on both sides.’

Coats were held up.

Biggles flashed the green light.

There was no answering signal.

‘The luck seems all against us,’ muttered Boris.

‘So far it’s been with us, or we wouldn’t be here,’ returned Biggles curtly. ‘Had we arrived *after* the launch we should never have got down, in the first place.’

‘Sorry. I’m afraid those last five minutes shook me,’ confessed Boris. ‘My nerves are not quite up to this sort of thing.’

‘You get used to it—with practice,’ averred Biggles, evenly.

CHAPTER 17

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

A MINUTE passed: or it may have been two or three. When nerves are strained time tends to become telescoped. Biggles had pulled the dinghy to the outer rim of the shadow in which they lurked, ready to move clear. He had one paddle, Marcel the other, in the water.

‘Roll Bertie’s coat and trousers up tightly and see to it that they don’t get wet,’ Biggles told Charles. ‘Better keep them on your lap. Those bags you fished up are still spilling a lot of water.’

Charles obeyed.

All eyes were now on the island, ears straining for sounds they feared might come at any moment. The beam of the spotlight could no longer be seen, but its reflection sometimes made a fringe of the tallest trees as it caught them.

‘Algy won’t start up while the launch is as close as that unless the light finds him,’ opined Biggles.

‘Wouldn’t it be a good thing for us to get nearer in case he has to make a bolt?’ proposed Boris.

‘Not with von Stalhein and his guards on the bank,’ answered Biggles. ‘He’d see us. The guards might be careless, but not he. He knows that if we aren’t already somewhere handy we’re on our way. You heard what he said about an unidentified plane. We got here just before he did, luckily for us. He has a long score to settle with me and I’m not giving him more chances to-night than I’m bound to. Ah! There we go!’

The Nord’s twin Jumo engines had started with a roar which, coming out of the silence, seemed to make the universe vibrate.

‘That means they’ve spotted him,’ said Boris, in a sinking voice.

‘Of course. It couldn’t mean anything else.’

‘Then what are you waiting for?’

‘To see which way he goes. If he takes off into the wind, and he will certainly do that if it’s possible, he’ll be heading away from us.’

‘Away from us?’ echoed Charles, aghast.

‘Yes. But don’t worry. As soon as he’s grabbed some altitude he’ll make a wide turn and then come in here up-wind. Whether we’re ten or forty yards from the bank makes no difference; he’ll see us. But if we start too soon, before it’s really necessary, von Stalhein will have a better chance of seeing us. The less time we’re on the open water the better. There go the guns!’

Punctuating the rising bellow of the Nord’s motors as they were put on full throttle for the take-off came the staccato chatter of machine-guns.

‘They’ll get him,’ gasped Charles.

‘I don’t think so,’ returned Biggles calmly. ‘Algy’s an old bird at this game. He’ll be all over the sky like a frightened snipe. It takes a smart gunner to hit an aircraft and the fellows behind those guns are anything but smart.’

‘How do you work that out?’

‘Had they been wideawake they’d have been ready and caught Algy sitting. They weren’t ready. He was well on the move before they opened up. He’s airborne now, and as I thought, he’s going the other way.’

The roar of the motors was receding.

‘You’re sure he’ll come back?’ Boris spoke with marked anxiety.

‘If there’s one thing certain in this uncertain world it is that Algy won’t go home without us,’ returned Biggles, curtly. ‘We don’t leave each other in the lurch, whatever happens.’

‘You’ll show him a light?’ Marcel asked the question.

‘Yes. It may bring the guards along but we must do it. Algy is on a more difficult spot than we are and we must give him all the help we can. Here he comes back. Okay, Marcel, let her go.’

‘There’s a cloud not far from the moon. Won’t you wait for it?’

‘No. It’ll be five minutes. We daren’t wait any longer. Algy must be looking for us now.’

They dug the paddles in the water and the clumsy craft surged clear of its hiding-place.

‘The farther we can get from the shore now the better,’ said Biggles, putting his weight behind each stroke of the paddle.

