

Biggles

**FORMS
A SYNDICATE**

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: Biggles Forms a Syndicate (Biggles #69)

Date of first publication: 1960

Author: Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns, (1893-1968)

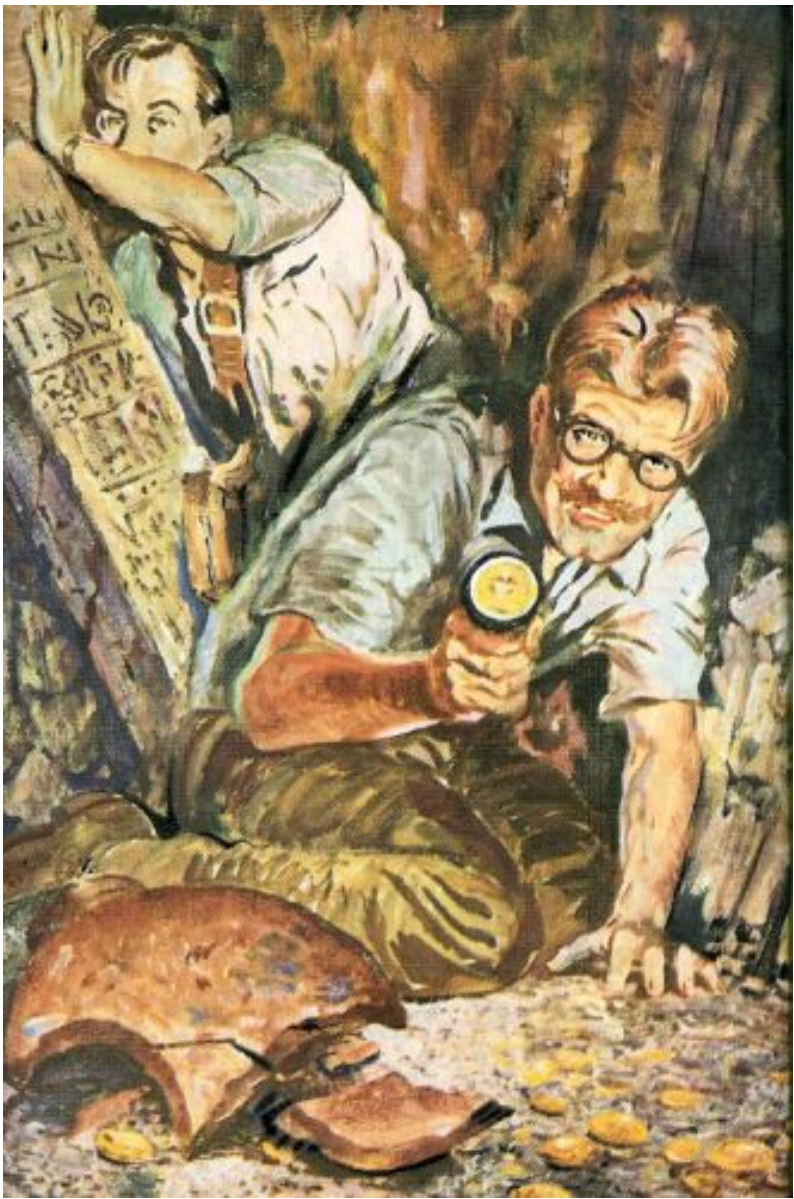
Illustrator: Leslie Stead (1899-1966)

Date first posted: December 21, 2023

Date last updated: December 21, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20231242

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, akaitharam, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



BIGGLES FORMS A SYNDICATE

An off-duty adventure of Biggles and his comrades
of the Air Police at the hottest spot on Earth,
sometimes known to members of the fighting
services as Hell's Gates

Biggles
FORMS A
SYNDICATE

By
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



Illustrated by Stead

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

THE CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE ENTIRELY
IMAGINARY AND BEAR NO RELATION TO ANY
LIVING PERSON

Copyright © 1960 by Captain W. E. Johns
Illustrations © 1961 by Hodder and Stoughton
First published in book form 1961

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN FOR
HODDER AND STOUGHTON LIMITED, LONDON,
BY C. TINLING AND CO. LIMITED, LIVERPOOL,
LONDON AND PRESCOT

GEOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ARABIA is the great peninsular that forms the extreme south west of Asia. Bounded on the east by the Persian Gulf and the south by the Indian Ocean it is separated from Africa on the west by the Red Sea. Its greatest length from north to south is about 1,500 miles, and its width, 1,250 miles. Its area is in the order of 1,200,000 square miles. About one third of this is sheer desert, and much of the remainder is arid and uncultivated. The atmosphere is extremely hot and dry. Clouds are seldom seen and rain rarely falls. The temperature can exceed 115° in the shade—where there is any shade.

The central and southern regions of this harsh land were among the last places on earth to be seen by a white man. Even today only a handful of explorers have penetrated its burning heart, for which reason much of it still remains a blank on the map. This is not only because of the inhospitable nature of the land itself but on account of the fanatical hostility of the independent Arab tribes which for centuries waged war between themselves, so that life was a hazardous business even for an Arab. For a Christian it was much more dangerous. Well into the present century Arabia clung to its tradition of the Forbidden Land.

Yet Arabia was well-known to the ancient writers, and in olden days the climate must have been more salubrious or it would not have been known as Arabia Felix (Happy). We read of fields, streams and orchards. The other parts were Arabia Deserta (Desert) and Arabia Petraea (Stony).

South of the Rub' al Khali, the great sandy desert known as the Empty Quarter, where the Red Sea meets the Arabian Sea of the Indian Ocean, is the port and British Crown Colony of Aden, from where is administered a long narrow coastal strip known as the Aden Protectorate. From west to east it is about six hundred miles long. Behind it for a hundred miles or so, between the actual coast and the Great Sandy Desert, is the Hadhramaut—the Valley of Death.

The Protectorate is divided into a number of sultanates, the chiefs of which are in protective treaty relationship with the British Government. It is their duty to keep order, but that does not always prevent the incursion of raiding parties from the north. The boundaries are always in dispute.

It is generally believed that somewhere on or near this southern coast of Arabia stood the fabulously wealthy town of Ophir, associated with King Solomon and the celebrated Queen of Sheba, to which reference is made in the Bible and by several ancient writers. That it existed is beyond doubt, but just where it was situated has long been a matter for speculation. It has disappeared and all trace of it lost.

The reason for its disappearance is thought by many to be the same as the one which has caused such a change over almost the whole of the Middle East; and that is the gradual encroachment of sand, carried by the prevailing wind from the great deserts of Central Asia. This, eventually, not only killed the vegetation, the roots of which helped to hold moisture in the soil, but has hidden under a deep blanket of sand most of the cities of the old world mentioned in the Bible. And there were many, for this, you must remember, was where civilization began.

Now, any rain that falls, with nothing to hold it, rushes to the sea through a thousand watercourses which at all other times, and that means most of the year, are dry. Again, long ago it was the cool forests that induced the clouds to precipitate their contents. Today there are no forests, so the few clouds pass on, leaving the thirsty land dry and sterile.

It was with this lonely and dangerous corner of the earth, as a result of an accident that occurred to an R.A.F. officer stationed at Aden, that Biggles—not from choice—found himself involved.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I A PILOT TELLS A TALE	11
II DIZZY ENDS HIS STORY	21
III BIGGLES MAKES A SUGGESTION.	31
IV TRAGEDY LOOMS	42
V MOSTLY SURMISE	53
VI TRAPPED	62
VII HEARTBREAKING WORK	73
VIII FRESH TROUBLE.	85
IX AWKWARD MOMENTS	96
X UP THE HILL AND DOWN	105
XI GINGER'S DILEMMA	114
XII "THE WILL OF GOD".	125
XIII THE SHEIKH LENDS A HAND	137
XIV BIGGLES SITS BACK.	147
XV THE LAST WORD.	157

CHAPTER I

A PILOT TELLS A TALE

IN the Air Police headquarters office at Scotland Yard the intercom telephone buzzed at the elbow of Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth, known to his friends as "Biggles," who was engaged in reading and sorting a pile of world aviation press cuttings that covered his desk.

He reached for the receiver. "Bigglesworth here. . . . Yes . . . please bring him up. Right away."

Glancing across at his staff pilots who were working in the same room he remarked: "Tighten your safety belts. If I know anything here comes trouble."

"In the shape of what?" inquired Algy Lacey.

"Do you remember Digswell, of four-two-four squadron?"

"Remember him! Dizzy Digswell! Who could ever forget him. Crazy as a dingbat. I'm only astonished that he's still walking the earth. Don't say . . ."

"He's on his way up."

"Stiffen the crows! What sort of gremlin has thrown him off course to put his wheels down here?"

"Nothing he did would surprise me so let's not try to guess what he wants. Stout lad all the same."

"I don't seem to know this chap," put in Ginger.

"I think he must have been a bit before your time."

"In which case, dear boy, you missed some lively entertainment," observed Bertie Lissie, smiling as he polished his eyeglass.

"If he managed to get the nickname of Dizzy in the Service he must have been pretty wild," returned Ginger.

"It all depends on how you look at it," resumed Biggles. "Actually, he was by no means as crazy as some people tried to make out. He was a natural pilot. He could make an aircraft do anything. Some people love horses. Some love dogs. Dizzy loved planes. To him his machine was always 'old girl'. He used to pat her."

“Sounds daft to me.”

“As a matter of fact Dizzy was the sort of chap aviation in the early days couldn’t very well do without.”

“In what way? What had he got that other people hadn’t got?”

“I wouldn’t know what to call it. Confidence in his own judgment, if you like. He certainly had brains, although not everyone would agree with that. It was the way he used them that shook people.”

“Remember the Flash?” inquired Algy, looking at Biggles.

“What was that?” asked Ginger, curiously.

Biggles went on. “The Flash was one of those unlucky aircraft which, early in its career, got a bad name, for which reason it never went into production. You know what that means. Never mind about giving a dog a bad name and hanging it. If an aircraft gets a bad name it’s almost impossible to live it down. Nobody wants to fly it. That’s no use. That was the fate of more than one machine years ago.”

“What was wrong with the Flash?”

“As far as I know, nothing, except that it may have been a bit nose heavy. But it wasn’t that that killed it. Only three were built. They were sent to us for a try-out. The first one to be taken up went into a spin. It never came out. A chap named Crane, a good pilot, took up the second one. It did exactly the same thing. As you can imagine, there was no mad rush to fly the third. Dizzy walked round it, having a good look. Then he climbed in and took it up. Most people had by this time decided there was a weakness somewhere. No inherent stability was the general verdict. Well, Dizzy went up to two thousand, flew round once or twice, and then, what everyone was expecting, happened. He went into a spin. We shut our eyes and waited for the crash. When I opened mine it was to see the Flash out of its spin. Only just in time. It was under fifty feet when it flattened out.”

“Dizzy must have been shaken,” interposed Ginger.

“Not in the least. I asked him what caused the machine to spin. He said: ‘It didn’t spin. I spun it.’ I said: ‘You mean, after seeing what happened to the others, you deliberately put her in a spin?’ He said: ‘Why not. I had a good look at her and could see no earthly reason why she shouldn’t behave normally. She was a bit slow coming out, that’s all.’ ”

“I begin to understand why you called him Dizzy,” asserted Ginger.

“He argued there was only one way of finding out if there really was anything wrong. That was his way of doing it.”

“Not for me.”

“Nor for most people. But then, Dizzy was no ordinary pilot. Another time, I remember, we had a prototype to test. People decided it hadn’t enough weather-cock stability, which made it awkward to handle. The fin was too small. Dizzy said that was all absolute rot. There was nothing wrong with the machine. It was the way people were handling it. No use being afraid of it, he said. To prove he was right he cut the fin off altogether, took the machine up and threw it all over the sky.”

“He was asking for it.”

“He didn’t think so. Anyhow, that’s the sort of chap he was, and probably still is.”

Following a tap on the door it was opened by a uniformed constable. “Squadron Leader Digswell,” he announced.

Biggles stood up with a hand outstretched to greet a small, wiry, smiling man of early middle age in civilian clothes. He wore glasses, behind which danced mischievous bright blue eyes. His upper lip was decorated by an absurdly long moustache fluffed out at the ends. Almost as conspicuous was a rather dreadful scar that ran diagonally across the full length of his right cheek, a souvenir, as everyone in the room knew, of a crash.

“Whatcher, chaps! Grand to see you all again,” he cried, shaking hands all round.

Biggles pushed forward a chair. “Take the weight off your legs,” he invited. “Why the bowler hat? Have they at last slung you out of the Service?”

“No, surprisingly enough, although I was more or less invalided.”

“What happened, old boy?” inquired Bertie Lissie. “Get your whiskers caught up in an airscrew, or something of that sort?”

“Nothing so complicated. I had a spot of eye trouble and couldn’t pass my medical for flying duties.”

“That was tough, after the number of different ways you’ve tried to kill yourself.”

“They offered me a chair at the Air Ministry but I couldn’t face the idea of flying a desk for the rest of my life.”

“You’d probably live longer doing that than flying an aircraft the way you do.”

“Oh, come off it. There’s nothing wrong with my flying.”

“I hope,” rejoined Biggles, suspiciously, “you haven’t come here in the hope of borrowing one of my aeroplanes to knock to pieces.”

The ex-pilot brushed aside the notion. “Nothing like that. Matter of fact I’ve come to offer you the chance of a lifetime.”

“How?”

“Can you use money?”

“More than so far I’ve been able to get my hands on.”

“Same as you. Well, I’m going to make your fortune.”

Biggles smiled sceptically. “Why make mine? Why not make your own, for a start?”

“There’s enough in this for all of us.”

“Why share it with me? Don’t say you can lay your hands on more boodle than you can spend yourself.”

Dizzy grinned cheerfully. “That’d be impossible.”

“That’s what I thought. If I remember rightly you’ve mastered the art of making money fly even faster than the machines you flew.”

“I’ve had to give that up,” admitted Dizzy, soberly. “Now listen, chaps. I don’t believe in beating about the bush so I’ll come straight to the point. You have an aircraft at your disposal and I haven’t. Moreover, I haven’t enough money to buy one and it’s unlikely I ever shall have.”

“From which I gather that if you had you wouldn’t be looking for a partner in this get-rich-quick operation.”

“True enough. I’ve come to you because I can’t see how I can go it alone. Apart from an aircraft you have facilities for getting about which are denied to blokes like me.”

“Could be,” conceded Biggles, cautiously. “Where’s this pile of easy money and who does it belong to?”

“It doesn’t belong to anyone. What do you take me for—a crook?”

“No.”

“Thanks. The last person to use this money I’m talking about was probably around the time Julius Caesar was unloading his landing craft on the south coast. Maybe long before that.”

Biggles looked at the speaker with suspicious, half-closed eyes. “You’re not by any chance talking about a treasure?”

“That’s exactly what I am talking about. What’s wrong with that?”

“Everything. I’ve something better to do than rush around digging holes at some place where X marks the spot.”

“In this case we don’t need a map with an X marking the spot.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“Seen what?”

“The treasure. I know exactly where it is.”

Biggles looked incredulous. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. Why do you think I’ve come here.”

“You have actually seen this treasure with your own eyes?”

“I wouldn’t be likely to see it with anyone else’s.”

“All right. Don’t quibble. If you’ve seen it why didn’t you collect the stuff while you were there?”

“It took me all my time to collect myself. I was in no shape to load up a sack of gold.”

“Then all I can say is you must have been in pretty poor shape.”

“I was. Moreover, I was in too much of a hurry.”

“A devil of a hurry, I’d think, to pass up a chance like that.”



“You’d think right. At the time I was afraid Old Man Death had got his claws on me at last.”

“All right. Let’s get down to brass tacks. Where is this hoard somebody carelessly left lying about?”

“Did you ever hear of a place called Ophir?”

“Of course. I’ve read my Bible.”

“Do you know where Ophir is, or was?”

“No, and neither do you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Of course, I couldn’t swear to it, but unless I’m right off the beam I’ve stood on the spot where Ophir used to be, and probably still is, under the sand.”

“Archaeologists have been looking for Ophir for hundreds of years but they still haven’t found it.”

“Because they’ve always looked in the wrong place, that’s why.”

“How do you know?”

“Had they looked in the right place they’d have seen it, or bits of it. Or, shall we say, what’s left of it.”

“According to the records Ophir was a seaport, so it must have been on the coast.”

“Quite right. So, no doubt, it was, three thousand years ago. But not now. That’s why the looking has been off course. Before we go any farther tell me what you know about Ophir and I’ll tell you if you’ve got it right.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

“I’ve got all the gen from the British Museum.”

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. “All I know is what I’ve read from time to time. In Biblical days Ophir was world-renowned for its riches, fabulous even in those days. It was the traditional market for gold, ivory and peacock feathers. There’s reason to believe it was the seaport from which King Solomon obtained his treasures of gold, silver and precious stones, to say nothing of carved stonework for his palace. It was also the place, if I remember rightly, from which the ancient Egyptians bought their frankincense in which to embalm their dead Pharaohs.”

“Quite right. Frankincense is still a business in Aden.”

“The town, thought to be on the south coast of Arabia, disappeared, presumably under the sand, ages ago.”

“Correct. According to the Old Testament it was a lovely land of luxuriant forests, babbling brooks and verdant valleys. That’s confirmed by the Romans, who knew all about it. They called it Arabia Felix. Happy Arabia. Well, I can tell you there’s nothing happy about it now. It’s just a heap of sun-blistered rock and sand where the chief recreation is murder. I should know. I’ve been there. If I’ve found Ophir there isn’t much left of it, at all events above ground. People have been looking along the coast. Maybe it was there at one time, but it isn’t now. For centuries the sand has been drifting down and pushing out into the sea, with the result that the

beach is miles from where it used to be. According to an expert I spoke to, the beach is still extending southward at the rate of several feet a year.”

Bertie stepped in. “I say, you know, it’s hard to believe that a place of that size could absolutely disappear without trace—if you see what I mean.”

Dizzy asked: “Did you ever serve in Iraq when you were in the Service?”

“No.”

“If you had you’d understand. I was once stationed at Mosul, which is the site of the Nineveh of the Old Testament. What about that? There’s plenty of evidence that Nineveh, which was the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Assyria, was a vast place built entirely of stone, with walls so thick that three chariots could race round abreast. It took an army three days to march round ’em. Eighteen canals fed the reservoirs with water. Where’s it all gone? All you can see today is a couple of humps, one thought to be the tomb of Jonah, who prophesied that the place would vanish and become dry like a wilderness. He was dead right; it has.”

“Let’s get back to Ophir,” suggested Biggles, bluntly. “How did you happen to be there?”

“It wasn’t from choice, you can bet your sweet life on that. I’ll tell you about it.”

“Before you start, have you told anyone else what you’re telling us?”

“Not on your micky. This is my find, and with me finding’s keepings.”

Biggles smiled. “Nobody’s likely to take a buried town off you.”

“Somebody might try to keep me away from it. That’s why I’ve kept the story under my hat. And I might as well admit frankly that the reason why I’m telling you is because I don’t know what to do about it. There’s more hanging to it than a lot of old stones, anyway.”

“Okay,” said Biggles. “Go ahead. We’re listening.”

CHAPTER II

DIZZY ENDS HIS STORY

“FIVE years ago I was posted to Aden for the usual period of three hot seasons,” began Dizzy. “As no doubt you know it’s the job of the R.A.F. to patrol the frontiers of the Aden Protectorate with Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Did you ever serve there?”

“No.”

“Then I’d better give you the set-up. The Protectorate is not much more than the coastal strip of Southern Arabia. It’s about six hundred miles long and is divided into about twenty sultanates, each being subsidized by us to keep order in his territory. That isn’t easy, because apart from tribal feuds, there are always smart guys trying to push a sultan off his chair in order to sit in it himself. The Arab populations are mostly concentrated in small towns along the coast, so for all practical purposes you can call the hinterland uninhabited.”

“Are the Arabs friendly?”

“More or less, but it isn’t safe to rely on it. They’ve really no time for white men. It’s mostly a matter of religion, in which respect they’re fanatics.”

“What’s the ground like?”

“The coast itself, washed by the Arabian Sea, is mostly the usual sandy beach. As you go inland it becomes what they call *sabkha*, which is salt plain, a mixture of sand and gravel. Beyond this the ground begins to slope up to end in a long range of rocky hills—sometimes two or three ranges, one behind the other. It’s all pretty grim. There’s practically no vegetation on the low ground, but as you get higher, towards the thousand foot mark, there may be patches of acacia and scrub palm which serve as camel fodder. I’ve seen bits of it here and there on the *rakibs*, a *rakib* being the local name for a patch of elevated sand on the hillside. The fact that the boundaries exist mostly in imagination doesn’t make it any easier for the sultans—or for us. Raiding across the border has always been a business, and lately, as you may have read in the papers, it’s been getting worse. The trouble, as in other places, is mostly communist inspired. Our aircraft stationed at Aden keep an

eye on things, but for the most part it's a dull job. The heat has to be felt to be believed. Incidentally, this was where I first had trouble with my eyes."

"Sun glare?"

"That's what the M.O. said it was. Perhaps I was a bit careless about wearing dark glasses—you know how it is. But that's by the way. Oh, I must tell you that at wide intervals along the coast there are emergency landing grounds, not much more than areas of sand from which the loose rocks have been cleared. Still, in the event of engine trouble they do give one a chance to get down without breaking anything. As often as not there's no one in charge, so one of our regular jobs was to give them the once over to make sure nothing had happened to them."

"What could happen to 'em?"

"You'd be surprised. It was nothing unusual to find the wind had shifted the sand leaving rocks sticking up, or maybe a dead camel lying in the fairway for you to trip over. One such place is called Hautha, easy to find by reason of a dry watercourse at one end of it. Nobody has ever seen any water in it but it makes a handy landmark. Another unmistakable marker, not far away, is a long tongue of loose rocks that might be the remains of a landslide in ages past. It reaches nearly to the sea." Dizzy took another cigarette.

"As a matter of fact on this particular trip I never got to the landing ground," he resumed. "If I did I never saw it, for just before my estimated time of arrival I met a sandstorm whistling along the other way. Like a nitwit I hung on for a few minutes hoping to complete the sortie, with the result that by the time I'd realized it was no use, and turned for home, sand had got into the engine through the air intakes and she was wheezing like an old man with asthma. Another minute and the cylinders were scraping as if the pistons were nutmeg graters. With the engine boiling and likely to blow her guts out at any moment I realized I'd had it."

"These *haboobs* are the curse of desert flying," put in Biggles. "What were you flying?"

"A Fury."

"So you were on your own."

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"What else could I do except bale out? There was no question of getting home. Nor, with probably nothing but rocks underneath me, was there any hope of getting the machine on the carpet in one piece. I was down to a thousand feet and daren't go any lower because I'd been edging away from

the sea—I didn't want to finish up as sharks' meat—and knew I might fly into the hills at any second. I couldn't see 'em. I couldn't see anything. I was wearing a broolly, of course, so my only chance was to step out, which I did."