To Charles, the dinghy, now on the open water in full moonlight, looked as big as a battleship. He was sure they must be seen. They were, but the eyes on the shore must have turned upwards following the sound of the aircraft, and they had some minutes’ grace before shouts announced they had been discovered. By then they were seventy or eighty yards from the shore.

Biggles thrust the torch into Boris’s hands. ‘Hold it towards the machine showing green,’ he ordered crisply, and resumed paddling. ‘With three of them on board one should soon see us,’ he added.

‘Algy’s turning again for the approach run,’ panted Marcel, digging water hard.

‘That’s it. He’s coming in now,’ said Biggles, as the motors died.

In the comparative silence rifle shots sounded in the direction of the mill. Bullets started zipping the water round the dinghy.

‘Not so good,’ said Boris.

‘It could have been worse,’ said Biggles. ‘If they’d run down the bank instead of shooting from where they are they’d have halved the range and stood a better chance of hitting us. Low in the water as we are we shall take some hitting.’ There was truth in this, of course, but Biggles spoke with a confidence he did not entirely feel. It would, he knew, need only one bullet in the right place to puncture the air-inflated craft and sink it. ‘Watch for Algy,’ he said. ‘We shan’t see him until he’s close.’

At that instant a bullet struck the dinghy with a sudden plop. Air hissed.

‘Anyone hurt?’ asked Biggles quickly.

‘It grazed my foot,’ answered Boris. ‘I think it went into the jewel bags.’

‘I can feel water coming in,’ said Charles.

Then the cloud sailed over the moon and the light faded as if a curtain had been drawn.

‘Good!’ exclaimed Boris. ‘That won’t make it any easier for them.’

‘It won’t make it any easier for Algy,’ said Biggles. ‘Here’s the launch coming back,’ he went on, as the vessel reappeared round the end of the island. ‘They must have heard the shooting. Easy all. We shan’t do better than where we are. Poor old Algy. He must be having an awful time.’

‘Aren’t we?’ cried Charles.

‘Not as bad. We’ve nothing to do. He has. Everything depends on him now, and he must know it. That’s always an uncomfortable feeling.’

‘We’re going soggy,’ said Charles. ‘The boat’s collapsing.’

‘You watch Bertie’s kit,’ advised Biggles seriously. ‘If it gets wet he’ll have something to say about it.’

Marcel laughed. ‘As if we’re not all going to get wet in a minute.’

‘If we go down I shall hang on to the jewels and go down with them,’ declared Boris, with a sort of desperate resignation.

‘That sounds a daft decision to me,’ asserted Biggles. ‘You’ve managed without diamonds so far, why not continue without them?’

Bullets were still flicking the water around the dinghy, now slowly settling in the water. Twice the spotlight swept over it without stopping, apparently having failed to see them. The cloud, which was only a small one, passed, and once more moonlight poured down from the sky. There now seemed to be as much water in the dinghy as outside it. Charles had to hold Bertie’s kit high. He was convinced that this was a wasted effort, for it was obvious that another minute would see their crumpling craft founder under them.

‘Here comes Algy,’ cried Biggles cheerfully, as the black bulk of the aircraft suddenly took shape a hundred yards away, coming straight towards them and nearly on the water.

Boris waved the torch wildly.

For a moment it looked as if the machine must run them down. The keel swished, churning up a foaming wake. Then, when collision seemed imminent, it yawed slightly, passed close and overshot for a few yards. The port engine roared, swinging the machine round almost in its own length and bringing the loading hatch into view. It was already open, with Bertie and Ginger on their knees just inside ready to do anything that was necessary. Another roar and they were alongside. Turbulent water slopped into the dinghy. It began to sink.

Standing knee deep in water Charles shouted ‘Catch’ and flung Bertie’s clothes at him.

‘The bags!’ shouted Biggles. ‘Get the bags aboard, Boris.’

Somehow this was done. The rest was a wild scramble, but in a few minutes they all managed to get into the aircraft, falling in a heap on the floor. The spotlight struck them.