"Not knowing what was underneath you that must have been a sweaty moment," interposed Bertie, sympathetically.

"Are you telling me! Only I know how lucky I was. I was farther inland than I had imagined and already over the hills. I hit the deck, half way up a backward-sloping line of crags, on one of those *rakibs* I mentioned just now, a rather long but narrow bed of wind-blown sand that might have been put there specially for me. It was a real feather-bed touchdown. I still couldn't see a thing but I heard the machine crash a bit farther along and well below me. Well, there I was, properly up the creek without a paddle. All I could do was get out of my harness and wrap some of the broolly round my head to save being choked to death by the blasted sand. There I sat, waiting for the storm to blow itself out, which it did, as usual, about sundown. I had a pretty good idea of where I was, and when the moon came up I could see."

"What time was this, when it happened?" asked Biggles.

"About five in the afternoon."

"Which meant you had about an hour of daylight left."^[1]

[1] All the year round there is little difference in the hours of sunrise and sunset, which is about six o'clock.

"Yes. I knew a machine would be sent out to look for me but with a *haboob* blowing it wouldn't be that day. I was about a hundred miles from home, and to try to walk that distance, without water, would be asking for it. If I stayed where I was I'd be fried like an egg in a pan the next day when the sun came up. The relief machine would soon spot the crash, of course, but that didn't mean it would see me if I stayed where I was, squatting like a rabbit in the rocks. I was a good way from the sea. I decided my best bet, as soon as it got light, was to make for the crash, or for the emergency landing ground which I could see in the moonlight about a mile in the other direction. What I was most scared of was some Arabs might come along before the relief machine saw me. They might be all right. On the other hand they might not. You never know."

"So what did you do?"

“First I had a look round among the rocks for a water soak, my mouth already being like sandpaper; but I might as well have looked for an ice-cream fountain. There wasn’t a bush or a blade of grass. Just rocks and sand. I spent the night where I was rather than risk breaking a leg to get down the cliff in the dark to the *sabkha* below; but at the first glimmer of dawn I was off, making for the black spot where my machine had burnt itself out. Any of the boys of the squadron out looking for me would be certain to see it. My best place was beside it, so there’d be no mistake about me being burnt up in it. Well, that was when I began finding things.”

“Such as?”

“The first thing I spotted was a fluted stone column that looked as if it had once been part of a palace or temple. It had fallen and lay half buried in sand, but it was a beautiful piece of masonry and had obviously been carved by a craftsman. I didn’t pay much attention at first because, as you know, the whole of the Middle East is littered with the ruins of bygone civilizations. As you can imagine, my one concern was to find myself back at the station with a long cold drink in my hand. My mouth was like old leather. But when I saw more pillars lying about, with bits of arches, hand-carved stones and all the rest of it, I did have a second look, because it was apparent that this must once have been a place of importance. The remains of buildings were lying about at all angles as if the place had been blitzed, or shaken down by an earthquake.”

“And you thought of lost Ophir?” interposed Biggles.

“Not then.”

“But you must have heard of Ophir.”

“Of course. But just then I had other things on my mind. The possibility that this was the site of Ophir came later, when I’d had time to think. Remember, I knew I’d got to get down off those rocks before the sun baked them red hot. Finding a way down wasn’t easy, which I imagine was why no one had been up there for—well, maybe for a thousand years. However, the next thing I saw did make me skid to a stop for a second look.”

“What was it?” asked Ginger, who was following the narrative with intense interest.

“It’s hard to know how to describe it. First of all you must understand that on my right, running the length of the *rakib*, was a cliff, varying, I’d say, between forty and a hundred feet high for a rough guess. It was more or less sheer, a crag with bits sticking out here and there. You can imagine the sort of thing. The object that caught my eye was a sort of crack, at the base, six or seven feet high, as if the rock had been split by an earth tremor, which

was quite likely because that sort of thing is always happening. Aden itself is in the crater of an old volcano. But as I had a second look at it as I was passing it struck me there was something unnatural about the way the crack had occurred. That was why I stopped.”

“What could there be unnatural about it?” asked Biggles.

“The shape. It wasn’t straight. One wouldn’t expect it to be. And you couldn’t describe it as zig-zag. It was in the shape of a flight of steps, each one the same size with a clear-cut edge, as if a man-made wall had been pulled apart. Looking closer I saw that the crack had been stopped from going any farther by an artificial retaining arch built with beautifully fitting pieces of hand-cut stones. In other words this had once been the entrance to some place and the entrance had been walled up. Do you follow me?”

“Pretty well.”

“The artificial wall had opened as if it had had a wrench. Hence the crack. It was only a few inches wide at the top but got wider as it went down. At the base it was just about wide enough for a man to squeeze through. Peeping in I saw a hollow space behind it, although whether this was a natural cave or an artificial vault I still don’t know.”

“Didn’t you go in?”

“Not me.”

“Why not?”

“Had I not been alone I might have done, but I didn’t like the look of it. The walling looked shaky enough to collapse at a touch and being alone I jibbed at the possibility of finding myself shut up inside. That wasn’t the only reason. I could hear an aircraft coming and was anxious to show myself. I knew that whoever was flying the machine would be bound to spot my burnt-out crash. Naturally, if I wasn’t in sight he’d come to the conclusion that what was left of me was still in it, in which case he’d turn round and go straight back to base to report. I didn’t want that to happen. After all, I’d already been without water for hours, and while I knew a patrol car would be sent out to pick up my remains it would be hours before it could get there.”



Biggles nodded. "I can understand how you felt, and in your position I'd have done the same thing. You still didn't think of Ophir?"

Dizzy laughed. "Why I didn't I don't know; but I didn't. The thought that came into my head was this might be the cave where Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves used to hide their loot. Don't ask me why. I did stop long enough to kneel down and stick my head in. It was pretty gloomy inside, but

just enough light was coming through the crack for me to see if there was anything about, near at hand.”

“Was there?”

“Too true there was. The first thing I saw, leaning against the side wall, was a number of what in the Bible are called Tables of Stone. In other words, slabs of rock looking mighty like thin tombstones with writing on the smooth surface. When I say writing I mean incised letters. Words carved in the rock.”

“In what language?”

“Don’t ask me. I haven’t a clue. I’m no professor of ancient languages but I can tell you it was neither Latin nor Greek. The cave ran back for some way. I couldn’t see the far end of it, but what I could see was more slabs farther along. To tell you the truth, it struck me that I might have found the Ten Commandments. They, you remember, were on tables of stone.”

“They were on only two tables.”

“I know that now but I didn’t know it then.”

“Anyway, you were a long way from Moses’ line of march to the Promised Land,” observed Biggles, smiling.

“How do you know?” challenged Dizzy. “You weren’t there. If the Children of Israel were wandering about the wilderness for forty years they might have gone anywhere.”

Biggles agreed. “Okay. Finish the story.”

“Whatever these stones are they must be of tremendous historical importance. And they weren’t all. Standing in front of some of ’em were tall, cylindrical shaped jars, made of some sort of earthenware. They had lids on.”

“Real Ali Baba stuff,” murmured Bertie.

“Exactly. As you can imagine I was tempted to slip in to see if there was anything in the jars. But there wasn’t time. One of our Furies was already circling round the crash and I realized it was time I showed myself. Waving my shirt, off I went down the hill.”

“I thought you said you’d seen the treasure? If you didn’t go in what’s all this talk about finding one?”

“Don’t be in a hurry. I haven’t finished. When the aircraft arrived I was kneeling to look through the widest part of the crack. As I pushed myself back my hand pressed on something hard. I looked to see what it was. I picked it up. This is it.”

Dizzy put a hand in his pocket and with a thud dropped on Biggles' desk a large, thick, roughly round silver object. On it in high relief was stamped, or moulded, the head of a man with a long wavy beard. He wore a crown. No one could mistake the object for anything other than a coin.

Silence fell as all eyes focused on it.

"Very pretty," said Biggles. "But I wouldn't exactly call that a treasure."

"Give me time," protested Dizzy. "I haven't finished yet."

CHAPTER III

BIGGLES MAKES

A SUGGESTION



BIGGLES picked up the coin, examined it, and mentally weighed it in the palm of his hand. "A very nice slab of silver," he remarked. "Must weigh a couple of ounces. Was this the only one you found?"

"Yes. I've told you why I hadn't time to look for more. But I'm pretty certain there must be more inside, in the jars."

"Could be, provided no one has been in and emptied 'em. They've been there an awful long time."

"I look at it like this. Had anyone found those jars he'd have brought them outside to check the contents. He would then either have left them there or carried them away bodily."

"Yes, you make a point there."

"I'd say this coin was dropped as the stuff was being carried in. As you can see it's as good as new, and I doubt if it was ever in circulation. Until I picked it up it may have been lying there just under the sand for close on three thousand years."

"You haven't been able to identify the king whose head appears on it?"

"Not positively. It could be King Solomon himself, who died in 930 B.C., or possibly King Sennacherib, who reigned from 704 to 681 B.C."

Biggles looked up. "Who told you that?"

"A chap I met in the British Museum when I was swotting up all the information there is about Ophir."

"You showed him the coin?"

"Obviously."

"You said you'd told nobody about this."

"Well, I did let this chap see the coin. I couldn't very well help it."

"Why not?"

"Naturally, I was trying to find out something about it. I showed it to the curator of Assyrian antiquities and this chap happened to come in. The

curator knew him as he'd been there before, studying the records for a book he was writing on the history of Arabia. The curator introduced us and asked for his opinion of the coin. It was he who said he thought the head must be that of Solomon or Sennacherib."

"Didn't he want to know where you'd got it from?"

"Of course he did. He was more than somewhat interested."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him what I'd told the curator."

"What was that?"

"The truth. I said I'd picked it up in the sand when I was serving with the Air Force at Aden."

"Then what?"

"He wanted to buy it, but I wouldn't part with it. It was the only proof I had that I'd dropped on to something important. As a matter of fact I didn't care much for the chap. He was a shifty-eyed, oily-looking type."

"I see. He wasn't British?"

"Nothing like it."

"What nationality was he?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask him. He looked like an Asiatic of some sort. Dark skinned, but not very dark, youngish; wore a small pointed black beard, the sort a man grows when he has never shaved. The curator introduced him by the name of Majoli."

"That isn't much of a guide."

"Does it matter?"

"It might. He might talk, and the news of what you'd found get around. It's my experience that the less you say about this sort of business, to anyone, the better. This chap Majoli, for instance, is evidently an enthusiast, and if he suspected you'd made an important discovery he wouldn't rest until he knew more about it."

"As a matter of fact he did ask me to meet him again. Wanted me to dine with him and some friends of his."

"Did you?"

"No. As I've said, he wasn't my cup of tea. There was something about him, I don't know what it was, that put me off having anything more to do with him."

"So you never saw him again?"

"No."

“Never mind. Finish the story.”

“Well, that was all there was to it. I managed to get down to the level ground at the foot of the hill and a pal of mine from the squadron who was flying the machine spotted me. He made a radio signal to base and some time later one of our cars came along to pick me up.”

“Did you say anything to the C.O., or in the mess, about what you’d found?”

“Not a word.”

“Why not?”

“Had I talked the whole thing would have got out. I didn’t want that to happen. I thought if I kept my mouth shut I might get a chance to slip back to the cave one day for another look. Between ourselves, it was my intention, when on my next solo patrol, to drop in at the landing ground. But before I could do that my eyes started to give trouble and I was posted home. The next thing was I was grounded. After that I put in most of my spare time at the British Museum swotting up ancient Middle East history.”

“It was then you got on the track of Ophir.”

“That’s right.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. It’s hard to see how I can do anything on my own. That’s why I’ve come to you. I knew you could be relied on to keep quiet about it. If I went to a stranger, and he blabbed, and the newspapers got hold of the story that’d be the end of it as far as I’m concerned. Archaeologists all over the world would join in a stampede for the spot. It’s likely that the Governor of Aden would then put the lid on any question of exploring. The Arabs would almost certainly get to hear about it and that would make things even more difficult. It would be in the local papers, and most of the Arabs around Aden can speak and read a certain amount of English.”

“Could you find this place again?”

“Find it! Nothing easier. I could go straight to it. It’s immediately behind a long pointed tongue of rocks running nearly to the sea—the one I told you about. It’s a mile or so short of the emergency landing ground with the dry watercourse to pinpoint it. The *rakib*, the sandy shelf on to which I dropped, is a good mile back from the sea, halfway up the hills, backed by a long low cliff of grey stone. The cave itself is a little beyond where the pillars are lying.”

“How long is it since you left the Service?”

“Best part of a year.”

“Why haven’t you been back?”

“I’ve never had enough money for the trip. If I had, having served in Aden I know I’d never get a permit to go to the place. The authorities are pretty tight on that. Several people, including some well-known explorers and others who have had experience of Arabian travel, have applied for permits to dig along the coast, but it has always been refused. Let’s face it. It’s dangerous country, and Christians aren’t popular with the Arabs. The local government isn’t looking for trouble. I can understand it. They’ve plenty on their plate without having to send out search parties for missing persons, or even providing escorts for archaeologists.”

“All right. Now you’ve said all that let’s come to the point. What do you suppose I can do about it?”

“You’re in a different position from most people. You’re in the way of being a government official. If you applied for permission to go there you’d probably get it.”

Biggles shook his head. “Not a hope. I’d be turned down flat, as other officials higher up the coast, at Dhutar and Oman, have been. Once permission had been refused I wouldn’t dare to go. How could I, as you say, a government official, break an order of that sort?”

“Then don’t ask for permission. Go without it. If you hadn’t been refused they couldn’t accuse you of breaking orders.”

“Have a heart, Dizzy. How do you think I could get there?”

“You’ve got an aircraft.”

“I have not. The machines I fly are owned by the government.”

“Look,” requested Dizzy desperately. “Nothing could be easier than the trip I’m suggesting. All you have to do is fly out to Aden. That’s simple. Then you slip along the coast for a mere hundred miles and land on the emergency landing ground I told you about. You wait there while I nip up to the cave and collect the boodle.”

“What boodle?”

“The treasure that’s in the jars.”

“And what if they turn out to be empty?”

“What a wet blanket you are! There are always the tables of stone. They’d be valuable, anyway.”

“I’m not a stone mason or a lorry driver. If you’re going to talk about heavy haulage what you need is a truck, not an aeroplane.”

Dizzy looked crestfallen. “If you won’t help me what am I to do? Fancy being broke knowing where there’s a treasure waiting to be picked up yet unable to get near it. There ain’t no justice in the world,” he concluded disgustedly.

“My advice to you is to go to the British Museum and tell them what you know. No doubt they’d be able to make arrangements to collect the stuff.”

“And what would I get out of it?”

Biggles grinned. “You’d get your name in the papers.”

“That wouldn’t buy food or pay for my lodgings. What do you think I am—a film star or something? My name in the papers is no use to me. I’d rather wash out the whole thing and let Ophir rot in the sun for all eternity.”

“What satisfaction would that give you?”

“I’d have the satisfaction of knowing I was the only man on earth who knew where Ophir is, or was, however you like to put it.”

“That wouldn’t pay for your lodgings, either.”

“Maybe not, but I’d get a good laugh every time I read in the papers of someone airing his opinion as to why Ophir must have been here, there, or somewhere else. Perhaps one day I’ll be able to work my passage to Aden and do the trip on foot.”

“You’d be a fool to try that.”

“You wouldn’t think so if I came home with Solomon’s crown in one pocket and the Queen of Sheba’s pearl necklace in the other.”

Biggles frowned. “What are you talking about? What have they to do with it?”

“They were there. The crown jewels may have been parked somewhere and forgotten. I told you I’ve spent some time swotting up the subject. Sheba, famous for her gold and jewels, was Queen of Southern Arabia, notably the country now known as Yemen. The people were called Sabaeans. The story of her visit to Solomon’s court is told in the Bible, in the Book of Kings. According to history they had a son named Menelek, who became the first King of Ethiopia, just across the Gulf of Aden. They must all have known about Ophir, and no doubt were often there. It’d be a funny thing, you must admit, if, when these kingdoms fell, a lot of valuable stuff wasn’t left there.”

Bertie, who had been polishing his eyeglass as he listened, stepped in. “I say, Biggles old boy, would you mind very much if I applied for a couple of weeks’ leave?”

Biggles looked astonished. “No, I wouldn’t mind. You’re due for leave, anyhow. But why bring that up now?”

“I’ve an idea.”

“Not another! What is it this time?”

“Well, I’ve got a few quid tucked away doing nothing. I thought of buying an aircraft, an old Tiger Moth or something of that sort, and doing a spot of aviation.”

“For Pete’s sake! What’s the matter? Don’t you get enough flying on your job?”

“Yes. But it isn’t that.”

“Then what is it?”

“Well—er—it’s like this, old boy. It seems to me that what with his eyes letting him down and nothing in his pockets to jingle life’s being a bit of a cad to poor old Dizzy.”

“I quite agree. But what’s that got to do with it?”

“I’m thinking of waffling him along to see if old Ali Baba left anything in those jam jars.”

Biggles stared. “Are you out of your mind, too?”

“Never was in it, old boy. That’s what they tell me. Never was in it. Don’t break out in a rash. This little trip I propose will be quite unofficial. No one need know where I’ve gone.” Bertie grinned sheepishly. “The fact is, I’ve heard so much about the Queen of Sheba that I have a yen to dangle her bangles on——”

“Here, wait a minute,” broke in Biggles. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Absolutely.”

“You mean—you’re really serious?”

“Too jolly true I am. A change of air wouldn’t do me any harm. Nothing like a pot of gold to put you on your feet.”

Biggles spoke slowly and distinctly. “Let me get this right. You’re telling us that you’re prepared to put up the money to buy a plane to take Dizzy to this heap of old stones that he fondly imagines is Ophir?”

“That’s the scheme, old boy. You’ve got it,” confirmed Bertie, brightly. “It’s time somebody had a peep into those pots.”

Biggles leaned back in his chair. “This brainwave of yours is likely to cost you a pretty penny.”

“I have a feeling you may be right.”

Biggles thought for a minute. He looked at Algy and Ginger in turn, then back at Bertie. He went on: "Naturally, we'd all like to help Dizzy on his latest dizzy stunt, but I don't see why the whole burden should fall on you."

"Does that mean you're thinking of tootling along with us?"

"Not on your sweet life. You seem to forget I have a job to do. Even if I hadn't I'd think twice before I threw a year's salary down the drain."

"Then what's on your mind?"

"To prevent any misunderstanding let's get this clear right away. I shall have to stay here. But instead of you finding all the money for an aircraft I see no reason why we shouldn't all row in, forming a syndicate, everyone sharing in the profits, if any, according to how much he puts in the kitty."

"Now you're talking," asserted Dizzy, delightedly.

"And why buy an aircraft?" continued Biggles. "If you're thinking of carting tombstones about you'll need a better weight carrier than a Tiger Moth; and after the job's finished you'll want to sell whatever machine you buy, and there's a very small market for second-hand aircraft."

"What do you suggest?"

"Several air operating companies are in process of replacing their equipment with new types, either selling off or holding the old ones in reserve. Starways, for instance, are no longer using their Dakotas, although they still keep their certificates of air-worthiness against an emergency. No doubt they'd be glad to sell one, but I see no need for that. They'd probably let you hire one at so much a day on payment of a deposit to cover damage, insurance, and so on. That'd be more economical than buying a machine which you might find yourself stuck with afterwards. After all, from what Dizzy tells us the job sounds pretty straightforward and shouldn't take more than a week or ten days at the outside. If you like I'll ring Tommy Thomas of Starways and see if I can fix it up."

"I wish you would," agreed Bertie.

Biggles looked at Dizzy. "Have you got a civil licence?"

"'Fraid not. But that doesn't mean I can't fly an aircraft."

"In this case it does. I'm in no position to break regulations. Bertie, or whoever else goes on this jaunt, can do the flying. That can make no difference to the actual trip and it may save a lot of trouble should anything go wrong."

"I don't see what can go wrong," said Dizzy. "Just a straight flight there and back."

Biggles smiled faintly. “You’d be surprised. You’re not in the Service now, with the whole organization to take care of you. Assuming I can get a machine who else is going? Bertie will go, of course, as it was his idea. I can spare either Algy or Ginger. How about you, Algy?”

Algy shrugged. “I’m not mad to go. If Ginger would like to be the third man that’s okay with me.”

“Fair enough. Algy can stay with me to take care of things here. I’ll confirm with the chief that leave passes will be okay and then see about a machine for you. After that you can make your own arrangements. Take everything you’re likely to need, rations, plenty of water, and so on. It might be as well to include a few things you’re *not* likely to need.”

“Such as?”

“Tools. Spares. First-Aid Outfit. You can borrow the one from the *Gadfly*. It’s new. I organized it myself, so I know it has everything in it.”

“We’re not likely to want *that*,” said Dizzy.

“Take it from me, my lad, when you leave the beaten track you don’t know what you’re likely to need,” declared Biggles, as he reached for the telephone. “I’ve had some experience of this sort of thing.”

“I’ll see that all the emergency kit, including the Red Cross box, goes in,” promised Ginger.

Biggles shook his head sadly. “At my time of life I ought to have my head examined before I allow myself to be caught up in any more imbecile schemes.”

CHAPTER IV

TRAGEDY LOOMS

A FORTNIGHT later Biggles strode into his office in a manner, and with an expression on his face, that brought Algy to his feet in questioning alarm.

“Have you seen this?” asked Biggles, crisply, holding up the evening newspaper.

“Why no! What’s the matter?”

“Listen.” Biggles arranged the paper to read an item. “It’s headed, Mystery of lost plane.” He went on: “An airplane, said to be a Dakota IV, has been found abandoned on the foreshore of Southern Arabia. It was first sighted by a patrolling R.A.F. aircraft two days ago. It is thought to be the British machine which, with a crew of three, refuelled at Aden and then continued on to a destination stated to be South Africa. The authorities are puzzled as to how the plane could have got so far off its course. An air search is being made for the three missing men. The plane has now been flown back to Aden by an R.A.F. pilot. If the missing airmen are not found tomorrow the search will be called off.”

Biggles threw the paper on to Algy’s desk. “So there we are,” he said, grimly.

“Where did this news item come from?”

“The Associated Press correspondent at Aden sent it out.”

“Is it dated?”

“Yes. Yesterday. Which means that the search has by now been called off.”

“I suppose there’s no doubt about it being——”

“No doubt whatever. A Dakota IV, crew of three—there’s a limit to coincidence. Now we know why we haven’t heard a word since we had a cable from Aden saying they’d arrived. I was expecting any minute to hear they were back in England.”

“The job didn’t turn out to be the slice of cake Dizzy seemed to think.”

“Obviously.”

“What could have gone wrong?”

“There was nothing wrong with the aircraft or it couldn’t have been flown back to Aden. It sounds as if they reached the objective all right. Something must have happened after they got there.”

“What could it have been?”

“The most likely answer is they fell foul of some Arabs. That would account for them all being missing. One of them might have had an accident, but surely not all three. Had one of them had a fall, or something of that sort, the others would have flown him straight back to Aden.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“As we’re the only people who know exactly where they were going and what they were really doing we shall have to go and look for them.”

“What’s this talk about going to South Africa?”

“That was simply a red herring. They’d have to say where they were going when they left Aden, but for obvious reasons they wouldn’t say anything about flying along the coast to Ophir. If they had, as that’s a prohibited area they’d have been stopped.” Biggles paced up and down. “I should never have let ’em go; but I didn’t want to seem churlish. It’s time we knew that these treasure hunting missions always come unstuck somewhere.”



“You’ll have to tell the Air Commodore.”

“Of course. I’ll do that right away, because every hour will lessen any hope of finding ’em alive.” Biggles tossed his cigarette in the ash-tray and confirmed on the intercom telephone that the Air Commodore was disengaged. He picked up the evening paper. “Don’t go away,” he told Algy, as he left the room.

The Air Commodore received him with an expression of curiosity on his face. "What's the trouble?" he inquired. "You seem upset about something."

"I've something to be upset about, sir," answered Biggles. "I've a confession to make. For a start would you mind reading that?" He laid the paper on his chief's desk, indicating the appropriate paragraph.

"Well?" inquired the Air Commodore, when he had perused it.

"Lissie and Hebblethwaite were in that machine."

"Is that why you asked for leave for them?"

"Yes, sir."

"What the devil do they think they're playing at?" The Air Commodore frowned. "Didn't they know the Aden Protectorate is a forbidden area for civil aircraft without special permission to fly over it?"

"They did, sir. So did I. I confess it was wrong of me to let them go but the circumstances were peculiar."

"They'd better be very peculiar or someone is going to get a rap over the knuckles," asserted the Air Commodore, sternly. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"I think that must be the answer, sir. But the point is, if they're not already dead they soon will be unless something's done about it."

"Which I take to mean you want to go to look for them?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know where they might be?"

"I know where they were going and what they intended to do."

The Air Commodore sat back and put his fingers together. "You'd better tell me about it," he invited.

"It all started a fortnight ago when Squadron Leader Digswell, an officer I used to know in the Service, walked into my office," began Biggles, and then went on to give a concise account of what had followed.

The Air Commodore heard him out in silence. "They seem to have made a mess of things," was his first comment. "It would have been better had you come to me in the first place, when I would have tried to get you a permit and you could have taken charge of the operation yourself."

"I see that now, sir, but I've told you why Digswell wanted to keep the thing under the hat. Had I gone I would probably by now be missing myself, bearing in mind that not only were all three in the machine experienced pilots but Digswell knew every inch of the ground, having served at Aden for close on three years. As things have turned out I think it's a good thing someone who knew all about the scheme stayed at home."

“You want to fly out to find out what happened?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When?”

“The sooner the better. Right away.”

“What machine will you take?”

“The Proctor would do us.”

“You’d take Lacey with you?”

“I’d like to in case I need a reserve pilot.”

“You realize that if this trip goes wrong you’ll leave me with some awkward questions to answer.”

“I realize that perfectly well, sir, and I’m very sorry about it. I’ll do my best to see that nothing goes wrong this time. I wouldn’t have brought you into it had there been an alternative. But lives are at stake.”

“That’s why I’m letting you go. What else do you want me to do?”

“It would be a great help if you could make a signal to Aden telling them that the Air Police are involved in this business of the Dakota and that I’m on my way out to investigate. Will they please give me all facilities. As the Dakota has been taken back to Aden will the Air Officer Commanding allow me to examine it for a clue that might provide the answer to what has happened.”

“Very well,” agreed the Air Commodore. “I’ll do that. Have you formed any opinion as to what might have happened?”

Biggles shook his head. “No, sir. At this distance one can only make wild guesses, and none of them really line up. One might say the most likely thing to have happened was an encounter with hostile Arabs, possibly raiding tribesmen from Yemen or Saudi Arabia. Of course, I’m sure there would have been no shooting on our side except in really desperate circumstances; but if the machine was attacked on the ground, and it obviously wasn’t attacked in the air, those in it would have put up some resistance. Had there been a fight there would have been signs of it. One would expect to find empty cartridge cases, probably bullet holes in the machine. But apparently there was nothing of that sort. Had our party been wiped out their bodies would have been there.”

“Could they have gone off and lost their way in the desert?”

“I’ve considered that, but there are arguments against it. In the first place they had no reason to go into the desert, which would have meant going over the top of the hills. What they were looking for was less than half way up, on the seaward side. Moreover, I can’t see them leaving the machine

unattended. Two would go, leaving the other in charge. In the event of serious trouble this man would have flown back to Aden to report it.”

The Air Commodore nodded. “That’s what one would think.”

“The only place we shall solve the mystery, if it’s possible to solve it at all, is on the spot. That’s why, if you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to be getting along.”

“Don’t be too long away.”

“Thank you very much, sir. With any luck we ought to be back in a week.”

“You might send me a signal if you have any news.”

“I’ll do that, sir.”

“All right. You’d better get on with it.”

“I’m on my way, sir.”

Biggles strode back to his office. “It’s okay,” he announced. “The chief didn’t even argue about it. We’re leaving in the Proctor right away. Let’s get cracking.”

What happened during the next forty-eight hours can be imagined. Biggles could not get to Aden quickly enough. More worried than he had been for a long time, for not only was he faced with the loss of two friends but also the prospect of a public inquiry involving the Air Police if he failed to find them, he arrived red eyed from anxiety and long hours at the controls of the Proctor. It was with a deep sigh of relief that he touched down on the R.A.F. aerodrome in the evening of the second day after leaving England.

With Algy he reported at once to the Station Commander, to find that the Air Commodore had been as good as his word with the result that they were expected.

“I don’t know what you can do that hasn’t already been done,” said the Station Commander, frankly.

“We may have certain information, unknown to you, that might help us,” returned Biggles.

“What are you thinking of doing now you’re here?”

“If it’s all right with you, sir, I’d like to have a look at the spot where the Dakota was found.”

“There are some hoof marks in the sand but that’s nothing unusual.”

“As it’s too late for us to go there today we shall have to wait until the morning. In the meantime I’d like to have a look at the Dakota.”

“As I have authority to give you all facilities that’s all right with me on the understanding that what you do when you leave here will be entirely on your own responsibility. Naturally, if you get into trouble we’ll do anything we can to help, but for goodness’ sake try not to stir up a stink. Things are touchy enough as they are.”

“You can rely on me to keep out of trouble if it’s humanly possible,” Biggles promised. “As I intend to start in the morning as soon as it’s light enough for us to see what we’re doing, I’d be obliged if you’d have my machine refuelled.”

“It shall be done right away. I’ll get the Station Sergeant-Major to show you the Dakota.” The officer touched a bell. The senior N.C.O. who had apparently been waiting for the signal, marched in and saluted.

“Take these police officers to the Dakota,” he was ordered.

“Yessir.”

Biggles and Algy followed their guide to the hangar where the Dakota had been housed.

“We can’t find anything wrong with her,” said the Sergeant-Major. “Funny business if you asked me.”

“I’m not asking you, Sergeant-Major, but you’re quite right,” agreed Biggles. “It’s a very funny business.”

With Algy’s help he began a thorough examination of the aircraft. Having spent the best part of an hour without finding as much as a hint to account for the mystery, with darkness falling they were about to leave when Biggles, as an afterthought, opened the emergency locker and checked the contents.

“Where’s the Red Cross box?” he asked, looking at Algy.

“Isn’t it there?”

“It is not.”

“It should be.”

“Certainly it should be. You heard Ginger promise to see that it was put in.”

“It isn’t like him to slip up on a thing like that.”

Biggles frowned. “I don’t understand this. I’d bet my last dollar he put it in.”

“He couldn’t have done or it would be there now.”

Biggles left the machine and returned to the Sergeant-Major. “Has anybody been in this machine since it was parked here?”

“No, sir.”

“Nothing has been taken out of it?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Are you quite sure of that?”

“Quite sure, sir. Why, is something missing?”

“Yes,” answered Biggles, slowly. “Part of its equipment was a complete emergency first-aid outfit. It was in the locker. Everything else is there except the medicine kit, a black box marked with a bold red cross.”

“You can take my word for it, sir, that it wasn’t in the locker when the machine was brought in. I made the inventory myself. The C.O. has it. I wouldn’t swear that none of our lads is above doing a bit of scrounging, but a first-aid box would be no use to anyone. Orders were no one was to touch the machine, and as far as I know they’ve been carried out.”

“Well, the box isn’t there now.”

“Then either it was never put in or it was taken out before we took over,” declared the N.C.O.

“I’m not suggesting you took it,” said Biggles. He turned to Algy. “It must have been taken out by one of them, presumably when the machine was on the ground since there’s no sign of it having been used in the cabin. Had it been used in the air, for what purpose I can’t imagine, one would have expected to see bits of bandage lint or something of the sort, lying about.”

“If they took it out why didn’t they put it back where it belonged when they’d finished with it? They wouldn’t have left it lying about. They would at least have put it back in the machine.”

Biggles shook his head. “This beats me. Well, standing here staring at the machine won’t give us the answers. We may find them in the morning. It’s no use looking for them in the dark. Let’s have something to eat and find a lodging for the night.” Biggles turned again to the N.C.O. “Thanks very much for being so helpful. In the morning, as soon as it’s light enough to see, we shall fly along and have a look at the place where the machine was found. By the way, have you yourself any ideas as to what might have happened?”

“No, sir. I remember Flight Lieutenant Digswell, as he was when I knew him. He always was a wild one. All I can say is this: they’re not on the coast. Our machines, flying low, have searched every inch of it. If they’d been on it they must have been spotted, whether they were alive or dead. It’s days

since the Dakota was first seen standing there. There was no one with it then, and no sign of Arabs anywhere near, so the officers reported.”

“Where *could* they have gone?”

“Unless they swam out to sea and were taken by sharks, of which there are plenty, they must have gone over the hills. If they did that, and lost themselves in the big desert over the other side, you haven’t a hope of ever seeing them again. A man can’t live there long without a lot of water.”

“I’m afraid you may be right,” said Biggles, quietly, as he turned away.

CHAPTER V

MOSTLY SURMISE

BIGGLES' departure in the morning was delayed for a few minutes by the Station Orderly Officer, a Flying Officer who said his name was Smith. He was of course on duty.

"By the way," he remarked, "they tell me Dizzy Digswell was one of the people in the Dakota."

"That's right," confirmed Biggles. "Did you know him?"

"Knew him well. We were in the same squadron in Iraq. What was he doing back here?"

Biggles hesitated. "Between ourselves I'll tell you. While he was on the station he had a forced landing along the coast and lost something he valued. He was hoping to find it."

"When I heard he'd been here it struck me as a bit odd."

"Why should it strike you as odd?"

"Because not long ago there was a fellow here asking questions about him."

Biggles' attitude of casual indifference switched to one of interest. "Really!"

"Yes. It happened I was doing assistant adjutant that day so it was me who saw him."

"What did he want?"

"I couldn't quite make out. He seemed mighty concerned with Dizzy's movements although I told him he wasn't here any longer. Wanted to know how long he was here, how long since he left, and so on."

"Did you give him this information?"

"As near as I could remember it. There was nothing secret or confidential about it."

"Did he say why he wanted this information?"

"No. He simply said he was an old friend and wanted to get in touch with him. Queer type. I fancy Dizzy must have got to know him when he was serving here."

Biggles was frowning. "Was this before the Dakota arrived?"

"Oh yes. Some time before. That's why it struck me as so odd that Dizzy should turn up here soon afterwards."

"What was this chap's name?"

Smith searched his memory. "He did tell me but I've forgotten it. Nasty looking piece of work for Dizzy to pal up with. Wore a bit of a beard."

Biggles spoke slowly. "Was his name by any chance Majoli?"

"That's right. You've got it. Do you know him?"

"No, but I've heard of him."

"Well, he certainly knew his stuff. Spoke English like you and me. Also Arabic. I heard him speak to one of our labourers. He was writing a book of some sort, he told me."

"Did he say where he came from?"

"Yes. He told me he was born not far away, in Abyssinia."

"In other words, he was an Ethiopian."

"That's right."

"Was he alone?"

"As far as I know. He came here alone. He talked for about an hour; then he went off and I haven't seen him since."

"I see," said Biggles, thoughtfully. "Thanks, Smith. Now we must be getting off."

"So long." The Orderly Officer walked away.

"What do you make of that?" asked Algy, as they walked on to the Proctor.

"I hardly know *what* to make of it. We know this fellow Majoli is interested in this part of the world so he may have been coming here anyway. It sounds as if he's still hoping to get a clue as to where Dizzy found that coin. I suppose that's understandable if he really is writing a book. He comes from Ethiopia. That's interesting in view of what Dizzy told us about King Menelek of that country; but I can't see anything sinister in it. The point that concerns us is this: he was here asking questions about Dizzy before the Dakota arrived, and I don't see how he could have known he intended coming here."

"Which means he doesn't know he's here now."

"I don't think we can be too sure of that. He may have been staying in Aden when the Dakota arrived. There's just a chance that he may have seen Dizzy, or learned he was one of the party in the Dakota. Again, he might

have read in the newspapers of the Dakota having been found abandoned along the coast after giving its destination as South Africa. If he knew that Dizzy was in it, it wouldn't need much brain work to put two and two together. But let's not bother about him. We've something more urgent to attend to."

Algy agreed.

"The C.O. said he'd fill us up but we'd better check it," said Biggles, when they reached the machine. "You might have a look to make sure the water bottles are full, too. This is going to be thirsty work when the sun gets high."

"Are you telling me?"

Although he did not harp on his fears to Algy it was with a heavy heart that Biggles took off and turned the nose of the Proctor towards the rising sun. He had very little hope that the crew of the Dakota were still alive. They had been missing for too long. They must now have been on the ground for days, and even if they had started walking with full water bottles they must have been emptied some time ago. That, in such a climate, could only be fatal. He knew, and he knew Algy must know, that what they were doing was little more than a matter of procedure. It would not bring the lost men back to life, if in fact they were dead, but the least they could do, if only for their own satisfaction, was try to find out what had happened. There was little hope now even of that, but if they failed the mystery would haunt them for the rest of their days.

From the air, to their left now stretched the waterless desolate hinterland of Southern Arabia, parched, colourless and without outline. Nowhere was there rest for the eyes. The only conspicuous feature was the range of hills running more or less parallel with the sea. To the right, glittering in the sunshine, was the blue Arabian Sea of the Indian Ocean. The only craft on it were two Arab dhows close in, making for port, and some distance out a white-painted yacht, sails set, making an attractive picture as it headed eastward.

As yet the air was as soft and smooth as milk, not having been lashed into protesting turbulence as it would be as the sun climbed towards its zenith. For the short flight before them Biggles did not trouble to climb for height but took the shortest way to the objective, which was of course the emergency landing ground about a hundred miles distant. With the sea as a guide there was no possibility of losing the way.

In half an hour the landing ground, marked by a white circle and a limp rag on a pole to serve as a wind indicator, was in sight. As Dizzy had told

them it was unmistakable. The landmarks he had mentioned were there, exactly as he had described them; the dry river bed and the long spit of loose rocks running from the hills nearly to the sea. They saw, and remarked on, the small area of blackened sand where Dizzy's machine had crashed after he had baled out.

Biggles spent ten minutes surveying the area, circling in widening circles; then, as there was no sign of life anywhere he went in and landed. He did not switch off at once, but for a little while taxied up and down trying to locate the actual spot where the Dakota had stopped. But he soon gave this up. There were tyre marks everywhere in the soft sand where the machines from Aden had landed. There were also hoof marks, as they had been told. At one place they appeared to be concentrated, and there Biggles cut the engine and got out.

"We can't be sure of it but I fancy it was about here that the Dakota switched off," he said, examining the ground. "This is where the hoof marks seem to converge." He pointed to some spots of oil on the sand. "An aircraft stood here not so long ago, anyway."

"There must have been a powerful bunch of Arabs here, judging from the hoof marks," observed Algy, morosely. "I'm no tracker, but it's pretty clear they came here, stopped, and went back the way they came. I'm wondering why they came and what they did while they were here."

Biggles didn't answer.

"There should be some European shoe marks."

"They'd have been trampled out," said Biggles.

They searched, but found none. Nor could they find anything to indicate what might have happened.

"I don't understand it," said Biggles again. "Had they been attacked there would have been fighting, and had there been fighting there would have been expended cartridge cases. Bertie and Ginger certainly would carry guns."

Algy shrugged helplessly. "Well, what do we do?"

Biggles gazed at the northern skyline, bounded by the jagged ridges of the drab grey hills, now quivering under the lash of the merciless sun. "Unless our party was forced to it there would be no earthly reason to go beyond those hills. They must therefore be somewhere this side, alive or dead, unless of course they were carried off by raiders, in which case it would be a waste of time to look for them. They might have gone in any direction and probably wouldn't stop for miles."

"You think that's what happened?"

“Frankly, no. It doesn’t make sense. I mean, why should Arabs clutter themselves up with prisoners? They might have killed them, in which case the bodies would have been left where they fell. I can’t see Arabs carrying them away. No, there’s something about this Arab theory that doesn’t fit. Let’s try to reconstruct what we know must have happened in the first place. The Dakota came here and landed. There’s no doubt about that. What would our chaps do next? Had there been Arabs about it’s unlikely they’d have left the machine. But they did leave it, so at the time of landing the coast must have been clear. Then what? They wouldn’t fiddle about. They’d make straight for the cave. And when I say straight I mean *straight*. The sooner they finished what they came to do the sooner they’d be on their way home. They wouldn’t sit around in the sun.”

“They wouldn’t all go and leave the machine with no one to look after it. Would you?”

“No. Even friendly Arabs, if they came along and found the machine unattended, might help themselves to anything they fancied. I agree with you there all right. Let’s suppose two went, leaving the third man in charge. Dizzy would certainly be one of those to go. It was his show and he knew exactly where the cave was. Bertie or Ginger would stay here. Then what happened? If Arabs came, the two on the way to the cave would see them and turn back. They wouldn’t leave the third man to face trouble alone. If the Arabs were friendly, okay, that would be an end to it. If they were hostile there would be fighting. They wouldn’t just submit to being captured.”

Algy shook his head. “It didn’t happen like that. We’re off the beam somewhere.”

“I think you’re right,” agreed Biggles. “This is where we run into the unknown quantity, something we haven’t yet guessed and are never likely to. Our best bet to find out what that was is to go to the cave. We should be able to find out if they’d been there.”

“Whoever was left with the machine, assuming someone was left, in the event of his being attacked might have retreated in the cave to join the others.”

“In that case we may find their bodies there, or on the slope, because obviously none of them got back to the machine. Let’s go.”

“What about the machine?”

“It’ll have to take its luck. We’d better not part company at this stage. Anything could happen. We shan’t be away long. We haven’t far to go. How far is it—a mile?”

“About that, I’d say.”

“We can get a bit nearer by taxiing the machine to the limit of the landing ground.”

This was done, and again Biggles switched off the engine preparatory to getting down. “Sling a couple of water bottles over your shoulder,” he told Algy. “Those rocks will be hotter than Hades, so getting over them will be thirsty work.”

Algy took one and handed Biggles another. They then jumped out on to the shimmering sand and without any more ado set off for the cave, or the position of it as it had been described to them. This they judged by the tongue of rocks.

When they were about half way Biggles stooped and held up a match stick. “We’re dead on course,” he said. “One of them must have lit a cigarette.”

Reaching the base of the hills they began to climb, not steeply, but up a rough slope at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It was not difficult going, but as Biggles had predicted it was warm work. However, after some ten minutes they reached a broad shelf of level, wind-blown sand, clearly the place of which Dizzy had told them. Within a minute confirmation was forthcoming when Algy pointed to a cigarette end, conspicuous on the smooth surface.

“They got as far as this, anyhow,” said Biggles. “At least, I can’t imagine anyone else coming here smoking an English cigarette. There’s the first fallen pillar Dizzy saw, straight in front of us. There should be another a little way past it.”

There was. They went on a short distance, looking about them, and then stopped to survey the scene ahead. Not that there was anything to see except a chaos of rocks of various shapes and sizes lying about in the sand. A little farther on, on their right, the hill resumed its ascent in the form of a low, backward-sloping cliff.

“That’s the place,” said Biggles, striding on.

“I don’t see a crack,” remarked Algy.

“There must be one.”

They continued on to the limit of the cliff face without finding a crack or anything like one.

“We’ve come to the wrong place,” said Algy. “The trouble is, the whole infernal hillside looks alike.”

Biggles did not answer. Quite a number of rocks had broken away from the cliff and lay littered along the base; but he was looking at a pile in the

form of a minor landslide.

“What are you staring at?” asked Algy, curiously.

“That heap of rocks.”

“What about them?”

“They haven’t been there long. You can see that from the different colour of the faces that have recently been exposed. They haven’t started to weather.”

“You don’t think—they might be—under it?” Algy’s voice hardly rose above a whisper.

“That’s just what I was thinking,” answered Biggles. “We know they came here. They didn’t go back. It might be the answer.”

Algy moistened his dry lips. He didn’t speak.

“Do you remember what Dizzy said when he was describing the cave to us?”

“Vaguely.”

“I’ll refresh your memory. When I asked him why he didn’t go in he said the entrance looked as if it might collapse at a touch, or words to that effect.”

“That’s right. So he did.”

“I’m wondering if one of ’em did touch it, in the rush to see what was inside,” said Biggles, grimly.

CHAPTER VI

TRAPPED

WHAT those in the Dakota had done when the machine landed at its objective was very much as Biggles had worked it out. There was nothing remarkable about this because they behaved exactly as might have been expected; probably the same as Biggles would have done had he been there. In short, having surveyed the landscape and seeing no one in sight, it was decided to proceed forthwith to what Dizzy facetiously called Ali Baba's hideout. Naturally, they were all agog to see what was in it.

"Someone had better stay here to keep an eye on the aircraft," said Ginger.

"I can't see that that's necessary; we shouldn't be away more than a couple of hours at the outside," answered Dizzy. "It's only once in a blue moon anyone comes along here."

"I don't care," argued Ginger. "I'm pretty sure that if Biggles was here he wouldn't leave the machine unattended. I'm not suggesting anyone would be likely to pinch it. But if some Arabs did come along, finding no one in it they might fiddle about with the controls or do some sort of damage. We don't want to waste time, when we come back, going over everything to make sure it's in order."

"Ginger's right," agreed Bertie.

"All right. Have it your way," conceded Dizzy. "In that case it becomes a matter of who's going to stay. I'd better go because I know the way."

"True enough. That leaves it between me and Ginger." Bertie turned to Ginger. "Toss you to see who goes."

"Okay."

Bertie took a coin from his pocket and spun it.

Ginger lost. "Fair enough," he said. "I stay."

All of which, it will be observed, with the exception of the identity of the man who was to remain with the machine, was precisely as Biggles had surmised.

"Let's get on with it," said Dizzy who, now he was on the spot, was obviously in a hurry to settle what had been on his mind for months. He put

on a pair of dark glasses. "We'd better put on our hats," he advised. "This sun's a fair scorcher and this is no time to go down with sunstroke."