‘Get mobile,’ yelled Biggles, as a burst of bullets lashed the aircraft somewhere aft of the cabin.

But Algy, seeing they were aboard, needed no order. The motors roared. The ship moved, and was soon racing across the water at ever-increasing speed.

‘Suffering skylarks! What a flap,’ muttered Biggles, picking himself up from the floor, as the ship became airborne. He pointed to the hatch. ‘Get that closed some of you,’ he ordered, and hastened forward.

‘Nice work,’ he congratulated Algy when he reached him. ‘You’ll never do a neater spot of aviation if you live to fly a million hours. Is everything all right?’

‘As far as I know,’ replied Algy, smiling weakly. ‘The pressure gauges are okay, anyway, that’s the main thing. My gosh! What a scramble!’

‘I was afraid one of those shots had holed a tank.’

‘One or two shots hit me before I could get away, but no harm done. I think. I sat tight against the island hoping they wouldn’t see me, but the luck was out. That spotlight did the trick. What’s the drill now?’

‘Keep her as she goes. Every anti-aircraft station for miles will be looking for us presently.’

‘Did you get the sparklers?’

‘We did. At least, I hope so. I haven’t actually seen ’em yet.’

‘Great stuff.’

‘Another minute and they’d have been at the bottom of the lake. So should we. A shot had gone through the dinghy and we were sinking fast. Keep straight on for the Black Sea. I don’t care where you strike it. I’ll go and see what the others are doing.’

Biggles went aft, to find the others at their stations. The hatch had been closed. Boris and Charles were jubilant. Bertie was grinning.

‘What’s the joke?’ inquired Biggles. ‘We aren’t out of the wood yet.’

‘I’m the only body with dry clothes.’

‘You can thank Charles for that, but you deserve them for that swim,’ complimented Biggles. ‘Give yourselves a hot drink out of the vacuum flask, and nibble a sandwich, or you’ll be getting pneumonia. Come forward and take over, Marcel, when you’re ready, and I’ll bring Algy back with me for our rations.’

‘*Bon,*’ agreed Marcel.

Biggles went back to the cockpit. 'How do we go?'

'Okay.' Algy inclined his head towards a long silvery streak straight in front of him. 'There's the sea. I'm still keeping her low.'

'And there are the boys getting to work,' stated Biggles, as searchlights began cutting the sky into sections across their front. 'There may be some shooting but it'll have to be snappy to hit us at this height.'

Very soon tracer shells were streaming up from a dozen different points. Biggles smiled. 'Looks as if von Stalhein wasted no time getting on the phone.'

'Von Stalhein! Was *he* there?'

'He was. He guessed what our next move would be. At one time he was standing within three yards of us. Had me really worried for a minute or two. That gun on the right is getting a bit nasty. I fancy a spot of weaving is indicated, and we may do better over the marshes. Swamps are awkward places to build concrete gun platforms.'

Taking the control column Biggles did a quick swing to the left and was presently flying a zig-zag course over the miles of flat plain with innumerable small rivers that form the great delta of the Danube. 'Keep your eyes open for interceptors; they may put some up,' he said, as the Nord tore along with its keel almost scraping the reeds.

If fighters were sent up to stop them they saw nothing of them. There was a lot of sporadic shooting but nothing really dangerous, and ten minutes later the aircraft sped like a startled bird across the long line of surf that marked the coast. For some time Biggles remained low, still weaving, but when the coast had faded into the gloom behind them he handed the machine back to Algy.

'We should be all right now,' he opined. 'I'd begin to take some altitude. They didn't put up much of a show after all. I expected much worse. They'll do better with more practice.' Biggles relaxed, yawning. 'We gave them a useful little exercise. I'll go and see if Ginger has the course for Cyprus.'

'Why there? Why not Marseilles? We have enough juice.'

'No, it'll have to be Cyprus. Marcel's pal has a load of fruit there awaiting shipment and he might be upset if it went rotten.'

'We've some nice fruit on board already,' returned Algy grinning. 'What exactly do you intend to do with it?'