"Have you got a torch?" inquired Ginger. "You may need one."

"In my pocket. That's all we shall need."

"What about a bag to carry the treasure?" Ginger grinned.

"I'll take a haversack," said Bertie. "We might find something worth bringing home. You never know."

"Better take some water, too," advised Ginger.

"Oh, for the love of Mike!" protested Dizzy, impatiently. "I've said we shall be back here well inside a couple of hours."

Ginger lifted a shoulder. "Please yourself. But let me tell you this. I've been flying with Biggles long enough to know he wouldn't go a hundred yards from this machine, in this sort of climate, without a water bottle. You might be delayed. In a place like this anything can happen. Why take a risk?"

"I suppose you're right," sighed Dizzy, wearily. "Okay. Get some water, someone."

Bertie went back into the cabin and returned with two service type water bottles and a haversack slung over his shoulders. "I've put in a packet of biscuits in case it takes us longer to count the cash than——"

"Oh, come on; let's get on with it," broke in Dizzy, and forthwith set off at a brisk pace towards the sun-soaked range of hills.

With a brief "See you later, laddie," Bertie followed him.

Ginger stood watching them until they were no more than two specks in the shimmering heat-haze; for while the day was still young the sun was already beginning to torment the barren earth. This drove him into the cabin; but there the heat soon became so stuffy that he went out again and sat in the only piece of shade available, the shadow cast by the wings and fuselage. From this position he watched Dizzy and Bertie until they disappeared from sight.

They were feeling the heat, too, although for this they were prepared and had dressed accordingly. The hot sand struck their feet even through the soles of their shoes. From time to time they looked back to make sure that all was well with the machine. It was. The long sandy foreshore was utterly devoid of a living creature of any description.

If the sand had been uncomfortably hot to walk on, the rocks, when they reached them, and over which they had to climb, were even more so. They had to climb without touching them with their hands, or as far as this was

possible; but again, this was no more than what had been expected and they pressed on regardless, Dizzy leading the way.

There was no talking, for both knew it was better to keep the mouth closed in such conditions, until, after an arduous climb, they reached a rather long shelf, forty or fifty yards wide, deep in the wind-blown sand of ages. It was hardly large enough to be called a plateau. On the far side, the rocks, scored and blasted by storm-driven sand, continued to climb towards the ridge that formed the horizon.

“This is the *rakib* I told you about,” panted Dizzy, as they paused for breath. “This is where I touched down when I baled out. You can see the mark where my machine crashed.”

“I can see the landing ground,” observed Bertie, looking in the opposite direction. “The old Dakota seems to be all right.”

Dizzy was already walking on.

“Here, I say, hold hard,” protested Bertie. “What’s the hurry? There’s no need to knock our pans out. We’ve got all day if necessary.”

But Dizzy, spurred on by excitement, did not stop. “There’s the first pillar I saw,” he said, as they passed a long fluted column lying half buried in the sand. “There’s another a bit farther along.”

Bertie was gazing around. “You know, old boy, from the squared stones I see lying about there must have been quite a place here at one time. You could be right. This might have been the site of Ophir. I wonder what happened. Earthquake, perhaps.”

“Who cares,” returned Dizzy, recklessly. “I’m nothing for ruins.”

“Jolly interesting, all the same. I can imagine how you felt after you’d baled out and found yourself sitting up here like a bally eagle. It wouldn’t have been funny if you’d hit the rocks. How lucky can you be?”

“It wasn’t funny anyway. There’s the cliff, straight in front of us.”

They stopped for a final look at the Dakota, now, through the quivering air, looking more like a distorted beetle than an aircraft. They couldn’t see Ginger, but that didn’t worry them because it was not to be expected that he would be standing out in the blazing sun.

They walked on, and after covering something in the order of a hundred yards, there before them was the objective: the crack that was the entrance to the vault, or cave. Dizzy was still not sure which it was.

“There it is,” he cried, exultantly. “Just as I last saw it. I’ve been looking forward to this moment for a long time.”



They stopped at the cracked wall that was the entrance. Its step-like shape, narrow at the top but fairly wide at the bottom, was exactly as Dizzy had described it when he had spoken of it in London.

“What are you staring at?” asked Bertie.

“It struck me that the crack has somehow got a bit wider since I was here; not that it matters; better to be wider than narrower.”

Bertie fixed his monocle. He looked at the crack, then up at the grey rock towering above it. It seemed to overhang slightly. “That doesn’t look any too safe to me, old boy,” he observed, critically.

“That’s what I told you,” replied Dizzy, taking his torch from his pocket. “That’s one of the reasons why I didn’t go inside. But it was like this when I first clapped eyes on it; and as it has probably been like this for thousands of years I don’t think we need worry about it.”

From Bertie’s expression it was clear he was not too happy about it. “It looks to me as if one good shake would bring the whole thing down at a run.”

“Forget it. We’re not likely to do any shaking. There’s nothing to shake, anyway. It’s only the entrance that looks a bit groggy. It’s sheer rock inside. The thing is not to barge against the bricks getting in.”

“Not wanting a rock on my skull you can rely on me not to do any barging,” returned Bertie, soberly. “What seems so odd is that the thing is still here, plain for all the world to see.”

“What do you mean? Why shouldn’t it be here?”

“I have a feeling it can’t have been like this for very long or someone would have spotted it.”

“Nobody ever comes here.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, I can’t imagine anyone coming here. Why should anyone sweat up over the rocks? You can’t see the place from ground level. I only

discovered it because by the merest fluke I happened to drop on it.”

“It all looks too easy,” said Bertie, suspiciously. “First treasure hunt I’ve heard of where there was no digging to do.”

“All right,” said Dizzy, shortly. “If you funk it I’ll go in alone.”

“It isn’t a matter of funking it, old boy. All I’m saying is, it’s a matter of looking before you leap.”

“What did you expect? An entrance like a tube station? I’m going in.”

Kneeling, Dizzy peered inside. “Everything just the same as when I last saw it,” he announced again, delightedly. “The stuff’s still here, the stones and the jars. I don’t mind admitting now that I was scared someone else might have found it.”

“Well, get inside and let’s have a look.”

Dizzy, holding the torch in front of him, taking care not to touch the jagged edges of the stone bricks on either side, crept in. Bertie followed, and in a few seconds they were standing together in a chamber which the exploring beam of the torch revealed to be of some size and running back for a fair distance. In fact, it was not possible to see the end. Leaning against the walls were the “tables of stone,” and in front of many of them the jars Dizzy had described: tall, perhaps three feet high, perfectly cylindrical, each one with a lid. The walls were smooth and the roof was arched.

“This isn’t a natural cave,” said Bertie. “Some hard-working johnnies carved this place out of the rock. Nice and cool, anyhow. It’s a relief to be out of that blistering sun.”

Dizzy agreed. “Now you can see why I said I thought the place might be a vault. Do you realize that we may be the first people to stand here for maybe three thousand years?”

“That’s a sobering thought,” averred Bertie. “When the last people left they sealed off the entrance with masonry. If that hadn’t cracked it could have stayed like this till doomsday.”

“Well, it didn’t. Let’s see what’s in the pots.” Dizzy walked to the nearest, a vessel of reddish-yellow earthenware. He had some difficulty in removing the lid, but having at last succeeded he inserted a hand. Apparently failing to find anything he withdrew it and turned in the beam of the torch.

“There’s something at the bottom but I can’t see what it is,” he reported. “It must have been in for so long that it’s stuck.”

“Tip it out.”

Dizzy tried tipping, but nothing came out. “There’s only one way to do this,” he said. Claspng both arms round the jar he turned it upside down and gave it a bump on the floor. Several objects fell out, among them what had evidently been a bag, although of what material it was impossible to tell. Not that any time was wasted in examining it closely, for rotted by time it had burst open to discharge a small heap of silver coins.

“Hoopla!” cried Dizzy. “Here we are.” He began scooping up the coins and putting them in his pockets.

“You needn’t do that,” said Bertie. “Why do you think I brought a haversack.” He unslung it, and with the water bottles set it against the wall. “I suggest we make a heap of everything worth taking home before we load up.”

Dizzy was examining the other things that had been in the jar; mostly dark brown objects that looked like pieces of dead wood. Whatever they were they were certainly not treasure. “What are these things?” he asked curiously.

“They look to me like bits of bone,” answered Bertie, examining some.

“I’ll bet that’s it,” declared Dizzy. “I’ve been learning a thing or two about the customs of the people who used to live here. What we’ve struck is a cemetery. These jars are funeral urns. These carved stones, if we could read ’em, would tell us who were in the pots.”

“And the money was put in to enable the dead bloke to buy a ticket for the next world.”

“That’s it.” Dizzy laughed. “Well, since he obviously didn’t use it, it should enable us to buy a few things in this world. Let’s see what’s in the others.” He walked to the next pot in the line, threw off the lid, and picking it up as he had the other, bumped it on the floor. As the contents fell out a stone rattled near the entrance.

Bertie spun round. “What was that?”

Dizzy grinned. “Maybe the spook of the poor blighter we turfed out of his coffin.” He was on his knees examining the coins the jar had yielded. “This is better,” he declared with tremendous satisfaction. “Take a look. Gold! That’s the stuff. Was I right about a treasure?”

“Absolutely.”

“This’ll make Biggles sit up and take notice. Will I pull his leg!” Dizzy was busy sorting the coins, putting the silver ones together and the gold ones in his pocket.

“Why bother to do that?” questioned Bertie. “Why not empty all the pots and then make one heap of everything?”

“That’s an idea. I can’t wait to see what’s in the others. We might find Solomon’s regalia or the Queen of Sheba’s jewel case. Who knows?”

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you, old boy. We’re not doing too badly as it is.”

Dizzy made for a jar rather larger than the rest. “This must have been a special job for someone important.”

“Don’t talk so much. Tip it up,” said Bertie, becoming infected with Dizzy’s excitement.

Dizzy had some difficulty in lifting the jar, for by reason of its size it was heavier than the first two. He tried rolling it on the floor, but nothing fell out. He managed to pick it up and drop it. Still nothing came out. Using his torch he looked in it. “There’s something,” he muttered. “It must have stuck.” Clasp the vessel in his arms, with an effort he lifted it high and let it fall with a bump that shook the floor, and incidentally, shattered the jar. Simultaneously with the rattle of the broken fragments came a crash and clatter from the entrance that lasted several seconds. The light that had come in through the crack was suddenly cut off. The piece of blue sky, shaped like a piece of a jig-saw puzzle, was no longer there.

It was a little while before either of them spoke. Both of them must have known only too well what had happened. With the beam of the torch lighting their way they walked slowly to where the entrance had been only to find their way blocked by a mass of loose rock and rubble mixed with hand-made brick-shaped stones. There was no crack, not a chink of light anywhere. The silence was the silence of a tomb. What had happened was all too apparent.

Bertie was the first to speak. In an unusual voice as if he was forcing himself to speak casually, he said: “You bumped that last jar a bit too hard, old boy.”

“I must have been off my rocker,” muttered Dizzy, in a voice bitter with self-reproach.

“It wasn’t very clever, I must admit.”

“I was in too much of a hurry to see what was in that big jar.”

“Whatever was in it isn’t much use to us at the moment.”

“I can see that. Don’t rub it in.”

“I wasn’t rubbing anything in. Just making a remark, that’s all.”

“We’re shut in.”

“Absolutely.”

“What do you suggest we do about it?”

“As far as I can see there’s only one thing we can do, laddie, if we want to see daylight again,” answered Bertie.

“Start digging our way out.”

“That’s it. You’ve got it first guess.”

CHAPTER VII

HEARTBREAKING WORK

“Do you think we shall be able to manage it?” said Dizzy, after a pause, as if the full enormity of what had happened had only just struck him.

“All we can do is try,” answered Bertie. “The trouble is, we haven’t a clue as to how much stuff there is to shift.”

“It sounded to me like a pretty good load, as if that artificial arch had given way, letting down that bulging mass of natural rock it seemed to be supporting.”

“If you’re right we’re likely to be here for some time. But before we start playing rabbits it might be a good idea to explore the whole place on the off-chance of there being another exit.”

“It’s worth trying,” agreed Dizzy, hopefully. “Save an awful lot of sweat if there was one.”

In ten minutes, in which every inch of the chamber had been explored, the project was abandoned. The big vaulted room ran straight back into the heart of the hill in which it had been hewn by labourers in the remote past. It was no more than a long, single, hand-made cave without a turning. The floor, deep in the dust of ages, was level. There was not a crack, or a mark of any sort, to suggest a possible alternative exit.

“Nothing doing, old boy,” said Bertie. “Bad show.”

They returned to the heaped-up rocks that marked the position of the only way out.

“When we don’t go back to the machine Ginger will come up to see what has happened to us,” said Dizzy, optimistically. “He’ll start work on the other side.”

“If he realizes what has happened.”

“He’s bound to.”

“Not necessarily. Never having seen it he won’t know exactly where the entrance was. No use relying on that, old boy. We’d better start on moving some of this muck. It may not be as bad as it looks. Jolly good thing we brought some water, but we shall have to go steady with it. We shall have to go easy on the torch, too. That won’t last for ever.”

“Without it we can’t see what we’re doing.”

This was evident, so the matter was not argued. Bertie took off his jacket and started work. “We’d better have some sort of method,” he suggested. “I’ll pick up the rocks, one at a time, and pass them back to you. You make a dump behind you.”

“Okay.”

The work began. It went on for hours. Neither spoke. They seemed to be making no headway although the heap behind Dizzy steadily grew larger. The disheartening part of the job was, as soon as a cavity was made more rocks fell into it. There was no way of preventing this.

“Good thing there’s plenty of room in here,” remarked Bertie, during a brief rest during which they wetted their dry, dusty lips.

“Why? What has size to do with it?”

“At least, if nothing else, we have plenty of air to breathe. Enough to last us for some time.”

“I wish you wouldn’t think of such things,” growled Dizzy, as the task was resumed.

How long this went on was not known. Thinking it was better not to know they deliberately refrained from looking at their watches. Eventually, in the circumstances, they forgot to wind them, so whether it was night or day outside was not known, either. The torch was now giving no more than a red glow.

Dizzy was the first to desist. “It’s no use,” he muttered. “I’ve got to have a rest. I’m all in. My back’s breaking.”

“All right. Let’s lie down and snatch forty-winks. It might be better in the long run. We’ll start again fresh. Put the torch out.”

How long they slept neither knew. In their exhausted state it was probably longer than either of them realized. Bertie was the first to wake. Feeling much refreshed he awoke Dizzy. They each had a short drink, nibbled a biscuit from Bertie’s packet in the haversack, and the labour was resumed.

Time passed. Hours. Many hours. Time did not seem to matter. Fingers were sore from handling the rough rocks, but in the matter of life and death that did not matter either. Dizzy now had such a pile of rocks behind him that they had to break off to move some of them farther back.

It was a long while after this that Bertie, pulling out a rock, exposed a tiny crack of light. Although this was what they had been working for, for a

moment they could only stare at the narrow ray as it pierced the gloom like a miniature searchlight.

“We’ve done it!” croaked Dizzy, as they stood blinking at it.

“We can afford to have a drink now,” said Bertie.

It was significant that not a word was said about the treasure.

They each had a drink, sipping the water slowly, with ineffable relish.

“Let’s get out,” said Dizzy, abruptly. “I want to stand in the daylight, sunshine and all.”

They returned to the rock face where, a moment later, their hopes proved premature. As Bertie touched the first stone there was a low rumble which again lasted some seconds. The ray of light disappeared and once more they were in darkness.

Dizzy swore.

“That’s tough,” said Bertie. “Keep going. No use swearing. We can’t have far to go.” But the length of the rumble had been a bad sign, and there was no conviction in his voice.

They resumed a task which seemed to have been going on for weeks. The torch, although it had been used sparingly, was now no more than a faint red spot as the battery became exhausted. The water bottles were nearly empty. This was unavoidable. They had to drink to live. The biscuits were finished, too. Both knew the end was not far off; that they were rapidly getting weaker. The air was stuffy and they had to breathe faster to keep their lungs supplied. Both knew the air was becoming vitiated but neither mentioned it. The periods of work were becoming shorter. The intervals for rest were becoming longer. There is a limit to human endurance; but there is also a will to live which in certain circumstances may carry a man beyond this point, and they struggled on painfully, rock by rock, stone by stone, every one calling for an effort.

There came a time when Dizzy sank down on a rock, his face in his hands. “It’s no use,” he said thickly, through dust-grimed lips. “We’ve had it.”

Bertie did not answer. He went on with what he was doing, picking up the rocks and putting them behind him.

Dizzy remained seated for a while and then, perhaps from shame, returned to his task. “Sorry I packed up,” he muttered.

“How long do you reckon we’ve been in here?” he asked during a pause a little while later.

“Haven’t a clue, old boy. Seems like weeks.”

“Must be nearly a week.”

“We’d better keep going.” Bertie resumed his labour.

“Sorry I brought you into this,” said Dizzy.

“Forget it. Nothing for you to be sorry about, old top.”

“What I can’t understand is why Ginger didn’t come up to help us,” said Dizzy, miserably. He had said the same thing a dozen times.

“He may be working on the outside for all we know.”

“If he was we’d hear him, or hear stones being moved.”

“That would depend on how much stuff there is between us,” returned Bertie, stumbling under the weight of a rock. As a result of having no food he was getting rapidly weaker, and he knew it. But he did not say so. Panting for breath he carried on.

Later Dizzy said: “Do you know something?”

“What?”

“Biggles was dead right about this treasure hunting pastime.”

“Of course he was right. He usually is.”

“It’s a game for lunatics.”

“Absolutely. We’ve realized it a bit late. But let’s keep going. There can’t be much stuff left unless the whole bally cliff has toppled down.”

“We’re wasting our time.”

“We’ve nothing else to do with our time. Better to work than sit and wait for a miracle. The next stone may be the last. You know what they say?”

“What do they say?”

“Never leave a stone unturned.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“No bally fear. Any stone now could let in a drop of daylight and a spot of fresh air.” Bertie swayed and nearly fell.

Dizzy did not answer.

Bertie groped and found him on the ground. He did not move. His breath was being taken in short gasps.

For a moment or two Bertie hesitated. He himself was in little better care. He knew he was finished. Already he was on his knees. But he picked up a stone and with the slow motions of a sleep-walker dropped it behind him.

“Is that you, Bertie,” came Dizzy, in a far away voice, as if his mind was wandering.

“That’s me, old boy.”

“Sorry to let you down. I’m all in.”

Bertie groped blindly for another rock, for the torch had long since failed. Suddenly he froze rigid.

“What are you—doing?” came Dizzy’s voice, from the darkness.

“Nothing. Did you hear something?”

“Hear what.”

“A rock being dropped.”

“Wasn’t it you?”

“No. I was standing still.”

“D’you mean—it could be—outside?” Dizzy dragged himself to Bertie’s feet.

“Listen.”

Again came the sound, a harsh scrape followed by a bump as if something heavy had been dropped on sand.

“It’s him,” croaked Bertie.

“Who?”

“Ginger. I hear him working.”

Suddenly there was a rush of falling stones. A blue hole appeared. Air, and daylight, poured in to cut a white wedge in the darkness. The black silhouette of a head and shoulders filled the opening. A voice called sharply: “Bertie! Are you there?”

“Just about, old boy, just about,” answered Bertie, weakly. “It sounds like Biggles,” he told Dizzy, wonderingly.

“That’s impossible.”

“Stay where you are. We’ll soon shift the rest of this stuff and have you out,” came Biggles’ voice. “It may take a minute or two because there’s still a risk of more falling.” The silhouette disappeared. In a moment it was back. “Here, get hold of this. I imagine you need it.”

Biggles handed in a water bottle and those inside had their first real drink since the disaster. This, the fresh air, and the knowledge that they were saved, soon had them on their feet.

“How are you?” asked Biggles.

“Not too bad.”

“Able to walk?”

“Yes. A bit groggy on the old pins, that’s all.”

“Okay. Stand by.”

This conversation was followed by a period of activity outside in which Biggles could be heard talking to Algy. Rocks and stones were thrown aside and the hole rapidly grew larger.

Biggles returned to it. “Right,” he said. “Come through one at a time and try not to touch the sides. They should hold up if you don’t knock against them.”

Bertie made a sign to Dizzy. “Out you go.”

Dizzy went through, to stagger like a drunken man before falling on the soft sand.

Bertie followed and did the same thing, shielding his eyes from the unaccustomed glare.

“What’s Ginger waiting for?” asked Biggles.

“Ginger?”

“Yes. Ginger.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Bertie, stupidly.

“I’m talking about Ginger. What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know what he’s doing.”

Biggles went to the hole and shouted: “Ginger.”

There was no answer.

“No use doing that, old boy,” said Bertie. “He isn’t there.”

“Do you mean—he wasn’t in there with you?”

“That’s what I mean.”

Biggles stared, his jaw sagging slightly from shock. “Then where is he?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Why not?”

“He didn’t come with us. We left him to take care of the machine.”

Biggles looked at Algy as if unable to grasp what he had just been told. “You hear that? Ginger isn’t with ’em.”

“When you appeared I assumed he’d brought you here.”

“We haven’t seen him.”

Bertie went on: “We couldn’t understand why, when we didn’t go back, he didn’t come up to help us out. We’ve been in that infernal hole a long time. I feel as if I’d been digging all my life.”

“So I imagine.”

“I don’t understand this about Ginger. Is the Dakota all right?”

“Yes.”

“Still on the landing ground.”

“No. It’s in Aden.”

“In *Aden*. What’s it doing there?”

“The R.A.F. flew it in when they saw no one with it.”

“Then how did you get here?”

“We flew out from home in the Proctor when we read in the paper that the Dakota had been found abandoned. Got here last night. Naturally, this was the first place we looked for you. Seeing the landslide we guessed what had happened. Lucky for you we did. Teach you to go treasure hunting.”

“At least we found one,” put in Dizzy.

“The deuce you did.”

“What about this?” Dizzy plunged a hand in his pocket and showed a collection of gold and silver coins.

Biggles’ eyes opened wide. “Great work. You deserve it.”

“There’s a lot more inside. Aren’t you going in to collect it?”

“Not me. Look at that overhang. Now the supporting arch has gone the whole thing might come down. That rock’s as rotten as a piece of old cheese. I’ve done enough stone hauling for one day. You both look as if a square meal would do you more good than all the gold you’ve found. Are you able to walk?”

“Just about.”

“Then let’s get off this grill. Did you have any food in there with you?”

“A packet of biscuits,” answered Bertie.

“Then you must be getting a bit peckish.”

“Not now. I was some time ago.” Bertie got up and reeled unsteadily.

“We shall have to look for Ginger, but before we do anything else we’d better get you back to the machine. All you need is food. There are some iron rations in the Proctor. That reminds me. Ginger said he’d put the medical kit in the Dakota. Did he?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Certain. I saw him put it in the locker. Why?”

“It isn’t there now.”

“But that’s fantastic. Who would pinch a thing like that?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“Ginger must have needed it.”

“For what?”

“An accident of some sort.”

“Had he had an accident he would hardly have left the machine,” Biggles pointed out, a trifle sarcastically. “But come on. Let’s get you back to the machine for a start.”

Bertie and Dizzy started to walk, but they both needed support. They had only gone a few yards when a loud crack made them turn. Another mass of rock had broken away from the overhanging part above the hole and came crashing down to again bury it under a pile of rubble.

“That settles any argument about going back in there, for the time being, at any rate,” said Biggles, grimly.

The party went on, but progress was slow and it was soon clear that the journey to the landing ground was going to take some time.

Algy made a suggestion. “Suppose you rest here while I slip down to the machine and fetch some food, what there is, and water.”

“I’ve a better idea than that,” answered Biggles. “I can’t think why I didn’t think of it before. Instead of us all trying to crowd into the Proctor, you slip along, Algy, and fly it into Aden. Tell the Station Commandant we’ve found two of them and need the Dakota to carry on the search for the other. In other words, come back here as fast as you can in the Dakota. Bring some soft food, sandwiches and so on, and one or two flasks of tea or coffee. They’ll let you have some at the officers’ mess when they know what it’s for.”

“What shall I tell the C.O.? He’s bound to ask what all this is about.”

“Tell him the truth. Say Bertie and Dizzy were exploring a ruin when the entrance caved in and shut them inside.”

Algy pointed out to sea where a yacht was cruising not far offshore. “There’s that craft we saw on the way here. They’re almost certain to have radio. Shall I try to contact them and ask them if they can let us have some grub?”

“No. While you’re fiddling about doing that you could get to Aden and back. You’ve two or three hours of daylight left. I want the big machine, anyway. Talking of food, you might put out some of the food and water we have in the Proctor.” Biggles threw Bertie a bantering smile. “Don’t kid yourself you’re going to have bacon and eggs. We have only hard tack, but that’ll be something for you to sharpen your teeth on. Get going, Algy.”

“Okay.” Algy set off, travelling fast.

The others followed slowly, with frequent rests. “Take your time,” said Biggles. “You can finish the water in my bottle if that’s any help.”

“Thanks. I can’t imagine what could have happened to Ginger,” said Bertie, during a pause. “The Dakota was still on the landing ground a few minutes before we were shut in. I saw it. Are you sure he didn’t follow us and get lost, or have a fall, or something?”

“I don’t see how he could have got lost,” replied Biggles. “We had no difficulty in following you here. Had he had a fall we should have found him on the way up.”

“It’s that medical outfit being missing that I can’t get over,” said Bertie. “I mean, even if Ginger had needed it for something he’d have put it back when he’d finished with it.”

“I fancy we shall have to wait until we find him before we get the answer to that one,” answered Biggles, sadly.

They went on down the barren slope.

CHAPTER VIII

FRESH TROUBLE

BIGGLES, with Bertie and Dizzy, helping them over the difficult places, continued on slowly towards the landing ground. They could see Algy far ahead, but knowing that with what he had to do he could not get back from Aden in the Dakota in much less than two hours they did not hurry. There was no shade on the hillside so there was little inclination to rest; nevertheless, they had from time to time to do so, for while there was nothing actually wrong with either Bertie or Dizzy they were of course desperately weak from having gone for so long without food. They had each lost a good deal of weight and jokes were made about it, although as Biggles pointed out there was really nothing to laugh at. Had it not been for the chance of his having seen the newspaper item about the Dakota having been found abandoned they would in all probability be still in the cave. But for the most part what little conversation there was concerned the mysterious disappearance of Ginger.

They saw Algy reach the Proctor; saw him put some things out on the sand, cover them with something and mark the spot with a small cairn of stones. He climbed into the cockpit. A swirl of dust trailed aft as the engine was started. Then the machine took off and headed west, leaving the landing ground, indeed, the entire scene, utterly forlorn. The only thing in sight that moved was the small yacht that had previously been remarked on. Travelling under mechanical power, for there was no wind to fill the sails, it was coming closer in, for what purpose no one troubled to guess. They were all too worried about Ginger.



The sea was only half a mile or so beyond the landing ground and it did occur to Biggles that Ginger might have gone for a bathe and been drowned; but he dismissed the thought as too improbable to be entertained.

Reaching the last spot where the Proctor had stood he removed the stones and a ground sheet which had been used to cover what Algy had left in the way of food and drink. Most important were two full water bottles.

The water, of course, was tepid, but as Bertie observed, it was wet, and that was all that mattered. There were two packets of biscuits, a can of bully beef with an opener, a slab of chocolate, very soft, some chewing gum and three oranges.

The mere sight of these things seemed to go far to restore Bertie and Dizzy to normal. The only trouble was, there was no shade, so they had to eat sitting in the sun. Biggles tried holding up the ground sheet, for there was not a twig, much less a stick, to give it support. He soon tired of it and threw it to the others who sat with it spread over their heads to protect them from the direct rays of the sun.

While he was eating Dizzy scraped a hole in the sand.

“What’s the idea?” asked Biggles, curiously. “Haven’t you done enough digging?”

“These coins in my pockets are a bit of a drag so I might as well park them until the Dakota comes.” He suited the action to the word.

“Don’t forget where you’ve put ’em.”

“Don’t worry, I shan’t do that. These stones can mark the spot.”

Biggles looked at some of the coins. “Very nice,” he observed. “At least you have something for your trouble. Were there any more?”

“Yes. We’d hardly got started when the entrance caved in, and that knocked all other ideas out of our heads.” Dizzy gave a more detailed description of what they had found in the vault and explained how, through his own folly, the landslide had occurred. “I seem to have made a nice mess of the whole show,” he concluded, ruefully. “I deserve to have my block knocked off.” He smoothed the sand over the coins and topped the spot with stones.

After that the talk returned to Ginger and what could have become of him. Biggles did not attempt to conceal from the others that he took a gloomy view of ever seeing him again. “Let’s face it,” he said. “We’ve already flown over the whole area within walking distance. Had he been on his feet we must have seen him. He would have heard the machine and stood in the open to wave. If he was not on his feet—well, he was on the ground, in which case, in this heat and without water he’d never get up again.”

“How do you know he had no water?” asked Dizzy.

“I counted the water bottles in the Dakota. The only two missing were the two you took with you up the hill. Why he should leave the machine without taking water with him is beyond my comprehension.”

“He wouldn’t be such a fool as to do that,” declared Bertie.

“I agree, and to that I pin my one hope of ever seeing him again. We’ll make another air search when Algy comes back with the Dakota but I don’t think we shall find him. I feel our one chance of seeing him again is that he’ll be brought back, and, frankly, I haven’t any high hopes of that.”

“What do you mean by *brought* back, old boy?”

“Look at it like this. Knowing Ginger as I do I feel more and more convinced that having been left to guard the machine he wouldn’t leave it except under force. And if for some extraordinary reason he *did* leave it he wouldn’t go without water. If I’m right it follows that he must have been taken away.”

“Who would take him?”

“Who else but a party of raiding Arabs. We know from the hoof marks that Arabs have been here.”

Dizzy shook his head. “They wouldn’t take him. If they were friendly they’d leave him alone. If they were on the war path they’d kill him. Remember, I’ve been here before and know something about it. If they’re friendly, Arabs can be the most hospitable people in the world. If they’re not in a friendly mood—well, it’s just too bad. Murder to them means nothing. Shall I tell you what I think?”

“Go ahead.”

“Leave the Arabs out of it. We left him here. When we didn’t come back he’d get worried. By evening he’d be worried sick, knowing something must have happened to us. What would he do? He’d do one of two things. First, he might take the machine into the air to try to see us. As we were in the cave, shut in, he wouldn’t be able to see us. So he’d take the machine back to the landing ground, since there’s nowhere else to put it, and set off on foot to look for us. He didn’t come back. Why? Because by that time it’d be dark. He lost his way, went down the wrong side of the hills and ended up in the big desert. That’s my opinion. If you don’t agree, tell me what else he could have done.”

“It’s a reasonable theory,” Biggles had to concede.

“Remember, this didn’t happen yesterday,” went on Dizzy. “It happened on Tuesday, the day we arrived here. Today, you say, is Saturday. We arrived at Aden on Monday, and left early the next morning.”

“The machine, they told me at Aden, was first spotted by an R.A.F. patrol late on Tuesday afternoon,” said Biggles. “It didn’t land, but as far as the pilot could make out there was no one with it then. This was reported. A machine was sent out the next day to have another look. The Dakota was in the same place, still nobody with it. As the Dakota was identified as the one

that had landed at Aden, en route for South Africa, the authorities in Aden sat up and took notice. Of course they did. Their job's like boiling a saucepan of milk. Take your eyes off it and it boils over. As the Dakota had no reasonable excuse for being where it was it was flown back to Aden."

Bertie polished and replaced his monocle. "I give it up. The whole bally thing has me beaten to a frazzle." He looked towards the sea as if seeking inspiration. He went on, in a voice rising with surprise: "Hello! What's all this?"

"All what?"

"The chaps in the yacht are coming ashore in their dinghy. Four of 'em."

Biggles turned. They all watched the dinghy pulled high and dry. One of the men waved to someone on the yacht which had dropped anchor about two hundred yards off shore, after which the whole party began walking briskly towards the landing ground.

"Looks as if they're coming here," observed Bertie. "They must wonder what we're up to."

"They may take us for a bunch of castaways," surmised Biggles. "From the yacht, through binoculars, they'd see we were white men. I wonder did Algy get in touch with them after all and ask them to bring us some grub. No—he wouldn't do that after I told him not to."

The men came on. A few minutes later, when they were close, Dizzy exclaimed in a voice of astonishment: "Why, that chap with the beard is the fellow I spoke to in the British Museum."

"The one you showed the coin to."

"Yes."

"Majoli."

"That's the name. What a coincidence."

"I wouldn't call it coincidence," remarked Biggles, dryly. "Did you know he'd been in Aden asking questions about you?"

Dizzy's eyes opened wide. "The devil he has."

"That's what I was told."

"What do you suppose he's doing here? Don't say he's had the nerve to follow me."

"It looks mighty like it to me. They're a nasty-looking mob, anyhow. I wouldn't trust any one of 'em as far as I could see him. They look as if Majoli might have picked 'em up in the slums of Suez or Port Said—anywhere in the Eastern Mediterranean."

“Perhaps he’s looking for material for that book he told me he was writing,” suggested Dizzy.

“Could be. But I fancy he’s looking for something more substantial.”

“What, for instance?”

“For you, or the place where you found that coin.”

“But he couldn’t have known I was here?”

“Why couldn’t he? He may have been in Aden when you arrived. If the story of the Dakota being found on the coast could get in the English newspapers it would be common knowledge in a hotbed of gossip like Aden. I saw that yacht this morning when I was flying along the coast, and no doubt those on board her saw me. They must have seen the Proctor standing here before Algy took her off. Obviously, they saw it go back towards Aden. Through binoculars they’d see us sitting here so they’re coming to see what we’re doing. If it comes to that they may have seen us coming down the hill from the cave. If they did, it could hardly fail to sharpen the curiosity of this fellow Majoli, who may have even more interest in this part of the world than he admitted when you asked his opinion of that coin, Dizzy. But here they come. Be careful what you say.”

“Hello, Majoli. What are you doing here?” greeted Dizzy, cheerfully, as the four men walked up.

Majoli, unsmiling, replied: “I could ask you that question. What are *you* doing here? Looking for more old coins?”

“Well, you never know. Where there’s one there may be more.”

“Where did you find the one you showed me?”

Biggles stepped in. “Why should he tell you?”

Scowling, Majoli looked at Dizzy, jabbing a thumb towards Biggles. “Who is this man?”

“Friend of mine.”

“What were you doing on the hill? We saw you from the yacht.”

Again Biggles broke in. “Whose yacht is that?”

“It belongs to a relation of mine.”

“Why come ashore in this sweltering heat? It must be much more pleasant at sea.”

“We landed to have a look round. Mr. Digswell knows of my interest in archaeology,” replied Majoli, coolly. “Do you intend to stay here?”

“Why do you think we may stay?” fenced Biggles.

“You sent your plane away. We saw it leave.”

“It’s coming back,” informed Biggles. “It has only gone to fetch a supply of water and food.”

“So you’ll be staying here?”

“That’s our intention.”

“Why?”

“Since you’re so interested in our affairs I’ll tell you. One of our party has managed to lose himself. If he doesn’t soon come back we’re going to look for him.”

From his expression Majoli didn’t believe this. He took his companions aside, and with them in low tones, held a short conference. At the finish he and his party set off towards the hills, taking a direction for the place from which he had, as he had told them, seen Biggles’ party coming down.

Said Biggles to Dizzy, as he watched them go, “It looks to me as if you did too much talking at the British Museum.”

“I didn’t say much to Majoli. I told you I didn’t like the man.”

“You may have said more to the curator.”

“I told him a certain amount. I had to, to get the information I wanted.”

“Naturally. I’d bet Majoli knows all you told him. Let’s not fool ourselves. Majoli knows perfectly well why you’re here; why we’re all here.”

“There is this about it. He can’t possibly know what we found.”

“He suspects you’ve found *something*.”

“Why should he?”

“He isn’t a fool. Take a look at yourself. You and Bertie look as if you’d been digging for days.”

“He didn’t comment on it.”

“There was no need. He’d draw his own conclusions. Why are we sitting here? He thinks he’s guessed the answer, but he’s wrong.”

“You told him we were going to look for somebody.”

“He didn’t believe that. He would suppose you’d been digging. He believes we’ve found what we were looking for. What he thinks about the Proctor going to Aden I don’t know. No doubt he’s doing some hard thinking about that.”

“He won’t find the cave with that landslide over the entrance.”

“He’s gone to look for it.”

“So what?”

“When he fails to find anything he’ll watch us.”

“Okay. Let him.”

“All right. As you say, let him. I’m more concerned about Ginger.”

“I don’t see why he should know as much as you seem to think,” argued Dizzy.

“Look at it from his angle. He knows that when the Dakota left Aden there were three people in it. That was in the newspapers. He had only to look at you and Bertie, and see the state you were in, to work out that you were two of that party. Where, he’ll wonder, is the other one?”

“It might be you.”

“Not likely. You look like a couple of quarry men at the end of a day’s work. I’m obviously a new arrival. The machine that first came here was a Dakota, a big twin-engined job. If he’s the sort of man I take him to be he’ll know the machine that just took off was not a Dakota. That will tell him there are two machines on the job, and at the same time explain how I got here. But perhaps it doesn’t matter. Let them do what they like. What we have to do is find Ginger.”

“Those fellows are up on the ledge,” said Bertie, who had been watching them. “What if they find those old pillars, and bits and pieces of old buildings?”

“They can have ’em as far as I’m concerned.”

“They’ll start excavating,” said Dizzy, ruefully.

“With what? Their bare hands?” Biggles laughed shortly. “They’ve no tools with them. Before they start digging they’ll have to fetch some.”

Half an hour passed. Biggles was watching for the Dakota, due at any time now, when Bertie said: “You were right, old boy. They’re not stopping to do any digging. They’re coming back. Seem to be in a deuce of a hurry, too. Anyone would think they wanted to have another natter with us before the machine comes back here to fetch us.”

“They haven’t found the cave, that’s all I care,” muttered Dizzy.

It was soon clear that Majoli and his party were not going to their boat. They walked directly to where Biggles and the others sat waiting. They seemed to be in a state of some excitement.

Said Majoli, curtly, when he strode up. “So you found it?”

“Found what?” asked Dizzy, in an innocent voice, real or affected.

“The treasure.”

“What treasure?”

“Don’t play that game with me. What about this?” Majoli almost thrust a hand at Dizzy. On the open palm lay a silver coin.

“Oh! my coin. That was careless of me. I must have dropped it,” said Dizzy. “I’m glad you found it. Do you mind letting me have it back?”

“This one isn’t yours,” rapped out Majoli.

“What do you mean—it isn’t mine?” Dizzy was staring.

Said Majoli, speaking slowly and distinctly. “This is not the coin you showed me in the British Museum. You’ve found more. Where are they?”

CHAPTER IX

AWKWARD MOMENTS

DIZZY gaped stupidly at the coin as if not fully understanding the purport of what had been said. Then he realized, or thought he realized, what had happened. He must have dropped the coin when he had taken a handful from his pocket to prove to Biggles that he and Bertie had found the treasure.

It was Biggles who answered Majoli's impertinent accusation. "Here, just a minute," he protested, coldly. "What have you got to get all steamed up about? Don't you talk to us like that. The coin Digswell showed you in the British Museum wasn't necessarily the only one lying on the sands of Arabia. The one you say you've just picked up could have been lying where you found it for thousands of years." Actually, of course, he didn't believe this. He had come to the same conclusion as Dizzy.

"This one hadn't been lying there for one year, never mind thousands."

"How do you know?"

"Look at it! It's in mint condition. Had that coin been lying in the open for any length of time the surface would have been scoured smooth by the action of sand blowing over it."

"Very well. For the sake of argument let's admit you're right. Suppose we had picked up a ton of coins, which in fact we have not, what has that to do with you?"

"It has a lot to do with me. I've been working on this particular field of exploration for years." Majoli spoke in a voice brittle with frustration.

"You mean treasure hunting?"

"You can call it that."

"Are you saying you *knew* there was a treasure near here?"

"I knew there was something important."

"How did you know?"

"From the old records of the country in which I happened to be born, when I was a student."

"You mean Ethiopia."

"Yes."

“Well, if you didn’t find what you were looking for that’s your bad luck. What are you going to do about it?”

“We want a share of this,” declared Majoli brazenly.

“The deuce you do! By thunder! You’ve got a nerve.”

“Are you going to tell us what you know?”

“Not a word. And don’t you start throwing your weight about with me or I’ll radio Aden and have you put off the coast. I’d wager you’ve no permit to land here.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.”

“Talk,” sneered Majoli. “All talk.”

“You’ll find I can do more than talk.”

Here this belligerent conversation was interrupted by the approach of the Dakota, flying low. Everyone stood still to watch it land. When it had done so Algy taxied close, switched off and, with a basket in his hand, jumped down.

“A pile of sandwiches and a couple of flasks of iced coffee,” he said, handing the basket to Bertie. Then, apparently sensing that something was wrong, looking from one to the other he inquired: “What’s going on here?”

“Just a slight argument,” replied Biggles, casually. “These gentlemen have the whimsical notion that we’ve found a treasure and claim a share of it.”

“How very interesting.”

“Have you taken the treasure to Aden?” asked Majoli sharply, as if the possibility had just occurred to him.

“What treasure?”

“The one you found near here.”

“Don’t be absurd. Do you suppose we’d still be here, frying in the sun, if we’d found this treasure you’re talking about?”

“Let’s stop fencing with words. Have you got it?”

“No. I wish we had.”

Majoli’s eyes suddenly fastened on the ground. He sprang forward and snatched up a small object. Again he held out a hand, palm upwards. On it lay another silver coin.

“You’re all lying,” he cried, shrilly. “What about that, eh? What about that?”

“What about it?” parried Biggles, evenly.

“This is one you dropped when you were loading up.”

“In that case it belongs to us. Hand it over.”

“It doesn’t belong to you.”

“It certainly doesn’t belong to you.”

“We’ll see about that.” Majoli whipped out an automatic and brandished it wildly.

“Oh, put that thing away before you do some mischief with it,” said Biggles, impatiently. “Now you listen to me. I’ve something better to do than stand here arguing with you. I have a friend to find, and at the rate the light’s going I haven’t long to do it in.”

“You say you haven’t got the treasure?” queried Majoli.

“That’s what I say.”

“If you’re telling the truth you won’t mind me having a look round in that plane of yours.”

Biggles shrugged. “If that’ll satisfy you. You’re welcome to all the treasure you can find.”

“At least you won’t be able to run away while we’re inside,” sneered Majoli.

The four men moved towards the aircraft.

“Go with ’em and show them everything,” Biggles told Algy. When they were inside, speaking to Dizzy, he went on: “Why don’t you mend the holes in your pockets instead of walking about shedding coins as if they were chicken feed?”

“Sorry. That must have been one I dropped before I emptied my pockets.”

Bertie stepped in. “I say, old boy, what are you going to do about these interfering grafters? I have a feeling they’re going to cut up rough if we don’t give them what they want.”

“They may be bluffing.”

“I wouldn’t gamble on that. Suppose they get really nasty. If Majoli packs a gun you can reckon his pals do, too. They might use ’em. They’re crazy to get this treasure, and if I know anything they’re not the sort to stop at threats. They’d be pretty safe in a place like this, with a boat standing by to take ’em off after the dirty work. And we have to look for Ginger.”

“It is a bit difficult,” admitted Biggles. “What can we do? We can’t afford to get involved in a gun battle if there’s any possible way of avoiding it.”

“Why not?”

“Use your head. For the simple reason there would certainly be casualties, perhaps on both sides. If we shot them we should have to report it, and that would start a rare old stink in Aden. It might not end there. The whole story would have to come out, and when it was known who we are there’d be questions asked in Parliament. I’d rather Majoli had whatever there is in the cave than allow that to happen. It would be letting the Air Commodore down. If any of us were hit we’d be in an even worse mess. The whole thing hinges on Ginger. If it were not for him I’d feel like pulling out and leave this bunch of chisellers to do what they like. But we can’t leave here until we know what’s happened to Ginger. You must see that.”

“True enough, old boy. Too true, in fact.”

“We may find a way of tricking them. Pipe down. Here they come.”

Majoli and his party returned.

“Satisfied?” inquired Biggles, with cutting sarcasm.

“No.”

“Well, that’s up to you. Do you mind if I take off now?”

“You’re not leaving here until you tell me where you found those coins.”

All four men, as if it had been prearranged, drew guns.

Biggles sighed. “For heaven’s sake. Can’t you understand that if we’d found anything it would have gone to Aden in the machine you saw take off?”

“Why did it come back? You’re not here for a holiday.”

“You’re dead right we’re not. I’ve already told you we’re waiting for one of our party.”

“Where is he?”

“I wish I knew. If he’d show up you wouldn’t see me for a cloud of dust and small pebbles.”

“Why did this machine come back?” Majoli pointed a finger at the Dakota.

“I’ll tell you, although I don’t know why I should. I wanted a larger machine.”

“Why? To carry the treasure?”

“No. To carry more passengers. The machine you first saw here was a Proctor, which happens to be a three seater. As you can see, there are four of us here now, and I hope there’ll be another. Anything else you’d like to know?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Where you’ve put the treasure.”

“And if I refused to tell you—assuming I had put it somewhere?”

“If you don’t talk we shall shoot the lot of you.”

“That wouldn’t be a very clever thing to do. We might be missed.”

“When you were found they’d know why you hadn’t come back.”

“How do you work that out?”

Majoli showed his teeth in an ugly grin. “We’ll throw you into the machine and set fire to it. It would then be thought there’d been another unfortunate accident.”

Biggles lit a cigarette. “You do have some charming ideas, I must say.”