'Get it to Marseilles with the rest of the fruit and let Boris and Charles do what they like with it. They'll have to declare it when they take it into

France, of course; but we can leave Marcel to take care of that end of the business.'

'What about Boris and Charles? There will be a nice row over to-night's business, I imagine, and the people after them will try all the harder to get them.'

'If they take my advice they'll remove themselves from Europe without wasting any time over it. There are still some quiet spots left in the world. I'll go and see how they're getting on, and send Marcel forward to take over while you chew a sandwich with a bowl of soup. These shows always make me hungry. You can put your navigation lights on now to let Turkey see we're honest men.'

Nothing more need be said about the homeward trip for the flight was completed without trouble of any sort, the Nord gliding down to its island base as the eastern sky was shivering into pink with the dawn of another day.

The sale of the jewels in Paris a month later caused a sensation, for it turned out they were even more valuable than had been supposed, one reason being that the price of gold and precious stones had gone up since Boris had last seen those belonging to his family. Buyers came from all over the world; but neither Boris nor Charles were there, for taking Biggles's advice they had gone to seek peace somewhere in Australia.

Word leaked out about where the gems had come from, as it was bound to, for some of them were recognized; but how they had reached France was a well-kept secret. Biggles and Marcel attended the sale not only as a matter of curiosity but to check up on undesirable visitors. To their surprise they saw von Stalhein standing amongst the spectators.

'By thunder! That chap certainly has got a nerve,' muttered Biggles.

'Do you want me to have him picked up?' queried Marcel.

'On what charge? What can you prove against him? Never mind what you know—what can you *prove*? Not the least clever part of his technique is the way he always manages to keep on the right side of the law. Put him in court and you may find yourself stirring up a lot of dirty linen that would be best kept in the laundry bag. I'll go and have a word with him.'

'What an extraordinary fellow you are!' exclaimed Marcel.

Biggles smiled faintly and lit a cigarette. 'Von Stalhein has been an obstacle on my line of flight for so long I should miss him if he wasn't there.'

A rogue elephant may be a nuisance, but the fault may not be entirely his. An old wound may irritate him. I shan't be long.'

Biggles made his way through the crowd knowing that von Stalhein had already seen him. 'Thinking of going into the jewellery business as a change from playing hide-and-see?' he greeted cheerfully.

'I've been in it for some time, but didn't manage to pick up the pieces I wanted,' returned von Stalhein, without turning a hair.

'You must have been looking in the wrong place. Take this little lot here, for instance. You were standing within a couple of yards of it at one time.'

'How do you know? Were you there?'

'As if I'd be mixed up with that sort of thing,' chided Biggles, looking innocent.

'Then how do you know?'

'A little bird whispered in my ear. Now let me whisper in yours. The French police are watching you. They don't like you, and when they don't like a person they're apt to let him know it. That goes, too, for a certain breed of fox in La Sologne.' Biggles turned away and rejoined Marcel.

The sale realized more than a million pounds sterling, of which Marcel's friend received more than the agreed figure to pay for the damage done to the machine—not that this was serious. Bullet holes are easily patched. Biggles, on behalf of his party, and Marcel, also received substantial cheques. Moreover, it seemed that Boris did not sell everything, for some time later Biggles received a registered parcel. In it was a diamond encrusted coronet.

'This must be Boris's cock-eyed idea of a joke,' declared Biggles.

'Or a souvenir,' said Algy. 'What are you going to do with a thing like that?'

'It must be quite valuable,' murmured Biggles thoughtfully, holding up the coronet. 'If we sold it I could think of one thing we could do with the money. There's probably a society in France taking care of the dependents of Maquis who died in the war. After all, if Boris hadn't given you the key of the chateau you would never have gone to La Sologne; and if you hadn't gone we should not have had this. Funny how things work out, isn't it?'

'I think that's a sound idea,' stated Algy.

And the others agreed.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations by Leslie Stead (1899-1966).

[The end of *Biggles Takes Charge* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]