Actually, he was thinking fast. First and foremost he had no intention of leaving the district without making another, more intensive, search for Ginger, if necessary covering a wider area. Again, he did not lose sight of the possibility of Ginger, or his body, lying somewhere on the hillside, because the most natural thing for him to have done, when Bertie and Dizzy failed to return to the aircraft, would have been to look for them. Indeed, it was almost impossible to think of any other reason why he should leave his post.

“Well?” prompted Majoli. “You’re taking a long time to think about it.”

“I’ve a lot to think about,” returned Biggles, evenly. “I’ll make a suggestion in the hope of putting an end to this unseemly squabbling. First, this aircraft must stay here in case my missing friend comes back. If he returned to the landing ground and found no plane he wouldn’t know what to do. It’ll be dark in an hour so my proposed search might as well wait until tomorrow morning when I shall have the day in front of me. In the meantime I’ll go with you up the mountain and show you where I believe more coins may be, although I must warn you that I’ve never actually seen them. One of my friends will go with us. The other two will have to stay here with the machine.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re in no state to do any walking. You can see that for yourself.”

“What have they been doing?”

“They got in the mess they’re in looking for this treasure you keep on about. Among other things they’re feeling the heat. They’ll have to rest. They’re not likely to run off leaving me here, so you needn’t worry about

that. But get this straight. Don't get the idea that you're pushing me into this. I was going up that hill again in any case, and it might as well be now."

"Why do you want to go up the hill?"

Biggles sighed. "Do I have to say everything twice? I've lost a friend. I have reason to believe he may have gone up that hill. If so he either became lost or met with an accident. Either way he'll be dead by now. I intend looking for his body, for which reason I shall search among the rocks."

"Don't try any tricks."

"Tricks? I could have shot you five minutes ago had I wanted to."

"With what?"

"With this." Biggles showed his gun.

For a moment Majoli looked shaken. "Hand it over."

"You try to take it. I'll wager I can shoot faster than you."

"My friends here would get you."

"That wouldn't help you much, would it? And get this. Shoot us and you'll never find that treasure as long as you live. I'll take my oath on that."

"Then you do know where it is?"

"Say I have a rough idea."

"Have you seen it?"

"I've told you, no."

Majoli had a whispered conversation with his associates and came back. "Very well. I agree."

"You realize that if we go up that hill with you we shall search among the rocks as we go. That's the only reason I'm going."

"You think you may be able to give us the slip."

"If I wanted to give you the slip I wouldn't have to sweat up that perishing hill to do it. I've told you why I'm going, and I'm going to the top. Now quit stalling before I lose my temper with you."

"All right," growled Majoli. "But don't waste too much time. We don't want to spend all night on the hill."

"I have no intention of doing that," returned Biggles, icily. He got up, turning to Bertie and Dizzy. "You two stand by just in case Ginger comes back. I'd advise you to have a sleep in the cabin. You need it." Then, turning back to Majoli: "Okay. We're ready when you are."

"Walk in front, then we can see what you're doing," ordered Majoli arrogantly.

Biggles obeyed without argument. “Suits me. You can put those guns away. You won’t need ’em.”

“Afraid you might be shot?”

“From the way you handle yours I’m more afraid you might accidentally shoot yourself; in which case we would have to go to the trouble of digging a hole to put you in,” retorted Biggles.

CHAPTER X

UP THE HILL AND DOWN

FOR the second time that day Biggles and Algy trudged wearily across the arid sand to the time-bleached rocks of the hills. Biggles was not acting under compulsion. Had he not wanted to go he would not have gone. As he had said, it had been his intention to make another search in that direction, the most likely one Ginger would have taken; the only one which, as far as was known, he had any reason to take. Wherefore as they walked they looked about them, dreading what they might find, sometimes, as they climbed the slope, making short detours to look behind boulders from which Ginger might have fallen. They did not attempt to deceive themselves. Had that happened it would be futile to hope he might still be alive, so, really, it was his body they were looking for. It was a depressing business altogether, and Biggles had some harsh words to say about treasure hunting.

When they made these short excursions Majoli and his friends watched them closely but did not follow, apparently having no desire to do more clambering over the broken rocks than was necessary.

“What are you going to do when we get up top?” asked Algy quietly, on one of these occasions when they were out of earshot.

“I haven’t made up my mind.”

“Are you going to show them the cave?”

“You mean where the cave was.”

“Put it that way if you like.”

“I may.”

“That’s as good as handing them the treasure.”

“Not quite. I had a good look at the place after that last fall of rock. There must be tons of stuff blocking the entrance to the cave, and it looked to me as if it would only need a touch to bring more down. I wouldn’t go near it for all the bullion in the Bank of England. If they like to take the risk that’s up to them. There won’t be time for them to do much today, anyhow. It’ll take some time to manhandle enough boulders to get inside. There’s a lot of rubble, too, and they’ve no tools with them.”

“By the way, after your argument with Majoli about who this stuff belongs to, who *does* it belong to?”

“I wouldn’t care to express an opinion. Several nations might claim it. Any of the Arab States, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the rest, could say they had a right to it. So could Israel if it comes to that. It might depend on who it originally belonged to.”

“How could that be established?”

“By the head shown on the coinage. Even that could be disputed because the stuff might have been stolen, or used to pay a debt.”

“It seemed to me there were several different heads on the coins I saw Dizzy pick up.”

“That would be natural. Some of the hoards found at home cover half a dozen reigns. I’d say this is a case where, after all this time, the coins belong to the finder. As a matter of fact, the interest in this particular find would be international because of its historical importance.”

“We should be able to give Majoli the slip when it gets dark,” observed Algy, changing the subject.

“We probably could, but I don’t feel like trying it.”

“Why not?”

“It wouldn’t help us. I’m not leaving here till I know what’s happened to Ginger, although, frankly, I can’t hold out much hope of finding him alive.”

“Not so much talking,” shouted Majoli. “Let’s get on or it’ll be dark before we get there.”

“All right. We’re coming,” answered Biggles, irritably. “No need to break our necks. You won’t find anything.”

“How do you know?”

“Never mind how I know. I’ve told you. If you’re hoping to come back with a sack of gold on your shoulder get ready to be disappointed. I’ve been here before. And the sooner it gets dark the better: it’ll be less like an oven.”

Majoli scowled but said no more.

They all went on up the hillside, picking their way between the sun-heated boulders. Biggles and Algy continued to look for Ginger, sometimes calling, but without success.

With the sun nearly on the horizon, flooding the landscape with an orange glow, they reached the sand-filled *rakib*.

“This is the place where the coins were found,” Biggles told Majoli, cynically. “Help yourself.”

Majoli strode along with eager step, looking about him.

“There must have been a big place here at one time,” he said excitedly, when they came to the first pillar lying in the sand.

“There’s another pillar and some hand-cut stones a bit farther along.”

“Is there a building of any sort standing?”

“I haven’t noticed one. There are probably plenty of ruins under the sand if you care to dig.”

“Where exactly were the coins found?”

Biggles pointed on towards the landslide. “There.”

“What is all this?” asked Majoli, when they came to it.

“What does it look like?” inquired Biggles, sarcastically. He smiled curiously. “There’s a cave of sorts behind that heap of rubbish.”

“How do you know?” flashed back Majoli.

“I’ve seen it.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“Did you go in?”

“Do I look as crazy as that? Not on your life. Good thing for me I didn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because most of that stuff came down while I was here, and had I been inside I’d be there now. I said a cave, but it was more like a crack in the rock. It was near the crack, when he was trying to see inside, that Digswell picked up that coin he showed you in the British Museum. That was a couple of years ago.”

“Didn’t he go in?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing he hadn’t time and for another he didn’t like the look of it. He was expecting to be able to come back, but he was sent home and never had a chance.”

“How did he come to be here in the first place?”

Biggles sighed. “What a man you are for asking questions. I’ll tell you. He was in the R.A.F. Flying along here he ran into a *haboob*, had engine trouble and had to bale out. This was where he landed. The machine crashed—you can still see the wreck. As soon as the storm fizzled out another machine came along to look for him, so being afraid it might go without

seeing him he had to run down to open ground. That's why he didn't stay here to do any exploring. There wasn't time. He never came back until a few days ago. Now you know the lot."

Majoli looked at the pile, his face a picture of disappointment and frustration. He turned to his companions. "We should be able to shift that stuff," he declared, although not with any great confidence.

"How?" asked Biggles.

"A stick of dynamite should do the job."

"Have you got a stick of dynamite?"

"Not here, but I could fetch some."

"It looks to me," said Biggles, evenly, "as if a stick of dynamite would bring down half the mountain. That rock's been exposed to the weather for so long that it's as rotten as a piece of stale cake. I wouldn't go near it. Why do you suppose I didn't touch it this morning, before you poked your nose into the business?"

"Is that why you didn't mind telling me about it? You knew I couldn't get into the cave."

"Of course," admitted Biggles, coolly. "You surely don't imagine I'd be such a fool as to show you the place if there was a sack of gold here waiting to be picked up."

Majoli glared. In his impotence he walked forward and seizing a boulder with both hands tried to prise it loose.

Biggles backed away hastily.

When a few stones came rattling down so did Majoli run back. "It's no use," he muttered.

"Don't say I didn't warn you. Anyone who goes near that will be asking for trouble. It'll need a lot of men, working carefully, and a lot of time, to clear a way into the cave—or whatever the cavity is."

"We'll come back," declared Majoli, harshly. He looked at Biggles and Algy malevolently, as if considering something. "You know too much about this," he said viciously.

But at this critical juncture Biggles wasn't even looking at him. He was staring at something, a movement, that had caught his eye farther along the escarpment. "We're being watched," he said, edging behind a big boulder. "Watch yourself, Algy."

Algy also took cover. "What is it?"

"There's somebody up there, an Arab, I think, and he's looking at us along the barrel of a rifle."

Majoli sneered as he took out his gun. “That old trick wouldn’t fool a child.”

An instant later came the report of a rifle. One of Majoli’s followers let out a cry, stumbled, and limped to the face of the cliff where his friend had also taken shelter.

“You’d better save your cartridges,” Biggles called to Majoli. “It looks to me as if you may need all you’ve got with you. If that’s an Arab up there he won’t be alone.”

Then, as Majoli and his friends spoke together, looking anxiously in the direction from which the shot had come, Biggles said tersely to Algy: “Let’s get out of this.”

“Which way?”

“Any way as long as we can get to the bottom.” So saying Biggles slid over the edge of the *rakib* to the rocks below and took a diagonal course towards the line of their ascent, pausing only to make sure Algy was with him. By this time it was dusk, and the failing light made the going treacherous, if not really dangerous.

“Don’t talk to me about treasure hunting,” grated Biggles acidly, as they hurried on, sliding on rubble and stumbling over rocks, making a good deal of noise in the process. But there was no question of going quietly.

Conditions were a little better when they reached that part of the hillside over which they had previously travelled. By that time they could hear the Majoli party crashing down behind them, presumably having run to the end of the *rakib*. Two shots were fired, but by whom and at whom was a matter for surmise.

“I believe that unscrupulous devil Majoli really intended shooting us,” said Algy, as they struggled on.

“I’ve no doubt about it. I saw the expression on his face. He’s gold crazy. He’s not sharing with anybody what there is here. I was on the point of pulling my gun when I saw a head pop up over the skyline to have a look at us. We’d been talking loudly, or Majoli had, and sound carries a long way in this thin still air. Keep going. Let’s get down to the level ground. Bertie and Dizzy should turn out to lend a hand if necessary. They must have heard the shooting.”

“I can see the machine but I can’t see them.”

“They won’t have left the machine.”

They went on, making the fastest time possible, with Majoli and his party coming down behind them, sending rocks rolling, some of which came

near to hitting Biggles and Algy as they overtook them. The sun had now sunk well into the horizon, only the upper rim of the disc remaining to shed a crimson light on the desolate scene.

It was unfortunate that just as they reached the level, sandy ground, Algy should put a foot on an unevenly poised piece of rock. It turned over and he fell. He was up in a moment, with a short sharp cry of pain, and clutched at Biggles for support.

“What is it?” asked Biggles, tersely.

“My ankle.”

“Broken it?”

“Don’t think so. Twisted it.” He took a few steps, limping. “Okay,” he said. “I can keep going if you’ll give me an arm.”

But Biggles had stopped, and was staring along the sandy waste at the base of the hills. “I don’t think we need keep going any longer,” he said, in a curious voice. “There’s no need to hurry, anyway. They’ve seen us.”

“Seen us? Who’s seen us?”

“Look what’s coming.”



Algy looked. He said nothing. There was really nothing to be said.

Racing towards them at a furious gallop was a party of horsemen whose flowing white headcloths revealed them unmistakably for what they were.

“Arabs,” murmured Biggles. He let out a little laugh. “Arabs and crooks above us, Arabs alongside, we seem to have got the lot.” He took out his cigarette case.

“Aren’t you going to do anything?”

“Do what? We can’t fight this new lot. There are too many of ’em.”

“With Arabs above and below Majoli seems to have made himself the meat in the sandwich.”

“That’s not going to help us. The thing is to keep calm. This lot may turn out to be friendly. As Dizzy said, you never know.”

As nothing could be done they could only await what to Algy looked like a storming attack. He saw Bertie and Dizzy leap out of the aircraft, apparently awakened—if they had been asleep, as was more than likely after what they had been through—by the wild yells of the Arabs. They took one look, saw what was happening and dived back into the machine. He could imagine their consternation, but as far as he could see there was nothing they could do, either, unless they took off, and somehow he couldn’t see them doing that. He wondered vaguely why the Arabs hadn’t made straight for the Dakota, which they had passed by a margin of less than two hundred yards.

To Biggles, who was lighting a cigarette, he said: “It looks to me as if we’ve had it.”

“I’m sorry to say it again, but I always told you treasure hunting was a mug’s game.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re right.”

“It’s a bit late to arrive at that conclusion. My big regret is we shall never know what happened to Ginger.”

The horsemen came on, making a spectacular picture which in different circumstances would have been thrilling entertainment.

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. “Wild-looking lads, aren’t they?” he observed, whimsically.

CHAPTER XI

GINGER'S DILEMMA

AFTER watching the others out of sight Ginger had made himself as comfortable as circumstances permitted in the only spot of shade available for miles. That was under the broad wings of the Dakota. As the shade moved with the angle of the sun so he moved with it. Without a living soul in sight he had nothing to worry about, nothing to cause him a moment's anxiety. The only thing on his mind was a hope that the others would soon be back, before the heat became intolerable. He looked frequently at his watch. Naturally, he was a little disappointed at not being allowed to take part in the actual search for Dizzy's treasure; but that, he told himself, was just his bad luck. No doubt if there was in fact a treasure he would be seeing it soon enough.

At the end of an hour, although he did not really expect to see them yet, he began watching for the return of the explorers. When a second hour had passed without a sign of them, although this was the limit of the time Dizzy expected to be away, far from any feeling of uneasiness he took this to be a good omen. Had there been nothing in the cave, he thought, they would have come straight back. Their prolonged absence could only mean that they had found something important which would need careful transportation.

When a third hour had passed, however, he had his first twinge of anxiety. The blazing disc of the sun was now well on its way across the steely-blue dome of heaven, striking down with bars of heat at the sterile ground. The air shook like a jelly. The sand flung back the burning rays, and even in the shade it became too hot to sit on. Really worried, he returned to the cabin.

Another hour passed slowly, another and another. The sun thundered over its zenith and still there was no sign of the absentees. By mid-afternoon he could no longer deceive himself. Something had happened, but he could not imagine what it was. One of them might have met with an accident but surely not both of them, he pondered. Had one been injured in a fall, or something of that sort, the other would return to the machine for assistance.

What to do for the best Ginger did not know. His quandary was plain to see. He had been left to guard the aircraft. Should he leave it, and it was

interfered with by passing Arabs, he would have failed in his duty. Should he stay with it, when perhaps the others were in dire distress, he would again be in the wrong. It was, he perceived, one of those positions where unforeseen circumstances called for a change of plan. It was a matter of using his initiative, but he found it hard to make up his mind. In his agitation he paced up and down regardless of the merciless heat.

At four o'clock by his watch he decided the time had come for action. He would have to find out what had happened. The machine would have to take its luck. Just as he was, with his hat tipped on the back of his head to shield his neck from the sun, he set off across the parched wilderness of sand and gravel.

He had covered less than a hundred yards when a sound on his right made him look sharply in that direction. To his alarm he saw a group of horsemen galloping furiously towards him. There was no need to wonder who they were. All too plainly they were Arabs, and when a minute later they had closed in on him, surrounding him and throwing themselves off their horses, he thought he had never in his life seen a more villainous-looking crowd. There were twelve of them, every man armed to the teeth, as the saying is, with rifle and dagger. Some held the horses, including some spare mounts. The others pressed in on him.

From their fierce expressions Ginger thought his last moment had come. He had no doubt that he would be put to death forthwith. There was nothing he could do about it. True, he had a small automatic in his pocket but he did not attempt to use it. Defence would obviously be futile so he stood still, waiting for the worst. Only when this did not happen at once did he begin to take hope that he had been mistaken in their intentions.

One of them, who appeared to be the leader, caught him by the arm. He appeared to be in a great hurry. So did they all. Certainly they had travelled fast, for their small, lean, ungroomed horses were sweating profusely.

"Come," said the man who had seized Ginger, and was now dragging at his arm.

Ginger stared at the savage face, so close to his own, uncomprehendingly. "Come," he echoed foolishly. "Come where?"

The only answer he got was: "Come."

"You speak English," challenged Ginger.

"Yes. Come."

"Come where," cried Ginger again, his brain in a whirl at this extraordinary state of affairs.

"Come. I show. Quick. Man die."

Now Ginger understood. Or he thought he did. Bertie or Dizzy had been hurt and needed help. Obviously the Arabs were not hostile or they would by now have killed him. In fact, some of them seemed to be wearing on their faces an expression that might have been intended for a smile.

Ginger hesitated no longer. "I come," he said.

"God be praised," cried the leader, and his followers echoed it. "God is great."

A spare horse was brought forward. Ginger climbed into the saddle, and in a moment the entire band was tearing across the landing ground leaving behind it a cloud of dust.

Let it be admitted, Ginger was no horseman. He could ride, and on rare occasions had ridden, but that was about all. He clung to the saddle. His mount needed no guiding. It kept with the others. He had one consolation. Still thinking of Bertie and Dizzy they could not have far to go. What puzzled him was the direction they were taking. It was towards the hills, but at a very wide angle from the line taken by the treasure seekers.

When the grey hills were reached the party had to slow down as it ascended a narrow winding path which, although it veered and made detours round rocky *massifs*, maintained a steady diagonal course towards the serrated skyline. The leader kept close to Ginger, sometimes throwing him what may have been intended to be a smile of encouragement. Ginger certainly needed encouragement, for the unaccustomed exercise seemed to be shaking him to pieces. What with the heat, and the strong smell of men and horses, he began to wonder if this was really happening.

When they crossed the ridge of an escarpment and started down the far side his heart sank. Wherever he was going it was not to Bertie or Dizzy; not in any circumstances would they, could they, have got as far away from the landing ground as this. In front and below stretched the great waste of the wilderness. This reached, the party again broke into a gallop, over not so much sand as wide areas of hard, baked clay, gravel or flint pebbles. Sometimes the pebbles were small, but more often large. Reflecting the glare of the setting sun they hurt the eyes.

Ginger thought the terrible ride would never end. It became a nightmare. He ceased to think. Saddle-sore, he could only pray for it to end. The sun died, and the rising moon made the picture even more unreal.

When the end finally came Ginger was hardly aware of it. Indeed, with his head hanging he was barely conscious. It was the barking of dogs that made him look up, when he saw they had arrived in a long depression where some camels were browsing on a patch of camel-thorn. The leader of the

party Ginger was with let out a yell, presumably to announce their approach. Passing through a number of small, black, goats' hair tents, they stopped before one, much larger than the rest and some little distance away from them, facing the rising moon. Standing in front of it was a tall, handsome man with a pointed black beard wearing a white robe of some light material, and on his head the *kafieh* (head-cloth) and *agal* (the twisted double circle head-coil) of a man of rank.

Ginger dismounted. Or it might be more correct to say he fell off his horse.

The tall Arab, who Ginger realized must be the Sheikh, stepped forward, touching his heart and forehead in welcome.

"God be with you," he said in perfect English. "I am the Sheikh Mital ibn Yezzin. Welcome to my tent. I hope I have not put you to great inconvenience, but my son, my only son, is ill, and needs your help."

"But I am not a doctor," said Ginger, aghast.

"I sent my men to Aden, but seeing you they brought you back. Riding tired horses it would have taken them three days more to reach Aden. But first you must need refreshment." The Sheikh clapped his hands.

A white-robed Arab appeared with a long-spouted brass coffee pot, and two cups without handles in the palm of his hand. Pouring coffee into one of the cups he bowed and offered it to his master. The Sheikh motioned him to serve Ginger first.

Ginger accepted the coffee gratefully, although as a matter of detail he would have preferred a pint of cold water. As a matter of courtesy he refrained from mentioning this. At least, he thought, it was not intended to murder him. What the others would think when they returned to the machine to find him missing he could not imagine. He had another problem, too. The Sheikh's sick son.

"Will you rest or will you see my son?" said the Sheikh, indicating a low divan, with camel saddles serving as a back.

"I will see the boy," answered Ginger. "But I repeat, I am not a doctor," he added.

"Had my men gone to Aden my son would have been dead when they returned. Even now I fear he will die. Perhaps you can do something. The boy is everything I have."

"I will see him and do what I can," answered Ginger, feeling that he could not refuse. "I have no medicines with me, nothing."

The Sheikh did not answer. Again he clapped his hands and the same servant appeared carrying a lamp. He led the way to a different part of the tent, a thirty-yards long affair in the form of an open canopy, stretched on poles held in place by guy ropes. Here, on a heap of rugs, lay the patient, who appeared to Ginger to be a handsome boy of about fourteen, with the smooth skin and olive complexion common to many young Arabs. It was clear he was desperately ill. His eyes were closed, and he threw his head from side to side, muttering as if in pain.

Without speaking the Sheikh knelt beside him, lifted an arm, and removed from the boy's hand a nasty mess of wet bandages. "You see," he said, quietly.

Ginger saw, and was shocked. The hand was in a terrible state, pallid, puffed, the swelling running up the arm. In the side of the hand there was a jagged wound, suppurating and obviously septic. The poison was now working up the arm and would soon kill the lad by blood poisoning if nothing was done. Ginger, of course, was no doctor, but it seemed to him that the first thing a doctor would do would be to amputate the hand. At least, that was his first impression, but he did not say so.

What he said was: "How did this happen?"

"My son was bitten on the hand by a camel. He made light of it. I was not told at the time. The teeth of a camel can be very poisonous."

"I've heard that."

"Well?" asked the Sheikh softly.

"The boy is very ill. He should be in hospital."

"He would die on the way. There is no hospital nearer than Aden."

"You should have sent for a doctor."

"The nearest doctor is in Aden, and Aden is four days distant from here by the fastest horse. My men were on the way to Aden with a message for my friends there when they saw you. I would not leave my son."

"What did they think I could do?"

"Thinking all you Christians are clever with medicine and knowing the urgency of the matter, they brought you here instead of going on to Aden."

"It's a pity they didn't tell me. I could have flown to Aden in my aeroplane and brought back a doctor."

"They speak so little English they could not have explained the matter to you."

"How do you speak English so well?"

“I went to a British school in Aden. Sometimes I have to go to Aden to speak to the Governor about matters in my territory.”

Ginger guessed that Mital ibn Yezzin was one of the minor sheikhs along the coast supported by the British authorities to keep order. He fell silent. It was certain that the boy would be dead long before a doctor could be brought to the spot. Equally certain was it that he would not survive a horseback ride to the Dakota. So there he stood, confronted by a problem to which at first there appeared to be no answer. Then he remembered something, and after that thoughts passed swiftly through his head.

The Dakota, as near as he could judge, was not more than four hours away by horseback. In the aircraft was the emergency locker, and in the locker, among other things, the modern medical and surgical appliances which Biggles had been at some pains to get together in the space available. As he had said at the time it was composed, in the nature of their work, often in out of the way places where no medical service was at hand, it was a reasonable precaution. The kit was not heavy; it did not take up much room, and in the event of an accident, which was always on the boards—a crash landing for instance—it might make the difference between life and death for one or more of them. That was why the Red Cross box had for some time been part of their regular equipment. It had been useful on more than one occasion. Biggles, with his usual foresight, had insisted on it being put in the Dakota.

As Ginger had said, he was no doctor. It is unlikely that he could have passed an elementary First-Aid examination. But he did at least know the purpose of the articles in the box. They all knew. Biggles had seen to that.

Ginger was not thinking of the medicines to be taken by mouth. These, in this case, would be useless. The first thing he thought of was the pain killer, morphine, injected by a hypodermic syringe. Biggles had put that in after seeing a pilot trapped in his machine by a crash. He was in great pain, and morphine had been administered to relieve it while parts of the airframe had been cut away to release him.

Then Ginger remembered the wonder drug, Penicillin. He had had some experience of that at a time when he was suffering from a chronic throat infection. The doctor had given him an injection and it had worked like magic. There were phials of Penicillin, the master anti-bacterial agent, in the medical outfit. Would it work? He didn't know. But it seemed to him that as the boy was going to die anyway, if nothing was done, he could do no harm by trying. The question was, could the box be fetched in time? He looked up to see the Sheikh watching him with dark intelligent eyes.

“If you can save my son,” said the Arab, “you shall have a thousand camels.”

Ginger smiled wanly at the thought of arriving home with a thousand camels. “Thank you, sir, but I have no use for camels,” he answered. “If I can save your son that will be sufficient reward. I must warn you again that I am not a doctor,” he went on. “And as you see I have nothing with me likely to be of any use. But at the place where your men found me there is an aeroplane. At least, I hope it is still there. In the plane there is a box containing medical things. If your men could fetch it, while I can make no promises there is a chance I may be able to help your son.”

“Men shall go instantly.”

“They may find friends of mine there. They will be looking for me. I will write a note to be given to them. They will give your men the medicines. They must travel fast. Every minute is precious.” Ginger faltered when he remembered that at the time of his capture neither Bertie nor Dizzy had returned to the machine. “In case my friends are not there I will tell you exactly where the box may be found, and you can tell your men. It cannot be mistaken. It is a black box with a large red cross painted on it.”

“Allah is merciful,” said the Sheikh, piously. “Write the letter and it shall be taken.”

Sitting on the divan, in the strangest circumstances in which he had ever written anything, using the back of an old envelope addressed to him to confirm that it really was from him, Ginger wrote the message.

The Sheikh took it. “Rest,” he said. “Food shall be brought to you. If God wills my son shall be saved.” Embracing Ginger by putting both hands on his shoulders he went out into the blue moonlight.

Very soon from outside came sounds of great activity. Feeling far from happy Ginger remained on the divan, his chin in his hands, wondering if he was doing the right thing. He was afraid that if the boy failed to respond to his treatment, and he was far from confident about it, the Arabs might think he had deliberately killed him.

Presently the white-robed servant came in bearing an enormous brass dish, fully six inches deep, in which the carcass of a sheep rested on a mass of rice and gravy. On top was the severed head of the animal to show it had been recently killed. With a deep bow as he set it down in front of Ginger he said: “You are in the face of Allah. God’s will be done.”

Ginger could not have agreed more.

Using his penknife and his hands, for no table utensils had been provided, he ate his supper without relish.

CHAPTER XII

“THE WILL OF GOD”

IN spite of his predicament, perhaps as a result of the gruelling ride which had left him bone-weary, Ginger had a fairly comfortable night on the divan. He was awakened soon after dawn by the barking of dogs and other noises which told him the camp was already astir.

With returning consciousness of the ordeal before him his doubts again assailed him; but he consoled himself with the thought that the others would know where he was and what he was doing. Not for a moment did it occur to him that neither Bertie nor Dizzy might not have returned to the Dakota. His fear was that when the Arabs arrived they might be in the air looking for him. They might even have gone back to Aden for fuel or supplies. In that case they would come back, but the delay would be fatal for the sick boy.

It was with relief, therefore, when presently the Sheikh, attended by his personal servant, came in, he saw he was carrying the all-important black box marked with the red cross. But this satisfaction was short-lived.

Said the Sheikh: “My men were able to find it.”

It took a moment for the significance of this remark to penetrate. “Didn’t they give my friends the letter?” answered Ginger, looking puzzled.

“Your friends were not there.”

Ginger stared. “*Not there!*”

“No. The aeroplane stood as before. There was no one with it.”

This information came near to throwing Ginger into a panic, for it was now quite certain that something unforeseen had happened. The thought of the machine standing unguarded on the landing ground shocked him. What could Bertie and Dizzy be doing? Had they returned to the machine and finding him missing gone on foot to look for him? This did not seem very likely. If they decided to make a search for him they would probably use the aircraft, which would give them a wide view over the whole area. The only conclusion he could come to, and this really upset him, was that there had been a serious accident. If that were so, Bertie and Dizzy might be waiting for him to come to their assistance. He did not guess the truth, and it was as well for his peace of mind that he did not.

Looking at the Sheikh with troubled eyes he said: "I can't understand why my friends were not with the aeroplane. They hadn't far to go and should have returned, in which case they would wait for me."

All the Sheikh could say was: "They were not there. My men brought back your letter." He handed it to Ginger.

"Could they have been killed or captured by hostile Arabs?"

The Sheikh assured him there were no hostile tribesmen anywhere near or he would know of it. His scouts were always watching for raiders. But, naturally, he was more interested in the welfare of his son. "Come," he requested, and led the way to that section of the long tent, curtained off, in which the sick boy lay, tossing restlessly.

Ginger followed in a daze.

He was surprised to find the boy still alive. He had been prepared to find him dead. A glance was enough to show that his condition was worse. He was obviously running a high temperature. The poison had spread farther up the arm. The hand was horribly swollen. The wound was still open and suppurating badly. The boy was not unconscious, but was too far gone to recognize his father or take any interest in the proceedings.

Trying not to show how much he dreaded the task before him, for he was terrified of killing the lad, Ginger said, briefly: "Bring hot water and towels."

While the servant was away, with the Sheikh watching him with dark inscrutable eyes, Ginger opened the box and took out the things he might require, cotton-wool, bandages, lint, and the small box containing the hypodermic syringe and the drugs that went with it. He put the Penicillin on one side and returned the others to the box.

By the time the servant returned he was ready, and went to work with a show of confidence intended to hide his nervousness. He was by no means sure in what part of the boy's body the needle should be inserted. In his own case, although only his throat had been affected, it had been in the buttock. He decided to use the same place. Turning the boy on his side he dabbed a spot with a piece of cotton-wool soaked in spirit. Then, hoping the Sheikh would not notice how his hands were shaking, he filled the syringe as he had seen his own doctor do it, and made the injection. This done he returned the syringe to its box, cleaned up the injured hand and bandaged it. For good or ill the job was done.

"Now we must wait," he said, as he washed his hands. "There is nothing more I can do for the moment."

The waiting was perhaps the hardest part, and with what anxiety Ginger watched his patient for any change can be imagined. Fears assailed him. Would it have been better to use the morphine to relieve the pain? He had been afraid to use both drugs for fear one interfered with the other. Had he given enough Penicillin to be effective? or too much? Only time would show. He had done his best, anyway.

Rugs and camel saddles for backs were brought in. On these Ginger and the Sheikh sat side by side watching the patient. Hours passed. The servant brought them thick black coffee; a little later a brass platter on which lay a sticky lump of dates. Ginger was in no state for eating but he was glad of the coffee. Time passed. Not a word was spoken. Ginger sweated freely, but that was due to the heat. Flies buzzed. The servant kept them off the patient with a piece of white muslin.

By afternoon it seemed to Ginger that the boy was breathing more easily—unless he was in the coma preceding death. His eyes were closed and it was impossible to tell whether he was unconscious or sleeping. The day wore on. The side curtains were rolled up to permit the entrance of what little air there was moving. Even so the heat was oppressive, although this did not appear to affect the Sheikh. Under the open curtain a line of camels, returning from pasture, moved slowly towards the camp.

At sunset the boy was still alive. Ginger thought his heart felt a little stronger so he gave him another injection of Penicillin, as had happened in his own case.

When, an hour later, the curtains were lowered for the night, there was no longer any doubt about it. The boy showed marked signs of improvement. His pulse was better. The fever had been checked. He was breathing more regularly and no longer tossed his head, which suggested he was in less pain. It may have been imagination but Ginger thought the hand had gone down a little. He washed and rebandaged it, giving the servant the soiled materials to be taken away.



Outside, groups of Arabs were standing about in the bright moonlight, apparently waiting for news. Eventually, leaving the Sheikh watching, Ginger dozed from sheer nervous exhaustion. He awoke at intervals to look at his patient, and towards morning, to his infinite relief, he saw the improvement had been maintained. He himself breathed more freely, for the strain he was under was far outside his experience.

When daylight came, and the curtains were again raised, the boy—whose name Ginger had learned was Ahmed—opened his eyes and said something in his own language.

“He asks for water,” translated the Sheikh.

“Give him some.”

The boy half raised himself and took a drink.

The Sheikh looked at Ginger with eyes aglow. “He will live?”

“Perhaps,” answered Ginger, cautiously.

“Praise be to Allah.”

“Thank God,” agreed Ginger, fervently.

“God be glorified,” said the servant.

“It is as He wills,” said the Sheikh.

Ginger’s problem now was whether or not to give the boy another shot of Penicillin or leave recovery to his own constitution. He decided to wait, for a while, anyway. If there was a relapse he would give him another injection.

A bowl of fresh camel’s milk was brought in. The Sheikh motioned Ginger to drink first. Ginger told the servant to try to get a little through the boy’s lips, which he did.

Later in the day another dish of rice and mutton was brought in. This time, beginning to feel hungry, Ginger ate more, following the Sheikh’s example of scooping up a handful of rice with his right hand, squeezing it into a ball and putting it into his mouth. The Sheikh picked out tasty pieces of liver and handed them to him. The meal over he went outside and washed his hands in the sand. Ginger did the same. The Sheikh spoke to his men, whereupon there were loud cries, apparently of joy or praise from the number of times the word Allah was used.

“God is merciful,” said the Sheikh.

By the following day it was evident that the magic drug had worked and Ahmed was on the way to recovery. He was able to sit up and drink some milk. The swelling was going down. But with the passing of this worry Ginger was possessed by another. What had happened to Bertie and Dizzy? What *could* have happened? And all this time the machine had been standing unattended on the landing ground. He told the Sheikh of his concern and asked to be allowed to return to the aeroplane.

But the Sheikh implored him to stay one day more in case the boy became worse. During the night, he said, when travelling would be easier

than during the day, he would send riders to the landing place to tell his friends where he was and that he would soon be back.

In the circumstances Ginger felt he could not very well refuse. And so the day passed as before, with Ahmed making steady progress.

By the morning of the next day, which Ginger made out to be Saturday, the boy was sitting up, smiling, taking a little rice and camel's milk. His temperature was almost down to normal and his face was beginning to show a healthier colour. The wound in his hand was beginning to heal. Ginger kept it clean with mild antiseptic lotion and continued to apply fresh bandages.

The Sheikh came to him with an unusual expression of concern on his face. "My men have come back from the landing ground," he announced.

"What news?"

"Your friends are not there."

"Not there!" Ginger stared, horrified. "Is the plane all right?"

"The plane is no longer there. It is as God wills," added the Sheikh, seeing the expression on Ginger's face at this startling, not to say alarming, news.

Ginger drew a deep breath. This was something beyond his calculations. What were Bertie and Dizzy doing? They wouldn't go away and leave him. Only they could have flown the machine—or so, quite naturally, he supposed. The thought struck him that they might be in the air, even then, looking for him.

"They may have returned to Aden," suggested the Sheikh.

"No. They would not go without me."

"Perhaps they have gone for food and will soon come back."

"Perhaps. I must go at once to find out what has happened."

"And if they are not there, how will you get to Aden?"

Ginger hadn't thought of that. "Yes, how," he muttered, thinking of the hundred miles of wilderness that lay between the landing ground and Aden. He would never do the journey on foot. What if he tried it and met hostile Arabs?

The Sheikh might have read his thoughts. "You will be safe wherever you go in this region, for word has gone out to all my people that you are *dakhile*."

"What does that mean?"

"You are inviolate. You are in my face, as we say. As my guest no Arab will harm you."

“Thank you. It is a relief to know that, for at any cost I must go. My friends must be thinking I am dead. Will you lend me a horse and a man to guide me to the landing ground?”

“I will go with you myself, with some of my men in case there should be trouble on the way. After what you have done for me I could not do less. Everything I have is at your command, praise be to God.”

“When shall we start?”

“As soon as you care to go.”

“Then it shall be at once.”

The Sheikh glanced at the sun, already well on its flaming course across the dome of heaven. “Do you not think it would be wiser to wait for moonlight, for the journey to the coast is a hard one?”

“No. The sooner we start the sooner I shall be there.”

“So shall it be, if God wills.”^[2]

^[2] To an Arab everything is the Will of God (Allah). The future is ordained. It would be impious, therefore, to wish or even pray for anything that might be contrary to His wish. “God is the Knower,” and what is to be will be regardless of human attempt to make it otherwise. This creed actuates an Arab’s life. It is so ingrained in him that it figures constantly in his daily conversations.

Thinking how strange it was that the name of God should for ever be on the lips of these wild men, for it was obviously sincere, Ginger went to say goodbye to his patient who, from now on, no doubt, would remember him as a great doctor. He found the boy sitting up, clearly well on the way back to health. When he told him he was going Ahmed embraced him the Arab way by resting both hands on his shoulders, his dark liquid eyes full of affection. Touching fingers to forehead he said: “Peace be with you, and the glory. Come back one day and you will be with friends.”

“Perhaps, one day, our paths will cross again,” returned Ginger, softly. “Now get well quickly and make your father happy.”

“It will be as God wills.”

Ginger went out and found his horse ready, held by the servant. The Sheikh was already mounted. Rifle in hand, with a bandolier of cartridges across his chest, he was a different man from the one he had been when resting in camp. Now he looked what he was, a warrior of the desert and a

man of action. A dozen of his men, armed in the same way, were with him, apparently their escort. One carried the Red Cross box.

“I would advise you to wear this,” said the Sheikh, offering Ginger a *kafieh*. “The sun is fierce and we have far to go. It is a better headdress for this climate than the hat you are wearing.”

Ginger, smiling faintly from embarrassment, put on the flowing white head-cloth and adjusted the *agal* that held it in place.

“*Wellah!*” cried one of the men in mock astonishment. “Our guest is no foreigner. He is a true Bedouin.”

Others took up the cry. “A true *Bedawi* . . . Praise be to Allah . . . May the power go with him.”

“Let us ride,” said the Sheikh, and with Ginger beside him he set his horse towards the distant hills.

There is no need to describe in detail a journey that was notable only for its monotony. This time it was made in the heat of the day, for which Ginger had no one to blame but himself since he had declined to wait for the cool of the evening. To offset that, however, there was none of the haste that had made the outward journey so exhausting. The heat of course was almost insufferable and for the most part Ginger travelled with bowed head and with his eyes closed against the glare, leaving his sure-footed horse to pick its own way. He suffered greatly from thirst, and once during a pause to give the horses a breather he asked for a drink, which apparently everyone else could do without.

He was handed a water skin, a raw hide container resembling the goat or sheep from which it had been taken. He took one mouthful, and only with difficulty refrained from spitting it out. It was warm and tasted horribly of the skin in which it was being carried. He did not repeat the experiment. The discomfort he endured by telling himself he would soon be back with the others. He could only hope they would be at the landing ground. He knew they would understand his absence when he explained what had happened but it upset him to think of the anxiety they must have suffered on his account.

They had reached the foothills when the sound of galloping hooves behind them caused them to rein in and turn to ascertain the cause. It was one of the Sheikh’s men. Joining them he spoke volubly, with eloquent gestures.

“Don’t say Ahmed has had a relapse,” said Ginger in alarm, shaken by the thought of turning back.

“No,” answered the Sheikh. “This man is one of my scouts. He has come to tell me that some Arabs of the Yemen ride in *ghrazzu*.”

“What does that mean?”

“They look for war. They are what you would call a raiding party. It happens often.”

“Does that mean we shall have to go back?”

“No. They are few in number, and there are enough men in my camp to prevent the camels from being stolen, for that is what they seek. They are travelling towards the sea and may molest your friends. Let us ride on.”

The march continued.

The sun was well down by the time the ridge that overlooked the landing ground, and the sea beyond, was reached. Ginger let out a cry of joy when he saw the Dakota standing there. “They have waited for me,” he said, thankfully.

The Sheikh was gazing steadily at the aircraft. “I see no one with it,” he said.

They halted to watch. No one appeared. They went on again, Ginger with his eyes on the aircraft. There was not a movement near it. He moistened his dry lips. Could it be possible that Bertie and Dizzy had never returned to the Dakota? The thought gave him a sinking feeling in the stomach.

They stopped again for another look when the level ground was reached. The landscape lay bathed in the glow of the dying sun. Nothing moved, anywhere.

The Sheikh looked at Ginger. “I fear for your friends.”

“Let us go to the plane,” requested Ginger, wearily, for he was sick with disappointment.

They had just started to move forward when from no great distance along the seaward facing slope of the hills came the cracking report of a rifle.

The Sheikh turned his horse in that direction and urged it to a gallop. His men, holding their rifles ready, with a wild yell followed him.

Ginger was carried along with the rest. This was the last straw, he thought morosely. He was now to be involved in a tribal war.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHEIKH LENDS A HAND

At the foot of the hills that held what Dizzy had believed to be the site of the fabulous lost city of Ophir Biggles and Algy waited in calm resignation for what fate might have in store for them.

It was not often that Biggles was prepared to admit that nothing, absolutely nothing, could be done to save a situation, but on this occasion he did. To attempt to retreat would obviously be futile, for the Arabs had seen them. This left only two courses open. They could submit to whatever the Arabs had in mind or they could defend themselves, or try to, for this could only end in failure. They might kill one or two of the enemy before they themselves were killed but that could serve no useful purpose. Indeed, it might do a great deal of harm by sparking off a minor war in the Protectorate, and Biggles would rather anything than that. It would only cost more lives. Moreover, being in an official position any such trouble would result in the dismissal of the Air Commodore as head of the Air Police.

So they waited for the end, whatever that might be.

The horsemen tore up, sending sand flying and dust swirling as they pulled their mounts to a stop at the last moment. So far there was no sign of hostility. One of them slid from his saddle and throwing back his *kafieh* advanced smiling. Unlike his companions his face was white, and that for a moment was all Biggles noticed. Suddenly it struck him that the face or what could be seen of it for dust and the folds of the *kafieh*, was vaguely familiar.

It is a not uncommon occurrence for a person to fail to recognize another when seen in unexpected and highly improbable circumstances. In this case, apart from the fact that Ginger was assumed to be dead, the *kafieh* may have had something to do with it. Consequently, when Biggles did suddenly recognize Ginger the shock sent him back a pace. In a voice pitched high with incredulity all he could say was: "It isn't true. Algy, look who's here!"

Although breathless from hard riding Ginger did not suffer from any such shock, although of course he was surprised to see Biggles. "Sorry I've been away for so long but I couldn't help it," he greeted them, contritely.

Human nature is liable to curious reactions, and when Biggles saw that his fears had been without foundation his first sense of overwhelming relief was quickly followed by irritation. "What sort of game do you think you're playing at?" he demanded, curtly.

"Believe you me it's been no game," rejoined Ginger. "I'll tell you all about it presently."

"You certainly will," Biggles assured him, shortly.

Ginger smiled wanly. "Allow me to introduce you to a new friend of mine, the Sheikh Mital ibn Yezzin."

Biggles looked at the Sheikh and raised his fingers to his forehead. "*Salaam Aleikum.*" He knew the usual Arab greeting.

"*Aleikum Salaam,*" returned the Sheikh, gravely.

Then Biggles noticed the Arab carrying the Red Cross box. Speaking again to Ginger he went on: "So it was you who took the medical kit?"

"Yes. I had to have it."

"Who have you killed?"

"Nobody."

"You realize we'd given you up for lost?"

"I was afraid of that. Where are Bertie and Dizzy?"

"In the machine."

"We couldn't see anyone when we came over the hill."

"They were probably asleep."

"We heard shooting, and knowing some raiders had crossed the border were afraid you were having trouble with them."

"We were," answered Biggles. "We were also having trouble with some men who came ashore from that yacht. Four of them. They're still somewhere on the hill. They were close behind us when you arrived."

"They will give you no more trouble," promised the Sheikh. He spoke to some of his men, who unslung their rifles in a businesslike way.

"I wish you'd tell me what's been going on here," said Ginger.

"I shall also be interested to hear what you have to say," returned Biggles. "But this is no place to stand talking. Let's get over to the machine. Bertie and Dizzy will wonder what's going on. I badly need a drink, anyway."

"Who were these men who attacked you?" inquired the Sheikh, his forehead knit with anger.

“First there were four men who came ashore in the small boat you see on the beach. They forced us at pistol point to go with them up the hill.”

“In the name of Allah the merciful! For what purpose?”

“It is a long story which I will tell you presently. I think it was their intention to shoot us, and they may have attempted that had they not been attacked by Arabs. I only saw one, who fired at us, but I feel sure there must have been more.”

“Who were these four men you speak of?”

“I know little about them but there is reason to believe they are from Ethiopia.”

“Where are they now?”

“They must still be somewhere on the hill. They were in pursuit of us when you arrived.”

“Would you like me to send my men to hunt them down and kill them?” inquired the Sheikh, dispassionately.

“I don’t think we would be justified in going quite as far as that,” replied Biggles, smiling faintly.

“Have they water with them?”

“No.”

“They must be mad. If the Arabs do not kill them we shall see them in the morning when they will be forced to come down to seek water. They cannot live without it. When we see them we will decide what shall be done with them.”

“It would satisfy me if you would put them in their boat with orders never to return.”

“If God wills so shall it be.”

“Do you know these Arabs who shot at us?”

“It is a party from the Yemen. I was told by one of my watchers that they were coming this way.”

“Aren’t you afraid they might attack you?”

“No. Only cowards shoot without first giving warning.”

No more was said, and the procession moved slowly across the darkening landing ground towards the Dakota, in front of which Bertie and Dizzy could now be seen watching and waiting.

“It’s all right. We’re with friends,” called Biggles as they approached. “Ginger’s here.”

Exclamations indicated astonishment at this information.

On arrival at the machine the Sheikh posted guards to watch for enemies and the possible return of the Ethiopians to their boat. Presently, the horses having been watered and fed, in the light of the rising moon they were all sitting in a circle on the warm sand and the explanations began. First Ginger told his story.

“I am sorry if this caused you distress,” said the Sheikh when he had finished. “My men had orders to ride to friends in Aden for help, although had they done this they would have returned too late. Knowing this, seeing one of your people, always skilled with medicine, they brought him to my tent. Doubtless it was the will of God.”

“Doubtless,” agreed Biggles. He then told the full story of the expedition and the purpose of it. He was heard out in silence.

“There are many ruins and ancient burial places in this country, for it is very old,” observed the Sheikh, pensively, at the end. “Things of ages past are of no interest to us, although sometimes articles of gold and silver are found. We use them as ornaments. To us our camels and horses, and water, are of more value, because we could not live without them. Do you still wish to enter the cave?”

“Certainly we would like to, for apart from any gold there are stones with writing on them which may tell us more of the ancient history of Arabia. But I fear that any attempt to reach them now would be dangerous.”

“In the morning we will look at this place to see what can be done,” decided the Sheikh. “If I can help I will, for I have a debt to pay for the life of my son.”

“We had a rare fright,” Bertie told Biggles. “We were asleep and dead to the world when the shooting started. That woke us up. Thinking we were being attacked we stood by for trouble.”

“We should all have been in trouble, I think, had it not been for the opportune arrival of the Sheikh and his warriors,” said Biggles.

There was a little more desultory talking, but with all mysteries solved and misunderstandings explained there was little more to say. Everyone stretched himself on the sand and silence fell.

The night passed without incident. Ginger, now with nothing on his mind, slept soundly, to be awakened at the first streak of dawn by talking. Sitting up he saw the others were awake. Biggles and the Sheikh were in earnest conversation looking towards the hills, their tops catching the first rays of the rising sun. Looking in that direction he saw four men hurrying towards the sea, most of the time running and often looking behind them. He did not need to be told that these were the four men from the yacht who had

been causing trouble. It was also easy to guess why they were in such a hurry. Afraid of the raiders above them, and knowing there were more Arabs on the level ground, they had spent the night hiding among the rocks, and realizing they couldn't spend the day there without water they were making a dash for their boat, which still lay on the beach as they had left it.

"Shall we kill them?" inquired the Sheikh, calmly.

"No," answered Biggles.

"Do you want them brought here?"

"No, thank you. We could do nothing with them. They seem thoroughly scared and I doubt if they'll come back."

"I will send word to tell them what will happen if they do," returned the Sheikh.

He gave an order, whereupon four of his men sprang on their horses and raced off to intercept Majoli and his friends. The Sheikh's lips curled when the running men, seeing their escape cut off, as they thought, stopped and stood with their hands held high. However, they were soon walking on towards their boat while the warriors cantered back to their leader.

As a matter of detail Majoli and his friends may have been lucky, because before they had gone far the raiders could be seen at the foot of the hill, apparently contemplating pursuit. But when they saw the Sheikh and his men they turned back, with the result that Majoli got away safely.

"I don't think we shall see any more of them," observed Biggles. "Hello! What's this coming?"

Three aircraft in tight V formation, wearing R.A.F. markings, had appeared, presently to roar overhead.

"Come to see we're not getting into mischief," went on Biggles. "I'd better show myself to let them see we're in no trouble." He went into the open and waved, whereupon the military machines, after circling twice over the Dakota, turned away, and headed back in the direction from which they had come.

"What will you do now?" asked the Sheikh, as the horses were given a little water and fodder from the supply each man carried.

Biggles hesitated, looking towards the hill.

"You would like to go up there?"

"I was hoping to have another look at the landslide that covers the cave I told you about. But I can see headcloths moving among the rocks so it looks as if the Yemenis intend staying there for a while. I can't go near while they're there so all we can do is go home."

“They are not good fighters.”

“That may be so, but I would get into serious trouble with the government if I started a battle. Not that I would do that in any case. We are not equipped for war.”

“I and my men will drive them away,” declared the Sheikh.

“That would be putting you to a lot of trouble on our account.”

“It would not take long. Those Arabs up there are not real desert men; they are sent from some town to make trouble; it often happens; when they see we intend to attack they will run away. I have never seen these ruins of which you speak and now I am so close I would like to look at them.”

“What about your horses?”

“We have enough food and water for two days, but I would not like to stay as long as that for I am anxious about my son.”

“Then what do you suggest we do? I am entirely in your hands. We are in no hurry to go home, but let us not detain you if you think your place is with your son.”

“It is my duty to keep my territory safe so we must deal with these insolent raiders. Remain here. I will leave two men to guard our horses. Watch the hill. When you see me wave my *kafieh* you will know it is safe for you to come up.”

“As you wish, O Sheikh.”

The Sheikh held a brief consultation with his men, and from the eagerness with which they looked towards the enemy it was clear that what was proposed met with their entire approval.

In another minute they were on their way.

“Anyone would think they liked war,” remarked Ginger, as he watched them go.

“They do,” answered Biggles, smiling faintly. “It’s about the only recreation they have. But they don’t fight as we do. It’s really a tough game for which, over goodness knows how many years, hard and fast rules have been laid down. Some of them seem a bit odd to us.”

“Such as?”

“Well, a surprise attack, for instance, is unthinkable. That’s held to be a cowardly way of doing things. Brave men shout their intentions to give the other side a chance to get ready. If a prisoner is taken he isn’t locked up, for the simple reason there’s no place to put him. He’s allowed to wander about as he likes, but he wouldn’t dream of running away because that would be a dishonourable thing to do. And so on.”

“But why fight at all, old boy? Why fight at all? Isn’t life hard enough here without making it harder?”

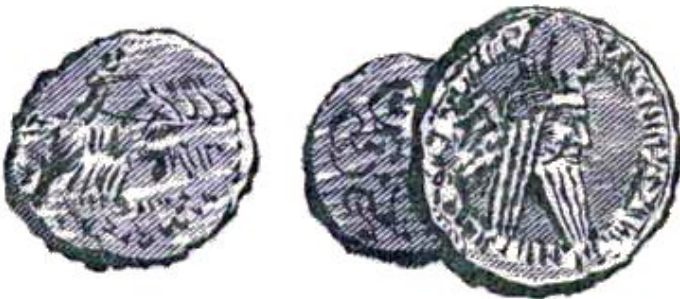
“It’s because life is so tough that tribal warfare goes on. To these chaps only two things matter. They couldn’t get along without them. First, water, and secondly, camels. It’s impossible for us to grasp the importance of water in a country like this. A lot of these fellows have never in their lives seen pure clean water such as we know it. Nor do they know what it is to drink to repletion. They simply cannot imagine such rivers as we have at home, running away to waste in the sea. Some years ago an Arab confided in me that he knew the true reason why the British and other Europeans were always squabbling over their land. He was convinced that we were really after their water. That should give you an idea of the value they put on the stuff we pour down the sink.”

Ginger mentioned how he had seen the Sheikh wash his hands in the sand.

“That’s what I mean,” rejoined Biggles. “In the desert water is too valuable, too scarce a commodity, to be used for washing.” He smiled. “The sand would probably do the job better. It might even be cleaner than the water, anyhow.”

Ginger, remembering what the water in the skin had tasted like, could believe that.

“Hello. The war seems to have started,” went on Biggles, as the sound of a shot reached their ears. “Let’s watch what happens.”



CHAPTER XIV

BIGGLES SITS BACK

FOR the next half-hour Biggles and his comrades had the unusual experience of watching a skirmish without taking any part in it. In the thin clear air it could be followed without difficulty, and the long drawn out cries of “*Oo-oo-oo-oo*” of the Sheikh’s men, as they gave warning of their approach could be heard distinctly. Not that there appeared to be any need for this, and Bertie made a remark to that effect.

“It’s all a part of this notion that it’s cowardly to try to take the other fellow by surprise,” answered Biggles. “Even if an Arab has a blood feud with another he’s not allowed to kill him from ambush, or attack him unprepared. I’m talking about the true desert Arabs, of course. Those who live in towns, and so come in contact with Europeans, are not so particular. Another odd custom is, a man who falls off his horse mustn’t be touched until he has remounted. In the same way a man on the ground would be a scoundrel if he took advantage of his own immunity to shoot at a man on horseback. That doesn’t apply in the present case, of course, because none of them is mounted. Those hills are no place for a horse.”

The battle, if so it could be called, did not last long. As the Sheikh had predicted, the raiders obviously had little enthusiasm for a straight fight. Even before the Sheikh’s force had started up the slope the white *kafiehs* of the enemy could be seen bobbing about as they retreated higher. There was a little sporadic shooting at long range when the invaders made a short stand on the topmost ridge, behind which they had presumably left their horses. This was followed by a period of silence, broken at last by one or two far distant shots, and then the Sheikh’s men could be seen coming back.

“It must be all over,” observed Biggles. “The enemy has pulled out. The best thing that could happen.”

That this assumption was correct was revealed a few minutes later when a white object could be seen waving on the *rakib*.

“That’s the signal,” said Biggles, getting up. “Let’s go. Who’s coming? Frankly, I think you, Bertie, and you, Dizzy, should stay here. Neither of you is fit for another drag up that hill. I’m not too keen on it myself.”

“That suits me,” agreed Dizzy. “As for that cave, treasure or no treasure, I never want to see the confounded place again. It still gives me the horrors when I think of it. I wouldn’t go inside it for a million quid—nor anywhere else underground unless I was sure of getting out. I have a new respect for coal miners.”

Bertie said he felt the same way and decided to stay with Dizzy by the machine.

“How about you, Algy,” inquired Biggles. “How’s your ankle?”

Algy tested it, and from the way he limped it was clear that it was still painful.

“Walking on it won’t do it any good,” asserted Biggles. “You’d better stay here, too. We don’t want to have to carry you down. I’ll go with Ginger. There’s no real purpose in any of us going, if it comes to that, but I feel that while I’m on the spot I might as well make a closer inspection of the landslide in case somebody else, the British Museum people for instance, feel like having a go at it. Apart from that, as the Sheikh has been to the trouble of removing any opposition it would be ungrateful to refuse to cooperate.”

The others agreed.

“Come on, Ginger. Fetch a water bottle and let’s get on with it,” said Biggles.

“If you should get into the cave you’ll find my haversack there,” put in Bertie.

“Why would I want a haversack?”

“To put the lolly in, old boy,” replied Bertie, brightly. “You’ll find some lying on the floor.”

“Forget it. I’m doing no rock heaving.”

Biggles, with Ginger still wearing his *kafieh*, started off. “It seems to be my bad luck that in spite of all my efforts to keep clear of this sort of nonsense I always manage to get mixed up in it,” he said, lugubriously.

In half an hour they were on the *rakib*, to find the Sheikh and his followers standing in front of the landslide. The Sheikh, to Biggles’ relief, said there had been no casualties in the fight, the raiders having made off before the attacking force could get within effective range. He pointed to the heap of fallen rock. “Is this the place where your friends found some money?”

Biggles said it was. “The entrance to the cave is under those rocks.”

Together they made a critical inspection.

“It should be possible to clear the entrance,” said the Sheikh, thoughtfully, much to Biggles’ surprise.

“It would be asking for trouble to touch that stuff,” declared Biggles. “I certainly wouldn’t have anything to do with it. I’ve seen as much as I wanted to see so we might as well go down.”

“But wouldn’t you like to see in the cave?”

“Yes, if the way in was open; but it isn’t likely to be as far as I’m concerned.”

The Sheikh called his men around him and there was a conversation in their own language. With all eyes on the landslide, and from eloquent gestures, it was clear that they were discussing the cave. At last the Sheikh turned back to Biggles and said, quite simply: “We will make a way in.”

Biggles implored him not to attempt it, pointing out the very apparent danger.

The Sheikh laughed his fears away. “You will see.”

Biggles shrugged. “All I ask is, if some of your men are killed, you will remember that I’ve asked you not to do it. I won’t accept responsibility so don’t blame me.”

“We are Arabs,” replied the Sheikh, with a touch of hauteur. “We do not blame anyone. It will be as God wills.”

With this Biggles could not argue, so he retired to a rock on which to sit and watch events. “I’m sorry about this,” he told Ginger, who joined him. “If somebody doesn’t get hurt it’ll be a miracle.”

“God is the Knower,” returned Ginger, briefly.

Biggles smiled. “Becoming quite an Arab, aren’t you?”

Forthwith began an exhibition which confirmed all Ginger had heard about the impossibility of understanding how the Arab mind worked. To him it looked like sheer suicide, but they made a game of it; a game in the manner of “dare you”. It went like this. A man, encouraged by the rest, would go forward, seize a rock, drag it clear and then run for his life. Then another would take his turn. Some had the audacity to take one of the higher rocks, either because it was more dangerous or to relieve the weight on those below. The Sheikh took his turn with the rest. One man had a close shave when a rock, falling from above, missed his head by inches. This produced a good laugh.

But Biggles wasn’t even smiling. “I’ve seen some daft games in my life, but this is the tops,” he muttered. “I wish now we hadn’t come. I might have guessed what would happen.”

“Why do they do it if they’re not interested in what’s inside?”

“To display their courage, what else. They know they’re dicing with death. With them personal bravery comes before everything, and this gives them an opportunity to show it.”

More and more rocks were moved although it was evident that the sport was becoming more dangerous. More than once Ginger held his breath.

At last the Sheikh intervened. What he said Ginger did not know, for of course he spoke in his own language. Some of the men went off along the *rakib*.

“Now what?” queried Ginger.

The answer was provided when the men were seen coming back carrying one of the fallen pillars. It had been broken in two pieces. One piece was placed on the ground. The other was erected vertically among the rocks to form a support.

“That was clever of ’em,” commented Biggles. “But it’s still a game I wouldn’t care to play.”

After more rocks had been removed the second piece of pillar was inserted near the first. A man who had gone off returned with a long slab. This was inserted horizontally with its ends resting on the tops of the two columns to form a lintel.

“Anybody would think they’d been playing this game all their lives,” remarked Biggles.

“I believe they’re going to do it.”



“I think you’re right,” returned Biggles, taking a fresh interest. “The thing isn’t as dangerous as it was, thank goodness.”

And so it transpired. At the end of another hour’s hard labour a small cavity appeared.

“You see?” called the Sheikh, looking at Biggles and pointing at it.

“I hope he doesn’t think we’re cowards for not lending a hand,” said Ginger, anxiously.

“He can think what he likes,” returned Biggles. “I might not be a brave man, but neither am I a fool to risk my life for nothing.”

With more square stones being used for supports the cavity was enlarged until it was of a size sufficient to permit the entrance of a man. The Sheikh came over.

“There you are,” he said, obviously well pleased. “God be praised.”

Ginger looked at Biggles dubiously. “Are you going in?” he asked, softly.

Biggles got up. “Of course. But I don’t mind admitting I’d as soon be kicked. But after all their sweat, not to mention risks, we can’t jib at it now. If more rock should come down we shall at least have the comfort of knowing that these lads will know we’re inside. Bertie and Dizzy didn’t have that consolation.”

“Pretty poor comfort,” murmured Ginger.

“Let’s go in. We might as well have a look at Dizzy’s treasure hole.”

Watched with great curiosity by their Arab friends, who stood in silence, they advanced to the entrance.

“Are you coming in?” Biggles asked the Sheikh.

“No. When I die it will be in the open.”

“We shall need a light,” Ginger told Biggles. “I have a few matches, but I doubt if they’ll be enough.”

“I’ve my lighter.”

The Sheikh heard this. He gave an order, whereupon the men collected all the wind-blown twigs of camel-thorn they could find. These were twisted together to make a rough torch.

With this in his hand, as yet unlighted, Biggles crept in, and Ginger followed. Standing erect the torch was lit and they looked around.

“Quite a place,” observed Biggles. “Dizzy certainly found something. Collect those coins on the floor while I get Bertie’s haversack. I see it over there.”

This was done, and the coins, those that Dizzy had left, were soon in the haversack.

“We might as well have a look in the other pots while we’re at it,” suggested Biggles.

“Let’s not be too long about it,” requested Ginger. “Knowing what Bertie and Dizzy must have been through in here the place gives me the creeps.”

It may as well be said at once that the results of the next ten minutes, by which time the torch had burnt out and Ginger had only one or two matches left, were disappointing. It seemed that the most important pots, those that Bertie and Dizzy had found, were those nearest the entrance, for the others investigated yielded little of value, mostly bones. There were no gold coins, only silver ones; but Ginger found the haversack he was carrying fairly heavy.

“From the archaeological point of view the writing on those stones is likely to be much more important,” opined Biggles. “I think we’ve seen the lot. Let’s get out. Like you, I’m not too happy in here. And like the Sheikh, I hope that when my time comes it’ll be in the open air.”

The clatter of a falling stone sent them hurrying to the exit, and Ginger breathed more freely when he found himself standing once more in the sunshine.

Biggles showed the Sheikh the contents of the haversack, inviting him to take some; but the Sheikh, for reasons known only to himself, refused to accept any of the coins. His men looked at the money curiously, but neither would they accept any.^[3] They may not have realized the value of them, although, in actual fact, being of silver their intrinsic value, as metal, was probably a good deal less than their historical worth as museum or collector’s pieces.

^[3] The only coins acceptable in Southern Arabia are Maria Theresa dollars, dated 1780. The coin is about the size of a five shilling piece and worth nearly half a crown. They are still specially minted for this particular trade. The Arabs call them Riyals.

“We’ll leave the cave as it is,” decided Biggles, looking at it. “One of the museums at home may like to see it. I shall tell the British Museum the story when we get back.”

The return journey to the Dakota was made without incident. Bertie, Algy and Dizzy were waiting impatiently.

“You’ve been a long time,” complained Dizzy. “What luck?”

“Not much.” Biggles gave them the facts. He smiled. “Sorry we couldn’t bring you Solomon’s crown or the Queen of Sheba’s pearls, but we haven’t done too badly. There should be enough here to pay expenses and a bit over.”

Dizzy sighed his disappointment.

The Sheikh stepped in. “Now I must leave you,” he said. “We have far to go and I am anxious for my son.”

“Naturally,” agreed Biggles. “It has been an honour to know you, O Sheikh. We may meet again one day.”

“If God wills, may He be praised.”

“Give my regards to Ahmed,” requested Ginger.

The Sheikh signified his assent, and in another minute the Arabs were in full gallop towards the hills.

“I forgot to give him back the *kafieh* he lent me,” cried Ginger.

“Keep it as a souvenir,” said Biggles, lightly. “Let’s get along home. Dizzy, before you forget, you’d better retrieve those coins you buried in the sand. Put them with the rest.”

This done they climbed into the Dakota, which was soon in the air heading West.

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST WORD

THE run home was made without trouble, and on arrival Biggles lost no time in reporting to the Air Commodore, to whom, from Aden, he had sent a signal to inform him of the successful outcome of the mission.

The Air Commodore's relief was tempered by discipline, and he made no secret of his disapproval of such personal undertakings.

"Did you find anything after all that?" he asked.

Biggles showed him the haversack and its contents.

He was duly impressed.

"What are you going to do with this?" he inquired. "I imagine you won't want to keep it."

"No. Just one, perhaps, for a souvenir. Frankly, sir, I'm in some doubt as to the best way to dispose of it. We shall have to sell it, of course, to pay for the hire of the Dakota and sundry other expenses."

"We don't want any publicity about this."

"I shall take care of that. Found where it was I don't think this little hoard could be claimed by the government as Treasure Trove. In that respect I'm thinking chiefly of Digswell, who was the originator of the scheme."

"As he was a serving officer when he found the treasure the Air Ministry could claim the coins were theirs."

"I've thought of that, but I can't see how they can have a claim. Digswell was a serving officer when he found his first clue; but he was out of the Service when he followed it up. Moreover, he made this last trip at his own expense, even though we helped him."

"What do you propose?"

"I could take the stuff to a reliable numismatist leaving it to him to give us a fair price for it. After all, every one of these coins is a collector's piece: or I could take it to the British Museum, tell them the whole story and hear what they have to say."

"I'd advise the Museum. They'll give you the full value of what the coins are worth, perhaps a bit over for what you can tell them about the

inscribed tables of stone. In that matter this find should cause quite a sensation in archaeological circles. If you decide to do that keep the police out of it or I'm likely to be asked some searching questions."

"It hasn't cost the government anything. On the contrary, we've done them a good turn."

"How?"

"Ginger's action in saving the life of the Sheikh's son has made him our friend for life, and as things are today friends in that part of the world are worth having."

The Air Commodore agreed. "All I ask is, see your names don't get into the newspapers."

"I shall do my best to prevent that in any case."

"Well, the coins are yours, so you can do what you like with them. Let me know what happens."

"I will, sir."

The upshot of this was Biggles and Dizzy took their little treasure to the British Museum, and there things fell out much as the Air Commodore had predicted. The production of the coins and the circumstances in which they were found caused considerable excitement. To an interested audience of experts Biggles told the full story, describing as well as he could the tables of stone that remained in the cave.

Dizzy's financial position having been explained he was given a substantial sum of money to carry on with until an estimate of the value of the coins could be made. As they were unique there was, of course, no actual market value.

In due course a much larger sum was received, one which left a good margin for division, according to the terms of the Syndicate, after the hire of the Dakota and incidental expenses had been paid.

The matter did not end there. A few weeks later Dizzy dashed into Biggles' office to tell him that an official expedition had been organized to recover the "tables of stone," and he had been offered a job to go with it in the position of guide. As he said, only he knew exactly where the place was.

After that, nothing was heard of him for some time. Then the news burst upon the world that the probable site of the lost city of Ophir had been discovered, nothing being said, however, of the manner in which it had been located.

Later, a letter was received from Dizzy to say that the entrance to the cave had been cleared and made safe. The tables of stone were on their way

to England to be translated. He was still at the site, where extensive excavations, with a small army of labourers, were in progress. It was hoped even more important discoveries would be forthcoming.

“He’s still got the Queen of Sheba’s jewel case on his mind,” declared Algy, grinning.

“What I’m wondering,” said Bertie pensively, polishing his eyeglass, “is what that nasty piece of work, Majoli, thinks of all this.”

“He can think what he likes,” concluded Biggles. “I couldn’t care less.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Biggles Forms a Syndicate* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]